

Sola Scriptura: A Scripture-Alone Life

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Some parent child conversations are as predictable as the sunrise. Play this out with me:

Child: "I think I should be able to do such and such."

Parent: "Who told you that?"

Child: "My friend Susie told me and all my friends are doing it too."

Parent: "If all your friends were all jumping off a cliff/bridge, would you do it too?"

Veiled in this parent/child moment is a question philosophers, theologians, and everybody else wrestles with. Who or what is the source of authoritative truth? Susie, Mommy, or something or someone else?

Big people versions of this were seen a year ago in the election as politicians quoted perceived sources of authoritative truth to prove the soundness of their ideas. They used this scientific journal or that recent survey of Americans, only to have their opponent question the study or their interpretation. You turn on the TV now and you see the talking heads on cable news telling you what they think reality is. They're telling you what they think the truth is from their perspective.

From the playground to the White House, we are all living our lives according to an authority that we believe to be true, right, or somehow best. You are even evaluating what I have just said according to your own grid of whether what I am saying squares with reality as you believe it to be.

But what is actually true? What is authoritative? What is "final truth"? The Roman governor Pontius Pilate famously asked Jesus that very thing, "*What is truth?*" (John 18:38 ESV)

This was THE battleground of the Reformation. This is our third week in our series on the Reformation. It is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, which was a movement of God beginning in the 16th century, sparked by Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and others who recovered the gospel out of the Medieval church which had added layer upon layer of rituals, smells, and bells. These clouded and distracted and obscured the essential gospel.

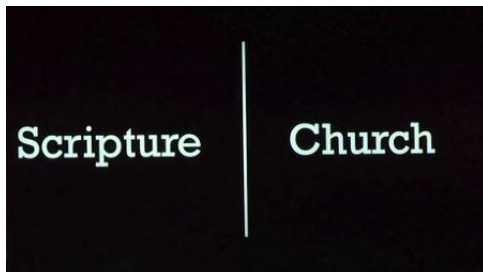
Our series is on the biblical doctrines the reformers recovered summarized by five solas (*sola* means "alone"). Scripture alone. Grace alone. Faith alone. Christ alone. God's glory alone. Last week we heard Martin Luther's famous refusal to recant in the face of excommunication and even death. "*I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus, I cannot and will not recant.*"¹

Remember last week, we had these diagrams (see next page) of the possible relationship between the Word and the church. The first possibility is that the church is the authority over Scripture. I don't know anybody who teaches that (I know people who practice that!), but I don't know anyone who formally teaches that.

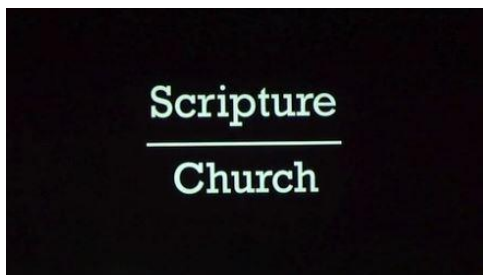
¹ Martin Luther, as quoted by Heiko Augustinus Oberman; translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart, *Luther, Man Between God and the Devil*, p. 39.



The second is actually the teaching of the Medieval church, which was that Scripture and the teachings of the church, and the declarations of the councils and popes, etc. are on equal footing (see below). They are the same. They are inspired. They are authoritative.



The third possibility is that Scripture is the authority over the church (see below). The reformers refused to allow any teachings or traditions of man to trump the authority of God's Word. God's Word is more important, more authoritative, more truth-filled than any word from any man no matter who he is. That, by the way, is the position of our church.



We saw last week that God's Word has at least three qualities that man's word never has:

- Inspiration – God is the source of Scripture
- Inerrant – God is true so his Word cannot contain error
- Infallible – God is true so his Word cannot be false

"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." (2 Timothy 3:16–17)

We focused last week on Scripture as being sourced in God. This week is the outworking of Sola Scriptura in life, or as Paul writes, Scripture teaches and trains making us spiritually mature ready for every good work. This is not because we are incredible bastions of truth and amazingly good at applying it to life. It is because God's Word is itself life-changing and with the aid of the Holy Spirit in us, will bear its wonderful fruit.

"For 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." (Hebrews 4:12)

"Living and active." What man writes lacks this spiritual dynamic. But when God speaks, things happen. God spoke and the universe came into existence. His word is an expression of his character, which is all-powerful.

His written word is also. It bears all God's characteristics including his absolute authority. The reformers had it right. No pope or pastor or council or lay person, no matter how insightful, has truth authority like God's. Therefore, our words may be true but only as they are consistent with God's truth. The Protestant Reformation was not the rejection of all human teaching. Far from it, the reformers' books and pamphlets were the best sellers in all of Europe. It was a writing and teaching and preaching movement. In fact, on my Reformation tour I had the privilege of standing in Calvin's pulpit (see picture below). He preached over 2,000 sermons from that pulpit. But the authority behind what was said was what God had said, not what man had said.



