

LUTHER 500

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Sola Scriptura

C. S. Lewis recognized that, “Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to making certain mistakes.” We’re all stuck in *our own age*, the only age we *experience*. So, it’s easy to miss where *we’re* mistaken – especially as we flatter ourselves into assuming that *we’ve progressed beyond* all those dolts who came before us. Then, we ignorantly *repeat* the mistakes of the past.

So, said Lewis, we “need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that,” he knew, “means, the *old* books.”

This wasn’t a reactionary conclusion of a crotchety old professor sequestered up in an ivory tower of nostalgia. It’s our *only option*. *One’s own era* is inescapably circumscribed within *its own* setting and its *own* bent. So, it does make sense to *try* to rise *above* one’s *own* era’s *inevitable* ignorance and shortsightedness. We’re in need of a cultural diversity that goes deeper than the present tense.

Since no yet-to-be-written books are available, the *only* options to today’s books *are* old books. They’re *free of our* era’s biases and blind spots, but they have biases and blind spots of *their* eras. Fortunately, the *old* books come from *many different* eras.

Unfortunately, and for some time now in American universities, the study of *old* books, e.g., the ancient classics, Western history, as well as basic principles of rational thinking and logic, have been dropped with high handed disdain for the sake of *our* day’s pet peeves, prejudice and priorities. That censorship dogmatically deprives us of a diversity of *viewpoint* and perspectives beyond *our own* biases and blind spots.

These days, people get themselves *anxious* and then *hostile* if they’re *presented* with *anything that questions or refutes their own* presuppositions, their postmodern prejudices, and their politically correct and postured pieties. Sadly, since they lack any real ability at skilled reason and argument, they start and end with “Shut up!”

Still, there’s *one collection* of *old* books that’s stood the test of time and that’s linked to various eras, authors, languages and cultures, that presents a perspective that *claims* to rise *above* any *one* particular time and place, and, indeed, *above all time and space*. It’s been received for nearly 2,000 years to be the Word of *God*. This collection of old books has impacted more people than any other collection. It’s called, of course, The Bible.

But Gallup finds that, even in our fairly “Christian” country, so to speak, “By and large, Americans don’t read it.” Says Gallup: “Because they don’t read it, they have become a nation of biblical illiterates.” Indeed, Barna finds that, however trite its little *Bible quiz* is, most Americans cannot name even five of the Ten Commandments. And fewer than half can name the four gospels.

Ignorant of a book they ignore, they’re nonetheless quite quick to register their *opinions* on the Bible – whether negative or positive. I heard plenty of that at City Church coffee hours.

Well, Luther *eventually* found the Bible to be the *inspired Word of God* and the *only reliable standard* for faith and life. But that came to him only *after* his many years of spiritual dread and depression, only *after* he’d engaged in seriously searching those pages, and really, only *after* he’d already posted his 95 Theses.

At last, he experienced overwhelming relief, even great peace, in the Bible's message of God's free grace. He said that it was as if he'd been "born again". He'd gained what for so long he'd sought.

Odd as it may seem, Luther recalled that, he'd *never* even *seen* a Bible until he was 20. He'd grown up going to Mass regularly. Yet, in his youth, he'd never *seen*, let alone, *read*, a Bible. He said that, back then, he'd assumed, "there were no other Gospels and Epistles besides those in the Homilies", the breviary or a missal mumbled in Latin and usually in a rush.

It was the vested interest of the medieval church hierarchy to *control* what was told to the masses. So, the Bible remained in Latin, a *foreign* language to everyday folks. This is why Luther's translation of the Bible into the language of the German people was so very significant. Yet, in our secular culture these days, fewer and fewer people have *seen* a Bible, let alone *read* one.

