

**A Comparative Analysis of the Three Methods of Scripture:**

*Sola Scriptura, Prima Scriptura, and Sacra Scriptura et Traditio*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores three primary approaches to the authority of Scripture in Christian theology: *sola scriptura*, *prima scriptura*, and *sacra scriptura et traditio* (Scripture and Tradition). *Sola scriptura* holds that Scripture alone is the final and infallible authority for faith and practice, while *prima scriptura* asserts that Scripture is the highest authority but allows for the guidance of tradition, reason, and experience. *Sacra scriptura et traditio* posits that both Scripture and Sacred Tradition are co-equal sources of divine revelation.

By steelmanning these positions, this paper presents each in its strongest and most coherent form to provide a fair and balanced comparative analysis. The biblical, historical, and theological foundations for each view are critically evaluated, with special attention to the role of tradition up until AD 681, when key Christological debates were resolved at the Third Council of Constantinople in shaping the theology of Christ's ontology. Ultimately, this study demonstrates how each method reflects different theological commitments and offers distinct pathways for interpreting Scripture, with *Prima Scriptura* emerging as the most balanced and historically grounded approach that best reflects the authority of Scripture within the Christian tradition.

To clarify the terms used in this study: *Sola Scriptura* holds that Scripture alone is the final and infallible authority for faith and practice, rejecting any other equal sources. *Prima Scriptura* maintains that while Scripture is the highest authority, it may be interpreted with the aid of tradition, reason, and experience—so long as these remain subordinate. *Sacra Scriptura et Traditio*, typically affirmed by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, asserts that both Scripture and Sacred Tradition are co-equal sources of divine revelation.



## I. INTRODUCTION

The authority of Scripture in Christian theology has been debated since the early days of the Church. Among the key approaches that have emerged are *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), *prima scriptura* (Scripture first), and *sacra scriptura et traditio* (Scripture and Tradition). Each approach provides a distinct framework for understanding how Scripture relates to other sources of divine revelation.

This paper offers a balanced analysis of these three methods, presenting each in its strongest form (steelmanning). However, special attention is given to Prima Scriptura as the approach that best balances the authority of Scripture with the insights provided by tradition, reason, and experience.<sup>1</sup> I limit the influence of tradition within the Prima Scriptura framework to the year 681, when key conclusions about Christ's ontology were formalized at the Third Council of Constantinople. This council is significant because it resolved important Christological debates, particularly concerning the two wills of Christ, a foundational issue for maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy. After 681, additional developments in Church tradition were often influenced by later ecclesiastical decisions that I do not consider as binding or authoritative as Scripture and early tradition.<sup>2</sup>

I will also incorporate the Jesus Model, which aligns with Prima Scriptura, as a practical framework for understanding the balance between Scripture and tradition. By focusing on Jesus' engagement with both Scripture and tradition, this paper illustrates how Prima Scriptura offers a balanced and historically grounded approach.

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 55-58.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), 302-305.

## II. CRITICAL BACKGROUND

### Understanding the Role of Oral Tradition in Jewish Thought

The foundation of *Prima Scriptura* is enriched by understanding how oral tradition shaped Jewish theology and, subsequently, Christian thought. During the Second Temple period, Judaism was predominantly an oral culture. Teachings, spiritual beliefs, and scriptural interpretations were often conveyed through spoken traditions rather than formal written texts.<sup>3</sup> This oral tradition carried nuanced understandings of concepts such as angelology, demonology, and eschatology—understandings that were deeply ingrained in the worldview of first-century Jews and significantly influenced the New Testament writers.

### The Value of Second Temple Writings and Jewish Commentaries

Our ability to understand Scripture comprehensively is greatly enhanced by access to Second Temple literature, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Jewish commentaries like the *Midrash* and the *Talmud*.<sup>4</sup> These sources offer essential insights into the oral traditions that permeated Jewish culture and thought. Without them, a strict *sola scriptura* approach might isolate the Bible from the broader religious and cultural context in which it was written. Instead, *Prima Scriptura* emphasizes that tradition, when used appropriately, sheds light on the worldview of biblical authors and the early Church.

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<sup>3</sup> James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 12-15.

<sup>4</sup> Michael O. Wise, Martin G. Abegg Jr., and Edward M. Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), xx-xxii.

## Midrash and Talmud: Definitions and Contributions

### Midrash:<sup>5</sup>

Emerging as early as the 2nd century CE, the *Midrash* is a collection of rabbinic writings that interpret and expand upon the Hebrew Scriptures. The term “*midrash*” means “*to seek*” or “*to inquire*,” reflecting a desire to uncover deeper meanings within the biblical text.

