

# Christian Epistemic Models & Sola Scriptura

Imagine looking over a massive parking lot covered in all kinds of vehicles and, out of sheer boredom, trying to come up with different ways to divide up all these vehicles into categories. You could, for example, organize them by size, by color, by body style or, based on numerous other criteria. Some categorizations, none the less, would be more meaningful than others: sorting them based on whether they are cars, trucks or vans will provide more useful information than color would, for example. Sorting by manufacturer, however, would be even more meaningful, because this would allow you to even make predictions about things like the quality, style and performance of the vehicles given the particular goals and challenges of the manufacturer. The same manufacturer might have built sports cars, trucks or vans, and, these might appear more similar to their respective counterparts from other manufacturers than to each other. But, just like in biology dolphins are grouped with mammals and sharks with fish in spite of the similarities, the manufacturer organizational scheme would be superior here as well.

Similarly, there are many different ways to organize the enormous collection of distinct theological perspectives that exists within Christendom. We can arrange them by whether they are classical or modern, by whether they adhere to certain key doctrines or not or, simply, by the denominations that promote them. But again, some organizational schemes are far more effective than others in that they help us wrap our mind around what would otherwise be an extremely confusing theological landscape. I propose, that one of the most meaningful ways to organize Christian theology is by epistemology.

Epistemology is the formal study of knowledge and why/whether various beliefs are justifiable<sup>12</sup>. Whatever epistemology a group or individual builds on (whether intentionally or not,) ends up affecting their perspective regarding the ultimate nature of reality (ontology) which in turn affects how they interpret everything else.

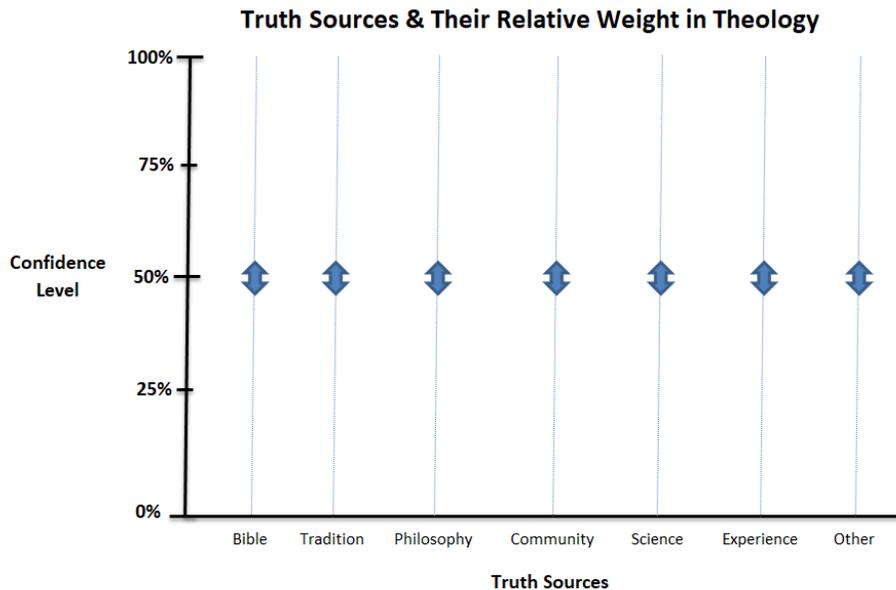
In this context, the question we are asking is what basis do the various theological models in Christianity have for arriving at their distinctive conclusions? To determine this, we need to look at the authoritative truth sources being used, the relative priority assigned to each of these truth sources and, the methods used to interpret the sources.

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<sup>1</sup> "Epistemology | Definition, Nature, Problems, & History," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed July 9, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/epistemology>. "**Epistemology**, the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge. The term is derived from the Greek *epistēmē* ("knowledge") and *logos* ("reason"), and accordingly the field is sometimes referred to as the theory of knowledge. Epistemology has a long history within Western philosophy, beginning with the ancient Greeks and continuing to the present. Along with metaphysics, logic, and ethics, it is one of the four main branches of philosophy, and nearly every great philosopher has contributed to it."

<sup>2</sup> Matthias Steup and Ram Neta, "Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2020 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/epistemology/>.

Some of the most common sources of authority in Christian Theology are, the Scripture, the Church, the Holy Spirit, tradition, experience, philosophy, science, culture, prophets, etc.<sup>3</sup> In the image below, you could imagine a computer program that allows you to arrange the sliders to various levels for each truth source, press a button, and then receive a complete theological system built on that particular arrangement.



An epistemic organizational scheme for Christian theology gives us tremendous insight into the particular theological turns taken by each tradition as well as the ability to make predictions regarding the future trajectory of any given model. It can tell us what direction any theologian is likely to take and with what model he is likely to end up, given his use of sources. Theological perspectives that might appear similar on the surface can be identified as fundamentally different given the differences in epistemology.

### Historical Epistemic Models

The role of epistemology in Christian Theology becomes even more meaningful when we look at the development of theology historically. Beginning only generations after the death of the apostles and, for many centuries thereafter, the center of authority for Christian theology rested with the Church. ‘Church,’ at this time, did not mean the totality of believers, but only the ordained clergy, specifically, in this case, the Magisterium. Through ecumenical councils or

<sup>3</sup> For example, here is a document put together by the World Council of Churches that discusses the various sources of authority used by different Christian traditions and the ways these sources are used. “Sources of Authority, Volume 2: Contemporary Churches,” World Council of Churches, accessed November 11, 2020, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/sources-of-authority-volume-2-contemporary-churches>.

official pronouncements of the Pope, theological questions were decided and conflict was resolved<sup>4</sup>.

The Church, however, was not the only or even the main source of truth. Most, if not all the different sources of authority listed above played a part in theological development. The role of the Church was to function as the final arbiter between all the other truth sources, determining the correct path to take whenever other truth sources came into conflict with one another<sup>5</sup>.

The Old Testament story of Elijah and Elisha helps illustrate the nature of this epistemic approach. When Elijah was taken up by the fiery chariot, his mantle symbolically fell down to Elisha, signifying a passing down of authority (2 Kings 2:9-15). In the same way, it is argued, when Jesus was taken to heaven, He passed His mantle to the apostles who, in turn, passed it on to the next generation of leaders, and then to the next, (Apostolic Succession<sup>6</sup>) unto this day.

If we had a yard stick but were unsure about the accuracy of its measurement, we could take it back to the factory and compare it with their yard-stick pattern. If we doubted the accuracy of this pattern as well, we could further compare it to the world's official yard-stick standard<sup>7</sup>. But if we had any further doubts, there would be no higher authority we could appeal to, since this official standard is the very definition of the yard measurement. A similar problem exists in epistemology: whatever ultimate authority one chooses to go with, there is no higher tribunal to appeal to, if there is disagreement, given we don't have direct access to the mind of God. The only options are either to submit to this authority even when every fiber of your being tells you something is wrong, or, to switch epistemic models. Time, however, does eventually reveal the consequences of the epistemic choices that we make.

It took over a millennium<sup>8</sup> before the Protestant Reformation finally brought about a shift in theological authority. Understanding this exact epistemic dilemma, the reformers realized that the only way the Church could be called upon to reform is if they answered to a higher standard. And, the standard the reformers chose to enthrone in place of the Church was the Scripture. Whereas before this, the authority of the Scriptures was subject to the interpretational authority of the Church, now, the Scripture became its own independent authority that everything else was subject to and judged by: *Sola Scriptura*<sup>9</sup>. None the less, as we shall see a bit later, the reformers did not completely follow through with this claim themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> "Catholic Essentials - The Magisterium," accessed July 9, 2020, <http://www.catholicessentials.net/magisterium.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Among the more famous examples are the Councils of Nicea (320AD) - Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought*, New edition edition (Lion Books, 2013), Location 1186 Kindle. - Constantinople (381AD) - location 1301, etc.

<sup>6</sup> "What the Early Church Believed: Apostolic Succession," Catholic Answers, accessed November 10, 2020, <https://www.catholic.com/tract/apostolic-succession>.

<sup>7</sup> Since 1959 it is by international agreement standardized as exactly 0.9144 meters. "The Yard - Wikipedia," n.d., <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yard>.

<sup>8</sup> (In general, Wikipedia references are intended as a quick source of information for topics the reader might not be familiar with) The 95 theses were posted by Luther in 1517 "The Reformation - Wikipedia," n.d., <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformation>.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Luther is quoted to have said at the Diet of Worms, "Since your majesty and your lordships desire a simple reply, I will answer without horns and without teeth. Unless I am convicted by scripture and plain reason--I do not

But unlike the Church, which managed to retain its hold on doctrinal authority for over a millennium (though often through manipulation and force<sup>10</sup>), the Scripture did not maintain its exalted position for very long. Part of the reason for this was the inability of the reformers to come to a consensus on what the Scripture actually said. From very early on, differences in interpretation led to fragmentation, something that has only increased with the passing of time<sup>11</sup>. And, this inability to come to an interpretational consensus reflected poorly on the claim that Scripture could function as the ultimate theological authority for Christians (if you purchased a complex piece of equipment and the manufacturer's instruction manual was understood differently by everyone who read it, you would question the value of the manual as well.)

An even more important reason for the shift away from Scriptural authority was the subsequent Age of Enlightenment<sup>12</sup> and the Scientific Revolution<sup>13</sup>. The Protestant Reformation succeeded in breaking the hold that the Church up to this point had had on society, as different regions of Europe began to side with the Reformation. Once the Church could no longer control developments in philosophy and science, an intellectual revolution began, side by side with the political revolution. In the world of philosophy, major shifts occurred, with God no longer being the beginning point of all rational thought. Whereas in the past, theology and the knowledge of God were seen as the pinnacle of intellectual development<sup>14</sup>, now, intellectual advancement tended towards the secular.

At the same time, the modern scientific method was developed, that began to study the world as primarily natural/material. Every attempt was made to eliminate preconceived assumptions and biases and accept as fact only that which could be empirically demonstrated. As this methodology was being modified and extended to fields such as history and archaeology, it began to be applied to the Scripture as well. The Bible was therefore dissected and examined like any other ancient book and the conclusion of the 'higher critics'<sup>15</sup> was that the book was, for the

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accept the authority of popes and councils for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, God help me. Amen." Perhaps the most notable words spoken in the Reformation, this according to early printed reports, was Luther's reply at Worms when urged to recant. He uttered the memorable lines in German on this day, April 18, 1521, and then, upon request, repeated their gist in Latin for those who did not understand his native tongue. He was sweating, said witnesses. With a victory gesture he slipped out of the room. "Martin Luther's Most Noble Words - 1501-1600 Church History Timeline," accessed November 11, 2020, <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1501-1600/martin-luthers-most-noble-words-11629925.html>.

<sup>10</sup> As one example, see story of John Huss. Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Rev. and updated, 2nd ed (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 415.

<sup>11</sup> As one of the more extreme examples, take the case of Niklaus Krell, chief adviser to the Elector Christian I of Saxony, who was executed in 1601 for the crime of introducing Calvinism to Lutheran lands. Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 2016), 1372.

<sup>12</sup> "Age of Enlightenment," in *Wikipedia*, November 12, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Age\\_of\\_Enlightenment&oldid=988309204](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Age_of_Enlightenment&oldid=988309204).

<sup>13</sup> "Scientific Revolution," in *Wikipedia*, September 20, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Scientific\\_Revolution&oldid=979448001](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Scientific_Revolution&oldid=979448001).

<sup>14</sup> Eire, *Reformations*, 1575.

<sup>15</sup> "Historical Criticism," in *Wikipedia*, August 2, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Historical\\_criticism&oldid=970842113](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Historical_criticism&oldid=970842113).

most part, fictitious/mythical, with many of even the historical events described therein having never taken place. When eventually the Theory of Evolution<sup>16</sup> was developed, it undermined the authority of Scripture even further.

Needless to say, the future of Christianity seemed bleak under these circumstances, so it is not surprising that a new epistemic center for theology was developed at this time. Liberal Christianity<sup>17</sup>, as the new brand of Christianity came to be known, once again attempted to shift the center of authority from an objective divine revelation, either through the Church or the Scripture, to the subjective revelation of human experience<sup>18</sup>. A new theological edifice was built that relied on experience, reason, science and morality<sup>19</sup>. The attention was drawn to Jesus' ethical teachings and social activism rather than to miracles, ritual or superstition. The resulting product, however, ended up looking very little like historical Christianity.

Finally, two additional movements emerged over the next century, as a reaction to and due to the perceived danger or inadequacy of Liberal Christianity: Fundamentalism<sup>20</sup> and Neoorthodoxy<sup>21</sup>. Fundamentalism completely rejected modernism, ignoring science and critical scholarship and returning to an extreme form of privately interpreted Sola Scriptura. The inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture was taken presuppositionally and as beyond questioning and any line of evidence offered against this assumption was simply dismissed and/or denounced.

Neoorthodoxy, on the other hand, held on to many of the presuppositions of Liberal Christianity but argued that objective divine revelation was still necessary for Christian theology. This revelation however was Christ Himself, and everything else we had, Scripture, Tradition, philosophy, were human attempts to make sense of that revelation. This approach made it possible to accept the findings of science and higher criticism while still maintaining continuity with orthodox Christian thought.

(We should briefly mention that some, early in the Reformation, also attempted to move the epistemic center to either the Holy Spirit's direct guidance of the individual or to His indirect guidance via living prophets<sup>22</sup> - similar to Pentecostalism or groups like the Mormons, Jehovah's

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<sup>16</sup> "Evolution," in *Wikipedia*, November 11, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Evolution&oldid=988186646>.

<sup>17</sup> "Liberal Christianity," in *Wikipedia*, October 14, 2020, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Liberal\\_Christianity&oldid=983474175](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Liberal_Christianity&oldid=983474175).

<sup>18</sup> Or "Feeling" as Schleiermacher referred to it. Hill, Jonathan. *The History of Christian Thought*. Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition. Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought*, New edition edition (Lion Books, 2013), location 4473 Kindle.

<sup>19</sup> Kant reframed religion as centered in ethics and morality and as such morality began to hold an epistemic role of sorts in Liberal theology. Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought*, New edition edition (Lion Books, 2013), location 4448 Kindle.

<sup>20</sup> "Fundamentalism," in *Wikipedia*, November 6, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Fundamentalism&oldid=987404316>.

<sup>21</sup> "Neo-Orthodoxy," in *Wikipedia*, August 12, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Neo-orthodoxy&oldid=972578222>.

