

Sola Scriptura: Should the Messianic Movement Reject this Theology?

A Response to the Article “Sola Scriptura” by Jacob Fronczak, *MJ* #111 (FFOZ, 2012)

by C. M. Hegg

Recently I presented some short teachings on the Five Sola’s at the congregation I attend. Church history is one of several points of interest within my studies and after I taught on *Sola Scriptura* my father mentioned to me that one of First Fruits of Zion’s (FFOZ) newer writers, Jacob Fronczak, had recently written a series of articles on the Five Sola’s in the “Messianic Journal” (*MJ*). Fronczak has his M.Div. in Theological Studies from Liberty University, so I was excited to read an exposition from a educated Messianic on the theological foundations of our faith. What began as excitement soon turned to disbelief as I began to read Fronczak’s article on *Sola Scriptura*. Not only does it seem that Fronczak lacks a basic understanding of this theological principle, but I was quite shocked that FFOZ’s theological editors didn’t catch such a blatant misrepresentation. Beyond this, Fronczak recklessly challenges a theology that many believers gave their lives for, so that we have the freedom to write openly about this subject.

Sola Scriptura: A Misrepresentation

Fronczak begins his article by explaining that one of his seminary professors challenged him on some statements he had made. He explains that his professor’s challenge was based on the Protestant doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. Surprisingly, Fronczak never once interacts with any of the Protestant reformers in his paper. Instead, Fronczak defines *Sola Scriptura* by utilizing a quote from Christian Smith’s book *The Bible Made Impossible*.¹ Smith is a professor at Notre Dame, a former Protestant who converted to Catholicism. Smith has written many different works including one titled *How to Go from Being a Good Evangelical to a Committed Catholic in Ninety-Five Difficult Steps*.² As a Catholic it is no wonder Smith would reject the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, but why Fronczak would take his definition of a Protestant doctrine from a Catholic is beyond my understanding. Smith is quoted as saying:

[*Sola Scriptura* is] exclusive authority, infallibility, perspicuity, self-sufficiency, internal consistency, self-evident meaning, and universal applicability.³

Although I would reject Smith’s entire premise in his work that is cited, some of the attributes that are assigned to *Sola Scriptura* in this quote are true, but need some clarification. Fronczak tries to give us this clarification:

To define *sola scriptura* without academic terminology might sound

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1. Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible* (Brazos Press, 2012).
 2. Christian Smith, *How to Go from Being a Good Evangelical to a Committed Catholic in Ninety-Five Difficult Steps* (Wipf & Stock, 2011).
 3. Jacob Fronczak, “The Five Solas: Sola Scriptura”, *MJ* 111 (2012), p. 47. [Here after Fronczak *Sola Scriptura*]

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.⁴

Wrong! I can only assume that the theological stance that Smith presents in his book has now been transported from the pages of a book that is widely seen as Junk Scholarship (as my father would so rightly say) by evangelicals, into Fronczak's understanding of this doctrine. What is more, Fronczak now takes this incorrect understanding of *Sola Scriptura* to argue his points throughout the rest of his article and to set up a straw man that is so easily knocked down.

Sola Scriptura: What it Really Is

Fronczak is correct that the theology of *Sola Scriptura* became a foundational principle of the Reformers to counter the Roman Catholic Church. During the 15th and 16th centuries the Catholic Church and the Pope had significant political and religious power. The Bible was not available in the vernacular. The Catholic Church thus had immense control of the people. Doctrines such as salvation through the Catholic Church and the Sacraments were being taught as if Paul had spoken these commands himself. But the winds of change were at hand. Martin Luther challenged the authority of the Church and (among other things) took it upon himself to translate the Bible into German.⁵

William Tyndale began a translation of the Bible into English. To the Catholic Church this threatened not only the authority structure of the Church and the Pope, but it also meant a significant financial hit. If the common person had the Word of God, they might realize that things such as giving money to the Church, buying indulgences, or even submitting to the authority of the Pope were not actually commanded in the words of Scripture. This threat led to the "burning of heretics"⁶ by the Catholic Church, and many believers were tortured and burned for being unwilling to recant in preaching against doctrines such as Transubstantiation (that the

4. *ibid*

5. It is true that Martin Luther was an anti-Semite. In his early years Luther was sympathetic to the Jewish people, but as he got older Luther began to change his tune. Luther wrote "The Jews & Their Lies," and extremely anti-Semitic work that was eventually used by the Nazis to give soldiers a religious reason to carry out the extermination of the Jews. I, of course, would in no way condone Luther's writings or theology against the Jewish people, but I do believe that God used Luther to bring about certain reforms that helped shape and change the way believers were treated and the theology they had.

