

# Scripture alone: 'Is the Bible all we need?'

*Tim Grass*

*This is the third of four addresses, subtitled 'Key Themes of the Protestant Reformation' by one of the Editorial Board of Evangel. It was originally delivered in an Anglican context (and is coloured thereby!).*

**KEYWORDS:** Reformation, faith, practice, tradition, individualism, authority, creeds, church, revelation, inspired, salvation, holiness, Jesus Christ, word, sacrament, translation, relationship

Many Christians nowadays say that the Bible alone is our authority in faith and practice. We sometimes hear the Reformation described as a contest of Scripture *versus* tradition. You will often find the phrase 'Scripture alone' is used to summarise Reformation thinking about Scripture, as if they didn't accept any other authority. But don't be misled. That kind of approach says more about the thinking of some people today than about the Reformers! What people today often mean by 'the Bible alone' is 'me and the Bible without any outside help', or 'my interpretation of the Bible is the only one' (cf. Gilbert & Sullivan 'In matters controversial my perception's very fine, / I always see both points of view, the one that's wrong – and mine.'). It is not surprising, therefore, that Orthodox and Roman Catholic writers accuse us of individualism, of believing that individual Christians have no need of the church or of the tradition of Christian theology.

But when the Reformers talked about 'Scripture alone', they did not mean to say that we can do without the church or tradition. For the Reformers, Scripture was not the *only* authority, but it was the *supreme* authority, in all aspects of

Christian faith and practice. Every other source of Christian teaching, such as preachers, creeds or confessions of faith, was subject to correction in the light of Scripture. In the same way, the Reformers valued the church's theological tradition, but they held that it must always be subject to further reform in the light of Scripture. The other authorities, such as the creeds of the early church, were accepted because they were seen as faithful summaries of Bible teaching (Article 8). On the other hand, there were some more recent traditional practices and beliefs which the Reformers wanted to question. Often, in the Articles, particular ideas were rejected precisely because they were believed to be contrary to Scripture. The church is to be 'a witness and a keeper' of Holy Scripture (Article 19). It must not insist that its members believe or practise anything which is contrary to Scripture. In the eyes of the Reformers, the medieval church was guilty of the same sin as the scribes in Jesus' day: he condemned them because by their traditions they made the word of God ineffective (Mark 7); they rejected the commandments of God in order to keep their own traditions. So the Reformers insisted that theology should return to Scripture as its primary source and supreme authority. And they treated the Scriptures as the supreme authority because they believed that the Bible was unique.

For the Reformers, **the Bible was unique** because it had its origin in God's revelation of himself to humanity. They explained that, as finite and sinful human beings, we can know God only because he has chosen to make himself

known, that God made himself known supremely in Jesus Christ, and that the Bible was a trustworthy and divinely-inspired witness to Christ. The authority of the Bible, then, comes from the fact that it represents God speaking. The bible is often described as 'inspired', and sometimes people think that means 'inspiring' but the Greek word would be better translated as 'God-breathed'. It is the production of human writers, and yet it is also the production of the Holy Spirit. And the Reformers said that the Bible's inspiration, its 'God-breathedness', if you like, is confirmed to us by the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit, who bears witness in our hearts to its truthfulness.

**So is the Bible all we need today?** In one sense, yes; in another, no. That sounds as if I'm trying to have my cake and eat it!

*It is all that we need* because it contains all that we need to know for salvation and growth in holiness. 2 Tim. 3:16,17; Article 6: 'Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation.' One reason why I accept the Bible as God's revelation of himself is, to use Coleridge's words, because 'it finds me'. Time and again it speaks to me – when it's read, or listening to a sermon, or when it comes to my mind at home, and I know I can't ignore it.

For the Reformers, as for the Fathers of the early church, the Bible was Christ-centred; he was the key to making sense of it. We are saved not by swallowing a book, but by coming into a living relationship with the one whom that book is about – Jesus Christ. We dare not neglect the Bible in favour of cooking up our own ideas about God, but that is because the Bible is a book about Jesus, and he is the one who has made God known to us because he is God incarnate, as the beginning of John's gospel makes clear: 'No one has seen God at any time, except the only-begotten Son; he has made him known.' The Reformers' commitment to the Bible was bound up with their commitment to Jesus Christ.

*It is not all that we need* because God intends us to live the Christian life, not on our own, but together, and we benefit from the gifts of one another in the church. Among the gifts which God has given are teachers to help us to understand the Bible and apply it to our lives. And that applies not just to our generation, but to past generations. It may be tempting to adopt a negative attitude toward Tradition, and I notice that my students often have that at the start of the course I teach, but we can view it in a positive way, as the voice of those through whom the Spirit has worked in previous generations to bring glory to Christ and understanding of the divine revelation. Since we readily affirm the gifts of those through whom he works today, this should not present us with any problem. After all, St Paul urged the Thessalonian Christians to hold fast the traditions they had received from him (2 Thessalonians 3:6), and he commanded Timothy to pass on what he had learned from Paul to faithful men who would, in turn, be able to teach others (2 Timothy 2:2) – four generations in one verse! That's how the gospel came to us, just as it did to the Christians at Corinth (1 Corinthians 15:1-3): it was handed down.

Also, the Reformers insisted that the Christian ministry was a ministry of word and sacrament. The sacraments of baptism and the eucharist derived their force from the fact that they were not magic rites but visible declarations of the promises of God. So we don't just hear God's word preached

and read, but the same truths are presented to us in sacramental form. God knows how we are made, and has provided them as signs and seals of our Christian faith.

**What the Reformers *did* tells us as much about what they believed concerning Scripture as what they *said*.** This is clear from their understanding of Christian ministry and worship. The primary task of Catholic priests was to celebrate the sacraments, which were seen as the main channels of God's grace. The Reformation brought a new emphasis on teaching and preaching, because the Reformers believed that the Holy Spirit used the word to create faith in the hearts of the hearers. Indeed, they regarded preaching as one of the marks of the true church. In the Anglican Ordinal, candidates for the priesthood were asked: 'Are you determined, out of the said Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge, and to teach nothing, as required of necessity to eternal salvation, but that which you shall be persuaded, may be concluded and proved by the Scripture?' Candidates for the office of bishop were asked the same question.

Some of them, the Anabaptists, were quite radical in their commitment to understanding the Bible. Often, Anabaptist services were more like our Bible study groups; anyone could contribute, because they believed that as God's people came together, he would give them understanding of his word. And he could use anyone in the fellowship to do that, not just the 'experts'. What mattered was not interpreting the Bible so much as obeying it. They became known for their familiarity with the Bible, their passion to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, and their desire to live in accordance with its teachings.

Most importantly, some of the Reformers translated Scripture into their own languages. When Luther was forced to spend 10 months hidden away in a castle for his own safety, he worked on translating the New Testament into German. An English priest named William Tyndale risked, and ultimately lost, his life because of his passion to translate the Scriptures into English – and incidentally, Tyndale's translation has given the English language a number of proverbial expressions, such as 'the salt of the earth', 'the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak', or 'a law unto themselves'. Calvin's cousin, Pierre Olivetan, translated the Scriptures into French.

And what we do may tell people more than what we say. How much do we value the Scriptures? How keen are we to get to know them better, and to understand what we read and hear? It's marvellous that we hear so much of the Scriptures read in church: do we, in Jesus' words, 'take heed how we listen'?

But if the Bible is God speaking to us, then we have to think **how we are going to respond to it**. Tyndale had this to say: 'the nature of God's word is, that whosoever read it or hear it reasoned or disputed before him, it will begin immediately to make him every day better and better, till he be grown into a perfect man in the knowledge of Christ and love of the law of God: or else make him worse and worse, till he be hardened [so] that he openly resist the spirit of God, and then blaspheme . . .' In other words, it will either make us better or it will make us worse, but it won't leave us as we were. The Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures, and whose mission is to point us to Jesus Christ, invites us to respond to him. In the words of the *Venite*, 'Today, if you hear his voice,

do not harden your hearts . . . ' (Psalm 95:7)

**Can we still believe in the Bible as God's revelation to us?** That's a question which there isn't time to say much about now, but the short answer for me is 'Yes'. We value all the light on the Bible which has come through scholars whom God has given to the church, and we need never be

afraid to face up to the challenges presented by modern science and so on. But for me, when all is said and done, this is a book which tells me about how and why God became man, and a book through which the Holy Spirit invites me into a relationship with God.

---