

Scripture ALONE

Topical

5 November 2017 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Idea: The Bible ALONE is the trustworthy and highest authority for the church.

Big Question: What role do Scripture and tradition have for us knowing God?

Introduction

A few years ago, I had a very long layover in Los Angeles as I was waiting for another plane.

Being my first time to the US, I decided to hire a car and set out on my own to see some sights.

On reflection, perhaps it wasn't the wisest idea to have your first crack at driving on the wrong side of the road straight after a long flight, but YOLO.

It probably would've also been a good idea to have a map.

Nah, why would I need a map?

I'd just got my first smartphone and although I didn't have any phone minutes or data, I'd downloaded a free GPS app.

What could possibly go wrong?

Things were fine... at first.

Travelling on main roads it was simply a matter of following the signs to the major places I wanted to see.

When it came to returning the car though, I ran into strife.

I couldn't just follow the signs to the airport because I needed to get back to the car hire place off-site.

Not knowing the city at all, I punched the address into the app and blindly followed the directions.

When the app announced that I'd arrived, it was a bit of a shock.

This wasn't Budget Rent A Car, it was a residential street.

I was in one of the biggest cities in the world, completely lost and with a plane that wasn't going to wait for me.

Not fun.

I relied on the app to show me the way around LA.

After all, that's exactly what the app claimed to do.

As I quickly discovered though, it wasn't reliable.

Lots of the roads in LA twist and turn and stretch for several suburbs.

The app couldn't handle street numbers and so it directed me to a random place miles from where I wanted to be.

I trusted it as an authority, but it wasn't reliable.

That's pretty much how things were at the start of the Reformation.

The church claimed authority when it comes to salvation.

In fact, they claimed that it was impossible to be saved outside the church.

The big problem was that although they claimed complete authority in all matters relating to faith and practice, they were actually groping around in the dark.

They claimed to be able to show the way when they didn't know the way at all.

Last Tuesday was the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's 95 Theses being nailed to the door of Wittenberg Castle.

That was basically the start of one of the defining movements in all of history: the Protestant Reformation.

500 is a very significant number – either a very long time or not all that long at all, depending on how you're looking at it.

The Reformation was a time when important truths about the Christian faith were recovered.

So, we're spending a few weeks in a sermon series thinking about the truths that were rediscovered at that time.

Those truths can be summarised with five 'alone' statements:

- Salvation is by Grace ALONE

- Through Faith ALONE
- In Christ ALONE
- According to Scripture ALONE
- To the Glory of God ALONE.

This morning, we're going to be looking at Scripture ALONE.

The reformers rediscovered that the Bible ALONE is the trustworthy and highest authority for the church.

Each point begins with 'P', so hopefully it's easy to remember.

- The Pope or the Word
- The Power of the Word
- The Priority of the Word

The Pope or the Word

The irony isn't lost on me that in a sermon on Scripture ALONE, we're not just working our way through a passage of the Bible.

But to get a sense of the importance of *sola Scriptura*, we need to begin with some history.

We need to understand the relationship between the Pope and the Word.

I really liked the question time we had after the sermon last week.

Someone asked a great question which was something like this: "Why didn't these people know that we're saved by grace?"

It seems so obvious to us, doesn't it?

We had a look at Ephesians 2 last week and it seems pretty clear that we're saved by grace and not by works:

Ephesians 2:8–9 (NIV11) ⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

How could the church miss something that's so obvious?

It's such a great question because it gets to the heart of the Reformation.

The simple answer to that question is that they didn't have access to the Bible.

They didn't have access to "*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God*" as Ephesians 6:17 tells us.

Without access to the Bible, the church had lost sight of the fundamental doctrines of grace.

Life in the medieval world was very different to what we experience today.

We take it for granted that we can read the Bible whenever we want to.

We have Bible apps on our phones.

If anyone in Australia wants to read the Bible, then it's easy enough to just go out and buy one.

In the 1500s though, there were all sorts of practical things which stopped people reading the Scriptures for themselves.

Producing books was very difficult and expensive so there just weren't that many copies around.

Martin Luther didn't have his own copy of the Bible until he became a theology professor.

It wasn't until Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in 1439 that it became easy to print books cost-effectively, rather than painstakingly copying them out by hand.

