

His name was Martin Luther, and that name, more than any other,
is associated with the birth of the social upheaval known as the Reformation.
It was a revival movement that swept through Europe in the sixteenth century
that gave new life to the church
and which is a major influence in who we are as Christian believers
here today as Cornerstone Church.

The Reformation certainly had political and economic dimensions,
some of which had been simmering for some time,
but its central thrust was religious.

The followers of Luther came to be called "Protestants,"—
because they protested the abuses of the medieval Roman Catholic Church,
but in the beginning, they were simply known as Evangelicals—
a word that comes from the Latin word for "gospel"—"*evangel*"—
which means "good news."

They were called Evangelicals because of their rediscovery of the Bible's gospel message—
the message of good news that God has acted in his mercy
to rescue us from our sin
and to redeem us not on the basis on our good deeds
but by his grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

This rediscovery of the gospel preached by the Reformers of the sixteenth century,
grounded in the authority of the Scriptures,
has been captured by later writers in what are called the **Five Solas**—
with sola being the Latin term for "only"—

The five great themes of the Reformation are these--

- 1) *Sola Scriptura*—
our ultimate authority is Scripture alone.
- 2) *Solus Christus*—
we are saved on the basis of the work of Christ alone.
- 3) *Sola Gratia*—
we are saved by God's grace alone.
- 4) *Sola Fide*—
we are saved through faith alone.
- 5) *Soli Deo Gloria*—
all this is to the glory of God alone.

During the five Sundays of this month,
in celebration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation,
we are going to be expounding these five "solas"—
as they shed light on the glorious truth of the gospel.

For we want to follow in Luther's footsteps
and be called "evangelicals" in the proper sense of that term—
people who are centered on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But let me go back for a moment to that castle church in Wittenberg.

What prompted Luther to do what he did?

What was he so upset about?

What did he hope to accomplish by this proposed theological debate?

The immediate cause of Luther's act was the arrival of a visiting preacher.

His name was John Tetzel.

Tetzel came into Germany as the chief fundraiser for Pope Leo X
who wanted to build the great St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome--
certainly, no ordinary building project.

The Pope needed lots of cash,

so he had concocted an ingenious fund-raising scheme.

Since the thirteenth century the Catholic Church had held that
the accumulated spiritual merits of Christ and the saints
that they no longer needed,

since they were already in heaven,

could be doled out by the church to ordinary sinners

in the form of what were called indulgences.

An indulgence would cancel the penalty

a penitent sinner would otherwise be obligated to pay in purgatory after they died
before they could experience the joys of heaven.

The Pope authorized Tetzel to sell these indulgences

to raise money for the building of the cathedral.

They could even be applied to deceased loved ones

who were even now suffering the agonies of purgatory,

Tetzel proclaimed.

"As soon as the coin in the coffer rings," Tetzel would declare,

"The soul from purgatory springs." Such a deal!

These get-out-of-purgatory-free certificates were wildly popular,

as you can imagine,

and the money came rolling in.

But Martin Luther was appalled.

He was outraged at the thought that the Pope in Rome

would fleece Luther's German countrymen of their meager resources

for an ostentatious building that they would never see,

but even more, Luther was horrified at the distortion of the Bible's message

that Tetzel was preaching.

For you see, Luther had only recently come to discover

the truth of the gospel for himself.

All his life he had been tormented by a guilty conscience,

sure that he had never done enough to satisfy a righteous God.

He had entered the monastery as an attempt to make himself right with God,

going beyond even the strict requirements of his order—

in fasting and prayer and Bible reading,

and whatever else was called for.
He would literally spend hours confessing every conceivable sin to his confessor,
who would grow weary of this overly scrupulous monk,
and who once told Luther to come back
when he had done something worth confessing.

Luther was to say later,
“I was a good monk.
If ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I.”

But this monk felt nothing but the horrible wrath of God pressing down upon him.

Then in the year 1515
Luther lectured on Paul’s letter to the Romans at Wittenberg University,
greatly influenced by Augustine’s work on that letter.

