

093: Our Reformation Heritage
Andrew Kneeland, October 30, 2022
Romans 3

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Father God, we thank you for the gifts you've given to us, and we ask your blessing on the rest of our service. Thank you for your Son and your Word. In Jesus' name, amen.

Today is Reformation Sunday! Five hundred and five years ago a young German monk named Martin Luther wrote down a list of 95 things that he wanted the Catholic Church to think about.

There were a lot of things the Roman Catholics were doing that were unbiblical. Luther believed that forgiveness was not something a person could *buy* or *earn* by purchasing an indulgence or visiting a relic. He disagreed with the Catholic teaching on purgatory. And Luther believed that the pope was motivated more by money than by love.

Those were fighting words. Now, Luther never meant to break away from the Roman Catholic Church; he wanted to *reform* it. To change it, and make it more Biblical and more faithful. When Luther nailed that piece of paper—the 95 Theses—to the church door back in 1517, he had no idea the storm of controversy that would erupt.

You see, the Roman Catholic Church had plenty of experience handling controversy. They knew how to quickly put out fires and how to quickly silence opposition. But Luther wasn't alone; there were many, many other people who also thought the Roman Catholic Church had strayed from the true faith and needed Biblical correction.

The Catholic Church tried their best to silence these reformers, but over the next few decades the number of protesters only grew. They soon realized that to be faithful to Christ and the Word they needed to separate from the Roman Catholic Church, so the *protesters* became known as Protestants.

Fast forward 500 years and we can be thankful for that young German monk and his insight into the errors of the Roman Catholic Church. When we look back at our history and our heritage we can see the hand of God at work protecting His Word and truth.

A lot has changed over the last 500 years. But what hasn't changed are the key teachings of the Lutheran church. There are traditionally five points that we call the heart of the Reformation: Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Christ

Alone, and to the Glory of God Alone.

The Latin word for “alone” is “sola,” so we call these five things the Five Solas of the Reformation. Let’s look at each of these and remind ourselves what we believe this Reformation Sunday:

Scripture Alone

The Roman Catholic Church in Martin Luther’s day had a long, storied history. They traced themselves back to the apostles, and claimed an exclusive authority over the Christian faith all throughout the world.

During the medieval era things got worse. The pope in Rome began to see himself as the highest-ranking Christian in the world, and the supreme authority for all things relating to the faith. The pope in Rome put together an elaborate governmental system of cardinals and bishops to protect and grow his power.

The pope also tried to control the Word of God. He authorized a particular translation that worded things in a particular way that emphasized his importance and the *church’s* role in forgiving sins and delivering salvation.

While the power and prestige of the papacy increased, the pastoral care of souls decreased.

The Roman Catholic Church gave equal authority to two things: the Word and their tradition. Luther and the reformers called the church out on this error: the only way tradition can be considered important and authoritative, they said, was *if* it agreed with the Scriptures. The Word of God *alone* was the source of all truth and authority. The system of popes and cardinals was a man-made institution and had no power over people’s souls.

The first “sola” of the Reformation was about Scripture. “Sola Scriptura,” “Scripture Alone.”

Here’s what Luther said about Scripture:

“The Word of God is the true holy thing above all things. Indeed, it is the only holy thing we Christians acknowledge and have. Though we had the bones of all the saints or all the holy and consecrated vestments gathered together in one heap, they could not help us in the slightest degree, for they are all dead things that can sanctify no one. But God’s Word is the treasure that sanctifies all things. At whatever time God’s Word is taught, preached, heard, read or pondered, there the person is sanctified by it, not on account of the external work but on account of the Word which makes us all saints.”

Sola Scriptura. The Bible is the Word of God. It is without error, totally sufficient, and the only source of all truth.

Grace Alone

Another thing the Roman Catholic Church tried to control was the distribution of forgiveness and salvation. The pope authorized salesmen to travel from city to city selling pieces of paper that apparently had the ability to forgive sins.

The Catholics had also invented the concept of *purgatory*, a place where Christians went when they died so they could suffer and endure punishment that would *purge* them from sin. The more sin you committed in your life, the more purging—the more years of purgatory—were needed.

So these salesmen would travel across the rural countryside of Europe and peddle these little pieces of paper to poor, illiterate people who didn't know any better. They were told that buying this paper, called an indulgence, would take five or ten or twenty years off their punishment. Or, they could buy an indulgence for a loved one who had died to make *their* suffering easier.

What a shameful abuse of power and what a twisted thing for the so-called religious leaders to do. Luther and the other reformers rightly called the Roman Catholic Church out for this error, too, and insisted that forgiveness is not something you can buy with money; it's not something the Church can put on a piece of paper and sell. Forgiveness and salvation come from "Grace Alone."
"Sola gratia."

