

## 02.05.20 SOLA SCRIPTURA

***“For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” Hebrews 4:12***

***You must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 2 Timothy 3:14, 15***

**‘Sola Scriptura’ is a Latin term which means ‘Scripture alone’.** *Sola Scriptura* simply means that all truth necessary for our salvation and spiritual life is taught either explicitly or implicitly in Scripture. It is the belief that the Scripture alone is the final and only infallible source for matters of faith and practice.

The Bible is not primarily a book of literature, philosophy or science. It is a Book that shows mankind the way of salvation.

The term ‘Sola Scriptura’ was linked to the European Reformation of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The message of the Reformers was *‘The Bible alone’, ‘Christ alone’, ‘grace alone’, ‘faith alone’,*

**The word ‘alone’ is significant, because it is intended to exclude other options.** The Reformers affirmed the following 3 critical truths when they produced the statement ‘the Bible alone’:

1. The supreme authority of Scripture
2. The sufficiency of Scripture
3. The clarity of Scripture

### **The Supreme Authority of Scripture (the Ruling Norm)**

The Bible is the supreme authority because Scripture alone is infallible. It is infallible because it is God’s word; it is the Divine disclosure of God to mankind about Himself. It is ‘God-breathed’ (2 Timothy 3:16).

The Bible had authority over reason and tradition because *it alone* was infallible as God’s word. All other authorities (including church leadership) were fallible and must submit to Scripture.

Why was the supreme authority of Scripture an issue at the Reformation? At the time of the Reformation, ‘the Bible alone’ excluded the Tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, or the Pope, as equal or superior in authority and effectiveness to the Bible. It also excluded personal or corporate spiritual experience, and also Reason, as equal or superior to the Bible.

A variety of medieval theologians believed that the institutional church’s leadership, the bishops headed by the Pope (technically called the “magisterium”), were the true interpreters of Scripture. This effectively placed the teaching authority of the bishops over Scripture itself. The magisterium then could not be questioned. A turning point was Martin Luther’s famous debate with John Eck (1486-1543) at Leipzig in 1519. There it dawned on Luther that the magisterium could be in error, because the Council of Constance (1415) had wrongly put John Hus to death. The supreme authority of Scripture served to keep church leadership accountable.

It was not that the Reformers dismissed Tradition, Experience, or Reason. They often appealed to early Christian writers of the first five centuries AD to support their interpretations of the meaning of the Bible, and to support their theology. They supported the contemporary skills in reading and understanding ancient texts and languages. They appealed to the experience of believers which expressed Biblical truth and teaching. They supported the study of science, medicine, astronomy, and government.

But *sola Scriptura* did mean that the Bible was the sole authority in the ultimate determination of our doctrine and our practice. It was the *‘norma normans non normata’* (the “norm of norms that cannot be normed”), the lone guide to

truth. Other avenues of truth were useful, but they all had to sit below the one authoritative source of truth, the Bible. *Sola Scriptura* is indeed the “formal principle” of the Protestant Reformation.

*Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful... Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. 1 Corinthians 4:1, 6*

*For I have not hesitated to declare to you the whole counsel of God. Acts 20:27*

### The Reformers’ Insistence on ‘Grammatical Historical’ Interpretation:

The Protestant Reformers emphasized the importance of a grammatical-historical interpretation of the Bible, which took seriously the grammar and literal meaning of the Biblical text. The reason for this was that at the time the Bible was often interpreted allegorically i.e. only symbolically with no real relevance to peoples’ lives.

The Reformers believed that the inspired text of the Bible was the original Hebrew and Greek text as written by the authors. They had written God’s word to them in these languages. The Reformers, therefore, were very careful to read and understand and interpret the original text grammatically and in its historical context.

For example, Luther understood that the Catholic doctrine of penance was built on an un-Biblical foundation because of a mistranslation of Jesus’ words into a Latin rendition reading “do penance” instead of “repent.” No, said Luther, the Bible—not even church tradition spanning over a millennium—must determine our doctrine and practice.

