

# **SOLA SCRIPTURA**

After Darkness, Light:

Reformation Doctrines that Set the World Aflame (No. 1)

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

### **Martin Luther and His Confession**

1483. Martin Luther was born in Eisleben, Germany to a father who was a copper miner and a mother who was a superstitious Roman Catholic. His father sent him to preparatory school at age 14 and later to a university, where he received both his bachelor's degree and master's degree and was exposed to every imaginable vice.

His stern father wanted him to be a lawyer. He surely would have been a lawyer, but God's providence turned him another direction. Only a month into his legal studies, on July 2, 1505, at age 21, he was returning to law school after a visit home and was caught in a thunderstorm. A lightning bolt crashed nearby and he was hurled to the ground. Fearing that he would die, he cried out to the only safety he thought he knew, the patron saint of travelers and miners, St. Anna, and vowed he would become a monk, if she would help him. He was spared and, to the utter dismay of his father, Luther kept his vow and two weeks later entered the monastery. Though Luther would later confess that this choice was sin, God nevertheless allowed much good to come out of it.

Two years later, he was ordained a priest in the Church of Rome, even though he was terrified of the Holy God he read about. When he was 28 (1512), Luther received his Doctor's degree in theology and became the chair in Biblical Theology at the University of Wittenberg, which he held for 34 years until his death at age 62 (1546).

Luther's professorship in biblical theology afforded him the opportunity to study Scripture and preach regularly at one of the two churches in Wittenberg, the smaller town church. And then came the year that would forever change the world, 1517. Luther was 34 and, by his own account, not yet converted.

It was that year, a crass friar named John Tetzel was hired to sell indulgences for the Roman Catholic Church as he preached across Germany. For a fee, commoners could buy from Tetzel a letter from the church that reduced the punishment for sin and freed a dead loved one from purgatory. Ever the salesman, his infamous sales pitch that robbed the poor fathers and mothers of their meager funds was this: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

When Luther heard about it, he challenged his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg to debate the sale of indulgences. He wrote 95 statements, or theses, against the practice. As was customary in the day, on October 31, 1517, he posted these 95 Theses on the academic bulletin board of the day—the front door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg.

Somehow, a printer obtained a copy of the 95 Theses and distributed copies all across the land, where Luther became not only a folk hero, but also a marked man in the eyes of the Church of Rome. This one act became the spark that lit the Reformation. It set into motion a chain of events that would lead to the recovery of key doctrines of the Bible and a separation from the heretical Church of Rome.

Luther wanted debate and he received it. Over the next few years, Luther was counted a heretic and berated by papal authorities. It was during this turmoil, according to Luther, he was converted after meditating on Romans 1:17 in the tower of Castle Church: “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.””

Never one to back down from a fight, Luther continued to develop his understanding of Scripture and published a number of books critical of the papacy and the Roman Catholic Church. In the summer of 1520, Luther was charged in the Catholic courts with heresy and he was ordered to repent or be excommunicated. They sent a list of 41 charges against him in the form of an official letter from the pope called a papal bull. When Luther received it, he responded by publicly burning it in a bonfire. This was open defiance and he was excommunicated.

Since he had been excommunicated, it was now the responsibility of the Holy Roman Empire to bring him to trial. So the emperor, Charles V, ordered Luther to appear before the next imperial diet, which was the formal assembly of all the princes of the Holy Roman Empire. The diet took place in Worms in April 1521, when Luther was 37, and roughly 3-1/2 years after posting the 95 Theses. The diet took place in the bishop’s palace at Worms where more than 200 of the most powerful men in Germany awaited in the grand hall, including Emperor Charles V.

In the hall was a table with the books that Luther had written. The prosecutor asked him two questions. He pointed to the table and asked Luther if he was the author of the books. Luther responded he was. Then, he asked Luther if he would renounce the teachings in his books.

He was stunned at the question and asked if he could have more time before answering. The emperor gave him 24 hours. The next evening, torches were lit in the hall and Luther was again brought into the great hall before the great men of Germany. He was again confronted with whether he would recant the teachings in his books and Luther is said to have replied with his now-famous words:

“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 I will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.”

Hearing Luther’s response, soldiers began shouting, “To the flames!” He was eventually condemned as a heretic and an outlaw of the empire.

### **Introduction to the Five Solas of the Reformation**

And so the Reformation began. With Luther’s bold stance on the Scriptures as the supreme

authority for every Christian, the spiritual darkness began to lift and the light of the gospel of grace began to shine. And the spark that began on October 31, 1517 turned into a flame that lit the world with God's truth and has carried forward, unstoppable, for 500 years to this day.

What made the Protestant Reformation distinctive? What were the core beliefs of the Reformers that united them together and became their rallying cries? At its core, what was Protestant Reformation about? The key beliefs of the Reformers can be summarized in five declarations—five foundational biblical principles—known as the five solas.

These five solas are:

- *Sola Scriptura*
- *Sola Fide*
- *Sola Gratia*
- *Solus Christus*
- *Soli Deo Gloria*

Since this month of October is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, we are celebrating the Reformation by a sermon series on the five solas that I'm calling: After Darkness, Light: Reformation Doctrines that Lit the World Aflame. We'll take one sola each Sunday in October.

