

“SOLA SCRIPTURA”¹ AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF THE REFORMATION AND THE RECENT “GAY DEBATE” IN THE DUTCH REFORMED CHURCH²

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Abstract

Although “sola Scriptura” was an important doctrine of the Reformation, it was not perceived to be a generic and exclusive principle that Scripture or the Bible had final authority with regards to any conceivable topic. The Reformation, with “sola Scriptura” as rallying cry, played a significant role in the development of critical biblical scholarship, and it was only after the emergence of evangelical fundamentalism in the late nineteenth century that the reinterpretation of “sola Scriptura” created a less accommodating attitude towards critical biblical scholarship. It is against this backdrop that the function of biblical authority in the recent “gay debate” in the Dutch Reformed Church will be discussed. In conclusion it will be asked whether “sola Scriptura” led to the Bible becoming a type of “paper pope” when the Counter-Reformation triggered the Protestant emphasis on the authority of Scripture to counter papal authority.

Keywords: Authority of Scripture; Sola Scriptura; Reformation; Gay debate; Dutch Reformed Church

Introduction

Some form of appeal to the authority of the Bible as Holy Scripture forms an indispensable part of Christian theology, but since the Enlightenment, it cannot be taken as a given. Sceptical academics in general and critical theologians in particular are challenging more traditional ways of presupposing the authority of Scripture (Paddison 2011: 448, 450-451). Adrian Thatcher (2008:142) goes even further and argues that it is “morally complacent” to turn a blind eye to the negative impact that certain claims of the authority of Scripture have had on marginalised and vulnerable groups in society – he makes special mention of the suffering endured by people of colour, Jews, the LGBTQTI community and women due to prejudice ostensibly backed by Scriptural authority.

¹ Although the title entails a wordplay on the name of the journal whose fortieth year of existence we are celebrating, the topic itself has somewhat less scope for amusement and mirth!

² When celebrating the fortieth anniversary of Scriptura, it is fitting to be reminded where and how it all started in the late 1980’s when Bernard Lategan (first editor), Johann Kinghorn (second editor) and Willem Vorster (NT scholar from UNISA) decided to launch an independent, academic journal that intended to provide a credible voice for intellectual discourse in South African Theology (Kinghorn 2000:i). For the first twenty years, Scriptura was managed by the Department of Biblical Studies in the Faculty of Arts, and for the past 20 years, it was housed in the Old and New Testament discipline group of the Faculty of Theology, still maintaining its character as an independent academic journal.

The Bible perceived as Scripture can be defined as “literature that is both holy and authoritative” without indicating what type of power is presupposed or what the extent of the authority amounts to (Sundberg 1964: 1-8). Any reflection on the authority of the Bible is soon confronted by the complexity involved in the conceptualisation and the appropriation of the term. Susan Schreiner (1996:197) ascribed the complexity of the crisis of biblical authority to its “theological, social and political dimensions” because power is involved in all these dimensions.

There is a tendency in Reformed churches across the globe to treat their doctrinal confessions “as ahistorical documents with timeless propositions” that do not require “responsible hermeneutics when reading the documents from our confessional tradition” (Smit 2010:x). In his historical research on the types of authority involved in the process of second century scripturalisation (canonisation), Francis Borchardt (2015: 182-196) comes to the conclusion that there were a variety of reasons for which a text became authoritative: it was presumed to be divinely inspired, historically accurate, politically expedient etc. – but one should take note that all of these reasons constituted different acts of reception resonating with aspects of its historical context. This contribution will focus on how the authority of the Bible was conceptualised in the term “*sola Scriptura*” by both the Reformation (Luther and Calvin) and the recent so-called “gay debate” in the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa.

***Sola Scriptura* during the reformation**

In his discussion of *sola Scriptura* during the Reformation, Gerrit Berkhouwer (1967:333-334) points out the concept’s close link with the doctrinal presupposition concerning the sufficiency of Scripture, indicating that this sufficiency was focused on Christian life as a religious confession.³ The view of the Reformation on *sola Scriptura* did not entail the total rejection of tradition because it viewed Scripture and tradition as mutually dependent on one another (Berkhouwer 1967:340-341).

For Martin Luther (1483-1545), his exegetical engagement with Scripture was totally integrated with his theological reflection, but as a professor in biblical interpretation, the Bible was his primary source (Ebeling 1970a:2; Nürnberger 2005:80). The fundamental position of the Bible in Luther’s theology is well illustrated by his comment as quoted and paraphrased by Klaus Nürnberger (2005:80):

“For Christians nothing but the divine Words (= the Scriptures) should be the first Principles, while all the human words (of later theologians) are deductions, which are derived from these and which again have to lead back to them and be confirmed by them (WA VII 96ff; H 84; Knaake 1883)”

³ One of Berkhouwer’s PhD graduates, the well-known Hennie W Rossouw (1963), focused on *sola Scriptura* in a similar fashion in the second thesis of his doctoral defence: “The reformational *sola scriptura* is falsified when the Holy Spirit in the exercise of its power is isolated from the activity of the church in service of the proclamation.”

Although Scripture as “divine Words” were his “first Principles”, Luther never subscribed to biblical inerrancy in a fundamentalist manner (Massing 2018:815).⁴

There is general agreement that for Luther the authority of the Bible was closely related to Jesus Christ (*solus Christus*), who formed the centre of his interpretation of the Bible – for both Old and New Testament. The New Testament is not merely a text concerning Jesus Christ, but the presence of the Living Word in Scripture forms the basis for its authority – ie, “that what promotes Christ” (“*was Christum treibet*”) is constitutive for its canonical authority (Childs 1992:44). According to Richard Soulen (2009:115), two poles can be discerned in Luther’s conception of Scripture: what God has done in Christ (“*was Christum treibet*” as “objective side”) and that “God’s forgiveness in Christ is to be received *by faith alone*” (the doctrine of justification as “subjective side”). Therefore, for Luther, *sola Scriptura* implied that “the Scriptures have supreme authority in matters of faith” because they “proclaim the good news of God’s saving grace in Jesus Christ” (Soulen 2009:119).

