**Sola Scriptura**

Based on [John 8:31-36](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Jn8.31-36)

Preached on October 31, 2021

Reformation Day

Pastor Nathan Fuehrer

Over 500 years ago, Martin Luther posted 95 Theses, topics for academic debate on the church door in Wittenberg. This was not an act of vandalism, the church door was supposed to be used for that purpose. The topics for debate were written by Luther in Latin, the church's language. But these Theses were taken down from the church door, copied and disseminated throughout Germany. Eventually, some friends of Luther translated the 95 into German for the common people to read. The newly invented printing press made it possible for mass reproduction and distribution of these Theses, which dealt with issues like "What is true repentance" and "Does the Church truly have the right to sell God's grace as a means of raising funds for the church...as was happening?" The common people read these theses and resonated to many of them. This is the event that history has chosen to commemorate the Reformation on October 31st every year.

Luther’s theses were avant garde at the time because they compared certain things the church was teaching at the time with the plain teaching of the scriptures. What was so jarring was that Luther presumed that the scriptures contained plain teaching...sound doctrine. Luther was not perfect, but he was zealous for the truth of God and how we can know it for certain. He had a fundamental faith in the clarity of Holy Scripture to reveal the sound doctrine upon which one’s conscience can be grounded.

And why shouldn’t he? And why shouldn’t we? After all Jesus says, "If you abide in my Word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free." He means that your conscience will be free to serve God without fear. Sorry Pinnochio...Your conscience is not your guide, your conscience is what needs to be guided and that is what Jesus offers with his word.

What kind of a saviour would we have if the freedom he promised came through an ambiguous or confusing or self-contradictory Word? Our consciences cannot find peace in confusion and darkness. But that is what those considered to be influential in the church were teaching about Scripture in that time...that the Bible is a dark, mysterious, confusing book. You cannot rest your conscience on scripture alone. Your conscience needs to be guided by the church.

So, in the spirit of the Reformation and over against all claims that christianity needs an earthly authority equal to Christ--either the Pope in Rome or the little pope in your heart--we say no. The church and preachers can *unpack* the word, they can *explain* the word, they can *preach* the word and God calls ministers to do that, and the church can make doctrinal statements and creeds drawn from the scriptures...but they do not ***reveal*** God’s Word beyond what the scriptures teach.

Because of the hand of God and the boldness of Martin Luther, so many people were convinced of this principle that “Scripture alone” reveals absolute Truth that it became a clarion call of the Reformation.

But the devil never sleeps, and whenever God closes a door, Satan opens a window. And so today, mass Christianity has been moving away not from the authority of popes and clergy, but away from any external authority whatsoever. In many churches there is little or no accountability to God’s word at all. By that I mean there are no statements of sound doctrine. Even in churches with beautiful and salutary liturgical worship practices and sacramental piety, it has become trendy to say things like “we don’t have formal doctrinal statements...our “liturgy” or our “worship” is our doctrine.” What they mean is that as long as they participate in the same form of worship, they do not need unity in how that translates into their individual lives outside of it.

But worship means nothing if you can walk away from it to live whatever kind of life you choose. In the same way, “Scripture alone” means nothing if the scripture can mean anything to anyone. And that’s why there is so much disunity in Christianity…and we all should shed a few tears for that today. There's disunity, not because God’s word is unclear or confusing, or because people disagree too much, but because, in the interest of peace and getting on with their lives, they “agree to disagree” until God’s word means anything to anybody and therefore means nothing. Let’s put the point this way, “Scripture without stable doctrine is no scripture at all.” An illustration...

Imagine a wife whose husband feels sick and sluggish and so he goes to the doctor. Her husband goes to the doctor, and the doctor writes down his recommendations on a piece of paper and sends him home. The wife reads the prescription the Doctor has written to her husband, "Your cholesterol is too high, stay away from fatty foods because they are not good for your heart, and you are already at high risk of an attack."

No sooner does she finish reading the note when she turns and sees her husband eating greasy-unhealthy food. And she says to him, "Honey, didn't you read what your doctor wrote?" "Oh, sure I did" "Well then, why are you eating greasy, fatty foods?" “Because dear, I don’t believe he was being "literal." When he said that I should stay away from fatty foods, and that my cholesterol is too high and my heart is in danger, I interpreted him to mean that my life is filled with the cholesterol of stress, and it's bad for my ‘heart’--that is, the way I feel about myself. And so when he says I should stay away from fatty foods, he means for me to stay away from those things that clog the arteries of my happiness.

“And so you see,it's actually good that I'm eating this fatty food. I think the doctor would approve...because I like it, and eating it relieves my stress and makes me happy. You don't want me to be unhappy...do you dear?”

What will the concerned wife say to her husband? She’ll say..."That's clearly not what the doctor meant, he meant your cholesterol is too high...that's why he said it." And what will her **postmodern, “spiritual but not religious”** husband say, "Well, that's just your interpretation, and you shouldn't force your beliefs on me.”

Or maybe her husband will come up with other ways and reasons not to listen to the doctor. Maybe he’s been schooled in **critical doctor theory**... “Yeah, well that doctor he’s a misogynist and a fat shamer, and he voted for Donald Trump, and I’ve seen pictures of him in blackface and he works for Big Pharma.” Maybe the husband’s been reading some articles on **emergent medicine**. “Honey...don’t be so narrow. Health is so much bigger than the medical establishment. You can’t presume to put the whole of human healthcare in a box. The doctor wouldn’t really want me to limit the plans this cheeseburger might have for my life. Love wins.” Or maybe he’s a **medical reductionist**…”Well, we might not agree on what the doctor told me or what his note means, but I went to see the doctor and I believe his prescription...that’s the only really important thing.”

Whatever the husband does, if he’s intent on resisting the plain teaching of the doctor, he will not submit. He will argue and evade, and make it so that the only way for the wife to have any peace in the household is to drop the issue, agree to disagree and let him have his way...or be ready to accept the struggle for the rest of her life without hating her husband yet without giving in. That’s a tall order, but that’s the cross she is called to bear...without hating her husband and without giving in.

And that is the cross that we, the true visible church on earth, bears in the midst of the doctrinal disunity of modern christendom. But in the midst of that struggle we rejoice. Because we have a peace that surpasses understanding. Christ has set us free to listen and live according to his simple teaching. Today we remember the Reformation for returning the church-or at least the remnant of Zion--to the clear, unambiguous, unanimous, authority of the Word of God over all.

And that clear word gives us sound and stable doctrine to guide our conscience in a way that no man or spirit has the authority to do. No one has the authority to correct God's Word, or stand above it, or treat it like an ink blot that means whatever comes to your mind when you first encounter it. There are probably, literally thousands upon thousands of ways to interpret God's word, but there's only one right way. That’s the way that God intended when he spoke it. And if you and I come to different conclusions about God’s Word and Will, then there’s no way out of it...either Christ is divided or we are...and if I had to choose...I’d much rather it be us than him. But if we are united...if we agree in what God has revealed, it is because we know the truth and He has made us free. Then we can be sure that He is united in us, and between us, and through us, and wherever we are gathered there he is...united with us and uniting us.