

Here I Stand

Here I Stand: Foundations of the Faith

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Why Celebrate the Reformation?

This month, we'll be celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, with five sermons on key aspects of the Reformation. Why celebrate the Reformation? There are a number of reasons. But at the core, we celebrate, because God used the Reformation to recover two things that are foundational for us as evangelicals.

The word “evangelical” has a stigma in our culture. But for us at First Free we're proud of what it really means. To be evangelicals is to be a people who are centered on the evangel—the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that we're saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And to be evangelicals is to be a people of the book. The Bible is at the center of our life and faith.

The Reformation recovered these two things. It recovered the gospel and restored the Bible to the center of the church during a really dark time in the Middle Ages. And for that reason we celebrate.

Summary of the Series

This morning, we're going to begin with the foundation of the Reformation; we're going to begin with what the Reformers called *Sola Scriptura*. Next week, Lucas will deal with the way that Martin Luther interpreted Scripture. The third week, we'll deal with what the Reformers called *Sola Fide*—we're justified by faith alone. Then we'll consider sanctification. Luther once said, although we're saved by faith alone, saving faith is never alone; it is accompanied by good works. The final week, we'll deal with Luther's doctrine of vocation and what the Bible calls the priesthood of all believers. While God may not need our good works, our neighbor does.

HISTORICAL SETTING FOR THE REFORMATION

Throughout this series, we will ground the key teachings of the Reformation in Scripture and situate the teachings of the Reformation in history. The historical portions will focus primarily on Martin Luther, the man who instigated the whole Reformation.

Debates on Authority

The Reformation is said to have begun on October 31, 1517. On that day, Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk and professor of the Bible at the University of Wittenberg, nailed his 95 Theses to the door of the castle church. Why did he do it? It wasn't because he wanted to leave the Catholic Church or start the Lutheran Church. That was never his intention. He simply wanted to engage in a scholarly discussion with students and other doctors of the university about the sale of indulgences. But the question of indulgences soon led to bigger issues.¹

We'll talk about indulgences and a number of the other issues in the weeks ahead. But for our purposes today, I want to talk about the issue of authority.

¹ Carson, D.A. “Should Pastors Today Still Care about the Reformation?” 9Marks Journal, [The Reformation and Your Church, Fall 2017](#).

Between 1517 and 1521—the year Luther was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church—Luther had several debates with Roman Catholic authorities on the issue of church authority.

You see, in the sixteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church thought authority for faith and practice came from two places.² They believed the Scriptures were authoritative. But they also believed Tradition (with a capital T) was equally as authoritative.

Scripture is God's Word written down in our Bibles. Tradition is the oral teaching of the apostles passed on to bishops, successively throughout the generations. Tradition also includes church councils and the pope's authoritative interpretation of the Bible. They didn't believe the pope could make a mistake in interpreting Scripture. Between 1517 and 1521, Luther was beginning to question the ultimate authority of Tradition. He believed that Scripture alone was the binding authority for faith and practice. This came out in two significant confrontations with Roman Catholic authorities.

The first confrontation was at Augsburg in 1518 with Cardinal Cajetan, a representative of the pope. During that debate, Luther made a critical move. He said the pope could make mistakes in his pronouncements. And Luther insisted that the pope's teaching must be backed up by Scripture.³

The second major debate was at Leipzig in 1519 with Martin Eck, a German theologian. During that debate, Luther denied the infallibility of church councils.⁴

The Diet of Worms

As you can imagine, this didn't sit well with the pope. He issued a papal bull (which is a decree from the pope) in 1520 condemning Luther's writings and giving him sixty days to recant.⁵ Luther, in typical fashion, burned the bull. After burning the papal pull, there was no turning back.

Eventually, Luther was summoned to the Diet at Worms in 1521. Now, kids, that doesn't mean that he was forced to eat worms. Worms was a town, and it's actually pronounced *verms*. A Diet (pronounced *dee-at*) was an imperial council. And the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, was presiding at this imperial council. At the Diet of Worms, Luther thought he was going to be able to engage in another debate and give a defense of his views. But instead he was simply asked to recant his views and his writings. After much consideration Luther gave his famous reply to the Emperor. He said,

*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 cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.*⁶

Luther was saying that his views on the gospel and his views on church authority were based solely on Scripture and plain reason, which meant a reasonable and responsible interpretation of Scripture. He would not accept Scripture *and* Tradition as equally authoritative, because Tradition had contradicted itself. He would stand solely on the authority of the Bible.

² McGrath, Alister. *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*. Third edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.

³ Sproul, R. C. *Are We Together?: A Protestant Analyzes Roman Catholicism*. Orlando, Fla: Reformation Trust, 2012.

⁴ Sproul

⁵ Dillenberger, John. *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*. New York: Anchor Books, 1962, xxiii.

