

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

by John M. Frame

## Part 3 of 3: Making the Most of Every Opportunity

In the first two installments of this essay, I focused on the *sola Scriptura* principle as a key to principled change. It is through *sola Scriptura* that we can change to meet the challenges of our time without compromising principle.

In this section, I'd like to get more specific, dealing with some areas in which we have opportunities today to minister in old and new ways without abandoning or compromising our foundation in the word of God.

The Apostle Paul said, "Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:15-17). The King James Version used to read that phrase, "redeeming the time"; the NIV renders it, "making the most of every opportunity." Note the negative and positive sides of that passage. Negatively, the days were evil when Paul wrote, and of course our days are evil too. We are not to copy the ways of the world but, as light is different from darkness, to be distinct from it. In Ephesians 5:6-7, Paul warned us not to be partners with those who are wicked.

But there is the positive side as well. You might expect Paul to have said, "Withdraw from the world, because the days are evil," but he did not. Rather, what he said was, "Make the most of every opportunity." And he said to take advantage of opportunities, not in spite of, but *because* of the fact that the days are evil. Paul was aware that there is danger of compromise when we seek to take advantage of opportunities. But he urged us not to be paralyzed by that danger. Rather, the evil of the world must motivate us all the more to spread the light.

## **The Opportunity For Simple Obedience**

What are the opportunities before us? In Ephesians 5-6, the opportunities are deceptively simple. They are normal opportunities to live holy lives. 5:18: Don't get drunk, but be filled with the Spirit. 5:19: Sing to one another about the Lord. 5:21–6:9: Maintain good relationships in households between husbands, wives, parents, children, masters, slaves. 6:10-17: Put on the armor of God, which includes God's truth and his word. God's soldier is one who lives, and also speaks, the truth of the gospel. 6:18-20: Pray, especially for Paul's witness.

These are not the things we usually think about when we hear the word "opportunity" in a church context. They are not particularly sophisticated or jazzy, not distinctive to the 1990s, not likely to get us written up in *Christianity Today* or *Leadership*. They are not the kinds of things that usually get discussed in seminars on evangelism or church growth. Usually, we think of an "opportunity" as an open door for a new kind of ministry, social action program, witness to a particular group of people, or some new apologetic approach suited to the contemporary mind. The opportunities Paul mentioned seem rather ordinary, not at all new and different. These are just opportunities to do the things God has always told us to do.

There is also a surprising epistemology operating here. We are often vexed by questions of how to *identify* opportunities in our time. In this passage, it looks pretty easy. There are plenty of opportunities right here in this chapter. They are as old and scripturally commonplace as the creation ordinances and the Ten Commandments. This reminds us that if our overall principle is *sola Scriptura*, then the first place to look for opportunities is right on the surface of the biblical text.

From this we can learn that God expects us to obey what we know of his will before expecting him to give us wisdom to discern the more obscure opportunities. He expects us to obey him in the commonplace areas before we get the opportunity to obey him in

some exotic way. As we saw in Hebrews 5, God gives his deepest lessons to those who have developed, by his grace, habits of righteousness, who have won battle after battle against the devil. It is those people who have been faithful in small things to whom the Lord will give greater responsibility.

### **The Opportunity For Conquest**

But I don't want to mislead you to think that Ephesians 4–6 deals only with simple, timeless morality. There is a context here. Paul is very much aware of his own time. The obedience of the Christians in this passage is constantly set against the background of the darkness of the world. Chapter four tells us how the Ephesians came out of paganism, how through grace God enabled them to live lives radically different from their pagan neighbors. They put off the old self and put on the new (4:22-24). When they lived obediently, they sent a bright light into the darkness. *We are* light, as Paul says, reflecting Jesus' statement, "You are the light of the world."

So, chapters 4–6 of Ephesians are not a mere ethical treatise; rather, they are a battle plan. Living a holy life is not only good in itself, though it is that; it is a way of winning a spiritual battle, as Paul emphasized in 6:10-18. It is a way of advancing God's kingdom against the forces of Satan. It is pre-eminently an "opportunity."

The light of godly Christian behavior exposes the evils of paganism for what they are (Eph. 5:11-14). It convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, as Jesus said his Holy Spirit would do in the world. It also brings the truth before the world, as believers are buckled with the truth, shod with the gospel of peace, armed with the word of God; this is Great Commission language. This passage has an evangelistic thrust.