He wrestled particularly with Paul’s words in 1:17
that spoke of the righteousness of God being revealed in the gospel.

“I had greatly longed to understand Paul’s letter to the Romans,” Luther wrote,
“and nothing stood in the way but that one expression ‘the righteousness of God,’
because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous
and acts righteously in punishing the unrighteous. ...

Night and day I pondered until ... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God
is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy,
he justifies us by faith.

Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn
and to have gone through open doors into paradise.

The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning,
and whereas before ‘the righteousness of God’ had filled me with hate,
now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love.
This passage of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven.¹

This righteousness of God can come to us
only through faith in the gracious work of Jesus Christ—
this is the good news that Luther so longed for.

But this Tetzl –he was deceiving people with a false gospel –
a gospel of monetary absolution—
buying forgiveness.

Surely, Luther thought, if the Pope only knew what this man was saying,
he would stop him.

But as things progressed,
and Luther made his case higher up the ecclesiastical ladder,
it became clear that Luther and the Pope
were on a collision course.

¹cited in Bruce, *Romans*, p. 59.

Two questions emerged as central to this debate—

The first was: How can a person be made right with God?

But this quickly led to a second—

How can we know? Who can say so?

In other words, on what authority can we know if we are right with God?

For Luther, the answers to those questions were clear—

We are made right with God by Christ alone

through grace alone received by faith alone,

and the Scriptures and the Scriptures alone are our highest authority—

they have the final word.

Only in this way does the glory belong to God alone.

The conflict came to a head in 1521 when Luther was summoned

to what is famously called "the Diet of Worms"—

which is not at all what it sounds like—

"Worms" was the German town

and a "diet" was a kind of legislative assembly.

Luther, who had already been excommunicated by the Pope the previous year,

would appear before Charles V, the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire—

Picture the scene:

a monk before a monarch,

a miner's son before the royal heir of the empire of Charlemagne.

When asked before the gathered assembly whether he would repudiate his writings,

with his very life hanging in the balance,

and the real prospect of being burned at the stake,

Luther hesitated, "This touches God and his Word," he said.

"This affects the salvation of souls.

Of this Christ said, 'He who denies me before men,

him will I deny before my Father.'

To say too little or too much would be dangerous.

I beg you, give me time to think it over."

He was given one agonizing night to consider his response.

The following day Luther was resolute—

His examiner put the question:

"I ask you, Martin—

answer candidly and without horns—

do you or do you not repudiate your books and the errors which they contain?"

To which Luther replied:

"Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—

I do not accept the authority of popes and councils,

for they contradicted each other—

my conscience is captive to the Word of God.

I cannot and will not recant anything,

for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe.

God help me. Amen."

To which the earliest printed version adds the words:

"Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise."²

Before the Holy Roman Emperor
and in the face of the authority of the church in the person of the Pope
and the authority of traditions that had grown up within the church,
Martin Luther took his stand on the authority of the Bible--
his conscience was "**captive to the Word of God.**"

Hence, *Sola Scriptura*—"Scripture alone"

The Roman Catholic Church certainly affirmed the authority of Scripture,
but that authority was joined with the authority of the church's tradition
which grew alongside Scripture,
and it was joined with the authority of the Pope
whose official proclamations trumped all.

But Luther and his fellow Reformers said **No**—
the Scriptures and the Scriptures alone are our highest authority—

In Luther's words:

"Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth." / /

So what are we to make of this formal principle of the Reformation—
the foundation of all that was taught by Luther

and by all those who followed in his train?

Well, you might ask, Isn't Jesus and not the Bible our highest authority?

After all, Jesus himself declared,

"All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth" (Mt. 28:18).

Yes, Jesus is Lord,

and it is for that very reason

that we hold the authority of the Bible in such high regard—
because Jesus himself did.

