

500 Years of Grace

Sola Scriptura: Word of God Across the Ages

II Timothy 3:14-17

preached @ Hawkwood Baptist Church
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Intro.

In honour of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, today I want to preach to you about the first of five great spiritual treasures that were rediscovered by Luther and the other reformers. The reformers differed on many things, but they were united on these five core truths: that our faith arises from Scripture alone, that man is saved by grace alone, through faith alone, because of Christ alone, and to the glory of God alone. Collectively these basic truths are known in Latin as the five solas: Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Solus Christus, and Soli Deo Gloria.

If you have no interest in a life in God, and with God, then nothing we say over these next five weeks will mean anything to you. The Reformation was sparked by men who hungered to know God and experience God. Luther longed for God. But he knew he was separated from Him, and he knew the cause for this separation was sin. Luther tried everything the Catholic church offered in a fruitless attempt to break down the sin barrier and come into the presence of God. (When I speak against Catholicism, please understand that I am criticizing the doctrine, not individual Catholics)

As I say, Luther tried everything to enter into God's presence. He tried the way of good works only to realize he could never do enough to save himself. He sought to borrow from the excess merits of the saints, but he had no assurance that they had anything to offer. When he went to Rome he visited a church that boasted a set of stairs that had formerly belonged to Pontius Pilate. Supposedly these were the very stairs upon which Christ, bloody, beaten, and wearing the purple robe and the crown of thorns, was introduced to the crowd by Pilate with the words, "Behold the man!" (John 19:5)

The Church's promise was that if you climbed up those stairs on your hands and knees, praying the Lord's Prayer on each step, you could release a soul from purgatory. Luther decided to climb the stairs on behalf of his grandfather; not only did he pray on each step, he also kissed the steps just to add extra devotion. When he got to the top he found he still had one burning question: "Who knows whether it is so?"

So to recap, Luther understood that good works could never save him and the merits of the saints were an uncertain promise at best. Finally he tried to confess his way into complete forgiveness of sins and acceptance from God. In making the attempt Luther came to realize that something greater than a few sins separated him from God, that in fact, there was something broken in his essential being. His very nature was corrupt.

That's when he learned that the penitential system would always fail because it was directed toward particular sins. He came to see that the entire person is in need of forgiveness *and* (mark the significance of this *and*) transformation. It wasn't that individual sins didn't matter, but that they pointed to something deeper. Luther put it like this. A doctor does not have to examine every bump to know that a man has smallpox. Moreover, you don't treat the bumps, you treat the disease. In the same way, Luther realized that you don't have to focus attention on every individual sin to know that man is sin sick.

In the end, it was **Scripture** that finally comforted Luther's soul, particularly the book of Romans.

Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, and also to the Greek. 17 For in it God's righteousness is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith.

Romans 3:21 But now, apart from the law, God's righteousness (justice) has been revealed—attested by the Law and the Prophets 22 —that is, God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe, since there is no distinction. 23 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. 24 They are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Him as a propitiation through faith in His blood, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. 26 God presented Him to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be righteous (just) and declare righteous (justified) the one who has faith in Jesus.

Luther noticed that Paul quoted the Old Testament to back up his doctrine of salvation by grace and through faith.

Romans 4:3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6)

Romans 4:6 Likewise, David also speaks of the blessing of the man God credits righteousness to apart from works: 7 "How joyful are those whose lawless acts are forgiven and whose sins are covered! 8 How joyful is the man the Lord will never charge with sin!" (Psalm 32:1-2)

It was when Luther grasped the meaning of these chapters in Romans (backed up by the OT) that he could finally testify: "Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise."

But what Luther writes next is crucial: "The whole of **Scripture** took on a new meaning. . . . This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven." Without at first rejecting all Catholic doctrine, Luther realized that the relief he'd found came from a close study of the Word of God. Later on, when he challenged the RCC on the subject of indulgences, he attacked them with scriptural arguments.

Don't think the church didn't notice what Luther was doing. In response, the pope and his supporters declared explicitly that the authority of the church stood above the Scriptures. For instance, in an early disputation, Cardinal Cajetan stated that Scripture must be interpreted by the pope, whom he declared to be above church councils and "even Scripture itself." Luther immediately replied, "His Holiness abuses Scripture. I deny that he is above Scripture."

The more the church pushed Luther, the more committed he became to the principle that **Scripture alone** is our final, or highest authority in all matters of faith (**Sola Scriptura**). Alongside **Sola Scriptura** Luther also committed himself to Biblical inerrancy. Popes could err. Councils could err (proved by the fact that they often contradicted one another). **Scripture alone** did *not* err. To quote Matthew Barrett, "While Luther greatly valued those Fathers and councils that defended orthodoxy, he argued that **Scripture alone** is our infallible source of divine revelation."

What is *Sola Scriptura*?

Sola Scriptura means that *only Scripture, because it is God's inspired Word, is our inerrant, sufficient,*

*and final (highest) authority for the church.*¹

Note the emphasis on “final” or “highest” authority for the church. Sola Scriptura does not mean the Bible is the church’s only authority. Luther and the other reformers frequently quoted from previous saints and scholars. They realized that if each generation of Christians tried to invent Christianity all over again, the same errors would be repeated over and over.