We should then add this to our understanding of the passage: the daily obedience of believers to God's commands in word and life, their practical holiness, is itself a powerful force for the kingdom of God. It rebukes and evangelizes those outside of Christ. Imagine what a tremendous power it would be in our society today if all believers

were simply to do the things they know they ought to do! Imagine the impact if we all were to pray, to witness to the lost, to help the poor, to be hospitable, to be sexually pure, to love and be submissive to one another in the family and church, to trust God through pain and sorrow. If everybody in our churches behaved that way, how our society would be changed, and what a powerful witness it would be to the unbelieving world! Instead, we read, for example, that the level of premarital sex among evangelical young people is about the same as in the general population. The world sees that, and winks.

As I said before, we haven't yet had any really stiff persecution in this country during our lifetimes; God doesn't expect much of us. Can't we bring ourselves to carry out some simple obedience? And can we expect that God will provide exciting, new, breakthrough opportunities if we cannot do these little things which he makes so clear to us in his word?

### **Prioritizing God's Commands**

There is a bit of complication, however, which enters at this point. We want to obey the commands of God. Sometimes, though, we must choose which command of God to obey at a particular time. I know that sounds a bit strange; I've explained it rather fully in my book *Evangelical Reunion*. Let me just say here that we cannot obey all of God's commands at once. We cannot pray, evangelize, teach our children, help the poor, and seek social justice all at the same time. We have to postpone some of them in order to do others. That means that we have the responsibility to prioritize God's commands. That sounds very suspicious, doesn't it? We want to say that all of God's commands are absolute; all are of ultimate importance. How can we dare to arrange them on a scale of *relative* importance?

Well, some distinctions need to be made. God's negative commands must be obeyed instantly and for all time. "Don't commit adultery" means "stop it now if you're doing it, and never do it again." Some positive commands are also to be obeyed instantly and for all time, like the command to believe in Jesus. But sometimes God commands us to do things that take definite periods of time to do, and

he doesn't tell us when or where. Praying, evangelizing, teaching, giving to the church, and helping the poor are examples of such commands. With those commands, we must prioritize. We must decide what we are going to do, when and where. We must decide what emphasis we will place on these.

For example, every believer should pray — but there are differences among us here. Scripture tells us that some people have (or had) the “gift” of prayer. Evidently, there is something about the prayer life of such people that differs from the prayer lives of those without this particular gift. We are told that Luther prayed for three hours every day. If he did, I have no doubt that God honored that. But does that mean that it is sinful for someone else to pray for only two hours a day, or for fifteen minutes? Not necessarily. Some people spend ten hours a week evangelizing neighborhoods, knocking on doors to make basic gospel presentations. Luther did not do that, to my knowledge. But I have no doubt that God honors those who do.

So even with regard to applying simple divine commands, there is a place for sanctified human wisdom. We must not only look at the Scriptures, but also at our own individual gifts and callings, and at the needs of the church in each particular situation. There is, therefore, a place for using extra-biblical knowledge to determine where we can best expend our energies at a particular time. There is also a need for the wisdom of God's Spirit to enable us to make godly judgments in these areas. Like Paul, we must be aware of where we are in space and time, and we must seek to do there what God calls us to do.

If there are such differences among individuals, there are differences among churches as well. In *Evangelical Reunion* I make the point that at least some of the differences between churches and denominations are not over doctrine, but over priorities. In Presbyterianism, we can sometimes distinguish among churches according to their relative emphasis on evangelism, doctrinal orthodoxy, or procedural regularity. We all believe in all three of these things. But some churches give relatively more time and energy to one, time that is necessarily not given to the others. Some analysts of the Dutch Reformed churches say that these are divided into “piets, Kuyps and docts.” The piets, or pietists, emphasize personal piety; the

Kuyps, or Kuyperians, emphasize the transformation of culture; the docts emphasize conformity to the Reformed Confessions. These emphases are not contrary to one another. The problem is simply that we are finite. None of us can do everything, so practically our emphases will be different.

