

Sola Scriptura: The Bible's Unique Authority, Sufficiency, and Clarity

“So my theses against Tetzel’s articles, which you can now see in print, were published. They went throughout the whole of Germany in a fortnight, for the whole world complained about indulgences, and particularly about Tetzel’s articles . . . This is the first, real, fundamental beginning of the Lutheran rumpus, which the bishop of Mainz, not Duke Frederick, began with that fleecer and pickpocket, Tetzel” (Martin Luther).

Andreas Carlstadt (1486-1541), the Doctor of Theology who awarded the same degree to Martin Luther (1483-1546) in 1512, proclaimed that when he came to the young University of Wittenberg to assume their primary theological chair, he was scripturally illiterate, “At this time, I had not yet read the Holy Scriptures.”¹ This was true in spite of the fact that he had earned his theology degree by studying at several universities across Europe including at Rome.

In England, William Tyndale (1494-1536) lamented that one could not study theology until after both the Bachelor and Masters courses were complete. Not “until he had been brainwashed by years of statutory immersion in scholasticism” could he be trusted to study the Scriptures.² Writing in 1530, Tyndale noted that **“the universities . . . have ordained that no man shall look on the scripture, until he be [nursed] in heathen learning eight or nine years, and armed with false principles; with which he is clean shut out of the understanding of scripture.”**³ Tyndale’s passion to translate the Scriptures into English rose from a desire to obliterate this Scriptural ignorance and illiteracy. And Tyndale gave his life to this end. John Foxe, in his massive eight-volume work, *Acts and Monuments of these Latter and Perillous Days, Touching Matters of the Church*, recounts one story catalytic to Tyndale’s vision.

Master Tyndall [sic] happened to be in the company of a learned man, and in communing and disputing with him drove him to that issue that the learned man said, we were better be without God’s law than the pope’s: Maister [sic] Tyndall hearing that, answered him, ‘I defy the Pope and all his laws, and said, if God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough, shall know more of the scripture than thou dost.’

“I had perceived that it is impossible to stablish the lay people in truth except the Scriptures were plainly laid before their eyes in the mother tongue that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text.”⁴

¹ Jean Henri Merle D’Aubigne, *The Triumph of Truth*, ed. Mark Sidwell, 42.

² David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography*, 37.

³ William Tyndale, *The Practice of Prelates*.

(<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433070779677;view=1up;seq=307>)

⁴ William Tyndale, *Preface to the Pentateuch*.

In England prior to the Reformation, J. C. Ryle (1816-1900) testifies that “one leading feature of English religion was *dense ignorance*. There was among all classes a conspicuous absence of all knowledge of true Christianity. **A gross darkness overspread the land, a darkness that might be felt. Not one in a hundred could have told you as much about the Gospel of Christ as we could now learn from any intelligent Sunday school child. . . . The people had neither schools nor Bibles. Wyckliffe’s New Testament, the only translation extant till Henry the Eighth’s Bible was printed, cost [an exorbitant amount]. The prayers of the Church were in Latin, and of course the people could not understand them. Preaching there was scarcely any. Quarterly sermons indeed were prescribed to the clergy, but not insisted on.** Latimer [1487-1555] says that while Mass was never to be left unsaid for a single Sunday, **sermons might be omitted for twenty Sundays, and nobody was blamed. After all, when there were sermons, they were utterly unprofitable: and latterly, to be a preacher was to be suspected of being a heretic. . . . Out of 311 clergy of [John Hooper’s (1495-1555)] diocese, 168 were unable to repeat the Ten Commandments; 31 of the 168 could not state in what part of Scripture they were to be found; 40 could not tell where the Lord’s prayer was written; and 31 of the 40 were ignorant who was the author of the Lord’s prayer. . . . If such were the pastors, what must the people have been! If this was the degree of knowledge among the parsons, what must it have been among the people!”⁵**

No less than Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466-1536) subtitled his *Paraclesis*, the preface to the Greek and Latin New Testaments he published on March 1, 1516, “an exhortation to the diligent study of Scripture.” In it, he declared his persuasion:

“Indeed, I disagree very much with those who are unwilling that Holy Scripture, translated into the vulgar tongue, be read by the uneducated, as if Christ taught such intricate doctrines that they could scarcely be understood by very few theologians, or as if the strength of the Christian religion consisted in men’s ignorance of it. The mysteries of kings, perhaps, are better concealed, but Christ wishes His mysteries published as openly as possible. I would that even the lowliest of women read the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. And I would that they were translated into all languages so that they could be read and understood Would that, as a result, the farmer sing some portion of them at the plow, the weaver hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveler lighten the weariness of the journey with stories of this kind! Let the conversations of every Christian be drawn from this source.”⁶

⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Light from Old Times*, “John Hooper: Bishop and Martyr,” 70-71.

