

Sermon for Sunday, October 31, 1993 by Dr. Timothy D. Brewer, Senior Pastor, The Central Presbyterian Church, 7700 Davis Drive, Clayton, MO 63105.

SCRIPTURE ALONE

Scripture: Psalm 119:11-16; 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Text: 2 Timothy 3:15b

This is a great day of celebration because it was 476 years ago today, on October 31st, 1517, that a young Augustinian monk by the name of Martin Luther took his convictions about what the Word of God taught, and he nailed them to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany. And so the Protestant Reformation was born. We are continuing to celebrate our great heritage as people of the Reformation as we look at the "watchwords" (or the 4 great Articles of Faith), which really gave birth to the Reformation. Last week we took a look at "Sola Fide", the fact that we are justified by faith alone. Today we come to the second of these great watchwords.

If there was one article or one central tenet that the Reformation was about (apart from the justification by faith alone), it would have to be "Sola Scriptura". Scripture alone is to be our guide. This morning I want to ask a simple, but very important question about our faith: "Why sola scriptura?" What is it about this book that makes it worthy of being our supreme authority? Why are the scriptures alone to be our final standard in this journey of life?

Please turn in your Bible to 2 Timothy 3:15. In our passage today, Paul says that the "Holy Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation." If ever there was proof of that, it was the Reformation. You see, Luther didn't just wake up one morning and pull this doctrine of justification by faith alone out of the thin air. No, it was a long and painful search for this feverish, legalistic monk, who sought the forgiveness of God.

We have a lot of misunderstandings about the Reformation. Many of us as Protestants think that the Reformation was primarily about forms of worship. But, the Reformation was not about whether or not we should say the rosary, or whether or not we should have candles or incense in church. It was not about devotion to Mary. It was not even ultimately about the authority of the Pope. The fundamental question that fueled the Protestant Reformation was simply this: How can a man or woman be right with Almighty God? That is what tortured Luther's soul. In fact, Luther's experience was probably not unlike a lot of us (even as evangelicals). Luther wanted to get right with God. So the church came along and said, "Great, we will give you 3 easy steps, that's what we're here for. We will help you get right with God." So, Luther entered the monastery. He prayed for hours. He did penance beyond anything his superiors had ever seen. Many historians believe that Luther may have even shortened his life with the injury he inflicted upon himself, trying to atone for his sin. And the great breakthrough for Luther didn't come all at once. No, it was a gradual process as he immersed himself in the scriptures. As he began to study the Psalms and Galatians and Romans, he came to realize that God's righteousness is not simply a demand, but it is a gift. It is something that God imputes, that he credits to us. It is an "alien" righteousness based on Christ, and that is the Gospel. Now many historians today debate over what it was that really caused the Reformation. Was it the unique economic trends? Was it the result of the Renaissance? Was it political conditions? It wasn't any of that. It wasn't even Luther! You know, we make a big deal about how Luther was so bold when he nailed those 95 theses onto the church door. But that was simply the town bulletin board. Everyone did that! It was like writing a letter to the editor. There was nothing unusual about it. No, there was only one thing that fueled this great movement of God. It was the rediscovery of scripture alone. You see, Paul said that the Gospel is the "Dynamis", the very power of God. That's the word from which we get "dynamite". And the Gospel is the very power of God unto salvation! Now isn't it freeing to know that you and I don't have to present the Gospel with bells and whistles, or try to trick people into the kingdom of God? All we need to do is faithfully preach the Scriptures. God is the one who saves sinners! "While the Gospel is foolishness to those who are perishing," Paul said, "to those who are being saved it is the very power of God unto salvation."

So why sola scriptura? First, because it is the "wisdom of God unto salvation, through faith in Jesus Christ." Secondly, Paul goes on to say in verse 16, "all scripture is God-breathed." It is the inspired Word of God. Friends, I want to tell you -- this book is good news only if it is true news. I repeat, the scriptures are good news primarily because they are true news. And this book of history, every time archeology puts it spade into the ground, is substantiated further. This is where it really pays to be a student of history. Have you ever read some of the classic arguments that unbelievers have brought against scripture down through the ages? For generations, the veracity of the Bible was ridiculed because of the supposedly strange, weird customs recorded in Genesis. Then in the late 1900's they discovered something called the Uragitic Texts. And sure enough, what did they find? An exact parallel between the customs of the Patriarchs recorded in Genesis and the common practice of that time in history. So they backed off on that argument. Then in 1923, a stinging indictment of how anyone that would believe this book to be literal must be a fool (or worse), is because the Old Testament mentions the kingdom of the "Hittites." No historian or archeologist had ever come across a reference to the Hittites. They assumed it must be mythological and, therefore, the Bible was mythological. Then in 1979 they were digging in Syria, and sure enough, they broke through the library of the king of the Hittites. There were so many thousands of documents that now archeology is saying that the kingdom of the Hittites was twice as large as the Bible suggested. So much for that one!

