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# SOLA SCRIPTURA: AUTHORITY VERSUS INTERPRETATION?

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the term *Sola Scriptura* and the consequences of its application on the church, commencing with the Church Fathers, when the principle/idea of *Sola Scriptura* was already present, and followed by Martin Luther, whose 95 theses served as an ignition for the Reformation. Luther's action led to the founding of the Protestant movement, with his followers separating themselves from the Roman Catholic Church on the grounds of Scripture. Over the past 500 years, a myriad of different churches has been established within the Protestant movement, separating themselves from other Protestants, each with the conviction of *Sola Scriptura*. The impression is that, although the authority of Scripture is maintained, their interpretation of Scripture has led them to found new churches. This then applied to the traditional Afrikaans-speaking Reformed Churches in South Africa, that came to this country as one church, and led to the establishment of at least five separate churches.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

William Chillingworth ([1637] 1888:463), a controversial 17<sup>th</sup>-century theologian, stated the following in his major work, *The religion of Protestants: A safe way to salvation*:

By the "religion of protestants", I do not understand the doctrine of Luther, or Calvin, or Melanchthon, nor the harmony of protestant confessions; but that wherein they all agree, and which they all subscribe with a greater harmony as a perfect rule of their faith and actions; that

is, the Bible. The Bible, I say, the *Bible only*, is the religion of protestants!  
(emphasis added).

Chillingworth made this bold statement approximately 120 years after the commencement of the Reformation. Without using the term *Sola Scriptura*, his book is dedicated to the sole authority of Scripture, on the one hand, and the right of the reader to interpret it, on the other. These two principles, *authority*<sup>1</sup> and *interpretation* lie at the heart of this article, because, although the Bible has so much authority and people admit that authority, people differ so vigorously on the interpretation thereof that they establish new churches. O'Brien (2014:170) captured this predicament on *Sola Scriptura*, stating the following about his church's<sup>2</sup> view:

The Protestant principle of sola scriptura has limited value ... biblical authority will be recognized within a framework that embraces scholarly criticism of the text while allowing difference of interpretive opinion within a deeply traditioned commitment to God's universal, prevenient, transforming love.

This seems to be a fact when applied to the global Protestant movement.

Currently, there are many Protestant churches in South Africa,<sup>3</sup> each referring back to and building their arguments on the Reformation, stating that their point of departure is the "Bible alone". In fact, their point of departure is based on *their interpretation* of the Bible. When referring to the traditional Afrikaans-speaking Reformed Churches, one wonders whether *Sola Scriptura*

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1 According to Wengert (2013:vii), a retired Lutheran pastor, the authority of the Bible is still "one of the most contested subjects" among the Protestant churches worldwide.

2 The Uniting Church in Australia.

3 The Reformed churches in South Africa can broadly be divided into four main groups, namely the traditional Dutch Reformed (sister) churches, the Pentecostals, the Methodists, and the Anglicans. Churches belonging to these groups are (groups separated by ";"): The Dutch Reformed Church, the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk, and the Reformed Churches, including, among others, the APK (Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk), the Christian Reformed Church in South Africa, the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa, and URCSA (Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa); the Free Church in Southern Africa; Pentecostal churches such as the Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa, the Nazareth Baptist Church, and the Zionist Churches; the Methodist Church of Southern Africa, the Presbyterian Church of Africa, and the Uniting Presbyterian Church in Southern Africa; the Anglican Church of Southern Africa as well as the Church of England in South Africa; the Baptist Union of Southern Africa, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Revolvy 2019).

even played a role during their schisms and founding processes, although they state that they have the conviction of *Sola Scriptura*.<sup>4</sup>

The term *Sola Scriptura* is assigned to the Reformation,<sup>5,6</sup> and sometimes more specifically to Martin Luther, or as a summary of Luther's thoughts. It is boldly referred to as "coined" by the Reformers (Clothier 2019), as the "famous battle cry of the Protestant Reformation" (Beck 2007:75), as "[o]ne of the great slogans of the sixteenth-century Reformation" (Foord 2017), and as the "Lutheran doctrine sola scriptura" (Weaver 2014:40). Some scholars argue that *Sola Scriptura* as "slogan" was only created *after* the Reformation: "[S]ola Scriptura as a formula or a slogan post-dates the Reformation" (Lane 1994:298).<sup>7</sup> Wengert (2013:16) argues that it was assigned to Luther mostly by English-speaking Lutherans and Protestants from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward. However, the *idea* or *principle* of *Sola Scriptura* was definitely present from as early as the Church Fathers.<sup>8</sup>

