

WHO REALLY HAS THE LAST WORD?: THE CURRENT DEBATE ON
SOLA SCRIPTURA

Is there any reason to believe that Scripture claims sole authority? In many ways, this seems like a trite question, but for a new generation of “evangelical” Christians, this is the very question that is being raised. Brian McLaren¹ is one of the chief spokesmen for an Emerging “conversation”² within the “evangelical” movement. In his book, *A New Kind of Christian*³, McLaren reveals his understanding of this question:

...The old notions of truth and knowledge are being, hmm, I was going to say “deconstructed,”⁴ but we don’t need to get into all that vocabulary. The old notions are being questioned. New understandings of truth and knowledge that might improve on them haven’t been fully developed yet. So, Dan, I’m not saying in any way that truth isn’t important. But I am saying that truth means more than factual accuracy. It means being in sync with God.⁵

Through the mouth of his fictional character “Neo,” McLaren also asserts that the Bible is not, nor does it claim to be, our “foundation.”⁶ Neither is it “authoritative” in the modern sense. It is, rather, a collection of useful stories to guide us.⁷ In a recent New York Times article, McLaren also makes the claim that the evangelical movement has

¹ Brian McLaren is a pastor at the Cedar Ridge Community Church just outside of the Baltimore area. He was named one of the 25 most influential evangelicals in America by Time magazine in a February 7, 2005 article. For more see <http://www.brianmclaren.net> and <http://www.emergentvillage.com> where he actively posts articles.

² This is the Emerging church’s preferred term for what we would normally term a “movement.”

³ This book is set as a fictional dialogue between two pastors: Dan and Neo. Dan is prototypical of the “burned-out” conservative pastor and Neo is prototypical of the “Emerging” pastor.

⁴ Deconstruction is a popular buzzword among the Emerging church’s conversations. It is often used without a clear understanding of its meaning, much like the word “postmodern.” To be optimistic, I assume that Emerging church authors intend it to mean unpacking God’s truth from man’s traditions, however, in the field of postmodern studies, deconstruction is “a literary approach, under the hermeneutics of suspicion, that hunts down tensions and inconsistencies in a text in order to set them at odds with each other and thus deconstruct the text, to generate new insights that might actually contradict what the text ostensibly says.” from D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 84.

⁵ Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 61.

⁶ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, 53.

⁷ McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, 52.

been hijacked theologically, as well as politically, by its more fundamentalist elements.

This is something he is trying to correct.⁸

McLaren is not alone in this assessment of Scripture's authority. Rob Bell⁹, another emerging church leader, also affirms this view of Scripture's authority:

This is part of the problem with continually insisting that one of the absolutes of the Christian faith must be a belief that "Scripture alone" is our guide. It sounds nice, but it is not true. In reaction to abuses by the church, a group of believers during the time of the reformation claimed that we only need the authority of the Bible. But the problem is that we got the Bible from the church voting on what the Bible even is. So when I affirm the Bible as God's Word, in the same breath I have to affirm that when those people voted, God was somehow present, guiding them to do what they did.¹⁰

It seems clear that both McLaren and Bell side with those who view Scripture as possessing divine authority only because of its role in the life of the community rather than by its nature as *theopneustos*, "God-breathed," yet they still want to stay within the "evangelical" community.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives his listeners this admonition:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of Mine, and acts upon them, may be compared to a wise man, who built his house upon the rock. And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and *yet* it did not fall, for it had been founded upon the rock. And everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does not act upon them, will be like a foolish man, who built his house upon the sand. "And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and burst against that house; and it fell, and great was its fall (Matthew 7:24-27).

The result of Jesus preaching was that the multitudes were amazed at His teaching, "for He was teaching them as *one* having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matthew 7:29). Jesus' words speak to this postfoundational, "younger evangelical"

⁸ Michael Luo, "Evangelical Debate the Meaning of 'Evangelical'", [article on-line] (accessed August 19, 2008); available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/16/weekinreview/16luo.html?ei=5090&en=aee7f4a99db2bde5&ex=1302840000&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss&pagewanted=print>

⁹ Rob Bell is the founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan. For more see <http://www.mhbcmi.org/findex.html> and <http://www.nooma.com>.

¹⁰ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 67-68.

movement. He spoke with authority, and he commanded His listeners to build their faith and practice upon His words. My fear is that the Emerging church is imbibing the postmodern agenda without reading the label or looking into the cup. In doing so, they are constructing their “evangelicalism” on the shifting sand of cultural relevance and coherence theories of truth. When the rains descend, the floods come, and the winds blow, great will be their fall.

