

**PROCLAIM THE WONDERS GOD HAS DONE:
*SOLA SCRIPTURA***

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**We believe, teach, and confess that for the retention of the pure teaching concerning the righteousness of faith before God, it is particularly important to hold steadfastly to the *particulae exclusivae*....
—Formula of Concord, Epitome, III, 10¹**

As the five hundredth-anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation (October 31, 2017) brings the Luther Decade (2008–17) to its long-awaited culmination,² it is quite fitting that the Evangelical Lutheran Synod reflects on the three Latin *solae* (anglicized *solas*) “By Scripture Alone, By Grace Alone, and By Faith Alone” (*Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, et Sola Fide*). Even though these “Reformation Principles” (*Prinzipien der Reformation*) or the “Exclusive Particles” (*Ausschließlichkeitsformeln*) do not represent the sum totality of the Christian faith, they have long helped Lutherans confess Holy Scripture’s inner core. It is no less fitting that the faithful remnant of the Norwegian Synod also reflects upon the three *solas* in anticipation of the synod’s centennial next year. In the wake of the Election Controversy and the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America (1917), Justin A. Petersen, J. B. Unseth, and Christian Anderson once

¹ FC, Ep, III, 10 (BSELK 1238–39; BC 496). See also FC, SD, III, 36 (BSELK 1400–1403; BC 568–69) on the Pauline origin of the exclusive particles. *Die Bekenntnisschriften der Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche*, ed. Irene Dingel, Bastian Basse, Marion Bechtold-Mayer, Klaus Breuer, Johannes Hund, Robert Kolb, Rafael Kuhnert, Volker Leppin, Christian Peters, Adolf Martin Ritter, and Hans-Otto Schneider, 1st ed. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014); *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

² For an English overview of past Reformation celebrations (*Reformationsjubiläen*), see Thomas Albert Howard, *Remembering the Reformation: An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Protestantism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

proclaimed just how vital the solas were for making a faithful Christian confession at the twentieth-fifth anniversary of the reorganized synod (1943).³

History of *Sola Scriptura* in the Context of the Solas

Before this essay can proceed any further, one needs to understand the history of the oft-dubbed Reformation Principles. Unless this is clarified, their true significance will not be fully realized. It may come as a surprise to hear that the three Latin solas were not coined by Lutheranism. After explaining why these ecclesial terms or phrases aptly captured Pauline theology in his *Loci Theologici*, Martin Chemnitz (1522–86), a Formulator of the *Formula of Concord*, demonstrated that the early church fathers used the exclusive particles, and what is more, they often used them in their correct Biblical sense.⁴ However, the contemporary Tübingen church history professor Volker Leppin shows that the Latin solas can even be found in the theology of the High and Late Middle Ages.⁵ Thomas Bradwardine (ca. 1300–49), the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote, “Man is made righteous by faith alone apart from preceding works.”⁶ The greatest Scholastic and Dominican Friar Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) employed

³ Justin A. Petersen, J. B. Unseth, and Christian Anderson, “Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, and Sola Fide,” *Report of the Twenty-sixth Regular Convention of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church* 43 (1943): 18–41.

⁴ Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*. ed. Polykarp Leyser the Elder (Frankfurt and Wittenberg: Mevius and Schumacher, 1653), 2:304–9; Martin Chemnitz, *Chemnitz’s Works*, trans. Fred Kramer, Luther Poellet, Georg Williams, J. A. O. Preus, Matthew Harrison, Jacob Corzine, and Andrew Smith (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008–15), 8:1006–18.

⁵ *Das Luther-Lexikon*, s.v., “Ausschließlichkeitsformeln.” See also *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, s.v. “Reformation Principles”; Volker Leppin, “Luther’s Transformation of Medieval Thought: Continuity and Discontinuity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 115–24; Heiko A. Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2001); Stephan H. Pförtner, “Das reformatorische ‘Sola Scriptura’—theologischer Auslegungsgrund des Thoma von Aquin?” in *Sola Scriptura*, ed. C. H. Ratschow (Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag, 1977), 48–80; Per Erik Perrson, *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970).

⁶ “Sola fide sine operibus praecedentibus fit homo iustus.” Thomas Bradwardine, *De Causa Dei Contra Pelagium Et De Virtute Causarum* (London: Ex Officina Nortoniana, 1618), I, 1, c. 43 (394B).

Sola Scriptura, *Sola Gratia*, and *Solo Christo* in his writings.⁷ If this were not interesting enough, even the average medieval Christian could at least encounter the theology of the three solas in the propers (variable parts of the liturgy) of Gesimatide (Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima), that is, the three Pre-Lent Sundays Lutherans inherited from the Latin Church.

The fact that the three Latin solas did not originate in the Lutheran Reformation is quite significant. Even if the medieval use of them lacked a good deal of Biblical precision, their medieval presence shows that Martin Luther (1483–1546) was not a revolutionary, but rather a reformer *par excellence* who reasserted the catholic (universal) faith of the Sacred Scriptures. At the same time, the theological confusion of the Late Middle Ages testifies to the importance of the Lutheran Reformation. It was not until the advent of the Lutheran Reformation that the proper Biblical meaning of three solas would be fully restored and their hermeneutical (interpretative) significance be elevated.

But are the Latin phrases *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Sola Fide* genuinely Reformation Principles? The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia church historian, Timothy Wengert, writes, “Using the critical Weimar edition of Luther’s works online and its search engine, one can now determine how often Luther used these phrases in all their permutations in his Latin works. The results? *Sola gratia*: two hundred times; *sola fide*: twelve

⁷ “Notandum autem, quod cum multi scriberent de Catholica veritate, haec est differentia, quia illi, qui scripserunt canonicam Scripturam, sicut Evangelistae et apostoli, et alii huiusmodi, ita constanter eam asserunt quod nihil dubitandum relinquunt. Et ideo dicit et scimus quia verum est testimonium eius; Gal I, 9: si quis vobis evangelizaverit praeter id quod accepistis, anathema sit. Cuius ratio est, quia sola canonica Scriptura est regula fidei.” *Super Ioannem*, c. 21, 1, 6. “Ad tertium dicendum, quod si accipiatur gratia operans secundum primam acceptionem, tunc planum est quod effectus quos operator formaliter, ipsa sola operator: sicut enim sola albedo formaliter facit album parietem, ita sola gratia formaliter gratum facit.” *Scriptum super Sententiis*, II, d. 26, q. 1, a. 5. “Interior autem effluxus gratiae non est ab aliquo nisi a solo Christo, cuius humanitas, ex hoc quod est divinitati adiuncta, habet virtutem iustificandi.” *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 8, a. 6 (11:134). Thomas Aquinas, *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici Opera Omnia Iussu Impensaue Leonis XIII. P. M.*, ed. Order of Preachers (Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta S. C. De Propaganda Fide, 1882–).

