

Reformation Month

Sola Scriptura

Various Texts

Introduction

Some time on October 31st 1517, a thirty three year old man approached the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. In his hand was a hammer, some nails and a manuscript which contained 95 theses which condemned the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church, and particularly the “doctrine of penance” or indulgences.

At this time the door of a church building functioned as a bulletin board for academic and church-related announcements. Unbeknown to the author of this document, the sound of that hammer striking the door would soon be heard around the world, and ultimately lead to the greatest transformation of Western society since the gospel was first preached by the apostles.

The man in question is Martin Luther. He was born on November 10, 1483 in Eisleben, Saxony in Southeast Germany. Luther’s father, Hans, had experienced some success as a miner and ore smelter. Hans knew that mining was a tough trade and he wanted his promising son to have a better life, he wanted him to become a lawyer. In 1484 Hans moved his family to Mansfeld where at the age of seven Martin Luther was enrolled in school. At 14 Luther went north to Magdeburg, where he continued his studies. It was here that Martin Luther earned his baccalaureate (Pronunciation: “back-a-law-re-ete”) and Master’s degree in the shortest amount of time permitted by the university. His academic prowess and oratory skills earned him the nickname of “The Philosopher”.

In July 1505, Luther had a life-changing experience that set him on a new course to becoming a monk. He was walking on the road to Erfurt when a severe thunderstorm arose. He feared for his life and was very nearly killed by a bolt of lightning which struck the ground near him. In the midst of this storm Luther cried out to St. Anne, the Patron saint of miners, “Save me Saint Anne, and I’ll become a monk.” The storm subsided and he was rescued.

Although the decision to become a monk bitterly disappointed his father, Luther had made a promise and he must fulfill it. The first few years of monastic life were particularly unpleasant as he did not discover the enlightenment or fulfillment his soul craved. As a Roman Catholic monk, Luther was terrorized by God’s wrath over sin. His conscience being extremely sensitive led him to seek justification by means of self-deprivation and self-flagellation. He would engage in extreme fasting, long hours of prayer, frequent confessions, and even staying in the freezing cold were all attempts to please God and bring comfort to his hurting soul. Luther’s entire life as a monk was one grand “self-salvation project”. Years later Luther wrote, *“If anyone would have gained heaven as a monk, I would have been among them.”*

However, all his attempts to soothe his conscience were in vain. Finally he decided to return to formal study in the hope that this might bring the light and illumination his troubled soul so desperately needed. In 1507 He began the study of Theology at the University of Erfurt. Sometime between the years of 1508 and 1517 Luther had what he called the “Tower Experience” because it occurred in the Tower of the Black Cloister in Wittenberg. There he was studying the Scriptures, and in particular the Book of Romans. For some time he had been wrestling with Romans 1:17 which declared that *“he who through faith is righteous shall live.”* At an undisclosed

moment in time, this Roman Catholic Monk came to understand the difference between the righteousness of the law and the righteousness of the gospel. Let me tarry just a while longer here and read for you Luther's own confessions regarding this precious moment in history.

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated [make someone less angry/hostile] by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' " There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy, as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which he makes us strong, the wisdom of God, with which he makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

At this moment in the Tower of the Black Cloister, a monk became a saint! From this time forward, Martin Luther became a champion for the long-lost gospel of Jesus Christ. His 95 theses nailed to that church door was just the beginning of the reformation.

Luther was called to recant of his beliefs in 1520. He did not recant, and he was excommunicated, exiled, and outlawed by Charles V in 1521. He went on to translate the Bible to German, wrote the Larger and Small Catechism, and became an accomplished hymn writer. Luther's theology centered on Christ as the Word of God, the finished work of Christ on the cross, the relationship between law and gospel, and justification by faith.

To this day Martin Luther's treatise on the Book of Galatians is second to none, but his greatest work was in calling his generation (and ours) back from the false teaching of a works-based salvation, traditionalism, papal authority and penance to a salvation found in the Scripture alone, accomplished by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone.

Let me close this introduction by reading Thesis 62 of the 95 which says, "The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God".

Introducing the Solae System & The Plan of Attack

Solar System Compared to Solae System

The solar system is the gravitationally bound system comprising the Sun and the objects that orbit it, either directly or indirectly.

The sun is the center of our solar system; the planets, over 61 moons, asteroids, comets, meteoroids and other rocks and gas all orbit the sun.

Today we commence a study on a different Solae System. It is not a scientific or astronomical system, it is a spiritual and biblical system. It too centers around a Son, but this Son is not a spinning ball of hot gas which lights up the world, it is the Son of God who is the Light of the World.

