

## Sola Scriptura

Earlier this year Mike, Trey, and I traveled to Prague. And one of the days we walked around this very old city. And right in the center of town was a monument to John Huss, who was martyred for his stance upon the Word of God. When the chain was put about him at the stake, he said, with a smiling countenance, "*My Lord Jesus Christ was bound with a harder chain than this for my sake, and why then should I be ashamed of this rusty one?*" As they piled the wood around him the Duke of Bavaria asked him to recant his teachings. Huss said, "*I never preached any doctrine of an evil tendency; and what I taught with my lips I now seal with my blood.*" He then said to the executioner, "*you are now going to burn a goose, but in a century you will have a swan which you can neither roast nor boil.*" If he were prophetic, he must have meant Martin Luther, who came about a hundred years later.

The year was 1517 (500 years ago on Oct. 31) when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the Church door in Wittenburg, modern day Germany. He was a monk in the Catholic Church (as distinguished from the Orthodox Church in the East); highly educated, hard-working, loyal to the established church. And these 95 short statements outlined what he believed to be erroneous teachings. (Has anyone ever read these?) And I think deep down, he really wanted the Pope and the bishops and the powers that be to heed his advice. He wanted to see reform in the church he loved so greatly.

But, what would follow in the coming years, was not the way he thought his life would go (It's the same with us. We plan our ways but God directs our steps.) He was compelled to defend his teachings. He came to believe that he was saved not by works, but by faith alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. Why? We must ask! Of course, we know it was because the power of God who gave Martin Luther the Holy Spirit and opened his eyes to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But, we must also say that Martin Luther did what he did because of the Word of God. At the Diet of Worms in 1521 he said, "*My conscience is captive to the Word of God.*" He was convinced that Scripture alone is the church's final authority. From 1521 until his death in 1546, Luther labored to see the church firmly established upon the Word. In the city of Torgau in 1544, at the dedication of what some say was the first "Protestant" building, he said, "*We can spare everything except the Word of God.*"

You see, Martin Luther (as well as others before him and many after him), believed in the authority of the Bible. And it wasn't that the Catholic church didn't believe in the authority of the Bible. They did. And they do today. But, there is a difference between what Protestants and Catholics believe concerning authority and Scripture. *Sola Scriptura* means "Scripture alone." For Protestants, this means the Bible is the SOLE and FINAL authority in all matters of life and godliness. But, the Catholic Church does not view authority in the same way. They add other sources of authority like the writings of the Church Fathers, the Church Councils, creeds, oral traditions, the words of the pope, and give those things the same authority as the Bible. And in the end, the Catholic Church itself, beginning with the pope has the authority to decide what is right.

Luther looked around at what the church was teaching. And he didn't like what he saw, mainly because he didn't believe that certain practices were taught in the Bible. One example was how the Catholic Church dealt with sin, especially payment for sins. A system of indulgences developed. An indulgence was a payment for sins. The Catholic Church at that time would sell indulgences to people, which "guaranteed" their sins were forgiven. Why wait for purgatory, when you can have them paid for now? And it went further than your own sins. A person could actually give the church money to pay for their dead relatives' sins, whom they thought were in purgatory. And the more you paid, the more sins could be forgiven. So, Luther's congregation started to buy these indulgences. And Luther did not believe the Scriptures gave the Church the authority to teach such things. Later, he would see the worship of Mary and other "saints," purgatory, their understanding of the body and blood of Jesus, pilgrimages, monastic vows, to name a few as erroneous. Why? Because they were not taught in Scriptures! *Sola Scriptura* are the words we use to describe Luther's (and all others who "protested" these doctrines) departure from the Catholic Church. And, it is still our departure today.

When we have conversations with our Catholic neighbors and friends about what we find to be erroneous like purgatory or the worship of Mary, etc. we immediately go to the Bible. And I believe our points in these matters are easily argued. But, we have a different approach (presupposition). We believe Scripture alone is our authority. But they believe in other authorities alongside the Bible. Now, let me say also as Protestants, we believe in the truth of certain traditions. I believe the early Church Councils that met to debate very important doctrines such as the deity and humanity of Christ reveal truth. And I believe them to be true and authoritative. When I read Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, Chrysostom, etc. I believe what they say is good and true. And there is great authority in their writings.

I believe the early Creeds of the Church are true and authoritative. As do the Catholics. But, there is a difference. I believe them to be true and authoritative as long as they do not undermine the teaching of the Bible; as long as they are in line with the Bible. And I think we would be crazy, ignorant, if we do not read the Church Fathers, the Church Councils, the writings of great men and women of faith, in order to help us understand the Bible. There is nothing new under the sun. The consensus of Christians throughout history on doctrine is very helpful. And I do believe the Church has the authority to decide on such things. But, at the end of the day, DOES THE BIBLE TEACH AND AFFIRM WHAT WE ARE TEACHING. This is the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*. With this in mind, let's spend the rest of our time asking the question: Why *Sola Scriptura*? I have truths and some applications.

1. The Bible is authoritative on its own. Why? God is the author! Though, the Word of God was written by men, God "inspired" these words. And they are EXACTLY what God wants for us to have. Who will defend God Himself? There is no higher authority! The same goes for his Word. Because the Scriptures come from God himself, from this perspective there is no need to defend the Word! Spurgeon likened the Bible to a Lion. Let it out of its cage! And you will see what will happen. In the beginning, God spoke the world into existence. And the same God who created out of nothing, who needs no introduction, who needs no one to defend him is the

authority behind the Word. Therefore, we don't need human reason or the church to VALIDATE the Scriptures. At the end of the Day, this is God's Word. We believe it. We trust it. We stand upon it. It is authoritative.

