

The Protestant Reformation

What It is and Why it Matters

A Study

Part 2- The Re-Discovery of the Beauty, Authority, and Sufficiency of the Word of God

“Sola Scriptura”

January 11, 2015

2 Timothy 3:16&17

16 All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;

17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

To the Glory of God

Now most of you have never heard of a man named Desiderius Erasmus. He was known as “Erasmus of Rotterdam”, and lived in the Netherlands during the late 15th and early 16th Centuries. And Erasmus did a lot of things wrong. For example- he was one of Martin Luther’s greatest enemies. But one thing Erasmus did right was to translate the New Testament into Latin. And, from that single act- God ignited something truly glorious. You see, for many decades during the 15th Century- **Matthew 4:17** was translated as:

"Do penance for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

And so it was taught and believed by many that people had to “do something religious”- in order to be found worthy to receive Christ’s Forgiveness and Salvation. And the details of what they had to “do” was defined only by the leaders of the Church and ranged from things as simple as praying certain prayers a certain number of times a day for a certain number of days to standing in snow barefoot for three days or serving in a leper colony for many years. Erasmus correctly translated that verse into Latin as:

"Be penitent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand".

... which had the meaning of being *sorrowful* over sin and *turning away* from it. Later he refined this to say:

"Have a change of mind for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

... which is the literal meaning of the original Greek word that the Apostle Matthew actually wrote down. Years later- William Tyndale translated that Latin phrase into English as:

"Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."

... which is what we have now in our English Bibles. Now to "repent"- which literally means: *to have a change of mind/be penitent*, is vastly different than "Do penance". *Doing* penance requires human works, while *repenting* is a response born of faith.

Now while this event is sadly not very important to many people today- especially to modern Protestants- the people of Europe literally were dancing in the streets over the news that their sins would be remitted by faith and trust in the finished Work of the Lord Jesus Christ and *not* through their participation of the Sacraments that was brought about through the guilt placed upon them by other men who happen to wear ecclesiastical robes.

And what was amazing is that this new way of being forgiven came to them- *not* by some papal edict or from an angel from heaven or through prophecy or a direct revelation- but from the understanding of the plain meaning of Holy Scripture. And from this single change- the question began to circulate all through Europe- "*What else is in God's Word?*"- which is what ignited the Reformation.

So, one of the greatest *re-discoveries* of the Protestant Reformation was that the Word of God comes to us in a form of a Book. When God speaks- He speaks through the pages of a Book. So if you want to know what God has spoken- read the Book, and if you want to hear God speak *audibly*- read the Book out loud.

So we are to understand that God preserves the experiences of both "Salvation" and "Holiness"- which is how a sinful person is justified before a holy God, and the life that this saved person is now to

live- God has preserved *both* of these experiences- from one generation to the next- by means of a Book of Divine Revelation, and *not* in a bishop from Rome, and *not* in the ecclesiastical leaders of the Church, and *not* in the Sacraments, and *not* through the ecstasies of people who lay claim to hear directly from God.¹

In the Passage that Brother Andy just read to you- the Apostle Paul said that Scripture is special, it is unique; it is different from any other writing on earth. Paul used the Greek word “theopneustos” to describe the way in which sacred Scripture came to us- Scripture is “inspired”- meaning that it was “breathed out” by God. And so nothing else in all the world is like Scripture. And by extension- “inspired” also means that Scripture is:

- ✓ **Inerrant**- it contains no errors in either part or whole
- ✓ **Infallible**- it doesn't possess the ability to be in error
- ✓ **Authoritative**- it speaks on behalf of God
- ✓ **Relevant**- it is good in any age and with any people
- ✓ **Sufficient**- it is all that God desires us to have concerning eternal issues

So the Word of God comes to us in a Book. So we need to know that the Protestant Reformation did not *create* the Bible, nor did this event add a single page to it or take a single word from it. The Reformation simply allowed us to *re-discover* the Beauty, the Divinity, the Authority, and the Sufficiency of the 66 Books of the Holy Bible.

Now as we discovered last week- beginning with the teachings of Thomas Aquinas in the 13th Century- all the way into the 16th- the Christian Church had descended into a very dark place. Truth became what the leaders of the Church said that it was- and *not* what God's Word said, and the participation of the Sacraments of the Church had overshadowed the simplicity of the Biblical Gospel. So in a nutshell- the leaders of the Church from the mid 1200's to the early 1500's had done to Christianity what the Pharisees had done to Judaism back in

¹ Thomas Muntzer, seven years Luther's junior, became the preacher the Church of St. Mary in Zwickau. "He ... joined a union of fanatics, mostly weavers, who, with Nikolaus Storch at their head, had organized themselves under the leadership of twelve apostles and seventy-two disciples, and held secret conventicles, in which they pretended to receive divine revelations." Philip Schaff, ed. *Religious Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1888), p. 1596. For Luther's response see A. G. Dickens and Alun Davies, eds., *Documents of Modern History: Martin Luther*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), pp. 75-79.

Jesus' day- they had prostituted what God said and warped it beyond any recognition. And this caused great hardship and suffering to the people.

So, as we saw last week- the Reformation was simply the Lord Jesus *restoring* the Church- for which He died- to where it had originally been when it was first established upon the Apostles and Prophets with Jesus Christ Himself being the Corner Stone.