hundred times; *sola Scriptura*: twenty times. Twenty times!”⁸ Wengert then attempts to show that some of these twenty *Sola Scriptura* references do not actually support the *Sola Scriptura* concept. Nevertheless, all three Latin solas are attested in Luther’s writings and can be found in his contemporaries.⁹ Wengert, moreover, does not account for Luther’s use of Latin or German equivalents for the solas, like “The Word Alone” (*Solum Verbum*) or “The Scripture alone” (*Die Schrift allein*).¹⁰ Even though the actual Latin phrases, *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Sola Fide*, are not equally represented in the Luther’s *corpus*, the concepts underlying them certainly permeate Luther’s thought. Some scholars have similarly argued that the Latin phrase *Sola Scriptura* cannot be found in the Lutheran Confessions.¹¹ All three Latin solas, their German equivalents, and underlying concepts can be found in the *Book of Concord* as well.¹² However, it

⁸ Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 16. See also Timothy J. Wengert, “A Note on ‘Sola Scriptura’ in Martin Luther’s Writings,” *Luther-Bulletin Tijdschrift voor interconfessioneel Lutheronderzoek* 20 (2011): 21–31.

⁹ In the “Vindication of All Articles of Luther Condemned by the Recent Bull of Leo X, 1521,” Luther writes, “I do not wish to be deemed more learned than all, but I wish for Scripture alone (*solam scripturam*) to reign; nor do I wish it be interpreted by my spirit or that of any other man, but I wish it to be understood through itself and by its own spirit.” Luther, WA, 7:98–99. See also Luther, WA, 30/3:153 (LW, 38:76); Luther, WA, 50:359. In the “Lectures on Galatians, 1535,” Luther writes, “I declare that they do not become righteous by works or by circumcision but solely by grace and by faith in Christ (*sola gratia et fide in Christum*).” Luther, WA, 40/1:74 (LW, 26:59). In “On Translating: An Open Letter, 1530,” Luther writes, “To you and to our people, however, I shall show why I chose to use the word *sola*—though in Romans 3[:28] it was not *sola*, but *solum* or *tantum* that I used, so sharply do the asses look at my text! Nevertheless I have used *sola fide* elsewhere, and I want both: *solum* and *sola*.” Luther, WA, 30/2:636 (LW, 35:188). Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. J. K. F. Knaake et al. (Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–1993); Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Briefwechsel* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1930–85); Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1912–21); Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Bibel* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1906–61). Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut Lehmann, and Christopher Brown (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Fortress Publishing House, 1955–).

¹⁰ Wengert, “A Note,” 21.

¹¹ Philip J. Secker, introduction to *The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn, Volume Two*, ed. Philip J. Secker (Mansfield: CEC Press, 2007), xxviii.

¹² “In this way the distinction between the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments and all other writings is preserved, and Holy Scripture alone remains the only judge rule, and guiding principle (*sola sacra scriptura iudex, norma et regula*), according to which, as the only touchstone, all teachings should and must be recognized and judged, whether they are good and evil, correct or incorrect.” FC, Ep, Rule and Norm, 7 (BSELK 1219; BC 487). See also FC, SD, I, 60 (BSELK 1345; BC 542). “In this Word the Holy Spirit is present and opens hearts that they may, like Lydia in Acts 16[:14], listen to it and thus be converted, solely through the grace (*sola gratia*) and power of the Holy Spirit, who alone accomplishes the conversion of the human being.” FC, Ep, II, 6 (BSELK 1231; BC 492), etc. “We Obtain the Forgiveness of Sins Only (*sola fide*) by Faith in Christ.” Ap, IV, 74–75 (BSELK 299; BC 133), etc.

must be pointed out that the three Latin solas do not seem to have ever appeared as a collected unit for summarizing Lutheranism in the early modern period. Rather the convergence of three Latin solas as a Lutheran Shibboleth or a popular shorthand for Lutheranism seems to be a nineteenth-century phenomenon.¹³ After a by no means exhaustive investigation, the first place this essayist found the three Latin solas as collective unit in American Lutheranism was the cornerstone of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod's seminary in Wauwatosa, WI. The cornerstone was laid by the WELS Synod President Philipp von Rohr (1843–1908) on October 13, 1892 and was later moved to the current Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary.¹⁴

In the twentieth century, the three Latin solas were sometimes expanded into a fivefold unit, which added “Christ Alone” and “To God Alone be the Glory” (*Solus Christus et Soli Deo Gloria*) or an eightfold unit that added “God Alone,” “By Word Alone,” and even “By Experience Alone” (*Solus Deus, Solo Verbo, et Sola Experientia*).¹⁵ Like their three counterparts,

¹³ Scholars generally claim that it is nineteenth century, but only provide early twentieth-century evidence. Jacob Corzine, “The Source of the Solas: On the Question of Which Are the Original Solas,” in *Theology is Eminently Practical: Essays in Honor of John T. Pless*, ed. Jacob Corzine and Bryan Wolfmueller (Fort Wayne: Lutheran Legacy, 2012), 51–71; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 26–27; Wengert, *Reading*, 16; Wengert, “A Note,” 21.

¹⁴ Edward C. Fredrich, *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1992), 95, 278n4; J. P. Koehler, “Rede bei der Eröffnung des Theologischen Seminars in Wauwatosa, Wis., am 5. September 1928,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 25, no. 4 (October 1928): 225–30. See also the treatment of the three solas in *Unser Erbteil: eine Gedächtnisschrift aus das 400jährige Reformationsjubiläum den 31. Oktober 1917* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1916), 137–59; Theo. Engelder, “The Three Principles of the Reformation: Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides,” in *The Four Hundred Years: Commemorative Essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and Its Blessed Results*, ed. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1916), 97–109; Herman Bavinck, “De Hervorming en ons national eleven,” in *Ter herdenking der Hervorming, 1517–1917: Twee redevoeringen, utigesproken in de openbare zitting van den senaat der Vrije Universiteit op 31 October 1917*, ed. H. Bavinck and H. H. Keyper (Kampen: Kok, 1917), 7; Daniel Harmelink, ed. *The Reformation Coin and Medal Collection of Concordia Historical Institute* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), xxxvff.

