

## The Monk's Tools— *Sola, Prima, and Tota Scriptura*

A monk stands alone against the combined prestige and power of the religious and civil leaders of his world—among them, representatives of the pope and the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire in person. This monk—arguably the most influential figure of the past thousand years—had gained some unique and important insights regarding the meanings of belief, faith, and the pathway to salvation. He had concluded that this pathway leads from the individual directly to Jesus Christ, who ministers in the heavenly sanctuary, freely dispensing grace and salvation to all humble, repentant souls.

These deep, personal spiritual truths had earth-shaking implications for the religious and political powers of the monk's day. If his claims were true, he had found a path that bypassed the toll road to salvation that was run by the church and state, which had dominated the Western world for more than a thousand years. Constantine's declaration that Christianity was to be recognized as the official religion of the West had given popes, prelates, and magistrates control of the pathway to heaven. They had claimed to have the license to set conditions on people's access to salvation—handing out penances, selling indulgences, and setting all manner of requirements that people had to fulfill in order to obtain peace with God.

Now, with the simple set of biblical beliefs that were the monk's tools, he was poised to tear this entire enterprise down and cast it out of the church and the palace. His beliefs about Christ, grace, and faith stood on the foundation provided by another doctrine—one that allowed him to pierce the medieval

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façade—the doctrine of the supreme authority of Scripture. The monk's feet were firmly planted on the foundation of *sola scriptura*, allowing him to develop the other *sola* doctrines: *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solo Christo*—"by faith alone," "by grace alone," "by Christ alone." He recognized that without *sola scriptura*, these other doctrines were vulnerable to being defined and compromised by church tradition and papal teaching. So, before the arrayed authorities of church and state at the Diet of Worms held in 1521, the monk, Martin Luther, took his stand on the doctrine of Scripture. However, he did so using words that might sound strange, maybe even heretical, to our ears in view of our conceptions of *sola scriptura*. Note his closing statement at that convocation: "Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments ["manifest reasoning" some translations read] . . . , I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I can not and will not recant any thing, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do any thing against the conscience."<sup>1</sup>

Much of this statement is familiar to us; the lines "my conscience is bound in the word of God" and "I can not and will not recant" have become part of the collective cultural memory of Protestants. But what about Luther's willingness to be judged not only by Scripture, but also by "clear arguments" and "manifest reasoning"? How does his appeal to reason square with his belief in the authority of Scripture?

Luther's reference to reason raises the question of what the doctrine *sola scriptura* meant to the Reformers. Did it mean that Scripture was the only place where they could obtain knowledge about God and spiritual things? Did it mean that they would consult no other sources regarding religious questions? What exactly is the proper relationship between Scripture and what other people consider to be valid sources of truth about the world and about God?

The Bible doesn't contain the term *sola scriptura*, but this term captures the doctrine of Scripture's centrality and authority that the Protestant Reformers developed from the Bible. It is highly instructive that at what probably was the most crucial moment of his life and ministry, when all hung in the balance, Luther clearly said that he believed in *sola scriptura*—assessing truth "*by* Scripture alone"—and not what we might call *solo scriptura*, obtaining truth "*from* Scripture alone."

Luther's appeal to manifest reason was a simple recognition that God speaks through scriptural revelation and through the universe that He created. Correctly understood, Scripture and nature, God's first and second books, agree. *Sola scriptura*, on the other hand, says that the Bible is the *only* source of religious knowledge and thus of religious belief. It is the only instrument that can reveal the truth or falsehood of religious doctrines and beliefs. Like *solo scriptura*, *sola scriptura* says that the Bible is the ultimate standard of truth and that all doctrines must be founded upon it. But it differs from *solo scriptura* in that it says that in addition to speaking to us through the Bible, God speaks to us through nature and through human reasoning.

For some, the suggestion that God reveals Himself to us through two channels of communication is radical and threatens to undermine the authority of

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Scripture. Yet the Bible itself clearly speaks of these two books. In Paul's letter to the Romans, the apostle wrote that "since the creation of the world [God's] invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they [the lost] are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). Paul's words echo Psalm 19:1–3:

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
And the firmament shows His handiwork.  
Day unto day utters speech,  
And night unto night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech nor language  
Where their voice is not heard.

