

The Five Solas: Sola Scriptura

Various

October 8, 2017

Introduction to the Solas:

The year was 1521. Martin Luther, a German monk whose writings ignited the Protestant Reformation, had been summoned by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, to appear at a counsel to defend his views. Upon arrival, it didn't take long for Luther to realize that, in reality, the purpose of the counsel was not to hear his defense but rather to demand that Luther recant his views. His books and articles were laid out on a table before him and he was asked if these were indeed written by him and if so, if he would recant their content. He requested time to respond, and it was granted Luther until the afternoon of the following day to address the counsel once again.

The next day Luther, this powerless monk, stood in front of church officials, princes, and the Holy Roman Emperor himself, and said this, "The works are mine, but ... unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

Luther knew full well the consequences of refusing to recant: it meant a certain death sentence: excommunication followed by execution for heresy. Yet for Luther, Scripture stood supreme. It was better to stand upon the truth of God's Word and lose one's life for it than to oppose God's Word and his conscience by affirming something he knew was false. For Luther, and for the other Reformers, the Bible - not tradition, not the Pope, not church counsels - was the final authority.

This morning I want to talk to you about the primacy of Scripture as our sole authority as Christians. Our message today is entitled, "The Five Solas - Sola Scriptura." The word "sola" is Latin meaning "alone." During the Protestant Reformation, the reformers were united around five main principles. These were: Scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, and the glory of God alone. These five Solas form the heart and soul of the Reformation and are what characterize Protestants today. Since we are a Protestant church - meaning the family of Grace Brethren churches of which we're a part of trace their origin to the 16th century break with the Roman Catholic Church - and since this month we're celebrating the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation, it seemed important for us to hit the pause button on our series in Romans and spend a bit of time going over the five Solas in order to understand why they were important then and why they are still important for us as Protestants today.

So over the next few weeks my messages are going to be different from the normal bread-and-butter of expository preaching. These messages will be far more topical in nature, although I will call your attention back to various passages of Scripture to help you see where these five Solas come from. We'll start with "Sola Scriptura" today, then we'll cover the following four Solas in pairs: we'll go over "Faith Alone" and "Grace

Alone” next week and then in two weeks we’ll consider “Christ Alone” and “The Glory of God Alone.” My hope is this short series will help you gain a better understanding and appreciation of our theological heritage we have as Protestants and help you see how these five Solas are still relevant for us today.

As we do this together, I want us to answer three questions: “What is this particular Sola affirming?” “What is it protesting?” and “What does it mean for us?” So as we work through these, we’ll first define what is being stated. Second, we’ll consider what abuse or issue was this reacting against. After all, the term Protestant comes from the word “protest:” they were protesting against doctrinal error within the Roman Catholic Church. And third, we’ll want to think about this as not a historical curiosity that was only relevant 500 years ago but as something we still need to affirm and commit ourselves even now in the 21st century. So let’s begin with our first point, which asks the question...

1. What is this affirming?

When we speak of Sola Scriptura (or Scripture alone), what do we mean? I like the definition that Ligonier Ministries gave, and they defined it like this,

“The Reformation principle of sola Scriptura has to do with the sufficiency of Scripture as our supreme authority in all spiritual matters. Sola Scriptura simply means that all truth necessary for our salvation and spiritual life is taught either explicitly or implicitly in Scripture.”¹

Perhaps the clearest passage of Scripture that attests to this is found in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. Why don’t we take a look at that in our Bibles? It’s on pg. 996 of the pew Bibles and I’m not sure what page of your own personal Bible but again the passage is 2 Timothy 3:16-17, which no doubt will be familiar to many of you. Here’s what it says, *“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.”*

So let’s walk through this for a bit. First, this passage concerns *“All Scripture”* both the Old and the New Testament. Second, all Scripture is *“Breathed out by God”* meaning that God has inspired it and it is his Word even though he used human authors to write it. Third, it is *“profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”* In other words, it can help teach us about God, ourselves, and what is necessary for salvation. Fourth, the end goal of this is so *“that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”* Scripture is sufficient to do the job of completing our salvation and equipping us to live righteously.

Have you ever come across instruction that were incomplete? Maybe it was a new item you had to assemble and the instructions assumed some knowledge you didn’t possess. Or perhaps it was a recipe that told you to do something with the eggs but you had no idea what it meant so you needed to google it to figure it out. Well, the Bible’s not like that. We don’t need to supplement Scripture with some other holy book or spiritual guru in order to understand what God expects of us. When it

comes to the Bible, it's a one-stop-shop for all our spiritual needs. It doesn't lack any information necessary for the Christian life. We don't need to have the Bible *plus* something else to properly live the Christian life: it's all there.

