

## **The *Sola Scriptura* Principle in the Current Debate<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Introduction**

In this article, I would like to present the contemporary Evangelical position on the *sola scriptura* principle, in the context of ecumenical dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church and the brief conversation with a current Adventist position. The preliminary working definition of the *sola scriptura* principle, from the conventional Protestant/Evangelical standpoint, may include:

- i. the primary and absolute authority of the Scripture, as originally given, as the final court of appeal for all doctrine and practice; ii. the sufficiency of the Scripture as the final written authority of God; iii. the clearness (perspicuity) of the essential biblical message; iv. the primacy of the Scriptures over all tradition rather than a total rejection of tradition and, v. the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture without external authority.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This article is partially a brief excerpt from my *Sola Scriptura: Benedict XVI's Theology of the Word of God*, PhD dissertation, North-West University, RSA, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Norman L. Geisler & Ralph E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 178-179.

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In the ecumenical dialogue between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics elements (ii), (iv) and (v) become especially pertinent. This is the reason I have chosen to discuss the principle *by Scripture alone* from the perspective of: (1) the scope of the authority of the Scripture (and tradition) within the particular debate about the nature of the Word of God as a broader expression for God's revelation, and (2) hermeneutical principles for biblical interpretation that endorse either self-sufficiency of Scripture or a need for a teaching office of the Church.

Dutch theologian Peter van Bemmelen, retired professor of Andrews University and my colleague, who once taught at the University of the Southern Caribbean, brilliantly recognized the general and modern trend of the shift in Evangelical theology regarding the understanding of the authority of Scripture and nature of tradition. He says:

Protestants are moving closer to the Catholic position. Even evangelical scholars have begun to put greater emphasis on the consensus and authority of Christian tradition. It seems that this inevitably must lead to a curtailment of the *sola scriptura* principle, which for many centuries was held to be a fundamental principle of Protestantism.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, regarding the hermeneutical principles, a notable evangelical scholar says: "Contemporary evangelical scholars widely differ from hermeneutical emphasis in the writings of Reformers. Evangelical studies converge with non-evangelical (catholic?) studies in many ways."<sup>4</sup> Both van Bemmelen and Goldsworthy, therefore, underline the fact of resurgence of the Evangelical understanding of tradition and consequently restrictions of the principle *by Scripture alone*.

My task in this article is to investigate the feasibility of these observations. First, the *sola scriptura* principle was redefined by certain theological modifications even during the early post-reformation and pre-evangelical period. Several examples validate this point. My focus will not be on a specific Christian denomination or tradition but on several representatives who belong to diverse protestant traditions.

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<sup>3</sup> Peter van Bemmelen, "Revelation and Inspiration" in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*; ed. George W. Reid (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 52.

<sup>4</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 191-192.

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### Pre-Evangelical Understanding of the Scripture Principle

John Wesley (1703-1791), father of Methodism, believed that the pathway to spiritual truth was threefold: Scripture, reason and experience.<sup>5</sup> The conventional Wesleyan Quadrilateral apparently includes Tradition as well which is indeed the experience of “historical consciousness” of the community of faith. As a continuation of Protestant orthodoxy it seems apparent that Methodism drifted from the original Reformers’ *by Scripture only*. Reason, experience and Tradition played equal roles in the theological and spiritual search for the ultimate truth of God. In this historical context it seems that this broadening of the Scripture principle brought a new understanding of revelation and the Word of God in general, as well as the endorsement of *prima scriptura* principle. If Scripture is not self-sufficient, or if it is somehow limited in the spiritual and theological understanding of God, a new condition appears in the theological understanding of *revelation*. Scripture ceased to be the only focal point of God’s revelatory activity. This is exactly what neo-orthodox theologians emphasized in their theological structure.

Traditional Reformers’ theology of Scripture is primarily shaped and modified by the twentieth century neo-orthodox views of God’s revelation. Emil Brunner (1889-1966) believed that the idea whereby the Word of God was equated with the words of Scripture goes back to a late Jewish innovation.<sup>6</sup> The Bible is human word *about* God, not God *Himself* as He confronts me in Christ, His transcended Word, argues Brunner.<sup>7</sup> It is not personal but impersonal objective revelation. There is an abyss between human words and God’s Word. The Bible is a human historical word about the divine *personal* Word,<sup>8</sup> and for that reason it participates in the inadequacy and fallibility of all that is human.<sup>9</sup> Christianity, therefore, is

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<sup>5</sup> George A. Turner, “John Wesley as an Interpreter of Scripture” pp.156-188 in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, John F. Walvoord, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 174.

<sup>6</sup> Emil Brunner quoted in Paul King Jewett, “Emil Brunner’s Doctrine of Scripture” pp.210-238 in *Inspiration and Interpretation*, John F. Walvoord, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 212.

