

Sola Scriptura:
Reforming the pulpit in the age of sovereign self
(자아 주권 시대 속에 강단의 개혁)

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The principle of *sola scriptura* was a major theme in the 16th-century European Reformation that shaped its character and agenda. Over the following centuries of Protestant development, the principle has been reemphasized and reapplied, while being redefined and recharacterized. At times, it was used to falsely justify certain people's tendency towards Biblicism, on one hand, and unwarranted interpretive individualism, on the other. Such misapplications have contributed to detrimental results instead of propelling the church towards a deeper reformation in the spirit of *semper reformanda*.

What then is the proper meaning of *sola scriptura*? One hint appears in Martin Luther's famous declaration at the Diet of Worms in 1521, when he stood his ground against the pressure of the Holy Roman Emperor; he demanded that Luther recant his published condemnation of the abusive practices of the late-medieval Catholic Church, including the infamous sale of indulgences. But Luther said, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the scriptures or by 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 conscience is captive to the Word of God."¹ Luther is boldly declaring that the scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments are the only final judge of what is true for our faith and

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan et al., trans. and ed., "Luther at the Diet of Worms," *Luther's Works* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1955-1968), v. 32, p. 112.

practice, and they are defensible in good conscience and reason as these faculties also are brought captive under the Word of God. John Calvin followed Luther's conviction and wrote in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that he identified the true believers as those who "know [that] the true rule of righteousness is to be sought from scripture alone."² The key phrase is "the true rule," which refers to the idea of a judge. It is Scripture that renders the final judgement over our faith and conduct. This principle is well summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith: "The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture" (1:10). Therefore, Scripture is the locus of the Holy Spirit's voice, speaking authoritatively as the final judge over "all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life" (1:6).

Then the main point of the principle of *sola scriptura* pertains to the issue of authority. Mark Thompson, -- having surveyed the thoughts of Luther, Melancthon, Zwingli, Bullinger, Calvin and Cranmer in his extensive article, -- affirms this conclusion as well: "*Sola Scriptura*, the conviction that Scripture stands alone as the final authority by which every other claim to Christian truth is tested, has long been described as the formal principle of the Reformation."³ Who holds the final authority? What is the final determinant to decide what is acceptable and what is not? The Reformation principle says that it is Scripture in which God speaks with absolute authority as the one and only, the exclusive Lord of all things. If so, the church bears the secondary authority derived from Scripture. If the church does not stand and operate based on

² J. T. McNeil, ed., *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by John Calvin (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:811.

³ Mark D. Thompson, "*Sola Scriptura*" in Matthew Barrett, ed., *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), p. 185.

Scripture, then the church has no warrant for claiming any religious authority. “[But] you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:19, 20, ESV). The foundation of the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments upholds the integrity of the true church.

The Reformation did not invent the idea of Scripture being the final authority; the true church from the very beginning has always gathered around “the Book” regularly to hear from it attentively and to order life of faith and obedience according to it. David Lyle Jeffrey surveyed the Old and the New Testament and the history of the Western Christianity in his work, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture*. His thesis is that Western Christianity is a movement of “a people of the book” and that they have been the main impetus for “the Western literacy” and its “literary culture.”⁴ Jeffrey argued against the pattern of Post-modernist thinking that rejects Western Christian tradition as “logocentrism”, negatively understood. He claimed instead that historic Christianity, with its center in the Bible, is at the very core of any meaningful elements found in the Western civilization.

As one surveys the history of Korean Christianity, the same argument can apply. Modern Korean history cannot be thought of apart from the translation of the Bible into *Hangul*. The early missionaries and the first Korean Christians in Manchuria and in Japan collaborated for the first translations. The subsequent Protestant mission in Korea spread the general use of the phonetic writing system. Ironically, it was buried for a long time under the tyranny of the Confucian literati, who stubbornly held on to the use of Chinese characters, because of the

⁴ David Lyle Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996). When the book was published, Jeffrey was a professor of English at the University of Ottawa and was widely active in North America as an Evangelical scholar of Humanities.

reason that *Hangul* was so accessible to all people. They thought that a language easy enough for “women and children” to learn was not worthy of literary dignity. The new Korea was in large part constructed on the foundation of the popularized use of *Hangul* by which both men and women and young and old were made able to read Scripture first hand. This is how the modern Korea rose to become a people group of nearly perfect literacy.

Christianity’s power resides in the expounding of Scripture done repeatedly in the regularly conducted gatherings of the people. This is what defined the church over the centuries as a unique faith community that continues to live and thrive, while outliving errors and misjudgment of men who have risen against the truth time after time.

