

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**Romans 10:11-17**  
***Issues the Church Should Care About: Captive to the Word***  
**April 20, 2008**

NRS Romans 10:11 *"The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13 For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." 14 But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? 15 And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" 16 But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" 17 So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ."*

For the next seven Sundays, I am sharing a series of messages on "Issues the Church Should Care About." We will explore several topics confronting the church and this world including, caring for creation, poverty, materialism, race, war and peace. It seems to me that we have allowed politics, and in particular *politicians*, to caricature the issues of this day for partisan and selfish purposes. I will have none of that in these forthcoming messages. If you are listening for political commentary, you will be disappointed, for the answers do not come from those running for office or holding office. Rather, together we will explore what the scripture has to say and what it does not say about these various issues.

To open this series, we look at one who considered what was going on in his world and church, and its disconnect with God as revealed in the Bible. I am speaking of the rather controversial life of Martin Luther, the reformer of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. I suppose a quick way to lose an audience is by looking at medieval church history, but his life was that of a revolutionary. Luther's contribution to Christianity was so important, we have even dedicated a pane in our stained-glass windows depicting him posting the 95 theses. Martin Luther looked around his culture, society, and the leaders, and saw incongruence between the conventions of the day and what the Bible actually said.

In an old text book that was required reading during my years in seminary, church historian, Roland Bainton describes an exchange Luther had with his accusers. Luther was being tried of heresy and was threatened with excommunication if he did not recant. This was no small threat in his day, for this could have meant everything from being ostracized by society to death. Here is what Luther said to his accusers, the anniversary of which, by the way is April 16, 1521:

"Unless I am convinced by scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right. God help me, here I stand. Amen." (*Here I Stand*, p. 144).

Captive to the Word of God...Bill Leonard asks the question: "What is it that would make an individual stand alone on the conscience and the Word of God, when all the world and its traditions said that he was wrong?" (*Word of God Across the Ages*, p. 34).

Martin Luther did not intend to battle the church or culture. He just read the Bible and could not reconcile the practices of the day with what the scriptures had to say. Luther did not select certain scriptures, pull them out of context, and twist them for his own agenda. Rather, he listened to the whole of scripture and the nudging of God and found that many of the traditions of the day were wrong.

This is not simply taking a stand that is unpopular with others. This is about doing what is right, even when we ourselves struggle at it. Out of all the people and issues Luther struggled with the most, his greatest adversary was himself.

In studying scripture, he came to discover God's truth, not because it was the most popular or culturally relevant or any other reason, except for that it struck something deep down in the core of human creation.

Martin Luther read in Romans, the text we have heard this morning: *No one who believes in him will be put to shame... the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him* (11-12). God doesn't pick favorites – Jew or Greek, male or female, black or white, rich or poor. In Luther's day, this meant breaking down the wall separating the clergy from the laity.

From Galatians he read: *For freedom Christ has set us free* (5:1). This did not mean a license of libertinism, but to be set free from society's whims. He read in Romans 1:17: *The just shall live by faith* (KJV). From his careful study of scripture and his attentive listening to the voice of God, Luther came up with some conclusions that changed the world. He posted these conclusions on the door of the Wittenberg Church.

From the Bible Luther identified four things of which every believer should stand alone:

1) *Sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone.

For Luther scripture alone was the determining factor of a believer's life and the church's teaching. Luther had once said he had not seen a Bible until he was 20 years old. Our challenge today is to move from talking about the Bible, to reading the Bible. Our reading, however, must submit to leaving our agendas behind.

What this means is that as we face some of the critical issues of this day - AIDS, the economy, war, sexuality, for example – we ought to look to what scripture says and does not say, as it informs our opinions. Sometimes the scripture is silent and we are left to reason through the Holy Spirit to guide us.

2) *Sola Fida* – Faith alone.

Simply put, working into God's grace, God's salvation is an impossible task. In Romans 1:17 we read, *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."* This is justification by faith, which Luther considered "the summary of all Christian doctrine."

Luther struggled through much of his young adulthood, with seeking to earn his salvation by one of several means. One was self-help. The monks prayed seven times a day, so Luther reasoned, that if seven times a day was good, then fourteen must be better. He fasted more than others, prayed longer than others, confessed every minute sin to his confessor, but still he felt the stirring emptiness and the haunting questions – have I fasted enough? Am I humble enough? Have I prayed enough?

Luther turned to the church, but was indignant at the immorality he observed of the clergy and the general irreverence towards things he saw as holy. His disappointment mounted and he grew depressed because he found himself failing at securing his own salvation.

Good works were never going to be good enough. Luther discovered that it is faith alone, or to once again quote Romans 1:17 *The just will live by faith.*

3) *Sola Gratia* – Grace alone

Compare and contrast this to human free will. It is only by the grace of God that we may come to know salvation. No will in the world can save us. "This is the reason why our theology is certain," Luther explained, "It snatches us away from ourselves and places us outside ourselves, so that we do not

depend on our own strength, conscience, experience, person or works, but depend on that which is outside ourselves, that is, on the promise and truth of God, which cannot deceive."

Grace simply means a gift – undeserved and unasked, a gift that God is giving. All we have to do is receive it.

#### 4) *Sola Christo* – Christ alone.

In all things and all matters, the summary is, Christ alone. Again, let me quote from Bill Leonard: "The church possessed orthodoxy, but its values had become so bound to the culture of the age that few could separate the church from the world. This audacious monk cried out to the pious protectors of orthodoxy: "You read the Scripture, but you know little of the Word of God." "You believe many doctrines but your worship is worldly and shallow." (*Word of God Across the Ages*, p. 38)

Well, we say, it is a good thing Martin Luther settled this back in 1517 and it is not a problem for us today. Or is it?

Who or what holds you captive? Do the whims of culture, politics, or celebrities charm you for good or bad? Do you find yourself working harder than ever seeking to please God and others, imprisoned outside of faith? Are you captive to your guilt or shame, knowing how easy and often you disappoint others and yourself? Do you neglect the gift of grace that God wants to give you, because either you feel you do not deserve it or you would rather follow your own will? Do you find yourself hostage to other gods and idols, to the point where Jesus is merely a good man to be admired, but not a savior to follow?

Who or what holds you captive? "For freedom, Christ has set you free."