Did Luther make use of *sola Scriptura* as a foundational motto for his understanding of the authority of Scripture? The short answer is “no”. In Luther’s response (*WA* 7,98) to his excommunication in 1520, his critique of the importance of church tradition in the Roman Catholic Church was “*sed solam scripturam regnare*” (“that Scripture alone reign”). This does not exclude tradition but emphasises the primacy of Scripture as opposed to interpretation based on arbitrary opinions (van den Belt 2016:209).

John Calvin (1509-1564) shared many theological focal points with Luther: the centrality of Christ, justification by faith, emphasis on the Word etc.; and although he felt strongly about these foundational issues, he exercised some scholarly restraint that often eluded Luther (Childs 1993:47). What was the underlying reason for this more cautious approach to the authority of Scripture by Calvin? On the one hand, Calvin did not perceive law and gospel in the same dialectical opposition than Luther did; and on the other hand, Calvin “was willing to draw on all fields of endeavour – language, classical studies, philosophy, even science – to explore the meaning of the biblical text” (Harrisburg & Sundberg 2002:19).⁵

A good example of Calvin’s appreciation for science can be found when he acknowledges that the reference to the moon as a “lesser light” in Genesis 1:16 is incorrect according to astronomy: “Moses described in popular style what all men without training and education perceive with their ordinary senses” (Calvin 1958: 356).

According to Calvin, the authority of Scripture was grounded in the presupposition that it was “self-authenticating (*autopistos*)” because God himself was speaking through this vehicle (*Inst. I.vii.5*). This involved an important “shift in perspective from seeing the church as the source of the Bible’s authority to that of the Bible itself” – Scripture had to be interpreted in terms of itself (Childs 1993:48-49).

John Calvin made incidental references to the concept of *sola Scriptura*, in, for example, his *Institutes* (3.17.8): “the true rule of righteousness is to be sought from

⁴ This article will argue later on that the emphasis on the supposed inerrancy of the Bible is a product of post-Enlightenment fundamentalism, and it is simply anachronistic to relate it to the major figures of the Reformation such as Luther and Calvin.

⁵ Calvin drew on all these scientific sources amidst his adherence to the priority of Scripture!

Scripture alone (*ex sola scriptura*).” Clearly, the concept is not absent, but as clearly, it is comparatively rare and to some extent accidental in Calvin’s work (van den Belt 2016:224-225).

Despite the unquestionable centrality and in a certain sense priority of Scripture during the Reformation, Anthony Lane (1994:324) pointed out that *sola scriptura* as doctrinal motto did not originate in the initial Reformation period and Henk van den Belt (2016:206) established that *sola scriptura*, *sola fide* and *sola gratia* as a triad “is absent from the writings of the reformers and of sixteenth and seventeenth Protestant orthodoxy”. The emphasis on *sola Scriptura* is explained as a Protestant reaction to the Council of Trent in 1546. This reaction rejected the combination of Scripture and tradition in the statement that “the Bible alone, without unwritten traditions, is the final judge, rather than the exclusive source, of all saving truth and moral rules, thereby confessing the sufficiency of Scripture, along with its necessity, authority and perspicuity” (van den Belt 2016:205).

It should be clear that *sola Scriptura*, as an important motto of Protestantism in general, initially did not intend to separate or isolate its adherents “as a theoretical axioma”, but this became visible in concrete action (like preaching) when it was guided by the Holy Spirit and its obedience to Christ (Berkhouwer 1967:369). In his study of Biblical Authority, Kevin Vanhoozer (2016:127) concludes that the Reformation did not view *sola scriptura* “simply as a principle but as a practice: the practice of using Scripture to interpret Scripture” as reflected in the well-known dictum of the Reformers “*scriptura sui ipsius interpres*”.

***Sola Scriptura* and the influence of fundamentalism**

Between the Reformation and the rise of fundamentalism at the end of the nineteenth century, Protestant scholastics were “preoccupied with establishing the supreme authority of Scripture over and against Roman Catholic claims on behalf of the pope”, and eventually “biblical inerrancy” was identified as one of the fundamentals of Christian faith” (Soulén 2009: 120-121.) In this brief survey, the focus will be on the approach to Scripture that was espoused by emerging fundamentalism at the end of the nineteenth century. During the Niagara Falls conference in 1895, five fundamental doctrines were formulated and published in booklets titled *The Fundamentals* between 1909 and 1915, with the first being (Badley 2002:138): “The Bible is God’s verbally inspired and inerrant word” (the remaining four fundamentals were on Christ’s virgin birth, Christ being God incarnate, Christ’s substitutionary atonement and his bodily resurrection from the dead). Although *sola Scriptura* is not specifically mentioned, verbal and not organic inspiration as well as inerrancy are taken as points of departure for the rest of the “fundamentals” that are focused on Christ.

Similar presuppositions about the authority of Scripture in fundamentalist churches can be detected in more recent times. Harriet Harris (2008:816-818), as an expert on Christian fundamentalism, pointed out different aspects of the foundational nature of Scripture in these circles: (i) the authority of Scripture is based on the doctrine of (full) verbal inspiration and therefore the understanding of the Bible is unmediated; (ii) the Bible is perspicuous and readily accessible for everyone, with a plain sense that requires no or little interpretation; (iii) the Bible is self-authenticating or self-justifying and

therefore allows for circular arguments that Scripture verifies its own authority and inspiration; (iv) the Bible as a reliable foundation also necessitates it being inerrant.

One of the few studies on fundamentalism and conservatism in South Africa, conducted by Christopher Stones (1977:155), argues that conservatives and fundamentalists “in an insecure context characterized by uncertainty will be resistant to change, except when the proposed change is perceived to be in the direction of increased security”. David Chidester (2008:362) points out in his study of religious fundamentalism in South Africa that fundamentalism is not only engaged in global politics “but also in the most intimate sexual politics, gender politics and family politics”, and his study is in agreement with previous studies (eg., Hoodfor 1996) that “religious fundamentalism is obsessed with women’s bodies and male power” by making the family “a site of male power and dominance” as a “ritual substitution for political problems they cannot solve.”