Our interpretations of the Bible's prophecies would be incomplete without the histories secular human writers have given us. Without the information contained in secular histories and other extrabiblical sources, we couldn't find the dates essential to these prophecies: 457 B.C. (the Persian decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem); A.D. 538 (the beginning of the 1,260-year period of medieval persecution), A.D. 1798 (the end of the medieval papal supremacy), and A.D. 1844 (the beginning of the antitypical Day of Atonement).

### Making Scripture an idol

People can use nature and reason to push Scripture out of their lives. Liberals who use science to reject the biblical Creation account do this very thing. But the opposite can happen too: people can turn the text of Scripture into an idol, thus overthrowing the living Word of God.

Consider the Pharisees in Christ's time. They had the words of God in the Bible, but they didn't have the Word of God in their hearts. Christ said the Pharisees treated the Bible with great respect, thinking the Scriptures to be the source of eternal life. But, He said, the Bible testifies of Him as the real Source of eternal life, and the Pharisees refused to act on what the Book they claim to treasure says (see John 5:38–40).

The Bible is the Word of God; but it isn't the *only* word of God. Jesus Christ is the ultimate Word of God. Though He speaks in a variety of ways—through nature, through the Holy Spirit, and through our consciences—we can distance ourselves from the voice of God or twist its contents for our own purposes. Of course, all that Christ says through these other avenues is consistent with Scripture, which must always remain the ultimate authority in our Christian walk.

Apart from God's revelation through nature and reason, the Reformers also recognized the value of using church councils and the church fathers as "patristic testimony" to biblical truth. Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, Zwingli, Bucer, and other famed Reformers recognized the usefulness of reading the Bible in the light

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of church history and of the church fathers as reliable witnesses for testing and checking their understanding of the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

One historian has summarized Luther's approach to the church fathers this way:

Luther appreciated the church fathers; indeed, he quoted them profusely in his works. He summarized his entire program by urging, "Back to the Bible, to Augustine and to the church fathers!" The last two of these may surprise some readers who assumed that *solā scriptura* would eliminate them. But Luther's extensive reading of Augustine's works had prepared him to turn to the Scriptures as the ultimate religious authority. He came to see Scripture as superior to patristic writings, to be sure. Even so, Luther repeatedly cited the church fathers . . . to document his teaching.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, these witnesses, as we noted in the introduction, are subject to the Bible and valid only insofar as they support and agree with it. As Luther put it, "All the holy fathers, when they speak apart from the Scriptures, are as fallible as anyone else." He used the church fathers to show that his own views of Scripture were not entirely peculiar or of new invention, but he insisted that he would "take their [the fathers'] books and go with them to Christ and his Word as the touchstone and compare the two."<sup>4</sup>

Luther's colleague Philip Melancthon had a very similar view. He said, "We know that what has been set forth in the Canonical Books is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. We do not know that what is decided by the councils is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit unless it agrees with Scripture."<sup>5</sup> Melancthon also made clear that while there were other authorities, all doctrine must be based and rooted in Scripture alone. "Articles of faith must be judged simply in accordance with the canon of Holy Scripture. What has been put forth outside [of] Scripture must not be held as an article of faith. Establishing doctrine," Melancthon declares, "belongs to 'Scripture alone.'"<sup>6</sup>

Many other Reformers, including Ulrich Zwingli, Johannes Oecolampadius, John Calvin, and Martin Bucer also quoted church fathers and councils. At the same time, they made clear that Scripture is the ultimate authority and that these other sources should be accepted only if they agree with Scripture. Thus, Scripture was the sole infallible authority. They also asserted that Scripture is the sole foundation and basis for church doctrine. In other words, no doctrine or church ritual could be instituted that was not rooted and based in Scripture.<sup>7</sup>

One helpful way to compare the authority of Scripture and other "witnessing" or "aiding" authority, such as history, reason, church councils, and church fathers, is to consider the difference between a norming norm and a formative norm. A *norm* is a rule or standard. A *norming norm* would be a rule or standard that rules all others, which is the role the Bible plays. A *formative norm* is a source of authority that helps form and fill out a norming norm. Such formative norms

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might be history, reason, and our own experiences and those of other believers.

