

Scripture Alone

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[0 : 00] So it's 500 years since the Reformation. We mark it as, well, it's kind of Halloween, but it shouldn't be Halloween. It's the 31st of October, 1517, was the date that Martin Luther hammered his 95 theses into the door of a church in Wittenberg.

And that was kind of what triggered the Reformation. I've got my little Martin Luther figure here, the Playmobil figure. Now the best-selling Playmobil figure is your little Martin Luther.

You should all have one as we celebrate. 500 years since all of this happened. I'm going to put him over here just to see what he makes of the next half hour. Okay, he was quite outspoken, Martin Luther, but not today, as you can see.

So last week we introduced the series and we pointed out that it's got nothing to do with sectarianism, which has kind of blighted this city and lots of parts of the world and persecution of Roman Catholics and horrible things like that.

No, rather, we're looking back to a time when the only church in the UK, in Scotland, in Europe, was the church governed by the Pope in Rome, the Roman Catholic Church.

[1 : 05] And people within the church rediscovered truth from God about God's grace. We thought last week about how the Reformation wasn't making up new ideas. It was rediscovering what had been there all along, but had been lost in the medieval period.

And that rediscovery led to a revolution, a revolution in the church, but also a revolution in society that we still live with the consequences of today in terms of all kinds of things, our views of family and sex and what sex is for, our views of work and the dignity of human labor.

There was a revolution across Europe. And we can remember the revolution by these five solas. Solar just means only. And there were five things that were discovered. Last week, we looked at faith alone, sola fide.

This week, scripture alone, thinking about the Bible. And when it comes to the Bible, our culture has drifted enormously from the Bible, this generation, in the last couple of generations.

Just an example of that. At the coronation of our queen, Queen Elizabeth II, in 1952, the moderator of the Church of Scotland handed the queen a Bible.

[2 : 17] And he said to her this, Our gracious queen, to keep your majesty ever mindful of the law and the gospel of God as the rule for the whole life and government of Christian princes, we present you with this book, the most valuable thing that this world affords.

Here is wisdom. This is the royal law. These are the lively oracles of God. A few years ago, there was an anniversary of the King James translation of the Bible.

And there was an article in the Independent newspaper. One of the columnists, Boyd Tonkin, said this. He said, For anyone religious or not who cares about the continuity of culture and understanding, Gordon Campbell let slip a remark to freeze the blood.

A professor at Leicester University, he recalled that When the name of Moses came up at a seminar I was leading, no one had any idea whom he might have been.

Though a Muslim student eventually asked if he was the same person as Musa in the Quran, which he is. Now that is a breathtaking change in our culture in 50 years. That is extraordinary.

[3 : 29] From the unwritten constitution, handing the Bible to our monarch to say these are the very words of God, to a lecture theatre where university students don't know who Moses is.

And of course, that's in the world. Now the world has rejected God, okay, and not just over 50 years. The world is always rejecting God. But I've got no doubt that one of the causes of that cultural shift is that the church has rejected the Bible in this country.

And even among evangelical Christians, we're meant to be marked by our commitment to the Bible as God's word. Cut me and I bleed the Bible. It should be a motto of any evangelical Christian.

But in evangelical churches, the Bible has just been sidelined. As though in our desire for something new, our desire to move on to something, maybe a better experience, or maybe we find the Bible too challenging, we want something less challenging, we start to treat the Bible like your car manual.

So like with your car manual, if you've got a car, you know the car manual is important, you wouldn't throw it away, but it just sits on the shelf. And you go through life using your car every day without referring to the manual, but one day you might need it if things went wrong.

[4 : 42] And it's as though that's how we treat the Bible today. It's on the shelf in case we get stuck. Now 500 years ago in Scotland, none of us would have had access to a Bible.

The priests had a Bible. They had the Latin translation, which was wrong, so that wherever it said, for example, elder in the Bible, presbyter, it was translated as priest, so there's this idea that the priests are special people, the church leaders.