A point of caution must be said, however: When the principle of *sola scriptura* is misappropriated, it fails to do what it originally intended to do, that is to establish Scripture as the final authority over our faith and life. In fact, it is that misappropriation which caused the major side-effect of the Reformation: the rise of religious individualism of the sectarian varieties of, so called, “radical” Reformers. This is the very point Mark Noll makes when he says that the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura* “liberated the Scripture to speak the words of God without fear or favor, [but] it also trivialized those words through multiple iterations of . . . ‘pervasive interpretive pluralism.’”⁵ This is truly ironic in light of the fact that *sola scriptura* was meant to address the problem of improperly placed authority. Scripture was to function as the external and objective authority over every Christian; but instead certain people began to use Scripture assuming the authority of individuals to exercise interpretative freedom. As this issue continues to play out in the contemporary situation, the principle of *sola scriptura* is wrongfully

⁵ Mark A. Noll, “The Gift of *Sola Scriptura* to the World” in John Witte Jr. & Amy Wheeler, eds., *The Protestant Reformation of the Church and the World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), p. 23. Noll cites the phrase, “pervasive interpretive pluralism,” from Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011).

understood as a Biblicist claim rather than what it should be, i.e. an authority claim. As a result, what we face is the reality of many churches giving in to the Post-modern symptoms of radical subjectivism and psychologizing of faith while still claiming to abide by the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*.

In this paper, I want to apply the principle of *sola scriptura*, according to its proper meaning, into the context of the error of our time: radical subjectivism and the psychologizing of the culture. Also, I will suggest four points of remedy for the ministry of preaching that may suffer the danger of either misappropriating the principle or being brought under the pervasive culture of radical subjectivism. These points highlight, on one hand, the character of Scripture as a text that is given in an objective manner and, on the other hand, our need to embrace hermeneutical accountability offered to us communally through history, academia, and the church.

The Age of Sovereign Self

I labelled our time as “the age of sovereign self.” But an elevation of oneself to the position of the final judge of all things, or the claim of autonomy, certainly is not new to this age. In fact, we may say that it is the very foundational sin stemming from the original fall. The ancient serpent’s line of questioning began with “Did God actually say?” In the ensuing conversation with Eve, the serpent wasted no time in bringing objection to God’s Word. “Not so!” he said and invited the woman to grab hold of a divine status, “to be like God.” Her mind began to come unhinged from the Word of God. She willfully rejected the notion of Creator-creature distinction. She began to engage in the act of judging for herself: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to

be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit and ate” (Genesis 3:6, ESV). Her claim of autonomy, being the law unto herself, however, was a mere illusion. She was *not* in the position of neutrality but was already deeply influenced by the words of the serpent. She was given into his lies and acted upon them when she ate the fruit of the tree. Thus, the pattern of this sin began.

As the reality of the original fall casts shadow on all subsequent human history, thought and culture, we observe how the claim of human autonomy plays out. Especially in the past few centuries, there has been a general movement of human thought away from the idea that there is an objective standard for moral judgement and an external authority distinct from oneself. In the West, the 18th-century was marked by the rise of the Enlightenment spirit, characterized by the elevated notion of human reason. At the time of the 16th-century Reformation, the principle of *sola scriptura* was applied to the situation of Scripture vs. Tradition. But with the 18th-century Enlightenment, it was Scripture vs. Reason.

We observe that the issue of the Reformation was not about an internalized sense of authority. Tradition remained an external authority over the people. But with the Enlightenment, a movement towards internality already begins to take shape. Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804) brought about a philosophical synthesis that essentially made anything outside of the judgement of human reason, based on sense-experiences, the “limiting concepts.” There was no point of dealing philosophically or even morally with the matters outside the limits of one’s natural understanding. Already then, the idea began to converge on the notion that the reality as I see it and only as I see it matters. With Modernism arriving in the 19th-century, the claims of empirical science became supreme. The credibility and validity of the human mind hinged on the claims of science, and with it the true promise of human progress rested. The arrival of the 20th-century did not feature an epistemological innovation, except that doubts began to creep into the Western

civilization with the two world wars which challenged the merits of what had been previously thought of as human advancement. The wars featured decay of information in various forms of propaganda, and it brought about an epistemological crisis. Where is the truth located? How do you know what you know? Post-modernity arrived in the latter half of the 20th-century into the 21st-century with doubts cast on the possibility of certainty. Especially in the realm of religion, the idea of supernatural revelation with its meta-narrative of God's dealing with the world and the system of transcendent ethics seemed unwarranted. Then we see in Post-modernity a radical turn toward internality, almost to its extreme ends. It is now the situation of Scripture vs. Self. Let me expand on this idea further by referencing a few contemporary authors.

