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This way forward

500 YEARS OF REFORMATION: SOLA SCRIPTURA

2 Timothy 3:15-17

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Five hundred years ago, if you were a European Christian, the church had a strangle hold on your soul. When your husband died, the church might ask for half of your inheritance to get him out of purgatory all that much sooner. In fact, half the wealth of Scotland was in the church. It was assumed the King or Queen were divinely appointed by God, so opposing them meant opposing God and risking eternal damnation. To keep control, the church might execute you if you met in unsanctioned Bible studies or, worse, translated the Bible so people could read it for themselves.

As surely as freeing someone from the basement of a warped kidnapper, so too were the people set free through the Reformation. It might be rightly argued that these reformers unlocked the hearts and minds of people like no other movement in all of history. Without their courage and their devoted scholarship, we would not be here today.

As distant in time as the reformation is, its impact on our world is as clear as if it were yesterday. As a way of coalescing the vast changes made, catch phrases arose both during and after the reformation which are summed up as follows:

A sinner is justified by grace alone (sola gratia) through faith alone (sola fide) for the sake of Christ alone (solus Christus), a truth revealed to us in Scripture alone (sola Scriptura).

For our 500th celebration of the Reformation, we will spend the month of October exploring these Reformation *Solas*, to more fully appreciate its continued influence on our lives.

As the reformation sought to push aside the strangle hold of the church and king, a power vacuum emerged. By whose authority would such sweeping changes be enacted? How would you

arbitrate between opposing views? Who would serve as the ultimate authority over people's lives and souls? People would stand or fall not on their fidelity to the church, but their faithfulness to God as interpreted through scripture. Scripture would serve as ultimate arbitrator on matters of faith, especially regarding salvation.

Paul wrote to Timothy to help him remain steadfast in the faith. Paul recites a litany of sins people would be committing. Sins such as: lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, arrogant, ungrateful, slanderers, swollen conceit! Was this written yesterday??!!!

Paul proceeds to tell Timothy that many of these sins are a result of wrong instruction, which prevent people from arriving at the truth and warns him that as the world is being spun in new directions, there is no reason to get caught up in the latest fad.

In contrast, Paul reminds Timothy that ever since he was a child he has learned the truth from God's sacred writings, especially in regard to salvation through Jesus Christ. Everything we need to know about our reconciliation to God can be found in God's Holy Word.

There is something tremendously comforting about an enduring text, which has not changed for thousands of years. It reminds us that God is the same today, as God was yesterday, and God will be tomorrow. People two thousand years ago in Jerusalem, to those 800 years ago in Turkey, to 200 years ago in China, to today in every corner of the globe have the same truth and, therefore, the same path to our Lord. Everyone is treated the same. That is the perhaps the biggest revolution the Reformation brings to the world.

But a warning about *Sola Scriptura*. Scripture is the ultimate source of truth regarding our salvation

in Jesus Christ, but it is not divine in and of itself. The Bible is not the fourth member of the Trinity. We do not worship the Bible, we worship God.

The enduring power of God's Word for over 2000 years does not mean we have a static text. One that was engraved into stone, so to speak.

In contrast to the tablets of stone given to Moses, God chose a different medium for this enduring Word. Rather than author the Bible by the divine hand directly, God chose to fill people with the Holy Spirit, breathing into them divine truth, while allowing their personalities and contexts to come through the writing.

This allows the text to speak to every age, in its own time, through our devoted study to discerning the coherence of the text through the contingent circumstances of the time.

But since it is inspired through people, their culture and personality come through in the text.

Through excessive zeal, people turned the authority of scripture in matters of faith into a *sola scriptura* in all sources of knowledge.

Such abuse led to absurd scientific conclusions like the continued assertion that the earth is the center of the universe. But also dangerous, social ones as well, such as using certain Bible passages to justify slavery and spousal abuse.

With the freedom granted by the reformation comes not only the freedom for good, but greater freedom for sin.

The reformers saw the inherit danger within *Sola Scriptura*. Because, with no other authority to turn to, suddenly each person could justify almost anything based on their individual interpretation! It was not their intent to turn the Bible into an individualistic tool for our personal whims. Instead, they sought to eliminate those traditions that had no basis in scripture while, as one scholar noted, "retaining the strength found in a traditional way of reading Scripture within a community of faith."

This approach is rooted in scripture itself, particularly in Paul's letter to Timothy.

Before declaring all scripture is inspired and useful for teaching, Paul tells Timothy, "Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, my persecutions, and my suffering," and then goes on to say, "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it."

This means scripture does not come to us in a vacuum and, normally, should be interpreted in light of faithful Christians who have come before us.

Thus, Timothy's and our understanding of God's holy Word is shaped by faithful people who both share with us the meaning of the text and show us how to live it out.

There are texts that have spoken to me directly. No doubt. But the ones that speak most powerfully to me are those that have been passed down by my teachers, my family, and you. They have opened Bible texts to me in ways I never would have discovered on my own.

The scrolls of your favorite Bible verses are filled with quotes from Philippians. At first, I wondered why. I love that letter, but why so many? It turns out many of you are in a class on Philippians. And those teachers have opened that letter to you, multiplying your appreciation for it.

It is this that makes scripture come alive, in ways that often our individual study cannot match.

Before seminary, for me, Deuteronomy was just a book written a long time ago. Though it was God's Word, it only had tangential relation to my life of faith. Then I took a course from Patrick Miller. As Professor Miller disclosed the context behind its chapters and its role in the life of the Jews, suddenly Deuteronomy sang. The verses which had previously struck me as needlessly repetitious, suddenly harmonized and resonated the Jews

struggles and joy with their relation to Yahweh, the law, and the Promised Land.

The Holy Spirit used Professor Miller to sanctify it verses in my soul.

Ever since a child I have been drawn to the 23rd Psalm.

As I have said it with you through scores of funerals, its power to speak through death has grown. As we have sung it together in worship, the beauty of God's presence has multiplied. As you have shared with me, its power to see you through cancer, lost jobs, and failed relationships, the notion of the Shepherd God has sunk much deeper into my soul. I could literally go on for hours with various other scriptures.

The reformers, through prayer and study, taught us that we need go no further than scripture to find God's promise and path for salvation. When you have lost your moorings turn to the Word. The Holy Spirit continues to connect us to its power and wonder through the voice, words, and hearts of each other. Amen.