

THE BIBLE ALONE (*SOLA SCRIPTURA*) 2 TIMOTHY 3:14-17; 2 PETER 1:20-21

A few years ago, a book came out with the title The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible. It was written by a non-Christian man named A. J. Jacobs. I've not read it, but it's reportedly a funny book. It spent 11 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. Jacobs spent an entire year committed to obeying Bible commands as literally as he could. He lives in New York. He grew a beard, dressed like Moses, and started to eat kosher. The Old Testament commanded the people of Israel to stone Sabbath Day-breakers, so he would prowl around Central Park, looking for offenders. He didn't want to get arrested, so he would secretly pelt them with tiny pebbles from behind and then look the other way. Of course, that was kind of weird and absurd which is the point of the book. Jacob wrote, "Millions of people say they take the Bible literally. A 2004 Newsweek poll put it at 55%, but my suspicion was that almost everyone's literalism consisted of picking and choosing. People plucked out the parts that fit their agenda." Part of what he intended to show is no one can take the Bible literally. Of course, many people do pick and choose what parts of the Bible they believe in and obey, so his critique is fair. While his book is humorous, it's also dead wrong. He missed the whole point of the Bible. Sorry, Mr. Jacobs, but that's not what it means to take the Bible literally.

Sola Scriptura. Today we're considering the third *sola* out of five. What's a *sola*? *Sola* is the Latin word for "alone." 500 years ago this month, a spiritual revolution began called the Protestant Reformation led by a Roman Catholic monk named Martin Luther when he nailed 95 theological objections to Catholic teaching in his day to the door of the cathedral in Wittenberg, Germany. It eventually resulted in a major division in Christianity throughout Europe between Roman Catholics and Protestants that continues today all over the world. The major differences between the first Reformers – men like Martin Luther and others – and Roman Catholics back then can be boiled down to the five *solas*. This is not about picking a fight with Roman Catholics! However, as one way of honoring and recognizing our spiritual heritage as Protestants, we're taking a fresh look at each of these five core convictions for Christians. Let me share three basic truths with you that underline the meaning of *sola Scriptura*.

THE BIBLE ALONE HAS ULTIMATE AUTHORITY.

Don't Roman Catholics believe in the Bible? Of course, they do! But back in 1517, one of the major issues was the role of the pope and the teaching authority of the Church. The Bible was certainly thought to be God's Word, but Roman Catholic leaders said only they – the pope and other teachers - could accurately interpret it for everyone else. You didn't need to read the Bible for yourself, because they told you what was in it and what it meant for your life. Gradually, the traditions of the Church over the centuries as well as the interpretation of the Bible and its teachings by a few select, powerful men became even more important than the Bible itself. Luther and other Reformers strongly objected. They said Scripture is supreme. Sure, truth about God can be found in many places. The traditions of the church can be of great help. Human interpretations of the Bible are valuable, to be sure. But these are always secondary to Scripture itself. *Sola*

Scriptura simply means the Bible stands alone when it comes down to where the ultimate and most important truth about God can be found, What the Bible says, God says. So, in many ways, *sola Scriptura* was a major disagreement among followers of Jesus over authority. Who or what has ultimate authority for followers of Jesus? The Bible? The Church? Some combination thereof?

For many people who aren't followers of Jesus, it's hard to understand how anyone can believe any book – even the Bible – has authority over people's lives. How can a book written and put together by fallible human beings over thousands of years have some kind of final authority over anyone's life? That's a legitimate question! First of all, it's more accurate for Christians to say that all, ultimate, and final authority belong to God alone. The Bible never claims to have all authority. After all, it was the resurrected Jesus who said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." (Mt. 28:18 NLT) When we talk about the Bible's authority then, we're really talking about an authority derived from or granted by God Himself. When we say the Bible has authority, we mean God uses the Bible to express His truth in a final, authoritative way. At the end of the day, *sola Scriptura* means what the Bible says, God says.