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- 4 See, for example, the websites of the two most recent churches. The APK states: "The APK consists of reformed churches of Christ, who ... find their mission in the proclamation of the word of God, where the basis of the Reformation is central: The word of God alone (*Sola Scriptura*)" (APK 2013; personal translation). The Geloofsbond van Hervormde Gemeentes states: "Only Scripture, only Christ, and only faith ... *Sola Scriptura* – the source of our faith is Scripture and only Scripture" (GHG 2019; personal translation).
  - 5 Thomas Aquinas already used the term in the 13<sup>th</sup> century – maybe for the first time – in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John 21*, where he stated: "Cuius ratio est, quia sola canonica scriptura est regula fidei" (The reason is that only canonical Scripture is a measure of faith; emphasis added; Pfürtner 1977:48-80; Raphaelis & Cai 1952:488, n. 2656).
  - 6 It is argued that the Roman Catholic Church regards tradition as (almost) on the same level as Scripture, as the Second Vatican in 1965, through Pope Paul VI, confirms in *De Divina Revelatione* 2.9: "Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed" (Vatican [s.a.]; emphasis added). It will become clear in this article that the Church Fathers and Luther, in particular, shared this view with them, although with lesser authority given to the tradition.
  - 7 Space does not allow us to discuss this further, although it is a good theme for another article.
  - 8 The era of the Church Fathers (Patristic Era) was "particularly" that of the first five centuries (*New World Encyclopedia* 2017). However, according to the *Catholic News Herald* (2018), this era only ended with the death of John of Damascus in 749.

## 2. THE IDEA OR PRINCIPLE OF SOLA SCRIPTURA IN THE WRITINGS OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

The writings of the Church Fathers<sup>9</sup> most definitely display the principle of *Sola Scriptura*. Concerning the “Scriptures” they refer to, the Old Testament was concluded by the so-called Jewish Council/Synod/Assembly of Jamnia in approximately 90 CE,<sup>10</sup> while the New Testament books took another 250 years before Athanasius named them in his *Easter Festal Letter* 39.<sup>11</sup> During the first three centuries, the Church Fathers mainly used the Gospels and most of the *Epistolae* ascribed to Paul, apart from the Old Testament (Rudd [s.a.]).

The idea or principle of *Sola Scriptura* in the writings of the Church Fathers was expressed in (at least) three ways, namely the *supreme authority*, *self-sufficiency*, and *clarity* of Scripture. While these three notions can all be linked to authority, as depicted in this article, the third concept – clarity – comes closest to interpretation. For the Church Fathers, the authority of Scripture within the church was also linked to the apostolic tradition (Foord 2017).<sup>12</sup>

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- 9 Luther (1897a:100) gave much authority to the Church Fathers, stating: “Through this argument [concerning Scripture], I do not want to take away authority from the Fathers and to repay with ingratitude for their holy labours, but to place higher the freedom of the Spirit and the majesty of the Word of God”. Their views are, therefore, important to this article.
- 10 According to Ryle (1892:93, 113, 172, 177-178), the Law (first five books of the Old Testament) was fixed by 432 BCE, and the Law and the Prophets in 200 BCE, while the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings were accepted in 100 BCE, and officially recognised in 100 CE (Newman 1976:321). In the “famous school of Johanan ben Zakkai” in Jamnia (Newman 1976:323), the canonicity of the Old Testament books was fixed (without the Apocrypha) as we have it today (Fohrer 1965:486; Parmelee 1948:138-141).
- 11 In 367, Athanasius sent out an Easter Festal Letter (no. 39) containing most of the current Old Testament books, excluding 1 & 2 Samuel, Nehemiah, and Esther (Easter Festal Letter 39.4), but with all the current books of the New Testament (Easter Festal Letter 39.5; Migne 1957a:1435-1440; Schaff 1885a:1346; Wengert 2013:9). Interestingly, he added “other books ... appointed by the Fathers to be read by those who newly join us, and who wish for instruction in the word of godliness: The Wisdom of Solomon, and the Wisdom of Sirach, and Esther, and Judith, and Tobit, and that which is called the Teaching of the Apostles, and the Shepherd [of Hermas]” (Easter Festal Letter 39.7; Schaff 1885b:1346-1347). However, until the Reformation, the “Bible” was supplemented by Apocrypha. Luther made a clear distinction in his German translation, by allocating the Apocrypha under a separate heading.
- 12 The difference between Scripture and tradition was that Scripture was infallible, while tradition was fallible. In his *Against Heresies* 3.3.2, Irenaeus argued: “[We do this] by indicating that tradition derived from the ... two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul ... For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its preeminent authority, that is, the faithful everywhere,

