

The Reformation Still Matters

By Todd Pruitt

October 31st of this year marks the 490th anniversary of Martin Luther's outrageous act of nailing his "95 Theses" to the door of the castle church at Wittenberg. It was, at the time, the shot heard round the world. The hammer blows were particularly loud in the ears of Pope Leo. Martin Luther was not the first to cry "reform!" For instance, one hundred years before Luther, the Czech, Jan Hus spoke out against the institutional and theological corruption of the Roman Church. For his efforts, Hus was burned at the stake. There were other pre-Reformation reformers like John Wycliffe whose body was exhumed following a natural death so that the church could burn his remains and thus condemn him as a heretic. But it was the monk from Wittenberg whose actions had the greatest impact on the church specifically and western culture generally.

The fires of reformation swept across Germany into France and Great Brittan. Men like Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Zwingli came to see that the Church had not only failed to be faithful stewards of God's Word but had lost the gospel of Jesus Christ. The message of God's free grace in Jesus had been muddied and defaced by a superstitious and works-driven religion. The Reformation began then with the cry, "Sola Scriptura" or "Scripture Alone!" It was a Bible movement. Like all genuine revivals going back to the Old Testament, the Reformation was driven by a passion to recover the Word of God and place it once again at the center of the lives of God's people.

The remainder of this article is drawn from the wonderful book by Stephen Nichols aptly titled The Reformation:

"The things that matter most to us all center on the gospel. The church simply can't afford to forget the lesson of the Reformation about the utter supremacy of the gospel in everything the church does...It is far too easy to forget, especially when forgetting eases our conscience. History, however, compels us to remember. In studying the Reformation, we remember what the church is all about, and we remember how easy it is for the church to lose its grip on the gospel.

"If he said it once, Martin Luther said it a hundred times: 'The church's true treasure is the gospel.' Luther lived at a time when this true treasure had been traded for something worth far less. As a monk, he stood in a long line of succession that stretched back through centuries of theologians and churchmen who had heaped up layer upon layer of extra-biblical teaching and practice, obscuring the church's true treasure of the gospel. Like scaffolding that surrounds and hides the beauty of a building, these layers needed to be torn down so the object that mattered could be seen without hindrance and without obstruction. Luther, with a little help from his friends, tore down the scaffolding, revealing the beauty and wonder of the gospel for the church once again. Luther called his own (re)discovery of the gospel a 'breakthrough'.

"In the process he brought about an entire revolution of church life, practice, and doctrine. Many of the doctrines that we Protestants take for granted find their

crystallized expression in the thought of the Reformers. Theologians speak of the *Solas*, from the Latin word *sola*, meaning “alone.” Usually we list five *Solas*:

1. *Sola Scriptura*, meaning “Scripture alone”: The Bible is the sole and final authority in all matters of life and godliness. The church looks to the Bible as its ultimate authority.

2. and 3. *Sola Gratia*, meaning “grace alone,” and *Sola Fide*, meaning “faith alone”: Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. It is not by works; we come to Christ empty-handed. This is the great doctrine of justification by faith alone, the cornerstone of the Reformation.

4. *Solus Christus*, meaning “Christ alone”: There is no other mediator between God and sinful humanity than Christ. He alone, based on his work on the cross, grants access to the Father.

5. *Soli Deo Gloria*, meaning “the glory of God alone”: All life can be lived for the glory of God; everything we do can and should be done for his glory. The Reformers called this the doctrine of *vocation*, viewing our work and all the roles we play in life as a calling.

“These doctrines form the bedrock of all that we believe, and the Reformers gave these doctrines their finest expression. In addition to the doctrines we routinely believe, the Reformers also laid out for us many of the practices of the church that we take for granted. The church had lost sight of the sermon, celebrating the Mass instead. The Reformers returned the sermon to the church service. In the case of the Puritans in England, they returned it with a vengeance.

“Congregations didn’t sing in the centuries leading up to the Reformation. In fact, Jan Hus, one of the pre-Reformation reformers, was condemned as a heretic for, among other things, having his congregation sing. Luther and the other Reformers restored congregational singing to the church. Knowing this should humble us every time we sing in church. We should offer our heartfelt thanks to Luther, and we should remember what Hus gave for the privilege.”

It’s very hard for a man to believe that God is gracious to him. The human heart can’t grasp this.

- Martin Luther

Recommended resources:

The Reformation by Stephen Nichols – Very helpful and fun to read history

The Reformation by Owen Chadwick – More comprehensive than Nichol’s book.

Here I Stand by Roland Bainton – Classic biography on Luther

The Case for Traditional Protestantism by Terry Johnson – Excellent study of the 5 *Solas*.