

The Bible Alone as Our Authority
Part 1 of a series on the Reformation “Solas”
January 8, 2017
Pastor Dan Erickson

(View a scene from the movie “Luther”)

Well folks, that is a depiction of one of the most important events in human history, Martin Luther’s defense of his teachings at the Diet, or Council in Worms, Germany in 1520. I used to think “The Diet of Worms” was a punishment Luther had to endure, but the Diet of Worms was where he defended his evangelical beliefs. Three years earlier, October 31, 1517, Luther had posted his 95 thesis or statements on the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany, igniting the Protestant Reformation. That simply means it was a protest against errors and abuses occurring in the church at that time. Reformations were needed to correct those errors and abuses. The political, social, ecclesiastical, and theological ramifications which resulted from this are gigantic. That is why 2017, the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation is being acknowledged and celebrated by many.

Now, I believe this time period, the Protestant Reformation, is the most fascinating time in history since the New Testament church, which is almost two thousand years ago. Yet, I realize many of you in this room are not really “into history.” You are trying to keep track of what happened the past five days. You don’t have time to think about five hundred years ago. Yet, some of the things Luther did, specifically what he taught, have a huge impact on your life as a Christian, today. The Protestant Reformation did not stay in Germany, but spread to Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and then Scotland and England. And some of those folks who embrace Reformation teachings began to call themselves Baptists. And eventually those Baptists started taking ships across the ocean to “The New World” and through a path which has all sorts of twists and turns, here we are at Chisholm Baptist Church, in the year of our Lord, 2017. Now, some of you, like my wife Nancy, grew up going to a Lutheran church. Others of you have never set foot in such a place. But, if you are a Bible believing follower of Jesus, an Evangelical Christian, you have Lutheran DNA in your spiritual ancestry. Oh, there is some Ana-Baptist DNA too, but we have been impacted in very

positive ways by what happened in Germany five hundred years ago.

How? Listen to what Dr. Steve Wellum, of the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, wrote recently: *“Beyond question, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century changed Christianity forever. The Reformation was not perfect, but it was a mighty reviving movement of the Spirit of God which purified the church and called people back to the fundamentals of the Gospel. In doing so, it removed from our thinking the emphasis of human reason and human tradition as equal in authority to God’s Word; it recovered the God centeredness of all of life and thought by glorifying in the triune God of the Bible in all of his majestic rule and Lordship; it emphasized the importance, yet pervasive depravity of human beings as (God’s) image bearers; it stressed the utter inability of humans to save themselves, thus proclaiming the need for God to redeem us by his sovereign grace alone; and it exalted the glory, majesty, exclusivity, and sufficiency of our Lord Jesus Christ who alone has accomplished our salvation fully, completely, and perfectly.”* Steve Wellum is a great fellow, but he writes like a professor. I hope you caught a glimpse of how important the Reformation is to our faith today.

Now, I suspect some of you are thinking, “Pastor Dan, I don’t care about this stuff, all this history and theology. I just read the Bible and believe what it says.” Okay, but my question for you is “Why do you do that?” Why do you read the Bible? Why do you believe what it says? “Well, that is what a Christian is supposed to do.” Yes, that is true, but why do you think that? I would suggest you think that way because this is truth God has shown us through the Protestant Reformation. For centuries almost all Christians believed reading the Bible was something only priests and other trained clergy were supposed to do. And as far as understanding and interpreting the Bible, that was something only the highest authorities in the church were entrusted by God to do. The idea that ordinary people should read the Bible and were capable of understanding what it said, is a truth that had almost been completely lost by the 16th century. If that truth had not been rediscovered in the Reformation or

in some subsequent movement of God's Spirit, it is unlikely anyone here would be reading and believing what the Bible says.

So folks, for the next few weeks we are going to focus on the Protestant Reformation. We will not concentrate on Martin Luther. He was a brilliant, fascinating, extremely influential, yet rather flawed man. We will not concentrate on the history of different churches and denominations that are rooted in the Reformation. Though that is a fascinating topic, and well worth your time to explore, that will not be our focus. Rather, we will devote our time to the key biblical truths which were rediscovered, highlighted and passed down to us through the Reformation. In theological circles, they are called "The Five Solas of the Reformation." Sola is the Latin word for sole, only or alone. These are the five truths:

1. The Bible alone is our authority.
2. Salvation is by grace alone.
3. Salvation is received through faith alone.
4. The foundation of the Christian life is Jesus Christ alone.
5. The purpose of all this is for the glory of God alone.

The Bible alone, grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, the glory of God alone, these will be our topics over the next few weeks.

