

Impact of the Formation of the New Testament Canon on the Creed of *Sola Scriptura*

Ervin Budiselić
Biblijski institut, Zagreb
ervin.budiselic@zg.t-com.hr

UDK:225:281.1:283:286
Original scientific paper
Received: October, 2010.
Accepted: March, 2011.

Summary

The purpose of this article is to evaluate and test the creed of sola scriptura against the historical and theological implications of the several-centuries-long process of the formation of the NT canon. As a result of all this, the author thinks that sola scriptura can be affirmed in some aspects, but in others it must be revised and changed. Historically speaking, sola scriptura accepts only twenty-seven NT canonical books (along with the OT) as the ultimate authority for the church's life and faith. However, since the term canon was not used for a closed list of the books from which nothing can be taken and nothing added until Athanasius in 367 AD, and since in the first four centuries, the term Scripture was applied more broadly than just to today's twenty-seven NT canonical books, it cannot be claimed that sola scriptura is the original teaching of the early church. Accordingly, if Protestantism continues to claim sola scriptura as the historical and original teaching of the church, then for the sake of historical correctness, it must either include more books as ultimately authoritative Scriptures than just today's twenty-seven NT books, or not claim sola scriptura until the time of Athanasius. Theologically speaking, the author argues that the NT canon was not the ultimate authority for the life and faith of the early church. Instead, the author suggests that the ultimate authority for the early church was the gospel message that was proclaimed by Jesus and which continued to be proclaimed by the church in oral and eventually in written form. Accordingly, the NT documents were recognized as authoritative primarily because they testified about the Jesus event and contained a written record of the gospel that was proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles, and not because they were inspired by God. Instead of focusing on the precise meaning and definitions of terms like Scripture and canon, the author suggests that focus should be placed on how much and in what measure these writings/books were used, that is, to make distinction

between three categories/classes of writings (based on how often they were cited) and three stages through which these writings were cited (in the first, second, third, and fourth centuries).

Introduction

Protestant churches have a high view of the Scriptures. For them, Scripture is the only and ultimate *authority* for faith and life, and the *norm* of truth by which everything else is measured. The reason for this is that the Scriptures, as the inspired Word of God, are infallible and inerrant. Historically, such a view is present in the Reformation's creed of *sola scriptura* and represents one of the pillars of Protestantism. However, after five centuries of *sola scriptura*, Protestantism is divided among itself with various denominations, teachings, emphases, doctrines, etc. These remarkable divisions (often irreconcilable differences) are all the result of keeping and founding one's faith and practice primarily on the Bible. How can this be? How can a single ultimate authority produce such diversities? While many reasons have contributed to the condition, some attention needs to be given to the creed of *sola scriptura*.

The intention of this article is to explore the *sola scriptura* creed in relation to the formation of the New Testament (NT) canon for two reasons. The first one is that while Protestants hold the Bible in very high esteem, the average Protestant gives little attention to the historical process by which we got the Bibles that we carry every Sunday to our congregations.¹ However, the church existed before the formation of the Bible, and Christians in the first few hundred years were more or less unfamiliar with the concept of "bringing your Bible to the church."

The second reason is that, in a dialogue between Roman Catholics and Protestants about the relationship between the *canon* and the *Church*, Roman Catholics are prone to emphasize that the tradition in the oral form preceded the written form and that the church was the one who created and decided which books would be included in the NT canon. The Protestant's response to such claims would be that Christians were never without the Scriptures (in this case, the Old Testament [OT]), that the Scriptures are not just a written form of tradition, but God's inspired report, and it was not the church who gave the Scriptures, but

1 Abraham observes that Luther did not accept the canonicity of the NT Scriptures because the church set them apart as such, but because these books preached Christ, the eternal Word of God. Otherwise he would ascribe a more foundational role to the church's judgment than that of Scripture itself (Abraham, 2006, 124). Maybe this is one of the reasons why Protestants in general pay little attention to the process of the formation of the NT canon because to do so would could be viewed as ascribing authority to the church over Scripture.

the Holy Spirit (McCarthy, 2004, 287–93). Such discussions are futile because, although the church existed before the NT canon, both the church and the NT canon came into existence because of *Jesus' saving act* and the gospel message that was proclaimed previously. In other words, neither was the church founded by the Bible nor was the Bible created by the church, but they both owe their existence to Jesus and his gospel message. Therefore, neither is the Bible above the church nor the church above the Bible, but they both fall under the authority of Jesus and *his* gospel message. In this matter, Forsyth makes a good comment: “The Gospel of God’s historical gracious act is an inerrant authority and power both over the Church and the Bible. That created them both. They both exist for him and must serve his purpose” [author’s translation] (Bloesch, 1989, 71).

Accordingly, the thesis of this article is that the *sola scriptura* creed, in viewing the *Scriptures* (which, in the case of the New Testament, contains twenty-seven NT canonical books) as the ultimate standard for the Christian faith *in the early church*, does not express a historically fair nor theologically correct view. Historically, from the NT point of view, *sola scriptura* accepts only twenty-seven NT canonical books as the ultimate authority for the church’s life and faith. However, until Athanasius in 367 AD, the term *canon* was not used for the closed list of books from which nothing can be taken and nothing added. Until then, the term *Scripture* was applied more widely than just to today’s twenty-seven NT canonical books, and they were not the *only* Scriptures that were authoritative in the church. Accordingly, if Protestantism continues to claim *sola scriptura* as the historical and original teaching of the church, then for the sake of historical correctness, it must include more books as ultimately *authoritative Scripture* than just today’s twenty-seven NT books, or not claim NT canon, and for that matter the existence of the *sola scriptura* creed, until the time of Athanasius when the NT canon (in the sense of a closed list of authoritative books) of Scripture was more or less defined. This is due to the fact that the *Scriptures* and the *NT canon* are not synonymous terms.

Theologically speaking, a review of *sola scriptura* does not signify that the NT canon or the Bible ceases to be the ultimate authority for the life and faith of the church. However, the NT Scriptures were not a single authority in the church, but were part of a wider ecclesial canon. The gospel message proclaimed by Jesus continued to be proclaimed by the church in oral and written form, and the NT documents were recognized as authoritative primarily because they testified about the *Jesus event* and contained a written record of the gospel that was proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles.² Accordingly, the question of the divine inspiration of

2 In this matter, I argue similarly to Zahn that the original canon or rule of Christianity was Jesus Christ, his life and his teachings, and that the authority of the NT lies in the witness of the apostles. This position is sometimes called “the canon before the canon.”

the NT documents was secondary for their authoritative status. But more than forming the closed list of the NT canon, the early church was, in the beginning, concerned with the proper interpretation of the *Scriptures*. Another theological problem of *sola scriptura* that will be addressed in this article is that after 500 years of claiming *sola scriptura*, churches that share Reformation heritage have a serious crisis of interpretation.

