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## SCRIPTURE ALONE

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*Sola Scriptura.* This truth, that Scripture alone is the sole authority for our beliefs and practices, abides at the center of Reformation theology. It should serve as the believer’s guardrails for life, doctrine, and ministry. Scripture alone is to determine what we confess, how we live, and how we order and minister within our churches. For the faithful evangelical, Scripture alone is the authority.

In fact, one can argue that *sola Scriptura* is the most foundational, and the most consequential, of all the *solas*. *Sola fide* is known as the “material principle.” This term means that justification by faith alone is the central truth of the Protestant Reformation. It is the central component of our biblical teaching, and the

center of the gospel itself. Yet we call *sola Scriptura* the “formal principle” of the Reformation, because Scripture alone is the singular, authoritative source from which our theology—including *sola fide*—is developed. As the formal principle, *sola Scriptura* is the doctrinal foundation upon which we erect the entirety of Christian belief, including our understanding of the gospel itself.

### DEFINING SOLA SCRIPTURA

For the Reformers specifically, Scripture alone meant the Bible held authority over all church tradition, popes, and councils. The point was not that tradition, popes, or councils could not instruct the church. Rather, it was that all these were subordinate to, and thus subject to, the Word of God. In other words, the Word of God regulates them; they don't regulate the Word of God.

In our day, we as evangelicals also confirm that Scripture alone holds authority over popes, councils, and traditions. Yet, we should add to that list experience, preference, and pragmatic considerations. For Luther—and for us—Scripture is the *norma normans*, the determining norm by which everything else is measured. It is the standard, the benchmark, the plumb line for the church.

*Sola Scriptura* means that Scripture establishes the church; the church does not establish the Scriptures. Scripture judges the church; the church does not judge the Scriptures. The church did not create the Scriptures; the Scriptures created the church. As Luther argued, “Who begets his own parent? Who first brings forth his own maker?”<sup>1</sup>

## MORE THAN AN ABSTRACT DOCTRINE

But Scripture alone is more than an abstract doctrine. Reflective Christians realize the singular role Scripture has played in their own spiritual formation. My conversion was rooted in the preaching of the gospel and the Word of God. And so was yours.

James teaches us we were born again “by the word of truth” (James 1:18). Peter reminds us,

For you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. For,

“All flesh is like grass,  
And all its glory like the flower of grass.  
The grass withers,  
And the flower falls off,  
But the word of the Lord endures forever.”

And this is the word which was preached to you.  
(1 Peter 1:23–26 NASB)

God also used His Word to call me into the ministry. God gripped my heart with Romans 10 and the Pastoral Epistles. As I studied the Scriptures, my call to ministry was clarified and intensified. The Scriptures seemed to demand that I preach them.

That's true of all who are called into the ministry. A call to the ministry is a call to minister the Word.<sup>2</sup>

*Sola Scriptura* also framed my theological convictions, including my denominational commitment. I continuously look to the Scriptures to determine what I am to believe and how the church is to be ordered. Even though I was reared in a Baptist home, my Baptist convictions were confirmed and strengthened after a thorough study of Scripture. This is how it was for me, and how it should be for you. The effects of *sola Scriptura* extend to all aspects of our lives. It is the authority for all we do.

*Sola Scriptura* is an eminently practical doctrine, determining far more about us spiritually, ministerially, and theologically than we may realize. My goal in this chapter is for you to consider *sola Scriptura*'s expansiveness. This will be accomplished in three ways. First, we will establish *sola Scriptura* biblically. Second, we will contextualize it historically in the sixteenth century. And third, we will apply it pastorally.

## ESTABLISHING SOLA SCRIPTURA BIBLICALLY

Within the Bible, the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is most clearly seen in 2 Timothy 3:15–17. Paul, in his final letter to his son in ministry, Timothy, charges him to stand strong in the gospel and to be faithful in his ministry. Paul exhorts him to stand firm and to preach the Word.

Timothy, we know, is vacillating. He is discouraged. He is weakened. Many have abandoned him in the faith. So Paul,

beginning in chapter three, documents the effects of sin and all that is going wrong in the church. He then charges Timothy to remain strong. Paul reminds Timothy in verse 12 that “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (NASB). In verses 14–15, he continues, “You, however,” as opposed to those who have forsaken the faith, “continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have learned the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (NASB).

