

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
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**“Five Solae of the Reformation:
Sola Scriptura”
Nehemiah 8:1-8
II Timothy 3:14-17**

**Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 24, 2017**

Nehemiah 8:1-8

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the Lord had given to Israel. Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. Then Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

II Timothy 3:14-17

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

"Five Solae of the Reformation: Sola Scriptura"

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

This morning we're going to start a new sermon series. This October 31st will be the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation. On that date in 1517, Martin Luther posted his now famous *Ninety-Five Theses*. He had no idea his objections and call for debate would spark massive change across Europe. Now, Luther and his peers are known as first-generation reformers. Many of the people in this room know that my favorite reformer is John Calvin. Calvin and his colleagues are known as second-generation reformers. Calvin began his ministry in Geneva some forty years after Luther's split with the Roman Church. Even though these and many other reformers were separated by time and space, many of them shared common objections with the Medieval church. As a side note, many believe the Reformation was able to spread so quickly and so thoroughly because of the relatively new invention of the printing press, which came on the scene three-quarters of the century earlier. The printing press was the internet or Facebook of the 16th century.

Before we go any further, I need to explain a few things. Firstly, the word *sola* is Latin for "alone" or "only." Right now you should be scratching your head thinking, "If there are five, how can even one of them be called *sola*?" You're right to puzzle over the paradox of having five "alone's." But

upon further inspection, we see these are not five independent truths that are floating out there in competition with one another, rather they are connected to each other and reveal to us one, absolute truth. Chiefly, “The Bible alone is God’s [inspired] revelation of His glory, which reveals His grace in Christ, which becomes ours through the gift of faith.” Or put another way, “God’s grace is uniquely revealed in His Word, which reveals the work of Christ, which becomes ours by faith, all rebounding to His glory.”¹ As you can see, the five *solas* can each be seen from different angles, but overall they point us in the same direction. Secondly, the five sayings are these: *sola scriptura*, Scripture alone; *sola gratia*, grace alone; *sola fide*, faith alone; *solus christus*, Christ alone; and *soli deo gloria*, glory to God alone. As you’ve probably guessed, we’ll take a look at a different *solae* each week. For today, we’ll start with Scripture alone. And lastly, to keep an overall structure to this series and to keep us on track, we’ll look at three areas for each *solae*: the historical objection, the biblical precedent, and the modern application. So grab your notepads and let’s begin!

Historical Objection

When we talk about or mention the Bible in society today, we hear thrown around words like inerrancy, infallibility, and inspired. These were conversations that grew out of or were developed in 19th century Enlightenment. For both the Reformers and the Roman Church, however, these conversations would be utterly foreign and unheard-of. Of course Scripture is inerrant, God’s revelation of himself can’t be in error because it’s God’s revelation of himself. Same with infallible and inspired. This is the starting point for all churches and theologians during the Reformation. We’ll talk a little more about this when we get to modern application. Where the Reformers began to differ with Rome were in two areas: the authoritative text and the authority of extra-biblical material.

Rome, up to the Reformation and even beyond—all the way into the 1960s—relied heavily on the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible. Now this translation came when St. Jerome translated the Septuagint and New Testament from Greek into Latin. Now there’s a whole history lesson on this alone, but for today I’m going to gloss over that. For our purposes, what we need to know is that the Roman Church asserted that the Latin translation was the only authoritative translation for Scripture. Not only that, they believed the Bible should not be translated into the vulgar or native languages of the different European tribes and nations. Essentially setting apart the Bible as a Holy book accessible only to the few who could read and understand Latin. Both Luther and Calvin firmly believed the Bible needed to be in the hands and homes of everyday people and in a language that they understand. Luther translated the Greek New Testament into German and Calvin preached regularly in French and encouraged Genevans to read their Bibles. Not only did they believe the Bible should be translated, they also believed it needed to be studied in its original languages. When St. Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, he was using a later Greek translation. Luther and Calvin went straight to the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek of the original texts. That’s the reason why I and other ministers today, especially in the Presbyterian Church, are required to learn Greek and Hebrew in order to be ordained.

