

Sola Scriptura, Truth, and the Future of Bible Interpretation | BY OLIVE J. HEMMING



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For five centuries, the so-called “Protestant Method”¹ of Bible interpretation has served competing ideological, doctrinal, cultural, and ecclesiological interests with no clear *telos* in sight. However, it is important to note that the principle of *sola scriptura* was in essence not a concern for method.² The overarching concern was to encounter Christ the Word as the sole authority and *telos* of Scripture—a concern which proceeds from and is preceded by the principle of *sola fide*. As Luther scholar Kenneth Hagen argues, for Luther, “*Christus* is not a *sensus*, a meaning,” but “the *res*, the reality of the truth of God.”³

Sola scriptura is a quest for the *logos*, the pure truth of scripture shrouded by centuries of church dogma and traditions that eclipse the Spirit of Scripture. However, what the Reformation sought to undo, namely the Roman Catholic Church’s control over the Bible and its meaning, ironically becomes more widespread and entrenched in Protestantism, as various Christian communities lay claim to their particular interpretation of Scripture as “the truth”, and some employ coercive means (beginning

with Luther himself) to maintain such. As a result, *sola scriptura* has morphed into a (sometimes rabid) bibliolatry that in many instances leaves Bible scholars and preachers walking around the Bible as though walking on eggshells, for fear of losing their livelihood, or position in the mainstream of the institution. Protestant bibliolatry is the exploitation of the religious/cultural power of Scripture to stem dissent under the pretext of “biblical authority.”⁵ It leaves many proponents of *sola scriptura* on a treadmill, well worked out, each using Scripture to prove their particular point of view, but going nowhere in freeing the pure Light⁶ of Scripture from dogmatic, ideological, and institutional control. If this is true, the Reformation quest remains largely unfulfilled and our work as scholars remains before us.

My purpose is to examine the Reformation ideal of *sola scriptura* in its advocacy for Christ—the *logos*, the Truth, and the *telos* of Scripture. I examine this towards a biblical perspective of *sola scriptura* based on the *logos* philosophy in the Johannine writings, out of which I construct a *logos* hermeneutic. To embrace the principle of *sola scriptura*

towards truth is to embrace a profound ethic of oneness in Being, as the one consistent principle of Bible interpretation used by Jesus of Nazareth, Paul of Tarsus, and the Hebrew prophets before them.

Sola Scriptura

What do the Reformers mean by *sola scriptura*? Two points are important to this conversation.

1. Scripture Is its Own Authority and its Own Interpreter

The Bible has no authority and needs no hermeneutic external to itself. For Luther, the Bible is not only its own authority, but its own critic. The Spirit that interprets Scripture is within Scripture and not outside of it, even if the external interpreter is the Church. Luther and Calvin argue that the “plain sense” in Scripture is Christ and it is the Spirit of Christ present within the text that authenticates the text, not the interpreter.⁷ Luther argues, “If you take Christ from Scripture, what else will you find in it?”⁸ With regards to obscure texts, Luther speaks of an external and internal clarity of Scripture. The internal clarity is the Spirit-enlightened heart, cleansed of the ego as it embraces and is embraced by God. This inner clarity emerges from an encounter with the Word—the proclamation of Christ by Scripture. From this encounter with Christ, the external clarity (i.e., the meaning of the text) emerges. This dialectic describes Luther’s story of his encounter with Christ through his study of Romans (1:17), and this is the lens through which he understands the nature of Scripture, reads everything in Scripture, and develops his theology. Thus, obscure passages need not be ignored “in mystical silence,”⁹ rather, they find meaning (or meaninglessness) in light of Christ. The “canon”—the measuring rod—is Christ, the only absolute truth against which everything in scripture may be judged. Thus, Luther says, “Whatever does not teach Christ is certainly not apostolic, even if St. Peter or St. Paul teaches it...whatever preaches Christ

would be apostolic, even if it were presented by Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod.”¹⁰

2. Scripture Has a Literal Meaning or a “Plain Sense”

This is directly connected to the first point. By “plain sense” the reformers mean to recover the real meaning of texts from the mystifying subjectivism of allegorical interpretation that dominated in Medieval Christianity.¹¹ The context of *sola scriptura* is the Medieval Church’s assumption that Scripture is unclear;¹² thereby it justified an interpretive framework based on the authority of the church and of tradition. This mystification of scripture gives the church sole authority over the scriptures to determine its meaning.¹³

It is also very important to stress what *sola scriptura* is not.

