

Sola Scriptura: Psalm 119: 89-112

From the corridors of power in Westminster to the board of the Football Association and beyond, you can't escape the calls for reformation these days, can you? "Things are not right! These practices are immoral, discriminatory, tantamount to bullying! We need change!"

And this call isn't new. 500 years ago, Martin Luther was one of many people calling for the church to be reformed. Corruption and immorality were rife amongst the clergy and practices like the selling of indulgences were angering many. Even some who opposed Luther at his trials, agreed with many of his calls for change. The church, which was called on to proclaim the glorious message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, had drifted off course.

But if that was the case, why did Rome unleash its full fury upon this small-town German monk? To answer that, let's look at the focus of many of Luther's grievances: the selling of indulgences.

The church at the time was teaching that although we are saved by God's grace, the death of Jesus on the cross was not sufficient to pay the price for all our sins. To get to Heaven we needed, through our good works or religious devotion, to top up our heavenly bank account so that at the time of our death we'd earned enough to go straight to be with God. If we didn't have enough heavenly savings, then we would have to pay the extra through suffering in Purgatory before we could be ready to meet God in Heaven. But, to help us on our way, the Church sold papal declarations guaranteeing, for a small fee of course, that either our account or the account of a loved one already dead would be topped up. 'When a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs' was the natty jingle used to sell these bits of paper.

Luther called for the selling of indulgences to be ended. The Church in Rome said no! Luther said they ran contrary to Scripture and the Pope didn't have authority to ordain anything that Scripture forbade. The Pope and the Church responded by claiming that the Pope and the Church councils had supreme authority in determining what Scripture meant! The Pope himself had said indulgences were legitimate and that was enough.

You see what was at stake here was the question of ultimate authority. By virtue of his calling the Pope claimed to be above Scripture. It was his role and the roles of church councils to interpret and apply the Bible for the people. Their position of authority in the Church was God-given, they said, so they were not subject to correction by Scripture since only they knew what it really meant. No, said Luther: Popes, Bishops, priests and councils are human and can err in their teaching. No one person or organisation is above Scripture, and all must be judged and held to account by God's Word.

That's why when all of Luther's works were laid before him at the Diet of Worms and he was asked to recant he replied like this: *"Unless I am refuted and convicted by testimonies of Scripture or by clear reason – since I believe neither the Popes nor the councils by themselves, for it is clear that they have often erred and contradict themselves – I am conquered by the Holy Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not withdraw anything, since it is neither safe nor right to do anything against one's conscience. Here I stand. God help me. Amen."*

Luther may have begun by arguing for the church to reform, but for reform to take place Luther saw that ultimate authority needed to be taken out of the hands of church leaders and placed back in the Word of God where it belonged. Of course, in Luther's day the church had tremendous secular power as well as religious power. The Church and the governments of Europe were closely intertwined, so when Luther started saying that the Pope and the councils of the church did not have supreme authority, it was a huge

deal. And it was this challenge to their claimed authority over Scripture which led to Luther being declared a heretic.

For Luther that had two huge implications. Personally, it led directly to his excommunication, but more widely it led Luther to translate the Bible into everyday German so that individual Christians could begin to see for themselves whether the church and its leaders were teaching the truth or not. Luther was never against church leaders or popes, and he never wanted to break up the church. What he wanted was for those in authority, whether popes or bishops or local clergy, to be held accountable to the Word of God.

Turn with me to Psalm 119, verses 89 to 112 and we'll see both the authority and effect of God's Word.

Even just a casual look in those verses reminds us that God's Word cannot be superseded by popes or preachers or councils or the cries of culture. The psalmist reminds us that the Word of the Lord is eternal, standing firm in the heavens. Verse 90 tells us that his faithfulness continues through all generations – that is that God's Word is utterly and continually reliable. These words were written perhaps 3000 years ago, yet they are just as relevant today because, as verse 91 says, they endure for ever because all things serve God.

Surely it is arrogant to think that in our culture in our day we know better than the God whose Word established the earth and sustains the universe. How can we know better than God? Verse 96 is interesting. The psalmist says that to all perfection he sees a limit. Perfect here implies something that is complete, done. There are glorious things in this world from paintings to buildings to music, but however perfect they might be they are finite, limited by time and space.

But God is unlimited, eternal, everlasting, unbounded by time and space. When God speaks whatever he decrees happens. What he promises, he guarantees for all generations: Not one of his promises has ever failed. And when we think about the quality of his character, his love, mercy, grace, holiness and patience: how can we doubt that his Word is not just powerful but good? How can we imagine that we who are finite, limited, frail, mortal human beings can know better than God about the right way and the best way to live in His world? No – it is God's Word that has true and lasting authority.

Verses 97 to 104 start to apply that and show us the life transforming effect of God's Word.

