

SOLA SCRIPTURA –
MARTIN LUTHER'S INVENTION?
II Commemorating the 500th Anniversary
of the Printed Edition of the Constitutions of
the Order of St. Augustine in Nuremberg in 1504-1506

The notions "Scripture principle" and "Scripture alone" are often used for differentiating the Christian denominations, being watchwords to distinguish Protestants from Catholics. However, the notion of "Scripture principle" is an invention of the nineteenth century¹ and "Scripture alone" (*sola scriptura*) as a concept is much older than Luther's Reformation and known primarily as a post-Reformation slogan.²

Throughout the history of the Church, the Sacred Scripture was the definitive authority in the Church. For the fathers of the Church and the theologians of the Middle Ages there was no doubt that theology always had to be biblical theology.³ Thomas Aquinas (died 1274) in interpreting John 21 with Gal 1:9, "If anyone preach a gospel to you other than that which you have received, let him be anathema", declared that "only the canonical Scripture is normative for faith" (*sola canonica scriptura est regula fidei*), or in a different translation one may say "only the canonical Scripture is the measure of faith."⁴

Luther himself apparently did not use the specific expression, *sola scriptura*. When consulting two recent books on "Luther's theology",⁵ one does not get any answer to the question of the origin of this "Protestant" maxim. In 1971 Gerhard Ebeling clarified what Luther meant by "Scripture alone". Luther meant to express with this concept the self-sufficiency and clarity of the biblical message that

¹ See Walter SPARN, Art. "Sola scriptura" in *Dictionary of the Reformation*, eds. Klaus Ganzer and Bruno Steimer, trans. Brian McNeil (New York: Crossroad, 2004) (based on the German *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*).

² See Anthony N. S. LANE, "Sola Scriptura? Making Sense of a Post-Reformation Slogan", in Philip E. SATTERTHWAIT and David F. WRIGHT, eds., *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 297-327.

³ See Walter KASPER, *Glaube und Geschichte* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald Verlag, 1970) 179.

⁴ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, Commentary on John 21.

⁵ Bernhard LOHSE, *Luthers Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995); Oswald BAYER, *Martin Luthers Theologie. Eine Vergegenwärtigung* (Tübingen: MOHR SIEBECK, 2003).

brings us life as it is the living, spoken Word of God.⁶ Scripture interprets itself (*scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*), as Scripture is the authority that teaches that Christ justifies the sinner.⁷ Luther understood "Scripture alone" also as "pure doctrine".⁸

Furthermore, for Luther the principle of "Scripture alone" meant Scripture reading "with closed eyes" without any other influence from outside, i. e. without scholastic philosophical speculations or revelations by enthusiasts. "Do not speculate!" "The eyes should be closed and the testimony [of the Bible] should be taken." "I do not believe in any dreams or vision... I simply believe the text." One must remain with the "naked text of the Bible" alone.⁹ The formula "with closed eyes" is another way of expressing the principle of Scripture alone. Against any "subjectivism" (of which Luther is accused by some older Catholic Luther scholars, i. e. Joseph Lortz et al.) the Reformer insisted: "One must not alter the Word of God to one's own taste."¹⁰ Yet, the expression "Scripture alone"/ *sola scriptura* is hard to find in Luther's works. The concentration on Scripture alone is not typical "Lutheran". But where did this principle come from, if it was not Luther's invention?

Luther himself indicated that his professor in Erfurt, Jodocus Trutfetter (died in 1519), taught them that one owes faith only to the Sacred Scripture.¹¹ In 1506 Trutfetter may have been known for this conviction and had been hired for the University of Wittenberg by the Augustinian Bible scholar Johann von Staupitz (died 1524).¹² Thus, one may assume that early on Luther was taught to concentrate on Scripture alone, and one may observe further that on the eve of the "Reformation" there was a canonistic tradition supporting Staupitz's and Luther's assertion of the primal authority of Scripture over that of

⁶ Gerhard EBELING, "Luther und die Bibel," *Lutherstudien I* (Tübingen: J. C. B. MOHR [Paul Siebeck], 1971) 286-301. On "Scripture alone" see Gerhard EBELING, *The Word of God and Tradition: Historical Studies Interpreting the Divisions of Christianity*, trans. S. H. HOOKE (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964) 102-47.

⁷ See Walter MOSTERT, "*Scriptura sacra sui ipsius interpres*. Bemerkungen zum Verständnis der Heiligen Schrift durch Luther," *Lutherjahrbuch* 46 (1979) 60-96.

