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SOLA SCRIPTURA AS A LIBERATING PRINCIPLE:

REFLECTIONS FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

At the ecumenical consortium of seminaries in Mexico City where I teach, we have students from a wide range of evangelical churches and denominations. When I ask what distinguishes their church from others, I frequently receive the response: “What makes us unique is that we go strictly by the Bible alone!”

Despite their differences, what the many churches and movements throughout the global South tend to have in common is an adherence to the principle of *sola scriptura*, as well as the corollary principle that Scripture is its own interpreter (*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*).¹ Among many evangelicals, however, the adherence to the *sola scriptura* principle leads to literalistic readings of Scripture that many Lutherans regard as highly problematic, since such readings tend to generate fundamentalist forms of Christianity and contribute, in God's name, to oppressive and unjust treatment of some groups, such as women.

There are two main differences between how *sola scriptura* has been understood and applied in Lutheran teaching and how it is understood and applied in many evangelical churches and movements today. First, prior to asking the hermeneutical question of “what the text means for us today,” Lutherans address the exegetical question of “what the text meant in its original context.” This way of reading Scripture goes back to Luther, who strove to discern the historical meaning of biblical texts on the basis of careful research in order to translate them into German and challenge the allegorical readings of Scripture that had been common since patristic times.² In contrast, among many evangelicals, it is quite common to skip the exegetical task of discerning the original meaning of biblical texts and to apply certain passages directly and literally to contemporary contexts.

While Lutherans may be critical of this, it is important to see this against the background of the contexts from which many evangelicals come. In places such as Mexico, evangelical Christianity has blossomed and spread particularly among less-privileged sectors of the population that have not had access to higher education. Because many pastors and leaders of these churches do not have the exegetical training and resources necessary for reconstructing the original context and discerning what the biblical texts meant then, they apply Scripture literally and directly to present-day contexts in ways that those trained in exegesis find problematic and at times even oppressive.

A second major difference between our Lutheran understanding of *sola scriptura* and that of many evangelicals today is related to the hierarchical systems whereby only some church leaders are seen as having the authority to interpret Scripture for others. While it may be said in principle that anyone can read and understand Scripture, hierarchical mindsets in effect limit the authority to interpret Scripture to church leaders (usually male!), the “pastors” or “shepherds” to whom the “sheep” are merely to submit obediently, often without questioning them.

This is essentially the same challenge that Luther and the other Reformers faced in the sixteenth century. The Roman Catholic Church claimed that only the Pope and the magisterium under him had the authority to speak unequivocally for God and to interpret the Scriptures properly. At the same time, the “enthusiasts” or *Schwärmer* also claimed to have received authority from God’s Spirit directly to speak for God. As the Reformers argued, once a particular person or group of people is regarded as having the final and definitive word regarding how Scripture is to be interpreted, the ultimate authority is no longer Scripture but that person or group, whose voice in effect becomes indistinguishable from that of God.

The Lutheran principle of *sola scriptura*, and especially its corollary that Scripture interprets itself, was a response to this problem.³ By claiming that all believers had divine authority to interpret the Scriptures, they avoided the problem of certain persons or groups elevating themselves to divine status in relation to others. No one is above Scripture; all are to be subject to it.

APPROACHES FOR RESPONDING TO OPPRESSIVE READINGS OF SCRIPTURE

In Western Christianity, several approaches have commonly been employed to challenge the literalistic reading of particular biblical passages that are regarded as oppressive. One approach has been to argue that certain problematic passages are not part of the original teaching of Jesus or Paul, but are instead the product of those who composed many of the New Testament writings in later decades. A second approach stresses the contextual nature of the biblical texts and the variety of different theological viewpoints they contain, as well as the difficulties involved in their composition, reconstruction, transmission

and translation. When their view of Scripture is transformed in this way, Christians no longer apply Scripture to present-day contexts in a direct and literalistic fashion.