For example, the doctrine of Christ's first coming and the timing of His baptism and crucifixion are set out in Scripture. However, the prophecies that assert these truths, the normative norms, are complete only when they are filled in with extrabiblical historical facts about the year that the decree to rebuild and restore Jerusalem was made. Likewise, we have a basic outline of church order in the New Testament: deacons, elders, and overseers (similar to our deacons, elders, pastors, and conference and union presidents), but based on its experience, our community of believers can fill in the blanks to create other offices, such as church secretary, treasurer, and religious liberty leader.

We can use basic information and facts from history and nature to fill out and interpret biblical truths and teachings as long as we always recognize the superiority of the biblical source. The church's pragmatic rule making should not become new scripture; the church manual should not be mistaken for a new part of the canon.

### **Our reason and experience**

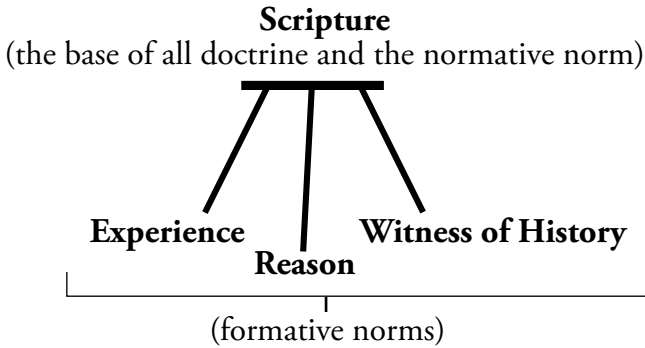
We unavoidably bring our reason and experience to Scripture. Even simple rules of scriptural interpretation, such as "the Bible should be read literally unless it is clearly using symbolism," make sense only if we know what is literal and what is symbolic. We can treat seven-headed dragons and winged lions as symbols because our experience with history and nature tell us that they aren't real. In this sense, we're using experience and reason to help us understand the normative teachings of Scripture. Experience and reason aren't superior to or equal to Scripture; while they support it, they are always subject to its overriding authority.

Two hundred years after Luther and Calvin, John Wesley put into a clear and helpful formula how these various sources of truth relate to each other. His model is sometimes called the Wesleyan quadrilateral. It illustrates the relationship between the four sources of truth: Scripture, reason, experience, and tradition. Listing all the parts together suggests they're all equal, but neither Wesley nor the earlier Protestant Reformers believed that. All the parts of the quadrilateral are subject to the norming norm of Scripture, and all doctrine must be rooted in Scripture. Rather than quadrilateral, it should perhaps be called the scriptural stool: the Bible is supreme at the top and it is supported by the three legs of reason, experience, and tradition.

Thus, while other elements could flesh out or "inform" a doctrine, the doctrine itself must have its basis in Scripture. Christ Himself was clear that the tradition of the community didn't have equal authority with the commandment of God. He rebuked the Pharisees who criticized His disciples for not engaging in ceremonial washings, accusing the Pharisees of "teaching as doctrines the commandments" or "tradition" of men ( Mark 7:7–9). The creation of doctrine based on human sources would lead inevitably to a clash with God's teachings, thus "making the word of God of no effect through your tradition" (verse 13).

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### Wesleyan Scriptural Stool



This model illustrates both *sola scriptura* (all doctrines must be based solely on infallible Scripture) and *prima scriptura* (Scripture is primary and has authority over the secondary authorities: reason, experience, and tradition; the secondary authorities contribute to the shaping and understanding of scriptural doctrine). These two ideas don't have to conflict with each other, as some would suggest. Rightly understood, they are complementary.

Another complementary element of the Reformers' *sola scriptura* teaching—one practiced by Wesley among others—is captured in the phrase *tota scriptura*. This phrase conveys the idea that all relevant Scripture should be brought to bear on a teaching or topic. This means that Scripture should be used to interpret itself. This principle can be seen in Christ's use of Scripture, when, for instance, on the road to Emmaus, "beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" (Luke 24:27).

