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Why Sola Scriptura is Crucial to Evangelicalism by Dr. R. C. Sproul

“The only source and norm of all Christian knowledge is the Holy Scripture.” This thematic statement introduces *De Scriptura Sacra* of Heinrich Heppé’s classic work in Reformed dogmatics and provides a succinct expression of the Reformation slogan: *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone). The two key words that are used to crystallize the *sola* character of Scripture are *source* and *norm*.

The Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* was given the status of the formal cause of the Reformation by Melancthon and his Lutheran followers. The formal cause was distinguished from the material cause of *Sola Fide* (by faith alone). Though the chief theological issue of the Reformation was the question of the matter of justification, the controversy touched heavily on the underlying question of authority. As is usually the case in theological controversy, the issue of ultimate authority lurked in the background (though it was by no means hidden or obscure) of Luther’s struggle with Rome over justification. The question of the *source* of Luther’s doctrine and the normative authority by which it was to be judged was vital to his cause.

***Sola Scriptura* and Inerrancy**

A brief historical recapitulation of the steps that led to Luther’s *Sola Scriptura* dictum may be helpful. After Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses in 1517, a series of debates, correspondence, charges, and countercharges ensued, culminating in Luther’s dramatic stand at Worms in April 1521. The two most significant transitional points between the theses of 1517 and the Diet of Worms of 1521 were the debates at Augsburg and Leipzig.



In October 1518 Luther met with Cardinal Cajetan of the Dominicans. Cajetan was acknowledged to be the most learned theologian of the Roman Curia. In the course of their discussions Cajetan was able to elicit from Luther his views on the infallibility of the pope. Luther asserted that the pope could err and claimed that Pope Clement VI’s bull *Unigenitus* (1343) was contrary to Scripture.

In the summer of 1519 the dramatic encounter between Luther and Johannes von Eck took place at Leipzig. In this exchange Eck elicited from Luther the admission of his belief that not only could the pope err but church councils could and did err as well. It was at Leipzig that Luther made clear his assertion: *Scripture alone is the ultimate, divine authority in all matters pertaining to religion*.

Gordon Rupp gives the following account:

Luther affirmed that “among the articles of John Huss and the Hussites which were condemned, are many which are truly Christian and evangelical, and which the church universal cannot condemn!” This was sensational! There was a moment of shocked silence, and then an uproar above which could be heard Duke George’s disgusted, “Gad, Sir, that’s the Plague!...” Eck pressed his advantage home, and Luther, trapped, admitted that since their decrees are also of

human law, Councils may err.

So by the time Luther stood before the Diet of Worms, the principle of *Sola Scriptura* was already well established in his mind and work. Only the Scripture carries absolute normative authority. Why? For Luther the *sola* of *Sola Scriptura* was inseparably related to the Scriptures' unique inerrancy. It was because popes could and did err and because councils could and did err that Luther came to realize the supremacy of Scripture. Luther did not despise church authority nor did he repudiate church councils as having no value. His praise of the Council of Nicea is noteworthy. Luther and the Reformers did not mean by *Sola Scriptura* that the Bible is the only authority in the church. Rather, they meant that the Bible is the only *infallible* authority in the church.

Paul Althaus summarizes the train of Luther's thought by saying:

We may trust unconditionally only in the Word of God and not in the teaching of the fathers; for the teachers of the Church can err and have erred. Scripture never errs. Therefore it alone has unconditional authority. The authority of the theologians of the Church is relative and conditional. Without the authority of the words of Scripture, no one can establish hard and fast statements in the Church.

Thus Althaus sees Luther's principle of *Sola Scriptura* arising as a corollary of the inerrancy of Scripture. To be sure, the fact that Scripture is elevated to be the sole authority of the church does not carry with it the necessary inference that it is inerrant. It could be asserted that councils, popes, and the Bible all err and still postulate a theory of *Sola Scriptura*. Scripture could be considered on a *primus inter pares* ("first among equals") basis with ecclesiastical authority, giving it a kind of primacy among errant sources. Or Scripture could be regarded as carrying unique authority solely on the basis of its being the primary historical source of the gospel. But the Reformers' view of *Sola Scriptura* was higher than this. The Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* involved inerrancy.