The Reformation understanding of the Bible as its own interpreter is not a literalistic, anti-intellectual, or even constrained¹⁴ contextual approach to the Bible. Allowing scripture to interpret scripture is not proof-text interpretation. There can be no consistent outcome to Scripture with this approach because it allows the interpreter to harvest the religious/cultural power of the text towards particular beliefs, interests, and ideologies, and the authority exerted is not of the scripture, but of the interpreter. This eclipses the reconciling power of the Bible’s own interpreter, namely, the *logos*, and transforms Scripture into a weapon of control.

The Task of the Twenty-First Century

As scholars, we are called to be ministers of the Word—prophets—and so our primary witness must be to the Word and nothing else. By the Word I do not mean scriptures, because biblically, those two—scriptures (*αἱ γραφαί*) and the Word (*ὁ λόγος*)—are not one and the same thing. In John, Jesus says to his antagonists of his own faith, “You search the scriptures because you think you have eternal life in them, but it is those (scriptures) that testify about me”

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(John 5:39). In the Johannine conversation, truth (*αληθεια*) resides in the *logos*¹⁵ (“...in it was light...”[John 1:4]), and the *logos* is Being of God (καὶ Θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος [John 1:1])¹⁶ which incarnates in Jesus of Nazareth (John 1:14). So, in John, the scriptures are not ends in themselves, rather the *logos* is the end of Scripture. This is the Spirit of Scripture that Luther struggled to find in his many sermons and lectures.¹⁷

Truth and the *Logos* in John

What is truth? The truth in John is not a dogma, but an ethical demand to love, based on the affirmation of oneness in Being demonstrated in the incarnation of the *logos*.

The question arises in the trial of Jesus of Nazareth, and is central to the deeply philosophical Johannine conversation representing the late first-century Scripture interpretive debate between church and synagogue.¹⁸ The *Life and Death*¹⁹ question, “what is truth?” appears just as Jesus is about to meet a hideous execution based on un-truth—trumped up charges before the Roman authority because his interpretation of Scripture does not conform to the then-dominant teachings and traditions of his own religion. But the untruth extends far beyond the trial. The untruth is the ground of a religious way of being, based on ecclesiological and political power and the self-preservation that such power demands.²⁰ Pilate’s question “what is truth?” is a “cliff hanger” in the trial drama. It concludes the first trial scene before Pontius Pilate (one of two Roman heads of the Jewish state now under Roman occupation). The question ends

the scene without an answer, but John has already answered the question in his account of the Jesus story.²¹

The answer to the question in John becomes evident when the reader looks at the big picture of the conversation. While the conversation takes place between synagogue and church, it engages the Gnostic philosophical system in which the Johannine community is immersed. It is a debate between the religious separatist compulsion to exclude the “other”, and prophetic demand to include: “For God so loved the world...that everyone who believes... may have eternal life” (John 3:16).²² John 3:16, the central truth in John, is a reinterpretation (or rather re-membering)²³ of the Abrahamic covenant and its Messianic fulfilment. The beneficiary of the covenant is not one group of people based on their religious practices, but the whole world. Messiah is not the servant of a religious superstructure;²⁴ rather Messiah is the *logos* of God, “I am” Being itself—an experience of life eternal into which every human being may enter.

In John, this is the truth of which Jesus declares, “...you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” It is not an egoistic assertion by or about Jesus of Nazareth, but an assurance of the immanence of *logos*—the very Being of God enfleshed in the human Jesus. Appearing in Chapter 8, the statement instigates a debate between Jesus’ teachings and the traditional teachings of his religion signified by an ethnocentric interpretation of the Abrahamic covenant. The conversation concludes with Jesus’

assertion “before Abraham came (γίνομαι) I am (εἰμι)”. If one considers its context, John uses this statement to steer his audience away from redundant tradition (“before Abraham came”) and to open their consciousness to the immediacy of Being (I am)—the *logos* incarnate. Being is prior to, and infinitely exceeds, tradition.²⁵

The *logos*, Being of God, is life available to humanity through one thing—love. “I give you a new commandment that you should love one another...” (John 13:34, 35; cf. 1 John 2:7–11). “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (1 John 4:16). “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another” (1 John 3:14). John reinforces this truth in the following ways:

