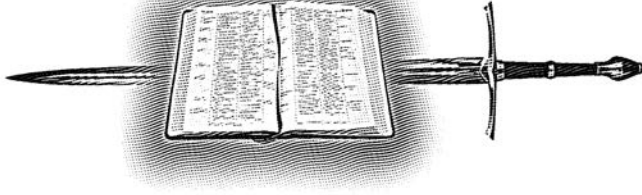


By Scripture Alone— *Sola Scriptura*



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: 1 Cor. 4:1–6; Titus 1:9; 2 Tim. 1:13; Mark 12:10, 26; Luke 24:27, 44, 45; Isa. 8:20.

Memory Text: “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (*Hebrews 4:12, NKJV*).

The Protestant claim of “Scripture alone” (*sola Scriptura*) elevated Scripture to the sole standard and decisive source for theology. In contrast to Roman Catholic theology, which emphasized Scripture *and* tradition, the Protestant faith emphasized the keyword “alone”; that is, Scripture *alone* is the final authority when matters of faith and doctrine are at issue.

It was the Bible that gave the decisive force and authority to the Protestant Reformation and its revolt against Rome and the errors it had been teaching for centuries. Over against an allegorical interpretation of Scripture, where many different meanings were read into the biblical text, the Protestant Reformers emphasized the importance of a grammatical-historical interpretation of the Bible, which took seriously the grammar and literal meaning of the biblical text.

This week we will look at *sola Scriptura* in greater detail. We will learn that *sola Scriptura* implies some fundamental principles of biblical interpretation that are indispensable for a proper understanding of God's Word. As Protestants, we must maintain the Bible as the ultimate doctrinal authority.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 2.

Scripture as the Ruling Norm

From their beginning, Seventh-day Adventists have considered themselves to be people of the Book, that is, Bible-believing Christians. To affirm the biblical principle of *sola Scriptura* (by Scripture alone), we acknowledge the unique authority of the Bible. Scripture *alone* is the ruling norm for our theology and the ultimate authority for life and doctrine. Other sources, such as religious experience, human reason, or tradition, are subservient to the Bible. In fact, the *sola Scriptura* principle was intended to safeguard the authority of Scripture from dependence upon the church and its interpretation, and it ruled out the possibility that the standard of its interpretation should come from outside the Bible.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1–6, especially verse 6, in which Paul says we should not go “beyond what is written.” Why is this point so crucial for our faith?

Not to go beyond what is written does not exclude insights from other fields of study, such as biblical archaeology or history. Other fields may shed light on some biblical aspects and the background of scriptural passages, and thus may help us to understand the biblical text better. Nor does it exclude the help of other resources in the task of interpretation, such as lexicons, dictionaries, concordances, and other books and commentaries. However, in the proper interpretation of the Bible, the text of Scripture has priority over all other aspects, sciences, and secondary helps. Other viewpoints have to be evaluated carefully from the standpoint of Scripture as a whole.

What we positively affirm when we practice the *sola Scriptura* principle is that if a conflict arises in the interpretation of our faith, then Scripture alone carries the authority that transcends and judges any other source or church tradition. We should not go beyond or against what is written in the Bible. True Christianity and convincing, gospel preaching depend on a firm commitment to the authority of Scripture.

“Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth.”—Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 32: *Career of the Reformer II*, ed. Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), pp. 11, 12.

Read Acts 17:10, 11. How do these verses inform what we’re talking about here regarding the primacy of Scripture?

The Unity of Scripture

The Bible itself claims that “all Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16, NIV) and that “no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation,” and that men “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet. 1:20, 21, NIV). With God as the Bible’s ultimate author, we can assume a fundamental unity and harmony among the various parts of Scripture in regard to the key issues it teaches.

Read Titus 1:9 and 2 Timothy 1:13. Why is the unity of the Bible important for our belief?

Only on the basis of its internal unity, a unity that is derived from its divine inspiration, can Scripture function as its own interpreter. If Scripture did not have an overarching unity in its teachings, we could not come up with a harmony in doctrine on any given issue. Without the unity of the Bible, the church would have no means to distinguish truth from error and to repudiate heresy. It would have no basis to apply disciplinary measures or to correct deviations from God’s truth. Scripture would lose its convincing and liberating power.

Jesus and the biblical writers, however, assume the unity of Scripture, which is based on its divine origin. We can see this in their common practice of quoting several Old Testament books as of equal and harmonious weight (Rom. 3:10–18; here Paul makes use of scriptural citations from Ecclesiastes [7:20], Psalms [14:2, 3; 5:9; 10:7], and Isaiah [59:7, 8]).