As we explore them, my hope is that we will, yes, learn a little history, but also develop a better understanding of key beliefs and teachings of this church which are indeed based on these five truths. Most importantly, however, we need to see how each of these truths need to be part of our lives as Christians today, right here in Northern Minnesota in 2017. This morning, we start with the belief that the Bible alone is our authority. The Latin phrase is "Sola scriptura." In many ways, this truth is the most significant contribution of the Reformation. And it is a truth which is more important today than ever.

The video clip we watched a few minutes ago, illustrates what we mean when we talk about the Bible alone being our authority. Luther refused to recant of his teachings, to admit he was wrong, unless he was convinced *the Bible* taught something different. He believed the Bible was the standard, the authority, the sole authority, by which theological and religious teachings must be evaluated. So when Luther, for example, questioned the church's teaching that a priest or pastor should remain celibate and not

be allowed to marry, he asked, "Where in the Bible does it say clergy need to stay single?" Yes, he knew that popes and other church leaders had insisted clergy should not marry, but where was this taught in the Bible? He noted that in 1 Corinthians 7 the Apostle Paul is quite clear that remaining single and getting married can both be good options for someone seeking to serve the Lord. And Luther asked the same questions concerning the church's teaching on topics such as indulgences, purgatory, confession and penance: "Is that what the Bible teaches?" Luther, and other reformers that followed him, developed this idea of "Sola scriptura," the Bible alone is our authority.

So where did Luther get this idea? Well, from the Bible, of course. There are four key aspects of this truth taught in the scripture, all of which we at Chisholm Baptist Church gladly affirm. Number one, the Bible is the word of God. The Lord has spoken to us through this book. Yes, God is certainly free to speak to us in other ways if He chooses—dreams, visions, an audible voice, a prophet, but He primarily speaks to us through the Bible. This is something implied many, many times as we read the scripture, but it is most explicitly taught in **2 Timothy 3:16a** *All Scripture is breathed out by God*. Many versions say "inspired by God," but breathed out is a more literal and better translation of the Greek word because it reminds us God is the ultimate source, the one who originates every word in the Bible. Yes, the Bible was written by human beings. What we call 2 Timothy is a letter, written by the Apostle Paul to his friend and associate, Timothy. Yet, these are also words breathed out by God. So, as I like to say, every part of the Bible, every word, is written by a human author to particular individuals or groups of people who lived at a particular time. Yet, every word in the Bible is also written by God and is for all people, at all times, and in all places.

Now, the exact process used by God to speak through human words is somewhat of a mystery. It is usually called the inspiration of scripture. We are given some idea of how it happened in **2 Peter 1:20, 21** (NLT) *Above all, you must realize that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God*. Friends, I don't know exactly how this process worked, but I do know the end result. Every word

in this book, to the extent it reflects what was originally written, is not only a word written by a man, but is a word from God.

Number two, these words are intended to be our authority, telling us what to believe and how to live. In 2 Timothy 3:15 Paul notes that one important role of the Bible is to teach about the salvation He has for us in Jesus Christ. He then adds, **2 Timothy 3:16-17** *All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, for every good work.* Let me read that from the NLT **2 Timothy 3:16-17** *All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.* So, God has spoken to us through the Bible, with a very practical purpose. He desires not only to tell us about His salvation, but also to teach us what is true and instruct us how to live in a way which is pleasing to Him. The Bible is (Psalms 119:115) a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, and should play a central role in the life of every Christian.

Number three, ordinary Christians are capable of understanding what the Bible says about God's salvation, what we should believe and how we should live. Some folks say, "Yes, God has spoken to us in very practical and important ways, but we cannot trust ourselves to really understand what those words mean. That is why He gave us the church to interpret the Bible for us and tell us what it means." Those saying this usually believe it is the Roman Catholic Church which has been entrusted with the task of interpreting the Bible for us. Yet, there are plenty of indications in the Bible that ordinary people were expected to understand what it says. I think the best example is what happened in Berea when the Apostle Paul preached the gospel in that city. **Acts 17:11** tells us the people there, *Searched the Scriptures day after day to see if Paul and Silas were teaching the truth.* In other words, they compared what Paul was saying, to their understanding of what the Bible said. And they were commended for that. Friends, they are a model for every Christian. When you hear a teacher, or read an author, compare what he or she is saying to what the

Bible says. Even as an ordinary Christian, you are capable of doing that.