Whenever it said repent, so just have a change of mind and turn back to God, it was translated do penance as a work that you had to do to get right with God. But if you wanted to know about God, you went to the priest and you asked the priest.

What was key to the Reformation was that people started reading and learning the original languages that the Bible was written in and the truth they discovered that had been there all along exploded across Europe.

So we're going to think about the reason for Scripture alone, the meaning of Scripture alone, the fight for Scripture alone, and then last of all, so what, basically? Scripture alone today.

[5 : 47] There's points inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful. So we had Mark read to us as we think about the reason for Scripture alone. Jesus is being questioned by the Pharisees because his followers don't ceremonially wash in the way that the Pharisees, and if you were there at the time, kind of religious acceptance, thought of as required and normal.

And Jesus says in verse 8, you have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions. You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions.

Verse 13, Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down, and you do many things like that. See what he's saying? Jesus sits under an authority, and he expects us to sit under that authority.

He is a Bible man, and instead of the religious people at that time being Bible people, they're giving human commands and human tradition the authority, even where it contradicts God's word.

And you see that throughout Jesus' life. So when he explains that he's going to die, in Mark chapter 14, for example, he quotes the scriptures. He says the scriptures must be fulfilled as he goes to die.

[7 : 08] When he's tempted in the desert by the devil in Matthew chapter 4, he's tempted, and three times he responds with God's word. He says, It is written. He's living his life under God's word.

He dies his death under God's word in the scriptures, in the Bible. And if that's the authority Jesus lives under, of course, as his people, we should be under it as well.

Just think, in John chapter 14, Jesus said, If you love me, keep my commands. His attitude towards scripture has to be the attitude of anybody who loves him as we keep his commands.

So scripture is our authority. It's also sufficient. We don't need anything else. In 2 Timothy chapter 3, we read this. It's all we need to be saved.

It's on the screen. If we just get it on the screen. Writing to Timothy, Paul says this, From infancy, you have known the holy scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

[8 : 13] It's all you need to be saved. And the very next verse, we hear that it's all you need to live your life and be the person God wants you to be. All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

There is no good work God wants you to do that you cannot be equipped for through the Bible alone. Not that God doesn't speak in other ways. He speaks through creation about his character. The Bible talks to us about spiritual gifts that God has given to his church. And some of those gifts are word gifts, gifts of prophecy, gifts of tongues, as people are given gifts from God to equip the church, gifts of knowledge.

But there is a finality to God's revelation in the Bible that means that everything else is underneath that. We measure everything under that. And we don't need anything else from him.

So we go to the Bible and we find there the historical Jesus and he points us to the Bible as our authority in life. Now you might be thinking that all sounds quite circular.

[9 : 30] I've thought about Scripture being our authority and I've used the Bible to show you that's what it should be which is a circular argument, isn't it? But the thing is that when you're talking about what your ultimate authority is, the argument has to be circular.

See, there are things that can encourage you in your confidence that the Bible is reliable. You can go to archaeology. You can look at secular historians. You can look at the number of copies we have of the Bible and how reliable they are compared to when you date them and when it was first written.

So history and archaeology and scholarship can give you confidence in the reliability of the Bible. But if we say you should make the Bible your authority because of those things, they've become your authority.

And we have to say ultimately the reason we think the Bible is our ultimate authority is because that's what it says of itself. It says it's God's word to us. What we really mean when we talk about the authority of the Bible is it's the authority of God because he speaks to us through his word the Bible.

So that's our first point. Why Scripture alone? Secondly, what is Scripture alone? It doesn't mean that we worship the Bible. We worship Jesus Christ and we need the Bible to see him.

[10 : 50] Scripture alone also doesn't mean that there's no other authority in your life. So even in church life or in the Christian life there are other authorities. The classic ones people talk about are reason and experience and tradition.

So we need our reason so that we can understand what we're reading in the Bible and so that we can apply it to the situations we encounter in life. We need experience.

God made us to experience life walking with him knowing him as our heavenly father. He's given us his spirit living in us so that we can experience the joy of knowing him.