1. *Contra* Gnostic sentiments,²⁶ the miracles for John are “signs” (σημεῖα), that the *logos* actually incarnates in the human Jesus. So, his overarching purpose, that his audience believe that Jesus is Messiah (John 20:30–31), is a profound interpretation of the covenant Messiah. Messiah is the *logos*, the life, an experience available to all of humanity (“so that by believing you may have life in his name” [John 20:31]).
2. Twice John says, “No One has ever (πώποτε) seen God” (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12); but in both instances he counters the statement with the assurance that God has been made known. In the first instance, the only son, who is close to God’s heart and who makes God known. In the second instance, those who love make God known.
3. John quotes Jesus as saying that whoever has seen him (Jesus) has seen God, and then challenges his audience saying, “those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” so that “those who love God must love their brother and sister also.” (1 John 4:20–21). This reflects Jesus’ own statement in John’s passion narrative: “Whoever hates me, hates God also.” (John 15:23).

So here is the seldom-told, plain truth in John; the story of the *logos* incarnate is not only the story of God, but it is the story of humanity. John affirms this (*contra* dogmatic literalistic interpretation of scripture of his day), as ethical demand and moral responsibility in Being—love. This radical ontological ethic is the dominant theme of the early church teachings. In the Lukan genealogy, Jesus is son of Adam, (who is) son of God. In Matthew, love for God is identical to love for one’s fellow human, and whatever one does to one’s fellow human, one does to God. Paul, the herald of this very Christ ethic to the church, declares that God is One (Romans 3:30), and by that he exhorts the church to accept the different ways in which Jews and non-Jews practice the *faith of Christ*.²⁷ Paul does not say there is one God, he says God is One (εἷς ὁ θεός). This is a radical monotheism²⁸ that recognizes no “other” and no competing elements in Being. That ethic is the basis of Paul’s teachings on righteousness. This is the Spirit of the *logos*, “the Spirit of Truth,” embraced only through love. It is the Spirit by which the early church interpreted and applied Scripture, and this is how we today should seek to interpret and apply it. I call this a “*logos* hermeneutic.”

Finding Truth in Scriptures: Logos Hermeneutic

A *logos* hermeneutic is one that embraces the oneness and immediacy of Being—God incarnate. As such, it approaches Scripture from the standpoint of ethics, rather than dogma and ideology. This embrace is the very faith of Jesus Messiah which manifests itself through love. It is the hermeneutic of Jesus of Nazareth²⁹ and Paul of Tarsus, and the Hebrew prophets before them. The Hebrew prophets call it “justice” (the same word misleadingly translated “righteousness” in both the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible); for the prophets, it is all that God requires.³⁰ In the early church understanding of Jesus’ teaching, love/justice is the end of Scripture: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the

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prophets” (Matthew 7:12). It is the conclusion of Paul’s teaching on righteousness: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another...love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:8–10). Love/justice is the stamp of God manifested in Jesus of Nazareth, and is the measuring stick that interprets and judges Scripture. It is this hermeneutic, central to the Johannine debate, that pulled the early church through the controversies over application of scripture as the hearers of the gospel³¹ became more and more culturally diverse.³²

As I have noted above, Luther identified this “canon” within the canon. However, his application falls short because its frame of reference is medieval personal piety, and centuries of assumed church dogma, rather than the ecumenical ethic of the early church.

Logos Hermeneutic and the Protestant Ethic

The essential Reformation hermeneutic at *face value* is a *logos* hermeneutic. In fact, Luther regards the Gospel and first letter of John as pre-eminent in the New Testament, along with Romans and Galatians, because they “masterfully show how faith in Christ overcomes sin, death, and hell and gives life, righteousness, and blessedness.”³³ Yet, I contend that the Reformation application of this hermeneutic is essentially flawed because it is rooted in medieval piety—personal piety,³⁴ rather than community. In medieval piety, preparing for the final judgement consumed a person’s daily life. Luther’s *sola fide* did not change this attitude, it only changed the way the individual seeks piety. This becomes the Protestant ethic that prioritizes *personal* freedom. His attempt to apply a *logos* hermeneutic failed because it was divorced from the *logos* ethic of oneness in Being; and because it worked within the parameters of a dogma/credo-centric Roman Catholic tradition rather than through *sola scriptura*. No surprise then that Luther called for the death penalty for those Protestants who did not subscribe to infant baptism, original sin, and

other doctrines and creeds. No surprise that having failed to convert the Jews to Christianity, Luther called for their persecution—destruction of their school, synagogues, homes, businesses, and even for their enslavement; so that he has been identified as the real criminal of the Holocaust.³⁵