David F. Wells, an Evangelical church historian, has actively sought to evaluate the culture of American Evangelicalism today. In his book, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World*, Wells laments the general condition of American culture today. The American social consciousness has shifted away from a world of morality and into the world of psychology. People seem to be increasingly consumed by the idea of "inner self" and how it needs to be treated therapeutically. The languages of sin or moral wrongs find no place, and they only offend the contemporary sensibility when they appear. People do not need repentance nor forgiveness; they need therapeutic healing by acceptance and affirmation and psychological massaging. "In a psychological world, we want therapy; in a moral world, a world of right and wrong and good and evil, we want redemption. In a psychological world, we want to be happy. In a moral world, we want to be holy. In the one, we want to feel good, but in the other we want to be good."⁶ Unfortunately, Wells sees that the cultural shift deeply controls the Evangelical's mindset as well. He is concerned that biblical preaching has been replaced by

⁶ David F. Wells, *God in the Whirlwind: How the Holy-love of God Reorients Our World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), p. 126.

inspirational talks. Those presuming to be culturally relevant church leaders see the congregation as an audience or clients with wounded inner selves seeking to be affirmed and healed; far from their concern is the biblical notion of God's holiness and His call for His people to pursue the life that reflects that holiness. There is a serious misunderstanding of the nature of God's love, the "holy-love". "He is not before us to be used by us. He is not there begging to enter our internal world and satisfy our therapeutic needs. We are before him to hear his commandment. And his commandment is that we should be holy, which is a much greater thing than being happy."⁷ Wells warns the church that cultural conformity will in fact make church irrelevant: "The more churches become like their own culture, the less reason there is to be in a church. What the church offers can be had from the culture far more conveniently and perhaps at less cost."⁸

More recently, Carl Trueman, a Reformation scholar and historian, published a work featuring social and cultural analysis focusing on the concept of human selfhood. As a Briton working in America, his social context is a bit broader than David Wells'. He is concerned with the historical trend in the Western society at large. In *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*, Trueman is seeking to make sense of the contemporary obsession with and politicizing of sexual identity. How did we get to where we are? As a historian, he provides a history from the Enlightenment to the current period documenting how the present concept of human selfhood emerged in the Western society. For our purpose, the key takeaway from Trueman's engaging work is how human inner psychology, characterized by the functions of "feelings" and "intuitions", has become a decisive factor in determining a person's identity and, thus, direction in life.

⁷ Ibid., p. 127.

⁸ Ibid., p. 199.

The result of this tendency is quite horrendous to say the least. “If the inner psychological life of the individual is *sovereign* (emphasis mine), then identity becomes as potentially unlimited as the human imagination.”⁹ That means one may become whatever he or she imagines oneself to be. Human identity, especially gender and sexuality in the modern obsession, is as fluid as one’s feeling, that is whatever one feels like. As the culture finds no defense for this tidal wave of thinking and the governments guided by the general feeling of the population as expressed in polls, such self-generated identities cannot be refused by the society; rather they must be recognized as legitimate and be accepted as matters of individual right. Trueman mentions culture-shaping thinkers such as John-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Karl Marx (1818-1883), Frederick Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Charles Darwin (1809-1882) as contributors in this process: “[In] their different ways [they] provided conceptual justification for rejection of the notion of human nature and thus paved the way for the plausibility of the idea that human beings are plastic creatures with no fixed identity founded on an intrinsic and ineradicable essence.”¹⁰ He also mentions Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) as the one who is responsible for leading people to believe that human are at the core “sexual beings” and the human identity is shaped ultimately by our sexual desires.

In all, Trueman laments the “cultural amnesia” that the contemporary Western society continues to choose to forget the Christian moral worldview though it is the very foundation of the Western society itself. What Trueman finds in the contemporary Western culture is, in agreement with David Wells, “a therapeutic culture of expressive individualism.”¹¹ In this culture, the only ethical issue that remains is whatever way of conduct one chooses at a given

⁹ Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), p. 50.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.166.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 348.

moment. In turn, the social ethical norm narrows down to the idea of “tolerance”; the worst evil turns out to be “intolerance”, which is often denounced as bigotry and hate. Who can dare object to the “sovereign self”?

Our Evangelical Pulpits Today

Now we turn to the topic of preaching in our days. The faithful and true preaching of the Word is a means of grace that brings God’s work of salvation (both definitive and progressive) into the life of the church as the Kingdom people belong to the King. Right preaching is a covenantal act: to bring constantly to the attention of the people the covenantal promises and the commandments, in order that they may be God’s holy people, set apart for His purpose. Through the preaching of the Word, the King speaks authoritatively from His heavenly sanctuary, as He sends forth the Word and Spirit to address His people. This is the *kerygma*, the declaration and proclamation of the Gospel that says, “Your God reigns” (Isaiah 52:7) and that He is the “deliverer” of His own people (Psalm 40:9). But, as David Wells said, in many of the Evangelical pulpits today, sound biblical preaching has been replaced by inspirational talks.

