

Sola Scriptura
Selected Scriptures
ABC 10/1/17

In 1521 the German Reformer, Martin Luther, was summoned to appear in Worms before the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V to defend what he'd taught & written. Soon after he arrived, it was clear he wasn't brought there to defend his views; he was there to recant them. Laid out on the table were 25 books or articles he'd written. The titles were read & Luther was asked if he were the author, & if so, would he reject their content. Luther asked for more time to respond & was given until 4 pm the next day. When the time arrived & Luther stood before the counsel, he said this:

The works are mine, but ... unless I am convicted by Scripture & plain reason--I do not accept the authority of popes & councils, for they have contradicted each other--my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot & I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.¹

For Luther, it was all about the teaching of Scripture. He didn't trust the pope. He didn't trust the councils. He'd seen how they contradicted the Bible & each other. Luther learned to trust in the Scriptures alone & we should as well. My message this morning is entitled, *Sola Scriptura*. It's the 1st of a 5 sermon series that will be looking at what are referred to as *The Solas*. They are the core doctrines of the Reformation. If you're a protestant, your theological heritage can be traced back to these Reformers. It was on Oct 31, 1517 that an obscure Catholic monk named Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. He had no idea his actions would change the course of history. He hoped merely to spark debate about church practices he saw as corrupt. Instead he ignited a revolution whose flames burn to this day. We are Protestants because we stand with Martin Luther & the other Reformers with our faith & practice grounded in Scripture. As we come to the 500th anniversary of this, I thought it appropriate to look at these things. What are these *Solas*? The 1st is *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture alone, meaning we look to the Scripture alone for our authority & guidance in spiritual matters. As John Huss said to His opponents who were calling him to denounce his beliefs, *Show me from*

¹ www.luther.de/en/worms.html

*Scripture & I will repent & recant!*² Next week, we'll take up *Sola Fide*, faith alone meaning that salvation comes by faith alone. You don't combine your works with your faith to obtain salvation. It comes through simple trust in Jesus our Savior. Our 3rd message will be on *Sola Gratia*, grace alone. That is, salvation is entirely a gift of God. Our salvation isn't based on or merited by anything we do. There's nothing we do to merit God's grace. 4th, we'll look at *Sola Christus*, Christ alone. This means our salvation comes only through Christ. It doesn't come through the sacraments or traditions of the church, but only through Jesus. Finally, we'll look at *Sola Deo Gloria*, glory to God alone. We take no glory for ourselves. All the glory for our salvation goes to God, both now & for all eternity. PRAY

The Protestant Reformation threw the Christian world into chaos. At the beginning of the 1400's the Pope's authority was absolute & the only means of *salvation* were the sacraments given by the church. There was a secular/sacred distinction that was ironclad, meaning the priests & laity lived in 2 separate worlds. There was no concept of corporate worship, preaching, or Bible reading in the churches. & as far as doctrine was concerned, there was no debate; the creeds & declarations from Rome were the law. Things had been this way for 600 years. In a world where life expectancy was in the 30's, that's essentially saying the church had been in the dark forever. But as you fast-forward to the end of the 1500's, all of that had been turned upside down. The absolute rule of the Pope had vanished, partly due to the 40 year period where 2 rival popes both ruled, & both excommunicated each other. The Holy Roman Empire was no longer relevant & the political world had passed the Pope by. Protestants found themselves in the wake of this upheaval, & there was one major question to be answered: What did Protestants believe? The reformation had followed similar & simultaneous tracks in multiple countries, yet at the end of it all the content of Protestantism was much the same. On the essentials, German, English, Swiss, & Dutch Protestants all stood for the same theology. But what was it? The beliefs of Catholicism were in their creeds & councils. But Protestants were so named because they protested against all that. So what were their beliefs? This is where the 5 solas come in. These were 5 statements

² www.livingsacrifice.us/living4god/pt10.html

about the content of the gospel, & by the end of the 1500's, these were the terms which identified Protestantism. These aren't an extensive statement on theology, but simply served as a way to explain what the content of the gospel was. The meaning of the word *sola* is alone or only. In the words of RC Sproul, *It is not an exaggeration to say that the eye of the Reformation tornado was this one little word.*³ We look to the Scriptures alone. We are justified by faith alone. We are saved by grace alone. It is on the merit of Christ alone. & we're to live to the glory of God alone. All of the reformers believed in these fundamental doctrines.