Based on Paul’s teaching about justification by faith rather than works of law in Galatians and Romans, Luther proposes two kinds of righteousness—“passive righteousness” and “active righteousness.”³⁶ Neither of these capture the intent of Paul in Galatians and Romans, because they register a fundamentally individualistic ethic. What Luther interprets from Paul as “passive righteousness”—the individual freedom before God—is, in its proper context,³⁷ about the universality of the Abrahamic covenant vis-à-vis an andro-ethnocentric interpretation of it. It is a call for the inclusion of all—Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free—in the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant. This promise is justice (δικαιοσύνη [again, the same word translated righteousness or justification]). This justice is about God’s vindication/liberation of a broken and alienated humanity, not just a particular group. This justice is the faith of Messiah (who fulfills the covenant through his own faithfulness) into which the believer is called to participate.³⁸ So the life of faith is not subscription to a set of dogmas and peculiar practices. Rather, it is about a life of justice—care for the creation well-being and fullness of life.

Luther’s idea of “active righteousness” is his *attempt* to account for the individual responsibility to community, but it does not arise in the writing of Paul. Paul makes no distinction between “righteousness before God” and “righteousness in the eyes of the world.”³⁹ In the gospels (and specifically as we observe in John) righteousness is *in* God (who is One), not *before* God. Luther’s teaching, as it characterizes the Reformation, though universal in its parts,⁴⁰ is fundamentally individualistic. Paul’s teaching, as it characterizes the teaching of the early church, demands profound individual accountability,⁴¹ but this in

the context of an activist ethic of inclusion, diversity, and *universal* liberation.

So, for 500 years the church has in many places misapplied Paul's teaching on righteousness, transforming it from the profoundly ecumenical ethic of oneness in a diverse creation "groaning to be free" into a dogma of personal piety—"righteousness by faith." For 500 years, without a clear and consistent application of the *logos* ethic in the inclusive context of the early church, the so-called "Protestant Method" has served competing ideological, doctrinal, cultural, and ecclesiological interests with no clear *telos* in sight.

Logos Hermeneutic: Implications for Bible Interpretation

Having observed the Johannine philosophy of *logos*, these are some vital implications for Bible interpretation:

1. A *logos* hermeneutic frees Scripture from the conditions that interpreters place upon its authenticity. The inspiration of Scripture lies in its *witness* to the *logos*, not in the *means* or *nature* of that witness which in many places may seem flawed. If the *logos* is the very "Spirit of life,"⁴² to deny the reality of various genres and sources of Scripture in the interest of a narrow⁴³ view of inspiration is, in the end, counterproductive to its unconditional acceptance as a witness to the incarnation. Divine voice is present in every vehicle of human understanding, and the Scripture reflects various vehicles. Bible-thumping fundamentalism that requires everything to be literal and accurate, and Scripture-rejecting liberalism that requires everything to fit its version of reality; both of these place conditions on Scripture. The Scripture is what it is, a (flawed?) human vehicle of Divine revelation; and that in and of itself is a witness to the miracle of the incarnation.
2. Any interpretive outcome that violates the fundamental principle of love/justice violates the Spirit of Scripture.⁴⁴ Interpretation should

not serve the interest of some against the full affirmation of others. For example, a hermeneutic that justifies even a *semblance* of domination and subjugation violates the authority of Scripture. The apostle Paul has passed down a legacy of *logos* hermeneutic in this regard. He rejects the headship ideology, which he so patiently outlines in 1 Corinthians 11: 3–10, by judging it with the *logos* in verses 11 and 12: "In the Lord... everything comes from God." In light of the *logos*, male headship usurps the sovereignty of God in the creation and perpetuates a culture of alienation. Further, Paul subverts a Roman household code of domination and subjugation (Ephesians 5:21–6:7) by stating, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesian 5:21).

It is unclear why so much resource and interpretive rigmarole goes into the reinforcement of a fundamentalist ideology of headship when the "plain reading" ("in Christ") lies at hand in these so-called texts of headship.