⁶ John C. Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus*, 101.

From this prevailing dearth and darkness, emerged a recovery of what we call *sola Scriptura*.

I. What is *Sola Scriptura*?

The statements above illustrate how displaced the Scripture had become. The reformers, recognizing their own need to submit themselves to the authority of Scripture and to confine themselves to that authority, then sought to teach others to give to the Scripture its rightful place – as the sole, exclusive, authority for **all** of faith and practice.

The word *sola* is a Latin adjective meaning “only,” “alone,” or “nothing else than.” In the words of theologian R. C. Sproul, “It is no exaggeration to say that the eye of the Reformation tornado was this one little word.”⁷

- The five *solae* are a retrospective summary. The reformers did not use these terms in the all-encompassing way that we use them, but they did use the terms *sola scriptura*,⁸ *sola fide*, and *sola gratia* as part of their articulation of the truths they aspired to preach. The only two of the *solae* to appear in writing together during the Reformation era are *sola gratia* and *sola fide* at the hand of Melancthon in 1554.⁹
- The subjects of the five tenets were addressed throughout the writings of reformers in that era but not as a comprehensive list. The first such list occurred in 1916, in an article produced by Theodore Engelder, where he mentioned the three fundamentals of the Protestant Reformation were *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Sola Fide*.” The other two were added later.¹⁰

This one little word, when connected with Scripture, crowds out such seemingly time-tested authorities as church councils, centuries of tradition, church hierarchy – particularly the papacy, and even the authority of teaching based on inaccurate translations of Scripture.

This one little word, when connected with Scripture, allowed God to speak directly to man, silencing the other voices in the room insisting on the right to be heard.

Sola Scriptura. Scripture Alone. Alone. Nothing else than. The word captures a recognition of Scripture’s uniqueness. It truly is different than any other authority, no matter how pompously dressed, no matter how many sources cited, no matter how much

⁷ See R. C. Sproul, “Committed to Faith Alone” (69-92) in *What is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics*.

⁸ Melancthon wrote, *sola gratia justificamus et sola fide justificamur* (“only by grace do we justify and only by faith are we justified”). For an example of the use of one of the *solae* in isolation, see John Calvin’s *Institutes*, 3:17, 8, “Twofold value of work before God,” says “Here I beseech the godly, if they know the true rule of righteousness is to be sought from Scripture alone . . .”

⁹ More help tracking the historical use of these terms among the reformers is available here: <http://effectualgrace.com/2017/04/24/the-when-of-the-five-solae/>

¹⁰ Theodore Engelder, “The Three Principles of the Reformation: Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides” in W. H. T. Dau, *Four Hundred Years, Commemorative Essays on the Reformation*, 97-109 (<https://archive.org/details/fourhundredyears00dauw>). Wikipedia actually has a helpful historiographic chronology of the development of the Five Solae into the primary talking points for the Protestant Reformation.

political power he may have wielded. It is unique in its authority, sufficiency, and clarity. And we could add to that many other things, unique in its origin, unity, endurance, etc . . .

Philip Schaff calls *sola Scriptura* the objective principle of the Reformation.¹¹ In another place, he calls it the “formal principle.”¹² He goes on to explain:

“The objective principle of Protestantism maintains that the Bible, as the inspired record of revelation, is the only infallible rule of faith and practice, in opposition to the Roman Catholic coordination of Scripture and ecclesiastical *tradition*, as the joint rules of faith.”

“. . . *the word of God*, as it has been handed down to us in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, *is the pure and proper source as well as the only certain measure of all saving truth.*”¹³

Even more specifically, *sola Scriptura* contends that “all things necessary for salvation and concerning faith and life are taught in the Bible clearly enough for the ordinary believer to find it there and understand.”¹⁴

“When Luther began his 95 Theses with the words, ‘When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said . . .’ and concluded them with ‘For I am neither so rash . . . , nor so senseless as to be willing that the word of God should be made to give place to fables devised by human reason.’ Those were strange words for that day and generation. Men had been wont to say: ‘when our Lord and master at Rome says.’”¹⁵

“Erasmus does not know the first principle, the basis and rule: Holy Scripture; God’s Word must remain empress. You must follow straight after Scripture and receive it and not utter one syllable against it for it is God’s mouth” (Luther).¹⁶

Declaring the authority of Scripture does not minimize the teaching ministry of the church and its leaders, but it does subordinate them to the Scripture. In fact, we believe that Scripture authenticates itself to those who believe, but unlike Rome, we do not insist that right understanding resides only with those forming a privileged class (i.e., papacy and bishops) defined exclusively by the church itself.