This world-wide phenomenon of protecting male power in the family appears relevant in South Africa given the emphasis placed on same-sex-sexuality and marriage by conservative evangelicals and religious fundamentalists. The COVID pandemic, economic decline, rampant corruption and increasing racial tension have aggravated already high levels of anxiety and insecurity in South Africa; this is an ideal environment for fundamentalism to thrive in since it offers “moral absolutism, traditional social values and the certainty of faith” – and one could add the absolutism of a certain understanding of *sola Scriptura* (Boucher 2006:1).

A word of caution is needed, since it seems to be advisable to speak about fundamentalisms (in the plural) to accommodate the wide range of its manifestations in South Africa, ranging from crude anti-modernism and anti-intellectualism to a more sophisticated postmodern version in which camouflaged appropriations of an intolerant understanding of *sola Scriptura* survive (Bosman 2008: 425).⁶

***Sola Scriptura* and its recent protestant reception**

On the occasion of the 400th anniversary of John Calvin’s birth, the influential Dutch Systematic Theologian Herman Bavinck (1909/2010:66) summarised that for Calvin “the essence of Christian faith” was that “in Scripture God tells us how much he loves us” – the foundational importance of grace and mercy for Reformed Theology. Although Bavinck pays scant attention to the role of Scripture in his discussion of Calvin, he is much more explicit eight years later when he speaks on the commemoration of the Reformation in 1917 about the “triadic principle of the Reformation: *Scriptura sola, gratia sola, fides sola*” (Bavinck 1917:7). One year earlier, Theodore Engelder (1916:99), as part of the Lutheran celebration in the USA of the Reformation, was the first to identify the three principles of the Reformation as “*Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides*”.

Wolfgang Pannenberg concluded that Luther exalted the authority of Scripture to such an extent that it can be detected as a type of “Scripture-positivism.” In a similar vein, Harrisburg and Sundberg (2002:17) argue that Luther considered the Bible to be

⁶ The limited scope of this article does not allow a more detailed investigation of the different modes of fundamentalism in South Africa. Against the background of persisting fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible as inerrant and infallible Scripture that defies scientific research, it is not surprising that the Bible has become a “paper pope” to counter the onslaught of areligious science and relativistic liberal theology.

both source (“*fons*”) and judge (“*judex*”) of the life of the church and that he asserted that the Bible alone is to be trusted because it is “through itself most certain, most easily accessible, comprehensible, interpreting itself, proving, judging all the words of all.”⁷

In his comments on Scripture and tradition, Gerhard Ebeling (1970b:282) is of the opinion that “*sola scriptura* sei obsolete geworden” in ecumenical dialogue. Antonius Gunneweg (1983:184-185) concurs with Ebeling and points out that theologians like Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann are critical of a “Bibilizismus” that emerged from Biblical Science orientated towards Scripture as canon. It would seem that the major hermeneutical dialectic has shifted from Scripture and church or dogmatic tradition to Scripture and the sciences and technology (Gunneweg 1983:196-197).

In South Africa, the influential systematic theologian Johan Heyns (1973:156-157) made it quite clear that the Bible did not intend “to say everything about everything” and that *sola scriptura* did not imply that theological-scientific reflection about Scripture “must be brought to a stand-still”; on the contrary, its close connection to the other attributes of Scripture (authority, reliability and perspicuity) should stimulate the ongoing reformulation (*semper reformanda*) of the interpretation of the Bible – without adding or deducting anything from the main scope or central message of the Bible.

The “Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in Southern Africa” (ABRECSA) defined the authority of Scriptura in their “*Charter and Declaration*” of October 1981, in which they articulate their theological point of departure as follows: “The Word of God is the supreme authority and guiding principle revealing all we need to know about God’s will for the whole existence of human beings. It is this Word that gives life and offers liberation that is total and complete.” Piet Naude (2010:59) responds to this seminal statement by pointing out that it corresponds with “the classic Reformed belief about the *claritas* and *perspecuitas* of Scriptures linked to its liberative intentions.”

The Bible is central to modern evangelical Protestants⁸, not only as doctrine but also as a component of their daily Christian practice of Bible reading – private and communal. According to Timothy Larsen (2007:8), *sola Scriptura* is “foundational to this stance” because evangelicals “believe that human beings are judged by the Bible and called to change in the light of it, rather [than] standing in judgement over the Bible and rejecting those parts that are not in line with their own sensibilities.” As the first point of their statement of faith, the “Association of Evangelicals in Africa” clarifies how they conceptualise *sola Scriptura*: “The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament... are the Word of God. [They are] divinely inspired, infallible, inerrant, entirely trustworthy and serve as a supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct (Larsen 2007:9). Where fundamentalist Christians presuppose the Bible to be the sole source of Christian belief and practice, evangelical Christians accept that Scripture has “final authority” over “Christian belief and practice” – but that it is more “ministerial” than “magisterial” (Treier 2007:35).

It is clear that *sola Scriptura* as a theological concept has developed over the five centuries since the Reformation and that fundamentalist trends within Protestant

⁷ It might be suggested that in certain respects the Protestant (especially the Lutheran tradition) critique of papal authority (triggered by the Council of Trent) resulted in the Bible becoming a type of “paper pope” whose authority was invoked for all spheres of life to counter the authority of the pope in Rome.

⁸ Daniel Trier (2007:35) defines “evangelicals” as “confessionally orthodox Protestants oriented to piety that is personal.”

churches have redefined the concept to suit their exclusive claims to power and influence within faith communities.

