

Scripture Alone

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening. So as Corrie was saying, it's 500 years since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, with Luther and his 95 theses on the door of Wittenberg Cathedral.

So we're commemorating this movement 500 years ago in the 16th century church in the Roman Catholic Church, which saw Christians protesting against what they thought their church had become, a power-hungry, money-focused empire whose beliefs, whose practices had wandered far from the teaching of the Bible, from the early church.

The Reformation was about a lot of issues, really central issues to our Christian faith. How can we know God? What does it mean to be saved?

Can we have assurance of our salvation? Can we know for sure that God is our redeemer, that he has saved us? What should the church be like? How should I read the Bible?

I suppose you could sum up the overall package with what Corrie was just saying, the ideas of the Reformation, that these protesting Christians were saying that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone and Christ alone, that our highest authority in the church should be Scripture alone, and that all of life is to be lived for the glory of God alone.

[1 : 3 3] There was no single 16th century reformer who put these five things together and said, this is a whole package, although they did argue for all of these things. Putting it together as five solas is a more recent way of trying to understand, trying to describe what happened in the Reformation.

And it's a very helpful way. So tonight we're starting off these sermons by looking at Sola Scriptura. Scriptura alone is the highest source of authority in the Christian faith.

Now, and I present that to you, it may seem really alien, this language of authority, especially because there's an anti-authoritarian bent that runs deeply through our culture.

Our culture likes to sell itself as we're individuals, we're autonomous, we live by our own terms, we define, we choose who we are. And that's something that's deep in our culture that you can tap into.

Think of, well, not that long ago, in the buildup to the Brexit referendum, Michael Gove really cynically tapped into it in a big interview on television.

[2 : 4 1] He was told, all of these experts think that what you're telling us to vote for is madness. And he tapped into this anti-authoritarian drive in our society and said, I think we've had enough of experts.

So he's tapping into this thing in our culture that tells us, we live by our own terms, we don't need experts, we are our own authorities. But that's not really true for any of us.

Accepting sources of authority and what they tell us, and living by what they tell us, and an act of faith, is actually something completely normal, something that you do all the time, every day, as you go about your life.

In fact, if you didn't do this, if you were truly your own authority on everything, if you investigated every claim, if you came to your own firm conclusion, if you never lived by faith in what other authorities tell you, it would paralyze your life immediately.

Your life would become completely unlivable. Living life is a constant exercise of walking by faith in what authorities tell us. You learn it as a small child, in the way that your parents teach you, this is what the world is, this is how the world works, this is how to live within it.

[4 : 02] When you're three, you're very limited ways of testing all of this out. You accept it by faith, and lo and behold, you learn how to walk through the world, you learn how to live.

As an adult, you do this constantly. So you're in the supermarket and you're there to buy some chicken, and it says it's chicken on the packet. Do you stop and say, maybe it's seagull.

I need to go and do tests on this meat before I'll accept that it's chicken. Is the sell by date, is the use by date telling the truth? That's a bad example, because we have this national scandal over the last week where we find out that we actually should question that a bit more with most of the chicken that we eat.

Imagine that when you meet someone new and they say, hi, I'm James Eglinton, do you say, is that really his name? Can I see some photographic ID please before we establish this relationship?

We don't live like this. We all live on the basis of things that we can't prove, either because we just don't have the opportunity to, because we don't have the skills to, or because there are things that are unprovable, but we accept them and we live on that basis, living a life of faith.

[5 : 14] Most profoundly, so one of the most important sources on this in terms of Christians have written about this in the past was Augustine. So really important early Christian thinker.

He has a book, The City of God, where he tries to work out what does it mean to have faith, to live by faith? He goes through lots of things in his life that he just accepts by faith because he can't prove them.

Then he gets down to the very core of his existence and asks himself the question, how do I know I exist? Not all these other things around me, the colour blue or these chairs, how do I know that I'm even here?

He says, I have no way of proving this. I can't step out of myself and look at myself externally and do some tests and work out, yes, Augustine is a real person. You believe you exist because you're self-conscious.

I can see all of you around me and I seem to be a thinking-speaking person talking to you, but I have no way of proving any of this. I simply accept what seems to be real, which is that I'm alive, that I'm a thinking existing being, and I go on living life on that basis, even though I have no way of proving any of it, that I actually exist.

[6 : 25] That's the question that philosophers have wrestled with ever since Augustine, and the general consensus is you cannot prove that you exist. And yet people go on living.