The full scriptural principle of the Reformers, then, is expressed in the three phrases *sola scriptura*, *prima scriptura*, and *tota scriptura*, as described in the chart below.<sup>8</sup>

### The Three-Part Protestant Principle of Scriptural Authority

<i>sola scriptura</i>	<i>prima scriptura</i>	<i>tota scriptura</i>
The Bible is the sole basis for church doctrine and ritual and the only infallible authority for the Christian. All church doctrine and ritual must be rooted in Scripture.	The Bible is the primary authority among the various sources of truth: Scripture, reason, experience, and history. The "norms" of Scripture are "formed" and applied with these other sources, which are subject to correction by Scripture.	The Bible is a unified whole and all relevant material throughout the Bible should be brought to bear on one's study of any topic or subject. The Bible should serve as its own interpreter since its authorship has been unified through the Holy Spirit.

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The real danger faced by those who claim to stand on *solo scriptura*—the view that study about God and religious truths begins, ends, and consists of reading only Scripture—is that they truncate or even deny these complementary principles while actually using them. Even the most hardened verbal-dictation fundamentalists actually use reason, experience, and the witness of other Christians in interpreting and applying Scripture. If they didn't, they would carry out all the literal commands of Scripture: the sacrificial and ritual laws of the Old Testament, Christ's instructions to cut off hands and pluck out eyes that offend, and certainly Paul's injunctions that women must wear hats in church and that, in the best case, Christians wouldn't marry.

The fact that even the members of the most hard-line fundamentalist churches don't follow these practices indicates their use of a certain amount of reason, reflection, and consideration of church history and modern culture. As these practices are often denied in theory, when they are used, it is often unreflectively and thus poorly. People think they are reading only Scripture when they are smuggling in elements of their own reason, experience, and even tradition shaped by their own cultures and backgrounds.

Most important, the notion of *solo scriptura* is not supported by Scripture itself. This is a very important point: the fact that the Reformers and Wesley used the quadrilateral, or scriptural stool, doesn't make their conclusions biblical. We must see some biblical evidence as well. But Scripture does support our use of other sources of information. We'll now examine the biblical verses that support the various legs of the scriptural stool.

*Reason.* According to the prophet Isaiah, God calls us to “reason together” with Him (Isaiah 1:18). On the road to Emmaus, Christ *expounded* (“explained” or “reasoned”) with the two disciples about the prophecies regarding the Messiah (see Luke 24:27). And Paul frequently went into the synagogues to “reason” with the Jews on the Sabbath day (Acts 18:4, 19). This reasoning was about Scripture—the study of Scripture is inseparable from reason. Along with using reason to help us determine what in Scripture should be taken literally and what is symbolic, we also use reason to compare Scripture with Scripture—to draw conclusions that are implicit within it.

If people truly believed in *solo scriptura*, they wouldn't preach sermons nor would they listen to them. Instead, they would merely read and recite extended passages of Scripture with no comment. People write and read sermons because they believe that doing so works to bring the truths of Scripture to the present day and apply it to contemporary life. This is what Christ was doing when, in the synagogue, He read from the scroll of Isaiah. If He had made no further comments after reading, He would have avoided trouble with the Jewish leaders. But it was His comments, the reasoning He presented after the Scripture reading, that made the important point that His neighbors needed to hear (Luke 4:17–30).

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*Experience.* Like reason, experience often serves as a guide to the proper understanding of Scripture. Some of Christ's most difficult statements are not obviously symbolic. In His sermon on the mount, He states that if people's eyes cause them to sin, they should pluck them out, and if their hands cause them to sin, they should amputate them (Matthew 5:29, 30).

Could people pluck out their eyes and amputate their hands?

Yes.

Did Christ *say* that He was being symbolic or exaggerating?

No. But our reason and our experience along with other scriptural principles—such as those that tell us that our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and should be treated with care—indicate that Christ is using the literary device of hyperbole to make a spiritual point.