### **The Sufficiency of Scripture**

The Roman Catholic church in the sixteenth century affirmed that Scripture needed supplementation with various rituals and beliefs not be found in Scripture. As John Eck put it: “*not everything has been clearly handed down in the Sacred Scriptures*”. In response, the Reformers argued that, whilst there were many truths of science and history that are not in Scripture, the Bible is sufficient for final salvation. Scripture equips believers with all that is needed to be saved and persevere to ultimate salvation. They proved this with the words that sum up John’s gospel:

*Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. John 20:30–31*

The Reformers used the sufficiency of Scripture to argue against a multitude of rituals and beliefs that had been brought in by the church (e.g. penance, purgatory, celibacy of the priests, the immaculate conception of Mary).

Holy Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. *Anglican article xi.*

*'The sufficiency of Scripture is due to the sufficiency of Christ to whom it witnesses.'*

### **The Clarity of Scripture**

The clarity of Scripture denoted that any person could read Scripture for themselves and discover the basic way of salvation.

This did not mean that all of Scripture was crystal clear to every Christian. It also did not signify that pastors and teachers were not needed to help laypeople understand Scripture e.g. Ephesians 4:11, 12...*And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.*

The clarity of Scripture denoted that any person could read Scripture for themselves and discover the basic way of salvation.

*All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all; yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or another, that not only the learned but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them. Westminster Confession 1.7*

It is because of this understanding of the Bible that the Reformers translated the Bible into languages of the common people. William Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English, believed that the Bible was even “for the plough boy”. Martin Luther translated the Bible into German. Both the English and German translations of the Bible became the bedrock of the English and German languages.

*Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved. Acts 4:12*

*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. John 3:16, 17*

*They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” Acts 16:31*

*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. Luke 19:10*

*He has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time. 2 Timothy 1:9*

*And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Acts 2:21*

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9*

*For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age. Titus 2:11-12*

### **The Unity of Scripture (Scripture interprets Scripture)**

*Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. 2 Peter 1: 20, 21*

*But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine. Titus 2:1*

When one studies the Scriptures, it becomes apparent there is a profound unity between the Old and New Testaments. For example, this unity is demonstrated by the fact that over one third of the New Testament is made up of quotes from the Old Testament. In truth, many Old Testament passages simply could not be understood without the New Testament. Consider the numerous prophecies referring to Jesus Christ, such as those in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. Without the writings of the New Testament, we would never realize that such texts were Messianic in nature.

The unity of the Word lies in its unified message from God to Man. Because it has a unified message and does not contradict itself, we can use Scripture to interpret Scripture. Its great purpose is to show man the way of salvation and why it is needed. Christ and His sacrifice is the great central focus of the Bible.

*‘The Sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster. In order to be rightly understood and appreciated, every truth in the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation, must be studied in the light that streams from the cross of Calvary. I present before you the great, grand monument of mercy and regeneration, salvation and redemption,—the Son of God uplifted on the cross. This is to be the foundation of every discourse given by our ministers.’ Gospel Workers, 315.*

'In daily study the verse-by-verse method is often most helpful. Let the student take one verse, and concentrate the mind on ascertaining the thought that God has put into that verse for him, and then dwell upon the thought until it becomes his own. One passage thus studied until its significance is clear is of more value than the perusal of many chapters with no definite purpose in view and no positive instruction gained... The Bible is its own expositor. Scripture is to be compared with scripture. The student should learn to view the word as a whole, and to see the relation of its parts. He should gain a knowledge of its grand central theme, of God's original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation. He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience; how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how, whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found.' *Education: p. 189-190*

Despite writing in radically different times and contexts, the Bible's many authors all told the same message about God's eternal plan, from Creation and the Flood to Christ's work on the Cross and the consummation of God's plan. You can find the same truths stated by Moses and the Old Testament prophets, Christ Himself, and Christ's apostles.

