

SCRIPTURE ALONE

2 Timothy 3:14-4:4

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 24, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Authority. Who gets to tell us what to do? Who gets to tell us what to believe? Who gets to tell us what is true? And do we really want someone to exercise authority over us. From the moment the serpent whispered to Eve, “Did God really say ...?” (Gen. 3:1), this has been a problem for us. Since that day, the human race has always had a problem with authority.

Now, I would suggest to you—and Scripture certainly affirms this—that authority is a good thing (Rom. 13:1). Now that doesn’t mean we necessarily appreciate the value of authority, does it? And it certainly doesn’t mean authority is always used correctly. People are often hurt by those in authority. Nothing inspires us to fight for freedom like the abuse of authority. We get worked up when we see someone victimized by someone in authority. And that should bother us. The term “righteous indignation” applies there.

But then we get really worked up when someone tells us we can’t do something we think we should be able to do, even if they might actually be right. Just take temper tantrums for example. And it’s not just toddlers who throw tantrums. We adults have our own versions of tantrums too, which may or may not actually appear more dignified. We don’t grow out of our problem with authority. We still feel that tension between our shoulder blades when someone tells us what we can or cannot do.

So, yes, authority can be abused, but that doesn’t mean authority is bad. Like so many other evils, it’s not the thing itself that is evil, it’s the abuse of the thing that is evil. Authority is good. It is a gift from God. And when this gift is used correctly it results in safety, peace, justice, good order, and all sorts of other good things.

Five-hundred years ago, the Lutheran Reformation dealt with the issue of authority, specifically in the area of theology. Who gets to tell us what is right and wrong? Who gets to tell us what to believe? Who gets to tell us what is true?

So in this third part of our “Doctrines of the Reformation” series, we are considering the phrase, “Scripture Alone.”

The phrases “Grace Alone” and “Faith Alone”—which we considered the last two Sundays—along with the phrase “Scripture Alone” rightly summarize the doctrinal emphases of the Lutheran Reformation. But you might be surprised to learn that in all of our Lutheran Confessions, there is not a single article on Scripture. When the reformers sat down to put on paper what they believed, it never crossed their minds that they should include a statement on the truthfulness and authority of Scripture. They included articles on God, original sin, justification, the Church, the Sacraments, the return of Jesus Christ, and all sorts of other things, but not Scripture. Now, in all these other articles, they used Scripture as their basis for proving these doctrines, and they often made passing comments regarding the authority of Scripture. But there isn’t an article that deals specifically with Scripture. Now, if they could have looked a few hundred years into the future, I think they would have realized the need for it.

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But at that time, the authority of Scripture was a given. The issue wasn't whether or not Scripture is true and authoritative. Both the Lutherans and the Roman Catholics agreed on that. The issue was whether or not Scripture was the *highest* authority. The issue was whether or not Scripture is the *only* authority in the areas of faith, doctrine, and life. The Lutherans said, "Yes," and the Roman Catholics said, "No." The Roman Catholic teaching was, and still is, that their church is the only divinely instituted church body on earth, and, therefore, is the authoritative interpreter of Scripture. That means, by virtue of their being instituted by God, the pope and church councils have authority to declare on God's behalf what is true.

So when the Reformers saw the Roman Catholic Church contradicting Scripture, they cried, "Foul." And instead of writing articles about Scripture, they wrote about the abuse of church authority, because that's where the problem was. The heart of the issue, though, was the authority of Scripture. So the biblical principle recovered during the Reformation is the idea of "Scripture Alone."

And this continues to be an issue for us. Our problem with authority has not gone away. The serpent's question, "Did God really say ...," has continued to echo for thousands of years.

So instead of using the anniversary of the Reformation as an opportunity to bash Catholics, we should take a hard look at ourselves and consider whether or not we are submitting to the authority of Scripture in every area of faith, doctrine, and life.

The Scripture passage I have chosen to teach the doctrine of "Scripture Alone" comes from *Paul's Second Letter to Timothy*, chapter 3, verse 14, through chapter 4, verse 4. It is on page 843 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Scripture reading. From 2 Timothy 3, we begin reading at verse 14. And we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

^{4:1} I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

Pay attention to what God's Word has to say about itself: "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (3:16). That's the basic idea when it comes to the issue of authority. Who gets to tell us what to do? Who gets to tell us what to believe? Who gets to tell us what is true? God does. And this is self-evident. God is the only person with ultimate authority.