Another example of the use of experience to aid our interpretation of Scripture is found in the story of the Jerusalem Council's debate regarding whether the Gentiles who became believers should be circumcised. In that discussion, appeals were made to both Scripture *and* experience. Notably, Peter pointed out that the Gentiles had received the Holy Spirit even though they weren't circumcised (Acts 15:6–11). Barnabas and Paul supported Peter's story of the conversion of Gentiles with their own accounts of the "miracles and wonders" done among the Gentiles. And then James quoted the prophet Amos as supporting these arguments that God was going to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. Scripture was indeed cited, but it was a case of Scripture confirming experience, and not the other way around (verses 12–18).

*Historical witnesses.* While Christ rejected the use of traditions that caused people to violate the teachings and spirit of Scripture, the Bible records that He Himself followed certain customs and traditions. For example, it was His "custom" to enter the synagogue on the Sabbath and read from Scripture (Luke 4:16). While God commanded that we *rest* on the Sabbath, He didn't say we must worship in a synagogue or read Scripture on that day. These acts were matters of custom or tradition that arose in support of the Sabbath command. Jesus had customarily repaired to the Mount of Olives for prayer (Luke 22:39). He also followed the custom of being baptized (Luke 3:21, 22) at the hands of His cousin John, though the Old Testament contains no command saying we must do so. Baptism is a custom or tradition that apparently developed in the period between the Old and New Testaments. It was practiced by the Essenes at Qumran, John the Baptist adopted it, and Christ, by His example, made it a Christian rite (Matthew 3:13–15; John 3:5).

Of course, baptism today is not based on tradition but on the teaching of the New Testament. But the manner in which we carry it out—the service and ritual, the testimony of the candidates, the wearing of robes—is all part of the tradition we follow in carrying out the biblical ritual.



## **Adventist traditions**

As Adventists, we have inherited and developed many other traditions: mid-week prayer meetings, summer camp meetings, weeks of prayer and revival, In-gathering, potlucks, and even worship that begins with Sabbath School classes and culminates in a formal preaching service.

What are the sources of these customs and traditions?

Many of them hail from Methodist and Baptist practices of the early nineteenth century that we have adopted and modified.

Do the sources of these practices make them evil?

Reflection will show that certain traditions are necessary for worshiping and studying “decently and in order.” If we didn’t agree that Sabbath School begins at 9:30 A.M. and the church service at 11:00 A.M., it would be difficult to worship together on a regular basis. These traditions are not harmful unless we begin to view them as having the same authority as church doctrines or teachings have. The purpose of these traditions is to help the church, and they are spiritually safe as long as the church knows it can change them when necessary.

In its best sense, tradition is the reason and experience of generations crystallized over time. It is the collective memories of the church community about how best to deal with recurring problems or carry out practices and implement beliefs. Thus, it should be appreciated and not discarded without thought, but it should not be a barrier to changes and innovations that are called for by changing times. Tradition becomes a problem when it hardens into dogma and becomes confused with core beliefs and doctrines. Christ rebuked the use of traditions when they violate God’s commands: “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?” (Matthew 15:3).

One must be careful in dealing with this question of tradition. We don’t want to create authorities competing with or supplementing the Bible. But neither do we want to impoverish the Bible and our belief systems by rejecting those supporting helps of which the Scriptures themselves approve. Indeed, there is one very important area where the tradition of the church, received from the prophets and apostles, is absolutely essential to the Christian church since its beginning: the information about how we define the parameters of Scripture.

Nowhere in Scripture itself are we given a list of the books that make up Scripture. If you look in the table of contents of your Bible, you will find it at the front of the Bible, outside of any of the inspired books. Where did this list come from? Effectively, from the tradition of the early church, “the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” who gave witness to the authority of those books that make up Scripture.

To be clear, they did not give authority to Scripture; rather, they recognized the authority that the Spirit had already put there.<sup>9</sup> They then passed along that information, both in written Scripture and by word. “So then, brethren,” Paul told the Thessalonians, “stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were

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taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us” (2 Thessalonians 2:15, NASB). What these “word of mouth” traditions were have largely been lost to history; the list of canonical books is the one continuing remnant of this oral tradition, which the church eventually put into written form. To reject all uses of tradition is to reject the identity of the biblical canon itself.

