

# **The Five Solas - Sola Scriptura, Sola Christus, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Deo Gloria**

**Psalm 145:8-13 and Ephesians 2:1-10 (NIV)**

**October 29, 2017 International Protestant Church of Zurich**

**Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**REFORMATION SUNDAY**

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Today is a special day, for reasons I want to talk about in a moment, and so we are going to set aside the sermon series from Nehemiah for one week and focus instead on the Protestant Reformation.

We'll get back to Nehemiah, I promise, and finish up the story by the end of November.

Even though the Reformation was to change the way people thought about lots of things – including politics and economics and culture and much more – it's important to remember where the Reformation began.

And it began – at least this is how the story has been passed down to us – it began with a Augustinian monk named Martin Luther who tried and tried, desperately at times, to find peace, to experience the gospel in its simplest terms.

To do that, as you know, Luther read and studied the letters of Paul, especially Paul's Letter to the Romans. For today's New Testament reading, I propose that we turn to Ephesians, because the same themes that excited Martin Luther 500 years ago, that drove him deeper into the biblical text, are also found here in this reading.

Using your new pew Bible, I invite you to read with me from Ephesians chapter 2...

**As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup> All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. <sup>4</sup> But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, <sup>5</sup> made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. <sup>6</sup> And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup> in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup> For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Today, as you've heard several times already, we are remembering the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of what has come to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

I don't think – and no serious scholar really believes – that, when Martin Luther or one of his graduate students (more likely) nailed those 95 debating points to the church door in Wittenberg, it was then (at that precise moment) that the Reformation was set in motion.

The truth is, lots of historical events – including the invention of the printing press and the longing among some German princes to be free from the tyranny of Rome – lots of events came together at about the same time to produce this thing that today we call the Reformation.

Martin Luther gets lots of credit, but he was only one part of it. An early part, of course, and an important part, but not the earliest, and maybe not even the most important. There were others.

A century earlier, Jan Hus in Prague, was already laying the foundation for what was to come, and as you know he was burned at the stake for his teachings, which were considered heretical at the time.

So, this thing we celebrate today had many parts, and it involved many people, and frankly it's difficult to know where to begin.

I should tell you that it's thrilling for me, personally, to be here at this historic moment, here in the geographical center of the Reformation. What a thrill. I'm excited about what we are doing today.

I grew up in a Christian tradition which celebrated the Reformation every year with special Reformation Day worship services, which (looking back) were actually big anti-Catholic rallies. We came together, to be honest, to remember all the reasons Catholics were wrong in what they believed.

I graduated from a college named after John Calvin, the great Protestant Reformer from Geneva. And I serve a church today which is only a 10-minute walk from the Grossmünster, where Ulrich Zwingli played a key role in the movement.

The Reformation is a big part of my life and my faith.

But I have to say, now that the day is finally here, I'm not entirely sure what we should be doing. I'm not sure what this day *really* means. Should we celebrate? Or should we merely commemorate?

Maybe we should gather today to repent and confess our sin. After all, there was a great deal about that period in history to be ashamed of.

John Calvin famously burned Michael Servetus at the stake for denying the Trinity. Ulrich Zwingli drowned a group of Anabaptists in the Limmat River for beliefs that many of us here today are quite happy to be identified with. Martin Luther, especially toward the end of his life, wrote some of the most disturbing anti-Semitic essays ever produced. They're shameful.

And that's just the beginning.

I don't know if you've thought much about this, but the legacy of the Reformation is not all good news. And I'll give you an example.

For the first one thousand years of church history, the church remained together, which is a remarkable achievement when you think about it. There was a split between east and west in 1054, which most of us today would be hard pressed to explain, but the church continued more or less in unity for another 500 years, until the Reformation.

And then – how should we put it? – things fell apart.

One of the most shameful legacies of the Reformation is that it has become common and even expected that Christians walk away from each other in times of disagreement. And we don't just walk away from each other, we denounce each other as heretical.

Today there are an estimated 43,800 different denominations in the world, often living in distrust and judgment of the others. It is shameful. It must grieve our Father in heaven. It is not what Jesus himself prayed for on the night before he died. Read John 17. Over and over in that chapter Jesus prayed that we his followers might be one, even as he and the Father are one.

I could give you several other examples, but I will give just two for now. Another terrible legacy of the Reformation is that the Protestant church almost entirely abandoned the inner life.

It's true that in the Reformation there was a flowering of intellectual life, which is one of the reasons I am glad to call myself Reformed today. I love it that my faith has an intellectual rigor, that you can debate and talk about it and study it. But in the process of encouraging the growth of philosophy, and even the natural sciences, what the Reformers largely abandoned were the spiritual practices.

Today, 500 years later, Protestants are turning to Catholic writers like Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen and other to rediscover contemplative prayer, and spiritual direction, and intentional retreats. Over the years, when I have wanted to go on retreat with the elders from my church, we have ended up, most of the time, in Catholic retreat centers. And there's an historical reason for that.

And then, just one more of those unfortunate legacies. The Protestant Reformation led to a rejection of art and beauty. If you've travelled to John Calvin's church, St. Peter's, in Geneva, then you've seen how the Reformers painted over that beautiful art which covered the interior of the church. Today, in parts of the building, that art is slowly being uncovered.

Reformers, like Calvin, had no use for art, and so walls of churches were left blank. Church buildings were plain, and the focus, always and everywhere, was to be on the word of God alone. Look at the architecture of this church – with pulpit at the center and raised, choir in the back – all of that is a direct result of the Reformation.

Only 500 years later have Protestants begun to re-discover art and architecture and beauty and their proper place in the church and in worship.