When he was challenged about healing on the Sabbath,

Jesus turned to the Scriptures and said to his opponents,

"Have you not read . . .?" (Mt. 12:1-8);

Or when confronted with questions about divorce (Mt. 19:3-6)

or resurrection (Mt. 22:23-32), his response was the same—

he turned to the Scriptures and said, **"Have you not read . . ."**

"Has it not been written . . ." he said,

"and the Scripture cannot be broken," he declared.

For Jesus, what was written in the Scripture was the end of every dispute.

² Bainton, p. 144.

Jesus not only **used** the authority of Scripture,
he **demonstrated** the authority of Scripture in what he did.
Scripture was formative for his whole life.

Jesus in the temple at age twelve shows his knowledge of Scripture (Lk. 2:46).

At the beginning of his ministry in Lk. 4:16-21,

Jesus quotes Is. 61:1ff. as a description of his mission.

The Scriptures speak of me, he says.

And the Scriptures were formative in his teaching

His Sermon on the Mount expresses the true intent of the Old Testament.

His "Golden Rule" sums up "**the Law, and the Prophets,**" he says

(Mt. 7:12; also, Mt. 22:34-40).

And think of the way that Jesus held the authority of the Bible

over that of human tradition—

In that passage we read earlier—

Matthew 15—In a dispute with the Pharisees,

Jesus says, "**you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.**" (Mt. 15:6).

"Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

'[These people] worship me in vain;

their teachings are merely human rules' " (15:9).

And consider how Jesus conceived the Scriptures that he had in the Old Testament.

At one point Jesus quotes a passage from the book of Genesis,

that in its context was not attributed to God directly

but Jesus says that these words are what God said.³

In other words, the Bible as a whole is the word of God—

the Bible is God's means of speaking to us. /

The Scriptures served as an authority in the life of Jesus—

and if it was an authority in the life of Jesus, whom we call Lord,

how much more should be an authority in our lives.

As Jesus himself said,

"A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.

It is enough for the student to be like his teacher,

and the servant like his master."

And Jesus not only accepts the authority of what is our Old Testament,

he also authorizes the authority of what is our New Testament.

He chose apostles as his representatives to be sent out, empowered by the Holy Spirit,
to serve as his authoritative interpreters.

They were commissioned by him to proclaim to the world the meaning
of who he was and what he had done.

The early Christians recognized the authority of the writings of these apostles,
and soon they were read alongside the Old Testament Scriptures

³ Matt. 19:4,5.

in the worship gatherings of the churches.

After the end of the apostolic age,
and with the rising threat of rival authorities,
and increasing persecution
in which protecting sacred books could result in martyrdom,
it became necessary to delineate more clearly
what books were considered "Holy Scripture."
The first list acknowledging the 27 books of the present New Testament
came from Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in A.D. 367.
This list was nearly universally accepted,
because these books were already being used as authorities in the churches
and these books were later officially designated as canonical—
that is, as the rule or standard of divine truth.

It would be wrong to assert that the authority of the church
stands over the canon of Scripture,
as if the church "created" the Bible.
The second generation of church leaders simply recognized
what was already true--
that the Word of God came to them through the apostolic witnesses
whose authority exceeded their own.

As one expert on this process describes it:
"During the second and succeeding centuries, this authoritative word was found,
not in the utterances of contemporary leaders and teachers,
but in the apostolic testimony contained within certain early Christian writings.
From this point of view the Church did not create the canon,
but came to recognize, accept, affirm, and confirm
the self-authenticating quality of certain documents
that imposed themselves as such upon the Church.
If this fact is obscured,
one comes into serious conflict not with dogma but with history."⁴

The church stands under the Scripture—under the writings of the New Testament
as much as the writings of the Old.

This is why Luther could stake his very life on the supreme authority of the Bible—
because of what it is—
he understood it to be the very word of God.

In a central passage on this theme, the Apostle Paul declares that
"all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16).
All Scripture comes as if breathed out from the mouth of God.⁵

⁴Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development, and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 287.

⁵Paul refers to "all" Scripture. This supports what is often referred to as the *plenary* inspiration of Scripture—it applies to each and every part.

