

Sola Scriptura

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We've been talking about [Martin Luther's] Reformation antics—how he was used by God to stir up people and to cause them to see the truth by putting the Scriptures before [them]. We've been looking at each of the different “solas” in what [we're calling] Reformation month—“solus Christus,” which is “by Christ alone,” “sola fide,” “by faith alone,” “sola gratia,” “by grace alone.” This morning, [I] want to look at “sola Scriptura,” which [means] “by the Scriptures alone.”

Job, after losing all of his possessions, all of his children, his reputation, his health—just everything—sat in an ash heap outside of town and scraped his sore, oozing, painful boils while his friends falsely accused him of sinning. Job, in defense of his character, said: “I have not departed from the command of His lips; I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food” [Job 23:12].

There was a time called the Dark Ages. It was a dark age because the Word of God was hidden from the people. Ignorance flourished and illiteracy was pervasive. The printing press [had yet] to be invented, and books were rare and very expensive. The Church, which was commanded by God to preach and teach the Word of God, was not doing so. Instead, mysticism and false doctrine—manmade religion—ruled the day. People were lost. They were in the dark. There was some mention of Jesus and His death on the

cross, but that's really it—[they were] not [given] a full gospel message or even [told] how to appropriate that gospel message.

In the 1300s, light came to take the world out of the Dark Ages. The Roman Catholic Church had the Bible, but kept it from the people. The reason [the Church] kept it from the people is [that it] had added so much manmade religion to Christianity [that it] feared anybody ever [getting in their hands] a Bible that they could read and understand. [The Church] knew that [if] the Bible was to get in the hands of the common people, in their common language, [its] religious scam and farce would be over. [It] would be exposed as being religiously naked and spiritually dead.

But around 1380, Bibles started to pop up in England . [Up to that point, it had been] rare [for copies of the Bible to be seen at all, but the Bible in *English* was nonexistent]. Yet, [Bibles] started to appear in the common language of the people—a language that people could actually read and understand instead of Latin, which hardly anybody knew. This came about because of the passion and desire of a man named John Wycliffe.

Those who read the Bible for themselves at that time began to realize the great scam that they [had] been deluded into [believing]. [They realized] that the Roman Catholic Church had lied to them, invented doctrines, and used those doctrines of demons to grow rich and powerful off the masses. Thus, the Bible in the common language of the people became a terror to the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1411, [the] archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel, referred to Wycliffe as:

This pestilent and wretched John Wyclif [sic], of cursed memory, that son of the old serpent [who has] endeavored by every means to attack the very faith and sacred doctrine of the Holy Church, devising to fill up the measure of his malice [by] the expedient of a new translation of the Scriptures into the mother tongue!

The Council of Constance on May 4, 1415, declared Wycliffe a stiff-necked heretic and declared that all his books and writings be burned. The Bible

in the hands of the common people caused so much grief to the Roman Catholic Church that twelve years later, after that conference, Pope Martin V ordered that John Wycliffe's remains be dug up, exhumed, burned, and the remains of his ashes pitched into the river Swift.

But Wycliffe, before he died, influenced another man, a Bohemian man named John Huss. Huss was convinced [that] the Bible should be preached in the common language of the people, and that's exactly what he did. He preached and drew huge crowds of people who, for the first time, actually understood a sermon. He was ordered to appear to the Council of Constance and [was] promised safe passage if he did. The Church lied. They captured him, threw him in prison, condemned him as a heretic, and burned him at the stake.

The Roman Catholic Church was in a frenzy, trying to control the [distribution of the] Bible in the language of the common people. Yet as soon as one Roman Catholic execution would take place, God would raise up another person [to carry on the spreading of God's Word]. William Tyndale was the first to use the printing press to mass-produce Bibles in English. In 1535, the Roman Catholic Church accused him of heresy and had him strangled and burned at the stake. But like feathers to the wind, so the Bibles in the common language of the people spread throughout Europe and beyond the reach of what the Church could control. Eventually, much of Tyndale's Bible found its way into the King James Bible of 1611.

In the early 1500s, England was almost exclusively Roman Catholic. In 1538, Pope Paul III commanded that all English Bibles be burned. Yet, within fifty years, England was almost exclusively Protestant. What happened? The Bible happened. Between 1525 and 1640, some 2 million copies of the English Bible were printed in a country of 6 million people. In fact, during William Shakespeare's life, who lived from 1564 to 1616, 211 different translations and new editions of the Bible were printed in English. Martin Luther busied himself translating the Bible into German and writing other works that explained the Bible. Luther's works, in the first three years, sold over 300,000 copies. There was no stopping the Bible now.

Soon, like Wycliffe, Huss, and Tyndale, Luther was branded a heretic [and] called before the Church to be tried in the city of Worms. He was going to be tried for heresy and, of course, summarily executed. Luther knew his life was in danger, but he went to the trial anyway. It was called the Diet of Worms. During the trial, Luther was asked to recant his heretical teachings and translation of the Bible. He knew that if he refused to recant, the Roman Catholic Church would burn him at the stake as they had done many others before for lesser crimes—like Thomas Bilney, who was burned at the stake [in] Norwich, [England], why? Because he had a Bible study in the White Horse Inn.

After being pressed to recant his works, Luther asked to have some time to pray and search the Scriptures before giving an answer. The next day, Luther stood before his Roman Catholic prosecutors and said this in his closing remarks:

I believe not the pope, neither his general councils that have erred many times and have been contrary to themselves—then my conscience is so bound and held captive by the Scriptures and the Word of God that I will not and may not revoke any manner of thing. It would be ungodly and unlawful for me to go against my own conscience. Hereupon I stand and rest. I don't have anything else to say. God have mercy upon me!

They pressed him, and said, “Tell us straightforwardly, do you or do you not recant?”

Luther's final reply was: “My conscience is bound by the Scriptures. Here I stand, so help me God.” So they determined to burn him at the stake, but with the help of some friends, he escaped.

When you start talking about the Reformation, what produced “sola gratia,” “by grace alone,” “sola fide,” “by faith alone,” “solus Christus,” “by Christ alone,” and “sola Scriptura,” “by the Scriptures alone”? One thing: the Bible alone—the Bible in the common language of the people, the Bible

preached and taught in a way that people could understand and apply it to their lives.

You can read many historians of the Reformation, and often they don't mention the Bible at all except maybe in passing, maybe giving one or two sentences to it. Yet it was the Bible that transformed all of Europe. It was the Bible that caused the Reformation; it was the Bible that caused the Puritan movement. God always blesses the Bible.

And so, when you pick up your Bible, when you feel it in your hands, when you look upon it with your eyes, never forget that people died to get you that Bible—lots of people died. Hell itself did everything it could to stop the Bible from getting into the hands of the people in their common language, but the gates of hell did not prevail.

Thus, we proclaim with the Reformers that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and add “by the Scriptures alone,” just as they did. That is what we call “*sola Scriptura*.”

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