¹¹ *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols., 7:16.

¹² *Principle of Protestantism*, 97ff.

¹³ Schaff, *Principle of Protestantism*, 98, original emphasis.

¹⁴ W. Robert Godfrey, “What Do We Mean by Sola Scriptura?” in *Sola Scriptura: The Protestant Position on the Bible*, 3.

¹⁵ See the full list of the 95 Theses in Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols., 7:160-166. Schaff includes Luther’s concluding “protestation” which most editions of the 95 Theses omit. Engelder, 99.

¹⁶ Engelder, 99.

II. What Does *Sola Scriptura* Counter?

When *sola Scriptura* is asserted, it assumes rival claims for either supreme or shared authority. Against the backdrop of which prevailing views of sacred authority did the Reformers come to discern and give voice to *sola Scriptura*?

- Tradition: The “oral” Word of God – Rome argues that the bishops possess portions of the Word of God that are not inscripturated. The basis of this position rises from Acts 20:35, where Paul seems to quote from Jesus a statement recorded nowhere in the Gospels: “. . . remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”¹⁷ This oral revelation formally is the primary aspect of Rome’s sacred tradition.

“. . . keeping this always in view, that, errors being removed, the purity itself of the Gospel be preserved in the Church; which (Gospel), before promised through the prophets in the holy Scriptures, our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, first promulgated with His own mouth, and then commanded to be preached by His Apostles to every creature as the fountain of all, both saving truth and moral discipline; and seeing clearly that this truth and discipline are contained in the written books, and the unwritten traditions which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ himself, or from the apostles themselves . . . have come down even unto us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand” (“Decree Concerning the Canonical Scriptures” from the fourth session of the Canon and Decrees of the Council of Trent, April 8, 1546).¹⁸

Examples of oral tradition include infant baptism, the worship of the saints, relic worship, purgatory, limbus infantum, the Mass, Lent, papal infallibility, the assumption of Mary, etc.

- *Sacred “Written” Tradition* – The ecclesiastical record of two things: the church’s record of its understanding of Scripture and the church’s practices. Ironically, this tradition is not static, but a fluid, growing development. The church often draws upon this to establish its oral revelation. Though for centuries tradition “spoke” with a presumed uniformity, by the time of the Reformation that illusion of uniformity had long been dispelled. Peter Abelard’s (1079-1142) *Sic et Non*, for example, more than simply announced the presence of variety among the church’s theologians, but documented the proclivity of doctrinal change.

¹⁷ Sometimes John’s comments in John 20:30-31 and 3 John 13 are also used to buttress the existence and superiority of oral tradition – “I had many things to write to you, but I am not willing to write them to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face” (3 John 13). Paul uses the word “tradition” (*paradosis*, /par-ad'-os-is/) five times, encouraging believers to “hold firmly” (1 Corinthians 11:2) and “stand firm and hold” (2 Thessalonians 2:15) to the “traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.”

¹⁸ <http://www.bible-researcher.com/trent1.html>

“This tradition which comes from the Apostles **develops** in the Church with the help of the Holy Spirit. For there is a **growth** in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down. This happens through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts (see Luke 2:19, 51) through a penetrating understanding of the spiritual realities which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received, through episcopal succession, the sure gift of truth. For as the centuries succeed one another, the Church **constantly moves forward toward the fullness** of divine truth until the words of God reach their complete fulfillment in her” (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 2.8, 1965, emphasis added).¹⁹

9. Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.

10. Sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, committed to the Church. Holding fast to this deposit the entire holy people united with their shepherds remain always steadfast in the teaching of the Apostles, in the common life, in the breaking of the bread and in prayers (see Acts 2, 42, Greek text), so that holding to, practicing and professing the heritage of the faith, it becomes on the part of the bishops and faithful a single common effort” (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 2.9-10, 1965).