So as we saw last week- The Reformation consisted of a number of "Re-discoveries of the Christian Faith" that had been *minimized* and *hidden* and *marginalized* and *forgotten* by the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church. And those *re-discoveries* were summarized in several Latin phrases that defined very important Biblical issues on which we stand today:

- ✓ Sola Scriptura
- ✓ Sola Fide
- ✓ Sola Gratia
- ✓ Solus Christus
- ✓ Soli Deo Gloria

So, as we begin this new year- I want to explore these "re-discoveries" and examine what the Protestant Reformation was and what the issues were that caused it and what the solutions were that the Reformers brought about.

In God's sovereign timing- God used frail men of clay feet- to bring the Light of Truth back into the Church to pierce through this man-made darkness where Justification by Grace alone through Faith alone in the finished Work of Christ alone was re-discovered, and the Latin phrase that best summarized the entire "Protestant Reformation" was "Post Tenebras Lux" Out of Darkness- Light! And today we want to look at what has been called "The Formal Cause of the Protestant Reformation", which is:

Sola Scriptura

... the concept that says that the Power to "bind the conscience" of the believer and the instrument that has the final Authority to define Divine Truth is the Holy Scriptures, and *not* the pope of Rome. So who

speaks on behalf of God? Does the pope? Do Pastors and Teachers? Do the Elders? Do Church Councils declare the Word of God to us? Does Church tradition make clear what God has said? When a man stands before 42,000 people and tells them that it doesn't matter what they believe as long as they love Jesus and as long as they are nice to each other- did God speak? Is that true? When a woman stands before 25 people and begins to give a "prophetic utterance" did God speak through her? So who speaks for God? The concept of "Sola Scriptura" says that Scripture and Scripture alone speaks for God. So the "Scriptura" part of this phrase is "The Scriptures"- the 66 Books of the Holy Bible- while the "Sola" part means: *alone*. So "Sola Scriptura" means: *Scripture alone*. And I want to try to tackle this issue by giving you some information about both the theology behind Sola Scriptura and behind the man that God used to re-discover it- a man named Martin Luther.

On October 31, 1517, the Roman Church received the world's most memorable trick-or-treater at its door- even though it was barely noticed at the time- when a lowly priest named Martin Luther approached the threshold of the Wittenberg branch in Germany and posted his 95 Theses (they aren't nearly as impressive as you would expect). Now the 95 Theses was Luther's excuse for sparring about the Church's deplorable sanctioning of "indulgences"- which was obtaining "pre-forgiveness" for sins not yet committed, and Luther was angling for some good-spirited debate about this issue.

But as we saw last week- the Christian Church was centuries overdue for major reform and so the kindling was already in place and Luther's little- almost accidental- spark set the whole thing ablaze very quickly. Some nameless visionary translated his theses from the Church's Latin into the people's German and sent them far and wide through the glory of the recently invented "printing press" which made books very cheap and thus- available to more people than ever before.

Over time- this lowly monk proved to have what it took to hold his ground against the Church and the world- "*Here I stand*", he said as he stood against the most power institution on earth- with absolute confidence that the written Word of God would defend him, or else what he was doing wasn't worth defending. And under God- Luther became the human tip of the spear for massive reform.

But we must know that except for His Own Son- Jesus Christ- God doesn't change the world through a single person- but through

many people. So with and behind every *remembered* individual is some great collective. Luther had a significant supporting cast in his Wittenberg work, and on the grander scale, it took many others — like Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin, Martin Bucer, Thomas Cranmer, John Knox, and many more, all with their associates and assistants — to usher in the Reformation. But God gave Luther the bullhead to do the pioneering. He was the battering ram. And his instrument was the Word of God.

But here's one thing to keep on your radar this year. God loves to use the seeming "accidents" in our lives to bring about His Purposes. It's the "accidents" that remind us that we are emphatically *not* the captain of our own soul- that we are definitely *not* piloting our own destinies, we're *not* on the point for planning the whole thing out and executing on it.

That such a Reformation began almost 500 years ago, and continues to this day is *not* the result of any human plan. It has been the "accidents" which have given it the markings of Divine Fingerprints. Luther's accidental spark may have lit the flame and Calvin's accidental lone night in Geneva may have changed the course for that city and for a major branch of Protestant theology. But the Protestant Reformation is a reminder to embrace the "accidents" in our lives- to look for the Hand of Providence and trust that God's Plans for us are infinitely better than our wildest dreams. For those who are His- God truly works together for their good- *all things*- even and especially the seeming accidental- to do for us far more abundantly than all that we can ask or think.

Now to give you an idea about the climate of hostility that existed in the Church during this time about the Scriptures themselves- one of Martin Luther's arch-opponents in the Roman Church, Sylvester Prierias, wrote in response to Luther's 95 theses:

"He who does not accept the doctrine of the Church of Rome and pontiff of Rome as an infallible rule of faith, from which the Holy Scriptures, too, draw their strength and authority, is a heretic"²

² Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, trans. Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart, (New York: Doubleday, 1992, orig. 1982), p. 193. Professor Steven Ozment of Harvard calls Heiko Oberman "the world's foremost authority on Luther."