<sup>7</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Word of God and Modern Man* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), 52.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-49. See Jewett, 216.

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not about “the words” but “the Word of God.”<sup>10</sup> Scripture represents “*human* testimony about God.”<sup>11</sup> It appears that Brunner believes that the Bible bears record of revelational events. It is not revelation in itself.<sup>12</sup> For neo-orthodoxy revelation is continuously a subjective experience. It is widely accepted that Brunner stressed the non-propositional nature of revelation and the non-identity of God’s Word with the human words of the Bible.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, Brunner, as a neo-orthodox theologian, claimed that Jesus Christ is Himself the only ultimate revelation of God and *personal* Word of God,<sup>14</sup> and as such the only true *meaning* of the Scriptures.<sup>15</sup> For Brunner, The Bible is not the ground of Christian faith, but its means. “I do not believe that Jesus is the Christ because I believe the Bible. Because I believe in Christ, I believe in the Scriptures” says Brunner.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the Bible *becomes* the Word of God to me in the moment of revelation when I become “contemporaneous” with Christ.<sup>17</sup> It has *only* instrumental authority, and it is closely related to historical encounter.<sup>18</sup> If Brunner’s position is disapproved, from the perspective of traditional Protestantism, his theology is but a step further in the direction to say that God may reveal Himself apart from and even outside of the Bible. This might be a limitation of scriptural authority and self-sufficiency. Furthermore, Paul King Jewett, in his “Emil Brunner’s Doctrine of Scripture” (1957), asks a crucial question:

Though *we* may be bound to a given means, God is sovereign. Why should he be bound to means? Since the Bible is not itself God’s Word,

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<sup>10</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Philosophy of Religion: From the Standpoint of Protestant Theology* (London: James Clarke, 1958), 152.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 217-8.

<sup>13</sup> Stanley Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Theology: God & the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992), 81-86; 83.

<sup>14</sup> Brunner, *The Word of God and Modern Man*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, *The Philosophy of Religion*, 152.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Paul King Jewett, “Emil Brunner’s Doctrine of Scripture,” pp.210-238 in John F. Walvoord, ed. *Inspiration and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 219.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>18</sup> For further research see John Goldingay, *Models for Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 299-313.

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but only a means of revelation, who is to say that God could not speak through other means, other books?<sup>19</sup>

Brunner would have replied that the Bible, so far as it is God's Word *to us*, is not like other religious books.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, post-Reformational *limitation* of scriptural authority, as the factual written Word of God, whether by reason, encounter or tradition is more than evident. The concept of the Word of God has been reformulated into a broader principle that encompasses revelation(s) of God "beyond what is merely written" in the Scriptures. In these ecumenical terms, Joseph Ratzinger and the current Pope Benedict XVI says:

It is untenable on the basis of the objective structure of the Word, on account of its own dynamic, which points beyond what is written. It is above all the most profound meaning of the Word that is grasped only when we move beyond what is merely written.<sup>21</sup>

Apparently, Joseph Ratzinger shared the neo-orthodox position on God's revelation. Brunner's project of the encounter theology is, therefore, a valuable ecumenical input about Jesus Christ as the ultimate and personal Word of God that validates the witness of the Scriptures and gives meaning to the proclaimed Word. Ecumenical theologian, *par excellence*, however, is his contemporaneous theological giant, Karl Barth.

Karl Barth (1886-1968), probably the most important Christian thinker of the twentieth century, similarly believed that the Bible was human testimony in which the voice of God could be heard. In as much as the Bible is proclaimed in the Church it becomes the Word of God.<sup>22</sup> The Word revealed and the Word proclaimed takes logical precedence. However, three forms of the Word of God (the Word as revelation, proclaimed Word and the written Word) should never be regarded in isolation. For Barth,

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<sup>19</sup> Jewett, 237.

<sup>20</sup> Brunner, *The Philosophy of Religion*, 154.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Pilgrim Fellowship of the Fathers* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005), 34.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, vol 1, part 1* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1936), 136.

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Scripture is *the witness* to the revealed Word or divine revelation.<sup>23</sup> In his own words:

The Bible, further, is not itself and in itself God's past revelation and is God's past revelation in the form of attestation. By really attesting revelation the Bible is the Word of God.<sup>24</sup>

Correctly understood, this "attestation" (verification or testimony) is always related to a crucial agent of God's revelation, personal Word of God through Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, though not revelation, Scripture might be called God's written Word.<sup>25</sup> "By *becoming* the Word of God in virtue of the actuality of revelation, the Bible and proclamation are also the Word," says Barth.<sup>26</sup> Scripture, therefore, *becomes* the Word of God in revelational encounter within human existence, or as Bruce McCormack nicely put it "the being of the Bible as the Word of God, as Holy Scripture, is a *being in becoming*."<sup>27</sup> This is an apparent inspiration of existential philosophy. Barth unequivocally stated:

The Bible is the Word of God only as a means because again and again apart from human decision or initiative God *uses* the Scriptures to produce the miracle of faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup>

The witness of the Holy Scripture is in fact witness to Jesus Christ.<sup>29</sup> In the spirit of Luther Barth unequivocally affirms that the Bible is the Word of God as the genuine and supreme criterion of the proclamation and also of dogmatics.<sup>30</sup> In fact, Luther's paradox of equation/distinction of the

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<sup>23</sup> Idem, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, vol. 1, part 2* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1956), 457, 462-463, 473, 479.

