

Sola Scriptura

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This phrase “*Sola Scriptura*” is best known from the period of the Reformation. It was a period of both spiritual and social upheaval amongst the people of Europe. For centuries Europe had been in darkness. The Roman Catholic Church ruled the religious lives of most. The Catholic Church claimed to have the power of heaven or hell over each person. All masses were held in Latin, which very few understood, and the common people had no access to the Bible in their own language. Because of this, the churches were known for abuse and the teaching of a salvation that could only be gained by doing the good works and rituals that the church prescribed. The church had no accountability to hold them to the scripture and through the church the people had no access to the light of Christ.

This is the religious world in which Martin Luther lived. He was a Catholic monk, priest and theology professor. He worked tirelessly to obey the demands of the church and the scriptures. He longed to be made right with God, but in all of his effort there never was a sense of being made right with God, only the ongoing sense of sin and guilt.

Luther was fortunate to be able to read both Greek and Latin. This enabled him to read the scriptures for himself. It was in reading scripture that Luther finally came to the understanding of the true gospel. Through scripture God revealed to Luther that it is only through faith that one is reconciled to Christ. This truth took hold of his life and came into direct conflict with Catholic teachings like the selling of “indulgences.” Indulgences were certificates, pieces of paper, which people received after giving money to the church. The paper certificate supposedly insured that people or their relatives would go to heaven. Luther saw this and responded by nailing his “95 theses” to the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517. They were 95 grievances that Luther had against the Catholic church. This act began what has become known as the Protestant Reformation.

Many people came to understand the gospel and basic biblical truths through Luther’s ministry. Luther would also later translate the New Testament into German, the language of the common people. God would use him and others like Zwingli and Calvin to change European society.

While this event was the spark that seemed to begin the Reformation, the truth of the situation is summed up in these words by John MacArthur:

“The true power behind the Reformation did not flow from any one man or group of men. The Reformation was the inevitable and explosive consequence of the Word of God crashing like a massive tidal wave against the thin barricades of man-made tradition and hypocritical religion. As the common people of Europe gained access to the Scriptures in their own language, the Spirit of God used that timeless truth to convict their hearts and convert their souls. The result was utterly transformative, not only for the lives of individual sinners, but for the entire continent on which they resided.”

The reformation was fueled by the Holy Spirit bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the people through the written Word of God. But what is so special about the Word of God? First let's look at the facts.

The Bible was written by 40 different authors over a span of 1,600 years. Some were kings, peasants, fishermen, statesmen, shepherds, scholars, a soldier, a doctor, a prime minister, a tax collector, a rabbi, a cup-bearer, and even a fig-picker. It was written in 3 languages (Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic) and on 3 continents (Asia, Europe, Africa). It was written in the wilderness, in a dungeon, in a palace, in a battlefield, and many other places. Most of the authors did not know the others and had no idea what writings were to come in the future. In spite of all of this, their writings miraculously resulted in one unfolding story, summarized in John 3:16 – “God reconciling man to Himself.”

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve sinned. The penalty for sin is death. But instead of ending their lives, the Lord took the skins of an innocent one, “an animal”, and covered their nakedness, their shame and their guilt. *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord”* (Romans 6:23). The innocent one died, to cover their sin, so Adam and Eve would not have to.

In the Old Testament God appointed that once a year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would sacrifice a lamb for the forgiveness of the people. The penalty for sin is death, but God had a way that would save them from their sin, if they would humble themselves before God and seek forgiveness. An innocent lamb died for the sins of the people so they would not have to.

In John chapter 1 John the Baptist had been preaching that people should turn back to God. The Messiah was coming and the kingdom of God was at hand. Day after day he preached preparing the way for the Savior. And then it happened. One day, as John looked into the crowd he saw Jesus coming towards him and said, *“Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* What was he talking about? The same thing God had been saying since the beginning. The penalty for sin is death, but an innocent One will come who will die in place of all mankind so that we will not have to. From Genesis to Revelation it is the love story of a God for His people. The authors didn't even know how the story would end. They had no idea of other authors that would come later. They just wrote as they felt led by God, many not knowing that their writings would be part of God's Word. Different authors, different languages, different countries, different times in history, yet it all plays its own part in God's plan of salvation for mankind.

