

Sola Scriptura

In the name of the Incarnate Word of God, dear friends in Christ: Last week when we began this series of Lenten devotions, we noted the Church's tendency to accumulate over time teachings and practices that at best obscure and at worst flatly contradict its true message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus. When in his earthly ministry Jesus saw it happening, he sharply rebuked and corrected those who taught falsely. And seeing the corrupt shenanigans going on in the temple, he went on a violent rampage driving out the thieving merchants and their wares from the sacred courts.

The Reformation that began in the sixteenth century, we saw, was another example of this: of Jesus cleansing his Church of false teaching and the corrupt and deceitful practices that had been allowed to pile up over time. These additions were causing the true Gospel to be obscured at best and at worst denied outright. Through the work of the reformers, the Lord once again cleared away the layers of theological gunk, grime, and clutter that were leading people away from his saving truth, and he brought the focus back on the things that matter most.

That brings us to the "sola's" of the Reformation. "Sola" is the Latin word for "alone" or "only". So when we speak of the "sola's", the idea is that *this* and *this alone* is what's important, and you can forget about all the other stuff that's getting in the way and trying to overshadow it. The big three "sola's" are on the banner behind me: sola Scriptura, Scripture alone; sola fide, faith alone; and sola gratia, grace alone. These three together might be called the battle cry of the Reformation. We'll be looking at these and a few other vital "sola's" – one each evening – as we continue our Lenten journey together.

We start with Sola Scriptura; and it's important that we do because it goes to the question of authority. When Jesus drove the moneychangers and merchants out of the temple, his indignant adversaries said, "You are just an itinerant preacher from Galilee. By what authority do you do this?" He responded, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He was referring to the temple of his body; and his point was this: my authority will be proven when I rise from the dead. You'll kill me, but I'm coming back. Then everything I've said and done will be shown to be the truth and right that it is. Just as he said he would, Jesus did rise from the dead. And his resurrection is the proof of his truthfulness and his authority.

When Luther began the cleansing of the late medieval Church, he was asked much the same question: "You're an obscure Augustinian Friar from Saxony. By what authority do you challenge these teachings and practices of Holy Mother Church?" (The issue at hand, you may remember, was the horrendously unbiblical selling of indulgences.) Luther answered, "I stand on the authority of God's Word. God's Word alone – Sola Scriptura – is only the source of all truth and authority in the Church."

But we saw that the Church tends to accumulate junk over time. And by the late Middle Ages some of the junk the Church had accumulated was other sources of truth and authority. To be sure, the principal authority to which everyone was told that they must submit was not the Holy Scripture, but rather the Bishop of Rome – the man who held the title of Pope. The Pope and what's called the Magisterium of the Church, that is, that whole hierarchy of cardinals, archbishops, and bishops who are in fellowship with the Pope and who derive the authority of

their offices through him – that’s what was supposed to be in charge of everything not only in the Church, but they claimed the authority to rule over kings, governments, and nations as well. So much for Jesus saying “my kingdom is not of this world”. Anyway, it’s not something that happened overnight. It took something on the order of twelve hundred years of the successive Bishops of Rome making increasingly greater claims about their power and authority, but by Luther’s time the whole mythology behind it was considered a settled matter.

The idea is that Jesus chose the Apostle Peter and his successors after him – the bishops of Rome – to be the head of his whole Church on earth and to rule over the other apostles and all other ministers of the Church. Yes, never mind that this is the same Jesus who taught his disciples that they should not vie for authority among themselves and who rebuked them when they sought positions of honor at his right and left hand. Forget that: the Pope is in charge. The Church is built on him; not as we say, its confession of faith in Jesus as Christ, Lord, and Savior.

So, what then is the Scripture in this scheme? The answer is that it is one source of divine truth; but there are others. For example, when the Pope speaks on matters of doctrine or practice in an official capacity (the technical term is “ex cathedra”, that is, from his seat of papal authority) his decrees are held to be equivalent to God’s Word. Other sources of divine truth include the decisions of Church councils, officially approved visions and revelations experienced by mystics, and sacred tradition. All of these are problematic, but the last one is especially troublesome. It works like this: if something – anything – is taught or practiced over a period of time and passes into acceptance or general usage, then it’s held to be from God not only if the Scriptures say nothing about it, but even if it contradicts Scripture. The notion is that God would not allow his Church to go astray; so if the Church does it, it must be right.

This was the argument Luther was confronted with when he raised questions about the sale of indulgences. When he tried to argue on the basis of Scripture, he was told he was out of line. Since the Church is doing it – and with the approval of the Pope no less – you may not question it. The matter is settled. God through the Pope and tradition has spoken.

You can see the problem with accepting multiple sources of divine truth. It pretty much opens the doors to allow anything to come in. There’s no single objective standard to filter something doubtful out. Couple this with the Church’s tendency to collect doctrines and practices of questionable virtue and you get ... well you get exactly what they got: you get teachings on Purgatory, the cult of Mary and the saints, the acquisition and veneration of relics, the requirement that priests be celibate; you get all kinds of ungodly nonsense including the teaching that turned out to be the fuse Luther inadvertently lit to blow the whole thing apart: the sale of indulgences.

Another problem that arises from accepting these multiple sources of truth is that it means there’s no way to evaluate and remove a teaching or practice once it’s been admitted into the Church. It’s like living in a home in which you can never take the garbage out no matter how badly it stinks. And to the argument made in defense of this, that God would never allow his Church to go astray, we must respond “Have you never actually read the Bible? The people of God constantly straying from his Word is a major storyline. It happens over and over again from Genesis to Revelation.”

And this is why the Church must have only one source of truth and authority: the inspired, infallible written Word of God. The Scripture alone is what God has caused to be recorded for us to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. The Scriptures

alone are the Words God breathed out that are profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness that we, the people of God, may be complete and equipped for every good work.

And it's as true today as it was in the sixteenth century. All kind of junk is still trying to get into the Church to confuse and overshadow the Gospel. Modern day self-appointed apostles and prophets are forever spouting what they claim are new revelations from God. They tell of their dreams and visions, or of their near death experiences by which they visited heaven (or in a few cases hell – too bad they didn't stay there).

On the flip side is liberal theology that places human reason and causes of perceived social justice in a position of authority above the sacred Scripture. They say that the Scriptures are unreliable because they were written by a bunch of patriarchal, heterosexual, males who were only trying to preserve their privileged status and oppress others. They feel compelled to rewrite and reinterpret everything in light of their noble struggle to throw off the chains that repress them – as they wage their war against the nuclear family, marriage, sexual ethics, capitalism, or whatever else their cause may be.

Against both supposed new revelations and attempts to undermine the authority of God's Word, we must take our stand on the Scriptures alone; for in the Scripture alone we find written for us the Words and teachings of Jesus who is the Word of God made flesh. When Scripture alone is our only authority and source of truth, then Jesus alone is our only authority and source of truth. Abiding in his Word we are truly his disciples. And then we know and trust the truth that sets us free. Free from sin. Free from Satan. Free from death through Jesus who gives us life now and in eternity. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!