Gamble writes, “The history of the canon makes it evident that the canon is not a primordial or even a particularly early feature of Christianity; it is the final product, rather, of a long and gradual development conditioned by a variety of historical circumstances, theological controversies, and ecclesiastical decisions” (Gamble, 1989, 224). Gamble’s statement is an excellent introduction into a discussion about the relationship between *sola scriptura* and the NT Scriptures as a canon because more than providing a closed list of sacred books, the early church was concerned with providing a correct interpretation of the Scriptures. While I support the creed of *sola scriptura*, that is, that for people today, the Bible is the ultimate standard of Christian doctrine, faith and life, some historical and theological revision of the traditional evangelical view of Scripture’s authority is necessary.

In the first part of the article, the relationship between *sola scriptura* and the NT canon will be discussed from a historical perspective, showing how the formation of the NT canon should revise current understanding of *sola scriptura*. In the second part of the article, the idea that *sola scriptura* has a theological problem in proving that Scripture was the ultimate authority in the life of the early church will be argued. Likewise, today the *sola scriptura* creed has been more and more transformed in modern Protestant churches into *solo scriptura*,³ and that creates serious problems for Bible interpretation.

3 By *solo scriptura*, it is meant the attitude where each individual holds its own interpretation of the Bible for him/herself in matters of doctrine without dialogue with other Christians, the church or tradition. This attitude goes hand in hand with the hermeneutic attitude, “just me and my Bible,” according to which each individual is allowed to retain his/her position on any given theological doctrine (McMahon).

SOLA SCRIPTURA IN RELATION TO THE FORMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CANON - HISTORICAL ASPECT

The Historical Problems of *Sola Scriptura* - The Historical Side of the Formation of the NT Canon

As stated in the introduction, the historical implications of the thesis of this article is that if Protestantism continues to claim *sola scriptura* as the historical and original teaching of the post-apostolic church (Webster, 1999), then for the sake of historical correctness, it must redefine *sola scriptura* in regard to the NT by including more books in the canon than just today's twenty seven, or not use the term until the time of Athanasius when the canon of Scripture was, in some sense, defined. This is due to the fact that *Scripture* and the *NT canon* are not synonymous terms. Hence, if a particular text was *authoritative* as *Scripture*, that does not imply the existence of the NT canon. Therefore, in this section, the meaning and definition of the word *canon* and what makes the canonical heritage of the church will be discussed. Also, various theories of the development of the NT canon will be analyzed, and finally, a historical survey of how and in what way today's NT books were used in the history of the church will be presented.

The Definition of the Word Canon and the Canonical Heritage of the Church

When "the canon of the Bible" is said today, it refers to a closed collection of texts to which nothing can be added and nothing can be taken. However, this meaning of *canon* was a result of historical development. When this word is used in the NT (e.g. Gal. 6:16; 2 Cor. 10:13; 15, 16; Phil. 3:16), it has nothing to do with a list of authoritative texts. Rather, it refers to a standard, or rule, of belief and living offered by the redemptive death and resurrection of Christ, or to the sphere that God gave to Paul for his missionary work (Allert, 2007, 79). However, the word *canon* preceded Christianity and had a variety of meanings in antiquity. Literally, the word meant plumb line, a tool for making measurements. In its figurative meaning, canon represented a model or principle by which all other things were judged. In a platonic sense, it represented a perfect form, e.g., it could mean an infallible criteria, e.g., principles of logic by which one is able to know what is true or false (Williams, 2005, 359). It could be also used as a rule in units of length (like today's ruler in centimeters), and from there, canon came to be used for the series of such marks. Eventually it came to be used in the general sense of "series"

or “lists” (Bruce, 1988, 17–18).

In the latter part of the second century, Irenaeus used the word *canon* for the *Rule of Faith*. This was a summary statement of the essential content of the Christian faith by which any system of doctrine or biblical interpretations had to be measured and estimated. Furthermore, the word canon was used for conciliar decisions, monastic rules, clergy, and finally to a list, index, or table - something with which a person could orient oneself (Allert, 2007, 79). Eventually, in 367 AD, Athanasius of Alexandria was the first to apply the word to a list of the NT books, but not just in a sense of a *list* of books, but in the sense of *rule* or *standard* - that is, the *list* of authoritative books to be used as a *standard* or *rule* for Christian faith, doctrine and practice (Bruce, 1988, 18). Therefore, today’s use of the word *canon* is as the *list* of books that are authoritative (representing the *standard* or *rule*) for Christianity.

Back in 1891, Edward Reuss observed that

“the use of the term canon has never been restricted to the Bible. There were canons of councils, canon law, the canonical life, canons of cathedrals, etc. All these expressions have at bottom the same origin and are derived from a primitive meaning anterior to our canon of Scripture” (Reuss, 1891, 218).

That means that the canonical heritage of the early church was much broader and included more items than just Scripture. According to Abraham, in addition to Scripture, the *Rule of Faith* and creeds, canonical heritage includes:

(1) practices, experiences, and rites intimately related to baptism and the Eucharist; (2) liturgical traditions concerning the general conduct of worship; (3) sophisticated iconographic tradition; (4) ecclesiastical regulations or canons concerning the internal regulation of the life of the church and its members; (5) fathers, saints, and teachers who, over time, gained special status in the intellectual and spiritual life of the community; (6) internal structures and ordering of the community such as the development of the episcopate (Abraham, 2006, 37–39).

The canon of Scripture was one part of the canonical heritage⁴ of the church and should not be separated from it because various canonical elements complemented each other. The historical fact is that oral tradition precedes Scripture and is presumed by Scripture. Also, it is known that the church existed before the NT

4 Sanders understands canonical as something that is relevant or adaptable for the ongoing lives of communities (Sanders, 1984, 41). Although he applies the meaning of canon specifically to Scripture, it is plausible to apply such a definition to all aspects of canonical heritage of the church.

