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DO WE REALLY BELIEVE IN SOLA SCRIPTURA? ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS, THEOLOGY, AND PREACHING

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Last year marked the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation. Although scholars will continue to debate where each of the Reformers got it right and where they did not, the vast majority affirm that with what later became known as the five *solas* of the Reformation, they not only got it dead right, but they also helped to set the church on a path toward once again living for the glory of God and focusing on the advance of the gospel. Of the five *solas*,[1] the most foundational is *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone"), the so-called "formal principle" of the Reformation, which serves as the necessary source for all the other *solas*. Only a commitment to the Bible as the sole infallible and authoritative rule of faith and practice can keep the church theologically and practically on track.[2]

I spent eleven years living on the prairies of Saskatchewan. It is so flat in Saskatchewan that there is a long list of jokes you inevitably hear when you move there. The day after we moved in I was talking to my new neighbor and he solemnly told me, "My dog ran away three days ago." "I'm sorry," I responded. "You must be worried!" "Oh, no," he said with a smile, "I can still see him. He's only 20 miles away." I wonder if that has become the evangelical attitude toward *sola Scriptura*, though we would be

1. The five *solas* are the Latin expressions: *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone"), *sola gratia* ("grace alone"), *sola fide* ("faith alone"), *solus Christus* ("through Christ alone"), and *soli Deo Gloria* ("for God's glory alone").

2. Although a biblical defense of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is beyond the scope of this article, this doctrine flows naturally out of 2 Tim 3:16–17, which highlights both the source of Scripture (God himself) and the sufficiency of Scripture (it equips believers for *every* good work).

slow to admit it. Most evangelicals would agree that there are all sorts of agenda-driven approaches to reading Scripture that make the agenda king and Scripture servant. "Fortunately," we evangelicals tell ourselves, "we have not embraced such aberrations. We still sign the ETS doctrinal basis every year."[3] In fact, evangelicals are, by definition, staunchly committed to Scripture.

I want to suggest, though, that even among Christians who are outwardly deeply committed to Scripture there has been a subtle move away from *sola Scriptura*, and with it an increasing lack of concern for Greek exegesis. Indeed, I would suggest that the shift away from a strong focus on biblical languages in seminary education has flowed out of, in part, a weakening commitment to *sola Scriptura*. So, if those who most loudly embrace what the Reformation stood for have unwittingly let *sola Scriptura* run away across the prairie of our belief system, with a commitment to Greek exegesis trailing behind it, where does that leave us? What is the solution?

To find a solution, we have to first recognize that we have a problem. To assist in that endeavor I want to consider how a declining commitment to Greek exegesis and *sola Scriptura* has impacted our English Bible translations, our popular theology, and our preaching, perhaps in ways that we have not realized.

Sola Scriptura and Bible Translations

For much of the history of the English-speaking church, there have been those who believed that they possessed the *ultimate* translation of the Bible. For many years, that translation was the KJV.[4] In recent decades, it has been the NIV for many in North America; and more recently it has become the ESV, particularly for many of those in the Reformed camp. Most readers of the ESV choose it, in part, because they have been told that it is

3. All members of ETS must sign its "doctrinal basis" each year: "The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory."

4. See, e.g., Carson, *The King James Version Debate*.

more "literal." And they believe that more literal—which is supposed to mean somehow closer to the Greek—must mean more reliable.[5] I do not want to get into what makes a translation a good translation. And my point is not to bash the ESV or the NIV or any other translation (though some may deserve it). The majority of the time the ESV and NIV, for example, accurately capture the sense of the Greek original. As Christian leaders, pastors, and scholars, however, we have a responsibility, if we believe in *sola Scriptura*, to make sure that we are not missing part of what the Bible is actually saying. Second Timothy 2:15 tells us, "Do your best (σπουδάζω) to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." The Greek verb σπουδάζω carries a connotation of urgency. Do we feel that urgency as those who teach and preach God's Word? Do we recognize that simply relying on our favorite translation when we study the Bible, whether we are reading a less literal version like the NIV or an "essentially literal" version like the ESV, can cause us to miss something important in God's Word?

