

500th Anniversary of the Reformation
~ The 5 'Solos' of the Gospel

Pastor Tom
 October 29, 2017

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4mk6Uj1edI> The Just shall live by faith alone.

2 days from now on October 31, 2017 is the 500th anniversary of a very significant moment in church history. But it is very unlikely that you will hear anything about this anniversary in the news. It is more likely that you will see people dressed up for Halloween. People will hustle and bustle to prepare for the Halloween "holiday." And recognition of this event will pass largely unnoticed. But the event that happened 500 years ago this Tuesday unleashed a chain of events that rocked the civilized world and continues to reverberate today.

500 years ago on October 31, 1517, a Roman Catholic priest named Martin Luther took a long scroll of paper with 95 statements or claims on it. He went to the church door in the village called Wittenberg, Germany. There he nailed the paper to the door. The posting of this paper was not unusual for the church door served as a kind of public notice board. It was the 95 claims that mattered. They confronted common practices in the church that day and criticized the pope. His paper was soon copied and spread throughout the German speaking world.

What led Martin Luther to do this? Well he had been struggling in his own faith as a priest for a long time. One time while conducting mass, terror filled him. He was convicted of the holiness of God and wondered if what they offered as a church and as priests was sufficient to atone for their sin. Luther not only served as a priest but also a teacher of theology. He prepared lectures on Paul's letter to the Romans. He came across Romans 1:16-17. "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 to faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Now the church taught that a person was justified or made right before God by faith AND through participation in all the different traditions of the church – veneration of relics; confession to the priests and indulgences. You could buy indulgences. Apparently they were like little certificates that declared the bearer was forgiven for their sins. Luther began to read Scripture more and more. He couldn't find any of these religious trappings in the Scriptures. He settled (as we saw in the video) on this text in Romans 1:17 "the righteous shall live by faith." But because of all the additions to faith he saw around him he declared that it was faith (alone or "sola" in Latin) by which a person was justified.

But then the Pope of that time wanted to complete the building project of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. He needed funds. So he sent a fellow named Tetzel around to sell indulgences to raise the money. Tetzel proclaimed that these indulgences not only pardoned the bearer of their sins. But you could also purchase them to pardon the sins of deceased loved ones who were caught in purgatory. Some of Luther's congregants purchased these indulgences. When they came to confession, they presented the certificates to him as evidence of their absolution. Luther completely rejected these indulgences and responded by posting the 95 theses. This sparked the Reformation and began the great divide that led to the Protestant church – the protesting church – an initial break that led the multiple denominations of churches we have today.

Now you might hate history. Or you might be slightly interested in it. But you might wonder what this has to do with any of us today? Well from the initial posting of these theses, a fierce response and debate occurred between Luther and the hierarchy of Rome. This led to a debate about the fundamentals of the Gospel itself. Ultimately this led to what are now known as the 5 “solas” of the Reformation which summarized Luther's position and clarified the Gospel.

Though they continue to be much debated today, these 5 Solas help us focus on what's fundamental to our faith. They direct us away from man-made additions to the Gospel. They force us to think through what our faith depends on and the power to live it out in our lives. Though we live in a culture that dismisses theology and a Christian sub-culture that downplays it, we need to be clear about the Gospel. Then we will gain confidence in the assurance of our salvation and live in the power of God in our everyday lives. So I am going to briefly survey the 5 solas of the reformation today which are really about the Gospel – the power of God unto salvation. Then we will close with some observations that I hope will put these into perspective for our lives today.

The first sola answers the question – **Where can we find the Gospel?** Where can we discover and learn about this power of God unto salvation? The Reformation's conclusion was **Scripture Alone**. The Scriptures alone – the Old and New Testaments of the Bible – contain the highest authority and source of divine revelation (disclosure, revealing, unearthing).