“For Rome, the Bible itself emerges from within the Church. The Church exists prior to the Bible; the Bible is itself an expression of the living voice of the Church. . . . the New Testament is Tradition – the earliest tradition inscripturated in distinction from the living Tradition which arises within the ongoing life of the Church in the context of apostolic succession.”²⁰

<http://www.breitbart.com/national-security/2017/08/25/pope-francis-invokes-magisterial-authority-to-say-liturgical-reform-is-irreversible/>

¹⁹ http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html

²⁰ Sinclair Ferguson, 206.

- The Church – both preceding forms of authority are actually manifestations of the root. The church believes that she is the lone voice of authority, discerning the proper understanding of written Scripture, the content of oral revelation, precisely which traditions have the imprimatur of the church, and even which books constitute the canon. Historians have long noted that Rome’s view of authority is *sola ecclesia*.

“But the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This teaching office is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously and explaining it faithfully in accord with a divine commission and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it draws from this one deposit of faith everything which it presents for belief as divinely revealed.

It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, sacred Scripture, and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls” (Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 2.10, 1965, emphasis added).²¹

“The teaching office of the church is more important than the Bible; only an infallible Church can tell us what books belong to Scripture, and only an infallible Church can interpret the true meaning of Sacred Scripture; no one can do this for himself. . . . The immediate and highest rule of faith is the living office of the Church.”²²

Interestingly, not all branches of the Protestantism Reformation practiced *sola scriptura* in exactly the same way. Some branches of it (i.e., Lutheranism and High Church Anglicanism) retained many of the extra-biblical traditions . . . to which some doctrinal errors had attached themselves. With greater willingness, the Zwinglian and Calvinistic

²¹ “ . . . the voice of history, with its thousand tongues, is overwhelmed, not answered, by the Church of Rome, with the declaration that she is absolutely infallible, the unerring organ of the Holy Ghost, to which all private judgment, all historical inquiry, must yield implicit submission. To this point in the end the whole controversy of right comes; with it the entire Roman Catholic system stands or falls. But this highest principle precisely of the infallibility of the papal hierarchy, like the highest principle of most philosophical systems, is merely asserted, *never proved*. It forms the *proton psuedos*, the grand falsehood, on which the whole system rests; and at the same time its central sin, creature deification, making itself identical with the universal church, yea, with the absolute kingdom of God, out of which all are heretics only and children of perdition” (Schaff, *Principle*, 103-04, original emphasis).

²² Matthias Premm, *Dogmatic Theology for the Laity*, 29, original emphasis. An excellent resource for a distilled presentation of Roman Catholic theology in language designed for a lay reader. It is a distillation of Premm’s five-volume work. In his explanation of oral tradition, he says, that it is “in a certain sense a more important [than Scripture], source of revelation” because “the Bible does not contain all the truths of Divine Revelation; many truths have been passed down only orally, first through the Apostles, then through their successors, that is, the popes, bishops, and priests. *In succession of time*, oral tradition precedes written tradition . . . thus, at its very outset, the Christian religion existed for several decades without Sacred Scripture” (28, original emphasis).

streams of the Reformation were willing to allow some of the more potentially theologically confusing traditions to pass away. Yet even after the first and second generations of the Reformation had come and gone, *sola scriptura* continued to be the guiding light . . . particularly in the areas of ecclesiology. For example, Early English Baptists in the 17th century, a full one hundred years later, saw themselves as a “third wave” of the Reformation – they embraced the Reformation, shared in its treasures, loved its doctrine, but . . . they believed the Reformation was not yet complete and that it needed to advance further, particularly in the area of ecclesiology. Their quest was the pursuit of a pure church, and we might add, a church that might structure itself and its practices to conform to its theology so consistently that it would never slip back into the kind of apostasy that made the Reformation necessary in the first place. What all branches held in common regarding *sola Scriptura* was its role in affirming truth in the face of doctrinal error.

The distinctive feature of the 16th century Reformation is the application of *sola scriptura* to the doctrine of salvation – to Christ’s work, His grace, and our faith. When soteriological questions were allowed to be tried in the halls of Scripture and its pages allowed to speak as witnesses, the transformational impact could not leave Europe the same.

“What is the truth as to the way in which God ought to be worshipped, in which a sinner is saved, and in which the ordinances and arrangements of the church of Christ ought to be regulated?”²³

What is the authoritative, sufficient, clear source . . .

- of religious truth (generally)?
- of saving truth (specifically)?