I recently finished a writing project on Revelation,[6] in which I attempt to show, among other things, that to understand Revelation we must recognize that much of its message is developed through the repetition of language. I had noticed this repetition reading Revelation in Greek and was dismayed to see that my favorite Bible translations were often inconsistent in translating this language, making it easy to miss, or even impossible to see some of what God is saying through this wonderful book. For example, the book of Revelation uses the verb νικάω, which can be legitimately translated, "be victorious," "conquer," or "overcome," seventeen times. It stands out in the letters to the seven churches, especially because each of the promises that Jesus gives to these churches starts with the same expression:

> "To the one who conquers (νικάω) I will grant to eat of the tree of life . . . " (2:7)

5. For a brief, helpful critique of the "literal is better" myth, see Decker, "Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation," 35.

6. Culy, *The Book of Revelation*.

> "The one who conquers (νικάω) will not be hurt by the second death" (2:11).
> "To the one who conquers (νικάω) I will give some of the hidden manna . . . " (2:17)
> "The one who conquers (νικάω) and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations . . . " (2:26)
> "The one who conquers (νικάω) will be clothed thus in white garments . . . " (3:5)
> "The one who conquers (νικάω), I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God" (3:12).
> "The one who conquers (νικάω), I will grant him to sit with me on my throne . . . " (3:21)

Seven times Jesus repeats, "the one who conquers," using the verb νικάω, and he offers those who conquer a wonderful promise. By the end of Rev 3 our hearts are left—or they are *supposed* to be left—crying out: "How do I become 'one who conquers'?" The rest of Revelation helps answer that question; and it does so, in part, through using the exact same language repeatedly:

> And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had *conquered* (νικάω) the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands (15:2).

In Rev 15:2, which builds on the vision of the beast in Rev 13, we are reminded that to be "one who conquers" we must reject the beast and refuse to worship his image or take his number. Such conquerors will dwell in God's presence. Jesus' promises are then reinforced again in 21:7 using the same language:

> The one who *conquers* (νικάω) will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son (21:7).

Here, we see those who conquer enjoying the new heaven and the new earth in the presence of God. More than that, this passage makes it clear that access to all that God promises in Revelation is restricted to those who "conquer."[7] Elsewhere, the same

7. Ibid., 246–47.

"conquering" language is used in ways that help reinforce how to conquer:

> And one of the elders said to me, 'Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has *conquered* (νικάω), so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals' (5:5).

In the context of Rev 5, it is clear that Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, who is revealed as a "Lamb standing, as though it had been slain" (5:6), conquered through his radical obedience to the Father, by becoming "obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). And that tells us something important about how we get to be those who "conquer." This is reinforced through the use of the same language in 12:11:

> And they have *conquered* (νικάω) him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death (12:11).

Here, it is clear that Jesus' faithful followers conquer not simply through the atoning blood of Jesus—by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone—but also through being Jesus' faithful witnesses even in the face of spilling their own blood—by becoming "obedient to the point of death," to use language from Phil 2. This use of overcoming language in Revelation reminds us that

> When Jesus says, 'Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life' (Rev 2:10), he actually means it. Jesus knows exactly how hard life will be for his followers. He knows that the emissary of Satan himself is coming, and this beast will rob them of their ability to make a living (13:17) and kill anyone who refuses to worship him (13:15); but this is still no excuse for compromise. The only way to overcome the beast is to refuse to love your life 'even unto death' (12:11).[8]

Finally, we find in Rev 17 one more implicit exhortation to be among those who conquer and one final indication of what conquerors look like:

8. Ibid., 247.

> They will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer (νικάω) them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful (17:14).

In this passage, it is clear that Jesus not only will conquer his enemies in the end, but when he does those who have been called and chosen by him will share in that conquest. Being called and chosen, however, is not sufficient to share in this blessing. To be one who conquers with Jesus one must be found faithful. There is no room for compromise.