***Sola Scriptura* and recent gay debate in the Dutch Reformed Church**

Does *sola Scriptura* still have any significance in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) in South Africa today or is it a mere doctrinal fossil that has survived since the Reformation of the 16th century? On the official church seal of the DRC, a seated female (representing the church) holds a cross in her left hand and the Bible in her right hand. In the discussion of the elements of the church seal on the official website of the DRC, the depiction of the Bible is explained as follows: “The Bible is central in all reformed churches who consider the Bible as their highest authority. A church meeting or a pope cannot take any decision that is contrary to the Bible. Therefore, “*sola Scriptura*” (“Scripture alone”), is one of the cornerstones of the reformed or protestant confessions of faith (Dutch Reformed Church Website: “Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk in Suid-Afrika se Kerkseël 4.6”).

The appeal to *sola Scriptura* in the recent “gay debate” in South Africa is focused on the decisions and statements made by the General Synod of the DRC on same-sex relations and the authority and use of the Bible⁹.

It has been observed that Protestant churches seem to be more prone to motivate their views on economic, political, and social issues by referring to some form of Biblical authority (De Villiers & Smit 1995:39-40). Christianity in South Africa has a chequered history with regards to its acceptance of oppressive social institutions like slavery (up to 1830’s) or its legitimisation for discriminatory political ideologies like apartheid (up to 1990’s). Secularisation and the democratisation of South African society have also eroded the authority of religion to make any pronouncement on societal problems, and at most some form of dialogue with social sciences seems to be the way forward when engaging with societal challenges as a collective (De Villiers & Smit 1995:43).

The role of *sola Scriptura* within the DRC should be evaluated against the background of its decisions with regard to the authority and interpretation of the Bible as Holy Scripture and the reports on the appeal to Scripture as part of ethical decisions during the past three decades. In the following survey, the official website of the DRC was consulted, and summarised translations of the Afrikaans texts are provided.¹⁰

One could start with the research report on the authority and use of Scripture by the ***General Synod of the DRC*** in 1986.¹¹ The Bible as Holy Scripture came into being through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and an “organic inspiration theory” is presupposed. In accordance with article 7 of the *Confessio Belgica*, Holy Scripture is the infallible Word of God and the result of inspirational dialogue between the Holy Spirit

⁹ The following section must be understood as a case study that illustrates the preceding sections and is probably less relevant for someone not involved or acquainted with the gay debate in South Africa.

¹⁰ It must be noted that prior to any synodical decision by the DRC, a University of Pretoria doctoral dissertation by Albert Botha was completed in 1975 with the title “Pastorale sorg aan die homoseksuele mens” (“Pastoral care to the homosexual person”). This dissertation was used as point of departure to compile a manual for pastoral carers, titled “Pastorale sorg aan die homoseksueel” (“Pastoral care to the homosexual”).

¹¹ The decisions made by General Synods of the DRC between 1986 and 2004 related to the authority and interpretation of Scripture are summarised by a research report “Algemene Sinodebesluit oor SKRIF: 1986, 1990, 2002, 2004” available on the official website of the DRC. A summarised translation is provided in this article and the original Afrikaans text is available on the DRC website.

and human authors. Historical-critical interpretation is considered suspect because it approaches the Bible as any other historical document, and this placed the infallibility of Scripture under threat. On the one hand, the absolute authority of Holy Scripture as Word of God is fully accepted, while on the other hand, it is stated that the Bible cannot be considered as a handbook for science and history. It is important that this tension is addressed by pointing out that the Bible has a specific religious scope or goal that must be taken into account when interpreting Scripture.¹² Furthermore, the Reformed principle that Scripture is its own interpreter, as opposed to church tradition interpreting Scripture, is again emphasised. Biblicist interpretation of the Bible is rejected because it does not do justice to the historical context of the text of the Bible.

Against the backdrop of the unresolved tension in the General Synod of 1986 between doctrinal presuppositions about the infallibility and absolute authority of Holy Scripture as Word of God and the acknowledgement that the Bible cannot be used as a handbook for science and history and that ahistorical interpretations of the Bible must be rejected, the following resolution was accepted (Bartlett 2017: 19-21): homosexuality and homosexual relations do not fit in the divinely ordained gender differentiation, does not comply with the essence of marriage and is at odds with the human as being created in the image of God; and this led to the recommendation that “in the light of Scripture” homosexuality must be perceived as a “deviant form of sexuality” and therefore “homosexual practices and homosexual relations” are considered to be in contravention of the will of God “as revealed in Holy Scripture.”¹³

The DRC General Synod of 1986 requested a study on how an appeal to Scripture can be made in dealing with ethical matters. Taking as a point of departure a similar report made to the DRC Synod of the Western Cape, the following recommendations were made to and accepted by the *General Synod of 1990*: i) That any appeal to Scripture in Ethics should be made according to “the correct interpretation” of Scripture – each word of the Bible must be understood in its historical context and in agreement with the central meaning of Scripture as the bringing of the good news of salvation in Christ etc; ii) that there are general laws and moral principles in the Bible that are normative for all times, but that it is part of responsible interpretation of Scripture to indicate how general principles are appropriated in current life contexts; iii) that problems emerging in the modern era must be addressed in view of the ‘total message of the Bible’; iv) that the central message and goal of the Bible must always be kept in mind when ethical decisions are made; v) that the guidance of the Holy Spirit in ethical decisions is non-negotiable.¹⁴

In 1993, *the Regional Synod of the DRC in the Western Cape* requested a report on how gay church members can receive pastoral care based on the Bible. An extensive report was tabled after four years in which the DRC’s view of the use of Scripture was combined with research by psychologists and sociologists, as well as empirical research

¹² Echoes of Johan Heyns mentioned above.

¹³ Piet Strauss (2020:10) considers this decision to be in accordance with the first article of the DRC Church Order that the Bible is the “objective” Word of God as opposed to the relational understanding of truth that was espoused by some Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

¹⁴ Strauss (2020:10) argues that since 1986 the DRC gradually shifted its understanding of the authority and reliability of the Bible as determined by its intention or purpose (‘die Bybel word `n tendensboek’) – amply illustrated by the General Synods from 1990 onwards.

amongst ministers of religion and gay church members (Gaum 2020:147). This report also advocates that the authority of Scripture is based on the message of salvation in the Bible as a whole and not on the literal meaning of a few texts. Serious consideration was given to the ground-breaking decision of the *American Psychiatric Association* in 1994: “Homosexuality is neither mental illness nor moral depravity. It is simply the way a minority of our population expresses human love and sexuality.”