We are even amazed by the accuracies of the prophecies and scientific related information, so many years before science would discover these truths. God's Word is the only reliable authority that can

impact every area of our daily lives. It alone shows us how to understand God, ourselves and the world around us.

The Word of God is a unique book, but what role should it play in our lives? Maybe this next story will help explain.

The year was 1903. The “Ford Model A” car had just been produced for the first time. Cars were still rare and captured people’s attentions when they drove by. One man was driving his Ford from one small town to another and had car trouble. He was stuck. No tow trucks, no repair shops, so he opened the hood and began trying to fix it himself. After an hour he had accomplished nothing but breaking a sweat. At that moment another car drove up behind him. A gentleman got out and said, “Hello my friend. It seems like you are having a little trouble. Do you mind if I take a look at it?” Within minutes the car was running perfectly. The first man thanked the second man and as he turned to leave he said, “Excuse me, but I don’t think I got your name.” The man turned and with a smile said, “Henry Ford.”

Why is his name important? Because he was the man who made the car. He knew everything about it. He could speak with authority about all things related to his cars.

In a basic way, that is what the Bible is for us. You might call it the owner’s manual for life.

We as humans were not created to be ultimately in charge of our own lives. All of our views and perspectives have been affected by our life experiences and our selfish, sinful natures. We are not fit to help ourselves, but there is One who has come from outside of this world, whose perspective is perfect. He can see the past, the present, and the future. He was here before time began, and He will still be here when it ends. He created the world. He created us as well. He designed all things. He knows how we work. How we think. How we succeed and how we fail. He knows how we were created to know joy and how we often turn to our own ways and bring suffering upon ourselves. He knows what is best and what is worst. He’s felt our pain and stirred our passions. He watches as we try to live life the way we want, and calls us back to truth, His truth, time and time again. He is good. He wants the best for us and has already proven it by being our Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us (John 10:11).

God desires for us to be involved in the daily process of renewing our mind and taking every thought captive with the Word of God. Scripture is meant to help us understand God and enter into a relationship with Him. As we sit humbly under His Word we come to know Him like never before. As the Word of God and the Spirit of God intersect in our lives we come to know Him and experience Him. The Word of God is essential in the life of faith. That is why “*Sola Scriptura*” was such an essential truth during the reformation and in our lives today.

As one seeks to apply these truths we find the words of James to be very helpful. In James 1, this text is speaking primarily about our response to the Word of God.

Throughout these verses there is an emphasis on “the word.” Spiritual birth comes through the word (v. 18). The word is received and implanted (v. 21). The word acts as a mirror for God’s will (v. 24). The word is the law of freedom and blessing (v. 25). When combined there is a joint message of hear the Word, receive the Word, and do what it says.¹

¹ Utley, R. J. D. (2000). *Jesus’ Half-Brothers Speak: James and Jude* (Vol. Volume 11, p. 22). Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International.

“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you” (James 1:19-21).

In verse 19 James calls the believers to be quick to listen. The idea of listening did not just mean hear with your ear. The idea of hearing was tightly tied to doing. If one truly heard God’s Word, then they would respond through obedience. Being quick to listen means that our hearts are completely ready and willing to hear and obey God’s Word. It would be similar to a mother always listening for a baby’s cry. The mother is quick to listen and to respond.

Warren Wiersbe reminds us of an illustration of this truth in the life of King David (2 Samuel 23:14-17). David was hiding with his soldiers near the city of Bethlehem that was under the control of their enemies, the Philistines. David had grown up in Bethlehem and knew the city well. At one point David in the story thought out loud to himself, *“Oh, that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate”* (2 Samuel 23:15). Three of his mighty men heard David’s desire. On their own initiative they went to Bethlehem and risked their lives just to get water for him. David was their leader and they were ready to do whatever he desired. They were “quick to listen.”² This readiness to obey God’s Word at any moment is that to which James is calling his readers.

