SOLA SCRIPTURA AS *PRIMA SCRIPTURA*: A MODERN EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT REFLECTION ON THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE:

A RESPONSE TO "A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PROTESTANT PRINCIPLE OF *SOLA SCRIPTURA* IN LIGHT OF ROMAN CATHOLIC ARGUMENTS ON THE TEMPORAL PRECEDENCE OF TRADITION AND THE FORMAL INSUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE"

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Abstract. This paper offers a critical evangelical response to Salvador G. Agualada Jr.'s analysis of the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, particularly his engagement with Roman Catholic critiques grounded in Yves Congar's arguments concerning the temporal precedence of tradition and the alleged formal insufficiency of Scripture. While acknowledging the historical development of Protestant reflection on Scripture and tradition, this study argues that *sola Scriptura* is best understood not as the exclusion of tradition but as the affirmation of Scripture's normative and final authority within the life of the church. Drawing on contemporary evangelical theology, the paper proposes that this principle may be more precisely articulated as *prima Scriptura*, wherein Scripture functions as the supreme and governing authority, while tradition, reason,

and experience such as ecclesial practices serve secondary and ministerial roles. By reframing the Protestant position in this way, the study seeks to clarify persistent misunderstandings surrounding *sola Scriptura* and to demonstrate how the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture may be upheld without dismissing the historical and theological significance of the church's interpretive tradition.

Introduction

A central conviction shared across the Christian tradition is that Scripture bears authoritative witness to God's self-revelation and to his redemptive purposes in history.[1] Through the canonical Scriptures, the church encounters the divine testimony to God's work in creation, the redemption of humanity from sin, and the ultimate restoration of all things under the reign of God. Accordingly, Scripture has functioned as the foundational source for Christian faith, theology, and practice from the apostolic era to the present. This includes the idea in Roman Catholic theology that nothing contrary to God's word in Scripture could have any claim to be authentic in tradition.[2]

Despite this shared affirmation, significant theological differences persist regarding the nature and function of Scripture's authority within the church. In particular, the relationship between Scripture and ecclesial tradition remains

1 For the Roman Catholic view on the Sacred Scripture, see Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation Dei Verbum,* Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html, particularly chapters 1 and 2.

2 While the Roman Catholic does not hold the concept that describes Scripture as a norm for validating tradition, but on its teaching on the authority of the Scripture, the Scripture somehow holds that canonical authority vis-a-vis church tradition. As such, no tradition contra Scripture must be authenticated as tradition. See Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 96.

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a central point of divergence between Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies. While both affirm Scripture as divinely inspired, they differ on whether Scripture alone constitutes the final normative authority for the church or whether it must be interpreted within an authoritative and co-constitutive tradition.

Roman Catholic theology, as presented by Salvador G. Agualada Jr. in engagement primarily with Yves Congar, advances two principal critiques of *sola Scriptura*.[3] First, it asserts the temporal precedence of tradition, arguing that apostolic tradition predates the New Testament canon and thus constitutes the original matrix within which Scripture emerged.[4] Second, it contends for the formal insufficiency of Scripture, maintaining that Scripture does not contain within itself all that is necessary for the full articulation of Christian doctrine apart from the interpretive authority of the church.[5]

In response, this paper argues that a properly articulated evangelical understanding of *sola Scriptura* neither rejects tradition nor denies the church's historical role in the transmission and interpretation of Scripture.[6] Rather, it affirms Scripture as the *norma normans non normata*—the normative

3 Salvador G. Agualada Jr., "A Critical Analysis of the Protestant Principle of *Sola Scriptura* in Light of the Catholic Arguments on the Temporal Precedence of Tradition and the Formal Insufficiency of Scripture," *Loyola Papers: Student and Alumni Journal of Loyola School of Theology* 7:1 (2026): 31-50.