1st & fundamental to all of the reformers was the sufficiency of Scripture. In matters of faith, believers are compelled by no other authority than that of Scripture. Our only ultimate authority is the Bible. How can we know the truth about God? We go to the Bible because it stands supreme above all other books because it alone is the pure & undiluted Word of God. Scripture alone is sufficient to accomplish God's work in the soul. In other words, to understand the ways of God, you don't need human council, popes, new revelation, or others to tell you what to believe. You simply need the Scriptures. This was the foundational fight the Reformers had in the 1500s. Will the Bible be accessible to the people in their own language so they can read it for themselves? Or will the priests & popes dispense the Bible at their whim? In the days of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church wasn't about the Bible. It was about priests, popes, & power. The popes & priests were the keepers of the truth. They were the interpreters of Scripture. Knowledge of the Bible was scarce among common people & the church was doing little to change that. People were kept in the dark about what the Bible said. But this all changed in the days of the Reformation. The Reformers challenged the Roman Catholic Church & fought hard for the Scriptures to be in the hands of the everyday worker. William Tyndale is famous for his argument with the Catholic Church. When they argued in favor of the church & the popes & the councils, Tyndale retorted, *I defy the Pope, & all his laws, & if God spares my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that drives the plow to know more of the Scriptures than you do.*⁴ He made it his life's work to get the Scriptures into the hands of the people. He translated the Bible

³ *What is Reformed Theology?: Understanding the Basics*, digital edition

⁴ www.desiringgod.org/messages/always-singing-one-note-a-vernacular-bible

into English & spent his life spreading copies of the Bible throughout all Europe. He was eventually betrayed, charged with heresy, tied to a stake, & strangled. Shortly afterwards his body was burned. His famous last words were, *Lord, open the King of England's eyes*.⁵ This prayer was answered, when James 1 commissioned a standard English translation, which was completed in 1611, some 75 years after Tyndale's death. Tyndale wasn't the only one to die getting the Scripture into the hands of the people. 150 years before Tyndale was martyred, John Wycliffe experienced the same fate for the same crime. He, too, was passionate about getting the Bible into the hands of the people so they might read it for themselves.⁶ To be clear, Wycliffe & Tyndale weren't martyred because they distributed the Bible. They were martyred because of their beliefs which were contrary to the Roman Catholic Church. But their beliefs came from the Bibles they worked hard to distribute. & it was their conviction that the Bible clearly taught these things. It was their conviction that the Bible in the hands of the people was the way to confront the errors & corruptions of the day. In other words, if you get the Scriptures into the hands of people & they read it for themselves, God uses it to open their eyes to see the truth of His Word. Never take for granted the Bible in your hand! The hope of these men was there would be reformation in the church. They were battling against the abuses & authority of the church. The only way they would win their battle is to appeal to a higher authority, the authority of the Scriptures. Is Scripture our sole authority? Turn to 2 Tim 3:16-17. Let's read this & make a few comments about it. **3:16-17**

These vs simply put forth the unique character of Scripture. It is breathed out by God. This is what we call *inspiration*. This is why we can call the Scriptures *The Word of God*, because God has breathed out the words we read here. Because of this, the Bible is unique. No other text in all the world can make such a claim. & no other text can have such absolute authority over our lives. This is what *Sola Scriptura* is all about. It's about authority. When it comes to spiritual matters, to what must we look? Shall we look to the church? To our own feelings & experiences? No, we look to Scripture. It's the Scripture that God has inspired. & it's the Scriptures that are

