Sola Scriptura: Hindrance or catalyst for church unity?

Authors:
Yolanda Dreyer[1]
Matthias Zeindler[2,6]
Anna Case-Winters[3,6]
Rathnakara Sadananda[4,6]
Michael Weinrich[5,6]

Affiliations:
[1]Department of Practical Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

[2]Institut für Systematische Theologie, Universität Bern, Switzerland

[3]McCormick Theological Seminary, United States of America

[4]Karnataka Theological College, South-India

[5]Systematische Theologie Ökumenik und Dogmatik, Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät, Ruhr-Universität, Germany

[6]Research Fellow, Department of Practical Theology, University of Pretoria, South Africa

Note:
This article is a reworked version of a paper presented by the *Sola Scriptura* Group of the Global Network of Theologians of the World Communion of Reformed Churches at its Consultation in Rüdlingen, Switzerland in March 2013. As primary author, I dedicate this article to Prof. Dr James-Alfred Loader. In 2010 he and I were part of a group of theologians of the Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NRCA) that declared apartheid as contrary to the gospel message. This declaration became a synodal resolution of the church in 2010. In 2011 it was reformulated and endorsed by a subsequent synod.

In the Reformed tradition *sola Scriptura* remains a central tenet in the search for truth. Scripture bears witness to the variety of ways in which God has acted in history. It attests to God's presence in the world and how God transcends the boundaries of human creations. The article focuses on how the Bible is interpreted differently by Christians from various traditions and even amongst Christians of the same tradition. Different hermeneutical approaches, confessional traditions and cultural contexts lead to different conclusions. Especially with regard to controversial ethical issues, different approaches to biblical reasoning lead to greatly differing results. The article reflects on whether *sola Scriptura* could provide a key to addressing both diversity and ethics more adequately.

Basics, problems and questions

An achievement of the ecumenical movement is its consensus on the importance of the biblical witness for the church. In the Reformed tradition, with its principle of *sola Scriptura,* this goes without saying. After lengthy discussions both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox traditions have now also recognised Scripture as the primary authority for the church.[1] However, the primacy of Scripture functions differently in the different traditions. Even in churches of the Reformed tradition there are different accents. If the complexity of biblical interpretation and the possibility that interpretations can be conflicting are accepted, and if there is a willingness to engage constructively with the various interpretations, diversity need not be a problem.

In the Reformed faith community a body such as the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC) could make a contribution to re-examining the underlying problems with regard to *sola Scriptura* and create the space for a 'hermeneutics of conversation'. An open and honest discussion can lead to conscientization and self-insight. The authority of Scripture is not simply a theoretical doctrinal matter, but also a practical matter of how Scripture actually functions in the life of the church.

For Calvin[2] the *sola Scriptura* principle is related to both the Spirit and the church: *directly* to the 'inward witness of the Holy Spirit' (in Mathison 2001:106); and *indirectly* to 'consent of the church' (in Mathison 2001:104). For both Calvin and Luther 'the church has no authority to interpret Scripture' (see Mathison 2001:103–118). For Calvin a doctrinal dispute should be resolved by 'true bishops' convening in an ecclesiastical meeting (see Mathison 2001:116); in other words, not by means of ecclesial authority from above, but by means of dialogue. For Luther the principle of faith is *clear*. Central to the clarity of Scripture (*die Klarheit der Schrift*) is Jesus Christ. According to Paul, believers should get to know the *nous* of Christ (1 Cor 2:16; cf. Kuss 1972:89–149) which gives life to the faith community. It is in Scripture that the *nous* of Christ can be discerned. The authority of Scripture in the life of the church is its use (Kelsey 1975:194). The question is therefore how Scripture functions in the church. Its use can commonly be seen in preaching and teaching, but the question is whether Scripture is also a guiding factor in church life and mission, and whether Scripture informs the decisions of its governing bodies rather than just being used for legitimating the preferred opinions of people. These preferred opinions are more often than not informed by culture and personal preferences. These could lead to division in the church.

1.For the Catholic view, see Ratzinger [Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI] 2010.

2.For *sola Scriptura,* see *Institutes of the Christian religion* 1.4.1, 1.6.2, 1.9.1, 1.10.2, 3.2.7, 3.22.9, 4.2.6.

Correspondence to: Yolanda Dreyer
Email: yolanda.dreyer@up.ac.za
Postal address: Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria, Private Bag X20, Hatfield 0028, South Africa
Dates: Received: 01 Apr. 2013 | Accepted: 24 Apr. 2013 | Published: 18 July 2013
How to cite this article: Dreyer, Y., Zeindler, M., Case-Winters, A., Sadananda, R. & Weinrich, M., 2013, '*Sola Scriptura*: Hindrance or catalyst for church unity?', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69(1), Art. #2000, 8 pages. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2000

The biblical canon is not the basis of the church's unity, but of its diversity (Käsemann 1964:95–107; cf. Käsemann [1965] 1969:262–259, 1970:62–97). Diverse and even opposing theological perspectives in the Bible give rise to different models of being church. Käsemann's solution is to opt for a 'canon within the canon'; in other words, to align oneself with a particular principle, such as, for example, Paul's notion of justification by faith (Protestant) or God's revelation through historical progression (Roman Catholic).

The way in which the Bible is received by Christians from various traditions and even amongst Christians of the same tradition differs substantially. Different hermeneutical premises, confessional traditions and cultural contexts lead to different conclusions. Especially with regard to controversial issues, different approaches to biblical reasoning lead to greatly differing results. Both the 'solutions' of the World Council of Churches, namely the older 'consensual ecumenical agreement' and the 1998 'difference and diversity' tolerance ('A treasure in earthen vessels') in effect only side-stepped the ethical problems caused by doctrinal and cultural diversity.