Side note: this is why our general practice at Bethel is expositional preaching from the Bible. Expositional preaching is starting with what God has said. Most of the time, that means preaching through books of the Bible. We try to understand what God has said, interpret it rightly, and teach it rightly and then ask, how can we apply this to our lives? It begins with what God has said, not what the pastor thinks, or what I think you want to hear. We want to be that kind of a Bible-teaching, Bible-preaching church.

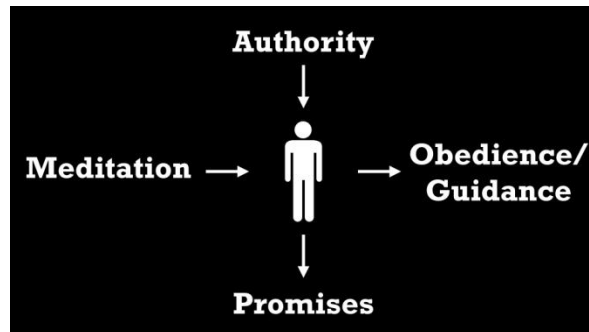
And by the way, a side note to my side note: that also means it doesn't matter who's doing it. It doesn't matter if I'm in the pulpit or somebody else is in the pulpit. What matters is that God's Word is being proclaimed. The Bible is our authority. The test is whether what is being taught is consistent with God's Word. The elders have a responsibility for guarding the doctrine of the church, but ultimately, this is the responsibility of the congregation.

And that is why, side note to the side note, to the side note: I think you should bring your Bible with you to church. You should be looking at it and studying it for yourself. Medieval European Christians were giving their lives to have a Bible; the least we can do is bring it and read it for ourselves. And that's what the reformers urged. That is what empowered the Reformation.

If what is being taught is consistent with the teaching of Scripture, then obey. If not, then get rid of the preacher.

The Reformation got rid of everything they deemed inconsistent with God's Word: icons. Worship practices. Everything was vetted by Scripture. Scripture was translated into the common languages of the people. Now people could read it for themselves.

But now what? Having a Bible is one thing. What do I do with it? What is my relationship to God's Word? (See diagram below)



Scripture Over Us (We Submit to Scripture)

This is the issue of authority; the foundational issue of the Reformation. The word "submit" here is good, but I think it must be much more than merely submission.

*"Thus says the LORD:
"Heaven is my throne,
and the earth is my footstool;
what is the house that you would build for me,
and what is the place of my rest?
All these things my hand has made,
and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD.
But this is the one to whom I will look:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit
and trembles at my word." (Isaiah 66:1-2)*

God is glorious. Heaven is his footstool. Yet, the kind of person God gives his loving attention to is one who trembles at his Word. "Tremble." Why "tremble"? Why not read the Bible like the newspaper? *Because "the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."* (Isaiah 40:8) Or we could put it this way, *The New York Times* withers and Oprah's Book Club will fade away. One million books are published every year. The Library of Congress has 16 million books. It is the storehouse of all the wisdom of man down through the ages. All of it will wither, fade, and burn. But the smallest thing God has said will last forever.

Our trembling is a loving, treasuring, trembling. *"Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day."* (Psalm 119:97) This whole Psalm 119 is a long love song about Scripture. Ten times it uses the word "delight." It is more delightful than other things we delight in, like sweets (honey), or money (thousands of gold and silver pieces).²

² Daniel Hyde, "The Word of God: How am I to Love God by Loving it?" www.Ligonier.org. January 6, 2014.

Let's be honest, aren't we often giving Scripture less attention than "tremble" and "love"? "Ambivalent" and "disinterested" might be closer to the truth. I know this because I see how long Bibles with names on them remain in the church lost and found. It's almost as if these people don't even realize their Bible is missing.

The real issue is not how or what I think about the Bible, it is how or what I think about God. The more I reverence him, love him, worship him, the more I will treasure his Word. Luther said, "The truth of Scripture comes first. After that is accepted one may determine whether the words of men can be accepted as true."³

What do you do when you get your mail? We look at who the mail is from. Mail that comes from people we don't care about we call what? Junk mail. We much prefer personal mail. Especially from someone we care about. If it's from a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, or wife, we may save that for the last one to open. Read it. Re-read it. Read it again. We may keep that card, put it on the fridge, put it by our nightstand. We don't want to throw it away. Why? Not because of what it says but who it's from.

If treasuring Scripture is a struggle, ask yourself, *have I downgraded God?* Ask God for a fresh heart vision of his glory, goodness, power, love, mercy, kindness, and grace. Treasure Scripture over us.

Scripture Under Us (We Stand on Scripture)

Martin Luther stood before a council (The Diet of Worms) requiring him to recant of his teachings and writings. He refuses to recant and concludes with these words, "Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise."⁴ "Here I stand." What did he mean? He meant that Sola Scriptura was not merely Scripture over him but also under him; under him as the foundation of his faith and hope. "*Here I stand.*"

Stand means trust. Trust what? Trust that God's Word will prove to be true. Trust in the promises of God. This is a huge blessing to us because so much of what God has said are promises from God to us.

- "*Fear not, for I am with you;
be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, I will help you,
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.*" (Isaiah 41:10)
- "*The LORD is on my side; I will not fear.
What can man do to me?*" (Psalm 118:6)

We have these and hundreds of other promises. We show that Scripture is our foundation when we take God at his Word and apply his promises to the difficulties of life.