III. Scriptural Precedents for a *Sola Scriptura* Reformation

A. Old Testament (2 Kings 22-23)

We don’t have time to work our way through this passage in any detail, but the story is a familiar one to us, and when you read through it, you discover a deep ignorance of Scripture and a dramatic reformation resulting from its rediscovery. This Old Testament reformation includes all of the composite elements of a Bible reformation: a recovery of Scripture, a corrective rebuke through that Scripture – for deviation from truth in doctrine and practice, from deformity of original purpose –, humble repentance, renewal of belief and practice, and a restoration of purpose that advances toward the original ideal.

²³ William Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, 5.

All of these events happened in unexpected ways and through unlikely agents. In Josiah's case, the boy king is now a young man, not much older than 25. He presides over the southern kingdom that has been plunged into sin by wicked rulers. Josiah's grandfather exceeded all of the other kings for his wickedness and reigned a long 55 years. Yet toward the end of Manassah's reign, he unexpectedly became a kind of "morning star" of the reformation that was to come (2 Chronicles 33:9-20).

The depth of the spiritual decline in Israel is staggering. In fact, had they not physically lost their copies of the Scripture, it's apparent that they had practically done so. All of the teaching, **initially given orally**, and then inscripturated, though preserved in the mind of God had been lost to the mind of man. Based on the kinds of reform Josiah implemented, we can discern the sins of which the nation needed to repent:

- The absence and silence of the Word of God (2 Kings 22:8)
- Vessels for the worship of Baal and other idols were kept in the Temple (23:4)
- An entirely illicit priesthood had been developed for the offering of sacrifices on the forbidden high places throughout Jerusalem and the rest of the southern tribal allotments (23:5)
- A syncretizing of the worship of Jehovah at the high places, idolatry, and Temple worship seem to have settled in and developed (23:4ff)
- Sensuous worship marked by heinous male prostitution (23:7)
- Questionable and false religious practices begun by Solomon more than three centuries prior had now entrenched themselves deeply into the religious customs of the people (23:13)
- The great Passover feast had not been observed for a long time (23:22)

This great reformation of worship, though it would not be complete and never seems to have worked itself down to the people's faith and practice, resulted from the recovery of the exclusive source of truth and authority that had been lost. The great failure of subsequent generations is that they did not advance or even maintain the reforming work that had been done.

B. New Testament (the combined ministries of Jesus and the apostles)

The entire New Testament embodies a Reformation era. It is all about the recovery of truth and authority that had been lost another way – by being obfuscated by human traditions designed, in the case of Judaism, initially to protect truth. Unwittingly, those traditions shrouded and clouded truth so that it blinded men both to the message of the old and the dawn of the new.

1. Jesus' View of Scripture and Tradition

Jesus succinctly and divinely diagnoses the religious situation of His day by stating, *But in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men* (Matthew

15:9) is repeated by Paul in Colossians 2:22 and Titus 1:14. The danger that the commandments of men will supplant the Scripture is very real in every age.

And the danger, in part, is not merely the error. Even more is how it deters the capacity for the people of God to be all that God intended them to be. A true Reformation restores that pursuit. It does not destroy, it comes to fulfill the divine ideal. When Jesus came, He did not come to destroy the Law, but to fulfill it.

“Toward the institutions of the old dispensation, disfigured though they were with arbitrary human additions, and toward its official ministers also, however poorly for the most part their personal character comported with their office, they exhibited all becoming respect. No iconoclastic zeal distinguished their steps; no revolutionary whirlwind gave token of their presence. Christ must *fulfill all righteousness* himself, and charged his hearers to observe and do what was commanded by *those who sat in Moses’ seat*.”²⁴

Though the light of truth had been greatly diminished, there were those early lights of the dawning Reformation. Anna, Simeon, Zacharias and Elisabeth, Joseph and Mary are reminders to us that the great darkness that had penetrated the minds of the religious leaders had not eclipsed all of the light. There were some indeed who still walked with God and lived righteously and who looked for redemption in Israel.

And though the darkness was great, Jesus seems to have had some ready access to Scripture. The Scriptures were not physically lost as they had been in Josiah’s day, but to most, they had been essentially lost, buried beneath the rubble of Jewish tradition and rabbinic authority. And as a result, the Scripture was wrongly used, even abused, by the very means allegedly designed to protect it. The Jewish religious system . . .

. . . was frightfully full of abuses. Though an institution comes from God, man may add to it that which is his own; and by degrees the human addition may become so identified with the divine institution that both are supposed to be of a piece and equally divine. The human additions grow and grow, until it is almost impossible to get at what is God’s through that which is man’s.