Scriptures, and before the canon of the NT.⁵ As Gamble argues, form criticism has shown that NT materials, especially the gospels, reflect consistent reliance and deference to tradition (confessional, liturgical, paraenetic, and exegetical) (Gamble, 1989, 229). It is known from Papias' example that oral tradition was equally as important as written material (and even regarded in higher esteem), but eventually written material related to the apostles gained more significance. It is also correct to say that the Bible is the church's book because it came into existence in the church's bosom, and it was interpreted and used by the church and eventually recognized by it as authoritative. So, any approach to studying the NT canon without paying attention to the tradition and canonical heritage in which the NT canon was formed is, in this author's opinion, a failure.

As Abraham (2006, 53) argues, each element in the canonical heritage is important depending on the scale of values and the purpose identified:

Hence the Creed is exceptionally useful in catechetical work; the Scriptures are useful in providing agreed text for preaching; the Eucharist is pivotal in nurturing an intimate communion with the risen Lord; iconography is important in signifying the sanctification of matter; the writings of the Fathers are invaluable in pursuing the implications of the scriptural material and in exploring second-order questions...the episcopate is vital in dealing with matters of internal order and discipline.

Whether or not Abraham is right in his conclusions is debatable, but D. H. Williams is not mistaken when he defines the Patristic Age as *canon*. If nothing else, this period functioned as a canon of Christian theology and the basis for directing the course of subsequent theology over the last one and half millenia (Williams, 2005, 362). Furthermore, the Patristic Age is responsible for setting the scriptural canon, creating basic professions of faith in response to various heresies, and formulating the first reflective responses to Scripture and the first Christian catecheses, commentaries and sermons (Williams, 2005, 365).

5 "Evangelicals...often fail to appreciate that the church was founded not upon the apostolic documents, but rather upon the apostolic doctrine. The church existed at least a decade before the earliest book of the New Testament was penned, and possibly as long as six decades until the New Testament was completed. But during this period it was not without authority. Its standard, its canon, was ultimately Jesus Christ Himself, and mediately His apostles. Even in the immediate post apostolic period we find a great stress on apostolic tradition alongside a written New Testament canon" (Sawyer, 1991, 40).

Theories of Development

The discussion about *when* the NT canon was developed and closed depends primarily on our understanding of the term *Scripture* and *canon*. “The former is an open collection of authoritative books, a collection with only vague contours; books can still be added to it, or removed from it. A canon however is a closed and exclusive list of books regarded as authoritative. The more strictly one defines ‘canon,’ the later the date of its origin” (De Jonge, 2003, 311). In both cases, writings as *Scripture* and writings as *canon* are authoritative, but that does not mean, as Donner rightly claims, that NT books were regarded as authoritative only when they were collected in the canon (Donner, 1982, 26). Therefore, in this section, four views about the closure of the NT canon will be discussed, and what is called the “orthodox” view of the formulation of the canon will be challenged.

B. B. Warfield

A more or less typical evangelical view about the canon can be found in B. B. Warfield’s writings. He asserted that the canon of Scripture, from the divine standpoint, was complete when the last book of the New Testament was written by the Apostle John. However, human acceptance of an individual book of that canon hinged upon “*authenticating proof* of its apostolicity.” For him, Scripture was authoritative because it was written by apostles who *imposed* their writing upon the church in the same fashion as Torah was imposed upon Israel (Sawyer, 1991, 32). He acknowledges that the canon varied in different churches, and that the church did not universally receive the entire canon, but he gives no indication of when the church universally received the canon. He only says that from the time of Irenaeus down, the church at large had the whole canon as it is today (Allert, 2007, 39).

Theodor Zahn

Zahn, very similar to Warfield, held that the New Testament canon came into existence as early as about the end of the first century. The original rule or canon of Christianity was Jesus Christ, his life and his teaching. As time passed, the first Christians saw the need to preserve Jesus’ legacy in writing. Once this happened, the NT canon was present and it can only be investigated as to how the early church received these books. He finds support for his claim in the following: whenever a quotation from some NT book is found in the early church writings, it is evidence for the canonicity of that book. Zahn does not argue that the present twenty-seven-book NT was in existence as the church entered the second century, but he does argue that there was already a core collection of writings to which the early church appealed. This collection was not forced on the church, but it was a

spontaneous creation that occurred in the life of the church (Allert, 2007, 41–2). Therefore, the canon was a product of continued collection, augmentation and growth, and was not imposed on the church like Warfield claims.

Adolf von Harnack

Von Harnack opposed Zahn in several ways. He thought that mere citation or allusion to some NT book in other early church documents was not proof of canonicity. For him, Zahn was only successful in showing that the NT books were known and used in the early church, but not that they were canonical or scriptural (Barton, 1997, 4). Only when the NT document was cited with an introductory formula such as “as Scripture says” or “it is written,” did the citation establish canonicity and prove that the document was placed on the same level as the OT. Unlike Zahn, he placed the emergence of the NT canon in the late second century because citations of the NT documents as “Scripture” only then emerge (Allert, 2007, 42–3). If Zahn viewed the canon as a product of continued collection, augmentation and growth, von Harnack viewed the canon as the result of a process of delimitation and exclusion. If a book was cited as *Scripture*, that meant that it was a part of a collection that had equal authority to that of the OT. Accordingly, if a book was not cited as *Scripture*, it did not belong to that authoritative collection. Von Harnack believed that the NT canon was formed in opposition to Marcion, but also in imitation of him since Marcion is the first person known to have published a fixed collection of what should be called NT books. In this view, Marcion virtually forced the church to form its own canon.

A Fourth Century Closed Canon

The last view reflects Sundberg’s thesis that in discussing the history of the NT canon, a distinction must be made between *Scripture* and *canon*. While both terms talk about writings that are regarded as authoritative, technically it is correct that *canon* was not mentioned until the second part of the fourth century. As Barton observes, Harnack was quite correct to regard Zahn’s early dating of the canon as failure, but that does not mean that many NT books were not already held in very high regard by the end of the first century (Barton, 1997, 4). Sundberg’s thesis has forced the discussion in the direction such that the canon of the NT can only be discussed if it can be demonstrated that certain texts were consciously and deliberately excluded from other documents. According to Sundberg, only from the fourth century onward can authoritative rulings about the exact limits of canonical lists be found.

The “Orthodox” View of the Formulation of the Canon

A. Hembd brings Edward Freer Hills’s view of what he calls “the orthodox view of formulation of the Canon.” According to Hembd, this orthodox view includes a position that all the books of the New Testament were gathered and accepted by AD 200, except for 2 and 3 John, 2 Peter, Hebrews and Revelation. However, by the 4th century, these books were universally accepted and questioned by very few; thus the canon was established, settled, and recognized, once and for all. In other words, the canon of the New Testament was fully settled by the 4th century, never to be questioned again (Hembd, 2007, 23).

