

9-2023

By the Word of God Alone: Sola Scriptura and the Leaders of the Reformation

Ning Xi
Emory University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Xi, Ning (2023) "By the Word of God Alone: Sola Scriptura and the Leaders of the Reformation," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. Vol. 13: Iss. 2, Article 2.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2023.130202

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol13/iss2/2>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

By the Word of God Alone:

Sola Scriptura and the Leaders of the Reformation

Ning Xi

Emory University

(Atlanta, Georgia)

During the Protestant Reformation, one of the main goals of the various reformers was to purify the church, doctrines, and practices from what they saw as impure influences or worldly teachings and rituals that diverged from the true word of God. For the reformers, the primary source for clear and authoritative guidance for the correct behavior, lifestyle, worship, and beliefs was, unsurprisingly, the Scripture contained in the Christian Bible. Martin Luther (1483-1546), the German theologian and priest who is known as the Father of the Protestant Reformation, championed the principle of sola scriptura, which asserted that Scripture alone is infallible as the divinely revealed truth. One of Luther's quotes that perfectly encapsulates the rationale of sola scriptura is "A simple layman armed with Scripture is greater than the mightiest pope without it." At first glance, this all seems very simple and far more straightforward than the Roman Church's labyrinthine amounts of rituals, saints, hierarchy, and doctrines. However, there was a vast amount of disagreement among Luther and his contemporaries, such as Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and Thomas Müntzer (1489-1525), over what the text of the Scripture actually meant, whether some portions matter more than others, should the Old Testament's rules

and commandments be put on the same level as what the New Testament says, and whether things not explicitly mentioned should be allowed or prohibited. The shared insistence on sola scriptura did more to divide the reformers than to unite them since all of them ardently insisted that their interpretation of Scripture was the only correct one.

In Luther's *Preface to the First Volume of His Latin Writings*, he details his journey from being a monk tormented by the anguishing fear of never being able to do enough to redeem himself before the Lord and escape eternal damnation to joyfully discovering the truth of salvation solely through the righteousness of God and justification from faith. The verse that Luther pays the most attention to is Chapter One in Paul's letter to the Romans: "In the righteousness of God is revealed."¹ Even as a monk, Luther could not relax about his fate and felt anger at the God that punished sinners to the point of near blasphemy. It is only through God's mercy and by meditating that Luther understands and accepts that righteousness is not earned but justified through faith by a merciful God. He dramatically stresses the importance of God's teachings being revealed through the gospel and "ran through the Scriptures from memory."² It should be noted that Luther does not name any other source or individual that he credits with bringing him to this revelation other than the words of the Scripture itself. He also castigates the traditional teachings for how he was misled to think that God only granted salvation to those who justified themselves through an unrealistic amount of good works.

In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther details what he views as the most crucial elements of the Scripture. He is obliged to "point out that all of divine Scripture is divided into two parts:

1. Martin Luther, "Preface to the First Volume of His Latin Writings," in *The Protestant Reformation: Revised Edition*, ed. Hans Hillerbrand (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 29.
2. Luther, "Preface to the First Volume of His Latin Writings," 30.

commandments and promises."³ To Luther, while the Old Testament's commandments have value as teachings and should not be thrown out, a Christian should read them not as instructions to do what they describe but instead as ideals that we do not have the power to fulfill. Luther interprets all the Old Testament commands as tools to make humans "recognize their inability to do good."⁴ The second part (the New Testament) comes to the sinner's aid with God's promise of justification from faith and not from doing everything that the law says. Through faith, what is impossible through works becomes quick and easy. Luther writes that "whoever has faith will have everything, and whoever does not have faith will have nothing."⁵ He even calls the Old Testament law's prescribed works "many and useless."⁶

Luther's assertion that there is a need to distinguish between the levels of importance of the Scriptures did not stop with the Old and New Testaments. In his *Preface to the German Translation of the New Testament*, he designates the Gospel of John, Paul's letters, particularly Romans, and Peter's first letter as "the true kernel and marrow of all the books."⁷ Those are the books that a Christian should read first and most and serve as "his daily bread" and teach a believer everything they need to know to be saved.⁸ Therefore, the other books and doctrines are, at best, add-ons that will not lead you to the true path of salvation. Luther justifies this controversial interpretation of the Scripture by pointing to how the books that he thinks are the best do not contain much about works or miracles, but there are vivid depictions of "how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell, and gives life, righteousness, and salvation."⁹ He points to

3. Martin Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," in *The Protestant Reformation: Revised Edition*, ed. Hans Hillerbrand (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 37.

4. Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," 37.

5. Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," 38.

6. Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," 38.