For myself, I would hate to have to teach the difficult doctrines of the faith—the Trinity, the unique divine/human person of Christ, or even the doctrine of justification by faith without getting help from the 4,000-year line of saints and scholars who are unified in expressing what the Scriptures teach. I want to know that nothing I say from the pulpit contradicts the great teachers and preachers who’ve come before me. Of course, in studying them I must judge their teaching by the Bible, but at the same time, I must humbly and diligently seek to know their teaching, lest my own interests and preferences lead me astray.

Perhaps the best balance between the authority of Scripture and the legitimacy of human teachers is found in Balthasar Hubmaier’s *18 Dissertations*: “Since every Christian believes for himself and is baptized for himself, everyone must see and judge by the Scriptures whether he is being properly nourished by his pastor.” Do you see what Hubmaier is doing there? He is teaching that there is a place for the pastor, the Bible teacher, but that at the same time every Christian is responsible to know the Scriptures well enough to only accept the pastor’s teaching if it is supported by the Bible.

Sidebar on nuda Scriptura

- Sola Scriptura is not the same as *nuda Scriptura*, which means no creed but the Bible. This is the belief of those who start from scratch, as though Christian faith never existed until they opened a Bible and began to read.
- Think Charles Taze Russell, founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Alexander Campbell, founder of the Churches of Christ, The Christian Churches and the Disciples of Christ, Red-letter Christians (Tony Campolo), Oneness Pentecostals (T. D. Jakes).

What is Scripture?

To cut to the chase, Scripture means the 66 books of the Bible—the 39 books of the Hebrew Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament. These books alone constitute the Word of God.

But what about those extra books that we sometimes find in Scripture? The books usually placed between the OT and NT and called the Apocrypha (14 books including the Wisdom of Solomon, Tobit, Judith, additions to the Book of Daniel, 1 & 2 Maccabees)

1. These books have no original Hebrew texts.
2. They are never quoted in the New Testament as authoritative, by Jesus or anyone else. On the other hand, Jesus and the NT authors either quote or make reference to passages from nearly every book in our Hebrew Old Testament.
3. They contain teachings inconsistent with the rest of the Bible.
4. They were not regarded as God’s words by the Jewish people. (Fascinating to note that in Jesus’ arguments with the Pharisees over Scripture there was a tacit agreement on what belonged in the canon.)
5. The marks of their imperfection are easily seen by all.
6. Their value is relegated to historical and linguistic interest.

¹Matthew Barrett, *God’s Word Alone, the Authority of Scripture*, p. 23

The RCC officially includes these apocryphal books in their Bibles because they contain passages that support the doctrines of prayers for the dead, justification by faith plus works, and the use of indulgences.

Two modern challenges to Sola Scriptura

1. **Limited inerrancy:** any version of the idea that the Bible is true in some places, but not in others, that it tells us something true, for instance, about God's love, but not about God's wrath, or judgment. Limited inerrancy shows up in a number of ways.
 - **Relativism:** The idea that there is no such thing as *objective* truth, that the Bible is no better than many other holy books.
 - **Post-modernism:** Starts with relativism, but proceeds to deny the possibility that there is one correct interpretation of reality. Most especially it denies the Bible's interpretation of reality.
 - **Evangelism at the cost of truth:** Andy Stanley, for instance, decided years ago to stop using phrases like "the Bible says," or "God's word is clear," because in his view such statements are meaningless in today's world, or even offensive. Now he's downplaying some Bible truths in favour of others. He holds onto the resurrection, but claims the virgin birth is of secondary or no importance. "Christianity doesn't hinge on the truth or even the stories around the birth of Jesus," Stanley said. "It really hinges on the resurrection of Jesus."
 - **The slippery slope of doubt:** Bart Campolo was once a Christian pastor and teacher. Today he is an atheist. How? "I passed through every stage of heresy. It starts out with sovereignty goes, then biblical authority goes, then I'm a universalist, now I'm marrying gay people. Pretty soon I don't actually believe Jesus actually rose from the dead in a bodily way."
2. **The elevation of science to the authoritative status of Scripture**
 - Science is a marvellous means by which reason can be used to explore and discover the wonders of God's Creation
 - But when Scripture is contradicted by the current state of science there is a groundless tendency to reject Scripture and go with science.
 - This goes deeper than the debate between young earth and old earth, or whether a Christian can be a theistic evolutionist.
 - Today we have so-called Evangelical teachers who reject the idea that Adam fathered the entire human race. They even state that Paul was mistaken when he spoke of Adam in that way.

How the Bible blesses us

1. The Bible is necessary for knowledge of the Gospel (See Rom. 10:13-17)
2. The Bible is necessary for maintaining the spiritual life (Deut. 8:3)
3. The Bible is necessary for certain knowledge of God's Will (Deut. 29:29), how to be blameless before God, how to achieve blessedness in this life and the life to come, and how to love God.
4. The Bible is the only book in the world whose author comprehends and builds His teachings on all the facts in the universe. It is the only book that never lies, and it is the only book that tells us true facts that we can be sure will never be contradicted. *This is the Bible.*

Today's text

II Timothy 3:14 But as for you (Timothy), continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. You know those who taught you, 15 and you know that from childhood you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 16 All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, 17 so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.