

Sola Scriptura and the Interpretation of Genesis 1

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All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

II Timothy 3:16

Knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

II Peter 1:20-21

The Solas of the Reformation

God used the great Protestant Reformation of the early 1500s to reform His church. Protestants since then have affirmed that the doctrine and life of the church need to be reformed in light of the truth of Scripture. The core doctrines of the Reformation, which are what all Protestants confess, need to be both defended and

developed in response to contemporary challenges to the faith.

These five core doctrines were expressed using the Latin word for “alone”: *solus*. Thus, they are called the five *Solas* of the Reformation. They are *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Fide*, *Sola gratia*, *Solus Christus*, and *Soli Deo Gloria*.

The first is the truth that God’s Word is the final authority in doctrine and life. Many have claimed that the Bible is riddled with errors and is only infallible concerning some vague “redemptive message,” but they do so apart from any real evidence or convincing line of argumentation. Despite persistent criticism, Scripture alone (*Sola Scriptura*) teaches that the inerrant Scriptures are the sole source of truth that can bind the conscience.

The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* affirms that the Scriptures alone are the final authority on matters of faith and life. Human traditions must be evaluated in light of authoritative Scripture. Any scientific paradigms or studies must be evaluated in light of the authority of Scripture. The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is important for the study of origins. God has spoken on the matter of origins. His Word is the final authority for what we believe about origins.

My Favorite Text

One of my favorite Bible passages is II Timothy 3:14-17. When I was a student at Calvin College, a roommate asked everyone in our suite about their favorite Scripture text. I surprised him by quoting this passage: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God!” I went on to explain why this Scripture was precious to me.

As a freshman at Calvin College, on the first day of class in Religion 103, my theology professor argued that the Scriptures were riddled with inconsistencies and errors. This professor argued that the Scriptures were only infallible concerning a redemptive message. It turned out that this redemptive message must have been revealed with great vagueness—since my professor claimed that Old Testament writers disagreed with each other over theology, just as New Testament writers

contradicted each other. Using higher critical methods, the Religion professor spent an entire semester tearing the Old Testament to shreds. One student in the class, a girl who was engaged to a seminarian, decided that if you needed to be a higher critic in order to understand the Bible, there was no sense in her even bothering to read it for herself. At least she was consistent in her application of the professor's teaching. Today, many ministers and professors claim that the Bible errs on historical, geographical, ethical, and scientific facts.

This challenge shook my faith.

Already as a freshman, I felt a call to the ministry of the Word, but how could I preach if I did not have a sure word from God? My reflection on II Tim. 3:14-17, II Pet. 1:20-21, and the significance of all the places in the Bible where a prophet states: "Then the Word of the LORD came to me" or "Thus says the LORD" led to the breakthrough. God used a little work by Homer Hoeksema that covered the doctrine of Scripture to reassure me that the Bible was in fact an authoritative word of God that could be trusted.

The issue of authority was one of the burning questions at the time of the Reformation. At first, Luther did not realize how dangerous it was to question the church hierarchy's claims to having sole authority over the interpretation of Scripture. He had nailed up his 95 theses against indulgences naively assuming everyone would agree that the Scriptures were the final authority in doctrine and life. He assumed that if a human teacher contradicted the clear teaching of Scripture, then the teacher was obviously wrong.

Consciences Captive to God-Breathed Scripture

The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith because they are the inspired word of God. It is because the Bible is God's inspired Word that it is authoritative. In II Tim. 3:14-17, Paul uses two words for the Bible. First, he speaks of the "sacred letters" in verse 15: "and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures." The language is reflective of Timothy's Jewish background and his exposure to the

Hebrew Scriptures. The word translated as “holy” is the Greek word for the temple and, by extension, that which was sacred. Paul then uses a Greek word that referred to the letters of the alphabet. So, the Old Testament Scriptures are called by a Jewish name—the “sacred letters.” Luther would say, “The Holy Scripture is God’s Word, written, and so to say, ‘in-lettered.’”

