



This morning we conclude our brief series of messages about the Reformation. I hope you're not breathing a sigh of relief!

In a few moments, when I read the Scripture text, I am going to use a different Bible than the one I normally use. The Bible I am using this morning – this one – is The One Year Bible, arranged in 365 daily readings so that one can read through the Bible in a year, without going through it in order, from Genesis to Revelation. But that's not the reason why I'm using it this morning. I'm also not using it because of this nice cover or cool picture on the cover. It's not one that has any particular sentimental value to me because it was not a gift to me. Until the other day, I had not actually picked up this particular Bible in quite a while.

So, why am I using this particular Bible this morning? I am using it to honor a person who gave his life to help ensure that we could read the Bible. Did you know there are people who gave their lives to translate the Bible into English so that we could read it? This Bible is published by Tyndale House publishers, a publishing company named after William Tyndale, a scholar who was burned at the stake in a small town in Belgium in 1536. His crime? Translating the Bible into English. If you have ever uttered the phrases *under the sun*, *signs of the times*, *let there be light*, *my brother's keeper*, *fall flat on his face*, *the land of the living*, *pour out one's heart*, *the apple of his eye*, *go the extra mile*, or *the parting of the ways* you are using phrases that Tyndale brought into the English language.

The translating of the Bible into English, first begun in earnest by John Wycliffe in the 14th century and followed by Tyndale, helped to solidify the Reformation, because it allowed, for the first time, for anyone who could read to be able to have a Bible, in English, and to read it. The first book to be mass-produced with moveable type – a momentous development in history – was the Gutenberg Bible. It was not mere happenstance that the Bible was the first book mass-produced.

While the availability of the Bible is so taken for granted today that we almost ignore it, there was a time when you could lose your life for the act of translating it and putting it into the hands of the average person. Hard to believe, isn't it? But even today there are countries where it is illegal to own or distribute Bibles (in countries such as North Korea, Somalia, Libya, and Morocco. In North Korea, the restrictions are so dire that not only is an individual who possesses a Bible in danger of arrest, imprisonment, torture, and death – so are up to three generations of their family!)

So, if you have a Bible with you today or a Bible app on your phone, computer, or tablet, a debt of gratitude is owed to those who risked, or gave, their lives, that we could read and study the Bible. The Bible revolutionized the world, and continues to revolutionize the world, and it is the topic of our

message this morning, as we come to one of the *Five Solas* of the Reformation. The *Five Solas* were the foundational theological principles of the Reformation, of which *Sola Scriptura* was one. *Sola Scriptura* means *Scripture Alone*. *Sola Scriptura* was a rallying cry of the Reformation as a proclamation that it was the Bible alone that would serve as the source of theology, practice, and doctrine for the church. Authority would not be vested in tradition, councils, creeds, denominations, other documents, church leaders or any individuals; Scripture alone would be the source of authority.

So, with all that said, let's read some of the Bible! Here are two texts that are famously about the Scriptures –

2 Timothy 3:14-17

14 But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it,

15 and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,

17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Hebrews 4:12

12 For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

There is so much to say about the Bible, and it was very difficult to narrow it down to what is going to be a very brief summary of the Bible in the context of the topic of *Scripture Alone*. I will talk about the Bible under the heading of three categories – *Authority*, *Interpretation*, and *Application*.

1. Authority.

If you receive – and read – the study guide sent out by email every week (it serves as an introduction to the Sunday morning message) then you have already read about the ways in which authority is viewed in the three branches of Christianity – Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox. There are some significant differences that are important to understand, especially if we want to understand one another across those divisions. I don't have time to get into the differences this morning so I hope you will read the study guide if you haven't, or you can ask me later. Suffice it to say this – every church, whatever its denomination or tradition – has some basis of authority. For Protestants, we say our sole authority is the Bible. That is, there is no other authority that informs our beliefs and practices, which is mostly true (I say it is mostly true because, within Protestantism, there are some examples of authority outside of local congregations. Not every church is completely autonomous. Within the United Methodist Church, for example, the denomination had a great deal of authority about the placement and movement of ministers, while other Protestant churches have complete autonomy when it comes to the selection and calling of ministers).

Here's how authority works in our church, as an example. First of all, I'm not in charge. In fact, there is nowhere in life where I am in charge, trust me. The congregation is the final authority. There is no outside group that tells us what we can or cannot do or what we are to believe. Our denomination has no authority over us. There is nothing that our denomination's office in Indianapolis can tell us to do, or not to do. Our General Assembly can pass all the resolutions they want when they gather, but our church is free to ignore them if we choose.

As the minister, I am in charge with leading the church, but I do not have any authority to set policy, practice, or anything else. I can make recommendations, but I am not in charge of doctrine, practice, or

belief. Our elders serve as the spiritual overseers of our church, but they are not in charge. They can make some decisions, certainly, but they can't tell the congregation what to do or what to believe. We have a board, who can also make some decisions, because sometimes it is too unwieldy for every decision to be brought before the congregation. Ultimately, however, the congregation is the final arbiter of any major decisions made by our congregation.

I know this can seem a bit like irrelevant theological minutiae, but it really matters when churches are trying to make decisions, especially decisions related to belief and doctrine. In a hierarchical church, such as the Catholic Church or the Orthodox Church, there is an official church theology and doctrine about everything. You can agree or disagree, but that's just the way it is. If the church hierarchy says *here is our position on this issue*, that's the church position. We don't have anything similar, and what happens then, if we are debating a policy, say, about women in ministry (although that is a settled question for us now, it wasn't at one time). Where do you turn for a voice of authority? We turn to the Bible. As Thomas Campbell, one of the leaders of the movement that brought about Disciples churches famously said, *where the Scriptures speak, we speak; and where the Scriptures are silent, we are silent*. Hmm. That's a great quote, but it doesn't really settle things, does it? It's a bit like Thomas Jefferson penning the 1st Amendment and then sitting back and saying confidently, *there; that ought to settle it! Every matter related to church and state and free speech is forever settled!* Except it isn't.