The question is whether the notion of *sola Scriptura* could provide a key to addressing both diversity and ethics more adequately. *Sola Scriptura* presupposes that the Bible is Holy Scripture. In this regard the relation between *revelation* and *biblical witness* is relevant. Karl Barth ([1932–1938] 2010:85–122) distinguishes three ways in which the Word of God (Holy Scripture) manifests itself:

- in the *proclaimed Word* (the present action of the church)
- in the *biblical witness* to Jesus Christ
- in Jesus Christ who is identified with God and who appears as the *incarnated Word of God*.

McCormack (2004:55–57) explains this as 'unity in differentiation'. John Webster (2003:123), elaborating on Barth's doctrine of Holy Scripture, sees Christian theology as an undertaking of the hearing and speaking church of Christ which is brought to life by the Word. The Word guides the church's reflection on the meaning of God's salvation. God is present in 'the startling reality of the gospel of reconciliation' (Webster 2003:123). Reflection on this is not only rational; it is also about experiencing God's awe-inspiring love and becoming a participant in God's reconciliatory salvation of the world.

According to this view on the authority of Scripture, Jesus Christ takes precedence over biblical words. This, in turn, has consequences for the understanding of 'inspiration'. All theological traditions adhere to some form of inspiration theory. The inspiration theory they adhere to often serves to obscure doctrinal prejudices. Inspiration implies that God reveals God-self through the inspired biblical words. God's will, 'the truth', is to be found in these inspired words. However, according to the above-mentioned view, God's will is manifested in the saving event through Jesus Christ, the Word. What is at stake is not so much 'inspiration' as 'truth'. The quest for the truth has ramifications, not only for internal Christian controversies, but also for interreligious relationships. How uncompromisingly dare Christians still speak about 'truth', or would greater modesty be advisable in this day and age?

The truth, that is, the saving event in Jesus Christ, is received through a variety of perspectives in the biblical witness. The question is: when is diversity still acceptable (still 'inspired' truth) and when does it become unacceptable (no longer to be regarded as 'God's will')? Is there a reconciling principle that can bring coherence to the variety? What can be regarded as *central* to Scripture, if such a question is at all appropriate? Ingolf Dalferth (1997a:173–198, 1997b:189, 2002; Dalferth & Hoare 1997) distinguishes between an internal and an external principle. The *internal principle* is found in the words of the Bible. In the Protestant world this would be Käsemann's 'canon within the canon' (Käsemann 1964:95–107) and in the Roman Catholic world Küng's 'early-catholic principle' (*Frühkatolizismus*), namely, that the words of the Bible are continued in the authority of tradition (Küng 1963:159–165; cf. Küng [2001] 2003). Neither of these positions, however, provides a satisfactory solution. Dalferth's *external principle* implies that God cannot be limited to biblical words alone. God's saving presence also manifests itself clearly in the real world. Dalferth (Dalferth & Hoare 1997:274) uses language such as 'the realism of mercy', 'hearing the cry for salvation' and 'righteousness' (cf. Schneider-Flume 2005:41–50). In this view the ethical implications of the gospel of Jesus Christ take precedence in the process of biblical hermeneutics.

What is meant by *clarity* and whether clarity can be found in the gospel of Jesus Christ is a hermeneutical question. Modern hermeneutical discourses have emphasised the aesthetics of reception that make the reader increasingly important. This approach challenges the historical-critical methodology with its emphasis solely on the text. With reception entering into the picture, not only the text and author, but also the reader contributes to the understanding of the text (Frege [1892] 1952:56–78; Ekegren 1999:106). Ulrich Körtner's (2012:448–466) solution to the issue of unity and diversity is based on this hermeneutical model. He calls it 'an ecumenical hermeneutics of diversity.' He uses Wittgenstein's concept of 'family resemblance' (see Wittgenstein [1953] 2009:250) to demonstrate that 'reconciled diversity' is possible. This presents a challenge for the ecumenical movement. 'Family' is analogous to the concept 'semantic domain' in structural linguistics. A semantic domain consists of a variety of words with several possible meanings. In the variety there are 'potentialities of meaning' that resonate with one another (a family of resemblance) and in so doing create an identity for the domain. Körtner's 'reconciled diversity' is an attempt to overcome the weaknesses of the 'unity *and* diversity' option on the one hand, and the ethical concerns caused by diversity on the other hand.

However, is 'reconciled diversity' at all possible? To some it may sound rather utopian. Probably, '*reconciling* diversity', as an ongoing process constantly working toward the ideal, could have opened up greater possibilities. Could the idea of 'reconciling diversity' have the potential to overcome the problems regarding diversity in Scripture and the

unity of the church? This becomes even more complicated if one moves beyond Christian boundaries and enters into an inter-religious discussion. Would Christian apologetics still be functional in such a context or should Christians be more modest in that case and rather seek the common good together with others?

'A willingness to suspect and a willingness to listen'

In the Reformed tradition in particular, the quest for the truth brings *sola Scriptura* into play. Scripture bears witness to the variety of ways God has acted in history. It attests to God's presence in the world and shows how God transcends the boundaries of human creations. In a multi-faith context the scriptures of other religions are also relevant. They inform and enrich people (including Christians) and open up new horizons for understanding reality and the revelation of God. The question is whether *sola Scriptura* fits into this bigger picture.