¹⁵ Eberhard Jüngel, “The Justification of Sinners: The Meaning of the Exclusive Formula Used by the Reformers,” in *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, ed. Eberhard Jüngel (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2014), 147–259; Michael Beintker, “Was ist das Reformatorische? Einige systematisch-theologische Erwägungen,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 100 (2003): 44–63; Albrecht Beutel, “Lutherische Theologie in den Unübersichtlichkeiten unserer Zeit: Ein Vorschlag zur Orientierung,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 103 (2006): 344–61.

these too have a Pre-Reformation and Lutheran pedigree.¹⁶ For Luther, *Solus Christus* was the foundation of the solas.¹⁷ Luther, theologians, and church musicians have long concluded their works with *Soli Deo Gloria* (e.g. J. S. Bach [1685–1750]), but C. F. W. Walther (1811–87) may be the only one to build dogmatic lectures around this theme.¹⁸ Unfortunately, just as Luther’s *Soli Deo Gloria* has been misused to foster a Calvinist interpretation of him, so too Luther’s use of *Solo Verbo* and *Sola Experientia* have been misused to argue for a Neo-Orthodox understanding of his theology. In a somewhat related matter, Jena theology professor Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) seems to have been the first to refer to Holy Scripture as “the only and proper principle of theology” (*unicum et proprium theologiae principium*).¹⁹ Yet, it was the Rationalist Lutheran theologian Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider (1776–1848) who first coined the distinction between the material (reconciliation/ justification) and formal (Scripture) principles of church dogmatics.²⁰

Since the three Latin solas are used to define all Protestants and Modern Evangelicals today, it is vitally important that the original Lutheran understanding of the solas be properly clarified. The solas have often been misunderstood in a reductionist or bumper sticker-like fashion. To be sure, medieval Latin theology once confounded their meaning due in part to theological, philological, and historical deficiencies. Roman Catholics went so far as to

¹⁶ Luther, WA, 8:669 (LW, 44:400); Luther, WA, 40/1:131 (LW, 26:55); Luther, WA, 2:460 (LW, 27:176); Luther, WA, 7:51 (LW, 31:346); Luther, WA, Br, 1:16 (*Sola autem experiential facit theologoum*). FC, Ep, III, 1 (BSELK 1235; BC 494); LC I, 4 (BSELK 933; BC 387), and FC, Ep, VII, 42 (BSELK 1267; BC 508). *Sola Experientia* and *Soli Deo Gloria*, conversely, are not found in the *Book of Concord*.

¹⁷ *Das Luther-Lexikon*, s.v., “Ausschließlichkeitsformeln.”

¹⁸ C. F. W. Walther, *All Glory to God* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2016).

¹⁹ Gerhard, *Loci*, Locus 1, Par. 1. Johann Gerhard, *Loci theologici cum pro abstruenda veritate tum pro destruenda quorumvis contradicentium falsitate per theses nervose solide et copiose explicate*, ed. Ed. Preuss (Berlin: Gust. Schlawitz, 1863–85). Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces*, trans. Richard Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006–).

²⁰ Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider’s *Handbuch der dogmatik der evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche ... hat*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1828), 1:46–47, which was originally published in 1814. See also Jan Rohls, *Protestantische Theologie der Neuzeit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 1:390–91

publically condemn the theology of the solas.²¹ Yet the non-Lutheran Protestant and Modern Evangelical articulation of the three solas is in many ways no less problematic. They have long vested the phrases with new and foreign meanings, all the while maintaining the theologically disingenuous, but often politically necessary subterfuge that they are the true heirs of Luther. In contrast to Lutherans, whom they dismiss as “Formulists” or “New” and “Fake-Lutherans,” they have often claimed that they are merely attempting to complete Luther’s Reformation.²² Lest one assume this notion has been scraped in the dustbin of history, R. Kent Hughes, the College Church of Wheaton, IL Senior Pastor, subtly softens the idea for a twenty-first century audience in the forward to the *Grace Alone* volume of Zondervan’s new *The 5 Solas Series*:

This tour includes ... the theological development of Martin Luther midst the arcane currents of his late medieval environment and his mature understanding of justification by grace through faith, wherein the act of faith must necessarily, be an act of sovereign grace; (d) though Luther firmly held to predestination, division among the Lutherans over the doctrine meant that theological reflection passed to the Reformed and became identified with John Calvin, who though he offered no innovations, adorned it with clarity, maintaining that election, predestination, and grace must only be contemplated *in Christ*.²³

Martin Luther’s Concept of *Sola Scriptura*

The remainder of this essay will turn its attention to an analysis of Luther’s concept of *Sola Scriptura*.²⁴ It argues that his *Sola Scriptura* rediscovery was not limited to the reassertion

²¹ Council of Trent, Session 4 (*Decrees*, 2:663–64); Council of Trent, Session VI (*Decrees*, 2:679–81). *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. N. P. Tanner, G. Albergio, J. A. Dossetti, P.– P. Joannou, C. Leonardi, P. Prodi, and H. Jedin (London and Washington: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990).

²² Bodo Nischan, “Reformation or Deformation? Lutheran and Reformed Views of Martin Luther in Brandenburg’s ‘Second Reformation,’” in *Lutherans and Calvinists in the Age of Confessionalism* (Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 1999), I:203–15. See also Alec Ryrie, “The Afterlife of Lutheran England,” in *Sister Reformations in Germany and England*, ed. Dorothea Wendebourg (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 213–34.

²³ R. Kent Hughes, forward to *Grace Alone Salvation as a Gift of God: What the Reformers Taught ... and Why It Still Matters*, by Carl R. Trueman, *The 5 Solas Series* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).

²⁴ For an overview of *Sola Scriptura* research, see *Das Luther-Lexikon*, s.v., “Autorität”; *Religion Past and Present: Encyclopedia of Religion and Theology*, 4th ed., s.v. “Scriptural Principle”; *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, s.v., “Scriptural Proof”; *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, s.v. “Autorität”; *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, s.v. “Scripture.” See also H.H. Schmid and J. Mehlhausen, *Sola Scriptura. Das reformatorische*

of the final sole authority of Scripture, but also the sole re-creative (performative) power of Scripture. As the world takes note of the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, it is just as important for Lutherans to confess this so-called performative understanding of God's Word as it is the sole authority of Scripture because the former is even less understood by the twenty-first century than the latter. For instance, many today defend the inerrancy of the Bible as a channel of sacred information (e.g. the veracity of the six-day creation), but far fewer believe that the same Word that brought forth the creation has the same power to create faith (regeneration) in a child's heart.

