

# Truths of the Reformation (2) Scripture Alone

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This morning our subject is Scripture Alone – Sola Scriptura in Latin. I'm thinking that in this series on Truths of the Reformation, we will first cover the Five Solas of the Reformation and then the Five Points of Calvinism or TULIP and then a few more important subjects that didn't make it into a famous group of five. That should keep us going for a while.

I want to mention as we begin that many of the truths of the Reformation are discussed over against Roman Catholicism. As we work through these truths of the Reformation in many cases the foil will be the errors of the Roman Catholic Church. That is kind of unavoidable when you are dealing with the Reformation. The Reformation was a response to errors in the Roman Catholic Church and so the Reformers were constantly showing where the church had gone off the rails and what Scripture taught instead. Much of Reformed teaching was formulated over against Roman Catholic teaching.

The fact of that matter is that much Bible doctrine has been formulated over against error. We see that in the NT already where Paul, for instance, expounds his doctrine of salvation in the light of the false teaching of the Judaizers. It has been a recurring pattern in the church that the church came to clarity on many doctrines in dealing with errors that had crept in. If you study the development of the doctrine of the Trinity and of the relationship between the divine and human natures of Jesus Christ, it is an exercise in tracing how the theologians of the early church countered various heresies that had risen in the Church. Much of the way that the Holy Spirit has guided the church to clarity on different aspects of the teaching of the Bible has been through the process of discerning and rejecting error. So, when we are studying the truths of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church is always in the background. It goes with the territory.

So, this morning we look at Scripture Alone. The Roman Catholic Church did not teach Scripture alone. It taught that the highest authority in matters of Christian doctrine and practice was shared by Scripture and Church tradition. It taught that the Holy Spirit has given truth to the church both by Scripture and tradition. The Roman Catholic Church taught things that were not in the Scriptures at all – like the doctrine of purgatory and like its teaching on the immaculate conception of Mary. They believed things that were not taught in Scripture. They believed these doctrines to be true on the basis of the teaching of the church alone. Furthermore, they believed that when it came to Scripture, no one was allowed to question the interpretation of the church. Once a church council or the pope had made a pronouncement that pronouncement could not be questioned.

The following statement on this matter from the 1995 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses the conviction of the Roman Catholic church both at the time of the Reformation and still today. “The Church 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.”

And this, by contrast, is what Martin Luther said at the Diet of Worms when he was ordered to recant what he had written where it differed from Roman Catholic teaching. “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 often err and contradict 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 retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.”

This is the historical context for understanding the term “Scripture Alone.” The Reformers taught that Scripture was the highest authority on whatever it addressed. That meant that everything that the church taught must be shown to be taught in the Scriptures. It meant that church teaching always had to pass the test of faithfulness to the Word of God. It meant that if anyone could show where church teaching was

not in harmony with the Bible that teaching must be rejected. And it meant that church leaders could not bind the consciences of church members in areas where the Bible was silent. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, taught that church tradition has as much authority as the Bible and the church could require members to believe doctrines that were not taught in the Bible.

Our Westminster Confession of Faith gives a clear expression of the teaching of Scripture Alone in 1:6 and 1:10: 1:6 “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory and man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly stated in Scripture or by good and necessary inference may be deduced from Scripture, **unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or by traditions of men.**”

1:10 “The supreme judge by whom all controversies of religion are to be settled and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and claims to private revelations are to be examined, can **only** be the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. With his decision we are to be satisfied.”

So, the term “Scripture Alone” answers the question, “What is the highest authority in the church?” The Reformation answer is “Scripture Alone” as opposed to Scripture and Tradition.

Now, of course, this Reformation teaching of “Scripture Alone” only has authority if it can be shown to be taught in Scripture. So, we will look now at the biblical basis for this key truth of the Reformation. Does the Bible actually teach “Scripture Alone”? It certainly does. In both the OT and the NT God tells us not to add to his Word or take anything away from it. Deuteronomy 4:2 says “You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it....” And in the last paragraph of the last book of the Bible we read, “I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (Revelation 22:18-19). Clearly God intends that nothing else should stand on the same level as his Word.

There are more verses that confirm this claim that the Bible alone is the highest authority in the church for doctrine and life. In Matthew 15:6-9, Jesus is disputing with the Pharisees and he makes a clear distinction between the words of men and the Word of God. In verse 6 he says, "For the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God." And in verse 9 he quotes from Isaiah, "[I]n vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." The Jews had an oral tradition that grew up alongside the Word of God and that tradition had assumed great authority in the minds of the Pharisees, but Jesus makes it clear that no human tradition is to be given the same weight as the Word of God.

Another important verse here is Galatians 1:8. Paul writes, "But, even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed." Paul is aware of having been given apostolic authority. In Galatians 1:11-12 he wrote, "<sup>11</sup>For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. <sup>12</sup>For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." Paul makes a clear distinction between what comes from man and what comes through revelation from God. The revelation from God comes with absolute authority. The word of man is never equal the word of God.