Sola Scriptura is one of the three *solas* of the Reformation and should not be considered in isolation. In the Reformed tradition biblical hermeneutics assumes, on the one hand, that the meaning of God's self-manifestation in Scripture is clear; on the other hand, the words and the texts of the Bible are not all that clear. They require a hermeneutics of critical enquiry that takes ambiguity seriously, as well as a hermeneutics of suspicion. Paul Ricoeur (1970) calls this 'a willingness to suspect and a willingness to listen':

> Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience. In our time we have not finished doing away with *idols* and we have barely begun to listen to *symbols*. It may be that this situation, in its apparent distress, is instructive: it may be that extreme iconoclasm belongs to the restoration of meaning. (p. 27)

It is necessary to distinguish between the historical authority (*auctoritas historica*) and the normative authority (*auctoritas normativa*) of the Bible. Present-day hermeneutical insights indicate where the traditional way should be re-examined. For example, the old Reformed hermeneutical 'principle' of 'interpreting Scripture with Scripture' should come under critical scrutiny. Secondly, is the *centre of Scripture* (be it 'justification by faith', 'covenant', 'liberation') to be found internally or externally?

Every interpretation takes place in a particular context and mediates new meaning in and for that context. Because of the variety of meanings in the Bible and the variety of contexts in which the Bible is interpreted today, biblical hermeneutics remains an ongoing process. Scripture facilitates believers to discover the realities of life. The readers hear what it *meant* in the past and what it *means* in the present (cf. Schneiders 1981:23–39; Kaiser 2007:29–31). It is about both *interpreting the text* and *listening to the Word of God.*

The primary event is God's self-manifestation in Christ. *Sola Scriptura* emphasises that Jesus Christ, the eternal Word, became flesh. This is central to biblical hermeneutics. When readers (and hearers) of the text remember, re-enact and relive that event, they participate in and give meaning to it. In biblical interpretation the community's religio-cultural conscience plays a role. A body of writings is accepted as sacred Scripture when it is seen as mediating the self-manifestation of God and providing meaning for existence. Scripture enables *active remembrance* of the *past* constitutive event of God's saving and sustaining relation to the whole of creation and its eschatological consummation. Scripture also enables a *present participation* in God's continuing acts and the church's eschatological vision. Therefore, Scripture should also play a central role in the ecumenical theological discussion. It is unfortunate that the principle of *sola Scriptura* has contributed more to division and conflict than to unity and oneness in the Reformed family. Yet, the complexity of the notion of *sola Scriptura* should not prevent it from making a positive contribution to the rather complex ecumenical discussion. Although Christian Scripture has been used in multi-faith contexts as an all-conquering weapon, it should rather be used as a place of reconciliation and a herald of grace.

Reformed churches understand themselves as *creatura Verbi Divini.* The Word of God is spoken, preached and written in various contexts, cultures and confessional traditions as well as according to different hermeneutical perspectives. Scripture is not only divinely inspired but also provides the very experience of 'presence'. The Word can be heard, proclaimed, touched and experienced in the written words. This raises a question. Has Scripture been divinely inspired or does divine inspiration *continue* to flow through the Word as people experience divine presence and liberation? The Holy Spirit creates an awareness of God's working in people and leads them to the truth. The Holy Spirit is the hermeneut of Christ and has thus a christological function. The Holy Spirit brings the text to life, makes it meaningful, and facilitates the text to become Word of God here and now.

The meaning of Christ incarnate is mediated through contextual, cultural, religious and ideological symbols. The meaning and content of symbols in a community's religious and ideological conscience are historically and culturally conditioned. Form and content are symbiotic. *Sola Scriptura* poses challenges to a contextually and culturally relevant interpretation of the Bible. Is it possible to interpret the text in and from the context/s or does the text interpret the context/s?

When Reformed theology upholds *sola Scriptura* on the one hand, and in ecumenical discussions engages with contemporary concerns on the other hand, the following questions become relevant:

- What is the role of the church and its traditions in understanding Scripture?
- How do the worship and liturgical practices of the faith community affect and determine the understanding of Scripture?
- What would be an appropriate use of the Bible when reflecting on topics such as: Christianity beyond differences;

the relationship between church and society; identifying signs of transcendence in a postsecular world?
- What would be an appropriate use of the Bible with regard to the church's prophetic responsibility of advocacy for economic, ecological and gender justice, as well as its calling to promote peace and participate in conflict resolution, in acts of resistance and endorsement?

The *solas*

In the church as *creatio Verbi Divini* and in the Reformed tradition, the reading, preaching and hearing of Scripture constitutes the way in which the voice of Jesus Christ, Lord of church and world, is heard. Only when the church is obedient to its head, can it be the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Then it manifests itself as a creation of the Word of God. However, from the outset Scripture has not always been a catalyst for church unity, but has often been a hindrance. Issues of the past century that have brought much division were, for instance, creation or evolution, the ordination of women, and the accommodation of sexual minorities. In the churches of the Reformation conflict often results in a split and the founding of new churches. Such separatism cannot be justified by invoking the 'principle of Scripture', *sola Scriptura*.

The Bible is often used in a way that does not build bridges, but rather deepens the schism. Another example is apartheid in South Africa, which caused the Bible to be used, on the one hand, to justify apartheid and, on the other hand, to condemn apartheid. Even though the Bible itself is not a body of harmonious writings, it is tragic when it serves as the foundation for bitter human conflict.

If *sola Scriptura* is to fulfil a constructive role, the Bible should be seen as being about more than just the exegesis of words, sentences and texts. It should be understood in a broad theological framework. The core of Reformed theology is that human salvation is solely an act of God who reveals God-self in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (*sola gratia*). God's action in Christ is not validated by some sort of human action. It is only to be acknowledged and received (*sola fide*) on account of God's grace.

