

Sola Scriptura: The Living Word

From the series: New Wine for Century 21

Text: Mark 2:22; John 1:14

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Spring Lake, Michigan
October 6, 1996

Transcription of the spoken sermon

September was a time for team participation in the preaching, speaking about New Beginnings, the dimensions of life that are before us. October issues in the month of Reformation, and Reformation, as we have celebrated it here for 25 years, has not been a celebration of our over-againstness, over against the Roman Catholic tradition out of which the Protestant tradition arose in the 16th century, but it has been a celebration of that which I think has been central to the Reformation at its best, and that is that the Church is the Church of Jesus Christ. It is not the Reformed Church; it is the Church of Jesus Christ, re-formed according to the word of God and always being re-formed.

I have enjoyed preaching in the fall; I've often addressed doctrinal or theological themes out of our tradition because I think it's a time between the seasons, and that is who are, that is whence we have come, and therefore, to rethink the faith - that's been a fall menu around here. This is an especially good time to do that, this year, 1996, October, 1996. For, even though we have been operating as an independent congregation with our life and our ministry before us, nonetheless, the news that we have, finally, closure from the other side and that all of that can be put behind us, even in the sense of the dangling details, makes this a special October, and a wonderful season for us to think about the Church in terms of its dynamism and its always being in a state of reformation and renewal.

We were born out of a period of radical revolution. One of the interesting, fascinating things about human experience is that there is, again and again, an outburst of renewal, of new energy, of new life, of creativity, new vision, and everyone is excited and tastes a new wine. Then, the children's children's children, who lose that fresh blush of newness, begin to build an idol out of that which was once so dynamic and alive, and they miss the joy of that explosion of the Spirit and begin to bow to forms and structures that are simply the aftermath, the consequence, of that burning new life that came to expression. So, in this moment in our life together, we have a rare, rare opportunity to re-imagine the Church.

You know, this is a fantastic time in which to be alive. Everything is changing; everything is spinning wildly out of its course. The breakthroughs in science and the technological developments, the electronic age, the fact that the whole globe becomes a neighborhood - all of the interconnections and networking around the globe - nothing, nothing is stable, nothing is the same. Everything is up in the air! What an exciting time to be alive, isn't it?

You might say, "Well, I could handle it a little bit slower paced, thank you very much."

But we don't have that choice. As a matter of fact, we are a part of a time in history when everything is being re-negotiated and when there is nothing that is solid and secure. That can be anxiety-producing. But, if we could only get our mind and our heart set, and if we could only understand our human situation as it really is, a very limited and finite and partial view of things, but secure in the eternal God, the eternal God Who is a substratum and Who overshadows it all, we could then enter in with zest to this exciting time in which our whole world is opening up new possibilities, closing old doors and breaking through to new vistas. We at Christ Community have what is a very rare opportunity to re-imagine the Church.

This noon your governance groups are going to begin the first stage in planning the future, and what we are really focusing on today is October 27, an afternoon planned after our Stewardship Party in which your governance groups (and I hope there will be a hundred or more of the rest of you. Any of you that are interested, any of you that want to be a part of it, will come with us) will meet for a period of about four hours and think the Church, think Christ Community, think in a way we've never thought before. Re-imagine the Church! Think about Century 21. Think about our times, our community, our situation, and how we can re-imagine this church so that it will be in 2001 what we want it to be as we contemplate our future.

October is Reformation month and I have often used it as a time to revisit some of the great central themes of the faith. So, I'm going to begin today with a new wine that needs to be poured into fresh wineskins, looking at some of the old, central themes that have made us what we are. A little Latin for our palate this morning: "*Sola Scriptura*," *sola* - only, or alone; *scriptura* - scripture. *Sola Scriptura*: the scripture alone as our authority for faith and for life, for what we believe and how we live. That will be followed in subsequent weeks with *Sola Gratia*, grace alone, *Sola Fidei*, faith alone, and *Sola Deo Gloria*, to God alone be glory.

Those were great themes that arose in the 16th century. They were those great insights that came out of the tragic break of the Christian Church, forming, then, out of the Roman Catholic tradition, the Protestant tradition of which we are a part. But those Reformation themes, tragic though the split and the rending of the body of Christ was, those great themes brought forth fresh insights that were

very, very critical, and we want to look at them together for a few weeks just to see how they look from this perspective and what they say to us and how they will continue to inform and shape our lives, as we move into a future in which we are re-imagining together what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ.

Sola Scriptura. Scripture alone. That is, that it is the holy scripture that gives us the content of our faith and that shows us the way of life. This book has been central in the life of the Reformation tradition. Historically, the pulpit was in the center and the open word in the Bible was an architectural statement about the centrality in the word of God, and we have been a part of that tradition that has taken seriously this written word.