Ephesians 2:19-22 is also important for the doctrine of "Scripture Alone." There Paul says that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone." It is from the apostles and prophets that the inspired word of God came. That is the foundation for the church. That foundation is the prophetic word and the apostolic word alone. There is no hint that there is anything alongside of that word with equal authority. This is confirmed in the way that Paul wrote to Timothy. Timothy was an important leader in the NT church. But he was not an apostle and so his task was to expound the apostolic teaching that he had received. It was not his task to add authoritative teaching to what he had received from the apostles. So, Paul says to him in 2 Timothy 1:13 "Follow the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me...." And in 2 Timothy 4:2 Timothy is told to "preach the word."

So, when we see how the Bible treats its own status and authority. It is always unique. It is the very Word of God and as such it is above all human words. And it does not envision church leaders beyond the apostles who will also receive revelation that will stand at the same level as what was received through the prophets and apostles and written down in the Bible. It envisions church leaders who come after the apostles basing all their teaching on the foundation of the apostles and prophets which is the word of God.

This is why we reject Roman Catholic doctrines and practices such as prayers to Mary and to the saints, the immaculate conception of Mary, transubstantiation, purgatory and indulgences and a whole lot more. Over the centuries, in the Roman Catholic Church, many practices and doctrines crept in which had no foundation in the Bible. Over time the teaching developed that these extrabiblical doctrines had also come from God and so they began to be given the same status as the Bible. By God's grace the Reformers came to see that that was not only beside the Bible. It was against the Bible. In studying the Bible itself they came to the conviction that it was God's will that Scripture occupy the position of highest authority and that every doctrine and practice must be evaluated in the light of Scripture. And further they saw that the leaders of the church were not to add anything as authoritative doctrine that was not found in Scripture. Thus, we come to the term "Scripture Alone."

Now it is important to understand that the doctrine of Scripture alone does not mean that there is no value in tradition at all. It does not mean that we should ignore all the wisdom of past generations with respect to the message and the application of the Scriptures. We saw last week that it is biblical that we should learn from what believers in past generations have discovered in the Bible and in living to Christian life. Indeed one of the weaknesses of much of the broader evangelical church is that often there is not enough appreciation for and attention given to what Christians in past generations have learned about the meaning of Scripture and the realities of the Christian life.

There was a man named Alexander Campbell who lived from 1788-1866 who said, "I have endeavored to read the Scriptures as though no one

had read them before me....” There is something of that attitude in many believers today. Such an attitude is foolish and arrogant and unbiblical. One of the things that Paul told Timothy was “[W]hat you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). Paul envisions the true interpretation of God’s word to be passed down through the generations. Further, the idea of wisdom in the Bible conveys the idea of learning from past generations. Deuteronomy 32:7 says “Remember the days of old; consider the years of many generations; ask your father, and he will show you, your elders and they will tell you.”

The doctrine of “Scripture Alone” means that tradition does not stand at the same level as Scripture. Whether an idea was taught in the past or is being taught in the present, it must conform to the teaching of Scripture. But that does not mean that we should ignore everything but Scripture itself. There is much that comes to us from the past which is faithful to Scripture and we can learn a great deal from teachers and preachers of past generations who have spent their lives pondering and interpreting and applying the Scriptures. The doctrine of “Scripture Alone” rejects the wrong use of tradition. It does not deny the right and healthy use of tradition.

An example of this is our confession and catechisms. They are part of the tradition of Reformed and Presbyterian Churches. They are not equal to the Word of God. The Bible is above the confessions in authority. But they are faithful to the Bible and they are of great value in helping us to understand and pass on what the Bible teaches. The confessions were written by men who were seeking to summarize the main truths of the Scripture as accurately as possible. They have been examined by generations of godly church leaders and theologians as well as church members. In all the generations since they were written they have been tested against the Scriptures again and again. And to ignore all of that and approach the Bible as if you were the first one to read it is arrogance and foolish.

The same is the case with church practices and worship practices. We are not the first generation to do church. We are not the first

generation to worship. We are heirs of a tradition of church practices and worship practices. We have besides our confessions, a Form of Government, a Directory of Worship and a Book of Discipline. They come to us from the past, but they have also been updated and refined because they are not the unchanging Word of God. They contain wisdom from past generations. Wisdom in interpreting the Bible for the life of the church. Wisdom in formulating practices and procedures in areas where the Bible has not spoken in minute detail. This too is part of the tradition that we inherit from the past. Again it does not stand on the same level as the Word of God. The tradition is under the Word of God. But in as far as it is consistent with biblical teaching it is very valuable. The church has learned all kinds of things as it interpreted and implemented the Bible through time. And it is ingratitude to God to ignore and depreciate what he has shown to past generations as long as we always remember that it does not have the authority of Scripture.

But it is also possible to give tradition too much weight even in Reformed and Presbyterian churches. The error of giving traditions too much weight is not restricted to the Roman Catholic Church. It is also found in churches that formally embrace the doctrine of "Scripture Alone." Certain traditions have a way of growing in authority in the minds of the people until in practice they are given the same weight as Scripture. This problem is sometimes referred to as traditionalism.