In other words, the sentiment of the day was that the Church and the pope are *primary*- they are "the authoritative deposit of Salvation and the Word of God", and that meant that the Holy Bible itself was "derivative" and "secondary". So what the average leader of the Church believed and taught was what we saw last week:

“Roma locuta causa finita”- Rome has spoken the matter is settled.

... so what the Reformation said in response was:

“Scriptura locuta causa finita”- Scripture has spoken the matter is settled.

Now the great theologian from the Netherlands, Heiko Oberman, who was, before he died in 2001, the leading authority on Martin Luther said,

“What you had in Martin Luther is the notion of absolute obedience to the Scriptures against any authorities; be they popes or councils.”³

In other words the saving, sanctifying, authoritative Word of God comes to us in a Book. And the implications of this simple observation are earthshaking. In 1539, commenting on **Psalm 119**, Luther wrote:

"In this psalm David always says that he will speak, think, talk, hear, read, day and night constantly—but about nothing else than God's Word and Commandments. *For God wants to give you His Spirit only through the external Word.*"⁴

Now this phrase, “God wants to give you His Spirit through the external Word”, is extremely important. The "external Word" is the Book- the Holy Bible. And Luther taught that the saving, sanctifying, and illuminating Spirit of God comes to us *through* this "external Word."

Now Luther called the Bible the "external Word" to emphasize that it is three things:

³ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, p. 204.

⁴ Ewald M. Plass, compiler, *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Vol. 3, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 1359 (emphasis added).

1. **Objective**, as opposed to subjective
2. **Fixed**, as opposed to varying
3. **Outside ourselves** (external), as opposed to being "of ourselves" (internal)

So Luther was saying that the *origins* of the Bible come from Heaven, from God, and *not* from the internal ideas or desires of Man. And as both Heavenly and Divine- the Book is unchanging and it is absolutely Authoritative.

And yet it is a Book. So neither the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church or the fanatical ecstasy of individual believers can replace the Book or shape it. It is "external," like God. You can take or leave it, you can believe it or reject it. But you can't change it- you can't make it be something other than what it already is. It is a book with fixed letters and fixed words and fixed sentences that have affixed meaning. And Luther said with resounding forcefulness in 1545, the year before he died,

"Let the man who would hear God speak, read Holy Scripture."⁵

Earlier he had said in his lectures on the **Book of Genesis**,

"The Holy Spirit himself and God, the Creator of all things, is the Author of this Book."⁶

So the startling re-discovery made by Martin Luther was that the Word of God that saves and sanctifies unworthy sinners from one generation to the next is preserved for us in a Book. And, therefore, at the heart of every Pastor's Calling is book-work. Call it reading, meditation, reflection, cogitation, study, exegesis, or whatever you will- a large and central part of our work is to wrestle God's Authoritative meaning from a Book, and proclaim it in the Power of the Holy Spirit- to the Glory of God and the Good of God's people.

Now Luther knew, that some would stumble over the sheer conservatism of the simple, unchangeable fact that God's Word is fixed

⁵ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Vol. 2, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 62.

⁶ *Ibid* p. 62.

in a Book. He knew then, as we know today, that many say this assertion *nullifies* or *minimizes* the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in giving Life and Light. And that *might* happen. But some people might argue that emphasizing the brightness of the sun nullifies the surgeon who takes away blindness. But most people would *not* agree with that. Certainly, not Luther. For example- he said in 1520,

"Be assured that no one will make a doctor of the Holy Scripture save only the Holy Ghost from heaven."⁷

Martin Luther was a great lover of the Holy Spirit. And his exaltation of the Book as the "external Word" did not belittle God the Spirit in the least. On the contrary it *elevated* the Spirit's greatest gift to Christendom. In 1533 he said,

"The Word of God is the greatest, most necessary, and most important thing in all of Christendom."⁸

So without the "external Word" we would not know one spirit from the other, and the objective personality of the Holy Spirit himself would be lost in a blur of subjective expressions. So cherishing the Book implied to Luther that the Holy Spirit is a beautiful Person to be known and loved and worshipped- not a "buzz" to simply be felt.

Another objection to Luther's great emphasis on the Book is that it somehow *minimizes* the "Incarnate Word"- Jesus Christ Himself. Luther said that actually the opposite is true. To the degree that the Word of God is disconnected from the objective, "external Word," to *that* degree the Incarnate Word- the historical Jesus- becomes "a wax nose for the preferences of every generation". Luther had one weapon with which to rescue the Incarnate Word from being sold in the markets of Wittenberg. He drove out the money changers—the indulgence sellers—with the whip of the "external Word"- the Book. For example- when he posted The 95 Theses on the door of the Church at Wittenberg on October 31, 1517- number 45 read:

⁷ Ibid p. 1355.

⁸ Ibid p. 913.

“Christians should be taught that he who sees someone needy but looks past him, and buys an indulgence instead, receives not the pope's remission but God's Wrath.”⁹

And that blow fell from the external Word- specifically from the Parable of the Good Samaritan, and from the *Second* Great Commandment in the external Word that said,

Matthew 22:39b

... You shall love your neighbor as yourself

... but without the “external Word” there would be no blow at all. And the Incarnate Word would be everybody's clay toy. So it was precisely for the sake of the Incarnate Word- Jesus Christ- that Luther exalted the *written* Word- the “external Word.”