In 180, Irenaeus (*Against heresies* 3.1.1) referred to the authority of Scripture as follows:

We have learned ... the plan of our salvation ... from those through whom the gospel has come down to us, which they ... handed down to us in the Scriptures, to be *the ground and pillar of our faith* (Schaff 1885c:1061; emphasis added).

In 200 CE, Tertullian (*Against Praxeas* 29) added:

Let us be content with saying that Christ died ... because the Scriptures have told us so much. For even the apostle ... immediately adds, "according to the Scriptures", in order that he may alleviate the harshness of the statement by the authority of the Scriptures (Schaff 1885d:1401).<sup>13</sup>

In 200 CE, Hippolytus (*Against the heresy of One Noetus* 9) confirmed:

There is ... one God, the knowledge of whom we gain from the Holy Scriptures, and from no other source (Schaff 1885e:560).<sup>14</sup>

Hilary of Poitiers (*On the Trinity* 10.67) argued in 350 CE:

Christ died and rose after a real manner, not a nominal, since the fact is certified by the full weight of Scripture authority; and that we must understand his death in that exact sense in which Scripture declares it (Schaff 1885f:461).<sup>15</sup>

In 360, Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catechetical Lecture* 4.17) announced:

[C]oncerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell thee these things, give not absolute credence, unless thou receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures (Schaff 1885g:136-137).<sup>16</sup>

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inasmuch as the apostolical tradition has been preserved continuously by those [faithful men] who exist everywhere" (Schaff 1885c:1061; emphasis added). In his Letter 60.6, *To Adelphius*, Athanasius added: "But our faith is right, and starts from the teaching of the Apostles and tradition of the fathers, being confirmed both by the New Testament and the Old" (Schaff 1885c:1402; emphasis added; original text in Migne 1857a:1079-1080).

13 Original text in Migne (1844:193-194).

14 Original text in Migne (1857b:816).

15 Original text in Migne (1845:394-395).

16 Original text in Migne (1857c:475-478).

In 375 AD, Gregory of Nyssa, in his *On the soul and the resurrection*, declared: “[W]e make the Holy Scriptures the rule and the measure of every tenet” (Schaff 1885h:818).<sup>17</sup> By the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Augustine (*Letter to Jerome* 3.24) mentioned:

It is to the *canonical Scriptures alone* that I am bound to yield such implicit subjection as to follow their teaching, without admitting the slightest suspicion that in them any mistake or any statement intended to mislead could find a place (Schaff 1885m:804; emphasis added).<sup>18</sup>

In the third chapter (of the *Authority of the Canonical Scriptures composed by the Divine Spirit*) of Book 11 of his *De civitate Dei* (*City of God*), Augustine refers to the works of the Holy Spirit concerning the authority of the Bible:

This Mediator ... has ... produced the Scripture which is called canonical, which has *paramount authority*, and to which we yield assent in all matters (Schaff 1885n:479; emphasis added).<sup>19</sup>

Secondly, the idea of *Sola Scriptura* in the Early Church referred to the self-sufficiency<sup>20</sup> of Scripture (based on 2 Tim. 3:16-17). In his *De Principiis* 4.19, Origen already supported the self-sufficiency of the canonical books (Schaff 1885p:791-792).<sup>21</sup> In 325, Athanasius (*Against the heathen* Part 1.3) stated: “[T]he sacred and inspired Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth” (Schaff 1885a:191),<sup>22</sup> and, in *To the Bishops of Egypt* 1.4: “But since holy Scripture is of all things most sufficient for us” (Schaff 1885a:647).<sup>23</sup> In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, Vincent of Lérins, in his *Commonitory* 2.2, argued that the “canon of the Scriptures is complete and is abundantly sufficient for every purpose” (McCracken & Cabaniss 1957:38). The sufficiency of Scripture lies in the fact that there should be an authoritative interpreter, while tradition should also be an interpreter, but then as a supplement to Scripture (Basil of Caesarea, *The Holy Spirit* 27.66, 29.71;<sup>24</sup> Lane 1994:315; Lane 1975:37-55).