6. Brian Moynahan presents a gruesome yet accurate portrayal of the burning of the Protestant martyrs in his book, *Book of Fire: William Tyndale and the Bloody Birth of the English Bible*, (Abacus, 2011) p. 267ff.

body of the Messiah is physically present in communion), paedo-baptism (the baptism of infants), and saying the Pope was not the direct mouth piece of God (a doctrine that *Sola Scriptura* directly challenged). R.C. Sproul explains the formation of *Sola Scriptura* this way:

The Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* was given the status of the formal cause of the Reformation by Melancthon and his Lutheran followers. The formal cause was distinguished from the material cause of *Sola Fide* (by faith alone). Though the chief theological issue of the Reformation was the question of the matter of justification, the controversy touched heavily on the underlying question of authority. As is usually the case in theological controversy, the issue of ultimate authority lurked in the background (though it was by no means hidden or obscure) of Luther's struggle with Rome over justification. The question of the *source* of Luther's doctrine and the normative authority by which it was to be judged was vital to his cause.⁷

Thus, the formation of *Sola Scriptura* was the doctrine that the Word of God had more authority than the Catholic Church, the Pope and the Catholic Councils. This doctrine did not preach that there was no authority outside of the Bible (as we will see below).

From the outset of Fronczak's redefinition of *Sola Scriptura* we see problems, even Smith's definition begins in error. *Sola Scriptura* is not the "only" authority within a believer's life, but it is the "final" authority. This means that all other authority must be checked and must conform to the Word of God. Scripture sets up authority structures within homes, families, congregations etc.⁸ While the modern day evangelical does not have continued ties to the Catholic Church, it was still a large factor in the 15th to 17th centuries. Martin Luther challenged the Church, the Pope and the Church councils in 1519 in his debates with Johannes von Eck in Leipzig. Sproul interacts with Gordon Rupp's account of Luther's proclamation of this theology and says:

Scripture alone is the ultimate, divine authority in all matters pertaining to religion. Gordon Rupp gives the following account: "Luther affirmed that 'among the articles of John Huss and the Hussites which were condemned, are many which are truly Christian and evangelical, and which the church universal cannot condemn!' This was sensational! There was a moment of shocked silence, and then an uproar above which could be heard Duke

7. James Montgomery Boice, *The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, (Zondervan Pub., 1979) p. 103.

8. I don't believe I need to take the time to show this from the Bible, but the Torah gives specific pecking orders in matters of judgment, and the Hebrew word זקן translated "elder" is used 43 times in the Torah alone to represent the elders of Israel or the elders of a city. Beyond this Eph. 5:22ff gives clear authority structures within the family and the home, and 1 Tim. 3 gives us the qualifications for those in authority positions within the Ekklesia.

George's disgusted, 'Gad, Sir, That's the Plague!...' Eck pressed his advantage home, and Luther, trapped, admitted that since their decrees are also of human law, Councils may err."⁹

Thus began the formation of the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. This is not to say that Martin Luther came up with such a doctrine, but rather that this is when it began to be formulated as a doctrine which now is called *Sola Scriptura*. Contrary to Fronczak's claim that such a doctrine is not found within Scripture,¹⁰ we find Peter affirming this doctrine in Acts 5:27-29 against Jewish authority:

When they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. The high Priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and yet, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men." (NASB)

According to Fronczak's methodology of oral Torah, this council would have had authority given by God, and therefore what they said should have been followed, yet the apostles take a firm stand that it is what God says that is authoritative and that these men did not have the authority to bind them with "oral law."

Luther continues the formation of this theology in his speech at the diet of Worms in 1521. He states:

Your Imperial Majesty and Your Lordship demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and unvarnished. Unless I am convicted of error by the testimony of Scripture or (since I put no trust in the unsupported authority of Pope and Councils, since it is plain that they have often erred and often contradicted themselves) by manifest reasoning, I stand convicted by the Scriptures to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us.¹¹

Luther was affirming the Scriptural doctrine that the final authority comes from God. But to say that Luther was advocating a teaching that we as believers are not to use any external literature

9. James Montgomery Boice, *The Foundation of Biblical Authority*, (Zondervan Pub. 1979) p. 104, quoting Gordon Rupp *Luther's Progress to the Diet of Worms*, p. 69

10. Fronczak, *Sola Scriptura*, p. 49

11. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder ed., *Document of the Christian Church*, (Oxford, 1950) p. 285