Look at the effect that meditation on God's Word has on the psalmist. Having remembered the Lord's commands, the psalmist is now, verse 98, wiser than his enemies; despite their qualifications he has more insight than his teachers, verse 99; and in verse 100 we read that despite his relative youth he now has more understanding than the elders, those with far more worldly experience. And that understanding has a purpose and an effect. By studying and obeying God's unchanging, reliable and good Word he keeps his feet from every evil path and is more able to live a life that pleases God. And since he knows that the Lord's Word is good, even his emotions begin to change. The things he once enjoyed doing he now hates doing because they are contrary to the Word of the Lord, verses 103-104.

Friends, God's Word is powerful and mighty. Through it we are equipped for life in a way that no university course can ever provide. God's Word brings life and truth and wisdom and safety; it transforms the psalmist's attitude to life and gives him confidence no matter what comes.

Of course, if the people don't have the Scriptures, then how can they know whether what they are being taught is right or wrong? They can't know! But knowledge of God's Word is power, and for those false teachers in positions of power in churches across Europe, the Bible in the common tongue was like kryptonite to Superman. That's why when William Tyndale's English Bibles started arriving in the UK most English Bishops condemned them, ordered that they be burnt before they got into the hands of English

Christians, and called for Tyndale's death! But when the people were armed with God's Word in their own language the flames of reformation spread through Germany, through Europe across the North Sea to England and beyond.

Sadly, wicked practises and false teaching in the Church were not limited to Luther's day. Long before popes were called by that name, there are plenty of examples, even going back to the early church, of bishops and ministers who claimed they were teaching the truth about God but who were actually teaching heresy. Sadly, even today where Bibles are available in almost every language on the planet, there are those in the UK and around the world who claim to be ministers of the Gospel but who teach things contrary to the Word of God so that individuals and whole churches are led astray.

How does that happen? How does God's Church wander from the truth? Let me suggest four ways.

The first change is so subtle that you hardly notice it until it's too late. We might call it erosion through inaction.

At the beginning of the James Bond film, *Tomorrow Never Dies*, a Royal Navy warship mistakenly sails into Chinese waters and is attacked and sunk. How did it get there? Well, the GPS signal which told the ship's position was gradually interfered with, so that bit by bit the ship was sent off course without even knowing.

In the same way, a tiny drip feed of errors over time can lead to churches ending up a long way from the truths of the Scriptures. The things are so small that no one notices until, over time, traditions are built up and doctrines take root which actually deviate a long way from the clear teaching of the Scriptures. How can we recognise that process or correct our course? By regularly checking how we live and how we worship to make sure that those things conform to God's true, unchanging and reliable Word.

The second means of change is from the cult of personality.

Even in Bible times God's people were sometimes led by charismatic, articulate preachers who brought a message with such conviction and dynamism that it was hard not to get swept away: particularly if their regular preacher or prophet was either a little dull by comparison. And of course, if the new preacher brought an up-beat and positive message then so much the better!

And time and time again God's people fell for the same old trick. They bought into a message their ears were just itching to hear and gave up their gold to a preacher who swept them along with a happy tune. But good news is only good news if it's true! And there's a danger in every age that we are attracted to style over substance. That's why you need to engage your brain every time I or someone else preaches and check that I'm teaching the truth! Don't trust me because I'm such a nice guy. Trust what I say if the Bible backs it up!

The third means of change is from outside: the pressure of culture.

Culture says, ignore the past, ignore where you have come from, because these are our values for today. Sometimes its influence is subtle like bias in how the Christian faith is portrayed in the media. Sometimes it's blunt: throwing students off courses because they don't take a PC line on certain issues or banning Christian groups from working in schools. Culture challenges the teachings of the Bible at the intellectual level and encourages Christians to adjust how they think. It says 'the Bible can't be trusted – walk this way instead!' And if we are not aware of our culture's force and direction, like a log in a stream we can be swept away from the truth. So how must we judge culture? How must we view the world and its morals,

its standards, its practices? By seeing our culture through the lens of the fourth, which are true for every place and in every time zone.

The final challenge comes from within: the demands of the emotions.

The most common reason people give for making decisions these days is based around what they think will make them happy, and sadly often that's the case in the church too. Important, sometimes life changing decisions aren't based so much on what is right and wrong but on what will bring me the most pleasure now? Will what I am doing make my life easier or harder? Will it bring me into conflict with people or make me more popular? Will it make me richer or damage my wealth prospects? Is it going to take up too much of my time or is it going to free me to live as I want to live? Those are all questions where the answer is led by our desires or emotion.

Now not all our emotions are bad, but left unchecked our emotions will say 'Pleasure is king! The Bible won't lead you that way! Trust me!' So how should we make sure keep our emotions don't lead us astray? How should we judge whether the decisions we make day by day, sometimes hour by hour about how we live are truly right? Again, as Luther recognised, the final arbiter of truth, of doctrine, of morals and Christian behaviour must be the Scriptures.