The problem with such a sweeping assertion, as Sawyer claims, is that it does not fit the historical facts. The synods of Hippo and Carthage were not ecumenical councils, but local assemblies whose decisions held sway only in the local sees, and The Festal Letter of Athanasius was not binding for the Eastern Church. The ancient church never reached a conscious and binding decision as to the extent of canon, and this can be seen in the canons of the various churches of the ancient world, as well in the fact that Luther, on the eve of the Reformation, was not alone in having problems with the extent of the NT (Sawyer, 1991, 43–5).

A Historical Survey of How and in What Way Today’s NT Books Were Used

The question of *how* and to *what extent* today’s NT books were used in the history of the church is one of the most important questions for this topic for two reasons. First, according to Barton, the outer limits of the critical period for the canonization of the NT are marked by the life and teaching of Jesus Christ and the series of fourth and fifth century conciliar decisions. However, the formation of the Christian Bible is a story with neither beginning nor end (Barton, 1997, 1). Therefore, there is little hope that one day all questions will be answered beyond a shadow of a doubt. Secondly, Barton sees the question of canon as an illusory question or pseudo problem. He regards scholar’s attempts to determine how and why the church came to accept no more and no less than twenty-seven authoritative scriptures of the NT and place them alongside the OT as unsuccessful (Barton, 1997, 2). He views the disagreement between Zahn, Harnack and Sundberg primarily as disagreements about the definition of terms⁶

6 The term canon can mean “authoritative rule” and can imply the books in which the rule of faith is authoritatively communicated, or it can mean “fixed list.” Accordingly, “if we use the term in the first sense, we are likely to endorse Zahn’s assessment...and argue that most of our New Testament was canonical by the early second century: most of these books were recognized as texts that Christians should take seriously, and to which authority was ascribed. If we

rather than a matter of substance because the understanding of how various texts came to be seen as part of the Bible is not materially affected whichever solution is adopted (Barton, 1997, 11).⁷ “So long as we ask only ‘was this book canonical or not in this period?’ we presuppose that ‘canonical’ was something that books could be” (Barton, 1997, 14).

Accordingly, Barton believes that all scholars previously mentioned are right: the NT books did have considerable authority in the late first century; they were added to, though not indiscriminately, in the second to third centuries; and from the fourth century onwards authoritative rulings about their exact compass are found. On the other hand, all scholars are equally wrong because no one in the first century had yet had the idea that the undeveloped NT would one day be a fixed, single book; in the second century most of the books were already agreed upon by all, though there was as yet very little opposition to including others; and when the fourth century councils attempted to regulate the canon, they were merely confirming what was already universally accepted (Barton, 1997, 14–15). Allert, in accordance with Barton, suggests that the main question in canon studies must shift from “What is in and what is out?” to “How did these documents function?” (Allert, 2007, 51), or in Barton’s words (who follows Franz Stuhlhofer’s suggestion): “The important question is not *whether* particular books were cited, but *how often* they were cited” (Barton, 1997, 16–17).

An answer to this question involves a distinction between three *categories/classes* of writings (based on how often they are cited) and three *stages* through which these writings are cited (in the first, second and third, and fourth centuries).⁸ The first category, which includes the synoptic gospels, the Fourth Gospel and the major Pauline epistles, is cited very often in all three stages. The second category, including the remainder of the NT (including Acts) and those books, are much less quoted. In the third category, there are books which are scarcely cited at all, and which would later be affirmed as non-canonical. Even they, in the earliest period of their usage, were not cited as often as the books in the second category.

adopt the second definition, we cannot date ‘canonization’ much before the fourth century, and Athanasius’ Festal Letter 39, which is the first text in which Scripture are explicitly said to be ‘of’ or ‘not of’ the ‘canon’ “ (Barton, 1997, 12). In other words, canon can signify books that are authoritative. Yet in the sense of a fixed list, it does not merely recognize some books, but it excludes others. Canon as a fixed list sets limits to the books that are recognized as holy (Barton, 1996, 78).

7 However, this has great implications for how sola scriptura is viewed because sola scriptura argues for the closed NT canon as the ultimate source of authority for Christian faith, doctrine and practice.

8 For more detailed information, see Barton, 1997, 17–24; Allert, 2007, 48–52.

In the first stage, the central core of the NT was being treated as the main authoritative source for Christianity, and there were not any serious controversies about the synoptic gospels, John, or the major Pauline epistles. There are few references to these books as Scripture, but they are used more than the OT which means that the core of the NT mattered more to the church of the first two centuries than the OT. The books in the second category (according to their usage in this period) are Acts, the Catholic Epistles, some minor Pauline epistles, the book of Revelation and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. In the third category, there are the apocryphal gospels and other books (that would eventually not be included in the canon) which have nowhere near the frequency of citations of the foundational core. In the second stage (in the second and early third century), books in the second category were cited more often, and the OT was used equally as often as the NT. There is no distinction between canonical vs. non-canonical books; rather there are much-cited books, less-cited books, and books that are usable for a specific purpose. The books in the first category are still secure, and disputes involve the following: whether or not a particular book was to be rejected altogether, or allowed a subordinate place; whether there were one, two, or three genuine Johannine epistles; and whether Hebrews was really Pauline. In the third stage, the rulings about the canon became firm, but the threefold distinction still appears. Alongside the canonical (much-cited books) and the rejected (less-cited), there are books like the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Didache* and some apocryphal books which are useful for catechism.

Instead of using the terminology *canonical* vs. *non-canonical*, or *what was in* and *what was out* (which is partially wrong because that was a time when the modern view of the NT canon was probably not present in the minds of the people), in the history of canon development and in patristic literature, there is a constant division between the three categories of writings based on *how often* they are used and cited. Their usage show how much *authority* they possessed in the church, but more interestingly, it can be noticed that they were used with remarkable constancy. This also shows that the question of *authority* for church doctrine, life, and practice was not necessarily connected *with* and placed *in* the idea of the *canon of Scripture*. Scholars' battle over terminology does not change the way the church, from the very beginning, received, recognized and practically ascribed authority to certain writings. The idea of *authority* is present from the very beginning whether it is connected with the idea of *scripture* or *canon* as an official list of authoritative books, but it does not originate or necessarily depend on them (Scripture and canon). In other words, the writings were *authoritative* not only because they were a part of the canon, or designated as *Scripture*.