So that brings us to the second point –

2. Interpretation

If we have no central authority to establish a statement of faith, if we have no creed that we follow, if we have no list of official doctrines, and we turn to the Bible to answer our questions, provide us guidance, inform our beliefs and our daily living, we have to interpret what it says. Some parts of the Bible are very clear – love God with all your heart, soul, and mind and love our neighbors as ourselves (Jesus replied, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*” *This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.* Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:30-31). That seems pretty obvious, doesn't it? But not everything is so obvious, and not everything that seems obvious is as obvious as we might think.

The Bible requires interpretation. No one takes it completely literally. No one takes every word of the Bible literally. No one. No matter how much they argue that they do, they just don't. In Leviticus, for example, we are told *do not plant your field with two kinds of seed. Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material* (19:19). Or, *do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard...or put tattoo marks on your selves* (19:27-28). I'm fairly certain that the suit I'm wearing today is made of a blend of material and I do cut the hair at the side of my head. While I don't have a beard, I do trim my sideburns and my moustache. Am I in violation of the Bible? I am if I take those passages literally. I think we would all agree, however, that some passages – such as these examples from Leviticus – were meant for a particular time and particular context that no longer apply. But what happens when we come to other passages, such as those that speak to the role of women in church or in ministry? There are plenty of churches who would say that what the Bible says about limiting the role of women is still very much applicable. Here is the larger point – we all practice Biblical interpretation, and we all understand that not all passages are to be taken literally, but who decides which ones are no longer applicable and which ones still apply? While that question is more difficult one to answer, here's one thing I do know for sure – when it comes to interpretation, we won't always agree with one another, and because we will disagree we must allow one another the freedom to interpret how we feel led by the Holy Spirit.

I'm telling you what I think and what I believe. I know a lot of ministers will say *I'm not up here offering my opinion; I'm telling you what the Bible says*. Well...they are saying what they believe it

says. I am telling you what I think and what I believe. You are not required to think what I think, believe what I believe, or agree with me. Your opinion is as valid as that of any of the deacons, the elders, or mine. I would rather you think and pray and struggle with your theology than just blindly agree with mine and agree without ever asking a question or expressing any disagreement, although it would be a lot easier at times if you just agreed with me. Not everyone wants that. A lot of people are much more comfortable with a church and a minister that will tell them exactly what to think and what to believe about every single topic, no matter how large or small, no matter how relevant or arcane.

To use the example of women in ministry again, this is where interpretation and authority become very important. If we were subject to denominational authority, they could tell us whether or not we can ordain woman. I can tell you most assuredly I would not like anyone outside of our church telling us what we can or cannot do. But it's also one of the reasons why matters of theology, belief, and practice can sometimes be sticky. There are any number of issues in our own time that are creating a great deal of contention in churches, because people disagree about how to interpret various passages of the Bible, and in our church context there isn't any person or group of persons who will establish an official list of beliefs. Now, having said that, we are sometimes called upon as a church to make a decision about what we will or will not practice, such as when this church some years ago discussed, debated, and then voted to ordain women, but no one was required to agree, disagree, believe, or disbelieve in the practice.

This is why church life can sometimes be very complicated.

3. *Application.*

When I was a member of another denomination, early in my time in that denomination I attended their annual meeting, which was very large and very contentious, as they were in the midst of a great battle over the Bible and what they believed it to say. I remember standing in the back of a very large convention hall in Dallas, Texas as we prepared to vote on an issue, and people had managed to get extra ballots and were passing them out to people, enabling them to vote with multiple ballots, when each person was supposed to cast only a single vote. They did not seem to notice the irony of "defending" the Bible while going against its principles of honesty and integrity at the same time.

Here is the reality – we can't simply talk about the Bible, we are called to apply the Bible; that is, we are called to live its message. We can't just talk about faith, hope, and love; we must live faith, hope, and love. We can't just talk about loving God with our heart, mind, and soul; we must actually love God with our heart, mind, and soul. We can't just talk about loving our neighbor; we must actually love our neighbor.

The writer of Hebrews tells us that the Bible is *alive and active*. *Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.* The Bible is an incredibly powerful book, because it is more than a book. The Bible does indeed contain the Word of God and the power of that Word changes lives. One of the most powerful examples of which I am familiar was in hearing a young man speak some years ago. He was from a small village in Asia, and one day a few people came to his village to distribute Bibles. The elders of the village did not want the Bibles to be distributed so they seized all the copies in order to burn them. The Bibles were thrown onto a bonfire, but as paper will do when it is thick, the pages did not immediately burn all the way through. One page of the gospel of John blew away in the breeze and the young man happened upon it. Reading that one page of Scripture, he was converted and immediately set about evangelizing other members of his village. Again, the village elders were not pleased and threatened him and even beat him. Undeterred, the young man continued, helping to bring a number of the members of his village to Christ before needing to flee because of threats against his life. Over time, the young man was responsible for bringing large numbers of people to Christ, all because one page of John's gospel blew out of a bonfire and ended up in his hands. That is a testimony to the power of the Bible! The Bible is indeed *alive and active*. It is also a great gift that we are able to read it in our own language, as some people gave their lives in

order for us to have that ability.

Sola Scriptura – Scripture Alone. That is the great rallying cry of the Reformation, and may it be ours as well.