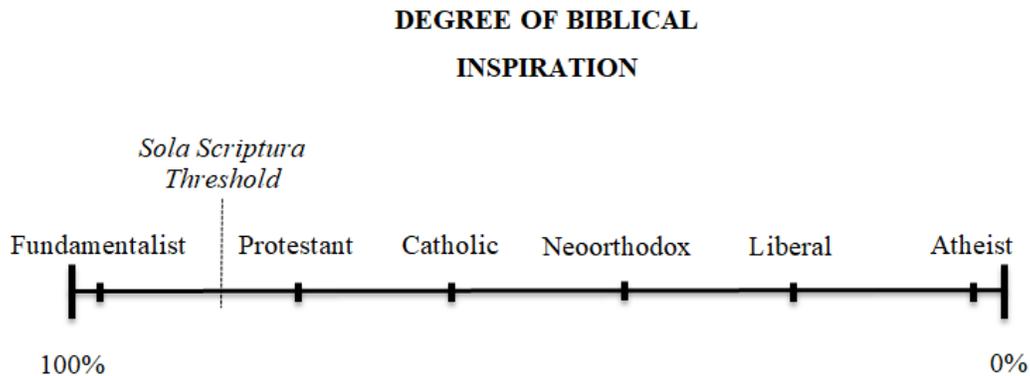
<sup>22</sup> Some examples of self-proclaimed prophets during the early years of the reformation are, Nicholas Storch, Thomas Stubner, and Thomas Dreschel. Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 2016), 459.

Witnesses and Christian Scientists today. But we will not take these approaches into account here.)

We can summarize the epistemic center for each of the main Christian traditions as follows:

- 1) Catholicism (and other similar groups) - the Church/Magisterium
- 2) Protestantism - Scripture - as understood from within the parameters established by the church fathers (will return to this shortly)
- 3) Liberal Christianity - experience, science, reason
- 4) Fundamentalism - individualized Scriptural inerrancy
- 5) Neoorthodoxy - The incarnation of Christ as God's primary revelation alongside science and reason

Another way to visualize the differences between these models is based on how they each relate to Scripture (atheism is listed in the graphic below as a point of reference):



Looking at all the doctrinal discussions and debates taking place among Christians from an epistemological perspective helps us understand that consensus among the different models is not possible even in theory, because the final tribunal in each of these traditions is different. Ultimately, each faction is building on a distinct foundation, so, if anything is to be debated at all, it should be the epistemic foundations themselves.

But it goes even further than this. As I will show later, the academic establishment probably lacks the tools (and likely always will lack the tools) to fully settle even the question of which epistemic foundation is the correct one. The inconclusive philosophico-theological debates of the past several centuries, rather than being the result of ignorance or bias, more likely reveal a limitation of the human knowledge-building apparatus. It is likely that an epistemic handicap

exists, in the very fabric of our reality, that is always going to prevent us from fully settling certain questions.

So rather than continuing to look at things in terms of right and wrong, we should learn instead to think in terms of 'Parameters of Viability' - a set of criteria that, if met by any epistemic model, qualifies that model as viable and allows it to continue its development under the Christian Academy's good graces, side by side with the other viable models. The pathway will thus be opened for a truce of sorts to finally materialize in Christian Academia that does not rely on the watering-down of theological distinctives, as was the case with previous ecumenical efforts.

Before we continue in this vein of thought, however, I need to first introduce one other epistemic model that, although has received much lip-service over the centuries, has none the less, up to this point, been mostly overlooked.

## II. The Quest for Sola Scriptura

The phrase ‘Sola Scriptura’ has played such a significant role in Protestant self-understanding that it might come as a surprise to find that, even to the early reformers, the phrase did not mean what one might take it to mean at face value. The reformers believed, as their descendants continue to believe to this day, that there are certain external parameters that are needed to interpret the Scripture correctly, parameters such as the early tradition found in the writings of the church fathers. Such parameters were deemed necessary, in order to prevent wild scriptural speculation, but they none the less constitute an authority that is logically above Scripture. To be fair, then, the Protestant epistemology should be more accurately classified as pseudo-sola-scriptura, and, for the remainder of this paper, the term ‘Sola Scriptura’ will not be used in reference to Protestant Theology.

This reliance on the early church fathers in Protestant Theology was something of an after-thought for the reformers, once having realized the potential danger of having a priesthood of all believers each interpreting Scripture in their own unique way. According to Alister McGrath,

*“The outbreak of the Peasants’ War in 1525 brought home to Luther that this new approach was dangerous and ultimately uncontrollable. If every individual was able to interpret the Bible as he pleased, the outcome could only be anarchy and radical religious individualism<sup>23</sup>.”*

In another one of his books McGrath again states,

*“The magisterial Reformation initially seems to have allowed that every individual had the right to interpret Scripture; but subsequently it became anxious concerning the social and political consequences of this idea. The Peasants’ Revolt of 1525 appears to have convinced some, such as Luther, that individual believers (especially German peasants) were simply not capable of interpreting Scripture. It is one of the ironies of the Lutheran Reformation that a movement which laid such stress upon the importance of Scripture should subsequently deny its less educated members direct access to that same Scripture, for fear that they might misinterpret it (in other words, reach a different interpretation from that of the magisterial reformers)<sup>24</sup>.”*

Another reason for turning to the patristic tradition was the pressure the reformers felt to show some kind of continuity with the Christian Faith. Was Luther the only person to understand the Faith correctly after fifteen centuries of Christianity? Rather, the reformers explained, the

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<sup>23</sup> Alister McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution--A History from the Sixteenth Century to the Twenty-First*, Illustrated edition (HarperOne, 2009), 10. (iBooks Version)

<sup>24</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4 edition (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 110. (Kindle version)

Reformation was not a novel idea, but a return to the true and original Christian Faith from which the Medieval Church had departed.

*“... the mainstream reformers had no difficulty with the notion of a “traditional interpretation of the Bible.” Mainline Protestantism was emphatic that it was not a new church, brought into existence by the happenstances of the sixteenth century. Rather, it represented a reform and renewal of Christianity, implying and affirming continuity with the great historic tradition of Christian faith, stretching back through the patristic era to the apostles themselves<sup>25</sup>.”*

*“The mainline reformers argued that since Protestantism represented the continuation and renewal of apostolic Christianity, it was able to share in the early Christian community’s decisions concerning norms of faith and that community’s identification of heresies and other inauthentic forms of faith. Most Protestants therefore accepted the traditional ecumenical creeds, regarding these as publicly authorized and endorsed interpretations of scripture.<sup>26</sup>”*

Moreover, reliance on the Church Fathers in Scriptural interpretation itself had a strong historical precedent, as the Fathers themselves looked to the traditions inherited from previous generations:

*“The importance of the idea of tradition first became obvious in a controversy which broke out during the second century. The “Gnostic controversy” centered on a number of questions, including how salvation was to be achieved. (The word “Gnostic” derives from the Greek word gnosis, “knowledge,” and refers to the movement’s belief in certain secret ideas that had to be known in order to secure salvation.) Christian writers found themselves having to deal with some highly unusual and creative interpretations of the Bible. How were they to deal with these? If the Bible was to be regarded as authoritative, was every interpretation of the Bible to be regarded as of equal value?*

*Irenaeus of Lyons (c.130–c.200), one of the church’s greatest theologians, did not think so. The question of how the Bible was to be interpreted was of the greatest importance. Heretics, he argued, interpreted the Bible according to their own taste. Orthodox believers, in contrast, interpreted the Bible in ways that their apostolic authors would have approved. What had been handed down from the apostles through the church was not merely the biblical texts themselves, but a certain way of reading and understanding those texts.*

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<sup>25</sup> McGrath, 93.

<sup>26</sup> McGrath, *Christianity’s Dangerous Idea*, 378.

*Irenaeus's point was that a continuous stream of Christian teaching, life, and interpretation can be traced from the time of the apostles to his own period. The church is able to point to those who have maintained the teaching of the church, and to certain public standard creeds which set out the main lines of Christian belief. Tradition is thus the guarantor of faithfulness to the original apostolic teaching, a safeguard against the innovations and misrepresentations of biblical texts on the part of the Gnostics.*

*Irenaeus thus understands "tradition" as an authorized way of interpreting certain texts of Scripture, which went back to the time of the apostles themselves. Scripture must be interpreted within the context of the historical continuity of the Christian church.<sup>27</sup>*

Therefore, to modern-day Protestant historians, the 'doctrine for which [the reformers] coined the term sola scriptura' was not so much a call to a Scripture-only theology, but rather an attempt to restore the proper 'relationship between Scripture, tradition, and the Church<sup>28</sup>' that was held by the early church.

Of course, as already mentioned, the use of early tradition as an interpretative boundary for Scripture did not prevent the reformers from arriving at conflicting interpretations<sup>29</sup>. And this is understandable, given that tradition is itself a body of text that is being used to interpret another body of text. If Scripture cannot be interpreted correctly apart from the guidance of tradition, what does one use to interpret the church fathers correctly?

Not just this, but where does one draw the line historically? At what point in time could the writings of the church fathers no longer be trusted? Or else, what geographical region best reflects the apostolic faith, given there were differences among the church fathers depending on their location as well<sup>30</sup>. Most importantly, what do we do with the heavy reliance of many of the church fathers on Greek Philosophy<sup>31</sup>? We will return to these questions briefly.

This notion of interpretational orthodoxy<sup>32</sup>, however, was not shared by all the reformers. A branch of the Protestant Reformation, that is today referred to as the Radical Reformation (ex. Anabaptists), rejected the idea that the church fathers could be trusted in Scriptural interpretation. Rather, they insisted, theology must be based on Scripture alone. And, in this sense, they were the first among the Protestants to call for a true Sola Scriptura epistemology.

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<sup>27</sup> McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 2011, 92–93.

<sup>28</sup> Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, n.d., 15.

<sup>29</sup> See for example the Luther - Zwingli debate over the Eucharist. Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 4 edition (Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 181.

<sup>30</sup> The ongoing debates between Antioch and Alexandria are an example but many more can be offered. See chapter 28, for example, Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Rev. and updated, 2nd ed (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 295.

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought*, New edition edition (Lion Books, 2013). See first chapter.

<sup>32</sup> This does not have to be taken as a disregard for the wisdom of previous generations but rather as a desire to go straight to the source of authority rather than to second-hand sources.

While mainstream Protestants “...accepted the traditional ecumenical creeds, regarding these as publicly authorized and endorsed interpretations of scripture. This approach was generally not adopted by sixteenth-century Anabaptist communities, which had serious reservations concerning the authenticity of earlier forms of Christianity, even during the patristic period.<sup>33</sup>”

*"Anabaptism, ...was critical of the notion of tradition – not necessarily on account of a disregard for the wisdom of the past, but because of a more fundamental belief that the true Christian church had ceased to exist at an early stage (typically, following the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century). Why pay attention to the theological past, when it was not truly Christian?<sup>34</sup>"*

According to McGrath,

*"...the Reformation program of a return to Scripture ended up being considerably more complex than at first had seemed to be the case. The slogan scriptura sola turned out to mean something rather different from what might have been expected, with the radical Reformation alone conforming to the popular stereotype of the Reformation on this point.<sup>35</sup>"*

But even though the Radical Reformers believed in the necessity of a Sola Scriptura Epistemology, they never quite figured out how exactly to accomplish this. Unlike the Magisterial Reformers who quickly established relationships with secular authorities and came under their protection, the Radical reformers ended up being persecuted by Catholics and Protestants alike. Their thought leaders did not have the luxury of spending significant chunks of time in study, contemplation and writing on university campuses as the Magisterials did, but often had to move from place to place to avoid capture<sup>36</sup>. It is understandable then that they were not successful in producing a methodology for Scriptural interpretation that adequately addressed the concerns outlined by both Protestants and Catholics (that a disregard for tradition and orthodoxy leads to private interpretations, individualism and theological chaos<sup>37</sup>).

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<sup>33</sup> McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 378–79.

<sup>34</sup> McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 2011, 93.

<sup>35</sup> McGrath, 113.

<sup>36</sup> “Zwingli took a harsher approach. By 1525, under his leadership, the city of Zurich was aggressively harassing those who refused to accept infant baptism. And in 1527, when adult rebaptism was declared a capital crime, the execution of Anabaptist “heretics” became routine. The first of these martyrs, Felix Mantz, was drowned in Lake Zurich, a fitting punishment, according to the Zwinglians, for someone who had abused the waters of baptism. After Mantz, other Anabaptists would bravely endure martyrdom, or flee to safer corners of the map.” Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 2016), 1235.

<sup>37</sup> McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 2011, 102.

Finally, we have already mentioned that, a bit later in history, there was one other major attempt to return to Sola Scriptura in the Fundamentalist movement. But, as usually happens with reactionary movements, Fundamentalism took an extreme and ultimately unsustainable position.

First, presuppositional<sup>38</sup> stances are always self-defeating. Taking the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture as a logically unassailable starting premise makes it impossible to differentiate Christianity from other religions where someone does the same thing with another holy book, like the Koran, for example.

Second, this extreme position regarding Scripture offers no additional help to the question Protestantism has been wrestling with all along: how does a Sola Scriptura theology avoid disintegrating into individualism and theological chaos? Rather, Fundamentalist groups more or less just inherit their theological perspectives from whatever Protestant tradition they are each the descendants of, further adding their own distinctive spins. The only explanation they could then offer as to why other Fundamentalist groups with an equally high view of Scripture arrive at different conclusions is that such groups must not in truth be faithful to Scripture or the Holy Spirit.

In an attempt to defend the Protestant position against both Catholicism and Modern Conservative Evangelicalism, Keith Mathison, professor of systematic theology at Reformation Bible College, describes the combination of factors that have contributed to the move away from the Protestant position. He explains that it was the Radical Reformation view of Scripture that denied 'the authority of tradition in any real sense. The Scriptures were considered not only the sole final and infallible authority, but the only authority whatsoever. The Enlightenment added the philosophical framework in which to comprehend this individualism. The individual reason was elevated to the position of final authority. Appeals to antiquity and tradition of any kind were ridiculed. In the early years of the United States, democratic populism swept the people along in its fervor. The result, is a modern American Evangelicalism which has redefined sola scriptura in terms of secular Enlightenment rationalism and rugged democratic individualism.<sup>39</sup>

He then further argues that,

*"Rather than placing the final authority in Scripture as it intends to do, this concept of Scripture places the final authority in the reason and judgment of each individual believer. The result is relativism, subjectivism, and theological chaos that we see in modern Evangelicalism today.*

*A fundamental and self-evident truth that seems to be unconsciously overlooked by proponents of the modern Evangelical version of solo scriptura is that no one is infallible in his interpretation of Scripture. Each of us comes to the Scripture with different presuppositions, blind spots, ignorance of important facts, and, most*

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<sup>38</sup> "Presuppositional Apologetics - Wikipedia," n.d., [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presuppositional\\_apologetics](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Presuppositional_apologetics).

<sup>39</sup> Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 239.

*importantly, sinfulness. Because of this we each read things into Scripture that are not there and miss things in Scripture that are there.<sup>4041</sup>"*

Thus Mathison, in his book *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, makes the case that the relationship between Scripture, Church and tradition that the reformers attempted to institute, is the same relationship that the early church knew, the 'Regula Fidei,<sup>42</sup>' a relationship that the Roman Catholic Church departed from by the introduction later in history of an independent tradition passed down orally through the Church<sup>43</sup>. The Reformers used the phrase *Sola Scriptura* in order to differentiate their position from the oral-tradition-based position of the Catholic Church<sup>44</sup>, but then the Radical Reformers and now modern-day Evangelicals have taken the phrase to a literal extreme the Reformers never intended (he introduces the phrase *Solo Scriptura* to differentiate the Evangelical position from the Protestant *Sola Scriptura*.<sup>45</sup>) Because this latter approach is unworkable, it has led to the present theological chaos that exists in Evangelicalism and has allowed Catholic and Orthodox apologists to blame the Protestant *Sola Scriptura* approach for what is clearly the result of the Radical *Solo Scriptura*<sup>46</sup>.

