

## Pastor Stef's Book Review – September 2018

Sola scriptura! Scripture alone! Everybody likes a slogan that summarizes what they believe and “the Bible alone” sounds good until you put two Christians in the same room to discuss their views on women in ministry, the end times, baptism, communion, foreknowledge or a host of other doctrines. Suddenly you’ll find two parties appealing to the “Bible alone” and making a “Biblical case” for their position all the while wondering if the other person *actually* believes in “the Bible alone.” For instance, I was once told by someone who saw something in the Bible differently than me, “Are you reading the same Bible I’m reading?” He was half joking, half serious, but the implication was that we *couldn’t* be reading the same book if my interpretation was different than his because there is only one correct interpretation, and obviously he had it – stupid me.

**Christian Smith’s** book *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism is not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (2011) was written to address this problem. The Reformation soon discovered that we never really read the Bible *alone*, but always approach it from within our traditions, culture, history, communities and personality traits. When Mary, Jesus’ mother, asked Jesus to do something about the wine running out at a wedding and Jesus answered, “*Woman, why do you involve me? My hour has not yet come,*” (John 2:4, NIV) was Jesus upset, teasing, provoking or questioning her? How you read it will have a lot to do with what kind of person you are and, therefore, will give you certain ideas of what kind of person Jesus was. So is it the Bible or you teaching you what Jesus is like?

“The Bible alone” has been abused far beyond what the Reformers ever meant. In what Smith calls “Biblicism”, where the Bible becomes the final source on everything, it may appear that the status of the Bible is being elevated, but it is actually being cheapened. Instead of the Bible being the grand narrative of God revealing himself to the world, particularly in the person of Jesus Christ, it gets reduced to a “manual for life” giving us instructions on everything from dieting to financial freedom. Smith gives us plenty of examples of this (and sources them) with book titles like, *Seven Secrets of Bible-Made Millionaires*, *Cooking with the Bible: Recipes for Biblical Meals*, and *The Bible Cure for Cancer*. Seriously!?

The answer to this problem, according to Smith, is developing a Christ-centered approach to reading scripture. Jesus is who the Bible is about and, therefore, our interpretation of scripture, both Old and New, should always be shedding further light on who Jesus is. Also, we have to become more comfortable with accepting the ambiguity of many aspects of scripture as well as learn to read within the larger community of the church, beyond the fishbowl of our little circle of Christian influence. We need to listen to the wider church community, especially the teachers of the Great Tradition in the first few hundred years of the church’s life.

Finally, this seems obvious but, unfortunately it needs saying, we have to actually read the Bible. Ironically many who claim “the Bible as my ultimate authority in life” rarely read it beyond a token “verse of the day.” If scripture really is our final authority in matters of faith and practice, in fact, precisely because of that, shouldn’t we be reading and learning how to read it properly? This is what Christian Smith wants to encourage us to do, and I applaud him for it because it is my prayer for God’s people as well.