

"CALVIN: SCRIPTURE ALONE"

II Timothy 3:16-17

Keith Miller and Bruce Larson write in their book, *Edge of Adventure*, this illustration. "The Bible can change not only a life but an entire lifestyle. Most of us have heard the story of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, but few of us have heard how the Bible played a very vital part in that historical event. The *Bounty* was a British ship which set sail from England in 1787, bound for the South Seas. The idea was that those on board would spend some time among the islands, transplanting fruit-bearing and food-bearing trees, and doing other things to make some of the islands more habitable. After ten months of voyage, the *Bounty* arrived safely at its destination, and for six months the officers and the crew gave themselves to the duties placed upon them by their government.

When the special task was completed, however, and the order came to embark again, the sailors rebelled. They had formed strong attachments for the native girls, and the climate and the ease of the South sea island life was

much to their liking. The result was mutiny on the *Bounty*, and the sailors placed Captain Bligh, in an almost miraculous fashion, survived the ordeal, were rescued, and eventually arrived home in London to tell his story. An expedition was launched to punish the mutineers, and in due time fourteen of them was captured and paid the penalty under British law.

But nine of the men had gone to another distant island. There they formed a colony. Perhaps there has never been a more degraded and debauched social life than that of that colony. They learned to distill whiskey from a native plant, and the whiskey, as usual, along with other habits, led to their ruin. Disease and murder took the lives of all the native men and all but one of the white men named Alexander Smith. He found himself the only man on an island, surrounded by a crowd of women and half-breed children. Alexander Smith found a Bible among the possessions of a dead sailor. The Book was new to him. He had never read it before. He sat down and read it through. He believed it and he began to

appropriate it. He wanted others to share in the benefits of this book, so he taught classes to the women and the children, as he read to them and taught them the Scriptures.

It was twenty years before a ship ever found that island, and when it did, a miniature Utopia was discovered. The people were living in decency, prosperity, harmony, and peace. There was nothing of crime, disease, immorality, insanity, or illiteracy. How was it accomplished? In the reading, the believing, and the appropriating of the truth of God!”

Well, this morning we continue with our series on John Calvin, that great church reformer of the 16th century. Over the past few Sundays we have looked at Calvin’s life, his view of God, and three Reformation mottos that lead and guided him. And it was to Scripture that Calvin went to and engaged in order to be faithful to the God of creation.

At the time of the 16th century almost everyone in Europe, whether Protestant or Catholic, believed the Scriptures to be

inspired by God and authoritative. And so our passage from II Timothy 3:16 where we read that, “all scripture is inspired by God” rung true for Calvin and countless others. But those leading the Reformation took it further and argued that **the Scriptures where not only authoritative but that the Scriptures were the preeminent authority in the church concerning all matters of faith and practice.** And here was another difference- the Catholic Church at that time believed that Scripture and church tradition were equal authorities, while the Reformers held up the principle of “**Scripture alone.**” Let’s look at key parts that go into this principle.

First, **Calvin, Scripture and the Printing Press.** Remember in my first sermon in this series I mentioned that Calvin’s first appointment in Geneva was that of a Bible teacher, and this is an important point to remember. Now in our society today, being a teacher is not seen as a power position but in Geneva at the time of Calvin it was different.

You see, Geneva was a city that had made a conscious decision to reform itself, and this decision to reform was based according to Scripture.

And so in Geneva, Calvin was seen as the chief interpreter of scripture which gave spiritual meaning and understanding to the whole of the society of Geneva- and this gave him power. So in Geneva when Calvin preached, taught, or lectured on the Scriptures, just like the old commercial for the investment firm E. F. Hutton that is now a part of Citigroup, when Calvin spoke, people listened. But they did more than listen, they responded. And besides all of this, his weekly lectures were transcribed and published. So what did this mean? Calvin's teachings were making their way all across Europe and influencing other Reformers in a very significant way. So this was helping to fuel the fires of reform everywhere.

For centuries, the ordinary laypeople had no access to the Scriptures as we have them today. Manuscripts of Scripture were scarce and if you were wealthy and fortunate enough to have a copy it was painstakingly

written by hand. And there were a few other things- ordinary people back then could not read or write, they spoke certain dialects of French, German, Italian all the while the scriptures available were written in Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic or Latin- so only the most educated could read the Scriptures.

But this all began to change in 1439 with the invention of the Printing Press by a German silversmith by the name of Johannes Gutenberg. This was like the invention of the Internet in our day and age. Now books could be mass-produced at tremendously lower costs and in the languages of the people. This only made Calvin's works that much more available and wide-spread, not to mention the distribution of the Bible. It has been said that without the printing press there would have been no Reformation (*John Calvin, Reformer for the 21st Century*, William Stacy Johnson, p. 33) So now the Bible belonged to all and trying to interpret its meaning was an ongoing work of both the clergy and the laity alike. It was Luther who even stated, "a simple lay man armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a

council without it." (*Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, Roland Bainton, p. 117)

Second, **Biblical Authority**. Biblical authority was not a question in the 16th century, unlike today. **The issue was if the Bible was to have preeminent authority over the traditions of the church.** There was no question where authority lied for Calvin and the other Reformers for they saw the Bible have authority over the church and not the church having authority over the Bible. Now I have to say that Calvin's view of Scripture was complex. He argued that the Bible is nothing more than a dead letter to us apart from the work of the Spirit. And so it is the Spirit that brings the Word alive. For Calvin, the Word and Spirit together exercise authority in the church.