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17 Original text in Migne (1863:51-52).

18 See also Augustine’s Reply to Faustus the Manichæan 33.9 (Schaff 1885j:591) and Augustine’s sermon, Our Lord’s Sermon on the Mount 11.32 (Schaff 1885k:43).

19 Original text in Dombart (1877:463-464).

20 Cognisance is taken of the difference between formal and material sufficiency as discussed by, *inter alia*, Lane (1994:313-320), but space does not allow to discuss that in this article.

21 Original text in Migne (1857d:383-386).

22 Original text in Migne (1857e:3-4).

23 Original text in Migne (1857e:547-548).

24 Original text in Migne (1857f:487-488; 199-202), with a good translation by Schaff (1885q:230-235; 239-240).

Thirdly, the idea of *Sola Scriptura* referred to the clarity of Scripture, implying that everybody could understand most of it with reference to their salvation. In 180 CE, Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis* 7.16) argued:

But those who are ready to toil in the most excellent pursuits, will not desist from the search after truth, till they get the demonstration from the Scriptures themselves (Schaff 1885b:1171).<sup>25</sup>

In 350, Hilary of Poitiers (*On the Trinity* 4.19) argued:

Yet it is well for us to know all that has been revealed upon the subject [under discussion], for though we are not responsible for the words of Scripture, yet we shall have to render an account for the sense we have assigned to them (Schaff 1885f:258; New Advent 2017a).<sup>26</sup>

### 3. MARTIN LUTHER

Should *Sola Scriptura* have been a “battle cry” or a “great slogan” of Luther,<sup>27</sup> one would expect him to use it in his 95 theses. When perusing these theses, one finds that he used the term “Scripture” only once and not even connected to *sola* (thesis 18) (Waugh 2017:2). However, Luther, who is credited with the commencement of the Reformation (Goeman 2017:5-16), used the *idea* of the term abundantly. For him, the focal point of his life and research was “Christum treibet” (*what pushed Christ* – best formulated in his *Solus Christus*; Luther 1931:385; Wengert 2013:vii). In his *Vorrede auf die Episteln S. Jakobi und Judä*, Luther (1931:385) stated:

For it is the duty of a true apostle to preach of the passion and resurrection and work of Christ, and thus lay the foundation of faith, as he himself says in John 15, “You shall bear witness of me”. All the genuine sacred books agree in this, that all of them preach Christ and inculcate [*treiben*] him. That is the true test, by which to judge all books, when we see whether they inculcate Christ or not, since all the Scriptures show us Christ (Rm 3), and Paul will know nothing but Christ (1 Cor 15).

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25 Original text in Migne (1857g:529).

26 Original text in Migne (1845:111-112).

27 Even close to his death, where one would expect him to convey the most important things in his mind, Luther stated: “If God wants to take me away this very hour or tomorrow, this is what I will leave behind: That I want to acknowledge Christ as my Lord, and I do this *non solum facio ex scriptura* (not only of Scripture) but also out of experience, because the Name of Christ has often helped me where no one else was able to help” (Luther 1912, Vol. 1:240).

What does not teach Christ is not apostolic, even though Peter or Paul taught it; again, what preaches Christ would be apostolic, even though Judas, Annas, Pilate, and Herod preached it.

For Luther, it was, in fact, a Christological principle.<sup>28</sup> This articulation does not only drive Scripture *per se*, but also one's ministry, and moreover, the entire church (Wengert 2013:11). God's word would not be his word when locked inside the Bible, but it becomes God's word when it is preached or proclaimed (Luther 1910:48; 1907:5).

According to Wengert (2013:16), a close look at Luther's work indicates that he used the term *Sola Scriptura* rather sparingly, not more than 20 times in all his documents. However, Wengert only supplies ten references, while the authors of this article managed to find another three. These are given in chronological order.