The biblical call for the church is that she would exist in the world as a subversive community: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2, ESV); “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few” (Matthew 7:13,14, ESV). Already in the eyes of the apostle Paul, there looms large the “times of difficulty” coming upon the church. We can never say that there was no warning: “But understand this, that in the last days there will

come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self . . . , lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:1, 2). When ministers lose focus on the subversiveness of Christian discipleship but turn their eyes towards mere opportunistic ministerial success, when the church ministry and growth are seen mostly in terms of sociology and psychology rather than biblically and theologically, the result will be a colossal spiritual failure. Most of all, the Lord will confront the church as he has done repeatedly in history. “For it is time for judgement to begin at the household of God” (1 Peter 4:16, ESV). “We who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1, ESV). David Wells also sounds a prophetic warning:

The constant cultural bombardment of individualism, *in the absence of a robust theology* (emphasis mine), meant that faith that had rightly been understood as personal earlier on was not becoming merely individualistic. It was self-focused and consumer-oriented. It was a faith in search of comfort and assurance in the midst of all the anxieties created by modern life. But this comfort and assurance were all about the private interior world. More than that, they were about therapy and rarely about truth. That was the change to which the church marketers attuned themselves. Instead of seeing this turn inward, this yearning for therapy, as a weakness to be resisted, they used it as an opportunity to be exploited. Increasingly, evangelical faith was released from any connections with the past, from every consideration except the self, and was imbued with no other objective by the pastors involved in this undertaking than entrepreneurial success. As the evangelical experience was thus cut loose, it became increasingly cultural, increasingly empty, increasingly superficial, and increasingly irrelevant in the modern world. After all, what did it really have to offer?¹²

The problem of the pulpit and other ministries giving into pragmatism was detected more than a century ago by Geerhardus Vos. Already in late 19th-century America, he found that “from the pulpit, there was too little theologically or doctrinally-oriented preaching that would help believers place individual truths with reference to the whole of God’s revelation and apply them

¹² David F. Wells, *Courage to be Protestant: Reformation Faith in Today’s World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), p. 9.

to the whole of their lives.”¹³ Vos found in American Christianity “an antipathy toward everything (especially in theology) that is abstract and theoretical.” With it “any dogmatic or theological unity of thought” was being lost; instead, people were instilled with “a habit of being satisfied with practical solutions.”¹⁴ In contrast, he argued “that fruitful praxis can only be achieved by means of a slow growth of theory.”¹⁵ Apparently, “an absence of a robust theology” in the mind and the ministry of pastors is not a new problem in America. Unfortunately, to this date, in many sectors of theological education and training the problem is not adequately addressed. The result is the enculturation in the age of sovereign self and the loss of biblical mandate for the church to be a subversive community belonging to the Kingdom of God.

How do we restore the true meaning of the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* in this contemporary situation? How can we establish Scripture as the final authority, external to ourselves, over our faith and practice while dethroning “self” from its illegitimate claim of sovereignty? How can the church resist a faulty use of Scripture as means to individualistic ends? How can we challenge those who use the Bible as a diving board for a sermon turned into an inspirational talk? How can we re-orient the tendency of personal Q.T. that moves too quickly from isolated Bible verse(s) to practical applications? How can we reform the pulpit to be shaped by the principle of *sola scriptura*?

I want to offer four points of recognition as an attempt to answer these questions. These are, by no means, new and original. Rather, they are mere reiterations of the old and familiar points. However, when these four points of recognition converge in pulpit ministry, we may

¹³ Bradley J. Bitner, “The Theological Vision of Geerhardus Vos: Theological Education and Reformed Ministry,” *Themelios* 46:3 (2021), p.647. In this article, Bitner introduces Vos’s first inaugural address, “The Prospects of American Theology,” delivered in 1888 when he was appointed a professor of didactic and exegetical theology at a Dutch Reformed seminary that later became Calvin Theological Seminary.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 659.

humbly expect a kerygmatic function of preaching to be restored and the awareness of the weight of divine authority resting in Scripture to re-enter into the hearts of both the preacher and the listeners. The four points are, (1) Recognition of the textual integrity as something objective; (2) Recognition of the coherence of biblical narrative; (3) Recognition of the diachronic theological community as well as the synchronic communities; (4) Recognition of a local church as a hermeneutical community.

1. Recognition of the textual integrity as something objective

The first recognition is an attempt to avoid trivializing and subjectifying the biblical text offered to the preacher and the listeners alike. It is important to recognize the “given-ness” of the text; therefore, you cannot try to make it anything you want it to be. Dan Kimball offers a few principles regarding how we ought to approach the Scripture in his guide book for Bible-readers. One of the principles says, “The Bible was written for us, but not to us.”¹⁶ To put it differently, one must put a healthy distance between oneself and the biblical text. There are both historical and linguistic-cultural distance between the text and the contemporary exegete. Therefore, one must not take lightly the importance of exegetical integrity. The principle of historical-grammatical exegesis plays an important role here.

