

St Bartholomew's, Ducklington
Lent 2017, Sermon Series: Principles of the Reformation

26th March Study Notes 4 "Sola Scriptura"

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." (2 Tim 3:16,17)

At first sight the Bible is a jumbled collection of writings compiled over many centuries without any obvious design. The individual 'books' are not presented in chronological order. To the modern reader it doesn't pass muster as a science textbook and the historical detail is sometimes misleading. Ever since the Protestant Reformation, the Bible has been used and misused to defend all kinds of human behaviour and social relationships (think of apartheid in South Africa, or its role in recent battles over sexual identity in the church).

Yet, despite this, it has had a profound impact on the personal lives and civilisations that have read it. What is the source of its influence? Why did it emerge as the primary source of religious authority in the 16th century? What is its message and is it still relevant in the 21st century?

In every age, and perhaps particularly in our own, the Bible offers a radical perspective on reality - a reality in which God is deeply involved and to which we are called to bear witness. It requires us to replace our tired, unsatisfactory ways of thinking, speaking and living with a way of life that is lived in response to the faithful love of God.

The big picture, offered by the Bible, is of God in intimate relationship with what he has made, working his purpose out as year succeeds to year. Perhaps the best way to describe it is as a covenant between the creator and his creation (Gen 9:8-17) and the story of this covenant in human history. A covenant is a deep, permanent commitment of love - a free unqualified promise for good, unconditional in its unilateral guarantee for the future well being of the world. This is an everlasting covenant that cannot be broken and does not depend on the obedience of the other party. Therefore it can be relied upon in every circumstance - and in every circumstance it calls humanity to live in the experience of, and out of this founding principle of, reality.

This story provides us, if we spend our time with it so that it shapes our thoughts and actions, a way of living faith-fully in the world. It is "profitable

for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man (or woman) of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

Questions

1. Do you have any childhood memories of the Bible? Perhaps your mother or grandmother told you its stories. If you found the Bible later in life what caught your attention?
2. So much of what is happening in our modern world leaves us longing for God to speak. We may be tempted, like Isaiah to call out to God to rend the heavens, come out of hiding and tell us what to do (Isaiah 64:1). But just when we need him most he is silent. It is then that we resort to reading the written Word. What is your experience of hearing God in the words of Scripture when he seems so distant?
3. What is the basic story of your life? Name two or three events that shaped your life - which parts are the good news and which are bad news? If we are called to witness to God's covenant relationship with his creation how might you tell your personal story in ways that are faithful to God's faithfulness?
4. The religious authorities of Jesus's day used the Scriptures for the very purpose of avoiding him. They searched the Scriptures yet he said to them, "you do not have his word abiding in you because you do not believe the one whom he has sent." (Jn 5:38). A. W. Tozer, the author of *The Pursuit of God* and *The Knowledge of the Holy*, wrote "...it is possible to become an expert in Bible doctrine and not have *spiritual illumination*, with the result that a veil remains over the mind, preventing it from apprehending the truth in its spiritual essence." What is the relationship between personal faith and our knowledge of the truth revealed in Scripture?
5. In the history of the church we have tried and rejected institutional authority, priestly mediation, and scholarly insight as the source of spiritual authority. No institution or individual has the whole truth and we are warned by Peter that no Scripture is of private interpretation (2 Peter 1:21). Perhaps the true source of authority - the means by which we may discern the Word of God for us today - is in the conversations between those who see God in creation and know him in Christ, who give attention to the nudges of his Spirit in daily life, and and let the Word dwell in them richly. What might this mean for us?