

Properly Defining *Sola Scriptura*

“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means!”

Tim Hegg • TorahResource • 2013

It was early in the afternoon. Once again I was sitting next to Mr. H’s bed in his home, but this time we were not talking as usual. Mr. H loved to talk, but now he was silent. I had visited with him many times in the past months as he battled the cancer that was slowly taking his life. He had contracted mesothelioma, lung cancer that was the result of breathing in asbestos. For years during his Navy career as a pipe fitter, he had wrapped himself in asbestos cloth while welding in the cramped quarters of a ship’s hold. That was the common procedure in those days—no one knew that breathing asbestos fibers would kill them. In fact, asbestos was thought to be the perfect shield against the burning sparks of the welder’s torch.

Finally Mr. H opened his eyes, looked up at me, and whispered “I’m ready.” With those last words he gave me a “thumbs up,” closed his eyes, and breathed his last. His wife, sitting on the opposite side of the bed, held his hand and wept as Mr. H slipped away into the presence of Yeshua.

Later that afternoon as I sought to console Mrs. H, she asked the same question of me that she had voiced many times before. “Why? Why didn’t they know how terribly dangerous asbestos is? If only they had known the truth, Mr. H would have lived many more years!” I lowered my eyes and was silent as I struggled to know how best to comfort her in this dark hour of her life. Being a strong believer, a moment later she said in a soft voice, “even though I don’t understand, I know God is with me and will help me through this.”

Following the funeral and burial of Mr. H, I sat in my office reflecting on my past visits with him. I was suddenly struck with the fact that, in the final analysis, ignorance was the cause of his death. Sure, asbestos was the actual culprit, but had people known how dangerous that glass-like material could be, they surely would have avoided it completely. The spiritual application came racing into my thoughts: it is the truth that sets us free and ignorance of the truth leads to all manner of spiritual sickness and death.

Today, many years later, I continue to be astounded at the amount of wrong teaching being presented by well-meaning teachers within the broad Messianic movement. Just like the Navy officers who, with noble intentions, sought to protect Navy welders by providing them with asbestos coverings, so there are teachers today who sincerely believe that what they are teaching will lead people to the truth, when in fact, they are wrapping them in spiritual asbestos.

Some, who have even denied that Yeshua is the true Messiah, continue as accepted teachers at Messianic gatherings, sowing seeds of doubt in the minds of those they teach. Others are teaching that hidden secrets of God’s will can be found in the shape of the Hebrew letters, or that the real truth of the Scriptures lay hidden in the words, uncovered only by a mystical, esoteric journey into the world of Kabbalah.

Still others are systematically trying to remove foundational truths of our faith. Take, for instance, this paragraph in Jacob Fronczak’s article in FFOZ’s *Messianic Journal*, Issue 111 (Fall, 2012), p. 47.

To define *sola scriptura* without academic terminology might sound something like this: The Bible is the only authority in the believer’s life; it is never wrong about anything; it touches on every aspect of life; it needs no outside help to be correctly interpreted; it never disagrees with itself; it can be understood by anyone of average intelligence; and it applies to everyone in every situation.

Fronczak’s purpose in the article is to show that those who hold to *sola scriptura* are actually ignorant of what that doctrinal position entails, and are willfully ignorant of the fact that *sola scriptura* is an impossibility. No one, Fronczak claims, actually stays true to a “Scripture alone” position because everyone uses “extra biblical” literature and traditions in interpreting and applying the Scriptures.

But before you agree with Fronczak and follow him down the road to believing “the Bible alone is not sufficient,” you should question whether he really understands what *sola scriptura* actually means. Is it possible that he, with noble intentions, is trying to guard you from dangerous error by providing you with asbestos theology?

In fact, his definition of *sola scriptura* is blatantly wrong. Let's look at each of the statements in his definition.

1. "The Bible is the only authority in the believer's life" – **wrong!**

Sola Scriptura states that "the Bible is the *final* and *ultimate* authority in all matters of faith and practice." We have plenty of authorities in our lives: governmental officials, police officers, heads of households, leaders in our respective communities, etc. *Sola Scriptura* simply holds that the Bible is the final and ultimate authority, so that, for instance, when any human authority requires us to disobey the Scriptures, we have the God-given right and obligation to appeal to that human authority and, if need be, disregard what they require. (Acts 4:19–20)

2. "it is never wrong about anything" – **misleading!**

Sola Scriptura does not mean that the Bible teaches everything. There's nothing in the Bible that teaches how to recover data from a hard drive. *Sola Scriptura* holds that "the Bible is the infallible rule in all matters to which it speaks."

3. "it touches on every aspect of life" – **misunderstood!**

Sola Scriptura never claims that the Bible directly speaks about every aspect of life or that it is somehow a "text-book" on everything in the universe. *Sola Scriptura* holds that the inspired, infallible word of God reveals God's "worldview," and that as the child of God accepts this worldview, it will likewise affect the way in which he or she approaches all aspects of life. (2Tim 3:16; Heb 4:12)

4. "it needs no outside help to be correctly interpreted" – **wrong!**

Sola Scriptura holds that the Bible must be interpreted according to its historical, grammatical sense. This means that knowing the history, culture, and language in which the inspired word is given is necessary for receiving its divinely intended message. But *Sola Scriptura* also states that the Bible is self-interpreting, meaning that since it is God's inspired word as a whole, it is never self-contradictory. Therefore, the truth of the Scriptures is found in the whole of the Bible's message, allowing the whole to interpret the parts.

5. "it never disagrees with itself" – **correct but incomplete!**

Sola Scriptura takes as a starting point that the Bible in its entirety is the inspired, infallible word of God, so that when it appears to disagree with itself, or when we find seeming contradictions, we conclude that we need more information or that we have misunderstood something of importance. We do not rush to the conclusion that the Bible contains errors because we accept the doctrine of divine inspiration and thus the inerrancy of the Scriptures as originally given by its human authors.

6. "it can be understood by anyone of average intelligence" – **misleading!**

Surely *Sola Scriptura* embraces what is called the "perspicuity of Scripture," which means that the essential truths of the Scriptures have been written in such a manner so as to make them understandable to those who read or hear them. Moses states this in Deut 30:11–14, concluding that the revealed truth of God is "in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it." But *Sola Scriptura* and the "perspicuity of Scripture" never negate the admonition of Scripture itself that every child of God should be a diligent student of the word (2Tim 2:15), nor the fact that the more we study and apply the word of God to our lives, the better we understand it.

7. “it applies to everyone in every situation” – **correct but incomplete!**

Once again, *Sola Scriptura* holds that the Bible is the *final* and *ultimate* authority in all matters of faith and practice, and this means that the child of God must seek to live his or her life in harmony with the will of God as revealed to us in the Scriptures. You won't find the Bible telling you which model of car to buy, but you will find the Bible giving you God's wisdom and righteous guidelines for making decisions that honor Him and are good for you. “Trust in Adonai with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. *In all your ways acknowledge Him*, and He will make your paths straight.” (Prov 3:5–6, emphasis added)

So before you embrace with open arms Fronczak's teaching, think twice! The cloak he is offering to keep you from being burned may be made of a substance that promises protection, but in the end will be spiritually fatal.

*Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth,
and having put on the breastplate of righteousness,
and having shod your feet with the preparation of the Gospel of peace;
in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith
with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.
And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*

Ephesians 6:14–17