To supplement the 1986 report on the authority and use of Scripture, the **General Synod of 2002** required some clarification of the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. It seems that the reference to the human character of the Bible caused problems, since it was perceived to undermine the authority of the Bible as the Word of God. The following recommendations and to some extent emendations were made: i) That the authority of the Bible as the Word of God must set us free; ii) that the human nature of Scripture is not a threat to its divine character since the latter is an expression of the former; iii) that Scripture is not given as an infallible source for scientific and historical information but to make known salvation through faith in Christ Jesus; iv) that it is clear from the Bible that not all parts of the Bible are inspired in the same way and therefore there must be discernment with regard to the heart of the message of the Bible; v) that the authority of Scripture is based not on individual verses but on Scripture as a whole; vi) that the authority of Scripture is based not on decisions of the church but on the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the Translator of the grace of God in Christ; vii) that the following eight points with regards to the text and interpretation of the Bible are accepted for reading and understanding Scripture. The eight guidelines for the interpretation of Scripture are as follows: a) To understand Scripture, the intention of Scripture is crucial; b) as the “book of the church” the Bible must be interpreted within the context of the community of faith; c) the interpretation of the Bible is influenced by assumptions related to its text and background; d) that although the intention of Scripture is not historical accuracy, history remains important; e) that not only the text of Scripture but also its historical context are important, as well as knowledge of the languages in which it was originally written; f) that it must be considered that the text of Scripture on occasion also went against its context and culture; g) that the “salvation-historical development within Scripture” must be taken into account; h) that the different literary genres of Scripture must be considered. The last paragraph (5.11.4) of the report is critical of both the lack of recognition of the incarnation of the Word of God by “fundamentalists” as well as the negation of this incarnation by “liberalists”.

The 2002 report of the DRC General Synod mentions the concept *sola Scriptura* twice. While discussing the Bible as revelation, it is emphasised that *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) also means *tota Scriptura* (“whole of Scripture”). This implies that each part of Scripture must be understood in terms of the whole and *vice versa*. It is also pointed out that *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia* and *sola fide* are intertwined, and to understand each one of these concepts, all three must be taken into consideration. It is also of importance to note that this 2002 report acknowledged that the criticism that the Reformation possibly exchanged a “Roman Pope” with a “Paper Pope” must be taken seriously because it indicates a real danger when discussing the authority of the Bible as Holy Scripture. In this regard the report argues that the depiction of Scripture as a “Paper Pope” is based on a misunderstanding of the role of the Holy Spirit that guides the interpreter or reader of Scripture into the love of God and neighbour.

The 2002 report on homosexuality wanted to relate the acceptance of the authority of the Bible with a monogamous relationship between two same-sex partners. It cautions the General Synod not to get bogged down in a literal interpretation of the Bible and points out how this type of interpretation tolerated slavery up until the 19th Century (Gaum 2020: 149). The DRC was also reluctant to accept that same-sex relationships can be considered to constitute a marriage.

Another report on the use and authority of Scripture was submitted to the **General Synod of the DRC in 2004**. In its “Introduction”, mention is made that there is a crisis in the Reformed view of Scripture and that it is in a phase of transition. The synod is cautioned that there are pressure groups impacting on church decision making: on the one hand, fundamentalism; and on the other hand, “radical reformers” (ie. “Nuwe Hervormers”). Although theological renewal is required, it is emphasised that the boundaries of renewal must be clearly demarcated. The main points of the eventual decision were the following: i) The DRC, as part of the Reformed tradition, confesses that the Bible is the Word of God and that it therefore has authority over the totality of life; is trustworthy because God as Trinity made Him known through Scripture; is clear because the church can hear the gospel of God’s love and grace; sufficient because the Holy Spirit teaches us through the Bible everything we need to know to have faith in God and to be obedient to His will. ii) This confession, in accordance with Reformed tradition, does not imply any of the following: that the ability to think is sacrificed, that the Bible can be seen as a handbook for historical and scientific knowledge, that all of the Bible can be independently and immediately understood by everybody, or that the Bible provides comprehensive knowledge about all aspects of reality that does not require further human reflection or research. iii) That the Holy Spirit guides the church through the ages by means of the truth of Scripture as the living Word of God. iv) That Scripture as Word of God must not be juxtaposed with the responsible interpretation of Scripture. v) That God will lead his church through his Word and Spirit and in close community with the church through the ages and across the world, striving for truth, justice and mercy in all doctrinal and ethical matters.¹⁵

After several years of consultation and study, a *report on “Homosexuality” was submitted to the 2007 General Synod of the DRC*. Consensus was reached by the commission on several important issues: The Bible was taken as point of departure for reflection and decisions concerning homosexuality and there was an honest attempt to interpret biblical values in a meaningful way within its context. Other matters on which consensus was reached include the importance of human dignity for all church members, inclusive church membership that is not determined by sexual orientation, the acknowledgement that the marriage between a male and female was an important institution introduced by God, and the acknowledgement that all forms of promiscuity (both hetero- and homosexual manifestations) are to be rejected. Despite these important points of consensus, the following differences of opinion could not be resolved and resulted in two reports with diverging recommendations: The Bible rejects all

¹⁵ Strauss (2020: 1-14) also reflects on the implications and impact of article 56 of the DRC Church Order, according to which the church exerts itself to reach decisions on current, doctrinal and ethical matters based on Scripture; as well as on article 21 that advocates that the church must discuss all matters in light of the Word of God and in a manner that resonates with being a church.

homosexual behaviour; and in opposition to that, it was argued that the Bible rejects certain sexual misbehaviour without providing any judgment on homosexuality. On the one hand, the first point of view cannot be depicted simply as fundamentalism since they consciously attempted to remain within the parameters of Reformed hermeneutics and therefore made a distinction between the scope and the periphery of Scripture, as well as consistently taking the historical context of the Bible into account. On the other hand, the second report cannot simply be pigeon-holed as liberal theology, since they also attempted take the Bible seriously within the broad parameters of the Reformed confessions.