Number four, all of us are capable of misunderstanding the Bible. That is true of individuals and churches. We all need to be humble, and sometimes need to re-evaluate to make sure we are interpreting scripture correctly. As we read the gospel accounts, it is interesting to note how the Jewish religious leaders who knew what the Bible said, so frequently failed to understand what it meant. The Pharisees were people who memorized the entire Old Testament. But they failed to understand its meaning. For example, Jesus says **Matthew 5:43** "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" That was the Pharisee's interpretation of the biblical command "love your neighbor." They kind of just added the "hate your enemy part." Jesus continues, **5:44** "But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.'" Folks, when your interpretation of the Bible is different than Jesus', you are wrong. Every individual, every church, and every organization, no matter how well educated or devout, is capable of misinterpreting what God has said in His word. That is why rather than relying on someone else to tell us what the Bible means, we need to always be diligent in prayerfully pondering what scripture teaches so we may correctly understand what it says.

Okay, the Bible alone is our authority. What does this mean in practical terms? First, let me address Roman Catholic friends who probably are not here, but might be listening on the radio, television or internet. Some of you agree with me that the Bible's authority trumps that of the church. That is wonderful. We agree on this important issue. Others of you read the Bible, which is also wonderful. However, you believe it is only the church which can tell us what the Bible really means. Well, let me say, I agree with you that the church and Christian tradition are important tools God gives to help us understand what the Bible teaches. I certainly don't believe every person should be free to interpret the Bible however he or she chooses. We always want to know what God means through these words. How Christians in the past understood a particular passage of scripture is an important guide on this path. However, it is the Bible, not the church, which is the ultimate authority to which we need to submit.

For example, the Bible talks about Jesus' brothers and sisters, including James, who became a leader in the early church. The Roman Catholic church often says these are either children of Joseph's from a previous marriage, or Jesus' cousins. That is possible, but not likely. The best interpretation of what the Bible says is that these are Jesus' younger siblings, born to Mary and Joseph. Yet, many Roman Catholics reject that interpretation, because they have already decided Mary could not have any other children, because she was always perpetually, a virgin. That folks, is not something taught in the Bible. At least I don't see it anywhere. Yet, if that idea causes us to re-interpret the Bible, to make it say something it probably doesn't say, then we are treating the church as a higher authority than the Bible. And friends, that is one of the basic differences between the Roman Catholic church and Reformation Protestantism. Many Roman Catholics believe the church has authority over the Bible, that the church gave us the Bible, and thus has the right to tell us how to interpret and use the Bible. Protestants believe the Bible has authority over the church, and that the Roman Catholic church, the Lutheran church, the Baptist church, and all other churches should conform their beliefs and practices to what the Bible teaches.

However, second, it is not just Roman Catholics who struggle with the authority of the Bible. Liberal Protestants are notorious for ignoring what the Bible says and claiming 21st century science helps us understand topics like evolution or homosexuality better than the Bible does. Yet, other Protestants, including evangelicals, including Baptists, sometimes find there is a conflict between what the Bible teaches and what traditionally has been taught in their churches or what their personal beliefs are. For example, John 2, Jesus turns water into wine...when I was growing up, we were taught this certainly must have been non-alcoholic wine, grape juice, since Jesus would never encourage anyone to drink alcohol. There are still people who make that argument today, though it is rejected by almost all Bible scholars. When the Lord commands us, through the Apostle Paul, ***Ephesians 5:18*** *Do not get drunk with wine*, which seems to clearly be an alcoholic drink, He uses the same Greek word "oinos" as is used for wine in John 2. It is also significant that it was in 1869 when Thomas Welch, a Methodist

pastor, invented Welch's Grape Juice, a pasteurized juice that would not ferment and turn into wine. He wanted to be able to use a non-alcoholic wine for communion in his church, but until 1869 that really was not an option.

Now, for a variety of reasons, I personally choose to not drink any alcohol. But that is because of my personal conviction, not a biblical command. While I should expect my fellow Christians to follow what the Bible teaches, I don't have a right to expect them to follow my personal convictions. In other words, I don't drink wine, but I should not be telling others it is a sin for them to do so. Yes, I should be telling people it is a sin to get drunk, it is a sin to abuse alcohol in any way, it is a sin to drink even a drop of wine before you are 21 years old, the legal drinking age. However, if I believe in the authority of the Bible alone, I should not pretend my personal convictions have the same weight as what the Bible teaches. I must avoid the temptation of pretending God has said He agrees with me, when He has not. Because we believe in the sole authority of scripture, we need to make sure we don't subtract from the Bible by denying truth God has revealed, and we need to make sure we don't add to the Bible, by giving our own opinions equal authority to scripture.

Sola scriptura, the Bible alone as our authority for what we as Christians believe and practice. That is an important teaching of the Bible. It is an important truth highlighted by Martin Luther and the other reformers. It is an important truth we at Chisholm Baptist Church believe and affirm. It is easy, however, to fall into the trap of letting other authorities compete with the Bible. May the Lord help us to avoid that trap, and always treat the Bible, God's word, as our sole authority.