Even if people had a Bible, it would've been in Latin and pretty much no one spoke Latin anymore.

And even if they could speak Latin, most people couldn't read.

It's been estimated that only 10% of people had any kind of education.

Joe Blow ploughing in the fields pretty much had Buckley's chance of reading the Scriptures for himself.

Most of us don't realise how much we've benefited from the Reformation.

We just take it as given that we can read the Bible if we want to.

But at the time of the Reformation the only way that you could find out about what it means to be a Christian – the only way to hear about God – was to go to church and listen to the priest.

And unless you went to a very big church, he probably wasn't all that well educated either.

All the authority, all the information, all the knowledge about following Jesus was in the hands of what's called the magisterium – that's the officers (priest, bishops, cardinals & the pope) – of the church.

Practically speaking, that meant they were really the only ones who could interpret the Christian faith.

It's not that being a Christian is complex and complicated.

But the average person just didn't have the skills to be able to read for the Bible for themselves.

So, just like a used car salesperson, the church said, "Just trust us.

"We're the experts. We know what we're talking about. We couldn't get it wrong.

"Just trust us."

As well as practical reasons, there were theological reasons as well.

In 2 Thessalonians 2:15, Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, encouraging them to hold onto the traditions they'd been taught.

2 Thessalonians 2:15 (NIV11) ¹⁵ So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

Just like in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul describes how he passed on the traditions that he'd received about the Lord's supper.

Who keeps track of those traditions?

Who was responsible for passing them down from generation to generation?

The church.

The Roman Catholic understanding of Matthew 16:18-19 is that Jesus appointed the apostle Peter as the head of the church.

And all the popes that came after him also have the authority of being the head of the church.

Ironically, it was this claim that led to the church dividing into east and west as there were competing claims between Rome and Constantinople about who had authority.

And then in the 14th century, there were actually three popes at the same time – who all excommunicated each other.

They resolved that one by appointing a fourth bloke as the "real" pope.

Papal infallibility is the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that when the pope speaks as the Vicar of Christ – *ex cathedra* – then everything he says is infallible and inerrant.

That didn't become an official teaching of the church until Vatican I in 1870 – long after the reformation.

It's still a doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church today.¹

At the time of the Reformation though, this wasn't official church policy.

Everyone believed that the church couldn't err.

However, there was debate about whether this was just the Pope or whether it was the church councils made up of the cardinals with the pope who were infallible.

No matter which way people went – either pope or the councils – they were considered infallible.

I titled this section “The Pope or the Word.”

The church was actually teaching that it wasn't one or the other, but both.

The church taught that knowledge of God could be found in the church, tradition and Scripture.

For practical and theological reasons though, the church taught that the Bible could only be understood by the church.

The church's traditions were needed to correctly understand the Bible.

The whole problem though was that in practice, the church's authority became far more important than the Bible.

To the point that there was really no priority on the word of God.

The church alone was the gateway to God.

The Power of the Word

We're going to see the Power of the Word as this situation changed and reformation happened.

Most people have some idea of the important role that Martin Luther had in launching the Reformation.

It'd be easy to get the impression that the Reformation happened because of Luther alone.

There's no doubt that God used him, but he wasn't the only one.

At about the same time, another man by the name of Ulrich Zwingli was fighting much the same battles in Switzerland.

Zwingli was a new breed of preacher.

He went to a university that was teaching a new philosophy called humanism.

Humanists emphasise human discovery.

We take observations and make deductions from those.

They also value thinking from antiquity.

Humanism had a big effect on how theology was done in the 1500s.

At the time, most people learned their theology by reading what the great writers of the last few centuries had taught.

However, humanists started to get interested in the original documents of the Bible.

For reasons that I won't go into now, it also became possible to read the Bible in its original languages once again.

They also started to take the church fathers – great theologians from the first few centuries of Christianity – seriously.

On 1 January 1519, Zwingli was appointed to be the preacher in the Great Minister in the city of Zurich.

Zwingli preached from the Greek New Testament and not from the Latin Vulgate.

He'd even memorised all of Paul's letters in Greek.

On his first Sunday, he started with Matthew chapter 1 and then went on to preach the whole book, verse-by-verse, chapter-by-chapter.