The Bible is the witness of God's deeds in Israel and in the life of Jesus Christ. The church exists in the expectation of hearing the Word of God in this witness. For this the church relies on God's faithfulness. *Sola Scriptura* pertains to all of this – actions and witness. *Sola Scriptura* expresses more than the preference for a privileged text. It is about more than the quest for the *centre* (*Mitte*) of the Bible. Rather, it is an all-encompassing understanding of the relationship between God and human beings. God becomes known to people by means of God's self-manifestation (revelation). In this making known, God's love (good-will) becomes apparent. A theology of Scripture therefore relates to a theology of revelation. To theologise about the meaning of Scripture is about getting to know both who God is and what the nature of humankind is.

It is necessary to *interpret* Scripture, because its message is not only a unifying one, but also contains a variety of meaning (polyvalence). Critical questions to be posed in the process of interpretation are: when is plurality conducive to life and when does it lead to harmful division? When can differences be considered inherent to the Bible, its message and meanings, and when are differences the product of the reader's ideologies that are forced onto the Bible? Part of the theological reflection on the role of Scripture in the life of the church is to identify factors that result in different readings of a text; factors such as hermeneutical presuppositions, denominational traditions and the cultural imprint that influence the reading of a text.

In the European context theological reflection on the role of Scripture has taken an interesting turn. During the modern period the dispute was that of fundamentalist versus liberal theology. But secularism presented an even more serious problem, namely a growing 'loss of the Bible'. This trend is continued in the present-day postmodern, postsecular era. The problem also manifests itself in the churches of the Reformation, even though these churches adhere to the centrality of Scripture. There is a significant decrease in the actual reading and knowledge of the Bible. This growing 'biblical analphabeticism' is evident amongst the majority of the members of Protestant churches.

The World Communion of Reformed Churches has the intention to develop a clear position concerning controversial ethical and political issues, including economic, ecological and gender justice. As the recent past has shown, such issues have the potential to create serious tensions within the Reformed body. The WCRC's reflection on *sola Scriptura* should model theologically responsible ways of dealing with issues without perpetuating existing conflicts. The fear of conflict should not inhibit the process of theological reflection. The only criterion for this process is to enquire what constitutes the will of God for the church in any given situation.

The life of the church

It has become clear that the notion *sola Scriptura* is of central importance for the life of the church. What is the place of Scripture? Some locate the authority of Scripture in its being 'inspired', 'infallible' or even 'inerrant' (Warfield 1948:3–68; cf. Lane 1986:77–94; Van der Belt 2008:200). Others locate authority in the revelatory power of the concepts conveyed in the Bible (biblical theology movement) (see Hasel 1994: 203–215). Still others find it in the 'mighty acts of God in history' accounted in the Bible (Wright 1967:77). For each of these, authority is intrinsic. It is inherent to the *content* of Scripture – a matter of what Scripture *is*. Another possibility is to find authority in how Scripture functions – what it *does* in conveying the good news of God purposes (Calvin) or bearing authoritative witness to Jesus Christ (Barth). All of the above positions have their claim. In all of this, tradition plays a role.

The relation between Scripture and tradition is therefore relevant to the ecumenical discussion. In Roman Catholicism,

Scripture is in a sense already tradition, already the testimony of communities of faith embedded in their contexts and traditions. The Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity suggested that the churches of the Reformation should also affirm that Scripture is the 'heart of the tradition'. If this were the case, the s*ola Scriptura* principle would no longer be valid. However, is it true that Protestant churches subordinate *all* of doctrine and practice to the authority of Scripture? Members of churches often have the impression that this is the case. In actuality the churches of the Reformation tend to be open to many sources, acknowledging that 'all truth is from God' (Zwingli). The intellectual currents of the day, the findings of science, and experience in the life of faith are all taken seriously. In all of this Scripture maintains its priority and remains the 'witness without parallel'. This begs the questions whether Reformed practice is founded more on a principle of *prima Scriptura* and, consequently, whether *sola Scriptura* is still the right language. If Reformed theology concludes that it is, and continues to use *sola Scriptura*, this term should be regularly accompanied by an explanation.

In the Reformed family some adhere to the doctrine of inerrancy or take a very literalistic approach to Scripture. Others have embraced historical-critical methodologies and reject inerrancy and literalistic approaches. There is therefore a challenge to search for wisdom already there in the Reformed tradition that could take it beyond the conservative versus progressive impasse and transcend the present battle lines. Such wisdom could include, for example, Calvin's understanding of Scripture (see Calvin [1509–1564] 2002: 49–55). He uses the language of 'infallibility' with respect to Scripture, by which he means that Scripture *will not fail* to communicate the good news that God wants to convey through it (cf. Nicole 1982:425–442). For Calvin Scripture provides true knowledge of God, but it does so by functioning like a mirror, giving a true reflection, but not imparting the thing itself. On the one hand, Calvin has a high regard for the authority of Scripture (its unity and sufficiency, its self-authenticating nature); on the other hand, he resists literalism and admits to errors in Scripture and the divine-human tension of the text. Calvin's insight into the dynamic relation of Word and Spirit (Calvin [1509–1564] 2002:49–55) in the work of revelation and his 'principle of divine accommodation' could deliver the Reformed tradition from bibliolatry.