*Value:* The *Midrash* fills narrative gaps, offers moral and ethical lessons, and reveals the interpretative practices of ancient Jews. This understanding is crucial for modern interpreters to grasp the religious mindset of the era.

### Talmud:<sup>6</sup>

Comprising the *Mishnah* (around 200 CE) and the *Gemara* (completed between the 3rd and 5th centuries CE), the *Talmud* is a comprehensive body of Jewish law, ethics, and theological debate. The Babylonian Talmud, completed around 500 CE, is especially authoritative.

*Value:* The *Talmud* provides a window into how Jewish law and theology evolved. It documents rabbinic discussions and debates, offering modern readers context for New Testament teachings. This resource illustrates how early Jewish traditions interacted with and influenced Christian theological development.

## The Challenge of Plain vs. Contextual Readings

A critical difference between *sola scriptura* and *Prima Scriptura* lies in the approach to interpreting Scripture. *Sola scriptura* often relies on a “*plain*” reading, which

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<sup>5</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Introduction to the Midrash* (New York: Yale University Press, 1994), 1-3.

<sup>6</sup> Herman Wouk, *This Is My God: A Guidebook to the Jewish Faith* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1959), 97-100.

can ignore the cultural and historical context. In contrast, *Prima Scriptura* promotes a “contextual” reading that acknowledges the complexities of the ancient world. This is particularly relevant when examining texts that have been misunderstood or oversimplified by modern readers.

**Plain Reading:** Commonly associated with groups like Young Earth Creationists (YEC), this method assumes that Scripture should be interpreted literally and at face value.<sup>7</sup> However, such an approach often leads to misinterpretations that overlook the deeper theological and cultural messages intended for the original audience.

**Contextual Reading:** A more nuanced approach that considers the cultural, historical, and literary context. For example, understanding the Genesis creation narrative through the lens of ancient Near Eastern cosmology reveals that it communicates theological truths about God’s sovereignty rather than offering a scientific account.<sup>8</sup> This method aligns with *Prima Scriptura*, which values tradition as a means to enrich and inform our understanding of Scripture.

**The Balance of Prima Scriptura:** *Prima Scriptura* acknowledges Scripture as the highest authority while recognizing the insights provided by tradition. This approach strikes a balance between the narrowness of *sola scriptura* and the potential overemphasis on tradition seen in *sacra de traditio*. By incorporating tradition, we gain a fuller understanding of the spiritual and theological worldview of the biblical authors.

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 45-48.

<sup>8</sup> John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 20-22.

This approach respects the complexity of Scripture and avoids the pitfalls of reading it in isolation.

### III. SOLA SCRIPTURA (SCRIPTURE ALONE)

#### Definition

*Sola scriptura* asserts that Scripture alone is the final and infallible authority for Christian faith and practice. This doctrine, central to the Protestant Reformation, holds that the Bible contains all the necessary divine revelation for salvation and doctrine, excluding the need for supplementary sources such as tradition or church councils.

#### Biblical Basis

One of the primary texts used to support *sola scriptura* is 2 Timothy 3:16-17<sup>9</sup>:  
*“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”* Proponents argue that this passage confirms both the sufficiency and authority of Scripture for guiding the Christian life. Acts 17:11, where the Bereans are commended for testing Paul’s teachings against Scripture, further underscores the idea that Scripture is the final test for truth.<sup>10</sup>

#### Historical Support

Historically, *sola scriptura* emerged during the Protestant Reformation as a reaction to what Reformers saw as the Catholic Church’s overreliance on tradition and ecclesiastical authority. Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other Reformers argued that the

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<sup>9</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV)

<sup>10</sup> James R. White, *Scripture Alone: Exploring the Bible’s Accuracy, Authority, and Authenticity* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), 45-46.



Church had elevated tradition to a status equal to or above Scripture, leading to doctrinal corruption.<sup>11</sup> *Sola scriptura* was a way to restore Scripture as the sole, infallible rule of faith.

### **Strengths**

The primary strength of *sola scriptura* is its emphasis on the sufficiency of Scripture for salvation and doctrine. This doctrine ensures that all believers can access the necessary truths for salvation directly from Scripture, without requiring mediation by church authorities. Additionally, *sola scriptura* protects against the introduction of human traditions that could distort or supersede divine revelation.

