

ARTICLES

LUTHER'S CONTRIBUTION TO SOLA SCRIPTURA AND BIBLICAL SUFFICIENCY

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The sixteenth century Protestant Reformation was a clarion call for Christians to return to the authority and superiority of the Scriptures for all of Christian faith and practice. Centuries before, John Hus (c. 1369-1415) and John Wycliffe (c. 1320-1384), devout men of faith in Jesus Christ, made valiant attempts to expose the overreaching authority and abuses of Roman Catholicism. But it was Martin Luther, while professor of moral theology at the University of Wittenberg, who formally inaugurated the ecclesiastical divorce from the Roman Catholic Church by nailing "The Ninety-Five Theses", or "Disputation on the Power of Indulgences" (Disputatio pro declaratione virtutis indulgentiarum) on the door of All Saints' Church (Schloßkirche) in Wittenberg, Germany. Soon after, Luther mailed "The Ninety-Five Theses" to Albert of Brandenburg, the Archbishop of Mainz on October 31, 1517, officially launching the Protestant Reformation.

The genesis of this monumental change began in the thinking of Martin Luther (1483-1586), many years before his publication of "The Ninety-Five Theses." A dedicated Roman Catholic monk, his studies of the Scriptures, in particular the Epistles of Paul to the Romans, Galatians, and the Epistle to the Hebrews, led him to the theological conviction of salvation by grace alone (sola gratia), through faith alone (sola fide). Luther himself attributes this theological awakening to his own personal conversion as he reflected upon Paul's statements in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11.

Day and night I tried to meditate upon the significance of these words: "The righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written: The righteous shall live by faith." Then, finally God had mercy on me, and I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that

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gift of God by which a righteous man lives, namely, faith, and that this sentence – The righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel – is passive, indicating that the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: “The righteous shall live by faith.” Now I felt as though I had been reborn altogether and had entered Paradise.²

His transformation did not end there. Once this change had occurred in his thinking, his view of the superiority of Scriptures began to change as well. He was now convinced of the scriptural teaching of salvation as being the active work of God alone, without the additional efforts of man as required by Rome. The Word of God alone stood as supreme in its authority and not the word of the church. Luther continues,

In the same moment, the face of the whole of Scripture became apparent to me. My mind ran through the Scriptures, as far as I was able to recollect them, seeking analogies in other phrases, such as the work of God, by which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.³

Once the transforming power of the gospel occurred in the life of Luther it awakened in him the undeniable truth that Scriptural supremacy (the wisdom of God) reigns over human reasoning, especially in ecclesiastical pronouncements. It is my thesis that Luther’s reliance upon careful biblical study of the original text of Scripture fueled the Reformation and demonstrated Luther’s commitment to sola scriptura. As this reformation took root in Luther’s thinking, it may be said that grace alone (sola gratia) enabled his faith alone (sola fide) in Christ alone (sola Christus) as understood in Scripture alone (sola scriptura) to the glory of God alone (soli Deo gloria). There was a theological progression to the five “Sola’s” of the Reformation that all stemmed from Luther’s biblical study of the original text.

² U. Saarnivaara, *Luther Discovers the Gospel* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1951), pp. 36-37. Accounts of Martin Luther’s salvific transformation also appear in various Table Talks as well as in the Preface to an edition of his Latin writings.

³ Ibid.

Roman Catholicism rejects these sola's because its theological legacy is Thomist. The writings of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), especially his *Summa Theologica*, was highly influential during the time of Luther and continues to be the leading Roman Catholic philosophy and theology today. Essentially, it is a view of man that believes that depravity has sickened man's ability to respond to God, but it has not deadened it. Free will has not been destroyed by original sin and the freedom that a person has is unviolated or unimpaired by God's grace.⁴ Therefore, both man and God are active in salvation and the payment of sin (e.g. through indulgences, participating in the mass, and the endless confessionals, etc.). Using Aristotelian reasoning, man can reason himself to God through nature, making the work of God and the Word of God a part of, but not exclusive for salvation. Reliance upon man's observational skills, abilities, and conclusions has always been an essential aspect of Rome's theology. Therefore, for the true Roman Catholic, divine revelation in nature is just as authoritative as divine revelation in Scripture since he functions with two co-authoritative sources: the Bible and man's careful reasoning. It was not difficult for the Roman Catholic of Luther's day to accept papal pronouncements as having the same level of authenticity as the Holy Bible. Catholic theology maintained that free will was maintained by man after the fall and originated from his being made in God's image.