It should not go unnoticed that the Lutheran Reformation rose from the work of a professor of Biblical theology. God's Word was the very pulse of the Reformation. Luther made a number of interconnected Reformation rediscoveries, the most important of which was passive righteousness (i.e., the imputation [crediting] of Christ's holiness to the believer *Sola Fide*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Sola Scriptura*). This rediscovery was essentially a new definition of what it meant to be Christian, that is, what it meant to be truly human.²⁵ The medieval mind understood man's relationship with God in terms of man continually climbing his way closer to God through the performance of good works and ritual, albeit facilitated by grace.²⁶ This attempt to achieve

Schriftprinzip in der säkularen Welt (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlag Gerd Mohn, 1991); Carl-Heinz Ratschow, ed. *Sola Scriptura* (Marburg: N. G. Elwert Verlag, 1977).

²⁵ The essayist is indebted to the work of Robert Kolb for showing the nexus between Luther's two kinds of righteousness and the performative Word. See Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring Word of God: The Wittenberg School and Its Scripture-Centered Proclamation* (Grand Rapid: Baker Academic, 2016). See also Robert Kolb, "Luther's Hermeneutics of Distinctions: Law and Gospel, Two Kinds of Righteousness, Two Realms, Freedom and Bondage," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 168–84; Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Robert Kolb and Charles P. Arands, *The Genius of Luther's Theology: A Wittenberg Way of Thinking for the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapid: Baker Academic, 2008).

²⁶ Luther, "Magnificat, 1521," in WA, 7:596 (LW, 21:350). For another example, the Semi-Pelagian Ockhamist school's view (that Luther was reared in) went so far to claim man actually had to start out his conversion by reaching out to God with a half-merit (*meritum congrui*) in hope that God would bless it with grace. Only then could salvation be acquired via a faith formed by love (i.e., by full-merits [*meritum condigni*] or good works).

salvation through what Luther called active (proper) righteousness sent in him in a tailspin in search of a merciful God. Gradually Luther came to the realization through prayer, meditation on the Scripture, and the cross that God was an engaged personal God, who alone could recreate the relationship that man lost in the fall. After all, man was God's greatest creation, but he remained completely dependent on his creator even before the fall for everything that he possessed. What is worse, man lost the image of God in the fall, becoming completely curved in on himself and enslaved to sin, death, and the devil.

Recalling Christ's words that a bad tree cannot become a good tree by trying harder to bear good fruit,²⁷ Luther rediscovered in Roman 1:17 that only the imputation of Christ's passive (alien) righteousness could recreate our lost relationship with God. For only passive righteousness could restore man's humanity and make him genuinely free.²⁸ The true purpose of active righteousness, conversely, was to thank God by serving one's neighbor and caring for the

²⁷ "The following statements are therefore true: 'Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works; evil works do not make a wicked man, but a wicked man does evil works.' Consequently it is always necessary that the substance or person himself be good before there can be any good works, and that good works follow and proceed from the good person, as Christ also says, 'A good tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit....' But as faith makes a man a believer and righteous, so faith does good works. Since, then, works justify no one, and a man must be righteous before he does a good work, it is very evident that it is faith alone which, because of the mercy of God through Christ and in his Word, worthily and sufficiently justifies and saves the person. A Christian has no need of any work or law in order to be saved since through faith he is free from every law and does everything out of pure liberty and freely.... Furthermore, no good work helps justify or save an unbeliever. On the other hand, no evil work makes him wicked or damns him; but the unbelief which makes the person and the tree evil does the evil and damnable works. Hence when a man is good or evil, this is effected not by the works, but by faith or unbelief...." Luther, "Freedom of a Christian, 1520" in WA, 7:61–62 (LW, 31:361–62). See also Luther, "Disputation on Scholastic Theology, 1517" in WA, 1:224 (LW, 31:9).

²⁸ "But up to then it was not the cold blood about the heart, but a single word in [Romans] Chapter 1[:17], 'in it the righteousness of God is revealed,' that had stood in my way. For I hated that word 'righteousness of God,' which according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, as they call it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.... At least, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, 'In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith...." Luther, "The Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings, 1545" in WA, 54:185–186 (LW, 34:336–37).

creation through vocations in the home, church, and society/state.²⁹ This new relationship with God, Luther further rediscovered, was only re-created through God's very same Word that once had the power to bring the universe into being and the same Word that assumes oral, written, and sacramental forms today.³⁰ As the passive righteousness bestowed by God's performative Word was challenged by pope, magisterium, tradition, and finally by church council, Luther declared that the Scripture alone was the final arbitrator of truth. Not surprisingly, the Lutheran princes made 1 Peter 1:25 the first battle cry of the Lutheran Reformation: "The Word of the Lord remains eternal" (*Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum*) and quite literally placed it on just about everything.³¹

On the one hand, the Bible was far from absent in the late medieval world of the young Martin Luther, pious Protestant fictions aside.³² In 1450s, the invention of moveable type made book printing more accessible than ever before, albeit large Latin Bibles were still too expensive

²⁹ See also 1519 Luther, "Two Kinds of Righteousness, 1519" in WA, 2:145–52 (LW, 31:293–306).

³⁰ Oswald Bayer zeros on Luther's conception of a speech-act promise that "actually constitutes a reality" for the believer as Luther's real Reformation turning point. "The *signum* itself is already the *res*," that is "the linguistic sign is already the matter itself." He locates the beginnings of this new performative understanding of God's Word in Luther's view of absolution as found in "On Seeking out Truth and Comforting Terrified Consciences, 1518" in WA, 1:630–33. In 1520, Luther writes, "Following upon this comes the other Word, the divine assurance and promise, which says: If you want to fulfill all the commandments, if you want to be free of your evil desires and sins, as the commandments pressure and demand, look here, believe in Christ, through whom I promise you all grace, righteousness, peace, and freedom. If you believe, you have it; if you do not believe, you do not have it: For what is impossible for you, by means of all the works of the commandments, which are many and which still cannot be of any value, is made simple and easy for you through faith. For God has made all things depend on faith, so that whoever has it shall have all things and be joyful; whoever does not have it shall have nothing. This is what the promises of God provide, what the commandments demand; they fulfill what the commandments demand, so that everything is from God himself, both commandments and fulfillment. He alone commands; he alone also fulfills." Luther, "Freedom of a Christian, 1520" in WA, 7:23–24, translated in Bayer, *Martin*, 60. Later Luther wrote, "See, he is now born of God through the Gospel, in which he remains and abandons his light and opinion, as St. Paul says, "I begot you in Christ Jesus through the Gospel.... Likewise for this reason the Gospel is called God's womb, in which we are conceived, carried, and born." Luther, "Church Postil, 1522" in WA, 10/1.1:232 (LW, 75:308).

³¹ See also Harmelink, *The Reformation*, xxxiv.

³² Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952); Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly, eds., *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception, and Performance in Western Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

to leave unchained and the population was largely illiterate.³³ Luther encountered the Bible in the readings at mass, in Latin School, as well as in a purchased postil (model sermons) and other devotional literature.³⁴ Ever since the High Middle Ages, the mendicant movement (e.g. Franciscans and Dominicans [Order of Preachers]) had been trying to meet the need for vernacular preaching. Merchant families and the guilds began endowing preaching positions in the cities by the Late Middle Ages.³⁵ The university, religious life, and a doctorate in Sacred Scripture afforded Luther the opportunity to hear the Bible read daily, to sing the Bible in the canonical hours, to possess a red leather Bible of his own, and to master the Biblical texts along with their traditional glosses (marginal commentary). The *Via moderna* (e.g. Ockhamism) school of theology that Luther was trained in, moreover, was critical of the *Via Antiqua* school's (e.g. Thomism) confidence in reason and stressed authority (e.g. Scripture) instead.

On the other hand, the Bible was also carefully regulated in the late medieval world because genuine heretics had long attempted to support their teachings on the basis of misreadings of Scripture.³⁶ Thus, Latin served as check on private interpretations of Scripture, though German Bible translations existed, provided they had episcopal authorization.³⁷ The Bible was delivered to the laity in selections, mediated through the authorized preachers (who

³³ Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

³⁴ Joachim Ringleben, *Gott im Wort: Luthers Theologie von der Sprache her* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010); Willem Jan Kooiman, *Luther and the Bible*, trans. John Schmidt (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961); M. Reu, *Luther and the Scriptures* (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1944); M. Reu, *Luther's German Bible: An Historical Presentation Together with a Collection of Sources* (Columbus: The Lutheran Book Concern, 1934).

³⁵ Richard H. Rouse and Mary A. Rouse, *Preachers, Florilegia, and Sermons: Studies on the Manipulus florum of Thomas of Ireland* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1979); H. Leith Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Larissa Taylor, ed., *Preachers and People in the Reformations and Early Modern Period* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001).

³⁶ Kolb, *Martin Luther and the Enduring*, 19–34.

³⁷ "The Edict of Berthhold, Archbishop of Mainz (March 22, 1485) Concerning Translations from the Greek, Latin, or Any other Language," quoted in Reu, *Luther's German*, * 93–* 94. This edict prohibited unauthorized translations of foreign language books, including the Bible. See also Reu's source material for examples of Pre-Reformation German Bibles and German devotional writings.

had limited impact in the countryside) or accompanied with glosses and tales of the saints that often stressed ritual and good works. Assuming that only churchmen had vocations and that the catechism/sacraments were sufficient for the laity, the Late Medieval Church did not equip the average Christian with a humanities education necessary to move beyond the milk of fundamental doctrine and live out Scripture-informed vocations.³⁸ While medieval theologians assumed the inspiration of Scripture and many recognized that popes/magisterium could and had erred,³⁹ none had yet recognized that tradition/councils had ever erred or could depart from Holy Scripture.

In the wake of the abuses of the Avignon Papacy (1309–77) and the Western Schism (1378–1415), the Conciliar movement-driven Council of Constance (1414–18), went so far as to decree that councils (not popes) were the final interpreter of Scripture.

The holy synod of Constance ... declares, that legitimately assembled in the holy Spirit, constituting a general council and representing the catholic church militant, it has the power immediately from Christ; and that everyone of whatever state or dignity, even papal, is bound to obey it [council] in those matters which pertains to the faith, the eradication of the said schism and the general reform of the said church of God in head and members.⁴⁰

However, at least two basic concepts of tradition had already developed by this time: The first conception was an older one-source theory that predominated in the fathers, monastics, and even the scholastics. It viewed tradition as the authoritative and faithful interpretation of a materially-sufficient Scripture within the historical continuity of the church. The second conception was a later two-source theory popularized by the canonists. It viewed tradition as a distinct source of

³⁸ Luther, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, 1520” in WA, 6:404–69 (LW, 44:115–217).

³⁹ Robert D. Preus, “The View of the Bible Held by the Church: The Early Church through Luther” in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 357–82.

⁴⁰ Council of Constance, Session 5 (*Decrees*, 1:408–9).

doctrine independent of Scripture.⁴¹ By the Eve of the Reformation, the popes had dramatically turned the situation around, for the papal-controlled Lateran V Council (1512–17) decreed that the pope had oversight over all councils and only he could convene, move, and conclude a council. In short, Lateran V shut down Conciliarism.⁴² Ironically, those who were sympathetic to Conciliarism but found Luther’s call to return to the sole final authority of Scripture too jarring had to capitulate to the emerging Roman Catholicism of the Council of Trent (1545–63), which permitted the second of the aforementioned conceptions of tradition and even left the papal supremacy claims of Lateran V stand.⁴³

As Luther zeroed in on his great rediscovery of passive righteousness through God’s performative Word, he was opposed by pope, magisterium, tradition, and even councils. What would make Luther so controversial after the 1519 Leipzig Colloquy was not that he asserted *Sola Scriptura*, but that he would show that even tradition and council had at times actually departed from Scripture and therefore Scripture is the final arbitrator of truth. Note further that Luther never argued that all tradition needed to be rejected. For instance, he recognized that the church fathers had often helped exegetes avoid contextually unjustified private interpretations of the Bible. Rather he merely insisted on Scripture’s sole ability to define doctrine and ultimately interpret itself. Luther’s exposure to Nominalism, Renaissance humanism, German mysticism, as well as his hermeneutical development all coalesced to facilitate this rediscovery. Nevertheless, Luther never presumed to assume the mantle of self-imposed Reformer like many of the Radical

⁴¹ Heiko Oberman in his *Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of the Late Medieval Thought Illustrated by Key Documents* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 53–65. Some scholars have suggested that Oberman’s distinctions are problematic.

⁴² Fifth Lateran Council, Session 11 (*Decrees*, 1:642).

