

Super Omina Scriptura

2 Timothy 3:16-17

Introduction

“My conscience is captive to the word of God...Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me!”

So Martin Luther concluded his brief appearance at the Diet of Worms. If Luther’s nailing the 95 theses on the door of the church in Wittenberg was the event that *sparked* the Protestant Reformation, this was the event that made turning back impossible.

There were many and deep forces at work in Europe at the turn of the 16th century. Constantinople had recently fallen to the Muslims, Columbus had discovered a new world, the plague was ravaging the continent, a merchant class was arising in the flourishing towns, scholars were rediscovering the literature of ancient Greece and Rome, and Guttenberg had made a reliable printing press. But it was in the heart and mind of a single Augustinian monk that these forces were nourished until they bore fruit in his discovery of salvation from sin.

Medieval Europe was a very religious place – or perhaps we should say a very superstitious place. No one doubted the existence of God or the devil, heaven or hell – and your ordinary man was terrified by the prospect of arriving at hell rather than heaven. The church at that time was on hand to help people in this mortal struggle, and she devised a vast array of methods to improve your chances of getting to heaven, or to speed your trip through Purgatory. Papal indulgences were merely one method, along side of baptism, the mass, confession, and above all, penance. Accordingly, Martin Luther availed himself of all these means, and others, to sooth his troubled soul. But although he tried with all his human strength, he found no rest. It was as he studied the Psalms that Luther began to see that God is the one who saves. But when he moved on to Paul’s epistle to the Romans, Luther saw with blinding insight that salvation is by grace alone. In rapid succession he grasped that God justifies sinners, because no man is righteous. Thus salvation is in no way dependent upon any of man’s efforts, least of all masses, confessions, and penances. At last Luther saw clearly the way of salvation, and he found rest with God. So although many forces contributed to the Reformation, they would have spent themselves blowing around Europe, had not Luther captured them in his own life.

Luther knew sinners go to hell. He knew it is a place of horrible torment. He knew he would go there unless he were righteous. And he was too honest to pretend that his life was righteous. So when Luther discovered in the scripture that God *gives His* righteousness to those who believe His word, Luther was ecstatic! A life of fear and a future of terror vanished overnight, replaced by peace and joy that comes only from God and passes understanding.

Have you ever had a narrow escape? Perhaps you walked into the exam miserably unprepared, knowing you are doomed to fail – and the teacher announces that it is postponed until next week. Have you ever been the victim of an attempted robbery or rape – yet escaped? Were you ever driving when the car in front of you suddenly slammed on his brakes – and you came within an inch of smashing into him? If you have had a narrow escape, you remember it vividly, and are enormously grateful for your escape. I remember when I was in high school and was out chopping corn with the tractor and chopper. The rear chute got clogged, and I had to open the side door to clear away the corn packed into it. I set right about it, as I had many times before, without waiting for the machine to stop. Suddenly I felt a burning sensation on my middle finger. I pulled it out to look, and saw that the spinning knives had sliced off the outer layer of skin. Another inch and my fingers would have been gone forever. Even now as I tell you this story my palms are sweating, thinking how close I came to losing my fingers. Waves of relief washed over me as I slumped down to thank God for watching over me.

So we can understand, can't we, Martin Luther's overwhelming relief when he escaped a life of misery and experienced the joy of salvation. And we can understand his profound gratitude for the source of that escape – the scriptures. What a million masses could not do, what an ocean of baptisms or a lifetime of fasts, what an encyclopedia of confessions or an army of priests or all the penance in the world could not do – scripture did. It was as Martin Luther read the word that he was saved. The message of salvation, yes even salvation itself was in the scriptures. That's it! Luther found life in God's word – real life, life with God, life that would last forever, life free from the threat of hell. So when the papal legate at Worms demanded that Luther recant the doctrine he learned from God's word, we can understand Luther's refusal.

But it was a costly refusal. The Pope had just excommunicated Luther. Any territory, town, or church which assisted him would be denied communion, which, to Medieval man, was a terrifying punishment. Furthermore, the emperor issued an edict declaring him an outlaw. So anyone who killed Luther would be a hero, at least to the church hierarchy. Damned and hunted, Luther's life hung by a thread. Only the creative protection of his prince saved Luther from certain execution as a heretic. But it was worth the risk. "For what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

What will you give in exchange for your soul? Your salvation is no less miraculous than Martin Luther's. You also were a miserable sinner, doomed to hell. You also were saved, if you have been saved at all, by God's word. Baptism doesn't save you, moral living doesn't save you, church membership doesn't save you. The only salvation there is, comes through God's word alone. If you know that salvation, are you fanatically devoted to God's word? Would you put your life on the line for the scripture? If you were facing death for your beliefs, would you say, "My conscience is captive to the word of God... Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me!"? If not, what *is* your conscience captive to? If you would not give your life for God's word, where will you find a life worth dying for?

