

“**SOLA SCRIPTURA**” was the great rallying cry of the Reformation, the firm belief that “Scripture alone” was the final authority in all matters of faith. Whatever differences arose between the many denominational traditions coming out of the Protestant reformation, this was one thing they held in common (at least in theory): the conviction that the existing church had abandoned Scriptural authority in favour of human tradition. What was needed, they all argued, was a return to the Bible by examining its words carefully and prayerfully, and considering how the Church through the centuries has understood those words.

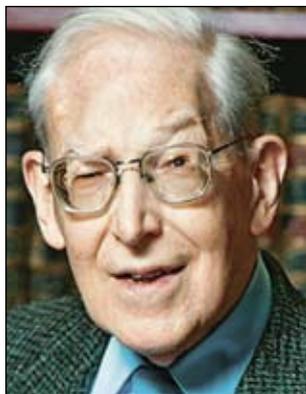
Fast-forward five centuries and the Church is still arguing over the authority of Scripture. What was once a great affirmation of faith has, for many Protestants, become a question: Scripture *alone*? Five hundred years on and the Church is still battling over the same questions.

Tipping point

The powder keg issue during the Reformation was the sale of indulgences. Today it is sexuality—specifically homosexuality. In denomination after denomination, this issue has awakened many Christians to the much larger question of the authority of Scripture. This surface point of contention covers a much deeper disagreement: can the Church change doctrine (for example, its definition of sin) based on popular opinion, or do the Scriptures remain authoritative in every generation? There still remain many Protestants who subscribe to “Scripture alone,” but an increasing number have begun abandoning that fundamental Protestant doctrine in favour of what they would call a more “culturally sensitive” Gospel.

Sadly, those on the side of biblical authority frequently are the minority in their denominations. As a result, they often become the targets of oppression from their national church bodies. Perhaps nowhere has this been more evident than in the Anglican Communion. Indeed, it is in Anglicanism the current theological battle over sexuality really began in earnest.

Rev. Dr. J.I. Packer, noted Evangelical Anglican theologian, has been involved in the controversy since its beginning. He says of his



Dr. J.I. Packer

own congregation, St. John’s in Vancouver, “It is not too much to say that we have acted in a way which, under God, triggered the present division in North America.”

After vocally opposing the movement away from biblical authority in their national church body, St. John’s, the largest Anglican congregation in Canada, eventually voted to secede from the increasingly liberal Anglican

Church of Canada (ACC), instead aligning itself instead under a South American Anglican bishop. The issue? The authority of Scripture—specifically, what Scripture says about homosexuality.

Whose agenda?

North American Anglicanism (and mainline Protestantism in general) had begun demonstrating too close an allegiance to the secular world, according to Dr. Packer. It had devoted itself to the idea that “the Church must fit in with the world’s agenda.” Dr. Packer explains, “In the latter part of the twentieth century, the secular world embraced positions which, according to biblical standards, are actually immoral. The ethic that accepts homosexual practice is an example of that.” In St. John’s and a number of other churches throughout Canada and the United States, the issue of sexuality became the crisis point: would they let the world or Scripture set the Church’s agenda? For St. John’s, the choice was clear: “The authentically Christian position in Anglicanism and elsewhere is that God has spoken; His Word must be our guide.”

