

Commending *Sola Scriptura*: The Holy Spirit, the Church, and Doctrine

DAVID B. GARNER

Abstract

In post-Reformation dogmatics, the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the doctrine of Scripture has often received insufficient attention. Contemporary treatments have erred in different directions, subjugating the doctrine of Scripture to communal hermeneutics or individual experience. By contrast, the magisterial Reformers offer a vital doctrine of the Holy Spirit for the doctrine of Holy Scripture *in conjunction with* the stewardship of that Scripture by the Spirit-birthing, confessing church. Drawing upon certain reformational insights, this paper will present a high doctrine of Scripture, in a manner that integrates the ministry of the Holy Spirit for illumination *with* the essential role of the Spirit within the confessing church for handling doctrine—particularly the doctrine of Scripture.

Introduction

In a lecture given at Westminster Theological Seminary in the late 1970s, J. I. Packer urged a holistic, interdisciplinary approach to the doctrine of Scripture.¹ In the throes of the so-called “Battle for the Bible”² at Fuller Theological Seminary and within the broader neo-evangelical movement,³ Packer discerned a stubborn abstracting in Scripture’s treatment, even in conservative theological circles. In particular, he pinpointed in seminary curricula a destructive wedge between the nature of Scripture and its interpretation.

In keeping with Packer’s complaint, it is fair to say the *doctrine* of Scripture generally finds itself relegated to systematic or historical theology classes, while the *interpretation* of Scripture gets attention in the biblical studies departments. Systematics considers Scripture’s DNA; biblical studies consider Scripture’s meaning. In many cases, the curricula and the faculty teaching course material present no obvious relationship between what Scripture is and how that identity shapes proper interpretation. Effectively, as Packer diagnosed, biblical ontology and biblical interpretation revolve in non-concentric orbits.

Nearly fifty years later, despite his admonition, the problem that Packer addressed persists. Contributing to this problem are the storms of literary and linguistic analyses and the avalanche of new interpretive theories that have smashed evangelical confidence in Scripture.⁴ Such deconstructionist and postmodern assaults on the doctrine of Scripture, combined with its frequent academic mishandling, drive us to wonder whether or not the reformational doctrine of *sola Scriptura* has a future—at least in Western-influenced evangelical scholarship.

To hone the issue more finely, throughout the lecture, Packer assumes the “church” bears the mantle of theological stewardship. Packer does not define the church *per se* but manifestly assumes that development and expression of the doctrine of Scripture—and of all doctrinal reflection—are the province of the visible church. While most evangelicals might share

¹ J. I. Packer, “Developing the Doctrine of Holy Scripture,” Westminster Media, Westminster Theological Seminary (Glenside, PA: exact date unknown); (<http://media1.wts.edu/media/audio/jp101-copyright.mp3>).

² This phrase was popularized by Harold Lindsell due to his volume by the same name; see Harold Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976).

³ Out of this battle was birthed the Chicago Statement on Inerrancy; “Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy,” Bible Research, February 2001, <http://www.bible-researcher.com/chicago1.html>.

⁴ See, e.g., David B. Garner, ed., *Did God Really Say? Affirming the Truthfulness and Trustworthiness of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012).

Packer's ecclesial spirit, it is difficult to pinpoint more than a nominal connection between the confessing church and the contemporary evangelical theological enterprise. Elastic evangelical conceptions of church have made the church/scholarship relationship amorphous, if not vacuous.

With only some exceptions, the theological academy operates with little ostensible connection to the visible, confessing church. It would be presumptuous to assert that scholars typically celebrate personal disconnection from a particular congregation or presbytery, but their theological labors commonly operate in isolation from any ecclesial body. And whether by serendipity, out of pragmatism, or due to past doctrinal controversy, many of their institutions evidence no present concern for churchly affiliation. Some even appear to hold principal opposition to it.