Sola Scriptura, ascribing to the Scriptures a unique authority, must be understood in a normative sense. Not descriptive, but rather normative authority is meant by the formula. The normative character of the *Sola Scriptura* principle may be seen by a brief survey of sixteenth-century Reformed confessions.

The Theses of Berne (1528): *The Church of Christ makes no laws or commandments without God's Word. Hence all human traditions, which are called ecclesiastical commandments, are binding upon us only in so far as they are based on and commanded by God's Word* (Sec. II).

The Geneva Confession (1536): *First we affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as a rule of faith and religion, without mixing with it any other things which might be devised by the opinion of men apart from the Word of God, and without wishing to accept for our spiritual government any other doctrine than what is conveyed to us by the same Word without addition or diminution, according to the command of our Lord* (Sec. I).

The French Confession of Faith (1559): *We believe that the Word contained in these books has proceeded from God, and receives its authority from him alone, and not from men. And inasmuch as it is the rule of all truth, containing all that is necessary for the service of God and for our salvation, it is not lawful for men, nor even for angels, to add to it, to take away from it, or to change it. Whence it follows that no authority, whether of antiquity, or custom, or numbers, or human wisdom, or judgments, or proclamations, or edicts, or decrees, or councils, or visions, or miracles, should be opposed to these Holy Scriptures, but on the contrary, all things should be examined, regulated, and reformed according to them* (Art. V).

The Belgic Confession (1561): *We receive all these books, and these only, as holy and confirmation of our faith;*

believing, without any doubt, all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Ghost witnessed in our hearts that they are from God, whereof they carry the evidence in themselves (Art. V). Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule (Art. VII).

Second Helvetic Confession (1566): *Therefore, we do not admit any other judge than Christ himself, who proclaims by the Holy Scriptures what is true, what is false, what is to be followed, or what is to be avoided (Chap. II).*

Uniformly the sixteenth-century confessions elevate the authority of Scripture over any other conceivable authority. Thus, even the testimony of angels is to be judged by the Scriptures. Why? Because, as Luther believed, the Scriptures alone are inerrant. *Sola Scriptura* as the supreme norm of ecclesiastical authority rests ultimately on the premise of the infallibility of the Word of God.

Extent of the Norm

To what extent does the *Sola Scriptura* principle of authority apply? We hear statements that declare Scripture to be the “only infallible rule of faith and practice.” Does this limit the scope of biblical infallibility? Among advocates of limited inerrancy we hear the popular notion that the Bible is inerrant or infallible only when it speaks of matters of faith and practice. Matters of history or cosmology may contain error but not matters of faith and practice. Here we see a subtle shift from the Reformation principle. Note the difference in the following propositions:

- A. The Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice.
- B. The Bible is infallible only when it speaks of faith and practice.

In premise A, “faith and practice” are generic terms that describe the Bible. In premise B, “faith and practice” presumably describe only a particular part of the Bible. Premise A affirms that there is but one infallible authority for the church. The proposition sets no content limit on the infallibility of the Scriptures. Premise B gives a reduced canon of that which is infallible; that is, the Bible is infallible only when it speaks of faith and practice. This second premise represents a clear and decisive departure from the Reformation view.

Premise A does not say that the Bible provides information about every area of life, such as mathematics or physics. But it affirms that what the Bible teaches, it teaches infallibly.

The Source of Authority

Heppe’s *sola* indicates that the Bible is not only the unique and final authority of the church but is also the “only source of all Christian knowledge.” At first glance this statement may seem to suggest that the only source of revelation open to man is that found in Scripture. But that is not the intent of Heppé’s statement, nor is it the intent of the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*.

Uniformly the Reformers acknowledged general revelation as a source of knowledge of God. The question of whether or not that general revelation yields a bona fide natural theology was and is widely disputed, but there is no serious doubt that the Reformers affirmed a revelation present in nature. Thus the *sola* does not exclude general revelation but points beyond it to the sufficiency of Scripture as the unique source of written special revelation.

The context of the *Sola Scriptura* schema with respect to source was the issue (raised over against Rome) regarding the

relationship of Scripture and Tradition. Central to the debate was the Council of Trent's declaration regarding Scripture and Tradition. (Trent was part of the Roman counteroffensive to the Reformation, and *Sola Scriptura* was not passed over lightly in this counter-offensive.)

In the **Fourth Session of the Council of Trent** the following decree was formulated: *This (Gospel), of old promised through the Prophets in the Holy Scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, promulgated first with His own mouth, and then commanded it to be preached by His Apostles to every creature as the source at once of all saving truth and rules of conduct. It also clearly perceives that these truths and rules are contained in the written books and in the unwritten traditions, which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand. Following then, the examples of the Orthodox fathers, it receives and venerates with a feeling of piety and reverence all the books both of the Old and New Testaments, since one God is the author of both; also the traditions, whether they relate to faith or to morals, as having been dictated either orally by Christ or by the Holy Ghost, and preserved in the Catholic church in unbroken succession.*

In this decree the Roman Catholic church apparently affirmed *two* sources of special revelation—Scripture and the Tradition of the church—although in recent years this “dual source” theory has come into question within the Roman church.

G. C. Berkouwer's work on Vatican Council II provides a lengthy discussion of current interpretations of the Tridentine formula on Scripture and Tradition. Some scholars argue that Tradition adds no new content to Scripture but merely serves either as a depository in the life of the church or as a formal interpretive tool of the church. A technical point of historical research concerning Trent sheds some interesting light on the matter. In the original draft of the fourth session of Trent the decree read that “the truths ... are contained partly [*partim*] in Scripture and partly [*partim*] in the unwritten traditions.” But at a decisive point in the Council's deliberations two priests, Nacchianti and Bonnuccio rose in protest against the *partim ... partim* formula. These men protested on the grounds that this view would destroy the uniqueness and sufficiency of Scripture. All we know from that point on is that the words *partly ... partly* were removed from the text and replaced by the word *and (et)*. Did this mean that the Council responded to the protest and perhaps left the relationship between Scripture and Tradition purposely ambiguous? Was the change stylistic, meaning that the Council still maintained two distinct sources of revelation? These questions are the focus of the current debate among Roman theologians.

One thing is certain. The Roman church has interpreted Trent as affirming two sources of special revelation since the sixteenth century. Vatican I spoke of two sources. The papal encyclical *Humani Generis* spoke of “sources of revelation.” Even Pope John XXIII spoke of Scripture *and* Tradition in *Ad Petri Cathedram*.

Not only has the dual-source theory been confirmed both by ecumenical councils and papal encyclicals, but tradition has been appealed to on countless occasions to validate doctrinal formulations that divide Rome and Protestantism. This is particularly true regarding decisions in the area of Mariology.

Over against this dual-source theory stands the *sola* of *Sola Scriptura*. Again, the Reformers did not despise the treasury of church tradition. The great councils of Nicea, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople receive much honor in Protestant tradition. The Reformers themselves gave tribute to the insights of the church fathers. Calvin's love for Augustine is apparent throughout the *Institutes*. Luther's expertise in the area of Patristics was evident in his debates with Cajetan and Eck. He frequently quotes the fathers as highly respected ecclesiastical authorities. But the difference is this: For the Reformers no church council, synod, classical theologian, or early church father is regarded as infallible.

All are open to correction and critique. We have no *Doctor Irrefragabilis* of Protestantism.

Protestant churches have tended to be confessional in character. Subscription to confessions and creeds has been mandatory for the clergy and parish of many denominations. Confessions have been used as a test of orthodoxy and conformity to the faith and practice of the church. But the confessions are all regarded as reformable. They are considered reformable because they are considered fallible. But the *Sola Scriptura* principles in its classic application regards the Scripture as irreformable because of its infallibility. Thus the two primary thrusts of *Sola Scriptura* point to:

1) Scripture's uniqueness as normative authority and

2) its uniqueness as the source of special revelation. Norm and source are the twin implicates of the *Sola Scriptura* principle.

Is *Sola Scriptura* the Essence of Christianity?

In a recent publication on questions of Scripture, Bernard Ramm wrote an essay entitled, "Is 'Scripture Alone' the Essence of Christianity?" Using the nineteenth-century German penchant for the quest of the "*Wesen*" of Christianity as a jumping-off point, Ramm gives a brief history of the liberal-conservative controversy concerning the role of Scripture in the Christian faith. Defining *Wesen* as "the essence of something, the real spirit or burden of a treatise, the heart of the matter," he concludes that Scripture is not the *Wesen* of Christianity. He provides a historical survey to indicate that neither the Reformers nor the strong advocates of inerrancy, A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, believed that *Sola Scriptura* was the essence of Christianity. Ramm cites numerous quotations from Hodge and Warfield that speak of the Scriptures as being "absolutely infallible," and "without error of facts or doctrines." Yet these men affirmed that "Christianity was true independently of any theory of inspiration, and its great doctrines were believable within themselves."

Ramm goes on to express grave concern about the present debate among evangelicals concerning inerrancy. Here his concern focuses not on the teaching of Hodge and Warfield but on the attitudes of their contemporary disciples who, in Ramm's opinion, go beyond their forefathers in asserting a particular view of Scripture as being Christianity's essence. Ramm writes:

*From the other writings of Warfield in particular, it would be impossible to say that he identified the *Wesen* of Christianity with his view of Holy Scripture. He was enough of a historian of theology to avoid saying that. The "inspiration" article was an essay in strategy. However, among current followers of the so-called Warfield position there have been certain shifts away from the original strategic stance of the essay. One's doctrine of Scripture has become now the first and most important doctrine, one's theory of the *wesen* of Christianity, so that all other doctrines have validity now only as they are part of the inerrant Scripture. Thus evangelical teachers, or evangelical schools or evangelical movements, can be judged as to whether or not they are true to the *wesen* of Christianity by their theory of inspiration. It can be stated even more directly: an evangelical has made a theory of inspiration the *wesen* of Christianity if he assumes that the most important doctrine in a man's theology, and most revelatory of the entire range of his theological thought, is his theology of inspiration.*

It appears from this statement that the "essence" of Ramm's concern for the present state of evangelicalism is that one's doctrine of Scripture is viewed as the essence or *wesen* of Christianity. This writer can only join hands with Ramm in total agreement with his concern. To make one's view of Scripture in general or of inspiration in particular

the essence of Christianity would be to commit an error of the most severe magnitude. To subordinate the importance of the gospel itself to the importance of our historical source book of it would be to obscure the centrality of Christ. To subordinate *Sola Fide* to *Sola Scriptura* would be to misunderstand radically the *wesen* of the Reformation. Clearly Ramm is correct in taking his stand on this point with Hodge, Warfield, and the Reformers. Who can object to that?

One may be troubled, however, by a portion of Ramm's stated concern. Who are these "current followers" of Warfield who in fact do maintain that *Sola Scriptura* is the heart or essence of Christianity? What disciple of Warfield's has ever maintained that *Sola Scriptura* is essential to salvation? Ramm provides us with no names or documentary evidence to demonstrate that his deep concern is warranted.

To be sure, strong statements have been made by followers of the Warfield school of the crucial importance of *Sola Scriptura* and the centrality of biblical authority to all theological disputes. Perhaps these statements have contained some "overkill" in the passion of debate, which is always regrettable. We must be very cautious in our zeal to defend a high view of Scripture not to give the impression that we are talking about an article on which our salvation depends.

We can cite the following statements by advocates of the Warfield school that could be construed as a possible basis for Ramm's concern. In *God's Inerrant Word*, J. I. Packer makes the following assertion:

What Luther thus voiced at Worms shows the essential motivation and concern, theological and religious, of the entire Reformation movement: namely that the Word of God alone must rule, and no Christian man dare do other than allow it to enthrone itself in his conscience and heart.

Here Packer calls the notion of *Sola Scriptura* "the essential motivation and concern" of the Reformation. In itself this quote certainly suggests that Packer views *Sola Scriptura* as *the* essence of the Reformation.

However, in defense of Packer it must be noted that to say *Sola Scriptura* was the essential motivation of the Reformation movement is not to say that *Sola Scriptura* is the essence of Christianity. He is speaking here of a historical controversy. That *Sola Scriptura* was at the heart of the controversy and central to the debate cannot be doubted. To say that *Sola Scriptura* was an essential motif or concern of the Reformation cannot be doubted. That it was *the essential* concern may be brought into question; this may be regraded as an overstatement. But again, in fairness to Packer, it must be noted that earlier in his essay he had already indicated that Justification by Faith Alone was the material principle. So he had already maintained that *Sola Scriptura* was subordinate to *Sola Fide* in the controversy. In any case, though the word *essential* is used, there is no hint here that Packer maintains that *Sola Scriptura* is *the* essence of Christianity.

In a recent unpublished essay, Richard Lovelace of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary cites both Harold Lindsell and Francis Schaeffer as men who have sounded urgent warnings concerning the relationship between inerrancy and evangelicalism. Lovelace cites the following statements of Schaeffer:

There is not use of evangelicalism seeming to get larger and larger, if at the same time appreciable parts ... are getting soft at that which is the central core, namely the Scriptures.... We must say most lovingly but clearly: evangelicalism is not consistently evangelical unless there is a line drawn between those who take a full view of Scripture and those who do not.

Again Schaeffer is cited: "Holding to a strong view of Scripture or not holding to it is the watershed of the evangelical world." In these statements Francis Schaeffer maintains that the Scriptures are:

- 1) the “central core” of evangelicalism,
- 2) a mark of “consistent evangelicalism,” and
- 3) the “watershed of the evangelical world.”

These are strong assertions about the role of *Sola Scriptura*, but they are made with reference to evangelicalism, not Christianity (though I am sure Schaeffer believes evangelicalism is the purest expression of Christianity to be found). Evangelicalism refers to a historical position or movement. When he speaks of “watersheds,” he is speaking of crucial historical turning points. When he speaks of “consistent” evangelicalism, he implies there may be such a thing as inconsistent evangelicalism.

The troublesome quote of Schaeffer is that one in which he says the Scriptures are “the central core” of evangelicalism. Here “core” is in the singular with the definite article giving it a *sola* character. Does Schaeffer mean that the Bible is the core of evangelicalism and the gospel is the husk? Is *Sola Scriptura* the center and *Sola Fide* at the periphery of evangelicalism? It is hard to think that Schaeffer would make such an assertion. Indeed, one may question if Schaeffer means what he in fact does say here. Had he said, “Scripture is *at* the core of evangelicalism,” there would be no dispute. But to say it *is* the core appears an overstatement. Perhaps we have here a slip of the pen, which any of us can and frequently do make.

In similar fashion Harold Lindsell may be quoted: “Is the term ‘evangelical’ broad enough in its meaning to include within it believers in inerrancy and believers in an inerrancy limited to matters of faith and practice?” Lindsell raises the question of whether or not inerrancy of the entire Bible is essential to the term *evangelical*. The question raised is: If *Sola Scriptura* in its fullest sense is of the *Wesen* of evangelicalism, can one who espouses limited inerrancy be genuinely called evangelical? The issue is the meaning of the term evangelical. Does it carry with it the automatic assumption of full inerrancy? Again we must point out the difference between the historical label “evangelical” and what is essential to Christianity.

None of the scholars mentioned have said that adherence to inerrancy or *Sola Scriptura* is essential to salvation. None have *Sola Scriptura* as the *Wesen* of Christianity.

It could be said that the argument of the writer of this chapter is constructed on straw men who “come close” to asserting that *Sola Scriptura* is the essence of Christianity but who, in the final analysis, shrink for such an assertion. But it is not my purpose to create straw men. It is simply to find some basis for Ramm’s assertion about modern followers of Warfield. Since I have not been able to find any followers of Warfield who assert *Sola Scriptura* as the *Wesen* of Christianity, the best I can do is to cite examples of statements that could possibly be misconstrued to assert that. It is probably charity that restrained Ramm from naming those he had in mind. But unfortunately, the absence of names casts a shadow of suspicion over all modern followers of Warfield who hold to full inerrancy.

Though advocates of inerrancy in the full sense of *Sola Scriptura* do not regard it as being essential to salvation, they do maintain that the principle is *crucial* to Christianity and to consistent evangelicalism. That in Scripture we have divine revelation is no small matter. That the gospel rests not on human conjecture or relational speculation is of vital importance. But there is no quarrel with Ramm on these points. He summarizes his own position by saying:

1. There is no questioning of the *Sola Scriptura* in theology. Scripture is the supreme and final authority in theological decision-making.

2. One's views of revelation, inspiration, and interpretation are important. They do implicate each other. Our discussion rather has been whether a certain view of inspiration could stand as the *wesen* of Christianity. We have in no manner suggested that matters of revelation, inspiration, and interpretation are unimportant in theology.

Here we delight in agreement with this strong affirmation of the crucial importance of *Sola Scriptura*.

Strangely, however, Ramm continues his summary by saying, “*If the integrity of other evangelicals, evangelical schools, or evangelical movements are assessed by their view of inspiration, then, for them, inspiration has become the wesen of Christianity.*” The inference Ramm draws at this point is at once puzzling and astonishing, and perhaps we meet here merely another case of overstatement or a slip of the pen. How would it follow from an assessment of others' evangelicalism as being consistent or inconsistent according to their view of Scripture that inspiration has become the *wesen* of Christianity? This inference involves a quantum leap of logic.

If the first two points of Ramm's summary are correct—that *Sola Scriptura* is important and that it implicates views of interpretation and theological decision making—why should not a school's or movement's integrity (a fully integrated stance) be assessed by this principle? Though *Sola Scriptura* is not the *wesen* of Christianity, it is still of crucial importance. If a school or movement softens its view of Scripture, that does not mean it has repudiated the essence of Christianity. But it does mean that a crucial point of doctrine and classical evangelical unity has been compromised. If, as Ramm suggests, one's view of Scripture is so important, then a weakening of that view should concern us.

The issue of full or limited inerrancy is a serious one among those within the framework of historic evangelicalism. In the past a healthy and energetic spirit of cooperation has existed among evangelicals from various and diverse theological persuasions and ecclesiastical affiliations. Lutherans and Baptists, Calvinists and Arminians, and believers of all sorts have united in evangelical activity. What has been the cohesive force of that unity? In the first instance, there has been a consensus of catholic articles of faith, such as the deity of Christ. In the second instance, a strong point of unity has been the cardinal doctrine of the Protestant Reformation: justification by faith alone. In the last instance, there has been the unifying factor of *Sola Scriptura* in the sense of full inerrancy. The only “creed” that has bound the Evangelical Theological Society together, for example, has been the affirmation of inerrancy. Now that point of unity is in jeopardy. The essence of Christianity is not the issue. But a vital point of consistent evangelicalism is.

***Sola Scriptura* and Limited Inerrancy**

Is *Sola Scriptura* compatible with a view of Scripture that limits inerrancy to matters of faith and practice? Theoretically it would seem to be possible if “faith and practice” could be separated from any part of Scripture. So long as biblical teaching regarding faith and practice were held to be normative for the Christian community, there would appear to be no threat to the essence of Christianity. However, certain problems exist with such a view of Scripture that do seriously threaten the essence of Christianity.

The first major problem we encounter with limited inerrancy is the problem of *canon reduction*. The canon or “norm” of Scripture is reduced *de facto* to that content relating to faith and practice. This immediately raises the hermeneutical question concerning what parts of Scripture deal with faith. As evangelicals wrestle among themselves in intramural debates, they must keep one eye focused on the liberal world of biblical scholarship, for the principle of the reduction of canon to matters of “faith” is precisely the chief operative in Bultmann's hermeneutic. Bultmann thinks we must clear away the prescientific and faulty historical “husk” of Scripture to get to the viable kernel of “faith.” Thus, although Bultmann has no inerrant kernel or *kerygma* to fall back on, his problem of canon reduction

remains substantially the same as that of those who limit inerrancy to faith and practice.

Before someone cries foul or cites the informal fallacy of *argumentum ad hominem* (abusive) or the “guilt by association” fallacy, let this concern be clarified. I am not saying that advocates of limited inerrancy are cryptic or even incipient Bultmannians, but that there is one very significant point of similarity between the two schools: *canon reductionism*. Evangelical advocates of limited inerrancy are not expected to embrace Bultmann’s mythical view of New Testament supernaturalism. But their method has no inherent safeguard from an arbitrary delimitation of the scope of the biblical canon.

The second serious problem, closely related to the first, is the problem of the relationship of faith and history, perhaps the most serious question of contemporary New Testament scholarship. If we limit the notion of inerrancy to matters of faith and practice, what becomes of biblical history? Is the historical substratum of the gospel negotiable? Are only those portions of the biblical narrative that have a clear bearing on faith inerrant? How do we escape dehistoricizing the gospel and relegating it to a level of supratemporal existential “decision”? We know that the Bible is not an ordinary history book but a book of *redemptive* history. But is it not also a book of *redemptive history*? If we exclude the realm of history from the category of inspiration or inerrancy either in whole or in part, do we not inevitably lose the gospel?

The third problem we face with limiting inerrancy to matters of faith and practice is an apologetic one. To those critics outside the fellowship of evangelicals, the notion of “limited inerrancy” appears artificial and contrived. Limited inerrancy gets us off the apologetic hook by making us immune to religious-historical criticism. We can eat our cake and have it too. The gospel is preserved; and our faith and practice remains intact while we admit errors in matters of history and cosmology. We cannot believe the Bible concerning earthly things, but we stake our lives on what it says concerning heavenly things. That approach was totally abrogated by our Lord (John 3:12).

How do we explain and defend the idea that the Bible is divinely superintended in part of its content but not all of it? Which part is inspired? Why only the faith and practice parts? Again, which are the faith and practice parts? Can we not justly be accused of “weaseling” if we adopt such a view? We remove our faith from the arena of historical verification nor falsification. This is a fatal blow for apologetics as the reasoned defense of Christianity.

Finally, we face the problem of the domino theory. Frequently this concern is dismissed out of hand as being so much alarmism. But our doctrine of Scripture is not a child’s game of dominoes. We know instances in which men have abandoned belief in full inerrancy but have remained substantially orthodox in the rest of their theology. We are also aware of the sad instances in which full inerrancy is affirmed yet the substance of theology is corrupt. Inerrancy is no guarantee of biblical orthodoxy. Yet even a cursory view of church history has shown some pattern of correlation between a weakening of biblical authority and serious defection regarding the *Wesen* of Christianity. The *wesen* of nineteenth-century liberalism is hardly the gospel evangelicals embrace.

We have already seen, within evangelical circles, a move from limited inerrancy to challenges of matters of faith and practice. When the apostle Paul is depicted as espousing two mutually contradictory views of the role of women in the church, we see a critique of apostolic teaching that does touch directly on the practice of the church. In the hotly disputed issue of homosexuality we see denominational commissions not only supplementing biblical authority with corroborative evidence drawn from modern sources of medical psychological study but also “correcting” the biblical view by such secular authority. The direction of these movements of thought is a matter of grave concern for advocates of full inerrancy.

We face a crisis of authority in the church. It is precisely our faith and our practice that is in question. It is for faith and practice that we defend a fully infallible rule—a total view of *Sola Scriptura*.

We know some confusion has existed (much unnecessarily) about the meaning of full inerrancy. But with all the problems of definition that plague the concept, we do not think it has died the death of a thousand qualifications.

We are concerned about *Sola Scriptura* for many reasons. But we affirm it in the final analysis not because it was the view of the Reformers, not because we slavishly revere Hodge and Warfield, not even because we are afraid of dominoes or a difficult apologetic. We defend it and express our deep concern about it because we believe it is the truth. It is a truth we do not want to negotiate. We earnestly desire dialogue with our evangelical brothers and collaborators who differ from us. We want to heal the wounds that controversy so frequently brings. We know our own views are by no means inerrant. But we believe inerrancy is true and is of vital importance to our common cause of the gospel.

Further dialogue within the evangelical world should at least help us clarify what real differences there are among us. Such clarification is important if there is to be any hope of resolving those differences. We do not intend to communicate that a person's Christian faith stands or falls with his view of Scripture. We do not question the Christian commitment of advocates of limited inerrancy. What we do question is the correctness of their doctrine of Scripture, as the question ours. But we consider this debate, as serious as it is, a debate between members of the household of God. May our Father bring us to unity here as he has in many glorious affirmations of his gospel.

From Dr. R.C. Sproul's article in [The Foundations of Biblical Authority](#). James M. Boice, ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980.

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