⁸ See Friedrich BEISSER, "Luthers Schriftverständnis," in Peter Manns, ed., *Martin Luther "Reformator und Vater im Glauben"* (Stuttgart: Franz STEINER Verlag, 1985) 25-37.

⁹ WA TR 3:439,2-5 (no. 3593). For this and the other quotations, see Franz POSSET, "Bible Reading 'With Closed Eyes' in the Monastic Tradition: An Overlooked Aspect of Martin Luther's Hermeneutics," *The American Benedictine Review* 38 (1987) 293-306.

¹⁰ WA 27:44,8; see POSSET, "Bible Reading 'With Closed Eyes,'" 301.

¹¹ See WA BRIEFE 1:70-74 (no. 74); on this, see Lohse, *Luthers Theologie*, 40.

¹² See Franz POSSET, *The Front-Runner of the Catholic Reformation. The life and Works of Johann von Staupitz* (Aldershot, GB: Ashgate, 2003) 85.

councils or ecclesiastical authorities.¹³ In addition to that it is most plausible that Luther got his clue for his concentration on Scripture alone from the policies of the Order of St. Augustine to which he belonged.

Between 1504 and 1506,¹⁴ Luther’s superior, Johann von Staupitz, worked on a new edition of the old *Constitutiones* of the Augustinian Order of 1287/1290 and published it under the title *Constitutiones fratrum Eremitarum sancti Augustini ad Apostolicorum privilegiorum formam pro reformatione Alemanniae*.¹⁵ The title is conspicuous as it includes “reformatio” as the purpose of the constitutions: “for the reformation of Germany”, meaning for the reform of the Order of Saint Augustine in Germany. Staupitz’s preface has the date of the Vigil of Pentecost 1504 at Nuremberg. The first known print does not give a date of printing nor the printer’s name or place.¹⁶ One assumes that the printer was Jerome Hölzel at Nuremberg and that the edition appeared soon after Pentecost 1504.¹⁷ One may wonder why the name, place and date of the print were not included. Was it intentionally left out in order not to get pinned down for a premature publication since the papal approval did not come until 24 March 1506?¹⁸ Or was it simply of no concern at all at that time to indicate a date and place of publication?

For our question concerning the maxim “Scripture alone”, the seventeenth chapter of the fifty-one chapters of the *Constitutiones* is important, as it deals with the tasks of the master of novices and what he is supposed to instruct them. His main duty is the supervision of the newcomers which includes the enforcement of a certain code of behavior; for example, on when and where to bow, genuflect, and prostrate; to carefully handle books and vestments; not to hang out with the convent of the friars unless invited; not to dispute about the Rule and Constitutions; not to join guests or the infirm at their meals; how to hold a cup with both hands and sitting down when taking a drink; not

¹³ Hermann SCHUESSLER, “Sacred Doctrine and the Authority of Scripture in Canonistic Thought on the Eve of the Reformation,” in Guy Fitch Lytle and Uta-Renate Blumenthal, eds., *Reform and Authority in the Medieval and Reformation Church* (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1981) 55-68.

¹⁴ On the date, see Introduction to the critical edition by Wolfgang GÜNTER in *Johann von Staupitz: Gutachten und Satzungen. Sämtliche Schriften* vol. 5 (Berlin and New York: Walter DE GRUYTER, 2001) 135.

¹⁵ GÜNTER, vol. 5:144-319. See Posset, *The Front-Runner*, 88 and 96.

¹⁶ See GÜNTER, vol. 5:135.

¹⁷ For arguments that the printing took place not earlier than the spring of 1506, see Günter’s introduction, 135, note 117.

¹⁸ This date of approval by the *breve* of Julius II is pointed out by W. GÜNTER in his considerations for a late publication date 1506 rather than 1504.

to walk around with heads up ("with neck outstretched" [*extento collo*] according to the Vulgate version of Is 3:16), but with the eyes fixed to the ground; never to talk about someone who is absent unless it is something good, never to praise someone to his face; not to send or receive letters without permission. A friar "shall love poverty, stay away from delights, and shatter his own will".