Calvin's view of biblical authority was tied to the relationship of the Old Testament to the New Testament and the unity between the two was crucial for him. He did not hold to a simplistic view that the Old Testament offered

a covenant of works, and the New Testament offered a covenant of grace. He believed God's mercy and grace were alive and visible in both Testaments. Calvin approached Scripture expecting to encounter a divine message from God embodied in human words. "While it is true that Calvin occasionally spoke as though God dictated the very words of Scripture to the biblical authors, this strictly metaphorical way of speaking did not mean that Calvin accepted the so-called verbal inerrancy of the Bible. In his commentaries, Calvin often mentioned the personalities, perspectives, and historical and cultural limitations of the biblical writers. He knew that there were multiple ways of dating various biblical writings. He also knew that the Bible contains occasional historical mistakes, and he had no trouble correcting biblical authors when they were in error." (Johnson, p. 35) I mean, American and British theologians, along with others have, for years, debated whether or not the Scriptures can contain any errors in such things as historical or scientific data.

But we have to emphasize the word CAN, since it is fact that the manuscripts that have been handed down to us DO contain these problems.

What I want to say is it is amazing that there are so few problems.

Calvin viewed Scripture as a divine message cloaked in human words.

So then how can one make a distinction between the Word of God in the Bible and human words? Calvin's response was that **Scripture is self-**

authenticating. What this means is that Scripture does not have to

depend on the church or any other human agencies for its authority and

power. It is Scripture that tells us who God is and so God is the only proper

witness to God. It is Scripture where God reveals Himself- God's character,

God's desires for humanity, God's moral standards, God's ethical standards,

not to mention God's plan for the salvation of humankind. And all of this is

not left to any kind of guessing, but rather it depends on the self-verifying

work of Almighty God. (Johnson, p. 36)

Third, **Scripture and Other Sources of Knowledge**. While it is true Calvin's motto was "Sola Scriptura" or "Scripture alone" there were other places where truth and meaning were found, and even from non-biblical sources. Calvin's *Institutes* were one of those sources and he also referred to others like classical Greek and Roman philosophers. So that this doesn't sound heretical, let me further explain how Calvin broke down **the knowledge of God**. He did so in **two categories: knowledge of God the Creator and knowledge of God the Redeemer**. Calvin believed that knowledge of God the Creator was something that everyone could relate to, both believer and non-believer. It is something universal that everyone could recognize even if our sinfulness blurs this knowledge. But the knowledge of God the Redeemer, the knowledge of God as the one who saves us from our sins is something that only Scripture reveals through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Calvin believed that a knowledge of God as Creator was important but unless we know God as Redeemer the other

knowledge alone is useless. And it was only a scriptural knowledge of God as Redeemer that would have the ability and power to lead us to salvation and would minister to our needs.

This brings me to my final point, **Always Reforming**. To try and get our heads around life in the 16th century might be difficult for us today. But Calvin was really pressing the limits by putting forth new interpretations of Scripture. It would have been seen as a **subversive act** that could have led to his arrest if not killed. And that is precisely why he was forced to spend his life in political exile. It has been said that to offer biblical interpretations that challenged the power of the church was, in effect, to lay an ax to the root of the whole of Western culture. (Johnson, p. 39) I mean think about it- back then the bishops of the church held tremendous power and if they and the people believed that when the Mass was celebrated it put the priest, bishop, pope right in touch with God, and any teaching questioning the clergy or challenging the theology of the Mass was nothing short of

revolutionary. It has to be remembered that while today, people say that religion is a private matter and where stating your religious beliefs might have no significant consequences, although I believe this is changing, such was not the case back in Calvin's day. As a matter of fact interpretation of the Bible had a public significance. Back then religion spoke to the political order of the day. That is why the monarchs worked hard to stifle new biblical views and why those, like Calvin, who balked at the power of the Catholic monarchs thought, why not seek reform and hold up the authority of the Bible rather than the church?

Let me just add that the reformers, even though holding to Scripture alone never held that the Bible was the only source when studying theology. For they too, like us, look to the natural sciences and did not push aside the learnings from practical human experiences. Calvin believed that the Scriptures were the "spectacles" or the corrective lens we use to understand the living God. And this book, God's Word, is to serve as a guide for us in

matters of Christian faith and how we live out our lives. And so that is why we must, we must continue to come back to the Scriptures, again and again and again; daily, constantly. Folks, this book is as relevant to us today as it was to Martin Luther King, Jr. when he was alive as it was to John Calvin back in the 16th century as it was to the early church fathers. The Scriptures have and are and will continue to speak for the Bible is not frozen in time; it is dynamic and changing, giving new life back in Calvin's day, today and tomorrow. "Always reforming...." Let me just say, that when Calvin read the Scriptures and interpreted them, all of Europe shook. Times haven't changed. Scripture Alone. Amen.

"CALVIN: SCRIPTURE ALONE"

II Timothy 3:16

Introduction: Keith Miller and Bruce Larson's book, *Edge of Adventure*
illustration

At the time of the 16th century almost everyone in Europe, whether Protestant or Catholic, believed the Scriptures to be _____ by God and _____

The Scriptures were the preeminent authority in the church concerning all matters of _____ and _____

First, **Calvin, Scripture and the _____**
Calvin- Bible teacher in Geneva

1439- Johannes Gutenberg invented...

Second, **Biblical _____**
The issue was if the Bible was to have preeminent _____ over the _____ of the church

How can one make a distinction between the Word of God in the Bible and human words? Calvin's response was that **Scripture is self-_____** - this means...

Third, **Scripture and other sources of _____**
Calvin broke down the knowledge of God into two categories:
Knowledge of God the _____

Knowledge of God the _____

Fourth, **Always _____**

The Reformers never held that the Bible was the only source when studying theology

Conclusion: When Calvin read the Scriptures and interpreted them. all of Europe shook. Times haven't changed.