When we say that the Bible is a "verbally inspired" book,
we don't mean that God dictated every word to some passive recipient.

No, it is more marvelous than that—

When we say that God inspired the Bible,
we mean that God has worked by his Holy Spirit
through the instrumentality of the whole personality,
life experiences and literary talents of its human authors
to produce the very words that God desired to be written
to reveal himself and his purposes to human beings.

Peter describes this process as men speaking from God

"as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:20-21).⁶
They gave us "God-breathed" words.

As its ultimate Author, God speaks to us in the Scriptures.

As the word of God, it is, therefore, trustworthy and true—
As we say in our EFCA Statement of Faith—

The Bible **"is to be believed in all that it teaches,
obeyed in all that it requires,
and trusted in all that it promises."**

The Bible alone is our highest authority.

Since Scripture alone is our ultimate authority of truth,
the Reformers also affirmed that all the truth that is necessary
for our salvation and spiritual life
is taught either explicitly or implicitly in Scripture.

In other words, the Scriptures are sufficient
to bring us into a saving relationship with God.

The sufficiency of Scripture is affirmed most clearly again in Paul's words to Timothy:

**"from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures,
which are able to make you wise for salvation
through faith in Christ Jesus"** (2 Tim. 3:15).

The saving grace of God is revealed in the Bible.

What is written there is able to lead us to salvation.

Paul goes on to say that the "God-breathed" Scripture

**"is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,
so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped
for every good work"** (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The holy Scriptures are the sufficient words God uses to conform our lives
to the image of Christ.

The Apostle here affirms that the Lord will equip us through his Word

⁶cf. Heb. 3:7; cf. Jesus' reference to David "speaking by the Holy Spirit" in Ps. 110 [Mark 12:36]).

for whatever "**good work**" he requires of us (cf. also 2 Pet. 1:3-4).

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) puts it this way:

"The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory,
man's salvation, faith and life,
is either expressly set down in Scripture,
or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture:
unto which nothing at any time is to be added,
whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men."⁷

In short, **the Bible is enough for us.**

The sufficiency of Scripture, of course, rests ultimately on the supremacy of Christ—
that is, *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) follows from *solus Christus* (Christ alone).

As we'll talk about next week—

nothing can be added to Christ's redemptive work.

And here we affirm that nothing can be added

to the revelation of that redemptive work
found in the Bible.

The New Testament is the divinely inspired apostolic witness to the Logos of God,
the Word made flesh in Jesus Christ (John 1:1,14),

and in Christ, God has revealed himself supremely.

"**In these last days, God has spoken by his Son**" (Heb. 1:2),

and "**in [Christ] are hidden**

all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3).

In the Scriptures, the revelation of Jesus Christ has been delivered to us sufficiently.

Hence, the admonition of Jude:

"**contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints**" (Jude 3).

We don't need any new revelation from the Book of Mormon or the Koran

or anywhere else.

Paul can say, "**But even if we or an angel from heaven**

should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you,

let him be eternally condemned!" (Gal. 1:8).

God has spoken, and he has spoken supremely in Jesus Christ,

whose apostolic testimony is found in the Scriptures.

We affirm the supreme authority of the Bible

not instead of the supreme authority of the Lord Jesus,

but because of the supreme authority of the Lord Jesus.

It is in the Scriptures that we come to know him who is the final Word of God.

What more could we possibly need to know?

How firm a foundation

Ye saints of the Lord

⁷ Cf. Gal 1:8-9; 2 Thess 2:2; 2 Tim 3:15-17.

*Is laid for your faith
In His excellent Word
What more can He say
Than to you He hath said
To you who for refuge
To Jesus have fled.⁸*

Everything required of us to live a godly life is given in the Scripture.

Sola Scriptura—The Bible alone is our highest authority.

But before I close, I need to address one very important misunderstanding
of this Reformation sola.

The Reformers believed, rightly, that Scripture alone is our highest authority,
but they also believed, rightly, that Scripture is not our only authority.