3. To accept scientific or historical findings that may run contrary to what appears in Scripture does not necessarily disavow the authority of scripture. To accept the *logos* as radically present Being of God is to affirm all knowledge and understanding of the creation and human affairs as divine revelation. A radical monotheism⁴⁵ cannot assign the vast body of knowledge obtained since the close of the biblical canon to some other. In a sense then, to disregard science may be, in and of itself, to disregard the true authority of Scripture, if that authority is the *logos*. Have we learnt anything from the case of Galileo⁴⁶ and the Roman Catholic Church of his time? His findings went against what the Church believed to be scientific data in scripture. They tortured and banished him before forcing him to recant; but today his findings are fundamental knowledge.
4. The Bible claims no other discipline outside of its own discipline, i.e., its witness to the redemptive presence of God in the creative/historical process. Scripture testifies that

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Divine revelation fills up time and space—God is present—I *am*. It seems to be an exercise in futility for scientists to measure the authenticity of Scripture with scientific data,⁴⁷ or for theologians to use Scripture to measure the accuracy of science. The Church will not soon win that battle if history is to teach anything.⁴⁸ What if we prioritize the profound lesson of grace, salvation, and human responsibility in the story of creation, over the obsession with scientific facts?⁴⁹ Will we then hear the creation story in the ways it yearns to be heard towards renewal and restoration? What if we embrace Sabbath observance as the *timeless* lesson of the miracle of existence, of human liberation and God's justice as Jesus has taught us? Should we subject that life-giving word to scientific debate?

5. Human responsibility and the Church's responsibility increases proportionally to the increase of knowledge. Cultural values of the past reflected in Scripture emerge from a place of knowledge significantly less than the present. To behold Christ in Scripture is to embrace what God continues to reveal toward the healing of a culture of alienation. The *logos* speaks to Divine omniscience, love/justice, providence, and grace, out of which a perpetually developing and learning humanity emerges.

Kerygma: Truth as Re-membering

John states that the commandment to love is not a new commandment; it is, as the *logos*, in the beginning⁵⁰ (ἐν ἀρχῇ)⁵¹ with God who is love. In the mind of his original audience, ἀρχή is about metaphysics (not time)—the very nature of reality, the ground of Being. Truth as love manifests itself in the darkness of this alienated world as re-membering of Divine Being with humanity as in ἀρχῇ (as is the nature of Being). Ἀλήθεια—truth—is the opposite of λήθη (which means “concealment” or “forgetfulness”). Truth is ἀ-λήθεια—literally the state of being unconcealed, or remembering. The source of ἀλήθεια in Greek philosophy is

not judgement (as in a determination of what or who is right or wrong), rather, its source is Being in and of itself, independent of time and space.⁵² At this point it becomes evident that in John, ἀρχή, θεός, λόγος, ἀγαπή, and ἀλήθεια co-exist as life. The *logos* incarnation is the truth calling fallen humanity back into that fellowship of life⁵³—re-membering.

In the history of humankind, often what makes something “truth” is its repetition and/or practice for a long enough period of time. So that what one calls “truth” often amounts to entrenchment or indoctrination, which often functions to conceal to the point of forgetfulness. Ἀλήθεια in John is profound encounter with God in the declaration “I am” without (self)consciousness of “other”—plainly awesome reality in the midst of which is trembling and total surrender to the miracle of life. Truth is *in God*, not in a body of beliefs.

What makes people stand to sing: “I love thee I love thee and that thou dost know, and how much I love thee my action will show,” and yet feel uncomfortable with someone “different” seated amongst them—singing with them in a different tempo? What caused people to leave church and go directly to the town square to take part in a lynching—faith communities to aid and abet oppressive political systems? What makes a woman oppose the affirmation of another woman as God's mouthpiece through the ceremony of ordination; and support religious dogmas that subjugate her—leading to the chronic objectification, abuse, and exploitation of women in so many cultures? What caused Martin Luther himself, having failed to convert the Jews, to call for their social, political, and economic destruction and expulsion from provinces where they refuse to convert? What makes religious people from the ancient of days, the furthest corner of the earth to the present day, perhaps here in this very place, exploit the name of God against fellow beings. I contend that it is not hate, it is forgetfulness—λήθη—forgetfulness of Being—who we are—who *I am*—forgetfulness of what issues from beginning—ἀρχή—the ground of Being.