'An artist begins by making a sketch, and then applies his tools to the canvas bit by bit until the whole picture (apparent to his mind from the start, though not to the beholder's) finally emerges. Again, parents teach their children step by step, "rule on rule, rule on rule; a little here, a little there" (Isa. 28:10). But if they are wise, they do not teach anything in the early stages which needs later to be contradicted. Their later teaching supplements what has gone before and builds on it; it does not come into collision with it. So God has gradually filled out his revelation, constantly expanding it but never repudiating it, until at last it was complete in Christ the Word made flesh (than whom a higher revelation is inconceivable) and in the witness of the apostles to Christ.' *John Stott*

### **Sola Scriptura and Ellen White**

**Ellen White was raised up as a messenger for God's people in the end-time. She was very clear about the role of her writings in regard to the Bible.** Let her words speak to us today:

I recommend to you, dear reader, the Word of God as the rule of your faith and practice. By that Word we are to be judged. God has, in that Word, promised to give visions in the "last days"; not for a new rule of faith, but for the comfort of his people, and to correct those who err from Bible truth. *Early Writings p. 78*

The Lord desires you to study your Bibles. He has not given any additional light to take the place of His Word. This light is to bring confused minds to his Word, which, if eaten and digested, is as the lifeblood of the soul. Then good works will be seen as light shining in darkness. *Letter 130. 1901. Selected Messages 3. P 29*

In public labour do not make prominent, and quote that which Sister White has written, as authority to sustain your positions. To do this will not increase faith in the testimonies. Bring your evidences, clear and plain, from the Word of God. A "Thus saith the Lord" is the strongest testimony you can possibly present to the people. Let none be educated to look to Sister White, but to the mighty God, who gives instruction to Sister White. *Letter 11, 1894. SM 3. P 29*

The Spirit was not given—nor can it ever be bestowed—to supersede the Bible; for the Scriptures explicitly state that the Word of God is the standard by which all teaching and experience must be tested. *GC introduction p.7*

Brother J would confuse the mind by seeking to make it appear that the light God has given through the *Testimonies* is an addition to the Word of God, but in this he presents the matter in a false light. God has seen fit in this manner to bring the minds of his people to his Word, to give them a clearer understanding of it. *SM 3. P 30*

If the *Testimonies* speak not according to the word of God, reject them. Christ and Belial cannot be united. *Ibid. p 30*

I exalt the precious Word before you today. Do not repeat what I have said, saying, "Sister White said this," and "Sister White said that." Find out what the Lord God of Israel says, and then do what He commands.—*Manuscript 43, 1901.*

## Conclusion:

*And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, <sup>5</sup> that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. Paul: 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 2:1-5*

***'I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing...the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor did such damage to it. I did nothing. The Word did it all.'* Martin Luther**

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## Additional Notes:

### Martin Luther:

The justification ('declared righteous') of a sinner before the holy God *sola fide* ("by faith alone") was the great pastoral insight of the Protestants of the 16th century. As a result, ordinary Christians as well as vocational ministers could know in their heart of hearts they were in a right relationship with God. They could have assurance that in the final judgment they would be received into God's presence because of Christ's completed work on their behalf.

Luther spoke movingly of the reality of justification in this way:

'Faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride is united with her bridegroom. As Paul teaches us, Christ and the soul become one flesh by this mystery (Eph. 5.31-32). And if they are one flesh, and if the marriage is for real—indeed, it is the most perfect of all marriages, and human marriages are poor examples of this one true marriage—then it follows that everything that they have is held in common, whether good or evil. So the believer can boast of and glory of whatever Christ possesses, as though it were his or her own; and whatever the believer has, Christ claims as his own. Let us see how this works out, and see how it benefits us. Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The human soul is full of sin, death, and damnation. Now let faith come between them. Sin, death, and damnation will be Christ's. And grace, life, and salvation will be the believer's.'

It is for these reasons that historians often call justification *sola fide* the "material principle" of the Reformation. It is the central facet of the theology of the Reformation, the teaching which secures how one is made right with God. It secures our salvation. Indeed, without it there is no Christian faith.