We live lives of faith in ourselves and so many other things in the world around us. We don't do this gullibly, accepting all sources of authority and what they tell us.

Imagine you've never met me before, you don't know that my name is James, and I shake your hand and say, hi, I'm Henry Jones. That on its own seems perfectly plausible, so you believe that.

Then we go on talking, and I mention just casually that I'm 6'8", and you start thinking, oh, that seems a little bit odd. Then I mention also casually in conversation that I just turned 13, and you look at the beard and think something's gone really wrong there.

And then I mention later on that I'm actually Chinese. You stop believing. We don't accept authorities in a really gullible way, but we do live by faith in all kinds of sources of authority and what they tell us.

[7 : 32] Think of things like, well, you go and see your doctor. Your doctor tells you, we've done some tests. I have news for you. Sometimes maybe in your life you've questioned them, you've asked for a second opinion, but we go on the basis of expert advice, and authority figure tells us this.

Think of when you take legal advice. Think of when you go and see your mortgage advisor. We ignore experts at our peril. So we have all these authority figures telling us all kinds of things, and we accept lots of what they tell us about your mortgage, about your health, about politics, about the things that you study at university.

What about God? What about authorities on God? Now, our world is also full of authority figures, sources of authority, telling us a lot of different things about God.

Some of them tell us that God doesn't exist. Some of them tell us that God might exist, but it's so unknowable that you should just forget about it. Remember those adverts on the buses a couple of years ago, there's probably no God.

So stop worrying about it and enjoy your life. Some sources might tell you, well, there are lots of gods. Some authorities will tell you there is a God, and he's a kind of loveless slave driver who just wants to ground you into the ground.

[9 : 03] Some will tell you there is a God, and amazingly this God endorses everything that I endorse and how I think the world should be. So classic example in our culture of liberal Christianity, and it's God who, coincidentally, is really for progressive social values, and that's also God's big thing.

Which authorities do you rely on, do you submit to, on God? In the context of the Reformation, that's where this idea, sola scriptura, scripture as the ultimate authority on God, comes to the fore.

So in the context of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church had put scripture and the church as equal authorities on God. Scripture is God's revelation, but the church tells you what it means.

So the church is this mouthpiece of, well, what should you think about scripture? What does it mean? And because the church tells you what it means, it interprets it for you, they're seen as equal sources of authority.

And the protest that the Reformers brought was, well, they thought the church had introduced so many things, like the example that Corey mentioned, selling indulgences. The idea that, or purgatory in the first place, that when you die, you go to some kind of other place, neither heaven or hell, and you're still suffering there, but you know what, if someone on Earth really cares about you, and they pay money, then the church has the power to let that soul rise up out of purgatory and then go to heaven.

[10 : 41] And they put those things in thought, that's not what the Bible teaches. And if that's true, doesn't that mean that the church sometimes gets it wrong in interpreting the Bible?

And what basis then can the church be corrected? If they're equal authorities, then how can you correct the church? And their insistence in arguing for sola scriptura is that scripture and the church are not equally authoritative.

Scripture is the higher authority, and it's the thing by which we judge what the church says and does and believes. And then the Reformation, this is a really important point.

Sola scriptura wasn't a rejection of all other, let's call them sources of authority on God's. So books by Christians, creeds, confessions, catechisms, all that kind of stuff, tradition.

It wasn't a rejection of all of them, but it was an insistence that the Bible is the highest authority over all of them, and that all these other sources are only authoritative insofar as what they say about God, about the gospel is grounded in what scripture teaches us.

[12 : 01] So it wasn't that these other sources are just done away with now, and we only read the Bible. The Bible is the best book to read, but the Reformers also thought that you can get great benefit from reading other things as well, but their authority is grounded in God.

And the reason for that, for the Bible is unique as a source of authority on God, is that it's the only book on God whose author is God.

Our church is a Reformed church, so we have catechisms, we have these books of Christian teaching, we have the Westminster Confession of Faith, as what we call our subordinate standard, so it's our summary of how we as a church understand what the Bible teaches, and we've tried to state it there clearly.

We have a great tradition of Christian writers and books. We have a church tradition that goes back to the Reformation over the last 500 years, and it goes back beyond it into the early church, to the ancient churches, councils and creeds, and we have all of that, and we value it, we love it.

It gives us a coherent identity that goes into the past, but we see all of those things as subordinate to the authority of the Bible itself.

[13 : 25] We think that in all of those things the Bible is unique, and the question is why? Why does our church say this? Why does our church affirm this?