Paul is reminding Timothy that he was taught the truth of the Scriptures from his mother and his grandmother at an early age. He is reminding Timothy that as he was taught the Old Testament, a new way of life came to him through the Scriptures. Here, Paul is saying the Old Testament makes the gospel clear. It makes faith in the coming Messiah clear.

Then, in verses 16–17, Paul writes this great passage that so much of the doctrine of Scripture is built upon. This verse should be interpreted with an anticipatory sense, meaning Paul is also foreshadowing the rest of coming revelation and the closure of the canon. He says this: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (NASB).

The first part of verse 16, “all Scripture is inspired” is significant. This word “inspired,” which in Greek is *theopneustos*, means “having been breathed out from God’s innermost being.” Also,

notice that Paul says, “*all* Scripture.” It is not up to us, or to the critic, to pick and choose what portion of Scripture we deem to be from God and thus true. Moreover, it is not left to us to pick and choose which portions of Scripture we think are most applicable or most urgently needing to be obeyed.

What Paul states here in seed form is the verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture. All of Scripture, not some of it, is inspired. The words themselves are inspired, not just the thoughts of the authors or the intent of the authors, but every last word. *All* Scripture is inspired by God.

Often, I will hear this verse read, and it will be insinuated that there is a period placed after the word “God”: “All Scripture is inspired by God.” But notice Paul takes it further than that: “All Scripture is inspired by God *and* is profitable for teaching and for reproof” (emphasis added). The Scriptures teach us many things, but specifically what to believe. They convict and reprove us by correcting our errant beliefs. This correction then trains us in righteousness. In other words, Scripture has a direct effect on how we live.

Verse 17 continues, “so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” Paul is basically saying, “Timothy, as you minister, as you preach, as you live, know this: Your weapon in the kingdom is the Word of God. Your tool is the Word of God. And as you wield it faithfully, you will be equipped for every good work.” So, we don’t have to search to and fro, looking for a mystical experience, some kind of charismatic reception of gifts, or something to make us complete and

worthy to minister. Verse 17 teaches that by the Spirit of God, and with the Word of God, we have been made ready to minister.

The logic here is clear, is it not? If this Word is of God, then it must of necessity be true. And if it is of God and true, it must be authoritative. Thus, we are called to submit our lives to it.

Thus, *sola Scriptura*, biblically speaking, is the acknowledgement that Scripture enjoys a singular status as God's Word. Therefore, it is the believer's final, ultimate authority.

## SOLA SCRIPTURA HISTORICALLY

Now that we have established *sola Scriptura* biblically, let's contextualize it historically. The doctrine is displayed in a man: Martin Luther. Journey with me back to the sixteenth century, to the years 1517, 1519, and 1521. What took place in Luther's mind and heart during that era, and the convictions he came to, illumine *sola Scriptura* for us.

First, we should acknowledge that the five *solas* were not packaged together in the sixteenth century as we know them now. They were present then, but as far as being packaged together, that was an early twentieth century phenomenon as the legacy of Protestantism was further crystalized.

For Luther, though, we don't see him sending out *sola Scriptura* public service announcements. Rather, he grew into this conviction over a period of years. He reasoned within himself through a number of conflicts. So, to understand this doctrine historically, it is best to look at it through the prism of Luther



and three pivotal scenes in church history. Two of these scenes are familiar to many of us, but one is not.

The first scene is Reformation Day, October 31, 1517. Luther, the young Augustinian monk, nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. He was concerned about many issues, but at the heart of it all was the selling of indulgences. This is perhaps the most dastardly abuse of authority in the church's history. In response, Luther set forth these ninety-five theses for discussion. He was not initially seeking to leave the Roman Church but to strengthen it. He intended to spark a debate. Instead, he sparked a conflagration that would sweep throughout Europe and beyond.

The second scene occurred in the spring of 1521. It is less familiar than the posting of the *Ninety-five Theses* but still relatively well-known. The Diet of Worms—which was convened by Charles V, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire—took place just four years after Luther had posted his theses.

The Emperor called Luther to give an account for what he had said and written. Luther was granted assurance of safe travel and promised that he would not be put to death upon arrival. He showed up April 16, at 4:00 p.m., and was told to report the next day at the same time. He entered the assembly and took his place in the middle of the auditorium. Before him were his collected writings and around him a gathering of ecclesiastical and imperial authorities. At this point for Luther, his choice was binary: reaffirm his writings or renounce them.