The *General Synod of the DRC in 2013* reconfirmed the 2007 decision and stated that this reaffirming was the result of thorough exegetical and theological study and requested further study on same sex relations in view of Scripture and Reformed tradition. The General Synod also decided that all students (hetero- and homosexual) preparing for ministry in the DRC must comply with the same Christian-ethical standard in view of legitimation.

The *General Synod of 2015* decided to recognise the status of civil unions of persons of the same sex whose relations are characterised by love and fidelity. In view of the stark differences of opinion on same sex relations, the DRC acknowledges the right of church councils to formulate their own decisions in this regard. A further decision was made to develop a Christian-Biblical ethical model on sexuality for all people to council local congregations.¹⁶

Soon after the General Synod of 2015, Andre Bartlett (2015) described two trends with regard to the understanding and use of the Bible in the debate leading up to the decision to accommodate gay church members. According to him, the first trend makes use of “proof texts” to motivate that the Bible is against any form of heterosexual practice and therefore the church must be obedient to these prohibitions of Scripture. The second trend does not restrict its focus to only a few texts in the Bible but sets out to follow broad trends in the Bible – with special attention to the ministry of Jesus, in which love is summarised and the appropriation of the law is qualified by the inclusion of marginalised groups into the community of faith.

Due to a flood of objections or *gravamina* (ca 80 consisting of more than 600 pages!) against the 2015 decision, a *special General Synod* was organised in 2016 – the first time in the history of the DRC. After vigorous debate, the 2015 decisions of the DRC General Synod regarding same-sex relations were overturned. Some of the decisions related to their view of the Bible are the following (Notule 2016:73): The General Synod reaffirms her commitment to decisions taken in 2011 concerning “View of Scripture, authority of Scripture, Hermeneutics and authority of Scripture”, as well as the 2004 General Synod’s statement on “Use and authority of Scripture” that entails a summary of the DRC’s view of Scripture. In conjunction with the 2011 decision, previous decisions and reports regarding the authority and use of Scripture, the appeal to Scripture when dealing with ethical matters accepted in 1986, 1990 and 2002 must be also be considered.

¹⁶ These decisions were qualified by the comment that they were made in humility and after seriously seeking the best appropriation of the message of the Bible as it is currently understood.

This raises the question of how the General Synod could come to different decisions about same-sex relations in 2015 and 2016, both based on the same views on the authority and understanding of the Bible as Holy Scripture. To understand the taking of diverging decisions within 13 months, special attention will now be given to the claims concerning the authority and understanding of Scripture made by the authors (individuals and church councils) of the numerous objections raised against the 2015 decisions. The focus will especially be on the use of the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* to motivate their objections or gravamina.

It is unnecessary to quote all references to *sola Scriptura* in these gravamina, but a few examples will illustrate the main trains of thought regarding the authority of Scripture and its appropriation when making ethical decisions (discussed in alphabetical order as printed in the official documentation of the DRC):

- *Dr A Bartlett* (Gravamina 2019: 5-10) As in 2015, he makes a distinction between a “proof text” approach motivating the rejection of same-sex behaviour and a broad trajectory of the Bible approach that accommodates same-sex behaviour within the faith community. In agreement with previous statements of the General Synod, he argues that the debate is about the mere tolerance of homosexuality as a defect or the positive acceptance of a homosexual relationship as a good gift. In short, the crucial question remains: “Is it possible to accept the authority of Scripture and at the same time approve of a durable relationship between two people of the same sex (Gravamina 2019:9).¹⁷ To resolve the deadlock between diverging opinions in the DRC, he suggests that the DRC must follow the Reformers and listen to the Spirit of God in the “letters’ of the Bible. Only in this manner will the Bible remain the “living Word of God. This debate on homosexuality is a text case of the underlying problem: the functioning of the authority of Scripture, not only within the church but also where ethical issues are addressed in view of Scripture.
- *DRC Burgersfort* (Gravamina 2019:76-83): In their introductory paragraph, they express their prayer that the Holy Spirit will guide the Synod and that the church in all its deliberations can declare, “*sola Scriptura*”. They insist that the DRC must reaffirm that the Word of God must take priority over all “General Revelations” and that the DRC as a church of the Reformation is steadfast in maintaining the confession “*sola Scriptura*”.
- *DRC Charl Cilliers* (Gravamina 2019:84-90): After recognising the Bible as the only true Scripture inspired by the Spirit of God, they reject input from “human sciences” because it is considered to be at the heart of a humanistic approach to the Bible that undermines the authority of Scripture.
- *Rev T Danzfuss & Rev HM Janse van Rensburg* (Gravamina 2019:94-122): They argue that the 2015 decisions on homosexuality are invalid because they are contrary to the Reformed principle of *sola Scriptura*, depart from a false view of the authority of Scripture, presuppose a relational understanding of truth and a one-sided view of love ethics. Furthermore, “general revelation” must be understood through the lens of Scripture and not the other way round.

¹⁷ A similar attempt was made in the 2002 report on “Homosexuality”.