The Bible writers considered Scripture to be an inseparable, coherent whole in which major themes are further developed. There is no discord between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The New Testament does not contain a new gospel or a new religion. The Old Testament is unfolded in the New Testament, and the New Testament builds upon the Old Testament. As such, the two Testaments have a reciprocal relationship in which they shed light upon each other.

The unity of Scripture also implies that all of Scripture (*tota Scriptura*) should be taken into consideration when we study a biblical subject, rather than building our teaching only on isolated statements.

What should we do when we come across texts or ideas that appear contradictory to each other in the Bible? How do we work to resolve them?

The Clarity of Scripture

Any appeal to Scripture alone makes little sense if the text of the Bible is unclear in its meaning.

Read Matthew 21:42; Matthew 12:3, 5; Matthew 19:4; Matthew 22:31; Mark 12:10, 26; Luke 6:3; Matthew 24:15; and Mark 13:14. **What does Jesus' repeated referral to Scripture imply in regard to the clarity of its message?**

The biblical testimony is unambiguous: the Bible is sufficiently clear in what it teaches. The Bible is so clear that it can be understood by children and by adults alike, especially in its most basic teachings. And yet there are endless opportunities for our knowledge and understanding to grow deeper. We do not need any ecclesiastical magisterium to provide the Bible's meaning for us. Instead, its basic teachings can be understood by all believers. It assumes the priesthood of all believers rather than restricting its interpretation to a select few, such as the clerical priesthood. Therefore, we are encouraged in the Bible to study Scripture for ourselves because we are able to understand God's message to us.

It has been aptly pointed out that "the consistent example of the Bible writers shows that the Scriptures are to be taken in their plain, literal sense, unless a clear and obvious figure is intended. . . . There is no stripping away of the 'husk' of the literal sense in order to arrive at the 'kernel' of a mystical, hidden, allegorical meaning, that only the initiated can uncover."—*Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2000), p. 65. Rather, the clarity of the Bible pertains to the language, sense, and words of Scripture because there is a definite truth intended by the biblical writers rather than subjective, uncontrolled, multiple meanings of the biblical text.

None of this means that we won't, at times, come across texts and ideas that we don't fully understand or grasp. After all, this is the Word of God, and we are but fallen human beings. Nevertheless, God's Word is sufficiently clear on the things that we really need to know and understand, especially in relation to the question of salvation.

Think about a time when you didn't understand some texts, only to have them clarified later. What did you learn from that experience that perhaps could help others struggling with something similar?

Scripture Interprets Scripture

Only because there is an underlying unity of Scripture can the Bible function as its own interpreter. Without such unity, Scripture could not be the light that reveals its own meaning, where one portion of Scripture interprets other portions and thus becomes the key to understanding related passages.

Read Luke 24:27, 44, 45. How does Jesus refer back to Scripture to explain who He is? What does this teach us about how we can use Scripture?

The beauty of letting Scripture interpret Scripture is that it sheds further light on its own meaning. In doing so, we do not indiscriminately string together various passages to prove our opinion. Instead, we carefully take into consideration the context of each passage. Besides the immediate context before and after a passage under investigation, we should take into consideration the context of the book in which the passage is found. Furthermore, since according to Paul in Scripture, “everything that was written in the past was written to teach us” (*Rom. 15:4, NIV*), we should study all that Scripture says on a given subject.

“The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God’s original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 190.

When we compare Scripture with Scripture, it is important to study the Bible thoroughly. If possible, we should do so in its original languages, or at least with an appropriate Bible translation faithful to the meaning contained in the original Hebrew and Greek. Though knowledge of the original languages is not necessary to have a good understanding of the Bible, it certainly helps when possible. If not, faithful and prayerful study of the Word, with an attitude of humility and submission, will still surely bear great fruit.

Think of a doctrine, such as the state of the dead, for which focusing on a few select passages could lead to error if other passages are ignored. What does this tell us about how important it is to gather and read all that the Bible says about a topic in order to understand best what the Bible teaches?

Sola Scriptura and Ellen G. White

Read Isaiah 8:20. Why is it always important to refer back to the biblical “law and testimony” as the norms for our teaching and doctrine? What does this mean for the ministry of prophets who have not become part of the biblical canon?

When we talk about *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), Seventh-day Adventists are inevitably confronted with the question of what to do with Ellen G. White, who also was inspired by God and served as God’s messenger to His remnant people. What is the relationship of her writings to Scripture?

Even a cursory reading of Ellen G. White’s writings shows clearly that for her, the Bible was foundational and central in all her thought and theology. In fact, she repeatedly affirmed that the Bible is the highest authority and ultimate norm and standard for all doctrines, faith, and practice (see *The Great Controversy*, p. 595). Moreover, she clearly supported and upheld the great Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* (see *The Great Controversy*, p. 9).