The historical-grammatical interpretation of the Bible is generally thought of as a product of the Reformation and the post-Reformation periods in the Western Christianity.¹⁷ While it was not a completely new innovation of the time, the method was developed as a systematic program

¹⁶ Dan Kimball, *How (Not) to Read the Bible: Making Sense of the Anti-Women, Anti-Science, Pro-Violence, Pro-Slavery and Other Crazy-Sounding Parts of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020).

¹⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation: Sacred Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), p. 27.

by the Reformers such as Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox and others.¹⁸ This is not surprising since the Reformers were carriers of Renaissance humanist persuasion: Back to the source (*ad fonte*) was their motto. With the rise of humanism, “[the] task of establishing the text and of closely examining its grammar and syntax in the original languages became, by way of their humanistic training, one of the basic tasks in the Reformers’ exegesis.”¹⁹ Not only did they seek to go back to the original languages in which the Bible was written, but they also wanted to avoid the spiritualizing and allegorizing tendencies of the earlier interpretations of the Scripture according to the methods well entrenched in the Medieval period.

Calvin himself was a champion of reading the biblical texts in their historical contexts. “Calvin was still more consistent than Luther in his rejection of all *allegoresis* and in his stress on the need for historical-grammatical exegesis. True, he was not adverse to the Christological-typological interpretation of the Old Testament (as a matter of fact, this is consistent with his salvation-history approach) but he always remained cautious in its application. His general concern was *le sens naturel*, the natural meaning of the passage, for only in it do we find the meaning of the Spirit.”²⁰ Due to Calvin’s efforts to see the OT passages according to their natural meanings, he was even accused of engaging in “judaizing” exegesis, which led to some famous disputes towards the latter part of the 16th-century.²¹ But Calvin’s effort was to establish the church’s dogmatic claims on the soundest biblical foundation. “For Calvin, this meant a reading

¹⁸ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), pp.48f.

¹⁹ Richard A. Muller, “Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation: The View from the Middle Ages,” in Richard A. Muller & John L. Thompson, eds., *Biblical Interpretation in the Era of Reformation: Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 14.

²⁰ Klaas Runia, “The Hermeneutics of the Reformers,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, 19:2 (1984), p. 143.

²¹ Barbara Pitkin, “John Calvin and the Interpretation of the Bible,” in Alan J. Hauser & Duane F. Watson, eds. *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Medieval through the Reformation Periods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), p. 357.

of Scripture where the present did not eclipse the past and where dogmatic concerns emerged only when the human author might reasonably be assumed to be giving voice to them.”²²

In today’s hermeneutical world, the term historical-grammatical interpretation is disdained as a simplistic non-critical and literal reading of the text. However, that certainly was not the intent of the Reformers. They were concerned with the subjectifying tendencies of the allegorizers who twisted the text to their own imagination, practicing more frequently eisegesis rather than exegesis. They read into the text what they wished to see rather than reading out of the text what the author in a specific historical and grammatical context intended to say. In this sense, the Reformers such as Calvin wanted to introduce a science of exegesis that offered a kind of control against unwarranted interpretative freedom.

For our purpose, it suffices to say that there needs to be an exegetical integrity for preachers and all Christians alike. When we come to Scripture, we ought not to manipulate the text for our own subjective therapeutic needs. We must recognize the text as objectively there, as something that is set apart from oneself. This emphasis must be maintained in the Post-modern era when the culture is increasingly self-oriented. We must eschew reader-centered, client-centered, self-expressive tendencies of the time and continue to present the Word as that which has the power to “take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5, ESV).

2. Recognition of the coherence of biblical narratives

The Reformers were familiar with the idea that Scripture, consisting of both the Old and the New Testaments, is a unit. Luther perceived the two Testaments as a necessary pair that represented to us both the Law and the Gospel. Calvin was even more proactive in joining the

²² Ibid.

two under the theme of the covenant. For both, however, the center of the Scripture was Christ himself. The Christ-centered reading of Scripture is not a new innovation of contemporary hermeneutics; rather, it is a long-standing tradition from the days of Reformation.

In the Reformed circle, the one who captures our attention is Geerhardus Vos, who became the first chair of biblical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1894. His inaugural address, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline,” laid down the very basic structure of his idea of biblical theology as distinct from that of the German liberal brand. His concern was to present the whole Bible as a coherent narrative of one redemption history. The biblical revelation not only demonstrates coherence and unity, but it is also progressive, climaxing on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Biblical eschatology is a system of thought that pervades the whole of Scripture from the very beginning to the end. The reason for this coherence is due to the divine authorship of the whole Scripture: while many human authors are employed for its composition, they are all inspired by the same Holy Spirit, who in essence is the one author for the whole Scripture. Vos said, “Biblical Theology discusses both the form and contents of revelation from the point of view of the revealing activity of God Himself.”²³ It turns out that from that point of view, the Scripture is (1) historical, (2) organic, (3) progress, (4) eschatological, (5) multi-formed, (6) united in testimony, and (7) Christological. The Holy Spirit Himself as the author reveals “the divine philosophy,” which no human reader can dare to ignore and instead project into it one’s own self-made ideas.