4 Ibid., 33-36.

5 Ibid., 36-40.

6 For a discussion on Sola Scriptura and Biblical Interpretation in the Protestant tradition, see my article written on the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, entitled: Jason Valeriano Hallig, "*Sola Scriptura*–Reformation's Ecclesial Legacy: Hermeneutical Freedom and Interpretive Diversity toward a Reformed Catholicity of the Church," *Mediator* 13, no. 2 (2018): 1-14, https://www.apnts.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/documents/mediator_documents/volume13/volume13-2/Mediator_13.2.1_Halig.pdf

norm that is not normed—while recognizing tradition as a real but subordinate or secondary authority. Reframed as *prima Scriptura*, this principle preserves Scripture's supremacy while situating it within the life of the church.

Scripture and Tradition: Revelation as God's Acts

God's revelation is given first and foremost through a series of divine acts and accompanying words in history. These saving acts—accompanied by God's own interpretive speech—constitute the primary mode by which God makes himself and his will known to his people. From the outset, such acts and words were received as authoritative by those to whom God revealed himself, forming the basis of the community's faith and obedience.

This divine self-disclosure, as it is received and remembered within the community of faith, gives rise to tradition—specifically, the apostolic tradition. This tradition is not a static deposit but the living transmission of God's revelatory acts and words, culminating in the person of Jesus Christ. In this sense, tradition denotes the ongoing reception, preservation, and proclamation of revelation within the life of the Jesus-believing community. It is therefore dynamic yet derivative, grounded in the prior reality of God's self-revelation in history generally and in Christ particularly. As such, apostolic tradition bears faithful and authoritative witness to God's definitive revelation in Jesus Christ.

In this respect, Yves Congar's emphasis on the temporal precedence of tradition rightly underscores the historical priority of the church's reception of revelation prior to its inscripturation. As Agualada observes, "for Congar, 'the apostles themselves at first built up the Church by the completest possible communication of the Gospel, by words and actions, preaching and example, by the exercise of authority and

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organization; not by writing.'"[7] The apostolic proclamation or tradition thus existed as a lived and transmitted reality before it assumed written form, highlighting the community as the initial locus of reception and transmission of God's culminated revelation in Christ.[8]

Yet this temporal priority does not entail normative superiority or coequal authority across subsequent generations. The tradition that precedes Scripture is not an independent source of revelation but the very means by which the once-for-all revelation is received and transmitted via movement from oral tradition to interpreted text. Dunning writes, "Instead of being the transmission of the event/interpretation complex, it becomes an interpretive tradition in relation to the transcribed text."[9] From a Protestant perspective, this transmitted witness finds its definitive and normative form in the canonical Scriptures, wherein the apostolic testimony to the person and work of Jesus Christ is inscripturated and fixed as the enduring rule of faith.

Accordingly, *sola Scriptura* does not arise in opposition to tradition but from within it. Indeed, it is the apostolic tradition

7 Agualada, "A Critical Analysis," 33-34.

8 Dunning offers at least four forms of apostolic tradition that can be identified with reasonable certainty: (1) **catechetical instruction**, reflected in the early Church's *kerygma* and embodied in the simple sermons recorded in Acts. Paul explicitly refers to this tradition in 1 Corinthians 15:1–3: "Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if you hold fast to what I preached unto you—unless you have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (KJV); (2) **hymnic material**, such as Philippians 2:6–11 and 1 Timothy 3:16; (3) **liturgy**; and (4) **sacrament**. H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988), 79.

9 Ibid., 79.

itself that served to discern and exclude oral traditions that deviated from the gospel already received and proclaimed. For instance, in Paul, "tradition" can carry negative connotations when it is merely human in origin or divorced from the gospel.[10] Scripture, therefore, stands as the canonical culmination and normative embodiment of both the Old Testament tradition and the apostolic witness. While tradition provides the historical matrix in which Scripture emerges, Scripture functions as the *norma normans non normata*—the norming norm that governs and judges all subsequent traditions.

The relationship between Scripture and tradition, therefore, is not one of competing authorities but of ordered relation. Tradition is indispensable as the means of reception and transmission, yet it remains ministerial and derivative, normed by the canonical witness. In this way, the movement from revelation to reception to canon establishes Scripture as the definitive and sufficient witness to God's redemptive acts in history, culminating in Jesus Christ.