But what about the text itself? We think: "Good grief -- My wife sends me to the grocery store and tells me to bring home milk. Ten minutes later I bring home donuts because I've already forgotten. How am I to trust a book that spans thousands of years, and that was just passed down from generation to generation? How do I know it's trustworthy? Do you realize that until 1947, the oldest manuscript we had of scripture was the Masoretic Text, from the 7th century AD? Many people scoffed that you could never trust a book whose oldest copy was from the AD 600's. Then in 1947, a little shepherd boy was throwing some rocks into a cave by the Dead Sea and you remember he broke something, and the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Original documents of the Old Testament from before the time of Christ! Believe me, the religious and scientific world held it's breath! Because 1000 years of textual transmission hung in the balance. Do you know what they found? Thought for thought parallelism. No deviation what-so-ever, except for spelling changes. Friends, this book is not "good news" because we want it to be right. It is good news because history backs it up. And the only rational explanation for that is the fact that "All scripture is God-breathed. It is the inspired word of God.

Then finally, not only is the Bible to be our guide because it alone can make us wise unto salvation, through faith in Christ -- Not only do we follow it because it is the inspired Word of God, and all scripture is God-breathed. But also "Sola Scriptura," because of what Paul says in verses 16 and 17. "The Scriptures are useful: they are profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man or woman of God may be equipped for every good work." Martin Luther made a fascinating observation in his day. He said that only a Bible reading laity can save the church from ruin. I think he was right on. But I want to

tell you, if that statement is true, we are in big trouble! Because poll after poll shows that the very people who talk the most about the Scriptures, we evangelicals, actually study it the least. Do you realize that the latest Gallup Poll indicated that 67% of evangelicals surveyed thought that the statement, "God helps those who help themselves," was a biblical statement? That came from Benjamin Franklin, a non-Christian deist 200 years ago! On naming the 10 commandments the general public came in first; Roman Catholics second; and Protestants third. And a little footnote on Catholic bashing. Friends, we've got to come clean. Most of us don't even understand the issues and the doctrines that sparked the Protestant Reformation. The irony is that many of us as Protestants are more guilty of the theological mistakes that the Reformation was fought over, than many of our Roman Catholic brethren today. So until we clean up our own act and put our own house in order, we have no right to be throwing stones at the Catholics. In fact, even George Lindbeck at Yale, who certainly is no evangelical, said that the unbelieving pagans who came to Yale in the 1950's had more of a basic biblical understanding than the fundamentalists who go to Yale today. So much for "sola scriptura." We're not only beaten out by non-Protestant traditions, we even lose out to the pagans, to the unbelieving culture around us. Yet, sad to say, I'm really not surprised. Let's be honest. How many of us really approach this Book as a serious student of God's word? Most of our devotionals, if we're honest about it, are so saccharine, so syrupy and sappy sweet, they don't actually tell us anything about the text. Most of those little devotional booklets that I see just use the text as a launching pad to tell you a story about the author. We read that for 30 seconds and say we've had our daily Bible reading. Please, I'm not trying to launch guilt bombs. But what I'm trying to say is that it does make a difference what we go to scripture for! Are we going to scripture to truly mine its riches and to plumb its depths, or are we simply going for an amusing story? In fact, if you don't think our own age is like the medieval period, listen to this quote from Calvin. "Very few sermons today are actually devoted to expounding the great truths of scripture. But rather the sermon today is divided into 2 parts. The first is given over to useless speculation and misty questions designed to astonish the rude populous. The second half is devoted to stories and amusing anecdotes to keep people awake." Yes, beloved, it does make a difference what we go to scripture for. Are we going for teaching? Are we going for correction, for reproving, for training in righteousness in order that we might be equipped for every good work? Or do we simply go to this book for a few helpful hints for happy living? Friends, I don't want to throw stones myself, but if we can quote James Dobson more than we can quote scripture -- we don't deserve the name evangelical. And if I can just share a little pet peeve as a pastor -- you know what really bugs me? The people that I call "cassette Christians." Do you know what I mean by that? People who couldn't find the Pentateuch if their life depended on it, but they can quote every radio personality, every TV preacher on the market. People who every time you bring up any question, any discussion, the stock response is well "Pastor So and So says"..... I praise God for Bible teachers, and I'm glad that we can benefit from their teaching. But, in all honesty, I don't care what "Pastor So and So" says. I want to know what scripture says. Sola scriptura, that is our authority, and only a Bible reading laity can save the church from ruin.