Now, let me begin by saying that the greatest living American historian of Christian doctrine, Jaroslav Pelikan, in his volume on the Reformation, in the preface to that volume, says "*Sola Scriptura*. It never was true." Never was true in the sense that in the 16th century the Reformation Party went to the word of God without any preconditions or any preconceptions or any biases or any prejudices as though they could go with a blank sheet, fresh to the Bible, find out something totally new and then live by that alone. Pelikan, a good historian, an honest scholar, says, "Come on, Reformation people, Lutheran and Reformed, let's admit it. There never has been a time when it was simply the Bible."

The Reformation of the 16th century was highly contextual; it was coming out of that medieval structure and all of the dominance of that religious institution. There were actions and reactions, charges and counter charges, people with passion, people with jealousies, people with vested interest. There have never been any saints that have been absolutely pure and clear. There have only always been people who have been played upon by pressures from the left and from the right, who have been limited in their judgment and limited in their commitment, who have tried to find their way.

So, *Sola Scriptura*, in the sense of the Protestant tradition being totally shaped by this book and this book alone? No. Never has been true.

But, that doesn't mean that that claim or that ideal is not terribly important. And how did it arise? Well, you know a little Reformation history. You know about the good Roman Catholic monk, Martin Luther. Luther never intended to break the Church, never intended to leave the Church. He was a scholar, a good German monk, a very devout and pious man. He nailed his 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg in order to engage in a discussion. There were points he wanted to debate. He thought that dialogue in the Church was important and necessary. What eventuated was far beyond anything he had ever conceived. But, in the process, he did get into the debate. There was a Dr. Eck, extremely acute, representing the Roman Catholic institution. In their debate, Eck, with all of his debating skills, put Luther into a corner where Luther had to admit that he believed that the Church in its council, had erred. And to say that the Church in its council had erred was to say that the Church could err, and therefore, that the

Church was not infallible, not infallible in its institutional expression, not infallible in its Papal head. And you can do a lot of things and get away with it, but you'd better not challenge the infallibility of a formidable institution like the Church of Rome.

And so, in daring to stand up against the massive power of that institution, Luther eventually was excommunicated and we have a Protestant tradition now and an ongoing Roman Catholic tradition. But, Luther, in his experience, not as though he sat down and figured this out in his study, but just in the concrete experience, recognized that the Church in its human form, its historical form, had to be called to account.

How do you call the Church to account? How do you call its leadership to account? How do you challenge its theological formulation or its ethical practice or its political organization? How do you call the Church to account? You have to have something over above; you have to have a normative principle. And I think it was out of that that we have that Reformation insight, *sola scriptura*. It was a radical insight. It was not, as it has become in our day, in conservative circles, that the Bible becomes the instrument of conservatism.

The Bible became the hammer that broke open the conservatism of the Church. The Bible, in Luther's view and as the reformers came to understand it generally, was that instrument that held the Church accountable. It was that instrument that held the tradition accountable. Now, no Pope or Cardinal or Bishop could say, "But, the Church thus and so ..." because there was now a counter principle, and according to the Reformation insight, this counter principle was superior to, over against the ecclesiastical organization. This counter principle was superior to all creedal formulations and all traditional organization. The whole Christian tradition was held up to the light of examination that flowed from this book.

Now, again, it wasn't the book as book, but it was the book as the container of the story. It was the book as the agent, the instrument through which the ongoing Word of God came to expression.

What Luther was going through in the 16th century is no different from what Jesus went through in the first century. In the first Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus is criticized because his disciples don't carry on an ordinary fast. In that whole section he is criticized because they don't keep the Sabbath; he's criticized because he heals on the Sabbath and they pick grain on the Sabbath and so on. One would think, just between us, don't let it get out of this room, but, one would think if one read the Gospel, and if one tried to follow Jesus, one would think that one could never accuse another of being radical or of challenging tried and true ways, because isn't that the whole tension of the Gospel? Was not Jesus bringing to bear on his religious institution, on the conventional wisdom and the organizational structure, a critique from the Word of God?

You see, the Word of God is never in a book. The book is the conveyor of the Word of God. But, the Word of God is the Word of God; it's living! It is powerful; it is creative; it is the breath of the Spirit here and now; it is always, always dynamic. It is always addressing us, encountering us, judging us, healing us, comforting us. Jesus was representing the tradition, which certainly was all wound up with what the prophets had spoken and Moses had written. That was the story. Not that its written form was so sacred, but the written form was that which conveyed the story. But the story was the story of the living God. The Word of God is something more than the book.