In Ellen G. White’s own view, her writings, when compared with Scripture, were a “lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light,” the Bible (*Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 20, 1903). Her writings are never a shortcut to or replacement for any serious Bible study. In fact, she comments: “You are not familiar with the Scriptures. If you had made God’s word your study, with a desire to reach the Bible standard and attain to Christian perfection, you would not have needed the *Testimonies*. It is because you have neglected to acquaint yourself with God’s inspired Book that He has sought to reach you by simple, direct testimonies.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 605.

As such, her writings are to be appreciated. They share the same kind of inspiration as the biblical writers had, but they have a different function than does the Bible. Her writings are not an addition to Scripture but are subject to Holy Scripture. She never intended her writings to take the place of Scripture; instead, she elevated the Bible as the only standard for faith and practice.

Think about what an incredible gift we have been given through the ministry of Ellen G. White. How can we learn to appreciate better the amazing light coming from her while also upholding the supremacy of Scripture?

Further Thought: In the chapter “Biblical Interpretation” in the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, read the sections The Analogy of Scripture: “Scripture Is Its Own Interpreter,” The Consistency of Scripture, and The Clarity of Scripture, pp. 64–66. Read chapter 20, “Bible Teaching and Study,” in the book *Education*, pp. 185–192; “The Primacy of the Word” in *Selected Messages*, book 3, pp. 29–33.

“The student of the Bible should be taught to approach it in the spirit of a learner. We are to search its pages, not for proof to sustain our opinions, but in order to know what God says. A true knowledge of the Bible can be gained only through the aid of that Spirit by whom the word was given. And in order to gain this knowledge we must live by it. All that God’s word commands, we are to obey. . . . The study of the Bible demands our most diligent effort and persevering thought. As the miner digs for the golden treasure in the earth, so earnestly, persistently, must we seek for the treasure of God’s word.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 189.

“When you make the Bible your food, your meat, and your drink, when you make its principles the elements of your character, you will know better how to receive counsel from God. I exalt the precious word before you today. Do not repeat what I have said, saying, ‘Sister White said this,’ and ‘Sister White said that.’ Find out what the Lord God of Israel says, and then do what He commands.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 33.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ What erroneous beliefs do people hold because they have looked at only a few select texts rather than at all that the Bible says about a topic?
- ❷ In Matthew 11:11, Jesus said of John the Baptist: “ ‘Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he’ ” (*NKJV*). Jesus points to a prophet here who has no writings in the Bible and yet said such things about Him. What should this tell us about why a true prophet does not have to have a book in the Bible and can still be a true prophet? What message can we Seventh-day Adventists take away from this fact?
- ❸ As Adventists, we’re not alone in claiming the Bible as our final authority. Other churches do so, as well. How, then, do we explain the contradictory doctrines that other Christians claim to find in the Bible, as well?

Road to Jesus

By ANTONIS MATSOUKAROS

I grew up in Cyprus, a Christian country. But my family was only nominally Christian.

When I was 12, I became sick, and no doctor could make me well. So, I began to seek God. I visited various churches in the hope of finding healing. I bowed before images and lit candles, thinking my actions would convince God to help me. But it didn't work.

Many years later, when I was 30, I found a leaflet under my door advertising a series of lectures on archaeological and spiritual matters in a public hall. The topic for each night was listed. Although I didn't know it at the time, the meetings were organized by the Seventh-day Adventist church.

I was not interested. But one topic, about midway through the list of topics, caught my attention: "The Antichrist and the Number 666." I decided to attend that one lecture.

The lively presentation intrigued me, and I ended up attending the remaining meetings. At the conclusion, the organizers invited attendees to worship at a Seventh-day Adventist church.

I began attending regularly and eventually became convicted about the Advent message. But I hesitated about baptism. Nicosia is a fairly small city, and the society is fairly close knit, so I wondered how my friends and family would react if they discovered that I had abandoned my childhood church to become a Seventh-day Adventist.

For 10 years, I pondered whether it was important to be baptized. Would it make me a better person? Was I ready to follow this church and its lifestyle?

The pastor was very patient. Over time we became good friends. After some gentle encouragement, I was baptized.

I have never regretted that decision.

Several years have passed since that beautiful day. Today I am 55 and active in our small church family. I teach the Sabbath School and have worked with a new pastor to build a website to reach the people of Cyprus.



Jesus is coming soon, and when He does, I will finally be healed of my lingering illness. Even more important, we want the people of Cyprus and around the world to know and be ready.

Part of the Thirteenth Sabbath Offering this quarter will help construct a new church building and community center in Nicosia for Matsoukaros's congregation and two other congregations. Thank you for planning a generous offering.