### **Steelman Consideration**

When steelmanning *sola scriptura*, it is crucial to recognize its internal logic. By placing all authority in Scripture, *sola scriptura* minimizes the risk of external, fallible authorities compromising divine revelation. The Reformers' emphasis on the clarity (perspicuity) of Scripture allowed for believers to engage with Scripture directly, trusting that the Holy Spirit would guide them into truth (John 16:13).<sup>12</sup>

## **IV. PRIMA SCRIPTURA (SCRIPTURE FIRST)**

### **Definition**

*Prima scriptura* asserts that Scripture is the highest authority in matters of faith and practice but acknowledges that other sources, such as tradition, reason, and

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<sup>11</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 204-210.

<sup>12</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 104-107.

experience, can aid in interpreting and applying Scripture. These secondary sources are valuable but always remain subordinate to Scripture. The Jesus Model, which emphasizes Christ's engagement with both Scripture and tradition, aligns well with this framework.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Jesus Model**

The Jesus Model—exemplified in the life and ministry of Christ—embodies the *prima scriptura* approach. Jesus consistently upheld the authority of Scripture while also engaging with and reshaping Jewish traditions. For example, in Matthew 4:4, Jesus responds to Satan's temptations by quoting Deuteronomy, affirming the primacy of Scripture. However, Jesus also critically engages with Jewish traditions that diverged from God's original intent, such as when He rebukes the Pharisees in Matthew 15:3-6 for placing their traditions above God's commandments.<sup>14</sup> This model demonstrates that while tradition has value, it must always be subject to Scripture.

### **Biblical Basis**

Supporters of *prima scriptura* argue that Scripture itself supports the use of tradition, as seen in 2 Thessalonians 2:15, where Paul instructs the Thessalonians to “*stand firm and hold to the traditions*” taught by the apostles. Similarly, 1 Corinthians 11:2 commends the church for maintaining apostolic traditions, indicating that tradition and Scripture can coexist as authorities.<sup>15</sup> However, these traditions are always evaluated against Scripture.

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<sup>13</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th ed. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 148-150.

<sup>14</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church Under Persecution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 281-283.

<sup>15</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (New York: Continuum, 2000), 40-42.

## Historical Support (Up to 681)

The theological foundation for *prima scriptura* draws heavily on the early Church Fathers, especially up to the year 681. Leaders like Irenaeus and Augustine relied on both Scripture and apostolic traditions to defend orthodoxy. Ecumenical councils, such as Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451), reflected the *prima scriptura* approach, with Scripture providing the primary foundation, and tradition (alongside reason) assisting in the articulation of key doctrines like the Trinity and the hypostatic union.<sup>16</sup>

The Third Council of Constantinople (681) solidified the two-wills doctrine of Christ, drawing from both Scripture and tradition but always under the authority of Scripture.<sup>17</sup>

## Strengths

A key strength of *prima scriptura*, particularly in the Jesus Model, is its allowance for a fuller understanding of Scripture. While Sola Scriptura can risk isolating Scripture from valuable historical context, and Sacra Scriptura et Traditio may elevate tradition in a way that compromises the primacy of Scripture, *prima scriptura* offers a more balanced approach that respects Scripture's authority while allowing for the valuable insights of tradition and reason. By incorporating the wisdom of tradition, reason, and experience, it helps avoid overly subjective interpretations. The Jesus Model provides a clear template for how Christians today can respect historical tradition while maintaining Scripture's authority as primary.

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<sup>16</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)*, vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 210-216.

<sup>17</sup> Brian E. Daley, *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 218-221.

## **Steelman Consideration**

When steelmanning *prima scriptura*, it becomes evident that this position balances Scripture's primacy with the necessity of tradition. The historical councils before 681 show that tradition, while subordinate to Scripture, plays an essential role in interpreting and preserving orthodoxy.<sup>18</sup> This approach provides flexibility, historical grounding, and theological coherence.

## **V. SACRA SCRIPTURA ET TRADITIO (SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION)**

### **Definition**

This position, primarily associated with the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, maintains that both Scripture and Sacred Tradition are co-equal sources of divine revelation. Tradition is not merely supplementary to Scripture but an essential means through which the full deposit of faith is transmitted.

### **Biblical Basis**

Supporters of *sacra scriptura et traditio* often cite passages such as Matthew 16:18-19, where Christ gives Peter authority to “*bind and loose*,” granting the Church an authoritative role in interpreting God's will. Additionally, John 21:25 suggests that not all of Jesus' teachings were written down, thus leaving room for Tradition to transmit some of these unwritten teachings. 1 Timothy 3:15, which refers to the Church as “*the pillar*

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<sup>18</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History: Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 305-307.