So we believe God is our ultimate authority and He has primarily revealed Himself to us today in these Scriptures. Therefore, we live by His Word. Certainly they must be interpreted, figured out and explained. One way churches do

this is by writing statements of faith. They are important. The church's interpretation of Scripture throughout history is important. But the church and its interpretation is not an additional source of divine revelation from God. Human interpretations can contain error. Interpreters can make mistakes. So the church, interpreters, pastors, and all Christians must be open to correction of their wrong interpretations.

The debate about this during the Reformation focused on whether the scripture and the church or Scripture alone formed the highest authority. The Reformers concluded and defended Scripture alone 500 years ago. But today the question is different.

It's not a matter of Scripture alone. It's a question of Scripture at all. Or it's a question of which parts of Scripture still have authority. There are multiple challenges to the authority and trustworthiness of Scripture today. You might have heard of a fellow named Bart Ehrman. He is an American professor and scholar who serves as Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina. Ehrman grew up as an evangelical Christian. He attended the evangelical Christian schools like Moody Bible Institute and graduated from Wheaton College in Chicago. He also graduated from the theologically liberal Princeton Theological Seminary. He began to doubt his faith as he looked at textual variants of the New Testament. He makes the case that the copies of the New Testament manuscripts have about 400,000 differences because of mistakes in copying, translation and manuscript degeneration. So he argues that we cannot get anywhere close to the originals and so we cannot trust the Bible in any way as reliable.

Ehrman's claims sound impressive until you consider them in a greater context. Daniel Wallace is the director for the Center of the Study of New Testament manuscripts. He has debated Ehrman at least 3 times and they collaborated on a book entitled "The Reliability of the New Testament: Bart Ehrman and Daniel Wallace in Dialogue." I recently listened to a podcast where Wallace tackles Ehrman's challenge of hundreds of thousands of differences in our Bible manuscripts.

Wallace asks "What is the reason for these differences?" He answers it's because we have so many manuscripts of the New Testament. We have 5500 manuscripts in Greek the original language of the New Testament. We have 10000 in Latin which was a translation of the New Testament done as early as the second century. We have hundreds of other manuscripts in Coptic, Syrian, Georgian, Armenian and Old church Slavic and a number of other ancient languages. So the best estimate today is that there are between 20000 and 25000 hand written manuscripts of the New Testament

prior to the printing press. More manuscripts gives you greater certainty as to what the original texts said. You can trace the genealogy of the manuscripts and get closer to the original. So more manuscripts means more differences but a greater ability to get closer to the original. So 20 to 25000 manuscripts is not a cause for concern but confidence that there is so much to work with. The reason for the difference in the number of manuscripts.

But then Wallace asks “what is the quality of these differences?” He argues that the vast majority cannot even be translated. Over 70% are spelling variations like spelling John with one n or two n’s. Of approximately 400,000 variants, he has concluded one quarter of one per cent, affect the meaning of the text. So in about 1000 places, there are variances that affect the meaning of the text. That’s still a seemingly significant number. But not one cardinal or central doctrine is affected by this. In fact, Wallace has challenged Ehrman’s claim that these differences lead to serious theological problem. Ehrman has not been able to produce even one. If you are interested in this stuff, I would encourage you to look up Daniel Wallace on the web or go to the White Horse Inn podcast and look for reliability of the Bible. So don’t buy into what you are hearing today about the unreliability of Scripture. It is very popular to dismiss it as just another ancient error filled book. But the magnitude of manuscripts and copies gives us solid evidence for a faithful transmission of the text.

With the reliability of the text in mind, we can move on to what the text says. This gives us the other 4 solas. They answer the question “**What is the Gospel?**” Justification by **Grace** alone through **Faith** alone in **Christ** alone to the **Glory of God Alone.**

Romans 3:21-26 (English Standard Version)

21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— **22** the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: **23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **24** and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, **25** whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. **26** It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Some of us might have heard or memorized Romans 3:23. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God in verse 23. But then we see the word justified in verse 24. What does it mean to be justified? According to the dictionary, justify means “to demonstrate or prove to be just or right.” So if a person is justified they are considered right or valid in who they are or what they do. But here it is God who does the justifying. So **justification is the act by which God puts people who trust Christ in right relationship with himself.** Theologian Wayne Grudem puts it like this –

“Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ’s righteousness belonging to us and He declares us to be righteous in his sight”. So it is like God pronounces a verdict over us regarding our sins – Not guilty forever. This is one of the glorious truths of the Gospel. Romans 8:1 – “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”. The problem in Luther’s day was the church kept teaching that you had to keep doing all these things to get or remain justified. Luther said no. It is a done deal because of God’s declaration.