We have many different limited authorities. If you are a child or youth, your parents have the responsibility and authority to tell you how it is in your home. If you are an employee, your boss has the responsibility and authority to tell you how it is at work. They have that authority. And there are several other authorities, including government or other institutions you may belong to. And you may not always like it, but they have the responsibility and authority to tell you how it is.

But all those authorities are limited. There is only one ultimate authority, and that is God. This is self-evident.

But the practical question is, *How do we know God's will?* Does God communicate himself to us? And, if he does, how does he do it? The answer, according to Scripture, is, *through Scripture*. The apostle Paul says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God." God is the source of the words written on these pages. They are God's words. Yes, the words were written down by men, and we can see their personalities and different nuances in how they wrote, but the whole process was the work of the Holy Spirit who moved those men to write the very words of God (2 Peter 1:21). And since they are the very words of God, they carry the full weight of his authority.

It's like a note you leave for your children that says, "Before you watch TV, you have to clean your room." The words carry the full weight of your authority. They can't just blow it off and then say, "Oh, you didn't tell me to clean my room; your note told me to do it. That's not the same thing." Oh, yes it is. That excuse won't fly. Your words carry the full weight of your authority. And the same thing is true with God and his Word. The Scriptures carry the full weight of God's authority. This is how we know God. This is how he has revealed himself to us. This is how he tells us what is right and what is wrong. This is how he tells us what to believe. This is how he tells us what is true. God's Word is the ultimate authority.

Now, just like any other authority, when we run up against things we don't like, we have a problem. The most common response when we encounter something in Scripture we disagree with is to just blow it off. This is easy to do in a pluralistic society where, legally, you can believe whatever you want. If you have a problem with the rules of your house, your parents are right there to put you back in line. If you have a problem with the posted speed limit on the interstate, there's a trooper sitting on the other side of the overpass. But if you have a problem with the commandment, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Ex. 20:8), the harshest part of your judgment will be delayed until after your death. You don't have to face the consequences yet. That makes the authority of Scripture easy to ignore, at least for now.

It's incredibly ironic, then, that the highest authority in all the universe receives the least amount of respect. And I'm not talking about "those people out there." I'm talking about "us people in here." When we come across something in Scripture that we either dislike or disagree with, and Satan whispers in our ear, "Did God really say ...," we think to ourselves, *Of course not, because I don't think God would really do that, or, I just wouldn't like a God who would say something like that.*

We naturally have a high view of our own opinions. This is self-evident, because, otherwise, we wouldn't hold those opinions. So whenever we encounter someone who disagrees with us, our default setting is to assume they are wrong. It takes a great deal of humility to honestly consider a differing opinion. We naturally think we are right about everything. And since we

believe that God is good, we assume he must agree with us. So when we encounter a god who disagrees with us, we naturally assume, *This must not actually be the real God. If he were, he would agree with me, because I'm right.*

So we easily dismiss any statements from God that don't fit what we already believe. The result, then, is that we create our own personal god in our own image. And we become our own little popes, who probably aren't any better than Leo X.

So when we have the freedom to go to any church we want, the temptation is to pick the one that agrees with our own personal wishes, rather than one that will unashamedly teach the truth of Scripture.

Now, I realize this is a prime example of preaching to the choir, because you're all here today instead of the "Church of Happy Feelings." But for at least some of us, the time will come in our lives when we have to pick a new church. Maybe you move to another city. Or maybe, God forbid, this church ceases to confess Scripture as the highest authority, in which case, you all should leave. Or maybe this very sermon is beginning to tempt you to go somewhere more comfortable. Will you pick a church that makes you feel good? Or will you pick one that calls you out of sin and unbelief, into the true faith expressed in Scripture. More often than not, I'm afraid, the wrong choice is made.

The Apostle Paul prophesied of this problem.

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. (4:3-4)

Paul's words certainly sound prophetic for our day. Whatever you want to believe, you can find a church to teach you that. And if you can't find a church that says what you want, you can start your own. People do it all the time. It's much easier to take your ball and go home than to play according to the rules God has prescribed.

Throughout our lives as Christians, we are bound to come across many things in God's Word that we just don't want to submit to. When you read your Bibles, and when you listen to biblical sermons, there will be times when you read or hear something and think to yourself, *That can't actually be true. I don't think God would say something like that. I don't want to believe that.* This is bound to happen again and again and again, simply because, even as Christians, we live with a sinful and rebellious nature. Do you realize, the fallen human condition is naturally opposed to everything God says? So we cannot and must not gauge truth by what we feel to be true. "Trust your feelings, Luke," may be true in Star Wars, but not in real life, because your feelings gave into the Dark Side long before you were even born. A long time ago in a garden far, far away, our first parents chose to believe a lie. They turned all of us to the Dark Side. And this, of course, is one of those things God teaches that we don't want to believe.