A major challenge to Mathison's thesis is that serious fragmentation occurred in Protestantism before it could be said that Protestants adopted the Radical Reformation's view of Scripture. But whether or not his thesis can be sustained, what is clear is that the three attempts at a true *Sola Scriptura* theology in Christian history have met with failure: one (Protestant,) because it soon after abandoned the idea and instead redefined the phrase to mean something that no longer qualifies as *Sola Scriptura* and the other two (Radical and Fundamentalist/Conservative Evangelical,) because they have not managed to provide a viable methodology for a purely Biblical theology that does not degenerate into 'relativism, subjectivism, and theological chaos.' The general impression of many today is that a true *Sola Scriptura* theology is probably not actually possible. Orthodox theologian Clark Carlton articulates this concern well:

*"The idea that the Scriptures are self-interpreting is patently absurd. It assumes a degree of absolute objectivity that would make the most ardent positivist cringe with embarrassment.... Texts do not exist in the abstract. Yet, this is exactly what the doctrine of Sola Scriptura assumes: a bare text that somehow imposed its meaning on the reader."<sup>47</sup>*

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<sup>40</sup> Mathison, 240.

<sup>41</sup> The author does not seem to realize that these concerns can be applied just as easily to tradition, and, for the Catholic/Orthodox critic, to the Church.

<sup>42</sup> Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Mathison, 81.

<sup>44</sup> Mathison, 86.

<sup>45</sup> Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, n.d., 149. In the footnote Douglas Jones, "Sola, Solo or Prima Scriptura' is referenced and is a possible source for the Sola/Solo differentiation.

<sup>46</sup> Mathison, 152.

<sup>47</sup> Clark Carlton, *The Way: What Every Protestant Should Know About the Orthodox Church*, (Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 1977), 90. As quoted in Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, n.d., 309.

If a Sola Scriptura theology were possible, however, what exactly would be affected by the lack of reliance on the church fathers? The most obvious answer to this question has to do with the influence of Greek Philosophy on Christian Theology.

Instinctively, we might be tempted to think that those who lived closest to the apostles must have inherited the purest apostolic faith. For modern church historians, however, it is a known fact that Greek Philosophy played a key role in early theological development. Jonathan Hill's book *The History of Christian Thought*, for example, has an entire chapter on Greek Philosophy at the very beginning of the section on the church fathers. Here he writes,

*“Christianity first appeared as a development within Judaism. The first issues that the early Christians had to deal with were those concerning the new faith's relations to its parent religion – the most famous example being the circumcision controversy described in Paul's letter to the Galatians.*

*As Christianity grew, however, it had to come to terms with religious and intellectual movements in the wider world – something it has been doing ever since. During those first centuries, theologians had to evaluate these rival movements and try to establish the place of their own faith in relation to them. Should they bitterly oppose anything non-Christian, or try to take over the best ideas of their rivals?*

*The movements that had most influence on early Christianity were the schools of Greek philosophy. Today, philosophy is an academic discipline understood only by specialists. In ancient times, however, it was much broader. Philosophy dealt with issues we would normally associate today with science: the nature of the world, what it is made of, where it came from. It also dealt with what we would consider religious issues: the existence and nature of God, the nature of the soul, life after death, suffering and salvation.<sup>48</sup>”*

Hill continues his section on the church fathers by showing that someone who lived as early (born c. 100 AD) and was as significant as Justin Martyr, was not only deeply immersed in Platonic thought prior to his conversion, but continued to believe that the two perspectives overlapped even after his conversion. Justin's “account of Christianity [drew] heavily on his Platonic past.<sup>49</sup>” The same can be said about many of the other church fathers that followed Martyr, with a few exceptions. Most importantly, the church father that most influenced the Protestant Reformation, Augustine, “...did not cease to be a Neoplatonist when he became a Christian.<sup>50</sup>”

Most theologians today don't see a problem with the church fathers relying on Greek Philosophy, because they assume the reason philosophy was embraced to begin with is precisely

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought*, New edition edition (Lion Books, 2013), 158. (Kindle Version)

<sup>49</sup> Hill, 225.

<sup>50</sup> Hill, 1604.

because it lined up with the Christian perspective. As the fathers themselves argued, “philosophy was given to the Greeks just as the Law was given to the Jews. Both have the purpose of leading to the ultimate truth, now revealed in Christ. The classical philosophers were to the Greeks what the prophets were to the Hebrews. With the Jews, God has established the covenant of the Law; with the Greeks, that of philosophy.<sup>51</sup>” The only way the Hellenization Hypothesis is problematic, some would argue, is if the Fall Narrative (the claim that the ancient church capitulated to its environment and abandoned important tenets of the Christian message,) can be demonstrated as correct<sup>52</sup>. In other words, trust in the Fathers should be a type of default, with the burden of proof being on those who would disagree - it is always convenient to establish one’s position by claiming the default.

In the end, however, we’re working with just two possibilities: either Greek Philosophy does align with Christianity, in which case Protestantism is on the right track, or, it does not, in which case, using the early church fathers as a hermeneutical lens on Scripture becomes problematic. These are two equally probable and simultaneously valid hypotheses, neither of which can claim default status.

The world has had five hundred years to see the results of a Protestant theology influenced by Greek Philosophy via early tradition. What it has not yet seen, in 2000 years of Christian history, is a theology truly based on the Bible alone. Now obviously, if such a thing is not possible, there isn’t much we can do about it. But if a purely Sola Scriptura theology is possible, it really ought to be taken as an embarrassment to Christianity that, in its entire history, no one has of yet developed a theology actually based on its central text. Even if, as some might argue, a Sola Scriptura Theology is no longer viable in the modern age, everyone with even a basic knowledge of Christian theology should be aware that it exists and have a basic understand of how it works, whether or not they ultimately agree with it.

What I will argue in the following sections is that there is in fact a pathway<sup>53</sup> to a truly Sola Scriptura Theology that resolves many of the challenges faced by previous attempts to develop such a theology. Further, I will also explain how such an approach can still be viable even when taking into account modern concerns, such as Critical Scholarship and the Theory of Evolution. Thus, as we consider the various Christian Epistemic Models and how they all fit into the wider philosophico-theological landscape, there is yet another important model that we need to take into consideration.

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<sup>51</sup> González, *The Story of Christianity*, 87.

<sup>52</sup> Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill, eds., *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God’s Emotions and Suffering*, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019), 72–73.

<sup>53</sup> This is not actually an original approach but has been developed in relative obscurity for over a century and a half now by the Seventh-day Adventist denomination. If the approach is viable, however, the source is irrelevant, and the approach belongs to all Christians.

### III. A Viable Sola Scriptura Methodology

Hermeneutical methodologies can get very complex, but, for the purposes of this paper, we need to only wrap our minds around the main elements of a Bible-only methodology. Let us begin with the previously quoted statement by Clark Carlton:

“The idea that the Scriptures are self-interpreting is patently absurd. It assumes a degree of absolute objectivity that would make the most ardent positivist cringe with embarrassment.... Texts do not exist in the abstract. Yet, this is exactly what the doctrine of Sola Scriptura assumes: a bare text that somehow imposed its meaning on the reader.<sup>54</sup>”

At first glance, the sentiment expressed in this passage might seem self-evident. But is that truly the case? Are bare texts really incapable of imposing their meaning on readers? If several people at a public library were asked to read a series of random books, would an authorized interpreter always be needed to ensure they all arrive at similar interpretations? In reality, there are thousands of books at any given library that describe fantastical worlds and out of the ordinary events and characters that an eight-year-old would have no problem deciphering without additional help. It is precisely because of the incredible meaning-carrying capacity of ‘bare text’ that society still relies heavily on written content.

The better question to ask is, what kind of text was the Scripture *intended* to be? Was it meant to be treated as a stand-alone document or not, given that not all text is intentionally constructed this way? Consider a professor teaching a class and passing out reading material meant to supplement the lectures. In such a case, going over this reading would not be the equivalent of attending the class, since we would miss out on the class lectures that tied everything together. On the other hand, if the professor later decided to write a book on the subject, both the reading and the lecture content could be included such that reading the book would in fact parallel attending the class.

An important reason why it is sometimes assumed that Scripture functions more like the supplemental reading described above rather than a comprehensive book, is because Scripture is a collection of distinct writings. It was authored by many different people, from different parts of the world, over an extended period of time<sup>55</sup>. But again, is that really a defeater for the stand-alone hypothesis? Couldn't God direct the overall process such that the contributions of different authors would still produce a complete revelation in the end? Couldn't Scripture be similar to a mosaic<sup>56</sup>, where a person standing really close sees only a collection of random shapes and colors, but, when they step back, the random shapes come together into a beautiful portrait?

In reality, it would be close to impossible to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt either that Scripture was intended as a stand-alone or that it wasn't. But again, this is not the kind of thing

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<sup>54</sup> Clark Carlton, *The Way: What Every Protestant Should Know About the Orthodox Church*, (Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 1977), 90. As quoted in Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, n.d., 309.

<sup>55</sup> Around 40 authors, written over a 1000-year period, from Israel, Babylon, different places throughout Europe, etc.

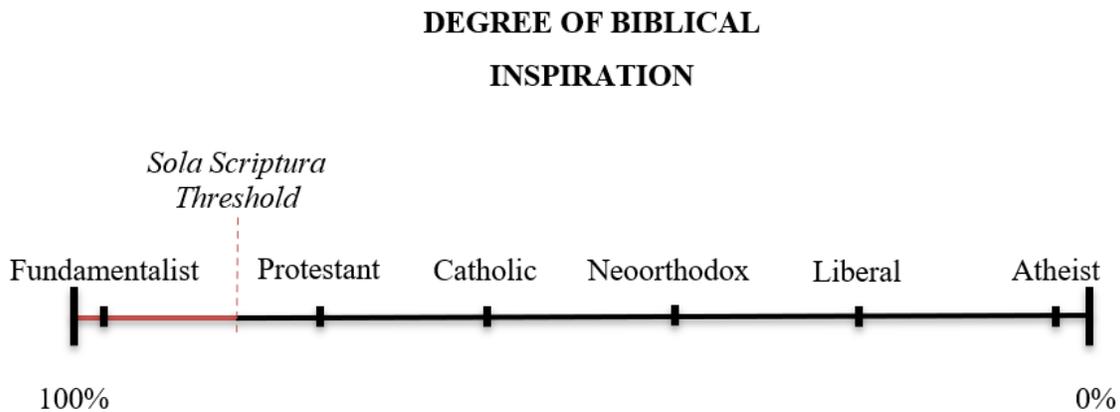
<sup>56</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosaic>

where one position can claim default status<sup>57</sup> but rather we are simply dealing with two distinct, equally legitimate hypotheses that each needs to be properly developed and evaluated, so we must consider the stand-alone option as well<sup>58</sup>. This would mean, however, that we take the time to think through what makes stand-alone documents different.

Before we delve into this any deeper, however, there are certain assumptions often taken for granted in discussions about Sola Scriptura that are not, in fact, a necessary component of such a theology. These assumptions revolve around the question of Biblical Inerrancy. How much error could be allowed for in Scripture before it is no longer possible for God’s message to adequately come across? For many fundamentalists, the answer is, none whatsoever. After all, who would then decide which parts are correct and which are not<sup>59</sup>?

But is that really the case? Imagine taking the instruction manual for a complicated piece of equipment and running it through a computer program that introduces random errors. There is a certain percentage of error that would not significantly prevent people from being able to properly handle their equipment. In other words, what matters is not how we can discern which parts of Scripture are correct and which are not. What matters is whether God feels the essential message could still come across in spite of some errors.

Thus, there is a spectrum of possible views that still qualify as Sola Scriptura, because they maintain that all that is necessary for a complete theological system can be derived from Scripture alone, whether it contains errors or not. In the picture used previously I intentionally did not place the Sola Scriptura threshold immediately after Fundamentalism to show that there is some degree of error that can be accommodated by a Sola Scriptura theology.



<sup>57</sup> See previous discussion on misappropriating default status

<sup>58</sup> There is a tendency for people to think in terms of either/or’s when instead, they should become comfortable with multiple simultaneous approaches.

<sup>59</sup> [https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI\\_1.pdf](https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf)

In reality, there are deeper philosophical reasons why some Christians hold to a strict inerrantist view when it comes to revelation/inspiration: they have a certain understanding of God's nature and of how God interacts with humanity (we will return to this point shortly.) Because of this, they assume that the divine message was miraculously imprinted on the prophet's psyche<sup>60</sup>, and, that the prophet was further under divine control as he committed that message to writing.

Having established, however, that there is room for limited errancy in a Sola Scriptura theology, we must now consider how things would work if the revelation/inspiration process was not so tightly controlled. What if, instead of miraculously imprinting divine revelation on the mind, God communicated with His selected messengers through the same cognitive processes we use to communicate with each other? If so, then the content of revelation would not have always been perfectly transferred from the divine mind to the scriptural pages, but each prophet would have to first comprehend the message for himself and then relate that message in writing as best he could<sup>61</sup>, keeping his own audience in mind. As is always the case with human beings, the potential for error and misunderstanding would be there, and the final product would not always end up exactly as God intended<sup>62</sup>.

None the less, there are other ways besides inerrancy that God could still control the process so that a Sola Scriptura theology would still be workable. First, He could carefully select His messengers/prophets<sup>63</sup>. Second, He could intervene with direct correction when necessary (ex. Nathan, David and the temple<sup>64</sup>.) Third, He could oversee which of the prophet's writings are preserved and become canonical<sup>65</sup>. And finally, if any error remained, it could be buttressed by the later contributions of future prophets, such that the correct message would still come across in the end.

A limited-errancy approach, therefore, while still falling within the parameters of Sola Scriptura, implies that a much heavier reliance on the entirety of Scripture is needed in theological development. Scriptural authority would, in this situation, have a canonical basis<sup>66</sup>: the accuracy of the message would be found in the complete collection of sacred writings rather than in the individual parts. Whatever one might conclude from studying any given passage, that conclusion would have to remain provisional until the rest of Scripture has been consulted on the topic. This is not substantially different from scientists collecting large quantities of data, knowing that, while individual data points might be anomalous, the data trend as a whole can be trusted<sup>67</sup>. Sola Scriptura could then properly be extended to Sola Tota Scriptura.

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Complete English ed (Allen, Tex: Christian Classics, 1981). See for example II-II.171.2

<sup>61</sup> See for example Dan. 8:27 where it seems the prophet did not understand his own vision.

<sup>62</sup> The Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7) and the passages regarding divorce (Matt. 19:8) are examples where Jesus seems to imply that past revelation had been misunderstood.

