

Today we start a series of 5 lessons on the "*Solas*" ("*Soli*") of the Protestant Reformation. These phrases summarize 5 essential emphases of historical orthodox Christianity that were central to the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura* (or Scripture Alone), *Sola Fide* (or Faith Alone), *Sola Gratia* (or Grace Alone), *Solus Christus* (or Christ Alone), and *Soli Deo Gloria* (or Glory be to God Alone).

We begin with *Sola Scriptura*. This has been called the "formal principle" of the Reformation. It is the basis upon which the other *Solas*, the so-called "material principles" of the Reformation, are established. At a most general level, *Sola Scriptura* answers a fundamental question of human thought "How do we know?" "How do we know anything?" And most centrally, "How do we know about life and death, righteousness and guilt, forgiveness and eternal life?" *What* we can know about these central matters is that eternal life, comes through faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of the triune God alone. These latter 4 *Solas* together are what saves us and gives us life. They are the *material principles* of the Reformation. *How* we know them to be true is through the self-revelation of God, through God speaking to humanity. And God has spoken both through His Son, and by His Spirit through the human authors of the 66 books of the Bible.

Sola Scriptura asserts that our bedrock basis for knowing and believing is what the living God has said in the Holy Scriptures, and that there is no other equally authoritative source of knowledge. Luther used the Latin phrase *norma normans non normata* to describe the Bible. That is, Scripture is the "norming (or supreme) norm that cannot be normed." Other sources of godly wisdom exist, but Scripture rules. Reason, tradition, and experience are inescapable, and when devout and subject to the Bible, are a great blessing. But they do not rule. Scripture alone rules.

Most specifically or narrowly, the Reformation doctrine of *Sola Scriptura* was a rejection of creeping Roman assertion of primacy and authority during the middle ages, that by the time of the Reformation was explicitly claiming that her non-Scriptural/extra-Biblical traditions were a second ruling source of authority and binding on anyone who would be Christian. Roman Catholicism further asserted that only its hierarchy was qualified to read or interpret Scripture, surely not ordinary people. The Reformers completely rejected the validity of any such claims.

¹ Scripture taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Copyright 2000; 2001, by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

It is important to be clear about what *Sola Scriptura* is and is not, and perspective on the history of the Bible will help us in that. God very directly gave His Law to Israel, His Spirit enabled the Old Testament prophets to speak for Him and write down His very words, and Hebrew history was recorded under the superintending of His Spirit. God's chosen people, led by the Holy Spirit, recognized those writings as God's Word, and humanity was given the Old Testament canon. At exactly the right time in history and consistent with the Old Testament revelation, Jesus Christ, God's Son, the second person of the Trinity, the Word of God in flesh, came and accomplished salvation for us at Calvary. When He returned to the Father, He left us His Holy Spirit and His Apostles to preach and teach and evangelize. He told the Apostles:

Joh 14:26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.

For a period of roughly 30 years, those Apostles and their close associates then taught a common basic Christian Gospel, relying upon this promise of Jesus, using only the Old Testament as Scripture. It was what they had for a written Word of God. But as time passed, the Spirit inspired New Testament writers to write, and the collective churches led by the Spirit and having been taught by the Apostles, recognized the books of the New Testament as God-breathed and consistent with what they had been taught orally. They acted consistent with

Joh 10:27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.

and the full canon of Scripture, Old and New Testaments, was then recognized for what it is, God's Word.

This unbroken line of God speaking and God's people corporately recognizing the already-existing Word of God is important, since Rome's claim became that she gave the world the Bible, and that in some ways it is her creature, subject to her authority. This, the Reformers flatly rejected. They insisted that the church is bound by the Scriptures, not the Scriptures by Roman interpretation and its extra-Biblical traditions.

It is vital to understand that in this, the Reformers were not innovators nor rebels nor individualists. Their intent was to return to the view of Scriptural authority held for at least the first 300 years of church history, to roll back Roman encroachment on that understanding. They did NOT believe in a "Solo" (personalized "just me and the Bible") *Scriptura* nor in a *nuda* ("no creed but the Bible") *Scriptura*. They had a

high view of the true church and its legitimate authority (derived from Scripture) and agreed with early church councils (like Nicaea and Chalcedon) that had worked out from Scripture important Christian doctrines and refuted heresy, identifying the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. The Reformers simply insisted, in agreement with the early Christian church, that Scripture alone rules and is binding on the hearts and minds of all Christian believers.

So then, what are we going to do with this Reformation history concerning the central ruling place of the Bible, today 500 years later? How can we bring honor to Christ as 2017 Protestant Christian believers in matters related to the place of the Holy Bible in life and faith?