To be fair, opposition may not expose a latent aversion to the church itself,⁵ nor does it necessarily betray scholars' motivation for academic respectability—securing that “place at the table,” as John D’Elia has described the lifelong academic aspirations of George Eldon Ladd.⁶ To many, the absence of ecclesial ties benefits theology. The church's boundaries allegedly stifle creativity and thereby obstruct authentic theological development. Only scholarship unencumbered by these church strictures supposedly safeguards freedom and ensures progress. Severing strings to denominations or curbing the force of ecclesial confessions preserves objectivity, unleashes creativity, and therefore *advances* scholarship.

It is the concern of this essay to challenge the rightness and effectiveness of a church-free approach to theological scholarship. Does scholarly independence from the visible church actually yield the fruitful results that advocates of so-called academic freedom claim it does? Whatever the answer to that question, it appears that Packer's assumption about the church's active role in the work of theology fails to align with the actual practices of contemporary biblical and theological scholarship. Contemporary scholarship has suffered a divorce from the church. With no small consequence, the most threatening developments in the doctrine of Scripture have surfaced largely in the academy, where autonomous scholarship is not only the *modus operandi*, it is also viewed as the *sine qua non* of scholarship itself.

In response, looking through Reformation and post-Reformation lenses, I want to confront the handling of doctrine outside of the historic, confessing church. The point here is not to impugn any one scholar, and it surely

⁵ That is, such disconnection does not necessarily draw upon particular scholars' own lack of desire for functional ecclesial answerability.

⁶ John A. D’Elia, *A Place at the Table: George Eldon Ladd and the Rehabilitation of Evangelical Scholarship in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

is not to put into question the value of penetrating theological inquiry. To the contrary, the goal is to urge ongoing academic rigor in a manner that yields to the Holy Spirit and the ecclesial structures that he has put in place for the stewardship of Holy Scripture. As Reformation theologians asserted, the visible church bears the responsibility for theological preservation and theological advance.

Punctuating various points by drawing upon select Reformers (particularly John Calvin) and upon post-Reformation dogmaticians (particularly Herman Bavinck and Abraham Kuyper), we will see that a return to such ecclesially framed scholarship is essential for a proper doctrine of Scripture, and indeed of all theological investigation. To that end, we chart our course according to the following map:

The *Objective* Gift: The Word of God and the Spirit

The *Subjective* Change: Regeneration and the Spirit

The *Collective* Responsibility: The Church and the Spirit.

I. *The Objective Gift: The Word of God and the Spirit*

For the Reformers, *sola Scriptura* entailed the conviction that *the Almighty God himself* is the Speaker in Scripture (Heb 1:1–2). The words of Scripture are the expressed (“breathed out”—2 Tim 3:16) Word of God, and as such, the Bible is “unswervingly true”⁷ and serves as the primary witness and the final court of appeal for all matters of faith and practice.⁸

Calvin writes, “We treat Scripture with the same reverence that we do God, because it is from God alone, and unmixed with anything human.” The uniqueness of the Christian faith is coupled with the uniqueness of Scripture. He continues, “Our religion is distinguished from all others in that the prophets have spoken not of themselves, but as instruments of the Holy Spirit.”⁹ Calvin summarily insists that the Holy Spirit “is the Author of the Scriptures: he cannot vary and differ from himself.”¹⁰

⁷ Gregory K. Beale, “Can the Bible Be Completely Inspired by God and Yet Still Contain Errors? A Response to Some ‘Evangelical’ Proposals,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 72 (2011): 1–22.

⁸ As the Westminster Confession of Faith 1.4 puts it, “The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.”

⁹ John Calvin, *Readings in Christian Thought*, ed. Hugh T. Kerr (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966), 163.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1:94–95 (1.9.2). He continues, “Hence he must

As the basis for affirming the consistent message of the Bible, the magisterial Reformers like Calvin tied Scripture to the Spirit—that is, Scripture’s authority resides in its spiritual (that is, Holy Spirit-ual) character. Scripture’s essence—including its sufficiency, perspicuity, and necessity—stems from the Spirit of God. Accordingly, as the Reformers insisted, every dimension of Scripture’s consideration belongs in a pneumatological framework; to whatever degree our consideration of Scripture departs from this Personal/Spiritual environment, we force Holy Writ from its identity, integrity, and indeed, its effectiveness.