But below and behind justification *sola fide* stands a second facet of the Reformation, *sola Scriptura* ("Scripture alone"), which gives shape and form to the doctrine of justification. To answer the question, How can I be made right with God?, first I have to determine by what authority I will come to my conclusion. Is it my experience, what seems to work for me? Is it the tradition of the church, or maybe its teachers, who tell me how to be in a saving relationship with the Lord? Or is it the Bible? Luther believed that Scripture—which alone was the breathed-out inerrant Word of God—was the only infallible source to answer weary souls' questions about their salvation. *Sola Scriptura* is thus the "formal principle" of the Reformation, guarding the conviction that the Bible alone was able to give shape to our doctrine, especially our theology of the justification of a sinner before the holy Judge. Matthew Barrett defines it as the belief that "only Scripture, because it is God's inspired Word, is our inerrant, sufficient, and final authority for the church."

The church didn't know what a lion they had let loose when they told Luther to study and teach the Bible. Luther was not easily satisfied with others' answers to his deepest questions, so he studied, and meditated, and studied more, until finally he was able to see that the Bible taught that one is made righteous not by doing good works or by submitting to the teaching of the Church. No, one is made righteous through faith in Jesus. He studied and taught these books: Psalms (1513-1515); Romans (1515-1516); Galatians (1516-1517); Hebrews (1517-1518); Psalms again (1518-1519). It's remarkable that Luther (who decided what books of the Bible he would study and teach) chose these particular books to study in depth. You couldn't arrive at a better I-want-to-become-a-Protestant curriculum of study. And through studying these books, and in his subsequent ministry, Luther became committed to the idea of *sola Scriptura*.

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## Sola Scriptura after the New Testament Canon and the Reformation:

In the years after the Reformation, the motto *sola scriptura* was often linked to the claim of 'the right of private judgment', which was a product of the Enlightenment focus on individual responsibility, and not a feature of Reformation theology of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Individuals do have a responsibility to read and understand the Bible, but one person is not an automatic or infallible judge or interpreter of the Bible, and God's purpose is that the church is 'the pillar and bulwark of the truth' (1 Timothy 3:15).

'There is one particular promise of Christ which these four groups – Roman Catholics, liberals, Anglicans and evangelicals – all claim for themselves! It is His promise that, when the Holy Spirit has come, the Spirit of truth, 'He will guide you into all truth' (John 16:12–13). Roman Catholics apply it to their bishops as the supposed successors of the apostles. Liberals insist that it is the individual whom the Spirit leads into the truth, or the contemporary church. A brash statement to this effect was recently made by Frank Griswold, Presiding Bishop of the American Episcopal Church. The Episcopal Church has certainly gone beyond Scripture, he conceded. How is this justified? Because 'Jesus talked about the Spirit guiding the church into all truth'. C. E. Bennison, Bishop of Pennsylvania, has gone even further. 'Because we wrote the Bible', he has said with bland self-confidence, 'we can re-write it.' But we did not write the Bible. In the New Testament letters, for example, the church was not writing in its own name. On the contrary, the apostles addressed the church in the name of Christ. Let us return to Christ's promise that the Spirit of truth will lead 'you' into all the truth. Who is this 'you'? It is a crucial hermeneutical question. I venture to say that both Catholics and liberals are wrong, for the 'you' cannot possibly refer to them. It refers rather to the apostles. Consider the context. Jesus said, 'I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth . . . he will tell you what is yet to come' (John 16:12–13). The first two 'you's' unquestionably refer to the apostles, who during the earthly ministry of Jesus were unable to assimilate all he had to teach them. So the third and fourth 'you' must refer to them too. We cannot change the identity of the 'you' in the middle of the sentence. What Jesus promised was that the Spirit of truth would accomplish after Pentecost what Jesus had not been able to accomplish during his public ministry. The promise was fulfilled in the writing of the New Testament. *John Stott*

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