<sup>63</sup> Ex. "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations." Jer. 1:5

<sup>64</sup> 2Sam. 7:1-5

<sup>65</sup> List of books mentioned in the Bible that did not make it into the canon: [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-canonical\\_books\\_referenced\\_in\\_the\\_Bible](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-canonical_books_referenced_in_the_Bible)

<sup>66</sup> See John Peckham, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016). for an introduction to Canonical Theology

<sup>67</sup> [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sample\\_size\\_determination](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sample_size_determination)

The implications of this approach go beyond mere hermeneutics to the presuppositions embedded in the exegetical methodology itself. Since the Protestant Reformation, and later, with the introduction of the historical-critical method, attempts have been made (often justifiably so) to rid the Biblical text of any external presuppositions superimposed on it by past interpreters and to try to get as close as possible to the authorial intent<sup>68</sup>. Even assumptions regarding any Holy Spirit-inspired continuity between segments of Scripture were eventually dismissed and passages were instead isolated and evaluated on their own merits. While it was understood that careful exegesis has its limitations and could only partially decipher the intent of someone who lived thousands of years ago using only fragments of text, the approach was still considered superior to others that ‘arbitrarily’ superimposed meaning on the text.

Even Fundamentalist scholars who do believe in a divinely inspired Scripture, have adopted this isolationist approach to exegesis because it lines up with their view of Scriptural inerrancy. If one’s view of revelation/inspiration assumes that the divine message was imprinted on the prophet’s mind, then getting as close as possible to authorial intent means getting as close as possible to the divine intent. If, however, because of limited-inerrancy, understanding the intention of the human author does not necessarily mean understanding the message as God intended, then Scriptural passages cannot be exegeted in isolation. A hermeneutical spiral<sup>69</sup> of sorts must be instituted between the parts and the whole, between any given passage and the rest of Scripture. Exegetes and systematicians must finally work out their differences.

Another implication of accounting for human participation and frailty in the revelation/inspiration process is that the historicity of Scripture takes on additional importance as well. Each prophet lived at a certain time in history and attempted to relay God’s message to a contemporary audience, an audience conditioned by the pre-understandings derived from the messages of previous prophets but obviously unaware yet of any revelation to be given at a future time. In an inerrancy scenario, we might assume revelation transcends time and space as God imprints on the mind timeless truths applicable to all generations. If revelation must pass through the human cognitive processes, however, historical conditioning takes on an important role as well.

To understand the overall message of Scripture, then, we must follow the storyline as it unfolds in its own chronological sequence, since otherwise, we risk reading our own assumptions into the text. We need to interpret each segment of Scripture considering what the author and his audience understood about the present topic from previous revelation. Thus, even the New Testament, which many Christians treat as the hermeneutical lens for the Old, must first be understood through the context set up by the Old Testament; an Old-New-Old sequence of interpretation.

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<sup>68</sup> “Hermeneutics is derived from the Greek word meaning “to interpret.” Traditionally it has meant “that science which delineates principles or methods for interpreting an individual author’s meaning.” Osborne, Grant R.. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (p. 21). InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Rev. and expanded, 2nd ed (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 21.

<sup>69</sup> Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*.

In summary, more than one perspective regarding the nature of Scripture is possible within the Sola Scriptura spectrum and each carries its own distinct methodological implications. The Limited-Errancy approach relies more heavily on the entirety of the canon<sup>70</sup>, on the chronology of revelation, and, on balancing localized exegesis with the canonically-derived system. Given that inerrantist advocates of Sola Scriptura have failed this far in producing a viable methodology - one that does not degenerate into 'relativism, subjectivism, and theological chaos' - we will here focus exclusively on the limited-errancy perspective, as we begin to consider the requirements for approaching Scripture as a stand-alone document.

We mentioned earlier that written material can be intentionally designed either to function as a supplement to other sources of information or, as an independent source of information. Independent content, however, requires the presence of additional elements that aide in interpretation. If the subject matter is relatively familiar to the target audience, the primary need of a stand-alone text is a unifying thread that ties all the components together into a coherent whole (the way the class lectures in the analogy above tied the supplemental reading together). If the audience comes from different backgrounds, or, if the content itself is unconventional in some way, it is additionally necessary to bring the audience into the same frame of reference the content is written in. The simplest way to illustrate how this works is with an extreme example, a form of highly unusual content that was none the less understood and appreciated across cultures: the popular sci-fi movie, *The Matrix* (if not familiar with the movie see here [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Matrix](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Matrix))

In *The Matrix*, the story starts with a young lady who is about to be apprehended by the police. She suddenly jumps up and floats in the air for several seconds, after which she starts running sideways on the walls single-handedly defeating the team of officers. Someone watching this with no prior expectation, immediately and instinctively goes through a process of interpretative re-calibration. The events just witnessed in the movie clearly defy normal physics and must therefore depict some type of alternative reality: maybe this story takes place in a magical realm, like *Harry Potter*, or in a super hero reality, like DC comics, or maybe in an exaggerated reality, like the old Chinese Kung Fu movies. We make these types of assumptions because we need some frame of reference within which to interpret what is taking place. But, if our assumptions are mistaken, they affect our ability to understand what is going on.

Of course, not long after, the 'curtain' is pulled back for us and we are informed as to what kind of reality this is (spoiler alert:) that the world the movie characters operate in is not the real world but is rather an extremely realistic computer simulation. It is then further explained that the reason people exist in a computer simulation is because 'in the early 21st century, there was a war between humans and intelligent machines. When humans blocked the machines' access to solar energy, the machines harvested the humans' bioelectric power, keeping them pacified in the

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<sup>70</sup> A common objection here is that there is uncertainty regarding which books belong in the Biblical canon as well. This objection, however, gives a false impression that there are many potential versions of the canon under consideration, when in fact the vast majority of Christians have been working with just two, which are nearly identical with the exception of a few disputed books. If it could be demonstrated that the inclusion or exclusion of these books significantly alters the data set for interpretation, two versions of the Sola Scriptura theology can be produced. This will still be a significant improvement over the hundreds of versions under the Protestant and Liberal epistemologies and even the church-based epistemology has a Catholic and Orthodox version at least.

Matrix, a shared simulated reality modeled after the world as it existed at the end of the 20th century.<sup>71</sup>

Because of the unusual nature of the Matrix film, the audience must be provided with the frame of reference within which to understand what is taking place. This frame of reference, or, what in philosophical jargon we would call the 'metaphysics'<sup>72</sup> of the movie, is the fact that the events are occurring within a computer simulation. Besides this frame of reference, we are also given the backstory regarding the war between the humans and machines, which forms the unifying thread or the macro-narrative that ties all the movie components together into a coherent whole. Once the metaphysics and macro-narrative are clarified, the rest of the story comes together.

For Scripture to function as a stand-alone document, a similar approach has to be followed in interpretation: we need to approach it with the expectation that it will provide its own metaphysics, that this metaphysics will then form the basis for its macro-narrative, which, in turn, will function as the hermeneutical lens for everything else. The metaphysics/macro-narrative then, will hold interpretative priority: the interpretative process would have to start by deciphering these elements first, so that they can then be used to understand the rest of Scripture.

Intentionally or unintentionally bringing extra-biblical metaphysical assumptions to Scripture, on the other hand, would affect the macro-narrative we end up with, and, a macro-narrative mismatch would then create interpretative discrepancies no matter how careful our subsequent exegesis. The fragmentation that occurred in Protestantism is precisely the kind of thing we would expect to see if such a mismatch took place, given its reliance on early tradition. It is in this way that Greek Philosophy, with its distinct metaphysical assumptions, could have derailed Christian theology.

If today, we did a broad survey of metaphysical perspectives worldwide, we would find dozens if not hundreds of distinct views<sup>73</sup>. Throughout history, however, the educated class at any given time usually held to only one metaphysical perspective and, additionally, was convinced that this view was the only rational option. For the earlier church fathers, for example, the generally accepted philosophical paradigm was Platonism<sup>74</sup>. And, we have already mentioned that this has left its impact on early theological development. A couple of centuries later, it was Neo-Platonism, which left its influence on Augustine and others<sup>75</sup>. A millennium later, Christian

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<sup>71</sup> [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Matrix](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Matrix)

<sup>72</sup> By 'metaphysics' we are referring to what ultimate reality is like beyond what can be perceived through the senses or through empirical inquiry. For a broader understanding of the field of metaphysics see, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaphysics/>

<sup>73</sup> See a long list of views under the Metaphysical Theories section [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline\\_of\\_metaphysics](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline_of_metaphysics)

<sup>74</sup> Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought: The Fascinating Story of the Great Christian Thinkers and How They Helped Shape the World as We Know It Today* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), location 173 Kindle. According to Hill, in the early years, the philosophical perspective "most significant to Christianity was Platonism."

<sup>75</sup> Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought: The Fascinating Story of the Great Christian Thinkers and How They Helped Shape the World as We Know It Today* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), location 1604 Kindle. Augustine, "...did not cease to be a Neoplatonist when he became a Christian."

theology was adapted to Aristotelianism by Aquinas<sup>76</sup>. Far more drastic philosophical changes took place after the Enlightenment, with corresponding updates in theology<sup>77</sup>. And finally, now that modern science has taken over much of the territory previously under the jurisdiction of Philosophy<sup>78</sup>, another theological synthesis is taking place yet again. At every stage, it would have been intellectually irresponsible to deny the factual reliability of each of these metaphysical views, and therefore, a theological synthesis was deemed necessary. What this has meant, however, is the continual revision of Christian theology to adapt to an ever-changing philosophical landscape.

Some Catholics and conservative Protestants might reject the notion of a metaphysical mismatch in Christian theology due to what they view as a tag-team endorsement of sorts for a particular metaphysical perspective. The Greek philosophers reasoned their way to a set of conclusions and, the Church Fathers or the Church Magisterium spiritually discerned that the philosophers were correct, so the dual endorsement establishes the correct metaphysics which is then appropriately superimposed on Scripture. The alternative, of course, is that the fathers were just as immersed in their contemporary metaphysical perspectives as most modern thinkers are in their own, and, they mistakenly assumed these were compatible with Christianity. The fact that so many intelligent individuals over the millennia have come up with distinct and often contradictory metaphysical perspectives<sup>79</sup> should rather indicate an epistemic limitation of human reason.

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<sup>76</sup> “Theologians disagreed over how to approach the new philosophy. Some condemned Aristotle, since some of his ideas conflicted with Christian doctrine. The prime example was his claim that the world had no beginning, which contradicted the doctrine of creation. Indeed in 1215, Aristotle’s scientific works were banned at the University of Paris – although his logical works were compulsory texts. Attempts were made to impose the ban elsewhere too. But other theologians enthusiastically defended Aristotle without reservation, some appealing to Averroes’s idea of double truth to claim that it is a religious truth that the world is created and at the same time a philosophical truth that it is not. Other theologians, unhappy with this kind of doublethink, sought various kinds of middle ways. Bonaventure represents one approach. He was critical of Aristotle, but was prepared to use his ideas cautiously where they seemed helpful. But ultimately the most fruitful approach was that pioneered by Albert the Great and perfected by Thomas Aquinas. For these thinkers, Aristotle was the supreme secular authority. They refer to him simply as ‘the Philosopher’, as if none other existed. Where he contradicts Christian revelation, they accept that he is wrong, for no secular authority can be infallible. But for the most part, and in all purely philosophical or scientific matters, Aristotle is the authority. This attitude was highly controversial in Aquinas’s lifetime. However, after his death and canonization, the rapid acceptance of Aristotle by everyone else was almost inevitable. Ironically, the exaggerated reverence for his ideas meant that there was little creative philosophy of the kind that Aristotle himself had done. It would be two centuries before the Renaissance would pull Aristotle off his medieval pedestal, as thinkers like Hobbes and Descartes redirected the course of philosophy, and scientists like Galileo demolished his physics. Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought: The Fascinating Story of the Great Christian Thinkers and How They Helped Shape the World as We Know It Today* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 2971.

<sup>77</sup> See previous

<sup>78</sup> “Philosophy dealt with issues we would normally associate today with science: the nature of the world, what it is made of, where it came from. It also dealt with what we would consider religious issues: the existence and nature of God, the nature of the soul, life after death, suffering and salvation.” Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christian Thought: The Fascinating Story of the Great Christian Thinkers and How They Helped Shape the World as We Know It Today* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

<sup>79</sup> Again, See a long list of views under the Metaphysical Theories section:  
[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline\\_of\\_metaphysics](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outline_of_metaphysics)

While this topic will be addressed more fully in the final section, consider that human beings have only two avenues to knowledge: our reason and our senses<sup>80</sup>. Given that metaphysics transcends our spacio-temporal reality, it is beyond the reach of our senses (empirical inquiry/science) by definition. Our reason, though capable of going beyond our senses, does so by relying on postulates; we might build highly elaborate metaphysical constructs on the back of these postulates but the postulates themselves might or might not be correct. We therefore don't have a way of actually knowing for a fact what ultimate reality is like apart from divine revelation. And, if this revelation came through Scripture, we should not superimpose our metaphysical speculations on Scripture, given this will automatically function as a primary hermeneutical lens. Rather, we should allow Scripture to develop its own metaphysics.

In summary, a possible pathway towards a truly Sola Scriptura theology that does not degenerate into 'relativism, subjectivism, and theological chaos' consists of having a limited-errancy view of revelation-inspiration (and its subsequent methodological implications), of deciphering first the Scripture's own metaphysics, of then determining the macro-narrative based on this metaphysics, and, lastly, of using this Biblical-metaphysics-based macro-narrative as the hermeneutical framework for everything else. This approach is no different than what we normally use to interpret other stand-alone documents and is therefore not something external arbitrarily superimposed on Scripture.

There is one final consideration to bring up as we work through the implications of a Sola Scriptura theology: self-authentication. Even if we could show that a purely Sola Scriptura theology is possible and that it is internally coherent, this does not automatically mean that the theology is correct. Internally coherent systems could still be just made up. Other epistemic models, appeal to extra-biblical factors such as philosophy and natural theology for authentication of the Christian Faith. How would a Biblical system authenticate itself? Moreover, how would such a system relate to the other epistemic models? Whatever the answer to these questions, the place to find it is, again, Scripture. For now, however, we need to look deeper into the specifics of how other metaphysical systems differ from Scripture.

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<sup>80</sup> See on history of debate between rationalists and empiricists: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>

## IV. Greek Metaphysics & Sola Scriptura

Maybe this happened to you: you got on an elevator, waited for the doors to close, and, after a few seconds of waiting, became impatient and pressed the floor button several times, only to see the doors close immediately. The next time around, when again the doors didn't close, you remembered what you did last time and spam-pressed the button again. The doors, of course, were set on a timer and only coincidentally closed when you pressed the button. But instinctively, you assumed some type of causation<sup>81</sup>.

The human mind is prone to look for patterns<sup>82</sup> and to assume cause and effect relationships, whether they exist or not. There is a billion-dollar supplement industry built on people's tendency to associate ailments with potential cures<sup>83</sup>. It is not difficult to understand then, why from the earliest stages of human civilization, people tried to make sense of the world around them by postulating all kinds of natural and supernatural relationships. Wearing some object or reciting certain words, brought good luck or protected from danger. If it rained in the right seasons, the gods were pleased; if it flooded, they were angry. If the right rituals were performed or sacrifices offered, their anger might be placated.