⁵ www.ligonier.org/blog/william-tyndales-final-words/

⁶ www.jstor.org/stable/3135994

profitable for teaching, reproof, correction & training in righteousness. & it's precisely because of God's role in producing the Scripture that gives us the assurance that the Bible has this authority in our lives. Peter said, **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 Pt 1:21). Men, moved by the Holy Spirit, spoke from God. & this is what we have in the Bible. In the days of the Reformation, the church didn't deny this, but claimed it wasn't the only authority for our lives. Added to Scripture was tradition, meaning the things passed down from those who'd gone before. It speaks of the official teaching of the church. At issue here for us with *Sola Scriptura* is the role of tradition. In other words, when it comes to what we believe, is it Scripture alone? Or is it Scripture + tradition? Is the Bible sufficient to guide us in faith & practice, or is it not? Do we need another authority to tell us what the Scriptures teach? Do we need someone or something to clarify the issues for us? The answer isn't as simple as proclaiming, *Away with tradition! It's of no use to us!* & there are those in our day & age, especially in light of our American individualism, who would take the words of Luther & run with them. *It's my conscience that is the ultimate guide. It is how I read the Bible that matters. It's how I interpret it that's important.* & thus, effectively, they've come to believe in *Solo Scriptura*, which means it's only the Scripture as I interpret it that matters. But *Sola Scriptura* isn't *Solo Scriptura*. There is room for others to teach & guide. **The church of the living God is a pillar & support of the truth** (1 Tim 3:15). We don't take the Scriptures in a vacuum, as if each of us are an end to ourselves. No, we're part of a body that comes to believe these things together. We have a corporate wisdom. If you have some belief that nobody else holds to (that you believe you see in the Scriptures, but others don't), I'd encourage you to think strongly about your position. It may be that you're going *solo*. Such was never the position of the Reformers. Along with the Reformers, I too believe there's a place for tradition in the life of the church. & I say that very carefully. But I say this because Paul himself speaks of tradition. He speaks of following the things that he **handed down**. He told those in Thessalonica to follow them. 2 Thes 2:15 says, **So then, brethren, stand firm & hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by a letter from us.** Paul continues in 2 Thes, **Now we command you,**

brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from any brother who leads an unruly life & not according to the tradition which you received from us (3:6). Furthermore, there are many things we look to in history that help guide us. We look to the early church. We look to the Council of Nicea (325 AD) & see how they condemned the Arians & affirmed the full deity of Jesus. We affirm what they said. We look to the Council of Constantinople (381 AD), & the Council of Ephesus (431 AD), & the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), & see how they clarified the nature of Christ. We affirm what they said about Jesus, 2 natures in one Person. Jesus is fully divine & fully human at the same time! We affirm the Chicago Statement of 1978 on the inerrancy of Scripture & the Nashville Statement of 2017 on biblical sexuality. This is the historic orthodox position of the church & we agree that this is what Scripture teaches. Yet there are some things in some of these councils that we don't agree with. We don't call Mary the *God-Bearer* or *the Mother of God*. Protestants (including the Reformers) look at tradition as helpful. Roman Catholics would look at tradition as authoritative. In other words, to the Roman Catholic, when the church speaks, she speaks with authority & her teachings are infallible. But to the Protestant, the church's authority is derived from the teaching of the Scripture. & as long as they teach the Scripture, their authority is to be accepted. If they deviate from the Scripture or go beyond the Scripture, their authority is worthless. This is what we mean by *Sola Scriptura*, looking to the Scriptures as the final authority, not the proclamations of the church. It's one thing for the church to gather together in humility, seeking to work together to clarify the teaching of the Scripture. This is a good thing. & we need to strongly consider their conclusions. But it's another thing when the church begins inventing things. Like the priesthood or the papacy or praying to Mary or purgatory or the entire system of penance & indulgences. Things about which the Scripture knows nothing. & in 1854 the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary & in 1950 the bodily assumption of the immaculate Virgin were added to the Roman Catholic's doctrine. These man-made traditions made Mary equal to Jesus in many ways. *Sola Scriptura* leads us to reject these things as inventions of the church, not teachings of Scripture. *Sola Scriptura* doesn't mean we reject church history, tradition, the councils, commentaries, or biblical sermons. All those have