A third approach⁴ derives from Scripture itself some basic, underlying principle that then is used to interpret the rest of Scripture. This may be understood by means of distinguishing between the “letter” and the “spirit” of the Scriptures. According to this idea, the Scriptures—in particular their ethical teachings—must be interpreted on the basis of core principles such as the requirement of the Law and the Prophets for justice, equity, and *shalom* for all, Jesus’ teaching regarding the two great commandments of loving God and neighbor, his stress on the need for practicing mercy, love, and justice, and Paul’s affirmations that fulfillment of the Law involves seeking the well-being and edification of all.⁵ In other words, while the letter of God’s law is important and necessary to understand its spirit, what ultimately is seen as being in conformity with God’s will and command is whatever promotes and contributes to the wholeness and well-being of all. Conversely, whatever undermines or destroys that wholeness and well-being must be seen as contrary to God’s will and command.

The advantage of this approach is that it provides a basis for challenging oppressive readings of Scripture and affirming the normativity of liberating ones on the basis of a normative principle derived from Scripture itself. In other words, here it is Scripture itself indicating how Scripture should be read, as its own interpreter. It affirms the simple fact that our contexts are in many ways different from those of biblical times and therefore, if we are to be faithful to the spirit of Scripture and to God’s will, we cannot apply certain passages composed in and for ancient contexts literally and directly to present-day contexts. Furthermore, while this approach still identifies Scripture with God’s inspired Word, it stresses that in Scripture God was speaking to people of other times and places, and therefore that we must discern the spirit underlying what God once said before we can apply God’s Word to our present contexts. While it is necessary to take into account the letter of the Scripture in order to understand its spirit, ultimately it is the latter that is binding for us today. By claiming that any interpretation that is not faithful to the spirit or core principles derived from the biblical text itself is not a valid reading of Scripture, literalistic interpretations of the New Testament that are deemed as oppressive can be questioned and challenged.

Although the claim that the letter of Scripture is no longer binding on us today might seem to undermine the notion that all of Scripture is God’s Word and divinely inspired, in reality this claim can be based on Scripture itself. For example, the differences between the Old and New Testaments can be used as a basis for arguing that what God originally commanded in one context, such as circumcision and the observance of dietary regulations, is no longer binding following Jesus’ coming on the basis of texts such as Mark 7:19, Acts 10:9–16, and Acts 15:1–29. On the same basis, it can be argued that the New Testament is not to be regarded as a new list of laws by stressing, for instance, Paul’s repeated insis-

tence that there is freedom among Christians in many areas and that what ultimately matters is that all act in ways that edify and build up others rather than doing them harm (see Rom 6:14; 7:4–6; 14:13–23; 1 Cor 10:23–31; 14:26; Gal 5:1, 13). By pointing out how Jesus and Paul themselves focused on the spirit rather than the letter in their own ethical teaching, we keep questions of justice, liberation and wholeness at the center of our biblical interpretation and are able to avoid oppressive readings of Scripture. At the same time, it can and should be claimed that those biblical commandments that are in continuity with the spirit of Jesus' teaching and the principles that lie at the core of the Scriptures are still to be upheld today.

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¹ On this latter notion, see Vitor Westhelle, "Luther on the Authority of Scripture," in *Lutheran Quarterly* 19 (2005), 377–78.

² As Oswald Bayer notes, while Luther believed in the external clarity of scripture, he also stressed the importance of a knowledge of the liberal arts, including the art of grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, philology and history for understanding Scripture. Jeffrey G. Silcock and Mark C. Mattes (eds), *Theology the Lutheran Way* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 57–58. For Luther's insistence on a historical rather than allegorical interpretation of the biblical texts, see Jaroslav J. Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (eds) *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–1986), 1:121, 132, 232–33; 2:164; 5:347; 6:125.

³ On the Lutheran understanding of *sola scriptura*, see especially Günther Gassman and Scott Hendrix, *Fortress Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 49–51.

⁴ See my book, *The Letter and the Spirit: Discerning God's Will in a Complex World* (Lutheran Voices; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2005). See also my article, "Freedom, the 'Letter' and the 'Spirit': Interpreting Scripture with the 'Mind of Christ'," in *Trinity Seminary Review* 26/1 (2005), 7–15.

⁵ See, for example, Isaiah 1:17; Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8; Matthew 22:37–40; 23:23; Mark 3:1–6; Luke 10:25–37; 11:42; John 13:34; Romans 13:8–10; 1 Corinthians 10:23–24; Galatians 5:14; 6:2.

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