Here are some examples of traditions that sometimes have been treated as if they are as authoritative as the Scriptures. In some circles the ban on the drinking of alcohol falls into this category. Sometimes the order of worship is treated as if it were divinely inspired. Some people believe that the church has not worshipped faithfully if the 10 commandments are not read in the morning worship service. In some churches the conviction is that the gospel has not been preached if there has been no altar call. The view that the King James Version is the only inspired Bible is an example of traditionalism. In the Anglican tradition it may be the Book of Common Prayer that is treated as if it were on the same level as Scripture. It is also possible to treat the Reformed Confessions as if they were on the same level as Scripture.

J.I. Packer has written a great essay on this called “The Comfort of Conservatism.” In that piece he affirms the importance and the usefulness of tradition. But he also critiques what he calls “carnal conservatism.” On this he writes, “The source of the trouble is the absolutizing of formulations and fashions that are human, not divine, and because human, provisional and open to change. Carnal conservatism treats those traditions as if they come straight from God and are therefore sacrosanct, and traditioners in leadership roles enforce them as if on that basis.” (Essay found in *Power Religion* pp. 283-299)

So, we must avoid the two extremes when it comes to the principle of “Scripture Alone” in practice. On the one hand we should appreciate and learn from the traditions of the church. “Scripture Alone” does not mean that we take nothing but Scripture itself into account when interpreting and applying the Bible. There is much human wisdom that comes from that past and is embodied in our traditions that is based on Scripture or consistent with Scripture that is helpful and edifying. The Bible itself teaches us to appreciate and learn from the wisdom of past generation. But on the other hand, we must avoid giving any human tradition the status and the authority of Scripture. All doctrine and practice must be evaluated in the light of Scripture and if it is something that Scripture does not address it must be subject to change if there are good reasons to do so.

Finally, we will consider an implication of the doctrine of “Scripture Alone” and that is what is known as the sufficiency of Scripture. If the Bible alone is the source of inspired and authoritative teaching from God, it implies that the Bible is sufficient as the source of such teaching. It means that we need nothing else at that level. We do need teachers to interpret and apply God’s word. The Bible itself teaches that. But we do not need any more inspired truth from God than what he has given us in his Word. We do not need authoritative tradition alongside the Bible. The doctrine of “Scripture Alone” implies the doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture.

Hear again the first sentence of WCF 1:6, “The whole counsel of God, concerning **all things necessary** for his own glory and man’s salvation,



faith, and life, is either expressly stated in Scripture or by good and necessary inference may be deduced from Scripture....” The Scriptures give us all the truth that we need for the glory of God, for our salvation, for faith and for life.

We have seen how the doctrine of “Scripture Alone” is taught in many places and in many ways in Scripture. Those same passages teach the sufficiency of Scripture as well. The inspired truth that God has given us in his Word is enough for our salvation and for our faith and for our Christian life. God has not answered every question that we might have. God has not taught us everything that we might like to know. But he has given us what we need to know to be saved and to live the life of saved people to his glory.

Here are some more texts that make this point. One of the most beautiful is Deuteronomy 8:3b, “[M]an does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” This verse implies that the word of God is sufficient for our lives – that is for our spiritual lives – for our relationship with God – for our Christian life in the world. A NT verse that makes the same point is one of the key verses in Scripture about Scripture, 2 Timothy 3:16–17, “<sup>16</sup>All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup>that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”

This is a wonderful truth to dwell on. In the Bible, we are given all that we need to know for salvation and for the foundation for our lives. We will need more information for life in this world. The Bible will not give us all that we need to know for a job or for maintaining our car. It is not intended for that. But the Bible is sufficient for the most important things of life – salvation and our relationship with God – telling us about God – the meaning of life – morality – how to live a life that is pleasing to God. These are the most important aspects of life. They put all the rest in their proper perspective. The Bible is sufficient as the foundation for our lives.

And this leads us to the great significance of Jesus Christ in all of these areas – salvation and our relationship with God – what God is like – the meaning of life and morality – a life that is pleasing to God. Jesus is the

key in each of these areas. And the reason that there is such a close relationship between Jesus and the Bible is that Jesus is the Word of God. That is what John teaches us in John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” We see the same thing in Hebrews 1:1-2, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son....”

We see the same connection when we compare Deuteronomy 8:3b with what Jesus says in John 6:35. Deuteronomy 8:3b, “[M]an does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.” John 6:35, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life.” Jesus is not the Scriptures. But he is inseparable from the Scriptures. The Scriptures point to him. We come to know him through the Scriptures. And both Jesus and the Scriptures give us life.

Real life – life as it was meant to be lived – what Jesus calls “abundant life” in John 10 or “eternal life” in other places. It comes from the Scriptures and it comes from Jesus. Or we might say that it comes from Jesus through the Scriptures. 1 Peter 1:23 says of believers, “[Y]ou have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.” When we are born again we are given new life. We are raised from the dead. That happens through the “living and abiding word of God.” And Jesus is the bread of life. Jesus says in John 6:40 “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”

The Word of God is unlike any human word. It is in a class of its own. That is why we confess “Scripture Alone.” That is why we confess the sufficiency of Scripture. The Scriptures point us to Jesus Christ who is more than sufficient for all that we need in this life and in the life to come.