<sup>24</sup> Idem, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, vol 1, part 1*, 125.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 136. See also Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth" *In Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, Carson, D.A. & Woodbridge, John D., eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books/Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1995), 290.

<sup>26</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, vol 1, part 1*, 131; 136.

<sup>27</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism" *In Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*, Bacote, Vincent E., Miguélez, Laura C. & Okholm, Dennis L. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 55-56.

<sup>28</sup> Barth quoted in Grenz & Olson, 71.

<sup>29</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, vol 1, part 2*, 485.

<sup>30</sup> Idem, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, vol 1, part 1*, 302.

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Word of God/revelation and the Holy Scriptures is partially endorsed.<sup>31</sup> Magisterial reformers, of course, did not accept so-called position “Tradition 0” (or *solo scriptura*) as Radical reformers did, but endorsed the position “Tradition I” which takes into consideration Church fathers and the broader Church tradition.<sup>32</sup>

Placing Barth’s theology into an active ecumenical dialogue with Roman Catholicism there are a few remarks he made about the Word of God that might be alluring in this context. Barth unequivocally affirmed:

Holy Scripture is the Word of God to the Church and for the Church. We will not be obedient to the Church but to the Word of God, and therefore in the true sense to the Church.<sup>33</sup>

In ecumenical terms, Barth, therefore, affirms the paradoxical tension between the authority of the Scriptures (the Word of God) and the authority of the Church. Obedience to the Word of God always comes first because it is the obedience to Christ as the revealed Word of God, but this obedience is, by its virtue of submission to the community that produced Scripture,

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<sup>31</sup> This paradox is described in the following statement: “Hence, *Word and Scripture were neither identified nor separated by Luther despite the demands of human reason*. Faith testifies rather to a self-disclosing God hidden under the “servant rags” of the testimony of believers to God’s mighty acts in history. *Luther does not pretend to understand or explain this mystery of divine revelation*. In the simplicity of faith which gratefully accepts all the precious gifts of God as miracles, Luther characteristically treasures the Scriptures as “the swaddling clothes and manger in which Christ was wrapped and laid (WA 10, 576). The manger is not itself the baby, but one must first go to the manger if the baby is to be found: so too with Holy Scriptures and the Word of God” (William H. Lazareth, “Luther’s ‘Sola Scriptura’: Traditions of the Gospel for Norming Christian Righteousness” *In Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, Neuhaus, Richard John, ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989], 60.)

<sup>32</sup> Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Canon Press, 2001), 97; 128; 146. Mathison argues: “*The reformers did not reject tradition; they rejected one particular concept of tradition in favor of another concept of tradition*. The Reformation debate was originally between adherents of two different concepts of tradition. One concept, which had its origins in the first centuries of the Church, defined Scripture as the sole source of revelation and the only final and infallible standard. The other concept of tradition, which was not hinted at until the fourth century and which was not clearly expounded until the late Middle Ages, defined Scripture and tradition as two separate and complementary sources of revelation” (Ibid., 345).

<sup>33</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, vol. 1, part 2*, 475.

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obedience to the Church as well. This makes Barth fully ecumenical. Both the authority of the Word and the Church are preserved in the dynamic and dialectic way. Nevertheless, the additional emphasis on the obedience to the Church (endorsement of tradition) seems to curtail the conventional Protestant understanding of the *sola scriptura* principle both in its element of the authority and hermeneutics.

In the same neo-orthodox terms some of the notable contemporary theologians like Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928- ), a German theologian of revelation as history, emphasized that the Bible cannot be a deposit of divine revelation. Pannenberg affirmed that Scripture is the sourcebook of a specific tradition in relation to *history* of religions. Therefore, the doctrine of Scripture cannot any longer be the foundation of theological reflection. The authority of the Scripture is the goal and not the presupposition of theology.<sup>34</sup> Pannenberg's theory of *revelation as history* is an apparent constraint on a traditional understanding of the *sola scriptura* principle. Scripture, according to evangelical tradition, is not just the inclusive part of God's revelation *as* history but an exclusive deposit and criterion of His special revelation *in* history.