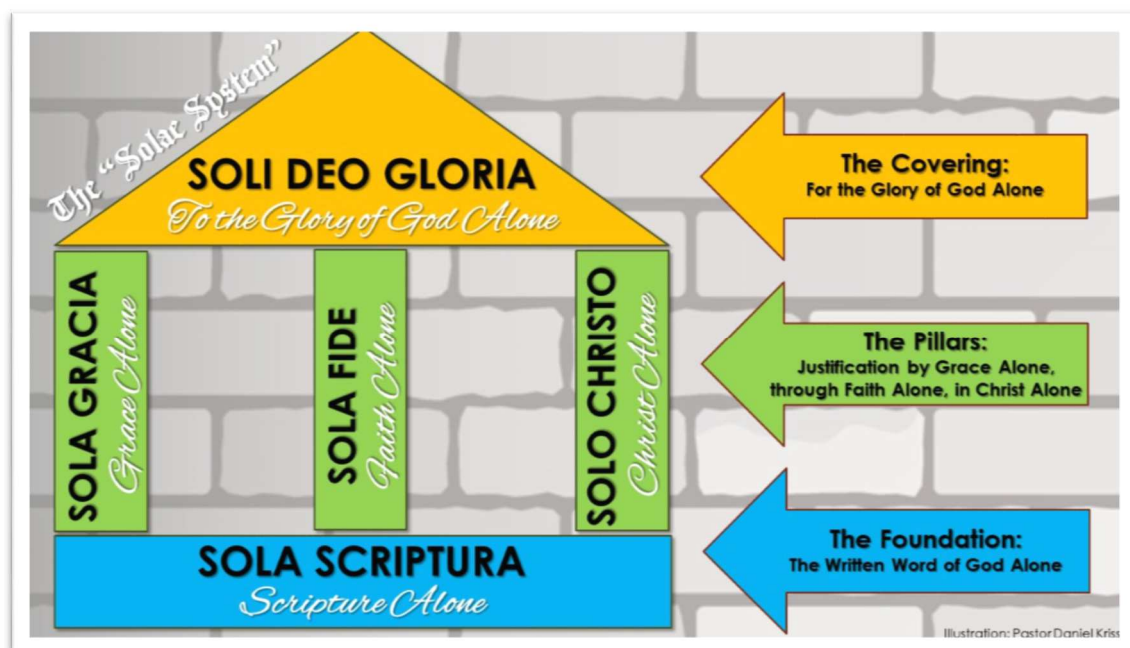
Similar to the Physical Solar System, the Biblical Solae System also includes luminous bodies which orbit around our precious Son. These are the great truths of the gospel. The spiritual moons are the lesser lights and the truths which reflect the glory of the Son.

As we study this spiritual paradigm it is extremely important that we do not lose sight of the central aspect of this Solae System – the Son of God. Sometimes theologians, pastors, teachers, and students become so enamored with the “small rocks and comets of the Solae System” that they lose sight of the central and glorious theme which is Jesus Christ who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16).

I have now demonstrated how the physical Solar System is in some ways similar to the spiritual Solae System. Now I want to show you what the Solae System really is by way of “Building Diagram.”

Solae System Represented by a Building

When I first came into contact with the Solae System or the “Five Solas of the Reformation”, I immediately came to appreciate how each truth was interconnected. I started to draw a diagram which quickly took the form of a building, and I think it is helpful to show you the building blocks which form this theological structure.



Plan of Attack

For the five Sundays of October we will be looking at the "Five Solas of the Reformation". Each Sunday will feature a different aspect of the diagram displayed. I will take the first two, Lucas will present the third, and then I will wrap up with the final two aspects of the Solae System. Today we will look briefly at the first and foundational aspect of Sola Scriptura or "Scripture Alone".

Please understand that the time we have together is so brief and the subject matter so vast, it is impossible for any human to do justice to the reformers and their theology in a mere 40-50 minutes on a Sunday morning. I will do my best to be concise, and you do your best to be attentive, and may God grant us an understanding of these glorious truths and how we can discover them for ourselves and defend them with our lives.

After that very long introduction, join me as we consider "Sola Scriptura- The Foundation of the Reformation."

1. A Brief Glossary of Terms

We have already defined the meaning of the Latin terms found in our Solae System diagram, but there are a few other terms that require some explanation if we are to understand what the reformers were fighting for, and against.

Lollards – The derogatory label was originally given to the followers of John Wycliffe in the 14th century. The term literally meant "mumblers of prayers" and was applied to those who upheld to teachings of personal faith, divine election, and the authority of the Scripture over church and state. The term eventually evolved to include all those who criticized the Roman Catholic Church and who attacked clerical celibacy, transubstantiation, indulgences, and pilgrimages.