- Two instances – against Cardinal Cajetan (1518) (Luther 1883:222-223) and Erasmus of Rotterdam (1524) – were references to their debate with him and were, therefore, not his words (Wengert 2013:16).<sup>29</sup>
- In 1518, in his *Defense and explanation of all the articles* (Pelikan & Lehmann 1955:11), Luther stated: *Scripture alone* is the true lord and master of all writings and teaching on earth. If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for? (emphasis added).
- In his *Proposition Thirteen* in 1519, in a debate against Von Eck who supplied 12 theses against Luther, the latter added his thirteenth thesis, referring to the papal authority, ending with: "So that it would not appear that I am discussing *Scripture alone*" (Luther 1884:227; emphasis added).
- Come 1520, Luther used the term in his *Open letter to the Christian nobility* (*Reform* Part 3.25): "[T]he *Scriptures alone* are our vineyard in which we ought to work and toil" (Luther 1520; emphasis added).
- In 1520, in his *Assertion of all articles*, aimed at the papal bull of communication, Luther argued: I do not wish to be considered more learned than all, but I wish for *Scripture alone* to reign. Nor do I wish it to be interpreted by my spirit or that of any other human beings, but I wish it to be understood through itself and by its own spirit (Luther 1897a:98; emphasis added).

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28 At the hand of Luther, Kooiman (1961:42) integrates all the solas, except *soli Deo gloria*, in one, stating: "*Sola scriptura* (scripture alone) is the same as *solus Christus* (Christ alone), and that is again the same as *sola gratia* (grace alone) and *sola fide* (faith alone)", also giving it a very Christological colour.

29 Not one of the references given by Wengert on Erasmus could be verified and are, therefore, not noted.

- In 1522, Luther attacked King Henry VIII, referring to his time under the papacy, stating: “I was content to expurgate the *Scriptures alone*” (Luther 1907:186-187; emphasis added).
- Still in 1522, Luther wrote a preface to the annotations of Philip Melancthon on Romans, as well as 1 and 2 Corinthians, in which he attacked Melancthon, because the latter argued that Scripture can be read without commentaries, stating: “You say, ‘*Scripture alone* must be read without commentaries’” (Luther 1907:310; emphasis added). According to Wengert (2013:17), “Luther had no place in his vocabulary for a reading of Scripture that excluded commentary”.
- In 1525, Luther used the term in his *De Servo Arbitrio* (Discussion: 2<sup>nd</sup> part, Sec. 78) stating: *It is, therefore, a settled determination with me, not to argue upon the authority of any teacher whatever, but upon that of the Scriptures alone* (Luther 1525; O’Bannon 1931:148; emphasis added).
- In 1526, he used the term *sola lectio Scripturarum* (*the sole readings of the Scriptures*) in an attack on the papists who constructed their doctrines on Scripture alone (Luther 1897b:177).
- In 1526-1527, Luther made the following remark in his lectures: “It is very rare that there are pure teachers in the church. *Scripture alone* is pure” (Luther 1898:745; emphasis added).
- In 1528, Luther attacked “false prophets” in the church (Wengert 2013:18), arguing that “*Scripture alone* must remain” (Luther 1903:287; emphasis added).
- In 1529, during a sermon where he preached on 1 Corinthians 15, Luther stated that “to remain in the *Scripture alone*, nourishes faith” (Luther 1904:331; emphasis added).

These instances do not always depict a positive view on *Sola Scriptura*, especially those used earlier in Luther’s life against Cardinal Cajetan, Erasmus of Rotterdam, Melancthon, and Von Eck. If one would have the courage to assign *Sola Scriptura* to Luther, noting his theology, it would be more appropriate to argue that he held the idea of *Sola Scriptura et fructus eius* (*Scripture alone and its fruits*) (Wengert 2013:18-19). For him, justification by faith alone was central (in imitation of the apostle Paul), as he wanted to see the

fruits of scriptural interpretation [because the] purity of Scripture had specifically to do with justification by faith as opposed to monastic vows (Wengert 2013:19, 18).

The interpretation of Scripture was very important for him, as the interpreter had to adhere to Scripture in order for others to see the fruits of their teaching.