Even C. S. Lewis (1898-1963), probably the most populist theologian of the twentieth century, did not see Scripture as God's Word proper but rather the vehicle that has been chosen and elevated above itself for this calling. In the spirit of Barth and Brunner he claims:

It is Christ himself, not the Bible, who is the true Word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of good teachers, will bring us to Him.<sup>35</sup>

Scripture, thus, has only instrumental authority and represents the means through which God's *personal* Word speaks.

To sum up, even before modern Evangelicalism adhered to the modification of the Scripture principle, a curtailing of the *sola scriptura* principle had become evident. On the basis of the nature of revelation and the concept of the authority of the Word of God, these theologians claim that Scripture cannot be equated with the general revelation of the Word of

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<sup>34</sup> Grenz & Olson, 196.

<sup>35</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Letters* quoted in Scott R. Burson & Jerry L. Walls. *C. S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer: Lessons for a New Century from the Most Influential Apologists of Our Time* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 127.

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God, and that Scripture principle must be understood only in conjunction with an experience of the encounter with God (neo-orthodoxy), or antiquity of church tradition and constructions of human reason (traditional and ecumenical Roman Catholicism). Scripture, however, remains the Word of God not only as a witness, but also as a revelation of God. It seems apparent, therefore, that ecumenical efforts for the unification of Protestant/Evangelical and Catholic positions had started long before modern Evangelicalism.

#### **Contemporary Evangelical Theology of the Scripture Principle**

In regard to the evangelical understanding of Scripture, first of all, we must have in mind the fact that evangelical thought underwent considerable evolutionary process. In this development, varieties of evangelical understanding of Scripture emerged.<sup>36</sup>

In this section, I will try to situate different notable representatives of evangelical Scripture principle in its historical context of the recent period, namely, to present each of them consecutively both in the historical and theological sense of the understanding of the *sola scriptura* principle. Prior to this task I think it would be appropriate to mention the unified evangelical understanding of the Bible—the so called “high view” of the Scriptures.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> That is why in hermeneutics, for example, we have different forms of evangelical hermeneutics: evangelical docetism, evangelical Zionism, evangelical Judaism, evangelical Bultmannism, evangelical Schleiermacherism, evangelical Catholicism, evangelical pluralism, or evangelical pragmatism (Goldsworthy, 167-180).

<sup>37</sup> Steve Lemke, in his “Contours of a Constructive Evangelical View of Biblical Authority and Inspiration” brightly summarized this view in the following statements:

1. A high view of biblical inspiration affirms that all Scripture is true.
2. A high view of biblical inspiration presupposes a confessional stance (hermeneutic of affirmation rather than a hermeneutic of suspicion).
3. A high view of biblical inspiration takes authorial interest seriously.
4. A high view of biblical inspiration makes good hermeneutics imperative.
5. A high view of biblical inspiration is careful not to impose modern standards of truth or accuracy which were unknown in that era and alien to the author’s purpose.
6. A high view of biblical inspiration, while acknowledging that there are phenomena in Scripture which appear inconsistent or inaccurate, affirms that these difficulties can be resolved.
7. A high view of biblical inspiration views the Bible as a divine/human book (Steve W. Lemke, “The Inspiration and Authority of the Scripture” *In Biblical Hermeneutics: A*

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The “high-view” proposition of faith represents the foundational dogma of the authority and interpretation of the Bible, and in that sense, a confirmation of the *sola scriptura* principle. Speaking about relationship between the high view of the inspiration of the Bible and the *sola scriptura* principle, the following comment by Fernando Canale is very beneficial:

The issue of revelation and inspiration is assumed but does not define the *sola scriptura* because those who have a high view of Scripture still do not side with the *sola scriptura* and follow tradition. The reverse, however is true, those that do not accept a high view of the origin of Scripture do not hold to *sola scriptura*, which means they accept tradition as a complement to Scripture more readily.<sup>38</sup>

Dialoguing in the conservative Evangelical terms about the authority of the Bible as a self-sufficient revelation of God, it seems that Millard Erickson (b. 1932), following Bernard Ramm’s principle of derived authority, correctly highlights:

God Himself is the ultimate authority in religious matters. He has the right, both by virtue of who he is and what he does, to establish the standard for belief and practice. With respect to major issues he does not exercise authority in a direct fashion, however. Rather, he has delegated that authority by creating a book, the Bible. Because it conveys his message, the Bible carries the same weight God himself would command if he were speaking to us personally.<sup>39</sup>

*Sola scriptura*, therefore, has been emphatically expressed on the basis of the origin and authority of the Scriptures. Erickson criticized the Roman Catholic position, on the one hand, which maintains that only through the church can we understand the Bible, and rationalism, on the other hand, which claims that human reason is the means of establishing the meaning and divine origin of the Bible.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, “as belief in the sufficiency of biblical authority declines, theologians tend increasingly to rest faith

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*Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, Corley, Bruce, Lemke, Steve W. & Lovejoy, Grant I., eds. [Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 2002], 189-192.)