My plan for the morning is to look at some of what the Bible says about itself and to then consider with you some implications of those Scriptures for life in our time and place.

So, hear the first 3 verses of Genesis:

Gen 1:1 In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

Gen 1:2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

Gen 1:3 And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

From the very beginning, God has been speaking. He spoke everything into existence. His speech has always been both creative and absolutely authoritative. Brothers and sisters, as we consider the Word of God, we must always remind ourselves that it is the expression of the great I AM, the Alpha and Omega, the One who was, and is, and is to come. God's Word is authoritative exactly because it is *His* Word, and *He* is Creator and Sustainer of all that is, and its rightful King and Judge.

This great God, the One who is the center of all things, spoke graciously to our first parents, Adam and Eve:

Gen 2:16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden,

Gen 2:17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

But there was another voice, and humanity in great tragedy chose to doubt the good Word of God, chose to believe Satan's slander, and chose to disobey.

Gen 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?"

Every bit of human misery traces back to this and what followed ... it traces to failure to take God at His Word, and to then go our own human way, to do our own thing, and to act as if we know best. Brothers and sisters, we humans are suckers and rebels. Genesis 3 ought to not only makes us grieve and mourn the dishonoring of God and the breaking of His good creation, it should make us cringe and wonder that God wasn't done with our race right then. But in grace He continued to speak, and made merciful promises of a Redeemer for fallen humanity. And He began to give us a written Word. Listen to a bit of what Deuteronomy says about the event of God's writing of the 10 Commandments on stone tablets:

Deu 4:32 "For ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and ask from one end of heaven to the other, whether such a great thing as this has ever happened or was ever heard of.

Deu 4:33 Did any people ever hear the voice of a god speaking out of the midst of the fire, as you have heard, and still live?

God's initial giving of a written Word was accompanied by cataclysmic thunder and lightning on Mount Horeb. As Al Mohler has pointed out, there are two enormous miracles referred to in Deuteronomy 4:33. First, God spoke to unworthy humans who deserved His silence. Second, the hearers were not consumed upon hearing God's Word and receiving the tablets. God's Word is holy and sacred. It is not something to treat lightly or as if it were just another voice in our world full of competing voices and options. It is absolutely unique, in that it reads us and infallibly tells us the way things are. It exposes us and our real motives in ways nothing else can. We simply *must* come to it in humility and reverence. Hebrews puts it this way:

Heb 4:12 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.

Heb 4:13 And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

The people of Israel were taught about the nature of the Word of God in their wilderness journeys. They learned that it is life-giving. It is real food for our souls. A few Chapters after the Deuteronomy account of the giving of God's law we hear

this:

Deu 8:3 And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.

The Word of God is no optional add-on to already-full lives. It's not a multi-vitamin taken once a day to keep the doctor away. *It* tells us that it's the difference between starvation and health. Really. That's what God says. It's the difference between starvation and health. God's Word is gracious and blessed and life-giving, and has the capacity to get inside us, and by the Spirit to sustain and perfect us. The Spirit uses it to change our minds and hearts. And that we desperately need. The prophet Isaiah eloquently says it this way:

Isa 55:8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD.

Isa 55:9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isa 55:10 "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

Isa 55:11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Christian, there is hope and comfort here for those who love God. God's Word cannot fail. This Book is infinitely more than some textbook on philosophy or morality. God has not simply given a technical manual for living or for operation of planet earth. The Spirit of God applies the Word of God to hearts and minds and it is living and effective and accomplishes what God intends. There is this in 1st Corinthians:

1Co 2:12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

1Co 2:13 And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

The Apostle Paul understood that the very words the Spirit gave through him are God's words, exactly the right words, words that uniquely convey God's intent and holy will. They are the words God's Spirit uses to give us understanding of God's mind. They are precisely the correct words to give us life, to save our souls, to conform us to the image of Christ. The first letter to the Thessalonians speaks of the ongoing work of the Word of God in sanctifying Christian believers:

1Th 2:13 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.

Ultimately and most fundamentally, the Bible, God's written Word, reveals the person of Christ to us, and teaches us the Gospel. *Sola Scriptura* serves *Solus Christus*. Hebrews opens with this:

Heb 1:1 Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,

Heb 1:2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

John's Gospel opens with this:

Joh 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Joh 1:2 He was in the beginning with God.

