

"Sola Scriptura"
2 Timothy 3:1-17
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October 28, 2001

The date was April 17, 1521. The place was Worms, Germany. Charles V, king of Spain and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, had summoned Martin Luther to appear before him at the Diet of Worms, an assembly of German governing authorities in the German city of Worms. Martin Luther there stood before the Emperor, the six German Electors, the Pope's legates, archbishops, bishops, dukes, margraves, princes, counts, deputies of imperial cities, ambassadors of foreign courts, and a numerous array of dignitaries of every rank. Standing before this august assembly, Martin Luther was shown a table with about twenty-five books stacked upon it. He was asked two questions: Did you write these books? and Would you retract them?

Luther seemed overawed by his surroundings. He spoke in a very low voice. People had trouble hearing him. Some thought he was about to collapse. He acknowledged that he wrote the books on the table, but as to recanting, to stating that the contents of these books were in error, he asked for time to consider his answer. The Emperor granted him one day.

The next day, Martin Luther again appeared before this intimidating assembly. He was again asked the second question,

Would he recant any of the contents of his published writings? Since his first appearance before the Diet, Martin Luther had been fortified by prayer and meditation. He now spoke with a firm voice that could be clearly heard. He concluded his answer with the memorable declaration:

"Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of the Scriptures or by clear arguments (since I believe neither the Pope nor the councils alone; it being evident that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures quoted by me, and my conscience is bound in the word of God: I can not and will not recant any thing, since it is unsafe and dangerous to do anything against the conscience. ... Here I stand."

Martin Luther here said that his ultimate authority was not the Pope nor church councils but the Scriptures of the old and new testaments. His final source of truth was the Bible, which addresses all issues either directly through a clear testimony or indirectly through deductions from Scripture. In the final analysis, he had to obey his conscience as informed by the teachings of the Word of God.

After leaving the Diet and returning to the room where he was staying, Martin Luther stated,

"If I had a thousand heads, I would rather have them all cut off one by one than make one recantation."

Luther stood firm and refused to recant. The Emperor, in response, proclaimed Luther a heretic.

What horrified the Emperor and the religious establishment of that day was not Luther's statement that the pope could err. Whether or not the pope could err was then an open question. The Roman church did not decide on the pope's alleged infallibility until 1870, some 350 years later. What horrified the religious establishment of that day was Luther's statement that an ecumenical church council could err. The almost universal opinion of Luther's day was that ecumenical councils were infallible. When the church authorized an assembly of theologians from a broad sector of the church to handle disputes and to answer questions, they could not err in their pronouncements. That was the popular opinion of that day.

Luther was not saying that church councils were always wrong. Luther agreed with the doctrinal statements of the early ecumenical councils which had established the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Luther knew, however, that ecumenical councils could err and were not always right. Luther had come to this conclusion a few years earlier during the Leipzig Disputation in July 1519.

During the Leipzig Disputation, which had lasted almost three weeks, Luther had debated the Roman Catholic theologian John Eck. During this debate, John Eck brought up the teachings of John Hus of Bohemia, who had lived and taught over a hundred years earlier. The Council of Constance in 1415 had condemned the teachings of John Hus as heresy and had turned Hus over to the state to be burned at the stake. John Eck charged that Martin Luther held to the heresy of John Hus. At first, Luther

repudiated John Hus and denied the charge. Then later in the debate, after reflection, Martin Luther said that the Council of Constance had erred when it condemned John Hus. The teachings for which the council had condemned Hus had been earlier taught by St. Augustine in the fifth century, and before that by the Apostle Paul himself. Luther concluded that the Council of Constance had erroneously condemned John Hus for teaching Scriptural truths.

The Council of Constance basically had condemned John Hus for following the teachings of John Wycliffe, an Englishman who had taught in the late 1300s. Hus had accepted Wycliffe's view that Scripture is the final source of appeal, and not the pope or church councils.

John Wycliffe in the 14th century, John Hus in the 15th century and Martin Luther in the 16th century all held to what we call "sola Scriptura," which means Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Scripture is not the only authoritative rule, but it is the only infallible rule, and its authority transcends all other authorities.

Wycliffe and Hus and Luther were not saying that they were throwing out all the wisdom of the ages. They were not saying that they had no creed but the Bible. It is dangerous and arrogant to build doctrinal systems without consulting the teachings of others as a check and a balance.

During college, I had a friend who attended a Bible study one summer. He told me that the man who taught this study boasted

that he had studied the Bible without consulting any outside sources. He had used no commentaries, consulted no creeds, considered no one else's opinions. He had argued that this somehow guaranteed the purity of his teaching. There is a real arrogance here, as if God had not been opening up the Scriptures to anyone with any reliability until this man came upon the scene; as if this man could open up the Scriptures and quickly resolve issues which other godly men had struggled with over the centuries.

No, I long ago concluded that to stand tall for Christ, one has had to stand on the shoulders of giants. One needs to consult the godly men of the ages and learn their understanding of what Scripture teaches. One needs to take seriously those interpretations which have a broad consensus over the ages, such as the orthodox view of the Trinity and the Incarnation. "Sola Scriptura," properly understood, does not mean "just me and my Bible." That attitude has led to the doctrinal chaos we see today with the multiplication of sects tossed about by every wind of doctrine.