Being "one who conquers" is one of the most important themes in Revelation. And it is a theme that is developed primarily through repeating the verb νικάω over and over again. Unfortunately, when we look at the NIV, for example, we find that of the seventeen uses of the verb νικάω, it is translated "victorious" ten times (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21 [2x]; 15:2; 21:7), but in the other seven places the translators have used "overpower" (11:7), "conquer" (6:2; 13:7) or "triumph" (5:5; 12:11; 17:14). This inconsistency makes it easy to miss part of what God is saying through having John repeatedly use the same word. Indeed, the final three passages (5:5; 12:11; 17:14) are critical for understanding what it means to be one who "conquers."

"Oh," you might say, "that's exactly why I use the ESV or NASB or NRSV instead of the NIV!" Unfortunately, all of these versions frequently show a lack of consistency as well. Let's consider the ESV. Remember that much of the message of Revelation is communicated through the repetition of language. For example, Jesus says to the church in Sardis:

> Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled (μολύνω) their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy (3:4, ESV).

The verb μολύνω is used only two other times in the entire NT, with one of those coming in 14:4 to describe the purity of the 144,000:

> It is these who have not defiled (μολύνω) themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes (14:4, ESV).

Once we recognize that Revelation is "a literary masterpiece whose overall force can only be grasped when it is read as a unified whole in light of its myriad of intratextual connections, i.e., parallel language and themes within Rev 1–22,"[9] there can be no question that God moved John to use the same term in 14:4 as in 3:4 to help Christians in Sardis grapple with the importance of not being defiled. Some Christians in Sardis had a serious problem. They had "defiled" their clothing (a metaphor for sin). And Jesus wanted to remind them that it is those, and only those, who have not "defiled" themselves who will live in the Lamb's presence.[10] So, he calls them to conquer by repenting, so that he can re-clothe them in white garments and they can enjoy the blessings of his coming kingdom.

Revelation regularly does this sort of thing through the repetition of language, but it is often missed in our English translations because of lack of consistency. In this case, the NASB, NRSV, NET, CEB, and the MEV all also translate the same word differently in these two passages.

We find a similar issue in the book of Jude, where the verb τηρέω ("keep") is used five times in a mere 25 verses, including twice in v. 6, to develop a theme that shapes the overall meaning of the book. Look, though, at how the ESV translates these verses:

> To those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept (τηρέω) for Jesus Christ . . . (Jude 1, ESV)

9. Ibid., 3: "Revelation's message is integrally tied up in its carefully crafted inner-connections."

10. The superficially offensive language in 14:4 likely draws on important traditions from the life of Israel to help drive home the overall point of Revelation: "one of Jesus' primary points in portraying the 144,000 as those who 'have not defiled themselves with women' was to characterize them as the antithesis of the Israelites at Peor. Faced with the temptation to assimilate to the nations around them and indulge in sexual immorality and idolatry, the Israelites failed miserably. The same will not be true of the 144,000. Their lives will be marked by absolute purity and devotion to Jesus." Ibid., 165. For a fuller discussion of the issues in Rev 14:4, see ibid., 163–66.

> And the angels who did not stay within (τηρέω) their own position of authority, but left their proper dwelling, he has kept (τηρέω) in eternal chains under gloomy darkness until the judgment of the great day (Jude 6, ESV).
>
> for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved (τηρέω) forever (Jude 13, ESV).
>
> keep (τηρέω) yourselves in the love of God (Jude 21, ESV).

Jude urges us to *keep* ourselves in right relationship with God in part by reminding us that God is *keeping* us and that those who have not *kept* God's Word are being *kept* for judgment. It is highly unlikely that English readers of the ESV are going to see what Jude was doing by repeatedly using the verb τηρέω. The NRSV, NASB, NET, CSB, CEB also use a different translation of τηρέω in v. 13.[11]

So, what does all of this have to do with *sola Scriptura*? I would suggest that *sola Scriptura* not only points us to the unique authority of God's Word but also to the unique importance of every word that is found in Scripture. We urgently need to "do our best" (σπουδάζω) to make sure that we are getting the whole message that God has revealed in his Word. We cannot be satisfied simply basing our sermon or lecture off of our favorite translation. We have to go *ad fontes* ("back to the sources") and get into the Greek text. A commitment to *sola Scriptura* demands this.