And we need tradition. There's been 2,000 years now of Christians nearly looking at the Bible and reasoning from it together.

So if you've got a question about God and his will it's extremely unlikely today that no one's ever asked it before. And we can go to tradition in the church the tradition of Christians down the ages to help us understand the Bible.

[11 : 54] In fact it's good to remember that if you've come up with a new interpretation of something in the Bible and you can't find anyone else who's ever thought it before it's almost certainly wrong. Okay?

A good phrase for I thought good motto for me when I was at college especially and encountering lots of different contemporary ideas about the Bible was if it's new it ain't true. Okay? If it's new it ain't true.

So we use reason experience and tradition but ultimately they are servants underneath the Bible so that if we're convinced that the scriptures say something clearly we submit to it even if our experience profoundly disagrees with it.

Scripture alone also means that we believe the Bible is actually clear as well and you see that in the Bible the assumption that the Bible is clear so in Deuteronomy 6 the people are commanded these words that I command you today shall be on your heart you shall teach them diligently to your children children can understand the Bible with the help of God's spirit in Psalm 19 verse 7 great verse for me the law of the Lord is perfect reviving the soul the testimony of the Lord is sure making wise the simple so even if you're simple you can be made wise by looking at the Bible it is clear and I think the biggest challenge today to the authority of God's word in his church is that people say it's not clear when we find it hard we say oh gosh it's very difficult whatever you decide really and that of course suits our post-modern culture whatever you choose to believe is true for you but when you look at how

Jesus spoke about the Bible there's something really important for us to grasp about the way Jesus handled disputes in his day about the Bible so that when two people came to Jesus with different ideas about the Bible it was never the Bible's fault for being unclear it was always the fault of the person who had the Bible wrong so in Mark chapter 12 the Sadducees come to Jesus they don't believe in life after death and Jesus says to them are you not in error because you do not know the

scriptures or the power of God and he quotes them Exodus 3 but he says have you not read in the book of Moses in the account of the burning bush how God said to him I am the God of Abraham the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob do you know what the Sadducees had read that when Jesus says have you not read it they had read it they just got it wrong and Jesus says when different people have different understandings of the Bible someone has it wrong of course there are things in the Bible that are hard to understand

[14 : 45] I personally I find it very difficult to know from the Bible what to do about whether or not to baptize children personally I find that difficult I've baptized our kids I think it's a hard one but in general we can trust that the Bible is clear and we should be confident of that if you are talking to other Christians and the plain reading of the Bible to you they are going against be confident the Bible is clear and we can talk about it now 500 years ago when the reformers discovered what we looked at last week that you can be made right with God by faith alone the church at the time the Roman church rejected it okay ultimately a lot of the reformers were burnt for what they believed okay when they rejected it they didn't say we reject this because we don't like the Bible of course they didn't they went to the Bible and they argued from it and they got the Bible wrong when people disagree people get the Bible wrong and we need to have that confidence today so that's what is scripture alone and that's what it means thirdly I just want us to think about the fight for scripture alone and this is where we're going to think back to the reformation last week we left Martin

Luther having discovered from the Bible that righteousness is a gift from God offered to you that you can receive by faith alone he was called by the Pope to a conference first of all the Pope actually wrote to him a papal bull which threatened his excommunication and he burnt it so by then Luther was becoming a bit of a character and he was called to a conference in the city of Worms so the conference is memorably called the Diet of Worms easy to remember because that is the Diet of Worms when you read it in English but that's not what it was and he stood there at that conference with the whole church against him the whole established church and he said this through the mercy of God I ask your imperial majesty and your illustrious lordships or anyone of any standing to testify and refute my errors to contradict them with the Old and New Testaments I am ready if better instructed to recant any error and I shall be the first to throw my writings into the fire the response was this you can see here the conflicting authority church or Bible the response was this your answer is not to the point there should be no questioning of things which the church councils have already condemned and on which decisions have already been passed give us a plain reply to this question are you prepared to recant or not do you see what's going on Luther is being asked is scripture your authority or is the church your authority he asked for time to consider it and then he said this your imperial majesty and your lordships demand a simple answer here it is plain and straight unless I am convicted of error by the scriptures and by clear reason I am bound by the scriptures I have quoted my conscience is captive to the word of God I cannot and I will not retract anything since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience here I stand I cannot do otherwise God help me amen and with such courage the reformation was born across Europe Luther's writings were being printed and sent across Europe and smuggled into Britain he translated the Bible into German so that people in Germany could read it for the first time in the west of England there was a brilliant linguist called William Tyndale and he had discovered from reading the Bible in Hebrew and

Greek the true gospel for himself he was opposed by a scholar and he said to the scholar I defy the pope and all his laws and if God spare my life in many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plow shall know more of the scripture than you do so he set his ambition to translate the Bible from its original languages into English but the bishops refused him permission the bishop of London said you cannot do that so Tyndale loved this country enough that he left knowing that he would never be able to come back so that he could give this country the Bible in English so he went to Worms actually just five years after Luther had been there for that conference and he translated the New Testament into English there so in 1525 his first New Testament emerged and it was getting smuggled into the UK key figures Henry VIII Cardinal Wolsey Sir Thomas Moore were furious they were buying up copies and burning them but he started a freedom movement where people were finding they were smuggled in wrapped up in cloths coming into the country people were finding these

Bibles so that every man and woman could read God's word for themselves so it was printed in the thousands in Wittenberg and then sent to Britain in bales of cloth Tyndale moved to Antwerp and he

spent a further nine years refining his translation of the Bible he translated the Old Testament as well and actually we still have today most of that translation in the King James Bible that's still used in some churches well 400 years on from the King James Version but 500 years from Tyndale's work as he did that he reshaped the English language again and again he was coming across words in the Bible and there was no translation for them in English so he had to make up words words like atonement at-one-ment bringing us back to God but in May 1535 he was betrayed by Henry Phillips led to soldiers and in October 1536 he was brought to the middle of a town square near Brussels strangled to death and burnt at the stake his final words were the prayer [20 : 46] Lord open the King of England's eyes incredibly just three years after he prayed that prayer Henry VIII published his English great Bible based on Tyndale's work and a law was passed that there had to be a copy in every church in the land the excitement was so great that priests started complaining that even during the sermon people in the congregation were just reading the Bible to each other in the pews no one was listening to the priests anymore the commoners the butchers the bakers were speaking about the Bible together in fact illiterate people learnt to read so that they could read God's great love letter to us the Bible there was no going back in this country so what about today well that's my fourth point so what four areas just to help us think about scripture alone today first of all in the wider church you look at the churches across Glasgow today and any city and you won't see us united under scripture alone that's the reality and that's quite deliberate the catechism of the Roman

Catholic Church published in 1992 said that there's not one authority for the church there are two authorities sacred scripture and holy tradition in fact they say this the church to whom the transmission and interpretation of revelation is entrusted does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy scriptures alone both scripture and tradition must be accepted and honoured with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence it's just one example one denomination but ultimately that's why churches it's the most fundamental reason why churches disagree today is because we have different authorities is your authority the tradition of your church is it your own experience of God is it your own reason or is it God's word the bible it still matters today and it matters personally for us because St Silas is a private chapel within the Scottish Episcopal Church which is part of the Global Anglican Church and in June our denomination as you know redefined marriage decided to allow the celebration of same-sex weddings that goes against the clear teaching of the bible we've had sermons we've looked at that together but the bible was sidelined in that debate in reaching that decision the bible was sidelined and that should deeply concern us as a church in partnership with those other churches this denomination was meant to have come out of the reformation as a reformed church but now stands on the wrong side of it because it's institutional unity matters to itself more than the truth revealed in the scriptures and if standing against that is costly for us let's remember what it costs people like Tyndale to give us God's word so that we would have life so that's the wider church just think as well about how we interact with the wider world as evangelicals today people committed to the bible we hit issues where sometimes the bible disagrees very strongly with what we think or how we feel and we need to ask ourselves will I let scripture be my authority it's worth saying that we should expect the bible to feel very strange to us at times because what we feel about right and wrong is shaped by our culture we were educated within our culture and we live in our culture we live and breathe the values of the people around us and it shapes us and so what we feel about right and wrong will go against what God says in his word unless we live in a culture that's got everything right in 1 Peter chapter 2 it gives us this warning about what it looks like to live for God it says dear friends I urge you as foreigners and exiles to abstain from sinful desires which war against your soul live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us there's a very positive end to that verse that people would see the distinctive godly lives of Christians and be drawn in to know God and glorify him but you see what else happens when we live our lives for God we should feel at times that we're going against kind of what we naturally feel is right or wrong because we have sinful desires that war against our souls and also the people around us will accuse us of doing wrong isn't that what we see today people accusing Christians who follow the Bible's teaching of being wrong of being harmful 1 Peter 2 says to expect that so the whole of our lives are under God's word not just what we do on a Sunday in Luther's words our consciences are taken captive to the word of God 50 years ago in our culture people wanted when they looked at Christianity they

wanted the morals without the miracles and so a generation of churches grew up that denied the miracles but preached the morals now today our culture wants the miracles without the morals you don't mind what you believe about did Jesus rise from the dead or the virgin birth as long as you don't follow the moral teaching of the scriptures that will affect how we feel but can we say like Luther did here I stand I cannot do otherwise a third implication is just thinking about our local church our congregation St.

[26 : 42] Silas what do we want for St. Silas what kind of church do we really want St. Silas to be the key principle for the reformers was this phrase *semper reformanda* which I'm told means it's always reforming the church was reformed but it's always reforming we should be a church reforming around God's word in all that we do so that when we have conversations and even arguments about for example what we sing at church and how we sing and what our singing is for we should do that seeking always to reform around God's word when we think about how we shape our church services the prayers that we pray our activities during the week and what they're there to do what our aims are as we meet together what our calendar looks like as a church always reforming around the word of God we shouldn't be frightened of change if it's changed to reform us under God's word and what about our attitude when we come to church what do we want from our gatherings on a

Sunday well sometimes I'm sure one could think do we have to have a sermon this week but when the Bible is faithfully preached we hear the voice of Christ and we encounter his presence with us Luther said this people generally think if I had an opportunity to hear God speak in person I would run my feet bloody but now you have the word of God in church and this is God's word as surely as if God himself was speaking to you it comes through a preacher as the Bible is expounded but done faithfully with the spirit of God at work we are hearing God speak and so we should come to church with bleeding feet desperate to be here to hear God and lastly for ourselves scripture alone we fill our lives with what we think will make us happy don't we and most of the time it is just junk food and the living bread of the scriptures is what we need to bring us true and lasting joy it takes discipline to put

Bible reading at the heart of your life every day but if we're willing to do that life changing treasure is there waiting for us to discover whoever we are and I feel like this sermon really today is giving you the notes to a poem hoping that you'll go and read the poem for yourself so that like the writer of Psalm 119 we could say to God oh how I love your law I meditate on it day and night the writer of Psalm 19 says the decrees of the Lord are firm and all of them are righteous they are more precious than gold than much pure gold they are sweeter than honey than honey from the honeycomb that joy from the Bible has been lost from much of evangelical Christianity today the reformers labored and suffered to give us that opportunity they knew that joy and if you commit yourself to reading your Bible every day prayerfully meditating on it you can share that joy we'll just have a moment of quiet and then we'll finish with a prayer written by the reformer of our own church

Thomas Cranmer which we'll say together it'll be on the screen let's pray together blessed Lord who has caused all holy scriptures to be written for our learning grant us that we may in such wise hear them read mark learn and inwardly digest them that by patience and comfort of thy holy word we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life which thou has given us in our savior Jesus Christ Amen