With the Spirit’s personal ministry in view, Calvin maintains the absolute and final authority of Scripture for its interpretation. Because Scripture speaks with the voice of God, no external witness trumps the divine Word. No other place of appeal exists. In fact, to seek final answers elsewhere is to denigrate Scripture; it is to abandon the authority of the Spirit of God for another authority. It is to pursue another spirit. It is to deny that *God himself* has spoken. Thus, the historic and Reformation view of unqualified biblical authority, as John Woodbridge has proven in his thorough dismantling of the Rogers and McKim thesis,¹¹ has been the celebrated conviction of the people of God through the ages.

As important as is the *concept* of biblical authority, however, it must never be treated *impersonally*. The biblical ontology question is a personal question, and this personal question concerns the Speaker’s *design* for the revelation in the first place. In fact, Calvin and the Reformers uniformly express the nature of Scripture according to God’s own purpose in it. That is, God has spoken intentionally—he determines that his people *will* hear his voice.¹² God’s speech remains epistemologically and hermeneutically prior, but the Almighty intends his giving of revelation and its enscripturation to produce *understanding*. Scripture is divine in its own right, but its divinity entails its communicative efficacy.¹³

Since, as Packer reiterates in his lecture, the recipient is never peripheral to divine communication, the Reformers consistently wed the doctrine of

ever remain just as he once revealed himself there. This is no affront to him, unless perchance we consider it honorable for him to decline or degenerate from himself.”

¹¹ See John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

¹² Though beyond the scope of this essay, the doctrine of the covenant is core to understanding the nature of divine, enscripturated revelation. God relates to his people covenantally, and his revelation comes in that covenantal framework. See, e.g., Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1–2.

¹³ Scripture is powerful because it is true; it is not true because it is powerful. Efficacy presupposes divine authority, and divine personal authority ensures Scripture’s efficacy.

Scripture to the doctrine of regeneration. Comprehension by the recipient is *divinely* purposed and *Holy Spirit-ually* qualified.¹⁴ Put otherwise, we cannot think about a doctrine of Scripture apart from a doctrine of the Scripture's hearer. To separate Scripture's identity from its understanding is to perpetuate a destructive abstraction, and to miss the very heartbeat of biblical revelation.

II. *The Subjective Change: Regeneration and the Spirit*

Calvin openly affirms that “apart from the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Word can do nothing.”¹⁵ This assertion contradicts neither Scripture's divine essence nor its communicative effectiveness. Any impotence of Scripture does not derive from an inherent weakness in the text but from the spiritual incapacity of the reader. Calvin accordingly offers here the necessary corollary to Scripture's ontology.

Divine illumination of the Word of God is necessary because sin deafens ears to the voice of God and hardens hearts to the will of God. So Calvin concludes concerning 1 Corinthians 2:14 that “men's minds ... [are] in blindness until they are enlightened by the Spirit of God.” The Spirit brings “special discovery of heavenly wisdom which God vouchsafes to his sons alone.”¹⁶ So also, Martin Luther: “Neither would we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷

In short, Calvin, Luther, and the other Reformers situate biblical understanding in the realm of the Spirit. Understanding of Scripture is a Spirit-ual gift—an irreducible dimension of new life in Christ. Jesus puts it strikingly, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27 ESV). Knowledge *by* Christ precedes the following *of* Christ. That is, the work of the Spirit of Christ enables the hearer to recognize Christ's voice and eagerly to follow. The voice of Jesus is warmly familiar because he knows us. So, writes Martin Bucer, “The elect will recognise the voice of

¹⁴ William Tyndale wrote, “For as they [the Scriptures] came not by the will of man, so may they not be drawn or expounded after the will of man: but as they came by the Holy Ghost, so must they be expounded and understood by the Holy Ghost. The scripture is that wherewith God draweth us unto him. ... The scriptures spring out of God and flow unto Christ, and were given to lead us to Christ,” Recorded in Ralph Werrell, “Little Known Facts about William Tyndale's Theology: The Work of the Holy Spirit and the Covenant with Man,” *Churchman* 122.4 (2008): 315–16.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Readings*, 169.