Martin Luther's pronouncement that salvation is entirely the work of God's grace alone was a rejection of human merit, free will, capability in regeneration, and papal authority. Luther argued that man is not sickened by his depravity, rather he is deadened by it (Romans 3:10-18). He has no free will because he is in bondage to his sinful nature. This was a radical awakening that Martin Luther and another reformer, John Calvin, shared.⁵ The sinfulness of man had brought absolute corruption. Since man was dead in his trespasses and sins, unable to save himself, salvation required the efficacious work of grace by God to awaken his soul to the gospel. Salvation was wholly a work of God because of the defilement of man's total depravity corrupting the entire human nature. As Luther grew in his theological

⁴ Often referred to as Molinism as it was first developed by Luis de Molina (1535-1600) in order to counter the teachings of the Reformers. Often seen among Roman Catholics as distinct from Thomist theology, which starts with a loose form of efficacious grace. Molinism starts with a clarifying statement of unobstructed free will. However, both depend to a high degree on man's rationality and free course of the will to determine truth.

⁵ T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*, (The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1975), 112-114.

understanding, he seriously questioned the entire Catholic sacramental system as indicated in his numerous tracts and sermons during the years of 1519 and 1520.⁶ If our Lord was the sole author and finisher of our salvation, what is the purpose of the mass and the Eucharist as practiced by Roman Catholicism? “All the accepted good works in the former Catholic system, such as pilgrimages, fastings, and special masses were thus rendered superfluous and even positively sinful.”⁷ Luther understood that if Scripture was to have the rightful place of authority in the Christian life, then not only would orthodoxy need to change but orthopraxy as well.

How did Martin Luther approach the text of Scripture in order to understand it? What hermeneutical methodology enabled him to make his conclusions? If the Bible was to be his sole standard for faith and practice, it is critical to understand the answers to these questions. Listen to the insight of Dr. E.G. Schwiebert, after spending years of his life studying Martin Luthe and his approach to interpreting the Scriptures.

The text was expounded largely on the basis of the grammatical historical method, while the interpretation became almost entirely spiritual. Allegory left the Luther classroom, even though it remained with him for a while in the pulpit.⁸

When it came to soteriology Luther had left behind the Roman Catholic practice of allegorizing of the text, but it still took him a while to remove it from his preaching. Yet, it is important to note that the amazing insights he had into the canon of scripture was built upon a grammatical-historical method. He relied upon a careful study of the historical and grammatical context to properly uncover the author’s original meaning, unlike the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy that depreciated the authority of the Word of God by making papal pronouncements equal in authority with the Scripture. Luther’s study method represented a radical departure from the typical Roman Catholic priest, for whom the Catholic catechisms and commentaries were the chief interpretive tools to understand the Bible, not the

⁶ E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 1950), p. 445.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 453.

⁸ E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 1950), p. 285.

Bible itself. The Roman Catholic's compromised view of Thomist theology elevated man-made commentaries to the same level of Scriptural authority, precluding the need to study Scripture for what it says and relying instead on books published by well-educated priests and scholars to teach theology. Biblical truth was sidelined in favor of human speculation. This is one of the reasons the Catholic hierarchy fought so fiercely to keep the Scriptures out of the hands of the common man, even subjecting many to inquisition and death if they translated the Scriptures into the tongue of the average man. If the local priest kept the Scriptures to himself, then he could control the meaning in the thinking of his parishioners. William Tyndale's (1494-1536) martyrdom is one result of these Catholic fears for he resolved to, "make the boy that drives the plough in England know more of Scripture than the Pope does."⁹ From Luther's perspective, Thomist theology had undermined the authority of Scripture and replaced it with ecclesiastic tradition.