2 Timothy 3:16 reads: “All Scripture is God-breathed.” Paul uses strong language to teach that the Scriptures (*lit.* the writings) are inspired by God: Scripture is exhaled by God. As Paul’s usage of a compound Greek word suggests, Scripture is literally God-breathed. When you speak, your words are “you-breathed”—your breath pours forth speech. You breathe out your words. You exhale when you speak. Luther marveled at how the breath of man can produce such beautiful words, especially in song. A Luther biographer states,

He noticed, as a wonder wrought by God, how the air was able to give forth, by a slight movement of the tongue and throat, guided by the mind, such sweet and powerful sounds; and what an infinite variety there was of voice and language among the many thousand birds, and still more so among men.¹

To say that the Scriptures are God-breathed means that they are God’s words. The word “breathed” used to be taken as an active construction---as if Scripture breathes God. But the Biblical word is in the passive tense—the Scriptures are the result of God’s Spirit.

That Scripture is God-breathed points us to the role of the Holy Spirit in the creation of the Scriptures. Scripture teaches that God produces all He would create by His Spirit. Psa. 33:6 tells us: “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth.” The Scriptures owe their origin and contents to the divine Breath—the Spirit of God. The human writers were powerfully guided and directed by the unseen influences of His Spirit in inspiration. You cannot see the invisible, inbreathing activity of God. When we think of the Spirit as the

¹ Julius Koestlin, *Life of Luther*.

Wind of Pentecost, we are struck by His power.

The Apostle Peter writes in II Peter 1:21 that men were “carried along” by the Holy Wind and spoke from God: “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (II Peter 1:21). To say prophets were “carried along” means that the drive behind prophecy did not come from the will or impulse of man. The prophets were borne along by the Holy Spirit. As the wind blows and bears a sailboat on its course, so men were borne along by the Holy Spirit. There are not two causes of Scripture—God and man. There is one moving power; the holy men were moved by Him. Calvin states it strongly: “The Law and the Prophets are not a doctrine delivered according to the will and pleasure of men, but dictated by the Holy Spirit.”

The Holy Spirit did not mechanically inspire the human writers, however, but equipped and prepared each one according to his own unique history and personality. Nor can we say that they were inspired in the Romantic sense that we would ascribe to a musical genius like Mozart. Rather, God so directed the prophets and apostles through His providence in their lives and so filled them with the Holy Spirit that certain letters they wrote were inspired Scripture. God made the mind and heart of man; His Spirit knows how to guide them. He filled the minds of the prophets and apostles with light and guided them in word and thought so that their words would faithfully reflect His truth.

Plenary Inspiration

As children of the Reformation, evangelicals believe in plenary inspiration. This means that all of Scripture is inspired. Paul writes to Timothy that “all” Scripture is inspired, not just some of it. Some have tried to translate this: “Every God-breathed Scripture is also useful.” This leaves open the possibility that there is another Scripture that is not inspired and therefore is not useful. The practical problem with this interpretation is that it renders the Bible worthless as a reliable guide to divine truth. Moreover, not every individual verse in the Bible is intended

to be profitable in each of the ways that Paul lists. Therefore, it is clear that Paul has in mind Scripture as a whole that is profitable for doctrine, reproof, and correction. The NIV gives a proper translation: “All Scripture is God-breathed.” John Calvin sums up the important practical point when he says: “We must not pick and cull the Scriptures to please our own fancy, but must receive the whole without exception.”

Luther was right to believe that the very words of Scripture were inspired, “We must regard every tittle and letter of the Bible as more important than the whole world and tremble before it as before God himself.” For this reason, the Reformer cared deeply about the minute details of grammar in the Scriptures. In fact, his “discovery” of justification by faith alone grew out of his careful analysis of the grammar and meaning of a Greek word for “righteousness” in Romans 1:17.

