

## *Rediscovering the Gospel: The Five Points of the Reformation*

The History of Protestantism began with the Protestant Reformation, an attempt to reform the Western Church. The word **reform** means to put or change into an improved form or condition; to amend or improve by change of color or removal of faults or abuses. The reactions of the ecclesiastical and political leaders at the time of the reformers led to a schism between Protestants and the Roman Catholic Church.

What, then, was the Reformation about?

To say that the church at that time was in sad condition is the height of understatement. Just as it is darkest before the dawn in our physical world, there was a thick veil of darkness over the church and even society itself. Gone were the simplicity of faith, the fervency of love, and the assurance of hope that was true of the Apostolic Age.

There was no joy, no peace, no certainty, and certainly no truth. Outwardly, there was pomp and formal display, but inwardly there was emptiness.

Worship was hollow and “preaching” was devoid of content. Sermons were not in the language of the people but were in Latin, which amounted to little more than “profane and vain babblings” (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:16) because only scholars understood it, leaving the people in ignorance and superstition. Beautiful cathedrals were built in the Middle Ages but within their walls lived no truth whatsoever.

During the centuries leading up to the Protestant Reformation, many western Christians were troubled by what they saw as false doctrines and malpractices within the Church, particularly involving the teaching and **sale of indulgences**.

At the time, systemic corruption often reached all the way up to the Bishop of Rome himself, the Pope. This set the stage for open debate and conflict after German theologian Martin Luther wrote his *Ninety-Five Theses* on the sale of indulgences in 1517.

## **What's an Indulgence?**

The Roman Catholic Church to this day claims that Jesus, Mary, and the saints did so many good works that left behind "merit" that they didn't need. That "treasury" of merit is in the possession of the Church, and that merit, says the Roman Catholic Church, can be bestowed on others as the Church wills.

There were two parts of an indulgence. First, Christians receive "temporal punishment" for sin, even after its guilt and eternal punishment have been forgiven by God. That temporal punishment must be paid either here on earth or in a temporary, after-death holding place called purgatory.

Secondly, The Roman Catholic Church has a "treasury," composed of the "superabundant merits of Christ and the saints," which the Church, through the exercise of the "power of the keys," can transfer to the benefit of those who are due temporal punishment.

John Tetzel was a friar, and an itinerant papal-fundraiser at this time who sold indulgences to raise money for the church's increasing expenses and for the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther detested the practice of Tetzel because it made Tetzel and the Church rich and it deceived sinners into a false hope of salvation.

Tetzel said, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory springs."

During one of his fundraising campaigns, Tetzel was recorded as saying, "Good people, have you ever burned your hand in the fire? Even one finger made raw by the flame will torment you throughout the night. Is it not so? [Holds his hand over a fire until it is burned]

Imagine then, your entire body burning. Not for one sleepless night, not for a week, but for all eternity! Are we to be spared the fires of damnation on the Judgment Day? [Unfurls paintings of sinners burning in the fires of Hell].

Tonight, your Pope, the vicar of Christ, sends you a gift, a gift to save you from such fires, a special indulgence, granted for the building of Saint Peter's

Church in Rome, where the bones of the apostles lie moldering, exposed to wind and rain, desecrated by wild animals. Take heed the words of your Holy Father who says, "Lay a stone for Saint Peters and you lay the foundation for your own salvation and happiness in heaven." How? With this indulgence. When? Tonight, and only tonight. Seek the Lord while he is near. Here is your raft!"

On October 31, 1517 Luther saw and heard enough and posted, on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany his 95 theses stating salvation is achieved through faith alone in Jesus Christ. (Posting things on church doors was a common practice back then, and that was where people posted all kinds of notices.)

Luther wanted the church to reform her ways, but she didn't want to change. The church basically laughed at Luther. This set off a chain of events that would change and impact Western Civilization for centuries to come.

In 1520, Pope Leo X ordered Luther to give up his beliefs. Luther burned the order in front of a cheering crowd and was excommunicated by the Catholic Church.

In 1521, at the Diet of Worms, Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, declared Luther an outlaw when he wouldn't recant from his views. Martin Luther went into hiding in the castle of Frederick of Saxony, a German Prince, and translated the New Testament into his native language of German, making it possible for more people to read the Bible.

