

SOLAS:Vespers

Sola Scriptura

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Sermon: “Oracles”

Yuri Hooker

Romans 3:2--*...to begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.*

SOLA SCRIPTURA, By the Scripture Alone. If there were ever an outlandish concept in our day and age, it is this. Hasn't the Bible been proven to be hopelessly outdated, not to mention contradictory? Oh sure, it has some passages that are wonderfully inspiring, that express the loftiest ideals and aspirations of humanity,

that can take their place, once they are suitably stripped of any disquieting demands, on some dusty back shelf alongside the great writings of Plato and Aristotle, Confucius and the Buddha, Shakespeare and Tolstoy, the collected wisdom of the ages...

But *all* of the Bible?

Don't you know about the cruelty it contains? Are you seriously going to tell me that those are suitable texts to consult in our enlightened age? We don't do things like that anymore! Good riddance to bad rubbish!

And Scripture *alone*? What a ridiculous idea! What about Science?

What about Experience? What about plain old Common Sense?

If you will be patient, I will try to explain what Sola Scriptura is and why it is important. It is so important that, although I won't have the time to fully back up this assertion in this sermon, I would categorically state that it is nothing less than the key to all other concepts, the gateway to a coherent understanding of reality. In the end, you may disagree with my conclusions, but I hope that at the very least you will have been challenged to give the claims of the Bible further consideration, and if you already believe in the importance of Scripture, to find it even more compelling.

First, however, I am going to back up a little ways, to the beginning of our service, to the first strains of music which you heard tonight. Mendelssohn asks: "Is it true?" But what is the "it" in the question? Is it true *that*...that you are waiting, that you are interested...in me? Can it be that you feel what I feel? Is it foolish to hope that all *that* is true, and that I will have you, and you will have me, forever? This is more than the amorous enthusiasm of a love sick teenager. It is the expression of our universal, existential *longing*, a desire that has been planted within each of us to know, and to be known, to love

and to be loved, to understand and be understood, forever.

As Augustine prayed at the beginning of his *Confessions*: “...you have made us with yourself as our goal, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” God reveals himself to all of us through this restless longing, this gnawing desire which can find fulfilment in him alone.

The apostle Paul brought up this fact when speaking to groups of people who knew nothing of the Hebrew Scriptures. To them he asserted that “God did not leave himself without a witness” (Acts 14:17), but desires “that they should seek him, and perhaps feel their way

toward him and find him” because, as he says, God “is actually not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27).

Apart from this longing, God has revealed himself universally in the creation of the universe. Paul wrote to the Roman church that God has revealed himself “since the creation of the world in the things that have been made” (Rom 1:20) as the supreme, divine being, infinitely powerful. That highlights the other strand from the outset of our service, when the VOICES OF SOLAS sang the opening strains of Psalm 19: “The spacious heavens declare God’s glory everywhere, the skies proclaim his might...” That is, the *vastness* of the universe, and not only

that but its *orderliness*, suggests an unfathomably intelligent, personal, powerful Mind at work in the invention of material existence, a Mind that, like ours, infuses matter with meaning, that breathes life and hallows it as an exceedingly unlikely and precious outlier which exists as far as we can tell, only on our seemingly insignificant little planet.

“What can be known about God,” Paul wrote, referring to the fact that he both exists and is powerful, “is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.” This claim, however bold it may be, is supported by the fact that every society in history has been overwhelmingly convinced of God’s

existence. It is only in the last two centuries that the notion of a strictly material existence gained any traction. And even today, if the statistics are to be believed, it would seem that the rumours of God’s demise have been greatly exaggerated.

That said, it can’t be denied that in North America church attendance has been on the decline, and that the number of young people who deny any religious affiliation, despite an enduring belief in God’s existence, has risen dramatically over the past couple of decades.

We are more or less OK with this unshakeable sense that God exists, and we can even derive some comfort

from the assumption that he is powerful, as long as he doesn't appear to meddle greatly in our day-to-day affairs.

This finally brings us to the text I have chosen for this sermon, which is printed in your service booklet. It's from the 3rd chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. In the flow of the great argument of the letter it's almost a throwaway comment, but its marginal place in the book, its offhand, incidental reference to what he can assume is understood implicitly by his original audience underlines a great truth.

But before we get to that, I feel I should address an aspect of this text

that may make some of us squirm. Given the history of the past 2000 years, we can be forgiven for feeling uncomfortable hearing a Christian use a term like "the Jews", seeming to draw an "us and them" line of demarcation. "To begin with", he writes, "the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God." And he is in fact drawing a distinction. But before we jump to any conclusions, we must bear in mind the particular distinction he is making here. Given that he and many of his Roman readers were both Jewish and Christian, it is emphatically not a distinction between Jews and Christians. He is, rather, distinguishing between Jews and Gentiles. He may be

drawing a line, but he is on the other side of the line from his Gentile readers.

His interest is to make reference to a truth which Jews continue to own to this day: that, among other things, they are the initial and ongoing recipients and guardians of what is at least a historically significant body of literature. This was a fact that Paul himself was extremely proud of. He counted himself fortunate to be among their number, calling himself elsewhere a “Hebrew of Hebrews”.

There’s a hint of that in our text in the little phrase “to begin with”, and indeed later in the letter he enumerates other aspects of Jewish

history and theology in which he took pride, as many other Jews continue to do, and count as a primary source of identity.

Think about what it means to be entrusted with something. The thing itself must be something important, something of great value, something precious. We don’t *entrust* our trash to Winnipeg Water and Waste even though they take care of it, we dump it in a bin and leave it out on the curb.

We *entrust* things which we expect to continue to hold their value, things which are unique, often fragile, things which we expect to make a difference to our future well-being, indeed to the well-being of future

generations, as long as we make adequate provision for their protection and maintenance. We entrust our health to doctors, our children to teachers and guardians, our democracy and our economy to leaders in the community who try to convince us that they deserve our vote.

To be *entrusted* with something is to be given a gift, but a gift that comes with a responsibility.

Sometimes precious cargo is entrusted to unlikely heroes. Frodo the backwater bumpkin is made Ring-bearer. In a similar way, the treasure our text refers to is entrusted to a people, initially just to one man and

his family, someone whom God speaking through Moses refers to as a “wandering Aramean” who “went down to Egypt..and there became a nation...” (Deut 26) He goes on to remind us that while there this nation was “treated harshly,” “humiliated,” and “oppressed”. They were in fact enslaved for centuries.

It was to Abraham, that lonely wanderer, to his shy son, to his grasping grandson and his squabbling, murderous great-grandchildren and, centuries later, to his descendant Moses, a fugitive hiding out in the middle of nowhere, that God chose to honour by revealing himself more fully. God made himself *known*, not as

a remote and disinterested deity, nor as some mischievous sprite who takes pleasure in jerking our chain.

He supplemented our inchoate, universal longings by implicating himself with a particular people, at a particular time and place, with a particular man.

Why does he do this?

This is what he says to Abraham in their first recorded interaction: “I will bless you...so that you will be a blessing...and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12). This legacy was recorded by Moses, the disgraced son turned reluctant prophet and leader. Listen to the

VOICES OF SOLACE sing the words of Psalm 147 which expresses it this way:

INTERLUDE

“He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws.” They do not know his laws, no, but Paul tells us in our text that they were *entrusted* to the Jews, who were committed to the mandate given to Abraham, that is, that every nation—all people without distinction—might eventually benefit.

Psalm 147 uses the terms “laws” and “decrees”, but it also calls them God’s *word*. That is, God spoke, he used language, he inspired prophets

like Moses to convey his attributes more fully, to assert his kingship over creation, to remind his people of their history: what he had done and how prone they were to reject him, to sing both of his delight and his disappointment over them.

That is to say, when we read terms like “laws”, “decrees”, or “oracles” in the Bible, we must be careful not to let our preconceptions of what they imply to us in our day distort our understanding.

“Law,” for instance, primarily refers to God’s teaching, to a holistic understanding of what it means to live a good, balanced life, walking in God’s way. Here, the Hebrew word used is

mishpat, giving a further dimension: justice for the weak and oppressed.

In a similar way, when we read a word like *oracles*, our imagination might be seized with the idea of a blind prophetess in a remote cave, burning incense and possessed by a spirit or demon who forces her to babble incomprehensible syllables that are opportunistically recorded by self-serving minders.

But no, to Paul “oracles” means particular revelation, verbal communication from God himself that is both meaningful and memorable. Indeed the books that make up the entire canon of Scripture were from earliest times preserved precisely

because they were believed to be communiques which God *entrusted* to his people through his designates, the prophets.

The prototype was Moses, who wrote most of the first five books of the Bible and who not only promised that God would raise up more prophets after he was gone, but also cautioned the people against just taking their word for it.

So the great tradition of prophets arose in Israel through whom God revealed himself ever more fully over many centuries. They were princes and peasants, poets and priests, they were scholars and slaves, soldiers and shepherds. Some were

eminent, others were exiles. Their number eventually grew to include even fishermen, a physician, and even a Pharisee.

A few enjoyed political favour, but most didn't. God's instructions are more often than not inconvenient and unwelcome. But any words which were ultimately understood to be revelations from God himself were deemed too important to be lost to future generations and so were preserved with remarkable care for thousands of years. Paul, once upon a time a proud and respected member of the religious establishment, tells us that the Jews were first and foremost entrusted with these words, these

periodic oracles of God. They copied them diligently, and guarded them with their very lives.

Yet something happened. The prophetic voice went silent. For 400 years no new revelation was given. Like their 400 years of slavery, it was 400 years of struggle. It was 400 years of fending off invaders, 400 years of insularity and infighting, 400 years of longing.

Finally, a new prophet arose, one who was to fulfil with finality the prediction made by Moses, one in whose mouth would be the very words of God. Indeed, he was God himself. God, who had implicated himself in human history way back in the days of

Abraham, took flesh, he became a man, the ultimate revelation, the ultimate communication, the ultimate embodiment of God's attributes. Indeed, the New Testament book of Hebrews calls Jesus the "radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb 1). He is, Paul says, "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1).

God once again spoke with his people, God again spoke *through* his people, and these new *oracles* were primarily entrusted to the Jews whom Jesus had designated as his emissaries, that is, his apostles. And again, these words, words inspired, "breathed-out" by God himself, have been lovingly preserved and transmitted

along with the earlier oracles, for the last two thousand years.

Yet again, these words have often not been welcome. They have often made life difficult. We have often struggled to understand what they mean, and what they mean to us. Over many centuries the Word of God was obscured by a blind adherence to a translation that had long since outlived its usefulness, and it was gradually pushed aside to make room for practices and prejudices reflecting the perceived needs of various times and places. The authority of the Word of God was effectively replaced by the authority of the word of powerful men.

There's a phrase that we musicians sometimes use when rehearsing a piece with which we are overly familiar. Typically the sheet music of such works becomes encrusted with a plethora of pencilled additions made by generations of musicians, sometimes ourselves, markings that are well-intentioned, seeking to help us understand and play the music better in different contexts. Then along comes someone, perhaps a conductor, who has gained deep insight into the score through long hours of study, who helps us understand some of the more perplexing indications of the composer. That person will say to us,

“Why don’t you just do what the composer is asking of you? It’s all there on the page...” Whereupon we will call out to our colleagues: “BACK TO THE INK!” Then we all take out our big erasers...

“Back to the ink” was the cry of the Reformers when new translations of the Bible were made that showed where the old ones had gotten it wrong. “Back to the ink” was their rallying cry as they threw themselves into the work of reviving and learning the forgotten languages in which the original oracles had been written: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. “Back to the ink” should be the daily cry of those of us who are familiar with the Bible,

who believe in the Bible, but wrestle with competing inner and external voices, and with the trials and temptations of life. “Back to the ink” is an invitation to those of you who do not yet know the Bible well to discover for yourself the very words of God, or to put it in musical terms, to discover the intentions of the Composer of the Cosmic Symphony for the very first time.

“Back to the ink” is a phrase inspired by an earlier phrase, *Sola Scriptura*, Scripture Alone, or more literally, Alone What-Is-Written, that is, inscribed. *Sola Scriptura* contends that the collection of books, or divine communiques, known as the Bible, is

unique in the history of the world. *It is the only text of its kind.* That is of course putting it rather bluntly, and the suggestion will likely cause some to bristle. And we don't have time for me to fully back up such an assertion thoroughly.

However, very briefly, I will once again lay out what makes the Bible unique, leaving aside for the moment the question of its divine authorship.

The Bible is a book well over 1000 years in the making, from the moment Moses put pen to papyrus to the "amen" inked by John the exiled visionary at the end of the book of Revelation. It is a book written by many people from many walks of life,

who were all self-consciously building on the writings of their forebears, writings which had themselves been painstakingly transcribed over many generations. It is a compilation not only of philosophy, or of rules, it is also an anthology bursting with song and history, and letters from distant friends, trustworthy and dear. The authors were utterly convinced that the words they were writing were God's words for his people, yet they were equally aware that they were not merely taking dictation. Rather, they self-consciously displayed all their learning, all their literary skill, drawing on their own life of joys, frustrations and sorrows to inform their writing.

They were not, in other words, automatons. The general conviction that these writings were inspired by God and worthy of preservation occurred very early in their existence, as a detailed study of the self-referential nature of the text itself makes clear. That is, later texts repeatedly make reference to earlier texts as “Scripture”, as the Word of God, sometimes before very much time had passed. All this makes the Bible a book unlike any other.

But is the Bible *actually* God’s oracle, God’s word to us? Clearly, countless people over countless generations in countless places have believed so. But of course, that

consideration isn’t conclusive on its own. Ultimately it is a question of faith, that is, trust: trust that God is of immense power and intelligence and created the universe; trust that he indicates his desire to be known by implanting in each of us a longing for him; trust that he revealed himself with particularity in time and space, *to* a person and *as* a person, to a people, and *for all people*.

I haven’t spent too much time today getting into the nitty gritty details regarding the reliability of the Bible. That is not because I feel they are unimportant. *I* had to consider them very carefully myself to arrive at the firm conviction that the Bible is

exactly what it claims to be. However, more than any apologetic, the more I study the text itself, prayerfully and thoughtfully, the more I infuse my life with it, the more I endeavour to use it as my primary lens on reality—for that, in a nutshell, is what Sola Scriptura means—the more the text itself convinces me.

Charles Spurgeon, one of the great preachers of all time, had this to say on the subject:

There seems to me to have been twice as much done in some ages in defending the Bible as in expounding it, but...we may leave it pretty much to defend itself. I do not know whether you see that lion—it is very distinctly

before my eyes; a number of persons advance to attack him, while a host of us would defend [him] ... Pardon me if I offer a quiet suggestion. Open the door and let the lion out; he will take care of himself.

That is my challenge to you. Let the lion out of the cage. And see what happens...