Since all of Scripture is God-breathed the Bible is absolutely incomparable. No other book, library, or anything else in the world, can make a lost sinner wise for salvation. For us to know God in Jesus Christ, God needed to reveal His gospel to us. He chose to provide the gospel for us in written language. This awesome view of the Scriptures places Holy Scripture on an entirely different plane than any human writings or ecclesiastical decisions. We need God-breathed Scripture because we need a rule of faith. Unless God reveals Himself authoritatively, we men are left to our own resources to ferret out what is truth. Can man’s fallen, darkened, rebellious brain determine spiritual truth? No, for apart from Him every intention of the thoughts of our hearts are evil and tainted by sin (Gen. 6:5). So, God has graciously spoken to us in Scripture.

From the time that Timothy was a child he had followed this rule of faith. His grandmother and mother read and explained the Scriptures to him from his earliest years. Paul counseled Timothy to continue in the teachings of the Scriptures so that he would not end up like the false teachers of his day. It is because the Scriptures are the only rule of faith, that Luther could stand at the Diet of Worms and proclaim to the false teachers of his day, “My conscience is ‘captive to the Word of God.’” The

Roman Catholic Church had placed Christian tradition, papal rulings, and decisions of councils on par with the Bible as a source of doctrine. At the Diet of Worms, Luther made his famous statement: “Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God.” He would not recant his teaching, as Emperor Charles V demanded, because his conscience was held captive to the authority of the Bible.

Conscience Captive to Scripture Alone

In graduate school, I once heard a philosopher lecture on the liberty of conscience. She specifically cited Luther in support of the idea that everyone should have the right to believe whatever he wants. This, however, is a distortion of Luther’s example. Luther’s conscience was not “free” in the sense that he could do whatever he wanted with it. On the contrary, his conscience was captive to what God’s Word said. He spent his life preaching that others also submit themselves and allow their consciences to be taken captive to God’s will revealed in the Bible. With Luther, we cannot allow our consciences to be held captive to human tradition of any kind.

At the time of the Reformation, the authority of the Scriptures became a burning issue. The Roman Catholic Church defended the idea that only the Magisterium (the teaching hierarchy) had the right to give authoritative interpretations of the Bible. Luther did not realize how dangerous it was to question the authority of the pope. Assuming that the Scriptures were the final authority, he nailed his 95 theses against indulgences on the church door hoping for a rigorous academic dispute about what the Bible actually taught. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, believed that there was apostolic tradition handed down from bishop to bishop outside of the Bible that could essentially trump the sacred writings.

At the Leipzig debate in late 1519, Luther was forced to admit that the key issue between him and those who supported indulgences was one of authority. The question was “Did the pope have a right to issue indulgences if they are contrary to the Word of God?” Does the hierarchy of the church have the final say on how Scripture is to be interpreted? Luther could do none other than to hold that the Bible

was the only infallible source of truth and that the popes and councils were wrong.

Luther argued ferociously against his opponent, Professor John Eck, that the Scriptures were the only sure source of authority and that popes and councils were indeed capable of error. He was arguing for what would come to be called the “formal” principle of the Reformation—that all doctrine and life must be *normed* by the Scriptures.

The real issue between Luther and his opponents was that of biblical authority versus ecclesiastical authority (that was at odds with Biblical teaching). Rome taught that the teaching office of church with the bishops headed by the pope alone could authoritatively interpret Scripture. According to Luther, “A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or cardinal without it.” The authentic meaning of Scripture can be established apart from the approval of the Roman Catholic Church or the Pope, who claims to represent the authority of Christ on earth.