Sola Scriptura and Theology

It is not only our comfortable reliance on our English translations, however, that can show our lack of commitment to *sola Scriptura* and Greek exegesis; it is also our theology. Remember, the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* was a response to the practice of

11. In some cases, the ESV and other translations translate the same Greek word in more than one way in a single verse, even though the term seems to carry the same sense in both occurrences: "And for their sake I consecrate (ἁγιάζω) myself, that they also may be sanctified (ἁγιάζω) in truth" (John 17:19, ESV).

putting tradition over Scripture, or adding tradition to Scripture as an authority. I suspect that most readers of this journal reject the traditions that led to the poor theology in Roman Catholicism at the time of the Reformation. What many of us do not recognize, however, is that we have often simply replaced Roman Catholic traditions with new traditions of our own. And these new traditions often drive our faith and practice more than Scripture itself.

For example, in certain evangelical circles, it is very common to hear people stressing the need for gospel-centered preaching, gospel-centered parenting, gospel-centered youth ministry, gospel-centered discipleship, gospel-centered counseling, gospel-centered communities, gospel-centered worship, and so on. We clearly have nothing without the gospel. We are nothing without the gospel. Where, though, in Scripture—remember *sola Scriptura*—do we get the idea that all of these things should be gospel-centered? In fact, does not a careful reading of Scripture, for example, lead to the conclusion that no worship can be biblical worship that is not God-centered worship? I am not saying that everything in the conversations about being gospel-centered is ill-conceived. What I am suggesting is that if we truly embrace *sola Scriptura*, then perhaps we need to ask ourselves more consistently if this year's theological trends flow out of careful Greek exegesis or simply represent the latest good-sounding human-made traditions.

Our challenges, however, do not end with the need to go back to Scripture before jumping on the bandwagon of the latest evangelical fads. I would suggest that even in our primary theological commitments, we may have allowed *sola Scriptura* to run off across the prairie of our belief system. I have spent my entire adult life working in the field of linguistics, the study of how languages work. Linguists study language data, whether from the sound system or grammar of a language, and then write rules to account for that data. Linguistic analysis is very much like solving a complex math problem. If the rules do not explain all of the data, the rules have to be adjusted or abandoned. When you finally crack the code and find rules that work, it is incredibly satisfying. For some of us, when we were introduced to Reformed

theology, we found that same satisfaction at last. Everything fit together into a nice, neat, logical package. The five points of Calvinism made sense. They represent an intellectually satisfying theological system, and that has led many to preach the "doctrines of grace" from the rooftops.

There is a serious problem with this, however. And I use the word "serious" intentionally because much is at stake. I believe *sola Scriptura* is at stake. Whether we call them the "five points of Calvinism" or the "doctrines of grace," by using such language we are setting these doctrines apart as key doctrines of our faith. We are telling people that these are doctrines that are critical to embrace and to promulgate. They are *essential* to biblical faith.

Why is that problematic? Quite simply, it is problematic because the Scriptures—remember *sola Scriptura*—do not elevate all five of these doctrines to the level of foundational doctrines of the faith. The Scripture is emphatic from Genesis to Revelation that mankind is totally depraved; Rom 1–3 drives that point home with hurricane force.[12] The Scriptures regularly come back to the fact that God saves those whom he has unconditionally elected; in Rom 9 God smacks us in the face with that doctrine. On the other hand, although I cannot conceive of how Jesus' atoning death could possibly apply to anyone other than the elect, "limited atonement" is not a doctrine that God was concerned to emphasize in Scripture. I am convinced that no one doing careful Greek exegesis of the New Testament will ever end up putting that doctrine in the top fifty doctrines that the New Testament emphasizes.