*and foundation of the truth,*” underscores the Church’s authoritative role in preserving and interpreting divine revelation.<sup>19</sup>

### **Historical Support**

Historically, this position has deep roots in early Christianity. The Church Fathers, ecumenical councils, and early creeds relied heavily on both Scripture and oral tradition to define orthodox Christian beliefs. The councils up to and including 681 demonstrate how tradition functioned alongside Scripture in articulating key doctrines, particularly the ontology of Christ.<sup>20</sup>

### **Strengths**

One of the key strengths of *sacra scriptura et traditio* is its ability to preserve the unity and continuity of Christian doctrine across centuries. By elevating Tradition alongside Scripture, this approach ensures that the Church’s teachings remain consistent with the apostolic faith. It also provides a safeguard against individualistic interpretations of Scripture by relying on the collective wisdom of the Church through the ages.

### **Steelman Consideration**

Steelmaning *sacra scriptura et traditio* requires acknowledging the role Tradition plays in maintaining doctrinal stability. Tradition offers a way to prevent doctrinal error by rooting itself in the historical faith.<sup>21</sup> By upholding the co-authority of

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<sup>19</sup> Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and Theological Essay* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 146-150.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph T. Lienhard, *The Bible, the Church, and Authority: The Canon of the Christian Bible in History and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 91-94.

<sup>21</sup> Michael J. Svelg, *RetroChristianity: Reclaiming the Forgotten Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 152-155.

Scripture and Tradition, this approach provides a robust framework for theological continuity.

### **Addressing the Spectrum Between *Sola Scriptura* and *Prima Scriptura***

One of the key challenges in discussing *Sola Scriptura* and *Prima Scriptura* is the fluid spectrum that exists between the two approaches. While these frameworks are often presented as distinct, their practical application reveals significant overlap, with many individuals and traditions adopting elements of both depending on context. This section explores the dynamics of this spectrum and its implications for theological practice.

## **VI. THE SPECTRUM IN PRACTICE**

The theoretical distinctions between *Sola Scriptura* and *Prima Scriptura* lie in how they prioritize Scripture relative to tradition, reason, and experience. However, in practice, adherents often find themselves navigating a continuum rather than strictly adhering to one framework. This fluidity can be categorized into three overlapping tendencies:

### **Functional *Prima Scriptura* Among *Sola Scriptura* Advocates**

- Many who identify with *Sola Scriptura* inadvertently operate within a *Prima Scriptura* framework. For instance, Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin heavily relied on early church councils, patristic writings, and historical theology to defend doctrines such as justification by faith alone and the Trinity. While

these sources were subordinated to Scripture, their use reflects a *Prima Scriptura* methodology.<sup>22</sup>

- Modern evangelicals who prioritize historical context, original languages, and insights from theologians to interpret Scripture are likewise functionally engaging with *Prima Scriptura*. This approach integrates tradition and reason as interpretive tools without compromising Scripture's ultimate authority.<sup>23</sup>

### **Prima Scriptura Leaning Towards Sola Scriptura**

- On the other side of the spectrum, some *Prima Scriptura* proponents emphasize Scripture's primacy so strongly that their approach resembles *Sola Scriptura*. For example, Anglican theologian Richard Hooker upheld the authority of Scripture while incorporating tradition and reason. However, his emphasis on scriptural sufficiency for salvation and doctrine aligns closely with classical *Sola Scriptura* definitions.<sup>24</sup>
- In ecumenical dialogues, *Prima Scriptura* advocates often distance themselves from any perception of elevating tradition to a co-equal status with Scripture, further narrowing the gap between these approaches.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Martin Luther, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in *Luther's Works*, vol. 36, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 107–109.

<sup>23</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1.7.5–7.

<sup>24</sup> Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2:231–233.

<sup>25</sup> Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 79–82.