<sup>38</sup> Fernando Canale, “Comments on my paper ‘Sola Scriptura in the Current Debate,’” September 22, 2011, University of the Southern Caribbean, Trinidad, WI.

<sup>39</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 246.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

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upon *something additional to the Bible*.”<sup>41</sup> Erickson emphatically states: “Whenever a tradition, whether it is a teaching of ancient origin or of a recent popular leader, comes into conflict with the meaning of the Bible, the tradition must give way to the Scripture.”<sup>42</sup> Apparently, Erickson, at least in theory, confirms the conventional expression of the principle *by Scripture alone*.

Moderate shift from the traditional evangelical understanding of the *sola scriptura* principle started with the theological interpretation of one of the “fathers” of evangelicalism, Carl F. H. Henry (1913-2003). In his article, “Divine Revelation and the Bible”, he extensively treats the topic of the relationship between God’s revelation and the Scriptures. He claims:

The term “revelation” and “Scripture” assuredly are not synonymous. No era of Christian thought has made the egregious error of equating them absolutely, although modern opponents of historic Christianity frequently gain sympathy for their low views of the Bible by imputing excessive and obviously objectionable claims to the theological tradition. When Christianity speaks of the Word of God, it designates not only the *rhema theou*, the spoken and written word of God in the grammatical sense, but also *logos theou*, the personal Word, or the speaking Logos, the agent in creation and the supreme revelation of God incarnate.<sup>43</sup>

For Henry, the category of revelation is, therefore, broader than the category of the spoken and written words of Scripture, since it covers special historic events that the Bible normatively interprets, including the incarnation. Special revelation is broader than the Bible in an added sense.<sup>44</sup> If revelation is always broader than the Scriptures, the key question would be: What does it include then? James Barr (1924-2006), a more outspoken liberal scholar, articulates:

The Bible is not the product of a few inspired individuals who wrote down a complete text of their book at the beginning, *but the product of*

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<sup>41</sup> Idem, *Where is Theology Going: Issues and Perspectives on the Future of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994), 104.

<sup>42</sup> Idem, *Christian Theology*, 258.

<sup>43</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, “Divine Revelation and the Bible” in *Inspiration and Interpretation* Walvoord, John F., ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 254.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

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*community tradition in which utterances, writings and accounts have been adjusted for new circumstances and added to with new insights plus interpretations of the old.*<sup>45</sup>

The Bible would be, therefore, a product of a long process of formation and revision of *traditions*.<sup>46</sup> In ecumenical terms, Barr comes very close to the Roman Catholic position on canonization and the progressive development of the Word of God (as a much broader concept than what is merely written) within the community of faith.

Furthermore, regarding the authority and interpretation of the special revelation, contemporary “postmodern” and ecumenical theologian Clark Pinnock (1937-2010) affirms:

What the coming of the Spirit does mean for our doctrine of revelation is that the norms given in a classical disclosure are dynamic in the sense that they *can be dynamically interpreted and freshly applied in ever-changing situations*. It means that revelation is not locked in the past as a collection of inflexible rules but is a disclosure that comes alive today.<sup>47</sup>

For Pinnock, the Bible is not a self-sufficient set of propositions but the means of grace by which God is able to speak to us in new ways.<sup>48</sup> Pinnock does not speak only about contextualization or Calvin’s accommodation principle. In postmodern hermeneutical terms, he speaks about *multiple meanings* of written revelation in different circumstances. Regarding the Bible vs. Tradition issue, Scripture is just a *part of tradition* without its proper sense, says Clark Pinnock.<sup>49</sup> In ecumenical terms, how different this position is from a Roman Catholic position at the Council of Trent, known as *partim/partim* which says:

. . . clearly that this (biblical?) truth and discipline are *contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions* which, received by the

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<sup>45</sup> James Barr, *Escaping From Fundamentalism* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 71; 127.

<sup>46</sup> *Idem*, *Explorations in Theology 7: The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London, SMC Press, 1980), 58.