Brothers and sisters, you do not know the precious treasure you have in God's word. You can live without a cell phone and a TV. You can live without a house and a car. You can even live without modern medicine, at least for a while. But you can never live without the scripture. Luther discovered this 500 years ago. Today let's examine how this works out in our lives.

The Nature of Scripture

Scripture is like crazy glue – you can use it for just about anything. People have used it to justify dangerous cults and unhealthy practices. They have twisted it to support heretical doctrines and illogical morals. Protestants also find many good uses for scripture. Certainly we look to God's word to save us and to lead others to salvation in Christ. Scripture goes further and gives us knowledge of God. Furthermore, God gives us knowledge of creation in His word. But I suppose the Bible is most often sought to provide guidance for life. Whether we are deciding to marry or become a missionary, move or stay put, rebuke or encourage – we turn to scripture for answers. Maybe you are discouraged and are looking for a way out of your slump. Or maybe you need to talk to your teenager about his future. Christians open the Bible looking for God to guide them through life's perplexities – and He does.

But often we overlook the most significant aspect of scripture. God's word is much more than a guide book for life, a theology text, or even instruction for salvation. Scripture is most fundamentally the source of life. That great psalm of praise for God's word, Psalm 119, says this. "I will never forget Your precepts. For by them You have given me life." (Psalms 119:93) The greatest statement of this in the Old Testament is found in Deuteronomy chapter 8, where Moses said,

Every commandment which I command you today you must be careful to observe, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land of which the LORD swore to your fathers. And you

shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what is in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD. (Deut. 8:1-3)

Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God! You see what this is saying? Life does not come from food – it comes from God’s Word. Now of course this is not saying that unbelievers, as well as cats and dogs and houseplants will die unless they read the Bible. You may read the Bible to your pets and plants if you wish, and I am sure some good will come of it. But that is not what God means here. On one level, *everything* proceeds from the mouth of God. The whole creation came into existence when God opened His mouth and spoke, and He continues to uphold the universe by His word. I am fairly certain that God intends us to think of this when we read this passage, but this passage clearly refers specifically to the written word of God, the scripture.

This passage hit home forcefully to its original audience, for they saw this principle in action. Moses delivered Deuteronomy just before the people of Israel entered the Promised Land. They had wandered forty years in the wilderness. Their own fathers and mothers had eaten manna, but it did not give them life. Manna was the bread of God – angels’ food – but they died in the wilderness because they were not nourished by God’s word. The question before the ones now assembled, the children, was this: would they also die, or would they obey God’s word and live? God’s word does far more than give you guidance – it keeps you alive!

Jesus picked up this idea in John 6. “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.” (v. 63) Later when many of Jesus’ followers gave up because He was too difficult to understand, He asked the disciples if they would leave also. “But Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.’” (v. 68)

If this is true, if scripture is our source of life, it ought to be an integral part of our lives. It was for Martin Luther. Not only was he willing to die for the doctrine found in God’s word, Luther also made the Bible part of all he did. You eat three meals day to maintain your energy level and stay healthy. Do you partake of scripture regularly and frequently? If not, how do you expect to stay alive? You are risking spiritual death.

The Role of Scripture

Scripture alone is the source of life and the way of salvation. But when we think of the reformation motto, *sola scriptura*, we usually think of scripture as the only rule of faith and conduct. This was in contrast with the prevailing practice, where 1500 years of tradition and canon law obliterated God’s word. Most people could not read, so they were dependent upon the clergy for their understanding of the scripture. But seldom did a priest preach much of any significance to them. Perhaps this is because even in the universities, the Bible was little studied. Thomas Aquinas or the works of Peter Lombard were studied instead. Along with this emphasis on tradition and canon law was the growing conviction that the church had authority to determine what is right and true. So although the Bible was still part of the church and played a role in the services of the church, in practice, tradition and the pope trumped the Bible. As long as there was traditional support for purgatory or the Pope authorized the sale of indulgences, a Biblical basis was not needed. The reformers flatly denied this. They insisted that the Bible, not tradition or the Pope, be their rule of faith and conduct.

