

Sola Scriptura: Scripture Alone

Justin Deeter – October 1, 2016



A German monk named Martin Luther sat in his study preparing for his weekly lectures through books of the Bible. He had lectured through the book of Psalms, Romans, and Galatians. However, during his study, he began to realize that the teaching of these books did not match up with his church's teaching. He wrestled in study in prayer many months over these doubts. After all, he had always had a sensitivity on what he must do to be saved, wrestling with his own salvation. When he was a younger man, his father wanted him to become a lawyer. However, a near death experience in a lightening storm, caused him to make a bold vow to the Lord to become a monk! Much to his father's disappointment, he kept that vow and entered into an Augustinian monastery. Over the years through his study the Bible, he became increasingly concerned over corruption in the church, particularly the practice of indulgences.

Indulgences were authorized certificates sold by the people that would reduce the time your deceased loved ones would remain in purgatory. The church in Rome needed a cash infusion to help construct St. Peter's Basilica, so the Pope authorized sellers of indulgences to travel around to raise money. The most infamous of the indulgence sellers was Johann Tetzel. He raised a great deal of

money for the church, and like a sleazy salesman preying upon the church, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs!”

Luther despised the practice of indulgences, and he had to vocalize his disagreement with the practice. Thus, on October 31, 1517, almost 500 years ago, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg to start an academic disputation over the practice of indulgences. The first thesis said, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “repent” (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” However, his theses went viral. A German printer too the document and translated it from Latin into German and started spreading it across Germany. Thus began the Protestant Reformation, and the Lord would use Luther to purify the church from doctrinal corruption.

This month marks the 500th anniversary from when Martin Luther first nailed those 95 theses. For the month of October, we are starting a five week series to commemorate the Protestant Reformation. Today is homecoming, a day in which we remember our church’s past. On this occasion, I wish to remember our heritage from not just a century ago, but five centuries ago. As a baptist congregation, we proudly stand in the heritage of the Protestant Reformation. Sadly, many Christians today have no idea what it means to be a Protestant Church, and the legacy of our Reformed heritage is forgotten by many. Thus, the need for this series.

I’m convinced that now, more than ever, we need to rediscover the heritage of our reformation roots. We need to remember who we are, and these Protestant distinctives that define us as a church. But what was the Reformation? Perhaps history wasn’t your strongest subject in school. The Protestant Reformation was a movement over the corruption and doctrinal impurity in the

Catholic Church led to a separation from that church, establishing new Protestant denominations.

What was it that the Reformers believed? What are these doctrinal distinctives we need to reclaim for today? They are popularly summed up as the five solas of the reformation. These were Latin phrases, that summed up the message of the reformation. Starting today, we will take each of the five sola's and devote a message to them. They are sola scriptura (Scripture alone), sola fida (by faith alone), Sola gratia (by grace alone), solus Christus (In Christ alone), and Soli Deo Gloria (to the glory of God alone). These five sermons this month will be different than the steady diet of preaching at Forest Hills. Rather than expositional messages (taking a passage of Scripture and unpacking it for us), these will be topical messages (taking a biblical theme and examining it from multiple sections of scripture). These five solas sum up what the Bible teaches, and need to be recovered for today's church.

Today we will take on the first sola, sola scriptura (scripture alone). Martin Luther's turmoil occurred as he observed a contradiction between the Catholic church's teaching and what the Scriptures actually said. At the core, the reformation was a conflict over authority. Which was the chief authority, the tradition and teaching of the Catholic Church or the Scriptures themselves? The reformers squarely decided that Scripture alone is the authoritative guide for the church. So this morning we will answer two questions. First, we will ask *What does Sola Scriptura Mean?* Second, we will ask *How should Sola Scriptura Impact my life and my church?*

What does Sola Scriptura Mean?

Sola Scriptura means that the Bible alone is the final source of authority, sufficient for the church and the Christian life, clear in its communication of truth, and effective in accomplishing God's purposes. As we break down this definition, let's take different pieces and see how this important principle is derived from the Bible itself.

1. Scripture is the Chief Authority (Deut 6:6-9, Josh 23:6, Mt 5:17-18, 1 Thess 2:13, Rev 22:18-19)

In the famous Shema from the book of Deuteronomy God instructs Israel with these words: "And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."¹ This tells us that Scripture must be bound as the authority over the human heart.

In the book of Joshua, as the people have received the Law of God and enter into the promise land. There Joshua commands the leaders of Israel to "Be very strong to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, turning

¹ Deuteronomy 6:6-9, ESV

aside from it neither to the right hand nor to the left.”² This tells us that we must not stray away from the authority of Scripture.