Notice those words at the end of v. 17. "*So that the man of God may be **complete**, equipped for **every** good work.*" I don't see any deficiency in that statement, do you? So what Paul is teaching us in 2 Timothy 3 is that Scripture alone provides for us all we need for our salvation. It is the very truth of God, inspired by God, fully capable to teach and equip us with all we need to know God and live a life pleasing to him.

Now having said that, we must not mistake Sola Scriptura for Solo Scriptura. What I mean by this is while Scripture is sufficient for all we need for our salvation, we must neither study it alone - that is, in isolation from others as if we alone can be the final arbiters of what it teaches - nor should we act as if Scripture alone can answer all our questions on everything under the sun. Let me address both of these concerns.

First, we aren't to take from this that your conscience is the ultimate guide such that you say, "I believe the Bible says this and that settles it." We exist in a community of other believers that help to teach and guide us in our understanding of Scripture. While Scripture alone is sufficient, we can be deficient in our understanding, and so we dare not "go it alone" when it comes to the Bible. So that means if you have an understanding of Scripture that nobody else holds, then don't write off those other believers as heretics. It might be you that are mistaken. The community of faith, both past and present, can help us correctly interpret Scripture so that it's not at the mercy of every subjective interpretation one brings to it.

Let me give an example: there are those who would reinterpret certain passages to allow for homosexual marriage between committed individuals. Well, if you're going to go down that road, one significant problem you need to face is that until just very recently, no one understood those passages to teach anything other than that any kind of homosexual behavior was a sin. For two thousand years of the church and for at least 1500 years before that with the Jews, everyone universally regarded Scripture to condemn homosexual behavior. So while that doesn't necessarily make the new interpretation wrong, it should raise serious red flags because it flies in the face of the collective wisdom and understanding of God's people for thousands of years. So while Scripture alone is our final authority, we shouldn't "go it alone" when interpreting it. We need the collective wisdom of God's people past and present to help guide and correct us when our interpretations fly off the rails.

Second, the Bible alone is sufficient for what we need for salvation and godly living, but that does not mean it contains everything we need to know. Scripture contains truth but not all truth about all things. If you want to know how to make lasagna, the Bible won't help you; you'll need a cookbook. If you are looking to change the oil on your car, you won't find instructions in the book of Leviticus or any other book of the Bible. If you want to learn about geology, I would suggest you put your Bible down and go speak to a geologist. If you wish to be an astronaut, then the Bible is not going to help you much with the fields of physics, rocket science, or astronomy.

While the Bible is sufficient for what it intends to do - to teach us about God and how to find salvation in him - it has little to say about culinary arts, auto mechanics, earth sciences, or cosmology. If I might quote Galileo, he famously said this, "The Bible shows us the way to go to heaven, not how the heavens go."

So then, sola Scriptura affirms that the Bible alone is sufficient to communicate to us all we need for salvation and sanctification. But why was this so important to the Reformers? What was it they were reacting against as they insisted on Scripture alone? So moving on now, our second question about sola Scriptura is this...

2. What is this protesting?

The issue here wasn't a question of the authority and inspiration of Scripture. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestants recognized the Bible to be the Word of God. To this day all would agree that the Bible is divinely inspired and is therefore authoritative. But the issue for the Reformers was that the Roman Catholic Church also affirmed church tradition, which would be defined as the teaching of the church that had been passed down, either orally or by means of written decrees, some of which came down by Papal decree. So for the Roman Catholic Church, both during the Reformation and still today, have both the Bible and church tradition as equal authorities. For them, when the church speaks, it speaks truthfully and therefore authoritatively.

Now the problem came when the Reformers began to read Scripture for themselves and discovered that not everything that church tradition affirmed squared with what the Bible said. Doctrines such as the primacy of the Roman bishop to serve over all of the church as Pope, purgatory, penance, praying to Mary, and indulgences, just to name a few, were not only not taught in Scripture but were in some cases even contradicted by Scripture. The Reformers saw the Roman Church using tradition to come up with all kinds of things which simply weren't in the Bible.

The Reformers recognized this wasn't the first time God's people had placed their traditions above and in opposition to Scripture. To give just one Biblical example, turn in your Bibles to Matthew 15, which can be found on pg. 820 of the pew Bibles. I want to read just the first nine verses of Matthew 15.

"Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, 'Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat.' He answered them, 'And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, 'What you would have gained from me is given to God,' he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: 'This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'"

The Jews were more concerned about their traditions than God's commandments, and if it so happened the traditions nullified God's Word, then so be it. Well, that's exactly what the Reformers saw was happening with the Church of their day. Over time, traditions had developed that were held with equal authority with the Bible and eventually became more important than the Bible, because when confronted with the error of their false teachings, the Roman Catholic Church refused to change.