In Christ’s day the accumulation of human additions to the religion which God had instituted had grown to a head. No one knows how it had begun; such things sometimes begin innocently enough. But it had been immensely developed by a misconception, which had crept in as to what the worship of God is. Worship is the means by which the empty human soul approaches God in order to be filled with His fullness, and then go away rejoicing, to live for Him in the strength thus received. But there is always a tendency to look upon it as a tribute we pay to God, which pleases Him and is meritorious on our part. Of course, if it is tribute

²⁴ Philip Schaff, *Principle*, 57-58, original emphasis.

paid to Him, the more of it that can be paid the better; for the more of it there is, so much the greater grows the merit of the worshipper. Thus services are multiplied, new forms are invented, and the memory of God's grace is lost in the achievements of human merit.

This was what had happened in Palestine. Religion had become an endless round of services, which were multiplied till they became a burden which life was unable to bear. The ministers of religion heaped them on the people, whose consciences were so crushed with the sense of shortcoming that the whole joy of religion was extinguished. Even the ministers of religion themselves were not able to perform all the orders they issued; and then hypocrisy came in; for naturally they were supposed to be doing those things which they prescribed to others. But they said and did not; they bound heavy burdens and grievous to be borne on other men's shoulders, while they themselves would not touch them with one of their fingers. It was high time for a reformer to appear, and the work fell to Jesus.²⁵

Jesus grew up inside of the blessed covenantal and religious privileges of Israel, and thoroughly relished every legitimate means to savor them and grow "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." It was His own people to whom "pertained the adoption and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises." Isn't it a beautiful thing to envision Jesus attending synagogue worship in His youth? That custom seems to have followed Jesus well into His ministry, and He repaid the blessing the synagogues had been to him by gracing them with some of His miracles. And we know Jesus, for sure, visited the Temple, attended feasts, and participated in offerings.

"The Church of His day was by no means a pure one; and He, if anybody, might have deemed it unworthy of Him, but He regularly waited on its ordinances and ardently loved it."²⁶

The very system of worship in which Jesus grew up is the very one He came to redeem and transform.

"At last a strong man is raised up to perceive the difference between the original structure and the human addition; and he tears away the latter, breaking it in pieces, amidst the wild outcries of all the owls and birds of darkness that have built their nests in it, and discloses once more the foundation of God. This is the Reformer."²⁷

"The first outburst of [Jesus'] reformatory zeal was at the outset of His ministry, when He drove the buyers and sellers out of the Temple. Their practices had

²⁵ James Stalker, *Imago Christi or The Example of Jesus*, "Christ in the Church."

²⁶ James Stalker, *Ibid.*

²⁷ James Stalker, *Ibid.*

probably commenced with good intentions It was a necessary thing; but it had grown to be a vast abuse; for exorbitant prices were charged for the animals and exorbitant rates of exchange demanded; the traffic was carried on with such din and clamour as to disturb the worship; and it took up so much room that the Gentiles were elbowed out of the court of the Temple which belonged to them. In short, the house of prayer had become a den of thieves. Jesus had no doubt noted the abuse with holy anger many a time when visiting the Temple at the feasts; and, when the prophetic spirit descended on Him and His public ministry began it was among His first acts to clear it out of the house of God. The youthful Prophet, with His scourge of cords, flaming above the venal crowd, that, conscious of their sin, fled, amidst tumbling tables and fleeing animals, from before His holy ire, is a perfect picture of the Reformer. . . .

In like manner He aroused the resentment of the Pharisaic party by turning into ridicule their long and pretentious prayers and the trumpets they blew before them when they were giving alms. He could not but expose these practices, for the people had learned to revere as the flower of piety that which was the base weed of vulgarity and pride. He had to consent to be frowned upon as a man of sin because He neglected the fasts and the Sabbatic extravagances which He knew to be no part of religion; and still more because He mingled with publicans and sinners, though He knew this to be the very course of divine mercy. He was compelled at last to pluck the cloak of hypocrisy entirely away from the religious characters of the day and expose them in their true colours as blind leaders of the blind and as whited sepulchres, which appeared fair outside, but inwardly were full of dead men's bones.

Thus He cleared away the human additions piled about the house of God and let the true Temple once more be seen in its own fair proportions. But He had to pay the penalty. The priests, the stream of whose sinful gains He had stopped, and the Pharisees, whose hypocrisy He had exposed, pursued Him with hatred that never rested till they saw Him on the cross. And so, in addition to the name of reformer, He earned the name of Martyr, and Himself became the leader of the noble army of martyrs, which in a thin line deploys through the centuries. . . .

The name Reformer, where it is truly deserved, is a great one in the Church; but to Jesus belongs one much greater; for He was the Founder of the Church.