They believed that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible
has been at work in believers through the ages
illuminating their minds to understand it.

The Spirit's work is to guide God's people into truth,
and to ignore the understanding of Christians of the past,
or of other Christians here today,
is to dishonor that work of the Spirit in their lives.

Those same Reformers who affirmed the final authority of Scripture
also affirmed the secondary authority of the church.

For Jesus has given authority to the church—
even using the term "keys of the kingdom"—
Church leaders have authority;
the gathered congregation has authority.

The church is the embassy of Christ's kingdom in the world,
but the church's authority is always under Christ's authority,
and Christ's authority comes to us supremely in the Scriptures.

Just as "faith alone" includes the notion that true faith would never be alone
but would be accompanied by good works,
so "Scripture alone" was never understood to mean
the authority of Scripture by itself (*nuda Scriptura*),
but Scripture understood in the company of God's people through time.

The Reformers believed that the early creeds, for example,
like the Apostles Creed that we read earlier,
these creeds could be abandoned only at great peril.

"In this sense," in the words of one Reformation Scholar,
"tradition served as a kind of guardrail on a dangerous mountain highway

⁸Rippon's *Selection of Hymns*, 1787.

keeping the traveler focused on the goal of the journey
by preventing precipitous calamities to the right and the left."⁹
Tradition, then, could not trump the Bible,
but it could be an aid in understanding the Bible.
It had a ministerial rather than a magisterial authority,
but a real authority nonetheless.

That's why Luther and Calvin and the other Reformers
often appealed to the early church fathers
in support of their understanding of the Scriptures.

The principle of Scripture alone along with the notion of the priesthood of all believers
was never a license to make every individual Christian their own Pope.
It means that the authority of Scripture must be understood
in company with all believers,
and not just the Bishop of Rome.

We need one another—together now,
and together with those who have gone before us—
to understand the Scripture rightly,
but in the end, all our theologizing must stand under the authority of the Bible.

As one writer put it,
" Tradition plays the role of (fallible) stream from Scripture's (infallible) source,
a moon to Scripture's sun:
what light it offers ultimately reflects the divine revelation in Scripture."¹⁰

Sola Scriptura—Scripture alone as our highest authority—
So why is this important?

Sola Scriptura is important because human councils and ministers can err.

That's why we are all to be like the Bereans,
who, Luke tells us in the Book of Acts,
"**examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true**" (Acts 17:11).

Sola Scriptura is important
because it gives us a standard of truth outside of the church
by which the church itself can be challenged and reformed.

That's why the church of the 17th century used the phrase
Semper Reformanda--
"the church is always being reformed—
But the church is always being reformed not for the sake of change,
or to keep up with the latest trend in the culture.

⁹ Timothy George, *Reading Scriptures with the Reformers* (IVP Academic, 2011), p. 123.

¹⁰ *The Reforming Catholic Confession*, p. 5; <http://reformingcatholicconfession.com>

The complete phrase was *Semper Reformanda secundum verbi Dei*--
"The church is always being reformed according to the word of God."

The church must always keep coming back to the Word—
And because the Scriptures stand over the church
they can correct the church and conform us to the will of God.
The Word of God alone is the final touchstone of truth.

And finally, and perhaps supremely *Sola Scriptura* is important
because the Scriptures reveal Jesus Christ to us—
Luther described the Bible as the crib that holds the baby—
and the baby is Jesus.
Jesus himself said it—"the Scriptures testify about me" (John 5:39).

God has spoken through the Bible,
and he continues to speak—
bringing Christ to us today through his word.

There is power in that word—
for that word through the work of the Spirit
brings God's presence into our lives.

The Spirit uses the Scriptures to breath his life into our hearts.
I see it—in lives of individual Christians
and in the lives of churches—
where the Bible is read and expounded and taken to heart and obeyed—
there is life—real spiritual life.

I think there is no more important lesson for a disciple of Jesus than this—
if you want to grow in your knowledge of God and your love for Christ
you must become a man or woman of the Word—
It is the Word of God
empowered by the Spirit of God
that brings the life of God into our lives.