Reliance upon careful biblical study of the original text of Scripture fueled the Reformation and demonstrated Luther's commitment to sola scriptura. Protestant reformers were not fearful of the average citizen possessing a copy of the Bible; they encouraged it. This motivated Luther's ministry of preaching and counseling. He wrote, "The entire Bible has two principal thoughts. The first: Human nature is in its entirety damned and ruined by sin, nor can it come out of this calamity and death by its own powers and efforts; the second: God alone is just and out of mercy destroys sin and justifies."¹⁰ Bible translation into the language of the common man grew rapidly throughout this time. By God's providence, it was enabled by Johannes Gutenberg's (1393-1468) invention of the printing press in 1440. And though the screw press was a very helpful tool in the Reformation's rapid growth throughout Europe, it would be naive to believe that the Reformation would never had happened without it. Such views, common in secular literature, do not take into account the fervent resolve of reformers like Luther and his sustained desire to see the truths of Scripture expounded and disseminated throughout the world. Hand-copied or mechanically printed, it mattered not to the reformers, such was the depth of the conviction to see the Word of God and its message of the gospel to be propagated among the populace.

⁹ F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 3rd Ed. (Revell Publishing, New Jersey, 1963), 223.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, "Table Talk," Weimar edition 5, (Berlin: Andesite Press, 2015), 68.

Furthermore, the way in which a man treated the Scriptures revealed to Luther the very character of the man. If he treated the Word carelessly, then he treated Christ carelessly.

The Holy Scripture is God's Word, written and, so to speak, lettered and put into the form of letters, just as Christ, the eternal Word of God, is clothed in humanity. And men regard and treat the written Word of God in this world just as they do Christ. It is a worm and no book compared with other books; for the honor people accord other writings of men by studying, reading, pondering, keeping, and using them they do not accord Scripture. If it is treated well, it lies there in neglect. Others tear it to pieces, scourge and crucify it, and subject it to all manner of torture until they stretch it sufficiently to apply to their heresy, meaning, and whim... It is a good sign, therefore, if a man has the precious gift of loving and liking Scripture, of gladly reading it, of highly esteeming and treasuring it.¹¹

Scripture was held in the highest regard in Luther's eyes as it was in the eyes of other reformers who joined him. It was not only a text to be studied, but to be revered, loved, cherished, and honored as authoritative above all other human works, because it was the inspired Word of God.

During the persecutory reign of Queen Mary I of England ("Bloody Mary") and her attempts at restoring Roman Catholicism, many Protestant Christians escaped England for the safety of Geneva, Switzerland, the home of the reformer John Calvin. It was during this time that the Oxford scholar William Whittingham, continuing with the same zeal as the other Reformers, made a complete revision of the English Bible and produced the widely accepted Geneva Bible (1560). It was "the Bible of Shakespeare, the Bible of the Puritans, and the Bible of the Pilgrim Fathers."¹² Eventually, the reformers' dedication to Sola Scriptura influenced parishioners to the point of instigating enormous social pressure on the Catholic

¹¹ Martin Luther, "Table Talk," Weimar edition 5, (Berlin: Andesite Press, 2015), 71-72.

¹² David Ewert, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, (Zondervan Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1990), 195.

leadership of their day. The resulting influence throughout Europe and England forced Roman Catholic leadership to reluctantly produce various translations of the Bible into the language of the common man, even though many of these were of poor quality because of their forced adherence to the Latin Vulgate.