¹⁶ John Calvin, “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 2:14,” *Calvin's Commentary on the Bible*, studylight.org, <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/cal/1-corinthians-2.html>, 1840–57.

¹⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 4, *Reformation of Church and Dogma, 1300–1700* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 167.

their shepherd.”¹⁸ Hearing and following the voice of Christ is a Spirit-given capacity.

Robert Reymond illustrates this principle by the dated but useful metaphor of tuning a radio. Until the Spirit dials the human heart to the signal of the divine voice, God’s Word sounds like static.¹⁹ Only by a channel change in the heart will the spiritual signal of the Word deliver its covenant-frequency modulation with the needed clarity. The sending signal is unchanged. The heart requires spiritual tuning, which brings the requisite change to the receiver.

Calvin similarly compares the unbelievers’ ears to those of a donkey at a symphony concert. The beast hears the sounds of the instruments but has no appreciation for the music’s majesty and sophisticated beauty. The concert offers nothing but noise to the “ass [who] is unqualified for understanding musical harmonies.”²⁰ By contrast, the believer hears with understanding and appreciation. What John Murray helpfully describes as the “noetic side” of regeneration,²¹ this *illumination of the Spirit*, tunes the heart and mind of the believer to discern the voice of the Christ and to delight in it, to receive and relish his symphony of gospel grace.²²

Thus, in his ministry of regeneration, the Spirit does not merely facilitate discernment of gospel truth; he also ignites the fires of conviction. Illumination of the Spirit produces a discerning and delighting disposition—what Geerhardus Vos describes as “sympathetic absorption”²³—toward the Word of God. Faith channels this Spirit-formed epistemic change.²⁴ For Calvin

¹⁸ Recorded in W. P. Stephens, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Martin Bucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 134.

¹⁹ Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 81.

²⁰ John Calvin, *The Commentaries of John Calvin on the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle, vol. 20 of Calvin’s Commentaries (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 82.

²¹ John Murray, “The Attestation of Scripture,” in *The Infallible Word*, 2nd ed., ed. Ned B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967), 51.

²² “But how do we know all this? I answer, the selfsame Spirit revealed both to the disciples and to the teacher (*doctorem*) that the author of the Scriptures is God. Neither Moses nor the prophets brought to us by chance the things we have received at their hands; they spoke as moved by God, and testified with confidence and courage that God’s very mouth had spoken. The same Spirit who made Moses and the prophets certain of their calling, has now testified to our own hearts that he used them as his servants for our instruction,” Calvin, *Readings*, 162–63.

²³ Geerhardus Vos, “The Wonderful Tree,” in *Grace and Glory: Sermons Preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary* (1922; repr., Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2007), 32.

²⁴ Illumination entails the embrace of faith (or to borrow Jonathan Edwards’s language, the change in our *affections*).

and his fellow Reformers, then, biblical understanding necessarily rises in a *soteriological* context; illumination comes by the Spirit, who applies the salvation of Christ. True understanding is saving understanding, and saving understanding is the province of those who possess the Spirit, or better, of those whom the Spirit possesses.²⁵

This soteriological emphasis is right as far as it goes, but such a construction still falls short of the full teaching of Scripture regarding the Spirit. As with the Reformers, we must advocate this critical soteriological and noetic point by wedding it to its essential *ecclesiological corollary*. The doctrines of regeneration and illumination, while personal concerns, are never private ones. Understanding of God's Word is a *corporate* matter. The Spirit poured out upon the believer is the Spirit poured upon *believers*. The Spirit of Truth is the Spirit who guides the *church* into all truth. The Spirit of the *Son* of God is the Spirit of the *sons* of God. Salvation produces the family of God, and therefore, illumination operates in the sphere of the visible church *as* church. The concept of private interpretation is as foreign to Scripture as is private, individualistic salvation.