Scripture and the Canon: The Inscripturation of God's Revelation

The formation of the canon reflects the recognition that God's revelation in history must be inscripturated for its faithful preservation and authoritative transmission. LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush write,

> The Bible nowhere suggests that all of God's revelations were committed to writing. On the contrary, the Gospels clearly indicate that Jesus Christ did and said many things which are not recorded–and these were part of God's revelation to

10 See D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris' "New Testament Canon," in *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 487-499. The already established Gospel Tradition was the unwritten "Scripture canon" of the oral and interpreted traditions of the Early Church.

> that generation (cf. John 20:30). But for the sake of future generations and in the light of his ongoing redemptive purpose, God did will that some of his revelation be written down so that his redemptive acts in former generations might serve as examples to those who came later. The result of this inscripturation is the Bible.[11]

As the covenant community entrusted with God's self-disclosure, the church receives, preserves, and transmits this revelation in written form under the guidance of the Holy Spirit: "All Scripture is inspired by God[12] and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man *or woman* of God may be fully capable, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim. 3:16-17) This means that "God used his revelatory and saving acts for his people, and his personal dealings with individuals, to lead them to write and collect together the books of the Bible; and since God himself is omniscient and infallible and consciously initiated this process, it follows that the resulting product will be true and reliable, although not necessarily infallible in every particular."[13] The inscripturation of revelation ensures that the apostolic witness is not lost to history but remains accessible and normative for succeeding generations.

In the process of canonization, the church does not confer authority upon Scripture but recognizes and receives those writings that are inherently authoritative as witnesses to God's revelatory acts and words. The canon is thus not the product of ecclesial determination but of ecclesial recognition. The

11 William Sanford LaSon, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic Wm. Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992 reprint), 12.

12 Literally "God-breathed."

13 I. Howard Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd., 1982), 39.

authority of Scripture resides in its character as the inspired and faithful testimony to God's revelation, rather than in the church's act of reception.

This distinction is crucial for a proper understanding of *sola Scriptura*. While the church plays an indispensable role in discerning and preserving the canon, it does so as a servant of the Word rather than its source. The church stands under Scripture even as it bears witness to it. In this sense, the canon functions as the normative boundary of divine revelation, delimiting the content of the gospel and safeguarding it from distortion.

The inscripturated Word, therefore, provides the stable and enduring form of the apostolic *kerygma*.[14] What was once proclaimed in the living voice of the apostles is now preserved in the canonical texts as the definitive witness to God's saving revelation. This written form does not diminish the vitality of the gospel but secures its integrity across time and context.

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14 For a thorough investigation of the apostolic preaching, or the primitive gospel, see Charles Harold Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936), 38-45, where he offers a summary of the primitive preaching under the following topics:

First, the age of fulfillment has dawned.

Second, this has taken place through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Third, by virtue of the resurrection, Jesus has been exalted at the right hand of God as messianic head of the new Israel.

Fourth, the Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory.

Fifth, the messianic age will shortly reach its consummation in the return of Christ.

Finally, the *kerygma* always closes with an appeal for repentance, the offer of forgiveness and of the Holy Spirit, and promise of salvation.

While Dodd employs the term *kerygma* to describe the apostolic message, he acknowledges its near equivalence to *euangelion*: *kerygma* emphasizes the act or mode of proclamation, whereas *euangelion* denotes the essential content of the message. See also George Eldon Ladd, *A New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994 reprint), 364-378.

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Accordingly, the canon undergirds the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*, properly understood as the primacy of Scripture. Scripture alone stands as the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice, not in isolation from the church, but as the norm that governs the church's life, doctrine, and proclamation. No ecclesial authority may stand above Scripture; rather, all such authority is accountable to it. As Roman Catholic theologian Avery Dulles rightly reminds the Catholic church on its perceived authority, "The Catholic understanding of the Church as a stable community in history, in which Christ continues to make himself present and available, leads to a different view of authority in the Church."[15] He adds, "The magisterium of the Church is, to be sure, not over the word of God but under it."[16]

Thus, the inscripturation of God's revelation in the canon establishes Scripture as both the foundation and the boundary of the church's faith. It is within this canonical framework that the gospel is preserved, interpreted, and proclaimed, ensuring that the church remains faithful to the once-delivered revelation entrusted to it.