⁴³ Council of Trent, Session IV (*Decrees*, 2:663–65); January 26, 1564 Bull of Confirmation (Denzinger, *Compendium*, [no. 1847–50]) 431–33). Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definition, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, ed. Peter Hünermann, Robert Fastiggi, and Anne Englund Nash, 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012).

and Reformed enthusiasts (*Schwärmer*). He countered the imperial edict against him by reminding all that the church made him obtain a doctorate in theology, the oaths of which obliged him to faithfully teach the Sacred Scriptures to the church.⁴⁴

Since God's Word is a manifestation of the Eternal Word (Christ), God's Word is not only the sole means of regeneration, but it is also solely authoritative, sufficient, perfect, and true.⁴⁵ This is why for Luther *Sola Scriptura* is inextricably bound with *Solus Christus*. After all, the fundamental canonical test for Luther was "what drives Christ" (*was Christum treibet*), although he never understood this in a Gospel reductionist fashion.⁴⁶ "It was not until the last half of 1519 and early 1520, in connection with his debate at Leipzig with Johann Eck and its immediate aftermath, that Luther first arrived at his *sola scriptura*; and it was not until late 1520 and early 1521 that he articulated this position in detail and depth."⁴⁷ In his 1513–15 *Lectures on the Psalms*, Professor Luther insisted, "She [church] is captive to the authority of Scripture and

⁴⁴ "However, I, Dr. Martinus, have been called to this work and was compelled to become a doctor, without any initiative on my own, but out of pure obedience. Then I had to accept the office of doctor and swear a vow to my most beloved Holy Scriptures that I would preach and teach them faithfully and purely. While engaged in this kind of teaching, the papacy crossed my path and wanted to hinder me in it. How it has fared is obvious to all, and it will fare still worse. It shall not hinder me. In God's name and call I shall walk on the lion and the adder, and tread on the young lion and the dragon with my feet. And this which has been begun during my lifetime will be completed after my death. St. John Huss prophesied of me when he wrote from his prison in Bohemia, 'They will roast a goose now (for 'Huss' means 'a goose'), but after a hundred years they will hear a swan sing, and him they will endure.' And this is the way it will be, if God wills." Luther, "Commentary on the Alleged Imperial Edict, 1531" in WA, 30/3:386–87 (LW, 34:103).

⁴⁵ "Thus, God, too, from all eternity has a Word, a speech, a thought, or a conversation with Himself in his divine heart, unknown to the angels and human beings. This is called His Word. From eternity He was within God's paternal heart, and through him God resolved to create heaven and earth." Luther, "Sermons on John 1 and 2, 1537–38" in WA, 46:544 (LW, 22:9). "Today Christ is still present to some, but to others He is still to come. To believers He is present and has come; to unbelievers He has not yet come and does not help them. But if they hear His Word and believe, Christ becomes present to them, justifies and saves them." Luther, "Lectures on Galatians, 1535" WA, 40/1:379 (LW, 26:240). "Not only the words, but also the expression is divine which the Holy Spirit and Scripture employ." Luther, "Commentary on the Psalms of Degrees, 1540" in WA, 40/3:254.

⁴⁶ Luther, "Prefaces to the New Testament, 1546 (1522)," in WA DB, 7:384 (LW, 35:396). See also David W. Lotz, "Luther and *Sola Scriptura*" in *And Every Tongue Confess: Essays in Honor of Norman Nagel on the Occasion of His Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. Gerald S. Krispin and Jon D. Vieker (Dearborn: The Nagel Festschrift Committee, 1990), 25–63; David W. Lotz, "The Proclamation of the Word in Luther's Thought" *Word & World* 3 (Fall 1983): 344–54; David W. Lotz, "Sola Scriptura: Luther on Biblical Authority" *Interpretation* 35, no. 3 (1981): 258–73; Lewis Spitz, "Luther's *Sola Scriptura*," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 31, no 12 (1960): 740–45.

⁴⁷ Lotz, "Luther and *Sola Scriptura*," 251.

does not teach anything but the Word of God.”⁴⁸ In contrast to the 1517 *Disputation on Scholastic Theology*, the much milder 1517 *Ninety-five Theses*, which catapulted Luther on the world stage and struck at an expanding means of papal revenue, really only questioned the pope’s pastoral prudence. The theology of indulgences was still unclear and indulgences had not yet become dogma.⁴⁹ Still well within the norms of the day, Luther remarks in a May 9, 1518 letter to his Erfurt arts professor Jodokus Trutfetter (d. 1519) that it was his former Ockhamist teacher who first taught him “the canonical books alone deserve faith” (*solis canonicis deberi fidem*) and that all others only merit “opinion” (*iudicium*), as Augustine, Paul, and John prescribe.⁵⁰

His 1518 *Explanation of the Ninety-five Theses* would begin to question papal infallibility and the historicity of primacy, but not the authority of the church itself.⁵¹ When a somewhat sympathetic Dominican Cardinal Cajetan (1480–1547) pressed Luther at Augsburg on the subject of papal authority, Luther retorted, “Panormitanus, too, in his edition of the *Decretals*, shows that in matters of faith not only is a general council above the pope, but also any believer, provided he used better authority or reason than the pope just as Paul does with Peter in Gal. 2[:14].”⁵² The papal court theologian and Dominican Silvester Prierias (1456–1523) attacked the

⁴⁸ Luther, WA, 3:261 (LW, 10:219).

⁴⁹ Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 43. Luther did not believe that his rejection of scholasticism and emerging two kinds of righteousness contradicted the consensus of the catholic church or its teachers in his “Disputation on Scholastic Theology, 1517” in WA, 1:228 (LW, 31:16).

⁵⁰ Luther, WA BR, 1:171.

⁵¹ “It makes no difference to me what pleases or displeases the pope. He is a human being just like the rest of us. There have been many popes who have been pleased not only with errors and vices, but even with horrible things. I listen to the pope as pope, that is, when he speaks in and according to canons, or when he makes a decision in accordance with a general council. I do not listen to him, however, when he speaks his own mind. In this way I am not compelled to say with certain people who hardly know the teachings of Christ that the horrible murders committed by Julius II among Christians might have been blessings by which he demonstrated to the flock of Christ that he was a true shepherd.” Luther, WA, 1:582 (LW, 31:171). See also Luther, WA, 1:571, 529–30 (LW, 31:152, 83).

⁵² Luther, Proceedings at Augsburg, 1518” in WA, 2:10 (LW, 31:265–66).

Ninety-Five Theses in 1518. Luther opens this rebuttal with Galatians 1:8: “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed” (ESV). He supports the catholicity of Scripture’s sufficiency with Augustine’s (354–430) letter to Jerome (347–419), stating, “I only appeal to these books which are called canonical, I give these honor because I most firmly believe none of their authors have erred.” He even posits “pope and council could err,” but he still maintains that the Roman church “has never contradicted the true faith by any of its decrees.”⁵³

Already by this time a former friend of Luther’s, the Ingolstadt theology professor Johann Eck (1486–1543), had concluded that Luther was a Bohemian heretic (Hussite). Eck set out to expose Luther as a Hussite in the city whose university was founded as an anti-Hussite school. He claimed victory at the 1519 Leipzig Debate when he got Luther to confess that the Council of Constance had erred when it condemned many of the teachings of Jan Hus (1370/71–1415).