In reading the account, you can almost feel the weight and

drama of the moment. The presiding officer, Johann Eck, asked Luther if the collected books were his and if he was prepared to retract their heresies. Luther asked for twenty-four hours to pray and deliberate.

The gathering reconvened on April 18 at 4:00 p.m. There, Luther declared the words that are written in immortal ink:

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.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, Luther articulated the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*.

Finally, and the most pivotal of the three scenes as it relates to *sola Scriptura*, is sandwiched between the two previous accounts and is often the one most overlooked. This third event was the Leipzig Debate of 1519.

On previous occasions, Luther affirmed Holy Scripture as completely authoritative, but as he gathered at the Leipzig Debate, this concept was clarified within him. Luther was called to debate Johann Eck, the German scholastic theologian who would later preside at the Diet of Worms. Here is where, it appears, he almost

stumbled into the doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. Eck was formidable, yet Luther held him with antipathy, as he did most all his critics. Luther declared Eck to be a “little glory-hungry beast.”<sup>4</sup>

In the debate, Luther was the better exegete, but Eck was the better historian. Eck’s strategy was to link Luther to his forbearer, Jan Hus. The church had officially condemned Hus and his teaching, so Eck knew if he linked Luther to Hus, Luther would thus bring on his own condemnation.

Eck pressed Luther to affirm Hus, who a century earlier at the Council of Constance, was burned at the stake. Luther, perhaps, would meet the same fate. However, a funny thing happened at Leipzig. During the fracas, they took a lunch break where Luther slipped out and reread the reports from the Council of Constance—reminding himself of what took place and reminding himself of what Hus claimed.

The debate resumed, and Luther declared, “I am a Hussite.” He knew exactly what he was saying. He knew precisely what was taking place. And in that moment, he was in essence saying, “I stand with Hus. We are men of the Book.”

Hus made a prophesy before he was martyred, saying, “Today you burn a goose, but in one hundred years a swan will arise which you will prove unable to boil or roast.”<sup>5</sup> Luther received that mantle and perceived Hus to be prophesying about him. This is why today in Lutheran churches the pulpit will often be in the shape of a swan.

At Leipzig, Eck’s whole plan was to back Luther into a corner by pressing him to affirm Hus. Luther was backing Eck,

and all who were present, into a corner by saying, in effect, “Your popes have failed. Your councils have failed. In fact, they have contradicted one another. So, if you do not have a pope who is legitimately authoritative, and you do not have a council that is authoritative, then what do you have?” Luther stood on *sola Scriptura*.

## SOLA SCRIPTURA AND YOUR CHURCH

Now that we have established *sola Scriptura* biblically and historically, let’s apply it pastorally. The demand of *sola Scriptura* is that we are obliged to submit our lives to the Word of God. As we do, we experience a more satisfied and fruitful Christian life, and most of all, we glorify God. Thus, here are ten words of application for you, your Christian ministry, and your church.

**First, any belief in *sola Scriptura* worth standing on necessitates a pulpit ministry that preaches the Word.** Why we preach, when we preach, and how we preach all reveal what we believe about the Word of God. If we confess to believe the Book but do not preach it, then we are merely running our mouths. But if we believe that the Bible is God’s true Word, God’s authoritative Word, and God’s sufficient Word, then we must be intentional about bringing it to bear on our lives and the lives of others. It should affect the whole of our ministries, most especially our pulpit ministries.

**Second, it shapes our soul care and how well pastors shepherd the flock of God.** At the end of the day, we want to

bring the Word of God to bear with grace—prayerfully applying it to other people’s lives. This is not just something that magically happens, though, we must be intentional about it. It is also not merely done from the pulpit, but from across the coffee table, in small group settings, and in the study where people come for counsel. We must bring the Word to bear in every aspect of our ministries. Ministers are often expected to be wonder workers, able to speak helpful words, magically improving the lives of our hearers. We can’t do that, but God’s Word can. We must simply unleash it, so it can work in the lives of people.

**Third, this doctrine should lead us to strive for church unity.** Luther was right on many things, but he can be faulted for being naïve about one thing. He assumed that a return to Scriptural authority and casting off the conflicting shackles of popes and councils would facilitate a new wave of mission fervor and church unity. The Reformation certainly brought fervor, but it did not quite bring unity. To be frank, today there is too much fragmentation in the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. I am not suggesting that we water down doctrine, but I am suggesting that as we preach and stand on *sola Scriptura*, we do so in a way that fosters unity in the body of Christ. As we do, we should be intentional about seeking to do so with like-minded brothers and sisters of strong evangelical faith. It is essential that we strive for unity.