value & we should never reject the biblical wisdom passed down from previous generations. However, we believe those things, as good as they are, can never be of equal value with the Word of God. We respect history but are not bound by it. JI Packer says church history is like one long Bible study in which Augustine, Aquinas, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, Spurgeon, & many others have taken part.⁷ We ought to respect the thinking of the godly saints who've gone before & labored to correctly understand & apply the Bible. This is why we have creeds & doctrinal statements. But these statements can never be used to overturn the clear teaching of the Bible. Perhaps the best way to understand *Sola Scriptura* & the dangers of tradition is in the context of Jesus interacting with the Jews. The Jewish religion in the days of Jesus was much like the Roman Catholic religion of Luther's day. Judaism was controlled by a pecking order & highly centralized. Rather than priests & bishops it was scribes & Pharisees. They even had their equivalent of a pope, the high priest, who functioned both as a political leader & a religious leader. The Jewish Religion assented to the truths of the Scripture but had built a hedge of years of tradition around the Scriptures. Today the Talmud contains some 6,000 pages of rabbinic teaching on the law & ethics & philosophy & customs & history.⁸ This is the tradition to which the Jews look, even today. Much of this takes you far beyond what's written in Scripture, just as the Roman Catholics believe in the veneration of Mary, penance, indulgence, purgatory, & prayer to the saints, all of which go beyond the teaching of the Bible. The Jewish religion of Jesus day was a burdensome religion. Jesus said the leaders of Israel **tie up burdens heavy & hard to bear & lay them on the shoulders of men; but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger** (Mt 23:4). There were some believing Jews in Jesus' day, especially among the masses. They loved to come & listen to Jesus. They longed for something better than what the Jews were providing. & I have no doubt there are genuine believers in the Catholic Church as well. But, by & large, they're believing in spite of what the church teaches, not because of it. So how did Jesus deal with the traditions of the Jewish people? He smashed them. He never spoke well of the traditions of the Pharisees. Listen to **Mt 12:1-8**.

⁷ Ray Pritchard, www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1997-06-15-sola-scriptura-the-bible-and-only-the-bible/

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talmud>

Plucking heads of grain on the Sabbath was one of those oral traditions that the Jews had developed regarding the Sabbath. They outlined what you can & can't do. & plucking grain was work; you definitely couldn't do that. When the disciples were doing so, the Pharisees were quick to point out their law-breaking. But Jesus turns them away from their Sabbath traditions & turns them toward the Bible. Hosea 6:6 says, **I desire mercy, & not sacrifice**. In other words, if you're hungry, you can pluck & eat. Even if it is the Sabbath. For Jesus, it was the teaching of the Bible that trumped the teaching of tradition. Look at **Mt 15:1-9**.

The Jews were concerned about their traditions & not about the commandments. & if their traditions nullified the law, that was fine with them. Their traditions were more important. Jesus constantly referred people back to the sufficiency of the Scripture. Do you remember Jesus telling of the rich man & Lazarus? The rich man enjoyed all the pleasures of this world while Lazarus was poor. But when they died, their roles were reversed. Lazarus was in Abraham's bosom, but the rich man was **in Hades ... far off, being in torment** (Lk 16:23). The rich man cried out to Abraham, **Father Abraham, have mercy on me, & send Lazarus, that he might dip the tip of his finger in water & cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame** (24). Such are the terrors of hell! When Abraham told him it was impossible, the rich man requested that Lazarus go & warn his 5 brothers lest they too experience this fate. Listen to Abraham's words. **They have Moses & the Prophets; let them hear them** (29). Jesus doesn't direct them to the Jewish traditions, but to the Scriptures. This is significant. When the rich man suggests it's important for Lazarus to rise from the dead & go in person to plead with them, Abraham replies, **If they do not listen to Moses & the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead** (31). Such is the power of the Word of God. If people don't listen to the Bible, they won't believe a miracle, nor will they be convinced through the teaching of tradition. & that's why Sola Scriptura is so important. The power is in the God-breathed Scripture. Martin Luther witnessed the power of the Scripture. This is what he spoke of when he looked back on the Reformation:

I will preach, speak, write, but I will force no one; for faith must be voluntary. Take me as an example. I stood up against the Pope, indulgences, & all papists, but without violence or uproar. I only urged, preached, & declared God's Word, nothing else.

*& yet while I was asleep, or drinking Wittenberg beer ..., the Word inflicted greater injury on popery than prince or emperor ever did. I did nothing, the Word did everything.*⁹

That's not surprising, is it? Heb 4:12 says **the Word of God is living & active & sharper than any 2-edged sword, & piercing as far as the division of soul & of spirit, of both joints & marrow, & able to judge the thoughts & intentions of the heart.** Here's an observation Charles Spurgeon made:

*Suppose a number of persons were to take it into their heads that they had to defend a lion, full-grown king of beasts! There he is in the cage, & here come all the soldiers of the army to fight for him. Well, I should suggest to them, if they would not object, & feel that it was humbling to them, that they should kindly stand back, & open the door, & let the lion out! I believe that would be the best way of defending him, for he would take care of himself; & the best 'apology' for the gospel is to let the gospel out.*¹⁰

That's why we need to fight for the Bible. That's why we need to do all we can to love & know this book & encourage others to read & know it. God's work is done through His Word. You take one step away from Sola Scriptura & you've put your foot on a theological banana peel. You're headed down a slippery slope & will crash at the bottom.

Our application this morning is this: Do you practice Sola Scriptura? It's one thing to profess Sola Scriptura. It's another to practice it. How central was the Bible in your life this week? Did you read it? Did you meditate on it? Did you pray over it? Do the words of Ps 19 resonate in your heart? Consider the truth of vss 7-8:

**The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes;**

It's the Word of God that revives the soul. It's the Word of God that makes simple people wise. It's the Word of God that gives joy to our heart. It's the Word of God that enlightens our eyes. Is this your experience? As David said, Consider the following statement made by David: **The Scriptures are more desirable than gold--than an abundance of pure gold; & sweeter than honey, which comes from the honeycomb** (Ps 19:10). God's Word is to be greatly desired. More than wealth. More than sweets. This was David's experience. Is it yours? Joel Beeke well says, ...

How well do we understand the principle of sola Scriptura? Do we search, love, live, & pray over the Holy Scriptures? Is the Bible the compass that leads us through the storms & over the waves

⁹ Schaff, p 389

¹⁰ Sermon titled, *Christ & His Co-Workers*, 6/10/1886

we encounter in this life? Is Scripture the mirror by which we dress ourselves (Jn 1:22-27), the rule by which we work (Gal 6:16), the water with which we wash (Ps 119:9), the fire that warms us (Lk 24:32), the food that nourishes us (Job 23:12), the sword with which we fight (Eph 6:17), the counselor who resolves our doubts & fears (Ps 119:24), & the heritage that enriches us (Ps 119:111-112)? Are we learning from Scripture? ... Has sola Scriptura become our personal watchword, causing us, like Luther & Calvin, to become captive in our consciences to the very words of God?¹¹

Luther & those who followed him declared that salvation was not in the church or the councils but only in Jesus. The Bible doesn't save you, it's the gospel of Jesus Christ that saves you. But where do you find this good news? You don't find it in Oprah or Rosie or on the Late Show. You can't get the gospel that way. Where has God put the gospel? He put the gospel in his book. That's where the gospel is. The issue is this: Has God spoken? & if God has spoken, did He speak the truth? & if God has spoken truth, where can we find it? Those are the great questions of our time. Has God spoken? Has He spoken the truth? & where can we find it? Only in the Bible. We are Protestants. We stand with Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, & a host of others who staked everything on the truth of the Bible & only the Bible. Only it is divinely inspired, verbally true, its inspiration extends to all its parts. It's the God-breathed message from God the Father & it's absolutely authoritative in everything it says. We must hold on to the Bible & believe it & never turn away from it. I can do no better than to finish with the challenge from JC Ryle.

