

## BOOK REVIEW

of

Keith A. Mathison,  
*The Shape of Sola Scriptura*,  
Canon Press, 2001.

This book is in the Evangel Library,  
and this review is presented by Larry D. Paarmann.

R.C. Sproul is quoted on the back cover of this book as follows: “The issue of sola scriptura is not an abstract problem relevant only to the sixteenth-century Reformation, but one that poses increasingly more serious consequences for contemporary Christianity. This work by Keith Mathison is the finest and most comprehensive treatment of the matter I’ve seen. I highly recommend it to all who embrace the authority of sacred Scripture.” For many of us, this endorsement is all we need to make us want to devour this book as soon as possible. Christendom is very much adrift over this issue. Some hold that the Church has ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice. Some hold that the Scriptures are both human and divine, and we as individuals must listen for the Word of God. Some hold that the Scriptures are sufficient in such a way that all the individual Christian needs is his Bible, and each of us individually must interpret it for ourselves and that the Church plays little or no role. And some hold that the Holy Spirit speaks to individuals today in private revelation and guidance in such a way that the Scriptures seem dry, lifeless, and almost irrelevant. Nothing could be more basic to Christianity than one’s attitude toward and approach to Scripture, whether that be an individual or an organized Church.

Before getting into a few details, I think a fair synopsis of Mathison’s work is that (1) the Protestant Reformers saw themselves as reforming the Church, and not as bringing forth anything novel, including the Church’s appropriate approach to Scripture, (2) the early Church was committed to the Scriptures as being the ultimate authority, (3) there are three basic ways of viewing tradition as a component in Christian authority, which are explained below, and (4) the correct role of tradition is what Mathison calls Tradition I, that the living, true Church of Jesus Christ has been guided by the Holy Spirit to a correct interpretation of basic doctrine, as considered by the early ecumenical councils and presented in the early creeds such as the Apostles’ Creed, and the Nicene Creed. The Reformers did not initiate a revolution but rather a reformation: they called the Church back to what it had earlier been committed to and away from the corruption and baggage that had been added over the centuries. In the process, some doctrine such as justification by faith, etc., from the advantage of centuries of theology and practice, could now be explained more thoroughly and consistently, but was not, in the reformer’s minds, anything new.

Mathison carefully develops that the Church for the first several centuries held to what he calls Tradition I, and that the Reformers held to this view as well. Tradition I holds to the view that the Church has properly, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as promised in the Scriptures, interpreted basic Christian doctrine. Tradition I includes the Scriptures themselves, and holds that the Apostles, the early Church Fathers, and early ecumenical councils properly understood and taught God’s revelation of Himself. This “tradition” is in opposition to heresies, and is the correct expression of the Christian faith.

Tradition II is today, but not in early centuries, held by the Roman Catholic Church and by the Orthodox Church. It holds that the church magisterium is the proper interpreter of Scripture, and that not everything taught by Jesus Christ or the Apostles is recorded in the Scriptures, and that these additional teachings are authoritative. Many teachings of these religious bodies are not based on things in the Scriptures but rather upon unwritten “tradition.” A huge problem with this stance is that, because these traditions are indeed “unwritten,” there is not an objective body of literature describing them that one can refer to, let alone attempt to verify their authenticity.

Tradition 0 is unfortunately, according to Mathison, held by the majority of evangelicals who also think it is what is meant by sola scriptura, and also assumed to be what is meant by sola scriptura by those who are opposed to it. Whereas Tradition I holds that the Scriptures are the only infallible authority, Tradition 0 holds that the Scriptures are the only authority. Tradition 0 is divorced from history, from theology, and from the great cloud of witnesses that have preceded us. Mathison says “Scripture does not exist in a vacuum. It was and is given to the Church within the doctrinal context of the apostolic gospel. . . . the modern Evangelical denial of genuine credal authority reduces the doctrinal content of Christianity to mere subjectivism,” and this denial of credal authority “is not only self-contradictory and foolish, it is an open invitation to every kind of heresy imaginable.”

The Scriptures and at least the basic content of what they teach have been given to us within the context of the Church. The next time we recite the Apostles’ Creed let us rejoice in this.