(as Fronczak claims) to help guide and interpret the holy words of Scripture is clearly not true and even neglects his other works. In his letter to Duke Albert of Prussia he states:

You would be troubled not only for the sake of your soul, which would be damned thereby, but for the sake of the whole Christian Church, for if you allow any to teach against the long and unanimously held doctrine of the Church when you can prevent it, it may well be called an unbearable burden to conscience. I should rather have not only all ranters, but all powerful, wise emperors, kings, and princes testify against me than let one jot of the holy Christian Church hear or see anything against me. For we must not trifle with the articles of faith so long and unanimously held by Christendom, as we can with papal or imperial law or the human traditions of the fathers and the councils.¹²

Luther was not the only reformer that made such statements. In his “*Institutes*,” John Calvin writes:

Thus those ancient Councils of Nice, Constantinople, the first of Ephesus, Chalcedony, and the like, which were held for refuting errors, we willingly embrace, and reverence as sacred, in so far as relates to doctrines of faith, for they contain nothing but the pure and genuine interpretation of Scripture, which the holy Fathers with spiritual prudence adopted to crush the enemies of religion who had then arisen. In some later councils, also, we see displayed a true zeal for religion, and moreover, unequivocal marks of genius, learning, and prudence. But as matters usually become worse and worse, it is easy to see in more modern councils how much the Church gradually degenerated from the purity of that golden age.¹³

Thus Fronczak shows a misunderstanding of what the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* actually is. Building on this misrepresentation, he then makes several untrue statements:

If the Bible is the only authority and the only necessary tool for faith and practice, it must state in the Bible that this belief is correct.¹⁴

Fronczak uses this false pretense to attack those who hold to *Sola Scriptura* by pulling doctrines such as the trinity and the formation of the Apostolic canon into the conversation. While Fronczak does not explain his personal views of the trinity doctrine, he argues that since the trinity

12. Preserved Smith ed., *The Life and Letters of Martin Luther*, (Houghton Mifflin, 1911) p. 291-292

13. John Calvin, *Institutes*, number 4.9.8, sighted from Accordance Bible Software.

14. Fronczak *Sola Scriptura*, p. 48, 49

doctrine is not specifically laid out in the Bible, it would then need to be rejected by Protestants.¹⁵ However this is clearly not what the Westminster Confession of Faith claims:

The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.¹⁶

Thus the plurality of God is clearly a doctrine that “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” *Sola Scriptura* also does not claim that “it touches on every aspect of life” as Fronczak wrongly asserts. In a short article by John MacArthur, he states:

Sola Scriptura simply means that all truth necessary for our salvation and spiritual life is taught either explicitly or implicitly in Scripture. It is not a claim that all truth of every kind is found in Scripture. The most ardent defender of *sola Scriptura* will concede, for example, that Scripture has little or nothing to say about DNA structures, microbiology, the rules of Chinese grammar, or rocket science. This or that “scientific truth,” for example, may or may not be actually true, whether or not it can be supported by Scripture—but Scripture is a “more sure Word,” standing above all other truth in its authority and certainty.¹⁷

I could continue to show how reformed theologians such as Martin Chemnitz, Charles Hodge and others all affirm that *Sola Scriptura* does not teach against using outside sources when seeking to interpret and understand the Bible. Nor does this doctrine hold that the Scriptures are the only authority in one's life. Surely God has ordained various levels of authority in a believer's life: local government, parents, spouse, ecclesial authorities, etc. The point made by *Sola Scriptura* is that when authorities require something of an individual which goes contrary to the Scriptures, then the Scriptures must be obeyed as over against other authorities. With this in mind Fronczak's claim that “Protestants have painted themselves into a corner here, as they re-

15. Ibid, p. 50

16. The Westminster Confession of Faith, Article 1.6 - Sighted from Accordance Bible Software

17. Ligonier Ministries, “What Does Sola Scriptura Mean?” (<http://www.ligonier.org/blog/what-does-sola-scriptura-mean/>) It is also interesting that Fronczak quotes from the Council of Trent, a Catholic Council that convened over a period of 18 years from 1545 to 1563, yet is completely silent when it comes to the Protestant Council of the Westminster Assembly, that largely spoke against the doctrines established at the Council of Trent.

ject any post-biblical tradition as authoritative,”¹⁸ falls to the ground as having misunderstood one of the basic tenants of *Sola Scriptura*.