In rebuttal I [Luther] brought up the Greek Christians during the past thousand years, and also the ancient church fathers, who had not been under the authority of the Roman pontiff, although I did not deny the primacy of honor due to the pope. Finally we also debated the authority of a council. I publically acknowledge that some articles had been wrongly condemned [by the Council of Constance], articles which had been taught in plain and clear words by Paul, Augustine, and even Christ himself. At this point the adder swelled up, exaggerated my crime, and nearly went insane in his adulation of the Leipzig audience. I proved by the words of the council itself that not all the articles which it condemned were actually heretical and erroneous.⁵⁴

At that moment, Luther’s *Sola Scriptura* had finally moved beyond the norms of the medieval Latin church. This admission was so decisive for the Gospel because it meant that neither pope, magisterium, tradition, nor council could overturn the rediscovery of passive righteousness.

⁵³ Luther, “Dialogue on the Authority of the Pope, 1518,” in WA, 1:647, 656, 662.

⁵⁴ Luther, “The Leipzig Debate, 1519” in WA BR, 420–24 (LW, 31:322)

The 1520 programmatic writings, *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*, the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and the *Freedom of a Christian*, soon followed, laying out his early program for reforming the church. Next, Luther crowned his rediscovered *Sola Scriptura* with a decisive refutation of the subjugation of Scripture to any interpreter following the arrival of the bull of excommunication.

The judgments of Scripture must decide the issue, and this cannot be done unless we accord Scripture the first place (*principem locum*) in everything concerning the fathers, so that Scripture itself might be through itself the most certain, the most accessible, the most clear, serving as its own interpreter, (*per se certissima, apertissima, sui ipsius interpres*), testing, judging, and illuminating every word of everyone.... I do not wish to be deemed more learned than all, but I wish for Scripture alone to reign (*solam scripturam regnare*); nor do I wish it be interpreted by my spirit or that of any other man, but I wish it to be understood through itself and by its own spirit (*per seipsam et suo spiritu*).”⁵⁵

All of this prepared Luther for the moment when his commitment to *Sola Scriptura* would really be put to the test. At the 1521 Diet of Worms, he did not back down, he did not recant. Rather he boldly confessed:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscious in captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. “I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.”⁵⁶

Yet Luther had hardly begun translating the Bible from his Patmos at Wartburg when the emerging Radical and Reformed movements began to twist *Sola Scriptura*, but still claimed to adhere to it. His colleague Andreas Karlstadt (ca. 1477–1541) disturbed the Wittenbergers by

⁵⁵ Luther, “Vindication of All Articles of Luther Condemned by the Recent Bull of Leo X, 1521” in Luther, WA, 7:97–99. See also Luther’s “Response to the Book of Ambrosius Catharinus Defending Silvester Prierias, 1521” in WA, 7:722, on the Gospel bearing and rearing the church.

⁵⁶ Luther, “Luther at the Diet of Worms, 1521” in WA, 7:838 (LW, 32:112).

advancing liturgical reforms that forbade any traditions and practices that were not expressly found in Scripture. This regulative principle of worship,⁵⁷ a mark of the Radical and Reformed Reformations, undermined Christian freedom and reinterpreted *Sola Scriptura* as a prohibition of the use of even good church traditions that supported the Gospel. This misunderstanding of *Sola Scriptura* meant that crosses, images, vestments, chant, etc., all had to go. Luther brought calm to the situation by articulating a key Pauline distinction in his famous 1522 *Invocavit Sermons*.

Here one can see that you do not have the Spirit, even though you have a deep knowledge of the Scriptures. Take note of these two things, “must” and “free.” The “must” is that which necessity requires, and which must ever be unyielding; as, for instance, the faith, which I shall never permit any one to take away from me, but must always keep in my heart and freely confess before every one. But “free” is that in which I have a choice, and may use or not, yet in such a way that it profit my brother and not me. Now do not make a “must” out of what is “free,” as you have done, so that you may not be called to account for those who were led astray by your loveless exercise of liberty.⁵⁸

The Radical and Reformed misconstruing of such fundamental hermeneutical distinctions as faith and reason, spirit and letter, spirit and flesh, natural and mosaic law, Law and Gospel, passive and active righteousness, the freedom and servitude of the Christian, two kingdoms, etc. all illustrated why Luther did not “wish [Scripture] be interpreted by [his] spirit or that of any other man, but [he] wish[ed] it to be understood through itself and by its own spirit (*per seipsam et suo spiritu*).”⁵⁹ Of all of these interpretative disagreements between them and Luther, it may surprise one to see him charge the Radicals and the Reformed with erring on the relationship

⁵⁷ John Calvin later articulated the concept as follows: “I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressively sanctioned by his Word. The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honour of God. But since God not only regards as fruitless, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command, what do we gain by a contrary course?” John Calvin, “The Necessity of Reforming the Church, 1543” in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Guilielmus Baum et al. (Braunschweig: C.A. Schwetschke, 1863–1900), 6:461; Calvin, *John Calvin: Tracts and Letters*, ed. Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 1:198.

⁵⁸ Luther, “Eight Sermons at Wittenberg, 1522” in Luther WA, 10/3:10–11 (LW, 51:74).

⁵⁹ Luther, WA, 7:97–99.

between faith and reason. They shared many of Luther's criticisms of the scholastics. Still Luther and Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531), a Swiss Reformed theologian, reached an impasse on the real presence at the 1529 Marburg Colloquy. Since Zwingli had reasoned that a finite body could not be present in more than one place, he refused to accept Scripture's teaching that Christ's body and blood are truly present in the Lord's Supper. Never lacking in rhetorical know-how, Luther drove home the point that Scripture's own hermeneutics decide doctrine (not human reason): "At this point Luther removed the velvet cloth and showed him the passage, 'This is my body,' which he had written for himself on the table with chalk, and said: 'Here is our Scripture passage. You have not yet wrestled it away from us, as you volunteered to do. We have no need of another passage.'"⁶⁰

The last way that Luther's opponents misconstrued *Sola Scriptura* was the old notion that the external Word was merely a springboard to some ever-expanding and new revelation of the inner Word. Some even thought that the Spirit could be obtained apart from God's Word altogether. Luther flat out rejected such a cabbalistic view. Just as God's Word in oral, written, and sacramental forms was the sole means of the Spirit's re-creative passive righteousness, so too there is no revelation beyond that expressed in the external Word.