Roman Catholic Church – This is the largest "church denomination" on earth with nearly 1.3 billion people claiming to be members or affiliates of the Catholic Church. The leader of this global religion is the "Bishop of Rome" or the Pope. His official and full title is the *"Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Patriarch of the Latin Church, Primate of Italy, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the Roman Province, Sovereign of the Vatican City State, Servant of the servants of God."*

He oversees the entire organization with many thousands of cardinals, arch-bishops, bishops, priests, deacons and the laity. Although the Roman Catholic Church believes that Jesus is the Son of God, they assert many erroneous doctrines which oppose the foundational truths of Protestantism including: the Role of the Pope as the head of the church, the truth of the Scriptures only as it is interpreted by the church or tradition, the celibacy of the clergy, the necessity of the priesthood in the remission or forgiveness of sins, the immaculate conception or sinlessness of the virgin Mary, the infallibility of the pope, transubstantiation in the Eucharist, prayer and intercession made to the saints, the existence of purgatory – a cleansing place in the afterlife, and the ability to commit mortal sins which result in a loss of salvation and require repentance, fulfillment of the seven sacraments, and ecclesiastical works or deeds.

Penance – The sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is one of the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. The etymology of the word means "religious discipline or self-mortification as a token of repentance and as atonement for some sin." Throughout the centuries Penance have taken various forms. In the first

two centuries A.D. penance was made primarily by practicing prayer, good deeds, fasting, and alms-giving. A new method was introduced in the 7th century called "Tariff Penance" whereby a sinner could pay money to the Catholic Church or the Priest to purchase their atonement. This particular form of Penance was extremely popular in Luther's day. Finally, "Individual Confessions" were introduced in the 12th century which is the most common form of penance in our day. These "Individual Confessions" include meeting one-on-one with a priest, disclosing the acts of sin that have been committed, and then fulfilling the requirements set out by the priest to bring about cleansing. Most commonly these include: reciting "hail mary's", prayers accompanied by rosary beads, and other forms of Roman Catholic absolution (or pardon).

These are some of the terms you will need to be familiar with on our journey into the lives of the reformers and what they stood against.

2. The Definition of "Sola Scriptura"

Turn to 2 Timothy 3:14-17

This favourite passage of the reformers is critical to an understanding of what they believed and why it was so important to them.

Sola Scriptura means that the revealed Word of God, the Bible alone, is instructive for the faith and practice of the Christian. This means that the Scripture is complete, authoritative and true.

This doctrine stands in stark contrast to the centuries of Roman Catholic traditions which were considered superior to the Scriptures.

Traditions can be wonderful things but they can also be deadly when they usurp the authority of the Scriptures.

Sola Scriptura does not nullify the concept of church traditions. Rather, it gives a solid foundation on which to base our church traditions.

There are non-biblical church traditions and there are anti-biblical church traditions. Non-biblical church traditions are without morality unless they are made to be pre-requisites for grace, faith and salvation. Anti-biblical church traditions stand in opposition to the revealed Word of God and must be eradicated from the church because they attack the core doctrines of the gospel.

Examples: Non-biblical

- Communion and lunch must be on the 1st Sunday of every month.
- A preacher must always wear a tie when in the pulpit.

Examples: Anti-biblical

- Confession of sin to a priest.
- The necessity of infant baptism for regeneration and removal of original sin.

Sola Scriptura is the foundation stone upon which all of the gospel truth stands. A failure to believe that the Bible is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction and for training in righteousness will bring about grave error and rob us of the truth that God revealed for His people.

3. The Implications of “Sola Scriptura”

In this third point, I want to discuss the “nuts and bolts” of Sola Scriptura. In other words, I want to explain what the Reformers implied when they raised the banner of Sola Scriptura.

1. The Scripture is Divine

Paul said, *“All Scripture is breathed out by God..”* (2 Tim. 3:16).

The reformers believed in the verbal plenary inspiration of the Scriptures. By this they meant that the Bible in its original autograph (manuscripts) was the precise words of God and recorded by those He selected to be His scribes.

2. The Scripture is Complete

The word “plenary” means “full” or “absolute” and in context of the Scriptures refers to the whole Bible as being inspired not simply portions of it.

Many denominations and sects believe that the Bible “contains” the Word of God but will not affirm the totality of the Scriptures as the complete special revelation from God.

3. The Scripture is Authoritative

It was perhaps this third point which spearheaded the reformation and widened the chasm between the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformers.

Church Traditions, papal declarations, and Catholic literature were all held in higher esteem and authority than the Scripture.

One can recall the time when Jesus said to the Pharisees, “You leave the commandments of God and hold to the tradition of men...thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down...” (Mark 7:8,13).

For Martin Luther and others they believed that the Scripture was the complete and final court of appeal for all matters of faith and practice.

When Luther was commanded to recant he replied by saying:

“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 will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me.” Amen.”

4. The Scripture is Perspicuous

By “Perspicuous” we mean that the essential teachings of the gospel are plain to see. They are not mystical or hard to comprehend. Since God is not a God of confusion (1 Cor. 14:33), Sola Scriptura teaches that the message of salvation which is the primary theme of God's Word, is not only for the elite or the academics.