When referring to the self-authentication of Scripture – very close to the authority of Scripture referred to in this article – Luther was adamant, at the hand of Philippians 4:13, that it is not a “precondition for faith, but a result of it ... It is God’s Word because it ‘does God’ to me” (Wengert 2013:8, 10; Forde 1990:2-8). For him, Scripture has to be its own interpreter “through itself and by its own spirit” (Luther 1897a:100). However, the role of the reader cannot be denied, because “human authority authorizes Scripture” (Wengert 2013:9). When viewing it this way, authority and interpretation are very close to each other:  $\hat{\text{I}}$  give authority to Scripture and  $\hat{\text{I}}$  interpret Scripture.<sup>30</sup>

Concerning the supreme authority of Scripture, the Reformers (with their idea of *Sola Scriptura*) did not exclude tradition. Luther and Calvin, for example, made ample use of the Church Fathers (Pelikan 1964:27-104; Lane 1981). However, Scripture remained “*the* theological resource, the others are very definitely subsidiary resources” (Lane 1994:313; original emphasis). Lane adds: “[T]he role of tradition was to convey the same apostolic teaching as Scripture, not to add to it” (Lane 1994:314). Trueman (2015) elaborates on this:

The very founding fathers of Protestantism were eclectic in how they related to previous theological tradition but relate to it they did.

Luther used the argument that Scripture remains “*the* theological resource” against the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Roman Church who argued through Von Eck ([1525] 1979:46) that “not everything has been clearly handed down in the Sacred Scriptures”, implying that Scripture had to be supplemented by some extra-Scriptural rituals and beliefs.

The above information clearly shows that Luther applied the idea/principle of *Sola Scriptura* in his arguments. For him, the authority of Scripture was above everything. This could be the reason why he did not break away from his church, even though he differed extensively from them on specific points.

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30 However, according to Sproul (2012), Luther maintained the contrary: “In the summer of 1519 the dramatic encounter between Luther and Johannes von Eck took place at Leipzig. In this exchange Eck elicited from Luther the admission of his belief that not only could the pope err, but church councils could and did err as well. It was at Leipzig that Luther made clear his assertion: Scripture alone is the ultimate, divine authority in all matters pertaining to religion ... For Luther the sola of sola Scriptura was inseparably related to the Scriptures’ unique inerrancy” (original emphasis). Sproul cannot be regarded as correct in light of the direct references of Luther to *Sola Scriptura* above.

#### 4. AUTHORITY AND INTERPRETATION DENOTING TO SOLA SCRIPTURA

As this article discusses two sides of *Sola Scriptura* – authority and interpretation – two statements by Luther are used as example to illustrate the closeness between the understanding of the two terms. Luther declared in 1533: “The Word of God is the greatest, most necessary, and most important thing in Christendom” (Plass 1959:913),<sup>31</sup> meaning that nobody/nothing has a higher *authority* than Scripture. Oberman ([1982] 1992:204) refers to this declaration: “What is new in Luther, is the notion of absolute obedience to the Scriptures against any authorities.” This declaration was made against Sylvester Prierias of the Roman Church who wrote a response to Luther’s 95 theses:

He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures, too, draw their strength and authority, is a heretic (Oberman [1982] 1992:193).

Luther has clearly set the authority of Scripture above that of the Pope. In addition, in his *Open letter to the Christian nobility* (the second wall) in 1520, Luther explicitly stated: “according to our interpretation of the Scriptures, which rests on faith”. This is much in line with what Piper (2012:2) argues nearly 500 years later:

A large and central part of our work is to wrestle God’s meaning from a Book, and proclaim it in the power of the Holy Spirit

– this is an indication of interpretation, the pastor’s interpretation – this can be called “positive interpretation”. There is also a “negative interpretation” or “selfish interpretation”, as Lyman Beecher, a German lecturer, once remarked in his class: “Scholars of every denomination come to the Bible to find their own doctrines taught there, and each finds what he (*sic*) seeks” (Smith 1912:235-236). This coincides with what someone (identity unknown<sup>32</sup>) wrote in a Bible in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: “Hic liber est in quo sua quaerit dogmata quisque, invenit et partier dogmata quisque sua.”<sup>33</sup>

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31 Years later, John Wesley confirmed this: “In all cases the church is to be judged by the Scripture, not the Scripture by the church” (Rack [1984] 2011:142).