These speculations regarding the nature of reality acquired by one generation were embellished and passed on to the next. As human society grew more complex, they became formalized and an integral part of community life. Those who rose to prominence as religious leaders became influential members of society, often on par with the civic leaders. Time, money and energy were spent, critical decisions were made, wars were fought, because of baseless beliefs and superstitions regarding both the natural and supernatural. It was in such a context that the Greek Philosophers came on the scene: the intellectual raw materials they had to work with were extremely limited and, there was a specific set of problems that their work was a reaction to.

The philosophers began by questioning<sup>84</sup> the validity of many of these deeply held beliefs: what we might call today a skepticist approach to epistemology. They attempted to then reconstruct a worldview based on what they deemed as purely rational principles. Rather than many gods often in conflict with one another, they envisioned one ultimate Source. Rather than the gods being slightly better versions of ourselves, they imagined a God that was altogether different and infinitely superior. Rather than gods with human-like characteristics, lusting after human females or becoming jealous or angry for no reason, they pictured a God entirely beyond emotion, pain or pleasure, completely unaffected by anything outside Himself<sup>85</sup>.

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<sup>81</sup> <https://www.google.com/amp/s/youarenotsmart.com/2010/02/10/placebo-buttons/amp/>

<sup>82</sup> <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/patternicity-finding-meaningful-patterns/>

<sup>83</sup> [https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/most-dietary-supplements-dont-do-anything-why-do-we-spend-35-billion-a-year-on-them/2020/01/24/947d2970-3d62-11ea-baca-eb7ace0a3455\\_story.html%3foutputType=amp](https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/food/most-dietary-supplements-dont-do-anything-why-do-we-spend-35-billion-a-year-on-them/2020/01/24/947d2970-3d62-11ea-baca-eb7ace0a3455_story.html%3foutputType=amp)

<sup>84</sup> Julián Marías and Julián Marías, *History of Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967), 38.

<sup>85</sup> [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical\\_theism](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_theism)

In observing the natural world, they recognized that everything around them deteriorated with time. They concluded from this that some ideal pattern (form<sup>86</sup>) must exist from which material things begin their deterioration process. Reality, therefore, must be dualistic: there must be a spiritual reality where the forms/ideals exist and of which the material world is but a shadow<sup>87</sup>. Time brings change and change, deterioration, therefore the ideal world is perfect, changeless and timeless while our world imperfect and transient. This perspective led to a pessimistic view of matter, change and time. However, because as human beings, we were able to contemplate the spiritual reality of the forms, this meant that a part of us transcended the material/temporal as well. Our consciousness had a spiritual basis, but it was entrapped in a material shell<sup>88</sup>.

Given the raw materials the Greek Philosophers had to work with, it is impressive what they were able to accomplish. But we must also ask ourselves if they would still hold these views, were they alive today. As compelling as their arguments might have appeared to the ancients, it is mostly those from a Christian background that still find them compelling today, due to the views having been immortalized in Christian tradition<sup>89</sup>. And this is peculiar, given these ideas are regarded by many Christians as a form of general revelation or natural theology intended to build bridges with those unfamiliar with the Faith.

But how does the metaphysical perspective of the Greeks compare with the metaphysics of Scripture? The primary point of conflict is the philosophical God-construct that eventually came to be known as ‘Classical Theism:’ a God that is an ‘absolutely metaphysically ultimate being’ that is ‘simple, and having such attributes as immutability, impassibility, and timelessness.’<sup>90</sup>

To the ancients, and to many modern Christian philosopher-theologians, this God-construct is an undeniable philosophical necessity and must be treated as an axiom that precedes Scriptural interpretation. Such forget that human reason, because of its limited reach into the realm of metaphysics, cannot logically make definitive pronouncements about the divine nature. At times, the necessity of the classical God-construct is pressed on the grounds that it is the only way to

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<sup>86</sup> Marías and Marías, *History of Philosophy*, 43.

<sup>87</sup> Analogy of the Cave - Marías and Marías, *History of Philosophy*, 48.

<sup>88</sup> Marías and Marías, 47.

<sup>89</sup> Tradition is a kind of thing that has the capacity to freeze time - like a photograph that captures reality as it is at one given point and does not update itself as that reality changes with time. Tradition is the tendency of each generation to view in high regard the perspective of the previous generation. This is both a natural phenomenon, because each generation grows up immersed in the intellectual milieu of the preceding generation - and is thus heavily indoctrinated prior to reaching maturity and the ability to question one’s own beliefs - but also because Christianity encourages us to respect our elders, especially those seem to be closest to God. It tells us that there is safety in the multitude of witnesses, and, with time, the number of ‘witnesses’ that have past exceeds those still alive. Can so many faithful Christians that lived before us have been wrong? Thus, it is very likely that, apart from Christian tradition, western philosophy would have proceeded very differently over the centuries. But tradition immortalized the version of philosophy that existed during the first few centuries AD. The fall of Western Rome had much to do with this as well. The Roman Empire had provided a certain degree of stability to society, a stability that is necessary for philosophical reflection to thrive. After Rome’s collapse, the state of civilization degenerated back into a more primitive form of existence that was not as conducive to intellectual pursuits. The lack of a central leadership structure at this time created a power vacuum that was filled by the papacy. And, under the control of the church, philosophical reflection was fenced in by tradition for almost a millennium when the writings of Aristotel were rediscovered.

<sup>90</sup> [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical\\_theism](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_theism)

inoculate the Christian Faith against clearly heretical alternative constructs such as Pan/Panentheism, Polytheism, Process Theism, Deism, etc., when in fact all these constructs, including Classical Theism, are equally speculative.

If we commit to a Sola Scriptura epistemology, however, then we must restrict ourselves to only the Scriptural data, by definition. And this data does not line up with Classical Theism. The God of the Bible, for example, is not represented as existing in timelessness, the way the Greeks pictured Him, but rather as eternally-temporal. God is therefore historical and personal and is capable of walking in the garden with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening (Gen. 3:8), of having dinner with Abraham (Gen. 18), of speaking face to face with Moses (Ex 33:11), as a man speaks with his friend, and of having a house built so that He might dwell among His people (Ex. 25:8).

To the classical theist, all these stories represent anthropomorphisms. To draw such a conclusion under the Sola Scriptura paradigm, however, requires that we would have stronger Biblical data for a different picture of God in contrast to which these examples could be classified as allegorical. We don't. The vast majority of Scriptural passages represent God as a participant in human history, though not restricted by it (2 Pet. 3:8). The same can be said regarding the notion of divine impassibility. When Jesus spoke of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11) or of the hen wanting to gather her chicks under her wings (Luke 13:34), He was revealing the heart of God far beyond the boundaries of the incarnation. And no, this does not make God subject to His own emotions, as classical theists might claim, given He freely chooses to care for His creatures<sup>91</sup>.

The imaginary ontological chasm between the timeless/spiritual and the temporal/material has created many other problems for Christian theology. The Bible depicts this world as having been created 'very good (Gen 1:31).' Yes, it has been marred by sin, and this explains many of the 'negative' features observed by the philosophers, but as originally created, the world was exactly the way God intended it to be. Time and change were not problems to be corrected in the afterlife, but integral features of God's perfect original creation; features that were intended to be permanent from the start and that will remain even after the eschaton (Rev 21,22).

Not just this, but the material world was created to be the 'real world,' not some 'shadow' of another ultimate reality (Plato,) not even the material shell for an immaterial substance/essence (Aristotle,) but reality itself. If there is any dualism in Scripture, it is between the Creator and all of creation, not between a material realm and a spiritual realm<sup>92</sup>. Human beings themselves were created physical beings intended to exist in a physical world that they would treat with the respect one affords the ultimate medium of their existence (as opposed to assuming true reality was in some spiritual realm and physical reality didn't ultimately matter very much.)

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<sup>91</sup> Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill, eds., *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God's Emotions and Suffering*, Spectrum Multiview Books (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2019).

<sup>92</sup> Yes, the Bible does mention spirit beings like angels, without clearly explaining their essence in contrast with ours. But this is nothing like the dualistic reality postulated by the Greeks.

Most Christians today, either because of a priori philosophical commitments or because of tradition-derived pre-understandings, are convinced that the Bible itself teaches substance dualism. This is further reinforced by the tendency to begin the study of Scripture with the New Testament, neglecting the hermeneutical role the Old Testament was intended to play in New Testament interpretation. And, the metaphysical bias often present in many of the popular Bible translations does not help either<sup>93</sup>.

When trying to understand the Biblical position, however, the question to ask is which perspective must function as the default? We exist in a physical reality and cannot perceive with our senses that a spiritual counterpart also exists. It would not be necessary for Scripture to make a strong case for a primarily physical existence, because that is the existence we are already familiar with. An existence that is primarily spiritual/immaterial, however, would need to be clearly articulated. If we follow the Biblical narrative in its chronological sequence, however, the kind of evidence we would expect to see, if the Bible promoted a dualistic reality, is conspicuously missing. The picture developed through the Old Testament then sheds significant light on key New Testament passages we might interpret differently in isolation<sup>94</sup>. Logical incongruities with Scriptural teachings regarding heaven and hell, the resurrection, the New Earth, etc. dissolve when we allow Scripture to function within its own metaphysics<sup>95</sup>.

The Christian understanding of ethics and morality has been influenced by Greek Philosophy as well. To the Greeks, God was perceived as the ‘Form of the Good.’<sup>96</sup> This seemingly resolved the dilemma of whether something is good because God wills it, which would make morality arbitrary, or else God wills it because it is good, which would mean that a moral standard exists that is superior to God Himself<sup>97</sup>. Also known as Divine Command Theory<sup>98</sup>, this perspective impacted Christian soteriology in that it led to a courtroom-style frame of reference for understanding the gospel. Instead, morality is actually a function of the nature of created reality and the divine commands are not so much a set of rules externally imposed on creation as they are an instruction manual informing us how to corporately thrive within creation.

Because something of a vicious circle always exists between epistemology and ontology, even how we relate to the process of Revelation/Inspiration is affected by whether we believe a timeless God imprints information on a prophet’s immortal soul or a historical God communicates with prophets via their cognitive faculties. The former view is more likely to assume Scriptural inerrancy while the latter, some degree of errancy. The influence of classical theism on Christian theology thus also explains why so many Christians conflate inerrancy with Sola Scriptura<sup>99</sup>.

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<sup>93</sup> For example, the ‘gave up the ghost’ expression in the KJV

[https://www.biblegateway.com/quicksearch/?quicksearch=%22gave+up+the+ghost%22&qs\\_version=9](https://www.biblegateway.com/quicksearch/?quicksearch=%22gave+up+the+ghost%22&qs_version=9)

<sup>94</sup> Ex. Slam-dunk proof texts that actually fit just as well without dualistic presuppositions because Christ is the next conscious thought: Absent from the body/present with the lord 2Cor. 5:8, depart to be with Christ Phil 1:23, etc.

<sup>95</sup> Ex. Hell must be eternal torment because the soul is immortal, a person goes to heaven when they die in their immaterial state but then gets a body again at the resurrection, etc.

<sup>96</sup> Marías and Marías, *History of Philosophy*, 52.

<sup>97</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthyphro\\_dilemma](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthyphro_dilemma)

<sup>98</sup> [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine\\_command\\_theory](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_command_theory)

<sup>99</sup> Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Complete English ed (Allen, Tex: Christian Classics, 1981). See for example II-II.171.2

As mentioned in the previous section, however, it was by influencing the macro-narrative selection that Greek Philosophy most impacted Scriptural interpretation. Unlike the Matrix movie, the Bible does not explicitly articulate its own macro-narrative. But it does provide sufficient clues for us to piece this macro-narrative together ourselves, as long as our extra-Biblical metaphysical commitments don't predispose us in a different direction.

While Scripture categorically rejects any form of cosmic dualism<sup>100</sup>, it paints a far more authentic conflict between the forces of good and evil than Classical Theism would allow for<sup>101</sup>. The God of the Bible is engaged in a real war with evil and must go to great lengths to gain the victory in the end, in spite of the fact that He is all powerful. The reason for this is the free will of created beings, God's desire to maintain the love and trust of these beings, and, His desire to also ensure that sin doesn't rise again a second time, once the conflict is finally brought to a close.

A brief articulation of the Cosmic Conflict Macro-Narrative can be made in three steps:

#### A. The Epicurean Trilemma

The question of why a good God would allow evil to exist makes it possible for us to simplify the argument into a bare-bones logical syllogism:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?

Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing?

Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing?

Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing?

Then why call him God?

One possible solution to this trilemma is free will. A loving, all-powerful God could allow evil to exist if it is freely chosen by an intelligent agent. It would not be meaningful to endow created intelligences with the capacity for free will, if they would then be prevented from exercising it.

This solution, however, is not sufficient to account for the particular circumstances humanity is in, because it would not explain the suffering of the innocent: those who did not freely choose evil.

A modified free-will response however does work: an all-powerful, loving God can allow evil to exist, temporarily, if this ensures that non-omniscient, free-willed beings will thereby become convinced never to choose evil again for the rest of eternity. In other words, the present human

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<sup>100</sup> <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manichaeism#General>

<sup>101</sup> The God-concept of classical Theism is too exalted for God to ever be perceived as actively participating in a battle with evil forces in any real sense, even if He could (which He cannot being timeless.) Moreover, since God is viewed as the form of the good, there would be no basis of evaluation as to who is right in the conflict, given that would amount to God being judged by Himself.

condition can serve as an inoculation process against sin and evil, making it possible to retain free-will and yet permanently secure the universe against evil rising again.

## B. A Two-Layered Conflict

While there are multiple possible scenarios for how such a temporary demonstration of the effects of evil might have unfolded, the scenario revealed in Scripture is one where God is being opposed by one of His most exalted creations turned evil. Lucifer, now Satan, and his followers, have rebelled first, and then brought evil to our world as well. What this means is that the conflict transcends humanity (hence ‘Cosmic,’) and involves other created intelligent beings besides ourselves that might possibly benefit from this demonstration, whether or not directly involved in it (ex. unfallen angels, etc. Rev. 12:7-9).

## C. The Rules of Engagement

Because both God and his nemesis are powerful beings that have the capacity to skew the results of this demonstration, certain rules of engagement must exist that ensure the process is fair overall. There are limitations to what both God and Satan are allowed to do, and God subjects Himself to these limitations so that all intelligent agents either participating in or observing this demonstration can see the fairness of the process and draw their conclusions. The Bible does not fully reveal the nature of these rules, but their existence helps explain the apparent silence or absence of God without resorting to imaginary ontological partitions between God and humanity. (It is beyond the scope of this paper to present a thorough scholarly articulation and defense of the Cosmic Conflict construct, but such a work already exists<sup>102</sup>.)

