

Remembering the Reformation
Message – Pastor Joe Davis
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I. INTRODUCTION

500 Years Ago Wednesday

It was All Saints Day, November 1st, in the year 1517, exactly 500 years ago this coming Wednesday, when a hammering was heard on the doors of All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany. Martin Luther, the 33-year-old Professor of Theology in Wittenberg, was nailing his famous 95 Theses on the doors of what was also known as Castle Church. In doing so, he was inviting others to a discussion, either by speech or in writing, the topic of indulgences. It was an ominous pounding that signaled the start of an intense spiritual battle that God would use to return his church to the true message of the gospel of Jesus Christ found clearly in the pages of the Bible...the good news message that true salvation comes by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, to the glory of God alone. It was the beginning of what we now call the Reformation. And in honor of its 500th anniversary, we're going to spend a little time today remembering what it was about and the crucial truths of Scripture it recovered.

The Man Who Initiated the Reformation

Well, who was this young professor whom God used to kick-start the Reformation? *Christianity Today* had an article recently that gives a nice, brief summary of Martin Luther and how he got to this point where he was ready to take that bold move of challenging the established teachings of the Roman Catholic Church:

“Martin was born [on November 10th, 1483] at Eisleben (about 120 miles southwest of modern Berlin) to Margaret and Hans Luder (as it was locally pronounced). He was raised in Mansfeld, where his father worked at the local copper mines.”

“Hans sent Martin to Latin school and then, when Martin was only 13 years old, to the University of Erfurt to study law. There Martin earned both his baccalaureate and master's degrees in the shortest time allowed by university statutes. He proved so adept at public debates that he earned the nickname ‘The Philosopher’.”

“Then in 1505 his life took a dramatic turn. As the 21-year-old Luther fought his way through a severe thunderstorm on the road to Erfurt, a bolt of lightning struck the ground near him. ‘Help me, St. Anne!’ Luther screamed. ‘I will become a monk!’”

“The scrupulous Luther fulfilled his vow: he gave away all his possessions and entered the monastic life. Luther was extraordinarily successful as a monk. He plunged into prayer, fasting, and ascetic practices—going without sleep, enduring bone-chilling cold without a blanket, and flagellating himself. As he later commented, ‘If anyone could have earned heaven by the life of a monk, it was I.’”

“Though he sought by these means to love God fully, he found no consolation. He was increasingly terrified of the wrath of God. [He said:] ‘When it is touched by this passing inundation of the eternal, the soul feels and drinks nothing but eternal punishment.’”

“During his early years, whenever Luther read what would become the famous ‘Reformation text’—Romans 1:17—his eyes were drawn not to the word faith, but to the word righteous. Who, after all, could ‘live by faith’ but those who were already righteous? The text was clear on the matter: ‘the righteous shall live by faith.’”

“Luther remarked, ‘I hated that word, ‘the righteousness of God,’ by which I had been taught according to the custom and use of all teachers ... [that] God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.’ The young Luther could not live by faith because he was not righteous—and he knew it.”

“Meanwhile, he was ordered to take his doctorate in the Bible and become a professor at Wittenberg University. During lectures on the Psalms (in [the years] 1513 and 1514) and a study of the Book of Romans, he began to see

a way through his dilemma. [He wrote:] ‘At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I ... began to understand that the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith... Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open.’”

“On the heels of this new understanding came others. To Luther the church was no longer the institution defined by apostolic succession; instead it was the community of those who had been given faith... Faith no longer consisted of assenting to the church's teachings but of trusting the promises of God and the merits of Christ.”

“It wasn't long before the revolution in Luther's heart and mind played itself out in all of Europe.”

The Need for Reformation

You see, the Roman Catholic Church at this point in history was fostering some terrible abuses of the power they held over society and claimed they held over the eternal destiny of people's souls. They had elevated the church teachings and traditions to the same level as Scripture itself, even though those teachings and traditions were often in direct opposition to the clear truths of Scripture. And they had developed that awful church fundraising mechanism called indulgences, which preyed on people's fear of judgment and eternal punishment. Jesus was primarily represented by the church as the wrathful judge who was coming to execute judgment on the wicked, while his saving and intercessory work was minimized and neglected.

And since everyday people had no access to the Bible in their own language, there was no way for them to read and understand the Bible for themselves and see where the church was in error. If you didn't know Latin, your only understanding of the Scriptures was given to you through the teachings and traditions of the church. Not to mention that if you challenged the Pope or the priests, they might refuse to grant you forgiveness and damn your soul to hell. These were some of the major reasons why the need for Reformation was so great at this point in history.