A Definition of Authority

What do we mean by the authority of Scripture anyway? We mean that Scripture possess the supreme right, as an account of God’s will for us, to command belief and action. The Bible is the sole authority regarding what we are to believe and how we are to live. Closely related to this is the concept of power. Scripture, as the “vehicle of the Spirit”¹¹ also holds the power, the ability, to enforce belief and action.

This is because Scripture is delegated authority from Jesus Christ. A king may not be able to present his ideas in person to everyone in his kingdom. He can, however, put his will into writing. The content of that writing, since it consists of his actual desires, will carry the same authority as if he presented his ideas in person.

The author of Hebrews ties the delegated authority of Christ to the Scriptures. He says, “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in *His* Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world” (Hebrews 1:1-2). And it is all of the Scriptures testify of Christ (John 5:39).

¹¹Martin Luther, *Luther's works, vol. 30 : The Catholic Epistles* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 321 in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1988), 82.

There is a subtle danger evident in those who affirm the delegation of God's authority, but place the domain of that authority in the Church, in tradition, or in experience rather than in Scripture.

Various Views on the Delegation of God's Authority

The Church and Authority

According to this view, it is through the church that we come to understand the Bible and to be convinced of its divine authorship. The church establishes its divine origin, and the church certifies to us the divinity of the Scriptures. The church was present before the Bible and gave us the Bible; therefore, it decided which books should be included in the canon. Furthermore, it is the church that gives us the correct interpretation of the Bible.¹²

In stark contrast to this, Scripture teaches that everything necessary for salvation, faith, and life are taught in the Bible (2 Peter 1:3-4), and given by God, not the church (2 Timothy 3:16-17). This means "Christ's people hear Christ's authoritative voice in Scripture through the Holy Spirit of God, such that He works in them all that is necessary for their salvation and sanctification in its entirety."¹³

Tradition and Authority

In this view, tradition is allowed to change and redefine the meaning of the Bible. In essence, tradition is adding to or taking away from the Bible. One example would be the insistence that popular music is entirely and always unfit for use in Christian worship. John Frame, in his book, *Contemporary Worship Music*, quotes D.G. Hart:

¹² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 272.

¹³ Steve Fernandez, *The Bible: God's All Living Sufficient Word* (unpublished class notes in course ST101 Bibliology, 2001), 27.

The traditions that the Presbyterians follow, for instance, are not done to throttle religious experience but rather, as the prescribed means of communing with God and his people...Presbyterians have conducted public and family worship in specific ways because they believe that worship should conform to God's revealed truth.¹⁴

Frame's evaluation is that "Hart here virtually identifies the traditional forms of worship with the Word of God. We must worship in traditional ways, he says, because God has commanded us to. It is only by using the traditional forms that worship can 'conform to God's revealed truth.'"¹⁵

The danger of this view is that it binds the conscience in areas where Scripture gives freedom (1 Corinthians 9:22). It leads to unnecessary divisions, which displease Christ (1 Corinthians 1-3). Ultimately, it adds to and takes away from the words of the Lord in Scripture (Deuteronomy 4:2). The biblical view of the authority of Scripture forbids us to elevate tradition or to put the conclusions of historical studies on the same level as Scripture.

Experience and Authority

Regarding this view, experience, either through human reason or emotion, is the means of establishing the Bible's meaning and divine origin. In the case of the former, the extreme form is seen in the rationalists who support "scholarly" higher criticism as a means to getting at the text. In the case of the latter, it is evidenced by those who use the phrases "God told me to do this," or "the Lord is leading me" as an excuse to disobey the teaching of Scripture.

¹⁴ D.G. Hart, "Post-modern Evangelical Worship," Calvin Theological Journal 30 (1995), 456.

¹⁵ John Frame, *Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 132.

The weakness of this view is to either reduce the authority of Scripture to something that can be objectively proven or subjectively felt. It leaves no room for the transcendence of God. It does not recognize that we are limited by our humanity (Job 11:7) and by our depravity (Ephesians 2:1-3; 4:17-19).