So, once again, let me ask you, What should be we doing today? Celebrating or confessing? No wonder most people I know prefer to dress up in silly costumes and go to Halloween parties.

Three years ago, along with a group of international church pastors and their spouses, Susan and I visited Martin Luther's famous Castle Church in Wittenberg, and our guide was a brand-new Ph.D. in German history.

And at one point, I asked him what Martin Luther is most remembered for in Germany today, and his answer – I've told this story before – his answer was that Martin Luther is remembered today and celebrated for having standardized the German language, when he translated the Bible from the Latin into German.

And I remember feeling sad about that. I still feel sad about that. Yes, it was a wonderful thing that the Bible became available to the people in a language that many of them – not all, but many of them – could read, but is that Luther's most important legacy?

Before we forget, before the Reformation disappears altogether from our minds, I want to lift up some important truths today which should not be forgotten. If we're going to celebrate today, let's celebrate these things. We should acknowledge and confess those other things I mentioned. Like most revolutions, political and religious, there was a great deal to be ashamed of.

But today let's remember what we have been given. I think most adult Christians should know this much about who we are and what we believe. And even if we can't say, exactly, what Luther or Calvin or Zwingli taught, and naturally there were differences between them, these are the truths that we should remember and celebrate.

As far as I know, none of the Reformers ever talked about the five solas – **Sola Scriptura, Solus Christus, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Deo Gloria**. There is a beautiful piece of art on the cover your worship bulletin, portraying the five solas, by the Christian calligrapher Timothy Botts. And if you don't know his work, I recommend it to you.

No Reformer ever taught the "five solas," but looking back at this period of history, what emerges and what seems clear are these truths. What animated these people, what drove them to do the things they did, what led them to offer their own lives (like Jan Hus)?

Well, it was these five truths that are the most important legacy of the Reformation. Let me say briefly what each of them means.

**Sola Scriptura** – Scripture is the revealed and written Word of God. It's the divine authority for our life and teaching. Everything else – the ancient creeds, the faithful teaching of Christian leaders – everything else carries less weight for us than God's Word. In fact, everything else must be measured against what Scripture teaches.

So, we are people of the Word. We are people of the Book. How are we to live and act and think? Well, that's easy. What does the Bible say?

According to the Westminster Confession (1646) – this is a famous quote – "**Councils...may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice....**"

Sola Scriptura. Scripture alone.

**Next, Solus Christus.** Christ alone.

We need no mediator between God and us, other than Jesus Christ.

Every Sunday morning we stand in this church and we confess our sin – to ourselves, to each other, and most remarkably to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. You don't need to come to me privately, you don't need to go to anyone else. Your relationship is with the one who died for you. You pray to him, you confess your sins to him, you appeal to him for forgiveness.

And let me ask you this: who is more likely to forgive you than the one person in the whole universe who is most for you, who gave his life for you. Solus Christus. Christ alone.

**Next, Sola Gratia.** By grace alone.

There has never been a more beautiful word in my life than the word “grace.” I was going to say it was the word that changed my life, but that's not true. My life was changed, and then I found the word to describe what had happened. And that word was grace.

I was loved and accepted and wanted – and not because of anything I had done or found the courage not to do. And at first I couldn't believe it. I had never felt anything so good, so wonderful. I will never forget it. It's why I stand here today. And it's why I have been doing this for nearly 40 years. One word. Grace.

I have read some modern analysis of Martin Luther that he suffered from a form of OCD, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, or sometimes called scrupulosity. He lived in a constant state of fear that he wasn't good enough, that he wasn't doing enough, that he would never be acceptable enough, that he would never find God's favor.

And to 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, that probably sound ridiculous. Who worries about those things? And yet I have known many church people over the years who suffer from milder forms of the same dysfunction.

If the gospel is good news, you would never know from looking at these church people. It's only by God's grace that we are loved, wanted, and forgiven. Sola Gratia.

**Next, Sola Fide.** By faith alone.

This was a big one. We are not accepted by God, according to the Reformers, because of any good works we have done or could do. We have nothing to offer as payment for the righteousness we need to come before God. That righteousness is received in only one way – by faith alone.

So, as the Bible puts it, we are saved by faith alone – faith in the incarnate Son of God who lived, suffered, died, and rose again to achieve righteousness for us.

I hesitate to give so much theology and so many theological terms in one sermon, but if ever there was a day to do it, today would be the day.

The doctrine or teaching for which Martin Luther will always be remembered is “**justification by faith.**” Luther famously said that justification by faith is “**the article with and by which the church stands.**”

For him – and for everyone who proudly stands in the history of the Reformation – there is nothing, not one thing, that you and I can do to receive God’s righteousness, except to believe.

Genesis tells us that Abraham believed God and it was “**credited to him as righteousness.**” It was the one and only expectation that God had, and Abraham met it. Sola Fide.

**Finally, Soli Deo Gloria.** To God alone be the glory.

Composers like Bach and Handel used to put the letters S D G on the works they composed. Bach even used those letters on many of his secular works.

What they did was for God’s glory alone. Human applause was nice. But the work in their minds was for another purpose, a higher purpose.

More of us, I think, could learn to live for God’s glory alone. We should all put the letters S D G on our work.

Getting approval from parents or peers or co-workers or faculty or fellow students or whoever you are looking to impress ... getting approval from them is nice when it happens, but it is nothing – the Reformers have taught us – it is nothing compared to living and working for the glory of God alone. That’s when we become fully human, fully alive, fully the people we were meant to be.

So, should we celebrate this day? I don’t know. But we should remember what the Reformers taught us – and the rich legacy of faith they left behind.

For all of that, I am grateful and I give glory to God alone.