

logic to college students or anyone who had tried to read and grade the persuasive essays they write for philosophy tests can tell you (I'm speaking from personal experience here), that level of critical thinking does not exist in the average, literate, well-nourished, modern college senior, much less the average, illiterate, malnourished, Medieval peasant. This is especially true when it comes to the abstract concepts and truth claims involved in philosophy and theology. Thus *sola scriptura* also presupposes a high level of universal education in critical thinking skills (a level which does not even exist today).

Therefore *sola scriptura* presupposes:

- (1) the existence of the printing press,
- (2) the universal distribution of Bibles,
- (3) universal literacy,
- (4) the universal possession of scholarly support materials,
- (5) the universal possession of adequate time for study,
- (6) universal nutrition, and
- (7) a universal education in a high level of critical thinking skills. Needless to say, this group of conditions was not true in the crucial early centuries of the Church, was not true through the main course of Church history, and is not even true today. The non-existence of the printing press alone means

sola scriptura was totally unthinkable for almost three-quarters of Christian history!

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Pamphlet 302

Sola Scriptura

Simply stated, the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone") teaches that every teaching in Christian theology (everything pertaining to "faith and practice") must be able to be derived from Scripture alone.

An essential part of this doctrine, as it has been historically articulated by Protestants, is that theology must be done *without allowing Tradition or a Magisterium (teaching authority) any binding authority*. If Tradition or a Magisterium could bind the conscience of the believer as to what he was to believe then the believer would not be looking to Scripture *alone* as his authority.

A necessarily corollary of the doctrine of sola scriptura is, therefore, the idea of an absolute right of private judgment in the interpretation of the Scriptures. Each individual has the final prerogative to decide for himself what the correct interpretation of a given passage of Scripture means, irrespective of what anyone-or everyone-else says. If anyone or even everyone else together could tell the believer what to believe, Scripture would not be his sole authority; something else would have binding authority. Thus, according to *sola scriptura*, any role Tradition, a Magisterium, Bible commentaries, or anything else may play in theology is simply to suggest interpretations and evidence to the believer as he makes his decision. Each individual

Christian is thus put in the position of being his own theologian.

First, if each Christian is to make a thorough study of the Scriptures and decide for himself what they mean (even taking into consideration the interpretations of others) then it follows that he *must have a copy of the Scriptures* to use in making his thorough study (a non-thorough study being a dangerous thing, as any Protestant apologist warning one against the cults and their Bible study tactics will tell you). Thus the universal application of *sola scriptura* presupposes the mass manufacturing of books, and of the Bible in particular.

Second, besides the printing press, *sola scriptura* also presupposes the universal distribution of books and of the Bible in particular. For it is no good if enough copies of the Bible exist but they can't be gotten into the hands of the average believer. There thus must be a distribution network capable of delivering affordable copies of the Bible to the average Christian.

Third, if the average Christian is going to read the Scriptures and decide for himself what they mean then he obviously *must be able to read*. Having someone read them to him simply is not sufficient, not only because the person would only be able to do it occasionally (what with a bunch of illiterates to read to), but also because the person needs to be able to go over the passage multiple times, looking at its exact wording and grammatical structure, to be able to quickly flip to other passages bearing

on the topic to formulate the different aspects of a doctrine as he is thinking about it, and finally to be able to record his insights so he doesn't forget them and he can keep the evidence straight in his mind. He therefore must be literate and able to read for himself. Thus *sola scriptura* presupposes universal literacy.

Fourth, if the average Christian is going to make a study of what Scripture says and decide what it teaches, *he must possess adequate scholarly support material*, for he must either be able to read the texts in the original languages or have material capable of telling him when there is a translation question that could affect doctrine (for example, does the Greek word for "baptize" mean "immerse" or does it have a broader meaning? does the biblical term for "justify" mean to make righteous in only a legal sense or sometimes in a broader one?).

Fifth, if the average Christian is to do a thorough study of the Bible for himself, then he obviously *must have adequate time in which to do this study*. If he is working in the fields or a home (or, later, in the factory) for ten, twelve, fifteen, or eighteen hours a day, he obviously doesn't have time to do this, especially not in addition to the care and raising of his family and his own need to eat and sleep and recreate. Not even a Sunday rest will provide him with the adequate time, for nobody becomes adept in the Bible just by reading the Bible on Sundays-as Protestants stress to their own members when encouraging daily Bible reading. Thus *sola scriptura* presupposes the

universal possession of adequate leisure time in which to make a thorough study the Bible for oneself.

Sixth, even if a Christian had adequate time to study the Bible sufficiently, it will do him no good if he doesn't have a diet sufficiently nutritious to let his brain function properly and his mind work clearly. This is something we often forget today because our diets are so rich, but for most of Christian history the average person had barely enough food to survive, and it was almost all bread. "Everything else," as the British historian James Burke put it, "was just something you ate *with* bread"-as a condiment or side-dish. This means that the average Christian of world history was malnourished, and as any public school dietitian can tell you, malnutrition causes an inability to study and learn properly. That is one of the big motivating forces behind the school lunch program. If kids don't eat right, they don't study right, and they don't learn right, because they don't think clearly. The same is true of Bible students. Thus *sola scriptura* also presupposes universal nutrition.

Seventh, if the average Christian is going to evaluate competing interpretations for himself then he must have a significant amount of skill in evaluating arguments. He must be able to recognize what is a good argument and what is not, what is a fallacy and what is not, what counts as evidence and what does not. That is quite a bit of critical thinking skill, and anyone who has ever tried to teach basic, introductory