Luther loved the book of Romans. We read chapter three of Romans this morning, and the reformers' teaching on "grace alone" can be seen so clearly in verses 23 and 24:

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

Faith Alone

The Catholic Church had done a great job of consolidating power and controlling every aspect of the faith. They had gone to battle with so-called heretics, who tried teaching doctrines that threatened the power and exclusivity of the papacy. They had also gone to battle against the kings and princes of Europe, fighting for and winning a great deal of control over the secular realm as well as spiritual things.

And because the Catholic Church had control over just about all aspects of life in medieval Europe, they also tried to control all aspects of the lives of believers. And to motivate people to live peaceably and to do good things and perform good works, the church made good works a condition of salvation. They claimed that in order to be saved, a person had to believe in Christ for their forgiveness, *and* do good works. Both were absolutely necessary; in other words, good behavior was how one *earned* the forgiveness of their sins.

Luther and the reformers didn't see it that way. They read their Bibles and saw the clear teaching over and over that salvation was a free gift that *didn't* require works. Salvation wasn't earned through works, it was received by *faith alone*. Sola fide.

Listen again to these clear verses from Romans 3: *"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe... For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."*

Good works *are* good, and we are still commanded to do them. We should absolutely love our neighbors, be good citizens, take care of what God has entrusted to us, be honest and truthful employees, be loving and patient parents and grandparents. But these good works are not tied to our salvation. Salvation comes through faith alone. And a person who is saved will do good works because he or she is thankful and grateful to God.

We are not saved because of our good works. We do good works because we are saved by faith alone. Sola fide.

Christ Alone

The fourth Sola of the Reformation is Christ Alone, Sola Christus. Through all the confusing Catholic teachings of extra requirements and the importance of tradition and a centralized authority and the high value of good works in addition to faith, the reformers fell back on the simple truth that only Christ alone can provide the salvation we need.

If you take this key teaching away, where else do we turn for our salvation? We would be in the same situation as medieval Europe; trusting our religious leaders when they tell us to do something or buy something.

But we know that no other person has the authority to forgive sins, only Christ. No piece of paper, no saint or holy person or relic, only Christ.

Luther said: *“But if I neglect this (truth) and let the treasure go... then I am already prepared for all sorts of snares and nets of the devil, and to let myself be led as he pleases; then someone comes who preaches to me: ‘If you want to be pious and serve God, then put on a hood, pray daily so many rosaries, burn so many little candles to St. Anna.’ Then I fall in with this like a blind man and everybody’s fool and prisoner, and do everything I am told, so completely that I cannot defend myself from even the most trifling mistake. ... but I have a Savior. On him and on no other creature, either in heaven or on earth, do I rely.”*

Christ Alone. Sola Christus.

To the Glory of God Alone

And finally, we also teach the fifth Reformation Sola: To the Glory of God Alone: Soli Deo Gloria.

This means that no one else gets the credit for our salvation besides God. We don’t deserve any of the praise or glory for trusting in Christ because it was God’s work, not ours.

In John 15 Jesus says: “You did not choose me, but I chose you.” Yes, you choose to repent of your sins. Yes, you decide to trust in God, and yes, you accept his forgiveness. But for you to even accept God is a gift. You don’t get any of the credit in the wonderful salvation transaction between you and God. The glory goes to God alone.

Luther said this: *“God has surely promised His grace to the humbled: that is to those who mourn over and despair of themselves. But a man cannot be thoroughly humbled till he realizes that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will and works, and depends absolutely on the will, counsel, pleasure and work of Another – God alone.”*

These “Five Solas” came from a context that’s different from ours. They were originally directed against the Roman Catholic Church and the abuses that Martin Luther and the other reformers were concerned about. But we still need these reminders today, and we still need to loudly insist on these five solas:

The Reformers taught that Scripture Alone was the source of all truth. How many things today are claiming to be truth? In today’s culture you can choose your own truth; you can decide for yourself what’s true and what’s right, and you’d better be inclusive of everybody else’s truth. The world and the culture around us change;

God's Word does not. Sola Scriptura.

The Reformers taught that salvation came through grace alone, and not through the elaborate system of popes and cardinals and indulgences. We might not have indulgences today but don't we have people putting conditions and obstacles to forgiveness? Making the Gospel *less* clear? Forgiveness and salvation come from "Grace Alone." "Sola gratia."

The Reformers taught that works were not a *condition* of salvation, but a *result* and *response* to salvation. We still have people twisting this order today. Confusing people by emphasizing political campaigns or social justice issues more than Christ. Salvation comes through faith alone.

The Reformers kept the focus on Christ when the Catholic Church tried to emphasize the role of the pope and other human institutions. We have Christians today emphasizing the role of our emotions or our intellect or our will power when it comes to being saved. But like Luther said: "*I have a Savior. On him and on nothing else do I rely.*"

And finally, the Reformers taught that only God gets the glory. The world today is filled with people and institutions that love to take the credit for things, even your salvation. It can be tempting for us to take the credit for ourselves, too, can't it? But the glory goes to God alone.

We get to celebrate our Reformation Heritage today. And even though a lot has changed over the last 505 years, much has stayed the same. Praise God for his steadfast love and unshakable truth.

Amen.