7. Martin Luther, "Preface to the German Translation of the New Testament," in *The Protestant Reformation: Revised Edition*, ed. Hans Hillerbrand (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 71.

8. Luther, "Preface to the German Translation of the New Testament," 71.

9. Luther, "Preface to the German Translation of the New Testament," 71.

Christ's single commandment to love as evidence of how the gospel's essence supports sola fide (faith alone) since Christ and his apostles never compel others to obey but rather gently invite them. He sharply contrasts this with Moses, the Old Testament's central figure, who is a lawmaker that uses threats, rebukes, and strikes. Luther was aware of how Catholics also were citing Scripture to support salvation through both works and faith, especially the Epistle of James. He dubs the Book of James "an Epistle of straw" because it says little about faith and much about the virtue of works.¹⁰ When Luther said that the Scripture is the only purely divine and truthful source for the Lord's word, he did not mean the entire Bible. He prioritizes the New Testament and even disputes its parts that do not support salvation by faith alone.

Zwingli was a Swiss reformer who also supported the doctrine of the Scripture being the ultimate source of authority for a Christian. However, he was more willing to diverge from the Roman Church's tradition than Luther and took a far stricter view on what was permitted during worship. One of the primary points of disagreement between Luther and Zwingli was the meaning of the Eucharist or the Holy Communion. According to the Roman Church, once the bread and wine were blessed and consecrated, it literally became the blood and flesh of Christ. Despite Luther's well-noted disdain for the authority and traditions of the Roman Church, his position on the Eucharist was not as radically divergent. Luther's explanation for what happened during the Eucharist was that there was a real presence of Christ's blood and flesh along with the physical wine and bread. His main disagreement with the Roman Church was the belief that consecration, a ritual conducted by human priests, could summon the presence of Christ. To Luther, that was an example of the false idea of salvation through works. Luther's view of the Eucharist is too convoluted for a layperson to articulate its exact metaphysics, but he did not see

10. Luther, "Preface to the German Translation of the New Testament," 72.

communion as a purely symbolic ritual performed with mundane wine and bread, which is what Zwingli said. In Zwingli's *Commentary on True and False Religion*, his primary purpose is to justify his radical view of the Eucharist. He writes that the view of the theologians on the Eucharist "is opposed by all sense and reason and by faith itself."¹¹ The contradiction, as Zwingli sees it, is in how experiencing the blood and flesh of Christ is experienced by faith, yet there is a dependence on physically experiencing Communion (applying faith to things of sense). It does not make sense to "hope for which he already sees."¹² While faith is removed from the physical world and our senses, it "does not rest upon our decision or election."¹³ That is why Zwingli believes that it is impossible to square the circle regarding the Eucharist. If the bread were Christ's flesh, one would know by sense, not by faith. Also, the statement about eating the true and bodily flesh of Christ spiritually cannot stand because "body and spirit are such essentially different things" that cannot coexist and are mutually exclusive.¹⁴ Zwingli cites Paul writing about the Lord's Supper in his letters from the Scripture to support his construction of the Eucharist as only symbolic and having nothing to do with Christ's body. The line that he pays the most attention to is "Do this in remembrance of me," which Zwingli argues indicates that the Eucharist is done out of remembering and honoring Christ's death, not paying for one's sins, which is "the province of Christ's death alone."¹⁵

Luther and Zwingli also had very differing views on what Christian worship should look like and consist of. Again, Luther was more of a traditionalist since he greatly supported the singing of beautiful hymns and intricate worship music and continued to use Latin during Mass.

11. Ulrich Zwingli, "Commentary on True and False Religion," in *The Protestant Reformation*, ed. Hans Hillerbrand (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), 109.

12. Zwingli, "Commentary on True and False Religion," 110.

13. Zwingli, "Commentary on True and False Religion," 110.

14. Zwingli, "Commentary on True and False Religion," 111.

15. Zwingli, "Commentary on True and False Religion," 115.

On the other hand, Zwingli saw music as a distraction from pure worship and banned both instrumental and vocal music. He also asserted that Latin was too much of an elite language and therefore unintelligible to the masses, so worship needed to be done fully in the vernacular. Finally, although he was hardly as extreme as the iconoclasts, Zwingli saw the icons of biblical figures and saints that were so popular within Catholic churches as akin to idolatry and demanded that they be removed from the houses of worship. The central split between Luther and Zwingli is over whether it is more important to look at what the Bible explicitly allows or what it does not ban. To Luther, the Scripture never says that music is forbidden, so he and his followers continued to give it a central role in worship services. Zwingli is far stricter in that he sees anything not explicitly granted by the Scripture as contrary to God's will and a source of corruption that must be removed.

