

Sola Scriptura

We are celebrating an anniversary today. This happens to be what the Protestant Church considers the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. It was October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther, a bible professor and Roman Catholic monk, nailed his ninety-five theses on the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg, Germany. The posting of the theses was actually calling for an academic debate, addressing issues in the church with which Luther was concerned. The debate was never held, but his 95 theses were published and his concerns spread eventually leading to what we call the Protestant Reformation.

The theses were protests against what Luther saw as abuses within the Catholic church. That included the sale of indulgences. Introduced during the Crusades as a source of income for the church, the idea was essentially in exchange for a contribution the church offered the sinner exemption from having to do penance. It was a get out of jail free card that could even extend beyond the grave. Regardless of the condition of your soul, good works aided in your salvation or a generous gift could even free the dead from purgatory. Luther protested the notion that salvation came not only through the merits of Christ's death on the cross, but also through good works and the efforts of the saints. Luther refuted the doctrine of purgatory and the selling of indulgences because there was no Scriptural evidence for either. He argued everything had to be based on Scripture. By placing the authority of Scripture above church tradition or the edict of the Pope, Luther was labeled as a preacher of dangerous doctrines and charged with heresy. He and the other reformers that followed gave expression to truths that would be the bedrock of our Protestant faith, expressed in these Latin phrases.

Sola Scriptura. By Scripture alone. The word of God is the sole infallible rule for faith and practice. Our faith, our actions, our beliefs, are based on and built on the Word of God. In Luther's time, the people didn't have the bible in their language or in their hands to read. The Catholic Mass was in Latin and the people didn't even know what was being said. Without knowing the Word of God, how could they know whom or what to believe? How could they know how to please God? At that time Scripture was not the final authority for faith and practice and doctrine, the Pope was, tradition was. Luther argued, "Neither the church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture." Church tradition, the wisdom of the church councils, the wisdom of the pope and the pastor, they are all instructive and we interpret Scripture through their wisdom, but all are subject to the authority of God's word.

It seems to me the church today is facing another crossroad. We are going to have to decide again whether we believe the Scripture to be the final authority for faith and doctrine and practice or will it be our own feelings, or the latest blog from our favorite preacher. The question for us today is, in the words of Phyllis Tickle in her book *The Great Emergence*, “who or what is to be used as the arbitrator of correct belief, action and control.”

Sola Gratia. By grace alone. In Luther’s time some in the church taught that salvation came through a mixture of reliance upon God’s grace and the merits of our own good works or that of other saints, referred to as “the treasury of merits”. Luther insisted we are saved by grace alone, through Christ alone, and not by our good works or efforts. The word of God declares, **“But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy...He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.” Titus 3:4-7** Salvation is by grace alone, through Christ alone, and not by our works or the efforts of anyone else!

Sola Fide. By faith alone. How do we appropriate that saving grace? It is by faith in Christ and what he has done. We are saved by grace through faith and not by works. It was the great discovery for Luther when he found that we are justified by faith and not by our efforts or good works. He had spent much of his life living under fear and condemnation, never feeling he was good enough nor had done enough to merit God’s love or grace. It was in 1515 while studying the book of Romans he read these words of St. Paul, **“For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” Romans 1:17** Luther said upon this realization that he was justified by faith in Jesus and his atoning grace alone that he felt himself “to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.” It is bedrock for us, that we are saved by faith in the merit of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. It is a matter of placing our total trust and confidence, our faith in Jesus for salvation. **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.” Ephesians 2:8-9** How can you be saved? By God’s grace, through faith in his Son.

Solus Christus. By Christ alone. We are saved through the merits of Christ and his sacrificial death and resurrection. Jesus alone was the mediator of this new covenant. Luther found that on that basis the believer had direct access to God through Christ. Neither the Virgin Mary nor the saints nor priests nor the Pope nor anyone else is necessary to mediate for us or assist in our salvation. **“For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men.” 1 Timothy 2:5-6**

Soli Deo Gloria. Glory to God alone. While some in the church in Luther’s time divided life into the sacred and the secular, Luther believed that all of life is to be lived under God’s sovereignty and for the glory of God. Pleasing God wouldn’t require living in a monastery, but instead every aspect of our life is to be lived for Him and for his glory. **“For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” Romans 11:36**

Luther’s appeal to the Scripture as the basis for authority would put him at odds with the Pope and he would eventually be excommunicated from the church. In 1521, when he was finally placed on trial and called upon to recant his teaching, he gave this famous speech, appealing to the bishops to show him from Scripture where he was in error. Luther said, **“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 have often erred and contradicted 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.” Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms**

Why should you care what an old Catholic monk said 500 years ago? Because he affirmed the authority of the Scripture as God’s infallible word and the rule for faith and practice. All other authority is derived from the authority of Scripture. Luther affirmed that truth to which Jesus referred when he said “heaven and earth will pass away but my words will never pass away.” Matthew 24:35 One author noted that “Every statue of Martin Luther in Germany today shows him clutching the Bible close to his heart. ‘It is by the Word of God and the Word of God alone,’ he would often say.”(Jim Garlow) Luther was reported to have said, “A simple layman armed with Scripture is greater than the mightiest Pope without it.” God’s word

is true and it is the basis upon which we build our lives, our faith and our practice. Thank God for Martin Luther and the stand he took to defend the authority of God's word!

But it's 2017. It's 500 years later and another reformation is stirring. People are looking for a new authority upon which to build their lives, their beliefs and doctrines. The bible's authority is viewed as outdated, questionable, or it's ignored, even in the church.