A historical survey of Christian theology reveals numerous attempts to superimpose a macro-narrative on Scripture. And, a Sola Scriptura theology does require that a macro-narrative be identified that can logically connect the parts. When the majority of these frameworks are contrasted with the biblical data, however, it becomes evident that large segments of Scripture must be reinterpreted to force-fit the frames on top of the data.

We have already mentioned the Platonic/Aristotelian construct (Classical Theism) that treats instances of divine-human interaction in Scripture as allegorical because of the supposed ontological separation between the timeless God and material/temporal man. Another potential macro-narrative, the Calvinistic ‘Divine Sovereignty’ motif, requires the adoption of determinism as an underlying presupposition, which is extremely difficult to maintain when the Biblical narrative is allowed to develop in its chronological sequence. Other, less popular constructs, like Manichaeism<sup>103</sup> with two equal but opposing forces or Process Theism<sup>104</sup> where God evolves alongside creation, are already acknowledged by most Christians as incompatible with Scripture. Any other potential macro-narrative contrasted with the Biblical data tends to have similar challenges.

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<sup>102</sup> John Peckham, *Theodicy of Love: Cosmic Conflict and the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018).

<sup>103</sup> <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manichaeism#General>

<sup>104</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/process-theism/>

The Cosmic Conflict macro-narrative, on the other hand, seamlessly accommodates all the biblical data. It can account for both God's imminence and transcendence, it can account for His action and inaction, it can provide a pathway for making sense of difficult Biblical segments, like the Canaanite genocide, and can reconcile different aspects of God's character as portrayed throughout Scripture. The challenge with the Cosmic Conflict construct has not been its compatibility with Scripture, but rather, its incongruity with a priori philosophical commitments. It is for this reason that it has not played a hermeneutical role in patristic theological development and, given the epistemic weight of tradition, in either Catholic or Protestant theology. A Sola Scriptura theology, therefore, requires an epistemic disconnect from tradition and orthodoxy, and then a careful reconstruction of Christian theology from within a biblically-derived hermeneutical framework.

## The Gospel & Ethics

The Protestant Reformation elevated not only patristic tradition but also the gospel itself to the level of a hermeneutical lens for Scripture, sometimes even to the point where entire books were deemed unworthy of being part of the canon based on their perceived incompatibility with the gospel<sup>105</sup>. The gospel, however, functions as a solution to a problem, and, the nature of that solution is entirely dependent on the nature of the problem. Thus, macro-narratives play an important role here as well, and, without accounting for this, the gospel-centric hermeneutic is itself yet another departure from Sola Scriptura. Instead, the process of deriving the Biblical gospel must be informed by the correct macro-narrative, after which the gospel can, as a component of that macro-narrative (problem+solution,) play its hermeneutical role.

For nearly its entire history, Protestant soteriology has essentially been tripartite/tripartisan, and, as such, the Gospel-Centric Hermeneutic has contributed to the fragmentation in Protestantism. The division has revolved around the question of free will, whether a complete rejection of it (Calvinism,) a minimal acceptance of it (Once Saved Always Saved,) or full acceptance (Arminianism.<sup>106</sup>) And, appeals to tradition have not helped to resolve this conflict, given all three can find representation in the Church Fathers. Approaching the question through the lens of the Bible's macro-narrative, however, immediately resolves the issue, given the entire conflict is taking place for the very purpose of preserving free will.

Several other idiosyncrasies in Protestant soteriology are resolved as well once other elements of Greek Philosophy are eliminated. When one's ethical framework begins with God as the 'Form of the Good,' i.e. the unquestioned ultimate authority in matters of morality, then salvation revolves around finding a legal loophole that preserves the integrity of God's judicial system while at the same time pardoning the sinner. If, however, morality is not just an absolute independent standard but a descriptor of how creation functions, then the central issue is whether non-omniscient free-willed beings can come to appreciate the nature of the reality they exist in and conform to its existential parameters for their own good and the good of those around them, making possible an eternal, harmonious coexistence. Those who persist in rebellion will continue

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<sup>105</sup> Hill, *The History of Christian Thought*, location 3777 Kindle version.

<sup>106</sup> Most evangelicals are familiar with the Calvinism-Arminianism debates but don't often notice that there are actually three sides to these debates because 'once saved always saved' proponents (usually Baptists) do believe in free will but only until the person accepts Christ.

to harm themselves and others thus rendering the entire demonstration pointless, given they will eventually reintroduce sin into the universe. Salvation, therefore, must transcend the mere forgiveness of sin, and bring about a transformation of the individual as well (a transformation of the whole person existing in the real world, not just the immaterial portion of an individual existing in a dualistic reality.)

An even greater challenge comes from the fact that Protestant soteriology was birthed out of an existential crisis<sup>107</sup> and there is therefore extreme sensitivity when it comes to the question of the assurance of salvation. Any incorporation of transformation/sanctification, or even free will in general, into the salvation equation, raises immediate red flags for many theologians. Biblical assurance, however, has a covenantal basis: we can have assurance not because of the removal or inexistence of free will but because God has committed Himself to our salvation.

We did not choose to be born here and play a part in this Cosmic Demonstration, we came into the world with a fallen nature, we picked up numerous bad habits and character flaws before we were even old enough to know what we were doing, we live in an evil world full of temptation and, moreover, we have powerful angelic entities working against us. Salvation, therefore, is offered to us as a gift. God takes upon Himself the responsibility of making us the kind of people He needs us to be, and yet He must do this without overriding our freedom to choose. He therefore enters into a covenant with us the moment we make a conscious decision to accept Him and remains faithful to His end of that covenant for the entire duration of our life on earth. We don't lose and regain our salvation every time we do something wrong; the free gift remains ours irrespective of any factor on our part. When our time on earth is over, however, God has to determine what our ultimate life decision has been and whether we chose to remain Christ's or not. This is not something that can be forced upon us, but, as long as it is what we want, it cannot be taken from us<sup>108</sup>.

This covenantal approach to salvation is modeled for us in the Old Testament Sanctuary service as it revolved around the yearly harvest cycle. When an individual brought an offering to the temple, or, when the Passover was offered in the Spring, the blood of the sacrifice was collected and sprinkled on the inner Sanctuary curtain, thus signifying that the case of the individual was now God's responsibility. It was only at the completion of the ceremonial year and of the harvest cycle, during the Day of Atonement in the Fall (cr. Matt. 13:30), that the Sanctuary was cleansed, signifying that God only enters the judgment process when the harvest is ripe, before which He focuses His attention entirely on our salvation.

The Sanctuary Model of Salvation reconciles free will and assurance given that our will cannot be taken from us and God never refuses to save someone who desires to be His. We can thus always come boldly to the throne of grace knowing He ever lives to make intercession for us and that no one can pluck us out of His hand or separate us from His love. It is quite possible that if Luther and Calvin had not relied so heavily on tradition, Augustine, and classical philosophy, and, if they had seen how the Old Testament sanctuary clarified the gospel, Protestantism would have avoided five hundred years of Calvinism-Arminianism-OSAS debates.

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<sup>107</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 2nd ed (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1993), 119.

<sup>108</sup> This is essentially the Arminian position

## Sola Scriptura and Self-Authentication

We must now return to the question raised at the end of the previous section: how does a theological model that does not rely on external philosophical systems avoid fideism? Every theological system, to deserve our attention, must authenticate itself in some way.

Picture a mushroom for a second. The body of the mushroom is not suspended in midair but needs a leg to stand on. In the same way, philosophico-theological paradigms cannot exist in a vacuum but must be grounded in some way; arguments must be produced that differentiate these paradigms from purely fabricated fables. Because of this, the various approaches to Christian theology have appealed to a variety of arguments over the centuries whether philosophical, scientific, moral, existential, etc. What is conspicuous about most of these arguments, however, is that it was not the Scripture that inspired their use. Does this mean, then, that Scripture does not care about authenticating the faith?

The religion of the Bible does not portray itself as a religion that must be accepted entirely on faith. Moses, for example, gave Pharaoh many clear signs of God's majesty while Elijah called down fire from heaven to demonstrate that Yahweh rather than Baal was God. Christ's own ministry was confirmed by miracles, healings and by His resurrection. These out-of-the-ordinary events, however, were the exception rather than the norm, even throughout Biblical history. What then was the primary basis on which the Biblical characters built their faith?

As we allow the Biblical narrative to unfold, we come to recognize that Biblical faith is consistently authenticated through God's foreknowledge and control of human history. At every stage in the narrative's progression, faith is placed first on divine promises and predictions that have already materialized and, second, on testable predictions that are being fulfilled as the narrative unfolds: 'I have told you before it come to pass, that, when it is come to pass, ye might believe.' (John 14:29) Whether Abraham having a son in his old age, or Joseph's dream interpretations becoming reality, whether Moses delivering Israel at the appointed time and Joshua conquering Canaan, or Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel anticipating the exile and return to Canaan, God had a schedule for history and documented that schedule ahead of time through His prophets. The epistemic weight that Scripture places on prophecy comes forcefully across as Jesus turns to Scripture to prove His resurrection before actually revealing that He was alive: 'beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.' (Luke 24:27)

The historical-prophetic nature of Biblical faith lines up well with Scripture's temporal metaphysics. Moreover, within the Cosmic Conflict Macro-Narrative, there is an expectation of a divine timetable superimposed on history, given the entire purpose of this demonstration is meant to address the sin problem as swiftly as possible and return the universe to its original pristine condition. All throughout Scripture, there is an anticipation of an approaching Eschaton that is consistently reignited by specific historical landmarks that manifest with the passing of time. It would be unreasonable to assume that this historical-prophetic element would no longer be a part the Biblical Faith after the time of the Apostles.

Thus, believers during the Old and New Testament Eras were not taught complex philosophical arguments by which to establish the epistemic foundations of their faith, but instead anchored their faith in the consistent historical fulfillment of God's promises. An important difference between them and us, however, is that for us the Canon of Scripture has been closed for two millennia now, meaning, that for the same means of authentication to be applicable to us, some portions of Scripture must have been intended for audiences in the distant future. A Sola Scriptura theology then, must be a Historicist theology.

For those not familiar, there are multiple schools of interpretation among Christians when it comes to Biblical prophecy, specifically the apocalyptic prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. Preterism, applies the fulfillment of these prophecies to the distant past, often to Ancient Greece and Rome. Futurism, another school of interpretation, applies their fulfillment to the future, usually after the Rapture. Idealism, on the other hand, interprets the prophecies apart from any connection to history, as carrying only spiritual significance. None of these approaches allow prophecy to play the corroborating role for Biblical Faith that it played during Bible times. With Preterism, the prophecies were fulfilled so long ago that they could have been written after the fact. With Futurism, they have not yet been fulfilled, and therefore cannot be verified. And, of course, Idealism has no expectation of fulfillment. It is only through the Historicist school of interpretation, where the Biblical prophecies are fulfilled throughout history (from Biblical times until today) and continue to make testable predictions for the future, that Biblical Faith is authenticated.

There is a long tradition of Historicist application of prophecy throughout Christian history and especially after the Protestant Reformation<sup>109</sup>. Today, however, the Historicist approach has been abandoned by most Christians. Part of the reason for this is its susceptibility to speculation and abuse. If someone is wrong about the interpretation of a prophetic event in the past (Preterism), an event in the post-Rapture future (Futurism) or a spiritual application of prophecy (Idealism,) it does not generally create too many problems overall. Being mistaken about events that are expected to happen in a matter of months or years, however, can cause and often has caused, major disruption and disappointment for the Church.

But, while this concern is understandable, it is not a necessary byproduct of the Historicist approach. The Biblical Prophecies foretell future events in broad strokes: they describe major geo-political trends covering extended periods of time. And, in regards to this, they provide sufficient independent lines of evidence based on which to develop a sound interpretation. Occasionally, additional details are provided that lack sufficient clues to decipher accurately, probably because these details are not intended to be understood until after the events have already taken place. And, it is usually regarding these obscure details that speculation takes place and people come up with their fancy theories. All this could be avoided, however, if we concentrate our attention on the parts that are clear and straight forward.

Because we would veer too far off track to get into the details of prophecy here, more information will be provided in the Appendix A. But several key elements should be mentioned even now. The apocalyptic prophecies seem to be organized in a 'repeat and enlarge' structure

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<sup>109</sup> Le Roy Edwin Froom, "The Prophetic Faith of Our Fathers: The Historical Development of Prophetic Interpretation / by Le Roy Edwin Froom" (Washington, D.C, Review and Herald, 1982).

that spans all of history from the prophet's time until the eschaton. Just like Joseph's dreams in Genesis had the same general message repeated multiple times using different symbols, the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation are not independent of one another or sequential but function in parallel. When in Algebra we want to solve for two unknowns, we need to have two different equations. In the same way, the prophecies can be understood by finding the corresponding symbols in each prophecy and then applying the interpretative clues across the board.

There is a tendency with many to quickly dismiss the idea that Bible prophecy can function as any form of authentication for Scripture. An objective approach to prophetic interpretation does exist, however. And, when applied, the broad outline of events that these prophecies describe does line up with history. Moreover, specific predictions are made about what we can expect in the future as well, so the possibility to further test these predictions does exist. For now, the main point to take from this section is that prophecy is how Scripture intended to authenticate itself, if allowed to provide its own credentials.

## Conclusion

So far in this essay we have introduced an organizational scheme that helps make sense of what would otherwise be a very confusing theological landscape, and, have presented a solution to challenges that had previously kept an important epistemic model unworkable. In the next section, we will dig deeper into epistemology and even the philosophy of science to explain how the Sola Scriptura model can engage with modern concerns (critical scholarship, evolution, etc.) and, why it is that we will probably always lack the ability to conclusively settle on just one of the epistemic models and must therefore learn to work with multiple models simultaneously.

Isolating epistemology as the root element responsible for giving each Christian theoretical model its peculiar flavor, not only helps to properly identify and sort the various traditions, but also explains why each tradition took the twists and turns it did in its theological development. We should, for example, be able to take someone who is completely new to the world of theology, explain to them the epistemic presuppositions of any one of these models, and then set them loose and watch them replicate the same theological trajectory originally followed by those who first developed that model. Other organizational schemes would not likely be able to provide the same level of predictive insight.

As mentioned, an immediate benefit of approaching theology from an epistemic perspective is that it can cut short the endless debates continually taking place between different factions within the Christian Community. There is no point in arguing about a particular theological position or the correct interpretation of some Biblical passage if, in the end, each party will appeal to a different final arbiter of truth. Moreover, since even the question of which final arbiter of truth is the correct one might be unanswerable, a truce of sorts between the factions might finally materialize. The various models mentioned in this essay, at least, have already proven

themselves to have incredible staying power, in spite of all the evidence other models have tried to produce against them<sup>110</sup>.

Such an approach would not mean that every imaginable model would be deemed acceptable. Two of the models mentioned this far, for example, would have a difficult time qualifying as legitimate. First, the fundamentalist (Solo Scriptura) approach, lacks a coherent methodology. The approach boils down to every individual either developing his/her own private interpretation of Scripture or falling back on whatever denominational tradition they most resonate with. Besides this, we also briefly mentioned the modern-prophet-based epistemology that some groups rely on, which sometimes treats the prophet as the authorized interpreter of Scripture while at the same time trying to prove the divine calling of that prophet with the Scripture. Since this approach is circular, it cannot qualify as a viable model either. Also, any approach that attempts to make the Holy Spirit's internal witness the final arbiter cannot work as this cannot be quantified in an academic setting and everyone can claim the witness of the Spirit.