Why is the Bible our highest authority on God? I think that something that's easy to not to understand in looking at these five solas of the Reformation is to think that the solas are primarily about us, that they are about Christians, that they are about what Christians think, what Christians do, what Christians believe, or what Christians should do, and what Christians should believe.

But actually, each of these five solas primarily is making a really important point clear about God, not primarily about us, but about God himself.

And we miss the point if we think that the solas are primarily to teach us about ourselves and about what we should believe, what we should do. Primarily they actually teach us about what kind of God the Lord is, what he is like, who he is.

So an example of this, Solagratia, okay, grace alone, we're saved by grace alone, that isn't primarily a statement about us and our salvation.

[14 : 47] It is a statement about those things that we're saved by grace alone, but primarily it's a statement about who God is, what kind of God he is, that he is a God who saves, and that he's gracious in how he does so.

It tells us a lot about God's heart. Solafidei, faith alone, okay? It's not primarily a statement about us and something that we exercise.

Even though it is a statement about that, that we need to have faith in Christ, and faith in no one else to save us but Christ. But it's primarily a statement about the kind of God the Lord is, a God who is faithful, a God who can be trusted.

So we can look at them first and think, well, this is really about us and our faith, but really it's about God primarily. It's about who God is, what he is like, and then because of that, how we should understand a relationship to him.

So, Sola Scriptura, well, what does it teach us about God? By its name, it looks like it's primarily a statement about the Bible, okay?

[16 : 04] Scripture alone, but it's also most profoundly a statement about God. And Sola Scriptura, if you want to understand it, the Bible alone, and why the Bible should be our highest source of authority on God, we actually have to start with the doctrine of God, okay, with trying to understand who God is, or with thinking about who God is, what God is like.

And where we have to begin is this reality, okay, this mind-blowing reality, that knowledge of God begins with God himself, that God knows himself fully, exhaustively, perfectly, infinitely, okay?

And only God can have that knowledge. If you are an infinite, eternal, unchangeable, all-knowing being, if that is what you are, which is what God is, it takes one to know one, okay?

You have to be all of these things to fully know what someone like that is, okay? So to have this kind of self-knowledge, you yourself would have to be infinite, eternal, all-knowing, to grasp by God who is all of these things.

But that's exactly who God is. He knows himself fully, and he is the only one who can do that, okay? Because of what God is.

[17 : 34] God is the original and the only true expert on himself, okay? Because God has that knowledge of himself.

And that knowledge that he has of himself, he then chooses to share with us. He reveals it, okay? He shares what he knows of himself with us.

And in fact, everything that we could know of God begins with what God knows of himself and that he shares with us. He has to share it with us for us to know it, okay?

He has to reveal it to us. So we're talking about how these solas actually first teach us about God. What sola scriptura teaches us is that God himself is the only, the perfectly qualified knower of himself, okay?

God can know God like God knows God. But he chooses to share that with us, okay? Maybe he's flipping to talk about it as expertise, okay? But that's something that you can compare it to and, you know, things that we know about as humans.

[18 : 43] For God, it's just knowing himself perfectly, delighting in himself and what he knows of himself. And then he shares what he's, he shares that delight in revealing himself to us.

And because of that, because God is the only one who could know himself perfectly, God, therefore, is the only authority on God whose expertise isn't derived from any higher authority, okay?

So for God to know about himself, he doesn't go and ask anyone else. He knows himself. And God, because of that, is uniquely qualified to tell us about himself, to tell us that he is, that he exists, to tell us who he is, to tell us what he wants.

And we see that in John 17. That's why I asked if we could read this chapter. In Jesus' high priestly prayer, Jesus in this prayer is praying to God, praying to his Father that we, that his people will know God in order that God, that knowing God, not just knowing about him, but knowing him, being in relationship with him, having him show himself to us, and us responding in faith, that knowing God will sanctify us, that it will change us, that it will make us holy.

So Jesus is praying for that, that you will know his Father. What does Jesus call on then when he's praying in order that his people will know God?

[20 : 17] What he calls on is the truth, because he says to his Father, your word is truth. He's calling on God to share what God knows of himself with his people, to transform them, to make them new people.

What's the consequence then of that unique knowledge that God has of himself for us in our world? Well, the obvious question is, where has God shared that knowledge of himself with us?

What we see in Scripture is that God has done that generally in the world in creating it. So think of texts like Psalm 19, think of Romans 1. So God makes the world as a kind of theater of his glory.