Insights can also be drawn from other Reformed theologians and from Reformed confessions. The variety of perspectives and approaches to interpretation could potentially enhance the life of the church. Scripture is the source and norm of all Reformed theological reflection and ethical action. It impacts, or should impact, everything that is undertaken. Much of the work on the themes of communion and justice has relied upon texts and their interpretation as foundational.

A balance between the affirmation that the word of God comes to human beings in Scripture and the affirmation that the Scriptures are human documents through and through, would endorse the Reformed insight that Scripture *becomes* the word of God as the Spirit speaks in and through it. This could lead to a relational or contextual approach to the interpretation of Scripture, which acknowledges that context shaped the formation of the Scriptures and also shapes the questions that people have today. Context also shapes interpretation. The commitment of Reformed churches to be in communion with one another implies, amongst other things, a willingness to hear one another out and attempt to understand one another's viewpoints when there is a conflict of interpretations. This is not to say that any and all interpretations have equal merit, but when engaging in committed conversation, Reformed churches can reflect together on the task of interpretation.

Hindrance or catalyst for church unity?

It has become clear that, despite the fact that all of Christendom accepts the Bible as its primary authority, this faith assertion does not necessarily succeed in unifying Christendom. This is understandable because even the Bible itself consists of different genres and a variety of theological dimensions that are sometimes conflicting.

Consequently, *sola Scriptura* does not have the capability of forging unity in the church. Rather, it is a hermeneutical (interpretative) technique which is used differently in different strands of Reformed tradition:

- In neo-Calvinist circles *sola Scriptura* implies *tota Scriptura* for some (cf. Sproul 2005). Scripture is seen to interpret itself. This dissolves all conflicting interpretations. This is the main method used to accomplish unity of Scripture. In the few instances where unity is not achieved in this way, the dictum *'non licet'* functions. This kind of hermeneutics results in a 'plain sense of Scripture' approach.
- In other Calvinist circles and in the Lutheran tradition a pneumatological approach brings a greater flexibility to the interpretation of Scripture. This approach is more open to the influence of the socio-historical context of the message of the Bible as well as to the evolutionary development of texts (historical criticism).

The very existence of these two approaches causes division in the church, especially with regard to ethical matters (cf. Seitz 2000:177–196). Divisions should not only be attributed to so-called North-South cultural differences ('democratic-European' vs. 'patriarchal tricontinental'; cf. Baudet [1966] 1988) or similarly to East-West cultural differences. The issue at stake is what Karl Barth called the principle of Scripture (*Schriftprinzip; principium canonicitatis*), that is: Jesus Christ (cf. DeVries 2003:294–310).

The most divisive factor in Reformed circles is the conception of Scripture. Culture is but a contributing factor. In the Lutheran tradition seeking the cause of Christ ('was Christum treibet')[3] is more important than focusing on the letter of Scripture. Luther ([1522] 1967:177–178, in Strathmann 1970) puts it as follows:

3.Luther, M., 1522, WADB 7:382, p. 27 = [1963] 1990, p. 63. [= *'Vorrede auf die Episteln S. Jacobi und Judae'*, WADS 7 = Luther Deutsch, *Die Werke Luthers in Auswahl. Bd.5.: Die Schriftauslegung,* herausgegeben von Kurt J. Aland.

> In this regard, all truly holy books are similar in that they proclaim Christ and advance the cause of Christ. That is also the criterion for evaluating all books, namely to assess whether they advance the cause of Christ or not, forasmuch as the whole Scripture points to Christ, Romans 3:21, and Paul resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ, 1 Corinthians 2:2. *What does not teach Christ, is not apostolic, even when taught by the apostle Peter or the apostle Paul. So also, what does proclaim Christ, is apostolic, even when proclaimed by Judas, Annas, Pilate and Herod*' (p. 42, [*my translation, my emphasis*])

For Barth, God's revelation is made relevant in a dynamic way wherever and whenever the gospel of Jesus Christ is proclaimed. This means that Jesus Christ is the canon *behind* the canon.[4] He is both the content and the proclaimer of the gospel. Chronologically Jesus came before inscripturation (cf. Marxsen 1968:282–284, 1976:45–62; Devenish in Marxsen 1992:xii). On a qualitative level the gospel of Jesus Christ is more than Scripture, more than the Christian message. Paul Tillich ([1963] [1996] 2007)[5] even refers to the 'irrelevance of the Christian message' when the plain sense of Scripture (content) is used to maintain social conventions whilst the ethics of Jesus is negated. Culture (also the cultures that are reflected in Scripture itself) should show deference to the *principle of Scripture.*

The tenet of *sola Scriptura* is central to Calvinist thought and as such should have been a strong binding factor in the World Communion of Reformed Churches. This, however, is not always the case. A theological discussion about 'the relevance and irrelevance of the Christian message' (see Tillich [1963] [1996] 2007) is necessary in order to build an authentic and strong, instead of a superficial, foundation for unity. By means of a 'hermeneutics of conversation' (Ricoeur 1974; cf. Tracy 1981, 1987, 1990) the dynamics of the divisive elements should be identified.[6]

Case study: Perspectives from the South African context

The postmodern world is a fragmented one. In post-apartheid South Africa there is also a lack of social cohesion. Churches strive for unity but have difficulty putting it into practice. The question is whether the root cause of the lack of unity could be attributed to the fragmentation that is characteristic of the postmodern world. However, never in the history of the Christian church has there been unity, therefore a particular paradigm or shift of paradigm is probably not the explanation.