**Fourth, this doctrine calls for faithful, disciplined biblical interpretation.** Interpretation matters. If you’re going to say you are committed to the Bible, and that it is true, then how you

interpret it makes all the difference. Be diligent and be devoted to the study of God's Word. Learn to properly employ the tools needed to rightly interpret the Bible. This Book is not an open sesame for us to read into it what we want. This book is God's Word, and it requires us to faithfully and humbly interpret it.

**Fifth, a commitment to *sola Scriptura* brings with it, I believe, a commitment to confessional statements.** Why? Because it quickly turns into a slippery slope when people say, "We just believe the book. We have no creed but the Bible." This is a place you do not want to go. My denomination articulates its beliefs via the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*. We also confess our beliefs from the *Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* as well as the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*. We are a confessional people and we do not let *sola Scriptura* sleepwalk us into nonsensical statements like, "We confess no creed but the Bible." To confess that is to confess no creed at all. While the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* teaches us that Scripture alone is the final authority for our beliefs and practices, we need confessions and statements to help us better understand what Scripture teaches.

**Sixth, we must have a strong commitment to regenerate church membership.** As evangelicals, we do not have a pope, and we do not want one. We do not have councils either. We have the local church and the Word of God. The local church gathered is where God's people come together and humbly seek God's will for the church under the leadership of its pastors. If we have a Book that is true, and people of God who are in submission to it,

then the last thing we need is a pope. Rather, a firm commitment to regenerate church membership guarantees that when the local church is gathered, they are united under the banner of the Word of God.

**Seventh, a commitment to *sola Scriptura* is a commitment to Christ-centered theology.** When we look to the Scriptures we look to Jesus, and any firm grasp of *sola Scriptura* leads to the necessity of a deeper commitment to the preaching of Christ. We are called to bring the Savior to bear, to proclaim the Lord Jesus Christ so that sinners will hear and believe; so that repentance will take place in the hearts of people; so that boys and girls, men and women would be saved; so that the Great Commission would be proclaimed. That is what we do.

**Eighth, *sola Scriptura* leads to a ministry that is marked by gravity and perspective.** Imagine Luther before the world's authorities, eking out the words, "Here I stand." Imagine Luther in 1517 strolling toward the door of the Castle Church and nailing these theses on the door, knowing what would likely happen. Imagine Luther at Leipzig during that lunch break, reminding himself of the Council of Constance and realizing, *I believe this. I believe this. I believe this.* He knew fully the consequences when he walked back out and said, "I am a Hussite." This historical context puts in perspective so many of our present concerns, which, in light of global Christianity and church history, are superficial. This ought to infuse our ministries with a sense of gratitude, knowing that there are many previous believers who paid the ultimate price that they could pay for the faith we received: their lives.

**Ninth, *sola Scriptura* shapes our worship.** For many Protestants, and for me personally, *sola Scriptura* means a commitment to the regulative principle for corporate worship on the Lord's Day. Simply stated, the regulative principle argues that our worship should include those elements specifically called for in the New Testament, including the public reading of Scripture, the preaching of the Word, the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, and, of course, baptism and the Lord's Supper. We are to preach the Scriptures, read the Scriptures, pray the Scriptures, and sing the Scriptures. The doctrine of *sola Scriptura* affects everything, especially how we think about and structure our weekly gathering for worship.

**Tenth and finally, *sola Scriptura* encourages us to put the "protest" back into Protestantism.** What are the great challenges of our generation? What is God calling you or your ministry to stand for? You may not know the answer today. You may stumble into it eight years from now in your local church gathering. You might be pressed into your own little crucible when you decline to marry a leading church benefactor's daughter because she is living in sin. You might find yourself in conflict when you are willing to stand on the Word of God and speak to issues of sexuality and gender. The society pressures us to be silent. As with every generation before, our task is to take the baton of faith, the truth that we have received, and to be faithful to pass it on to the next.

*Sola Scriptura* is more than an abstract doctrine; it is a truth that is essential for our Christian lives and our local church



ministries. *Sola Scriptura* indeed is the formal principle of the Reformation—and it is to be the formal principle of our lives. As Luther discovered, everything else rests upon it. Have you discovered the same?