

SOLA SCRIPTURA
Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
Autumn Ridge Church
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No. 1: Sola Power

Three important anniversaries are taking place in 2017. This year the Protestant Reformation is 500 years old. Communism is 100 years old. The iPhone was introduced just ten years ago.

Now which of these three events have made the greatest impact? I would argue it was the Protestant Reformation which brought the church back to the Bible. The person God used to do this was Martin Luther.

Luther was an interesting guy. After surviving a lightning bolt blast he promised Saint Anne that he would quit law school and become a monk. He was fake kidnapped by his pals and hid out in a castle.

He grew a beard and pretended to be a knight named "Junker Jörg". He smuggled a nun out of a convent by hiding her in a herring barrel and later married her.

He housed orphans and refugees in his home in Wittenberg. His writing spiked European literacy rates and standardized the German language. And his 95 theses can be viewed as the world's first viral message.

Now Luther was certainly not a perfect man. He has been accused of being anti-Semitic with just cause. He blamed evil stares from Jews for the illness that killed him. He penned a 65,000 word treatise titled "On the Jews and Their Lies."

His anti-Jewish rhetoric is widely believed to have contributed to the development of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. Yet God used this very flawed, sinful individual who was obsessed with his bowels to point the church back to biblical truth.

Let's remind ourselves of the story that started the Reformation. 500 years ago on the 31st of October 1517, Martin Luther, who was an Augustinian monk and a professor of theology, nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany.

That was a fairly innocent gesture. In those days church doors acted as notice boards for the local community. If you lost your dog, you announced it on the door. If you were having a potluck, you put it up on the door. If you wanted to promote a church event, you attached it to the door.

As it happened, no one showed up to debate Luther's theses, but that didn't matter because the printing press had recently been invented. So Luther's 95 theses were

printed up and within weeks they spread out across Europe and were stimulating debate in many countries.

To understand why Luther nailed up these 95 suggestions we need to meet a few more characters. One of them is Albert of Brandenburg. Albert wasn't old enough to be a Bishop yet he was already Bishop over two cities which was against church law. On top of that he wanted to be Archbishop of Mainz. To hold three offices was also against church law which meant that Albert needed a papal dispensation.

So now Pope Leo X enters our story. Leo was from the Medici family of Florence. The Medici were a prominent banking clan and patrons of the arts. It was Leo who brought Michelangelo in to paint the Sistine Chapel ceiling in the Vatican.

Albert worked with Leo about getting a dispensation and like good business men they struck a deal. For 10,000 ducats Albert could have his three bishoprics. But Albert had a problem. His money was largely in land and not in cash so he needed to raise the funds.

So now another character enters our story. It is the enterprising Friar Johann Tetzel. Tetzel sold indulgences on Albert's behalf and some of the money went to help Albert pay the cost of becoming Archbishop of Mainz. Indulgences were supplied by the Pope. They provided for past sins to be forgiven and for future sins to be wiped out as well.

These indulgences were a great deal as they also allowed the buyer to get their relatives out of Purgatory, and who wouldn't want to spend a few hundred dollars to bail out their mother-in-law from that rather disagreeable place. So Tetzel began selling these indulgences and he had an advertising jingle to promote his business. *"As soon as the money in the cash box rings, the soul flies out of Purgatory and sings."* Rather catchy, isn't it?

Well this fundraising scheme deeply troubled Luther. He recognized it was contrary to church teaching. People were essentially buying their salvation. There was now no faith or change of life required in becoming a Christian. Once you had an indulgence you could live as you liked. It was like a "get out of jail free" card.

So Luther watched in despair as the people under his care went to buy Tetzel's indulgences. So he did what any scholar would do. He went into his study and penned his 95 theses to invite public debate about whether indulgences were good and godly. Then he posted them on the church door on October 31st.

His first thesis says "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent', he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance". Now Luther starts with repentance for an important reason. In 1516 the Greek New Testament was published by a scholar called Erasmus.

When Luther read this Greek New Testament he realized that the Latin Bible, called the Vulgate, which had been the official text of the church for centuries, was wrong.

For the Vulgate translated the Greek word "repent" as "do penance."
But in fact what the Bible said was "repent," which means to turn around and live differently.

So the main character in the Reformation is not Luther. It is the word of God. Luther discovered that for years the true teaching of scripture had been hidden by centuries of tradition. So that's what the Reformation is about. It is about pulling back the covers and releasing the power of the word of God and the beauty and truth of the gospel.

Now the Reformation may have begun in 1517 but it took decades to work itself out. It has left a legacy for us as Christians today. This legacy is summarized in what are called the five Reformation Solas.

Now in the 16th century scholars spoke in Latin. This way they could all communicate whether they came from Italy, Germany or England. Luther's 95 theses were written in Latin. The Latin word "sola" means "only" or "alone." We get our word "solitary" from it.

These five solas summarize what the Reformation accomplished. Here they are.

Sola Scriptura – Only the Bible

Sola Gratia – Only Grace

Sola Fide – Only Faith

Sola Christos – Only Christ

Sola Deo Gloria – To God Alone be the Glory

That is sola power for you. These five solas declare five great gospel truths. Our final authority is **scripture alone**, not amended or added to by tradition, opinion or church councils.

We are justified by **grace alone** through God's kind, gracious and free initiative. God gives us what we don't deserve and could never earn which is forgiveness, transformation into Christ's likeness, and adoption into his family.

Our justification before God is by **faith alone**. God declares us righteous in his eyes not because he sees righteousness in us but because we fully rest and trust in the work of Christ on the cross to pay for our sins and because we receive his perfect righteousness as our gift.

The basis of our forgiveness before God is **Christ alone**, not saints, relics, or any good works on our part. In his substitutionary sacrifice on the cross, Jesus completely bore God's righteous wrath against us. His payment was full, final and effective.

All of this is accomplished for **God's glory alone**. For all eternity praises will resound to the God whose wisdom, power and love ordained that he will have a people from every tribe, language and nation to share in his triune joy forever.

Over the next five weeks we are going to explore these five solas. As we do so we are joining with Christians all over the world in celebrating the birthday of the Reformation.

Right now Luther is red hot. Playmobil, the German toy company, got unexpected headlines last year when it released a limited edition Martin Luther figurine. Outside of how smiley it cast the cantankerous theologian, the toy itself wasn't especially newsworthy.

But what got everyone's attention was how quickly it flew off the shelves. Overnight little Luther became the fastest selling item in the company's 40 year history.

In our own country there are conferences on these five solas. Books are being written about them and scholarly papers are being given. Small groups are studying them and new movies are being made about Luther.

All this reminds us that our faith is rooted in history. That history has given us the five solas.

We start today with **SOLA SCRIPTURA – Only the Bible.**

By this Luther meant that the Bible should have priority in our understanding of how to live as Christians. In Luther's day it was often the traditions or customs of the church that prevailed over scripture.

In 1521 Martin Luther appeared before the Diet of Worms to defend himself against the charge of heresy due to the ideas expressed in his 95 theses. He was asked to revoke the statements made in his writing.

He gave this famous answer, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of scripture or by clear reason, I am bound by the scriptures I have cited, for my conscience is captive to the word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since to act against one's conscience is neither safe nor right. Here I stand, I can do no other, God help me. Amen." In other words Luther is asking "How do I know indulgences are wrong?" The answer is "The Bible tells me." We might wonder if there are indulgences still today. The answer is there are. Any presentation of the gospel that omits the cost of discipleship and is light on repentance is like an indulgence. It may look like an attractive deal but it cannot save.

In the following year Luther wrote a book called *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* in which he stated "What is asserted without the scriptures or proven revelation may be held as an opinion but need not be believed." Again, Luther is emphasizing the primacy of scripture.

This doesn't mean Luther rejected tradition outright. He respected the writings of the early Church Fathers, especially those of Augustine, and he considered the universal statements of faith, such as the Nicene Creed, binding on the church of his day.

But he said that all creeds and the sayings of the Church Fathers and the decisions of church councils must be judged by the "sure rule of God's word."

So for Luther the church does not take priority over the Bible. Instead the church is the creation of the Bible. For the church is born in the womb of scripture. Luther felt so strongly about this he translated the Bible into German in just 10 months because he wanted ordinary people, like the farm boy and the milkmaid, to feel the words of scripture in their heart.

Luther held a high view of the inspiration of the Bible. He called it "the Holy Spirit book." He said:

**"The Bible is alive. It speaks to me.
The Bible has feet. It runs after me.
The Bible has hands. It lays hold on me."**

Luther insisted that scripture should interpret scripture and that its truth is unchanging. That is a helpful reminder for us because we live in days when values are changing rapidly. Some want to fit the new morality into the teaching of the Bible by ignoring parts of the Bible and being selective in the verses they quote to justify their new position. But Luther calls us to take our stand on the totality of the word of God, however unpopular that may be.

So why do we need only the scriptures? First, because **SCRIPTURE IS PERFECT.** Psalm 19 declares: **"The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul." (Psalm 19:7)** The Bible is perfect because it was authored by God and God is perfect.

That's why we should study the Bible. It won't lead us astray. The Bible is like a GPS. It provides direction for life and shows us the way to heaven. Proverbs says **"Every word of God is flawless." (Proverbs 30:5)**

That's why we say the Bible is infallible and inerrant. It doesn't just contain the word of God. It is not that as we read it some parts become the word of God to us. Rather the Bible is the word of God from start to finish.

In his commentary on Romans written in 1522 Luther states, "One thing, and one alone, is necessary for life, justification, and Christian liberty. That is the most holy word of God, the gospel of Christ... The soul can do without everything except the word of God. But having the word, it is rich and wants for nothing, since that is the word of life, of truth, of light, of peace, of justification, of salvation, of joy, of liberty, of wisdom, of virtue, of grace, of glory, and of every good thing."

Second, we stand on Sola Scriptura because **SCRIPTURE IS PROFITABLE.** Paul tells Timothy **"The Holy Scriptures ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 3:15)**

What is more important than salvation? Nothing. Salvation is the greatest reality in the universe and the Bible reveals that salvation.

This verse shows us it is not enough just to believe the Bible. After all, Satan believes the Bible. Rather, we must believe in the one the Bible reveals. We must believe in Jesus Christ who alone can save us. He is the only hope for the sinner. He is the only hope for you and me.

When Walter Scott, the great Scottish novelist, was dying he said to his secretary "Bring me the book." His secretary looked at the thousands of books lining the shelves of the library and asked "Mr. Scott, which book?" Scott replied, "The book. The Bible. The only book for a dying man."

Walter Scott was the creator of the historical novel and the author of books like *Ivanhoe*, but Scott knew that the Bible was the only book for a dying man. And we might add it is the only book for a living man because it is our word for life as well as our hope in death.

Third, we stand on Sola Scriptura because **SCRIPTURE IS POWERFUL**. Luther said, "A simple layman armed with scripture is greater than the mightiest Pope without it." At the end of his life Luther was asked about his role in the Reformation. He gave an astonishing answer saying, "I did nothing. The word did everything."

There is a wonderful statement about the power of scripture in First Thessalonians where Paul writes: **"Our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction."**
(1 Thessalonians 1:5)

At Autumn Ridge we soak in scripture because we wish to become scripture-shaped and therefore Christ-shaped. In response to the scripture's compelling power we want to become living commentaries on scripture. We long to exhibit the reality of the risen Christ in our life.

No wonder John Wesley said "I want to know one thing, the way to heaven. God himself has consented to teach us the way. He has written it down in a book. O give me that book. At any price give me the book of God."

Then we declare Sola Scriptura with Luther because **SCRIPTURE POINTS US TO JESUS**.

This is its supreme value. The Bible is not just an ancient document describing events that took place a long time ago. Rather its purpose is to reveal the Lord Jesus. Indeed without the scriptures we would know very little about the Son of God.

It is interesting to watch what Paul does in his missionary travels. We see his practice in the city of Thessalonica where he met with the local people and

"He reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead." (Acts 17:2-3)

Now the New Testament hadn't been written at this time so the scriptures Paul is talking about are the Hebrew Bible. Paul shows the Thessalonians from the Psalms, the prophecies of Isaiah and the book of Deuteronomy that scripture predicted that Jesus would suffer, die and then rise from the dead.

You see, the heart of the Christian gospel is the death and resurrection of Jesus. So Paul points the people of Thessalonica to Christ. That is what we must do for the people of Rochester.

In summary, we take our stand on Sola Scriptura because **SCRIPTURE PROVIDES THE WAY OF SALVATION.**

That's why God has given it to us. If you want to know how to be saved, sit down and read the New Testament. You will come across stories like Paul's visit to Philippi where he and Silas are thrown in prison. After an earthquake knocks the jail down the Philippian jailer asked the missionaries **"What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30)**

That's the most important question any of us can ask in life. It is even more important that "Will you marry me?", "What college shall I attend?", "What job shall I do?" or "When shall I retire?" For it deals with our salvation in this life and our satisfaction in the next.

This is how Paul and Silas answered the jailer's question. **"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." (Acts 16:31)**

Notice how simple salvation is. It means believing in Jesus. There are a lot of things that can get in the way of a person coming to faith, but Paul gets to the heart of the matter. To be saved we must believe in Jesus. That's it.

But what are we to believe about Jesus? We believe what the Bible teaches about Jesus. So we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that he was born of a virgin, that he died on the cross, that he rose on the third day, that he ascended into heaven from where he sends his Spirit, that he is coming again to establish his eternal kingdom. To believe in Jesus is to understand his offer of salvation and his warnings of judgment.

All those things we learn about in the Bible. For the Bible shows us the way of salvation. We don't have to agonize about whether we are going to heaven or hell as people did in Luther's day. We simply ask "Am I believing in Jesus Christ as my Savior?"

The Protestant Reformation began 500 years ago on the Wittenberg Door. And I am glad to tell you we have our own copy of the Wittenberg Door out in the Main Lobby.

I am immensely grateful to Max Gernand for creating this. Max has done a magnificent job. Beside the door you will find Martin Luther and a six-foot high copy of the 95 Theses.

Now on the bottom of your message outline you will find a tear-off sheet entitled **"Nailing my thesis."** This will allow you to join in the Reformation celebration. What would you want to tell the world about the Christian faith?

Write it out and go over to the Wittenberg Door, grab a hammer and a nail, and put it up. Perhaps you have an idea for reforming the church. Let us know what it is.

Maybe you want to say "I think we need to pray more and I'd like to lead the effort" or "Let's do more outreach in Rochester and I'll be part of it."

Who knows? This could lead to a new reformation. Maybe you want to tell the world your favorite Bible verse or cry out to God to send revival. Whatever it is, write it down and nail it up.

If you don't have a sermon outline it doesn't matter. There are pieces of paper over by the Wittenberg Door. As we do this we are declaring with Luther and the other reformers "Sola Scriptura". Only the Bible.

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