What then is the role of the confessing church in hearing the Word of God and assuming the stewardship of doctrinal development in general and of the doctrine of Scripture in particular?

III. The Collective Responsibility: The Church and the Spirit

The first of the Ten Theses of Berne (1528) reads, "The holy, Christian Church, whose only Head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, abides in the same, and does not listen to the voice of a stranger."²⁶ In dogmatic terms, the church is a *creatura verbi*. The Word of God does not exist because of the church; rather, the church exists by the Spirit working with the Word of Christ. The church resides under Scripture, never over it.

According to the biblical design, Christ's church is neither a human creation nor a divinely created concatenation of individuals. The church is the family of God, united to Christ and to one another by a Spirit-wrought faith. The doctrine of union with Christ manifests in visible communion of the saints.

²⁵ The Westminster divines penned it tersely: "We acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word" (WCF 1.6).

²⁶ Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 49.

Understanding of Scripture is thereby not an individual or communal creation but a churchly act of Spirit-enabled receptivity. Spiritual illumination embeds *shared* truth in *the collective heart* of the people of God—visibly expressed in confessional solidarity, theological fidelity, corporate holiness, and hermeneutical unity. As the Reformers discerned and affirmed, such humble understanding arises only in the visible, confessing body of Christ. *And* such understanding comes not by mere reliance upon the collective wisdom of the interpreters but upon the Spirit in Scripture speaking to the family of God in one voice.

Though he clearly distanced himself in key ways from Cyprian and Rome's assumption of this church father's classic ecclesiastical assertions, Calvin unashamedly affirmed the central place of the visible church for gospel conversion, gospel provision, gospel preservation, and gospel advance. He openly employs Cyprian's metaphor:

But because it is now our intention to discuss of the visible church, let us learn even from her simple title of "mother" how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breasts, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels [Matt. 22:30]. Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives.²⁷

For Calvin, the visible church is the source *for our gospel care* and the residence *for our care of the gospel*. The visible church forms the home for spiritual nourishment and worship *and* provides the only rightful domicile for scholarship. Mother Church is the Christians' home and the Christians' school. In fact, as far as Calvin is concerned, all Christians are theologians, and all theologians must be *homeschooled*.

Following Calvin here, Kuyper writes, "The Holy Scripture and the Church ... are no foreign phenomena to each other, but the former should be looked upon as the *mother of the latter*."²⁸ Then he articulates the attendant theological stewardship implications embedded in this Word/church relationship: "It is self-evident that the transcendental action of the regeneration of the elect had to go hand in hand with the noetic action of the Word in order to give rise to the Church and to maintain it."²⁹ The church's vocation as "pillar and ground of truth" thus obligates the Body of Christ

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:1016 (4.1.4).

²⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, trans. J. Hendrik DeVries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 572 (my emphasis).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

to believe and to study, to preserve and to protect, to teach and to propagate the apostolic faith.

