

Sola: Scripture Alone

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This October is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. It was not an event; it was more of a tsunami in Western civilization at the time. It was not a tsunami of technology, although technology played a role. It was not a tsunami of politics, although it changed empires and nations forever. It was a tsunami of truth. Not truth merely in the ivory towers of academia, although it shook and changed them too. It was truth on the street level. Truth in the alleys and pubs. Truth in the homes and in the kitchens. It was a truth tsunami for people like you and me. It lit up Europe and changed the world forever.

What truth? The real gospel of Jesus. Over the centuries man-made rituals and traditions had obscured the gospel in the church. They didn't subtract from the gospel as much as they added to the gospel. We called this last week, "gospel plus." The real gospel plus anything changes the essential nature of the gospel. God used the Reformers to clear away the plus stuff and get back to the essential gospel.

Key in this story is a guy named Martin Luther. He was an Augustinian Monk who became a University Professor. A fastidious follower of gospel plus teaching, he followed the traditions of the Western Church ruthlessly. He never had peace. He always felt guilty and the terror of God haunted him.

As he taught through Galatians and Romans, he began to see that what the church was telling him and what Scripture taught were very different. Specifically, Romans 1:17 (KJV), *"the just shall live by faith."* Luther hadn't lived by faith; he lived by law and tradition and ritual. He was trying desperately to save himself. The blinders came off and he embraced the apostolic biblical gospel of salvation by faith in Jesus alone. Sola Faith. Sola Grace. Sola Christ. He went public with his disputes with the Church and long story short, sparked the Protestant Reformation which populated the world with new and renewed churches, protestant churches, united by a Sola Gospel belief.

This October is the 500th anniversary of that tsunami. We are doing a fall series on the truths that created the tsunami and today we address the foundational sola that allows the other solas to stand. Sola Scriptura. English: Scripture Alone.

So here's the scene. It's 1517. A Catholic council was called—really a trial—to either condemn Luther as a heretic and potentially to death or exonerate him (which nobody really thought was possible short of a mea culpa by Luther). Cardinal Eck pressed Luther, "Will you recant of your writings and teachings?" Luther responded:

"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason—for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves—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, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. God help me. Amen."¹

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

These famous words hold a key to the entire Reformation. "My conscience is captive to the Word of God." While the essence of the Reformation was the gospel, the foundational truth that held the whole thing up was a conscientious conviction that the final authority for all matters of faith was the Word of God. And this was at a time where this was a real battleground. What was the final authority? Bible or Church? Bible or Tradition? In many places they were given equal authority.

Now this was not the case in the early church. They had the Apostles and the Old Testament Scriptures. If you had a question, like Acts 15 regarding the Gentiles' responsibility to the Mosaic law, you simply asked the Apostles. That doesn't mean that everything the Apostles said or did was inspired by God. Peter was wrong in pulling away from Gentile believers when the Jews showed up and Paul called him on the carpet for it (Galatians 2:12 ESV). Peter erred. Paul and Barnabas had a serious falling out. Yet, the Apostles spoke with Jesus-granted authority. But they all eventually died. Then what? Where is final authority found?

From the beginning it was recognized that some of the writings of the Apostles were more than mere letters. They were actually God's Word through the Apostles' writing.

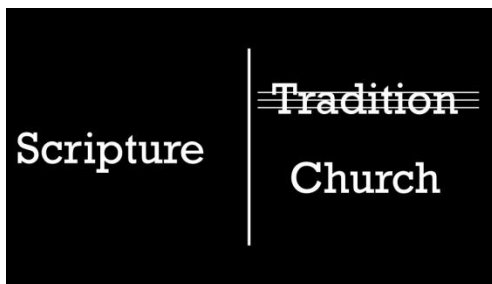
"And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures." (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Peter calls Paul's letters "Scripture" and places them on par with "other Scriptures." The story of the New Testament is the early church gathering apostolic letters and gospels and affirming their status as Scriptures. The church did not make writings Scripture; Scripture is self-authenticating. The church recognized what was Scripture and collected them into what we call the New Testament. That subtle but important distinction was lost over the centuries. How?

Let's summarize the authority structure options. The Church over Scripture is an option, although I am unaware of any branch of Christianity that overtly practices this.



Church and Scripture equal is the belief of the Roman Catholic Church and other ancient churches. They call it "Tradition" which means interpretations and teaching decrees over the centuries are viewed on equal authority as Scripture (See next page).