Next to praying there is nothing so important in practical religion as Bible-reading. God has mercifully given us a book which is "able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim 3:15). By reading that book we may learn what to believe, what to be, & what to do; how to live with comfort, & how to die in peace. Happy is that man who possesses a Bible! Happier still is he who reads it! Happiest of all is he who not only reads it, but obeys it, & makes it the rule of his faith & practice!

Nevertheless it is a sorrowful fact that man has a sad ability to abuse God's gifts. His privileges, & power, & abilities, are all ingeniously perverted to other ends than those for which they were bestowed. His speech, his imagination, his intellect, his strength, his time, his influence, his money—instead of being used as instruments for glorifying his Maker—are generally wasted, or employed for his own selfish ends. & just as man naturally makes a bad use of his other mercies from God, so he does of the written Word. One sweeping charge may be brought against the whole of Christendom, & that charge is neglect & abuse of the Bible.

To prove this charge we have no need to look elsewhere: the proof lies at our own doors. I have no doubt that there are more Bibles in our country at this moment than there ever were since the world began. There is more Bible buying—and Bible selling—more Bible printing & Bible

¹¹ *Living For God's Glory*, pp 134-135

distributing—than ever was since we were a nation. We see Bibles in every bookstore, Bibles of every size, price, & style—large Bibles, & small Bibles—Bibles for the rich, & Bibles for the poor. There are Bibles in almost every house in the land. But all this time I fear we are in danger of forgetting, that to "have" the Bible is one thing & to "read" it quite another.¹²

Do you believe that the Bible is the Word of God? Do you believe that the Bible is God-breathed so that it is truth & truth alone & truth without any mixture of error? Do you believe that the Bible reveals the message of salvation through Jesus Christ? Do you believe that the Bible is able to thoroughly equip you in every way to live a life pleasing to God? If you believe those things, read this Book. If you believe those things, study this Book. If you believe those things, meditate upon this Book. If you believe those things, take this Book & put it in your hearts, put it inside where you can never lose it. If you believe those things, take the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ which is in this book & go from here & proclaim it. Never be ashamed of God's Word. Never be ashamed to believe it. Never be ashamed to stand upon it. His Word is true. His Word is the firm foundation. His Word will stand forever. May we all stand on the Word of God & on the Word of God alone. May it regulate our lives, our preaching, our worship, our fellowship, our ministries, & our daily steps. May the Word of God & the Word of God alone be our rule of faith & our standard for what is true in this world. May God give us the grace to stand on the Word of God alone.

COMMUNION MEN COME

As we come to the Communion table, there are three things we should remember, according to 1 Corinthians 11:23–30.

First, we should look back. We are to participate in Communion in remembrance of Christ (24). And so we look back. We look back to the cross. We remember what Christ accomplished for us. And we are reminded of His love for us.

Second, we are to look ahead. The Scriptures say to do this **until He comes again** (26). The 1st time Jesus came to this earth, He came as the Suffering Servant. The next time, He'll come as the Conquering King. Communion is an observance to remind us that Jesus will come again.

Third, Communion is a time to look within. We're to look within and ask the Holy Spirit to show us any areas of our lives that may not be pleasing to God (28). Once we acknowledge these areas, we are to repent of these sins. (29).

So we come to the Communion table in joy, in reverence, in honesty, confessing our sins & experiencing God's forgiveness.

¹² www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/pract5.htm