SOLA SCRIPTURA IN RELATION TO THE FORMATION OF THE CHRISTIAN CANON - THEOLOGICAL ASPECT

In this part of the article, the historical understanding of the formation of the NT canon and how it should theologically inform the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura* will be addressed. To do that is not to deny the inspiration of the Bible nor the Bible's ultimate authority for the Christian faith, doctrine and life. On the contrary, it establishes a proper role for inspiration in the formation of the NT canon, and a foundation upon which the supreme authority of the Bible can be argued more correctly.

Since the foundation for the creed of *sola scriptura* (in conjunction with the OT) is the *closed list of the NT canon*, theologically, *sola scriptura* can be rightly challenged in several ways: a) according to this thesis, the NT documents were recognized to be authoritative primarily because they testified about the *Jesus event* and contain a written record of the apostolic message, and not because of its divine inspiration. Furthermore, the divine inspiration of the NT documents was a secondary reason for their acceptance and placement as authoritative texts in the NT canon; b) the apostolic writings/Scripture (which would one day be eventually put together in the NT canon) did not represent the *single ultimate authority* for the early church. Therefore, the Roman Catholic Church rightly objects that *sola scriptura* neglects the role of the oral tradition in the early church; c) the creed of *sola scriptura* creates problems in Bible interpretation. Although some could say that if someone incorrectly interprets the Bible, the problem is not in the Bible or the *sola scriptura* creed, but in those who interpreted the Bible in a wrong way, such a view presupposes that the Bible was dropped out of the heavens as a finished product, ready to be used in the life of the church. However, the position of this author is that more than forming the closed list of the NT canon, the early church was concerned with the proper interpretation of Scripture. In the rest of the article, these three challenges will be addressed and discussed.

The Authority of the NT Documents

A typical evangelical view of the NT canon, according to Allert, looks like this:

“Many assume that as soon as a New Testament document was available, it was consciously separated from all other noncanonical documents and added to a growing New Testament canon.... the closing of the New Testament canon occurred when the final document was received and added by the apostles, resulting in our twenty-seven-book New Testament” (Allert, 2007, 38).

The key element in this process was divine inspiration. Recognition of a document's inspiration determined inclusion in the canon in a way that the church did not choose which documents would be included in the canon; rather, the documents forced themselves on the church by virtue of their inspiration (Allert, 2007, 12,58). Therefore, the matrix goes like this: authority of a particular document is grounded in its inspiration - inspiration is connected *solely* with and can be found *only* in the apostolic writings - apostolic writings were authoritative because they were inspired - the ultimate authority for the church is Scripture/canon of the NT.

In reply to such a matrix, two things need to be said. First, the fact that the Bible is inspired is not questionable. What is questionable is whether or not said inspiration can be seen as a unique possession of the canonical books alone (Allert, 2007, 58). The solution to this question is that divine inspiration in the early church was not limited solely to a particular set of writings,⁹ but it was considered to be a part of the church as a whole. Accordingly, to claim the ultimate authority of a document solely on the basis of its inspiration would mean that everything else that is inspired should be treated as equally authoritative to the apostolic writings.

Second, such a view has a tremendous difficulty to explain: why the NT canon, as a closed list of books, did not come into existence before the fourth century; why the apostolic writings were not always called *Scripture*; why *Scripture*, for the early church, was a category that included more than just apostolic writings; and why oral tradition was so prevalent in the life of the church. Claiming the inspiration/ultimate authority for the *Scriptures* means to argue for a larger canon than exists today (since the term Scripture embraced more than just the twenty-seven NT canonical books). The occurrence of a closed list of the NT canon as authoritative/inspired documents in the fourth century poses the question of why, if the unique possession of inspiration makes Scripture the ultimate authority for the church, did the church not close the canon of Scripture earlier? The only plausible solution to all of these questions is that the ultimate authority of Scripture was not in its divine inspiration, but in the fact that it contains a genuine and original written record of the Jesus-event and the apostolic message.

In this matter, Zahn argues well that the original *canon* or rule of Christianity was Jesus Christ, his life and his teachings, and that the authority of the NT lies in the witness of the apostles. This position is sometimes called "the canon before the canon". Ridderbos (1959, 192) also argues that:

The foundation for this Canon lies in the history of redemption itself, i.e., in

9 Allert provides a sample of the broad way in which the church fathers understood inspiration (185-88).

what God has done in the coming and the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. In other words, the significance of the Canon, as a distinctive and authoritative report of what happened ‘when the time had fully come’ and as an objective and fixed norm for faith and life, is given in the New Testament history of redemption itself.

What is common to Zahn and Ridderbos is that they both regard the apostolic witness as *canon* or the real *norm* which gives authority to everything else. In line with that, the Jesus-event and the apostolic message are not only a basis for the authority of the NT documents, but also the ultimate authority for the early church.

The Ultimate Authority in the Early Church

If the NT canon was formed so late, and if other written documents other than today’s twenty-seven NT documents were considered to be *Scripture*, the logical question is to ask what then represented the ultimate authority for the church in the first three or four centuries. A broad definition of *Scripture* and the *canon* of Scripture that was not closed until later, leave room for acknowledging other sources of ultimate authority beside the ideas of *NT* or *Scripture*. However, the solution is not to see the Bible or church tradition as the ultimate authority for the church. On the contrary, the *ultimate authority* is in Jesus - his life and his message which first existed in oral form, and eventually in written. In other words, Jesus’ message and apostolic witness were the ultimate authority for the church. Before the canonical heritage of the church was developed which, among other things, included the *canon of faith* and the *canon of Scripture*, there was another canon already present in the church - that of Jesus Christ.