At the root of the Reformation were five key truths, all of which began with the Latin word *sola*, meaning “alone.” They were:

- Sola Scriptura, the Scripture alone
- Sola Gratia, grace alone
- Sola Fide, faith alone
- Solus Christus, Christ alone
- Soli Deo Gloria, to God alone be glory

A Christian author writes, “We could put these together in one statement that summarizes the true, biblical Christian faith: It is *Scripture* alone that declares that salvation comes by *grace* alone, through *faith* alone, in *Christ* alone, by which *God* alone is glorified.”

In a similar way, the Reformers, in articulating the five *solas* used prepositions to state these central truths. They explain how five things all work

together in the plan of God, and yet each is distinct in itself, without the mixture of anything else added to it. Note the prepositions in the following sentence: **BASED ON** Scripture alone, we can affirm that justification is **BY** grace alone, **THROUGH** Faith alone, **BECAUSE OF** Christ alone, all **TO THE GLORY OF** God alone.

Therefore, the title of my message today is, ***Rediscovering the Gospel: Five Points of the Reformation***. The Reformers didn't discover something new. The gospel was always there in the Bible. The hearts of men had become darkened and ignorant to the truth of the gospel. Men such as Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli, and John Calvin rediscovered the truth and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. What they rediscovered could be summarized in five points. I would like to consider three points this morning, and then the other two this evening.

## 1. The first point is **GRACE ALONE**.

We read in Titus 3:5-7, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified **by his grace**, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

Because God is gracious, therefore sinful men are forgiven, converted, purified, and saved. It is not because of anything in them, or that ever can be in them, that they are saved; but because of the boundless love, goodness, pity, compassion, mercy, and grace of God.

Ephesians 2:8-9 makes it clear, “**For by grace** are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Grace is the divine method in saving sinners.

Jonathan Edwards writes, “Tarry a moment at the well-head. Behold the pure river of water of life, as it proceeds out of the throne of God and of the Lamb! What an abyss is the grace of God! Who can measure its breadth? Who can fathom its depth? Like all the rest of the divine attributes, it is infinite.”

The word *grace* means, favor. It is often used in the New Testament, and is employed in the sense of benevolence; felicity, or a prosperous state of affairs. It seems to be a word including all those blessings that are applicable to Christians in common; denoting an ardent wish that all the mercies and favours of God for time and eternity, blended under the general name grace, may be conferred on them.

James Montgomery Boice observes, “The words *sola gratia* mean that human beings have no claim upon God. That is, God owes us nothing except just punishment for our many and very willful sins. Therefore, if he does save sinners, which he does in the case of some but not all, it is only because it pleases him to do it.

Indeed, apart from this grace and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that flows from it, no one would be saved, since in our lost condition, human

beings are not capable of winning, seeking out, or even cooperating with God's grace.

By insisting on 'grace alone' the Reformers were denying that human methods, techniques, or strategies (this would include indulgences and purgatory) in themselves could ever bring anyone to faith. It is grace alone expressed through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that brings us to Christ, releasing us from our bondage to sin and raising us from death to spiritual life."

We read in Romans 5:15, "But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the **grace of God**, and the **gift by grace**, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many."

Matthew Henry observes, "Through one man's offence, all mankind are exposed to eternal condemnation. But the grace and mercy of God, and the free gift of righteousness and salvation, are through Jesus Christ, as man: yet the Lord from heaven has brought the multitude of believers into a more safe and exalted state than that from which they fell in Adam. This free gift did not place them anew in a state of trial, but fixed them in a state of

justification, as Adam would have been placed, had he stood. Notwithstanding the differences, there is a striking similarity. As by the offence of one, sin and death prevailed to the condemnation of all men, so by the righteousness of one, grace prevailed to the justification of all related to Christ by faith. Through the grace of God, the gift by grace has abounded to many through Christ; yet multitudes choose to remain under the dominion of sin and death, rather than to apply for the blessings of the reign of grace. But Christ will in no wise cast out any who are willing to come to him.”

The Reformers rediscovered GRACE ALONE in the gospel.

## **2. The second point is SCRIPTURE ALONE.**

We read in II Timothy 3:14-17, “But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, having been given by inspiration of God, are the all-sufficient and only rule of faith and practice, and judge of controversies.

Whatever God teaches or commands is of sovereign authority. Whatever conveys to us an infallible knowledge of his teachings and commands is an infallible rule. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the only organs through which, during the present dispensation, God conveys to us a knowledge of his will about what we are to believe concerning himself, and what duties he requires of us.

When the Reformers used the words *sola Scriptura* they were expressing their concern for the Bible's authority, and what they meant is that the Bible alone is our ultimate authority—not the pope, not the church, not the traditions of the church or church councils, still less personal intimations or subjective feelings, but Scripture only.