### Ellen White: *Prima traditionis*?

How do believers in the *sola*, *tota*, and *prima scriptura* principles approach the writings of Ellen White, which the Adventist Church views as inspired? Her view of the relationship of her works to the Bible is instructive. Some wish to make her writings part of the *sola scriptura* package, but she herself acknowledged that could never be. She wrote that the “Spirit was not given—nor can it ever be bestowed—to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the Word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested.”<sup>10</sup>

She denied that her writings carried either of the characteristics associated with the *sola* or *prima scriptura* principles. She rejected notions that her work had ultimate authority or could serve as the basis for rules of faith and practice. She acknowledged that her work was the “lesser light to lead men and women to the greater light”—the Bible. She repeatedly indicated that doctrines must be based on the Bible and that her writings did not give “additional light to take the place of His Word.” She was clear that church members should embrace “the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice,” and that last-day visions were “not [meant to establish] a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of His people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth.”<sup>11</sup>

So, Ellen White herself denies that her writings were meant to be the basis of new doctrines or serve as an ultimate authority. That authority continues to be the Bible. In regards to her writings, she uses language that fits very well with the idea that they were meant to witness to biblical truth. “The written testimonies are not to give new light, but to impress vividly upon the heart the truths of inspiration already revealed. . . . Additional truth is not brought out; but God has through the *Testimonies* simplified the great truths already given.”<sup>12</sup>

Yet the evidences of her inspiration make it inappropriate to treat her as just another witness, with authority equal only to that of commentaries or the writings of the Reformers, which we may accept or disregard based upon our own judgment. Again, her testimony is instructive: “Some have taken the position that the warnings, cautions, and reproofs given by the Lord through His servant, unless they come through special vision for each individual case, should have no more weight than counsels and warnings from other sources. . . . There have been those who claimed that testimonies purporting to be given by the Spirit of God were merely the expression of my own judgment. . . . This statement is utterly false.”<sup>13</sup>

So where do we place Ellen White in relation to our “stool of truth”? She cannot occupy the scriptural seat, which is the sole ultimate authority and the

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only adequate basis of doctrine. She must play a supporting role, similar to but superior to the other legs of the stool. Perhaps a helpful way to think of her is as a kind of *prima traditionis*—a source of teaching, insight, and authority that, while subject to the Bible and not the basis of doctrine, is superior to the other formative norms. She is tested by the Bible, but her inspired teachings are superior to other human sources of truth, whether experience, reason, or history.

Some would treat her as an inspired commentator on the Bible, and there may be some truth to this. This view, however, can lead to some dangerous results if pressed too far. Often, Ellen White used biblical language and references as rhetorical devices, as the basis for devotional thoughts, and as homiletical springboards. In these cases, she wasn't intending to give the precise exegetical meaning of a passage or to exhaust its potential meanings or applications. Deciding when she was using Scripture in this way can be difficult, and it was probably for this very reason that she urged church members and leaders not to use her writings to settle doctrinal disputes.

She had to release such cautions in the 1880s, when various leaders were arguing about the nature of the law in Galatians, as well as later on, when others were seeking to determine the identity of Daniel 11's king of the North. In both instances, she urged the disputants to base their arguments upon the Bible rather than upon her writings. She didn't want to be viewed as a normative norm, but she was obviously content, and indeed desirous of, being a formative norm, albeit an inspired one—a *prima traditionis* that took precedence over other formative norms.

## The books of nature and of Scripture

The use of these other sources of information about God and religious experience is merely a recognition that God has two books, Scripture and nature. As Adventists, we rightly emphasize the importance of Scripture, as this avenue plainly shows the way of salvation and clearly reveals the character of God. But the book of nature has a valid and important place in both the church and the world, and indeed we cannot do careful scriptural study without it.

Ellen White recognized the importance of the formal use of the tools of nature, reason, and experience in the search for truth. In a remarkable statement, she indicated that above all else, we must study three things in our schools.