Sola Scriptura is all about guarding against replacing the Scriptures with the traditions of men. Greek exegesis is all about determining what Scripture actually says so that our lives and ministries can be shaped by God's Word rather than by our own traditions. And careful Greek exegesis and a tenacious commitment to *sola Scriptura* will drive us not only to avoid focusing our teaching and other forms of ministry on trendy new

12. Examining all of the details of this or any other doctrine against Scripture is beyond the scope of this article.

traditions like "gospel-centered worship," but will also push us to avoid emphasizing what Scripture does not emphasize. For, to do so would put us out of step with Scripture. Instead, *sola Scriptura*, if we embrace it, is going to lead us to wave a red flag whenever we see any theological system, any theological agenda, or any ministry trend supplanting the Scriptures as our sole rule of faith and practice. After all, we do not want to hear Jesus say to us, as he said to the Pharisees in Mark 7:9: "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!"

Sola Scriptura and Preaching

Finally, let me briefly address how a weakening commitment to *sola Scriptura* and Greek exegesis has impacted our preaching. I would hope that we are all committed to letting the text of Scripture set the agenda for what we preach. Part of the reason for showing examples from the NIV and ESV was to demonstrate that if we simply rely on our favorite English translation to prepare a sermon—especially a single translation—we may well miss at least part of the agenda of the passage, and the result will be a sermon that is not fully text-driven. But there is another, perhaps more foundational issue we need to consider related to preaching: Does our *approach* to sermon preparation and preaching reflect our commitment to *sola Scriptura*?

Perhaps the most popular approach to expository preaching today is the approach that involves identifying the main idea or the "big idea" in a passage and then building your sermon around that.[13] Years ago, a good friend of mine would often call me on Friday afternoons and say something like, "Please pray for me. I'm really wrestling to discover the big idea in the passage I'll be preaching on Sunday. I feel like it's just beyond my grasp!" Although I always sympathized with my friend's plight, his struggle begged the question of why anyone should feel obligated to identify a single "big idea" in a sermon text.

13. See, e.g., Robinson, *Expository Preaching*; Motyer, *Preaching*, 61–62.

Thinking that every text has one main idea has absolutely nothing to do with *sola Scriptura* or Greek exegesis, and it also defies common sense.[14] Many of us will recall that the same thinking was applied to interpreting parables for many years. The idea that each parable teaches one main point, however, has been shown by Craig Blomberg and others to be fundamentally flawed.[15] The same is true of the belief that each passage has one main point. Biblical passages that have clear linguistic boundaries marking the beginning and the end will often have two, three, four, or even more major ideas communicated through them.

Most advocates of expository preaching, of course, do not claim that every text has a single main idea. Rather, they recommend—likely more strongly than they should—that a good sermon must be organized around a single main idea. Organizing a sermon around a single main idea or theme can be quite

14. I am not attempting to demean what is typically known as expository preaching or those who promote it. Indeed, the emphasis on expository preaching has been driven, in large part, by a commitment to *sola Scriptura*: "Expository preaching . . . emerges not merely as a type of sermon—one among many—but as the theological outgrowth of a high view of inspiration. Expository preaching then originates as a philosophy rather than a method." Robinson, "Homiletics and Hermeneutics," 803. I enthusiastically embrace expository preaching. In this article, however, I am concerned with one common aspect of homiletical *method* that cannot be sustained either exegetically or linguistically. Robinson (*Expository Preaching*, 33–36) argues that it is critical to have a single unifying theme for a sermon to be effective. Although Robinson's discussion at this point is driven by homiletical concerns—concerns with which I would tend to agree generally—he later goes on to suggest that each passage can be boiled down to a single *exegetical* idea (see, e.g., *Expository Preaching*, 66–68; see also "Better Big Ideas," 353–57). This perspective is also reflected in his definition: "Expository preaching is the communication of *a biblical concept*, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context" (*Expository Preaching*, 20, emphasis added). This emphasis on isolating a singular concept that stands at the heart of each passage may be good homiletical practice much of the time, but goes beyond *sola Scriptura* and has neither an exegetical nor linguistic basis.

15. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*; Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*.

effective, depending on the cultural context where the sermon will be delivered. We must guard, however, against two potential pitfalls: (1) Assuming that "big idea" sermons are always the most effective; and (2) allowing a commitment to big idea preaching to lead us to assume wrongly that a biblical text actually only has one main idea.[16] The Scriptures teach us neither. The former is a tradition of men; the latter appears to be a misconceived inference drawn from the former. If we embrace either as homiletical dogma, I would suggest that we run the very real risk of getting out of step with *sola Scriptura*, because when we try to boil a passage down to one main idea we will often miss other important aspects of the message of that passage. And when that happens, we inevitably fail to proclaim the whole counsel of God.