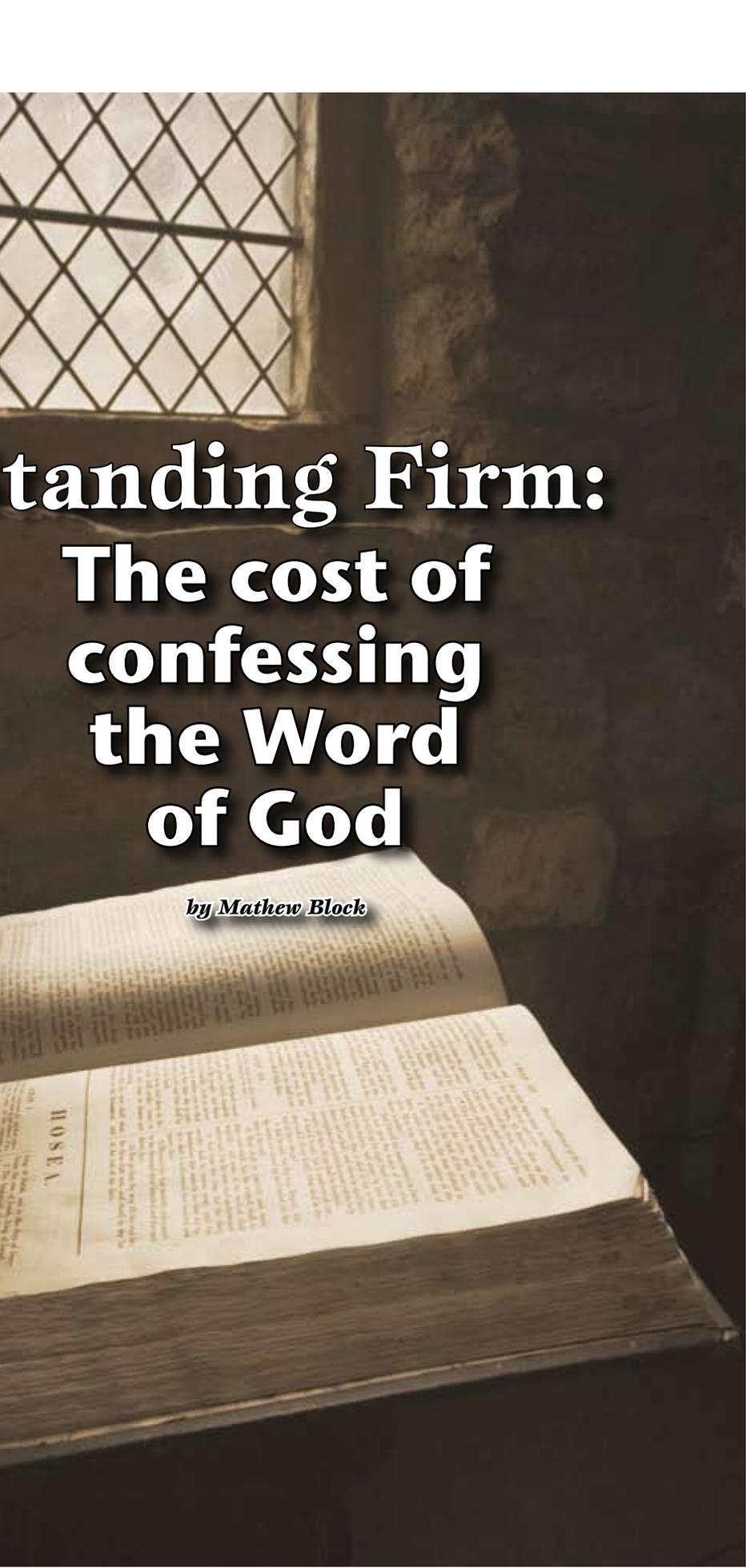
Standing up against error has not exactly been a walk in the park though. For numerous congregations in the Anglican Church of Canada (and, in their American counterpart, the Episcopal Church), standing on the Word of God came with severe legal ramifications. Canadian courts have generally understood the episcopal structure of Anglicanism to mean the denomination—not the congregation—owns church property. So when a congregation decides to leave the ACC for a more theologically orthodox group like the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), the denomination often attempts to strip them of the property. Generally speaking, they succeed.

In the courts

Dr. Packer’s church, St. John’s in Vancouver, faced just that sort of battle. It fought the ACC for the right to its property, arguing it was the denomination and not the congregation which had changed theological allegiance. The congregation, they argued, was still teaching faithfully the doctrine for which the property was originally dedicated.