In Jesus’ sermon on the mount, he gives us this promise: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”³ This tells us that Scripture authority is permanent and its truth certain.

The apostle Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica , “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”⁴ This tells us that Scripture’s authority is grounded in the fact that it is the word of God.

The book of Revelation concludes the whole canon of Scripture with these words, “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”⁵ This tells us that Scripture’s authority cannot be edited or revised.

So what does this survey of Biblical texts tell us? They teach sola scriptura! The Bible is the certain and authoritative word of God, binding upon our lives so that we cannot edit it, revise it, or deviate from it in any way.

² Joshua 23:6, ESV

³ Matthew 5:17-18, ESV

⁴ 1 Thessalonians 2:13, ESV

⁵ Revelation 22:18-19, ESV

You see, the Catholic Church had lost its way on this principle, to this very day. The Catholic Church upholds that the church tradition that interprets Scripture has authority on par with Scripture itself. Therefore, the teaching of pope's and councils were binding on the people as the chief authority. As Luther and the other reformers began to discover that this tradition contradicted what the Scripture's plainly said, they came to hold the conviction of sola scriptura, by scripture alone!

2. Scripture is Sufficient (2 Tim 3:16-17)

Scripture is also sufficient, meaning that it contains all we need for life and godliness in Christ. As Paul writes to his protege Timothy he says this about Scripture: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."⁶

The Scriptures, being breathed out by God, are profitable to our lives. They teach us, reprove us, correct us, and train us. Through the Scriptures we are built up into maturity and righteousness in Christ! Everything we need to live a godly life in Christ Jesus has been revealed to us in the Bible.

3. Scripture is Clear (Psalm 19:7; 119:105)

The Scriptures are clear in teaching us the truth contained, particularly when it comes to the Gospel! Psalm 19:7 tells us that "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple."⁷ In

⁶ 2 Timothy 3:16-17, ESV

⁷ Psalm 19:7, ESV

Psalm 119:105 it is written, ““Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”

⁸ This means the Scriptures are clear on the matter of Salvation, meaning that anyone can pick up the Scripture and plainly understand its truth.

This principle helped the reformers put the Bible into the hands of the ordinary person, encouraging them to read it for themselves! One of those Reformers was the Swiss reformer Ulrich Zwingli. He preached a sermon to his congregation in Zurich called “Of the Clarity and Certainty of God’s Word.” He preached, “We should hold the Word of God in the highest possible esteem...and we should give to it a trust which we cannot give to any other word. For the Word of God is certain and can never fail. It is clear and will never leave us in darkness.” ⁹

4. Scripture is Effectual (Heb 4:12)

This means that Scripture accomplishes the purpose of God. As the author of Hebrews puts it, “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” ¹⁰ In other words, God has chosen to use his word to pierce the hearts of men, bringing them to salvation and helping them to grow in grace. Because the word of God is the effective sword of the spirit that pierces the hearts of men, the Reformers believed that the Word of God needed to be central in everything they did.

They explained the Scripture. They taught the Scripture. They sang the Scripture. They preached the Scripture. Over time, the reformers began to do

⁸ Psalm 119:105, ESV

⁹ G.W. Bromiley, Zwingli and Bullinger: Selected Translations and Notes (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979), 93.

¹⁰ Hebrews 4:12, ESV

away with much of the Catholic mass, and sought to design worship around the Scriptures. So the Reformers took the table for the mass, prominent and to the center, and moved it to the side. They placed the pulpit in the center place of prominence, to communicate the centrality of the authority of the preached word.

The reformers began to systematically preach through books of the Bible, to help their congregations know the word of God. There are many such examples, but I'll give you the best of the expository preachers from the reformation, John Calvin in Geneva. During the year of 1549, John Calvin was averaging five sermons a week.¹¹ Over the course of his pastoral career, Calvin preached through every book of the Bible, except for Revelation. He preached 123 sermons on Genesis, 200 sermons on Deuteronomy, 159 sermons on Job, 176 sermons on 1 and 2 Corinthians, and 43 sermons on Galatians. ¹² Why did preaching, particularly expositional preaching become such a visible display of the reformation? It's because the reformers believed in Sola Scriptura, that the word of God is used by the Spirit of God to change people's lives; that it's the chief authority for the church and the Christian life.

How Should Sola Scriptura Impact my life and my church?

Now that we've seen what Sola Scriptura is, why is it important for us today to hold to this principle. We stand in the legacy of the Reformers, and we today

¹¹ T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

¹² Goodloe IV, James. *Preaching through the Gospel of Luke: The Gospel as Catechism*, xiv.

profess this same principle of sola scriptura. I want to help us think through the implications of this principle by first looking at the individual level then at the church level.