The same is true of the logical-sounding, but misguided notion that the main point of a passage will be communicated through the main verb. This leads many preachers to look at main clauses rather than subordinate clauses when they look for the main point or points of their sermon. To this, if we embrace *sola Scriptura*, we might simply ask: Why? Those trained in Greek exegesis should know that main points are communicated in a variety of ways, including quite commonly through the repetition of language or the clustering of language from a particular semantic domain. And such language is often found in subordinate clauses.

For example, 1 Pet 1:3–12 is a single clause in Greek, and it actually does not even have a main verb. The main clause ("Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ") is a verbless clause in Greek. There are a number of key points that are communicated in this passage through subordinate clauses. We find a strong focus on the incredible inheritance that we have through Christ, which is emphatically expressed by reminding us that it is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you" (v. 4). Similarly, the writer draws attention to the

16. Do not miss the point here. You may choose on homiletical grounds to organize your sermon around a single point, but that is very different from claiming that the passage, on exegetical grounds, has one main point.

brevity of this life and the imminency of the life to come through the use of the phrases, "salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (v. 5) and "now for a little while" (v. 6). These themes are important not only in this passage but throughout the letter; yet they are buried in subordinate clauses.

In recent decades, there has been a greater appreciation for the fact that meaning is communicated through discourse units, and this has rightly influenced approaches to preaching. Just as words have meaning in the context of phrases and sentences, so sentences have meaning in the context of larger discourse units (e.g., paragraphs). In the case of 1 Pet 1:3–12 a single, extended sentence makes up the discourse unit. To understand the parts we must read and interpret them in light of the whole structural unit. This is why most commentators analyze these verses as a unit.[17] Some commentaries, however, divide this one-sentence unit into smaller units, and provide homiletical suggestions for each unit,[18] perhaps due to a preconception that a preaching unit must have a single main point, or simply to make the text a more manageable size for a sermon. The problem with this is that the meaning of the passage is almost inevitably skewed when we analyze smaller portions of it in isolation. A commitment to *sola Scriptura* should drive us to expect Scripture to set the agenda for our sermons in part through the linguistic boundaries in the text, which serve to identify units of meaning. When we ignore such boundaries, even for the sake of finding a more manageable unit of text for a sermon, we run the risk of skewing our exegesis of the passage and thus preaching points from the text that are not actually prominent when the entire meaning unit is considered.

We find a similar construction in Eph 1:3–14, a single 202-word sentence in Greek, which also lacks a main verb. There are a number of key points that this passage makes, but one of them

17. See, e.g., Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 59–76; McKnight, *1 Peter*, 67–82; Dubis, *1 Peter*, 4–22.

18. See, e.g., Forbes, *1 Peter*, 17–21, 22–28, 29–35; Helm, *1 & 2 Peter and Jude*, 28–35, 36–44, 46 –53.

is made, or emphasized,[19] through the refrain "to the praise of his glory," which is expressed three times with the same words (εἰς ἔπαινον δόξης αὐτοῦ),[20] with the phrase in each case buried in various levels of subordinate clauses (vv. 6, 12, 14).[21] There is no question that a significant part of what this passage is teaching is communicated through this repeated phrase. Indeed, if the original readers went away from this passage with anything ringing in their ears, it would have been the phrase "to the praise of his glory." Through the use of this refrain, "Paul leads his readers to the conclusion that the only proper way to respond to the incredible favor and love God shows to his people is by rendering praise to him, magnifying his glory."[22] Careful students of the Word are going to recognize that meaning is conveyed in a variety of ways in any given passage, including through subordinate clauses as well as main clauses, and through repeated phrases like "to the praise of his glory."[23]

Finally, consider Rev 4–5. Whatever conclusion one reaches about the main points of these two chapters, which represent a single vision and thus single meaning unit, one thing is clear: This passage emphasizes the sovereignty of God. And that emphasis is established, in large part, through the repetition of the

19. The threefold refrain, "to the praise of his glory," supports the opening call to ascribe praise to God for what he has done ("Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," ESV). The point remains the same: To discover the central points that a passage teaches one must look beyond main clauses and main verbs.