The Supreme Court of British Columbia disagreed; the building, the court said,



An open Bible is shown in the foreground, with its pages slightly aged and the text visible. In the background, a window with a diamond-patterned leaded glass is visible, set against a dark wall. The overall lighting is soft and focused on the Bible.

standing Firm: The cost of confessing the Word of God

by Mathew Block

belonged to the ACC. St. John's appealed, but the Supreme Court of Canada recently turned down the appeal. The decision has now forced St. John's (and three other congregations involved in the same legal battle) to leave their church buildings behind. And it is a growing problem across North America; recently, another conservative Anglican church in Windsor was forced to vacate its building.

Lutherans too!

Legal wrangling has not characterized the battle in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) as in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada. But that does not mean the experiences are any less trying for those involved. Like the Anglican Church, the ELCA's problems exploded over the subject of sexuality. "But the far deeper issue," explains recently-elected Bishop John Bradosky of the North American Lutheran Church (NALC), "is the authority of Scripture."

In 2009, the ELCA narrowly voted to open the ranks of the clergy to practising homosexuals, and also to approve officiating at same-sex marriages. In response, a number of disaffected congregations began leaving the denomination—a lengthy process requiring a series of votes in which two-thirds of the congregation must vote in favour of seceding. Then, the congregation must join a new Lutheran denomination. Finally, the local bishop must approve the congregation's departure—a decision to which she or he is not obligated. In at least one case, the bishop refused, arguing the property was necessary for the ELCA's outreach. Before being allowed to leave the denomination some other congregations have had to pay back decades-old grants.

Of those congregations which have succeeded in leaving the ELCA, a number have affiliated with Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ, a denomination which broke off from the ELCA in 2001. The majority of others voted in 2010 to form the North American Lutheran Church—a denomination which has grown to more than 250 congregations in just one year. Many other disaffected ELCA congregations are still in the process of trying to leave.

For Bishop Bradosky, as for most disaffected ELCA Lutherans, the issue is less about sexuality *per se* than a recognition

that the ELCA no longer seems to accept a Lutheran understanding of Scriptural authority. The denomination, he argues, has become “more controlled by issues and agendas than by the authority of the Word.” To simply suggest that what the Scriptures say about homosexual practice is not applicable for today is to not take the Bible seriously. “That’s not a faithful way to interpret the Scripture,” he says. “It’s certainly not a Lutheran way to interpret the Word of God. I think the way we’ve used the Word of God has really failed to live up to the integrity of our confessional and historical background.”

What about Luther?

Martin Luther would likely agree with Bishop Bradosky’s assessment. In one of his books, Luther criticizes a man named Latomus for refusing to call sin, sin. Latomus argued that after baptism, Christians no longer sinned; at worst, they had merely the “appearance” of sin.

For Luther, this was simply man-made nonsense; the Scriptures did not support the idea. And so his response to Latomus was particularly scathing. Were he alive today, we might expect he would have similar words for those Lutherans who refuse to call sin what the Scriptures clearly call sin:

“Here I entreat you, dear reader, be free and a Christian. Do not swear allegiance to any word of man, but be a steadfast adherent of the holy Scriptures. If it calls anything sin, beware of being influenced by the words of any of those who—as if they could speak better—deny sin itself.... Believe me, the Holy Spirit is quite capable of expressing His meanings in suitable words, so that there is no need for human inventions.”

For Luther, sin is sin. We do no good by pretending it is anything else; we must not obscure the clear meaning of the Scriptures. If we are to truly realize what grace is, Luther writes elsewhere, “we must bear the true, not an imaginary sin.” It is only in recognizing we are broken, sinful people that we come to realize our need for grace. The Law shows us our sin to drive us to Christ, because in Christ alone there is forgiveness. In Christ alone there is salvation.

Canadian context

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) voted this summer to go the same direction as



Martin Luther stands before the Diet of Worms in 1521 confessing the authority of Scripture

its American counterpart. Like the aftermath which is rocking the ELCA, the Canadian situation undoubtedly

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will be similarly volatile. When asked whether the North American Lutheran Church is currently fielding enquiries from disaffected ELCIC congregations, Bishop Bradosky is to the point: “Absolutely.” He notes that a number of Canadians attended the recent NALC convocation and that Canadian congregations are already requesting NALC officials to visit and advise them on leaving the ELCIC.