Scripture and the Gospel: The Proclamation of God's Revelation

Revelation is God's self-communication—his gracious disclosure of his will and saving purpose to humanity—and, as such, constitutes the good news for all generations, grounded in divine love: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) This revelation was first proclaimed in history through God's saving acts and the

15 Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1987, expanded edition), 87.

16 Ibid.

apostolic witness prior to its inscripturation, thus reflecting the historical priority of the church's living tradition in the transmission of the gospel.

Scripture bears the normative and authoritative witness to this once-delivered revelation, extending its scope to all nations. The gospel it contains is universal in intent and has been entrusted to the church as its steward or rather herald.[17] Through the process of canonization, the church received and preserved this apostolic witness, recognizing in it the definitive and normative form of the gospel. Thus, while Tradition temporally precedes Scripture, Scripture functions as the canonical norm that governs and judges the church's proclamation.

The proclamation of the gospel is therefore inherently ecclesial. It is through the church—under the agency of the Holy Spirit—that the once-given revelation is faithfully proclaimed and rendered effective. Proclamation participates in the economy of revelation not by supplementing it or adding to it, but by transmitting and actualizing the apostolic gospel within ever-new contexts.

The apostolic *kerygma*, first delivered orally and later inscripturated, constitutes the material content of the gospel. These writings, entrusted to the church, serve as the full and sufficient witness to God's saving revelation. Accordingly,

17 Dulles argues that one of the models of the church is that of a herald. He writes, "Characteristics of this model, as contrasted with the three previously considered, is a sharp distinction it makes between the Church in its terrestrial form and the kingdom of God, considered as an eschatological reality. Kung stresses that the Church neither is the kingdom of God, nor does it build the kingdom, or extend it on earth, or work for its realization. 'It is the reign of God which the Church hopes for, bears witness to, proclaims. It is not the bringer or the bearer of the reign of God which is to come and is at the same time already present, but its voice, its announcer, its herald. God alone can bring his reign, the Church is devoted entirely to its service.'" *Models of the Church*, 79.

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the canonical gospel is materially sufficient. Yet, as Catholic critiques have argued, Scripture is not formally self-sufficient in abstraction from the interpretive community; its proper understanding presupposes the living tradition of the church.

Nevertheless, this does not necessitate the formal insufficiency of Scripture in an absolute sense. Rather, Scripture is formally sufficient insofar as it normatively governs the church's interpretive activity. The church, as the recipient and steward of divine revelation, does not stand above Scripture but under it, even as it serves as its faithful interpreter. In this way, material and formal sufficiency are held together within a dynamic relation between Scripture, Tradition, and the church.

The gospel thus remains the hermeneutical center of Scripture and the decisive norm of its proclamation. Consequently, the church is bound to the apostolic gospel and cannot proclaim another: "If anyone preaches to you another gospel, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:8).

Scripture and Theology: Revelation and the Need for Discipleship

The living tradition of the church is actualized in its theological task, understood as the disciplined and ecclesial reflection upon God's revelation for the purpose of faithful articulation. This task is grounded primarily in Holy Scripture and secondarily informed by the church's historical and theological reflections or tradition, reason, and experience. Theology thus arises not as an optional or speculative endeavor but as a necessary function of the church's vocation, particularly in light of its mandate *to disciple* all the nations (Matt 28:18–20). The work of discipleship entails not only the transmission of the gospel but also its ongoing interpretation, doctrinal formulation, and contextual application.