Today and for several centuries in Protestant churches, tradition and the Pope have presented no

threat to the supremacy of scripture. We must never think ourselves above and beyond falling back into tradition and reliance upon raw church power, but this is not the issue we face today. The issue facing the Protestant church for several centuries has been the challenge of science. One hundred years ago whole branches of the Protestant church sold themselves out to science, and today they are hardly churches at all. Darwin's Theory of Evolution was merely the cutting edge of a vast plow of scientific publications which threatened to bury the church. While some churches denied the faith, others retreated from science and rallied the faithful to preserve true Christianity. Such was the state of the western world in the middle of the 20th century. But things have changed rapidly in the past 50 years. No longer are evangelicals hiding in an intellectual ghetto, protecting the faith. They have taken the faith out into the world and put it to work – in the pro-life movement, Christian education, politics, entertainment, and most branches of cultural life. And what is the result of this? Has Christianity transformed our culture? Not much, it seems – at least not yet. What is a lot more evident is the way our culture is transforming Christianity.

The problem is that science simply cannot be ignored – and I say this not because it is so powerful or because I studied biology, but because it is God's voice. Calvin explained God's revelation as coming to us in two books: the book of nature, and the book of scripture. Both testify to God. Both are made by God and sent by God. Both are true and good. But both must be used the right way. Science is simply the systematic study of nature, so true science always benefits the faith. The problem is not science, but scientists – or more accurately, the way science is pursued. The critical error that everyone tends to make is to forget that man is sinful, and that his sinfulness causes him to corrupt the truth. Biology and geology and astronomy in no way cast any doubt upon the faith – but unbelievers will use these fields to undermine our faith. In the case of unbelievers, scripture teaches us that they have a prior commitment to falsehood, as far as God is concerned. They “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” But believers have the same problem, although to a smaller degree. Sin also clouds our minds and leads us astray. Science is wonderful! Science is one important way we fulfill the Creation Mandate. But science distorted by sin coughs up lies along with the truth. How can we sort them out?

Here Calvin is helpful again. Calvin pointed out that one important function of scripture is to help us see clearly. Scripture is like eyeglasses. Without glasses we can see, but poorly. With glasses we can see clearly. Science brings forth knowledge of the universe, but we understand this knowledge poorly until we see it through scripture. So we know, for example, that no matter what scientists may say, God created the universe. We know, no matter what psychologists say, that man is born sinful. Scripture provides a framework for science. It establishes boundaries and guidelines for the truth. Within this framework, scientists are free to seek knowledge of the universe. The problem the church continually faces is getting this backward. Too often the church lets science (as practiced by unbelievers) establish the boundaries for truth, and then tries to fit the scripture into it. When that happens, sound doctrine is obliterated and the church collapses.

Perhaps the clearest example of this principle is the current debate in the PCA over the first chapters of Genesis. I have no interest here in the intricacies of this controversy, but the debate illustrates the difficulty of keeping science in its proper place. I assume all parties firmly believe the Bible and adhere to the Reformed Faith. And all admit the value of science. Some see scripture presenting a view of creation which harmonizes with certain tenets of science, while others see this as allowing science to determine our faith. This is an unpleasant and troublesome issue in the PCA right now, but the real disaster would be if we were to ignore it entirely. It is an important matter which requires attention. Let's pray that the attention given is accompanied by charity.

Psychology is another science which has been seducing evangelicals for the past few decades. In their zeal to learn from creation, and in their willingness to recognize truth wherever it may be found (a commendable trait), evangelicals have uncritically imported unbelieving psychology into the ministry of the

church. Again, we agree that God reveals truth in creation, so we can learn about man by studying him directly. But the fruits of such study must be measured carefully against scripture, and applied in a Biblical manner. Our fundamental conviction is that man is born sinful, Christ saves those who call on Him, and scripture is the power for life and godliness. Scripture is not one tool among many. Scripture is central in ministry. Any counseling which puts scripture on par with other tools is dangerously departing from the biblical norm. Just so you know, I do not subscribe to any particular school of counseling. But I do hold passionately to the centrality of scripture in ministry.

The counseling office is not the only place where evangelicals are in danger of selling out to science. Pastoral ministry in general is beset on all sides by pressures to subordinate scripture to modern theories of ministry. The church growth movement was a favorite whipping boy of conservative evangelicals – until the Willow Creek church made seeker-sensitive services all the rage. You see, these trends all have in common an approach to ministry based on observation about people and how they behave. This is just a sort of social science. These observations are then packaged and sold as better means of doing ministry. And they work! The men who produce this stuff are not charlatans or idiots. They produce growing churches. The question is how biblical these churches are.

Look, I appreciate much of what these people say. Too often evangelicals have hidden laziness behind a claim to faithfulness. But small does not equal faithful. I think we can learn how better to appeal to people and minister to them. In my ministry I have benefitted much by using the Myers-Briggs personality profile. I think it can be abused, and some people probably rely on it too heavily. But it helps me know how to motivate and encourage people, and these are biblical things to do. The point, again, is whether scripture is the controlling force in ministry, or whether evangelicals are becoming just like liberals 100 years ago – willing to go to any lengths to adapt to the spirit of the age.

