

“The Word Alive: Second Helvetic Confession”
Jeremiah 23:23-32; 2 Timothy 3:10-17;
Matthew 22:23-33

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Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

As we have been working through the Confessions, we are now in the mid-1500s when it was a period of discovery. People were enabled to see things in new ways. There was more movement of people. The economics were changing and the world just seemed to be changing in a variety of ways. In a period of about 10 years, between 1560 and 1570, we have three confessions that come out. The one we are looking at today, the Second Helvetic Confession, is dated 1566.

It was a time called the Reformation, and there was a reason why things were changing. People were beginning to pay attention to what was going on in a different way. As people thought about their faith in relationship to the changing world, I think there was a drive to go back to the basics, the centrality of what it was all about. So sometimes you will hear about the “Five Solae” of the Reformation:

Sola gratia
Sola fide
Sola scriptura
Solus Christus
Soli Deo gloria

That’s all Latin to me, but it means solely by grace, solely by faith, solely by scripture, solely by Christ, solely for the glory of God. When I first heard those, I thought it can’t be *only* each one. Obviously, that’s not quite what it means. It’s not *only* that, but it reminds us that we can go directly to God through scripture, by grace, through faith, because of Christ, and find the wonder of the gift God has given us. Because of that, we can give glory to God.

So as we think about the different Confessions, each one is working its way through trying to understand again, or anew in some ways, what it means to be faithful people. Who are we as people of faith? It is struggling with institutional ways of doing this that have grown up, seeing some graft that had worked its way into various places, and trying to return to what it means to be a faithful person and recognizing the gift of grace God had given that we could become God’s people. The *solae* are in a way saying these are sufficient for our salvation. We can find our way through them.

Part of the reason that was all happening, as I said, is because it was quite a swirl at that time. The printing press had been around for about a hundred years. It was just now that the Bible was coming out in the vernacular and people were beginning to read it for themselves. In Switzerland where this Helvetic Confession comes from, there was this back and forth about what was right and who was right. There was a person named Ulrich Zwingli who was probably the most famous of those reformers. He was inspiring in his preaching and was teaching these five ways of knowing the faith and going with God.

There was a young man who lived in Bremgarten and trained to be a priest. He heard Zwingli and decided Zwingli really must have it right. He began to study scripture more and more. His name was Heinrich Bullinger. He soon became a pastor in Bremgarten. Bremgarten switched to being Protestant. Zwingli died in a battle at Kappel. There is all kinds of history here and we can't take time for it all. But in Bremgarten, Bullinger became a pastor and there happened to be a convent in that town. The whole town had switched over to being Protestant except the convent, because nobody had gone over to preach to them. So a reformer went and preached. After that, the convent dissolved except for one person who was taking care of her ill mother there. Her name was Anna Adlischweiler. It happened that as Bullinger had become a preacher and was studying under various people, he went one day with the chaplain to the convent and met Anna. After Anna's mother died, he wrote a long letter of proposal, and he and Anna married.

Then as things went, with the shifting tides, Bremgarten became a Catholic city again. And this was a forceful time. It wasn't that people just decided to change. There was some force involved, so Bullinger had to flee. He fled to Zurich. He and Anna were already married and had two children. He had to flee and then Anna had to flee. They both made it to Zurich and he ended up in the pulpit that Zwingli used to be in.

He is one who took scripture incredibly seriously. In fact, when he starts his confession, it begins with the importance of scripture. I think he was one who really heard the words from scripture that the choir sang in their anthem today, where he said, "I may be able to inspire with my preaching, but if it doesn't show in my works, then I'm a clanging gong." For you see, not only was he a leader who gave us this incredible confession that we have now and he helped Frederick III get the Heidelberg Confession OK'd, he also would open his home to refugees from all over. He would open his home to students who were studying at the local seminary that he was probably in charge of, and he opened his home to foreign dignitaries. He exhibited what it meant, not only to know scripture, but to live it out.

It's easy to simply just focus on Heinrich, because he's the one who made the pronouncements, but it wouldn't have happened if it hadn't been for Anna. She's the one who had to run the household. She made it possible. They had 11 children, so she took care of 11 children, and there were often from one or two to a large number of guests. One time it said there were refugees from Lucano, in southern Switzerland, who came over the mountains – 100 of them came to Zurich. Heinrich and Anna took care of 80 of them. So he and she were living out their faith.

When the plague hit Zurich, Heinrich refused to stay cloistered, but went out to serve those who were dying. He contracted the plague and Anna nursed him back to health. But the sad part of the story is that she contracted it and she died.

This is the background of the man who wrote this confession. He and his wife exhibited what they found in scripture. In the confession you start with the importance of scripture and from that how your faith builds through encountering Christ,

encountering the Trinity, and having the sacraments and becoming the people of God. It's one of the most practical confessions, because he saw the world not only as a theologian, but as a pastor. It's the way I think God sees, and so gave us Christ as one who came with compassion to show us the grace of God.

Bullinger is one of the first ones to write a book about how to help people in their grief. He's one of the first ones to write something about how to have a good marriage. He describes how we can be a good church because it is as we encounter the grace of God through faith because of Christ that we can become a church. And the church is us, but the church is much larger. It is all those who belong in the body of Christ.

He has a section on election and predestination, which are issues we often struggle with. What he says is be careful about that, because the temptation is to use election and predestination as things that puff us up, that make us arrogant. He says, "Scripture says all who seek God get to come." He also says that election simply means we are given grace by God. God elects to give us grace and that election has purpose if we recognize the grace we've been given, much like he and Anna. He welcomed the refugee. He welcomed the people from England who were fleeing the reign of Mary I. Elizabeth I wrote him a letter of thanks for taking in those refugees. He sees that being the people of God, being a people who know that it's only by grace, only by faith, because of Christ, through scripture, that, as it says in 2 Timothy, we get built up, learn, are equipped and taught to do good works.

I think he also realized one other thing—one reason why he's probably not the most famous of the reformed folks. How many of you have ever heard of him before? Because what he did was he simply cared about people. He had a huge correspondence with people, encouraging them. He recognized what he was doing was not about himself. It was about the work of God. In that way he gave the glory and honor to God.

It feels to me like Heinrich's and Anna's lives are a description of what it means to hear scripture, recognize the grace in Christ that gives us the faith and trust to go forward in life listening to what Christ has taught us, not for our own honor, not so that I might be somebody, but so that I might give glory to God and might truly honor the God who has given me that grace, that has given us life, given us grace and given us hope and life everlasting. Glory to God. Amen.