Indulgences were the pinnacle of abuse in the church at this time and thus the first thing Luther tackled with his new understanding of Scripture. Indulgences were tied in with the church-created teaching of Penance, which was said to be necessary to remedy any serious lapse into sin. According to T.M. Lindsay, in his book, *History of the Reformation*, the Sacrament of Penance had four parts: *“Sorrow; Confession; Absolution; and Satisfaction.*

The absolution, [which was granted by the priest after sorrow and confession, was said to remove] the whole guilt of the sin confessed and the whole of the eternal punishment due. However, temporal punishments were still due [to the sinner] and satisfaction was necessary to deal with this. [Satisfaction involved things like fasting and giving money to the poor...religious duties to try and make up for the sin. However,] If the satisfaction performed during earthly life was not sufficient, then Purgatory, [a place of temporary punishment before entering heaven], would be necessary to complete it. Indulgences [which, conveniently, could be purchased from the church] became a way to remove the threat of Purgatory.” And lo and behold, you could also buy them for your dead relatives and friends and get them out of Purgatory.

In essence, the spiritual battle Martin Luther was entering, was a battle to recover salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone...not by works or purchased with money or needing a priest to grant it. In the words of Martin Luther himself:

“Now the true meaning of Christianity is this: that a man first acknowledge through the law, that he is a sinner, for whom it is impossible to perform any good work...Trying to merit grace by preceding works, therefore, is trying to placate God with sins, which is nothing but heaping sins on sins, making fun of God, and provoking his wrath...Thus the first step in Christianity is the preaching of repentance and knowledge of oneself.”

“The second step is this: If you want to be saved, your salvation does not come by works; but God has sent His only Son into the world that we might live through Him. He was crucified and died for you and bore your sins in His own body (1 Peter 2:24)...He wants to give us forgiveness of sins, righteousness, and eternal life for the sake of Christ. For God is He who dispenses His gifts freely to all, and this is the praise of His deity. But He

cannot defend this deity of His against self-righteous people who are unwilling to accept grace and eternal life from Him freely but want to earn it by their own works.”

Salvation always begins with a crying out to God for mercy. God’s gift of salvation is accepted with humble repentance granted by God; a simple acknowledgment of personal sin and a desire to turn away from it. The gift of salvation is opened as we believe in Jesus Christ’s death on the cross for our sins and resurrection from the dead and invite him to be our Savior and Lord. And there’s absolutely nothing we can ever do to earn or deserve it.

This was a radical message within the church of 16th century Europe, because the clear teachings of Scripture had been mostly obscured by the traditions of a power-hungry church in need of money. Martin Luther was opening a huge can of worms that desperately needed opening, but whose opening would create a firestorm of controversy and vicious attempts by the power-brokers of the church to silence the truth.

A Favorite Martin Luther Moment

Well, before we briefly look at what’s known as the Five *Solas* of the Reformation and the related Scriptures, I want to share with you my favorite Martin Luther moment. It comes from the description of an eyewitness at what was called, the Leipzig Disputation, where Martin Luther publically debated John Eck, who represented the Roman Catholic Church. Intense controversy had been swirling since his nailing of the 95 Theses, and now Luther was face-to-face with one of the premiere debaters of the opposing views. Listen to how the eyewitness described the two men during the debate:

“[John Eck] had a huge square body, a full strong voice coming from his chest, fit for a tragic actor or a town crier, more harsh than distinct; his mouth, eyes, and whole aspect gave the idea of a butcher or a soldier rather than of a theologian. He gave one the idea of a man striving to overcome his opponent rather than of one striving to win a victory for the truth. There was as much [falsehood] as good reasoning in his arguments; he was continually misquoting his opponents’ words or trying to give them a meaning they were not intended to convey...”

“Martin,” says the same eyewitness, “is of middle height; his body is slender, emaciated by study and by cares; one can count almost all the bones; he stands in the prime of his age; his voice sounds clear and distinct...however hard his opponent pressed him he maintained his calmness and his good nature; though in debate he sometimes used bitter words...He carried a bunch of flowers in his hand, and when the discussion became hot he looked at it and smelt it.”

Don't you love that picture of Martin Luther? In the intensity of debate as his opponent tried every means to ruffle his feathers and cause him to lose his temper, Luther kept pausing and quietly studying the flowers and then taking a calming breath of their fragrance. This must have helped him follow the advice of Scripture from the book of James: “Be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.” We could all benefit from this strategy of Luther's in our own lives! Listen carefully... breathe...consider the big picture...and then calmly respond without anger. Martin Luther would need this strategy many times in the years to come as the controversy of the Reformation heated up. But the truths of Scripture Luther was bringing to light were so worth the battle, and he would fight it courageously by the Lord's strength. And you and I today have reaped the benefits of the risks and perils and constant attacks Martin Luther endured throughout his life.

II. THE FIVE SOLAS OF THE REFORMATION

Well, as I already mentioned, the key truths of Scripture affirmed by Luther and the other reformers are commonly called, “The Five *Solas* of the Reformation.” The Latin word, *Sola*, means, “alone.” But somehow “The Five Alones of the Reformation” just doesn't have quite the same ring to it! But let's spend a few minutes reviewing the five key *solas* of Scripture that were re-affirmed during the Reformation.