James Bannerman in his classic (and recently retypeset and republished) volume articulates the Reformational doctrine of the church in contrast to its two contemporaneous and competing errors. On the one hand, Rome (“the Popish system,” as he calls it) sins against Scripture by denying the church the *limits* of its “proper and legitimate” authority. On the other hand, rationalism sins against Scripture by denying the church the *extent* of its “proper and legitimate” authority.³⁰ The Reformers did not reject the unbiblical authority of the Roman Catholic magisterium by espousing an opposite yet equally unbiblical approach—radical individualism or *sola Scriptura*, as Heiko Obermann puts it.³¹

Bavinck helpfully addresses how to avoid these two pitfalls by upholding the church’s proper relationship to Scripture. He is worth quoting at length here:

Scripture is the light of the church, the church the life of Scripture. Apart from the church, Scripture is an enigma and an offense. Without rebirth no one can know it. Those who do not participate in its life cannot understand its meaning and point of view. Conversely, the life of the church is a complete mystery unless Scripture sheds its light upon it. Scripture explains the church; the church understands Scripture. In the church Scripture confirms and seals its revelation, and in Scripture the Christian—and the church—learn to understand themselves in their relation to God and the world, in their past, present, and future.³²

Accordingly, with a view to the inextricability of Scripture from the church and the church from Scripture, development of doctrine, starting with reflections on *sola Scriptura*, is the purview of the visible church, not individual scholars or individualistic scholarship. With a view to the church’s ministerial and declarative stewardship of God’s Word, Kuyper helpfully summarizes, “The domain of the church can be described as the domain within which the Holy Scripture prevails and operates.”³³

³⁰ “The Popish system, under whatever modification it is held, essentially sins against Scriptural principles on the subject of ecclesiastical authority in religious truth, by denying its *proper and legitimate limits*. The Rationalistic system, under whatever modifications it is held, no less sins against Scriptural principles on the subject of ecclesiastical authority in religious truth, by denying its *proper and legitimate extent*.” James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline and Government of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 303 (my emphasis; see pp. 247–303).

³¹ Heiko Obermann, *Harvest of Medieval Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

³² Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 1.384

³³ Kuyper, *Principles*, 572.

Summarily, the Spirit of Christ draws together, in an inseparable relationship, the inspiration of Scripture for the church (the objective), the illumination of believers to the Word (the subjective), and the Spirit-led theological stewardship of this illumined Word *by* and *for* the church (the collective). What conclusions must we draw then from this inseparable Spirit-created relationship between Word, illumination, and the church?

Let me offer two inclusive points concerning the *objective*, *subjective*, and *collective* ministry of the Spirit for doctrine in general and *sola Scriptura* in particular.

IV. Application One: The Visible Church and Theological Stewardship

Since the church is the “domain within which the Holy Scripture prevails and operates,” making God’s Word truly a “family Bible,” theological development must be rightly restored to Mother Church in her visible and confessional stewardship.

Theological reflection is never to be rogue speculation but instead a Spirit-ually discerning and therefore churchly accountable undertaking. Under the authority and guidance of the Spirit of the risen Christ, doctrinal development is a Spirit-given, Christ-centered churchly task. *Semper reformanda* flourishes only within this visible confessing body. I return again to Kuyper: “*The factor of the church* must be included in theological investigation.”³⁴ That is, the visible church shares historic theological confession as the key to its Spirit-given identity, even as it exercises the visible marks of preaching and the administration of the sacraments. It also does so in keeping with the faith openly confessed, as a manifestation of its Spirit-birther DNA.

Following the Reformation conception of the visible church’s stewardship of theology, we must, on the one side, drop the anchor of the confessing church within the academy, and on the other side, to prevent sailing astray, openly insist that the academy submit itself and its theological labors to the confessing church. Claims of individual reliance upon the Holy Spirit not only do not offer sufficient guidelines; such claims also effectively cast aspersions upon the Spirit who has faithfully illumined his people to Scripture over the course of the millennia. Disregard for the church’s confessions evidences modernist arrogance, even as it displays a functional denial of the value of the Spirit’s work in the life of the church through the centuries.

³⁴ Ibid., 575.

One clarification is in order here. Claims that the invisible church sufficiently preserves theology fail on their own terms. Invisible connections to the invisible church lack both veracity and value. How does an invisible identity yield anything other than impotent (and meaningless!) accountability? Accordingly, the stewardship of Scripture in each generation must occur in the context of the *visible* church, which openly confesses the faith given once for all to the saints—codified through the ages in the church’s historic confessional documents.