Oral Tradition

In trying to prove that Protestants believe in “oral tradition,” Fronczak evidences a lack of knowledge regarding the canonicity of the Apostolic Scriptures. His argument seems to hinge on the idea that the Church Fathers were the ones who put together the canon of the Apostolic Scriptures, and if we accept the biblical canon we are somehow acknowledging the superior authority of the Church Fathers. Once again this is simply not the case. First of all, the Church Fathers are not the ones who decided which books formed the biblical canon. The Apostolic Scriptures are self authenticating. It is true that the Church Fathers saw what was clearly evident by the Holy Spirit, but it was not only the Church Fathers. Rome was putting many people to death for their unwillingness to deny their faith. It was the Ekklesia as a whole that confirmed what was and what was not the inspired Scriptures of the Apostolic Canon, for it was a question of whether or not one was willing to die for the books that were held to be God’s Word.

The Apocrypha for instance was not accepted by the larger body of believers. Fronczak is correct that Luther called James an epistle of straw, but isn’t it interesting that Luther’s translation into German has the book of James in it? Why is this? Because Luther recognized that through the authority of the larger body of believers, this book was still considered Scripture. Tyndale believed the book of Hebrews not to be Scripture, yet we find it in his translation of the Apostolic Scriptures. The Scriptures were not canonized by a council, or by a group of men. Rather they were canonized by the larger body of believers who were willing to lay down their lives for the words which these books contained. Beyond this, Fronczak claims

Protestants tacitly accepted the belief that the canon was divinely ordained and that the tradition of canonization was outside the scripture itself when they borrowed entirely the Catholic canon, not adding one single book to it (though the Apocrypha were later removed).¹⁹

Once again this shows a lack of understanding not only of the reformers’ views of authority within the larger body of believers, but also a lack of knowledge of how the Bible was put into the vernacular. Luther’s German translation of the Bible placed the Apocrypha in a intertestamental section. This was highly controversial as Luther was basically making the claim that the Apocrypha, while good to read, was not part of the Canon. Tyndale’s translation also did not include the Apocrypha. It was not until Myles Coverdale came along and finished the work Tyn-

18. Fronczak *Sola Scriptura*, p. 49

19. Fronczak *Sola Scriptura*, p. 49

dale had nearly finished that the Apocrypha was added.²⁰ The King James version Bible did include the Apocrypha. However, this version was sanctioned by King James, who though a protestant himself was willing to accept “crypto-Catholics” into his government and the inclusion of the Apocryphal books was typical of King James’ ecumenical dealings for political gain. It was the Catholics that accepted (and still accept) the Apocrypha. The Protestants rejected these writings in their Canon, and thus we have 66 books. The place of the Apocrypha in the Canon has been a point of discussion since the time of Yeshua. But to say that the Protestants accepted the Canon because of the Church Fathers does not give credit to the working of the Holy Spirit through the entire body of the Ekklesia, and also neglects to reckon with the fact that the Reformers did, in fact, embrace Church tradition, as I have already shown.

One of the bigger questions I would pose to Fronczak is the issue of oral tradition as a whole. If Fronczak truly believes that there is divinely sanctioned “Oral Torah,” as seems to be his point, then what oral Torah does he purpose we accept? What oral tradition has God sanctioned and what oral tradition has He not sanctioned? For instance, recently one of Fronczak’s colleagues, Toby Janicki, wrote a blog post entitled “Can Women Wear Tzitzit and Tefillin?”²¹ Toby’s answer is “no,” and he uses an argument that tzitzit are a man’s garment, and the larger body of Judaism does not allow women to wear such a garment. Toby makes the statement: “It is modern, liberal Judaism that is pushing for women to be able to wear tzitzit and tallits.”²² Yet Rab Judah The Prince (the rabbi to whom tradition credits the compilation of the Mishnah) made the women of his household wear tzitzit.²³ Would Fronczak then say that Rab Judah The Prince is not sanctioned as having divinely inspired oral tradition? Surely Fronczak would disagree with this excerpt from the Babylonian Talmud about our Messiah Yeshua:

AND A HERALD PRECEDES HIM etc. This implies, only immediately before [the execution], but not previous thereto. [In contradiction to this] it was taught: On the eve of the Passover Yeshu was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, ‘He is going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Any one who can say anything in his favour, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.’ But since nothing was brought forward in his favour he was hanged on the eve of the Passover! — ‘Ulla retorted: Do you suppose that he was one for whom a defence could be made? Was he not a Mesith [enticer], concerning whom Scripture says,

20. It could be argued that Tyndale would have added the Apocrypha on his own if he had not been captured. However, this point is debatable.

