

The Shape of Sola Scriptura by Keith A. Mathison.
Canon Press, Moscow, Idaho. 2001.
Paperback, 364 pp. Reviewed by Johan D.Tangelder.

Contemporary Christianity is split into literally thousands of denominations. Millions of believers are convinced of multiple contradictory doctrines, and all of them claim to base their beliefs on the authority of Scripture alone. The world is supposed to be hearing the Church preach the Gospel of Christ, but instead it is hearing an endless cacophony of conflicting and contradictory assertions by those who claim to be the Church of Christ. Mathison rightly states that much of this divisiveness within the church rests within the different views of ecclesiastical authority. Therefore, the issue of the nature and authority of Scripture is not an abstract doctrinal debate relevant only to the turbulent sixteenth century Reformation, but poses increasingly serious consequences for the twenty-first century Church.

According to Mathison, the unique authority of Scripture must be continually repeated and affirmed for each generation of Christians. Because the Bible is inspired, or God-breathed, it is the very Word of the uniquely and authoritative God. Because of its inspiration, we can truly say what Scripture says, God says.

Mathison exposes the fundamental problem with the Scripture alone principle that exists within the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox concepts of Scripture and tradition. At this point in history they have rejected the Scripture alone doctrine. Their final authority now rests not in God's Word, but in the autonomy of the Church. Their claims of infallibility force them to ignore their own deviations from the ancient faith of the Church.

Mathison also chastises evangelicalism for its individualistic interpretation of the "sola Scriptura" doctrine. In evangelicalism it has resulted in the autonomy of the believer who has become a law unto himself. Scripture is therefore interpreted according to the conscience and reason of the individual. Everything is evaluated according to the final standard of the individual's opinion of what is and what is not Scriptural. In other words, the individual and not Scripture is the real authority.

Adherents of this view have not understood that "Scripture alone" doesn't mean "me alone." Mathison observes that the Bible nowhere gives any hint of wanting every individual believer to decide for himself and by himself what is and is not the true meaning of Scripture.

Unlike modern evangelicalism, the Reformers held a high view of the Church. They didn't reject the Church, nor the apostolic faith, nor the ecumenical creeds. Their desire was to remove the obvious abuses that had come to cripple the Church. Mathison points out that if the ecumenical creeds are rejected, we reject the possibility of defining Christianity's essential and authoritative doctrinal content. The Trinity then becomes simply another doctrinal opinion that the individual Christian is free to accept or reject depending on how it measures up to his interpretation of Scripture. The Reformers were convinced that the Church must be reformed not by being created from scratch, but by returning to her ancient beliefs and practices - including the belief about the Scripture alone principle. They believed that the Church is the pillar and ground of truth, the interpreter, teacher,

and proclaimer of God's Word. But it is the scriptural Word, which she proclaims that carries supreme authority. Apart from the Word of God, the Church is mute.

Mathison's work is an impressive defense of the classic Reformation doctrine of "Sola Scriptura" against the claims of Rome and Eastern Orthodoxy. His book is also an excellent, rigorous, scholarly, and orthodox Reformed antidote to individualistic, experiential, and non-creedal evangelicalism that clouds clear thinking about doctrinal truths.