

The Five Solas: Scripture Alone

Introduction

- **Sola fide** (faith alone) is the material principle of the Reformation.
- **Sola scriptura** (Scripture alone) is the formal principle of the Reformation.
- “If there is a single thread running through the whole story of the Reformation, it is the explosive and renovating and often disintegrating effect of the Bible.”¹ **G. R. Elton**

1. The Historical Development of Scripture Alone

(a) The Leipzig Debate

- “Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth.” **Martin Luther**

(b) The Diet of Worms

- “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 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.” **Martin Luther**

2. The Meaning of Scripture Alone

(a) Scripture alone is infallible or without error.

- **2 Timothy 3:16-17:** *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.*
- “We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it.” **The Belgic Confession (1561)**

¹ Quoted in Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*, 11.

The Roman Catholic Church would agree that Scripture is without error, but the Roman Catholic Church would not believe Scripture is the only authority without error.

- “The council accepts and venerates with a like feeling of piety and reverence all the books of both the Old and the New Testament, since the one God is the author of both, as well as the traditions concerning both faith and conduct, as either directly spoken by Christ or dictated by the Holy Spirit, which have been preserved in unbroken sequence in the Catholic Church.” **Council of Trent (1546)**
- “There exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.” **Second Vatican Council (1965)**
- “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.” **Catechism of the Catholic Church (1995)**

Sola Scriptura means “Scripture alone is our supreme and final authority and the rule of faith and life.”

From our Statement of Faith:

The Origin of Scripture

All of Scripture is breathed out by God, being accurately delivered through various human authors by the inspiration and sovereign agency of the Holy Spirit. We therefore receive the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments as the perfect, infallible, and authoritative Word of God. With the fullness of revelation given in Christ and his completed redemptive work, no new normative revelation will or need be given until Christ returns. In its original manuscripts, the whole of Scripture (and all its parts) is inerrant—without error in all it affirms. Because there is one divine author behind all of Scripture, we are able to arrive confidently at a harmonious, doctrinally unified understanding of the whole. Furthermore, God in his loving providence has determined to preserve his Word as pure and trustworthy throughout history, just as he guided the early church in discerning and identifying the canon of Scripture he inspired.

The Attributes of Scripture

Believers live by every word that comes from the mouth of God. The Word of God is therefore necessary and wholly sufficient for knowing the Father’s love in Christ, experiencing his glorious plan of redemption, and being instructed in the way of fruitful and godly living. The Word of God is clear, and everything we need in order to know, love, and fellowship with God can be plainly understood through ordinary means, without appeal to any human authority. Although not all Scripture is equally plain, when its intended meaning is misunderstood, the fault lies not in the clarity of God’s communication but in the recipient. Scripture alone is our supreme and final authority and the rule of faith and life. The Scriptures must not be added to or taken away from, and all creeds, confessions, teachings, and prophecies are to be tested by the final authority of God’s Word.

(b) Scripture alone does not mean the Bible is the only authority.

3. The Application of Scripture Alone

(a) The Word of God is to be central to corporate worship.

(b) Read and mediate on the Word of God personally.

(c) Interpret the Word of God rightly with “the analogy of faith.”

“Now if anyone of the saintly fathers can show that his interpretation is based on Scripture, and if Scripture proves that this is the way it should be interpreted, then the interpretation is right. If this is not the case, I must not believe him.”² **Martin Luther**

1. Interpret Scripture respectfully.

Interpret the secondary in light of the primary, obscure in light of the clear.

2. Interpret Scripture harmonistically.

Interpret Scripture without pitting one part of Scripture against another.

3. Interpret Scripture broadly.

4. Interpret Scripture Christocentrically.

Interpret Scripture to see how it is fulfilled in Jesus.

² Quoted in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 82.

“Now the gospels and epistles of the apostles were written for this very purpose. They want themselves to be our guides, to direct us to the writings of the prophets and of Moses in the Old Testament so that we might there read and see for ourselves how Christ is wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in the manger, that is, how he is comprehended in the writings of the prophets. It is there that people like us should read and study, drill ourselves, and see what Christ is, for what purpose he has been given, how he was promised, and how all Scripture tends toward him.”³ **Martin Luther**

“Is [Christ] not the subject of the whole Scripture, and, like a golden ore, runs through every vein of the mine? He is the centre wherein all the lines of Scripture meet; we can open no part of it but something of Christ strikes upon the mind.”⁴ **Stephen Charnock**

(d) Apply the Word of God thoroughly and continually.

We must beware of:

- Beware of *biblicism*
- Beware of *subjectivism*
- Beware of *individualism*
- Beware of *disobedience*

“That Jones shall worship the god within him turns out ultimately to mean that Jones shall worship Jones.” **G.K. Chesterton**

Right understanding = authority (*the Word*) + interpretation (*analogy of faith*) + community (*the study of the Word across history of the church*).⁵

Conclusion

Almighty God, and most merciful Father, we humbly submit ourselves, and fall down before your Majesty, asking you from the bottom of our hearts, that this seed of your Word now sown among us, may take such deep root, that neither the burning heat of persecution cause it to wither, nor the thorny cares of this life choke it. But that, as seed sown in good ground, it may bring forth thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold, as your heavenly wisdom has appointed. Amen.

Middelburg Liturgy

³ Quoted by Mark Thompson in *Reformation Theology*, 159.

⁴ Quoted in Allen Chapple, *True Devotion*, 221.

⁵ Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel*, 127.