There are so many implications that flow from this truth that we don't have time to touch upon all of them. But let me sum up what I think it important for us to know. What we can say about God, we can also say about the Word. For example, God is always right. Therefore his words are always right. 2 Sam. 22:31: **"This God-- his way is perfect; the word of the LORD proves true . . ."** Ps. 12:6: **"The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times."** God is love. This book is a book of love. It is full of God's revelation to a sinful world which screams out God is love. *"Come unto me and find life."* *"Know what I am like."* *"Live as I have commanded you to live."* Also, God is holy. This book is a testimony to God's holiness. He will do what is right. This means He is a God who judges sin and rules righteously. Throughout the Bible, we see a God who judges. The Bible is clear! God will judge you according to your deeds, which are filthy rags in his sight because of our sin natures. Or, God will judge his Son in the place of all call upon Him.

God is powerful! And such is his Word. Heb. 4:12: **"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."** The Bible says God will accomplish his purposes (all of them). Is. 46:11: **"I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it."** Is. 55:10: **"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, <sup>11</sup> so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."**

God is a God of grace and mercy. Such is the Word. I had never known such mercy and grace until the Word powerfully revealed God's Son to me back in 1987. God is One who cannot lead you astray! This is infallibility. This means when we read the Bible, God speaks clearly. On and on we can go.

2. The Bible is without error. This simply follows what we've been already saying. But, I wanted to single this one out because of it's applications for *Sola Scriptura*. The Scriptures are inerrant! I believe the Chicago Statement of Faith on biblical inerrancy is an excellent document expressing this truth. *"We affirm that Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud, or deceit."* I believe one of the main reasons for the departure from the truth, especially in medieval times leading up to the time of Luther, was the fact that little by little, more and more, the Roman Catholic Church relied upon other sources that were spoken and written by men. And men are infallible; men are errant. And when the authority of the church is based on Scripture AND other sources of authority all kinds of errors abound. (Worship of Mary and other saints, Mary's sinlessness, extra sacraments other than baptism and the Lord's Supper, purgatory, etc.)

Augustine said, “*The church does not convey authority to Scripture . . .*” “*Instead, Scripture gives authority to the church.*” Thomas Cranmer, who would become a martyr in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century for his stance on the Bible, said that as a Church we must be “*a witness and keeper of holy writing.*” “*Our responsibility must be to preserve the Scriptures and hand them down to the next generation. ‘A ‘witness’ and ‘keeper’ does not control the written Word; instead, it guards it and facilitates serious sustained engagement with it.’*”

Listen to one more quote by Cranmer concerning error and the church: “*If anything were the Word of God other than Holy Scripture, we could not be certain of Gods Word. If we be uncertain of the Word of God, the Devil might be able to make for us a new word, a new faith, a new church, a new God, indeed make himself God, as he has done up to now. For this is the foundation of the Antichrist’s kingdom. If the church and the Christian faith did not rely upon the certain word of God as a firm foundation, no one could know whether he had faith, whether he were in the church of Christ or the synagogue of Satan.*” (This is certainly what we see around us.)

3. The Bible is unified. God is not divided. Therefore, it follows that the Book I hold (my Bible) is also one. It is a unified revelation from the God who is ONE! If you read other religious documents and books, you will not find unity like you find in the Bible. Let me ask, “*How do we know the Bible is unified?*” How would you answer that? I think there are lots of ways we could support this truth. But the number one way we see unity in the Bible is it’s message is about Christ. Luther particularly emphasizes this point. He says: “*Now the gospels and epistles of the apostles were written for this very purpose.*” Speaking of the OT he continues: “*It is there that people like us should read and study, drill ourselves, and see what Christ is, for what purpose he has been given, how he was promised, and how all Scripture tends toward him. For he himself says in John 5, ‘If you believed Moses, you would also believe me, for he wrote of me.’ Again, ‘search and look up the Scriptures, for it is they that bear witness to me.’*”

At the end of the day, *Sola Scriptura* matters because the gospel is at stake. If we allow other authorities besides the Bible to take either be “equal with” or “greater than” the Bible and it’s authority to be God’s revelation to us in all areas of life, godliness, doctrine, then the Gospel itself is at stake. (We will see this emerge with the other *Solas*.) We end up “taking away” or especially “adding to” the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And I think we’ve seen the Catholic Church do this throughout the centuries. (I am not saying that someone in the Catholic Church cannot be saved. They can; if they have Christ.)

Let me end with another story about Luther. After that October day in 1517 when Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door, the rift between the pope and Luther heightened. In 1521 Pope Leo X excommunicated Luther, calling him a “wild boar.” Luther returned by calling the pope the Antichrist. But, the big showdown came at the Diet of Worms in the spring of 1521. Expecting a debate, Luther was instead asked two questions. His accusers pointed to a heap of writings on the table, asking if they were his writings. He said yes. Then he was asked to recant. He took a day to think about it. The next day he stood before the same folks who again asked him to recant. Boldly he proclaimed:

*“Since then your serene majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, plain and unvarnished: 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 the councils alone, since it is well known that they often err and contradict themselves, I am bound to 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.”*

Today, you may ask, “Does the Reformation still matter?” And, “Does it continue today?” I say “yes, and yes.” The same principle divides Catholics and Protestants. And it begins with Scripture.