

Sola Scriptura
(Daniel 9:1-11, 2Timothy 3:12-17)
February 21 2010

This year Kansas and Kansas State are both top 10 basketball teams. In fact, before season's end they may both end up in the top 5, that's some elite company!

If you were asked to give a top 10-or better yet- top 5 essentials of your faith what would they be? Which would be the most important-doctrines and theologies?

Lent is a time of personal, spiritual and theological reflection, 40 days-not counting Sundays-between Ash Wednesday and Easter morning.

Some churches offer "Lenten studies", others suggest taking up Lenten disciplines and still others encourage new commitments or piety.

This year during Lent I will be doing a Sermon Series on the classical top 5-if you will-of Reformed Theology "Sola Scriptura, Soli Deo Gloria, Solo Christo, Solo Gratia and Sola Fide."

Each week we will analyze the importance of that Sola, connect it with history, scripture, apply it to our denomination and or church/faith-life in the 21st Century.

Martin Luther said, "A simple layman armed with Scripture is greater than the mightiest pope without it".

The intention of the Reformation was to correct the perceived errors of the Catholic Church by appeal to the uniqueness of the Bible's authority and to reject what Catholics considered to be the Apostolic Tradition as a source of original authority alongside of the Bible.

Sola scriptura, however, does not ignore Christian history and tradition when seeking to understand the Bible. Rather, it sees the Bible as the only final authority in matters of faith and practice.

According to *sola scriptura*, the Church does not speak infallibly in its traditions alone, but only in Scripture. As John Wesley stated centuries later, "In all cases, the Church is to be judged by the Scripture, not the Scripture by the Church." For this reason, *sola scriptura* is called the formal cause or principle of the Reformation.

Sola Scriptura, means Scripture alone. This does not refer to a pietistic or monastic view of "me and my Bible" interpreting it in any way we choose. Nor does this doctrine seek to negate the authority of the Church.

What it refers to is the idea that Scripture is to be the main rule of faith for the church and its members.

God has called teachers and other officers into the Church; they are not to exercise dominion over the Bible, but to submit themselves to it. Only the Scripture is God breathed (2 Tim. 3:16), and every idea, thought and doctrine needs to have its foundation in Scripture to carry the weight of true authority.

If a false teacher, preacher or church member says something that cannot be supported by Scripture the truth is not in them. It tells us to beware of the, “God told me to do such and such” crowd.

The abuse of power by Roman Catholic Priests, Bishops and Popes in the early years of the church made many within the ancient assembly uneasy about their faith; uneasy enough to publicly dispute some of the human-made traditions of the church.

Thus, the first meat filled pot-luck dinner during Lent was in 1522 in Switzerland. There was a public sausage-eating event organized. The people's priest from Zurich-Ulrich Zwingli-defended the sausage-meal saying, “The law of fasting is a human law and therefore not valid.” Only divine laws are to be obeyed by followers.

But Zwingli didn't stop with changing the eating restrictions...

In 1525 he replaced the elaborate mass with a simple service in which the often highly ornate altar was substituted with a simple communion table in accord with the servant Lord that he most desired to serve.

A characteristic feature of Reformed theology is the emphasis on the Bible's witness as paramount for faith and life.

Indeed, the Ordination questions for Elders/Deacons and Pastors include, “Do you accept the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be, by the Holy Spirit, the unique and **authoritative** witness to Jesus Christ in the Church universal, and God's word to you?”

Having said that, one wonders whether all Presbyterian churches still hold such a high view of scripture? But that's a subject for another series!

So it went, during the 16th century reform swept through many previously Catholic Swiss, Southern German and French towns and they became Protestant. Eventually the movement made its way to Scotland under the teachings of John Knox.

The most important figure in Reformed movement of the 16th century was John Calvin. He left his mark upon the Reformed faith in the “Institutes of the Christian Religion.”

Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper was a milestone for Reformed theology: unlike Zwingli who saw it as “a mere memorial”, Calvin believed that Christ was really present by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is not to be found in the bread and wine directly, but is nevertheless really present. This is still the Reformed understanding of communion.

The difference in interpretation of the Lord's Supper was and is one of the most obvious points of difference between churches.

Baptists, E-Free and Non-denominational churches do NOT consider Communion a Sacrament, it is an ordinance...it is important but not done on a regular basis.

Methodists do believe in the frequency of Communion but they do not believe in the Spiritually Real presence of Christ during the act, they believe it is a memorial meal.

Catholics believe the bread and wine actually change into the body and blood of Christ

Lutherans believe that Christ is present in the elements but that the elements stay elements and are not literal the body and blood of Christ.

Not until 1529 did European Reformed and Lutheran churches accept each other's concepts of the Lord's Supper (Leuenberg Concord).

In the U.S. Presbyterians are now in full communion with Lutherans of the E.L.C.A, The Reformed Church in America and the United Church of Christ. However sadly this is NOT the case with the Lutheran church Missouri Synod, Wisconsin Synod, Baptist-of any variety-OR The United Methodist Church.

Practically speaking there are ways to bridge these denominational divides but even so it is important to know what you believe as a Presbyterian and never assume-even as I preach it-that you agree with what others tell you to believe.

The central reason that the reformers of the church pushed for a higher-more personal and accessible-view of scripture was that the Roman Catholic Church of the 16th Century gave too much authority to its institutional regulations; which may or may not have been in accordance with the scriptures.

Persons were to mindlessly go along with what the “mother church” told them to do.

What do you believe? Some of you were raised Presbyterian but many of you were raised in another denomination, do those teachings still matter to you?

Is the way one understands/practices Holy Communion a big deal for you?

Is the way the church is governed important to you? Or the way a church views scripture?

The Reformers were clear about their belief of scripture; it was to be of high authority.

Our scripture passages today spoke of the classic wrongs we commit when we forget the scriptures as well as the need for consistent and fearless devotion to God's word.

Admittedly, scripture can be confusing and contextual but even so it is still to be studied.

Daniel is very clear that the fault of faithlessness and spiritual ignorance is our matter and that the place of forgiveness is God's-if He intends to give it.

The passage from 2nd Timothy directs us to the inspired word of God for our instruction.

The reformers were trying their best to change the church of which they were a part; they had no immediate plans to form different denominations.

Have you taken a look at our own denomination? Our own church? How are we doing?

Are we being faithful in our service to others? Are we making discipleship a priority?

Are we standing for the truth in a world that finds many things subjective?

Are we providing a place and ways to learn the scriptures? What needs to be reformed?

Recently I read a survey called the "Presbyterian Pannell." It cited that "16% of members and 5% of pastors say the Bible is the literal word of God, 41% of members and 61% of pastors say it is the word of God to be interpreted in light of its historical and cultural context, 34% of members and 34% of pastors agree with the need for contextual interpretation but also add that the church teachings are important as well, finally 4% of members and 1% of pastors do not believe it is the word of God."

Another stat is even more interesting, "60% of members and 66% of pastors in our denomination believe that Jesus Christ is the absolute truth for humankind.

Regardless of how you view the word of God or the respect you have for other religions, The Bible makes it crystal clear that Jesus claims to be the Savior of the world.

Do you believe that claim or downplay it in your life?

How can the PCUSA be filled with the Holy Spirit if 40% of our members and 34% of our pastors aren't sure if it is ok to call Jesus Christ the absolute truth?!

I love reading the stories of Ulrich Zwingli, John Calvin and John Knox but I often wonder what they would think of the Reformed churches of the 21st Century?

What things would stand out as completely out of sync with their intentions?

Are we holding a high enough view of scripture, of the Lordship of Christ?

What are your essential beliefs? Is scripture authoritative, some what useful, or just fascinating fiction? Sola Scriptura? Or Sola...*something else*?

