

The Legacy of Sola Scriptura in Biblical Counseling

I. Introduction: Parallels between Martin Luther and Jay Adams.

- A. Both men based their conclusions on the Bible alone.
 - 1. Luther: *Unless I am convicted by Scripture or by clear reason (for I do not trust either I the pope or in counsels alone, since it is well known that they often err and contradict themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me Amen.*
 - 2. Jay Adams: *The conclusions in this book are not based upon scientific findings. My method is presuppositional. I avowedly accept the inerrant Bible as the standard of all faith and practice. The Scriptures, therefore, are the basis and contain the criteria by which I have sought to make every judgment...I am aware of the sweeping implications of the changes that I advocate. I am willing to refine my position if I have gone too far. I want to alter any or all of what I have written provided that I can be shown to be wrong biblically.*
- B. Each was engaged in training future leaders and had no ambition to turn the world upside down by starting a new movement.
- C. Neither saw himself as an innovator beginning something new, but rather recovering something old which had been lost. *Sola Scriptura has historically been a powerful housecleaning tool.* (John Frame)
- D. Both ignored sympathizers who urged them to tone down their rhetoric.
- E. Both upset the existing establishment which first tried to dialogue with them and then separated from them and maligned them.
- F. Both were sharpened by debates with their critics.
- G. Both were preceded by forerunners (Hus/Wycliffe, Van Til/Machen).
- H. Both were followed by consolidators (Melancthon, Powlison) who had different gifts which God used to shape the ongoing movement.
- I. Both were committed to the involvement of lay people in their movement. Rom. 15:14

II. Sola Scriptura – God’s Word is uniquely authoritative.

- A. Sola Scriptura defined: 2 Tim. 3:16-17 2 Pe. 1:20-21
 - 1. Bible is inerrant and infallible. Ps. 119:160 Rom. 3:4 Titus 1:2 Mt. 4:4 5:18
 - 2. The Bible is sufficient. 2 Tim. 3:17 *Scripture contains all the divine words necessary for any aspect of human life (Frame).*

3. God's Word is the standard by which we judge all truth claims.
 4. Nothing is to be added to the Bible. Heb. 1:1-2
 5. The perspicuity of Scripture.
 6. The Bible is self-authenticating. Its authority is not granted by the church.
- B. In Luther's day tradition and the magisterium were treated as equal to Scripture.
1. *Both sacred tradition and sacred Scripture are to be venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence.* (Vatican 2)
 2. When tradition is added alongside of Scripture, it typically supercedes Scripture – this is not a new problem. Mark 7:8 Lev. 18:1-4
 3. Luther's foundation of Sola Scriptura led inevitably to the other Solas.
- C. Sola Scriptura has continued to come under attack in the subsequent centuries – modernism/the enlightenment, post-modernism, capitulation to culture, sola experientia.
- D. Jay Adams recognized the threat secular theology posed to biblical soul care.
1. *Competent to Counsel* was his 95 Theses in which he critiqued the departures of the church from Sola Scriptura.
 - a. *I am not interested in debate which moves off non-Christian suppositions or debate based upon supposedly neutral objective empirical data. All such evidence in the end is interpreted evidence. There is no such thing as brute uninterpreted fact. Data are collected and related and presented by men all of whom are sinners and subject to the noetic effects of their sin. In God's world all men are related to him as covenant breakers or covenant keepers (in Christ). The judgments of unbelievers, therefore, are arrived at and presented from a point of view which attempts to divorce itself from God.*
 - b. *I have attempted to reexamine counseling... in a biblical manner, and I ask, therefore that my work shall be similarly criticized.*
 2. Sola Scriptura in counseling.
 - a. Bible is the final authority; Bible is sufficient authority.
 - b. The Bible is the standard by which we judge all truth claims.
 - c. Counseling is a theological enterprise.
 - d. Biblical counseling is the private ministry of the Word which complements the public ministry of the Word in the context of the church.

- E. The chief objection to Adams, “Isn’t all truth God’s truth? Why can’t we integrate the best from the social sciences with what the Bible teaches to give people the best possible care?”
1. They argue that we should accept and use what science discovers about psychology in God’s creation (general revelation) alongside special revelation in Scripture.
 2. What they call general revelation is not factual, but rather interpretations of the data by fallen human beings who love darkness and suppress the truth. John 3:19 Rom. 1:18ff
 3. They misunderstand the purpose of God’s general revelation in creation.
 - a. General revelation is given to reveal God’s existence and power so that believers will praise Him (Ps. 19:1-16) and unbelievers will be without excuse (Rom. 1:18ff).
 - b. Special revelation is redemptive as it addresses problems caused by human sinfulness for which people need counsel.
 - c. Special revelation (Scripture) is necessary because men cannot be redeemed through general revelation.
 4. Those who want to integrate psychology and Scripture in counseling tend to make psychology their big book. Mark 7:8-9

III. Sola Scriptura – God’s Word is unique in its power and glory – uniquely able to help people. Sola Scriptura makes our counseling unique. Ps. 19:7-10 Heb. 4:12-13

- A. Behold God’s glory in His Word. Psalm. 19:7-9
1. A magnificent poetic description of Scripture – six nouns, six adjectives and six verbs.
 2. God’s Word is perfect/sure/true – versus fallible pronouncement of men. v. 7a
 3. God’s Word is timeless – versus ever-changing fads of the social sciences. v. 9a Isa. 40:8 Mt. 24:35
 4. God’s Word makes the simple wise/enlightened. v. 7b,8b Pr. 1:7 Ps. 14:1
- B. God works powerfully and uniquely through His Word. Ps. 19:7a He. 4:12-13 Isa. 55:11
1. God’s Word is the means of the conversion of those who once were spiritually dead. Rom. 10:17 Js. 1:18 1 Pet. 1:23 1 Co. 6:9-10 2 Co. 5