Joh 1:3 All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

Joh 1:4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

Jesus, the Word of God incarnate, is made known to You and me by His Spirit through the written Word of God. We know who Jesus is and what He has done because God has told us in the Bible. Because the Bible is authoritative we are not left guessing or in doubt about Him, and are not free to make up an imagined Jesus to suit our personal preferences or the current whims of society. What it tells us about Christ is binding on all people. What the Bible says about Christ, God says about Him.² Because the Bible is both necessary and sufficient, we need not, and absolutely should not, look anywhere else for new revelation about Christ. God in

²B.B. Warfield is often quoted as saying "The Bible is the Word of God in such a way — that when the Bible speaks, God speaks." St. Augustine long before him said much the same thing.

His mercy and providence has told us exactly what we need to know about Christ for salvation and real eternal life that begins in the here and now. Because Scripture is literally the Word of God, we need not and should not be in the place of Adam and Eve, susceptible to the questions "Did God really say ... ?" "Is it really true?" What the Bible says about all things, and in particular what it says about our Savior, is completely reliable, completely without error. Because the Bible is clear, it is not beyond ordinary people to humbly open it, hear what it says, believe and repent, and inherit eternal life that Christ opened for His people on Calvary. Because God is immutable and the Bible is His Word, we know that what it tells us about Jesus is unchanging, always and forever relevant. Because the omnipotent God of the Bible is the very definition of truth, His Word it is invincible and final. What it says about the future is absolutely sure. What it says about the return of Christ and His eternal rule and reign is as good as done. Praise be to the I AM!

Brothers and sisters, there has been a lot of water over the dam since October 31, 1517. Since 1517 Rome has drifted even far beyond its medieval position on Scriptural authority, specifically repudiating *Sola Scriptura*, adopting official doctrines declaring the pope infallible (and effectively a law unto himself), and officially taking positions like the immaculate conception of Mary and her bodily assumption into heaven, on the basis of supposed tradition over and against Scripture. Since 1517 western evangelicals of most stripes have drifted to only a vague and highly personalistic doctrine of the Bible that really doesn't much resemble that of the Reformers and instead more reflects the enlightenment movement's promotion of individual autonomy and a fascination with self-interested democracy. Since 1517 theological liberals have given up any pretense of viewing the Bible as anything but a bunch of quaint ancient writings riddled with errors and lacking any authority. And what is probably most germane this morning is the nearly complete post-modern secularization of western society since 1517, a reality that has been incredibly accelerated by the absolutely suffocating digital presence of the voice of this world, represented in those awful smart phones we're slaves to.

SO, we must face the question of "What then?" To borrow a phrase from Francis Schaeffer of 35 years ago, in the light of what is true about Scripture and the time and place in which we live, "How should we then live?" We'll frame some answers in line with three more short New Testament passages:

1Pe 1:23 ... you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God;

1Pe 1:24 for "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls,

1Pe 1:25 but the word of the Lord remains forever." And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

2Ti 3:14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it

2Ti 3:15 and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

2Ti 3:16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,

2Ti 3:17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Col 3:1 If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Col 3:2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Christian people are saved by believing in the atoning work of Christ presented in the eternal Scriptures and repenting. Those Scriptures are "breathed out" by God. They are exactly what He says. Having been raised from Spiritual death in and with Christ, we are then to seek and set our minds on things above. Brothers and sisters, the same Word that saves us enables us to obey the Colossians 3:1-2 instruction regarding what we are to seek and value. Therefore:

In our time and place in light of what is true about the Bible, let us trust the triune God of the Bible and those through whom He has spoken. Let us be thankful for the prophets and Apostles who lead us to Christ. Let us know that they speak for God and speak truly and let us be grateful.

In our time and place and in light of what is true about the Bible, let us love it and live in it. Let us read and study, read and study, read and study, and repeat. Hear what 19th century English Baptist pastor Charles Spurgeon said in this regard. "It is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible until at last, you come to talk in scriptural language, and your spirit is flavored with the words of the Lord, so your blood is *Bibline* and the very essence of the Bible flows from you."

Spurgeon's phrase "eat into the very soul of the Bible" is startling. But it's consistent with the understanding given by Deuteronomy 8:3 and Jesus's quotation of it at the temptation in the wilderness. It's consistent with a sense of desperate need and

recognition that God's Word is the difference between life and death. It is far from a casual or polite nibbling at the Word.