Jesus and his disciples were on the road to Caesarea Philippi. They were used to Jesus' referencing himself as "The Son of Man" (i.e., a man), *but also* an allusion to the Hebrew Scripture's latest reference to a *heavenly Messiah*, from the Book of Daniel (c. 165 BC). So, they assumed he, again, meant *himself* when he asked: "Who do the crowds say that the Son of Man is?" His disciples replied: "Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah, and still others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets." Then, Jesus asked *them, directly*: "And *you*, who do *you* say that *I am*?"

Instantly, Simon Peter replied: "*You* are the *Messiah*, the Son of the Living God!" Instantly, Jesus affirmed his reply: "Peter, son of John, how *blessed* you are, for you did not come up with *this* on your own. *This was revealed* to you by my Father in Heaven."

Then, Jesus spoke a *revelation* of his own, and he used a pun in doing so: "You are *Petros*, and on this *petra*, I will build my church, and the gates of hell will never overpower it." (Matt 16:13ff)

Petros is the Greek *masculine name*. It means, "stony". *Petra* is the Greek *feminine* for a "massive rock" – a fitting image of that *solid rock foundation* of Peter's divinely derived *testimony*.

This pivotal teaching moment, reported by Matthew and Luke, shows that Jesus knew exactly what he was doing in his asking the question and at the revelation of his identity as Messiah. (Matt 16; Luke 9) These biblical texts couldn't be clearer on his *fullest endorsement* of the Divine origin of Peter's reply.

But here's how a writer for *The Atlantic* magazine described this scene to his elite, albeit biblically illiterate, readers. Lamely, he *projects* that Jesus' question is the query, "of a man who wishes to disturb but who is also himself disturbed; of a man who has somehow found himself in deeper waters than anticipated; of a man at once baffled and intrigued by a destiny that he may have begun to glimpse but of which he is not fully aware. And thus, seeking guidance, seeking perhaps to ken the range of possibilities, Jesus put the question to his followers." Huh?

The Atlantic's writer *spins* the scene: "Peter ventured a reply, 'Thou art the Christ'." Without a single syllable of *Jesus' ringing endorsement* of the *divine origin* of Peter's reply, *The Atlantic's* writer claims: "Jesus declined to enlighten his followers." Say what? There was no *higher authority* to which Jesus could have attributed the *source* of Peter's witness than the *divine intervention* of Jesus' *heavenly Father*. And Jesus *did* that! Only *then*, did he ask that, for a time, they keep this *revelation* quiet.

Having presented his *counterfactual* report, *The Atlantic* writer takes as *his*, a secularist meme that flies in the face of the historical and textual evidence: “The Gospels are highly imperfect historical documents.” And, *The Atlantic* – how historically reliable is *it*?

Who do people *say* Jesus is? That *depends* on *who’s speaking* and *whom* they’re *reading*. Skeptics are deeply *invested* in buying into *false* narratives. They can’t *afford* to *say* what Gospel writers *said* Jesus *said* of Peter’s identifying him by *God’s revelation*. So, the misinformed *elite* remain misinformed *skeptics*, and continue to twist even *misinformation* into what they think they can *afford*. Long ago, Jesus gave a heads up on all of this: What we *find*, what we *say* – whoever we *are* – reveals *where we’re coming from*. What we’re full of, spills out. (Luke 6:45)

In 1956, as a first year student at BJU, I wrote an English term paper and called it, “‘That’s what they *say*...!’ But who are *they*?” Unlike Dr. Bob’s “feedback”, when he shouted me down for defending Billy Graham, my English teacher said I was *witty*.

It’s more than *witty* to ask, on *any* subject, “Who *says* so?”, “Who are *they* to say?” What’s *footnoting* for, if not to document *who* said it and raise the legitimate question, “Who are *they*?”

Of course, that question, “Who are *they*?” *can* be put with *telltale* signs of *defensiveness*, especially in retaliation to *basic truth* claims and *admonitions*. “Says *who*?” or “Who are *they* to tell *me* what’s right or wrong?” It can be put with even stronger censure: “Who *the hell* are they?” Had I used *that* version as the title of my term paper, my teacher’s reaction would have echoed Dr. Bob’s.