Martin Luther's sustained commitment to the Scripture can also be seen in his dedication to translating the Bible into the German language. The Luther Bible was a translation from Hebrew and ancient Koiné Greek texts. Luther's dedication to this project brought about the New Testament in German, published in 1522. Later, he completed the Old Testament and Apocrypha, and the entire Bible was published by 1534 into German. Luther's commitment to the Scriptures was remarkable, considering the unusual attention Roman Catholic clerics gave to Vatican pronouncements over against a careful study of God's Word. For him, the true teaching of Scripture had been neglected and often replaced with Roman Catholic doctrine. Getting the Word of God into the hands of the German populace was a major priority. There is no question that Luther was undeterred in his resolve to ensure that the average man had access to the Holy Scriptures because he was truly committed to its superiority and sufficiency.

Four Historical Observations

Sufficiency Illustrates Biblical Superiority

I would like to make four historical observations in this paper. First, Martin Luther's resolve to return to the biblical teaching on salvation demonstrates his reliance on biblical superiority over fabricated religion and self-dependence. It is obvious that this was the beginning spark of the Protestant Reformation. Salvation through faith alone, by grace alone, trusting Christ atoning sacrifice alone, is the very essence of the gospel (Ephesians 2:1-10). The theological culture of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was hostile to this gospel and those who preached it. Preaching the Gospel Luther preached required two things: a peculiar disregard for the preservation of one's life during this time, and an uncommon trust in the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture. This same gospel had been systematically dismantled and obscured by centuries of Catholic teaching

throughout Europe and it took an uncompromising trust in the superiority of God's Word to uncover the true biblical gospel. As Luther himself wrote, "People are not to believe me, the church, the fathers, the apostle, or even an angel from heaven if we teach anything contrary to the Word of God. But the Word of the Lord should stand forever."¹³ Such was his high regard for Holy Scriptures.

If Martin Luther's reverence for the Word of God was so exalted, what would he think of a Christian's reliance upon anything other than this Holy Word to address the deep matters of the soul? What would he think of psychology? What would he think of Christians who advocated secular psychological theories in an attempt to cure the turmoil of the soul? I believe it is safe to say he would not think highly of anything conceived by man as having any authority in resolving deep matters of the soul. Luther was clear on this:

We do not condemn the doctrines of men just because they are the doctrines of men, for we would gladly put up with them. But we condemn them because they are contrary to the gospel and the Scriptures. While the Scriptures liberate consciences and forbid that they be taken captive by the doctrines of men, the doctrines of men captivate the conscience anyhow. This conflict between the Scriptures and the doctrines of men we cannot reconcile. Therefore because these two forms of doctrine contradict one another we allow even young children to judge here whether we are to give up the Scriptures, in which the one Word of God is taught from the beginning of the world, or whether we are to give up the doctrines of men, which were newly devised yesterday and which change daily?¹⁴

It is as if Luther could see on the horizon the beginnings of a major philosophical shift in Europe away from the trustworthiness of Scripture to a dependence upon human reasoning. In less than one hundred years after Luther wrote these words, the Enlightenment (die Aufklärung) jettisoned any reliance upon the supernatural or divine revelation, and replaced it with a trust in the empirical observations and conclusions of man. Secular German philosophers would arise and

¹³ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 40:132, quoted in *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, vol. 3 (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 1479.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, "We Do Not Make God's Word True or Untrue No. 3229b – Between June 9 and 12, 1532," in *Luther's Works*, vol. 54, Table Talk (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1967), 152-153.

reject the Scriptures, men such as Christian Wolff, Moses Mendelssohn, G.E. Lessing, and Immanuel Kant. The principles of human reason would govern what is considered to be true, not the Bible. Psychology became the natural birth-child of the Enlightenment as man's attempt to explain disorders of the soul without God. In what way did Luther himself see the Scriptures in light of the ever-increasing advances of the arts and sciences? Listen to his words:

The Holy Scriptures surpass in efficaciousness all the arts and all the sciences of the philosophers and jurists; these, though good and necessary to life here below, are vain and of no effect as to what concerns life eternal. The Bible should be regarded with wholly different eyes from those with which we view other productions. He who wholly renounces himself, and relies not on mere human reason, will make good progress in the Scriptures; but the world comprehends them not, from ignorance of that mortification which is the gift of God's Word. Can he who understands not God's Word, understand God's works?¹⁵

Because he thus believed in the surpassing greatness of God's Word, Luther often spoke of the infinite ability of the Word of God to provide life-changing answers, exceeding human expectations. He also once wrote, "The authority of the word of God goes beyond the capacity of our mind."¹⁶ Human reason could never surpass, let alone approximate, the depth of God's Word.