What does the scripture say about ministry? It says that scripture, especially preaching of scripture, is central. It doesn't matter how well you get people in, and how comfortable they feel once they are in the church – you do not have a biblical ministry unless you have solid exposition of the word and a service which is shaped by the scripture. Now I suppose this sounds familiar to you. It's the thing we Reformed people always say. But we are losing this conviction without even being aware of it. Pastors are spending more time in committee meetings and administration than in study and preaching. Worship bands get more time and attention than the sermon. We design our services to please man, not God. But our text this morning teaches us that scripture is profitable in all aspects of ministry, and *thoroughly* equips us for *every* good work. This is what we call the sufficiency of scripture. Scripture is enough to get the job done. Sure, I use a computer and a personality profile and movies in my ministry – but I could accomplish my ministry without them. These things are helpful, but scripture, and only scripture, is essential. Scripture is sufficient by itself to minister to God's people in all their needs and circumstances of life.

I am not here this morning to criticize you, but to apply the principle of sola scripture to the church in our generation. I have seen these things first-hand. I have watched evangelical ministries move from firm dependence on scripture with solid preaching, to dependence on man's wisdom with scripture playing a supporting role. Brothers and sisters, scripture is not a tool to help us do ministry. Scripture is our life! As we lose that conviction, the life fades out of our ministry.

The Uses of Scripture

If scripture truly is our life, it will have a profound effect on all we do. As I reflect on life in the evangelical church, I am alarmed by how little it differs from the life of unbelievers. We go to church, we don't fornicate as much (actually that is no longer true), we don't generally rob or kill. But is God really central in our lives? Is His word present in all we do?

I remember a conversation with an English lady in town for a conference. She commented, “In America you have many Bible churches. But there is little Bible in them. They read only a few verses and then preach for 45 minutes. In my Anglican church we read an Old Testament lesson, an Epistle lesson and a Gospel lesson every week. I think we have more Bible than the Bible church!” Wasn’t it wonderful to hear several passages of scripture read this morning? It makes you feel more alive doesn’t it?

The reformers abolished the monasteries for the most part, but they were convinced of the importance of scripture and prayer in the life of the church. In Wittenberg, Strasbourg, and Geneva, services were held every morning and evening, and they were not poorly attended. In today’s society it would be difficult for a congregation to gather like that except in the cities. A better model might be the Puritan idea of the family as a “little church.” The Puritans vigorously promoted family devotions, and were quite emphatic regarding their necessity. You don’t eat food only once a week, and it’s crazy to think you can get by with biblical nourishment only once a week. You need scripture every day some way or another. If we aren’t getting it in church during the week, we need to get it in our homes. Men, this means you need to open the Bible and read to your family. Find a time when you all can assemble. You don’t need a long time – 10 minutes is not a bad start – and simply read the word of God and discuss it. Your life, and the lives of your family depend on it.

Finally, scripture should be a part of all we do. Moses said in Deuteronomy 6:6-7,

And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way. When you lie down, and when you rise up.

I am not very good at this, but here is our goal. When you wake up, when you drive to work, in the office or shop, at lunch time, in leisure, in everything – our lives should be infused with God’s word. I was out plowing a field with my grandfather, and he pointed out the clay knoll in the middle of the marsh. He said the earth couldn’t have evolved by chance. How could that clay knoll have gotten there unless God put it there? Perhaps you disagree with his science, but you see, he was following Deuteronomy 6:7. He was reflecting on the scripture as he was going out.

Conclusion

By *sola scriptura* the reformers did not mean that they never studied anything but the Bible. A casual reading of Luther or Calvin will reveal a significant use of tradition and pagan writers to illustrate their points. But in all their studies and in all of life, scripture took first place. So perhaps a better motto would have been *super omnia scriptura* – scripture over all. For no matter what else they studied, nothing overshadowed God’s Word.

Luther eagerly went to Worms, knowing he might never return, because he had found the source of true life. Are you prepared to die, or live, because you have discovered the life that comes from scripture? And if so, does that life infuse all you do? May God open our eyes and reveal to us the preciousness that is only in His Word.

Payer

O Lord God, how can we neglect your precious word? It is purer than silver, more valuable than gold, tastier than honey. It is the source of our very lives, yet we fill our lives with cheap satisfactions. Forgive us, O God. Create in our hearts an unquenchable longing for your word. Plant in our minds an insatiable desire to know the scripture. And shape our wills to obey all your commands. As we rise, as we go in and out, when we retire, let us do all aided by your word. And at last, may they say of us, “Those

people lived by God's word alone." In the name of our Lord and Savior, the Living Word, your Son Jesus Christ; Amen.

C. David Green
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Calvary Presbyterian Church
Willow Grove, PA