21. Found in the FFOZ blog archive, Jan. 27th 2014
(http://ffoz.org/blogs/2014/01/can_woman_wear_tzitzit_and_tef.html)

22. Ibid.

23. b.*Menachot* 43a.

Neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him? With Yeshu however it was different, for he was connected with the government [or royalty, i.e., influential].²⁴

As believers, I would presume that Fronczak does not hold this oral tradition of the Rabbi's to be divinely sanctioned since it teaches that our Messiah Yeshua was a sorcerer. Yet the wider Jewish community continues to hold to such a belief. How should one decide what should be followed and what should not? The Protestants had a pretty good idea... Hold it up to the Scriptures and see if it aligns. This is known as the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, the very thing that Fronczak is speaking against!

Fronczak now moves his argument to the Masoretic pointing of the Tanach. It is true that the pointing (vowel markings) provided in modern texts come from a standardized tradition.²⁵ The Masoretic pointing is a nice tool, and many people use it today (including the teachers and staff at TorahResource Institute). But Fronczak claims:

In effect, the entire Old Testament is dependent on this oral tradition; without it, we would only have a string of Hebrew letters with an almost infinite permutation of meanings.²⁶

This is not only ridiculous, but is clearly wrong! Fronczak even refers to the Dead Sea Scrolls community. Not only did this community not have any pointing in their biblical texts but they also rejected the common “oral tradition” of the Judaisms represented in Jerusalem. Is Fronczak suggesting that the Dead Sea Scroll community was unable to read their own literature because the vowel pointing was not added? According to this logic, they simply had a “string of Hebrew letters with an almost infinite permutation of meanings”? This is total nonsense! The fact is that those that can read the Biblical Hebrew well do just fine without the pointing. In the places where a word might have several options, context will almost always tell a reader the correct translation. Beyond this, in the minute amount of places where context is not a help, or there could be two different words used in context, it never makes any difference in our understanding of a text. Does it speak to the issue of our salvation and faith if Jacob leaned on his “bed” or his “staff” (מטה in the Hebrew) in Gen. 47:31? Once again Fronczak builds himself a nice little straw man that he can knock down, in order to reject a doctrine he doesn't understand.

Conclusion

Fronczak has taken a foundational truth of our faith and tried to do away with it. He has shown a lack of understanding of the very basic theology upon which we as believers stand. In so doing he has misrepresented the doctrine and theology of the Protestant reformers. But even

24. b.Sanhedrin 43a

25. Even this is somewhat debatable, as there are still texts extant from the school of Naphtali. I assume that Fronczak is referring to the texts from the school of Ben Asher.

26. Fronczak *Sola Scriptura*, p. 53

more egregious is that Fronczak has questioned the authority of the Holy Word of God by teaching that human authority has given Scripture its authority.

Fronczak makes the statement that:

First Fruits of Zion has been vehemently attacked for this very reason—we rely on rabbinic traditions and other extra-biblical literature to illuminate and explain the text of the Scripture.

Even in this Fronczak shows his lack of understanding when it comes to the very reason why people are speaking against the teachings of FFOZ. People are speaking against these issues because FFOZ gives to rabbinic literature a level of divine authority which it simply does not have. People are speaking against shoddy scholarship that sets up a straw man from a misunderstanding of basic doctrines in order to belittle biblical truth for which believers live and are willing to die.

Recently I received an email from someone perplexed on why my father would write his article about FFOZ's "Purim 1946" teaching. This person explained that TorahResource and FFOZ were preaching the same Gospel and that we should basically "all just get along." The reason why my father has been so persistent in pointing out these "small theological issues" is because he saw where a misrepresentation and neglect for the rules of hermeneutics would lead... to the rejection of core doctrines! We now see this very thing happening. FFOZ is rejecting historic, biblical truths which form *hayesod* (the foundation) of our faith in Yeshua. First they proclaim that a "*sola scriptura* approach leads to the wrong answer,"²⁷ but what's next? The Deity of the Messiah? Salvation through faith alone? Ladies and gentlemen, this should be a call for every person to take notice and not allow the erosion of foundational biblical truths to become an acceptable reality in their own lives or in the life of their faith communities.

Let your voice be heard! It is time to make sure that the foundation of our faith in Yeshua is solid and unshakeable, and this means that we must have an unwavering allegiance to the Scriptures as the final and ultimate authority in all matters of faith and *halachah*.

27. Fronczak, *Sola Scriptura*, p. 54