At the same time, these parameters of viability cannot be too stringent, or else none of the current models would qualify, given they all have their respective problems. All one has to do is quickly survey the critiques the other models have raised against each one of the individual models to get a sense of what those problems might be. The problems, however, are seldom the same for all models; some models are strong in one area while others in a different area.

One way to think about how this works is to imagine a physical structure, like a house or a building. Most physical structures tend to have certain weight-bearing components that are critical to the structure's integrity. You might be able to knock down entire walls and even rearrange rooms without serious consequences, but, if the weight-bearing components are knocked down, the entire building can collapse. Similarly, theoretical models, like the epistemic models described in this paper, all have their distinct weight-bearing components. In many cases, you can take a critique aimed at one model, re-purpose it to address the weight-bearing components in a different model, and it will prove just as devastating. For this reason, when any given model is being evaluated, it should not be evaluated against some ideal/perfect standard but based on how it measures up against the other models. A set of parameters of viability should first be articulated, all the epistemic models that fall within these parameters should be identified, and, the model being evaluated should then be judged based on whether it could meet the criteria of viability to a similar degree the other models do.

Of course, unlike with other fields of study where people must come to terms with multiple competing perspectives at the same time, in theology, one's entire existence is often tied to one particular worldview. It can be incredibly disruptive to have to change one's understanding of reality after having spent a lifetime viewing things a certain way and organizing one's life around that view. There are thus instinctive and imperceptible psychological barriers in place that often prevent us from giving other alternatives due consideration<sup>111</sup>. Moreover, there is an inherent

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<sup>110</sup> Although it does seem that, for the past few decades, the Protestant Model is hemorrhaging academic talent at an alarming rate into either the Neoorthodox or the Fundamentalist camps or even the Catholic/Orthodox camps. The main reason for this seems to be science. I believe I might have a solution to this in the next installment of the essay.

<sup>111</sup> [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive\\_bias](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cognitive_bias)

circularity to ontology and epistemology such that, any particular understanding of reality tends to make a person more inclined to resonate with the corresponding epistemic perspective that leads to that understanding of reality (all the while perceiving other epistemic perspectives as less plausible.) The epistemic models themselves function as zero-sum games: if there is any legitimacy to the Protestant perspective, for example, then it brings into serious question the Catholic perspective. Or, if there is any legitimacy to the Sola Scriptura model described in this essay, both the Catholic and the Protestant perspectives are brought into question. It is understandable then that there would be tremendous competition between the models in general and that specifically regarding the Sola Scriptura model, some might find it advantageous to continue to deny the possible existence of such a model even if the model proves viable.

None the less, there is also great benefit to having these different epistemic models in place. It allows us to better understand our own position as we contrast it with other possible perspectives. We are each greatly benefiting from the fact that hundreds/thousands of deep thinkers have for decades/centuries painstakingly worked through the logical implications of each of these models. We can also see the practical real-life fruit of people taking these perspectives to heart and living their lives accordingly. Whatever model we ultimately choose to go with, we don't have to make that choice in ignorance but are privileged to have access to a tremendous amount of useful data upon which to base our decision. Except for the Sola Scriptura Model, that is. While all the other epistemic models mentioned in this essay have had their place within the corporate Christian consciousness, at least at the academic level, the Sola Scriptura model outlined here, has not. And this might not matter so much, if this was some fringe approach, but it is the one approach that is successfully built entirely on Christianity's central text. If this approach is viable, everyone should be aware that it exists and have some basic understanding of how it works.

Is then the Sola Scriptura approach a viable model?

This far, I have tried to address the question of whether the Sola Scriptura methodology is coherent, whether it can provide sufficient hermeneutical controls to avoid disintegrating into 'relativism, subjectivism, and theological chaos' and, lastly, whether it can establish sufficient points of contact with historical Christianity while at the same time diverging from orthodox Christian thought in significant ways. How this model interacts with science and critical scholarship will be addressed in the next section.

The argument here can be broken down into three parts:

First, I have argued that there are multiple possible presuppositions about the nature of Scripture, revelation and inspiration which coincide with one's metaphysical presuppositions. Sola Scriptura does not have to mean inerrancy, as there is some degree of limited errancy that would still allow for theology to be based on the Bible alone, as long as the totality of the Biblical data is relied upon (it is only if extra-biblical data is introduced that the process would no longer qualify as Sola Scriptura.) This might appear as an arbitrary process to some, but the methodology is actually well understood in disciplines that depend on accurate data analysis.

Such a process, unlike inerrancy-based methodologies, will avoid much of the difficulty that arises when attempting to build a theology on conflicting exegetical conclusions<sup>112</sup>.

Second, I have argued that Scripture can function as a stand-alone document if treated the way we treat all stand-alone content: we begin the interpretative process by deciphering first the metaphysics and macronarrative and then using these as the interpretative framework for everything else.

Third, I have argued that when the above principles are applied, the clearest point of conflict between Scripture and orthodox Christian theology is the Greek metaphysical construct known as Classical Theism with its inherent implications for cosmology, anthropology, etc. Without these external metaphysical parameters superimposed on Scripture we can then place every imaginable macronarrative on the table, contrast it with the Scriptural data, and, objectively evaluate to what degree Scripture has to be reinterpreted to make each macronarrative fit. I have argued that the Cosmic Conflict macronarrative is a much better fit than all the major competing alternatives.

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<sup>112</sup> This is often the challenge with Inerrancy based approaches. The best exegesis of one segment of Scripture often contradicts the exegesis of another segment, making things difficult to reconcile given both/all passages are assumed to say exactly what God intended. This often results in the creation of a canon within a canon.

## V. Why Sola Scriptura?

It is possible that someone, while by now recognizing the general feasibility of a Sola Scriptura model, might wonder why such a model would even be desirable, given we have other trustworthy sources of knowledge at our disposal. And, the quick response to this question is that first, only a handful of valid epistemic models exist in Christian theology, so everyone with even an elementary knowledge of theology should be aware of the available models and of the basics of how they work. Second, the Sola Scriptura model is intrinsically important because it is the only model based entirely on Christianity's central text. Third, the Sola Scriptura phrase itself has played an important role in Protestant Tradition so it is significant that the dilemma of how to develop such a model has finally been solved. And lastly, the Sola Scriptura model makes testable predictions (prophecy,) so even those who do not presently find the model compelling should be aware of these predictions and thus have a chance to reconsider the model if/when such predictions do materialize.

But, more importantly, each of the models has intrinsic assumptions about the level of trustworthiness of the available knowledge sources. These assumptions are themselves based on even more primordial assumptions about the nature of reality, God and man's nature, and the process by which the human mind acquires knowledge. So there is a certain circularity<sup>113</sup>, as previously mentioned, between ontology and epistemology which has the capacity to prejudice us against the proper evaluation of these questions. This is something we should be aware of as we make an effort to give other perspectives a fair evaluation.

If a classical theist<sup>114</sup>, for example, imagines a reality where God is timeless, where human consciousness is rooted in an immaterial soul and where, therefore, our knowledge-acquiring processes transcend material reality and have their roots in the immaterial point of contact between the soul and God, then, such a person will be inclined to trust themselves in deciphering truth in multiple sources, not just direct divine revelation. On the other hand, if we don't share the classical ontology and therefore view our knowledge-building apparatus as bound by human limitation, then any direct divine revelation will be intrinsically superior to other knowledge sources. Which brings us to the final topic of this essay, the issue of foundational epistemology and its implications for how the Sola Scriptura model relates to other knowledge sources including modern science.

### Foundational Epistemology

To discuss the foundational aspects of epistemology, we need to correctly establish the default position from which such a discussion must start. What exactly can we assume from the start regarding the nature of ultimate reality, the trustworthiness of various knowledge sources, or, even the mechanism by which human beings access knowledge? And the answer to this question is..., 'nothing;' we cannot take anything for granted because we don't know a priori what reality is like or what sources can be trusted. Because there is disagreement at the most fundamental

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<sup>113</sup> A somewhat similar idea is discussed here: <https://iep.utm.edu/ep-circ/>

<sup>114</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical\\_theism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_theism)

level, the default must be a position of ‘ignorance.’ Anything other than an agnostic starting point will inevitably skew every subsequent conclusion.

Second, we need to determine a baseline regarding how human beings access knowledge. In part one, we briefly mentioned that humans rely on two primary avenues for knowledge, our reason and our senses<sup>115</sup>, and then discussed the limitations of these two avenues. The fact that this should be the default position regarding knowledge acquisition can be demonstrated with an analogy that could in theory be converted into an actual scientific experiment:

Imagine that you were drugged, kidnapped, and woke up in a large room with thick cement walls and no doors or windows. What process would you follow to figure out where you are and what is happening? You might check around the room for any cracks in the wall that allow you to see outside. You might put your ear to the wall to see if you can hear anything. You might even try to detect some scent in the air. But, if none of this works, that is the end of the direct knowledge you can acquire about your situation using your senses. Empirical/scientific knowledge, in this case, is clearly limited by the fact that you don’t have a way to access what is beyond the concrete walls.

Your reason, on the other hand, allows you to go beyond the limits of your senses by considering various plausible scenarios. This could, for example, be some sort of twisted science experiment. Or, maybe, some sadistic form of entertainment, or over-the-top practical joke. The implications of each of these hypotheses can be further developed but, ultimately, unless whoever kidnapped you breaks the silence and reveals to you why you are there, there is no way to determine which of the guesses is correct, if any.

This thought experiment helps establish something of a universal baseline for epistemology. We cannot directly know that which our senses cannot access, and, the most we can do beyond this is to come up with plausible guesses. We exist in a physical/material reality and gather information about this reality via senses that are themselves a function of the physical/material. The objects that we see, for example, are visible to us because our eyes can detect the light the objects reflect. The scientific process itself studies the material. If anything exists beyond the material, then, it would be outside the reach of our senses, and of science also, by definition. Reason and philosophy often attempt to go beyond where science can go, but the most they can come up with is plausible guesses. Therefore, metaphysics is inherently beyond the reach of the human knowledge-building apparatus and the only way for us to access such knowledge is if it is revealed to us in some way, (just like the kidnapper in the analogy above could reveal to the prisoner why they are there.) In other words, we ourselves might be epistemically limited, but God can grant us additional access to knowledge beyond those limitations.

Any epistemic system, therefore, that claims something regarding metaphysics, is either arbitrarily guessing, or is making an additional assumption about how knowledge is accessed that goes beyond the default/baseline position we have just established. In other words, a hypothesis is being introduced and a burden of proof is being assumed. If, for example, someone believes that metaphysical knowledge is accessed as the immaterial soul connects with God, that’s a hypothesis. If someone believes knowledge of God can be deciphered in nature, because God

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<sup>115</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>

imprinted information about Himself therein (natural theology,) that's a hypothesis. If someone believes God-knowledge comes through feeling, experience, morality, etc., that's also a hypothesis. And, it is also a hypothesis that God might communicate with individuals directly.

It is important to point this out because there is a tendency among theologians to assume that theological systems that are based on direct revelation are more fideistic/presuppositional while those that are not are more rational. In reality, all theological systems are ultimately presuppositional in that sense, it's just that you have to peel through additional layers to get to the foundational presuppositions or starting hypotheses. At some foundational level, these systems make assumptions regarding metaphysics and attempt to justify those assumptions in some way that takes us beyond what human beings should have the capacity to know unaided, as illustrated in the concrete room analogy.

Thus, each model begins with an assumption/hypothesis regarding how God chose to communicate with us. And, we don't have a way to know which hypothesis is correct a priori, because we have to first choose a hypothesis in order to develop our picture of God so we cannot then use that picture of God to determine which hypothesis is correct.

None the less, in spite of our epistemic limitations, we cannot function in life as true agnostics. We inevitably make some choices regarding what we believe reality to be like and which of the epistemic models is more plausible, and then live our lives accordingly. And, rather than making this choice haphazardly, it is to our benefit to think through it carefully. Essentially, we have to start from an agnostic default position, come up with plausible hypotheses regarding the nature of reality, develop these hypotheses into more robust epistemic models and then evaluate the models based on how well they incorporate the available data.

For example, one possible hypothesis is that physical/material reality is all there is, i.e. metaphysical naturalism. So let's think about how our human epistemic limitations would apply to this hypothesis. Many atheists treat naturalism as the default position in contrast to which other metaphysical possibilities require proof. In reality, a default cannot be arbitrarily assigned to any of the metaphysical paradigms any more than one can assign a default number to dice. We simply have no way of knowing, a priori, what ultimate reality is like. Occam's razor<sup>116</sup>, while useful from a practical standpoint, doesn't make one of the possibilities inherently more probable than the others. The atheist might insist that, even if we cannot know it a priori, the success of science is still a strong indicator that naturalism is correct. But many metaphysical perspectives are compatible with the success of science, so such a conclusion is premature as well. Further, because of the epistemic limitations of the human knowledge-gathering apparatus, if the naturalistic hypothesis is true, there would not even be a way for us to know for sure that it is true. As our lack of access to metaphysics requires that something outside the system provide us with metaphysical knowledge, and, as naturalism denies that there is anything outside the system, there would be no way to access that knowledge.

What naturalism can do, however, at least in principle, is to demonstrate that the natural/material aspect of reality, at least, could have come to exist on its own without outside help. This would not prove that nothing exists beyond the physical/material, but would at least show that

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<sup>116</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occam%27s\\_razor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occam%27s_razor)

something like a god is not needed to explain material reality. To do this would require, first of all, that plausible explanations be crafted for some of the more difficult questions such a model raises. (For an example of such a question, as the energy in our universe performs work, it is eventually converted into heat energy, ultimately leading to a state of maximum entropy also known as heat death<sup>117</sup>. Working backwards, this raises the question of where the initial energy in our universe came from.)

The first step then is to identify and develop conceptual models that can explain these types of complex questions. But the fact that an explanation can be crafted does not mean that it is actually what happened. That would need to be demonstrated as well through empirical data, which is difficult, given we have access to such a limited sample size: we can only observe a small fraction of our own universe and have no idea what else exists, if anything, beyond that. The naturalistic hypothesis, then, faces limitations on two levels: first, it lacks the apparatus for accessing metaphysics in order to show that its metaphysical perspective is correct, and, second, even that which it can access in theory, material reality, it can access only in small part, at least as of yet. (I am not pointing this out to argue that the naturalistic hypothesis is inferior, but rather to preempt the claim that it is superior, once I start pointing out the problems with other models)

The matter is further complicated by the nature of the scientific methodology itself. Unlike philosophy, that has spent millennia trying to untangle the mysteries of metaphysics in spite of this inherently being outside philosophy's reach, science sidestepped the never-ending metaphysics debates by focusing only on the material world, as a matter of principle. Essentially, the naturalistic paradigm was adopted not as a metaphysical stance but only as a provisional working environment that helped reduce distraction from unanswerable questions. This a priori elimination of a large number of untestable metaphysical variables brought the focus entirely on that which can be empirically verified and has proven incredibly effective at making sense of the world. The approach has come to be known as Methodological Naturalism<sup>118</sup> (MN) and has become a key tenet of modern science.

