

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE SHACK AND SOLA SCRIPTURA

Although affirmed in principle by most evangelicals, *Sola Scriptura* has actually ceased to exercise a controlling influence on the beliefs of an ever-growing number of professed evangelicals. Many evangelicals who identify with the Pentecostal/charismatic traditions categorically reject *Sola Scriptura* because it does not allow for continuing revelation in terms of dreams, visions, and ongoing prophecy. Some who stand in this tradition may protest and declare their allegiance to *Sola Scriptura*, but as Reymond has pointed out: “It must be noted that to the degree that one believes that God still speaks directly to men and women today through prophets and glossolalists, just to that same degree he is saying that he does not absolutely need the Bible for a word from God, and accordingly he has abandoned the great Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*.” Other evangelicals, especially many in church growth circles, while not actually denying *Sola Scriptura* and the sufficiency of Scripture explicitly, do end up denying these truths implicitly. The Bible is used as a support base for popular psychological theories, and models for church growth and ministry are often constructed, not from the Scriptures, but from the various social sciences and marketing techniques developed in the world of business and advertising. *Sola Scriptura* is likewise ignored by a host of evangelical churches who decide that the style of worship will be determined based on popular consensus or that it needs to be tailored to fit the likes and dislikes of so-called seekers. In this regard as well, *Sola Scriptura* is quietly laid aside for pragmatic concerns.¹ The most telling example of this mentality is seen in the best selling book *The Shack*. All of the gross theological errors embedded in the best-selling “Christian fiction” book, *The Shack*, are traceable to the categorical rejection of *Sola Scriptura*. *The Shack* rejects the sole authority of the Bible – even going so far as to call into question that the Bible is the Word of God. Over and over again, the “God” of *The Shack* contradicts Scripture. One prime example that we highlighted earlier had “Papa,” the incarnation of God the Father in the book, saying “I don’t need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring from the inside. It’s not my purpose to punish it; it’s my joy to cure it” (p. 120). But the God of the Bible declares otherwise. In Psalm 1:4-6, we read that the wicked will not be able to stand in the judgment of Almighty God but instead will be blown around like chaff. In Matthew 7, Jesus says that some people who thought they were all religious will be told to depart from Him because He never knew them. Time and time again He mentions that those folks will be in eternal punishment “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” There are literally hundreds of passages that speak of God’s judgment on sin and sinners. There are critically important theological reasons for rejecting the “God” of *The Shack*, and its view of God’s judgment. “For Christians, this line of reasoning runs afoul of God’s revealed attribute of justice and holiness (and so impinges on who God is), but it also removes an indispensable element of the gospel itself—the work of Christ on the cross in satisfying the just demands of the punishment of the law. The fact that the wages of sin is death, and that this payment was meted out in the crucifixion of Christ, is part of the logic of the gospel. Without it, God’s work on our behalf is severely undercut, reducing God to a resource for our own positive self-affirmation.”² The author of *The Shack* however, ignores all of these and puts words in God’s

mouth to suit his own distinctively New Age understanding of spirituality. “In recent decades the notion of ‘spirituality’ has become astonishingly plastic. People judge themselves to be ‘spiritual’ if they have some aesthetic sense, or if they are not philosophical materialists, or if they have adopted a pantheistic view of reality, or if they feel helped or reinvigorated by the ‘vibrations’ of crystals. Even within a broadly Christian heritage, many writers appeal to ‘spiritual disciplines’ that are utterly divorced from the gospel and detached from the teaching of Scripture.”³ What about the Bible? Does it matter? These questions touch the very important question concerning the nature and authority of the Bible. Many people pay their respects to the Bible; they are even willing to acknowledge that the Bible contains some useful information. But does it provide us with a decisive criterion by which we are to live ... and die? Our conception of Scripture is extremely important, because, as John Murray correctly observed, “as will be our conception of Scripture, so will be our conception of the Christian faith. What, then, is to be our conception of Scripture?”⁴ The text before us today defines, in a way unsurpassed by any other text in the Bible, how Scripture as to its ORIGIN, CHARACTER, AUTHORITY, and PURPOSE is to be understood. What we find in this text is Scripture’s assessment, or verdict, as to It’s own distinctive character.

I. THE CONTEXT

This is Paul’s *last* epistle (II Timothy 4:6). We usually attach particular interest to the last words of men, and so here also we should note the importance of what Paul has to say as he approaches the end of his life.

A. The Times.

The Apostle was writing in “the last days” of world history (II Timothy 3:1, I Timothy 4:1). This is a reference not to some distant future end times. The “last days” began with Christ’s first advent (Hebrews 1:2; Acts 2:17).

B. The Exhortation.

Paul is calling Timothy to remember this in order that he might conduct himself with all sobriety, knowing that perilous times lay ahead (II Timothy 3:1–4). Because of this, the apostle urges his young disciple to remain steadfast in the doctrine Paul had taught him (II Timothy 3:14).

II. THE IMPORT

How is this relevant? The “last days” have not run their course. *We* are in these *last days*, and it is in this context that Paul delivers his great statement on Scripture. We do well to take note, for we are subject to the same wavering of faith that faced Timothy.

A. The Instrumentality.

Every word of the Bible came through the agency of man ... be it Moses or David or Paul. Human authorship is not suppressed or overlooked. But this does *not* mean that the Scriptures, having passed through the hands of sinful men, have the infirmity that we always attach to the efforts of man.