Every Christian must struggle, at many times and throughout our entire lives, with truth. When you encounter something you don't want to believe, the easy thing to do is ignore it. The difficult thing is to wrestle. If you have never experienced the struggle of wrestling with Scripture and fighting with God—if God has never dragged you, kicking and screaming, toward a conclusion you didn't want to reach, then there is probably something wrong. Either you're not actually listening to God's Word or your pastor might not be doing his job.

It's tempting sometimes for pastors to look the other way, because some conversations are very difficult, and, many times, people don't listen anyways.

Several years ago I confronted a person regarding a sin against the Sixth Commandment. That's the adultery one. I said, "You should not move in together, and you should not have a sexual relationship with anyone you are not married to." The response was, "I'll pray about it." I said, "That's not necessary." On an issue where God has already clearly spoken (Ex. 20:14; Deut. 5:18; Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 6:9, 18; 1 Cor. 10:8; Gal. 5:19; Eph. 5:3-5; Col. 3:5; 1 Thess. 4:3; Rev. 21:8), what other answer do you expect? I guess the idea is that if you pray about it, and then you feel okay about it, then it must be okay with God. But that's not a biblical approach to theology. That's the "Trust Your Feelings" method of theology. That's the "I Get to Be My Own Pope" approach to the Scriptures.

If we never go through the struggle of being corrected by the Scriptures, there's probably something wrong.

So here's your homework for the next year. Read through the entire Bible, and just try to be corrected as many times as possible. It might have to do with doctrine, or it may have to do with how you live your life. And this isn't just something for new Christians. Every Christian should expect to be corrected often from the Word of God, including those of us who went to seminary.

Maybe you don't believe what God has to say about how he created the world or how he created male and female. Maybe you don't believe the doctrines of original sin or predestination or the Sacraments or Christ's Return for Judgment.

Maybe you think pornography is okay because it's not hurting anyone. Maybe you think gossip is okay because you're just letting people know how to pray for a certain person. Maybe you think it's okay to take the summer off from church because you go to the lake. By the way, I would be happy to help you find a good church near your lake home. Maybe you think it's okay to lie—just a little bit—on your tax returns because the government is really stealing from you. Or maybe you just think you're better than all those people who commit the sins I just named. God's Word condemns pride more than anything.

When we read the Scriptures, we should expect to be corrected. If we have not yet died and gone to heaven, we are still in need of correction. That's one of the things the Bible does. What does Paul say? "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." This is for every single one of us. God's Word has the authority to correct us. And this is good.

If God's Word doesn't have the authority to correct us, then it also doesn't have the authority to forgive our sins. And that's what this is really all about. Paul also says these Scriptures "are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:15).

I said some harsh things just now. Perhaps you feel uncomfortable, or even angry. If you are upset with me, all I ask is that you search the Scriptures to see if I have misrepresented them. If I have, then you need to correct me. But if I have not—if you have sinned against God in some way—then you need to confess that sin and receive Christ's forgiveness.

I gave you examples of real sins because Jesus died for real sins. He did not bear your hypothetical sins in his body. He bore your actual sins in his body. He bore your adultery, your

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pornography, your gossip, your laziness, your stealing, your pride, and everything else you can think of in his body. This is what the Scriptures declare.

If God's Word has authority to condemn your sin, then it also has authority to forgive your sin. Like a note left on the counter that says, "I forgive you," the words on these pages proclaim to you the full forgiveness of all your sins.

For the past month we've been singing this hymn, "By Grace I Am an Heir of Heaven." It teaches the doctrines of "Grace Alone" and "Faith Alone." And it also teaches us how we know these doctrines are true: "Scripture Alone." Listen to this:

By grace I am an heir of heaven:
Why doubt this, O my trembling heart?
If what the Scriptures promise clearly
Is true and firm in ev'ry part,
This also must be truth divine:
By grace a crown of life is thine.

Or again,

What all the men of God have written.
What God's own words so plainly show,
What faith alone can rest upon
Is grace, in Christ, God's only Son.

How do you know your sins are forgiven? How do you know you have peace with God? It's because the God who took on human flesh, who suffered a brutal death, and who rose again from the dead, said these are his words. These are the words that explain what all that suffering was about. It was for your salvation. It was for the forgiveness of your sins. If you ever think your sin is too great, let God's Word correct you. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death" (8:1-2). By the authority of God's Word, I declare to you the full forgiveness of all your sins. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.