Although a significant number of Christians, especially from conservative circles, have traditionally viewed methodological naturalism with suspicion, it is in fact a breakthrough that has allowed science to progress at an unprecedented rate. No human tool is perfect and 100% effective in every situation, but MN-based science has done in a couple of centuries what metaphysics-based science has failed to do in millennia, so Christians should treat science with due respect. But, overall, the approach has been so effective in studying the natural world, that philosophers of science have been slow to fully consider the limitations of such a process. In fact, it is difficult to even broach the subject openly as this is automatically perceived as an attack on MN.

But even though methodological naturalism is not the same thing as metaphysical naturalism, it is still a methodology that assumes a metaphysic, a metaphysic which might or might not ultimately be correct. The potential therefore exists for discrepancies to accumulate between science and reality, discrepancies which will not likely be readily apparent. To illustrate why this

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<sup>117</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heat\\_death\\_of\\_the\\_universe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Heat_death_of_the_universe)

<sup>118</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalism\\_\(philosophy\)#Methodological\\_naturalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalism_(philosophy)#Methodological_naturalism)

is, let's assume that the possibility exists for the supernatural to interact with the natural order of things. How would this affect the scientific process?

Let's begin by considering a situation where the scientific process does really well. Suppose we are trying to determine if a certain medication is effective. Here are some of the steps followed:

- 1) Large Sample Size - Instead of relying on the experience of one or two individuals, we conduct tests that involve several hundred or even thousand individuals.
- 2) Control group - We divide those involved in the test into two groups, those who take the medication and those who don't, to see if there is significant difference between the two.
- 3) Placebo - Those who aren't taking the medication are still given a 'fake' pill so that they don't know they are not receiving the actual treatment.
- 4) Double-blind - Neither those who are receiving the medication or those who are administering it know whether the medication is real or not.
- 5) Randomness - The selection as to who gets the real medicine is random.
- 6) Data - Accurate data is kept of how the sickness progressed for each individual involved in the experiment.
- 7) Statistical Analysis - Once the data is in, it is analyzed carefully to determine whether there is significant difference between the two groups.
- 8) Reproducibility - One or more independent groups attempt to reproduce the results
- 9) Peer-Reviewed Publication - The results are published in trusted journals so that others can evaluate the process and possibly use the results in future research.

By using such a strict process it is possible to determine with a fair degree of certainty if any given treatment really works. Moreover, such a process could easily be adapted to supernatural claims as well. Similar experimental conditions could be arranged to determine whether, say, something like intercessory prayer can have detectable effects.

However, ideal experimental conditions like those described above are not always easy to arrange. Even when it comes to something as simple as medication, if the active medicine causes visible side effects, for example, those administering the meds can usually tell which of the patients took the real pill and which the placebo, so the experiment is no longer double-blind. Thus, if something happened long in the past and the evidence is not well preserved, if something is too small, too far away, happens too quickly, if there isn't a large enough sample size, if it's an isolated event so there is no repeatability, if we are not able to control for variables or if the testing carries ethical implications (ex. testing on humans), then, the effectiveness of the scientific method significantly diminishes, even when working with purely natural elements.

These limitations are considerably magnified when it comes to the supernatural. Let's use as an example the central event in the Christian Religion, the resurrection of Jesus. But let's make this event significantly better supported than it currently is:

Imagine that over a thousand years ago, some emperor decided to hold a gathering for dignitaries from his own realm as well as from many neighboring nations. At the beginning of the festivities, as a show of strength, he decided to execute a number of prisoners via decapitation, and to leave the severed bodies in the open for everyone to see as the day continued. Late in the day, after the dead bodies had been laying there for hours, suddenly the heads of several individuals rejoined themselves to their bodies and the individuals came back to life. The festivities were immediately halted, the dignitaries all left for their respective homes and wrote up detailed accounts of those events that can still be found today in the official libraries of many different nations.

In this analogy, decapitation was chosen as the method of execution rather than crucifixion, to ensure that the individuals were really dead. Moreover, several people were resurrected, not just one, both the death and the resurrection were observed by large numbers of strangers (not only disciples) who were official dignitaries (not uneducated fishermen) and who then went and left behind independent official records in many different countries (not just four gospels where entire sections are copied.) We can add any additional line of historical evidence to this analogy to bolster its credibility if needed, even to the point where we make it into the most well documented historical event ever, and it would still not make it any more acceptable from a scientific standpoint (Christians who don't believe this should imagine the above story in a non-Christian setting - Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, etc.)

If resurrections such as these could occur today and be replicated under controlled experimental conditions, science would have no problem recognizing that a resurrection did in fact take place. But for a miraculous event that has taken place in the distant past, there is an endless number of naturalistic explanations that will always appear more credible to someone who approaches the question scientifically, even if such an event did actually happen. It might, for example, be explained by claiming that the people were distracted, intoxicated, or hypnotized, it might be that twins/lookalikes were used to replace the dead, it might be that people were paid serious money to propagate a lie or, that the evidence in the official records was planted and none of it, not even the gathering, actually happened. Whatever the natural explanation chosen, it will always be seen as more plausible than what actually happened, from a scientific standpoint.

In other words, there is an intrinsic anti-supernatural bias in the scientific process. The many Christians who hold science, evolution and critical scholarship in high regard but also take the resurrection of Jesus as a historical event do so only because they momentarily suspend the scientific rigor they apply in other areas to make an allowance for something that is critical to their belief system.

This intrinsic bias in science can be extended to any aspect of material reality. As long as everything that happened was natural, science works great. But if there was supernatural interference at any point in the development of our universe, science would tend to prefer a naturalistic solution instead. This is not just a result of the scientific mindset, but a necessity of

the methodology as well. When natural explanations are assumed, those explanations allow for the formulation of testable predictions that can then be examined experimentally. Supernatural assumptions, on the other hand, don't generally allow for testable predictions because we have no idea how the supernatural works.

This should not be viewed as a fault of science, but as a limitation. There are no perfect tools, though science, for what it can do, is pretty great. A metal detector cannot detect plastic objects someone lost at the beach. But rather than denigrate the device for not finding plastic, we should appreciate the fact that it is a much better way of finding lost metal than manually digging through all the sand on the beach.

Now of course, this limitation of science is only a problem if in fact there was supernatural interference. The typical argument usually raised here is that in the past, people assumed supernatural causes for everything (lightning, earthquakes, etc.) and now we have found natural explanations for those things, so we will find natural explanations for everything else as well. There is no need to postulate a 'God of the Gaps'<sup>119</sup>.

Arguments like this are not sound arguments, however, because there is no way to know a priori what ultimate reality is like, how exactly a god would go about the creative process or, what exactly we will discover through future scientific research. Why couldn't God use both natural and supernatural processes to create the universe? We ourselves can build robots and then use them to help build cars for us, so there is no reason why God couldn't create certain things directly and then use those things to help create everything else.

Because the naturalist is making the claim that the universe could have come to exist entirely on its own, he is automatically also making the claim that the universe could have developed on its own after God did some percentage of the work first. In other words, if a 0% divine involvement model of the universe is viable (as the naturalist claims,) then a 95%, 70%, 45%, 10% or 1% divine involvement model of the universe must automatically be viable as well. So if science up to this point has been able to dismiss the 95, 70 and even 45% possibility by finding naturalistic explanations, this does not mean that now the 0% possibility is more likely than the possibilities of 1-44%. It could be that some small degree of involvement was necessary for the universe to be able to exist at all, but everything else after that was left to unfold naturally, and this explains why the scientific method has worked so well this far.

None the less, science (methodological naturalism) continues studying the universe under the 0% assumption, because it is dependent on the ability to make testable predictions, something that would no longer be the case if the supernatural was allowed for. Given any question about how our universe formed, science proposes a naturalistic solution. If it turns out that the solution does not work, it then proposes another naturalistic solution, and so on. Even if none of the proposed solutions work, science doesn't give up and turn to consider the supernatural, but instead places the question on hold, with the expectation that it will find a naturalistic solution at some point in the future when science has advanced more. Science, therefore, always assumes 0% divine involvement even though it has no way of knowing there was 0% involvement. And, this assumption inevitably creates a bias. The only metaphysical perspective fully compatible with

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<sup>119</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God\\_of\\_the\\_gaps](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_of_the_gaps)

science is naturalism; all other perspectives will conflict with science at some point, if the scientific methodology is applied consistently.

Should we then dismiss all scientific conclusions as untrustworthy or biased? There are differing degrees of confidence we can have in any given scientific conclusion depending on how well it is supported by evidence. If, for example, we tested a medication on only two people and they got better, we can have limited confidence. If we tested a hundred people, however, we would have more confidence and even more confidence if a thousand people were tested. Science, therefore, must be taken seriously, but cannot be given wholesale epistemic priority when determining which epistemic model is most plausible. Rather, individual scientific conclusions must be assessed based on the degree of supporting evidence in their favor.

It should be mentioned here that many theists will have difficulty following the above reasoning because they are accustomed to thinking about the scientific methodology through their own metaphysical perspectives rather than the perspective science itself operates in. Some theists, for example, rely on a Platonic metaphysic where the material world is a shadow of an immaterial reality. Others, on an Aristotelian metaphysic where material objects have an immaterial essence. Still others, on a panentheistic metaphysic where the natural and supernatural are two sides of the same coin, making the natural/supernatural distinction meaningless, etc.

Approaching the question through these independent metaphysical lenses muddies the water because it does not allow for the evaluation of the scientific methodology within its own context. Science makes its own assumptions about the nature of reality and that reality is assumed to be materialistic and mechanistic. To understand the limitations of science then, one has to contrast this naturalistic metaphysic with a metaphysic that views reality almost exactly the way science views it, with the exception of occasional divine interference (i.e. the Deist metaphysic.) Without doing this, what they are evaluating is not real science, but a metaphysically distorted version of science. One of the main reasons why both theists and atheists have failed so far in adequately sorting through the limitations of the scientific process is that they all presuppose a metaphysic as they reason through the methodology.

So what then does all this mean?

First, to exist and function in this world, we need a belief system. True practical agnosticism is not possible; we all hold certain beliefs regarding the nature of reality that guide us in how we live our lives. One such belief is naturalism, there are numerous other belief systems throughout the different world religions and several more in Christianity. Depending on how we set up our criteria of viability, we might be able to dismiss some of these systems but probably not all.

If the supernatural does not exist (naturalism,) then, because of our epistemic limitations, there is no way for us to know for certain that the supernatural does not exist. If, however, the supernatural does exist, it could potentially reveal to us more than what our natural limitations allow for. We would need, however, to make certain hypotheses regarding how knowledge of the supernatural is being communicated, develop theoretical models on the back of those hypotheses, and then, evaluate the theoretical models in contrast with the available data.

All epistemic models besides naturalism, then, rely on a set of foundational assumptions regarding how metaphysical knowledge is accessed. If those foundational assumptions are discredited, the entire model collapses. Science, however, has an intrinsic bias that, if the methodology is applied consistently, will discredit the foundational assumptions of all models other than Naturalism. The reason these models still exist, then, is because they choose to make an exception and not to apply science consistently when it comes to the critical elements of the particular model.

For example, let's take the Liberal Epistemic Model, given it is the closest to the Naturalistic paradigm within Christianity. If one of the key aspects of the Liberal epistemology is the 'feeling' of absolute dependence on something greater than ourselves, then, a perfectly natural alternative explanation can be provided for this 'feeling.' It could simply be a coping mechanism that developed through mechanistic evolutionary processes. Science can produce an alternative naturalistic explanation for any aspect of reality where one might otherwise assume that it is necessary to postulate a god.

Of course, abandoning such models in exchange for the Naturalistic Model is not a solution either because, as mentioned, the Naturalistic Model lacks a mechanism for verifying its own metaphysics, it lacks, for the foreseeable future, the ability to demonstrate that material reality could have come to exist on its own, and, it uses a methodology liable to give false positives in confirmation of the model. For these reasons, while the Naturalistic Model could constitute a rational perspective, it is not inherently more rational than other epistemic perspectives. We are essentially forced to choose between multiple models that each have their strengths and weaknesses.

Because of this, we cannot evaluate epistemic models apart from an alternative model. Consider another analogy:

Suppose you were traveling cross-country with a friend and your car broke down in the middle of nowhere. You manage to find a used car dealership, the only one around for miles, and begin looking at their cars. But, no matter what car you look at, your friend starts to point out all the problems he can find with that car. After this happens several times, you finally turn to him and tell him that he should pick the car instead. Of course, the minute he does, you find all kinds of problems with his choice just as well.

In this analogy, you have to pick a car from the dealership because you have no other options and need to get to your destination, but all the available cars have their problems. There is no such thing as independent evaluation; you cannot compare each car against some ideal standard. The best you can do is to compare the cars with each other.

A common mistake in theology is to critique an individual model through independent scientific criteria divorced from an alternative model. This creates an unrealistic standard of evaluation since eventually we will have to choose an alternative model and that model would face similar problems when evaluated by independent scientific criteria. The responsibility of each model, then, is only to meet scientific scrutiny to a similar degree the other models do.

For example, the Sola Scriptura model described in this essay is intrinsically better adapted to interact with critical scholarship than the Fundamentalist model, because of its acceptance of limited errancy. None the less, it will likely face challenges from higher criticism more than some of the other models, because the Scripture constitutes its epistemic center. All the alternative models, however, will face similar challenges, when a similar degree of scientific scrutiny is aimed at their own epistemic center. Whether this is Scripture and Tradition for Protestantism, The Church, Tradition and Natural Theology for Catholicism, feelings of dependency, morality, science or philosophy for Liberal Theology or the preceding plus the incarnation of Christ for Neoorthodoxy, a critical-scientific approach, if followed consistently, will undermine these epistemic centers as well. The Sola Scriptura model then will not be able to accept critical scholarship wholesale but will need to evaluate independent findings to determine how well supported each of those findings are. An independent branch of critical scholarship might need to be developed to work with the unique needs of this model.

In summary, it is essential for us to understand the epistemology of the available models to establish a baseline of viability when it comes to how these models interact with science. This will then impact how the Sola Scriptura model is evaluated. Further, more work must be done in the field of the philosophy of science to better account for the limitations of the scientific methodology. In fact, it is very likely that we must reconsider how we think about philosophy, science and theology in general, to better account for our epistemic limitations. We probably have sufficient data from centuries of progress in these fields to know that we will not be able to achieve consensus any time soon and will need to make room for simultaneous viable models<sup>120</sup>.

\*\*\* Please visit <http://solascripturazoomchurch.com> for discussions/debates on this paper. \*\*\*

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<sup>120</sup> Allowing for multiple models simultaneously does not mean pluralism, but only that these are the limitations of the academic endeavor.