Roman Catholic Theology Allied with Enlightenment Psychology

In contrast, most Catholic theologians had no problem accepting and even adopting psychological principles from the Enlightenment era. Thomist theology was based upon Aristotelian concepts that gave human reason and observations co-authoritative acceptance with biblical truth. This brings us to a second observation

¹⁵Martin Luther and William Hazlitt. n.d. "The Table-talk of Martin Luther." (Grand Rapids, MI: Generic NL Freebook Publisher, n.d. eBook Collection, EBSCO host, accessed December 13, 2016), 3.

¹⁶Martin Luther and John. Dillenberger, "Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings." The Anchor library of religion. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1961), 270.

in this paper, that the core of Roman Catholic theology was man-centered, which made it a natural ally to the early man-centered psychology of the Age of Reason. Of course, Roman Catholics could not accept every aspect of this enlightened Age of Reason; they condemned many attempts to discount theological conclusions made by science. But significant accommodations were made, especially in the discipline of psychology. This can especially be seen as a result of the openness to psychotherapy in the Vatican II conclusions. But seventeenth-century Roman Catholic clergy had considerable difficulty straddling the ever-widening gap between the Bible and Enlightenment-inspired observations of the soul made by early psychologists. Eventually they advocated a Neo-Scholastic accommodation between faith and science by claiming, "any concept of the human being that ignored the soul and its rational, immortal core, was missing the most essential things."¹⁷ Catholics could see the encroachment science-inspired skeptics were making on ministry to the soul and they chose to find common ground in empirical observation rather than assert the sole authority of Scripture. Later, in the nineteenth century, "Freud threw down the gauntlet to people of faith by calling attention to pathological aspects of religious belief-and viewing religion itself as a form of psychopathology."¹⁸ Anyone who believed in a religion or a god, by Freud's definition, possessed a neurosis. The Bible was not completely thrown out by Roman Catholics, but through Freud's subtle influence scripture was even more diminished in its authority to speak to difficult problems of the soul. Integrationist Eric L. Johnson admits, "Catholics may have been the first identifiable Christians who sought to provide texts that supplemented the literature of empirically based psychology with religiously grounded discussions on the person or soul."¹⁹ There is little doubt that the theological drift of Catholic theology was recognized by Luther as a coming storm for Christians. This is why he elevated the authority and reliability of the Bible over human reason. Roman Catholic historians Henryk Misiak and Virginia Staudt have written,

Since Catholic psychologists are not only psychologists but also
Catholics, they will always endeavor to integrate psychology,

¹⁷ <http://www.themontrealreview.com/2009/Psychology-and-Catholicism.php>, "Psychology and Catholicism: Contested Boundaries" by Robert Kugelmann (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "Psychology & Christianity: Five Views," edited by Eric L. Johnson (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic), 28.

philosophy, and theology...; but this endeavor does not preclude their participation in science even if this science assumes physicalistic methodology or is cultivated by people who do not share or care about Catholic philosophy or theology.²⁰

Catholic compromise can also be seen in the year of 1892 when Monsignor Edward A. Pace was one of the first five psychologists to be elected to the American Psychological Association (APA), assuming a leadership role.

