

# SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 29 OCTOBER 2017



Martin Luther lays his hand on the Scriptures, famously declaring, “Here I stand. I can do no other...”

## Sola Scriptura – The Bible Alone

*Peter Adam*

‘The Bible alone’, ‘Christ alone’, ‘grace alone’, ‘faith alone’, are familiar ways of summarising the message of the European Reformation. Each one provides a useful perspective, and ‘the Bible alone’ provides the source for our understanding of all of them.

### **Alone?**

The word ‘alone’ is significant, because it is intended to exclude other options. At the time of the Reformation, ‘the Bible alone’ excluded the Tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, or the Pope, as equal or superior in authority and effectiveness to the Bible.

It also excluded personal or corporate spiritual experience, and also Reason, as equal or superior to the Bible.

For the Reformers, the Bible was the lens or grid or perspective which both taught God’s truth, and also enabled them to evaluate, discard, or accept the insights, assumptions, and ideas of Tradition, the Pope, Experience, or Reason. In doing this, they relativised the other sources, and claimed their fundamental inadequacy and potential damage in knowing God and his revealed truth.

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Their ‘*sola scriptura*’ position meant that they opposed the mighty Roman Catholic church, plus those who trusted in Reason as the superior source of truth, and the radical elements in the Reformation who elevated experience above the Bible.

At the same time the Reformers’ appeal to ‘the Bible alone’ was similar to the view taken by contemporary Humanists, who wanted to get behind later commentators on ancient secular Greek and Roman texts, and study the original classical texts. Both wanted to return to the original fountains: ‘*ad fontes*’ was a common aim. This led the Reformers to the study of Greek and Hebrew to understand the Old and New Testaments.

This also led to work on the effective translation of the Bible into vernacular languages, because it was recognised that the Bible was God’s gift to his all his people – not just the educated

few who could read the Latin Vulgate translation. This also led to a push for general education so that everyone would be able to read the Bible themselves.

### **Scripture and Human Sources of Wisdom**

It was not that the Reformers dismissed Tradition, Experience, or Reason. They often appealed to early Christian writers of the first five centuries AD to support their interpretations of the meaning of the Bible, and to support their theology. They supported the contemporary Humanist skills in reading and understanding ancient texts and languages. They appealed to the experience of believers which expressed Biblical truth and teaching.

They supported the study of the 'liberal arts', including science, medicine, astronomy, and government.

### Scripture Supreme

But they were wary of the lies of Satan, as also of our human propensity to manufacture idols for ourselves, instead of knowing God as he reveals himself historically and descriptively in the Bible, and personally in his Son.

As John Calvin wrote:

*If true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be, that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teaching, and that it is impossible for any man to obtain even the minutest portion of right and sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture. Hence, the first step in true knowledge is taken, when we reverently embrace the testimony which God has been pleased therein to give of himself. For not only does faith, full and perfect faith, but all correct knowledge of God, originate in obedience. (Institutes 1.6.2)*

In all this they echoed the insights of many faithful saints of previous times.

*For if, as Paul says, 'Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God', and if the man who does not know Scripture does not know the power and wisdom of God, then ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ. (Jerome, Commentary on Isaiah, Book 18, prologue.)*

*Since then we are to discourse of the things of God, let us assume that God has full knowledge of Himself, and bow with humble reverence to His words. For He Whom we can only know through His own utterances is the fitting witness concerning Himself. (Hilary of Poitiers, On the Trinity, 1.18)*

### God's Word for God's People

In the years after the Reformation, the motto *sola scriptura* was often linked to the claim of 'the right of private judgement', which was a product of the Enlightenment focus on individual responsibility, and not a feature of Reformation theology of the 16th century. Individuals do have a responsibility to read and understand the Bible, but one person is not an automatic or infallible judge or interpreter of the Bible, and God's purpose is that the church is 'the pillar and bulwark of the truth' (1 Timothy 3:15).

We often think of *sola scriptura* in terms of authority in matters of faith and practice. The

Reformers also knew that the Bible is the chief instrument of ministry, because it is God's powerful and effective word. So while gospel ministry includes prayer, love, sacraments, patience, authenticity, godliness and holiness, the Bible must be in our ears, in our hearts, in our hands, and on our lips.

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As the English Reformer Thomas Cranmer wrote:

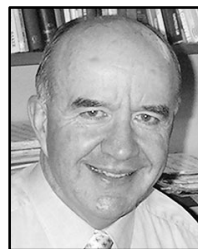
*Unto a Christian man, there can be nothing either more necessary or profitable, than the knowledge of Holy Scripture; forasmuch as in it is contained*

*God's true word, setting forth his glory, and also man's duty... And as drink is pleasant to them that be dry, and meat to them that be hungry; so is the reading, hearing, searching, and studying of Holy Scripture, to them that be desirous to know God, or themselves, and to do his will...*

*Therefore, forsaking the corrupt judgement of fleshly men, with care not for their carcase, let us reverently hear and read Holy Scripture, which is the food of the soul. Let us diligently search for the well of life in the books of the New and Old Testament, and not run to the stinking puddles of men's traditions, devised by men's imagination, for our justification and salvation.*

And again:

*These books, therefore, ought to be much in our hands, in our eyes, in our ears, in our mouths, but most of all in our hearts... The words of Holy Scripture be called words of everlasting life: for they be God's instrument, ordained for the same purpose. They have power to convert through God's promise, and they be effectual through God's assistance; and, being received in a faithful heart, they have ever a heavenly spiritual working in them... (Cranmer, Homily: A Fruitful Exhortation to the Reading and Knowledge of Holy Scripture)*



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Source:

<https://australia.thegospelcoalition.org/article/sola-scriptura-the-bible-alone>

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