There are passages in the Bible that tell us clearly that God has chosen to reveal Himself in and through the Bible itself. Here are two important ones to consider. Let me share with you four important "tions." What's a "tion"? It's just a theological word ending in the letters – tion! Christians believe the Bible is God's revelation. It's the truth about God given by God Himself to human beings. Additionally, it's inspired. Of course, the Bible is inspiring, but inspiration means something more. The Holy Spirit influenced the different authors of the 66 books that make up the Bible to write down exactly what God intended. That's what "God-breathed" or inspiration means. There are many different kinds of musical instruments that require you to blow air into them to make music: clarinets, oboes, flutes, trumpets, tubas – just to name a few. The biblical writers were like those instruments. The Holy Spirit was like the breath of God blowing His truth into those people. The actual words that got written down are like the music. That's why the Gospel of John doesn't sound like Genesis or Jeremiah doesn't sound like 1 Corinthians. John was a clarinet. Moses was an oboe. Jeremiah was a tuba. Paul was a trumpet. Each had a different sound, but the same Holy Spirit was blowing through them so that each one faithfully recorded exactly what God wanted to say to you and me for all time and forever. Then when the Holy Spirit enables you and me to understand God's inspired revelation, it's called illumination. It's like the proverbial lightbulb goes off and we say, "Wow! I understand what God was saying right there, why He said it, and how to apply it to my life." When we actually obey what the Bible teaches, you and I practice application.

Most people today believe they should be the final authority of their own lives. I decide what's true and false. I decide what's right and wrong. You can see how well that's working out in American society and culture right now. It's no wonder we're in such a mess! Everyone has their own truth and their own definition of what's moral. And it's all supposed to work together somehow even when your truth is the opposite of my truth and your morality is 180 degrees opposite of my morality. It reminds me of a summary

verse from the Old Testament book of Judges, “All the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes.” (Jg. 21:25 NLT) Just read the book of Judges. Chaos. Injustice. Anarchy. Despair. As a nation, the Jewish people refused to acknowledge the authority of the one, true King of the Universe. When human beings make themselves the final authority, the inevitable outcome is disaster. What the Bible says, God says. *Sola Scriptura*. The Bible alone has ultimate authority.

THE BIBLE ALONE CONTAINS THE GREATEST STORY.

The Bible isn't what most people picture when they hear the word authority. The Bible isn't primarily a book of commands to obey or a book of doctrinal statements to believe. Of course, the Bible has commands and it involves doctrine, but it is not mostly about that. Some people think of it as a kind of owner's manual for Christian living. That's wrong! Your car has an owner's manual. It's not a book you read for fun, right? You use an owner's manual to find out how to fix what's broken. Many people think you use the Bible like an owner's manual. “What should I do when I have doubts about God?” Page 32. “What's the right belief about the end times?” Page 64. “How do I fix my kid?” That's pages 12 to 1,094! The Bible's not arranged like that. People get confused and frustrated when they realize it doesn't function like an owner's manual.

N.T. Wright is a British Bible scholar who reminds us Scripture contains the greatest, most important, and most meaningful story out there. The Bible is primarily a God-orchestrated story. Not a fictional, make believe, fantasy story. No, this is an absolutely true story rooted in human history. That's a direct contradiction of much of what we hear today. Our culture says, in effect, “There's no ‘great story’ out there. Your life is random. There's no ultimate meaning to anything. Life has no great purpose.” But the Bible says there is a story. And we're in it. Our stories are part of a bigger story - the biblical story. And if you miss God's story, you'll miss everything that matters.

In 2012, 75 year-old Marion Shurtleff purchased a Bible in a used book store near her home in San Clemente, California. After making her purchase and returning home, she discovered a couple of folded pages tucked in the middle of the Bible. The contents of the yellowed notebook paper contained a child's handwriting that looked familiar. To her amazement, Marion discovered her name at the top of the first page. When she looked closer she realized she was actually reading a four-page essay she'd written as a 10 year-old to earn a merit badge for the Girls Scouts in Covington, Kentucky—more than 2,000 miles from where she'd just purchased the Bible. Marion was deeply moved. “I opened the Bible and there was my name,” she said. “I recognized my handwriting. I was shaking, literally. I was crying.” It's still a mystery how Marion's essay ended up in a used Bible in a bookstore half way across the country, but here's a thought. When we look deeply into God's Word we see evidences of our lives, too. In the Bible we see individuals just like us—people who pursue faith and hope in God, people who battle sin like doubt, lust, and pride. As we read the biblical stories about Abraham, Ruth, David, Mary, and Peter we also recognize our own life story.

Again, N.T. Wright says it might be helpful to think of the story of the Bible like a play with five acts. Act 1 is Creation. You can read about it in Genesis 1-2. God created the heavens and the earth in the beginning. That's why this world is full of stuff and most of it's really good. It's good to be alive. Life is good because God made it. We have beautiful days because God makes them. Cheryl and I enjoyed a wonderful vacation this summer in Glacier National Park in Montana. Mountains, lakes, cliffs, wildlife. Incredible beauty everywhere. God made it all and it's good.

Act 2 is the Fall. You can read that part of the story in Genesis 3-11. Adam and Eve rebelled against God and committed sin. Their son, Cain, killed his brother, Abel. Because of the Fall, injustice, violence, oppression flooded the world. This part of the story revealed that all the negative things found in this world past and present aren't accidental. Sin messed up God's good creation and affected human beings in destructive ways. Things definitely aren't the way they're supposed to be. It's not primarily because of ignorance or lack of progress. This world can't be fixed through education or technology. This world is broken because of sin, because of what has happened to the human heart. This is what we learn in act two. How did God deal with the tragedy of the Fall? Did He give up? Will the story have a hopeless ending?

Act 3 is all about the chosen nation of Israel. It begins in Genesis 12 and ends with the last book of the Old Testament – Malachi. No, this part of the story tells us God most definitely did not give up. He called a man named Abraham and told him he'd be the father of many nations. God used Israel to reclaim all the people of the world not just the Jews. He rescued this people out of slavery in Egypt. He made a covenant with them. "I will be your God, if you will be my people." God gave them an identity and a way of life. He gave them laws to live by, and here's just one place it's easy to misunderstand how the Bible's authority works and what it means to take it literally.

God's Word is authoritative for us in different ways. Here's one example. There are different kinds of laws in Act 3 - the Old Testament. The Old Testament contained moral laws. Here's two examples. "And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength." (Dt. 6:5 NLT) "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18 NLT) Most of those moral laws show up again in Act 4 and Act 5 of the biblical story meaning they continue to have relevance to and authority over us today. But our relationship to God today - which is Act 5 - because of what Jesus did in Act 4 changes how we interpret and apply much of the material in Act 3 which is about Israel. The Old Testament also had civil laws that helped Israel function as a nation in a godly way. They deal with things like people's property and how certain crimes were to be punished. But since God's people today are no longer restricted to one ethnic group or nation, our relationship to those kinds of laws is different today. There were also ritual or ceremonial laws. These were largely about worship – appropriate sacrifices, different worship events throughout the calendar year. All of that anticipated what Jesus accomplished on the cross as our perfect, final sacrifice. If we tried to go back and live under those laws, we'd actually violate their ultimate purpose. Sure, Act 3 is still a part of God's revelation; it's still inspired, but it functions as God's Word today in a different way. Yes, it's a part of the story – our story – but we live in a different act.

That's my problem with Mr. Jacobs and his attempt to follow the Bible literally for one year. He treated the Bible inappropriately. Because he never understood the Bible as a great story and treated it instead like a list of disconnected rules, he came to some very wrong conclusions. Here's an analogy. Back in May 1945, World War 2 ended in Europe while it continued on in the Pacific until August 1945. At that point in time, Allied soldiers who had been fighting against Nazi Germany began to rebuild Germany while they were still fighting against Japan in the Pacific. Imagine somebody looking back at World War 2 and concluding, "That's really odd. Sometimes Allied soldiers attacked German soldiers and bombed their country and sometimes they helped Germans even while they were trying to kill Japanese soldiers. I guess they just randomly picked and chose who to attack, who to kill, and when to help them." Insightful? No, it's stupid. The person just didn't understand the story of World War 2. They were ignorant of the story so they inevitably misunderstood the story. Because Mr. Jacobs is ignorant of the biblical story, he inevitably misunderstood its message.

Act 4 is about the life and ministry of Jesus as found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. His birth and major teachings. All four Gospels focus a disproportionate amount of their accounts on just one week in Jesus's life – his trial, death, burial, and resurrection. After His resurrection, Jesus interacted with two of His followers. "Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." (Lk 24:27 NLT) In other words, Jesus claimed everything in the Old Testament – Acts 1, 2, and 3 - led up to His life and ministry. The whole story is about Him. Everything about the whole story - creation, the Fall, the nation of Israel - finally makes sense now in the light of Jesus – who He is and what He accomplished.

What's Act 5? It's the Church which takes up the book of Acts through Revelation. After His resurrection, Jesus ascended back to the Father. He sent the Holy Spirit to His followers. He sent His followers out on a mission to the entire world - to proclaim the good news of God's salvation and God's love for sinful humanity. This part of the story – Act 5 - has been going on now for about 2,000 years. That's where you and I fit into the biblical story. We're in Act 5. We've been given the Holy Spirit, too. We're expected to pass on God's message to the next generation, too. We're called out to be a part of God's great mission through evangelism and discipleship, too.

In the Bible, you and I have access to God's great story. It's the story that gives your personal story meaning and purpose. That's one reason the Bible is front and center in our recent efforts to create a discipleship culture at KRBC. When our triads get together, we want an open Bible in front of each person. Some people complain that understanding the Bible isn't easy. Well, what in life is easy that's also deeply worthwhile and profoundly transforming? Do whatever it takes to become a student of the Bible. Read it, meditate on it, memorize it, and ask questions about what it says. But most of all, do what it tells you to do. Submit yourself to what this book tells you about how to please God. Don't allow your culture or your personal preferences to have authority over your life. Instead, allow the Bible to be authoritative over your choices, decisions, and lifestyle. One day Act 5 will be all over. We'll enter a whole new story.

And according to the Bible, the new story is so much better than the one we experience now. *Sola Scriptura*. The Bible alone contains the greatest story. A final thought...

THE BIBLE ALONE HAS SUPREME VALUE.

“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.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17 NIV) Right there Scripture itself tells you and me it has supreme value because God uses it in a unique way. By it, God teaches you. How else could you know anything true or reliable about God or about Jesus if it wasn't for the Bible? In addition, the Bible is full of positive and practical instruction on how to live in a way that pleases God. Through Scripture, God rebukes you. True, it's no fun getting rebuked, but it's a necessary part of becoming the person God wants you to be. I agree with Mark Twain, the famous author, who said, “It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me. It's the parts I do understand that give me fits.” But if you really want to please God and become the person He wants you to be, you'll open yourself up to the occasional biblical rebuke.

Through the Bible, God corrects you. Where can you find truth in the midst of all the different and competing theories out there about what's real, what's important, and what's the meaning and purpose of life? The more you know your Bible, the more you're able to evaluate what's real, true and important, and then allow God to correct your perspective. By Scripture, God trains you. Trains you for what? It says there – righteousness. That simply refers again to how you relate to God daily which will inevitably also affect every other relationship in your life and how you live your life every day. Finally, through the Bible, God equips you. In other words, the Bible will help you do the stuff that pleases God and blesses other people. The Bible's primary purpose isn't to provide you with lots of interesting information or even to satisfy your curiosity. Ultimately, the Bible was given to you and me to enable us to live to God and for God. It has supreme value. *Sola Scriptura*.

Have you ever heard of Jacob DeShazer? He participated in Jimmy Doolittle's bombing raid over Japan in 1942 – the first American response to the Pearl Harbor attack. His plane ran out of fuel and he was captured by the Japanese. He was tortured and tormented in a prisoner of war camp for the rest of the war years. He watched friends go before firing squads and others die of starvation. Though he was an atheist, the constant pain and deprivation made him consider issues of life and death. He asked one of his jailers for a copy of the Bible and was met with scorn. But he kept asking and more than a year later, a guard brought him a Bible. He told DeShazer, “Three weeks, then I take it away.” Sure enough, three weeks later the guard returned and confiscated DeShazer's Bible. But those three weeks changed his life. He read the Scriptures over and over again.

One day before the Bible was taken away, Jacob DeShazer received Jesus as his Lord and Savior in a Japanese prisoner of war camp. He applied what he remembered to his harsh life in prison – especially the part about loving your enemies and blessing those

who curse you. After the end of the war, in 1948, Jacob DeShazer returned to Japan with his wife, Florence, as a missionary. Can you imagine? Army chaplains had distributed more than a million tracts containing DeShazer's testimony entitled, "I Was a Prisoner of the Japanese." Thousands of Japanese people wanted to see the man who could forgive his enemies. In his first few months in Japan, the former bomber spoke in two hundred places. Soon he and Florence helped Japanese Christians establish churches. They served the Lord in Japan for the next thirty years.

The Word of God has the power to change your life through the Holy Spirit. It alone has ultimate authority. It alone contains the greatest story. It alone has supreme value. *Sola Scriptura*. The Bible alone.