<sup>47</sup> Clark Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (Vancouver, CA: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 13.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

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Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the Apostles themselves, the Holy Ghost dictating, have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand.<sup>50</sup>

Defending the concept of tradition interpreted by some Catholic thinkers, Clark Pinnock says that tradition is just amplification and interpretation of the Word in the community of faith. It has to be respected, but also accepted critically.<sup>51</sup>

Donald Bloesch (1928-2010), one of the notable evangelical scholars who write in ecumenical terms expressed his protestant belief in the Scriptures. In terms of Karl Barth, he affirms that only the Word of God is infallible:

Foundation of the Christian faith is not the infallibility of the papal office or even of church tradition, *not even the canon of Holy Scripture*, but the living God Himself and his Word that is both ever new and ever the same. This Word created both the community of faith and the canon of Holy Scripture, and this Word therefore judges both church and Scripture.<sup>52</sup>

In these ecumenical terms, Bloesch, equating the transcendent Word with revelation of God, concludes his interpretation of the Word of God:

By rediscovering the transcendence and dynamism of divine revelation, both Catholics and Protestants might come to a new understanding of the relationship between church tradition and Scripture, and a convergence on this issue might indeed become possible.<sup>53</sup>

Bloesch apparently offers the possibility of ecumenical reconciliation of Evangelical principle *sola scriptura* and the Catholic principle of Tradition, expounded in *Dei Verbum* at the Vatican II:

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<sup>50</sup> J. Waterworth., trans, 1848. *The Council of Trent: The Canons and Decrees of the Sacred and Oecumenical Council of Trent* (London: Dolman. Hanover Historical Texts Project, scanned by Hanover College students , 1995), First decree, section 4.

<sup>51</sup> Pinnock, 151.

<sup>52</sup> Donald Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration & Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 155.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

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Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, *flowing from the same divine wellspring*, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end.<sup>54</sup>

Bloesch clearly endorses the concept of revelation proposed at Vatican II as one “divine wellspring” manifested in holy tradition and Holy Scriptures. In its ultimate form and within hermeneutical principles of *sensus plenior* (deeper sense) offered by Donald Bloesch, the *authority of the Scriptures is even validated by the community of faith* inspired by the Spirit. Magisterium of the Church as the interpreter of the deposit of faith is indispensable in this process as well. Therefore, on the ground of both the authority of Scripture and its interpretation contemporary Evangelicalism departed from the traditional *sola scriptura* principle.

The emphasis on the *community of faith* as the foundational principle of the validation and understanding Scripture becomes essential in the theology of Stanley J. Grenz (1950-2005). He claims that origins of the Scriptures are in the community of faith:

The Scriptures witness to the fact that they are the final written deposit of a trajectory that incorporates a variety of elements, including oral traditions and other source documents. *Within the community* these took on a life of their own, as it were, forming part of the authoritative materials that the community under the Spirit’s direction interpreted and reapplied to new situations. . . . *Our Bible is the product of the community of faith that cradled it.* The compiling of Scripture occurred within the context of the community, and the writings represent the self-understanding of the community in which they developed.<sup>55</sup>

In ecumenical terms, Grenz positively regards recent developments which reveal that Evangelicals accept the concept of tradition, and that after all, Christianity existed before the Bible. Catholics, on the other side, affirm

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<sup>54</sup> PAUL VI, *Dei Verbum : Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* (November 18, 1965). [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651118\\_dei-verbum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html). Date of Access 3 April, 2012, chapter 9.

<sup>55</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 386.

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that the primary function of tradition is to point us back to Scripture.<sup>56</sup> Grenz says that the devaluation of tradition was a reaction to the Council of Trent. The Reformation overreacted with theological conclusion that the sole source of theology has become the Scripture.<sup>57</sup> He also laments over the fact that the Tradition has been lost in Evangelicalism. Quoting Richard Lints, Grenz expands some reasons for that: inductive Bible study, parachurch trans-denominational approach (evangelical movement has no cohesive tradition), and a-historical devotional piety.<sup>58</sup> There is a danger that the Bible can be “enslaved” by individualism (reading the text only for ourselves). If we reject historical tradition we deny the apostolic sources and adhere “to the biases of our own situation.”<sup>59</sup> Tradition is a historical deposit—a heritage that provides hermeneutical trajectory in which our own theological discourse can properly transpire.<sup>60</sup> Scripture, heritage and culture, therefore, are a threefold, interrelated single source for theology. They are inseparable.<sup>61</sup> Evangelicalism is firmly grounded in the tradition of the church, concludes Grenz, in clear ecumenical terms.<sup>62</sup>

To sum up Grenz’s contemporary interpretation of the Scripture principle, he explicitly affirmed the *sola scriptura* principle only in the context of authority of the community (church) and tradition. The interpretation of the Bible should be based on the Spirit-based multiple messages found in the Scriptures as an instrument, and given to the church as fresh and new in every age. Obviously, Grenz was one of the “postmodern” evangelical theologians who paved the way for the ecumenical understanding of the Scripture principle, accepted by the Roman Catholicism as well.

In conclusion, Peter van Bemmelen, was quite accurate in his observations. In the existing debate between evangelicalism and Roman

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<sup>56</sup> Idem, “How Do We Know What to Believe?” in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, William C. Placher, ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 13.

<sup>57</sup> Idem, With John R. Franke. *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2001), 103.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 71.