James next advises the reader to be “slow to speak.” Too many times we argue with God’s Word, if not out loud, at least in our hearts and minds. Instead of being slow to speak we would rather debate or rebel against God’s Word. A public sense of speaking against God’s Word was also, at times evident in the early church. Their services were informal, and often the listeners would debate with the speaker.³ Those interrupting the speaker often did so to show how much they knew or to somehow justify a life that was contrary to what God’s Word was teaching. James is calling us to be quiet and listen in the presence of God’s Word with a heart that is receptive and surrendered to God’s will.

James warned the reader about responding to God’s Word with anger. When our hearts are more set on sin, selfishness, and our own agenda, the Word of God feels more like our enemy than our friend. In those moments beware of bitterness that may harden your heart. God’s Word shines its light into our dark places and reveals the sinfulness of our hearts. We naturally do not like that, but James is calling us not to harden our hearts against the transforming truths of God’s Word. God is love and out of that love His Word works in our lives for His glory and our good. We are in a spiritual “tug of war” being pulled between the truth of God and the forces of evil. We must hear God’s Word and cling to it. It is our only hope of not being dragged away to temptation and destruction.

James then instructs us to get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent. This term “moral filth” was at times used for dirty clothing that needed to be taken off, but a greater use of this term was when referring to “a wax build-up in the ear.”⁴ Figuratively it gives the idea of being spiritually deaf because our sinfulness has made it impossible to hear the voice of God.

² Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 2, p. 346). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

³ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 2, p. 346). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

⁴ Utley, R. J. D. (2000). *Jesus’ Half-Brothers Speak: James and Jude* (Vol. Volume 11, p. 23). Marshall, TX: Bible Lessons International.

James also presents the human heart like a garden. If not cared for, weeds will grow and overcome the seed which has been planted. Because of this we must be diligent about pulling the weeds of moral filth and evil so that our hearts will be fertile soil to receive the Word of God.

After the weeds of sin have been removed from our lives we then are ready to “humbly accept” the Word of God. This phrase in the original language meant, “a welcoming reception.” Some might see it as laying out the red carpet as you might when a king or president is arriving. It might be even more similar to grandparents who are waiting at the airport to see their daughter and grandchild for the first time. They wait with a great sense of expectancy. When the daughter and grandchild finally appear they run to embrace them and hold them tightly. The celebration begins. This is the way we should wait for and embrace the Word of God. With a teachable spirit we join young Samuel in saying, “*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening*” (1 Samuel 3:10).

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this —not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it— he will be blessed in what he does” (James 1:22-25).

At times we seek to strengthen our faith by listening to sermons, studying our Bible, and attending group Bible studies. While all of this is helpful, if we do not apply what we learn, it is pointless. Spiritual growth comes when our knowledge of God’s Word is accompanied by our doing of God’s Word. Anything less is empty religion. To hear and to not do is like the Dead Sea in Israel that has no living thing in it because the water only enters and never leaves.

James describes anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he saw. A mirror shows us what we are like on the outside. God’s Word shows us what we are like on the inside. In this verse the Greek word for look is the same as a passing glance. It is a casual look that then moves on, not really concerned with what he saw. If one looked in the mirror and saw his shirt mis-buttoned, or his hair out of place, or chocolate on his face, would he not take a moment to make the needed changes? We should not be mistaken on this point. Looking casually at God’s Word and then doing nothing in response is as fruitless as looking at a mirror and doing nothing to correct one’s appearance.

But those who look deeply into God’s Word and then actually do it . . . they will be the people who are truly blessed.

Today, in response to God’s Word, may we be people who are quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger. May we welcome His truth with joy and may we be counted among those who look deeply into the Word of God and do it. These are those whose lives will be transformed by the power of God’s Word. Then we will be ready to live a life alongside the reformers who truly believed “*Sola Scriptura*”, that God’s Word was sufficient for life and holiness.

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.

The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever.

The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous.

They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold;

They are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb.

By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

(Psalm 19:7-11)