⁶ Bainton, Roland H., *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*. New York: Meridian, 1995, 144.

This was the watershed moment in the Reformation. After this, Luther was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformation began in earnest.

This is the historical background for the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. But what exactly do we mean when we say that we are committed to *Sola Scriptura*? And where do we find in Scripture that Scripture alone is the ultimate authority in the church for faith and practice. And what does that mean for us today?

Those are the questions I want to try to answer with the rest of our time this morning. We'll begin with a definition of *Sola Scriptura*. Then we'll see what the Bible says about its own authority. Finally, we'll consider a couple of applications for us today.

DEFINING SOLA SCRIPTURA

Let's begin with a definition of *Sola Scriptura*. What does it mean?

Like I said earlier, the Roman Catholic Church thought that both Scripture *and* Tradition were equally authoritative. The Reformers said that Scripture was not equal with Tradition. In fact, all Tradition had to come under the authority of the Bible.

Now that doesn't mean that the Reformers rejected all tradition (lower case t). They didn't think you had to throw out all of teaching in church history and start from scratch every time you interpreted the Bible. They put a huge emphasis on the way the church had always interpreted Scripture. For example, the church fathers and the great creeds of the church had consistently affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity and the incarnation of Christ. These creeds protected the church from false teaching and bad interpretations of Scripture. The things the church had always believed in all places were a good form of tradition.

The problem in the Middle Ages was the Catholic Church was starting to come up with teachings that were different from what the church had always believed—like their teaching on the mass and purgatory and indulgences. And then they were saying that everybody else needed to believe this teaching. And they grounded their authority in Tradition. The Reformers discovered tension between what the Bible said and what the church had always said and the current practices of the church.

What authority would arbitrate the differences? Were the pope and church councils authoritative or was the Bible authoritative? You can't have two equal authorities. The Roman Catholic Church was basically saying the pope and the councils had the ultimate authority to interpret Scripture. The Reformers were saying the Bible alone is the ultimate authority.

They believed that all traditions are subject to the authority of Scripture. They said that Scripture was the *norma normans*; that is Scripture is the norming norm. There are other authorities. But all other authorities are under the authority of Scripture. Scripture is the touchstone by which all other authorities are judged; even authorities like the great creeds of the church.

Luther used an analogy to speak of the relative authority of the church fathers and the potential danger of putting too much emphasis on the church fathers to the exclusion of Scripture. He said, "Scripture must remain master and judge, for when we follow the brooks that flow from the springs

of Scripture...too far (namely the pious writings of Christians, especially the church fathers), they lead us too far away from the spring and lose both their taste and nourishment.”⁷

When Scripture is not king and when you don't focus on Scripture alone, eventually you start coming up with stuff that's not grounded in Scripture and therefore bad for the church.

There are other authorities. But they must all come under the ultimate and primary authority of Scripture. That's what is meant by *Sola Scriptura*. *Sola Scriptura* means that the Bible alone is the ultimate authority for faith and practice. It cannot and does not compete with other forms of authority like Tradition, or reason, or science, or experience.

This is critical for us as evangelicals today in the EFCA. Luther said, “Concerning anything not found in Scripture, you should say: ‘When did God ever make that statement?’”⁸ That sounds almost exactly the same as what we've been saying in the Free Church for over 100 years. The EFCA began as a reform movement in the state churches of Scandinavia. Like the Reformation, our movement spawned a renewed focus on the Bible. And “Where stands it written,” became the watchword for all faith and practice.⁹ When we think of Scripture, we are like Luther and the Reformers. We too say, “Here I stand.” We do not accept Tradition as ultimate authority, because Tradition has contradicted itself. We stand on the Word of God, *Sola Scriptura*

THE BIBLE'S TEACHING ON THE BIBLE'S AUTHORITY

But if the Bible is our ultimate authority for all of faith and practice, then we must ask the question, what does the Bible have to say about its own authority? Where do we find *Sola Scriptura* in the Scriptures?

There are a number of places we could go. But the classic text on this passage is probably the easiest. 2 Timothy 3:15-17 teaches us so much about the Bible and its authority. Turn in your Bibles to 2 Timothy 3.

Luther's belief that the Bible alone was the ultimate authority for faith and practice was grounded in the simple reality that the Bible is God's Word.¹⁰ 2 Timothy 3:16 says that “all Scripture is breathed out by God.”¹¹ That means the Bible is God's Word. God's Word was recorded on the pages of Scripture by human authors. But those human authors were writing God's very words in such a way that what they say on the pages of Scripture is what God says. 2 Peter 1:21 says, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” The reason we call the Bible God's Word is because that's what it is.

