

Lesson 4

The Reformers' Doctrine of Scripture and Religious Authority

(adapted from a work by Sam Storms @ www.enjoyinggodministries.com)

1. ***Sola Scriptura*** - The concept of Scripture *alone* most characterized the reformers of the 16th century. It was Luther who most clearly stated the principle of the "infallible Word of God" over against the "fallible word" of the Church and its extra-biblical traditions.^[1] Contrary to Roman Catholic church which insisted that the Church should determine what the Bible teaches, Luther argued that the Bible determines what the Church ought to teach.

2. **Scripture is the Interpreter of Scripture** - In other words, the Bible is, in a manner of speaking, a world of its own. It can and does interpret itself to the faithful from within, apart from any appeal to tradition, council, or pope.

3. **The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit** - All study of the Scriptures is futile apart from the bestowal of enlightenment or illumination by the Holy Spirit. Luther said: "The Bible cannot be mastered by study or talent; you must rely on the influx of the Spirit." The only authoritative interpreter of a book is its author!

4. **The Clarity of Scripture** - The Catholic Church in part justified withholding Scripture from the people by arguing that its meaning was inaccessible to the untrained mind. Only those duly authorized by the church and endowed with the essential skills can interpret Scripture. The Reformers, on the other hand, argued for the essential clarity of the Bible's fundamental message. Luther wrote this to Erasmus:

"I certainly grant that many passages in the Scriptures are obscure and hard to elucidate, but that is due, not to the exalted nature of their subject, but to our own linguistic and grammatical ignorance; and it does not in any way prevent us knowing all the contents of Scripture."^[2]

5. **The Unity of Scripture** - Luther and Calvin both saw Christ and His redemptive work as the overall unifying theme of the Bible.

6. Grammatical-Historical Interpretation - Both Luther and Calvin emphasized that the Bible should be interpreted in light of the cultural and historical context in which it was written, and according to the rules of grammar which apply to all languages (as opposed to allegorical interpretation which sought to find "Spiritual truths" hidden behind what was written).

So, why is this doctrine of Scripture so critical?

Two answers may be given:

1. In the words of J. I. Packer, "biblical *accuracy* and biblical *authority* are bound up together. Only truth can have final authority to determine belief and behavior, and Scripture cannot have such authority further than it is true. A factually and theologically trustworthy Bible could still impress us as a presentation of religious experience and expertise, but clearly, if we cannot affirm its total truthfulness, we cannot claim that it is all God's testimony and teaching, given to control our convictions and conduct."^[3]

2. We should subject our souls to the infallibility and authority of the Scriptures, immerse our minds in its truths, and bathe our spirits in its teachings because the inerrant special revelation of God in Scripture has the *power* to change human lives and to transform the experience of the church.

- The Word of God is the means or instrument by which the Holy Spirit regenerates the human heart. That is to say, the proclamation or communication of the Word is the catalyst for the inception of spiritual life. See 1 Peter 1:23-25. Observe that this "word" which brings life is a "preached" word!
- The Word of God is the power of God unto salvation. See especially Romans 1:16-17; 10:14-15; and 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.
- The Word of God is the spring from which the waters of faith arise. Paul says in Romans 10:17 that "faith comes from hearing" and that hearing comes "by the word of Christ."

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- It is from or through the Scriptures that the Spirit imparts perseverance and encouragement: "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through *perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures* we might have hope" (Romans 15:4).
- It is from or through the Scriptures that joy, peace, and hope arise. How so? Paul prays in Romans 15:13 that God would "fill you with all joy and peace **in believing**, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Both joy and peace are the fruit of *believing*, which in turn yields hope. But believe "what"? Belief is confidence placed in the truth of what God has revealed to us in Scripture about who He is and our relationship to Him through Jesus.
- It is the Word of God that accounts for the on-going operation of the miraculous in the body of Christ. Again, how so? We read in Galatians 3:5, "Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?" The instrument God uses is the faith that we experience *upon hearing the Word of God!* When we hear the Word of God (in preaching and teaching), our thoughts and hearts become God-centered; our focus is on His glory and thus our faith in His greatness expands and deepens, all of which is the soil in which the seeds of the supernatural are sown. Apart from the truths of preached texts, there can be no genuine, long-lasting, Christ-exalting faith; and apart from such faith there can be no (or at best, few) miracles.
- It is the Word of God, expounded and explained and applied, that yields the fruit of sanctification and holiness in daily life.
Consider the following:

*"And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, **which also performs its work in you who believe**" (1 Thessalonians 2:13).*

*"In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, **constantly nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following**" (1 Timothy 4:6).*

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*"Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word, that **by it you may grow in respect to salvation**" (1 Peter 2:2).*

"For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

ADDITIONAL NOTES ON CATHOLICISM - Ted Kirnbauer

Some notes on Roman Catholicism that are pertinent to the theology of the Reformation:

The Protestant Reformation (1517-1648) began as an attempt to doctrinally reform the Catholic Church from what the reformers perceived as false doctrines and ecclesiastic malpractice — especially the teaching and the sale of *indulgences*^[4], and *simony*^[5] and the selling and buying of clerical offices.

According to the Catholic Church, two distinct consequences follow when a person sins. A *mortal sin* (one that is serious and is committed knowingly and freely) is equivalent to refusing friendship of God and results in the loss of eternal life and eternal punishment.

In addition, there are *venial sins* (meaning "forgivable" sins) which are lesser sins that do not result in a complete separation from God and eternal punishment. A venial sin involves a "partial loss of grace" from God. Each venial sin that one commits adds to the penance that one must do. Penance left undone during life converts to punishment in *purgatory*^[6].

Generally in the Catholic Church, the repentant sinner confesses his sins to the priest and the priest may then offer advice and impose a particular penance to be performed. The most common penances involve the recitation of standard prayers, such as the Lord's *Prayer*^[7] and the *Hail Mary*^[8], meditation on particular scriptural passages, or praying the *rosary*^[9].



Footnotes

[1-3] [An excellent discussion of Luther's view is provided by J. I. Packer in "Sola Scriptura in History and Today," in *God's Inerrant Word*, ed. by John W. Montgomery.]

[4] Indulgences - the full or partial remission of temporal punishment when venial sins have been committed. At the time of the Reformation indulgences included prayers, alms, fasts and even the payment of fixed sums of money depending on the various kinds of offences (tariff penances). These were greatly abused as professional "pardoners" went among the populace offering forgiveness of sin for monetary donations.

[5] Simony - Simony is the ecclesiastical crime of paying for holy offices or positions in the hierarchy of a church, named after Simon Magus, who appears in the Acts of the Apostles 8:18-24 and offered the disciples payment so that anyone he would place his hands on would receive the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the origin of the term "simony" but it also extends to other forms of trafficking for money in "spiritual things".

[6] Purgatory - In addition to accepting the states of heaven and hell, Catholicism believes in a third state before being admitted to heaven. According to Catholic doctrine, some souls are not sufficiently free from sin and its consequences to enter the state of heaven immediately, nor are they so sinful as to be destined for hell either. Such souls, ultimately destined to be united with God in heaven, must first endure purgatory—a state of purification. In purgatory, souls "achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven." Purgatory is a cleansing that involves painful punishment, associated with the idea of fire such as is associated with the idea of hell.

Those who go to purgatory are those who commit venial sins and yet do not achieve purification for those sins during their life. If this purification for those venial sins is not achieved in life, people can still be purified after death in "purgatory". Furthermore, the fate of those in purgatory can be affected by the actions of the living. Prayers for the dead and indulgences have been thought to decrease the "duration" of time the dead spend in purgatory. At the time of the reformation, people trying to raise money for the church were selling indulgences.

[7] Lord's prayer - the prayer of Jesus in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4.

[8] Hail Mary - is a traditional Catholic prayer asking for the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

The prayer in English is "Mother of God and Virgin, rejoice, Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, for thou hast given birth to the Savior of our souls."

[9] Rosary - The Rosary (from Latin *rosarium*, meaning "rose garden") or "garland of roses" is a popular and traditional Roman Catholic devotion. The term denotes both a set of prayer beads and the devotional prayer itself, which combines vocal (or silent) prayer and meditation. The prayers consist of repeated sequences of the Lord's Prayer followed by praying the Hail Mary ten times and a single praying of "Glory Be to the Father" ("Glory Be to the Father", also known as *Gloria Patri*, is a doxology, a short hymn of praise to God.)

- "Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, Both now and always, and unto the ages of ages. Amen."

This is then sometimes accompanied by the "Oh my Jesus" prayer; each of these sequences is known as a decade.

- my Jesus, forgive us ours sins, save us from the fires of Hell, lead all souls to Heaven, especially those most in need of thy mercy.