“Who *the hell* are they?” is, of course, a rhetorical *demand*: *I’m* the one who gets to say what’s so! This *defensive* tone exposes *insecurity* – the doubts and fears of one who thinks he’s *not as right* as he *pretends* to be, but thinks he *needs* to be, and thinks he *needs you* to think so, too.

There are *seemingly* more *tolerant phrasings*, but disingenuous posturing is *just as dogmatic, defensive* and *dismissive*: “Well, who’s to *say* what’s right or what’s true?”, “You’re entitled to *your truth*, *I’m* entitled to *my truth*. So there!”, and they sign off.

Even *before* postmodernism’s defensive assault against *Truth* with a capital “T”, people presumed to make pronouncements on all sorts of matters about which they had little or no basis to judge except, of course, their own *agenda* and *ignorance* – in that order.

But, even *rational* principles, applied in investigation and study, *must* always operate on *assumptions* that are *taken for granted* – *by faith* – if you will. Still, *rationality can discipline* thought and thus, can *guard* against mere confirmation bias. Asking, *by what authority* or *on what basis* do we say this or that, is all-important.

Given the wide range of ideas, beliefs and opinions that are at odds with each other, it’s no wonder that *disputes* have arisen over whether or not we can *know any ultimate truth*. But saying there’s no ultimate truth, *postures* one’s own *ultimate truth*. Saying *all* is *self-delusion, functions* as self-delusion. And, if one pretends that *all, but I*, are self-deluded, he or she is *surely* stuck in *self-imposed* delusion.

So, *where* in *this world* of ignorance, self-centeredness, contradictions, lies and delusions is there a *sure foundation* for knowing *ultimate Truth* and *Reality*? Clearly, such a foundation must *come into* our limited and limiting world *from beyond* all of our own distracting personal agendas.

Luther found *Truth* and *Reality* when *Truth* and *Reality* *came* to him in his desperate quest for truth and reality. How did *Truth* and *Reality* *come* to Luther? *Truth* and *Reality* *came* to Luther in *Reality’s* Word of Truth, the Holy Scriptures. From then on, Luther found *his personally experienced reformation* and his *public proclamation for reformation*, rooted in a *biblical*

revelation he'd so *surprisingly*, yet *amazingly*, learned the *hard* way. And it had been there all along – right there in the Bible.

In the 20th century, the world-renowned and rather liberal Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, taught at Tübingen in Germany. He was papal advisor to the Second Vatican Council in the mid-'60s. Now, at 89, Kung has asked Pope Francis to, "give room to a free discussion" of *papal infallibility*. That dogma dates back only the Counter Reformation against Luther.

Kung is no Bible-based Luther, but each man sought or seeks reformation of the church. They have something else in common. Says Kung: "In writing my book, *The Church* [in the mid-'60s], I found myself always speaking about this man Jesus Christ. I realized that I did not really know who this man Jesus really was. And it occurred to me that many of my colleagues and many of the people who read my books didn't know who Jesus was either."

In 1983, that 500th year of Luther's birth, Kung wrote his book, *Infallible?* He revealed, "I was more than ever pushed to discover on what our theology is based. I think I know the tradition – that is, the old tradition – about as well as anyone. I was educated in Rome and spoke in Latin every day for seven years. And I liked it. But I was never able to preach about Jesus. . . . I decided eventually to preach on the Gospel of Saint Mark, and I did, verse by verse. I experienced in a new way what I had once found boring. I came to the conclusion that basically the Christian message is He Himself. I hate to say it so simply – I've seen in America what television preachers can do with such remarks – but that is a convenient way of getting across the general idea."

Christianity is Christ! That's the title of an old book, a book that W. H. Griffith Thomas, a British evangelical and co-founder of Dallas Seminary, wrote 117 years ago.