Here we need to have more love and understanding of one another. People who emphasize doctrinal orthodoxy tend to look at those who emphasize evangelism as if the latter group were not interested in orthodoxy, and vice versa. There is, of course, room for us to stir up one another to more complete visions of God's purposes. But our main attitude in such situations should be one of thankfulness to God that he has equipped others for tasks different from ourselves. Remember the New Testament metaphor of the body with many parts. The parts do different things; but none is absolutely superior or inferior to the others. The head cannot look down on the foot, nor the heart upon the liver.

What we should not do, certainly, is simply to insist that everybody do things in the precise way we have been doing them. Here again, it is important for us to recognize that *sola Scriptura* is very different from blind traditionalism. Under *sola Scriptura* we allow Scripture to identify those areas in which we must all be alike. Beyond those areas, we recognize those spheres in which we are free to be different. And under *sola Scriptura*, we are free sincerely to honor those who differ from us in such matters of emphasis.

Further, if you can bear another point from *Evangelical Reunion*, it seems to me that when we learn to honor such legitimate differences of emphasis, we will come closer to breaking down the sinful denominational barriers that today keep Christians from working together. God intends for his church to operate as one, not as many denominations. Our lack of oneness, I am convinced, is one important reason for the church's powerlessness in our time. For a church to be powerful, it needs to have the full variety of the gifts of the Spirit, and that means that it must have a wide variety of different priorities among the commands of God.

## **General Priorities: The Great Commission**

We have seen that Scripture permits considerable diversity among us in prioritizing opportunities for obedience. But there are some general, broad priorities, which all of us should share. As I pointed out, we are all equally obligated to repent and believe, to abstain from evil, to pray, to witness of Christ to the world, and above all to seek the glory of God. I believe there is also a single task that God gives to all of us as individuals and as members of his body, a task which encompasses all the other tasks, and which, therefore, can be described as *the* task of the church.

That single task is the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus told his disciples, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Reformed theologians have sometimes asked how the Great Commission relates to the “Cultural Mandate” of Genesis 1:28, where God commanded Adam to fill and subdue the earth. It seems to me that the Great Commission applies the Cultural Mandate to the situation after the Fall. If we are to fill the earth with people who will subdue it to God’s glory, we must first evangelize and teach them. Thus, the Great Commission has the highest priority in defining the task of the church.

It has often been pointed out that the Great Commission is not *narrowly* evangelistic. It does not single out evangelism as the church’s task *over against* the nurture of those who are already Christians. Rather, it includes both. We are to make and baptize disciples, but also to teach those to obey everything Jesus commanded us. Clearly, then, there is something wrong with a church which focuses on evangelism, but in which the new converts remain spiritual babies. On the other hand, and I think this is the greater danger in Presbyterianism, there is also something wrong with a church which spends all of its time nurturing believers and very little time reaching out to the lost. And there is something wrong with our

nurture if we are not teaching our children how to evangelize, how to make new disciples. People grow best, they receive the best nurture, not in a hothouse that is isolated from the world, but in an environment where people are constantly leading others to Christ and discipling them.

I mentioned in the first installment our historic tendency as Presbyterians to withdraw from the world, to be suspicious of evangelism and of involvement in society. A *sola Scriptura* Presbyterianism will not withdraw, but will reach out in simple obedience to claim those for whom Christ died.

Placing the Great Commission as our first priority will affect many other things we do. It will challenge us to train our people in evangelism. It will remind us also that even our worship must be intelligible to visitors, so that they will fall down and exclaim that God is in our midst.

Great Commission churches will think less of themselves and more of “seekers.” I agree with my former pastor Dick Kaufmann that churches should not be “seeker driven,” but they should be “seeker sensitive.” The ultimate authority for our ministry comes not from the preferences of unbelievers, but from the word of God. But for that same reason, we are not to be governed by our own preferences either, by what makes us comfortable. It is not ultimately important what music we like, or how long we like to sit, or how big a church we like to have, or how Presbyterians have always done things, our historical traditions. God’s word is important, and that word tells us to sacrifice our preferences for the needs of others, particularly the desperate need of the lost.

I do believe that God is calling us Presbyterians to a style of church life, a style of worship, teaching, and nurture, which is far more centered on evangelism than our tradition historically has been. Some have observed that the American Presbyterians lost the frontier in the early nineteenth century to the Baptists, Methodists, cultists, and secularists. Various reasons have been proposed, such as an unbalanced emphasis on an educated ministry, an unwillingness to make the best use of ruling elders and deacons, and so on. I think

there is truth in these analyses. But perhaps we can sum it up by saying that, for the Presbyterians in those days, evangelism was not a high enough priority. They missed that crucial opportunity, and Reformed Christianity has been trying ever since to make up for that loss. In our time, we need to be very clear as to what the task of the church really is. That task must be taken from the scriptures, *sola Scriptura*, not from tradition or from our human preferences. That task is nothing less than our Lord's Great Commission.