Luther, along with his fellow reformers, taught that a man’s conscience does not need to be and may not be bound by the traditions of men, what Jesus called the “traditions of the elders” in His time (Matthew 15:1-9). The incarnate Word of God is the Master and Judge of all human traditions. The written Word of God is the master and judge of all human writings. Article 7 of the Belgic Confession of Faith states that “it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures.” It adds that Reformed Christians confess that we do not consider “of equal value any writing of men, however holy these men may have been, with those divine Scriptures.” Luther said, “Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrines on earth... When Scripture is no longer master and judge of tradition, teachings ‘lose themselves in the salty sea.’”

Luther sometimes wondered whether he was right in taking a stand against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. His enemies persistently raised the challenge: “How can you suppose that you alone are correct and that the church for centuries has erred?” Perhaps something you believe from the sacred Scriptures is

widely challenged. Luther's only comfort can be yours as well. If what you believe is taught in the Scriptures, then you are safe. If we confess what the Scriptures confess, we believe the truth—and can believe the doctrine with a good conscience.

Jesus taught that the traditions of the elders must be rejected when they contradict and undermine the Law of God. The Apostle Paul warns against the sources of authority among pagans: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Colossians 2:8). To signal a contemporary debate, we need not be held captive by the so-called scientific consensus of evolutionary biologists who have aligned themselves against God and His Word.

Such is the authority of the Scriptures that Paul would reject even the testimony of angels if they were to “preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you (Galatians 1:8).” If any man or angel teaches other than what the apostle teaches as the rule of faith in his epistles, Paul doesn't hesitate to declare them condemned. (Galatians 1:9). He can make this seemingly harsh claim because the gospel Paul teaches is ultimately the gospel taught by God: “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Galatians 1:11-12).

How may we know that the Scriptures are truly the Word of God if we're not able to appeal any authority above them? In a word, the Bible self-authenticates itself. The Holy Spirit witnesses to the genuineness of Scripture (I Corinthians 2:6-16; John 14:25-27). Luther said: “The Bible is alive, it speaks to me it has feet, it runs after me; it has hands, it lays hold of me.” The 66 books of the Bible by their teaching attest themselves to the hearts of all Spirit-indwelt people as being the living oracles of God. Therefore, believers are filled with a deep reverence whenever they hear the voice of God addressing them from God-Breathed Scripture.

God-breathed Scripture Cannot Err

Our consciences can safely be held captive to Scripture because the God-breathed Scriptures *cannot err*. Jesus Himself taught that the Scriptures cannot be broken in a surprising claim of Scripture that some Israelites were rightly called “gods.” Jesus said: “If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came—and the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). In the middle of a debate with his Pharisee opponents who attacked His claim of being God’s divine Son, Jesus quotes from the Psalms: “I said, ‘You are “gods”; you are all sons of the Most High.’ But you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler” (Psa. 82:6-7). The entire passage is about the rule of judges. Such is the dignity and authority of judges who rule in God’s name among the covenant people that they are called “gods.” Jesus states that a surprising statement in the Psalms that one might suppose was an error---cannot be a mistake. It is not a misprint! And if Scripture calls those who rule in God’s place “gods”—the Jews should not have a problem with what the incarnate God states about Himself: “I am the Son of God!”

Jesus does not teach that the Bible is only reliable concerning some vague redemptive message. It’s difficult to see how the claim that judges among the covenant people can be called “gods” falls under the category of “redemptive message.” Is the Law of God set down in the Mosaic ordinances a strictly “redemptive message?” About the ethics we find in the Scriptures, Jesus says that not one jot or tittle shall fall from them. Anyone who does not teach the least of these commandments will be least in the Kingdom of God. Since the Scriptures are God-breathed, they are inerrant.

If the Scriptures are verbally inspired, they will be true and right on whatever issues they address. Only the Scriptures are the infallible rule of faith. Children of the Reformation confess with Article 4 of the *Belgic Confession of Faith* that “nothing can be alleged” against the Old and New Testaments. They confess in Article 5 that “We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and canonical, for

the regulation, foundation, and confirmation of our faith; believing without any doubt, all things contained in them.” They affirm in Article 7 that “it doth thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects.” Consequently, we who hold to the supreme authority of Scripture “reject with all our hearts whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule.”