By the time you get to the 16th century, the treacherous possibility of tradition being equal with Scripture had allowed for terrible abuses of authority and even more horrific doctrines. There is a long list but the indulgence doctrine is an easy one and was central in the Reformation. The indulgence doctrine taught if a donation was made to the church you would receive a certificate guaranteeing time in purgatory would be reduced by up to 1902,202 years and 270 days. It was a full or partial remission for sins drawn from the Treasury of Merit which was a storehouse of grace funded by the death of Christ and the good works of the saints.² Your instinct might be to say, “Where is that in the Bible?” When the church or tradition is equal with the Bible, it doesn’t matter if it’s in there or not.

If you are a protestant with no background in an ancient church, that sounds like craziness. If you grew up in 16th century Europe with no Bible to read and only a priest at church to explain anything to you, how could you know anything different? *It must be true. The Church has said this. Who am I—a butcher, a baker, or candlestick maker—to question what the church has said?*

We come at this with unintentional ignorance because most of us have a Bible on our phone in our pocket in 15 translations with podcasts and study Bible notes too. We can’t fathom NOT having access to the Bible. With no Bible or no understandable Bible, practical authority rests wholly in the authorities of the Church and what they say. If Scripture and tradition are equal, but nobody can read Scripture, effectively the Church IS over Scripture.

This is why part of the story was the established church desperately trying to keep the Bible from being translated in the language of the people. It was in Latin at the time. They wanted to keep it in Latin. It might as well have been pig-Latin. Remember pig-Latin? It was a way to say words where nobody else knew what you were saying. I could never do it well. The Church was desperate to keep the Bible in pig-Latin. They knew if people actually knew what the Bible said, the traditions and practices and authority they survived on would collapse or they would be forced to defend them. *Excuse me, Pope Leo, where exactly do you get 1,902,202 years and 270 days from?*

The trial of Luther and subsequent tribunals would show Luther and the Reformers saying, Scripture is above the Church; Scripture is over tradition (see chart next page).

² Matthew Barrett, *God’s Word Alone*, p. 34.



At the same time, the Roman Church was saying, we will tell you what the Scriptures mean and what we say is equal with Scripture! Which is it?

Ins and Out of Sola Scriptura

"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)

The key phrase is the first one. All Scripture is *breathed out* by God. The word "All" encompasses the entirety of writings that are Scripture. What makes writings Scripture? What gives it its authority? It is "breathed out" by God. Now God doesn't have lungs, but this is language that accommodates our understanding of the way things work. When we speak, we must breathe out. If you try speaking while breathing in you make weird noises. Words require breathing out. All Scripture is God breathing out, He spoke. Scripture is God talk. It is God speaking to us. Its character flows from its source. Scripture comes from God. Its authority comes from him. It isn't made Scripture by decree of the church. It doesn't have authority *if* the church says it's authoritative.

Jesus said, *"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."* (Matthew 5:18) God trumps the church and any tradition. That is the "out" of Sola Scriptura. God breathed out his Word to us in written form. This is known as **Inspiration**. God breathes out a written Bible that is therefore inspired by God.

But this necessitates other truths. If God is the source of Scripture, then it must be truthful and perfect. **Infallible** and **Inerrant** are two other theology words for Scripture. Both of them flow from the character of the author God. Since God is the source, Scripture must be true because God is true. Nothing false. In him there is no darkness at all. So His Word is without error (inerrant) and without the possibility of being false (infallible).

You may say, *Wait, if God spoke through humans, God may be perfect, but we all know humans aren't.* How can what is written in Scripture be perfect if humans were involved? *"For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit."* (2 Peter 1:21)

The God who speaks through the heavens and the beauty of creation can and did also speak through human authors in a way where what they wrote was their words, contains their personalities, but the ultimate source was not the will of the writer but the will of God through the writing of man to produce the Word of God.

Further, Jesus is the perfect union of deity and humanity, Scripture is like that. God and human.

This is where our gospel plus from last week is so important. The Western Church had the Bible (along with some apocryphal books disputed and not ultimately included in early church and post-Reformation Bibles). They had the Bible but what they also had, or added, were the teachings and decrees of councils and popes and theologians which were held at the same level as the Bible.

The Reformers rejected that along with the superstructure of church tradition that they couldn't find anywhere in the Bible. The cry of the Reformation was, *Where is that in the Bible?*

The ins and the outs. God breathed out His Word through human authors creating a written Word that is inspired, inerrant, and infallible.

What Sola Scriptura Doesn't Mean – Just Me, my Bible, and Jesus

How easy it is to overcorrect. Like driving your car on a Northwest Indiana snowy day. If the back wheels start sliding sideways, you need to correct without overcorrecting. Overcorrecting puts you in the other ditch on the other side.