The plans devised and carried out for the education of our youth are none too broad. They should not have a one-sided education, but all their powers should receive equal attention. *Moral philosophy*, the study of the Scriptures, and physical training should be combined with the studies usually pursued in schools. Every power—physical, mental, and moral—needs to be trained, disciplined, and developed, that it may render its highest service.<sup>14</sup>

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What is *moral philosophy*? In Ellen White's time, it was a systematic study of knowledge, morals, and questions of right and wrong derived by the use of reason from a study of human nature, history, and the natural world. Almost all Protestant universities of Ellen White's day had courses in moral philosophy designed to introduce students from all disciplines and fields of learning to the overarching truths of God's second book, which was thought to complement and supplement the truths of God's Word. We have largely lost sight of this important field of study and have, to a great extent, lost our ability to influence society for moral truths, except indirectly through converting individuals in outright evangelism.

Our pioneers understood that people could talk about right and wrong, about truth and error, even outside the parameters of the Bible. They were involved in political issues, such as the abolition of slavery, the prohibition of alcohol, and health and temperance reform. They could be involved in these issues in part because they could talk about them using moral language drawn not only from the Bible, but also from the world of human moral reasoning as well. Those who believe only in *solo scriptura* cannot do this. But a balanced and careful use of *sola scriptura*, along with *prima* and *tota scriptura*, opens up these possibilities. To rediscover the balance among these vital scriptural principles, we need to listen to the Reformers and to our own pioneers.

### Discussion Questions

1. What elements of our church services do we maintain just because of a sense of tradition that perhaps we could rethink and update in light of biblical principles?
2. Once we admit that sources of information outside the Bible can help inform doctrine and teaching, how do we make sure that we preserve its superiority to these other sources?
3. Did Jesus have to wrestle with both conservative and liberal extremes among the religious authorities of His day? Read the story of Jesus and the woman at the well (John 4:7–27), and discuss how the story illustrates Jesus' response to both conservative and liberal extremes.

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1. Martin Luther, quoted in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 7, *Modern Christianity: The German Reformation*, 2nd ed. (1910; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 304, 305.

2. Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 156.

3. James R. Payton Jr., *Getting the Reformation Wrong: Correcting Some Misunderstandings* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 138.

4. Luther, quoted in *ibid.*, 139.

5. Philip Melancthon, quoted in *ibid.*, 143.

6. Melancthon, quoted in *ibid.*, 145.

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7. Ibid., 148–157.

8. See McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 151–160. *Sola, tota*, and *prima scriptura* appear to be terms coined by historians looking back on the period of the early Reformers. Much as the word *trinity* isn't found in the Bible but the idea is, the concepts underlying these terms are certainly found in the writings, confessions, and statements of belief of various Reformers and Reforming groups. A good example is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith, written in 1647 by British Puritans. They declared the *sola scriptura* principle in chapter 1.6: "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 consequences may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or tradition of men."

Then, in chapter 1.9, they set down the *tota* principle: "The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture . . . it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly." Finally, in chapters 1.6 and 1.10, they asserted the *prima* principle: "There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and the government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed." And in chapter 1.10, "The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture." Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed., vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 603–605.

9. The early church was exercising what we might call *ministerial authority* when it recognized the list of inspired books. This authority is essentially delegated from on high, and one must exercise it in a certain way once specific criteria are met. This stands in opposition to *magisterial* or *discretionary authority*, which means one has the authority to actually decide an issue one way or the other. Thus, once the church recognized the divine credentials of a book, which was based on some combination of authorial authority (it was written by an apostle or a known and authorized associate of one), its consistency with existing Scripture, and endorsement by apostolic authority, then the church must include the book in the canon. If it did not meet these criteria, then the church didn't have the authority to include the book. The church's role was merely recognizing what the Spirit had done.

10. Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1980), 30.

11. Ibid., 3:29, 30.

12. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press®, 1948), 5:665.

13. Ibid., 5:683.

14. Ellen G. White, *Christian Education* (Battle Creek, MI: International Tract Society, 1894), 210; emphasis added.