²³ Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline” (Inaugural address as Professor of Biblical Theology in Princeton Theological Seminary, 1894) in Richard B. Gaffin, ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 3-24.

“Biblical Theology must insist upon claiming for its object not the thoughts and reflections and speculations of man, but the oracles of God.”²⁴

Along with Redemptive-Historical unity of Scripture, another coherent pattern is found in the notion of *missio Dei*, the mission of God. The idea is popularized by those who are the pioneers of the missional reading of Scripture, such as David Bosch and Leslie Newbigin, and more recently Michael Goheen, the editor of *Reading the Bible Missionally*.²⁵ Among them is a consensus that mission is a key theme of the Bible stemming from the very character of God as the one who sends. As revealed in Christ’s own words, the series of sending is what constitutes the very movement of the whole Scripture: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (John 20:21, ESV).

For our purpose, what we want to stress here again is the idea of coherence in the whole of the Scripture. In fact, Goheen observes the development of missional reading of Scripture is precisely in accord with the idea of the unity of Scripture:

A . . . trend in biblical scholarship favorable to a missional reading of Scripture is the development of hermeneutical approaches that take seriously longitudinal themes in Scripture and the message of the entire canon. Richa Bauckham points specifically to canonical and narrative critical approaches that come to Scripture with an awareness of the storied nature of the entire biblical canon. For a missional reading to develop, this kind of awareness is essential, since both the mission of God and the role of God’s people develop precisely in the unfolding of the biblical narrative. Even more promising is the recognition by some biblical scholars that the narrative unity of Scripture is not simply a hermeneutical or biblical-theological approach, but is a worldview-story or a metanarrative in which we are called to live the whole of our lives . . .²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Michael W. Goheen, *Reading the Bible Missionally* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016).

²⁶ Ibid., p.10.

This understanding of the unity of Scripture is critically important for fostering a healthy pulpit ministry. A preacher's concept of Scripture should not be in a state of fragmentation. One of the failures of contemporary theological education and Christian education in general is the problem of fragmentation. It is very possible that a theological seminary can operate without a coherent theological program. The students may be bombarded with many conflicting views and ideas. One may argue that such diversity of viewpoints generated in the atmosphere of academic freedom should help the students to cultivate minds of their own. However, that seems to be playing into the very issue of the modern view of selfhood. The contemporary view sees education as a way of self-discovery and coming to terms with oneself. However, human beings are irresistibly drawn to the pursuit of meaning. All things must come together in a meaningful way and contribute to the integrity of the whole. Diversity is meaningful only in the context of harmony and unity. Unity and diversity, then, are not conflicting concepts but complementary. This is consistent with the Christian worldview of the "ultimacy of One and Many" based on the doctrine of the Trinity. God is ultimately One and ultimately in Three Persons, and that is the ultimate reality we live in. As Vos observed, the Scripture has that character of One and Many: it is multi-formed, but it is also organically united as one whole story of God's redemption. When a preacher's mind is lodged in the understanding of the whole counsel of God as a unit, he will be able to stand against the temptation of radical subjectification that the culture demands.

3. Recognition of the diachronic theological community as well as the synchronic communities

Another important recognition that can safeguard us from subjectification is our conscientious participation in both the diachronic theological community as well as synchronic theological communities. This is an important protection against "pervasive interpretive

pluralism.”²⁷ By diachronic theological community, I mean the theological contributions made by all generations composing one historic Christianity. We must not think that Christianity began with us today. We must not be so proud to think that we’ve finally arrived at the best and final form of Christian faith. Though heirs of Reformation we are, we must not think that the true church of Christ began in the 16th-century. The entire 2,000+ years of church history belong to us. We must hear from every generation who engaged in theological reflections. We must also acknowledge that every generation can fall into its pervasive errors. Therefore, historical theology remains an important field of theological education. We must not be too quick to dismiss one era on one hand, and not be too quick to celebrate another on the other.

C. S. Lewis had a name for the problematic tendency of his age to dismiss the past simply because it belongs to the past: “the chronological snobbery.” It is “the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.”²⁸ It is not enough to dismiss something simply because it went out of fashion; you must find out first why it did. It is possible that you may find the problem dwelling not in the past but in the present.