Missional Community and Authority

There is a new view being developed in scholarly circles and popularized by leaders in the Emerging church that the authority of God has been delegated to the missional community. N.T. Wright, although not part of the Emerging church, in a recent book, articulates this view. In a rather vague fashion, he says:

Here we have the roots of a fully Christian theology of scriptural authority: planted firmly in the soil of the missionary community, confronting the powers of the world with the news of the Kingdom of God, refreshed and invigorated by the Spirit, growing particularly through the preaching and teaching of the apostles, and bearing fruit in the transformation of human lives as the start of God's project to put the whole cosmos to rights.¹⁶

He explains his definition by saying it is an integrated view of the dense and complex phrase "the authority of Scripture." He says this community must be characterized by "prayerful listening to, strenuous wrestling with, humble obedience before, and powerful proclamation of scripture, particularly in the ministries of its authorized leaders."¹⁷ This resonates with the belief of the Emerging church. It is a combination to varying degrees of church, tradition, and experience as the basis of authority.

This new understanding of the authority of Scripture is perhaps most clearly seen in the latest book by Brian McLaren. He spends a large amount of time establishing the

¹⁶ N.T. Wright, *The Last Word*, 50.

¹⁷ Wright, *The Last Word*, 114.

Bible as the story of the church community against any propositional truth (holding up the church as an authority),¹⁸ an appeal to a simplistic view of church history and tradition (elevating tradition as an authority),¹⁹ and an emphasis on the tears of joy it brings him to discover the “secret” meaning of the gospel (setting experience as an authority).²⁰ For McLaren, it seems that the authority of Scripture lies in the reader’s interpretation of Scripture’s “story” through the lens of experience, tradition, and community consensus.²¹ In one footnote, he even reinterprets the book of Romans as a “story less as a linear argument and more as a rapid-fire succession of parable-like analogies, images, narratives, and imaginary conversations...Paul proves himself less like the lawyer making arguments and more the poet making parables than many people have realized.”²²

What Wright and the Emerging church are doing is confusing the outworking of the authority of Scripture with the theology of the authority of Scripture. D.A. Carson, in his insightful critique of *The Last Word* says, “As his [N.T. Wright’s] understanding of justification developed elsewhere, has in effect elevated ecclesiology over soteriology, so his linking of God’s authority with the kingdom of rescue and transformation has in effect elevated ecclesiology over bibliology.”²³

Sola Scriptura

¹⁸ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 26-34, 43-49.

¹⁹ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 78, 209-218.

²⁰ McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 103.

²¹ In another book, McLaren states, “All four – Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience – are gifts from God, and none should be rejected.” in *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 210.

²² McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, 230.

²³ D.A. Carson, “Three Books on the Bible: A Critical Review,” [article online], http://www.reformation21.org/Past_Issues/May_2006/Shelf_Life/Shelf_Life/181/vobId_2926/pm_434/.

In contrast to these deficient views, the Bible itself asserts that it is the sole and sufficient infallible rule for faith and practice. It alone possesses the supreme right to command what we should believe and how we are to live, and it does this in a clear and understandable way. This is what the Reformers meant by the term *Sola Scriptura*.

The Berean Church is a beautiful example of *Sola Scriptura* in action. Acts 17:11 tells us, “Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily, *to see* whether these things were so.”

By means of clarification, affirmation of the Bible as the sole and supreme authority does not mean that the Bible is equally clear to all people. Nor does it mean that the Bible is the only place where truth can be found or that the instruction of the Church or tradition is not beneficial.

It does mean that a rejection of the authority of Scripture is a rejection of the authority of Christ. Jesus said, “If anyone hears My sayings, and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world, but to save the world. He who rejects Me, and does not receive My sayings, has one who judges him; the word I spoke is what will judge him at the last day” (John 12:47-48). Loyalty to our Savior and Lord is measured by loyalty to His Word, and submission to the authority of Scripture alone brings glory to Him alone. Submission to the authority of Scripture is therefore an act of worship, for it is the Scriptures that bear witness of Christ (John 5:39), and we are seeking to be conformed into the image of the Living Word by beholding Him in the written Word. (2 Corinthians 3:18). Spurgeon’s words are much needed today:

If the Word of God be in you, give it *a place of rule*. Let it be the master of your thoughts, ruling your understanding; the master of your affections, curbing your passions, and exciting in you holy desires...Put the Scripture, the inspired Word,

put Christ, the Incarnate Word himself, upon the throne of your whole being, and surrender yourself to him, without attempting to make any terms or conditions... As for me, I care not what men invent, or what they deny; the truth which I have learned from the Scriptures, by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, is the truth by which I shall stand so long as there is breath in my body; and with Luther I would say, I can do no other. To this I must stand, and let those who will do otherwise, follow after novelties till they weary of them.²⁴

²⁴ Charles Spurgeon, "Place for the Word," in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Volume 44 electronic edition* (Rio, WI: Ages Software), 513-515.