And in that he shows us things about himself, his creative power, the limitless extent of his genius. Everything in the world, as God made it, reveals God's own greatness, and so far as he is greater than the universe he's made.

The universe is ancient, God is eternal. If the universe is vast, God is infinite. But he also reveals himself specifically in Scripture.

[21 : 35] That's why we read the 2 Timothy 3 text, that God, in the sacred writings that Paul writes about there, God has breathed out his word in order that we will know him, to equip us for lives of godliness.

What are the consequences of that then for how we live individually and as a church, as Christians? Well, there's this principle about knowing, that what we know of God and how we relate to others, and the claims of authority on God, always has to be grounded in Scripture.

Think of an example like this in Acts 17. So Paul and Silas go to Berea to teach people their Christian faith. And what Paul writes, what you find in Acts there is, that they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things, the things they were being taught by Paul and Silas, were so.

And of course, so there's this principle of knowledge then, that what we know about God has to be grounded in Scripture. But you could do that in quite a lifeless, intellect-only way.

And that doesn't do justice to, not simply to, what God has revealed of himself in the Bible, but why God has revealed that. Not that God hasn't revealed himself only so that we will know about him.

[23 : 09] Okay, so God doesn't reveal himself in the Bible, just to give us a lot of facts, even accurate ones. What did Jesus pray for in John 17?

Not simply that God's people would be armed with lots of good facts about God, but that they would know him, that they would be changed.

And Sola Scriptura, therefore, is something, the Bible has, this is why the Bible should take such a central place in our lives of faith, in our individual lives, and the life of this church.

Because of how important the Bible is, because God wants us to know Scripture so that we will know him. Because God wants us to know him.

I want to talk just briefly about some challenges that this idea faces in our context. So we live in a kind of post-modern culture.

[24 : 13] And in our post-modern culture, there's a lot of skepticism to the idea that a single human can have a big picture and get some kind of universal truth. So instead, you have lots of, well, you have your opinion, I have mine, we all have our different interpretations, multiple interpretations, and many things are possible.

And in that kind of context, an idea like Sola Scriptura could really easily be misunderstood. If you misunderstand it as thinking, there's no authoritative tradition that tells us what we should think when we read the Bible.

So let's all read it in our own way. I'll read it in my way. You read it in yours. We may disagree on everything, but it's kind of relative, isn't it? You can read the biblical texts in multiple ways and come up with lots of different conclusions.

And there's no longer an authority in the church that tells us what we have to believe. That isn't Sola Scriptura. Sola Scriptura doesn't reject church tradition.

So things like confessions of faith, creeds, statements of belief. In fact, it affirms tradition, but it says this tradition is under the authority of Scripture.

[25 : 29] And the tradition only is authoritative insofar as it sounds in line, as it times in line with Scripture. And it's also, if we kind of twist it in a postmodern way, it's hard to see the sense in which Scripture actually has any kind of meaningful authority.

If you can read its contents in any multiplicity of ways with multiple meanings. In the Reformation era, the challenges that this idea faced were quite different.

The big challenge was, instead of Sola Scriptura, Sola Ecclesia, the church alone, is the authority on what we know of God. One of the really striking things about Sola Scriptura is what it says about how the church can get that wrong.

And then the Reformers draw us back to Scripture in order that our churches can be more biblical, that they can be reformed when they do go wrong. But I suspect that probably for most of you, something like the church alone, that's not a great threat to how you read the Bible.

Because of that kind of postmodern context I was talking about. I think that a great challenge to this, probably for many of you, is something that instead of Sola Scriptura, Scripture alone, or Sola Ecclesia, the church alone, we have something more like Sola Cultura.

[26 : 55] Culture alone is the authority on how we read the Bible, or the authority on how we know God. So the kind of culture that we live in is post-Christian, it's quite aggressively secular, and it views its progressive secular culture as the corrective, rather than the church, rather than what God reveals in Scripture.

Our culture, this post-Christian culture has a secularizing impulse that wants to reshape the church, that wants to reshape the Christian faith in its own image.

And it takes a kind of get-with-the-program attitude towards Christianity, adapts to our values, conforms to us where your traditional Christian belief is different, live and think on our terms, will still despise you, but will tolerate you.

You see this a lot in the ways that secular politicians air their opinions on the church and Christianity. It's something that needs to get with the times, and if it does that, we'll ignore it again, and if it doesn't, we'll keep on pressuring it.