Overcorrecting here can put you in the other ditch. Sola Scriptura sounds like all I need is the Bible. Sola Scriptura means by the Bible alone. They call this in Latin Nuda Scriptura. Nuda sounds like what? Nude. Nuda Scriptura describes the over-correction that says, me and my Bible is all I need. Listen to one Nudist from the 19th century, Alexander Campbell:

*"I endeavored to read the Scriptures as if no one had ever read them before me, and I am as much on my guard against reading them today, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatever."*³

Matthew Barrett adds this comment, *"While tradition is not being elevated to the level of Scripture, the individual is!...we must acknowledge that "Scripture alone" doesn't mean "me-alone."*⁴

Scriptural nudists appear sincere, but it is only pride that says *I and I alone have the correct interpretation! The thousands of years godly people have read, thought, and wrote about this all got it wrong. I and I alone have uncovered something radically new and nobody but me can see it clearly!*

That's called a cult and before long you are drinking the Kool-Aid thinking you are the most insightful Christian that has ever lived. The truth is that we are blessed to stand on the shoulders of centuries of faithful interpreters of Scripture who were gifted by the Holy Spirit to understand God's holy Word. If you think you uncover something nobody has ever thought or believed before, you are not amazing; you are likely a heretic.

What Sola Scriptura Does Mean – Scripture is Sufficient

The sufficiency of Scripture says that God's Word is complete, lacking nothing we actually need, and fully capable of providing truth to believe and live the life to which God has called

³ Alexander Campbell as quoted by Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone*, p. 345-6

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 345-6.

us. It doesn't contain all there is to know, but it does contain all that is necessary to know to live the life God expects.

It does not mean that all truth is found in the Bible. Geometry and biology and other sciences discover and describe truth. They may not interpret it rightly, but God's truth is found beyond the Bible because all truth is God's truth. It means the Bible is sufficient for what we need to know, believe, and live.

- *"His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."* (2 Peter 1:3 NIV)
- *"...and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.* (2 Timothy 3:15)
- *"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."* (Revelation 22:18-19)

How committed are you to the trustworthiness of the Bible? What would you stake on it? What would you be willing to risk for it?

This is where the Reformation indicts modern-day Christianity where we have access to Scripture more than any other Christians in history and the least interest in it. Most of us have more Bible on our phones than entire cities of Christians would have had in the 16th century.

It's one thing to have the Bible, it's another to so treasure it that you stake your life on its teaching. The list of Reformers who refused to recant anything in Scripture and were burned at the stake is awe-inspiring. They died for truth as found in God's Word refusing to elevate any tradition or teaching above it.

- **John Huss** – before being lit on fire said, *"God is my witness that I have never taught that of which I have been accused by false witnesses. In the truth of the Gospel which I have written, taught, and preached I will die today with gladness."* 102 years before Luther nailed his 95 theses, Huss proclaimed as the fire grew around him, *"In 100 years, God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed."*⁵
- **Hugh Latimer** – a godly man in England who tirelessly taught God's Word, was sentenced to die for failing to put the church on equal footing with Scripture. Latimer was burned at the stake with Nicholas Ridley. As they are about to burn he said to Ridley, *"Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."*⁶
- **Thomas Cranmer** – Archbishop of Canterbury in England. Later in his life under arrest and threat of death, recanted his reformation doctrines. Then dramatically, when given the pulpit, recanted his recantations. He was pulled from the pulpit and

⁵ John Huss, as quoted by Matthew Gilbert, *Come to the Well: 50 Meditations to Fuel Your Joy in God*, Chapter 6, page unknown.

⁶ Hugh Latimer as quoted by John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, p. 309.

drug to the same spot Ridley and Latimer had been killed, and they lit the fire on him. He told them the first thing to burn would be the hand that had written a recantation. He made sure of it as he thrust his right hand into the fire.⁷

These and many others show the passion for God's Word. Next week we are going to look at what Sola Scriptura looks like in our everyday lives.

But hear it this week. From Luther's, "*I shall not recant,*" to Wycliffe, Huss, Tyndale, Latimer, Cranmer, these and many, many others refused to upgrade the traditions and teachings of men above Scripture. How could they when they loved and worshiped the God who spoke the Scriptures into existence?

We don't worship the Bible, but because we worship God we hold his Word over the fallible words of any man, council, pope, or pastor.

Martin Luther once said, "*I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing.... The Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.*"⁸

Over our church we say the same—*God, by his Word and through His Spirit has done it all. We look back on the radical Reformation God used by unleashing his Word and gospel and pray, God, do it again. For your glory. By your Spirit. Through your Christ. By your Holy Word. Sola Scriptura.*

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⁷ Summarized from *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, pp.351-387.

⁸ Martin Luther as quoted by Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, p. 55.