***Sola Scriptura* – By Scripture Alone**

The first is: *Sola Scriptura*...by Scripture alone. This affirms the foundational truth that the Bible is the very Word of God and is infallible, authoritative, and trustworthy in all respects and is our final and complete guide for life and godliness. We don't need any other writings or books or teachings to be able to

understand who God is and how to live in relationship with him. And any other writings or teachings that contradict what the Bible teaches or add additional requirements or doctrines not found in the Bible are in error. *Sola Scriptura* affirms the truths of 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

And the truths of 2 Peter 1:3-4:

3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 4 by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

In the Bible we find all the truth we need to come to new life through Christ and learn to live life and eternity with our God. And through the Holy Spirit the Bible is also understandable to every person who approaches it with humility and faith. It doesn't need a priest or a theologian to be understandable.

Sola Gratia – By Grace Alone

The second *Sola* is: *Sola Gratia*...by grace alone. This *Sola* affirms the Scriptural truth that salvation is never by works...it's not something we can ever earn by our own efforts or goodness. None of us deserve salvation. Salvation is by grace alone...it's a free gift of God that's given to all who will simply accept that gift through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. *Sola Gratia* affirms the truth found throughout Scripture that salvation comes only as a gift of God's grace and is not something we can earn. As in 2 Tim 1:9-10:

9 [God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, 10 and which now has been manifested

through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel...

And in Ephesians 2:4-9:

4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved— 6 and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, 7 so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Did you see some grace in there?! Well, in case you're still wondering if you can earn salvation or ever deserve it, Romans 3:20 should clear it up forever:

20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

No human being will be saved by keeping the Law. We will always fail. Instead the Law is intended to help us see our desperate need for God's salvation, so that we will come to him in repentance and accept his beautiful gift of salvation. Salvation is by God's grace alone – *Sola Gratia*.

Sola Fide – Through Faith Alone

The third *Sola* is: *Sola Fide*...through faith alone. Salvation is on the basis of faith. Faith is the only means of salvation. Saving faith comes when by God's grace we recognize our sin and need for salvation and come to him in simple repentance. And in that repentance and cry for mercy, he provides us with the faith we need for salvation. *Sola Fide* affirms the truth we just looked at in Ephesians 2:8-9:

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, 9 not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Notice that salvation is through faith, not by works. This removes any basis for boasting on our part. Even the faith we need is given as a gift of God as we call out to him.

And re-stated again in Galatians 2:16:

16 yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.

Sola Fide...salvation is through faith alone. But it's not just a faith in anything...It's a faith in one specific person.

***Sola Christus* - Through Christ Alone**

And this brings us to the fourth *Sola*: *Sola Christus*...through Christ alone. There's no other person or place in the universe where salvation can be found. God's salvation comes only through faith in his Son, Jesus Christ. *Sola Christus* affirms the truths of John 14:6 and Acts 4:12:

John 14:6

6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Acts 4:12 – [Speaking of Jesus]:

12 And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

Sola Christus...eternal salvation is through Jesus Christ alone...through faith in his death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection from the dead.

***Solo Deo Gloria* - To the Glory of God Alone**

And finally, the fifth *Sola*: *Solo Deo Gloria*...to the glory of God alone. When salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone, apart from

any works of our own, all glory goes to God alone...who is both the Author and the Finisher of our salvation! Amen?!

We get a great summary of the work of Christ and how it leads to the glory of God in Philippians 2:5-11:

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Salvation is by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, and results in the glory of God alone! And we know all this through Scripture alone!

III. CONCLUSION

So I hope you see now why the Reformation is so worth celebrating and remembering. I'm not intending today to honor and glorify Martin Luther and represent him as a perfect man who somehow won a great battle for God. But what I am intending to do today is celebrate and remember how God used an imperfect man saved by grace and empowered by his Spirit, to recover the clear message of his good news of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone...a salvation and forgiveness and new life available to every single person in the universe who will simply call on the name of the Lord in repentance and faith in Jesus Christ!

This salvation doesn't come through an earthly priest or pastor or depend on our good works or our financial contributions. It's a free gift waiting for everyone willing to accept it by God's grace, and when accepted it brings new spiritual life, peace with God, eternal forgiveness, freedom from God's wrath, adoption as

God's child, God's Spirit dwelling inside, power to defeat sin, and so much more!
It's the power of God for the eternal salvation of everyone who believes!

If you haven't accepted it yet, I implore you to call out to God and do it today!
And if you have accepted it, don't ever be ashamed of it, but let's be about
sharing it boldly at every opportunity with others. Let's read and believe Romans
1:16-17 together:

***16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for
salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is
written, "The righteous shall live by faith."***