In spite of the reality of diversity, the unity of faith in the one Lord, one Spirit, one God (Paul) remains imperative. Christians cannot simply accept the divisions caused by diversity as a given, but should keep striving for unity – what Cullmann ([1986] 1988:13) calls *Einheit durch Vielfalt* [unity through diversity[. When Christians strive for unity it is not a utopian attempt to smooth over all diversity. The reality of diversity should be taken into account when searching for ways to find unity beyond the existing diversity. One such path may be pneumatological faith. Believers compelled by the Spirit of God could transcend boundaries through a spirit of justice and love. Spirit-filled believers should not remain trapped in their material existence (*sarx*), but 'live according to the Spirit and set their minds on the things of the Spirit' (Rm 8:5). In Christ there is 'neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female' (Gl 3:28). Cultural and other differences can and should be transcended by a life in the Spirit.

In South Africa the rocky road to church unity can be seen in how the Belhar Confession has become a divisive factor. Gender exclusivity has ostensibly been overcome. Recently two women have been elected as moderators – in the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA – Mary-Anne Plaatjies-Huffel) and in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South African (Norma Rossouw). However, the very same URCSA that designed Belhar to overcome racism could not apply the Confession to also overcome heterosexism. Three years ago this led to the resignation of Allan Boesak from the Executive of URCSA in the Western Cape.

From the other side, the Belhar Confession is deemed unacceptable by many members of the DRC. It has become a sensitive issue that is impeding the process of the unification of the DRC and URCSA. The question is: what is the root cause of this lack of unity? There are three possible answers: the post-apartheid lack of social cohesion, a conflict of cultures, or there may be a deeper underlying reason.

Postcolonial theories (cf. Pui-lan 2005:186–208) could be used to explain the post-apartheid problems in South Africa. However, quite possibly the country now finds itself in the throes of neo-colonialism where a hegemony similar to that of the previous colonial regimes is prevalent. During the Mandela era there was a strong postcolonial agenda: turning away from apartheid, striving for unity (cf. the film *Invictus* 2009), not getting rid of everything European, but using it to the benefit of building up the country, and an intentional attempt at reconciliation (cf. Boesak & De Young 2012). Since the Mbeki era racism has surfaced more strongly again and this is increasing in the Zuma era.

The postcolonial agenda focused on reconciliation in spite of the colonial heritage. On the one hand Africa did not want to return to 'old Africa' and the people of European origin could not 'return' to Europe (since they had been Africans for many generations). This is a postcolonial perspective. Colonialism brought industry and some values worth retaining from Europe to Africa. On the other hand, African philosophy contains enriching humanising elements. 'In-betweenness' is inherent to South African culture and probably to many post-colonial cultures all over the world. Neo-colonialism, on the other hand, feeds on differences and therefore instigates and capitalises on polarization. The race card is played in response to many a problem. Neo-colonialism is divisive. Hegemony is revived.

4.Over against *in*; see Alexander Schweitzer's (1863:165) reductionist interpretation of Luther.

5.Tillich's Earl Lectures in 1963 at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley.

6.See also Jürgen Habermas' (2001) 'postnational' contribution with regard to the current European situation.

Another possible cause for the lack of social cohesion in South Africa (and other post-colonial countries) and the problem of a lack of unity in the Christian church, could be cultural difference. In order to find the language to articulate cultural difference and cultural conflict, some unfortunate binary oppositions have been coined: North-South and the Muslim East as opposed to the Christian West. This is not only geographically inaccurate, but it also amounts to generalization and stereotyping. If these divisions are taken to be *the* main reason for the lack of unity rather than just a contributing factor, the situation in South Africa could be described as follows: the Eurocentric (White) Dutch Reformed Church does not want to accept the Belhar Confession of the Black Uniting Reformed Church. Or from the former's side: it is the patriarchal culture of non-Eurocentric churches that causes conflict with regard to ethical matters such as gender and sexuality. This would amount to an over-simplification of the situation.

Henri Baudet ([1966] 1986) demystifies the simplistic distinctions of a Eurocentric mentality that romanticised the 'non-European man', both in the colonial and the post-colonial era. 'Primitive', 'natural', 'authentic' humanity, uncontaminated by European baggage, could, according to this mentality, be found in Africa and the Orient. However, this 'paradise lost' mindset was paradoxically contaminated by the distinction between 'superior' and 'primitive'. If such ambiguity is not faced honestly and demystified, the divisive elements in Christendom at large and in the WCRC in particular, will not be exposed effectively.

The post-apartheid situation and the lack of social cohesion in South Africa and the larger 'North-South' tension are but contributing factors and not the root cause of the lack of unity in the Christian church, be it in South Africa, in the Reformed world or in Christianity in general.

If culture is not the core problem, the deeper underlying issue could be the conflict of interpretation in spite of an ostensibly unifying tenet such as *sola Scriptura* in the Reformed tradition. This conflict occurs when there is an inability to recognise the Authority *behind* the authority of Scripture. In order to be able to recognise this Authority, a hermeneutics of suspicion, including suspicion of culture, is necessary. Such a hermeneutics: (1) focuses on what advances the cause of Christ ('was *Christum treibet*'), and (2) includes an honest discussion on the 'relevance and irrelevance of the Christian message'. In such a conversation that which is irrelevant because the gospel of Christ is not central to it, should be confronted honestly and openly.

Acknowledgement

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

Y.D. (University of Pretoria) is as principle author, the presenter of the paper in Rüdlingen, Switzerland. She collected and reworked the data, and incorporates both M.W.'s (Ruhr University) research with regard to 'basics, problems and questions' and A.C-W.'s (McCormick Seminary) as well as R.S.'s (Karnataka Theological College) respective responses to M.W. M.Z. (University of Bern) focuses on the controversy fundamentalist-liberal usage of scriptures and the relevance of the research for the World Communion of Reformed Churches (WCRC). From a hermeneutics of suspicion, Y.D. applies the research to social matters with regard to the 'binary opposition' 'North-South' and 'Muslim East-Christian West'.