To avoid falling into the problem, one important practice Lewis recommended is the reading of old books. An essay titled “On the Reading of Old Books” is a republication of an earlier work that was first printed as “Preface” to St. Athanasius’s classical work, *The Incarnation of the Word of God*. In this essay, Lewis pointed out that he was able to discover a familiar smell that ran across many different literatures that voice historic Christianity. This smell seemed to possess a great staying power. It simply did not change over time and even through repeated encounters. In the essay, he personally recommended these Christian authors:

²⁷ See footnote #4.

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955), p. 207

Richard Hooker (1554-1600), George Herbert (1593-1633), Thomas Traherne (1636-1674), Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667), John Bunyan (1628-1688), Boethius (b. 470), Augustine of Hippo (354-430), Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), François de Sales (1567-1622), Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), Izaak Walton (1593-1633), Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), Henry Vaughan (1622-1695), Jakob Boehme (1575-1624), William Law (1686-1761), Joseph Butler (1692-1752), Philip Sidney (1554-1586), Athanasius (296-373), and George MacDonald (1824-1905).²⁹ We certainly don't need to rely on Lewis's list for our edification. One can see that Lewis had a special love for 16th- and 17th-century English literatures, and his list seems to lean towards that direction. Another's list may look quite different, but we can still take Lewis's confidence that in reading old books, we may come to discover the familiar smell of historic Christianity. The Reformers who firmly held to the principle of *sola scriptura* quoted extensively from the Early Church Fathers to support their claims. The Reformation did not reject Christian tradition but only removed it from the position of the final authority. When it is placed in its proper locus, it helps us to remain well situated in the diachronic theological community, and it should keep us under a formidable accountability structure.

Also, another probably more important way we participate in the theological community of the past is by taking a good look at historic creeds and confessions. These have risen from the company of godly individuals who gathered in earnest to carefully knit together words and concepts to yield priceless formulae. The example of the Westminster Confession of Faith as the one confession to which nearly all Presbyterian churches around the globe subscribe in common is a powerful sign that the diachronic theological community does in fact exist and it is binding.

²⁹ C. S. Lewis, "On the Reading of Old Books" in Walter Hooper, ed., *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), pp. 200-204.

Now we move on to consider synchronic theological communities. By that, I am referring to many theological clusters that exist today. We may think of many theological societies in which we participate. Also, theological institutions usually feature theological communities of their own, consisting of professors and academic fellows. Bygone are the days when a single professor taught all disciplines for the students. While at times this may be unavoidable due to lack of human and other resources, it is not at all advisable. A theological community need not be large. It can be a group of 3 or 4 theologians who are mutually committed to keeping each other accountable. In fact, the act of publication and receiving reviews is happening with the background of a broad theological community. When no one reads your work and you don't read anyone else's, you are not likely to maintain a good theological health.

For pastors, Presbyterian system is established to provide check-and-balance for all members within it with no exception. In general, the heirs of the Reformation do not recognize the absolute authority of a single person. Such authoritarianism is not to be desired in the church nor in the state. So, not just Presbyterians but all Protestant denominations have a notion of accountability. If they do not, they are not living up to their name. Not only in the church government, but also in the work of the exegesis, no one should keep things in private and no leader should be in a walled in position where his preaching and teaching will never be accountable to anyone.

This mutual submission in accountability requires conscientious participation. One must be willing to continue to break down personal idols, and resist the temptation to build one's own kingdom. One must continuously seek to learn from others and to grow in knowledge drawing an upward spiral pattern through regular and substantial interactions with one another.

4. Recognition of a local church as a hermeneutical community

What pulpit ministers must keep in mind is that the Reformation attempted to place the Bible in the hands of every person in the church. With the invention of the printing press, the Reformation impetus was able to accelerate the process of change like no other movement of the past. We are now living in the era of digital revolution. If used rightly, the present digital culture may be helpful for the general distribution of Scripture to all people of all ages. In fact, with the easy accessibility of high-powered Bible software, the manner of Bible study for theologians, pastors, and lay people has changed dramatically. However, we still need to keep away from “pervasive interpretive pluralism.”³⁰ We don’t want to live in a world in which every individual is his or her own autonomous interpretive authority without accountability. Rather, we seek to be a “hermeneutical community” in which we are all formed and shaped by the community church, past, present, and global.

Furthermore, preachers do not monopolize the Bible. “Scripture, for evangelicals, belongs preeminently to the communion of saints. While some may have special gifts in understanding the Bible, these gifts do not warrant a self-authenticating magisterium of exegetical science.”³¹ Therefore, preaching, while an act of proclamation, should not be done without accountability. No preacher is infallible, only the Scripture is. Every preacher ought to be in a company of godly people who love, read, and study the Scripture together. A good Presbyterian church would have a robust session consisting of both ruling and teaching elders who are together under the authority of Scripture. It is advisable for all pastors to keep an on-going and open learning community for himself and other spiritual leaders in the role of

³⁰ See footnote #4.