### **Techniques and Strategies**

It is the Great Commission also, I believe, that helps us answer questions about the use of "techniques" and "strategies." I am not one who condemns modern techniques or strategies with a broad brush. As I argued, *sola Scriptura* does not shut us up to doing only things that are mentioned in Scripture, and the sovereignty of God in Scripture is never opposed to human responsibility. God uses human beings to accomplish his great purposes, and he calls them to use the best means, the best techniques and the best strategies they can use. Surely there are some techniques developed after the biblical period that none of us would question, such as the use of the printing press, the microphone, or the tape recorder to spread the gospel. Nor do any of us question the legitimacy of teaching and learning techniques in preaching. God can use a poor sermon, and he can withhold his blessing from one which is technically very good. But he certainly calls us in preaching as much as anywhere else to do the work heartily, as unto the Lord, not unto men. That means, surely, using the clearest language possible, together with the best logic, the best illustrations, and the best speaking voices we can.

The same is true for every area of ministry. When people say that churches should never develop evangelistic plans, or that we should never plan for church growth since it is all in God's hands, they are not really talking seriously. The early Christians were methodical in spreading the Gospel. They expected God to add to their numbers through the preaching of God's powerful word. They used the best human means that were available at the time. They went where the people were, not where the people weren't. They went to the

synagogues rather than to the pagan temples. They spoke the languages of the people. Paul urged the Corinthians at great length to carry on their worship, not in unknown tongues, but in known languages, so that both unbelievers and believers could be edified. Moreover, the church mobilized all the believers to carry the word of God on their lips wherever they went. All of this was strategy and technique, done in faithfulness to the Great Commission.

Indeed, you really cannot avoid strategy and technique unless you cut the brain out of your head. It is a simple fact of human nature that you cannot perform any rational action, as an individual or as a church, without a prior mental intention. That is, you can't do anything without at least implicitly planning what you are going to do. The plan may be stupid or brilliant; but there will always be a plan.

That does not mean, of course, that every technique or strategy is biblically acceptable. It is hard sometimes to make judgments in these areas. What about telemarketing? What about modern sales techniques? (I wish I had a dollar for every famous evangelist who had a background in sales.) What about attempts to produce a "user-friendly" atmosphere in our worship services? What about drama and dance in worship? What about modern styles of music?

We are too close to the end to discuss these issues one by one, but as the conclusion to our "theology of opportunity," let me make some suggestions on how to reach conclusions in these areas.

Negatively: we should not resolve these issues simply by referring to our tradition, or to that with which we are personally comfortable. We should also pay little attention to objections to modern techniques that are based mainly on taste, granting that there is a fine line, especially in art and music, between matters of taste and matters of objective quality.

Positively, we should ask questions such as the following:

1. Does the technique achieve legitimate biblical values, such as clarity and intelligibility of communication?

2. Does it violate any biblical norms, such as the command against false witness, or the regulative principle of worship?

3. Does it communicate a false subtext? For example, does it encourage pride or complacency?

4. Does it spring from a right or wrong motive on our part? Are we seeking to glorify God and reach the lost, or are we trying to please ourselves? This question should not be answered quickly, but reflectively and prayerfully.

5. Does it tend to manipulate people into ill-considered, perhaps insincere, responses?

6. Does it give people false assurance, or unjustified fears, as to their standing with God?

7. Does it fit consistently into a comprehensive plan to evangelize and to teach *everything* Jesus commanded?

We have much yet to learn from the ancient principles of *sola Scriptura* and the Great Commission. The questions before us are not easy, but God has promised to give us wisdom when we ask him, and I believe that in many of these areas he already has — in the Bible. I am convinced that discussions of these matters to date have been focused all too much on what is traditional, or up-to-date, or respectable, or comfortable, or tasteful, and all too little on what God's word actually says. May he honor that word in our ministries as we seek to be more faithful to him, for Jesus' sake.