If this suggestion is correct, it brings understanding to why the early church received the gospel message of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the OT, why the apostolic confirmation and transmission of the gospel confirmation was so important for the early church, why the church was so “careless” about using the term *Scripture*, why it was so “slow” to define the canon of Scripture, and why oral tradition continued to exist side by side with the written documents, enjoying a high respect. The only plausible explanation for all of these things is that the *ultimate authority* for the church was something that was shared between *Scripture*, *canon*, and *tradition*, but was not found *only* in the *Scripture*, *canon* and *tradition*, per se. The highest authority was located in the apostolic witness to the Jesus-event, and everything that reflected this *canon*, whether it was *Scripture*, the *rule of faith*, *oral tradition*, the OT, or the *NT canon*, had an equal standing as

long as it reflected and was faithful to the original apostolic message.¹⁰

Sola Scriptura or Solo Scriptura - The Problem of Interpretation

To claim that *Scripture* is the ultimate authority for the church is one thing, but to know exactly what this ultimate authority says and commands is another thing. Right there is where *sola scriptura* has a serious problem. McGrath rightly points to the core issue: “Texts need to be interpreted. There is little point in treating a certain text as authoritative or normative if there is serious disagreement concerning what that text means” (McGrath, 2001, 157). An objection to McGrath’s claim is that if someone interprets the Bible incorrectly, the problem is not in the Bible or the creed of *sola scriptura*. The problem is in the one who interpreted the Bible in a wrong way. But McGrath rightly points out that there is not much sense in having something as an ultimate authority if one does not know *what* that authority requests and expects. Unfortunately, churches that are built on the Reformation heritage often do not treat the Bible as the ultimate standard to which they must subject themselves, but as a proof-evidence to support their theological views (Barton, 1996, 77–8). If not, then how can such dividedness in Protestantism over every crucial issue be explained? All these differences come from the different understandings of the same Bible.

When various apostolic writings were put into one closed collection (NT canon in the fourth/fifth centuries) as a unified whole, and were declared to be a unique work, with an authority like no other document, “then it would have to be susceptible of a unitary interpretation, much as an individual book would be.... Just as there can be no inconsistency within a scriptural book... so there can be none among the different books that comprise a closed canon” (Barton, 1996, 79–80). Abraham argues similarly when he says that “the appeal to Scripture as the foundation of theology required that the Bible be unequivocal in its teaching. The Bible must exhibit the kind of clarity and distinctness in its message which all can grasp on their own with relative ease” (Abraham, 2006, 150). This is the premise behind *sola scriptura*, and early reformers were optimistic in their belief

10 According to Grant, what Paul regards as authoritative, in addition to the Old Testament, is a rather vaguely defined group of oral traditions related to what Jesus did and said (1970, 1:286). According to Meye: “The ultimate authority for the primitive Church was the living authority of the risen Lord Himself” (1979, 1: 601). Bruce explains: “The earliest Christians did not trouble themselves about criteria of canonicity; they would not have readily understood the expression. They accepted the Old Testament scriptures as they had received them: the authority of those scriptures was sufficiently ratified by the teaching and example of the Lord and his apostles. The teaching and example of the Lord and his apostles, whether conveyed by word of mouth or in writing, had axiomatic authority for them” (1988, 255).

that the ordinary pious Christian believer would be perfectly capable of reading Scripture and making perfect sense of what was found within its passages. However, disagreements between Luther and Zwingli made it obvious that the clarity of Scripture is not so obvious in every instance. Therefore, while every individual believer has the right to interpret Scripture, reformers also recognized that at certain points, the meaning of Scripture is obscure (McGrath, 2001, 162–3). In this case, Scripture must be used to interpret Scripture. The tradition of the church was not rejected completely, but reformers sought to eliminate all human addition to the scriptural witness. Therefore, when tradition teaches something which is not explicitly witnessed to in the Scriptures, that teaching must be rejected (Abraham, 2006, 159).

To summarize: the main message of Scripture is plain and obvious to everyone; tradition is accepted as long as it can justify its conclusions based on Scripture; obscured theological doctrines in the Scriptures must be explained with the help of theologians (Bloesch, 1989, 66) and with the help of other parts of Scripture. In this way, reformers were able to criticize the Roman Catholic Church who developed various doctrines and practices that were not in the Scriptures, but also radical reformers who were prone to individualism and to raising their private judgment above the corporate judgment of the Christian Church (McGrath, 2001, 155).

The real battle over the Bible is always in the field of interpretation because the one who is in a position to claim that his/her interpretation is correct correctness is in a position of power. Accordingly, if the Bible, as the ultimate authority, does not confer a clear, easy and understandable message, or if the Bible, as the ultimate authority, only serves to confirm the doctrines and practices which custom and usage regard as correct, it is no authority at all. That is why the early church, in the battle with Gnostic interpretations, developed the *Rule of Faith*. They were aware that *sola scriptura* was not argument enough since both sides used the *same* document but with different *conclusions*.

Therefore, to deal with Roman Catholicism and the radical wing of the Reformation, magisterial reformers (Luther, Calvin...etc.) developed two things regarding Bible interpretation: a) various catechisms (or in Calvin's case, *Institutes*) that served as a filter through which individuals were able to interpret Scripture more easily; b) "the political hermeneutic" which was present in the sense that the *city council* had a right to be involved in theological matters. The responsibility to interpret Scripture which had been previously assumed by the Pope or by an ecumenical council was transferred to city councils (McGrath, 2001, 163).

Sola scriptura is *primarily* a hermeneutical question - it claims that Scripture adequately serves as its own interpreter, and it is a reaction against the view that the interpretation of Scripture requires supplementation by an external principle,

that is, unscriptural church tradition (Gamble, 1989, 230). In other words, *sola scriptura* is concerned primarily with *authoritative interpretation*, and not just in the role of the Bible as the ultimate authority for the church. Interpretation is what is at stake, not just the position of the Bible itself. Accordingly, in order to claim the Bible as the ultimate authority for the church, one must provide an ultimately authoritative interpretation of the Bible, and Protestantism, with its multiple divisions, is not in a good position to do so. It is Protestantism and its fragmentation in the interpretation of the Bible which makes the Bible unreliable.

In order show the reliability of the Bible, there are two principles that are somewhat helpful in Bible interpretation: a) *patristic age as canon* - the apostolic and patristic traditions are, in some sense, foundational to the Christian faith like no other period of the church's history can claim (Williams, 2005, 362). It was a period in which doctrines about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit were established, major creeds were created, and theological terminology and concepts developed which are still being used today (Williams, 2005, 378); b) *Scripture interprets Scripture* - if Barton is correct when he says that "all the writings that make up this unique Scripture must be consistent with each other. Since they are . . . a divinely ordained collection, they must create a harmony among themselves" (Barton, 1996, 72), that would make the principle "let the Scripture interpret Scripture" a valid one.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to evaluate and test the creed of *sola scriptura* against the historical and theological implications of the few-centuries-long process of the formation of the NT canon. As a result of all this, the conclusion is that *sola scriptura* can be affirmed in some aspects, but in others it must be revised and changed.