The early church proclamation of the life and teachings of Jesus is a re-membering of an original creation that reflects oneness in Being, laid buried under scrolls and scrolls of tradition and egoistic interpretation of Scripture. The early church teaching on the faith(fullness) of Messiah, which seals God's universal covenant, created a humble body of believers—men and women, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free persons working together in inclusion, equality, and mutuality for the liberation of a groaning creation, as Paul calls it. It eventually became the Roman state religion of power and control, exclusion and separatism that suppressed the very religion from which it sprang, namely Judaism. Luther, steeped in Christian tradition, transformed the teachings of Jesus, Paul, and the apostles into a separatist Christianity. Luther's Paul and Luther's Jesus are decidedly Christians converted from Judaism by Augustine before him. Luther's doctrine of *sola fide*, crafted out of the forgetfulness of centuries of Christian dogma, could not return the church to its root in the original ecumenical gospel of righteousness by faith. Power and control, intolerance, exclusion, and separatism remain firmly rooted among many who stridently embrace Reformation *sola fide/sola scriptura*. This kind of piety translates into works of dogma and tradition by which the believer/community forgets its full responsibility in an alienated creation as each vies for its own purity, identity, and self-preservation through the observance and enforcement of unexamined traditional values.

Forgetfulness of Being in God creates fear of "difference"—fear that my clan's life is at risk from the other. Dogmas and tradition *often* function to justify the walls we put up in the interest of self-preservation. And thus continues the cycle of forgetfulness and alienation. If the church can salvage the noble Reformation goal of *sola scriptura* by which, in Scripture, we encounter none but the *logos*—the truth of who are—then we can enter a dialectic of beholding and becoming into the image of God from whence we have fallen.

So, this is my appeal: Let not our deliberation here be a mere flex of intellectual muscle, or pledge of loyalty to particular ideologies, dogmas, and cliques, but let this be, year after year, a place of encounter with the *logos*, and a place from which we conspire to transform and re-member. ■



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Footnotes:

1. This method is based on the assumption that the scripture has a literal meaning, as opposed to having a mystical sense. Thus, if one reads Scripture in historical and literary context, one can know precisely what the text means. This approach became known as "Historical Grammatical Method."

2. Kenneth Hagen, in his book *Luther's Approach to Scripture as Seen in His Commentaries on Galatians, 1519–1538* (London, England: Coronet Books, 1993), 18, argues that concepts such as "hermeneutic" and "method" are nineteenth-century, post-enlightenment and modern concepts which are alien to Luther and his approach to Scripture.

3. *Ibid.*, 15–17.

4. Luther called for the death penalty for "doctrinal heretics" and in particularly Anabaptists who, though they developed out of the teachings of Luther and Ulrich Zwingli, these men considered to be too radical. Anabaptists oppose infant baptism and other doctrines which ironically emerge from Roman Catholic tradition rather than *sola scriptura*. See also, John S. Oyer, *Lutheran Reformers against Anabaptists (Dissent and Non-conformity)* (Paris, Arkansas: The Baptist Standard Bearers Inc., 2001).

5. There is no doubt among sociologists that sacred canons such as the Bible or the Qur'an in and of themselves hold the most powerful sway over the minds of any culture.

6. "In it (the *logos*) was light, and the light was the life of humanity." John 1:2.

7. *Luther's Works*, 10:332; John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.7.1

8. Weimar Ausgabe 18:609. 1–14 cited in Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 84.

9. *Ibid.* This is Erasmus' approach to passages that do not make sense.

10. *Luther's Works*, 35:136, cited in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 83.

11. The Reformers oppose a subjective arbitrary interpretation that, according to Origen before them, requires special spiritual insight by select people to decipher the meaning of the objects, parts, and elements of scripture. Origen, *On First Principles* 4.1.6 (Butterworth, *Origen*, 265).

12. Luther protests that there is nothing recondite in scripture. He goes on to say, "many passages in scripture are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due not to the exalted nature of the subject, but to our linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not prevent in any way our knowing all the contents of the Scripture." See John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 172.

13. Calvin rails against this usurping of Biblical authority by the church saying, "But a most pernicious error widely prevails that scripture only has so much weight as is conceded to it by the consent of the church." Calvin, *Instit.* 1.7.1. According to Luther, "the church does not constitute the Word but is constituted by the Word." *Luther's Works*, 35:138.

14. "Constrained" because often interpreters attend to context only when it does not uncover error in an already established doctrine or practice.