References

Barth, K., [1932–1938] 2010, *Church Dogmatics Vol 1.1, Sections 1–7: The doctrine of the Word, the Word of God as the crition of Dogmatics*, G.W. Bromiley & T.F. Torrance (eds.), T&T Clark, Edinburgh.

Baudet, H., [1966] 1988, *Paradise on earth: Some thoughts on European images of non-European man*, transl. E. Wentholt, Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, CT.

Boesak, A.A. & De Young, C.P., 2012, *Radical reconciliation: Beyond political pietism and Christian quietism,* Orbis Books, New York, NY.

Calvin, J., [1509–1564] 2002, 'The testimony of the Spirit necessary to give full authority to Scripture: The impiety of pretending that the credibility of Scripture depends on the judgment of the church', in *The institutes of the Christian religion,* transl. H. Beveridge, pp. 49–55, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI. (Christian Classics, Ethereal Library).

Cullmann, O., 1986, *Einheit durch Vielfalt*, Mohr, Tübingen.

Cullmann, O., [1986] 1988, *Unity through diversity*, Fortress, Philadelphia, PA. PMCid:172351

Dalferth, I.U., 1997a, 'Die Mitte is aussen: Anmerkungen zum Wirklichkeitsbezug evangelischer Schriftauslegung', in C. Landmesser *et al.* (Hrsgs.), *Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift: Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums*, pp. 173–198, De Gruyter, Berlin. (BZNW 86.)

Dalferth, I.U., 1997b, *Gedeutete Gegenwart: Zur Wahrnehmung Gottes in den Erfahrungen der Zeit,* Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen.

Dalferth, I.U., 2002, *Die Gemeinschaft evangelischer und anglikanischer Kirchen nach der Meissener Erklärung,* Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, Leipzig.

Dalferth, I.U. & Hoare, R. (eds.), 1997, *Visible unity and the ministry of oversight: The Second Theological Conference held under the Meissen Agreement between the Church of England and the Evangelical Church in Germany*, Church House Publishing, London. (The Society for Ecumenical Studies.)

Devenish, P.E., 1992, 'Introduction: The Jesus-kerygma and the Christian theology', in W. Marxsen (ed.), *Jesus and the church: The beginnings of Christianity*, selected, translated, and introduced by P.E. Devenish, pp. xi–xxxv, Trinity Press International, Philadelphia, PA.

De Vries, D., 2003, 'Rethinking the Scripture principle: Friedrich Schleiermacher and the role of the Bible in the church', in W.M. Alston & M. Welker (eds.), *Reformed theology*, pp. 294–310, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Ekegren, P., 1999, *The reading of theoretical texts: A critique of criticism in the social sciences*, Routledge, New York, NY. (Routledge Studies in Social and Political Thought).

Farley, E. & Hodgson, P.C., 'Scripture and tradition', in P.C. Hodgson & R.H. King (eds.), *Christian theology: An introduction to its traditions and tasks*, pp. 61–87, revised and enlarged second edition, Fortress, Philadelphia, PA.

Frege, G., [1892] 1952, 'On sense and reference', in P. Geach & M. Black (eds.), *Translations from the philosophical writings of Gottlob Frege*, pp. 56–78, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

Habermas, J., 2001, *The postnational constellation: Political essays,* transl. and ed. with introduction M. Pensky, Cambridge Polity Press, Cambridge, MA.

Hasel, G.F., 1994, 'The nature of Biblical theology: Recent trends and issues', *Andrews University Studies* 32(3), 203–215.

Invictus, 2009, Motion picture, Warnar Bros. Pictures, Beverly Hills, CA.

Kaiser, W.C., 2007, 'The meaning of meaning', in W.C. Kaiser & M. Silva (eds.), *Introduction to biblical hermeneutics: The search for meaning,* pp. 29–31, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI.

Käsemann, E., 1964, 'The canon of the New Testament and the unity of the church', in *Essays on New Testament themes*, pp. 95–107, SCM Press, London.

Käsemann, E., [1965] 1969, 'Unity and multiplicity in the New Testament doctrine of the church', in *New Testament questions of today*, pp. 252–259, SCM Press, London. (New Testament Library).

Käsemann, E., (Hrsg.), 1970, *Das Neue Testament als Kanon: Dokumentation und kritische Analyse zur gegenwärtigen Diskussion*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.

Kelsey, D., 1975, *The uses of Scripture in recent theology*, Fortress, Philadelphia, PA.

Körtner, U., 2012, 'Towards an ecumenical hermeneutics of diversity: Some remarks on the hermeneutical challenges of the ecumenical movement', *Theology Today* 68(4), 448–466. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0040573611424329

Küng, H., 1963, 'Early catholicism in the New Testament as a problem in controversial theology', in *The Council in action: Theological reflections on the Second Vatican Council,* pp. 159–165, Sheed & Ward, New York, NY.

Küng, H., [2001] 2003, *The Catholic Church,* Random House, New York, NY.

Kuss, O., 1972, 'Über die Klarheit der Schrift: Historische und hermeneutische Überlegungen zu der Kontroverse des Erasmus und des Luther über den freien oder versklavten Willen', in J. Ernst (Hrsg.), *Schriftauslegung: Beiträge zur Hermeneutik des Neuen Testamentes und im Neuen Testament*, pp. 89–149, Collegium Biblicum, München.