32 Although the identity of the person is unknown, some ascribe these words to a Protestant theologian, Samuel Werenfels, who lived in the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century (New Advent 2017b). These lines were most probably part of a song sung during that time. Lane (1994:315) calls it “an ancient ditty”.

33 This is the book in which everyone looks for his (*sic*) own convictions; and everyone likewise finds his (*sic*) own convictions.

Newman (1850:33) refers to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Anglo-Irish preacher, J.N. Darby: “[H]e only wanted men ‘to submit their understanding to God’, that is, to the Bible, that is, to his interpretation” (original emphasis). This shows us that there is a big difference between a “positive” and a “negative” interpretation concerning *Sola Scriptura*. When considering the traditional Afrikaans-speaking Reformed Churches in South Africa, the question can be asked whether their interpretation of this conviction was/is positive or negative.

## 5. ONE CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA BECOMES MORE

The first White settlers arriving in the Cape in 1652 brought the Calvinistic Reformed Church from The Netherlands with them (Giliomee 2003:5). This church was, in fact, the only church permitted by the government until 1804,<sup>34</sup> when governor De Mist lifted this restriction. The Great Trek took place between 1834 and 1838. In February 1852, the Volksraad in Potchefstroom officially broke their ties with the church in the Cape (Schutte 1943:31; Pont 1970:25) and called themselves the Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk van Afrika (NHKA). The latter retained both the Calvinistic confession and the dogma/ta of the (mainly English) church in the Cape. Politics and the English Methodist theology – breaking free from the English hegemony in the Cape – were the reasons for this schism (Schutte 1943:31). In 1854, the Lydenburg congregation decided to rather become part of the Cape church and synod (Schutte 1943:32), because the preacher in Potchefstroom, Dirk van der Hoff, was too liberal (Van der Watt 1980:178). Only five years later, in 1859, another schism took place with the formation of the Reformed Church (RC) in the ZAR. The reason for this split was their unease with the hymns being sung in the NHKA (Kruger 1957:209). Ten years later, in 1869, the RC declared the NHKA a false and corrupted church (Pont 1970:43), “in order to be recognised by the church in [T]he Netherlands” (Oliver 2011:6). In 1866, a group in the ZAR under the preacher, Frans Lion Cachet, decided to form the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (Dutch Reformed Church [DRC]) and concurred with the RC that the NHKA was a false institution (Cachet 1866:31). Their reason was based on “[d]isunity and strife among the preachers in the ZAR” (Oliver 2011:6).

In 1885, after the successful First Anglo-Boer War, the DRC and the NHKA decided to unite the two church groups. From the launch of the union, there was infighting and uncertainty about many aspects of the union, leading to its split in a court case in 1888 (Van der Watt 1980:176-182).<sup>35</sup>

34 This is despite the fact that the Lords Seventeen gave the Lutheran church their own building in the Cape in 1779 (Otterman 1995:12).

35 According to Tolmay (2014:1), it was 1892.

The number of these churches did not officially increase until, in 1987, the Afrikaanse Protestantse Kerk (APK) broke away from, mainly, the DRC (SAHO 2014), due to, *inter alia*, the DRC's publication of *Kerk en Samelewing* (Church and Society), in which the DRC argued that people of different cultures should worship together (Algemene Sinode van die Ned Geref Kerk 1986:18-40). In 2011, the Geloofsbond van Hervormde Gemeentes (GHG) split the NHKA almost in half as, *inter alia*, they regard the preachers in the NHKA as liberal-minded (GHG 2019). They viewed themselves as the real Hervormers ("steeds Hervormers" – GHG 2019) and even retained the emblem of the NHKA.<sup>36</sup>

During 1939, the three churches established an Inter-Church Commission<sup>37</sup> without any legislative powers. From its inception, the RC stipulated that they would not be bound by any decisions made by the Commission. The NHKA did not even attend the launch of this Commission and only started to participate at the third meeting (Van der Watt 1987:144). In 1983, the Commission stated that they would aim to unite the three churches (Van der Watt 1987:155). However, according to the RC, the Commission decided, in the 1990s, that church unity was not viable. They then started to focus on collaboration rather than church unity (Gereformeerde Kerke 2009:154). The Commission changed its name in 2004, but not its focus, becoming a Council.<sup>38</sup>