- *DRC Eendracht* (Gravamina 2019:136-137): Their formulation summarises most of the general objections raised. Homosexuality is a deviant form of sexuality because it is the result of falling into sin and is contrary to God’s will and creational order as revealed in Scripture. Holy Scripture has the highest authority because the Bible as the Word of God must be the foundation of all church decisions.
- *Dr JH Ernst* (Gravamina 2019: 139-235): His extensive objections are based on the Bible, the Confessions and the Church Order, and he argues that the 2015 decisions were not made in accordance with any of the three. Ernst (2019:199) points out a certain “logic” to the 2007 decisions: (i) The Bible and biblical values guided the DRC deliberations on homosexuality; (ii) the love of Christ is basic to all relations within the faith community, and therefore all people are welcome; (iii) the DRC does not discriminate against people with a homosexual orientation because they can be members of the church, have access to the sacraments and be ordained if they adhere to church discipline and order. According to Ernst (2019:215), it is a soft option to explain the diverging points of view in the DRC regarding same-sex relations as the result of a difference in the use and interpretation of Scripture. It is not merely the juxtaposition of a literal and historical reading of Scripture.¹⁸ To address this dichotomy in the DRC, his recommendation is as follows (2019:220): “The infallible Words of God, as articulated through fallible human words, must be cautiously and painstakingly read and interpreted in each other’s company and in the presence of God.” He continues by suggesting that no decision on same-sex relations can be reached by the DRC without the framework of a “Biblical, hermeneutically responsible, Reformed, Christological theology” – this framework should focus on the Bible as Holy Scripture and Gospel and not on the foundation of natural theology (2019:221). Ernst (2019:222) is convinced that the problem facing the DRC and other Reformed churches is not two diverging paradigms or schools of thought about the use or interpretation of Scripture but more fundamentally the lack of clarity about the authority of the Bible as the Word of God (*sola Scriptura*). He concludes that the confession of *sola Scriptura* can unify the DRC and other Reformed churches if the variety of views about *sola Scriptura* is first explained within the framework of an accountable Biblical-Reformed hermeneutic that establishes church unity in love and fidelity (Gravamina 2019:222).
- *Prof Johan Janse van Rensburg* (Gravamina 2019:269-306): He argues that the 2015 decisions reflect little of the central position that Scripture ought to have in decisions made by church meetings. Instead, he finds questionable attempts to focus on human dignity, new scientific approaches, love, and context to function as underlying hermeneutical keys when making theological-ethical decisions (2019: 270-277). Janse van Rensburg (Gravamina 2019:278-279) reaffirms the authority of Scripture as his hermeneutical key and claims that the 2015 decisions shifted the authority of Scripture from an ontological to an existential level that amounted to natural theology that does not take Scripture

¹⁸ This seems to be a response to the submission of Dr. J. Kirkpatrick that will be discussed in more detail,

to be the final authority and does not comply with the Reformed doctrine of *sola Scriptura*.¹⁹

- *Dr JD Kirkpatrick* (Gravamina 2019:307-320): He points out that there seems to be a close relationship between the deliberations of the DRC on the use of Scripture and their 2015 decisions on same-sex relations. While the DRC engages difficult ethical issues, it has consistently chosen to read the Bible historically and with cultural sensitivity (Gravamina 2019:307). He concludes that there is no lack of clarity in the DRC about the authority of the Bible as the Word of God and that there is a clear trend to reject fundamentalism as an a-historical reading of the Bible – “what it meant and what it means” is not necessarily the same and true to a reformed understanding of Scripture. There can be no final decision about the Bible because all decisions are open for ongoing reflection (Gravamina 2019:220).
- *Rev J Theron* (Gravamina 2019: 458-466): He identifies three focal points in the discussions of the Special General Synod of 2016: *sola Scriptura*, the juxtaposition of sin against human rights and the use of confessions of faith to affirm the Reformed tradition of the DRC. It seems that the 2016 General Synod emphasised *sola Scriptura* as protection against what they perceived as an onslaught from liberal theology, in a way similar to how Luther used it to counter the power of tradition and the pope. He reminds the General Synod that the Reformation always related *sola Scriptura* with *sola gratia* and it seemed to him as if the 2016 reversal of 2015 decisions did not focus enough on the link with *sola gratia*. Furthermore, *sola Scriptura* as the mere citing of a few verses from the Bible does not imply that one is following the will of God. One must keep in mind that *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture alone”) must also be interpreted in close connection with *tota Scriptura* (“whole of Scripture”). If the 2015 decision can be summarised by “love is love”, then the gist of the 2016 reversal is “sin is sin” – only *tota Scriptura* allows the law to be in service of love (Gravamina 2019:459).
- *Dr C van Wyk* (Gravamina 2019: 467-532)²⁰: In a well referenced and extensive objection against the 2015 decision, van Wyk states that this decision is contrary to the Bible as the holy and infallible Word of God and that it was not aligned with Reformed tradition in this regard. He claims that same-sex relations and not only same-sex behaviour were well known in antiquity and were rejected by all three monotheistic religions (Gravamina 2019:469). The authority of the Written Word is paramount and with that as point of departure, he formulates his own hermeneutical framework for the exegesis of biblical texts (Gravamina 2019:474 – 480: i) The Bible is never read in isolation from other readers; ii) God exercises his authority through the Bible; iii) therefore, the authority of the

¹⁹ In a somewhat melodramatic manner, he concludes that the “monster of relativism” is already standing “salivating” at the door of the DRC and threatens the *sola Scriptura* principle of the Reformation (Gravamina 2019:306).

²⁰ The compilers of the Agenda of the 2019 General Synod of the DRC pointed out that this gravamen reflected the essential arguments in most of the other objections.

Bible is based on God²¹; iv) the voice of God can be heard in the Bible; v) the Bible as the canonised legacy of the oral truth and gospel is authoritative as the written Word of God; vi) God establishes his Kingdom with the message of the Bible. One of his final recommendations is that the 2015 decisions on same-sex relations are contrary to article 1 of the Church Order of the DRC that affirms the doctrine that the Bible is the holy and infallible Word of God²². This is further qualified by his clarification that the “Written Word of God” is the point of departure for the church in all matters concerned with doctrine and life (Gravamina 2019:527). For the Reformation, “*Scripture alone*” is the highest and final authority for all decisions made by the church, and the understanding of the biblical text must be based on the interpretation of the text, since the text of the Bible is the inspired Word of God, both in its divine and human character (Gravamina 2019:528).