In Luther's day, the Renaissance bloomed across Europe, in arts, humanities and science. And the great historian, Jacques Barzun, makes a profound observation of all of it, saying, in Luther and the Reformation, "The Modern Era begins" .

Explorers were finding new worlds beyond the seas. The half-century old invention of a practical printing press had, in its day, an impact similar to today's technological advances. Gutenberg's movable type made the cheap, rapid and wide distribution of the printed page an everyday reality. Luther took full advantage of it. He became the most *prolific* and most *popular* writer of his day.

What was first printed by this new invention tended to be large volumes in Latin. However, Luther latched onto the printing press to flood Europe with his tracts and pamphlets as well as his Bible translations in the language of the people. Most peasants couldn't read, but they certainly *could listen to others* read what Luther wrote and they grasped what he said. They received it very well.

Incidentally, by the time Luther finished *writing* what he had to say, his unabridged works add up to over 70,000 pages in print.

Luther learned from his *experience* with the Bible, that, indeed, it was *God's* word, for, as he put it, "No book, teaching, or word is able to comfort in troubles, anxiety, misery, death, and even in the midst of devils in hell, except *this* book, which teaches us God's Word and in which God Himself speaks with us as a man speaks with his friend."

This *written* word of God serves us, as it served Jesus himself, in *his own* deep experience of testing. Luke says that Jesus, "*full* of the Holy Spirit, was *led* by the Spirit, far into a *dangerous desert* of wild wilderness where the Satan tested Jesus who was hungry and exhausted. "Turn these stones into bread", was one test. But Jesus rebuked him with, "*It is written*", and cited God's word from the Torah. We "can't live by bread alone, but by every *word* that comes from

the mouth of the Lord”. (Deut 8:3) Well, Satan didn’t stop there. He next made a *false* promise in exchange for Jesus’ worship of *him*. Again, Jesus rebuked him with words from the Torah: “*It is written*: Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.” (Deut 6:13) Satan kept it up, testing Jesus again. This time, he twisted the Torah into a perverted “proof text”. Again, Jesus rebuked him: “*It is written*: Don’t put the Lord God to a test.” (Deut 6:16) At that, the Satan withdrew for the time being. And Jesus returned to the Galilee to minister “in the power of the Spirit”. (Luke 4:14)

So, throughout his ministry for reform, Luther, too, repeatedly and bluntly urged: “Whoever would *hear* God speak should *read the Holy Scripture*.” He explained: “The entire Bible does nothing else but give a person to understand *what he was* and *what he is*. . . . It tells him he’s *completely lost*. It also tells him of Christ’s mercy and, through Christ, it leads us to God.” Luther knew that, without God in Christ, we’re *completely incomplete*!

Luther condensed the whole teaching of the Bible to two lessons: Humanity is *ruined and damned by sin* and cannot escape on its own. God, in his mercy, *destroys sin and justifies humanity*. As Luther put it: “The purpose of the entire Scripture is to commend to us the goodness of God, who, through His Son, effected the restoration of human nature, fallen into sin and damnation, to righteousness and life.” So, he asked, rhetorically, “What purpose other than this proclamation does Scripture have from beginning to end?” He said: “Messiah, God’s Son, was to come and through His sacrifice, as an innocent Lamb of God, bear and remove the sins of the world and thus redeem us from eternal death for eternal salvation.” This is the whole scope of the Good News.

It’s sad that, Luther’s *biblical* Good News is so uncommon a theme in “Bible-believing” churches today, given a preoccupation with selective moralist nitpicking and *Rightwing* politics. It’s sad too, that Luther’s *biblical* Good News is so uncommon a theme in Lutheran and other mainline churches today, given a preoccupation with selective moralistic nitpicking and *Leftwing* politics.

Luther cautioned that Christians should *not* expect to have *all* their questions answered to their *own* immediate satisfaction by looking up “answers” in the Bible. But so many go against this advice. Whatever *their prejudice*, they find “proof texts” for *rationalizing*.

