God’s Word Alone is both a fitting tribute to its Reformation sola name-sake and a constructive contribution to the doctrine of Scripture in its own right. Sola Scriptura has become something of a whipping concept in contemporary theology, but Barrett’s book goes a long way to correcting modern and postmodern caricatures of the doctrine. I particularly appreciated the chapters on the Reformers’ own understanding of Scripture as the supreme and final authority for the church and how this is rooted in its being the only wholly reliable authority, a consequence of its nature as divinely authored and inspired. Barrett here covers all the theological bases—biblical, historical, and systematic—as one might expect of a home run.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Perhaps the greatest crisis in the evangelical world today is the loss of any meaningful commitment to the functional authority of Scripture. While lip service is paid to biblical “inspiration” and perhaps even some sense of the Bible’s “infallibility,” the final, functional authority of inerrant Scripture to govern both our beliefs and behavior has gradually disappeared. This alone makes Matthew Barrett’s book on sola Scriptura so essential to the church in our day. If the Bible, and the Bible alone, isn’t our final and determinative authority, the church will have lost its bearings and be cast hopelessly adrift on the sea of personal subjectivity. It is a massive understatement to say this book is much needed today. I cannot recommend it too highly.

Sam Storms, Lead Pastor for Preaching and Vision, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, OK

The 500th anniversary of Luther’s nailing the ninety-five theses to the door of the chapel of the Wittenberg Castle provides an eminently suitable occasion to remind ourselves of one of the five solas of the Reformation: sola Scriptura, “Scripture alone.” Matthew Barrett takes his readers through some of the controversies surrounding the Bible that have arisen across this last half millennium and competently demonstrates the relevance of the doctrine of Scripture in our day. In the final analysis, the issue is revelation: What is the locus of God’s gracious self-disclosure—God generously giving up his privacy, as Carl Henry used to say?

D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School
Matthew Barrett’s *God’s Word Alone* is a comprehensive discussion of the nature and role of Scripture. He deals with the church’s historical controversies, especially during the Reformation period, with the place of God’s speech during the history of redemption, and with all the topics of current discussion including inerrancy, clarity, and sufficiency. Barrett’s knowledge is very broad and his position thoroughly biblical. I pray that God will give it a wide distribution.

**John M. Frame**, J. D. Trimble Professor of Systematic Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological Seminary Orlando

The Reformation doctrine of *sola Scriptura* teaches that the Bible is the only infallible and sufficient rule for Christian faith and practice. Matthew Barrett’s new study provides persuasive evidence that this doctrine is firmly rooted not only in the Reformation but in the early church and in Scripture itself. In very readable prose, Barrett graciously provides thoughtful and nuanced responses to the objections of critics of this doctrine. Moreover, he demonstrates that the doctrine of biblical inerrancy has resided as a central teaching of the Western churches since the patristic era. This is a welcomed and much-needed resource for Christians in a day in which much confusion exists regarding the doctrines of *sola Scriptura* and biblical inerrancy. For this reason, the volume belongs in the libraries not only of teachers, seminary students, and pastors but laypersons as well. Highly recommended.

**John D. Woodbridge**, Research Professor of Church History and Christian Thought, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois

This book—what a feast! Appetizing opening chapters recount how the Bible’s authority came to be trashed in the modern West, even in many church circles. Then comes the main course: how God’s saving work and presence have always intertwined with his written Word. Lastly, dessert: tasty slices of Scripture’s truth, clarity, and sufficiency. A world awash in error and self-destruction cries out for meaning and direction. This book shows why skepticism of Scripture is a bad idea, and why devoting ourselves to studying, living, and spreading the Word of God...
written—inspired, inerrant, and authoritative—holds such promise, for this world and the next.

Robert W. Yarbrough, Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri

Matthew Barrett’s book on the authority of Scripture is a welcome addition to the growing number of recent books on Scripture. I loved the richly theological texture of the book. From beginning to end we are treated to a deep and careful reflection on what is entailed in the recognition of Scripture as the Word of God written. The Bible’s own teaching rightly has a prominent place. The teaching of the Reformers is appropriately a particular interest, given the series in which this volume appears. Modern and postmodern challenges, and the detailed, informed responses that have been made to them, are given due attention. Yet Barrett keeps drawing the lines of connection to the person and character of the God whose word Scripture is. Assaults on the Word of God go back to the garden of Eden. Ultimately they each involve an assault upon the person, character, and purpose of God even when this is not the conscious intent of those involved. Here is an articulate, informed, edifying, and persuasive account of why the Reformation doctrine of sola Scriptura should be taught, celebrated, and defended—not only against those who would deny it but also against those who claim to hold it while perhaps defining it in a way that unwittingly exalts the individual (“Scripture alone” doesn’t mean “me alone”). I expect to be recommending this book often.

Mark D Thompson, Principal, Moore Theological College, Sydney

Without belief in Scripture alone as our supreme and trustworthy authority, the very faith of the church must totter. Dr. Barrett has mounted an impressive defence of the key Reformation doctrine of Scripture, demonstrating just how vital it remains today. This book will do great good in grounding the faith of a new generation.

Michael Reeves, President and Professor of Theology, Union School of Theology, Oxford, England

Sometimes the doctrine of Scripture is treated as separate from the other doctrines of Christianity—as a sort of preamble to the faith. Helpfully, Barrett draws in the Bible’s own Trinitarian, covenantal, and
salvation-historical themes to offer a persuasive alternative to various attempts to evade scriptural authority. It’s an argument, to be sure, but also an edifying essay that helps us to understand what we’re doing when we submit our reason to God’s judging and saving speech.

Michael Horton, J. G. Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; author of The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way

I welcome this fresh study of the formal principle of the Reformation—the belief that God’s written Word is the inspired norm by which all other religious authorities and traditions must be judged. Evangelicals are gospel people and Bible people, and this book shows why adherence to the latter is crucial for the advance of the former.

Timothy George, founding dean, Beeson Divinity School of Samford University; general editor of the Reformation Commentary on Scripture

On the foundation of a careful examination of the confession of biblical authority and challenges to that confession from the Reformation through postmodern debates within evangelical circles, Barrett’s work sets for a nuanced proposal for the utterly reliable, error-free Scriptures which center on God’s coming to earth as Jesus Christ. Barrett’s Trinitarian presentation of the metanarrative from creation in Genesis to the last day in Revelation offers readers useful patterns for presenting and applying the Bible and its message within the twenty-first-century context.

Robert Kolb, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri

Every generation must think afresh what the foundations of its faith are. The Bible is the unchanging Word of God, but our perceptions of its role and relevance deepen as we confront new challenges that our mission to the world throws up. In this clearly presented and closely argued book, Dr. Barrett takes us through the main issues of our time, showing how and why they have arisen and offering ways and means by which they may be addressed. This is a key work and a valuable resource for pastors, teachers, and students alike.

Gerald Bray, Research Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University
God’s Word ALONE THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE
The Five Solas Series
Edited by Matthew Barrett

Books in Series:
God’s Word Alone—The Authority of Scripture
by Matthew Barrett
Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior
by Stephen Wellum
Grace Alone—Salvation as a Gift of God
by Carl Trueman
Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification
by Thomas Schreiner
God’s Glory Alone—The Majestic Heart of Christian Faith and Life
by David VanDrunen
God's Word Alone

The Authority of Scripture

What the Reformers Taught . . .
and Why It Still Matters

MATTHEW BARRETT

FOREWORD BY R. ALBERT MOHLER JR.

ZONDERVAN®
To my mother,
for giving me the sacred Scriptures.
“Jesus loves me this I know,
for the Bible tells me so.”

*Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum*
“The Word of the Lord endures forever”
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A Note from the Series Editor

What doctrines could be more foundational to what it means to be an evangelical Protestant than the five solas (or solae) of the Reformation? In my experience, however, many in evangelical churches today have never heard of sola Scriptura (Scripture alone), sola gratia (grace alone), sola fide (faith alone), solus Christus (Christ alone), and soli Deo gloria (glory to God alone).

Now it could be that they have never heard the labels but would recognize the doctrines once told what each sola means. At least I pray so. But my suspicion is that for many churchgoers, even the content of these five solas is foreign, or worse, offensive. We live in a day when Scripture’s authority is questioned, the exclusivity of Christ as mediator as well as the necessity of saving faith are offensive to pluralistic ears, and the glory of God in vocation is diminished by cultural accommodation as well as by individual and ecclesiastical narcissism. The temptation is to think that these five solas are museum pieces of a bygone era with little relevance for today’s church. We disagree. We need these solas just as much today as the Reformers needed them in the sixteenth century.

The year 2017 will mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. These five volumes, written by some of the best theologians today, celebrate that anniversary. Our aim is not merely to look to the past but to the present, demonstrating that we must drink deeply from the wells of the five solas in order to recover our theological bearings and find spiritual refreshment.

Post tenebras lux

Matthew Barrett, series editor
As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, I am tremendously grateful for the literature that faithful Protestant and evangelical scholars are producing that advances the great truths recovered by Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers. We must always remember that what was at stake in the Reformation was nothing less than the authority of Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Many historians note that two driving principles served as the engine to Reformation theology. The material principle of the Reformation was *sola fide*—the doctrine of justification by faith alone. This central emphasis in Luther’s theology was not only the truth of the gospel that liberated him from perpetual guilt and “swung open the gates of heaven” but it was also the public rally point for the Reformation. The truth that sinful man could be justified by faith alone, apart from works of the law and apart from the sacramental system of Rome, ignited the firestorm of the Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe.

Yet behind this “material principle” of the Reformation was a deeper and perhaps even more fundamental commitment—*sola Scriptura*, or the affirmation that the Bible alone is the ultimate authority for life and doctrine. Historians refer to *sola Scriptura* as the formal principle of the Reformation, the doctrine that shaped the contours of Reformation conviction. It was this commitment to the ultimate authority of Scripture that gave the Reformers the courage to separate with Rome in their proclamation of the gospel.

True Christianity and true gospel preaching depend on a firm commitment to the authority of Scripture. That is why, since the time of the Reformation, the inspiration, inerrancy, and authority of Scripture have been under constant attack. In the Enlightenment, modernist philosophers like Descartes, Locke, and Kant confronted Western culture with a series of questions that ultimately transformed the notion of truth in the Western mind. The result was a totalitarian imposition of the scientific model of rationality upon all truth, the claim that only scientific data can be objectively understood, objectively defined, and objectively
defended. In other words, the modernist worldview did not allow for the notion of special revelation and openly attacked the possibility of supernatural intervention in world history. Modernity thus presented the church of the Lord Jesus Christ with a significant intellectual crisis.

In the United States, there was a quintessentially American philosophy that developed, known as pragmatism, that also challenged the ultimate authority and truthfulness of Scripture. Pragmatism was the idea that truth is a matter of social negotiation and that ideas are merely instrumental tools whose truthfulness will be determined by whether they meet the particular needs of the present time. In the eyes of the pragmatists, ideas were nothing but provisional responses to actual challenges, and truth, by definition, was relative to the time, place, need, and person.

As most of us are aware, modernity has given way to postmodernity, which is simply modernity in its latest guise. Postmodernism is nothing more than the logical extension of modernism in a new mood. Claiming that all notions of truth are socially constructed, postmodernists are committed to total war on truth itself, a deconstructionist project bent on the casting down of all religious, philosophical, political, and cultural authorities. A postmodernist ahead of his times, Karl Marx warned that in the light of modernity, “all that is solid melts into air.”

The only way to escape the rationalist claims of modernism or the hermeneutical nihilism of postmodernism is the doctrine of revelation—a return to the doctrine of sola Scriptura. Christians must remember that in the doctrine of the inspiration and authority of Scripture bequeathed to us by the Reformers, we can have confidence in God’s Word in spite of the philosophical and theological problems of the age. God has spoken to us in a reasonable way, in language we can understand, and has given us the gift of revelation, which is his willful disclosure of himself. As Carl F. H. Henry stated, special revelation is nothing less than God’s own forfeiture of his personal privacy so that we might know him.

Indeed, the war against the authority and truth of Scripture has been raging since the Reformation and has continued into our own generation. Back in 1990, theologian J. I. Packer recounted what he called a “Thirty Years’ War” over the inerrancy and authority of the Bible. He traced his involvement in this war in its American context back to a conference held in Wenham, Massachusetts in 1966, when
he confronted some professors from evangelical institutions who “now declined to affirm the full truth of Scripture.” That was fifty years ago, and the war over the truthfulness of the Bible is still not over—not by a long shot.

As Evangelicals, we must recognize that as the theological heirs of the Reformers, we cannot capitulate to revisionist models of the doctrine of Scripture. An affirmation of the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible has stood at the center of the Reformed faith since the sixteenth century. We are those who confess along with the Reformers that when Scripture speaks, God speaks. Scripture alone is the ultimate authority for life and doctrine. In a sense, Reformed theology hangs on the accuracy of that singular proposition.

The theology of the Reformation cannot long survive without the church’s explicit commitment to the authority of Scripture above all else. Without the authority of Scripture, our theological convictions are merely conjectures and our preaching becomes nothing more than a display of human folly. As the Reformers understood and taught, sola Scriptura is vital for the life of the church. Scripture is the fount from which flows all faithful preaching, discipleship, and worship.

Matthew Barrett’s God’s Word Alone is a faithful restatement of the Reformation doctrine of sola Scriptura. Barrett carefully and compellingly argues for the divine inspiration and ultimate authority of Scripture. Barrett also shows that Scripture claims for itself the attributes of inerrancy, clarity, and sufficiency. He does all of this with careful attention to the modern theological challenges that have attempted to overthrow a biblical doctrine of Scripture. This is the type of book of which the Reformers would have been proud. This is the type of book the church needs today.

As we approach the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, my hope is that the theology of the Reformers finds new life in the modern church. The health of the church is directly connected to the strength of our commitment to the authority and truthfulness of Scripture. Let this book fuel that commitment, strengthen your confidence in God’s Word, and compel you to be faithful to the gospel.

R. Albert Mohler Jr.

President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Acknowledgments

This book is not longer than other books I have written. However, it has been the most difficult book I have written so far. The reason is simple: the enormous importance of the doctrine of Scripture was a heavy weight on my shoulders as I wrote.

Much hangs in the balance today when it comes to the doctrine of Scripture. Few doctrines have come under such severe attack in the modern era. The twenty-first century is no exception. Yet few doctrines could be more important to the evangelical faith. So in writing this volume, I felt an incredible duty to get it right. As much as I hope the reader will benefit from this book, ultimately it was not the reader I was most concerned about, but God himself. After all, I am dealing with his holy, sacred Word, and I tremble lest I fail to take God seriously (Isa 66:2). Therefore, I have an audience of one, and it is his opinion I care about above any other.

That said, in my labor over this manuscript, I had the support of so many people. I cannot name them all here, but a few deserve mention. First, I would like to begin by thanking Ryan Pazdur, who invited me to edit this series and has improved each book by his editorial pen. Ryan has guided this series from start to finish. Without his vision for this series, as well as his editorial skills, there wouldn’t be one! I am also thankful to the Zondervan staff, particularly Jesse Hillman, who has worked hard to make sure the end product is superb and that it gets into the hands of readers.