## Shifting Contexts and Emphases

- The same individual or tradition may oscillate between *Sola* and *Prima Scriptura* depending on the theological or pastoral context. For instance:
  - In debates with Roman Catholicism, Protestants might adopt a more rigid *Sola Scriptura* stance to counter claims of tradition's co-authority.<sup>26</sup>
  - In pastoral counseling or academic settings, the same individuals might lean on tradition and reason, reflecting a *Prima Scriptura* methodology.<sup>27</sup>
- This adaptability highlights the practicality of these frameworks as tools for engaging different challenges rather than rigid doctrines.<sup>28</sup>

## Implications for Theological Practice

Understanding the spectrum between *Sola Scriptura* and *Prima Scriptura* enriches theological discourse and practice in several ways:

### Fostering Unity in Diversity

- Recognizing the shared reliance on tradition, reason, and experience within both frameworks can bridge divides among Protestants and between Protestants and other Christian traditions.<sup>29</sup>
- Emphasizing the spectrum encourages mutual respect for differing emphases while affirming the central role of Scripture in all approaches.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 105–108.

<sup>27</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 147–149.

<sup>28</sup> Heiko Oberman, *The Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 364–366.

<sup>29</sup> D. H. Williams, *Tradition, Scripture, and Interpretation: A Sourcebook of the Ancient Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 155–157.

<sup>30</sup> Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 203–206.



## Encouraging Self-Reflection

- Adherents of both positions benefit from reflecting on how their practices align with their stated beliefs. For example:
  - Do *Sola Scriptura* advocates acknowledge their functional reliance on tradition and historical context?<sup>31</sup>
  - Do *Prima Scriptura* proponents maintain Scripture's primacy while integrating other sources?<sup>32</sup>

## Promoting Balanced Interpretation

- Understanding the spectrum discourages extremes, such as the isolation of *Nuda Scriptura* or the overreliance on tradition seen in *Sacra Scriptura et Traditio*.<sup>33</sup>
- A balanced approach respects the authority of Scripture while valuing the insights of tradition, reason, and experience, ensuring robust and faithful interpretation.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion

The spectrum between *Sola Scriptura* and *Prima Scriptura* reflects the dynamic interplay of Scripture, tradition, and reason in theological practice. Rather than rigidly adhering to one framework, many Christians navigate this continuum, adapting their approach to meet specific theological and pastoral challenges. By acknowledging this fluidity, we can foster deeper understanding and collaboration across traditions, affirming

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<sup>31</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (London: Continuum, 1978), 37–40.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 212–214.

<sup>33</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2005), 51–53.

<sup>34</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 143–145.

the primacy of Scripture while embracing the richness of historical and communal wisdom.

## VII. CRITICAL COMPARISON AND EVALUATION

Each of these three approaches presents a distinct framework for understanding the relationship between Scripture and authority. *Sola scriptura* offers a direct engagement with the biblical text, ensuring the sufficiency of Scripture for salvation and doctrine. However, it has been critiqued for potentially leading to interpretive subjectivity and fragmentation, as seen in the proliferation of Protestant denominations.

*Prima scriptura*, particularly as demonstrated by the Jesus Model and anchored in pre-681 tradition, maintains Scripture's primacy while acknowledging the value of tradition, reason, and experience in the interpretive process. This approach balances flexibility and historical grounding, avoiding both rigidity and unchecked doctrinal innovation.<sup>35</sup> The Third Council of Constantinople (681) solidified the two-wills doctrine, also known as Dyothelitism<sup>36</sup>—the belief in Christ's two wills, divine and human—drawing from both Scripture and tradition but always under the authority of Scripture. This Christological resolution is foundational for maintaining orthodoxy while ensuring that later doctrinal developments do not overshadow Scripture's primacy.

Meanwhile, *sacra scriptura et traditio* provides a strong safeguard against interpretive error by elevating Tradition to a co-equal status with Scripture. However, it

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<sup>35</sup> Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 211–13.

<sup>36</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 422–425.

has been critiqued for potentially compromising the unique authority of Scripture by elevating the Church's role in the transmission of divine revelation.

### **Sola, Prima, and Sacra Scriptura Compared to Solo Scriptura**

While *sola scriptura*, *prima scriptura*, and *sacra scriptura et traditio* each offer distinct frameworks for engaging with Scripture, they all share a rejection of *solo scriptura*, an individualistic misuse of biblical authority. *Sola scriptura* maintains that Scripture alone is the final authority but recognizes the value of historical tradition as long as it is subordinated to Scripture. However, *solo scriptura* distorts this principle by rejecting the importance of community and tradition altogether, leaving individuals without accountability in their interpretation. In contrast, *prima scriptura* emphasizes that Scripture is the highest authority while affirming that tradition, reason, and experience play valuable roles in informing interpretation. *Solo scriptura* neglects this balance, often resulting in fragmented or subjective theology.