Luther's sense was to divorce Christianity from this dangerous and destructive drift through a return to the authority of Scripture and its high view of God's redemption. His stand at Wittenberg anticipated such a substantial drift by Roman Catholicism. He questioned the very core of Catholic man-centered epistemology and its elevation of man's reason, laboring to return theology to its original purpose of being God-centered and purposefully God-focused. Psychology will always be man-centered and purposefully man-focused, but the Christian church does not have to be. What would Luther think about the wedding of human psychology with Biblical doctrine? In his Table Talk discourses he asserts, "Whatever does not come from Scripture is certainly of the devil himself. All that God has done, particularly all that pertains to our salvation, is clearly put down and noted in Scripture so that no one may excuse himself."²¹ Later he proclaimed, "One should have a pure faith, one that believes nothing that is not grounded in Scripture. All that we are to believe, aye, more than enough, is in Scripture."²² And still later he presses his point, "I shall and must be convinced by Scripture, not by the unreliable life and teachings of men, no matter how holy they may be."²³ There is no doubt that Luther held the Bible in the highest esteem. There was nothing that man could produce, no empirical conclusions man could make that could shake his confidence in the reliability and superiority of God's Word. Psychology was the product of human reasoning and philosophy. It pretended to be a science, but was a soft science, at best, where science attempted to rely on causation, causes that are directly related to effect. Psychology was built upon covariation, causes that seem to be

²⁰ Misiak, Henryk & Staudt, Virginia M., "Catholics in Psychology" (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1954), 14.

²¹ Martin Luther, Martin, "Table Talk," Weimar edition 5, (Berlin: Andesite Press, 2015), 84.

²² Ibid., 85.

²³ Ibid., 91.

related to effect. That is why it is a soft science that has more to do with a world-and-life-view than it does with hard science.

Luther also believed that if human observations and conclusions made in hard science disagreed with the Bible, then the Bible is to be believed and not changed to fit the science. To the Enlightened man or woman that thought was intellectual suicide, but for Luther it was the natural conclusion of his redeemed eyes of faith as he viewed creation. For example, Bible scholars before Luther were fond of allegorizing accounts of the creation events in Genesis 1-3 to agree with their own observations of reality. This is something Luther despised. Concerning them he wrote, "With respect, therefore, to this opinion of Augustine, we conclude, that Moses spoke properly and plainly, and neither allegorically nor figuratively: that is, he means, that the world, with all creatures, was created in six days, as he himself expresses it."²⁴ Luther took the account of creation, as revealed in the Hebrew text of Genesis, as being an actual account or literal account of God having created the universe in six, twenty-four hour days. To view it any other way was to him, a distortion of the plain text, and an unnecessary accommodation to subjective empiricism. Not only would Luther have strongly objected to the theory-laden notions of psychology, but he would have also denied the assertions of nineteenth century naturalist, Charles Darwin. Luther himself was not opposed to science, especially hard science. But he did understand its limitations and weaknesses and he implicitly trusted the Word of God over supposed scientific claims. Catholic scholars, on the other hand, were at the mercy of the Age of Reason. If science denied a text of Scripture, especially as it relates to the psychology of the soul or the creation of man, then Roman Catholic theology would change its understanding and teaching of Scripture. Their chief tool of change was the hermeneutical spiritualizing or allegorizing a text. Once this tool is used, Scripture can be made to mean almost anything. It is no longer the authority, but man's ever-changing opinion becomes the final authority.

Reading meaning into the Scripture makes man the final authority. Science then becomes a religion that forces you to constantly shape the meaning of the text

²⁴ Martin Luther, "The Creation: A Commentary On the First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis," Trans. by Henry Cole (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1898), 25.

to agree with it. Luther believed this to be not only wrong, but alarming and dangerous with the result of ruining people. Martin Luther explained this problem when he wrote, "All manner of religion, where people serve God without His Word and command, is simply idolatry, and the more holy and spiritual such a religion seems, the more hurtful and venomous it is; for it leads people away from the faith of Christ, and makes them rely and depend upon their own strength, works, and righteousness."²⁵

