

Was *Sola Scriptura* a Causal Factor in European Imperialism? A Response to Steed Davidson¹

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Abstract

This essay responds to Steed Davidson, granting his basic premise about the role of the Reformation in tandem with European imperialism in the colonization of the Caribbean. Yet the essay questions whether *sola scriptura* was indeed as decisive a factor in the shifts of power as Davidson claims. Yet Davidson is to be commended for raising the question of the relationship of biblical authority to cultural self-identity and the lived reality of the Caribbean.

I start by offering my thanks to Steed Davidson for his essay, “From *Sola Scriptura* to Maroonage: Reflections on Caribbean Biblical Interpretation.” Davidson here offers important insights on the Protestant Reformation five hundred years later, which are particularly appropriate in the context of a Caribbean seminary, the *raison d’être* of which is the study and proclamation of Scripture.

I found compelling Davidson’s analysis of the relationship between the Protestant Reformation’s disturbance of, and challenge to, papal authority, on the one hand, and the emergence of European colonialism, on the other. He argues that the Reformation reshaped Europe politically and, as a consequence, also shaped the Caribbean. More specifically, he notes that Christian theology and biblical interpretation joined with legal theory and the scholarly enterprise as “key instruments in building the initial scaffolding for European imperialism.”

The relationship between the Protestant Reformation and European imperialism is a central point of contention here. Davidson asserts that they are not simply parallel historical movements; yet he also denies that there is a neat causal relationship between them. Nevertheless, he claims that the Protestant Reformation is part of the whole movement that created Europe and that enabled Europe to act through notions of supremacy vis-à-vis the rest of the world.

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To the extent that Davidson is describing historical circumstances, his point about the part of the whole and the enabling of Europe cannot be denied. However, Davidson is saying more than that. He is contending that it is the central Reformation principle of *sola scriptura* that made the decisive contribution. His argument is that the principle of *sola scriptura* is what eroded, challenged, and diluted papal authoritarianism. And then the previously unchallenged authority of the Pope over the church was replaced, wittingly or unwittingly, with the aid of *sola scriptura*, by the untrammelled authority of princes over the nation states of Europe.

Further, the principle of *sola scriptura* gave impetus to the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. Davidson argues that the content of the Bible, “articulated through the principle *sola scriptura*,” gave the Bible a unique “place in the power politics of Europe.” In order to clarify this, he writes this telling paragraph:

Sola scriptura reordered the power structure that gave sole authority to the pope in matters of faith, placed the church in a subordinate position to the Bible, and in the process broadened the scope of decision-making power to include princes and religious leaders. As Jonathan Sheehan observes, Luther created a “battle cry” that would ring throughout Europe and thus “alter forever the complexion of European society.”

Davidson’s observation about the coincidence of the Protestant Reformation and European imperialism is undeniable.

Where I think the case still remains to be made is in his suggestion that the principle of *sola scriptura* is problematic because it has had a causal relationship in the redistribution of power in Europe, thus rendering the unsuspecting peoples on the margins of history more gullible and more vulnerable to European hegemony. The argument has a baby-and-bath-water ring to it. Furthermore, it is rather like blaming the invention of the smartphone for accidents on the highway. It is the misuse of the smartphone in texting while driving, not the invention of the smartphone, that is the problem.

History suggests that power re-configures itself in order to counter the effectiveness of change that has eroded its stranglehold of oppression. What had previously been done by papal authority to oppressed people and those on the periphery is done in new ways as power is re-configured in princes and religious leaders, rather than concentrated in the authority of the Pope. This requires those who desire to be the harbingers of the change in pursuit of faithfulness to God and justice for people to be mindful not only of what we repudiate, but also of what we embrace in the course of repudiating.

Davidson is correct about the way in which the embrace of printing technology and the power of literature has managed to stifle orality in the course of privileging the vernacular. What started out as translations into the vernacular in Germany and England has ended up as the language of empire. The language of empire has managed to peripheralize the indigenous languages and cultures of the people of the Caribbean, as well the languages and cultures that came with the African slaves. This does not mean that the problem is with *sola scriptura* itself. It does mean that the centrality of biblical authority to Protestant faith needs to be held in tension with a determination to privilege the cultural self-identity and lived reality of the Caribbean people who are evangelized with this faith.

I commend Steed Davidson for his reading of the principle of *sola scriptura* from the perspective of the Caribbean in a manner that contends both with the residue of the European empire and the resurgence of the new empire of Western globalization. I commend his courage and independence of thought. I believe that his point of view has admirably brought to the fore factors of analysis that we neglect to our peril.