But how could God declare that without compromising His own justice and holiness? For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. That’s where the next “sola” comes in. Grace Alone. Romans 3:24. “And are justified by his grace as a gift.” So this Justification is by grace. It is an unearned gift from God. Grace generally means to show mercy to those who don’t deserve it. So if a parent catches their child with their hand in a cookie jar, an appropriate response might be a time out for going into the cookies without permission. But grace might say, “I don’t want you to do that again. But you may leave the cookie there and go back to playing. Here **Grace is God’s goodness towards those who deserve punishment.**

But doesn’t this still compromise God’s justice? How can he pardon us or show grace to us when our sins needed to be punished or paid for? Verse 25 of Romans 3 explains this. “For 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, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood.” Here is how God can offer us grace without compromising His own holiness.

“Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood”. God put Jesus forward as a substitute sacrifice for us. God offered up His own Son to suffer the punishment we deserved. Jesus’ sacrifice satisfied God’s holy and just requirements that sin needed resolution. That’s what the cross was all about. Instead of us paying with our blood, Christ paid with His blood.

So justification or right standing before God is received by grace alone. Why was “grace alone” such an issue? In Luther’s day, it was grace and works. It was grace and veneration of relics and confession and indulgences. Though we might scoff at that today, so many religions or faiths basically argue the same thing. It’s not a question of grace at all. You can make yourself right before God by good works. As long as your good and you love others, God will accept you.

But that's not the Gospel. That is a man-made salvation that really seeks to justify ourselves instead of turning to the justification God provides.

But how does this justification by grace actually come into our lives? Romans 3:25 again – “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood *to be received by faith*.” We receive salvation by faith. This points back to that key verse in Romans 1:17 – “The Righteous or Just shall live by faith.” **What is Biblical faith? Trust in Jesus Christ and His work through which God pours all the benefits of the Gospel.** Faith is like an open hand that reaches out to receive what God has for us. Or it is like a tunnel connecting to God through which God pours all His Gospel blessings. Faith looks outside of ourselves and trusts someone else to save us and make us right with God.

This clarification that we are saved through faith comes from Paul's letter to the Ephesians 2:8-9. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” So we are saved through faith. We must continue to live by faith where we trust in God to provide us the resources, wisdom and power to live by His Spirit every day.

But faith in whom? That's where the next “sola” comes in – faith in **Christ Alone**. Romans 5:19 talks about this. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.” Paul contrast the impact of Adam, the first man's life with the Jesus, the second Adam's life. Through Adam, we all inherited the sin nature. Through faith in Jesus alone, we receive justification and salvation. It was only through Jesus that this was attainable.

Instead of trusting in Christ and the church or Christ and the traditions, it was trusting in Christ alone that ultimately brought salvation. Today the challenge to Christ alone is Christ as one among many acceptable options. Remember pluralism is the worldview that affirms 2 or more mutually exclusive faiths as equally valid? So again the question arises – Is our faith in Christ alone or Christ and something else?

The last Sola is “**to the glory of God alone**.” This arose because the church of the time adhered to what Martin Luther called the theology of glory for the sinners salvation. Who got credit or glory when sinners were forgiven? he church thought it was Christ, partly Mary and the saints and partly the sinner themselves. But the reformers responded, “No, the only true Gospel is that which gives glory to God alone, as is taught in the Scriptures.”¹

¹ <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/qna/fivesolas.html>

So these are 5 “Solas” of the Reformation and some of the challenges to them today. We’ve seen a little of what Martin Luther did that ended up sparking drastic changes. I want to end with some observations and resources.