Why Your Conscience Can Be Captive to Inerrant Scripture

Your conscience can be captive to God-breathed Scripture because the Scriptures are a *clear* Word from God. The Scriptures that God has breathed forth are clear: children of the covenant are able to understand them. Chapters 1-10 of Genesis are so clear that little children have no trouble understanding them. Even though theistic evolutionists attempt to avoid the clear statements of Scripture by reducing Genesis 1-10 to the genres of “myth” or “saga,” little children easily perceive the historical nature of the Genesis account. Sophisticated evolutionary geologists and theistic evolutionists may deny the historicity of the worldwide flood of Noah, but little children immediately understand and believe what God says in the Scriptures.

Scripture is so clear that William Tyndale risked his life to translate it into idiomatic English. He wanted the simplest plowboy to have a copy because he trusted that Scripture was clear enough to be read by every single one of God’s people. The Bible is the simple, clear Word of God. It is meant for commoners and religious professionals alike. Thus, it belongs in the common vernacular.

In a mere eleven weeks in Wartburg Castle, Luther translated the New Testament into colloquial German! The Roman Catholics leaders had not wanted the Bible in German for fear that it would subvert their authority. One bishop was even afraid that women might read it! Luther, however, welcomed the idea that all God’s children might profit from His Word. For this reason, he wanted the translation to be so simple that children and maids could understand it. If God had the apostles write the New Testament in the common Greek of ordinary people, then surely it

could be translated into the common language of ordinary people today.

To say that the Word of God is perfectly clear (perspicuous) is not to deny that there are some things in Scripture that are difficult to understand. The important Reformation teaching that Scripture interprets Scripture emphasizes that what is necessary for salvation and a godly life is readily understood by the uneducated believer and covenant children. The Scriptures are not a mass of confusion that only learned (unbelieving) critics with doctoral degrees from Ivy League schools can begin to understand! Our problem, as Christians, is not that we don't understand most of what we read, but we don't celebrate as we ought or obey as we should.

Your conscience can also be captive to God-breathed Scripture because it is a *sufficient* Word. Is the Bible enough for knowing what God wants us to believe or do? Yes. The Apostle Paul reminded Timothy that the Scriptures were sufficient to make him “wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 3:15). Article 7 of the Belgic Confession confesses that the “Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein.” This rule is a sufficient rule.

While it is true that God could have revealed more, the doctrine of sufficiency says that God has revealed everything we need to know. God doesn't reveal things that might simply tickle our fancy, but those truths which meet the spiritual needs of His people. The Psalmist sings, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul: the statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple” (Psalm 19:7). We confess in *The Belgic Confession of Faith* that God has revealed what is “necessary for us to know in this life, to His glory and our salvation” (Article 2). It is because the Bible is sufficient in itself that there are harsh warnings for those who would add to it: “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book” (Revelation 22:18).

The Benefit of Reading God-breathed Scripture

Continue to read Scripture and allow it to bind your conscience so that you can enjoy the benefits of God's grace. There are great benefits to receiving the Word with all readiness of mind. Paul knew well the benefits of submitting one's conscience to Scripture: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it" (II Timothy 3:14).

Children of the Reformation must benefit from the binding of their consciences to God-breathed Scripture. Listen to it; read and hear it preached. If you believe that the Bible is God's very Word then it is your solemn responsibility to read it, study it, meditate upon it, and obey what it says. What does it gain you if you believe that the Bible is God's Word and yet refuse to go there and hear God's voice?

Your conscience needs to be captive to what Genesis 1 and 2 teach about origins. Since the sacred Scriptures are God-breathed and, therefore, the very Word of God; you must believe what God has revealed about how He created the world and everything in it in six days. All scientific paradigms need to be evaluated in terms of sacred Scripture; for God has spoken.