Think back to the Garden of Eden almost since the beginning of time the supremacy of the Word of God has been challenged again and again and again. And the root of the first ever challenge still echoes in all of the challenges we face today: "*Did God really say...? God is lying to you! Obeying him won't make you happy!*" And if you listen carefully enough you can still hear the hiss of the serpent in the challenges to God's Word that echo through the ages to our own time.

Popes, church councils, the overwhelming force of culture, the cry of our own selfish sinful souls, have all tried, and still try to place themselves over the Bible so that we go their way instead of submitting to God's way. I wonder if you feel those challenges in your own life? I'm sure we all do. And when we feel that pull of temptation or when we wonder about the right path or when we simply want to check that we are walking in the will of God the best thing we can do is to go back to the Scriptures again and again and remind ourselves that we have a God who speaks and who has spoken to all people everywhere in his Holy Word. That's why you have Bibles in your pews and why I encourage you to have them open in our talks. That's why we give away gospels and why we encourage everyone to spend time daily in the Bible and prayer.

But having the Bible isn't enough. Actually, even knowing the Bible isn't enough.

We finished our time in America with some time on the coast of Maine where shipwrecks were once frequent and so lighthouses are numerous. But lighthouses, like warning labels or road signs, have absolutely no effect unless we pay attention to them.

According to the psalmist in Psalm 119 verse 105, the Word of the Lord is a lamp for his feet and a light on his path. But God's Word only has the effect of guiding him in the right way when he takes the light of the Lord with him and allows that light to guide his footsteps. And, like us, he's in need of guidance isn't he? Look down at verse 110: "*The wicked have set a snare for me!*" He says. This is a man who feels that there are people out there trying to get him. His life is dangerous. In verse 109 he says that following God means daily taking his life in his hands. Perhaps it's pressure to conform to culture; perhaps it's pressure from a superior to turn a blind eye to injustice; perhaps it's the pull of his own heart which would lead him astray. Whatever the threat, the Word of the Lord is only a lamp for his feet and a light on his path if he takes it with him and goes where the Lord leads.

And that's my challenge to you today: will you submit to God's Word in thought, and word and deed?

If you are not a Christian, perhaps the idea of believing everything this ancient book says about God, the World and how we should live as human beings seems rather crazy? After all, hasn't the world moved on? If that's where you are coming from let me say two things: firstly, read it for yourself! And secondly, as you read it ask yourself this: isn't it possible that the awesome, Holy, loving, creator God described in these pages is powerful enough to have caused his reliable and unchanging Word to be written a book that would be totally truthful and relevant to each generation, whatever their age and culture? Of course he is!

But if you are a Christian, then it's time for a position check. Just like that navy ship in the Bond movie, it's easy for us to drift off course and into dangerous waters. So today will you search your heart and answer this question: when it comes to what you believe about God and the right way to live, are you placing anything above Scripture right now?

I suspect it isn't the Pope, but perhaps you have one person you look to whom you trust more than God's Word. It could be a friend, a favourite author or a small group of people whom you listen to more than God. If so, how have their words influenced your faith? Have they caused you to deviate from the clear teaching of Scripture?

Perhaps you're swayed more by culture: you want to fit in and avoid aggro so in your mind you say things like "I know what the Bible says but we know better today." Perhaps as a result you've adjusted your values so you don't stand out. Perhaps your deepest desires and ambitions are far more worldly than godly, and even when something pricks your conscience you'll keep your mouth closed when you should speak the truth.

But perhaps actually it's just you and your desire for pleasure in one form or another that is sitting above the Scriptures right now. You want pleasure now so you ignore what the Bible says and go your own way. Perhaps you don't honour your parents because that's just a drag. Perhaps you don't give regularly to the work of the church because if you did you wouldn't be able to afford the things that you wanted. And perhaps if pushed you would say that frankly the way you operate your relationships or parent your children has nothing to do with anyone else including God.

But friends, God has spoken. The God who created this world has revealed himself to us through his Word and if we are his children then we need to walk in the light of his unchanging, reliable, powerful, life bringing words. Will we do it? We can't receive and believe the good news of salvation the Bible speaks then ignore what the Scriptures teach about the way of life the Christian is called to live! That's intellectually hypocrisy. What's more it won't satisfy! Ultimately living God's way is the only way to true life, lasting peace and deep, heavenly joy.

The first step to changing and walking in the light of the Lord is recognising the authority under which you bow. If it's people, they are frail and fickle and false. If it's culture, then it changes continually and you have no security there. If it yourself, then recognise the sinfulness of your own heart. How can you trust your own wisdom when you know how unwise you often are? Sola Scripture! The Bible alone must be our ultimate authority.

The fundamental battle of the Reformation was the authority of the Scriptures. From that foundation Luther and the other reformers were able to proclaim the good news we'll hear of in the next 3 weeks of salvation for the sinner by faith alone, by grace alone, in Christ alone. And that means that if we have drifted off into error, if we have placed something or someone else above Scripture, then by God's grace, as the Bible declares, we can come and receive his forgiveness today.