2. God's Word is the means of ongoing transformation/sanctification of believers. 19:7b,11 Eph. 4:31-32 Heb. 4:12-13 Gal. 5:16ff
3. *The Word does things that only God can do (Frame).*
4. *Take me, for example. I opposed indulgences and all papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word: otherwise I did nothing. And then, while I slept or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip of Amsdorf the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing: the Word did it all. Had I wanted to start trouble.... I could have started such a little game at Worms that even the emperor wouldn't have been safe. But what would it have been? A mug's game. I did nothing: I left it to the Word (Luther).*

C. God's Word is uniquely valuable and desirable. Ps. 19:10

1. Luther "*Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth. If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for? The more we reject it, the more we become satisfied with men's books and human teachers (Luther).*
2. *In the writings of heathen authors there are no doubt to be found true & useful sentences scattered here & there; & it is also true that God has put into the minds of men some knowledge of justice & uprightness; but in consequences of the corruption of our nature, the true light of truth is not to be found where revelation is not enjoyed, but only certain mutilated principles which are involved in much obscurity & doubt (Calvin).*

D. It grieves us that many fail to appreciate the unique power and the beauty of God's Word.

1. Many Christian therapists view biblical solutions as simplistic.
 - a. *We may rely excessively on Scripture when we could be using other counseling strategies...*
 - b. *The best counselors use Scripture only after carefully considering the psychological implications and the effect on the therapeutic relationship...*
 - c. *At this time the research is so limited that it is premature to draw any conclusions about the effective use of scripture in counseling.*
2. They believe psychological interventions are more sophisticated and effective.
 - a. *Psychological therapies are a clear improvement on the pre-scientific strategies of the older pastors.*

- b. *The Christian is ... limited in understanding people if there is little awareness of the field of psychology with its proven insights into the complexities of human behavior.*
 - c. *Some are concerned about sophistication and nuance and are slow to use the Bible because of that. My response is that the Bible is far more those things than any of us are. The Holy Spirit wrote the thing! (Lambert)*
- 3. What people need is redemption. Change that pleases God flows out of the gospel.
 - a. *Psychotherapy can relieve some troubling symptoms, but its goal is only the alleviation of symptoms. At best it is like David's harp.... Those who have assimilated these ideas have a difficult time getting excited about forgiveness of sins, and they miss the privilege of being directed to a God who is awesome and glorious (Powlison and Welch).*
 - b. *Jesus Christ is at the center of all truly Christian counseling (Adams).*

IV. Clarifications and cautions.

- A. There is truth to be found in sources outside of Scripture, including science (psychology). *I do not wish to disregard science, but rather I welcome it as a useful adjunct for the purposes of illustrating, filling in generalizations with specifics & challenging wrong human interpretations of Scripture, thereby forcing the student to reread the Scriptures (Adams).*
 - 1. We value other sources of knowledge as long as they are interpreted under the authority of Scripture.
 - 2. Special revelation and general revelation will not contradict each other.
 - 3. Psychology can contribute to the general well being of humankind in common grace.
 - a. They can make profound observations of human behavior, brain structure, neuroscience, effective listening techniques, etc.
 - b. Sometimes the data and scientific interpretations may cause us to go back to the Scriptures to be sure that we have interpreted them correctly. *I am aware that my interpretations & applications of Scripture are not infallible (Adams).*
 - 4. Science is unreliable when it comes to the study of people.

- a. They cannot interpret the data correctly because they don't understand who man is and what is wrong with him. Rom. 1:18ff
John 3:19
- b. They have the wrong goal – client happiness versus God's glory. 2 Co. 5:9 1 Co. 10:31
- c. Their solutions/prescriptions are flawed – often contrary to Scripture and always excluding redemption/the gospel.

B. Sola Scriptura is not nuda scriptura (term: Barrett)

1. We value extrabiblical traditions and confessions as subordinate authorities under Scripture – fallible and amendable. *Church tradition & church officials play a ministerial role, Scripture alone plays a magisterial role* (Barrett)
2. *The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men* (WCF 1.6).

C. Not all who claim to believe in biblical counseling are competent counselors. 1 Tim. 3:1ff

1. We may have been done more harm by our friends than our enemies.
2. The Bible teaches that church leaders must be qualified and gifted.

D. The work of the Holy Spirit is necessary before anyone can understand and practice the Scriptures. 1 Co. 2:14 1:18

1. A gifted counselor with the Word of God still can't change people.
2. *Sufficiency does not deny that the work of the Spirit is also necessary. Indeed the Spirit's work is indispensable if we are to properly understand Scripture and make use of it* (Frame).

E. Biblical counseling takes place in the context of the church – God's institution for soul care.

1. The public and private ministries of the Word complement each other. Acts 20:20
2. For those seeking state licensure: *Counselors are aware of—and avoid imposing—their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors* (ACA standards of conduct).

3. We no more want government to regulate the private ministry of the Word than we would want them regulating what could be said in the public ministry of the Word.

V. Conclusion: Four Implications of Sola Scriptura for us today.

- A. The great need of biblical counselors is knowledge of the Bible. Ps. 19:10ff 1:1ff 119:10 1 Pe. 2:2-3 Acts 2:42 2 Tim. 4:1ff Jude 1:3-4 Eph. 6:17 Rom. 15:14 Heb. 3:13 Col. 3:16
- B. Our counseling should be saturated with Scripture. Luke 10:26 Ps. 19:7ff Heb. 4:12-13
- C. Our counseling should be permeated with the great central theme of Scripture – redemption.
- D. We counsel with hope and confidence. Romans 15:14