During the much anticipated **2019 General Synod of the DRC**, the decision of the Western Cape Synod concerning same-sex relations was tabled, discussed, and accepted²³. The decisions relevant for this discussion were formulated as follows (Gaum 2020:207-210): i) The General Synod acknowledges that the differences of opinion with regards the use and interpretation of Scripture have reached a dead-end-street (“vasgelooptheid”) and that ongoing reflection on the responsible interpretation of Scripture is still required; ii) The General Synod confesses that the unity of the church is based on a unity between Christ and its confessional base and that this unity is not weakened by the diverging use and interpretation of Scripture regarding same-sex relations but is enriched and enhanced by it; iii) The General Synod is committed to an ongoing and humble listening to one another, with respect for diverging approaches to the use of Scripture and hermeneutics; iv) it is requested that study must continue regarding what constitutes a marriage and what human sexuality entails for feedback during the next synod.

It is clear from this case study on the gay debate in the DRC that more than three decades of agonising discussions have not yet reached a point where adequate common ground has been found between the diverging points of view. There seems to be a whole range of different opinions and approaches on how a Reformed church should interpret the Bible as Word of God and how it should be appropriated when discussing theological-ethical matters such as same-sex relations and marriage. After three decades of deliberations, it has become obvious that it serves no purpose to make sweeping statements about opposing points of view by simply describing it as a juxtaposition of theological fundamentalism and liberalism within the DRC.

Although some clarity has been reached about the “ears of the hippopotamus” (diverging approaches in the gay-debate), further dialogue and reflection are required to address “the hippopotamus” of doctrinal and hermeneutical presuppositions that lurk beneath the surface of future discussions.

²¹ This might be considered an unfortunate example of circular argumentation – see comments by Harris (2008) above.

²² Compare the similar argument by Strauss (2020) above.

²³ The official minutes of the 2019 General Synod was not yet available on the DRC website at the completion of this article in 2020.

Conclusion

According to Martin Luther, “Nothing is more miserable than uncertainty” (Schreiner 1996:189). It is ironic (even tragic) that in times of tribulation, such as famine, pandemics and war, sources of possible certainty and security inevitably become more attractive. Hard-line ideologies and religious fundamentalisms seem to flourish in uncertain times, such as ours during the COVID pandemic, and therefore attempts to claim unqualified, infallible Scriptural authority for one’s point of view should come as no surprise.

Is it foolhardy to hope for a decrease in religious fundamentalism and an acknowledgement by certain traditions amongst Protestant churches that the Bible as supposedly inerrant Holy Scriptura has become a “paper pope” that is rooted in the rise of twentieth century fundamentalism and not in the Reformation of Martin Luther or John Calvin? The appropriation of *sola Scriptura* must take into account how it, together with *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, formed part of a doctrinal triad that articulated the Protestant response to the Counter-Reformation launched by the Council of Trent (van den Belt 2016:207).

Jean Oosthuizen (2018: 247-260) is correct when he points out that the “elephant in the room” for the Dutch Reformed Church, when it discussed contentious issues like same-sex marriages, sexual intimacy, the existence of the devil etc, was the authority of the Bible as divine or Holy Scripture. This point of view is also accepted by Frits Gaum (2020:45) when he acknowledges that the Dutch Reformed Church is aware of the challenge of diverging interpretations of the Bible within its denomination but have yet to succeed in establishing a hermeneutic that allows the co-existence of diverging biblical interpretations.²⁴

Sola Scriptura, in a qualified sense, remains an important point of theological orientation within Protestant theology and probably for theological reflection in general. However, *sola Scriptura* does not imply the exclusion of church or ecclesial tradition that came into being prior to the Reformation; neither does it imply the rejection of scientific research since the Reformation. If *sola Scriptura* implied a consistent literal interpretation of Scripture that did not allow any input from church tradition or scientific research, a geocentric worldview and slavery might still be around. It took the “courage of Christians to interpret Scripture from a new hermeneutic perspective” informed by critical biblical studies to abolish untenable cosmological presuppositions and abhorrent social practices (van den Belt 2016:216). Similar courage will be needed to relate the scriptural affirmation of human dignity with growing scientific evidence related to gay sexuality.

The ethics of interpretation should also be kept in mind when reflecting on the authority and use of *sola Scriptura*. Biblical interpreters (trained exegetes and members of synods alike) must not only be held responsible by requirements of the academic guild and the doctrinal framework of a church but also for the impact that their interpretations have on vulnerable groups in society. Theology has long ago abdicated as queen of the sciences, and the Bible is no longer a “paper pope” because the authority of the Bible (including *sola Scriptura*) is intrinsically relational. It should not exert power over an

²⁴ This resonates with the strong plea by JH Ernst in his gravamen of 2019 that further dialogue about same-sex relations in the DRC must be conducted within the framework of a Biblical – Reformed hermeneutic (see above).

“Sola Scriptura” against the Background of the Reformation and the Recent “Gay Debate” in the DRC 17
interpretive or faith community but guide the dynamic interaction between those who have power and authority and those who have not: the aliens, the orphans, the poor, the widow and the gay community.

All interpreters of the Bible must be aware of the power-play involved when invoking Biblical authority as divine warrant for their point of view – making it almost impossible to argue for an alternative. Constructive future dialogue on establishing a common hermeneutic depends on it.

For forty years, the journal *Scriptura* focused on theological topics that were examined from a broadly contextual hermeneutical perspective – a methodology that gained in relevance and importance during the past four decades. The appropriation of *sola Scriptura* in the 21st century can gain a lot by becoming more aware of the initial contextual interpretation of the doctrine during the Reformation and its eventual reinterpretation by fundamentalist Biblicists at the turn of the previous century. It also needs to avoid succumbing to the temptation of superimposing this fundamentalist interpretation on the Reformation and the appeal to Scripture in current theological-ethical discussions.²⁵

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²⁵ A toast to (*sola?*) *Scriptura* – may the next forty years be as exciting as the first four decades!

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