Lane, A.N.S., 1986, 'B.B. Warfield and the humanity of Scripture', *Vox Evangelica* 16, 77–94.

Luther, M., [1522] [1963] 1990, *Vorrede auf die Episteln S. Jacobi und Judae, WADB 7=Luther Deutsch, Die Werke Luthers in Auswahl, Bd.5.: Die Schriftauslegung,* herausgegeben von Kurt Aland, 4. Auflage, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Gottingen. (UTB 1656).

Marxsen, W., 1968, *Das Neue Testament als Buch der Kirche*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, Gütersloh.

Marxsen, W., 1976, 'Jesus – Bringer oder Inhalt des Evangeliums', in *Die Sache Jesu geht weiter*, pp. 45–62, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, Gütersloh.

Marxsen, W., 1992, *Jesus and the church: The beginnings of Christianity*, selected, transl. and introduced by P.E. Devenish, Trinity Press International, Philadelphia, PA.

Mathison, K.A., 2001, *The shape of sola Scriptura*, Canon Press and Book Service, Moscow, ID.

McCormack, B., 2004, 'The being of Scripture is in becoming', in V. Bacote, L.C. Miguelez & D.L. Okholm (eds.), *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, authority and hermeneutics,* pp. 55–75, InterVarsity Press, Leicester.

Migliore, D., 2004, *Faith seeking understanding: An introduction to Christian theology*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Nicole, R., 1982, 'John Calvin and inerrancy', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 25(4), 425–442.

Pui-lan, K., 2005, 'Beyond pluralism: Toward a postcolonial theology of religious difference', in K. Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial imagination and feminist theology*, pp. 186–208, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY.

Radford Ruther, R., 2012, Is Christ white? Racism and Christology, in G. Yancy (ed.), *Christology and whiteness: What would Jesus do?*, pp. 101–111, Routledge, London.

Ratzinger, J.A., 2010, 'Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *VERBUM DOMINI* of the Holy Father Benedict XVI, to the bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful on the Word of God in the life and mission of the church', in *Vatican*, viewed 06 April 2012 from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations

Reiser, M., 2007, *Bibelkritik und Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift: Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese und Hermeneutik,* Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen. (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament/WUNT 217).

Ricoeur, P., 1970, *Freud and philosophy: An essay on interpretation*, transl. D. Savage, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Ricoeur, P., 1974, *The conflict of interpretations,* D. Ihde (ed.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Il.

Schneider-Flume, G., 2005, 'Die vielen Geschichten der biblischen Tradition und die eine Geschichte Gottes: Zur Frage nach Einheit und Mitte der Schrift', in G. Schneider-Flume & D. Hiller (Hrsgs.), *Dogmatik Erzählen: Die Bedeutung des Erzählungs für eine biblisch orientierte Dogmatik,* pp. 31–50, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn.

Schneiders, S.M., 1981, 'From exegesis to hermeneutics: The problems of contemporary meaning in Scripture', *Horizons* 8, 23–29.

Schweitzer, A., 1863, *Die christliche Glaubenslehre nach protestantische Grundsätzen*, *Band 1*., Hirzel Verlag, Leipzig.

Seitz, C., 2000, 'Sexuality and Scripture's plain sense: The Christian community and the law of God', in D.L. Balch (ed.), *Homosexuality, science and the 'plain sense' of Scripture*, pp. 177–196, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI. PMid:10917154

Sproul, R.C., 2005, *Scripture alone: The evangelical doctrine*, P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ.

Strathmann, H., 1970, 'Die Krisis des Kanons der Kirche', in E. Kiisemann (Hrsg.), *Das Neue Testament als Kanon: Dokumentation und kritische Analyse zur gegenwartigen Diskussion,* pp. 42–61, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Gottingen.

Tillich, P., [1963] [1996] 2007, *The irrelevance and relevance of the Christian messag*e, D. Foster (ed.), Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene, OR.

Tracy, D., 1981, *The analogical imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism,* Crossroads, New York, NY.

Tracy, D., 1987, *Plurality and ambiguity: Hermeneutics, religion and hope,* Harper & Row, San Francisco, CA. PMCid:1477713

Tracy, D., 1990, *Dialogue with the Other: The inter-religious dialogue,* Peeters, Louvain. (Louvain Theological & Pastoral Monographs 1).

Van der Belt, H., 2008, *The authority of Scripture in Reformed theology: Truth and trust*, Brill, Leiden. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004163072.i-384

Warfield, B.B., 1948, *The inspiration and authority of the Bible*, S.G. Craig (ed.), Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, Philadelphia, PA.

Webster, J., 2003, *Holy Scripture: A dogmatic sketch,* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. (Current Issues in Theology). http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808180

Weinrich, M., 1987, 'Prinzipien protestantischer Schriftauslegung', in W. Langer (Hrsg.), *Handbuch der Bibelarbeit*, pp. 162–167, Kösel Verlag, München.

Weinrich, M., 1994, 'Die Bibel legt sich selber aus: Die ökumenische Herausforderung des reformatorischen Schriftprinzips oder vom verheißungsvollen Ärgernis angemessener Bibelauslegung', in H. Frankemölle (Hrsg.), *Die Bibel: Das bekannte Buch – das fremde Buch*, pp. 43–59, Ferdinand Schöningh Verlag, Paderborn.

Wittgenstein, L., [1953] 2009, *The philosophical investigations: A collection of critical essays,* P.M.S. Hacker & J. Schulte (eds.), rev. 4th edn., Blackwell Publishing, Oxford.

Wright, G.E., 1957, *Biblical archaeology*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA.