

# The Bible Alone

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On October 31, 1517, something happened that changed the world. Do you know what it was? Well, even the man who did it didn't know the effect it would have. On October 31, 1517, a Roman Catholic Augustinian monk and priest by the name of Martin Luther nailed a notice on the door at Wittenberg Castle church in Germany. This was the common way of scheduling a debate in those days. The notice listed the ninety-five points or 95 Theses Luther wanted to discuss with other scholars. Luther especially wrote his 95 Theses in response to indulgences being sold by a Dominican monk named Johann Tetzel. Indulgences were certificates that one could buy from the church that promised forgiveness of sins and assurance of salvation. The Catholic church had long sold indulgences, but Tetzel's claims for them went beyond what the pope had authorized.

Luther's 95 Theses were a protest of the sale of indulgences, and he thought the pope would back him up. But the pope supported the sale of indulgences because he needed the money to fund the rebuilding of St. Peter's church in Rome. Instead of supporting Luther, the pope ordered him to be silent. Luther refused. The pope's opposition caused Luther to dig in more firmly and question even more church teaching.

Among the many abuses and false teachings Luther pointed out, two were central. The first one had to do with Scripture, tradition, and the authority of the pope. Luther said that the Bible was authoritative in determining doctrine, not church tradition and not the pope.

The second central issue had to do with the means of salvation. The Catholic Church taught that salvation is obtained by a combination of Christ's sacrifice and various good works that we do. Luther said that we are saved by the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone through faith in Christ alone as our Savior. Luther particularly pointed to Romans 1:17: "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written. The just shall live by faith." Luther contended that Paul meant faith alone, without any works added. He backed this up with such Scriptures as Galatians 2:16, "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified," and Galatians 3:11, "But that no man is

justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith.”

In June 1520, the pope issued a letter, or bull, that pointed out what he said were 41 errors in Luther’s teachings. He told Luther to recant, that is, withdraw what he had said, or be excommunicated. Luther not only refused, but he publicly burned the papal bull.

The pope wanted to try Luther in Rome, but Duke Frederick of Saxony, the ruler of the area of Germany in which Luther lived, refused to extradite him. He said Luther must be tried in Germany. So Luther appeared before an assembly of German noblemen and the emperor, Charles V in the city of Worms. This type of assembly was called a diet, so this was called the Diet of Worms.

Luther was given the chance to recant by withdrawing his writings. In his response Luther said, “Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

Frederick of Saxony knew that, by not recanting, Luther had in effect, signed his own death warrant. So he secretly had Luther abducted and taken to the Wartburg Castle. There, Luther translated the New Testament into German.

I don’t have time for much more detail, but I want to point out that the movement Luther started became known as the Reformation, and the German princes who followed Luther’s teachings became known as Protestants. But the movement Luther started grew so fast that it often got out of his control. And even when he tried to control it, he didn’t always make what we, in hindsight, would say was the wisest decision. For example, Luther at first seemed to support a revolt of the peasants against the princes. But then he reversed himself and told the princes to squash the rebellion.

In fact, Martin Luther was, and still is, a very controversial figure. This view might be expected from Roman Catholics. But even many Protestants and Baptists fault him for some of his doctrine and practice, his interference in politics, and the harsh stand he took in his later years toward Jews.

True, his doctrine was not perfect. But five rallying cries came out of the Reformation. In English, they are Scripture Alone, Faith Alone, Grace Alone, Christ Alone, and To God Alone Be the Glory.

### ***Sola Scriptura* — Scripture Alone**

For the rest of this program, I want to talk about the first two of these—faith alone and Scripture alone as they relate to each other. The Bible alone means that the Bible alone is the ultimate authority in all matters concerning salvation, faith, obedience, how to worship and serve God, all other Christian duties, and anything else that the Bible addresses. In fact, the Bible is the final authority in all disputes concerning the interpretation of Scripture. The Bible interprets itself.

Now, I want to ask. Do you believe the Bible? I mean, do you believe the entire Bible to be the Word of God? Do you believe that every word of it comes from God? Couldn't it be that the Bible is just a collection of ancient writings? Or, even if God inspired the original writings, how can we be sure that the Bible we have today hasn't become corrupted through the years?

Over the centuries, there have been many arguments back and forth between supporters of the Bible, and those who say that it is merely a book of ancient writings marred by errors and inaccuracies. Oftentimes, both supporters and detractors of the Bible try to base their arguments on science or archaeology.

But should we try to support the Bible with science or archaeology? No, we should not. First, if we try to support the Bible with science or archaeology, we are making science or archaeology more authoritative than the Bible. For example, if I say that I believe the Bible because nothing in it contradicts the findings of archaeology, then I am suggesting that if the Bible did not agree with archaeology, I would not believe the Bible. Second, who can really prove that science and archaeology are right? Why should I believe them more than I believe the Bible? There is no reason to do so.

What, then, should be my basis for believing the Bible? Faith. Every system of thought is ultimately based on a kind of faith, but Christianity's faith is a miraculous gift from God.

Every system of thought is founded on presuppositions, which are assumptions that are not provable. Science, for example, is founded on the presupposition that the scientific method can lead to theories

that actually describe reality. The presupposition of archaeology is that people will always leave behind evidence of their presence and that this material evidence can be used to draw conclusions that tell us the way the culture really was. Evolution is based on the presupposition of evolution. That is, all of the data evolutionists use can be explained other ways, but evolutionists simply choose to explain it by evolution. The presupposition of humanism is that man has a free will. By the way, this is why the sovereignty of God and man's inability should be stressed in the church. Some people seem to think it is useless to teach such things. But when Christians are left to think that they have free will, they drift into humanism, which says that man is sovereign. Arminianism and humanism are brothers.

So we see that ultimately all systems of thought are believed for no better reason than that they are believed. The scientist, the evolutionist, the humanist believe because they have faith in the unprovable presupposition that underlies the system of thought. Ultimately, something is believed because we want to believe it. It is what causes us to want to believe it that makes the difference.

Just like all other systems of thought, Christianity has a presupposition that is believed by faith. At first, you might think the presupposition is the Gospel. But it is something more basic that underlies the Gospel. After all, the Gospel is in the Bible. There would be no reason to believe the Gospel if we didn't believe the Bible. Christians believe the Bible because they believe some form of this presupposition: The Bible alone and the Bible in its entirety is the infallible and inerrant, inspired Word of God. Why do they believe this? Because of faith. But, unlike other systems of thought, the faith that causes Christians to believe is a miraculous gift from God. God causes us to believe the Bible.

When the Bible disagrees with science, or archaeology, or with any other information, it is what disagrees with the Bible that must be disbelieved and discarded. When Moses came across an Egyptian and an Israelite fighting, he didn't hesitate and wonder about what to do. He hit and killed the Egyptian. That's the way we must treat any information that contradicts the Bible. When it conflicts with the Bible, we should not hesitate to dispose of it. This means that the Bible is the standard of truth—of all truth.

The idea that knowledge and truth can be divided into separate realms of "secular" and "religious" is false. The Bible's supreme authority extends to all that it contains. Therefore, it is the final authority in all areas where it has spoken, and the Bible speaks in many areas,

including science and history. Whatever contradicts the truth of the Bible is not true. In fact, it is a lie.

The Bible clearly tells us where lies come from. In John 8:44, Jesus says that Satan "is a liar, and the father of lies." So, if, for example, someone says that, contrary to the biblical account of Creation, life slowly evolved on the earth, you can know that this is a lie. When someone says that there was no worldwide flood in Noah's time, or that God didn't really work a miracle when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, or that the account of Jonah and the great fish is a myth, you can know that these are also lies, and you can know that Satan is behind the lies.

The world does not believe the Bible because it does not have the gift of faith. This is a miracle that God gives only to His elect.

But what do we do when the Bible seems to contradict itself? We find out what is causing this supposed contradiction and straighten it out. Earlier, I mentioned how Moses handled a conflict between an Egyptian and an Israelite. But he later saw a fight between two Israelites. What did he do then? Did he kill one or both of them? No, he tried to reconcile them. There has never yet been a case where a supposed contradiction between two passages in the Bible could not be reconciled.

But how do we know that the account of the Bible we have today is accurate? How do we know that the Bible has not become corrupt over the years? After all, isn't it reasonable to expect that, as the Bible was copied from one manuscript to another, time after time, over thousands of years, that more and more mistakes would be introduced? Yes, this would be a reasonable thing to believe if humans alone were involved. But it is not what happened because God was also involved. God did not keep His hands off the Bible once the original autographs were written. He also made sure the Bible was preserved. Why? Because God did not just give the Scriptures to the ancient Israelites. He did not just give the Bible to the first-century church. God intended the Bible for His people in every age, including right now. God inspired the Bible to be written and preserved for you and for me.

### **Confessions and Creeds**

Now, I want to mention another thing about the Bible and the way the church should treat the Bible. The Bible is what we are to believe and

is our ultimate statement of faith. But that doesn't mean that we can't have a statement of faith or confession or creed to summarize what we believe about the Bible. We just have to be careful how we use these creeds and confessions. It seems that the human tendency is to make such human writings as authoritative as the Word of God. Maybe it's laziness—we figure that the people who wrote the confession did all of the work already, and they must have known what they were talking about, so why should we go through all of the work again to prove it from the Bible? But that's all wrong. When I ask someone why he believes something, I expect him to prove it from the Bible, not just point me to article ten of his confession.

I want to ask you a question. If you belong to a church that follows a confession, or creed, or canon, or catechism, have you proved it from the Bible? I don't mean just going through the proof texts and saying, yep, those verses are in the Bible. I mean really proving each subject with your own study of the Bible. If you do this, you might be surprised to find that some things aren't as biblically solid as you thought. It is very dangerous to assume that the people who wrote these statements knew the Bible so perfectly that they were always right. And, if you study the history behind some of the confessions, you might find that politics sometimes had as much to do with the confession as the Bible.

Don't fall into the thinking that those who wrote the confession were experts and you're not. Don't fall into the thinking that the church must know best and you'll just follow along. That is falling right back into two Roman Catholic ideas: 1) That tradition carries as much weight as the Bible, and 2) That the church is the final authority in doctrine and practice. I have even heard one Reformed pastor say in a sermon that the *Three Forms of Unity* of the Reformed Churches are the Word of God. That's terrible! That's taking a giant step back to Rome, and it is giving up on one of the major tenets of the Reformation—*Sola Scriptura*, the Bible alone.

Have we forgotten that Luther said he needed to be convicted by Scripture, and that he would not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other? That holds true for creeds and confessions and catechisms, too. And, I will add, that they have not only contradicted each other, but they have contradicted the Bible.

## **What the Bible Claims for Itself**

One of the reasons we know we are to follow the Bible alone is that the Bible never contradicts itself. As I said earlier, there has never yet been a case where a supposed contradiction between two passages in the Bible could not be reconciled. And there are other ways that the Bible asserts Scripture alone. It was Scripture that Jesus used in contending with His foes. And, in Mark 7 and verses 9 and 13, Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, "Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition... Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition, which ye have delivered: and many such like things do ye." Jesus here calls the Scriptures, the Word of God. In John 17:17, Jesus prays to the Father, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." Now, if God's Word is truth and God's Word is the Bible, then the Bible is truth. Jesus again calls the Scriptures the Word of God in John 10:35: "If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the Scripture cannot be broken." Notice that Jesus says the Scriptures cannot be broken, meaning that whatever the Scriptures say cannot be contradicted.

In 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Paul says, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly [thoroughly] furnished unto all good works." It is important to see that Paul does not say that in order to be perfect, or complete, in our knowledge as people of God, and thoroughly equipped for good works, that we must have Scripture and tradition or Scripture and creeds. If Scripture can make us perfect and thoroughly furnish us, what more do we need? Nothing. The implication is clear. Here is *Sola Scriptura*. Scripture, all Scripture, and Scripture alone is "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

## **Right and Wrong Uses of Creeds and Confessions**

So, is it wrong for a church to have a statement or creed or confession or catechism? No, when they are used properly. Unfortunately, human nature being sinful and idolatrous, there is a great danger of their being used improperly.

These statements should merely summarize what we believe about the Bible. After all, many churches claim to believe the Bible. A statement

of beliefs can help to distinguish them so we know where they stand on certain issues. Peter tells us to “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15). So, if someone walks up to us and asks us what we believe, we are to give an answer. Any answer we give—even if we only say we believe the Bible alone—is a statement of our beliefs. So, we can also write a statement of our beliefs.

Statements and confessions can be used to set the record straight when a church is being falsely accused of something. When the Baptists in England were being unjustly accused, seven congregations in London put together the *First London Baptist Confession of Faith*. As they said in the introduction, they published this, “for the vindication of the truth and information of the ignorant; likewise for the taking off those aspersions which are frequently, both in pulpit and print, unjustly cast upon them.” By making a statement and backing it up with Scripture, statements of faith and confessions should prove the Bible as the source of our beliefs.

But problems arise when these works of men are used to bind people’s consciences or as the authority upon which to base a charge of false teaching or wrong practice against someone. Only the Bible can be that authority. Through the centuries, those who tried to remain faithful to Scripture according to their consciences were often banished, scourged, drowned, burned at the stake, or tortured on the rack by those who were blindly following the traditions, creeds, and confessions of a church. Confessions must never have sway over a believer’s conscience. First Peter 2:9 calls all believers a “royal priesthood.” The description does not belong only to those who formulate confessions. We must respect the priesthood of all believers, including their right to interpret Scripture as they are guided by the Holy Spirit, not as they are dictated to by a confession.

I think one of the greatest tragedies of history, and one that has brought great shame on the name of Christianity, is the almost incessant persecution of one group bearing the name Christian by another group bearing the name Christian that occurred up until about the 19th century. The persecutions by the Roman Catholic Church are one thing. But it is almost beyond belief how Protestant churches that professed Scripture alone, the priesthood of believers, and the inviolability of the conscience would, when they came into political power, persecute others who also called themselves Christians, but who believed a little differently. Taking up the sword in one hand and a confession in the other, Reformed would go against Lutheran, Lutheran



against Reformed, Anglicans against Presbyterians, Presbyterians against Anglicans, one kind of Presbyterian against another kind of Presbyterian, Puritans against Anglicans and Presbyterians, and everybody against Baptists.

It is generally held among family counselors that someone raised by abusive parents has a high risk of also becoming an abusive parent. I think this may help to explain what happened in those first centuries of Protestantism. The Roman Catholic Church was an abusive mother who followed tradition, believed it was the final authority, and believed in the union of church and state. It had a centuries-long history of persecuting dissenters, often using the sword of the state. Is it any wonder that the churches that sprang from her at first followed the same pattern of abuse?

Confessions must not be taken as completely accurate, comprehensive, having authority above or equal to Scripture, or final. Too often, they are regarded as if they are perfect, set in stone, and unchangeable. At that point, they replace the Word of God as the authority and become a sort of oppressive false god or idol. They ought to be seen as helps and explanations, not authorities. After all, Paul, when he knew the time of his arrest and eventual execution was near, did not commend the Ephesians to creeds, confessions, canons, and catechisms. He wrote, "And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace" (Acts 20:32). That's the Bible, *Sola Scriptura*.