Meanwhile, *sacra scriptura et traditio*, the framework followed by Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, elevates tradition to a co-equal status with Scripture. Although different from *prima* and *sola scriptura*, this view also rejects the isolation found in *solo scriptura*, insisting on the necessity of church authority to safeguard the correct interpretation of divine revelation. In sum, all three frameworks recognize that interpreting Scripture requires more than personal insight, distinguishing themselves from the errors of *solo scriptura*, which places interpretive authority solely in the hands of the individual.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Michael J. Svigel, *RetroChristianity*, 85–88.

## The Danger of Nuda Scriptura

While *sola scriptura* distorts biblical authority by isolating Scripture from the guidance of tradition and community, *nuda scriptura* represents an equally problematic approach. *Nuda Scriptura* assumes that Scripture can be fully understood in isolation from historical, cultural, and theological contexts, effectively stripping the Bible of its depth and richness.<sup>38</sup> This view, often conflated with *sola scriptura*, reduces Scripture to a static text divorced from the dynamic interplay of divine revelation and human culture.<sup>39</sup>

### Key Pitfalls of *Nuda Scriptura*:

- **Contextual Ignorance:**

By neglecting the cultural and historical backgrounds of the biblical authors, *nuda scriptura* risks shallow or distorted interpretations. For instance, understanding biblical references to kingship, sacrifice, or law requires familiarity with ancient Near Eastern customs and practices.<sup>40</sup>

- **Loss of Communal Wisdom:**

*nuda scriptura* bypasses centuries of theological insight and communal interpretation, resulting in interpretations that often reflect personal biases rather than the intended message of the text.

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<sup>38</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 84–85.

<sup>39</sup> James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 15–20.

<sup>40</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 152–54.

- **Theological Minimalism:**

By ignoring the providential shaping of Scripture through human authorship and cultural influences, *nuda scriptura* reduces the Bible to a set of isolated proof texts, disconnected from its broader theological narrative.<sup>41</sup>

**Differentiating *Sola Scriptura* from *Nuda Scriptura*:**

While *nuda scriptura* may appear to align with *Sola Scriptura*, the Reformers themselves rejected this extreme. Figures like Martin Luther<sup>42</sup> and John Calvin relied heavily on historical context, tradition, and reason to articulate doctrines like justification and the sacraments.<sup>43</sup> *Sola Scriptura* affirms the primacy of Scripture but acknowledges that understanding Scripture requires the Spirit's guidance and engagement with the Church's collective wisdom.

***Prima Scriptura*'s Response:**

*Prima Scriptura* explicitly rejects both *Sola* and *Nuda Scriptura* by balancing Scripture's authority with the contributions of tradition, reason, and experience. It affirms that God not only inspired the biblical text but also sovereignly shaped the cultural, historical, and theological contexts in which it was written. This framework allows for a robust, contextualized interpretation that honors both the divine and human elements of Scripture.

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<sup>41</sup> Michael J. Svigel, *RetroChristianity: Reclaiming the Forgotten Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 42–44.

<sup>42</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 168–70.

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## VIII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, each of the three methods of engaging with Scripture offers valuable insights. By steelmanning the positions I do not hold, I have presented them in their strongest forms, demonstrating their theological coherence. Among these, the Jesus Model, as articulated within Prima Scriptura, offers the most compelling and balanced framework for honoring the primacy of Scripture while drawing on the wisdom of tradition, reason, and experience. By limiting the influence of tradition to the year 681, Prima Scriptura safeguards the authority of Scripture and ensures fidelity to early Church orthodoxy, making it the most historically grounded and doctrinally sound approach for interpreting Scripture.

This approach not only preserves the historical integrity of Christian doctrine but also provides a practical framework for addressing modern theological challenges, such as the Church's response to shifting cultural attitudes on issues like gender identity, marriage, and social justice. Prima Scriptura allows believers to engage with these contemporary issues by upholding the primacy of Scripture while recognizing the valuable contributions of tradition and reason. In doing so, it ensures that interpretations remain faithful to the original texts while remaining responsive to the moral and ethical questions of today. Ultimately, Prima Scriptura provides a path forward that honors the authority of Scripture while thoughtfully navigating the complexities of modern life.

While *sacra scriptura et traditio* rightly emphasizes the historical role of Church tradition, the claim that tradition is co-equal with Scripture and safeguarded by apostolic succession lacks strong evidence in the earliest Church Fathers. Councils like Nicaea and Chalcedon drew heavily on Scripture as primary, using tradition as a subordinate guide.

Prima Scriptura better reflects this early Church model—prior to later ecclesiastical developments that centralized magisterial authority.

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