
The Reformation @ 500

Sola Scriptura – Scripture Alone A Small-Group Discussion Guide

The start of the Protestant Reformation is often dated to Martin Luther nailing “The 95 Theses” to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany on Oct. 31, 1517. Historians reflecting on the Reformation and its meaning identify five statements or watchwords as central to the movement. These watchwords, called the five “solas” from the Latin word meaning “only” or “alone”, are: grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone, and to God’s glory alone.

This third of five study guides explores Scripture Alone, using reflections and insights gleaned from presentations made at an event held at Presbyterian College, Montreal on Reformation Day (Oct. 31) 2015. The study guide invites participants beyond an academic discussion to tell stories of the role of Scripture in their lives as a way to understand Scripture now.

It would be useful for each participant to have a copy of the guide so they can have the italicized material in front of them.



Section I: Reflecting on our response to the Bible

A variety of images have been used to describe the Bible: Word of God, Lamp, Seed, Sword, Bread of Life, etc. Which of these or other images speak to your experience of the Bible?

How would you describe your relationship with the Bible? (love it, hate it, read it every day, ignore it, confused by it, intrigued by it, or some other description)

Section II: Being shaped by Scripture

The church proclaims Christians are shaped by their baptism. But, as Roland De Vries (Presbyterian College, Montreal) noted in his presentation in Montreal, those coming to be baptized and the community of the baptized have been shaped by Scripture. Scriptures shapes people into the baptized community. If baptized as adults, they read and study the Bible and found themselves called to baptism. If they were baptized as infants, individuals turn to the Bible to learn what happened to them in their baptism and how they are to live as baptized people.

In what ways has your life been shaped by Scripture – have heard it, having read, having reflected on it? In what ways are you a different person because of the Bible?

As a number of panelists reminded those gathered in Montreal, not only are individuals shaped by the Bible, so too are communities of people (congregations).

What signs do you see in your congregation of it being shaped by Scripture? Include in your reflections: worship, sacraments, and outreach.

Section III: Recognizing the Voice of God in the Scriptures

Jennifer Cameron (minister of St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville) told this modern parable:

No one was certain why the Park family's dog was at the baseball game, but Rover was there. Rover, deciding to live up to his name, took a walk and ended up in the outfield. Once Rover got there turmoil ensued. Players yelled at Rover, the umpires yelled at Rover, people in the stands yelled at Rover. Confused and scared by the noise Rover ran all over the field unsure what to do. Suddenly Rover stopped, perked up his ears and headed straight to a woman on the third base side

who was calling out "Rover, Rover." With a yip of joy Rover leaped into Meaghan Park's arms. Rover had heard a voice he knew and trusted.

From this parable Jennifer Cameron drew the analogy: when people who have been formed by Scripture hear the voice of God in the Word they are drawn to it, knowing it to be their primary allegiance, the way to follow.

Read John 10:1-6

Shepherds would gather their sheep together at night, for safety, warmth, and to allow each shepherd to get some sleep as other shepherds kept watch. Then in the morning the sheep would have been separated for grazing. The sheep were separated by following their shepherd's voice.

How is God's voice recognizable among all the other voices calling to us?

Take a moment to reflect, when was a time you heard the Bible/Scripture speaking to you? Could you tell the group your story of hearing God's Word speaking to you, and knowing it was God's voice?

Section IV: The Materiality of Scripture

The Bible tells a series of stories that happened in time and place. Biblical scholars seek to describe the context (time and place) in which the events took place and against which the words were written. Thus the Bible is rooted in the materiality of human existence.

One of Hillary Kaell's (Religious Studies Dept., Concordia University) research interests is North American Christians taking pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Study of the Bible, Kaell suggested, leads some people to travel to the Holy Land to see where the events happened.

In what ways is your reading and understanding of Scripture impacted by the fact that it describes events that are rooted in time and place?

Would you read and understand those accounts differently if they were not rooted in time and place?

Does seeing where the events happened, either by visiting the sites or by viewing pictures or videos, enrich or hamper your understanding of the Bible?

Section V: Scriptural Authority

Living Faith (a subordinate doctrinal standard of The Presbyterian Church in Canada)

5.1 says:

The Bible has been given to us by the inspiration of God
to be the rule of faith and life.

It is the standard of all doctrine
by which we must test any word that comes to us
from church, world, or inner experience.

We subject to its judgment all we believe and do.

Through the Scriptures the church is bound only to Jesus Christ its King and Head.
He is the living Word of God to whom the written word bears witness.

Take time to read this statement through two or three times. What phrases or ideas caught your attention?

Another way to define “from church, world, or inner experience” would be tradition, reason, and experience. How does one test tradition, reason, and experience by means of Scripture?

“We subject to its judgment all we believe and do.” Think of time when Scripture challenged something you believed or a pattern in your life. How did you work through the challenge? What authority did Scripture have in your life as you worked through the challenge?

Section VI: Summing up

Name one way your understanding of the place of Scripture in the lives of Christians has been challenged or re-affirmed by this conversation.

Name one thing you will do, say, believe, or begin to change because of this conversation.

The “Scripture alone” event was the third of five Ref@500 Project events taking place from 2013 to 2017. Sponsored by the Committee on History and funded through the support of the Ewart Endowment for Theological Education and the Conference Fund of the Life and Mission Agency, these events lead up to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

The project’s purpose is to address the questions: What do the five “solos”, so central to the Reformation, say to the church in Canada today? Are the 500-year-old theological slogans robust enough to be relevant today? For more information about the Reformation@500 Project or this study guides, contact Peter Bush, 197 Browning Blvd., Winnipeg, MB, R3K 0L1, email peterwwpres@mymts.net or call 204-837-5706.