For that reason, the Reformers sought to bring the Bible to the people.
Up to this time, the Bible was only read by church leaders who could read Latin.
But Luther quickly translated the Bible into German,
and over the next century, sometimes at the cost of martyrdom,
the Bible was translated into English.
That process culminated in the translation sponsored by King James of England in 1611.

In the preface to that work, the translation team wrote a preface
that not only addressed their patron, the King, but also the "gentle reader."
They urged these ordinary men and women
to read, search, study and love the sacred Scriptures—
I quote: "But now what piety without truth?
What truth (what saving truth) without the Word of God?"

What Word of God (whereof we may be sure) without the Scriptures?
The Scriptures we are commanded to search.

They are commended that searched and studied them.

They are reproved that were unskilled in them, or slow to believe them.

They can make us wise unto salvation.

If we be ignorant, they will instruct us;

if out of the way, they will bring us home;

if out of order, they will reform us;

if in heaviness, comfort us;

if dull, *quicken* us;

if cold, *inflame* us.

Tolle, lege; tolle, lege, "Take up and read; take up and read. . . ." ¹¹ / /

Prayer—

Augustine later wrote this prayer regarding the Bible and its power—

Lord, "I know no other book so destructive of pride,

so potent a weapon to crush your enemies and all who are on their guard against you,
refusing to be reconciled with you and trying to justify the wrong that they do.

O Lord, I know no written words so pure as these,

none that have induced me so firmly to make my confession to you,

none that have so eased for me the task of bowing my neck to your yoke

or so gently persuaded me to worship you for your sake and not for mine.

Let me understand them, good Father.

Grant me this gift, for I submit myself to them . . ."

And now we come to this table—the Lord's Table.

I invite our servers to come forward.

The Reformers were insistent that we never come to this table

without first attending to the word of God—

the word of the gospel found in the Bible---

For it is that word that gives meaning to what we do here.

for here at this table the words of the gospel,

the words that present Christ to us—

become visible for us in the bread and the cup.

The Bible doesn't save us—Christ does—

and here we see him displayed before our eyes—

in the bread as his body which is given for us,

and the in the cup as his blood which is shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

He offers himself as the crucified and risen Savior—

full of grace to all who receive him in truth by faith.

¹¹ Cited in Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*, p. 255.

This is the gospel—
God giving himself to us—in his mercy and grace.

Prayer—as our servers come forward.

Prayer

Communion

Closing Song:

Benediction:

The Five *Solas* of the Reformation, #1
Oct. 1, 2017

Celebrating the Reformation: "Sola Scriptura: Scripture Alone"

This morning we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation as we begin a series on the five central themes of that movement—the "five solas."

I. Introduction:

**Martin Luther—igniting a movement
that reshaped the Western church.**

II. *Sola Scriptura*—

**the Scriptures and the Scriptures alone
are our highest authority.**

III. Jesus and the Authority of Scripture

Jesus' attitude toward the Old Testament

Jesus' authorization of the New Testament

The New Testament "canon"

IV. The Bible as the Word of God—

It is trustworthy and true

It is sufficient—

it gives us all the divine words we need

V. *Sola Scriptura* and Church Tradition—

**The voices of Christians of the past and in other places have ministerial
rather than magisterial authority--*Sola Scriptura* is not *nuda Scriptura***

VI. Finally, the Scriptures Reveal Christ.

Discussion Questions:

**Celebrating the Reformation:
"Sola Scriptura: Scripture Alone"**

- What does it mean for you to say that the Bible is your "highest authority"? How does that authority impact your life?
- What illustrates the way that Jesus viewed the Scriptures of his day? How should this affect your attitude toward the Bible?
- In identifying which books should be in the canon of the New Testament does the church stand over the Bible? Why or why not?
- What is meant by the "sufficiency of Scripture"? Why is this important? Where do you see this denied?
- What should be the role of church tradition as it relates to the authority of the Bible?
- How does the Bible bring Christ to us?