I am also indebted to many friends and colleagues who spent time offering feedback, especially Fred Zaspel, Thomas Schreiner, J. V. Fesko, Michael Haykin, Chris Castaldo, Korey Maas, and Robert Kolb, who read the manuscript early on and improved it in countless ways with their insights. My gratitude also extends to James Grant, who devoted time to improving the work.

But perhaps the person I am most indebted to is my wife, Elizabeth. She has been so generous. Her patience with me while I finish a thought and am late to dinner, her flexibility in allowing hundreds of books to
flood our house all in the name of “research,” and her constant dialogue with me on the topic of this book demonstrate her love and care not only for me but for the Word of God. Seeing a mother of four rise early each morning so that she can read her Bible is a visual reminder to me why I ventured to write this book in the first place.

Last, I want to dedicate this book to my mother, for she first gave me the Scriptures. The mothers of Timothy, Augustine, and so many others had irreplaceable roles in the conversions of their sons. I can say the same. Thank you, Mom, for telling me about Jesus at a young age. God used your gospel words to shine light into my darkness. And your support ever since has been invaluable. This book is for you.

*Semper Reformanda*

*Matthew Barrett*

*London, 2015*
## Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ANF</td>
<td>Ante-Nicene Fathers</td>
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<tr>
<td>ApOTC</td>
<td>Apollos Old Testament Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCOTWP</td>
<td>Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms</td>
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<tr>
<td>BECNT</td>
<td>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>BSac</td>
<td>Bibliotheca Sacra</td>
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<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td>Church Dogmatics</td>
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<tr>
<td>EBC</td>
<td>Expositor’s Bible Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>JETS</td>
<td>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAC</td>
<td>New American Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>NICNT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the New Testament</td>
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<td>NICOT</td>
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<td>NIGTC</td>
<td>New International Greek Testament Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIVAC</td>
<td>NIV Application Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>NPNF¹</td>
<td>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>NPNF²</td>
<td>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>OTL</td>
<td>Old Testament Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>PNTC</td>
<td>Pillar New Testament Commentaries</td>
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20  God’s Word Alone


**TJ** *Trinity Journal*

**TN** *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*

**TOTC** *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*


**ZECNT** *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*
Introduction

Sola Scriptura

Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth. If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for? The more we reject it, the more we become satisfied with men’s books and human teachers. — ML Luther

I approve only of those human institutions which are founded upon the authority of God and derived from Scripture. — John Calvin

Sola Scriptura “is the corner-stone of universal Protestantism; and on it Protestantism stands, or else it falls.” — B. B. Warfield

“So what if everything in the Bible isn’t true and reliable or from God? That doesn’t really matter, does it? The Bible still remains an authority in my life.” Though it has been years now, I remember hearing these words as if it were yesterday. I had no idea what to say in response.

I was shocked because I was hearing these words from a churchgoing, Bible-carrying, evangelical Christian. This person saw no relation between the truthfulness of Scripture and the authority of Scripture, as if one had nothing to do with the other.

In that moment I realized two things: First, the Reformation doctrine of sola Scriptura is just as important today as it was in the sixteenth century. In the sixteenth century the Reformers faced off against Rome because the Roman church had elevated tradition and its magisterium to the level of Scripture. Nevertheless, Rome still believed Scripture itself was inspired by God and therefore inerrant, that is, trustworthy, true, and without error.¹

¹ Rome did not use the term inerrant, but the concept itself was affirmed.
Since the sixteenth century, Protestantism (and its view of the Bible) has undergone an evolution in its identity. Movements such as the Enlightenment, Liberalism, and, more recently, postmodernism have elevated other voices to the level of Scripture or even above Scripture, and the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture have been abandoned, something Rome never would have done in the sixteenth century. Today, many people reject that the Bible is God-breathed and truthful in all it asserts.

As Carl Henry pointed out in his magnum opus, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, the church throughout history has faced repeated attacks on the Bible from skeptics, but only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have the truthfulness and trustworthiness of God’s Word been questioned, criticized, and abandoned by those within the body of Christ. To the Reformers, this would have been unthinkable, yet this is the day we live in. Not only do Bible critics pervade the culture but now they have mounted the pulpit and sit comfortably in the pews.

If Carl Henry is right, then there is legitimate cause for alarm. Repeated attacks on Scripture’s own character reveal the enmity and hostility toward the God of the Bible within our own souls. One of the most significant needs in the twenty-first century is a call back to the Bible to a posture that encourages reverence, acceptance, and adherence to its authority and message.

Along with the realization that *sola Scriptura* is just as applicable today as it was in the sixteenth century, I also saw that many Christians in the church have no idea what *sola Scriptura* is or what it entails. What is the relationship of the authority of the Bible to attributes such as inspiration, inerrancy, clarity, and sufficiency? Even if we accept that the Bible alone is our final authority, we may have no idea why this is true. Is it because the Bible is the best guidebook we can find?

These questions led me to carefully study the massive shifts in authority that have taken place since the Reformation. I wanted to better understand the relationship between biblical authority and the nature of Scripture, namely, its own inspiration, inerrancy, clarity, and sufficiency. In this book, we will begin by exploring the past

so that we better understand the present, and we will address each of these key attributes to retrieve this indispensable doctrine for the church today.

**What is Sola Scriptura?**

The title of this book is *God’s Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture*, which is another way of saying *sola Scriptura*. But what is *sola Scriptura*? *Sola Scriptura* means that only Scripture, because it is God’s inspired Word, is our inerrant, sufficient, and final authority for the church.

First, this means that Scripture alone is our final authority. Authority is a bad word in our day of rugged individualism. But the Bible is all about authority. In fact, *sola Scriptura* means that the Bible is our chief, supreme, and ultimate authority. Notice, however, that I didn’t say the Bible is our only authority. As chapter 10 will explain more thoroughly, *sola Scriptura* is too easily confused today with *nuda Scriptura*, the view that we should have “no creed but the Bible!” Those who sing this mantra believe that creeds, confessions, the voices of tradition, and those who hold ecclesiastical offices carry no authority in the church. But this was not the Reformers’ position, nor should it be equated with *sola Scriptura*.

*Sola Scriptura* acknowledges that there are other important authorities for the Christian, authorities who should be listened to and followed. But Scripture alone is our final authority. It is the authority that rules over and governs all other authorities. It is the authority that has the final say. We could say that while church tradition and church officials play a ministerial role, Scripture alone plays a magisterial role. This means that all other authorities are to be followed only inasmuch as they align with Scripture, submit to Scripture, and are seen as subservient to Scripture, which alone is our supreme authority.

Second, *sola Scriptura* also means that Scripture alone is our sufficient authority. Not only is the Bible our supreme authority, but it is the authority that provides believers with all the truth they need for salvation and for following after Christ. The Bible, therefore, is sufficient for faith and practice. This notion of the Bible’s sufficiency has been powerfully articulated by Reformation and Reformed confessions. The Belgic Confession (1561) states: “We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man
ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein.” And the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) says: “The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men [Gal 1:8–9; 2 Thess 2:2; 2 Tim 3:15–17].”

In short, the Bible is enough for us.