1 – Martin Luther was not perfect but used by God for great purposes. Later in life, Luther had some serious health issues. He suffered under much stress and strain. Some of his writings we would recognize today as over the top in intensity and wording. Yet, he was just a man. He was a sinner who recognized his great need for a Savior. God used his earnest seeking to bring renewal and spread of the Gospel throughout the world.

2 – Theology that doesn’t result in any mission work is flawed or incomplete. One criticism of the Reformers, and people who follow them today, is that they show more concern for right theology than right living. Or to put it another way, those who love theology think their work is done when they get the theology right or point out wrong theology. I think this is a valid criticism. I have met and at times I have been smugly content with my knowledge of right theology. We have to guard against making theology an idol that displaces Christ. Proclaiming right theology while absolving ourselves of any responsibility towards the starving, oppressed or vulnerable points to something seriously wrong. God didn’t give us justification by grace through faith so we could get a certificate saying we understand it. God gave us this immeasurable gift so that we could live and minister free from constant wondering about our status before God. He gave us the Gospel so we could receive the power of the Holy Spirit to minister for the common good of the body and the world. A disciple of Christ has not reached maturity by getting to the right theology. They mature by faithfully living out their lives in obedience to Christ and service to others.

3 – Yet right theology is vital to living the Christian life to the glory of God. Some people and some movements in history have dismissed theology. They have focused on social justice or what some call the “social gospel.” Basically, they would say “it doesn’t really matter what you believe or your understanding of theology. What really matters is if you are feeding the hungry, bringing clean water to those who have none, clothing those who have nothing and intervening for those who are oppressed”. This was a necessary correction for those who just focused on theology & forgot about the outside world. But there are some problems with this approach.

A lot of people who engage in social justice today have some good motives. They want to help others. They want to make a meaningful difference in their community. But without God and a desire to serve Him, these motivations can become warped and even self-serving. So a person wants to help out at the food bank or serve a meal

at the Mustard Seed. They do so to help those there and maybe feel good about themselves. But is feeling good about ourselves a sustainable and pure motive to keep doing social justice? When a person serves others to the glory of God, it helps deal with any self-serving motives that might creep into our service.

Another problem with social justice only concern is the power or strength to persevere. If you have ever been involved in tackling significant social issues or problems, you know how complex and sometimes overwhelming the problems can seem. You social workers know the multiple factors that contribute to problems in some of your clients lives. You know people who need multiple supports just to keep functioning. It can be an overwhelming and discouraging endeavor. If left to human power, it is one that seems hopeless. But when God is in the picture, there is potential to minister to the whole person. There is power to keep going when the human or government resources fail. There is Jesus who has this deep heart of compassion for those in need and will bring resources from all of his riches in glory to supply needs.

Then there is the challenge of boundaries. If God is not in the picture, who defines the boundaries of social justice? What about social justice that is not God honoring? What about social justice that affirms what He calls sin? Without theology and understanding of God's holiness, there is no sin really. We've seen this Fall that it's very possible to sin as we worship God. It's all possible to sin while engaging in social justice when that so called justice actually goes against God and His Word.

So there needs to be a healthy partnership between right theology & active mission work. In my understanding of the Reformation, some oppression ended because of the theology. People who thought they had to pay money to get forgiveness no longer lived under that tyranny. People at the mercy of corrupt or oppressive priests who read a Bible in a language they couldn't understand, soon had the Bible in their own language to read for themselves. This gave renewed purpose and focus for their lives. May that be the legacy of the Reformation in our church community. May God continue to do His work in transforming us more and more into Christ's likeness by the power of the Gospel. Let us not be ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God unto our salvation in glory for everyone who believes.

Resources:

- *The Reliability of the New Testament: Bart Ehrman and Daniel Wallace in Dialogue*
- *Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts*