

A Theology of Opportunity: *Sola Scriptura* and the Great Commission

by John M. Frame

Part 1 of 3: Principle, Change, and *Sola Scriptura*

Introduction

I want to talk to you in these three sessions about the *theology* of opportunity. We have heard about many areas of present-day culture which present opportunities for Gospel witness. If you are like me, you want to reach out and grasp these opportunities. But how should we do this? Does the Bible have anything to say about the business of grasping opportunities?

As Reformed Christians, that should be our first question: what does the Bible say? For us, God must have the first and last word in our decisions, including the decision to grasp an opportunity. Our opportunity now as then is to reach people and their culture for Jesus Christ. But we know that attempts to reach the culture have historically resulted in compromise of biblical teaching. In the second century, Justin Martyr, a courageous, zealous, and intelligent Christian, tried to reach the Jews and the Greek philosophers of his day. But in doing so, he reinterpreted the Bible to make it teach Greek philosophy, distorting among other things the biblical doctrines of the Trinity and of creation. In the thirteenth century, again from an evangelistic motive, Thomas Aquinas bent the scriptural teachings to fit the philosophy of Aristotle. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher, trying to reach the intellectual despisers of Christianity, rejected biblical authority entirely and replaced it with the authority of human subjectivity. Charles Finney, trying to reach the lost,

advocated an Arminian, almost Pelagian, version of human free-will. And on it goes. Evangelism is a central biblical idea, but it seems so dangerous.

One of the dangers is a reaction on the other side. When Reformed people have taken note of the compromises made by prominent evangelists, they have sometimes become suspicious of evangelism itself. We all know that there are Bible-believing Presbyterian churches that are very critical of Arminian evangelism, but have found with which nothing to replace it. They say much about what biblical evangelism is not, but they scarcely practice evangelism at all. Since the eighteenth century, American Presbyterians have fought many battles over “revivalism” and “new measures,” the results being that those Presbyterians who have remained doctrinally Reformed have often avoided any organized, disciplined, concerted emphasis upon evangelism in their churches. This is a very serious problem; in essence it amounts to a repudiation of our Lord’s Great Commission.

What I’ve said about evangelism is true to some extent of all Christian interactions with culture: social action, involvement with the arts, conversations with scientists and philosophers. On the one hand there is the tendency to compromise, on the other the tendency to withdraw into our own subculture, forsaking both the Cultural Mandate and the Great Commission.

But it’s not enough to say that there must be a happy medium here. We don’t get any nearer our goal by mixing a little compromise with a little withdrawal. Neither alternative is pleasing to God, and no combination of them can please him either.

If the biblical picture of the church tells us anything at all, it is that there has got to be a way for us to reach our culture dynamically, powerfully, not by compromising our doctrine, but by

being especially consistent with it; not playing it down, but pressing it hard; not holding it only theoretically, but living it out in the fullest way possible. That is God's way.

In Scripture and history, the church has had the strongest, most lasting influence on society not when it has accommodated itself to the world, but when it has been most true to its own confession against overwhelming odds. Consider Noah and Abraham, believing God's promises against all the apparent evidence to the contrary. Consider Moses, standing boldly before Pharaoh to proclaim God's word, demonstrating God's power against the most powerful totalitarian dictator of the time. Consider Elijah, challenging King Ahab and the 850 prophets of Baal and Asherah. Consider Peter, preaching to the murderers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost; Paul, taking the gospel through the world; the Christian martyrs of the first centuries; Athanasius of Alexandria, standing against the world for the doctrine of the Trinity; Luther and Calvin, protesting that salvation is entirely by God's grace without human works; the Puritans, seeking to bring all of human life and society under the rule of God's word.

All of these walked in the steps of Jesus, who set his face like a flint to go to Jerusalem, to lay down his life in obedience to his Father and in submission to scriptural prophecy. No accommodation there; no compromise. But what cultural power! By his obedience to his Father's word, Jesus creates nothing less than a new heaven and a new earth, wherein dwells righteousness. By his sacrifice of himself to the Father's will, he fulfills the cultural mandate, filling and conquering the earth. By his sacrifice, he empowers the fulfillment of the Great Commission, spreading his grace to every corner of the earth.

In Scripture, then, and in history, we see that we are not forced into the dilemma of compromise on the one hand and withdrawal on the other. There is a third way, to borrow a phrase,

that is attended by God's blessing and by great spiritual power. But how can we define that third way? I have already given you the answer in essence: we must become *more* scriptural.

A Testimony

Let me pause here to make a few personal remarks, a kind of testimony, for I want to be honest with you about where I am coming from. There are, unfortunately, all sorts of parties in the church, and anyone who speaks on this kind of issue may rightly be suspected of making a partisan pitch. I try to avoid fitting neatly into clubs or cliques within the church, bearing in mind the apostle Paul's condemnations of partisanship in 1 Corinthians 1–4. And to tell you the truth, I haven't been in the PCA long enough to know much about its partisan structure, though perhaps I already know more about it than I really want to. But if, after hearing me out, you want to pin some kind of label on me, that is your decision. I just want to be up front with you, so that if you do pin a label on me you can do so on the basis of some informed thought.

First, let me say that, theologically speaking, I don't have a liberal bone in my body. In college I read J. Gresham Machen's great book, *Christianity and Liberalism*, and saw liberalism up close and at its worst in the university and in the church. That was my vaccination; since my sophomore year in college, I have never since had the slightest temptation to be a liberal. The whole idea of adjusting or rewriting the gospel to make it acceptable to modern man is an idea which I view with supreme contempt. I have always insisted that Christianity is entirely pointless unless it is a revelation from the true God. And if God has revealed it, then we are emphatically not free to pick and choose, or to make adjustments to suit our tastes.

Equally, I despise the idea, not uncommon in evangelical circles, that Christians have to follow all the intellectual, ethical, and political fashions: egalitarianism, pluralism, liberal divorce, abortion, gay rights, evolution, secular psychology, or whatever.

You know, we have it so easy in this country. There is so little persecution, really, compared with other historical and geographical settings. Cannot we even muster the small amount of courage it takes to oppose cultural fashions from time to time, when these are clearly contrary to the Word of God? God asks so little of us; the weakness of the church is shown in that it is so often unwilling to do even that little bit. To be a bit unpopular, a bit unfashionable . . .

Well, to continue my testimony, I also read Cornelius Van Til in college and studied with him at Westminster Seminary. I can say that I am to this day a Van Til disciple, but not a slavish one. Over the years, my closest friends have been in those groups that are usually seen as the most highly principled: Van Tillians, Macheinites (I was in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church for twenty-two years, and I am still a Machenite), theonomists (I wouldn't call myself a theonomist, but some of my best friends are theonomists), neo-Puritans, old schoolers, the "truly reformed" or "T.R.'s" as we say in the PCA. For all my disagreements with these friends, and there are some, I've always felt that these are people with whom I can talk because these are people who want above all to be scriptural, to make decisions on principle. With these people, you can disagree, but you always know where you stand, and you always know in general how to move from point A to point B.

I don't relate easily to "barely reformed" types — the "B.R.'s," as we say — even when I do agree with their ideas. I'm sure nobody here admits to being "B.R." "B. R." is what Van Til used to

call a “limiting concept”; there really aren’t any, but it’s convenient to measure yourself against them. But there are people, you know — again, certainly nobody here — who are kind of fuzzy thinkers when they talk about theological matters. They are not solidly grounded. As I say, I have a hard time relating to people like that, for when people are not solidly anchored doctrinally, you never know quite how to talk to them. You don’t know how to persuade them of anything, and you never know how you can learn from them. They’re always grabbing for ideas in the mists of their subjectivity, trying to be what? Up-to-date? User-friendly? Whatever. That mentality, at any rate, is not going to produce the powerful witness that God expects of us today.

Most of us are combinations of the two mentalities to some degree, but some of us are weighted more on the T.R. side, others to the B.R. side, hence the party names. Methodologically, I am very much on the T. R. side.

Nevertheless, I confess that on many matters I find myself agreeing with people who are sometimes called “B.R.’s” over against the T.R.’s. The main reason is that in my estimation the T.R.’s are often so eager to be historical, to maintain traditional ways of doing things, that they don’t always listen closely to Scripture, as they know they are supposed to. The so-called B.R.’s, being less well-anchored in historical models, are sometimes able to see things that the T.R.’s can’t see. Although they aren’t always terribly clear on the exegetical basis of their ideas, they sometimes see intuitively that Scripture is directing the church to take new steps, steps different from those taken in the past.

Repentance, Change, and *Sola Scriptura*

My suggestion is that we combine the T.R.s' concern for exegetical rigor with the B.R.s' openness to learning something new. The Bible, after all, is good *news*, something new. It is the living word of God. God didn't give it to us to reinforce our prejudices, but to challenge us, to prod us to repentance and change. Remember: repentance always means change.

Over and over again, God's prophets challenged the people to rethink their traditions. A while ago I listed some of the heroes of the faith in Scripture and in church history as people who stood up for principle, for the word of God, against overwhelming odds. What I want to add now is that these heroes of the faith always stood for something new because the word of God imposed upon them something new. It knocked them out of their routines, routines both of thinking and of living. From them we learn the lesson that when people think they have God figured out, reduced to a routine, God comes with his powerful word and shakes them to the roots.

Think of Noah and Abraham, about how God shook up their routines. The flood had no historical precedent at all; God called Noah to do something entirely new. And God specifically called Abraham to tear up his historical roots and to start over in a new country, to become the father of a new people. He did not break all ties with his brothers and their families, but his move was a decided break with the past, and a commitment to a divine promise for the future that seemed from every human point of view quite incredible.

Think of Moses delivering God's word to Israel in Egypt. Leave Egypt? Promised land? When Pharaoh hears this, he will only make us work harder! We have a routine here; let's stick with it! And even after God brought them out of Egypt with a mighty arm, they remembered that routine: Didn't we have great

food in Egypt? Why, Moses, did you bring us out here to die in the desert?

All through the history of the Old Testament, people were tempted to mistake their routines, their traditions, for God's word. The Lord says through Isaiah, "The people come near to me with their mouth, and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men" (Isa. 29:13). This passage is quoted in the New Testament in Matthew 15:8-9 and Mark 7:6-7. In these passages, we learn that the Pharisees dishonored their parents by their tradition of giving to God what would have otherwise gone to parental support. Jesus accused the Pharisees of making the word of God of no effect by their tradition. The example is multiplied, for Jesus said that the Pharisees did many other such things.

The Pharisees thought they were experts in the word of God, that they knew what God expected of them. They were the ones who in their time were considered the most principled in their adherence to God's word. But they had developed various traditions, which they thought were applications of the word of God, and they had their pattern of obedience down to a routine. But Jesus told them their routines were wrong. The word of God actually challenged those routines and called for change.

The Pharisees also had their hermeneutical or exegetical traditions. They read the Old Testament and concluded that a certain kind of Messiah was coming: one that would restore the throne of David, the independence of Israel from Rome, and the earthly prosperity of the Jewish people. Again, they had it wrong. Their traditional ways of thinking prevented them from recognizing Jesus Christ, the Son of God, come in the flesh to save his people from their sins.

In John 5:39-40, Jesus said to the Jews, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” A terrible indictment: they gave themselves over to studying the Scriptures, to becoming experts in God’s word; yet they missed the entire thrust of it, its most important theme.

To two disciples who mourned the death of Jesus, not knowing that he had risen from the dead, the risen Christ complained, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and to enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:26). Again, these disciples had read the Scriptures, but had missed the whole point. But their hearts burned within them as Jesus taught them the Old Testament in a whole new way.

Similarly, through the history of the church, God has from time to time called his people to reconsider their traditions and to return to the purity of the word of God. Most of us would agree that the greatest of these occasions was the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was a great time of housecleaning for the church — in theology, worship, preaching, and every area of the church’s life. The reformers were conservative in going back to the scriptural teachings; but they were radical in their attack on the traditions of men.

Thus came the slogan “*sola Scriptura*,” by Scripture alone. We sometimes refer to that principle as “the sufficiency of Scripture.” This was one of the great “alones” of the Reformation, together with *sola gratia* (“by grace alone”), *sola fidei* (“by faith alone”), *solo Christo* (“by Christ alone”), and *soli deo gloria* (“glory to God alone”). The sufficiency of Scripture means that the ultimate authority for faith and life is the Scripture alone, not any ideas or traditions of men. Popes and councils may err and have

erred. But God's word does not fail. All human ideas, whether contemporary or traditional, are to be tested by the Scriptures. As Paul said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Scripture is inspired of God, God-breathed, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. Scripture is our sufficient rule; we need not and dare not supplement it with our own ideas.

At the beginning of this lecture, I said that we needed a way of thinking and living which permitted neither compromise of the truth nor withdrawal from the changing world. *Sola Scriptura*, the sufficiency of Scripture, is just the principle we have been seeking. If you adopt that principle and follow it consistently, you will be absolutely principled, and you will also be absolutely prepared for the changes God wants you to make. You will not be hidebound by human traditions, nor will you be carried this way and that by the winds of modern fashion. See the point: *all* human ideas are to be tested by Scripture; not only the modern ones, not only the traditional ones, but all of them.

Another slogan of the reformation was *semper reformanda*: always reforming; hence *fides reformata reformanda est*, "the reformed faith is always reforming." That slogan also presents the balance we have seen in the principle *sola Scriptura*: both "reformed" and "reforming." Our faith is "reformed," based on unchanging biblical principle. But our faith is also "reforming," challenging all human traditions and fashions by the word of God. Adopt this principle seriously, and you will find that you are in truth more conservative than the conservatives and more radical than the radicals — at the same time. It will be quite an adventure! People will misunderstand! Terrible things could happen to you! But you will be assured that the infinite power of God's word will undergird your ministry.