How do we return scholarship to the visible church’s domain? In brief, ordination requirements rise as the most obvious tool to secure the church’s role in theological research, writing, and theological study. Such reinstated churchly accountability could occur in numerous ways: denominationally run seminaries with licensure or ordination requirements for their faculty, nondenominational seminaries with licensure and ordination requirements of their faculty, *ad hoc* church oversight by ordained church officers of scholars doing biblical-theological research in a college or university setting, and the like. Any mechanism in which visible strings re-attach scholarship to the visible church would render welcome modifications.

To elevate this concern to its proper ecclesiastical import means that any scholar unwilling to subject his formulations to the visible church, even with the risk of his own ordination or employment, should be given credence *neither in the academy nor the church*. Theological scholars in our seminaries, universities, and colleges should eagerly operate with transparent accountability to the visible confessing church. Though many publishers might protest because they thrive on the provocative, a return to a churchly context for theological scholarship will reward the faithful over the flashy. Such a humble reorientation surely would honor the Head of the Church and his outpoured Spirit, even as it would rightly commend the doctrine drawn from the text of the Word of God.

V. Application Two: The Visible Church and Theological Advance

Though perhaps counterintuitive initially, churchly oversight of theological development, rightly considered, facilitates theological *advance*. To be sure, the church must muzzle unaccountable scholarship; scholarly endeavors need the church’s vigilant guardianship. But the Spirit-given role of the church is never merely defensive. Theological scholarship is not only wall erecting but also path building. Indeed, the church *must advance its understanding of Scripture* to each generation of the church that stands on its shoulders.

In surveying the development of theology in the history of the church, Murray writes, “there is a *progressive understanding* of the faith delivered to all the saints.” For Murray, this fact evidences the very teaching of Ephesians: “There is in the church the ceaseless activity of the Holy Spirit so that the church organically and corporately increases in the knowledge unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.”³⁵ Theology is not static. Development, even in its expression of the nature of Scripture, is essential to the life of the church.

Cornelius Van Til’s insistence upon “receptive reconstruction”³⁶ in theological activity deserves mention here. Theology, by its very received essence, must avoid autonomous invention. Instead, it pursues understanding by humble reception—a receptivity in which each generation of the church moves more deeply into its understanding of Scripture. The ceaseless spiritual activity of receptive re-creativity is the great privilege and responsibility of the church of Jesus Christ. Measured pursuits of scholarship are not only interesting or even merely worthwhile; they are *essential*. And the church with its historic confessions provides the only legitimate context for these acts of stewardship.

The game of tennis helpfully illustrates here. Among other things, tennis requires strength, finesse, precision, and endurance. In tennis, the lines, the net, the racket, and the rules provide the context for skillful play and genuine innovation. Elimination of these rules would not engender creativity but would generate more chaos than John McEnroe ever did. Removal of boundaries would rob the sport of decency, proficiency, and demonstrable creativity.

By analogy, elimination of all boundaries in the theological enterprise eviscerates *any* and *all* advance of doctrine. As expert tennis players learn to do in sport, scholars must function within the well-tested historic and confessional borders and skillfully place their thoughts within biblically given boundaries as expressed in the church’s doctrinal confessions. Advancement almost always comes by precision within the lines rather than brashly crossing them.

For the lines to be moved or the rules to be changed in tennis would require the engagement of the whole Tennis Players’ Association, according to its collective institutional *gravitas*. Change to the rules must not and will not ensue by mere individual, even *expert* complaint—no matter how

³⁵ John Murray, *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976–82), 4:242–43 (emphasis added).

³⁶ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), 126.

eloquent or loudly the complainant speaks. The game of tennis is larger than particular, even stunningly gifted, players.