Now it is true that the people of the Church need to see the Lord in His earthly talking and walking on the earth. Our faith is rooted in that decisive Revelation in history. But God used Martin Luther to re-assert, to re-discover, that this *seeing* happens through a *written* Record. So the “Incarnate Word”- Jesus Christ, is revealed to us through the “external, written Word”- this Book.¹⁰

So is it not remarkable that the Spirit in both Luther's day, and ours, is silent about the Incarnate Lord- except in magnifying and amplifying His Glory through the written record of the “external Word”? Neither the Roman Church nor charismatic “prophets” then or now claim that the Spirit of the Lord narrated to them untold events in the life of the historical Jesus. And this is astonishing. Of all the claims to authority *over* the “external Word” (by the pope), and *along-side* the “external Word” (by the modern so-called “prophets”), *none* of them brings forth new information about the Incarnate Life and Ministry of Jesus Christ.

Rome will dare to add facts to the life of Mary [for example, the “Immaculate Conception”¹¹], but *not* to the Life of Jesus. Charismatic

⁹ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, p. 77.

¹⁰ It is true that “flesh and blood” cannot see the glory of the Lord (**Mathew 16:17**). Only the Spirit of God can open the eyes of the heart to see the Glory of God in the Face of Christ (**2Corinthians 4:6**). I am not denying that. I only mean, with Luther, that the Spirit does not reveal the Son apart from the “external Word.”

¹¹ Pope Pius IX announced the doctrine on December 8, 1854 with these words, “That the most blessed Virgin Mary, in the first moment of her conception, by a special grace and privilege of Almighty God, in virtue of the merits of Christ, was preserved immaculate from all stain of original sin.” Philip Schaff, ed. *Religious Encyclopedia*, Vol. 2, (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1888), p. 1064.

"prophets" will announce new movements of the Lord in the sixteenth century, and in our day- but *none* of them reports a new parable or a new miracle of the Incarnate Word that was omitted from the Gospels. So neither the supposed Roman "authority" nor the prophetic ecstasy of our day and theirs- adds to or deletes from the external Record of the Incarnate Word¹².

So why is the Spirit so silent about the Incarnate Word- even among those who encroach on the Authority of the external Word? The answer seems to be that it pleased God to reveal the Incarnate Word to all succeeding generations *through a Book*- the external Word- especially the Gospels. Luther put it like this:

"The apostles themselves considered it necessary to put the New Testament into Greek and to bind it fast to that language, doubtless in order to preserve it for us safe and sound as in a sacred ark. For they foresaw all that was to come and now has come to pass, and knew that if it were contained only in one's heads, wild and fearful disorder and confusion, and many various interpretations, fancies and doctrines would arise in the Church, which could be prevented and from which the plain man could be protected only by committing the New Testament to writing the language."¹³

We must understand that the sovereign Ministry of God the Holy Spirit does *not* nullify the Ministry of the "external Word." He does not *duplicate* what it- the Bible- was designed to do. The Spirit glorifies the Incarnate Word of the Gospels- Jesus Christ- but He does not *re-narrate* His Words and Deeds for illiterate people or negligent believers.

The immense implication of this for us today is that we Pastors are essentially "brokers" of the Word of God transmitted in a Book. We are fundamentally readers, and students and teachers and proclaimers of the Message of this Book- the *external* Word of God. And all of this is for the Glory of the *Incarnate* Word of God- Jesus Christ- by the Power of the indwelling Spirit of God. But neither the indwelling Spirit nor the Incarnate Word leads us *away* from the Book that Luther called "the

¹² 12. Critical historians do this. They use various historical criteria to deny that such and such saying of Jesus was not really said by Him, or such and such a miracle was not really done by Him. But none of these historians claim that they are retelling the story of the Incarnate Word because of the inspiration of the Spirit. In other words my point here is not that there are no attacks on the historical Jesus, but that the role of the Spirit is not to replace the role of the Book, and that the true Incarnate Word is revealed not by the Spirit apart from the Word.

¹³ 13. Hugh T. Kerr, *A Compend of Luther's Theology*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943) p. 17.

external Word." Christ stands forth for our *worship* and our *fellowship* and our *obedience from* the "external Word." So it is in the Book where we see the "Glory of God in the Face of Christ" (**2Corinthians 4:6**). So it's for the Sake of Christ that God the Holy Spirit *broods* over the Book where Christ is clear- and *not* over mystical trances or human concepts- where He is obscure.

So what I want to try to show you this morning is the powerful difference the *re-discovery* of the Authority of the Book made in the way Luther began the Protestant Reformation.

Martin Luther was born November 10, 1483, in Eisleben to a copper miner. His father had wanted him to enter the legal profession. In 1502 at the age of 19 he received his Bachelor's Degree, ranking him a dismal 30th out of a class of 57. In 1505, Luther received his Master of Arts degree at Erfurt and then- he ranked second among only 17 candidates. And it was during that summer that Luther's Providential Damascus-like experience happened. On July 2, on the way home from law school, he was caught in a thunderstorm and hurled to the ground by lightening. In terror, he cried out,

"Help me, St. Anne; I will become a monk"

... calling upon the supposed "patron saint of the miners", as Luther was yet unsaved. He feared for his soul and did not know how to find safety in the Gospel yet- so he took comfort in what was, in his mind, the *symbol* of the Gospel- the monastery.

Fifteen days later, to his father's great dismay, Luther kept his vow and on July 17, 1505, he knocked at the gate of the Augustinian Hermits in Erfurt and asked the prior to accept him into the order. Later on Luther would say that this choice was a "*flagrant sin- and not worth a farthing*", because it was made based on two things:

1. Rebellion *against* his father
2. Fear that God would damn him

... and not out of love for God. Then, he added, "*But how much Good the merciful Lord has allowed to come of it!*"¹⁴ Now it would be 20 more years until he married Katharina von Bora on June 13, 1525. So there

¹⁴ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* p. 125.

were 20 more years of wrestling with the temptations of a single man who had very powerful drives. But, *"in the monastery,"* he said, *"I did not think about women, money, or possessions; instead my heart trembled and fidgeted about whether God would bestow His grace on me ... For I had strayed from faith and could not but imagine that I had angered God, whom I in turn had to appease by doing good works."*¹⁵ There was no theological gamesmanship in Luther's early studies. He said, *"If I could only believe that God was not angry with me, I would stand on my head for joy."*¹⁶

On Easter Sunday, April 3, 1507, he was ordained to the priesthood. And Luther was so overwhelmed at the thought of God's Majesty, he said, *"I almost ran out of the Church"*. And it is said that this incident was not an isolated one in Luther's life.

A great recognition of the Holiness of God was to be characteristic of Luther throughout his entire life. And this prevented "pious routine" from creeping into his relations with God and kept his Bible studies, prayers, and readings from declining into the mechanical matter of course that typified the Church and its leaders of that day. Luther says that his ultimate concern in all these efforts was *"to encounter the living God."*¹⁷

For two years Luther taught aspects of philosophy to the younger monks. He said later that teaching philosophy was like *"waiting for the real thing."*¹⁸ And, in 1509 the "real thing" came and his beloved superior and counselor and friend, Johannes von Staupitz, "admitted Brother Martin to the Bible," which meant that he allowed Luther to teach the Bible instead of moral philosophy. So now Luther could teach Paul instead of Aristotle. And just three years later on October 19, 1512, at the age of 28 Luther received his Doctor's degree in theology, and Staupitz turned over to him the chair in Biblical Theology at the University of Wittenberg which Luther held the rest of his life. And Luther getting into the Bible and studying it and preaching from it and thinking about it and pondering the Words of sacred Scripture became the key to his own conversion and the formulation of the concept of "Sola Scriptura".

¹⁵ Ibid p. 128

¹⁶ Ibid p. 318

¹⁷ Ibid p.137

¹⁸ Ibid p. 145

So through all of these aspects of Luther's life- we can see that the Hand of God was upon him- even though he was not yet saved- and God was drawing Luther to Jesus Christ for the salvation of his own soul and toward the Reformation for the rescuing of Christ's Church *by, through, and in* the external Word of God- the Bible.

Now we need to understand that in the Church in Wittenberg in those days there were no programs- only worship and preaching using this schedule:

- ✓ Sunday 5:00 a.m. worship with a sermon from an Epistle
- ✓ Sunday 10:00 a.m. with a sermon from a Gospel Record
- ✓ Sunday afternoon sermon from the Old Testament or catechism
- ✓ Monday and Tuesday sermons were on the Catechism
- ✓ Wednesday's sermon was from Matthew's Gospel
- ✓ Thursday's and Friday's sermons were from the Apostolic Epistles
- ✓ Saturday sermon from the Gospel of John¹⁹

... and keep in mind that while Luther was doing all this- he was *not* the Pastor of the Church. The Evangelical historian, Walther von Loewenich said in his biography,

"Luther was one of the greatest preachers in the history of Christendom ... Between 1510 and 1546 Luther preached approximately 3,000 sermons. Frequently he preached several times a week, often two or more times a day."²⁰

Yet Luther knew the pressure and the heartache of having and rearing and losing children. His wife, Katie bore him six children in quick succession: Johannes (1526), Elisabeth (1527), Magdalena (1529), Martin (1531), Paul (1533), and Margaret (1534). But in 1528- the year between Elisabeth's and Magdalena's birth- the year in which he preached nearly 300 times- Elisabeth died at eight months old and so his preaching was under the great pain of personal loss.

And lest you might think that Luther simply neglected his family- consider that on Sunday afternoons- after having already preached twice- Luther led the household devotions- which were, for all intents

¹⁹ *Luther the Preacher*, pp. 37-38.

²⁰ Walther von Loewenich, *Luther: the Man and His Work*, trans. by Lawrence W. Denef, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986, orig. 1982), p. 353.

and purposes, was another worship service for an hour- including any guests that may have been there.²¹

We also need to know that Luther was not only a *part* of almost all the Church Controversies and Conferences that arose in his day- he was usually the *leader* of them. There was the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518, the encounter with Cardinal Cajetan at Augsburg in 1518, the Leipzig Disputation, with John Eck and Andrew Karlstadt in 1519, and the Diet of Augsburg in 1513.

And besides this active, personal involvement in all these Church Conferences- Luther produced an unbelievable stream of publications that are all related to the guidance of the Church and that were all from Scripture alone. For example, in 1520, he wrote and published 133 works, in 1522 130, in 1523 183 (which is one every other day!), and just as many in 1524.²²

For Luther- the importance of Bible Study was so interwoven with his discovery of the true Gospel that he could never treat it as anything other than utterly crucial and life-giving and history-shaping. For him- studying God's Word had been the gateway to the Gospel and to his own Salvation and to the Reformation and to God. We need to know that Luther did not become either convicted or saved through the celebration of the Mass or through his participation of the Sacraments or through any of the Church's rituals, nor did he come into contact with Jesus Christ from personal mystical experiences. Luther became convinced that he was lost and he discovered that Salvation was a sovereign Act of God through his time spent in the Book.

In our day of such ease and comfort- we take so much for granted about the Truth and about the Word that we can hardly imagine what it cost Luther to re-discover the Truth and sustain access to the Word. For Luther- studying God's Word really mattered. His very soul and the life of Christ's Church hung on it. And we need to ask whether all the ground that was gained by Luther and the other Reformers could be lost over time- if we lose this same passion for Bible Study- while simply *assuming* that Divine Truth will always remain obvious and available- even though we are so cavalier and lax.

²¹ *Luther the Preacher*, p. 38.

²² W. Carlos Martyn, *The Life and Times of Martin Luther*, (New York: American Tract Society, 1866), p. 473.

But to see how the external Word of God and Salvation through belief in the Gospel connect- let's go back to Luther's early years in Wittenberg. Luther himself dated his own great discovery of the Gospel and Salvation as being 1518- during his series of lectures on the **Psalms**- because the **Psalms** led him to read and study and teach and preach from **Romans**. He tells this story in his book, *A Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings*. And this account of his discovery as being the only way to Heaven is taken from the Preface of that book written on March 5, 1545, the year before his death. He said, "*In 1518- I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans.*" And specifically **Romans 1:16&17** that says:

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

17 For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "*BUT THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.*"

So, by studying this single Passage- Luther learned two things:

1. The Gospel itself was **"the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."**
2. *In* the Gospel itself- **"*the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith."**

... because **"*THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.*"** So, where were the Church Sacraments of Baptism and Confession and Penance and the celebration of the Mass that the Church was teaching were *necessary* for Salvation? Where were all the Church rituals? Where was the Rite of Penance? Where was all the indulgences? The Apostle said here in **Romans** that the Biblical Gospel- *all by itself*- was the Power of God for Salvation to:

"... everyone who believes"

... *not* to everyone who faithfully attends the Mass, *not* to those who are faithfully baptized or who faithfully adheres to the Rite of Penance- but, Luther re-discovered, that Salvation was for all those who *believe*! And

then the Apostle went onto say that God's very Own Righteousness becomes tangible to the sinful human "by faith" and *not* through all the various religious duties that Luther had been taught all his life. And to this re-discovery Luther said,

"I hated that phrase 'the righteousness of God,' *which according to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically* regarding the "formal" or "active" righteousness, as they called it, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.

"Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that God was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the Righteous God Who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, 'As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the Law of the Decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the Gospel and also by the Gospel threatening us with his righteous wrath!' Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, *I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.*

"At last, by the Mercy of God, *meditating day and night*, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it (the Gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed," as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." There *I began to understand* [that] the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the "passive righteousness" with which [the] merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Here a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. *Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory ...*

"And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'righteousness of God.' Thus *that place in Paul* was for me truly the gate of Paradise"²³

But, please notice just *how* God was bringing Luther to the Light of the Gospel of Justification. Luther gave six sentences- all of them

²³ John Dillenberger, ed. *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, pp. 11-12.

revealing the intensity of his own study and wrestling with the Biblical text. Listen to them again:

1. *I had indeed been captivated with an extraordinary ardor for understanding Paul in the Epistle to the Romans.*
2. *According to the use and custom of all the teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically. (An approach to study from which he was breaking free.)*
3. *I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.*
4. *At last, by the Mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words.*
5. *Thereupon I ran through the Scriptures from memory.*
6. *That place in Paul was for me truly the gate to Paradise.*

Now these are not the words of a lazy man nor of a man who did not know the Bible. He wrote in 1533,

"For a number of years I have now annually read through the Bible twice. If the Bible were a large, mighty tree and all its words were little branches I have tapped at all the branches, eager to know what was there and what it had to offer."²⁴

So, for Luther- it was a matter of life and death whether one studied the text of Scripture itself, or spent most of his time reading commentaries and secondary literature. Looking back on the early days of his study of the Scriptures he said,

"When I was young, I read the Bible over and over and over again, and was so perfectly acquainted with it, that I could, in an instant, have pointed to any verse that might have been mentioned. I then read the commentators, but soon threw them aside, for I found therein many things my conscience could not approve, as being contrary to the sacred text. 'Tis always better to see with one's own eyes than with those of other people."²⁵

²⁴ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Vol. 1, p. 83.

²⁵ Hugh T. Kerr, *A Compend of Luther's Theology*, p. 16.