"Sola Scriptura" doesn't mean that I never consult another book other than the Bible. What it means is that the Bible is in a different category from every other book. The Bible is not my only creed, but it is my only infallible creed. The Bible is not my only creed, but it is the only creed by which all other creeds must be measured. The Bible is my only infallible rule of faith and practice. There are other rules of faith and practice, but the Bible is the only infallible one, the only one which can never err and the only one which must never be questioned.

The unique foundational status of Scripture as the ultimate measure of truth is implied in the commendation of the practice of the Bereans found in Acts 17:11:

- 11 These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.

The Bible is infallible and also all sufficient. As the **Westminster Confession** puts it:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture ...

Or, as the apostle Paul put it in our Scripture reading for today,

3:16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,

3:17 that **the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.**

"Sola Scriptura" means that the Bible is our only infallible rule of faith and practice, that the Bible provides a sufficient basis for the guidance we need in every area of life, and also that the Bible's basic teachings are understandable. Yes, there are difficult passages in the Bible. In 2 Peter 3:16, Peter specifically

said that there were some things in the epistles of Paul which are hard to understand. There are hard passages in the Bible, but all we basically need to know for salvation is taught clearly somewhere in Scripture. Or, as some have put it, in the Bible, the main things are the plain things, and the plain things are the main things. The **Westminster Confession of Faith** puts it this way:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.

The doctrine of "Sola Scriptura" is that the Bible is my ultimate authority, my sufficient authority and my plain and understandable authority. When Wycliffe, Hus and Luther proclaimed this position, they were not teaching something new. This was also the teaching of the early church, and it was not until the late middle ages that another view came to predominate. This other view is the view that there are two final authorities: the Bible and church tradition. Church tradition includes all the church councils and the official papal declarations. The Roman church came to teach that church tradition is needed as an equal authority to the Bible because the Bible by itself, they said, is not sufficient and not understandable.

This two equal authorities view became official Roman Catholic doctrine at the Council of Trent in 1546. This position is important in Roman Catholicism because many of the prominent doctrines and practices of the Roman Catholic Church are founded not on Scripture but on tradition. Where in Scripture do we find anything about the pope or about the worship of Mary or prayer to the saints or purgatory and so on and so on?

We should not elevate church tradition as equal in authority to the Word of God. Remember, the Bible is the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Jesus Himself warned against elevating tradition to a level of authority with the Bible (Mark 7:5-9), and the New Testament even gives us an example of a tradition in the early church which was in error (John 21:21-23).

This two source view of authority is dangerous regardless of what we make the second infallible authority. When people have a second source of authority other than the Bible, they seem always to interpret the Bible by means of that other authority. That second source of authority always seems, in the long run, to come to be regarded as more authoritative than the Bible.

Many people today act as if the Bible is not enough. Some have additional scriptures, such as the Book of Mormon. Some have Bible interpreters which they cannot question, such as the Watchtower Society. Others today claim to have the gift of prophecy and think God speaks truth directly to them apart from the Bible.

Even more commonly, many today put science above the Bible. We can see the harm of that in the Scopes trial here in Tennessee in 1925. William Jennings Bryan was the prosecutor who stood for the Christian faith. The prosecutor, Clarence Darrow, put Mr. Bryan on the witness stand, and asked him if the days of creation were ordinary 24 hour days, as the Bible appears to say. Mr. Bryan said they were not. This greatly compromised Mr. Bryan's position because it indicated that he himself trusted science over what the Bible clearly says.

Mr. Darrow then put church leaders on the stand and asked them if we should believe what the Bible says or what science says about the theory of evolution. The church leaders said we should believe science over the Bible. Mr. Darrow then put scientists on the stand and asked them to give their evidence for the theory of evolution. The Scopes trial was a humiliating experience for Bible believing Christians in the United States. It was a major factor in the loss of doctrinal integrity in the mainline denominations.

Interestingly, in the years since the Scopes trial, the scientific establishment has rejected as false most of the scientific facts put forth as evidence for evolution in the Scopes trial. Yet the Bible has not changed. Heaven and earth will pass away but God's Word will by no means pass away. How much better off the church would have been if the church leaders at the Scopes trial had testified that the Bible is their only infallible rule of faith and practice.

If people can put science over the Bible, they can also elevate other aspects of modern culture over the Bible. Sadly, that is what many today are indeed doing. Many people today interpret the Bible within the framework of modern attitudes and opinions, even though they know their interpretation is not what the original writers intended. Thus we have people today preaching from the pulpit that women can legitimately be preachers and elders, and homosexuality is a legitimate alternative lifestyle, even though the Bible so clearly denies these teachings.

We today need to reject all such views and return to the "Sola Scriptura" of the early church and the Reformation. The Bible is our only infallible rule of faith and practice. The Bible gives us the basic, foundational guidance we need for all of life. And the Bible's main message is understandable.

This is so important, because the basic message of the Bible is so important. As Jesus said in John 5:39:

39 "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.

Allow me to close this morning by exhorting you to submit to the most basic and clear message of the infallible Word of God. That message is this: Jesus came to seek and to save sinners. Receive Him as your Savior. Rest upon Him alone for your salvation. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved. Turn to the Bible, and the Bible will point you to Jesus, in whom you will find eternal life.