Still, as Luther explained, “Scripture is *its own light*. It’s a fine thing when Scripture explains itself. So”, he urged, “rather than believing *papal lies*, be *free to doubt* whatever is not made *clear* in words of Scripture.” He noted: “The scripture, as it’s for everyone, is *clear enough* in truths *necessary for salvation*. But it’s *obscure enough* for those who merely want to *pry* into every little thing”.

He anticipated the “analogy of faith”, seeing *obscure* texts in the light of *clearer* texts. He put the principle beautifully: “Be sure that nothing brighter exists than the sun, that is, the Scripture. But if a cloud has drifted before it, there is, after all, nothing behind it but that same bright sun. So, if you come to a *dark* passage, don’t doubt that it surely contains the same truth that’s *clearly* put at other places. Whoever can’t understand dark passages should stick with clear passages.”
Capeesh Papa?

Luther stressed a passage’s *context*: “Weigh the *words* carefully, comparing what *preceded* with what *follows*, be diligent to capture the *integral* meaning and don’t read *your eccentricities* into a text by mutilating words and tearing them out of their context.” But preachers have abused Bible verses to push racial segregation and to fight against interracial and same-sex marriage. They’ve done untold damage to people of color and same-sex attraction, as well as to the Law-free Gospel, the Golden Rule, Galatians 3:28, *et al.*

For Luther, the *widest* and the *central* context of Scripture is *Christ*: “We clarify the Old Testament by the Gospel, not vice versa; and we identify the *meaning* of the Old Testament with the *meaning* of the New, making both look to *Christ*, as do the two cherubim on the mercy seat.”

Luther said: “If we have the correct understanding of *scripture* and the correct articles of our faith, that *Jesus Christ, God’s Son, suffered and died for us*, then we’re *not* lacking much, even though we’re not *able* to answer everything that is asked on *other things*.” Unfortunately, so many are still stuck on all those “other things”.

Luther never failed to speak up in defense of Christ’s Gospel, even under threat of death. Today, all over the world, thousands are imprisoned, tortured, raped and killed for their witness for Christ. But *we* in this free country fear that some friends might offend themselves and “un-friend” us, were we to share our faith in Christ.

Luther knew that, scripture “turns all the supposedly wise and clever people into fools and it’s an open book only to the distressed and foolish folk” for whom Jesus was thankful and he prayed, “O Father, Lord of heaven and earth: I thank you for hiding these things from those who pose as wise, and for revealing them to the childlike.” (Matt 11:25) He prayed this prayer as he denounced the many towns where he’d done so many miracles, including his base at Capernaum: “And you, Capernaum, do you think that you’ll be exalted to the skies? Oh, no, you’ll go down into the depths of the dead. For if the miracles that were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But, I tell you, it will go *easier* for Sodom on the Day of Judgment than for you.” (Matt 11:23f) Jesus explained to Peter, “To the one who’s been given much, much will be expected.” (Luke 12:48)

Luther challenged people to, “Dismiss *your own notions* and *your own feelings* and think of *scripture* as the most *sublime*, most *noble* of *sacred things*.” Recalling those days of his youth around the copper mines, he said that Scripture is like “the *richest* of the mines, that can never be entirely emptied”.

Another of his metaphors, reminiscent of “Away in a Manger”, though that carol was *mistakenly* attributed to him, he wrote these lines: “Here [in Scripture] you will find the swaddling clothes and the manger in which Christ lies, to which the angel directs the shepherds. The swaddling clothes are plain and ordinary, but dear is the Treasure, Christ, who lies in them.” This tender metaphor is so much more meaningful than all of Rome’s fake relics that Luther scorned – that fake little vial of the virgin mother’s milk and fake baby teeth from Jesus.

Over the centuries, papal hierarchical control over the churches gradually, yet *radically*, and for all *practical* purposes, *reduced* the place of Scripture. So it’s no wonder that the peasants lost touch with the Bible, when even clerics had inadequate training in the Bible. Still, some monasteries, such as Luther’s ancient Order of Augustinians, did study Scripture seriously.