In these matters, which concern the spoken, external Word, it must be firmly maintained that God gives no one his Spirit or grace apart from the external Word which goes before. We say this to protect ourselves from the enthusiasts, that is, "the spirits," who boast they have the Spirit apart from and before contact with the Word. On this basis, they judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or oral Word according to their pleasure. Müntzer did this, and there are still many doing this today, who set themselves up as shrewd judges between the spirit and the letter without knowing what they say or teach. The papacy is also purely religious raving in that the pope boasts that "all laws are in the shrine of his heart," and that what he decides and commands in his churches is supposed to be Spirit and law—even when it is above and contrary to the Scriptures or spoken Word....

⁶⁰ Luther, "Marburg Colloquy and Marburg Articles, 1529" in WA, 30/3:145 (LW, 38:67).

Everything that boast of being from the Spirit apart from such a Word and Sacrament is of the devil.⁶¹

Despite the manifold misunderstandings of *Sola Scriptura*, Luther's confidence in the power of God's Word to accomplish what God's desires (Isaiah 55:11) only grew. This never found more humorous expression than in 1522 *Sermon on Monday after Invocavit*: "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word, otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."⁶² In the remaining years of his life, Luther had the opportunity to unpack the significance of the performative nature of God's Word that he rediscovered in the pivotal years of his Reformation breakthrough.

To start, Luther recognized that God's Word is the life-creating manifestation of the Eternal Word, Jesus Christ. "Thus we see that the Holy Spirit also has His own language and way of expression, namely, that God, by speaking, created all things and worked through his Word, and that all His works are some words of God, created by the uncreated Word."⁶³ This divine language did not merely describe reality, it brought forth all things forensically, that is, God's declaration constituted all things out of nothing. "'Let there be light' are the words of God, not Moses; this means that they are realities. For God calls into existence the things which do not exist (Rom. 4:17). He does not speak grammatical words; He speaks true and existent realities. Accordingly, that which among us has the sound of a word is a reality with God. Thus sun, moon, heaven, earth, Peter, Paul, I, you, etc.—we are all words of God...."⁶⁴

⁶¹ SA, III, VIII, 3–5, 10 (BSELK 770–73; BC 322–23). See also Luther, WA, 36:500–501 (LW, 28:76–77).

⁶² Luther, WA, 10/3:18–19 (LW, 51:77).

⁶³ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis, 1535–45" in WA, 42:35 (LW, 1:47).

⁶⁴ Luther, "Lectures on Genesis, 1535–45" in WA, 42:17 (LW, 1:21–22).

Luther explains the nature of divine language further, indicating that in God's Word the linguistic sign/utterance bestows that which it expresses.⁶⁵ "Here we must observe the Hebrew way of expression. For when Scripture says that God speaks, it understands a word related to a real thing (*verbum reale*) or action, not just a sound, as ours is."⁶⁶ He goes on to stress how important an understanding of the performative nature of God's Word is for a proper understanding of Scripture. "This manner of speaking, however, is to be found only in the sacred language. I often admonish the youth to learn it (though almost in vain), for a knowledge of it adds remarkably to the ability of explaining the Scriptures. It was taken from Moses; in the first chapter of Genesis, when he refers to establishing all things out of nothing...."⁶⁷

Luther emphasizes the importance of understanding the performative nature of God's Word not only so that pastors have confidence that God's Word does what it says, but also so that hearers can rest assured of the reality of their salvation.

In Holy Scripture, however, there are real blessings. They are more than mere wishes. They state facts and are effective. They actually bestow and bring what the words say. We also have blessings of this kind in the New Testament through Christ's priesthood, which is our blessing, when I say: "Receive the absolution of your sins." If I said: "Would that your sins were forgiven you; would that you were pious and in God's grace!" or "I wish you grace, mercy, the eternal kingdom, and deliverance from your sins," this could be called a blessing of love. But the blessing of a promise, of faith, and of a gift that is at hand is this: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; that is, I reconcile your soul to God, remove from you God's wrath and displeasure, put you in His grace, and give you the inheritance of eternal life and the kingdom of heaven." All of these things have the power to grant you forgiveness immediately and truly if you believe, for they are not our works; they are God's works through our ministry. Accordingly, they are not blessings that express wishes; they are blessings that have the power to bestow. When I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, it is just as if I were saying: "I am

⁶⁵ For studies on Luther and language, see Johannes von Lüpke, "Luther's Use of Language," in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomír Batka (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143–55; Birgit Stolt, *Martin Luthers Rhetorik des Herzens* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

⁶⁶ Luther, "Lecture on Psalm 2, 1532" in WA, 40/2:230 (LW, 12:32). See also Luther, WA TR, 4:666.

⁶⁷ Luther, "Lecture on Psalm 2, 1532" in WA, 40/2:231 (LW, 12:32–33).

snatching you from the hands of the devil and bringing you to God, and I am doing this truly and in fact.”⁶⁸

In his *Lectures on Jonah*, Luther calls his reader to reflect on the turn of events that God’s Word brought about. If God’s Word had such power and effect in pagan Nineveh, it will certainly do no less today. “We are taught in this account how powerful, active, and effective God’s Word is. It cannot be preached in vain so that it fails to produce, and that in plain sight. If we will think about this account in terms of the power and effect of the Word, the story becomes wonderful and full of comfort”⁶⁹

It is clear that Luther’s insights into God’s Word are no less exciting today than they were five hundred years ago. There is certainly many more facets of this doctrine that a twenty-first century Lutheran could elucidate, but a fuller analysis of *Sola Scriptura* is beyond the scope of this essay. Hopefully, the essay has peaked interest and provided a foundation for further study. We close with the words from U. V. Koren’s *Church Factions among Our People in America* (1877).

Still, what indescribable glory there is in faith’s childlike and invincible assurance about “*what God said.*” We have [the task] of stirring up our congregations sincerely and joyfully to apply to themselves our Synod’s [Synod of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America] motto: GEGRAPTAI, that is, “*It is written*” (*GEGRAPTAI, d. e. “Der er skrevet*”). The history of the Lutheran church will come to our aid here, and God be praised, the history of our own little church body also gives us proofs of the blessings of not tolerating any concession in doctrine even if we also should suffer because of it.⁷⁰

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Feast of Boniface, the First Reformer of the Germans
June 5, 2017

⁶⁸ Luther, “Lectures on Genesis, 1535–45” in WA, 42:525 (LW, 5:140).

⁶⁹ Luther, “Lectures on Jonah, 1525” in WA, 13:242 (LW, 19:4).

⁷⁰ U. V. Koren, *Samlede Skrifter*, ed. Paul Koren (Decorah: Lutheran Publishing House, 1911–12), 2:148; U. V. Koren, *U. V. Koren’s Works*, ed. Mark DeGarmeaux, trans. Mark Degarmeaux et al. (Mankato: Lutheran Synod Book Company, 2013–17), 2:167–68.