After seeing how far their national church bodies have departed from the Word of God, many congregations and individual Christians are waking up—confessing of Scripture the words attributed to Martin Luther: “Here I stand. I can do no other.” Like Luther, many making that confession today face fierce opposition from the world around them.

Standing together

If we must make that stand, we do not do so alone. We ought to commend and defend others who are similarly committed to the authority of Scripture. Dr. Packer suggests that now, “through the providence of God, we



have new opportunities for partnership between people who genuinely do share the authentic biblical faith.” This may be a time for Lutherans and Anglicans committed to God’s Word to stand together.

Dr. John R. Stephenson, professor of Historical Theology at Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary in St. Catharines, Ontario holds similar sentiments. “We’re really discovering new areas of Christian solidarity,” he says. Dr. Stephenson is Lutheran Church–Canada’s (LCC) representative to recent dialogues between LCC and The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod (LCMS) on one side and the Anglican Church in North America on the other. “At this stage, we’ve

had two conversations,” he reports, with two more meetings to come. They have gone well thus far, he says. “When we discuss the creeds and Scriptures, we realize we’re on the same page.”

But we don’t ignore the differences which may exist between our church bodies; we must recognize disagreements as such whenever they arise. At this point, Dr. Stephenson cautions, “It would be unwise to aim for too much.” But he also warns that “it may not be wise to aim for too little either.” When the current discussions end, he and his LCMS and ACNA counterparts will report back to their respective church bodies. “Then,” Dr. Stephenson says, “it will be up to the church leaderships to decide where to take it from there—to work out whatever relationships are appropriate.”

In the meantime, there is value in standing together on those things in which we agree—namely, the authority of Scripture. As Dr. Stephenson explains, “You can begin to



Dr. John R. Stephenson

feel as though you have your back to the wall; it’s really rather nice to recognize kindred spirits, to know that there are others battling on the same side as us.” Dr. Packer agrees: “It is sometimes to one’s advantage to form new relationships and bring together all the people who are united against a particular form of error.” It was, he says, what the Reformers discovered over the subject of justification. “Now,” Dr. Packer suggests, “it’s happening again with regard to ethics and the understanding of biblical teaching, Christ’s teaching, God’s revealed will about human behaviour.”

Bishop Bradosky takes a similar perspective. “It is certainly a time for the confessing church to stand up and to come together in meaningful ways—to mark the differences between just being part of the institutional church and taking seriously the claim of the Gospel and the cost of discipleship.” The NALC will begin dialogue with the LCMS in December 2011 in St. Louis, Missouri. There will no doubt be some frank discussions (the NALC and the LCMS/LCC hold very different opinions on the subject of female ordination, for example). The extent to which participants can affirm each other’s understanding of Scripture is not yet known. Nevertheless, the NALC is optimistic. “We look forward to continued conversation and work together,” Bishop Bradosky says, “to developing relationships with new and faithful partners.”

The role of LCC

And that is precisely the opportunity before Lutheran Church–Canada: being faithful partners with those willing to affirm the authority of God’s Word. At the national level LCC is part of the dialogue between confessional Lutherans and the ACNA, for example. But support is emerging at the local level as well. Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Vancouver, for example, recently welcomed disaffected Anglican congregation St. Matthias and St. Luke’s Church to share its facility, as the Anglican congregation recently lost its property to the ACC.

Dr. Stephenson well articulates how LCC should respond: “We want in our hearts to be open to these brothers and sisters,” he says. We can stand together with other faithful Christians to proclaim the authority of the Word of God. We can stand together against the error of culture-led Christianity, and affirm the importance of a Christ-led faith, founded on the Bible. We are part of the Christian Church universal; and on the authority of Scripture, we can and must stand together.

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Bishop John Bradosky