There’d been a few German Bibles before Luther, but his translations from the original Greek and Hebrew were the greatest in terms of accuracy, readability and consequent popularity.

Reflecting on his work of translating, Luther noted his *purpose* – to render Scripture for *understanding*. He asked, “What’s the point in unnecessarily sticking to literalism if that misleads?” He knew that confusion could arise for German readers if he kept Hebrew *idioms*. So, he pondered: “Now, let me see, ‘How does a German speak in this case, or in that case?’ Let me dismiss the *literalist* Hebrew and freely express the real *sense* of the text in the best *German* way.” He even paid attention to casual talk in the market square to pick up everyday idiom of everyday Germans. That’s the way to do it. And that’s the way Bible translation is done today.

But his translating wasn’t easy. He said he’d not have done it but for his love of Christ, for no amount of gold could have enticed him into such difficult and exhausting labors.

Luther's reception of God's revelation for reform was, by God's *continuing* gifts, not original to him. He, in *his own* turn, took seriously what the *first* Christians had learned from Jesus himself and then, from what Paul and others had learned and written, that was collected and preserved as the New Testament. And the Spirit behind Luther's protest was the same Spirit who'd inspired other *declared* "heretics" like England's John Wycliffe, "Morning Star of the Reformation", born a hundred years before Luther, and Jan Hus, Czech Reformer, burned to death a hundred years before Luther's posting. Hus had quipped that his *goose* was cooked but that a fighting *swan* would come to take his place. Luther adopted that sign of a fighting swan for himself.

Luther's recovery of the Bible from Rome's *abuse* and his return to the *centrality* of Scripture, was *his* part, in *his* day, in what, ever since, has been the worldwide *evangelical* standard for accurate biblical theology and its application to everyday life.

Luther was usually wise enough not to personalize responses to his ministry, though he could seem mean-spirited when he was *grieved* over the rejection of the Gospel. He usually saw himself as a wanderer, singing a song through the woods of the world and, "Whoever hears it, hears it." But, he did frustrate himself over how *indifferent* and *resistant* people could be to this wonderfully liberating Good News of God's free grace in Christ Jesus.

At Eisleben, in 1546, in the very last sermon he ever preached, Luther said: "In times past, we would have run to the ends of the earth if we had known of a place where we could have *heard God speak*. Yet now that we *hear God speak* every day [in God's Word and in sermons based in God's Word] we don't see this happening. ... You ought to lift up your hands and rejoice that we have been given the honor of having *God speak to us through his Word*. But, people say, 'Eh', who cares? We're tired of that.'" At *that*, Luther became sarcastic over such pitiable indifference and tragic rejection. He mocked them in grief: "All right then, go ahead, dear brother, if you don't want *God to speak to you* ... then look for something else. Over in Aachen you'll find Joseph's pants and our blessed Lady's chemise; go there, squander your money, buy indulgence and the pope's secondhand junk."

By the way, that Marian Reliquary is still in Aachen Cathedral, now opened only every seven years. Next time is 2021. You can still see Mary's chemise there, though Joseph's pants are missing. What's there instead is Jesus' diaper and his loincloth as well as John the Baptist's decapitation cloth. I kid you not.

The *heart* of the Reformation was the *Word* "made flesh" in Christ Jesus. And this was *revealed* in God's *Word* of Good News in Scripture. *God's Word* revolutionized and restored perspective and spiritual health to the *heart and soul* of Martin Luther as it had restored the *hearts and souls* of prior reformers and the earliest Christians. And through all these centuries since, this heart-regenerating Word of God has given the same relief to millions upon millions of souls who sought God "with ears to hear and eyes to see".

Do we listen? Do we *hear*? Do we look and *perceive*? Pray that, by God's grace, we do! Amen.