The old Church in which He was brought up was ready to vanish away. It had served its day and was about to be taken down. He Himself prophesied that of the Temple there would soon not be left one stone above another; He told the woman of Samaria that the hour was coming when they would neither in Gerizim nor yet on Mount Zion worship the Father, but the true worshippers everywhere would worship Him in spirit and in truth; and when He died, the veil of the Temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom.

He founded the Church of the New Testament in His own blood. By the shedding of His blood He abolished the imperfect relation between God and men mediated by the blood of bulls and of goats and established a new and better relationship. So He said in instituting the Lord's Supper, 'This is the new covenant in My blood.' The new house of God is illuminated with the perfect revelation made by Him of the Father; and in it are administered the new and richer blessings purchased by His life and death.

But in building the new house of God its Founder did not wholly discard the materials of the old. He instituted the Lord's Supper in the very elements with which on the evening of its institution He and His disciples were celebrating the Passover. The forms of worship and office-bearers of the Christian Church bear a close resemblance to those of the synagogue. Above all, the Scriptures of the Old Testament, with the figures of their saints and heroes, form part of the same volume as the Scriptures of the New."²⁸

2. Paul and Peter's View of Tradition vs. Scripture

We acknowledge (with Rome) that chronologically, oral revelation preceded written revelation. Jesus wrote no books, and the New Testament Scriptures were not complete until the end of the first century. In some senses, oral revelation was part of the medium of communication of God's truth during the apostolic era. How did the apostles understand the relationship between Scripture and tradition?

	<i>Tradition</i>	<i>Scriptures</i>	<i>Observations</i>
Paul	<i>Paradosis</i> (used 5x) Galatians 1:14 1 Corinthians 11:2 2 Thessalonians 2:15 2 Thessalonians 3:6 Colossians 2:8	<i>Gramma</i> (15x in NT; Paul uses it 7x) – components of writing, letters, etc. <i>Graphe</i> (51x in NT; 14x by Paul) – speaks of Scripture in its totality and overall design Key passage in which both words are used (2 Timothy 3:15-17)	1. Paul acknowledges he delivered guiding traditions to the Corinthians and the Thessalonians 2. Paul encourages believers to “ <i>hold firmly</i> ” (1 Corinthians 11:2) and “ <i>stand firm and hold</i> ” (2 Thessalonians 2:15) to the “ <i>traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us.</i> ” 3. Paul acknowledges that some of the traditions were already being written down 4. Paul asserts that the Scriptures are inspired and are entirely sufficient for man's spiritual readiness 5. If the Scriptures are inspired and sufficient, nothing necessary to our completion and adjustment is excluded
Peter	<i>Patroparadotos</i> (used 1x) 1 Peter 1:18	“more sure word of prophecy” (2 Peter 1:19) and “prophecy of the Scripture” (<i>graphe</i>) is of no private origination (2 Peter 1:21)	1. Peter surprisingly (to us) acknowledges that the written word is “more sure” even than a significant spiritual manifestation of Christ to the eyes 2. Peter, ironically, serves as the greatest illustration of the danger of depending exclusively on a visual or oral revelation. He actually misunderstood the transfiguration appearance of Christ.

²⁸ Stalker, *Ibid.*

IV. *Sola Scriptura* Bequeathed to Us

A. Preservation of the Scripture

1. It is preserved in the totality of the original language manuscripts available to us.
2. It is legitimate to translate the Bible with authority into other languages.
3. The Word of God translated is rightly the Word to the degree that it corresponds to the original autographs.

“I have undertaken to translate the Bible into German. This was good for me; otherwise I might have died in the mistaken notion that I was a learned fellow” (Martin Luther).

4. The question of what constituted the Scriptural canon resurfaced. Rome’s view of inspiration is that of God primarily assisting and directing men.

B. Perspicuity of the Scripture

1. The central message of Scripture energized by the Holy Spirit is self-evident and clear (not murky and dependent entirely on the church to make it known).

“I most firmly do believe that the authors were completely free from error. And if in these writings I am perplexed by anything which appears to me opposed to truth, I do not hesitate to suppose that either the manuscript is faulty, or the translator has not caught the meaning of what was said, or I myself have failed to understand it.”²⁹

2. Scripture is its own best interpreter.

Rome’s insistence that tradition and oral revelation is the only sure guide of truth, and that they are necessary to understand the Scripture.