Now it is important to understand that Luther didn't mean that there is no place at all for reading other books. After all- Luther himself wrote other books. But, he counsels us to make all other books *secondary* and make them *few*. As a slow reader myself, I find this advice very encouraging. Luther said,

“A student who does not want his labor wasted must so read and reread some good writer that the author is changed, as it were, into his flesh and blood. For a great variety of reading confuses and does not teach. It makes the student like a man who dwells everywhere and, therefore, nowhere in particular. Just as we do not daily enjoy the society of every one of our friends but only that of a chosen few, so it should also be in our studying.”²⁶

“The number of theological books should ... be reduced, and a selection should be made of the best of them; for many books do not make men learned, nor does much reading. But reading something good, and reading it frequently, however little it may be, is the practice that makes men learned in the Scripture and makes them pious besides.”²⁷

So instead of simply running to the commentaries and the fathers as a short cut to gaining Truth- Luther said, “*I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted.*” And this was not an isolated incident. He told his students that,

“... the student of Scripture should treat a difficult Passage no differently than Moses did the rock in the desert, which he smote with his rod until water gushed out for his thirsty people.”²⁸

Because,

“The Bible is a remarkable fountain: the more one draws and drinks of it, the more it stimulates thirst.”²⁹

²⁶ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Vol. 1, p. 112.

²⁷ *Ibid* p. 113

²⁸ Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, p. 224.

²⁹ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Vol. 1, p. 67.

So that is what Bible Study was to Luther- taking the Scripture the way Jacob wrestled with the angel of the Lord, and saying: *"It must yield! I WILL know the Word of God in this text for the sake of my own soul and for the sake of Christ's Church!"* That's how God burdened this Reformer- he wrestled and he struggled and he agonized with God's Word until he broke through to the true meaning of the "righteousness of God" in his own Justification. And that is exactly *how* this man also broke through the fog of Church Tradition and Human Philosophy and the tyranny of Mysticism, and that is *how* God used him to begin to restore the Church of Jesus Christ- Sola Scriptura- by Scripture alone!

Now we are not Luther and could never be- no matter how hard we tried. But the point here is: do we who stand in the pulpit to proclaim God's Word to the people- do we work at our studies with rigor and diligence, or are we slothful and casual about it, as if nothing really great is at stake? When he was just short of sixty years old- Luther pleaded with pastors to be diligent and not lazy.

"Some pastors and preachers are lazy and no good. They do not pray; they do not read; they do not search the Scripture ... But the Divine Call is: watch, study, and attend to reading- feed My sheep! In truth you cannot read too much in Scripture; and what you read you cannot read too carefully, and what you read carefully you cannot understand too well, and what you understand well you cannot teach too well, and what you teach well you cannot live too well ... The devil ... the world ... and our flesh are raging and raving against us. Therefore, dear sirs and brothers, pastors and preachers, pray, read, study, be diligent ... This evil, shameful time is not the season for being lazy, or for sleeping and snoring."³⁰

Now keep in mind that great personal suffering was also woven into the very fabric of Luther's life and in his understanding of Sola Scriptura. We need to keep in mind that in addition to all the preaching and all the studying and all the writing and all the reforming that was going on- in addition to all the sniping from critics who rejected his every move- from 1521 until the day of his death- Luther lived under the constant threat of immediate death from the Holy Roman Empire- which was neither "Holy" nor "Roman". The emperor Charles V said,

³⁰ Meuser, Fred W., *Luther the Preacher*, pp. 40-41.

"I have decided to mobilize everything against Luther: my kingdoms and dominions, my friends, my body, my blood and my soul."³¹

Now it is not a coincidence that after the Roman religious system *officially* and *formally* rejected the concept of "Sola Scriptura" at the Council of Trent later in the 16th Century- they continued on the path that led them to eventually proclaim on July 8, 1870, the "The Doctrine of Papal Infallibility" which declares that when the pope sits in the throne of St. Peter and speaks about matters of faith or morals- that what comes out of his mouth is "Infallible"- meaning that it does not possess the ability to be in error. So as Rome *rejected* the infallibility of the inspired Scriptures- they assigned this Power to the pope. And as they condemned Luther personally and what he taught about Scriptura- they extended that condemnation and persecution to all those who would follow Luther in believing and adhering to the concept of Sola Scriptura.

But, in addition to his ongoing persecution- Luther suffered *physically* from excruciating kidney stones and headaches with buzzing in his ears that developed into frequent ear infections. And, in addition to all this- Luther went through several bouts of deep and horrific depression. But these were the trials that he said made him a "real" theologian. These experiences were as much a part of Luther's exegetical labors as were his Greek lexicon, and they, too, were used by God to fashion his soul all the more to attend to God's Word- because *ultimately* it was from Scripture and *not* from his suffering that gave him what he had. Scripture helped Luther make sense of his suffering.

Luther also understood the role that prayer played in Sola Scriptura when he wrote in 1518,

"That the Holy Scriptures cannot be penetrated merely by study and talent alone is most certain. Therefore our first duty is to begin to pray, and to pray to this effect that if it please God to accomplish something for His glory—not for yours or any other person's—He very graciously grant you a true understanding of His Words. For no master of the Divine Words exists except the Author of these words, as He says: 'They shall be all taught of God' (**John 6:45**). You must, therefore, completely despair of your own

³¹Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil*, p. 29.

industry and ability and rely solely on the inspiration of the Spirit in and through your study.”³²

So to Luther that meant bathing all his work and all his studying and all his preaching in prayer, and casting himself so on God that He enters and sustains and prospers all his efforts for God’s Glory. And so Luther concluded that the true biblical way to study the Bible will be saturated with great prayer and with great self-doubt and with great God-reliance- moment by moment when he said,