Over the next six years, he preached through all of the New Testament and so in 1525, he started teaching on the Old Testament.

That mightn't sound all that radical to you.

After all, Paul tells Timothy to preach the word.

2 Timothy 4:2 (NIV11) ² Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.

At the time though, most people – including Luther – preached from a lectionary.

There was a set gospel and epistle reading for each week.

It was quite unusual to hear the Bible explained passage-by-passage.

The people of Zurich lapped it up.

Zwingli became a very, very popular preacher.

By our standards, he wasn't really doing anything that was all that difficult or novel.

All he was doing was preaching the Bible.

There's lots of people who think that preaching the Bible is boring.

You might be one of them.

Sure, it can be boring at times.

And I'd be the first one to say that sometimes it can be hard work.

But it's also immensely rewarding.

God's Word is awesome.

When we read the Bible, we hear the God of the universe speak.

It's hard to describe what hearing from the Bible is like because reading the Bible is unlike any other book and yet not.

We probably can't do much better than the words of the Psalmist.

Listen to his enthusiasm in this part of Psalm 119:

Psalms 119:9–16 (NIV11) ⁹ How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word. ¹⁰ I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. ¹¹ I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. ¹² Praise be to you, LORD; teach me your decrees. ¹³ With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth. ¹⁴ I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. ¹⁵ I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. ¹⁶ I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word.

The Word has the power to change us.

It teaches us what it means to have live a godly life.

Paul writes to Timothy those now-famous words:

2 Timothy 3:14–17 (NIV11) ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Paul encourages Timothy to continue in what he's learned.

The character of the people he learned from matters.

That sounds like a tick for the Roman Catholic Church's emphasis on tradition, doesn't it?

Not so fast.

Because in the very next breath he says that it's "*the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise.*"

The 'who' matters, but only because of where they get their teaching from.

All of Scripture is useful – not just some bits.

And it's useful because of what it does.

God's word rebukes us – it shows us where we've strayed and gone wrong.

And it corrects us.

That's not always an easy process.

It can even hurt at times.

Honest friends are good friends, though.

As God's word shows us what we're really like, it mightn't always be pretty, but it's definitely good for us.

God's word also trains us.

It teaches us what it looks like to become more like Jesus and aids us in following in his footsteps.

That's why it's a delight for us as Christians to hear God's truth proclaimed.

And it warms our hearts.

Preaching the Word is simple, effective and essential because there's power in the Word.

The Priority of the Word

Zwingli's preaching the Bible in Zurich was the beginning of a movement of people who began to make preaching the Word a priority once again.

This new way of doing things also made things a little bit awkward.

As he taught through the Scriptures, Zwingli began to see that there was a difference between what the church was teaching and what the Bible said.

The church said that it was compulsory to fast during Lent.

But the Bible doesn't say that.

In fact, the Bible says the very opposite in Colossians 2:

Colossians 2:16–17 NIV11 ¹⁶ *Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day.* ¹⁷ *These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.*

The church also said that priests weren't allowed to be married.

However, a priest could pay a licence fee of four gold coins to the bishop and they were "licenced" to have a concubine.

And then they could pay another four gold coins as a fee for each child they had.

But they weren't allowed to get married.

The Bible doesn't demand that priests or pastors or elders are single.

1 Corinthians 7 tells us that singleness is a gift that's only given to some people.

So, Zwingli along with ten other priests wanted to get married.

They wrote to their bishop a treatise with the title, *"To Allow Priests to Marry, or at Least Wink at their Marriages."*

The Bishop wasn't very impressed.

He sent another priest named Johannes Fabri to have a debate with Zwingli.

The debate was run by the local Town Council and about six hundred people came.

One of the rules they set for the debate was that all arguments needed to be made from Scripture.

Zwingli came armed with his Hebrew Old Testament, Greek New Testament and Latin Vulgate.

Topics like the intercession of the saints and the role of Mary came up.

Zwingli asked where these things could be found in the Bible.

Fabri talked about history and tradition.

It's important to be clear about what this debate wasn't about.

Everyone in the church believed that the Bible alone is infallible – that wasn't up for debate.

The question was whether it was only the Bible that's infallible.

Zwingli reasoned that if the church was teaching something different to what the Bible was saying, then the church must be wrong.