Paul wrote to Timothy, *“from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus”* (2 Tim.3:15).

The Roman Catholic Church historically forbade the laity from owning and reading the Bible. Only the church leaders were permitted to divulge and interpret the

Scriptures. This led to a plethora of erroneous teachings and formed the reason why Tyndale, Wycliffe, Luther and others were so concerned about translating the Bible into the common language of the people.

Quote by William Tyndale:

"I perceived how that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth except the Scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue."

"I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy who drives the plough to know more of the scriptures than you do."

Before we move on, it is important to note that the Reformers also asserted that Scripture's most effective means of interpretation is the Scriptures themselves. This was called the "analogy of faith principle" which simply meant that when one had difficulty understanding an unclear text of Scripture, they would turn to other biblical texts for the answers.

Had we more time, I would tell you about the Timelessness of the Scriptures, the Translation and Transmission of the Scriptures.

Let me share one more core implication of the Scriptures as understood by the Reformers:

5. The Scripture is Christ-Centered

The reformers lived in a time when the Bible was only available to the religious elite and the majority of the teaching provided by the priests and monks was church-centered, tradition-driven, pope-inspired messages.

The reformation was largely about a return to the authority of the Scriptures, but it also included a renewed understanding of the centrality and supremacy of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle John proves that Christ is the central theme of the Scriptures in John 5:39 where Jesus says, *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me."*

It is interesting to note that when Martin Luther's followers began to call themselves "Lutherans", he was horrified. Listen to his view about himself and Christ:

"The first thing I ask is that people should not make use of my name, and should not call themselves Lutherans, but Christians. What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone. St. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 3, would not tolerate Christians calling themselves Paul's or Peter's, but only Christians. How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?"

Here we see Luther's heart for Christ and that men and women would follow him. He was quick to turn the spotlight from himself to the Scriptures and the Saviour.

As we draw to a close, it is necessary that I leave you with one final aspect of Sola Scriptura:

6. The Applications of Sola Scriptura Today

In this final point we are simply asking, what relevance or importance does "Sola Scriptura" have for us today 500 years after the reformation?

1. The Exceeding Value of the Scriptures

The floor of history is stained red with the blood of countless men and women who believed in Sola Scriptura, and died in an effort to bring the Word of God to the people.

Consider how the Psalmist described the Scriptures:

Psalm 119:24 Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors.

Psalm 119:47 for I find my delight in your commandments, which I love.

Psalm 119:72 The law of your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

Psalm 119:97 Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.

Psalm 119:103 How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

If nothing else is achieved in this message, my prayer is that every person in this place, and those watching via simulcast would have a renewed love and appreciation for the Word of God.

Short History of the Scriptures:

The translation of the Scriptures into English began largely with John Wycliffe in the 14th century. Next came William Tyndale whose herculean efforts amidst great tribulation, still make up nearly 90% of the King James Bible. Tyndale's work was the first rendering into English directly from the Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. Tyndale experienced all manner of trial and tribulation and finally was betrayed by a "friend" which led to his martyrdom on October 6, 1536. He was strangled and then burned at the stake. His last words were, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." This prayer was answered three years later when Henry 8th published the "Great Bible" in 1539.

Martin Luther, Miles Coverdale, John Rogers, and many other names played an important role in bringing the Scriptures to the populace in their native tongues. All of these abandoned the notion that the Bible was simply for the religious leaders, and many of them paid dearly for this decision, often with their lives.

May God give us an appreciation for men and women of yesteryear who sacrificed all to bring us God's Word.

2. The Timeless Truth Amidst a Landscape of Revelations

God's Word has stood the test of time. It has had enemies in the form of emperors, dictators, generals, religious leaders, and many others who have sought to destroy and annul its power.

Today the greatest enemy of the Scripture outside of Satan himself is the contemporary church who are seduced by leaders who claim to have special revelations, visions, dreams, prophecies and "words from the Lord for us today". These deceivers assert that God's revealed Word in the Scripture is incomplete, irrelevant, and time-stamped. They instruct us to perform tasks that are in opposition to the Word of God, and their doctrines oppose that which the apostles and prophets wrote under the inspiration of God.

The half-brother of Jesus wrote, *"Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to*

contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (Jude 1:3-4).

Jude continues in verse 8, "Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones. But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ. They said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions." It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit. But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit" (Jude 1:8, 17-20).

Conclusion

There are so many more things I would like to say but time is our enemy.

Suffice to say that 500 years ago a 33-year-old preacher hammered 95 theses to a door in Wittenberg, and 500 years later this 33 year-old-preacher wants us here to understand that the Scripture Alone is STILL our foundation for all faith and practice. Let us defend this truth with our lives if necessary.

"Sola Scriptura"!