³¹ Mark A. Noll, *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship, and the Bible in America* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), p.153.

shepherding where mutual corrections are possible under the light of Scripture. Walter Brueggemann insists, “[We] cannot be a faithful church if private, isolated communities of interpretation simply insist on reiterating their interpretations with the discipline and impingement of the whole church.”³² He continues, “The temptation to privatization reflects the fact that we have become largely a therapeutic community designed to deal with the psychic world of self.”³³

We should hope that the whole congregation can be nurtured into a hermeneutical community. This can only happen when they continually sit under a faithful and steady supply of sound expositions of the Bible from the pulpit. They can come together according to the identity of historic Christianity as “the people of the Book.” Let the congregation become active participants in the kerygmatic process that should run the course from proclamation by one, to the fostering of faith in all. “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?” (Romans 10:13-14, ESV).

A great example of active hermeneutical community is found in Acts 17:10-12. Of these noble Bereans, it is written, “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so. Many of them therefore believed, with not a few Greek women of high standing as well as men” (ESV). Also, Paul nurtured a hermeneutical community in Ephesus through his teaching

³² Walter Brueggemann, *The Book That Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 39.

³³ Ibid., p. 41. Brueggemann here is highlighting the problem of the therapeutic society focusing on self, relying on an American sociologist Robert Bellah’s thesis in Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

ministry at the Hall of Tyrannus. He preached the whole counsel of God, reasoning with them daily, and “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19:9, 10, ESV). As a result, Paul was able to commit the church into the hands of the Word-saturated elders, who were the shepherds placed over the flock: “[The] Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” And they are committed to keeping the church from false teachers who will “[speak] twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” So, Paul addressed them this way: “And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:27-32, ESV).

One of the symbolic, as well as practical, changes of the contemporary church in tune with the therapeutic culture of sovereign selfhood is the way the worship setting is arranged. The contemporary theatre-style arrangement, though visually very different from the traditional cathedrals, functions very much the same way. The pastor/cleric is on stage and spot-lighted, but the congregation remains under a dim light. The stage is set for performance and a motivational talk, while the “audience” is watching and listening. The concert-style performance of the band is “leading worship,” but the singers’ voices are overpowering and drown out all other voices. The TED Talk style preaching is short and dynamic, aided by those bright super-sized LCD screens behind the speaker that flash key phrases and Bible verses. Often, video clips are played over a sophisticated multi-media system. Though there may be exceptions where these technological innovations are actually helping the church to be nurtured as a hermeneutical community, more often than not, the effect is adverse. Such a setting does not give a generous amount of time and attention for the church to dwell on a passage together during a sermon. The sound of the Bible pages turning in a corporate worship is hardly heard these days. The worship

space is no longer a place of learning and engaging the mind; it is a space for religious entertainment and emotional hype. At what cost? Scripture as the very locus of the authoritative speaking of the Holy Spirit has been replaced by therapeutic music and a charming personality of a gifted communicator. Unfortunately, such emotional manipulation bears signs of manufactured revival and religious propaganda. The ones who can do these the best will win entrepreneurial success. The self-obsessed therapeutic culture wins; *sola scriptura* is eclipsed. Ironically, these things do happen in, so called, “Bible-believing” churches all around. We do need a new reformation for our time.

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to diagnose the cultural symptom of the day as a culmination of the process of internalizing and subjectifying that began as early as the Enlightenment period. The focus of authority has shifted from the external and objective reality of the authoritative Scripture toward self as defined in terms of the culture’s psychologizing tendencies. The “feelings” and “intuitions” are raised above the regenerate mind transformed by the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. The will of God is rejected in favor of the will of sovereign self. Even the church seems to be occupied with the lovers of selves rather than the lovers of God. Ironically, the principle of *sola scriptura* has turned on its own head. “Bible only” means to contemporary Evangelicals “I will use the Bible to help myself as best I can.” The principle is about the Bible being the final authority over our faith and life; instead, it just became an affirmation that the Bible offers us good material for our own service. To these enculturated Christians, Bible-believing means Bible-using, and worse, Bible-abusing.

I have offered four points of recognition as ways of countering the cultural trend, especially for those who are endeavoring to answer the lofty call of preaching the Word of God. They are simply the reiterations of the familiar ideas: a call for exegetical integrity, firmly embracing the unity of Scripture, engaging with historic Christian doctrines and those enduring old books as well as with cohorts in theological reflections, and nurturing the local church to become an active hermeneutical community. Christianity has always been lodged on Scripture: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17). Will it be *sola scriptura* or *sola cultura*?³⁴ We will do well by carefully listening and obeying the voice of “the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture” (WCF 1:10).

³⁴ Wells gives credit for this phrase to Os Guinness in David F. Wells, *Courage to be Protestant: Reformation Faith in Today's World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), p. 21.

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