Müntzer most likely was the most radical of these three leaders during the Reformation. While initially an early supporter of Luther, the two eventually became bitter enemies as Müntzer's ideas became increasingly radicalized and unrecognizable from Luther's. Müntzer was not a believer in sola scriptura the way Luther was and taught that God still communicates directly to believers through the Holy Spirit and that the literal interpretation Bible was not the end-all-be-all. Luther opposed any separation between the Holy Spirit and the Scripture as a source of corruption and ungodly ideas. Perhaps, Luther's loyalty to the established Scripture and Müntzer's more populist, people-centered doctrine influenced their vastly contrasting views on the German Peasant's War when large groups of peasants and farmers, at least partially inspired by the Reformation, took up arms to revolt against what they saw as oppression from their feudal overlords and nobles. In Müntzer's *Highly Provoked Defense*, he deploys a plethora of colorful insults against Luther and compares him to the Pharisees, who boasted "that they understand the

Holy Scripture, cover every book with writing, and babble," yet thwart the very faith they claim to be experts in by denying the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ The comparison to the Pharisees or teachers of the laws is particularly striking since they justified their opposition to Christ by claiming that he was going against the sacred Scripture. Müntzer also expresses support for the ordinary people in their struggles and demands and says that if rebellion is needed, "So be it."¹⁷ He writes that "it is the greatest abomination of earth that no one will embrace the misery of the needy, while the great do whatever they wish" and cites Job 41 as a parallel.¹⁸ He points to the double standard of only applying the commandment to not steal to the peasants and craftsmen who are forced by circumstance to take the most mundane things and not to the lords and nobles who plunder and fleece everyone who lives. In Luther's *Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants*, he deploys the harshest possible language against the rioting peasants and calls upon the lords to use every means available to put it down. From the Scripture, he cites Christ's command to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and criticizes the peasants' use of the Old Testament as proof that they are entitled to freedom when, according to Luther, only the New Testament really matters, and that is where all the verses about obedience to earthly authority were written. While Luther was outraged about the killings and destruction of property, he was most offended by the peasants insisting that the Bible sanctioned their actions and how they forced fellow Christians to support them, which he finds to be pure blasphemy and wants no association of his teachings with the unspeakable horrors.

While the Reformation is popularly envisioned as a single coherent movement, analysis of the doctrine of sola scriptura reveals that to not be the case. Between Luther, Zwingli, and

16. Thomas Müntzer, "Highly Provoked Defense," in *Martin Luther, On the Freedom of a Christian: With Related Texts*, ed. and trans. Tryntje Helfferich (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2013), 108.

17. Müntzer, "Highly Provoked Defense," 113.

18. Müntzer, "Highly Provoked Defense," 113.

Müntzer all citing the Scripture as the only truth (with the latter being somewhat of an exception), they had wide disagreements on what parts of the Bible were the most important, what worship should look like, what is allowed and forbidden for Christians, the meaning of the most sacred rituals, whether there is any other source of communication between God and mortals besides the Scripture, and the relationship between believers and temporal rulers. The disagreements were inevitable since the Bible is not a singular text but rather a collection of several histories, prophecies, letters, and sayings that span from the beginning of time to the Roman Empire written by many authors from countless places and backgrounds. Therefore, one cannot reasonably expect everything in the Bible to be perfectly in tune with the rest. That is why *sola scriptura* was more of a divider than a unifier for the reformers because anyone could find some part of the Bible to support their doctrine due to the Scripture's very nature.

About the author

Ning Xi graduated *summa cum laude* from Tulane University in May 2023 where she earned a double major in English and History with a minor in Sociology. This manuscript was written during her undergraduate studies. She is currently attending Emory Law School.

Bibliography

- Luther, Martin. "Preface to the First Volume of His Latin Writings." In *The Protestant Reformation: Revised Edition*, edited by Hans Hillerbrand, 29-30. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009.
- Luther, Martin. "Preface to the German Translation of the New Testament." In *The Protestant Reformation: Revised Edition*, edited by Hans Hillerbrand, 71-72. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009.
- Luther, Martin. "The Freedom of a Christian." In *The Protestant Reformation: Revised Edition*, edited by Hans Hillerbrand, 37-38. New York: Harper Perennial, 2009.
- Müntzer, Thomas. "Highly Provoked Defense." In *Martin Luther, On the Freedom of a Christian: With Related Texts*, edited and translated by Tryntje Helfferich, 108-113. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2013.
- Zwingli, Ulrich. "Commentary on True and False Religion." In *The Protestant Reformation*, edited by Hans Hillerbrand, 109-115. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968.