He came to the conclusion that Scripture alone must be infallible.

The members of the Council made a decision: Zwingli won.

They were convinced that the Bible should be trusted over human beings, even the pope himself.

The church in Zurich officially separated from the Roman Catholic Church.

And their influence spread to other churches in Switzerland and across the south of Germany.

There was another important question that was asked by someone in the audience that night.

He asked whether it was okay to read the church fathers like Gregory or Ambrose.

Zwingli responded by saying that of course it's okay.

The Reformers weren't saying that it's just the Holy Spirit, the Word of God and me.

There's a neat term for that – *Nuda scriptura*.

When we read the Bible, it's wise to listen to what people have said about it in the past.

We listen to how other people have understood the Bible.

That's why we have commentaries to help us understand how others have understood the Bible.

That's also why it's important to know a bit about church history – so that we don't repeat the same mistakes and errors that people made in the past.

But as fallen people, what they say about the Bible isn't authoritative.

That belongs to the Bible itself.

So, be like the noble Bereans.

In Acts 17, when Paul came to Berea, the people there very carefully checked to see whether what Paul was saying matched with the Scriptures.

Acts 17:11 ¹¹ Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.

If that was true of the apostle Paul, how much more is it true of anyone who stands in this pulpit?

Sola Scriptura – Scripture Alone – isn't saying that the only thing that has any value is Scripture.

Sola Scriptura means that the Bible is the final and ultimate authority in all that we do.

The priority must be the word of God.

Our own doctrinal statement says:

They are the true, authoritative and sufficient revelation of His will and are trustworthy for salvation and life. These books are authoritative over every domain of knowledge to which they speak and are the supreme and final authority by which Christians shall finally be held accountable.²

Conclusion

I began with my experience of driving around LA with a guide that wasn't very reliable.

Many of us today have exactly the same experience when it comes to making sense of the big questions of life.

What is the guide for your life?

What authority do you put your trust in and use as a guide for your life?

Do you just trust in tradition?

That's what the Roman Catholic church taught.

Tradition is good when it's a tradition that points us to the gospel of Jesus.

We can't know whether our tradition is any good if we don't measure it against the Bible though.

Tradition can just as easily point us away from Jesus like the church in the middle ages which had lost salvation by grace ALONE.

Of course, most Protestants claim that they believe in the Bible as the ultimate authority.

But is that really true?

How often have you heard people say we do this or that, or don't do this or that, because we're Baptist or Presbyterian or Anglican or Roman Catholic.

Or the best one, "That's the way we've always done things."

The traditions we have might well be good, but they always need to be measured against the Bible.

Other people trust themselves.

They rely purely on themselves without any reference to anyone else.

Whatever I think must be right and so I don't need anyone else.

Some Christians say, "I've just got me and the Bible and that's enough."

If they knew their Bibles though, they'd see all the one anothers.

We need each other. Christianity is done in community.

Still others trust their feelings.

Are you someone who's guided, who makes decisions based on what you feel?

That often works for a time, but feelings are a very unreliable guide.

They change frequently and can be dangerous.

Instead of challenging our sinful desires, feelings often fuel them.

The Reformers rediscovered the doctrine of Scripture ALONE.

Through the Bible, we hear God speak.

That stops us from putting our own spin on things and causes us to trust in him.

God invites you to come and put your trust in what he has said.

¹ Catechism, 891 “The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher of all the faithful - who confirms his brethren in the faith he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals.”

² GBC Doctrinal Statement

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Big Question: What role do Scripture and tradition have for us knowing God?

Introduction

1. Many people today have never even heard of the Protestant Reformation. How would you describe the event and its impact to someone in a few sentences?
2. What are some of the reasons that people didn't have Bibles in the early 16th century?
3. The reason a reformation was needed is that the church was teaching that the Bible is full of errors. True or false?
4. Another reason the reformation was needed is that the official position of the church was that the pope was infallible. True or false?
5. What did Ulrich Zwingli do differently to most other priests at the time?
6. What are some of the reasons that Scripture tells us that we need the Bible?
7. Some Christians use the motto "No creed but Christ, no book but the Bible." Is that an accurate description of *sola scriptura*? Why?
8. Do you think there's any place for tradition in the church?
9. How can the authority of the Bible be misused?