So for us, the context is more Sola culture, I think, as this ultimate authority on what we believe about God. The issue there again is that Scripture becomes a set of texts that you can chop and change.

[28 : 23] You celebrate it when its contents confirm what culture, culture alone, as the highest authority wants you to do. But where Scripture challenges our secular culture, well, then Scripture shouldn't have any authority to speak.

We get rid of those texts. What's the problem with Sola culture? With culture alone, why can't secular culture serve as our highest authority on what we believe about God?

And again, this is where we come back to John 17, to Jesus' high priestly prayer, where Jesus in his prayer says that he is not of the world.

That he has come into the world as God reveals himself by sending his Son into it. So Jesus has come from God to speak to us as God, to speak to us from God.

And he does that faithfully as the Son that God sends. As God's faithful Son, he faithfully shares God's perfect knowledge of himself with us.

[29 : 32] This is very clear in John 17, that Jesus has shared what God gave him to share with us, that he's not of the world. And when he speaks about the world at the end of his prayer, he could not be clearer that the world does not know God.

The world does not know you, he says in verse 25, I know you. It could not be any clearer why for Jesus the world rather than God cannot be your highest source of authority in what you think about God.

It has to be God himself, and that God has spoken in the Bible. What does the Bible say about the Bible?

I mentioned it earlier from 2 Timothy 3, that when Paul writes to Timothy, he encourages him in the fact that he has read the Bible, the sacred writings, since he was young.

The Bible can make him wise to salvation through faith in Christ. And then Paul gives Timothy the reason he should continue to turn to the Bible above all else, and not given to the kind of sola culture, a culture alone of his day, which Paul describes in the chapter.

[30 : 45] And the reason is, the reason why the Bible above all else should be the authority that he will trust in about God is because all of it has been breathed out by God.

It's been inspired by God. It's the only book about God whose author is God. This is why so often in Scripture we find this description of the Bible of God's word as a lamp.

A lamp to our feet, Psalm 119. Your word is a lamp to our feet and a light to my path. Scripture has been breathed out by God to illuminate the darkness around us, to shine a light on our path from God, where God does that by directing us to Jesus, because the one who's shining that light, because Scripture's divine author knows God as God, because it's divine author is God.

I said at the beginning, in your life, we spend all of our lives looking to sources of authority about all kinds of things. And you look to those things, you live out your faith in them with the hope that they will be light to your feet, a lamp to your feet, and a light to your path in many areas of life.

Think of the political commentators that you consistently turn to to interpret all of these complex things for you. Think of the newspaper columnists that you regularly read.

[32 : 24] Think of the media outlets that you regularly turn to. Which channel do you always go to for your news? Which newspaper do you buy every day? You look to people in your life who inspire you, who seem to know what they're all about.

You look to experts, and if you submit to the right authorities, it can be great. It can lead you to wisdom, to knowledge, to understanding.

It could save your life. But if you submit to the wrong authorities, it can be devastating. At its core, the Reformation was a call for God to be our authority on God.

Our ultimate authority. The God who knows himself perfectly, who delights in what he knows so much, that he would send his son into our world to share God with us, and then to pray the prayer that he prayed in John 17.

The God who would reveal himself to us faithfully in Scripture, who through his Holy Spirit inspired human authors as God breathed out these sacred writings.

[33 : 42] And also that we might not just know about God, but so that we would know God. At its core, the Reformation was this insistence that no one knows God, like God knows himself.

But it was also an insistence that that God wants us to know him, and that he has made himself known by giving us his Son, by giving us Scripture, by giving us his Holy Spirit.

So I hope that as we, over the next four weeks now, as we go through these solas, what we'll see is how the Reformation was this rediscovery of the greatness and glory of God through the Gospel.

God as he wants us to know him. Let's pray together. Father God, our Maker, our Redeemer, we thank you for the knowledge that you have of yourself, that everything you know of yourself infinitely, exhaustively delights you, for the knowledge that exists between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, of that shared glory, of that shared love.

And we thank you that you have been so pleased by what you know of yourself, that you would reveal yourself by creating our world, that you would reveal yourself by creating us as your image, that you would reveal yourself by speaking to us in the Bible, in Scripture, that you'd reveal yourself by sending Jesus into the world to pray the prayer that we have read tonight.

[35 : 24] We thank you for giving us Scripture. We pray that you would help us to love it, to read it, to cherish it, to be shaped by it, to encounter you through it, and to be sanctified by it as your Word, because your Word is truth.

So Lord, please help us through all these things to know you better, to love you because you loved us first. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.