20. In v. 6, the phrase is part of a larger expression: εἰς ἔπαινον δόξης τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ.

21. Larkin (*Ephesians*, 5) argues that the repeated phrase is used to conclude each of three subsections in this portion of Paul's letter, subsections that focus in turn on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; cf. Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 159; Thielman, *Ephesians*, 83.

22. Arnold, *Ephesians*, 84.

23. As O'Brien (*Ephesians*, 123) notes, "The eulogy of vv. 3–15 began with an outburst of praise as Paul blessed God for all the blessings he had showered on his people in the Lord Jesus Christ. The note of praise has been sustained throughout by means of the recurring refrain 'to the praise of his glory' (vv. 6, 12, 14)." The result, as Snodgrass (*Ephesians*, 45) suggests, is "one of the most impressive expressions of praise ever written."

term for "throne" (θρόνος), which occurs nineteen times in these chapters alone and forty-seven times in the book of Revelation overall. This verbal repetition is "clearly intended to remind God's people that it is God who is seated on the throne; he is reigning supreme; he is in control."[24] And to fully understand the significance of the revelation of God's sovereignty in Rev 4–5, one must read these chapters within the context of the broader message to each of the seven churches. Thus, for example,

> For Christians in Pergamum who were staying true to Jesus' name in the midst of incredible adversity, the reminder of who is on the throne would have been very comforting. Yes, they were living where Satan had *his* throne, but look at who is sitting on the Throne of thrones! The impressive nature of the acropolis at Pergamum and the superficially absolute power that the Roman governor had over the lives of people in Asia Minor paled in comparison to the picture of God and his throne in Rev 4–5. The powers that be may be arrayed against the people of God currently, but they ultimately had only temporary authority over a small patch of land in a world that God created and controls. It was only by God's will that these authorities even existed (4:11). Satan may be running the show in Pergamum—indeed, his control may well extend to the ends of the earth (1 John 5:19)—but that control is limited, derivative, and temporary. While God was currently allowing Satan to rage against his people, particularly in places like Pergamum, Satan's power was not absolute. It was power that God had allowed him to have for a time; but a day was soon coming when his power would be undone, and God's people—including those suffering in Pergamum, Satan's city—would reign with him on the earth (5:10). In short, Rev 4–5 repeatedly draw the attention of those living where Satan has his throne to the One who is sitting on the only throne that really matters.[25]

These examples serve to illustrate very briefly how *sola Scriptura* can or should impact how we determine what we preach on a particular passage. A commitment to "*sola Scriptura* preaching" will help guard us from falling into the trap of either expecting a single main point in a given passage or expecting the

24. Culy, *The Book of Revelation*, 68.
25. Ibid., 98.

main points of the passage to necessarily be stated with main verbs. If we are going to handle God's Word responsibly and preach the whole counsel of God, we dare not allow human traditions to keep us from careful Greek exegesis, which is critical for identifying prominent themes in a passage.

So where does that leave us? This article is not a call to abandon our English translations of the Bible, reject a particularly theological system, or denounce expository preaching. All three are rightly celebrated for their great strengths. We would do well, however, to reexamine our commitments and practice in these three areas if, in fact, we are truly committed to *sola Scriptura*. Relying on our English versions alone, making our theology the starting point for our exegesis rather than vice versa, or allowing our sermon preparation to be unduly driven by human-made traditions are all sure paths away from *sola Scriptura*, where the Word of God is the sole authoritative rule for both faith and practice. Genuine belief in *sola Scriptura* will always lead to a deep commitment to careful exegesis, exegesis that is not constrained by the limitations of our English versions or by our prior theological or homiletical commitments. The biblical doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is what fueled the Reformation. The question for us is: Does it still fuel our ministry and scholarship?

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