God's Word alone is the ultimate authority for life and salvation because it's God's Word. And God cannot be separated from his Word. To respond to God's Word is to respond to God himself. To obey his Word is to obey God. To disobey his Word is to disobey God. The authority of the Word is tethered inextricably to the authority of God himself.¹²

⁷ Kolb, “The Bible in the Reformation and Protestant Orthodoxy” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. Carson, D.A., Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2016, 93.

⁸ Allison, Gregg R., *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2011, 88.

⁹ “Article 2: The Bible.” in *Evangelical Convictions*, Minneapolis, Minn., Free Church Publications, 2011.

¹⁰ Kolb, 92.

¹¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

¹² Allison, Gregg R., “Two Views on Church Authority: Protestant vs. Roman Catholic.” 9Marks Journal, [The Reformation and Your Church, Fall 2017](#).

And because the Bible is God's Word, it is inerrant. That is, it is without error. You see, God cannot lie (Titus 1:2); therefore, God's Word is without error. The same cannot be said of Tradition or councils or the pope for that matter. Tradition contradicts itself at points and is not without error. God's Word is inerrant.

This was the basis of the Reformation's confidence in the Bible and the reason they said the Bible alone was authoritative for faith and practice.

Another reason was that God's Word is effective. In 2 Timothy 3:15, Paul says 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." The Scriptures are able to save us. They accomplish God's purposes.

Isaiah 55:10-11 says, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." God's Word gets God's work done in the lives of his people.

For Luther, this was a critical point. His lectures on Genesis were pivotal in his view that the Bible is the ultimate authority for faith and practice.¹⁵ He argued that from the very beginning of time, and on the first pages of Scripture, we see God's Word established as authoritative and effective. When God says, "Let there be light," there is light. God's Word is effective to bring about creation. And the creation obeys the authoritative Word of God. God then establishes a relationship with Adam and Eve by his Word. He tells them that they are to live in obedience to him. And if they don't they will face his judgment. But he also speaks a Word of salvation to them after they disobey him. He promises that the seed of woman will crush the head of Satan. And he ultimately provides salvation through the fulfillment of his Word. God's Word is not only effective and authoritative in creation; it's also effective and authoritative in salvation.

Luther believed that the Bible was authoritative and effective. And he believed that God's Word ultimately made the Reformation effective. One of my favorite quotes from Luther has to do with the effectiveness of God's Word. He said,

In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no one by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends...the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.¹⁴

Another reason that God's Word was seen as the ultimate authority for Luther was because God's Word is sufficient. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 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." What Paul is saying here to Timothy is that the Scriptures are sufficient for his life and his ministry. He didn't need to get wrapped up in human words

¹⁵ Kolb

¹⁴ Quoted in George, Timothy. *Theology of the Reformers*, Nashville, Tenn: B & H Academic, 2013, p. 55.

(cf. 2 Tim. 2:14-15) and debates. He needed to stick to the Bible. It was sufficient for him. He needed to preach the Word in all seasons (2 Tim. 4:2).

We see something similar in 2 Peter 1:3. “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence...” The knowledge of God comes through the Scriptures and through Christ, the one the Scriptures point to. It’s in this knowledge, in the Word of God, that we have everything we need for life and godliness.

We don’t need Tradition, or councils, or popes. We have all we need in the gospel. This is what the Bible says about its own authority. This is why we stand on the Scriptures. The Scriptures themselves testify to the Bible’s ultimate authority.

APPLICATION

Hopefully I’ve established why *Sola Scriptura* was so important for the Reformers and that *Sola Scriptura* is deeply rooted in the Scriptures. Now we must ask the question: What relevance does *Sola Scriptura* have for our lives today and how do we apply this key Reformation doctrine? I want to give two applications.

First, the Word of God needs to be central in our lives and in the church. This was the primary implication of *Sola Scriptura* for Luther.

Following the Diet of Worms and Luther’s excommunication, he was in danger. As he journeyed back to Wittenberg he was kidnapped. But he wasn’t taken captive by the pope’s henchmen. No. Fredrick the Wise arranged for Luther’s capture. Fredrick was the elector of Saxony. He was the key authority in the region Luther lived. And he was sympathetic to Luther’s cause. He arranged for his capture so that he could protect Luther.

He had Luther taken to the Wartburg castle where he lived in hiding for a year. He disguised himself as a knight named Junker Jorg (pronounced *YOON-kar yerg*).¹⁵ While he was in hiding, he set himself to work. Now that the Reformation was under way, he knew that he needed to help those who were a part of the Reformation succeed in their new Reformation faith.

The first thing that he did was to translate the Bible into German. He knew that if the Bible was going to be the ultimate authority in the church that the people needed to have access to the Bible in their own language. He also wrote model sermons on the Bible for Reformation pastors to use in preaching, because the priests in that day had very little understanding of how to exposit the Bible. While he was at Wartburg, his associate Philip Melancthon was busy in Wittenberg reforming the worship of the church around the Word.