Finally, we have talked about what sola scriptura is. Let me close by pointing out briefly what it is not. First, it is a shared duty of interpretation. It is not the exclusive domain of the professionals. Luther said in his own day that the average layman didn't care about reading the scriptures, because he said "I'm a layman, no theologian. I go to mass, I hear what my priest says, and in him I believe". Think times have changed much? The average layman today says, "it's neat that you seminarians go and learn about the Bible, but don't bother me with all that heavy theology. I only want the basics. I just want to go to church, hear my pastor, and in him I believe." Yet, the reformers believed that the scriptures must be in the hands of the laity. You see, the reformers didn't have a beef with Rome over the inerrancy or the inspiration of the text, that wasn't in question. The debate was over the clarity, over the perspicuity of scripture. In other words, is the Bible clear enough, is it reasonable enough, for a common layman to understand? Rome said "no." It is very dangerous to let people like you get your hands on this book. Because hard telling what kind of error you might come up with! Whereas, the reformers insisted that, while things might be difficult to understand, even a child could understand the basic points of the gospel. That's why we need the collected wisdom of the "communion of the saints;" the laity and the clergy together struggling to understand what God teaches in his Holy Word. You see, the Bible is infallible, but our interpretation isn't. We need each other to share in the task of interpreting the scriptures, so that we don't go astray.

Finally, one last thing on what sola scriptura isn't. It is not a separation of the Spirit from the Word. You see, you can go to this book and open it up and read it from cover to cover, but if the Holy Spirit isn't opening your eyes, you'll be as empty as a tin can sitting by the side of the road. But the good news is that the same Holy Spirit who wrote this book is alive and active today. Even now, He illumines the minds of those who read it. But if that is true, we need to be careful of not going beyond scripture. If God has already given us an infallible rule of faith and practice, why do we continue to seek the Spirit outside of (and even beyond) the scriptures? Please, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that God does not lead people today. But what I'm saying is that the only authoritative way he leads his people is through holy scripture. That's why Luther said, "beware of those who teach that the Holy Spirit can be swallowed like a chicken, feathers and all." What he meant by that was those who say: "Why take the trouble to read the Bible since that's so hard? Doesn't God fill us today? Can't God give us revelations right now?" Well, maybe he can, but there is a real danger with saying that whatever word God spoke to me in the last 10 minutes, is just as authoritative as what God spoke in holy scripture, centuries ago, authoritatively. Because, then we no longer have one rule of faith and practice. We don't have sola scriptura, but we have sola experientia -- where my experience in the last half hour is the ultimate arbiter of truth. Why sola scriptura? Why the scripture alone? First, because the Bible alone can make us wise unto salvation. This is special revelation. Not the mountains, not communing with God on the weekend. This is what shows you the way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Secondly, sola scriptura because it alone is God-breathed. It is the inspired Word of God. Finally, scripture alone because it alone is profitable for teaching, for correcting, for rebuking, for training in righteousness, so that the man or woman of God might be equipped for every good work.

There's a true story told of a little church outside of Munich that burned down in the late 1960's. The tragedy was that the church had stood there for generations, but with the rise of the liberal movement in Germany around the turn of the century, people stopped supporting it and very few people came. So over the years they couldn't make ends meet. In fact, the parish pastor had to sell everything they owned, even the pews, and they still couldn't keep it afloat. Whether he set fire to it out of anger and resentment, or whether it just happened, no one knows. But this little church that couldn't meet its budget burned down. And in the rubble they found a statue which had been hidden between two walls. They think that some of the local people had hidden it there during the time when Hitler was confiscating the great art works of Europe. And they dated that statue back to Da Vinci. They had in their church a work of art that was priceless! But the irony was, they didn't even know it until it burned down.

Friends, you and I have at our fingertips a treasure of eternal wealth -- a treasure beyond comprehension. What a tragedy that most of us never learn it until it's too late. We wait until our lives are in tragedy and things are burning down around us to open God's Word. Friends, if you're not in a Bible Study, it's not too late to get in one. And don't be content just to come to worship on Sunday morning. Go to adult education where you can learn this Word in depth. Most of all, if you're not reading the Bible on your own and learning it for yourself, there is no time to start like today. What do you say? Let's be Reformed people. Let's be people of the Word. "For the scriptures alone are able to make us wise unto salvation, through faith in Jesus Christ." Amen.