Of the five, *sola Scriptura* is sometimes called the formal principle of the Reformation. That means that *sola Scriptura* is the source of all the other solas. And so it is here that we begin our series.

## II. SOLA SCRIPTURA

The phrase *sola Scriptura* is Latin for “Scripture alone.” What do we mean by “Scripture alone”? *Sola Scriptura* means that because Scripture is God's inspired word, Scripture alone is our inerrant, sufficient, and final authority for the church.

In that definition is a cluster of four important biblical doctrines that we must believe:

- Scripture is God's inspired word.
- Scripture is inerrant.
- Scripture is sufficient.
- Scripture is authoritative.

What I want to do in this sermon is briefly address each of those doctrines by pointing you to Scripture to show you that these doctrines are true and must be believed.

### A. SCRIPTURE IS GOD'S INSPIRED WORD

We begin with the belief that Scripture is God's inspired word. We believe that the Bible is God's written revelation to man, given to us by the Holy Spirit.

The classic text on the inspiration of Scripture that you should know is 2 Timothy 3:16–17:

"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."

The key phrase is “breathed out by God.” That phrase comes from the Greek word *theopneustos*. It is a compound word of *theo* (“God”) and *pneustos* (“breath”). Literally, all Scripture is God-breathed. It comes from the mouth of God. That’s what we mean by inspiration. Perhaps it would be better to call it expiration because that’s what you do when you breathe out.<sup>1</sup> When you speak you breathe out. The Greek word has to do with what comes out of God’s mouth, not what is drawn in.

So to say that the Scriptures are inspired is not so much about the way God communicated his revelation as it is about the source of the revelation. It isn’t that God breathed into the books of the Bible to make them Scripture, it’s that God breathed-out the Scriptures, which were written down. The source of Scripture is God. That’s what makes it Scripture. And that’s what we mean by inspiration: the source of all Scripture is God.

By inspiration we also aren’t talking about how inspirational the Bible is. Sure, the Bible makes a great source for motivational quotes, but that’s not what we mean that Scripture is God’s inspired word.

I recall debating a girl in college who was an artist. And I made the comment that the way we connect with God is not through creating art but through the word of God because only God’s word is inspired. And she reared up and protested something to the effect, “Who are you to say my art is not inspired!” I knew right away that she had misunderstood what I meant by the word inspired. She was angry because she thought I was making a judgment about the inspirational quality of her art, but I was making a point that only Scripture is God-breathed.

God is the divine author of Scripture, though he used human authors to write the words. So we also believe that all Scripture has dual authorship—divine and human. The key passage for this belief is 2 Peter 1:20–21:

"[N]o prophecy of Scripture comes from someone’s own interpretation. 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."

The verb “carried along” comes from a Greek word used in Acts 27:15 of a ship being driven along by the wind. To paraphrase the great Princeton theologian, B. B. Warfield, the human authors were taken up by the Holy Spirit and driven to write what God wanted them to write. So Scripture has dual authorship. The words were penned by human authors with their individual personalities and writing styles, but the human authors’ thoughts were influenced and overseen (superintended) by the Holy Spirit to write exactly what God wanted so that every word was God’s own words. That extends to every single word of Scripture. *All* Scripture is God-breathed.

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<sup>1</sup> Inspiration is the word William Tyndale used when he translated the Bible into English, and the word has stuck.

We believe that Scripture teaches verbal, plenary inspiration. That is, inspiration extends to the *precise words* themselves (“verbal”) not just the thoughts behind the words, and to *every* word equally (“plenary”). No other writings can claim what God’s word can claim. The Scriptures alone are inspired.

Now, if you understand that Scripture is the very words of God, then a number of important points follow. This was the logic of the Reformers. If you believe that Scripture is inspired—that it is God-breathed—then you must necessarily believe that Scripture is the inerrant, sufficient, and final authority for the church.

## **B. SCRIPTURE IS INERRANT**

Next, we turn to the belief that Scripture is inerrant. Since Scripture comes from the mouth of God, then it must be true.

Numbers 23:19: “God is not a man, that he should lie.”

Rather, John 17:17 says that God’s word is truth.

Because the Scriptures come from God, we believe the Scriptures are entirely truthful and have no errors at all in the original manuscripts.

Proverbs 30:5: "Every word of God proves true"

Psalm 12:6: "The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times."

Scripture is true in all it teaches. It does not affirm any errors. It may report a lie someone tells, but it doesn’t endorse the lie. Now there are lots of documents that have no errors. You could take a test and get 100%. You could write a sentence that is true. But Scripture is unique in that not only is it inerrant (without error), but it is also infallible. Infallible means that Scripture is incapable of erring. Infallibility has to do with possibilities.

You could write a sentence that is true, but you are capable of making a mistake. But when the Lord composed Scripture through human authors it was impossible for them to affirm error. Scripture not only does not have errors in the original manuscripts, it also could not contain errors. Why? Because God is the divine author and everything he speaks is true and he moved in such a way that the human authors only wrote what was true.