“You should completely despair of your own sense and reason, for by these you will not attain the goal ... Rather kneel down in your private little room and with sincere humility and earnestness pray God through His dear Son, graciously to grant you His Holy Spirit to enlighten and guide you and give you understanding.”³³

Luther taught Sola Scriptura with an emphasis on prayer because he was persuaded from **Romans 8:7**, and elsewhere, that:

"The natural mind cannot do *anything* godly. It does not perceive the Wrath of God, and therefore cannot rightly fear Him. It does not see the Goodness of God, therefore it cannot trust or believe in Him either. Therefore we should constantly pray that God will bring forth His gifts in us.”³⁴

But to fully understand Luther's understanding of Sola Scriptura- it is extremely important to recognize that he realized that it was neither the “Indulgence Controversy” or the issue of “Purgatory” that was the central issue of the Christian Faith in the 16th Century. It was the inherent *powerlessness* of Man before God that was the central issue then and that is the central issue today. The Scriptures declare very clearly and repeatedly that sinful and fallen human beings are *entirely* powerless to justify ourselves, *entirely* powerless to sanctify ourselves, *entirely* powerless to study as we ought, and *entirely* powerless to trust God to do anything about this. And, therefore- *any*

³² *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Vol. 1, p. 77.

³³ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Vol. 3, p. 1359.

³⁴ Conrad Bergendoff, editor, *Church and Ministry II*, vol. 40, *Luther's Works*, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), pp. 301-302.

honest attempt at adhering to the concept of Sola Scriptura will say that- and it will magnify the majesty of God's Grace as a primary tenet.

Erasmus' exaltation of Man's will as being "free" to overcome his own sin and bondage- absent a sovereign Act of God- was, to Luther- an assault on the absolute Freedom of God's Grace, and, therefore, it was an assault on the very Gospel itself and could not stand. And so in his summary of faith in 1528 he wrote,

"I condemn and reject as nothing but error all doctrines which exalt our 'free will' as being directly opposed to this Mediation and Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. For since, apart from Christ, sin and death are our masters and the devil is our god and prince, there can be no strength or power, no wit or wisdom, by which we can fit or fashion ourselves for Righteousness and Life. On the contrary, blinded and captivated, we are bound to be the subjects of Satan and sin, doing and thinking what pleases him and are opposed to God and His Commandments."³⁵

For Luther- the issue of Man's bondage to sin and his "moral inability" to believe or make himself right- including the inability to study rightly- was the "root issue" of the Reformation- because it is what Scripture teaches. Therefore, nothing less than the Absolute Freedom of God, and therefore, the freedom of the Gospel, and therefore, the Glory of God and the Salvation of men was at stake in this controversy. Therefore, Luther loved this message from the book that he wrote, *The Bondage of the Will*, ascribing all Freedom and Power and Grace to God alone, and all powerlessness and dependency to Man:

"I recall that at the beginning of my cause Dr. Staupitz (one of Luther's mentors)... said to me: 'It pleases me that the Doctrine which you preach ascribes the Glory and everything to God alone and nothing to Man; for to God (that is clearer than the sun) one cannot ascribe too much Glory, Goodness, etc.' This word comforted and strengthened me greatly at the time. And it is true that the Doctrine of the Biblical Gospel takes all Glory, all Wisdom, all Righteousness away from men and ascribes them to the Creator alone, Who makes everything out of nothing."³⁶

³⁵ *What Luther Says: An Anthology*, Vol. 3, p. 1376-1377.

³⁶ *What Luther Says*, Vol. 3, p. 1374

And this is *why* prayer was the root of Luther's concept of Sola Scriptura, and why it should be ours as well. Prayer is the echo of the Freedom and Sufficiency of God in the heart of weak and powerless Man. It is the way Luther conceived of his theology and the way he pursued his studies. And it is the way he died.

At 3:00 a.m. on February 18, 1546, Luther died. And his last recorded words were, "*Wir sein Bettler. Hoc est verum.*" "We are beggars. This is true." So a correct understanding of Scripture- a proper use of the concept of Sola Scriptura teaches us that God is free- utterly free- in His Grace. And we are beggars- we are pray-ers.

So Luther gave us the gift of the *re-discovered* the Beauty and the Authority and the Sufficiency of the Scriptures. And he did that through his intense study of them. And that led him to develop the concept of Sola Scriptura. And so from God's Word we know that Justification *cannot* come from a participation of the Sacraments *nor* from conducting religious duties. But from knowing and understanding God's external Word- the Book- the Holy Bible- we know that Justification comes only by Grace and through Faith- by God graciously and sovereignly giving us the gift of faith that grants repentance and that opens our eyes to the Biblical Gospel, and that gives us both the ability and the desire to believe in that Gospel and put our trust in Jesus Christ and in His finished Work- which will forgive all our sins and save us to the uttermost.

And so that is Luther's understanding of the Reformed concept of Sola Scriptura- which we firmly hold on to today- that what we believe and what we teach today must come from the Scriptures and from Scriptures alone. And so that is how we are to live our lives- so that God gets all the Glory and we get all the Grace.

Amen. Let's pray

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The Covenant of Peace Church 13600 John Clark Road Gulfport, Mississippi 39503 228.832.7729 www.covenantofpeace.net

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.