Similarly, if the church determines that new theological assertions comport with the teaching of Scripture, the church may need to revise its confessional “boundaries.” But any such changes *must* occur within the context and according to the *gravitas* of the visible, confessing church. To put it in more overtly biblical language, the church’s confession must not change unless the visible church discerns the voice of her Master in the new formulations. Such changes will never be reactionary, flippant, or fast. Theological development may require confessional change, but such change should receive the ecclesiastical attention—time, debate, assertion, and correction—it is due.

The doctrine of Scripture begs this insistence in particular. To alter the church’s assertions about the doctrine of Scripture must not stem from one expert or even many so-called expert voices but only from those—*who by their open ties to the confessing church*—show themselves “sympathetically absorbed” in the gospel. When developments or corrections occur from those aligned by faith and the Spirit within the confessing church, theology progresses and the church thrives. The church then faithfully paves the way for future generations of saints, who too are entrusted with the mysteries of God. Advance comes by submission to God’s Word, and never by autonomous treatment of it.

Kuyper helpfully warns of the abandonment of this churchly charge for theological development:

In the service of the Holy Spirit, theology is called ever and anon to test the historic, confessional life of the Church by its source, and to this end to examine it after the norm of the Holy Scripture. By itself confessional life tends to petrify and to fall asleep, and it is theology that keeps the Church awake; that lends its aid in times of conflict with oft-recurring heresies; that rouses her self-consciousness anew to a giving of account, and in this way averts the danger of petrification.³⁷

How we practically return to a churchly orientation in the work of biblical and theological studies requires much more penetration than this essay can offer. The pathway forward does not appear straight or smooth. But any paths that alienate the academy from the church ensure disaster, whether by the church’s petrification through theological laziness or by the unaccountable progressivism of the academy.

³⁷ Kuyper, *Principles*, 593.

Conclusion

With these thoughts in mind, we return to a critical question: Does *sola Scriptura* have a future? The short answer is an overwhelming affirmative. Even if the church in the West fails to rise to her stewardship, God's purpose for his own Word ensures the glorious future of *sola Scriptura*. In the efficacy of the divine Word we can take full comfort: "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa 55:11).

But does *sola Scriptura* have a future in the West and in places where Western influence dominates theological discourse? Frankly, no—not if the academy continues to eclipse, ignore, or marginalize the visible church. On the other hand, if the visible church in the West recovers its stewardship of doctrine and the academy openly submits itself to the visible church, *sola Scriptura* will prove life giving to the people of God.

The question then is not whether *sola Scriptura* will survive. Instead, it is whether *sola Scriptura* will survive in our age and in our context. To ensure that it does, the *church* as a confessing body should rise to ensure that humble receptivity and theological fidelity prevails. The *academy* as a whole must openly embrace its handmaid function—where biblical and theological investigation operates *in service of the church*. The *theologian* must sustain open allegiance to the confessing church—the very body defined and created by the Word and the Spirit. To be clear and to summarize, the all-too-common non-ecclesial or anti-ecclesial context of theological scholarship—concerning the doctrine of Scripture in particular—can neither preserve nor advance doctrine effectively. Any development in theology, and of *sola Scriptura* in particular, will happen fruitfully only in step with Spirit-given contours and provisions—those given to the visible, confessing church of Jesus Christ.

Bavinck offers an insightful reinforcement coupled with a warning that usefully draws the present concern to a formidable and pastoral conclusion:

The church has been appointed and given the promise of the Spirit's guidance into all truth. Whoever isolates himself from the church, i.e., from Christianity as a whole, from the history of dogma in its entirety, loses the truth of the Christian faith. That person becomes a branch that is torn from the tree and shrivels, an organ that is separated from the body and therefore doomed to die. Only within the communion of the saints can the length and the breadth, the depth and the height, of the love of Christ be comprehended (Eph. 3:18).³⁸

³⁸ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1.83.

The church as church must commend *sola Scriptura*, as this *principium unicum* surely lies at the very foundation of her grace-filled theological stewardship—now and for the future generations of the body of Christ.