Historically, the Church of Rome affirmed the inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of Scripture. But the challenge that Luther made against the Church of Rome was that he said *only* Scripture is the infallible authority for the church, while the Church of Rome said that Scripture *and* the church’s tradition were *both* infallible authorities.

After Luther had posted his 95 Theses, one of his chief opponents (Sylvester Prierias) wrote in response: “He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures, too, draw their strength and authority, is a heretic.”

In other words, if you don't believe that the Church of Rome and the pope are infallible in what they teach, and that the Scriptures get their authority from the Church and the pope, you are a heretic.

What the Reformers said was that the Scriptures alone are inerrant and infallible and are authoritative, not because the church says so, but because they came from God's own mouth.

### **C. SCRIPTURE IS SUFFICIENT**

Third, we believe that Scripture is the sufficient authority for salvation and following after Christ. It is often said that the Scriptures are sufficient for faith and practice.

Notice again in 2 Timothy 3:16–17: "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."

Because the Bible comes from God, it has everything we need to grow in righteousness. It tells us how we can find peace from the wrath of God and how by trusting in Christ, we can receive the righteousness of Christ necessary to live with God forever. And the Scriptures are sufficient to lead us on the path of living righteously—living as God would have us. Scripture is sufficient to complete us. That is, it is sufficient to make us able to do everything we are called by God to do so that we are equipped for every good work. If God has called you to do something, he has written a word to equip you to do it.

In our day, the sufficiency of Scripture has been attacked from every angle. One pastor notes: "Every corruption of biblical Christianity begins by compromising the principle of sufficiency. . . . Every deviation is the Bible plus or minus something."

As we've already seen, the Church of Rome was adding the church's tradition and the teaching of the pope as necessary for the Christian. They undermined the sufficiency of Scripture by adding to it.

In more recent times, the sufficiency of Scripture has been attacked in the evangelical church through the belief that the Scriptures aren't enough to solve our psychological problems or that we need business principles in order to lead the church or that we need marketing strategies to win the lost to Christ or that we should minimize doctrine in order to bridge the divide between Protestants and Catholics, even Jews and Muslims, to accomplish social change.

These are all attacks on the sufficiency of Scripture.

### **SCRIPTURE IS OUR FINAL AUTHORITY**

Finally, we believe that Scripture is our final authority. This is axiomatic. God is the supreme ruler of the universe, so what he speaks is supremely authoritative.

Read through Psalm 119 and see how Scripture is described. Scripture is called God's commands, his testimonies, his statutes, his rules, his precepts, his ways. These are all terms of authority. Scripture is our final authority because God is our final authority. The words are his

words and he is the supreme authority in the universe. So we cannot deny the authority of Scripture without denying God. We cannot turn from the Bible and run our life on our own standards. We have *the* authority for our life in the book that God wrote.

Jesus affirmed the enduring authority of the Scriptures in Matthew 5:18-19:

"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. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

The iota refers to the smallest of the Greek letters and the dot refers to the smallest stroke differentiating Hebrew letters. Down to the tiniest detail, God's word will remain. His word is to be perpetually observed all the way until the new heaven and earth.

But this point of authority is often misunderstood. We call this Reformation doctrine *sola Scriptura* not *solo Scriptura*. It isn't that *only* Scripture has authority in our lives, but that Scripture alone has *final* authority. Scripture is the authority that guides and governs all other authorities. It is the authority with the final say.

The Reformers didn't believe Scripture was the only authority, but the final and greatest authority. That is, the Reformers recognized that even Scripture itself teaches there are secondary authorities that govern our lives. God has instituted government in our lives to maintain order (Romans 13). God has instituted fathers and mothers to govern the lives of their children (Ephesians 5). God has instituted the church and the leadership structure within the church in order to accomplish the aims of the church and to restore sinners in the church through church discipline (Heb. 13:17; Matt. 18:15-20). These are all real sources of authority. The Reformers didn't deny secondary sources of authority. But they did reject any authority coequal with God's own words for faith and practice in the church.

In 1519, Martin Luther debated his infamous foe John Eck on the subject of indulgences. Martin Luther contended that the Church of Rome had no authority to create the system of indulgences. He argued: "As for the pope's decretal on indulgences, I say that neither the church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture."

He was right. The authoritative source that we go to for faith and practice is Scripture, which is over all other secondary sources of authority.

### III. CONCLUSION

So again, *sola Scriptura* means that because Scripture is God's inspired word, Scripture alone is our inerrant, sufficient, and final authority for the church. This belief broke the true church free from the Church of Rome. And if we are to be faithful to our God, his word, and, indeed, our heritage, we must hold to these truths as well.

Every one of these truths is under attack. Every one of these truths has been undermined. If we don't hold to these doctrines and teach them, our children will lose them. We must not be the generations that lose the precious truths of Scripture recovered 500 years ago.

We each must take our stand, standing with Luther and all the Reformers, that we are bound by the Scriptures and we will not neglect his holy word. We stand on the Scriptures, we cannot do otherwise.