Third, **sola Scriptura** means that only Scripture, because it is God’s **inspired** Word, is our **inerrant** authority. Notice that the basis of biblical authority—the very reason why Scripture is authoritative—is that God is its divine author. The ground for biblical authority is divine inspiration. As the Westminster Confession of Faith says, “The **authority** of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or Church, but wholly **upon God** (who is truth itself) the **author thereof**; and therefore it is to be received, **because it is the Word of God** [1 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:19, 21; 1 John 5:9].” Scripture is the church’s final and sufficient authority because Scripture is the Word of God. One of the most important chapters in this book for applying **sola Scriptura** is chapter

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4. “The Belgic Confession (1561),” in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation, Volume 2, 1552–1566*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2010), 427 (article VII). Also consider two other confessions: The French Confession (1559) says that Scripture is the “rule of all truth, containing all matters necessarily required for the worship of God and our salvation,” and therefore it is not right to “add unto or to take from” it (“The French Confession [1559],” in Dennison, *Reformed Confessions, Volume 2*, 142 [article V]). And The Thirty-Nine Articles (1563) says, “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation” (“The Thirty-Nine Articles [1562/63],” in Dennison, *Reformed Confessions, Volume 2*, 755 [article VI]).

5. In chapter 10 we will address the complex issue of how we make sense of sufficiency in light of general revelation, the role of the Holy Spirit, and extrabiblical sources.

6. Some will prefer to use the word **infallible** instead (which does have historical precedent). I am fine with using the word **as long as** one means, by infallible, that Scripture (in total) is not capable of erring. However, I would reject those who use the word to say that Scripture is true only in its saving message but not in its specifics (e.g., historical details). As I will explain in chapter 8, **infallible** and **inerrant** are complementary and compatible concepts, **infallible** (Scripture cannot err) being an even stronger word than **inerrant** (Scripture does not err). Therefore, I think it is historically and biblically erroneous to use the word **infallible** to convey something less than inerrancy.

7, where we see why Scripture and Scripture alone (not Scripture and Tradition) is God-breathed and, on this basis, stands unshakable as the church’s final, flawless authority. What Scripture says, God says.

To get a full picture of sola Scriptura, we need to go beyond saying that the Bible is inspired or God-breathed. Inspiration should lead to an understanding that the Bible is perfect, flawless, and inerrant. In other words, inerrancy is the necessary corollary of inspiration. They are two sides of the same coin, and it is impossible to divorce one from the other. Because it is God speaking—and he is a God of truth, not error—his Word must be true and trustworthy in all that it addresses.

Because inerrancy is a biblical corollary and consequence of divine inspiration—inseparably connected and intertwined—it is a necessary component to sola Scriptura. The God of truth has breathed out his Word of truth, and the result is nothing less than a flawless authority for the church. In saying this, I am aware that my inclusion of inerrancy in our definition of sola Scriptura (and in this book) will prove to be controversial, given the mixed identity of evangelicalism today. However, were we to divorce the truthfulness and trustworthiness of Scripture from its authority, disconnecting the two as if one was unrelated to the other, then we would be left with no doctrine of sola Scriptura at all. Should Scripture contain errors, it is unclear why we should trust Scripture as our supreme and final authority. And should we limit, modify, or abandon the total inerrancy of Scripture, we set in motion tremendous doubt and uncertainty regarding the Bible’s competence as our final authority. The ground for the believer’s confidence that all of Scripture is the Word of God is shaken.

8. In chapter 1 we will see how Rome differs in its elevation of Tradition as a second infallible source of divine revelation.


The Chicago Statement on Inerrancy makes this point as well: “The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded.” In other words, to reject inerrancy is to undermine confidence in the Bible’s authority, and what could have more relevance to sola Scriptura than biblical authority? As Roger Nicole once exclaimed, “What is supremely at stake in this whole discussion [of inerrancy] is the recognition of the authority of God in the sacred oracles.” It should not surprise us to find that in the recent history of evangelicalism, leaders have rallied around statements such as the Cambridge Declaration (1996), affirming inerrancy’s inseparability from sola Scriptura in stating, “Scripture alone is the inerrant rule of the church’s life,” and they “reaffirm the inerrant Scripture to be the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience.”

As we will explore more thoroughly in the first chapter, what is often missed in retellings of Luther’s progress to the Diet of Worms is the question of why Luther’s stance on Scripture was so detested by Rome. After all, Rome also affirmed Scripture’s authority and inspiration. So what made Luther’s stance on biblical authority so different and so offensive to the Roman church? The answer is that Luther had the audacity to say that only Scripture is the inerrant authority. While...
popes and councils err, Scripture alone does not! For Rome, Scripture \textit{and} Tradition were \textit{inerrant} authorities. For Luther, Scripture \textit{alone} is our \textit{inerrant} authority.

What distinguished Luther and the rest of the Reformers from church leaders in Rome was their claim that as important as tradition is (and they thought it was extremely important), tradition is not without error. That honor goes to Scripture \textit{alone}. In fact, it is because Scripture alone is inspired by God and consequently inerrant that the Reformers believed Scripture alone is the church’s \textit{final} authority, sufficient for faith and practice.\footnote{See R. C. Sproul, \textit{Scripture Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine} (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2005), 18. To clarify, I am not saying that inerrancy is \textit{the basis} on which we believe that the Bible is authoritative. Rather, as mentioned already, the Bible is authoritative because it is inspired by God. So inspiration is the \textit{basis} of biblical authority. However, we should be careful that we do not then conclude that inerrancy has nothing to do with authority. Actually, the relation between inerrancy and authority is crucial. While inerrancy may not be the \textit{ground} of authority, nevertheless, inerrancy is the necessary consequence of inspiration and therefore inseparably connected to inspiration (e.g., the Bible is truthful because the God who breathed it out is a God of truth). Therefore, to abandon the inerrancy of Scripture is to do untold harm to Scripture’s authority, creating distrust and suspicion within the reader toward divine authorship. If the Bible contains errors, one naturally begins to question whether it is truly authoritative as well. All that is to say, while inerrancy may not be the all-sufficient \textit{basis} or \textit{ground} of \textit{sola} Scriptura, it is a necessary and essential component due to its inseparable tie to inspiration.}

\textbf{Moving Forward}

So where do we go from here? Together, we will take three steps to better understand the origins, development, and contemporary relevance of the doctrine of \textit{sola} Scriptura.

First, this book will travel back in time to demonstrate that a shift in authority has taken place since the Reformation, one that has massive
implications for today. Part 1 begins with the Reformation and its heroic adherence to *sola Scriptura* in the face of insurmountable opposition from Rome. We will also examine the massive crisis in authority that erupted shortly after the Reformers passed from the scene, beginning with the Enlightenment, progressing through theological Liberalism, and climaxing today with postmodernism. As we shall see, a seismic, earthquake-shaking shift in biblical authority has occurred, reorienting our ecclesiastical landscape.

While I seek to fairly and accurately represent the diverse voices of the past, I also provide critiques along the way. My aim is to show that abandonment of biblical authority has been under way since the Enlightenment, and the church is worse off because of it. What is the solution? We must retrieve and apply *sola Scriptura* to our contemporary challenges.

You will want to pay special attention to the section entitled “How Shall We Then Proceed?” at the end of chapter 3. There I explain how we can approach Scripture in contrast to many of the modern and postmodern approaches represented. I argue that we must begin by listening to what Scripture has to say about itself, rather than imposing a modern or postmodern agenda on the text. We must have an open ear to the biblical categories that Scripture itself provides as the Holy Spirit guides us in its interpretation. We must allow Scripture’s own voice to affirm and correct our pre-understanding of what Scripture is and how it should be read. Such an approach pays heed to the self-authenticating nature of Scripture, the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit, as well as the humility fostered by faith seeking understanding, a motto the Reformers retrieved from the church fathers.17

Second, we will incorporate a biblical theology of God’s Word, and in doing so trace the redemptive-historical context for the doctrine of Scripture to show that the triune God has made himself known covenantally and his covenantal word always proves true.18 By understanding the nature of God’s oral and written Word in the story line of redemptive history, we are better equipped to see to how Scripture describes itself and to grasp the inherent attributes of Scripture.19 In this, I make two assumptions:

17. Also note our treatment in chapter 1 of the self-authenticating nature of Scripture in our discussion of John Calvin.
18. I will use “word” to refer to God’s diverse forms of speech throughout redemptive history and “Word” to specifically refer to either Scripture or Jesus Christ.
19. While we do not treat the attributes of Scripture until part 3, these attributes are
First, that God’s Word is inherently and invariably *Trinitarian* in nature. Throughout redemptive history, each person of the Trinity participates in the delivery of divine revelation (see chapter 4), yet it is the Holy Spirit in particular who takes on a central role, carrying along the biblical authors so that they speak from God (2 Pet 1:21). In addition, I assume that God’s Word, though communicated in a variety of ways, is undeniably *covenantal* in character. Not only does God communicate who he is and what he will do within the context of divinely initiated covenants, but Scripture itself *is* a covenantal document. As we will learn in chapters 4 and 5, Scripture is the constitution of the covenant between God and his people.\(^{20}\) Therefore, to reject God’s Word is to reject his covenant as well.\(^{21}\) Redemptive history demonstrates that the covenantal Word of the triune God proves true. His covenantal promises, both spoken and written, will not fail, and nowhere is this more evident than in the incarnation of Christ, the Word made flesh.

Third, rather than limiting ourselves to the attribute of sufficiency (as treatments of *sola Scriptura* sometimes do), we will systematically explore the range of scriptural attributes in order to defend biblical authority against the many challenges it faces today. Once we see that Scripture is God-breathed, we will look to inspiration’s natural corollary, the inerrancy of Scripture. As with inspiration, we will discover that the Bible affirms its own truthfulness and trustworthiness. Furthermore, as we address both inspiration and inerrancy, we will give special focus to Jesus, demonstrating that our Lord himself believed Scripture to be both God-breathed and without error. Our discussion will take us back to the doctrine of God, and we will learn that Scripture is fundamentally truthful because its divine author is a God of truth.

Last, we will turn to the attributes of clarity and sufficiency. In the wake of Rome’s muddy Tiber and postmodernism’s murky waters, few doctrines have been so quickly dismantled as the clarity of Scripture. Nevertheless, we will argue that when God speaks, he intends to be heard and understood. Not only is our God not silent (as Francis Schaeffer so famously put it) but the silence is broken by his clear and effective speech. Lack of clarity is not a quality to be attached to the

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\(^{21}\) See Frame, *Doctrine of the Word*, 356.
work of the divine architect of language. Finally, sufficiency will close our study. Few attributes have such warm and practical implications for life, putting real flesh on the skeleton of sola Scriptura. Having established Scripture’s own testimony to its sufficiency, we will answer contemporary challenges to sufficiency from traditionalism (with a particular focus on Rome and her view of the canon) to science and reason, and finally experience and culture.

With our course mapped out, tolle lege!
PART 1

God’s Word under Fire, Yesterday and Today
CHAPTER 1

The Road to Reformation: Biblical Authority in the Sixteenth Century

While I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer . . . the Word so greatly weakened the Papacy that never a Prince or Emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing. The Word did it all. — Martin Luther

The foundation of our religion is the written word, the Scriptures of God. — Huldrych Zwingli

The Reformation of the sixteenth century was founded upon the authority of the Bible, yet it set the world aflame. — J. Gresham Machen

There they sat. Relics. Lots of them. There was a cut of fabric from the swaddling cloth of baby Jesus, thirteen pieces from his crib, a strand of straw from the manger, a piece of gold from a wise man, three pieces of myrrh, a morsel of bread from the Last Supper, a thorn from the crown Jesus wore when crucified, and, to top it all off, a genuine piece of stone that Jesus stood on to ascend to the Father’s right hand. And in good Catholic fashion, the blessed Mary was not left out. There sat three pieces of cloth from her cloak, “four from her girdle,” four hairs from her head, and, better yet, seven pieces from “the veil that was sprinkled with the blood of Christ.”¹ These relics and countless others (nineteen-thousand bones from the saints!) stood ready to be viewed by pious pilgrims. The relics were the proud collection of Frederick the Wise, elector of Saxony, Martin Luther’s prince. And they sat in the

¹ All these details come from Roland H. Bainton, Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1950), 53.
Castle Church at Wittenberg, prepared for showing on All Saints’ Day, November 1, 1516.2

In the midst of all this fanfare was also one essential ingredient—the procurement of indulgences. Veneration of the relics was accompanied by the issuance of an indulgence, a certificate guaranteeing the buyer that time in purgatory would be reduced and remitted by up to 1,902,202 years and 270 days.3 An indulgence was the full or partial remission of temporal punishment for sins. It was drawn from the Treasury of Merit, a storehouse of grace which was accumulated by the meritorious work of Christ and by the superabundant merit of the saints.4

**The Coin in the Coffer Rings**

Indulgences were the bingo games of the sixteenth century. In a complicated set of political affairs involving Albert of Brandenburg, Pope Leo X utilized the selling of indulgences to fund the completion of St. Peter’s Basilica, but not just any indulgence would do.5 Pope Leo issued a plenary indulgence, one that would apparently return the sinner to the state of innocence first received at baptism.6

There was no one so experienced as the Dominican Johann Tetzel in

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4. “Indulgences had to do with the sacrament of penance, and only with one part of that: the works of satisfaction which the penitent sinner was required to perform in order to pay the penalty of sin. Medieval theologians distinguished between the guilt incurred by sin and the penalty that had to be paid, since no sin could go unpunished. When the guilt was forgiven by God through the absolution of the priest, the penalty of eternal condemnation was commuted into works of satisfaction which the priest then imposed upon the repentant sinner according to the seriousness of the sin committed. An indulgence was the additional prerogative of the church to release penitents from these works of satisfaction. Since the thirteenth century, the power to permit such a relaxation or ‘indulgence’ of the penitential obligation was derived from the ‘treasury of the church.’ This treasure contained the accumulated merits of Christ and the saints which, since they were superfluous for those who had originally acquired them, stood available for ordinary sinners in the church. An indulgence applied these merits to the penitent sinner and canceled the debt he would otherwise be obliged to pay off with works of satisfaction” (Scott H. Hendrix, *Luther and the Papacy: Stages in a Reformation Conflict* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981], 24).


marketing this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. What exactly did the sinner receive in buying this indulgence? According to unscrupulous sellers like Tetzel, the impression was given that the indulgence would result in the total forgiveness of all sins. Not even the sin of raping the mother of God could outweigh the efficacy of these indulgences! Even the horrors of years in purgatory could now be removed. And if this was not good enough, one also had the opportunity to buy an indulgence slip for one’s loved ones in purgatory (and one need not be penitent himself for such an indulgence to be effective). With the appropriate amount of money, repentance was now for sale, and any sin could be covered.

Going from town to town with all the pomp of Rome, Tetzel flamboyantly laid a heavy guilt trip on his hearers: “Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends, beseeching you and saying, ‘Pity us, pity us. We are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance. . . . Will you let us lie here in flames? Will you delay our promised glory?’” And then came Tetzel’s catchy jingle: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” With just a quarter of a florin, you could liberate your loved one from the flames of purgatory and into the “fatherland of paradise.”

By the end of 1517, Martin Luther had had enough. One year prior, Luther had preached against the corruption of indulgences. This time, he would put his objections in writing for academic debate. Luther drew up ninety-five theses exposing the abuse of indulgences, denying the power and authority of the pope over purgatory, and testing whether the pope truly had the welfare of the sinner in mind.

