



The Five Reformation Principles

Study 2: Sola Scriptura (2 Tim 3:1-17)

o The doctrine of “sola scriptura” states that the Bible alone is the authority in all matters of faith and practice.

I. Recovery of the doctrine.

1. The sole authority of Scripture is also known as “the formal principle of the Reformation”, for it is the underlying principle for all doctrinal discussion. The church imperceptibly departed from “sola scriptura” for reasons that are easy to understand.
 - The early church followed the examples of the Lord and the apostles, as taught in Scripture (John 13:14-17; 1 Cor 11:1; Phil 3:17; Heb 13:7). This is an abiding principle of Bible interpretation. John Owen said that an apostolic example “has the force of a divine institution” (Works 16:197).
 - When the principle of imitation was wrongly extended to church leaders in later ages, and to the practice seen in well-established churches, problems arose.
 - Furthermore, the RC was actively propagating superstition and church traditions. The idea of “papal infallibility” was already entrenched in medieval theology, although officially defined later at the First Vatican Council (1869-1870). It is held that what the pope proclaimed “ex cathedra”, i.e. in his official capacity, on faith and morals, is to be accepted as infallible.
2. Martin Luther was outraged by the many human innovations and superstitious teaching in the church, e.g. the selling of indulgences by Tetzl.
 - In worship, there were images, prayer to the saints, the wearing of surplice, the burning of incense, etc. The people were spectators. The choir sang in Latin. Scripture and prayer by the priests were in Latin, which the people could not understand. The mass was an enactment of the sacrifice of Christ for the propitiation of sin.
 - The Reformation removed the innovations of the RC Church. The Reformed churches retained the liturgy and the use of the prayer book. The surplice was retained by the Lutheran churches and the Anglican church.
 - The reading of Scripture was reintroduced, with prayer, in the vernacular tongue (cf 1 Cor 14:23-25). Preaching was based on the read Scripture and applied to the hearers. Congregational singing of psalms in the vernacular tongue was reintroduced (cf. Eph 5:19; Col 3:16). In the 17th century, hymn singing was introduced in England, which spread to other Reformed communions. Some today cling on to exclusive Psalm-singing, citing their understanding of the Regulative Principle of Worship.
3. The contribution of the fore-runners of the Reformation must be noted.

- John Wycliffe (1320-1384) was a priest and theologian at the University of Oxford. He denied the doctrine of transubstantiation and emphasised the importance of preaching and the primacy of Scripture. His followers, known as Lollards, travelled everywhere to preach. Wycliffe, together with his good friend John Purvey, translated the Bible into English.
- The teaching of the Lollards influenced John Huss (1369-1415), a priest and professor of theology at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic. He spoke against the RC mass, the sale of indulgences, and the office of pope. He was pronounced a heretic and burned at the stake in 1415. The followers of Huss and his fellow martyr Jerome of Prague became known as the Czech Brethren and later as Moravians.
- Martin Luther was influenced by the Moravians. He providentially triggered off the Reformation on 31 October 1517. Martin Luther translated the Bible into the German tongue. The Wycliffe Bible was never printed and made widely available. Gutenberg's printing press appeared only in 1440. William Tyndale (1494-1536), a leading figure of the Protestant Reformation in England, translated the New Testament into English. It was printed in Germany and smuggled into England. King Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic Church in 1534. Tyndale, however, was burned as a heretic in 1536. Although Tyndale's translation of the OT remained unfinished at his death, his work became the basis of subsequent translations of the Bible, including the "King James" version of 1611.

II. Implications of the doctrine.

1. The sole authority of the Bible implies that Scripture is sufficient, complete, final, and perspicuous, i.e. capable of being understood (2 Tim 2:16-17; 2 Pet 1:19-21; Isa 8:20). Three things are needed to help us understand Scripture.
 - (i) The correct rules of interpretation must be followed. Basic rules are: taking the text plainly, taking the text in context, to compare Scripture with Scripture. From these arise the sub-rules that help us determine the correct meaning.
 - (ii) Teachers given to us by God, both of the present (1 Cor 12:28; Eph 4:11) and of the past (2 Tim 2:2; Heb 13:7). Books and confessions of faith are included under the latter.
 - (iii) The Holy Spirit must enlighten us. We must be born again and receive the Spirit (1 Cor 2:14; 1 Pet 1:22-23; 2:1-2). Once converted, the Spirit will help us grasp the spiritual sense of the word (Gal 3:2; 1 John 2:20-21, 27).
2. Errors of the past tend to re-appear. Beware of the following errors:
 - (i) Adopting human traditions and pragmatism: This was the error of the RC Church. Contextualisation (or accommodation) in missions and syncretism have been practised, e.g. Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) in China approved veneration of the dead. While acknowledging the need for appropriate adaptation and application of the truth to different situations, we must beware of perverting the gospel, adopting pagan elements, and becoming worldly.
 - (ii) Questioning the inspiration and uniqueness of Scripture: This was the error of Modernism (or Theological Liberalism) which started in Germany in the 19th century. C H Spurgeon fought it during the Downgrade Controversy. A series of books called "The Fundamentals" were published in America in the 1900s to counter Modernism. Modernism denies the miracles and supernatural events (e.g. the virgin birth of Christ, the resurrection) of the Bible. It is claimed that the Bible "contains the word of God", while other parts developed with the church and need to be identified by "scientific methods" such as textual criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism. The inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture was attacked in the name of proud scholarship.

- (iii) Undermining the sufficiency and completeness of Scripture: This is the error of the Charismatic movement, which claims the continuation of the sign gifts such as tongue-speaking, healing and prophecy. The Sovereign Grace group of churches hold to the Five Points of Calvinism and the sovereignty of God, but also to “continuationism” (or “non-cessationism”). They also practise contemporary worship and adopt questionable contextualisation in missions.

= Holding to “sola scriptura” requires that we know the Bible well and be joined to a faithful church.

Review Questions

1. Define “sola scriptura”.
2. What is “sola scriptura” also known as?
3. What is “papal infallibility”?
4. What language was used in the worship service of the Roman Catholic Church?
5. What were some elements of worship retained by the Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican churches?
6. What were the followers of John Wycliffe and John Huss known as, respectively?
7. Into what languages was the Bible translated by Martin Luther and William Tyndale, respectively?
8. What does the sole authority of the Bible imply about Scripture?
9. What three things are needed to help us understand Scripture?
10. What three errors must we beware of with regard to Scripture?

Assignment/Discussion

Believing in “sola scriptura” would require us to encourage and support the translation of the Bible into different languages. Why is this so?

Memory Passage (2 Tim 3:17-18)

16 All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.