Consider a bit of math. There are slightly fewer than 1200 chapters in the Bible. That means that at a pace of 25 chapters a week, a person can read the Bible through once per year. It also means that at a pace of about 40 chapters a day, a person can read the Bible through in a month, or 12 times in a year. I do not presume to prescribe here, but offer brief descriptions of two cases I have personally known. I know a wonderful couple who for about 30 years took church youth groups through the Bible every year, giving wonderful Bible knowledge quizzes every Wednesday evening. I can testify that that exercise was good for many young souls. I also know a young international woman who believed and repented the first time she heard the Gospel preached in the US. By the time I first met her, she had been saved for about 3 years. By then, despite having had little access to good preaching, this young woman had a comprehensive Biblical knowledge, a deep love for Christ, the heart of an evangelist, and a sound orthodox Christian theology. How? Well, for her entire Christian life (while a graduate student) she was reading the Bible through monthly, and in Spurgeon's words, the very essence of the Bible was flowing from her. That should be our desire as well.

In our time and place and in light of what is true about the Bible, let us use the inspired categories and words of the Bible. They are exactly the right ones. The categories of post-modern society do not rule. Scripture rules. Good is what God says is good and evil is what He calls evil. Bible words are the ones God uses to tell us the truth. They ought to increasingly be on our lips. As Spurgeon said, we should "come to talk in Biblical language."

In our time and place and in light of what is true about the Bible, let us subject every thought and attitude to Christ as revealed in the Scriptures. We ought to continually ask ourselves "Where did that thought come from?" "Is that Biblical?" "Can I imagine the Apostle Paul saying that?" "Is that the Spirit of Christ?" Reformer John Calvin wrote: "We ought surely seek from Scripture a rule for thinking and speaking. To this yardstick all thoughts of the mind and words of the mouth must be conformed." Our environment is one where society says every person is the judge of all and that all is relative, nothing is "true" except "for me." The great evil in our time is to suggest that there is any absolute that rules outside my whims. Those are the thoughts of the world, not of Christianity. Christian thoughts are ones that Spurgeon described as "flavored with the words of the Lord."

In our time and place and in light of what is true about the Bible, let us be genuinely humble as we approach the Scriptures and orthodox Christian doctrine derived from them. The Scriptures are not obscure and individuals have the right to interpret them. But we do not have the right to *misinterpret* them. In this, the church present and through ages past is our check against our own arrogant foolishness. R.C. Sproul put it this way: "Although tradition does not rule our interpretation, it does guide it. If upon reading a particular passage you have come up with an interpretation that has escaped the notice of every other Christian for two-thousand years, or has been championed by universally recognized heretics, chances are pretty good that you had better abandon your interpretation."

In our time and place and in light of what is true about the Bible, let us allow Scripture to dictate our priorities and concerns. This is the basic philosophical question of "value." The Scripture tells us what matters, what deserves our attention. The world says otherwise, but let us love the LORD our God with all our hearts souls minds and strength, and love our neighbors as ourselves, and use our Master's resources, including our time and mental and physical energy, accordingly.

In our time and place and in light of what is true about the Bible, let us measure the world we live in by Scripture and not vice versa. Christ called us His people to be salt and light, a city set on a hill, not to blend into the cultural landscape by giving Biblical truth a facelift or accommodating the spirit of the time.

In our time and place and in light of what is true about the Bible, let us glory in the Gospel message preserved for us in the Bible and love and obey the Savior it shows us. We have been given a wonderful true reliable message of redemption. We have been given real food for the soul. Let us constantly rejoice in that. Thanks be to the one true God who speaks.

Let me pray for us in closing.

Father, we give You thanks for Your Word. We agree with the Psalmist that Your law is perfect, reviving the soul; Your testimony is sure making wise the simple; Your precepts are right, rejoicing the heart; Your commandment is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of You is clean, enduring forever; Your rules are true and righteous altogether. May we walk before You carefully and gratefully in the light of these. In Christ we pray, Amen.

Some Suggested Reading and Listening (in no particular order)

Barrett, Mathew. *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2016.

Sproul, R. C. *Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine*. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2005.

Mathison, Keith. *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*. Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2001.

Kistler, Don, ed. *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible*. Sanford, Florida: Reformation Trust Publishing, 1995.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. (See Chapters 2-8)

The Cambridge Declaration (on the website of The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals)

<http://www.alliancenet.org/cambridge-declaration>

The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy (on the website of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals)

<http://www.alliancenet.org/the-chicago-statement-on-biblical-inerrancy>

Paul Washer 2017 G3 Conference Sermon

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-NDLxismOY>

Al Mohler Sermon/Conference Talk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTIU2MjNJhI>

Another Al Mohler Sermon/Conference Talk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZ83kRLvdBE>

R.C. Sproul Lecture

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfRAjJav06s>

Steven Lawson Lecture

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTIU2MjNJhI>