

Reformation Sunday: 500th Anniversary October 29, 2017

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On October 31, 1517, a little-known Monk named Martin Luther took a hammer and nailed his 95 Theses (Truth Propositions) to the wooden doors of the Wittenberg Chapel.

That act produced a spiritual earthquake that literally changed the world. At the heart of Luther's concern was the Church's departure from the Gospel and its recovery.



The Church of the Middle Ages was shrouded in spiritual darkness. Popular theological conceptions were that God was angry, Christ was distant, the Holy Spirit non-existent, and death was something to be feared, for what followed was purgatory. Heaven was an elusive hope. The reason? The Scriptures were inaccessible to the common people, being in Latin, a dead language. As a result, the Church could mislead them to believe that right standing with God was only to be gained by works of righteousness, buying of indulgences, praying to the saints, etc.

While Martin Luther changed all of that, he first had to be changed. An Augustinian monk, Luther was as a living example of monastic piety, much as Saul of Tarsus was an example of Pharisaic piety. His confessor became frustrated with his endless and agonizing confessions, and encouraged his study of the Bible. Luther poured over the Scriptures, particularly Paul's letter to the Romans, but one section became key:

“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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” Romans 1:16-17 ESV

God revealed the truth of his word to that miserable monk, it set him free and so it is for us. Right standing with God comes not by works of righteousness, not by purchasing indulgences, not by praying to the saints. It comes by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

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Martin Luther started a revolution he never planned or expected. On April 18, 1521, Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the Catholic Church demanded that he recant his heresies or face a fiery death. Luther famously replied: “Unless I can be instructed and convinced with evidence from the Holy Scriptures... then I cannot and will not recant... Here I stand, I can do no other. So help me God. Amen!” Today, we must stand for the Gospel, and in particular, these Reformation truths:

Sola Scriptura: Scripture alone. God’s word is final authority for the Christian (2 Tim. 3:14-17). No edict by the Church has the same force. Where tradition, teaching or our experience and the Bible differ, Scripture is supreme.

Sola Fide: Faith alone. Only by placing our trust in Christ can we be made right with God. It is “not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:9). Faith alone is our response to the grace of God mediated through Christ.

Sola Gratia: Grace alone. All are fallen sinners by nature and choice and are under God’s wrath (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). Yet Holy God responds with grace to the undeserving sinner because of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Our works of righteousness have no effect. We are saved by God’s grace alone (Eph. 2:8).

Solus Christus: Christ alone. As the “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:5-6), only he could take our place and punishment. Our right standing with God depends on the merit of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. Christ alone saves us.

Soli Deo Gloria: Glory to God alone. Since our chief end is to glorify God, whatever we do, we should “do all for the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

Reformation Sunday Prayer: “Almighty God, who through the preaching of your servants, the courageous Reformers, has caused the light of the Gospel to shine forth: Grant us Father, that knowing its saving power, we may faithfully guard and defend it against all enemies, and joyfully proclaim it, to the salvation of souls and the glory of your Holy Name; through thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever. Amen.” - Adapted from an Old Lutheran Service Book & Hymnal

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