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7. In “Summary Instruction for Indulgence Preachers” (Hillerbrand, Protestant Reformation, 15–18), a manual Albert prepared, this plenary indulgence is said to result in the full remission of all sins not only on this earth but in purgatory. And one need not show evidence of contrition or even go to confession. See Hendrix, Luther and the Papacy, 25–26, 31. Luther, however, became frustrated, given the misunderstanding this cultivated among common people. Brecht captures Luther’s discontent: “The indulgence agents only demand that people pay, but they do not explain what indulgences are and what use they serve. Thus the misunderstanding arises that people are immediately saved after obtaining indulgences. But through indulgences as such one does not obtain the grace which makes one righteous or more righteous, but only the removal of penitential punishments and satisfactions. The people, though, expect indulgences to give them complete remission of sins and the kingdom of heaven, and so, by neglecting genuine repentance, they sin” (Brecht, Martin Luther: His Road, 188–89).

8. Hendrix, Luther and the Papacy, 25–26; Bainton, Here I Stand, 59.

9. See “Summary Instruction for Indulgence Preachers,” in Hillerbrand, Protestant Reformation, 18; Hendrix, Luther and the Papacy, 26; Bainton, Here I Stand, 59.


11. Brecht, Luther: His Road, 185–86.

12. Martin Luther, Ninety-Five Theses, 1517, in LW 31:17–34; cf. Luther, Explanations...
When they were finished, his theses were posted to the Castle Church door on October 31, 1517.

Despite his disagreements with the pope, Luther was just trying to be a good Catholic, reforming the Church from the clear abuses he had witnessed. At this point, Luther wasn’t trying to position the authority of Scripture over the pope—at least not explicitly. Nevertheless, the seeds of confrontation had been planted. Luther was arguing that the pope did not have power over purgatory for the remission of sin or its penalty—clearly questioning the pope’s authority on this matter.13

“The Scriptures Cannot Err”

Though Luther’s theses were written in Latin for academic debate, others translated them and spread them throughout Germany. Soon everyone was talking about Luther’s theses.

Interpreting Luther’s theses as an affront to papal authority, Tetzel called for Luther to be burned at the stake as a heretic.14 Then, in a second set of theses, Tetzel defended papal authority and infallibility.15 Luther’s *Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses* would confirm Tetzel’s suspicions, arguing that the pope’s primacy and supremacy were not ordained by God at the genesis of the church but had evolved over time.16

Luther also traded fighting words with Sylvester Prierias, a Dominican theologian appointed by Leo X to respond to Luther’s theses. It became clear to Prierias that authority was the issue at stake in all of Luther’s arguments. Prierias wrote in his *Dialogue concerning the Power of the Pope*, “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.”17 Luther responded by pointing out that Prierias cited no Scripture to prove his case and wrote to Prierias, “Like an insidious devil you pervert the Scriptures.”18 Luther exposed the contradictions

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and corruptions of the papacy by pointing to the examples of Julius II and his “ghastly shedding of blood,” as well as the “outrageous tyranny of Boniface VIII.” Luther then asked Prierias, “If the Church consists representatively in the cardinals, what do you make of a general council of the whole Church?”

It’s important to remember that papal infallibility would not be declared official dogma until the First Vatican Council in 1870. However, Prierias’s response to Luther shows how many already believed the pope was infallible and inerrant whenever he spoke *ex cathedra* (“from the seat” as the vicar of Christ on earth). As Martin Brecht explains, not only were the Roman church and pope considered infallible, but “the authority of the church stood explicitly above that of the Scriptures,” even authorizing the Scriptures. On this point too Luther disagreed with Prierias, not only appealing to Scripture’s authority but also to Augustine’s letter to Jerome where Augustine elevates Scripture’s authority, emphasizing that the Bible alone is inspired by God and without error. The “radicalism” of Luther’s reply to Prierias “lies not in its invective but in its affirmation that the pope might err and a council might err and that only Scripture is the final authority.”

Following his dispute with Prierias, Luther faced off against the Dominican cardinal Cajetan, perhaps the most impressive theologian of the Roman Curia. They met in October of 1518 in Augsburg, and an argument between the two lasted for several days. Luther was commanded to recant, which he would not do. When Cajetan confronted Luther with Pope Clement VI’s bull *Unigenitus* (1343)—a bull that, according to Cajetan, affirmed that “the merits of Christ are a treasure

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19. Ibid.
20. Tierney argues that there “is no convincing evidence that papal infallibility formed any part of the theological or canonical tradition of the church before the thirteenth century; the doctrine was invented in the first place by a few dissident Franciscans because it suited their convenience to invent it; eventually, but only after much initial reluctance, it was accepted by the papacy because it suited the convenience of the popes to accept it.” Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility, 1150–1350: A Study on the Concepts of Infallibility, Sovereignty and Tradition in the Middle Ages*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman, Studies in the History of Christian Thought 6 (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 281.
21. To clarify, Rome did not believe the pope was infallible and inerrant by virtue of his own righteousness, but only by speaking *ex cathedra*. See Timothy George, *Reading Scripture with the Reformers* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 110.
of indulgences”—Luther rejected it along with Pope Clement’s authority. “I am not so audacious,” said Luther, “that for the sake of a single obscure and ambiguous decretal of a human pope I would recede from so many and such clear testimonies of divine Scripture. For, as one of the canon lawyers has said, ‘in a matter of faith not only is a council above a pope but any one of the faithful, if armed with better authority and reason.’” When Cajetan responded that Scripture must be interpreted by the pope who is above not only councils but Scripture itself, Luther replied, “His Holiness abuses Scripture. I deny that he is above Scripture.”

Harold Grimm summarizes the conflict this way: “The more Cajetan insisted upon the infallibility of the papacy the more Luther relied upon the authority of Scripture.”

Luther’s greatest challenge would come the following year at the Leipzig debate with the Catholic disputant Johannes von Eck. Though the debate would formally be an engagement between Eck and Andreas Karlstadt, Luther anticipated that he would have an opportunity to participate. After all, Eck’s real target was Luther himself. In the months leading up to the debate, Luther rigorously prepared himself, knowing that papal supremacy was the critical point under debate. In his research Luther had to address two key passages Rome relied on: (1) In Matthew 16:18–19 Jesus calls Peter the “rock” that he will build his church on, conferring upon Peter the “keys of the kingdom.” According to Rome, here Jesus teaches that Peter is the first pope, giving to Peter (and his successors by default) the foundational position in the erection of his church. Since Peter (and by implication all future popes) is given the “keys of the kingdom,” the pope possesses supreme authority and control over the church and infallibly exercises that authority as the supreme ruler when he teaches as the vicar of Christ on earth. (2) In John 21:15–19 Jesus tells Peter to “feed my lambs.” Again, Rome saw Jesus as conferring on Peter the exclusive right to exercise power over the church.

Luther, however, rejected these interpretations. He believed that

Rome was reading the papacy and its claims to power back into the Bible. In interpreting Matthew 16:18–19, Luther followed the interpretive tradition that applies this promise either to Christ’s disciples or to the very faith confessing Jesus as the Christ. As Brecht observes, for Luther the “rock is not any particular church, but the invincible church is wherever the Word of God is heard and believed.” It is faith which “possesses the keys, the sacraments, and the authority in the church.”

And in interpreting Jesus’s command to feed his sheep, Luther argued that this has nothing to do with the exclusive power of the pope, but refers instead to preaching. Luther concluded that neither one of these passages supports papal supremacy. Luther rejected papal infallibility as well as the belief that the pope exclusively possessed the correct interpretation of the Bible. Rome’s twisting of Scripture to bolster its ecclesial power only demonstrated to Luther that a Babylonian captivity had indeed come upon the church.

When it was time for the debate, Eck brought the central issue to the table: Who has final authority, God’s Word or the pope? For Eck, Scripture received its authority from the pope. Luther strongly disagreed, arguing instead that Scripture has authority over popes, church fathers, and even church councils, all of which have erred in the past. Moreover, said Luther, not only is Scripture our only infallible authority, but a schoolboy with Scripture in his hand is better fortified than the pope!

Lest we miss the obvious, it is important to note that for Luther, sola Scriptura was directly connected to the inerrancy of Scripture. Luther did not use the term inerrancy in his writings or in debate, yet the concept is present throughout his thinking on the matter. If

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30. Brecht, Luther: His Road, 308.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Rupp, Luther’s Progress, 114.
35. For a more extensive overview of the entire debate, see Brecht, Luther: His Road, 309–22.
Scripture is not inerrant, then *sola Scriptura* is without a foundation. For Luther, what made the Bible alone the supreme authority was that not only was it inspired by God, but as a result of being God-breathed, the Scriptures, *and the Scriptures alone, could not and do not err*. On the other hand, church councils and popes can and do err. So while Rome believed Scripture *and* Tradition were inerrant authorities, Luther argued that Scripture *alone* is our inerrant authority from God.\(^{37}\) As Luther would state in his 1521 treatise *The Misuse of the Mass*:

> Since the Fathers have often erred, as you yourself confess, who will make us certain as to where they have not erred, assuming their own reputation is sufficient and should not be weighed and judged according to the Scriptures? . . . What if they erred in their interpretation, as well as in their life and writings? In that way you make gods of all that is human in us, and of men themselves; *and the word of men you make equal to the Word of God*. . . . The saints could err in their writings and the sin in their lives, but the Scriptures cannot err.\(^{38}\)

Elsewhere Luther would argue that the fathers “have erred, as men will; therefore I am ready to trust them only when they give me evidence for their opinions from Scripture, *which has never erred*.” Luther quotes Augustine in support of this point: “I have learned to do only those books that are called the holy Scriptures the honor of believing firmly that *none of their writers has ever erred*.” Therefore, concludes Luther, “Scripture alone is the true lord and master of all writings and doctrine on earth.”\(^{39}\) Luther believed inerrancy was a necessary corollary to *sola Scriptura* and a key component of biblical authority and sufficiency.\(^{40}\) Contrary to Rome, Luther protested that God’s

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\(^{37}\) For Rome’s definition of “Tradition,” see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1995), sections 80–82, 120, 891. We will interact more thoroughly with this definition in chapter 10 since defining tradition and its role is a dividing line between Protestants and Roman Catholics. I will use “Tradition” to refer to Rome’s view and “tradition” to refer to the Protestant view.


\(^{39}\) “If that is not granted, what is Scripture good for? The more we reject it, the more we become satisfied with men’s books and human teachers” (Martin Luther, *Defense and Explanation of All the Articles*, in *LW* 32:11–12, emphasis added).

Word *alone* was the church’s *flawless* authority. To deny this, Luther believed, was to reject the *sola of sola Scriptura*. It was to make the teachings of men equal to the Word of God, as if they too were not only God-breathed but without error.

At Leipzig, Luther was quickly classified as a heretic, joining the ranks of his forerunners John Wycliffe and Jan Hus. “I see that you are following the damned and pestiferous errors of John Wycliffe, who said, ‘It is not necessary for salvation to believe that the Roman Church is above all others.’ And you are espousing the pestilent errors of John Hus, who claimed that Peter neither was nor is the head of the Holy Catholic Church.” At first Luther denied such an association with Hus, who was condemned by the Council of Constance and burned at the stake in 1415 as a heretic. But during a break in the debate, Luther realized that Hus had taught exactly what he believed about the authority of the church. When he returned to the debate, he boldly declared:

> It is not in the power of the Roman pontiff or of the Inquisition to construct new articles of faith. No believing Christian can be coerced beyond holy writ. By divine law we are forbidden to believe anything which is not established by divine Scripture or manifest revelation. One of the canon lawyers has said that the opinion of a single private man has more weight than that of the Roman pontiff or an ecclesiastical council if grounded on a better authority or reason.

When Eck responded that Luther was “heretical, erroneous, blasphemous, presumptuous, seditious, and offensive to pious ears” should he defend Hus, Luther then made himself abundantly clear about the fallibility of councils:

> I assert that a council has sometimes erred and may sometimes err. Nor has a council authority to establish new articles of faith. A council cannot make divine right out of that which by nature is not divine right. Councils have contradicted each other, for the recent Lateran Council has reversed the claim of the councils of Constance and Basel that a council is above a pope. A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it. As for the pope’s decretal on indulgences I

say that neither the Church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture. For the sake of Scripture we should reject pope and councils.43

Luther’s stance was further solidified when the debate moved to the topic of purgatory. Eck defended purgatory by appealing to 2 Maccabees 12:45, but Luther retorted that the Apocrypha was not canonical and therefore was not authoritative.

After the debate, Eck returned to Rome reporting this “Bohemian virus” to the Pope, and Luther left the debate only to become further convinced that Scripture, not the pope, was the Christian’s final authority.44 In the end, Luther realized that if the pope was to have authority over Scripture, then reform from within was impossible. As Reeves observes, “The pope’s word would always trump God’s. In that case, the reign of the antichrist there was sealed, and it was no longer the church of God but the synagogue of Satan.”45

The Leipzig debate is one of the most pivotal events of the Reformation. Eck’s name in German means “corner,” and playing off of Eck’s name, many at the time believed that Eck had “cornered” Luther, showing from church history that Luther was aligned with the heretic Hus.46 Yet while Eck may have cornered the reformer, Luther’s appeal to Scripture over popes and councils removed the rug of Rome’s authority right out from under Eck’s feet. Eck appealed to councils, but Luther went to the fountain itself: Scripture and Scripture alone.

Captive to the Word of God: Luther at the Diet of Worms

Tensions escalated, and in 1520 Luther produced several tracts and essays, writing like a madman. In August came To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, calling into question the authority of the pope, specifically the pope’s exclusive right to interpret Scripture and call a council.47 Luther also denied that the church held a monopoly on the proper interpretation of Scripture. Luther rejected papal infallibility and claimed that the pope must answer to Scripture.

43. Ibid., 103.
44. Ibid.
47. Martin Luther, To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation, in LW 44:115–219.
In October came *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* where Luther argued that God’s gift of righteousness is received by faith alone (*sola fide*), and therefore Rome is in error to claim that divine grace comes only through the priest’s distribution of the sacraments (which Luther argued were limited to two rather than seven). Here again Luther gave clear hints of his belief in *sola Scriptura*. “What is asserted without the Scriptures or proven revelation,” Luther protested, “may be held as an opinion, but need not be believed.”

The last of the three treatises came in November. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, dedicated to Pope Leo X, Luther positively put forth the idea of an exchange, that our sin is imputed to Christ while Christ’s righteousness is credited to us. Luther made it clear that good works do not merit righteousness but are the fruit that comes from being declared righteous.

Prior to any of these three works being published and disseminated, Pope Leo X had issued a papal bull. The decree, made on June 15, 1520, called Luther’s teaching a “poisonous virus” and demanded that Luther recant in sixty days or be excommunicated. The bull, entitled *Exsurge, Domine*, had four summons: “Rise up, Lord,” “Rise up, Peter,” “Rise up, Paul,” and “Rise up, all saints.” Leo X declared that Luther was a wild boar, ravaging God’s vineyard, a pestiferous virus, as well as a serpent creeping through the Lord’s field, and he must be stopped. His books were to be burned, and should he not recant in sixty days after receiving the bull, he would be declared anathema!

How did Luther respond? After receiving the bull on October 10 of that year, Luther waited sixty days before publicly burning it on December 10, exclaiming, “Because you have confounded the truth of God, today the Lord confounds you. Into the fire with you!” Luther had declared war. There was no going back now. The break with Rome was inevitable. On January 3, 1521, Luther was excommunicated by Leo X in the bull *Decet Romanum Pontificem*.

In 1521 Luther was summoned to Worms for an Imperial Diet before Charles V, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire and a committed Roman Catholic. On April 17, a great crowd gathered for the event. To

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50. For Luther’s rationale, see *Why the Books of the Pope and His Disciples Were Burned*, in *LW* 31:279–395.
keep Luther safe, he was escorted like a thief through alleys, likely to the rear entrance of the bishop’s residence. Wearing the garb of the Augustinian order, Luther appeared before Charles V, who supposedly said upon seeing Luther, “He will not make a heretic out of me.”

Luther’s publications were set out on a table, and he was asked whether he would stand by what he had written or recant. Luther did not take this moment lightly. He feared speaking rashly, not wanting to do harm to God’s Word and put his own soul in jeopardy. So Luther asked for time to think about his answer. After thinking the matter through, Luther returned the next day and spoke with boldness, stating that his writings fell into three categories. First, there were books on piety, which were so evangelical that even his enemies acknowledged their usefulness. Second were his books against the papacy, but neither could he recant these since they only spoke against the pope’s laws that were contrary to the true gospel. To recant these would be to approve the pope’s tyranny! “Good God, what sort of tool of evil and tyranny I then would be!” Third, and last, were his books against specific persons who defended this popish tyranny. But again, he could not recant these for the same reasons. Instead, Luther asked that he be refuted with real proofs of his wrongdoing. The Scriptures, said Luther, should be determinative in this matter. Should he be shown his errors from the Scriptures, he would gladly recant, and not only recant but he would be the first in line to burn his books. By the end of his reply, Luther was sweating profusely due to the hot, overcrowded room.

Johann von der Eck was the official responsible for responding to Luther, and he was not pleased with Luther’s reply. He disagreed with the distinctions Luther had made and demanded that Luther recant the heresies taught in these books. Von der Eck was clear that the Tradition of the church and its councils could not be questioned by a single individual like Luther. So he demanded that Luther give him a clear answer. Would he recant or not? At that, Luther spoke these famous words:

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52. Brecht, *Luther: His Road*, 452.
53. Ibid., 453.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 458.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 460.
Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they often err and contradict themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and 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. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.58

While popes and councils contradict each other, and therefore err, Scripture alone does not err.59 Scripture, Luther believed, is the *norma normans* (the norming norm), rather than the *norma normata* (the determined, ruled, or normed norm).60 With his speech now finished, Luther left and returned to his quarters, only to lift up his hands and shout, “I’ve come through, I’ve come through.”61

**Background to the Debate: Tradition or Tradition?**

Luther and the Reformers believed that for the early church fathers, Scripture alone (as opposed to Scripture and Tradition) was inspired by God, perfect and flawless as a source of divine revelation, and therefore the final and ultimate authority in all matters of faith and practice.62 Tradition was a tool meant to assist the believer in understanding Scripture’s meaning. While Scripture possesses *magisterial* authority, tradition’s authority was always *ministerial*, a handmaiden to the biblical witness, rather than an authoritative voice governing Scripture. Tradition is subject to Scripture because only Scripture is the inerrant and infallible written source of God’s revelation to his people. Heiko Oberman has called such a view of tradition and Scripture “Tradition 1” (T1).63 Against Rome’s accusation that the Reformers had departed

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58. “Luther at the Diet of Worms, 1521,” in *LW* 32:112.
62. Keith Mathison has demonstrated at length that the early church fathers affirmed Tradition 1 (on which, see above). Keith A. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2001), 19–48.
Historians and theologians have long recognized that at the heart of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation were five declarations, often referred to as the five “solas”: sola Scriptura, solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide, and soli Deo gloria. These five statements summarize much of what the Reformation was about, and they distinguish Protestantism from other expressions of the Christian faith. Protestants place ultimate and final authority in the Scriptures, acknowledge the work of Christ alone as sufficient for redemption, recognize that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, and seek to do all things for God’s glory.

In Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification, renowned biblical scholar Thomas Schreiner looks at the historical and biblical roots of the doctrine of justification. He summarizes the history of the doctrine, looking at the early church and the writings of several of the Reformers. Then he turns his attention to the Scriptures and walks readers through an examination of the key texts in the Old and New Testament. He discusses whether justification is transformative or forensic and introduces readers to some of the contemporary challenges to the Reformation teaching of sola fide, with particular attention to the new perspective on Paul.

Five hundred years after the Reformation, the doctrine of justification by faith alone still needs to be understood and proclaimed. In Faith Alone you will learn how the rallying cry of “sola fide” is rooted in the Scriptures and how to apply this sola in a fresh way in light of many contemporary challenges.
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In God’s Glory Alone—The Majestic Heart of Christian Faith and Life, renowned scholar David VanDrunen looks at the historical and biblical roots of the idea that all glory belongs to God alone. He examines the development of this theme in the Reformation, in subsequent Reformed theology and confessions, and in contemporary theologians who continue to be inspired by the conviction that all glory belongs to God. Then he turns to the biblical story of God’s glory, beginning with the pillar of cloud and fire revealed to Israel, continuing through the incarnation, death, and exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ, and culminating in Christ’s second coming and the glorification of his people. In light of these stunning biblical themes he concludes by addressing several of today’s great cultural challenges and temptations—such as distraction and narcissism—and reflecting on how commitment to God’s glory alone fortifies us to live godly lives in this present evil age.
Historians and theologians alike have long recognized that at the heart of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation were five declarations (or “solas”) that distinguished the movement from other expressions of the Christian faith.

Five-hundred years later, we live in a different time with fresh challenges to our faith. Yet these rallying cries of the Reformation continue to speak to us, addressing a wide range of contemporary issues. The Five Solas series will help you understand the historical and biblical context of the five solas and how to live out the relevance of Reformation theology today.

In Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior, Stephen Wellum considers Christ’s singular uniqueness and significance biblically, historically, and today in our pluralistic and postmodern age. He examines the historical roots of the doctrine, especially in the Reformation era, and then shows how the uniqueness of Christ has come under specific attack today. Then he walks us through the storyline of Scripture from Christ’s unique identity and work as prophet, priest, and king to the application of his work to believers and our covenantal union with him to show that apart from Christ there is no salvation. Wellum shows that we must recover a robust biblical and theological doctrine of Christ’s person and work in the face of today’s challenges and explains why a fresh appraisal of the Reformation understanding of Christ alone is needed today.
Historians and theologians alike have long recognized that at the heart of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation were the five “solas”: sola Scriptura, solus Christus, sola gratia, sola fide, and soli Deo gloria. These five solas do not merely summarize what the Reformation was all about but have served to distinguish Protestantism ever since. They set Protestants apart in a unique way as those who place ultimate and final authority in the Scriptures, acknowledge the work of Christ alone as sufficient for redemption, recognize that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, and seek to not only give God all the glory but to do all things vocationally for his glory.

The year 2017 will mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. And yet, even in the twenty-first century we need the Reformation more than ever. As James Montgomery Boice said not long ago, while the Puritans sought to carry on the Reformation, today “we barely have one to carry on, and many have even forgotten what that great spiritual revolution was all about.” Therefore we “need to go back and start again at the very beginning. We need another Reformation.”* In short, it is crucial not only to remember what the solas of the Reformation were all about but also to apply these solas in a fresh way in light of many contemporary challenges.