As Barton observes, the discussion about the formation of the NT canon is usually focused on the precise meaning and definitions of terms like *Scripture* and *Canon*. Therefore, it is possible to argue both for the existence of the canon by the end of the first century (Zahn's position), or by the end of the fourth century (Sundberg's position). However, both Zahn and Sundberg are right because the church possessed a group of authoritative books from the start, but they were not put together as a collection for a few centuries. Instead of arguing over words and definitions, it is better to pay attention to how much, and in what measure, these writings/books were used. In this way, this article shows that, though connected with the idea of *the NT canon* or *the Scripture*, the question of *authority* for church doctrine, life, and practice was placed and originated elsewhere.

By arguing that the closed collection of the NT canon/the Bible is the ultimate authority for the church, *sola scriptura* inevitably falls into two traps. The Church

Fathers often called non-canonical documents *Scripture*, and the *NT canon* was not closed and put into a collection until after the first few centuries. Therefore, if this creed is applied consistently, it would mean that either Protestants must accept a wider NT canon (if Scripture equals canon), or acknowledge that *sola scriptura* is valid more or less only after Athanasius. If this claim is correct, that leaves the issue of the ultimate authority for the church in the first few centuries somewhat vague. Accordingly, Williams claimed that for ancient Christians, “tradition was not conceived as an addition to Scripture nor as a source which functioned apart from Scripture. No matter how much one relied on the role of the tradition to govern faith, it did not preclude *the primacy of scriptural authority*” [emphasis mine] (Williams, 2005, 364). Yet this claim does not stand up to the test because of arguments just presented. The solution for locating the ultimate authority must be sought somewhere else, and not in claiming the one over the other.

The authority of the NT documents was not in their inspiration, but in the fact that they contained a genuine and original written record of the Jesus-event and the apostolic message. The NT canon is a distinctive and authoritative report of what happened in the history of redemption. However, inspiration was something that was not uniquely connected with the future NT documents. Furthermore, the Jesus-event and the apostolic message were not only the ultimate authority for the Bible, but also for the early church. This explains why everything that reflected this *canon*, whether it was Scripture, the *Rule of Faith*, oral tradition, or something else, had an equally authoritative standing in the early church.

Hence, viewing the ultimate authority in the apostolic witness to the Jesus-event holds great implications for current the debate between Roman Catholics and Protestants in two ways. First, claiming the ultimate authority of the Bible on the basis of divine inspiration¹¹ can be rejected while the supremacy of the

11 “Scripture is inspired but, how that inspiration functions is not explained... Therefore, if the Bible does not give a theory of inspiration, we must be cautious about making inerrancy the logical conclusion of it” (Allert, 2007, 171-2). Although in this article, this article does not argue for or against the inerrancy of the Bible, Kevin J. Vanhoozer’s observation is worth citing: “...is inerrancy itself a hermeneutic? Our preliminary response must be, ‘Yes and no.’ Positively, inerrancy assumes the ultimate unity of the Bible, a crucial hermeneutical premise. On the other hand, simply to assume the Bible’s truth is not yet to say what it means... We need to distinguish the text as a truth-bearer from the interpretation (or the interpreter) as a truth-bearer. The Bible’s witness to its subject matter is always true; the interpreter’s witness to the text, by contrast, suffers from various forms of existential short-sightedness, confessional tunnel vision, and cultural myopia. Yet the vocation of the interpreter is to be nothing less than a witness to the truth of the text and hence to the subject matter that it attests... is inerrancy a theory of interpretation? As we have seen, the assumption that the Bible exhibits a unified truth, while a vital hermeneutical presupposition, nevertheless underdetermines the exegetical results. Just as inspiration does not tell us what the Bible means or how it functions as an authority in

Bible remains intact. There is no need for extra-biblical theory when, on the basis of historical evidence, the supremacy of the Bible can be argued. Second, maintaining that the ultimate authority is in the apostolic witness to the Jesus-event means that whatever reflects and testifies to that event holds a place of authority in the church. Accordingly, it cannot be argued that the Bible is above tradition, or that church with its traditions stands above the Bible, or the like. They all fall under the authority of the Jesus-event and the apostolic message.

So, after 2000 years, what represents the ultimate authority for the church today? Is it the Pope, tradition, the Bible, or something else? There is only one answer: the Bible! Dayton's words are insightful: "The oral gospel had become written. Another step was inevitable. The written canon must be closed, especially as writings of doubtful origin and significance multiplied" (Dayton, 1976, 33–34). Barton also adds that "... the texts in the canon are unique, and uniquely authoritative.... Any thoughts or idea that conflict with what is in this authoritative collection must be false" (1996, 72). The supreme authority of the Bible comes from the fact that it is the *oral gospel* that was written, and a *collection of documents* that are *uniquely authoritative*. Unlike any other element in the church, the Bible is the *written record*, and in modern times, is the only *authoritative witness* to the apostolic message of the saving event of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Bible is the highest authority for the church in every aspect.

Lastly, *sola scriptura* is, in its essence, a hermeneutical question because the ultimate goal of claiming the authority of the Bible is to communicate what the Bible says. In other words, claiming the authority of what the Bible *is*, as its ultimate goal has to assert the authority and importance of what the Bible *says*. If a person claims that the Bible is the only authority for the Christian life, practice and faith, and yet it cannot offer a meaningful and correct interpretation, the very authority of the Bible falls into question. Accordingly, when opposing theological interpretations which are both based on the Bible are offered, that directly impacts and degrades the importance and position of the Bible. The battle during the Reformation was not only in the area of Bible VS. Tradition, but also about who has a right to interpret the Bible. The question was whether or not Scripture interprets itself, or if the church has an obligation to offer the correct interpretation. Therefore, the battle was fought, not only for what the *Bible is*, but also for what the Bible *says* exactly. But the question that is still lingering today is whether or not Protestantism can, after 500 years of existence and despite its divisions and theological contradictions, offer correct, meaningful

theology...so inerrancy – the belief that the Bible speaks truly in all that it affirms – does not necessarily generate interpretative agreement even among those who hold to it" (Vanhooser, 2005, 97).

and authoritative interpretations of the Bible.