B. The Author.

The Apostle declares, “All Scripture is given by inspiration by God.” What does this mean? The word translated “inspiration of God” (KJV) is THEOPNEUSTOS and occurs only here in the New Testament (and is not found earlier in all Greek literature), but it’s meaning is not in doubt. The lexical *consensus* is clear. The word means “God-breathed” (as in NIV) “and, in accordance with the genius of the compressed, clear Greek compounds, this includes in itself the implication that the words are *spoken* by the

Spirit of God."⁵ This is not only the force of the words selected by Paul, it represents his understanding of Old Testament texts like Psalm 33:6; Isaiah 1:20 and 40:5.

C. The Extent.

"All Scripture is God-breathed." Some have argued that *all* here cannot really mean *all* in the absolute sense because the Bible contains much that is not God's word, e.g., the words of the serpent in Genesis 3:1–5. But Paul's point is this: it is by God's actions that what the serpent said is written. Thus we have the revelatory word of God in recording not only the agency, but also the strategy, of the evil one, so that the Scriptures, in the fullest and strictest sense of the word, are the revelation of God—"How much Satan deplores this inscripturated revelation! It is Satan's art to conceal his own strategy. It is God's grace to expose it."⁶ Scripture, it must be declared, is a fixed body of writings. As such, this means no more or no less, that it is a fixed body of words, sentences, clauses, paragraphs, chapters and books. God is not continuing to give inscripturated revelation. The Bible, and the Bible only is the written Word of God.

III. THE UTILITY OF SCRIPTURE

Notice how this is put: it is *profitable* (KJV), *useful* (NIV)—from the word, ὀφελιμος to help (cf. I Timothy 4:8). Four spheres are mentioned in which the usefulness of Scripture can be seen. Two deal with doctrine and two with practice.

A. Doctrine and Reproof.

One is distinctively *positive*; the other represents the *negative*. Doctrine is concerned with what is true.⁷ The Scriptures are concerned with absolute truth, and doctrine has to do with the whole wide range of thought respecting God, the world, man, life, death—there is no area that this does not touch. If we have no interest in doctrine, we have no interest in God.

B. Correction and Training.

This is the ethical plane. Again the negative and the positive aspects are underscored.

IV. THE PURPOSE

"There is a distinct objective in this profitableness of Scripture. The verse opens with a clause introduced by HINA which denotes that purpose or result."⁸ What is this purpose? So that "the man of God" may be equipped. Who is this person? It is the person who has been laid hold upon by God, separated unto and possessed by the true and living God. Note in particular the word *thoroughly*. It is a term that expresses comprehensiveness. There is *NO* situation, *NO* demand, *NO* circumstance that confronts us in which the Scriptures are not adequate and sufficient.

CONCLUSION: The "God" of *The Shack* is a poor substitute for the Living God that confronts us in the Bible. The "God" of *The Shack* has been domesticated and gentrified to make "God" more palatable to our modern sensitivities. The sad thing is that this book is being celebrated by Christians. But popularity does not matter much when it comes to things of eternal significance: *The Shack* simply reflects the lack of serious theological reflection that is so common in Evangelicalism today. My friend, T. David Gordon, recently touched upon this, "The great seriousness of the reality of being human, the dreadful seriousness of the coming judgment of God, the sheer insignificance of the present in light of eternity—realities that were once the subtext of virtually every sermon—have now disappeared, and have been replaced by one triviality after another."⁹ Because all Scripture is God-breathed, no detail is unimportant. It is all pertinent and relevant to our lives. *The Shack*, on the other hand, displays a decidedly anti-Reformational view of

Scripture. “The Reformation, from one angle, can be seen as a debate around Scripture’s authority. Either Scripture stands over and above us as individual persons and as the corporate people of God, or we, either as individuals or as the collective body of the church, stand over it. The Reformation plank of *Sola Scriptura* addresses this directly, proclaiming emphatically and explicitly that Scripture stands over us as individuals and over us as the collective body of Christ. The church’s teaching and practice must be derived from its pages or the church risks running afoul.”¹⁰ *The Shack* is just one more indication of how far Evangelicalism has drifted from its Reformational roots.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ This is cited from my chapter, “The Eclipse of The Reformation in The Evangelical Church: Much Ado About Nothing? In *Whatever Happened To The Reformation?* Eds. G.L.W. Johnson & R.F. White (P & R, 2001) p. 5.
- ² S. Chung, *Modern Reformation* (Vol. 18, No. 2, Mar/Apr. 2009) p. 47.
- ³ D. A. Carson, preface to Peter Adam, *Hearing God’s Words: Exploring Biblical Spirituality* (IVP, 2004) p. 9.
- ⁴ *The Collected Writings of John Murray III* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), p. 256. The original Westminster Faculty (especially John Murray) publications on this subject have shaped this sermon and my own understanding of Scripture.
- ⁵ B. B. Warfield, *Revelation and Inspiration in Works I* (Baker, 1981), p. 263.
- ⁶ Murray, op. cit., p. 259.
- ⁷ David F. Wells has documented the tragic loss of truth in the Church’s attitude toward doctrine in his book *No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Eerdmans, 1993). Lee Strobel, one time associate pastor at Willow-Creek wrote a book titled *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church* (Zondervan, 1993). One of the disturbing aspects about this book was the statement that unchurched people’s “question is not so much, ‘Is Christianity true?’ ‘ but, ‘Does Christianity work?’”—This was stated in such a way as to imply that pragmatism is the solution in our evangelism.
- ⁸ In the New Testament Greek grammar this is called a “hina-purpose-clause” cf. Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles: The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1972), p. 165.
- ⁹ T. D. Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach: The Media Have Shaped The Messengers* (P & R, 2009) p. 59.
- ¹⁰ S. J. Nichols and E. T. Brandt, *Ancient Word, Changing Worlds: The Doctrine of Scripture in a Modern Age* (Crossway, 2009) p. 22.