You Must Ground Your Life in the Authority of God's Word.

Because the reformers championed sola scriptura, they were passionate about getting the Bible into the hands of everyday and ordinary people. It's hard for us to imagine a time when people didn't have their own Bibles, but during the Reformation, most people couldn't afford them. Even if they could afford them, they couldn't read them. The Bible was translated in Latin and not in the common tongue of ordinary people.

John Wycliff died about a hundred years before Martin Luther was born. However, men like Wycliff provided the prelude to the coming reformation. John Wycliff is often nicknamed "The Morning Star of the Reformation." Wycliff knew that any hope of reformation began with translation. He helped translate the Bible into English, much to the anger of the Catholic Church, and he went through the arduous process of hand copying the Bible for people to read, as the printing press had not yet been invented.¹³

Martin Luther would carry on the legacy of bible translation. Eventually, Luther had to lay low for a considerable time for his own safety against Catholic authorities who wished to take his life. So he remained locked up in Wartburg castle for two years. There Luther began translating the Bible from the original languages into German. With the invention of the printing press, the Bible could

¹³ <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-morning-star-of-the-reformation>

be quickly printed and distributed to ordinary people. This was groundbreaking in getting the Bible out of the hands of the clerical elites and into the hands of ordinary Christians.

Now, we have more Bible translations than we can count, and anyone can access the Bible anytime they'd like. Chances are you have several on your shelf at home! The reformers helped change the world by getting the Bible into the hands of ordinary people. How blessed we are to own a copy of God's very word, now sitting on our laps! Most Christians throughout the history of the faith have not had this privilege that you and I share!

In our personal Christian lives, we must not squander this privilege we've been given. If we truly believe that the Scriptures are the only authority for the Christian life, sufficient, clear, and effective in our lives, then we must read them. We must study the scripture, memorize the scripture, and let our lives be transformed by scripture.

Our Church Must Ground Everything We Do in the Authority of God's Word.

What does sola scriptura mean for our church? It means that everything we believe and do is decided by the word of God. Our church isn't governed by personal opinion or personal agenda. The authority of God's word is a fixed authority; it doesn't morph or change based on our culture's demands. Because God's word is true, we commit to living out God's word in our fellowship together.

Sola Scriptura must be lived out in practice in our church. This is why we, as Forest Hills Baptist Church, take the Bible so seriously. When we gather to worship we sing the Bible, we pray the Bible, we preach the Bible, we respond to the Bible.

When we meet in community groups, we discuss the Bible, apply the Bible, and live out the Bible with one another! I've found that many churches will affirm in theory something like sola scriptura, but they fail to put it in practice. A church that truly believes in sola scriptura bleeds Bible. Their fellowship centers around teaching the Bible and proclaiming the message of the Bible to the world.

Sadly, many Protestant churches are beginning to look more like Catholics, governed by their traditions rather than by Scripture. They cast away the plain teaching of the word of God for the traditions of men! No wonder so many churches are shriveling up in coldness of faith and abandoning sound doctrine; they have abandoned the principle of sola scriptura. The church today needs its reformers. It needs men and women of conviction who will challenge the idolatry of the church and the false authority of religious tradition. The church needs reformers who have the courage to stand against opposition and criticism in order to conform the church to the authority of God's word. Each generation must do this work. We must evaluate everything we do in light of what God's word says. Every hobby horse ministry, church tradition, and sacred golden calf must be melted down by the heat of the inspired and authoritative word of God!

Where are the reformers today who are bold enough to challenge the status quo? Who has the courage to shape our lives and our church in the authority of God's word? Who will take a stand on the word of God in our world and in our church? Who will risk persecution and shame because we believe the Bible is truth and authoritative for our life and our church?

Final Thoughts

After 1517, Luther's 95 theses spread; controversy erupted. As you might imagine, the Catholic Church did not like Luther's challenge. In 1520, Pope Leo X issued a Papal Bull summoning Luther to an imperial diet to recant of his writings. Luther arrived to Worms on April 16, 1521. There, his books laid on the table, which challenged the papacy and the Catholic church with the principle of sola scripture. He was asked to publicly recant of his writings. He was given the night to think it over.

His life was literally on the line. Luther expected a certain death if he stood by his writings and what he believed to be the plain teaching of Scripture. Would he stand on the authority of God's word even if it meant certain death? Would he challenge the authority of the church and its tradition? The next day, Luther gave his answer:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.

Is your conscience captivated by the word of God? Will we continue to stand upon the principles of sola scriptura?