I know for me over the years God has used different passages at certain times in my life right when I needed it. It gave me perspective. It sustained me. It got me through. I'm sure you could testify to the same.

³ Matthew Barrett (Ed.), *Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary*, p. 153.

⁴ Martin Luther as quoted by Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, p. 183.

Jesus said some people build their lives on sand, but others on the rock of God's truth. Which are you? Of course, it is times of difficulty where our real foundation is revealed. Like buildings in these hurricanes. You don't know which ones are wobbly till the winds and rain come. Maybe you are in a hurricane time right now. Everything feels shaky. You are fainting. You are weak. Do you actually believe the promises of God for his presence and provision?

Here's some Bethel Church history. When we built the auditorium 18 years ago, we placed under the pulpit three things before they sealed it with concrete: a Greek New Testament, an English Bible, and a hymnal. Dr. Joe Stowell II, the first pastor of our church, was invited to our grand opening. We shared that we had buried a Bible under the pulpit. He was in his early 90s but when he came to the pulpit, he looked down, and he said, "It's good to be standing on the promises." Indeed. Here we stand. We can do no other.

Scripture in Us (We Meditate on Scripture)

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." (Colossians 3:16)

God's Word over us is the final authority. God's Word under us, is the foundation of promises. For either of these to be effective we must have God's Word in us.

The Reformation exploded out of a desert of biblical truth. The people were starving for the gospel and God's Word. That's why translating the Bible into languages the common people could read was so huge. People literally gave their lives to have a Bible in their language. Tyndale. Wycliffe. Others were burned at the stake for translating the Bible into common languages. Why were they so committed?

"Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation." (1 Peter 2:2) After having two children of my own, I have personally witnessed how an infant communicates it's hungry. Scream! She's not satisfied until she eats. Peter says, be like that.

How do we get Scripture in us? Read it. Memorize it. Meditate on it. Discuss it with others. Hear it taught and preached. Teach it to others. Pray it. Sing it. Quote it. And other ways. We are blessed to have so many resources that place Scripture in our hearts and minds. Can I encourage you to do all you can to regularly expose your heart to God's Word? One way we provide is every weekend God's Word is proclaimed at Bethel Church. Make it a priority. Scripture over us—authority. Under us—foundation. In us—meditation.

Scripture Through Us (We Live Out Scripture)

Parents, have you had this experience?

"Sweetheart, it's time to stop watching TV and get ready for bed."

"OK Daddy!" She doesn't move.

"Sweetheart, it's time to stop watching TV and get ready for bed."

"OK Daddy!" Still doesn't move.

What if I asked, *"Honey, are my words important to you?"*

"Yes, Daddy, they are the most important words in my whole life."

Really? It sure doesn't look like it.

I wonder how often God looks down at us, hearing our apparent commitments to him, seeing our Bibles around the house or the Bible apps on our phone, seeing us nodding our heads at Sola Scriptura sermons, yet, we are still on the couch NOT prioritizing Daddy's words. How do you know if Scripture is over you, under you, and in you?

Obedience to God's Word

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." (James 1:22) James goes on to describe this person like someone who looks in a mirror but then walks away without making any necessary changes. Like, what difference is what you see actually making to you?

If my daughter says, "OK Daddy," and quickly obeys, I know she is putting my word ahead of her own desires. Obedience to God's moral and spiritual will in his Word is really the bottom line.

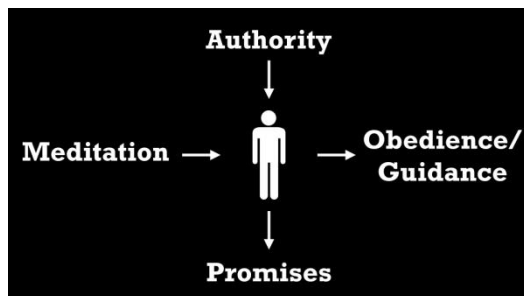
Yes, we believe in grace and forgiveness and we all fail in my respects. But that doesn't mitigate the need for a life of obedience to God's Word. Sola Scriptura leads to life Scriptura.

Guidance by God's Word

Not all decisions in life are about obedience, many are questions of guidance. Wisdom. Choosing what is best. God's Word is so helpful here too. It tells us what to prioritize.

- *"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."* (Matthew 6:33)
- *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."* (Romans 12:2)
- *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart...and he will make straight your paths."* (Proverbs 3:5-6)

"[God's Word] is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (Psalm 119:105) We are the sum of our decisions. God's Word and wisdom will guide us toward decisions that please God. When my mind is renewed and saturated by God's Word, the inclinations of my heart lean toward the things God wants in my life. With those decisions come the blessings of God on my life. The house of my life is built on the rock and my decisions and directions are too. Let's review.



Scripture over us—authority. Under us—promises. In us—Bible intake. Through us—obedience and guidance. Sola Scriptura. Let's be doctrinally right but let's make sure right doctrine leads to right living. *"This God—his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true; he is a shield for all those who take refuge in him."* (Psalm 18:30)

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