<sup>60</sup> Grenz, “How Do We Know What to Believe?,” 28.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>62</sup> Idem, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993), 105-106.

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Catholicism of the twentieth and twenty-first century, the *sola scriptura* principle has undergone serious transformation from the time of the Reformation. The Scripture principle is always undermined and devalued when we affirm that the Scripture is only a *part* of the transcendent *specific* revelation of God. If the Scripture is only a part of dynamic Word of God, then where will we be able to find the rest of it? Would it be the Spirit, tradition, community of faith, experience, philosophy, encounters of mystical theology etc? Furthermore, regarding the dynamic relationship between revelation and the Scriptures, the dilemma James Packer (b. 1926) recognized is still valid:

If the relation between Scripture and revelation is not one of identity, what is it? And how, in detail, are we to distill God's revelation from the total contents of the Bible?<sup>63</sup>

Though we might agree that the revelation of God is a dynamic, multifaceted and mysterious reality, if we do not recognize equality between His revelation and the Word, we do not have the ultimate norm or standard of the validity and truthfulness of the revelation of *one* and *true* God. It seems that ecumenical Scripture principle avoids this important theological predicament. This calls for the further clarification especially within the recent Adventist theology.

**Adventist Perspective on Sola Scriptura**

In perplexing historical and modern (post-modern) experiences of God that do not correspond to the authoritative "it is written" it is always possible to mislay the uniqueness of Adventist theology of revelation and Scripture. Ellen G. White clearly stated:

The Holy Scriptures are to be accepted as an authoritative, infallible revelation of His will. They are the standard of character, the revealer of doctrines, and the test of experience (White, *GC*, *vii*).

The Spirit was not given—nor can it ever be bestowed—to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the Word of God is the

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<sup>63</sup> James Packer, *God has Spoken: Revelation and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), 27.

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standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. . . (White, *GC*, vii).

Regarding *faith* and *morals*, we have no other specific revelation (tradition) that needs to guide us and bring us to salvation in Christ except Scripture and Scripture only. Apparently, Ellen G. White confirms the traditional position of the Reformers (though even Luther and Calvin were supporting the “Tradition I” position that includes theological insights from Church tradition).

In recent debates on *sola scriptura* within Adventist theological circles Fernando Canale made probably the most significant contribution. He argues:

Adventists should not continue to assume that Protestant and Evangelical theologies and ministerial practices are compatible with the *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* principle and with Adventist theology. As a forgotten task, the Biblical Reformation of the Church lies still in the future.<sup>64</sup>

Canale, furthermore, developed his emphasis on the incompatibility between Protestant/Evangelical/Ecumenical and Adventist understanding of the *sola scriptura* principle in his two-part article *The Eclipse of Scripture and the Protestantization of the Adventist Mind*.<sup>65</sup> In his own words his “general purpose in this and the next article is to trace some signposts of the eclipse of Scripture in recent Adventist experience.”<sup>66</sup> I do not have space here to explore all the different thought-provoking details of the presented historical departure from the Adventist idealistic Canale’s *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* principle. It seems that his conclusion is the following one:

In our quest to understand the progressive eclipse of Scripture in Adventist thinking and practice, we have discovered that the *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* principle is the ground on which Christ’s Remnant Church stands or falls. The application of this principle requires that the Church should interpret Scripture from Scriptural presuppositions (Scripture

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<sup>64</sup> Fernando Canale, *Sola Scriptura and Hermeneutics: Are Adventist and Evangelical Theologies Compatible?* Unpublished paper, 2011, 28.

<sup>65</sup> Idem, *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 21/1-2 (2010):133-165; *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society*, 22/1 (2011):102-133.

<sup>66</sup> Canale, *The Eclipse of Scripture*, part 1, 137.

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interprets itself). Early Adventism stood on the *sola Scriptura* ground because they interpreted the whole of Scripture in the light of the Sanctuary doctrine. This marked the dawn of Scripture in the incipient discovery of an historical understanding of Christian theology, and led Adventists to come out of Protestantism.<sup>67</sup>

Canale concludes:

Few realize that the Evangelical interpretation of the Gospel as the new hermeneutical key (hermeneutical condition of theological method) *stands on tradition* and implies the rejection of the *sola-tota-prima Scriptura* principle thereby eclipsing Scripture with culture and tradition.<sup>68</sup>

Uniqueness of Adventist theology and Adventist movement as the Remnant, according to Canale, therefore, lies in the fact that pioneers recognized the hermeneutical key of the Sanctuary and applied it to all the teachings and the writings of the Bible (Scripture interprets Scripture). Unlike Evangelicals, therefore, who developed this hermeneutical key from the tradition of the Reformers (Gospel/Cross), Adventists offered a new insight into the understanding the Bible based on theology and experience of the Sanctuary. According to this view, it seems that Canale supports “Tradition 0” position, namely the position of the Radical reformers who claim that nothing but the Bible is the ground for theological system (*sola scriptura*). Luther and Calvin endorsed the teachings of the Church fathers (tradition) and developed “Tradition I” position.