Three years ago I preached a series of messages called *Where are the Boundary Stones?* I said then that many of the boundary stones of our society had been moved. There used to be a consensus about what was morally right and wrong. We knew the boundaries of common decency and appropriateness, but the boundaries have been moved. "Who are you to impose your values and your morals on me? Your truth isn't my truth!" That's what we hear. The consensus is gone and even in the church we have multiple interpretations of biblical truth.

How do most people decide what to do and what not to do? How do we decide what is truth? In that sermon series I quoted from Peter Kreeft. In his book *Making Choices*, he suggests three basic standards for how people decide what to do. **"(1) Social fads and fashions, other's expectation, peer pressure, 'everybody's doing it'; (2) our feelings, ('it can't be wrong if it feels so right'); and (3) our desire for the easiest, most pleasant, least troublesome life."** Kreeft wrote, **"I think most of us use these three standards far more often than the standard of good and evil, right and wrong, in deciding what to do. If we're asked why we did something, how often do we answer, 'Because it was right?'" ... Peter Kreeft**

I watched the Today Show this week and in an interview with Dolly Parton and Kenny Rogers, Dylan Dryer asked, "People wonder why the two of you never had a romantic relationship, why you never got together." Dolly said, "We are more like brother and sister. It would just be incestuous." They laughed and that seemed to satisfy the interviewer, but a better answer would have been, "You are aware I've been married for 51 years, aren't you? I'm not an adulterer! I wouldn't be unfaithful to my husband or Kenny to his wife!" It just blows me away! It doesn't even occur to people today that there might be people who honor their marriage vows. It is beyond the ability of our culture to believe that people still live a sexually pure and chaste life, that people are still committed to fidelity in their marriage. Everyone cheats on their spouse, right? It doesn't occur to people because they decide what is right or wrong based on whether it is easy or pleasant or satisfying or popular and not on whether God says it is right or wrong!

Why shouldn't they cheat on their spouse? Why shouldn't you, if opportunity is there? Because our culture says you shouldn't? Not anymore. Being faithful to a spouse is hardly expected in our culture. I'm fascinated by Hollywood's response to the Harvey Weinstein sex scandal. It is a horrible thing and I'm sorry for the women that were sexually abused or harassed. That should never happen. But the irony is that this is the same Hollywood that honored Hugh Hefner and made him an icon for objectifying women and viewing them as sexual playthings, and this is the same Hollywood that glorifies sex and perversion and mocks marital fidelity and chastity, and this is the same Hollywood that cheapens sex and celebrates people "hooking up" for casual sex and now they act as though they are shocked and surprised when a person of power uses others for sexual gratification and expects people in real life to act just like they do in the movies.

But, back to my question, why shouldn't we cheat on our spouse, or if we are single have multiple sexual partners, or lie, steal or kill someone we don't like or a host of other behavioral choices? The question is who or what will be the source for us to determine right from wrong? Who or what will be the arbitrator of correct belief, action and control? It matters. It makes all the difference. It will determine your eternal destiny. It shapes the final outcome.

You may have heard we've got a little construction project going on. If you've been part of a building project then you know every detail is drawn and specified to the tiniest detail. You want to know the specs on the toilet in the family restroom? Look at the plans. It will tell you the style of the handle, the sink, the faucets. Everything is spelled out. Why? Because there is a designer, an architect, and he has drawn up a set of plans for us upon which we can build. We have to know the plans. We have to consult the plans. Every crew has a set of plans to tell them what to do, how to build, how far to go and when to stop. To ignore or violate the plans will change the way the building looks. To ignore the plans affects the integrity of the building. It will affect the functionality of the building. It may mean the difference between whether the building can withstand the storms that will come or not.

You get where I'm going don't you? There is a set of plans for us that tells us how to build our life, how to build so we can endure the storms of life. Luther and the reformers knew it. They called it *Sola Scriptura*. The word of God is the set of plans that if we follow and live according to His plans, they will lead us to heaven and to victory in our life, but if we ignore the

plans, if we build on our own plans and not his, we are destined to failure, to disappointment. In the end, our life sure isn't going to look like what it was supposed to look like!

We've seen a huge change in our culture in the area of marriage and sexuality. Far too many people have decided God's plan, God's order and design, is not worth considering any more, not in 2017. According to the Barna Group, two-thirds of Americans believe cohabitation is generally a good idea (69%). But here is what got me, a Gallup poll in September found 30% of Pentecostals believe sexual relations between unmarried men and women is "morally acceptable." 30% of Pentecostals! We are supposed to be people of the Book! This is the book that tells us how to live. This is our authority. Are we living according to the book? Or maybe it's because no one is preaching what the book says.

Next Sunday we are going to go back to the beginning, back to the Garden, and we are going to look at God's original design, God's order with regard to marriage and gender and sexuality. I'm not doing this to point fingers at any one kind of sexual sin. I'm doing this to call us as a church to sexual purity, to living according to God's word. I'm doing this so we can know what the bible says about an important area that affects all of us. If we do this, if we live in obedience to God's word, there is blessing that comes with it. If the church doesn't teach God's word on this subject, then people are going to follow their "gut theology" and live any way they choose and they will sin against God. I have an obligation to tell you what God's word says about sexual purity and living a life that honors God and his word.

What are you building your life upon? Your feelings? The opinions of friends and family? Are you just going with the crowd or are you building your life and your choices upon God's word? Do you have the courage to examine what the bible says? Are you willing to listen and to submit your life to God's word, to Christ alone, for the glory of God alone? Let's be hearers and doers of God's word! Let's commit ourselves to a life of obedience to God and his word and when we do, we can expect the blessing and peace that comes with obedience!