In this very context of Chapter 17, the following directive is given concerning the Sacred Scriptures: *Sacram scripturam avidè legat, devote audiat et ardentèr addiscat*, "He is to read the Sacred Scripture eagerly, listen to it devoutly, and learn it fervently".¹⁹ The text continues with the admonition not to mention the social position (*gradus*) of one's parents or the degree of their nobility or any parental wealth or worldly honors. Although the directive about the Bible may easily be drowned out by all the other rules and regulations, it remains significant that the study of the Sacred Scripture within the Order is the noblest task for the friars, a kind of divine service. One may take this phrase from the Order's *Constitutiones* as another expression of *sola scriptura*.

Already in his Tübingen Sermons prior to 1500 Staupitz had declared that the Bible is the *eminentissima auctoritas* as holy writ (*sancta scriptura*), using St. Augustine's words from the *City of God* (Book XI,3): Sacred Scripture is the "highest authority". Scripture gives credence concerning all those things that we ought to know and yet, by ourselves, are unable to learn.²⁰ In his Tübingen Sermon 31 Staupitz actually said that "in the Sacred Scripture alone" (*in sola scriptura sacra*) we see the face of God while we are here on earth.²¹ Thus, Scripture alone provides the proper revelation of who God is. In the same vein, the late-medieval Augustinian Friar Conrad Zenn (died 1460) had declared that one had to know the Sacred Scriptures if one wanted to know Christ.²²

¹⁹ GÜNTER, vol. 5:194,38-39. See Richard D. BALGE, "Martin Luther, Augustinian," in Edward C. FRIEDRICH, Siegbert W. BECKER, David P. KUSKE, eds., *Luther Lives. Essays in Commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of Martin Luther's Birth* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1983) 8. Adolar ZUMKELLER, "The Augustinian School of the Middle Ages," in John E. ROTELLE, ed., *Theology and History of the Augustinian School in the Middle Ages* (n. p., Augustinian Press, 1996) 11.

²⁰ Tübingen Sermon 13 in Staupitz, *Tübinger Predigten*, ed. Richard WETZEL (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1987) 245, see also 74; Adolar ZUMKELLER, *Johann von Staupitz und seine christliche Heilslehre* (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1994) 21; Posset, *Front-Runner*, 96.

²¹ 139-141; see ZUMKELLER, *Johannes von Staupitz und seine christliche Heilslehre*, 57.

²² See Hellmut ZSCHOCH, *Klosterreform und monastische Spiritualität im 15. Jahrhundert: Conrad von Zenn OESA (+1460) und sein Liber de vita monastica* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988) 169, note 216.

Evidently, according to the Order's *Constitutiones*, the Augustinian novices are to devote all their energies to the study of the Bible, in apparent contradiction to Gabriel Biel (died 1495) who stressed that even for beginners in the study of theology the reading of the Bible would not be appropriate, as it would almost be detrimental to send them on such a wide ocean.²³ In contrast to such opinion, the Augustinians were programmed early on in their monastic careers to dedicate themselves to the study of the Bible. Young Luther greatly benefited from these *Constitutiones* with which he grew up in the Order. The historical Luther would thus not be understood correctly if one would disregard the centrality of the Scriptures with which Luther was confronted already as a novice in the Order of St. Augustine. Luther had "moved in" with the Augustinians at Erfurt on 16 July 1505.²⁴ This was about one year after Staupitz has signed his preface for the publication of the *Constitutiones*. Later, even the ex-friar Luther declared in his lectures on Titus in 1527, as if he were quoting the Augustinian Constitutions, that "the meditation of the Word of God is the highest task of piety."²⁵

Luther with his Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* followed the medieval concentration on the Bible and radicalized it by applying the Scripture principle now against certain ecclesiastical traditions such as the indulgences, and this sort of application was then something "new".²⁶ Luther applied the Scripture principle, which he learned to cherish within his own Order, primarily against the unfortunate influence of scholastic philosophy upon biblical theology, but without using the explicit notion *sola scriptura*. However, neither the formula itself nor the concept behind it was Luther's invention. He inherited it and used it in a new way. The issue of Scripture versus Tradition in the way it was debated after Luther at the Council of Trent was probably not on his mind.

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²³ See Gabriel BIEL, *Collectorium circa quattuor libros Sententiarum*, eds. Wilfridus WERBECK and Udo HOFMANN (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1973) vol. 1:6.

²⁴ WATR 4:440,5-6 (no. 4707).

²⁵ WA 25:6,6; see POSSET, "Bible Reading with Closed Eyes," 305.

²⁶ See LOHSE, *Luthers Theologie*, 205.