"In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. All things that were made were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made." This Word of God or this idea of God or this intention of God, this purpose of God was in the beginning, creating, effecting, and all things were made by the Word. This was the light that was coming into the world, the light that enlightens everyone coming into the world. This light. He came to his own, and his own didn't receive him, didn't understand, but to those that did hear and receive, to them gave he power to become the children of God, to be born anew, not by a human action, by a human will. But this was an action of God, you see, the living God. And in the fullness of time, at just the right time, this Word, this eternal Word, this eternal intention, this eternal purpose, this movement of God took on flesh and dwelt among us. The Word became flesh. The Word of God can never be captured, can never be put in a book as though somehow or other, if you've got a text, that's it. This book is the consequence of that encounter with God. The living God through the Spirit, speaks.

And then, according to the good pleasure of God, there were those prophets and apostles who wrote it down, who gave witness to that encounter. And so, the Church says, that's our story, and we read it. We read it and, lo and behold, here and there, now and again it strikes fire in our hearts and in our imagination.

The Church has a storybook. It doesn't worship the book. We don't say a lot about the Bible. You'll find a lot said about the Bible where people are rather insecure about whether or not it's really living and powerful. You only worry about the source of authority when you've got to thump somebody over the head or you're not really convinced about what you're doing. Insecurity is measured by the degree to which people pound this book. We don't say a lot about the book, but we try to turn the story loose every week, because we know that this is the means that God uses to address us. That is, to address us in our church structure, to critique us, to shatter our forms, to address us in our doctrinal formulations, to help us clear the ground so that sometimes in the light of new experience and new developments, we can have a new formulation, a deeper understanding. There is no creedal formulation that is sacred. There is no ecclesiastical structure that is sacred. We may not absolutize and make ultimate anything that human heart or mind or hand has constructed. That's the Protestant principle. God alone is sovereign. God alone is ultimate. And this book is a storybook that the living

God uses, through the Spirit, through the foolishness of preaching like this, now and again, here and there, to shape us up, shake us up, make us new, create us again, call us to dance and to sing and to find some grand new future that we haven't yet dreamed of.

You see, the book is radical. It will keep us from finding a resting place. It will keep us from being comfortable. It will keep us on the move. It will open for us and interpret for us the ever-changing landscape of a world that is spinning wildly out of orbit. It will continue to be that reference point that will help us to remember our past and to find our way into the future. And when we say *sola scriptura*, what we're really saying is that it holds a place in our life that no creed can hold, it holds a place in our life that no ecclesiastical structure can hold, it holds the normative place in our life so that, wherever we go in the future, however we shape ourselves, whatever we confess, however we live, it will be in dialogue with this storybook and with no other reference point.

Now, this thing isn't read in a vacuum. We read it in the total complex of our lives. But, finally, prayerfully, humbly, openly, we place ourselves before this book and, sometimes, it's Bingo!

The Jewish scholar, Martin Buber, suggests a way that I wish could be true for all of us as we approach the Bible. "Read the Bible as though it were something entirely unfamiliar." (That's our problem, you know. We already know before we go there what the answer is. And we generally go there in order to buttress the answer, rather than to be unmasked and undressed by a strange word). But, Buber says,

"Read the Bible as though it were something entirely unfamiliar, as though it had not been set before you, ready made. Face the book with a new attitude as something new... let whatever may happen occur between yourself and it. You do not know which of its sayings or images will overwhelm you and mold you...."

Wouldn't that be wonderful? Wouldn't it be great to read this book with fresh eyes so that something reached right out and grabbed you, made you cry or made you laugh? Or broke through to you like you never believed possible? Wouldn't that be wonderful?" But, hold yourself open. Do not believe anything *a priori*. Do not disbelieve anything *a priori*. Read aloud the words written in the book in front of you; hear the word you utter and let it reach you."

Sola Scriptura. This book is loved and is a part of our devotion and our worship. We don't worship it, but we know that it tells the story and keeps the story alive and keeps us always potentially targets for the living voice of the living God.

Sola Scriptura. There's no need to defend it, to try to buttress it beyond just simply opening ourselves to it. I'm accused of not taking the Bible seriously, but only by those who already know its contents before they ever open it afresh. Let's

never be too sure we have it all wrapped up, because it is the living God with Whom we have to do, and this is the place, this is the book, and by the grace of God, God keeps meeting us as we open our lives to it. That's not going to change, because there is enough, there is enough newness and dynamic power for any future of which we can conceive, and that future will always be structured in conversations with this book. *Sola Scriptura*.