The sad point is that all the traditional Afrikaans-speaking Reformed Churches adhere to the conviction of *Sola Scriptura*, while the reasons for them splitting with each other had nothing to do with the *authority* of the Bible, not even with the *interpretation* thereof. To form a new church on the basis of politics or language (NHKA), of one preacher in the church being too liberal (Lydenburg), an unease with the hymns being sung in the church (RC), disunity and strife among the preachers (DRC in the ZAR), because people of different cultures should not worship together (APK), or because the preachers in a church are too liberal-minded (GHG), are all forms of heresy in itself. To fall back on the conviction of *Sola Scriptura* after a schism took place on non-Biblical grounds or arguments could also be regarded as a form of heresy.

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36 Their conviction is that "ons nie van die NHKA wil wegskeur nie" (we do not want to part from the NHKA – GHG 2019).

37 The name of this commission changed twice. Their first name was "Interkerklike Kommissie" (1939), then "Tussenkerklike Kommissie" (1955) (both can be translated with interdenominational commission), which became the Tussenkerklike Raad (interdenominational council/board) in 2004 (Tolmay 2014:2).

38 Interestingly, the year 1998 saw the launching of the Conventus of Reformed churches, to which 15 reformed churches belong (Tolmay 2014:3). The basis of the Conventus is collaboration and not unity (Tolmay 2014:4).

Another sad point is the fact that, after so many years, these Reformed Churches could not find a way of uniting as one church.<sup>39</sup> There is not even a visual unity between the Afrikaans churches and their Black/Coloured counterparts (the so-called missionary churches), except for the RC. All these churches have the same creeds and dogma/ta and all of them base themselves on *Sola Scriptura* as the supreme *authority*, but clearly differ on their *interpretation* of the term. This corresponds to the above argument of positive and negative interpretation, depicting the churches' interpretation as negative – back to Darby's argument earlier.

## 6. CONCLUSION

During the era of the Church Fathers, one was either part of the church or not. Even if a person or a group was devoted followers of God, but their interpretation of Scripture was against that of the church, they would be stigmatised as heretics (Isichei 1995:21-22; Schaff 1885p:562). None of the heretic movements during the Early Church Era was ever regarded as another church. Although many groups interpreted the idea or principle of *Sola Scriptura* differently, the church remained one. However, Luther stood up against this same church with his 95 theses and was anathematised from the pulpit by Tecelius (Johnson 1795:67). This opened the door for the Reformation. His example, however, superseded that of his followers, as he remained a member of his church till his death, while they started with a new and separate movement (Hoyer 1946:81-88).

One wonders if Luther's actions did not cause a "too easy" breakaway from the Catholic Church for his followers, opening the door for all the other schisms to follow. Although, in his case, (the idea and principle of) *Sola Scriptura* could, to some extent, be regarded as justifiable for the break from the Catholic Church, there is, within the South African context, no justification for the existence of all the traditional Afrikaans-speaking Reformed Churches.

The farce that we have in South Africa with all the traditional Afrikaans-speaking Reformed Churches is clearly against the direction in which the Church Fathers and Luther interpreted *Sola Scriptura*. Apparently, the term *Sola Scriptura* is used without these churches thinking clearly on what they articulate with the term. It is obvious that *Sola Scriptura* in these churches

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39 Already in 1986, the DRC stated in one of their documents, *Kerk en Samelewing*: "The separate existence of the three Afrikaans churches is in principle not justifiable. They basically have the same creed, church government, and liturgy; they co-exist in the same country and fulfil their mission within the same people; their ministerial requirements are exactly the same. There is therefore no determining reason why these churches cannot form a unity." (personal translation) (Algemene Sinode van die Ned Geref Kerk 1986:44). Many words – no action.

acts as a dividing factor and not a uniting one. As all of these churches have the same creeds and dogma/ta and boast that they are adhering to *Sola Scriptura*, they recognise the first part of this conviction, as depicted in this article, as being the authority of Scripture, but the second part – their (negative) interpretation of Scripture (and maybe a few other determinants) – caused the schism between them, and the fact that they will probably never become one church.

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Martin Luther

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