So for the Reformers, it was necessary to proclaim that Scripture alone was the authoritative rule for God's people, not church tradition, not the Pope, not even church councils. While those things could be helpful - and the Reformers would have affirmed that some church councils and traditions were of great benefit to the church - but all such things needed to be checked against Scripture and rejected if found lacking.

Martin Luther especially believed in the power of God's Word as the sole authority sufficient to dismantle the unbiblical traditions that had been built up around the church. Later in his life, reflecting back on the Reformation, he said this,

"I stood up against the Pope, indulgences, and all papists, but without violence or uproar. I only urged, preached, and declared God's Word, nothing else. And yet while I was asleep, or drinking Wittenberg beer with my Philip Melanchthon... the Word inflicted greater injury on popery than prince or emperor ever did. I did nothing, the Word did everything."

So then, Sola Scriptura was a foundational battle cry of the Reformation because it was on that basis that true reforming of the church could take place. Those things which the Roman Catholic Church taught in contradiction to Scripture must be rejected. The only standard that mattered was what God's Word said for it alone had the authority to determine right doctrine and right practice.

But now we need to turn to our third and final question: what does this mean for us today? The Reformation took place 500 years ago; surely this is old news by now. Is the principle of Sola Scriptura still relevant for us in the 21st century? The answer, in short, is a resounding, "Yes, yes it is." So moving on now to our third question...

3. What does this mean for us?

Sola Scriptura still matters because we still have those who would either place something else alongside the Bible as an equal authority or allow other teachings to be placed above Scripture. Let me give you three examples.

First, the Roman Catholic Church hasn't changed on their view of the authority of tradition as equal to the authority of the Bible. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states this in paragraph 82, ". . . *the Church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of Revelation is entrusted, does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.*"

As a result, the Roman Catholic Church still affirms the doctrines of penance, purgatory, indulgences, papal infallibility, the veneration of Mary, and many other doctrines that have no basis in Scripture and are often contradicted by Scripture. And this is still going on. Within the past 150 years, the Roman Catholic Church has added to their system of belief the immaculate conception of Mary in 1854 and more recently, in 1950, the bodily assumption of the sinless Mary into heaven. So when we Protestants affirm the Reformation principle of Sola Scriptura, we do so because the Catholic Church still to this day places tradition on the same level as Scripture as an authority. Therefore the Reformation is still necessary.

Second, we have cult groups like the Mormons who will place the writings of Joseph Smith not only on par with Scripture but as superior to it. The Book of Mormon is considered to be part of God's continuing revelation to man and thus because it is newer, more relevant revelation, it is held in higher esteem. So Sola Scriptura is still vitally important for us to affirm today because there are groups like the Mormons who will claim new revelation from God and hold it as more important than Scripture.

Third, many people today will reject any kind of holy book and grant their subjective experiences and personal feelings with the highest authority in their lives. Their theology is simply a patch-work of various beliefs and comforting notions that they happen to like and which fits in well with wider social sensibilities. For them, they don't want to be told what to believe from some holy book: their spiritual life is a journey they need to discover for themselves. Yet such people are the new idolaters as they fashion as god of their own making. So for them, we must stand firm on Sola Scriptura: the Bible alone is where we are to find true teaching about who God is and what he expects of us.

So then, we still need Sola Scriptura because people are still willing to look to other things like tradition, to so-called new revelations, and their own experience as a greater authority for spiritual matters than the Bible.

But not only must we affirm Sola Scriptura to others, we need to practice it ourselves. So I ask you: what role did the Bible play in your life this week? Have you spent any time reading it? Have you consulted it when wrestling through life's difficulties? Is it something you've bother to memorize? Has it informed your prayers? As you seek to follow Christ, is Scripture your final and sufficient authority for how you think and speak and live? We must do more than simply affirm that Scripture alone is sufficient for all we need for a life of godliness: we need to open it up and use it.

Conclusion:

As we close, I think this challenge from J. C. Ryle is appropriate to us as we seek not only to uphold the principle of Sola Scriptura in our words but live it out in our actions.

"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.” By reading that book we may learn what to believe, what to be, and what to do; how to live with comfort, and 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, and makes it the rule of his faith and practice!

Nevertheless it is a sorrowful fact that man has a sad ability to abuse God's gifts. His privileges, and power, and 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. And 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, and that charge is neglect and 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 and Bible distributing - than ever was since we were a nation. We see Bibles in every bookstore, Bibles of every size, price, and style - large Bibles, and small Bibles - Bibles for the rich, and 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 and to "read" it quite another. ²

Please join me in bowing your heads now as we close in prayer.

Endnotes

1. <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/what-does-sola-scriptura-mean/>
2. <http://www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/pract5.htm>.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2017.