That was the first area of objection. The second revolved around the authority of extra-biblical material. This is where the saying “Scripture alone” sticks out. In the early centuries of the Church, theologians and pastors debated a lot on the things we are to believe as Christians. You see, Christianity is an orthodox religion, orthodox meaning “right belief.” This is different when

compared to Judaism and Islam, which are orthopraxis religions. Orthopraxis meaning “right actions” or “right practices.” Generally speaking, practices and actions are way easier to define and regulate than beliefs. Which is why the church throughout the ages has been wrought with debate. These debates were officially called councils. Groups of pastors and theologians would gather, discuss, debate, and codify beliefs. For the Roman Church, these councils were just as or sometimes even more authoritative than Scripture. Furthermore, Rome also said that the magisterium, or the papal see is just as or sometimes more authoritative than Scripture. Essentially, what the Pope declares becomes as authoritative and binding. This ideology is based in Matthew 16:18-19 where Jesus tells Peter, “on this rock I will build my church...I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” Since the Pope, as Bishop of Rome, is considered a direct apostolic successor of Peter, whatever he binds or looses on earth, is bound and loosed for eternity. On the same authoritative level as Scripture.

Biblical Precedent

The Biblical precedents behind the Reformers’ objections are vast and varied. For today I just want to lift up a couple. *Sola scriptura* means the only way that we can know God’s commands and rely confidently on that revelation is solely through Scripture as the only authoritative source for the Church and in the Christian life. Listen to Jesus’ words to the Pharisees in Mark chapter seven:

“You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.’ But you say, ‘If a man tells his father or his mother, “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down.”

Jesus here shows that Scripture teaches us to honor parents or succumb to death. The Pharisees were claiming folks didn’t need to care for parents (or the elderly) if they were giving all of their resources to the Temple. The Pharisees were taking Scripture and twisting it to their advantage. God’s revelation of himself in Scripture is not to be used as a tool for personal gain. God revealed himself so that we might have a guide, a sourcebook from which we mold our worldview. Calvin likened Scripture to a pair of spectacles. The Bible is to be the lens through which we see the world. This means human laws and actions ought to be seen through the lens of Scripture, and if they go against Scripture, then reformation must occur. For instance, in Acts we read,

The brothers immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea, and when they arrived they went into the Jewish synagogue. Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; *they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.*²

That last verse is the important one. In this episode, we see that Paul was teaching and preaching in one of the synagogues. The folks there heard Paul’s words and instead of openly rejecting or blindly accepting his teaching, they compared what he had to say with Scripture. *Sola scriptura* means the Bible is the highest authority to which all claims must be measured.

Modern Application

To apply this in our modern situation is not something farfetched or, in my mind, controversial. The modern debates around the inerrancy or infallibility of Scripture are straw-man arguments. They distract us from the truth that regardless of who wrote the Bible, it is for Christians an inspired and authoritative source. And as such is efficient and sufficient for being the foundation of our worldview. Earlier I mentioned that before the Reformation the Bible was only offered in Latin. Today, the Bible can be found in nearly every language. On the website Bible Gateway, there are fifty-seven English versions of the Bible. For the most part they are very similar, but because Christianity relies on a translated Holy book, the translations of specific, and oft times difficult or contentious words, will vary between translators. I can't make the recommendation of one English version over another because the context of different publishing houses may make one version more Evangelical, or more Reformed, or more conservative, or more progressive, or whatever. My recommendation is either learn the original Hebrew and Greek, or buy three to five different versions and compare them as you study the Bible. And be wary of those Christians who claim only one version is authoritative. I hear very often that the King James Version is the only version English-speaking Christians should read. The KJV is a beautiful and poetic translation. But it, too, was written with an agenda, an anti-Reformed agenda at that. My friends, that is the same position the Reformers were pushing against.

Moreover, and more importantly, is this notion that the Bible should be used as a lens, as Calvin says. The Reformers did not completely cut out church doctrine and the writings of the early church fathers. So our denominational confessions, historical creeds, and forefathers' teachings don't have to be thrown to the wayside. In fact, as we read in this morning's passage, Paul urges Timothy,

Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, *knowing from whom you learned it* 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.³

Instead of casting out our confessions, creeds, and teachings, we should hold them up and examine them through the lens of Scripture. If we see they still hold water, then we know these sacred writings are able to bring us wisdom. Use the Bible as a filter, as a lens, through which you interact with the world. Immerse yourself into the beauty and complexity of Scripture, so much so that you begin to think about yourself and the world in which you live through a biblical understanding.

Now the overall message of the Bible is that we are saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. Grace is where we'll pick up next week with *sola gratia*. For now, let us pray. Author of Salvation, in ages long past, you saw it fit to reveal your will to humble and willing men. They wrote down and passed on your revelation and your providence saw it preserved through history. Holy Ghost, illumine our hearts and minds as we explore Holy Scripture. Block out all earthly and sinful influences that wish to distort God's Word. Open our ears and eyes to the Word made flesh. And may we see and live as the Bible teaches. Amen.

¹ R. C. Sproul, Jr. "The Soul of the Solas" *Tabletalk*, November 2012. Page 26.

² Acts 17:10-11

³ II Timothy 3:14-15