“The Bible is a plain book. It is intelligible by the people. And they have the right, and are bound to read and interpret it for themselves; so that their faith may rest on the testimony of the Scriptures, and not on that of the Church.”³⁰

“You shall believe God who speaks plainly in his Word. Further than the Word teaches you shall not believe the one or the other. The Word of God is plain in itself. If there is any obscurity anywhere, the Holy Spirit, who is never contrary to himself, explains it more clearly in other places. No one can remain in doubt, save those who remain obstinately ignorant.”³¹

²⁹ Augustine to Jerome, Letter 82, 82.3

³⁰ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:183

³¹ John Knox to Mary, Queen of Scots, when asked by her about the differences of competing voices citing the Bible as authoritative.

C. Sufficiency of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

The Scripture is sufficient to be all that it is designed by God to be to enable man to be all he was created to be.

“The case can be made that every corruption of biblical Christianity begins by compromising the principle of sufficiency.”³²

“The more anyone enters into the contents of the Bible, the more he learns to say with Luther that it resembles an herb, that by every rubbing becomes only the more odiferous, a tree, that by every shaking throws down only a richer supply of golden apples.”³³ (paraphrase of Luther by Schaff)

“Every true progress in church history is conditioned by a new and deeper study of the Scriptures, which has ‘first, second, third, infinite draughts.’”³⁴

D. Superior Authority of the Scripture (authority unshared and unequalled)

1. Human authority, even religious human authority, must yield to Scripture (Acts 5:29, *obey God rather than men.*)

“I ask for Scripture . . . and Eck offers me the Fathers. I ask for the sun, and he shows me his lanterns. I ask, ‘Where is your Scripture proof?’ and he adduces Ambrose and Cyril . . . With all due respect to the Fathers, I prefer the authority of Scripture.” (Martin Luther)

2. Tradition must yield to Scripture (Matthew 15:3)

3. Reason must yield to Scripture (Acts 17:11)

April 18, 1521 – Since your most serene majesty and your high mightinesses require of me a simple, clear and direct answer, I will give one, and it is this: I cannot submit my faith either to the pope or to the council, because it is as clear as noonday that they have fallen into error and even into glaring inconsistency with themselves. If, then, I am not convinced by proof from Holy Scripture, or by cogent reasons, if I am not satisfied by the very text I have cited, and if my judgment is not in this way brought into subjection to God’s word, I neither can nor will retract anything; for it cannot be either safe or honest for a Christian to speak against his conscience. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise; God help me! Amen.

³² Terry Johnson, *The Case for Traditional Protestantism*, 38.

³³ Schaff, *Principle*, 108, a paraphrase of Luther.

³⁴ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 7:17.

"[Luther] knew that, if it were not Scripture solely, it would be no Scripture at all. If reason is not confident to let Scripture stand as it is, its only purpose in amending it is to strike it out. Passing Scripture-truth through the channel of human reason is to divest it of its divine truth – else it will not pass through. The condition of theology in the schools of Rome demonstrated that. And so nothing else than the Word of God, not even what you are inclined to look upon as a messenger from the very throne of God, shall establish articles of faith."³⁵

4. One's conscience must yield to Scripture – *bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ* (2 Corinthians 10:5, KJV).

"A theologian should be thoroughly in possession of the basis and source of faith – that is to say, the Holy Scriptures. Armed with this knowledge it was that I confounded and silenced all my adversaries; for they seek not to fathom and understand the Scriptures; they run over them negligently and drowsily; they speak, they write, they teach, according to the suggestion of their heedless imaginations. My counsel is, that we draw water from the true source and fountain, that is, that we diligently search the Scriptures. He who wholly possesses the text of the Bible is a consummate divine."³⁶

"In short, I will preach it, teach it, write it, but I will constrain no man by force, for faith must come freely without compulsion. Take myself as an example. I opposed indulgences and all the papists, but never with force. I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26-29], . . . the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything. Had I desired to foment trouble, I could have brought great bloodshed upon Germany; indeed, I could have started such a game that even the emperor would not have been safe. But what would it have been? Mere fool's play. I did nothing; I let the Word do its work. What do you suppose is Satan's thought when one tries to do the thing by kicking up a row? He sits back in hell and thinks: Oh, what a fine game the poor fools are up to now! But when we spread the Word alone and let it alone do the work, that distresses him. For it is almighty, and takes captive the hearts, and when the hearts are captured the work will fall of itself."³⁷

³⁵ Engelder, 99-100.

³⁶ Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, entry 5.

³⁷ Martin Luther, *LW* 51.77.