Other sources of authority may have an important role to play. Some are even established by God—such as the authority of church elders, the authority of the state, or the authority of parents over children. But Scripture alone is truly ultimate. Therefore, if any of these other authorities depart from Bible teaching, they are to be judged by the Bible and rejected.

John MacArthur writes, “We must embrace that the Bible alone is the Word of God and that it alone is the only source for truth about God and His kingdom. The Church doesn't interpret the Scriptures for the people of God but the Church flows from the Scriptures. Doctrine must flow from the Bible and the Bible alone (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The authority of the believer lies in the Word of God and that alone is our defense and our sword (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12; 1 Peter 3:15).

We must learn how to rightly divide the Word of God through diligent study and practice (2 Timothy 2:15 NKJV). Jesus said that His true disciples abide in His teachings and the only source for the teachings of Jesus is in the Bible (John 8:31-32; 20:31).”

It is in our hearts where we question the authority and rule of God the most.

Martin Luther adds, "I am more afraid of my own heart than of the pope and all his cardinals. I have within me the great pope, Self."

The Reformers rediscovered Scripture alone as the rule of faith and practice in the church.

### **3. The third point is FAITH ALONE.**

We read in Romans 5:1,2, “Therefore being justified **by faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access **by faith** into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”

Ephesians 2:8-9 makes it clear, “For by grace are ye saved **through faith**; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Grace is the divine method in saving sinners. Faith is the divine means in saving sinners.

John Owen writes, “The truth which we plead has two parts:

That the righteousness of God imputed to us, unto the justification of life, is the righteousness of Christ, by whose obedience we are made righteous.

That it is faith alone which on our part is required to interest us in that righteousness, or whereby we comply with God's grant and communication of it, or receive it unto our use and benefit; for although this faith is in itself the radical principle of all obedience, - - and whatever is not so, which cannot, which does not, on all occasions, evidence, prove, show, or manifest itself by works, is not of the same kind with it, --yet, as we are justified by it, its act and duty is such, or of that nature, as that no other grace, duty, or work, can be associated with it, or be of any consideration.

And both these are evidently confirmed in that description which is given us in the Scripture of the nature of faith and believing unto the justification of life.”

The Reformers never tired of saying that ‘justification is by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.’ When put into theological shorthand the doctrine was expressed as “justification by faith alone,” the article by which the church stands or falls, according to Martin Luther. The Reformers called justification by faith Christianity’s “material principle,” because it involves the very matter or substance of what a person must understand and believe to be saved.

Justification is a declaration of God based on the work of Christ. It flows from God’s grace and it comes to the individual not by anything he or she might do but by ‘faith alone’ (sola fide). We may state the full doctrine as: Justification is the act of God by which he declares sinners to be righteous because of Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone.

What do we do with a passage like James 2:17,24, “Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone...Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only.”

This verse is teaching that faith cannot stand alone and be of any avail. Only when it shows its power in works is it of the slightest value.

Faith being alone is dead in itself. If the works which living faith produces have no existence, it is a proof that faith itself has no existence; that is, that what one boasts of as faith, is dead. Faith is said to be "dead in itself," because when it has works it is alive, and it is discerned to be so, not in respect to its works, but in respect to itself. Faith, if it have not works, is dead, being by itself "alone," that is, severed from works of charity; just as the body would be "dead" if alone, that is, severed from the spirit.

Albert Barnes writes, “The ground of justification in the case is faith, and that only; the evidence of it, the carrying it out, the proof of the existence of the faith, is good works; and thus men are justified and saved not by mere abstract and cold faith, but by a faith necessarily connected with good works, and where good works perform an important part. James, therefore, does not contradict Paul, but he contradicts

a false explanation of Paul's doctrine, he does not deny that a man is justified in the sight of God by faith, for the very passage which he quotes shows that he believes that; but he does deny that a man is justified by a faith which would not produce good works, and which is not expressed by good works; and thus he maintains, as Paul always did, that nothing else than a holy life can show that a man is a true Christian, and is accepted of God.”

The Reformers rediscovered faith as the means in salvation.

In closing, we have considered three points of the Reformation: GRACE ALONE, SCRIPTURE ALONE, FAITH ALONE. Tonight we will study, CHRIST ALONE, and TO GOD ALONE BE GLORY. Let us celebrate the five points of the Reformation, not because of mere historical interest, but because this is the only way God does in fact save sinners. These five central truths of the Gospel stand together, and forever, and always... alone. Let us pray!