15. From here on I will use the actual Greek word *logos* (English transliteration), because, as becomes evident in the progress of this conversation, the Greek term *logos* and its literal English translation "word" are not equivalent. The prologue of John reflects the marriage of Greek philosophy and Hebrew wisdom. *Logos* in Platonic legacy designates the very mind of the cosmos that gives it form and meaning. In John 1:3–4, life and light reside in the *logos* and everything comes into being through it. This brings to the Judaic mind σοφία (wisdom). In Wisdom 9:12, "God made all things by your word, and by your wisdom fashioned man" [sic].

16. In this construction, λόγος having the definite article ὁ, is the subject, while θεός, without the article, functions as complement of ἦν ("was" [from the verb "to be" which is not an action but a state of being]). Θεός appearing as compliment without the article is not identifier, but modifier or describer, so that the *logos* finds description and definition in God as Being of God.

17. See especially "Sermons on John 1 and 2", 1537–1538; *Luther's Works* 22. See also, Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 161–220.

18. The church began in the synagogue, but separation evolved as its interpretation of the Gospel continued to clash with the orthodox interpretation.

19. John crafts the debate as a choice between life and death.

20. The drama of the trial indicates that Jesus' teaching not only disrupts the structure of an entire religious system, but it threatens the authority of its leader Caiaphas. Jesus' teaching was a disclosure, ἀληθεια: divine love that sets a people free, unearthed from layers of religious dogma, ritualistic obsession, and hierarchical power structure that hinder the flow of divine love. The crowd follows Jesus and listens to his condemnation of

a corrupt religious system, and witnesses his life-giving power in the *signs* (miracles). This being the time of the biggest Jewish festival, the Passover, with millions of Jews in Jerusalem, Caiaphas must not lose control or lose face. He fears an uprising, and this uprising could be the end of the Jewish nation in a Roman Empire that brutally crushes any kind of uprising (John 11:45–51). It is because of this that Caiaphas "advised the Jews that it was better to have one person die for the people." (11:40; 18:14). And Pontius Pilate yields to the untruth (John 19:1–16) because he is ultimately responsible for keeping the peace in his province, short of which Rome would depose or execute him.

21. The debate about truth climaxes with the last of the seven signs—the raising of Lazarus from the dead and Jesus' declaration "I am the resurrection and the life... everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25–26). This appears just before the passion narrative.

22. See also John 1:11–13: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him...but as many as believed...he gave power to become children of God."

23. The Abrahamic Covenant is a recapitulation of humanity in the blessing of God: "...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Its devolution into an ethnocentric interpretation signifies the state of alienation that the incarnation means to rectify.

24. Foundational to Jewish apocalyptic understanding, especially in the period of the second temple, was the coming in of a new age of God's reign through Messiah, the arbiter of justice who liberates God's people from oppressive principalities and powers. In powerful Judaic quarters, based on their interpretation of the prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea), Messiah was to bring about political and spiritual redemption of Israel and establish a world government in Jerusalem. See "Mashiach: Messiah" in *Judaism 101*, <http://www.jewfaq.org/mashiach.htm>.

25. Cf., John 1: 17: "The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

26. At the onset of both the gospel and the first epistle, John resists the Gnostic philosophical impulse in his community to deny that God can mingle so intimately with fallen humanity. The assertion at the onset of the gospel and the first epistle is that the *logos* became flesh (John 1:14), that their eye saw it and their hands touched it—the *logos* which is life revealed by God. John invites his audience into this intimate fellowship of life (1 John 1:1–3). He further dismisses the Gnostic denial of the *logos* incarnation calling it the anti-Christ spirit (1 John 4:1–3).

27. The term translations render "faith" (πίστις) actually means "faithfulness." The English word "belief" is not equal in meaning to the Greek word πίστις. Paul's reference to Abraham's faithfulness in Romans 4 is about his "commitment, trust and devotion," not merely an intellectual affirmation versus doubt as the English word "belief" implies. (In Greek argumentation the πίστις is the proof of, or faithfulness to, one's claim). The phrase "faith in Jesus Christ" (πίστις του Ιησού Χριστού) both in the Greek

and in the context of Paul's discussion literally reads "faithfulness of Jesus Messiah." God's people receive justice through the faithful mediation of Messiah; and this is the actual meaning of the Abrahamic covenant in the context of Jewish Messianic expectation. See Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 191–194.