Sufficient to Address the Substantive Needs of the Sinful Soul

For Luther the real power of the truth of Scripture was found in its capacity to speak to the major problems of man. The third major observation is that Luther's view of the supremacy of Scripture is best seen in his belief that it was sufficient to address the substantive needs of the sinful soul. Luther saw the Word of God as an all-sufficient resource in counseling the soul of a troubled man. This is the place he sent the person plagued with mental instability and emotional vulnerability. These are his words, "

My counsel is, that we draw water from the true source and fountain, that is, that we diligently search the Scriptures. He who wholly possesses the text of the Bible, is a consummate divine. One single verse, one sentence of the text, is of far more instruction than a whole host of glosses and commentaries, which are neither strongly penetrating nor armor of proof."²⁶

What about the person who is undergoing a tremendous trial or difficult temptation? Luther proceeds to admonish such a counselee, "Such a person [one facing temptation] must by no means rely on himself, nor must he be guided by his own feelings. Rather, he must lay hold of the words offered to him in God's name, cling to them, place his trust in them, and direct all the thoughts and feelings of his heart to them."²⁷ To Luther, God's Word was not just a superior source, it was a sufficient source for help. A person with emotional or deep turmoil of soul could find lasting answers in this Truth. Perhaps Luther's devotion to the stability of

²⁵ Martin Luther, "Table Talk," trans. William Hazlitt (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2004), 94.

²⁶ Martin Luther and William Hazlitt, "The Table-talk of Martin Luther," (Grand Rapids, MI: Generic NL Freebook Publisher), 3, accessed December 8, 2016 eBook Collection (EBSCOhost).

²⁷ Martin Luther, "Luther's Works," Volume 42: Devotional Writings (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 183.

Scripture comes from his own personal experience with his former mystical beliefs as a Catholic which led him into many dark and depressant valleys. Whatever his prior experience, now that he was a born-again Christian, he understood how the Word was a substantive and reliable agent of change.

How would Luther conceive of the modern concept of “mental illness?” It was not a common label until the middle of the nineteenth century and the terminology was believed to have originated with Sigmund Freud. In reality, it is a misleading term since it is impossible for the mind to get ill. The mind is not an organic entity; the brain is. The brain can get ill, and the mind can be affected in its ability to function in a proper way. Sometimes the brain can experience a severe trauma, an aneurism, a stroke or a chemical imbalance. Any of these can affect the ability of the mind to process information. But when there is no identifiable epidemiology, no presence of a disease or pathogen, and the brain is free of any abnormalities, yet the person still suffers from severe distress, it is not a physiological problem that needs addressing; it is a spiritual (mental) problem that must be addressed. In his correspondence Luther recognized this to be true in the life of a female believer. He remarked, “Her illness is, as you see, rather of the mind than of the body. I am comforting her as much as I can, with my knowledge. In a word, her disease is not for the apothecaries (as they call them), nor is it to be treated with the salves of Hippocrates, but by constantly applying plasters of Scripture and the Word of God.”²⁸ Apothecaries were drug providers, people who prepared and sold medicines. Luther recognized that there were some problems that presented themselves as physical diseases when they were actually spiritual problems. The answer to a spiritual problem was not medications or salves, but a healthy application of Scripture. Medications applied to spiritual problems only alleviate symptoms and never cure the problem. In fact, many psychotropic medications today improve symptoms, and the patients think they are better, but the problem reappears once the medication wears off. Even in the sixteenth century Luther understood that there are many problems people face of a spiritual nature, even though they may manifest physiological symptoms, which can only be cured on a deep heart level through the proper use and application of the Scriptures. Luther

²⁸ Martin Luther, “Luther’s Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters,” vol. 1, (Eugene, OR, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), 402-2.

did not forbid medication when it was warranted, but he also saw a general misuse of medication in attempting to resolve a serious spiritual issue as clerical malpractice. Good medical treatment for a physical malady was viewed by Luther as a legitimate practice for the Christian, but there were many troubles that found their source not in the body but in the heart of man.