Therefore, if Scripture (*sola scriptura*) is the ultimate authority for the church today, then it must be realized that there is no difference between the Jesus-event and the apostolic witness/preaching that is written on the pages of the NT. Accordingly, today, there should be no difference between the Jesus message and the way Christians believe, practice and live out faith, notwithstanding the fact that 2000 years of church history and theological development are behind us. However, the \$64,000 question is how that can be done.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abraham, William J. (2006). *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Allert, Craig D. (2007). *A High View of Scripture?* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Barton, John (1996). "The Significance of a Fixed Canon of the Hebrew Bible." pp. 67–83 in: *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: the history of its interpretation*. Magne Saebo (ed.). Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Barton, John (1997). *Holy Writings, Sacred Text*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Bloesch, Donald G. (1989). *Osnove evanđeoske teologije*. Novi Sad: Dobra vest.
- Bruce, F. F. (1988). *The Canon of Scripture*. Downers Grove: IVP.
- Dayton, Wilber T. (1967). "Factors promoting the formation of the New Testament canon." *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 10.1, 28–35. Online: http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/canon_nt.php. Accessed 23. 4. 2010.
- De Jonge, Henk Jan (2003). "The New Testament Canon", in: *The Biblical Canons*. Editor J. M. Auwers & H. J. De Jonge. Leuven: Leuven University Press, pp. 309–319. Online: <http://www.ntgateway.com/canon/>. Accessed 15. 4. 2010.
- Donner, Theo (1982). "Some Thoughts On The History Of The New Testament Canon." *Themelios* 7.3, 23–27. Online: http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/themelios/canon-nt_donner.pdf. Accessed 19. 4. 2010.
- Gamble, Harry Y. (1989). The Canon of the New Testament, in: *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*. Editor E. J. Epp & G. W. MacRae. Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 201–235 .
- Grant, R. M. (1970). The New Testament Canon, in: vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to Jerome*. Editor P. R. Ackroyd &

- C. F. Evans. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 284–308.
- Hembd, Albert (2007). "The Doctrinal Views of Dr. Kurt Aland." *Quarterly Record* 579: 17–40. Online: http://www.trinitarianbiblesocietyusa.org/about_the_society/quarterlyrecord.html. Accessed 20. 4. 2010.
- McCarthy, James G. (2004). *Evandjelje po Rimu*. Krapina: Baptistička crkva Emanuel & Teološka biblijska akademija.
- McGrath, Alister E. (2001). *Reformation Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- McMahon, Matthew. "The Doctrine of Sola Scriptura in a Nutshell." *A Puritan Mind com*. Online: <http://www.apuritansmind.com/Creeds/McMahonSolaScriptura.htm>. Accessed 20. 4. 2010.
- Meye, R. P. (1979). Canon of the NT, in: vol. 1 of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Editor Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 601–606.
- Reuss, Edward (1891). "History of the Canon of Holy Scriptures in the Christian Church." Edinburgh: R. W. Hunter. Online: <http://www.archive.org/details/historyofthecano00reusuoft>. Accessed 13. 4. 2010.
- Ridderbos, Herman (1958/1959). The Canon of The New Testament, in: *Revelation and the Bible. Contemporary Evangelical Thought*. Editor Carl F. H. Henry. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958 / London: The Tyndale Press, 1959, 189–201. Online: http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/ipaper/rev_henry_12.html. Accessed 22. 4. 2010.
- Sanders, James A. (1984). *Canon and Community*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Sawyer, M. James (1991). "Evangelicals and the Canon of the New Testament." *Grace Theological Journal* 11.1: 29–52.
- Vanhoozer, K. J. (2005). "Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics." *Journal- Evangelical Theological Society* 48 no.1: 89–114. Online: http://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/48/48-1/48-1-pp089-114_JETS.pdf. Accessed 20. 4. 2010.
- Webster, William (1999). "What did the Early Church believe about the authority of Scripture? (sola Scriptura)." Online: http://www.christian_answers.net/q-eden/sola-Scriptura-earlychurch.html. Accessed 22. 4. 2010.
- Williams, D. H. (2005). "The Patristic Tradition as Canon." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 32: 357–79.

Ervin Budiselić

Utjecaj formiranja novozavjetnog kanona na kredo *sola Scriptura*

Sažetak

Ovaj članak analizira povijesni i teološki utjecaj koji nekoliko stoljeća dug proces formiranja novozavjetnog kanona ima na kredo *sola Scriptura*. Kao rezultat toga, autor potvrđuje valjanost *sola Scriptura* u nekim aspektima dok u drugim aspektima smatra da *sola Scriptura* mora biti revidirana i promijenjena. Povijesno gledajući, *sola Scriptura* uzima 66 biblijskih knjiga kao konačni autoritet za vjerovanje i život Crkve. Budući da se naziv kanon – što je zatvorena lista knjiga kojoj se ništa ne može dodati i ništa od nje oduzeti – ne koristi za novozavjetne spise sve do vremena Atanazija (367. g) i budući da se naziv Pismo u prva četiri stoljeća koristio i za druge spise, a ne samo za današnjih dvadeset sedam knjiga Novog zavjeta, nemoguće je tvrditi da *sola Scriptura* predstavlja izvorno učenje rane Crkve. Ako protestantizam nastavi tvrditi da *sola Scriptura* predstavlja izvorno učenje rane Crkve, onda se poradi povijesne točnosti i drugi dokumenti osim dvadeset sedam novozavjetnih dokumenata moraju uzeti kao autoritativna Pisma ili se ne može govoriti o kanonu Novog zavjeta (niti o *sola Scripturi*) sve do vremena Atanazija. Teološki gledano, autor smatra da kanon Novog zavjeta nije bio konačni autoritet za vjeru i život rane Crkve. Umjesto toga, konačni autoritet za ranu Crkvu nalazio se u poruci Evanđelja koja je prvotno naviještena od strane Isusa, a kasnije je navješćivana po Crkvi u usmenom i, u konačnici, u pisanom obliku. Današnji dokumenti Novog zavjeta bili su prepoznati kao autoritativni zato što svjedoče o Isusovu događaju i sadrže pisani zapis Evanđelja koje je naviješteno od strane Isusa i apostola, a ne zato što su nadahnuti od Boga. Također, o raspravi o kanonu umjesto usmjeravanja na točno određivanje značenja pojmova kao što su Pismo i kanon, autor predlaže da se usmjerimo na pitanje koliko i u kojoj mjeri su novozavjetni dokumenti bili korišteni, to jest, da se prepozna razlika tri kategorije dokumenata (koja ovisi o tome koliko su često bili navođeni) i tri razdoblja u kojima su ti dokumenti bili navođeni (prvo, drugo i treće stoljeće).