All of this activity was grounded in the belief that the Bible needed to be restored to the center of the church. As evangelicals we too need to keep the Bible central in our lives and in the church. We can’t simply have a doctrine of the authority of the Scriptures. If we believe the Scriptures have ultimate authority for faith and practice, then we need to read the Bible, be committed to it being preached faithfully, and committed to it being central in our worship. I’m thankful to be in a church who has upheld this commitment of the Reformation. That’s a reason to celebrate.

¹⁵ Carr, Simonetta, *Martin Luther*. Christian biographies for young readers. Grand Rapids, Mich: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016.

The first way to apply *Sola Scriptura* is a positive application. The second is negative. The first is what we should do; the second is what we shouldn't do. We shouldn't become our own authority.

One of the unintended consequences of the Reformation is that faith became somewhat privatized over time. And in the absence of the authority of Rome, people set themselves up as an authority. They basically became their own pope. This manifested itself in a couple of ways.

For one, some people thought that in the absence of the pope being authoritative, that the individual would become the authoritative interpreter of Scripture. This led to a whole host of heresies, some old, some new. Like Arius before them, some people started reading the Bible for themselves and then denying the doctrine of the Trinity or the deity of Christ.

But it's important to remember that heretics appeal to Scripture for support of their beliefs every bit as much as orthodox Christians appeal to Scripture for their beliefs.

There has to be some guardrails around the interpretation of the Bible. Remember, the Reformers didn't reject all tradition. They retained the traditional interpretation of Scripture—the things that all Christians have always believed. Sound doctrine served as guardrails for the church.

While tradition must come under the authority of Scripture, it's arrogant to think that we're the only ones to ever read the Bible. We need to interpret Scripture with humility, knowing that we're standing on the shoulders of giants like Athanasius, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, etc. So, there needs to be some rule of faith for keeping us out of the weeds theologically.

Just this last week, I read an article where a person who claims to be a Christian committed to the Bible is trying to justify an ongoing sexual relationship with someone who isn't your wife (it's called a polyamorous relationship). Their argument is that, in the same way that the one God exists in three persons, it's okay to have an ongoing sex relationship with a third person other than your wife, as long as it's consensual. They're throwing out 2,000 years of biblical interpretation and the plain interpretation of Scripture to support their sinful practice. They're making themselves a pope. That's not what the Reformation established!

Another way privatized religion infected the church in the Reformation was through the enthusiasts. Enthusiasm means "God within." There were people during the Reformation who thought they could receive special revelation from God outside of Scripture because they had the Holy Spirit. They believed they had direct revelation from God outside of the Bible. Again, sounds like they were acting as mini-popes.

While Luther was at Wartburg, there were some self-styled prophets who came to Wittenberg claiming special revelation of the Spirit over and above Scripture. When it looked like they'd be successful at leading people astray, Luther risked his life, came out of hiding, and confronted these self-appointed prophets.¹⁶

This is what he said to them. "God does not deal with us otherwise than through his spoken Word and the sacraments. It is the devil himself [who] is extoled as Spirit without Word and Sacrament."¹⁷

¹⁶ Dillenberger

¹⁷ Quoted in Horton, Michael "Connecting the Church and the Gospel: A Reformation Perspective." 9Marks Journal, [The Reformation and Your Church, Fall 2017](#).

Eventually people like the prophets at Wittenberg spread like wildfire in Reformation Europe. They were called the radical reformers.

But don't we have the same thing going on in our day. So many Christians today that say they are committed to *Sola Scriptura* are always talking about a special word they've received from the Lord. There's an infatuation with prophets all over, from Kansas City to California. God's objective revelation in his Word has been sidelined for some subjective view that God is speaking directly to me.

Now, I'm not saying that God doesn't guide Christians by his Holy Spirit. But I am saying that God's written Word takes precedent over some experience. The Bible is God's Word. The Holy Spirit directed the biblical writers to write the Word of God. And the Holy Spirit's main role in our lives is to open the eyes of our heart to see Jesus in God's Word.

We believe in the Holy Spirit! Let there be no mistake. But God's Word must take precedent over our own subjective word from the Holy Spirit. Luther was right. "God does not deal with us otherwise than through his spoken Word...It is the devil himself whatsoever is extoled as Spirit without Word...."

Conclusion

If God's Word is the ultimate authority for faith and practice, then we need to place it in the center of our lives and in the church. We can't set up any other authority that competes with God's Word, including ourselves. If we want to recover the gospel and retain the gospel as central in the church and in our lives, then we need to place the Bible in the driver's seat. Let us say with Luther, "Here I stand."