28. See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1943). Foundational to Niebuhr's moral philosophy is his interpretation of the Christ event as a demonstration of oneness in being, so that all institutions, all religions, all ideological processes, all nations, all cultural activities and scientific breakthroughs, all life forms, all living experiences connect in the One (beyond the many) as essential parts of the process of being.

29. See the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7).

30. Isaiah 1:10–17, Micah 6:8, Amos 5:21–24.

31. The Gospel is Judaic and was the content of the preaching of the Hebrew prophets. It did not begin with the church as some may assume. See Isaiah 61 and Luke 4:8, 19.

32. Gentiles regard matters such as circumcision and diet as cultural with no inherent spiritual value; and Paul for example agreed. This was the contention of his teaching on righteousness.

33. *Luther's Works* 35:396, cited in Althaus, 83.

34. See Kolb and Arand, *The Genius of Luther's Theology*, 34.

35. See Christopher J. Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012)

36. "In the former we receive righteousness before God through faith on account of Christ. In the latter, we receive righteousness in the eyes of the world by works when we carry out our God given responsibilities." See Charles Arand, "Two Kinds of Righteousness as a Framework for Law and Gospels in the Apologies," *Lutheran Quarterly* XV (2001): 421.

37. Contrary to centuries of indoctrination, Paul did not address legalism. Jews did not believe that they receive God's righteousness/justice because of what they do. On the contrary they receive it because God chose them through covenant (Abrahamic Covenant [condensed in the Davidic covenant in view of the separation from the ten northern tribes {See 2 Sam 7:12–13; 1 Kings 12; 2 Chronicle 10})). Their religious norms (which Gentiles saw as cultural) identified them as God's covenant community of the righteous. E. P. Sanders calls this *covenantal nomism*. Covenantal nomism is the belief that all who seek the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant, namely God's just vindication or God's righteousness, must become members of the covenant community by means of proselytization (one must take on Jewish ethnicity/identity). This is what Paul argues against in Galatians and Romans. See E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Mineapolis: Fortress Press, 1977), 2.5.5

38. *Ibid.*, 2.5.4

39. See note 26, above.

40. Assuming one may interpret "active righteousness" as such.

41. See for example, 1 Corinthians 10:23–30; Romans 14.

42. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

43. A narrow view of inspiration is the insistence that everything in Scripture has to be literal and accurate according to modern standards of accuracy.

44. Moltmann puts it thus: "We... work out whatever in the text furthers life, and we ... subject to criticism whatever is hostile to life." I go further to say however, that it is the Spirit of the *logos* in Scripture that subjects Scripture "to criticism." See Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 57.

45. See note 26, above.

46. When the churchman Galileo, in the sixteenth century, embraced the heliocentric view of Copernicus based on his own astronomical observations, the church subjected him to torture and banishment before forcing him to recant. This was because the church believed that heliocentrism was contrary to the teaching of the Bible (See 1 Chronicles 16:30, Psalm 93:1, Psalm 96:10, Psalm 104:5, Ecclesiastes 1:5; cf. note 13, above). Now heliocentrism is a foregone conclusion, and Galileo is named the father of modern science. Yet many have rejected the Bible because of this very controversy. The church therefore has to take the responsibility to explain carefully the process of Biblical inspiration.

47. Joshua commanded, "O sun, stand still at Gibeon, And O moon in the valley of Aijalon" (Josh 10:12). If Joshua did not know that the sun was stationary relative to the earth, it is not because he was not inspired; rather it is because he was not involved in a scientific debate. The text rather speaks to a miracle for more daylight hours in a manner that was familiar to Joshua. "It is not the words... that are inspired, but the men...." (1 SM 1:21.2).

48. See note 18, above.

49. History has demonstrated that the attempt to transform the Bible into a science book will only create unbelievers, or otherwise mute conformists. This was indeed the case in the controversy over Galileo's findings. See note 14, above.

50. 1 John 2:7; 3:11.

51. In Greek philosophy, ἀρχή is not about time, rather it indicates the "first principle of intelligibility" or the ground of Being.

52. Vladislav Suvák, *The Essence of Truth (alētheia) and the Western Tradition in the Thought of Heidegger and Patocka*, in *Thinking Fundamentals*, IWM Junior Visiting Fellows Conferences, Vol. 9: Vienna 2000, 5.

53. At the climatic *sign* in John, Jesus pronounces: "I am the resurrection and the life...." (John 11:25–26).