If Scripture was the sufficient remedy for maladies of the soul, then it was also the chief means of diagnosis for Luther. What was the essential source of these soul-problems? The simple answer is found in Scripture and it is a worship problem of man's heart. The fourth historical observation is that Martin Luther realized that Scripture exposed man's heart to be essentially idolatrous. The nature of a man's heart is rooted in a depraved tendency to worship anything but the God of Heaven. It passionately desires and longs to finding meaning, happiness, and pleasure in the things of this world. Luther described it this way,

Human nature is idolatrous and superstitious; it flees from the true God, the true worship and fear of God, and promotes confidence in its own brand of worship and in its own works. Priests become rich from traffic in these and get to be great lords. Just so there also was no end and no limit to extravagant gifts and grants under the papacy."²⁹

During Luther's ministry he observed men placing their confidence in the papacy or their own self-reliant abilities, to such an extent that he made this observation, "Idolatry is far more fervent than true piety."³⁰ Men's hearts cling to the things of this world in zealous worship, denying the true worship of God as revealed in Scripture; consequently they suffer from overwhelming fear, anxiety, guilt, sinful anger, and depression. The idolatrous ruling desires of a man's heart robs him of the true joy and contentment that comes from worshipping the God he was created to worship in the Bible. There is no doubt that the human heart is a factory of idols. Luther remarks, "It is very easy to fall into idolatry, for all of us are idolaters by nature. Since idolatry is born in us, it pleases us very much."³¹ From within the very nature of man comes passionate desires that rule the heart and steal away life itself. It is pleasure that rules the heart and cause fights and quarrels (James 4:1-3). It is

²⁹ Martin Luther, "Table Talk," Weimar edition 5, (Berlin: Andesite Press, 2015), 678.

³⁰ Ibid., 679.

³¹ Martin Luther, "Table Talk," Weimar edition 5, (Berlin: Andesite Press, 2015), 678.

disappointed pleasures that can cause depression. It is the absence of pleasure and loss of safety that brings out overwhelming fears. Everything goes back to what a man naturally worships.

A worshiper of the God of the Bible is willing to sacrifice the temporary pleasures of life and endure the wrath of others for the eternal reward of heaven. Luther loved the Epistle to the Hebrews, and found that Hebrews 11:27 helped him fight off anxiety and give him great comfort at the Diet of Worms (1521), presided over by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles the Fifth. Speaking of Moses as he left Egypt it says, "By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen." Luther knew, like Moses, the probable wrath of the king, but his heart worshipped the God of heaven. He feared the displeasure of heaven more than he feared the displeasure of man. When men worship the God of the Bible, all of life comes into proper perspective. Listen to Luther's own counsel concerning fear written to a Mrs. Elizabeth Agricola on June 10, 1527:

You must not be so fearful and downhearted. Remember that Christ is near and bears your ills, for he has not forsaken you, as your flesh and blood make you imagine. Only call upon him earnestly and sincerely and you will be certain that he hears you, for you know that it is his way to help, strengthen, and comfort all who ask him. So be of good cheer, and remember that he has suffered far more for you than you can ever suffer for his sake or your own.³²

In conclusion, there are four historical observations concerning Luther's contribution to sola scriptura and biblical sufficiency that are important to remember: First, Martin Luther's resolve to return to the biblical teaching on salvation demonstrates his reliance on biblical superiority over fabricated religion and self-dependence. Second, the core of Roman Catholic theology was man-centered, which made it a natural ally to the early man-centered psychology of the Age of Reason. Third, Luther's view of the supremacy of Scripture is best seen in his

³² Martin Luther, "Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel," From a letter to Mrs. Elizabeth Agricola on June 10, 1527 (Literary Licensing, LLC, June 5, 2011), 82.

belief that it was sufficient to address the substantive needs of the sinful soul. Fourth, Martin Luther realized that Scripture exposed man's heart to be essentially idolatrous.

Soli Deo Gloria