The indispensable debate over the role of Ellen White’s writings in relation to Scripture is offered in a brilliant article by Merlin Burt.<sup>69</sup> In Adventist theology Ellen White’s writings, therefore, do not represent the additional Word of God, but only points to the existing biblical revelation as the ultimate norm of faith and morals. Therefore, the principle of *sola scriptura* has been preserved.

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<sup>67</sup> Canale, *The Eclipse of Scripture*, part 1, 160-161. For Sanctuary as a hermeneutical key see also part 2, 132.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>69</sup> “Ellen G. White and Sola Scriptura.” Seventh-day Adventist Church and Presbyterian Church USA Conversation Office of the General Assembly PC (USA), Louisville, KY, August 23, 2007. Presented also at Third Interdenominational Theological Symposium, University of the Southern Caribbean, Trinidad, WI, September, 2011.

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Nevertheless, in the dialogue with Evangelicals or Roman Catholics the discussion might not end here. Apparently, Canale would deny the theological role of Ellen G. White as a “tradition” of the Church. In a general sense, he calls for the hermeneutical task of interpreting Scripture *apart* from the tradition of the Adventist community of faith. Therefore, the “Tradition 0” principle is endorsed and supported.<sup>70</sup> If the testimony of Ellen G. White is not an addition or an additional theological interpretation of the hermeneutical key apart from the Word of God, the question remains: what is then the role of the Spirit of Prophecy? If it is not the Word of God and equal with Scripture, then why shouldn’t it be labeled as “tradition”? Mere visionary repetition of the biblical scenario does not seem the only purpose of Ellen G. White’s writings. According to recent Adventist interpretation she was a prophet “to the Scripture.”<sup>71</sup> The purpose, what is important for this debate, was to provide the hermeneutical key of the Sanctuary.

It is quite implausible that pioneers of Adventist faith would have recognized this key without the aid of Ellen White’s visions and interpretations of the Bible. Having this in mind, the role of the Spirit of prophecy has to be clearly defined. For example, the New Testament is not just an appendix to the Old Testament but the dynamic and living interpretation of the Old Testament that becomes the Word of God. If Ellen White’s writings are not the prophetic Word of God in this sense, then what are they? Whatever is the answer to this question, which is not the primary purpose of this article, one thing is clear: Adventist theological system is based on the Holy Scriptures *as interpreted* by the hermeneutical key of the Adventist “tradition” and historical-theological consciousness of the church which idealistically *should* be grounded in Scripture as well. Even if this hermeneutical key is strictly biblical (as revealed by the Spirit) still it remains the part of the prophetic interpretation of the book which cannot interpret itself by its very nature of being a book. It requires the spiritual

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<sup>70</sup> Of course, Tradition 0 position is plausible only if tradition represents philosophical and theological foundations and assumptions opposite to the Bible (Ibid.)

<sup>71</sup> Merlin Burt, *Ellen G. White and Sola Scriptura*. Seventh-day Adventist Church and Presbyterian Church USA Conversation Office of the General Assembly PC (USA), Louisville, KY, August 23, 2007.

community of faith and the theological role of the teaching office.<sup>72</sup> It seems that “Tradition 0” or the *sola scriptura* position, as contemporary Evangelicalism already pointed out, is implausible and impossible.

### **Conclusion**

The *Sola scriptura* principle should not be undermined by the tradition of the community of faith, if this tradition strives to recognize and endorse the hermeneutical key offered by the Spirit of God in the biblical revelation. Nevertheless, due to extra-biblical foundations of faith and morals, the ecumenical Evangelical theology of the Scripture principle might not be based on the theology of Christ-centered revelation of God. On the other hand, the Adventist theology needs to grow in the understanding of the importance of the role of tradition within its community of faith and its relationship to the written closed canon of the Word of God. Therefore, there is no genuine Scripture principle or the principle *sola scriptura* without the ultimate authority of Christ in the Bible and the community of the Spirit (with its living teaching office), who clearly has to affirm the self-sufficiency of the Word of God, scrutiny of every extra biblical revelation, and practical spiritual hermeneutics (according to the Spirit) that leads us to salvation in Jesus.

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<sup>72</sup> By *teaching office* I mean the authoritative body of the Church which preserves and upholds the faith and morals revealed in the Holy Scripture. This was an apostolic office in the apostolic church. It is distinguished from the traditional role of the *magisterium* in the Roman Catholic Church which operates in defense of *partim/partim* structure of revelation.