As Agualada observes, "determining Christian doctrine and practice demands consulting other theological *loci* within the Church's Tradition, as 'an appeal to the Bible does not suffice by itself,' since the meaning of Sacred Scripture is interpreted, understood, and expressed through the church's life and worship."[18] Properly construed, this claim does not undermine the Protestant principle of *sola Scriptura* but clarifies the conditions of its operation. Scripture is not appropriated apart from the interpretive activity of the church; rather, it is received, read, and expounded within the community of faith, employing the requisite hermeneutical and theological judgments necessary for faithful understanding.

Yves Congar's formulation is instructive at this point:

> Scripture does not surrender its meaning by the bare text; it yields it to a living mind, a subject living within the conditions of the Covenant. This living subject...is the Church, God's people, the Body of Christ, and the Temple of the Holy Spirit... it is there, in this setting and in these conditions, that the Holy Scriptures reveal their meaning.[19]

This insight rightly underscores the ecclesial location of interpretation. Yet, from a Protestant standpoint, this must be qualified: the church is not the constitutive source of Scripture's meaning but its ministerial interpreter, bound to the text as the normative witness to divine revelation.

The nature of Scripture itself necessitates this theological labor. Scripture is theological without being a fixed system, historical without being reducible to historiography, and literary without collapsing into literalism.[20] Wright and Bird warn,

18 Agualada, "A Critical Analysis," 38-39.

19 Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2004), 91, as cited by Agualada, "A Critical Analysis," 39.

20 See N. T. Wright and Michael Bird, *The New Testament and Its World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 51-58.

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> These three elements comprising history ('the past'), literature ('the text'), and theology ('understanding God and the world') are all sewn together into the fabric of the New Testament. And yet, what we find as whole cloth in the text—a historically situated discourse about God and the world, in various literary forms— can be violently torn asunder by readers who are afraid that too much history, or too much literature, or too much theology might prove that their mighty edifices of scholarship and piety have been built on a foundation of sand. It has been all too easy for some interpreters to highlight one of the trio: history or literature or theology—and to discard the rest.[21]

Consequently, its faithful appropriation requires disciplined hermeneutics and responsible theological construction. The church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, undertakes this task as the means by which the once-for-all revelation of God is continually proclaimed and applied across diverse contexts and generations.

Accordingly, *sola Scriptura* is not a principle of mere repetition but of ordered theological authority. It designates Scripture as indeed the *norma normans non normata*, the primary and definitive source of all theological judgment, while recognizing the subordinate and ministerial role of tradition, reason, and experience. These secondary *loci* do not constitute independent sources of revelation but function as necessary instruments in the church's interpretive and doctrinal work. In this way, the theological task remains ordered to the church's mission of discipleship, ensuring that the apostolic witness to God's revelation in Jesus Christ is rightly understood, faithfully articulated, and normatively governed in every age.

Conclusion

Agualada, Jr. is to be commended for concluding, in line with Yves Congar, that the same value cannot be attributed

21 Ibid., 55-56.

to tradition and Holy Scripture, notwithstanding *Vatican II's* affirmation of their conjoint reverence.[22] His recognition that Scripture possesses an absolute value as the supreme guide to which all other authorities are subject marks a significant point of convergence with the Protestant claim regarding Scripture's unique normativity.[23]

Building on this insight, this study has argued for a reframing of *sola Scriptura* as *prima Scriptura*. Properly understood, the Protestant principle does not negate tradition or the church but orders them. Scripture, tradition, and the church exist in a relation of theological coherence, structured by the movement from revelation to reception to inscripturation. Within this order, Scripture alone functions as the *norma normans non normata*, while tradition remains ministerial and derivative, serving as the means of reception and transmission rather than an independent source of revelation.

Accordingly, the sufficiency of Scripture—both material and formal—is affirmed in relation to the gospel and its proclamation. At the same time, the necessity of the church's living tradition is upheld in its theological task of interpretation, articulation, and application. *Sola Scriptura*, therefore, is not a principle of isolation but of regulation, grounding the church's ongoing work of discipleship in the normative authority of the canonical witness.

> In this way, the Protestant principle is best understood not as a rejection of tradition, but as its proper theological ordering under the final authority of Scripture.

22 Ibid., 49.

23 Ibid.

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