

Five Rediscovered Biblical Truths that Re-launched the Church.

Romans 1:15-16,

I returned to work on Monday after vacation, to discover that my computer had been running all week long. So it was no surprise when I signed in to get to work that nothing worked. Screens would not load completely, documents wouldn't print rightly, everything was taking way too long. I had no choice but to press the restart button and start everything over again. But then, as if by a miracle with the press of that button, everything once again began working as it should. Computers are like that. Leave them running for too long and their electronic memory gets crowded with bits and pieces of lost programming that no longer do anything but mess up the rest. Every so often you just have to push the restart button.

The Church can be like that as well; let things run for too long and we eventually drift away from what we should believe and from that which we should be doing. So every now and then someone has to press the restart button to get us back to our original purpose. While there have been multiple smaller restarts throughout history (revivals, re-awakenings), this Sunday marks the 501st anniversary of the biggest we've ever had.



In 1517 when Martin Luther publically posted a document listing out 95 protests against Church abuses, he launched the biggest restart in church history; that is why we call this day "Re-formation" Sunday.

Since we as a church are currently "Majoring on the Majors," thinking together about those ideas that are essential truths of the Christian faith, those beliefs which we cannot compromise regardless of whatever direction culture may take, I thought today would be a good day to review five biblical truths – actually six - which Martin Luther rediscovered and which in 1517 re-formed the Church as we now know it.

First let me give you some background.

For the first 400 years of its existence the Christian faith was a very loose organization of house churches formed around their belief in Jesus Christ as God's promised messiah who gave his life to save all who would put their trust in him. That was the simple message they shared with any who would listen and the Bible was their only authority.

Surprisingly, even as a persecuted minority, those were very successful years for the Christian faith, the Church grew dramatically in this fairly civilized, literate culture with the Bible made available for all who could read it; until finally, you might say the Church Conquered Rome. In 380a.d. Constantine's grandson the Roman Emperor Theodosius recognized Christianity as the official religion of the Latin world. State funds were directed towards crafting beautiful church buildings and Christian Priests were given government status.

But dark times lay close ahead. Just thirty years later, by 410a.d Rome had been sacked by foreign invaders and Western Europe descended into 600 years of anarchy, illiteracy, widespread poverty, and just plain hard living for everyone known as the Dark ages..

In those dark times Christian priests found themselves to be the only literate, spiritual, governmental type leaders left in the land, so they did what good pastor's should do – they shepherded and cared for all the people as best they knew how. Out of necessity, The church essentially became the local government.

Now fast forward another 1,100 years to around 1500a.d. by which time western culture had rebuilt itself and secular governments had been reestablished. Once again the common people were fairly literate, fairly prosperous, living fairly good lives, but chafing under a Church that having held too much power for way too long, now held most of the wealth and owned most the land in Europe with corrupt church leadership acting like nobility, claiming both spiritual and governmental authority even over local kings. A restart was desperately needed.

What laid the groundwork for that restart was that by the 16th century, academics were once again able to study the Bible in its original languages no longer were they restricted to the original Latin version (the Vulgate) which had been translated by one man (Jerome) in 382a.d. Among these scholars was a brilliant young college Professor named Martin Luther who could teach the Bible directly from the Greek and Hebrew.

Well when you are learning Christian truths direct from the Bible you can quickly see where the church with its traditions and pronouncements had slipped away from those truths. Thus Martin Luther found and championed five Biblical truths – actually six – which he declared were nothing new, but rather a return to the original teachings of Jesus and that is how the Protestant Reformation of the Church began.

Luther named five of these truths "*the five solas*" (the 5 alones), because as described in the Bible, these truths stand on their own authority and not even the Church dare add to them or take away from them; which is exactly what the Church had been doing over past centuries. Lets briefly list them and then take a closer look at each:

The Five "Solas" of the Bible

1. Scripture alone
2. Christ alone
3. Grace alone
4. Faith alone
5. To the Glory of God alone.
6. Priesthood of all believers.

1. Lets begin with: *Sola Scriptura* - **Scripture alone.**

By the 1500's Europe now had a fairly well educated population who could read God's word for themselves – but it was against the law for lay people to do so because that would cause a loss of power and prestige for the ordained priests and because through the dark ages the church had formed more religious rules than could be supported by the Bible alone.

Some of these rules that the Church taught were:

- that ordained priests were closer to God, in some special spiritual way more holy than the laity (non-priests) – and that the priests were to be honored as such.
- That whatever pronouncements the Pope made had equal or greater authority than the Bible.
- That salvation was bestowed upon a person by the hands of the priest with the act of water baptism – and it could also be taken away from any person by the church's act of excommunication.
- but even though having been made a "Christian" by baptism, your sins had to be paid for before you could ever hope of going to Heaven...
- thus after death Christians must go a place called Purgatory (a spiritual halfway house) for a period of time to atone for their sins until they were good enough to get into heaven.
- However, if you hadn't lived a necessarily holy life, but had enough money, then you could purchase extra holiness (called indulgences) from a spiritual bank account held by the Church. These indulgences could be applied to your personal heavenly account or to the account of a loved one thus shortening their time in Purgatory.

It was actually this final teaching on indulgences that kick-started the Reformation.

In response to rules made up by the church here is what the Bible says about its own authority

*Every word of God proves true;
He is a shield to those who take refuge in him.
Do not add to his words, or else he will rebuke you,
and you will be found a liar. Proverbs 30:5-6*

And this is how Jesus concluded his revelation to the Apostle John in the final book in our Bible.

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

Revelation 22.18-21

For hundreds of years the Church had taught that the traditions of "the Church" and the edicts of the pope were equal with, even superior to, and could revise whatever was recorded in the Bible. The Church also taught that the common person could not understand the Bible and thus they were not allowed to even read it. Only priests were allowed to interpret the teachings of the Bible to non-priests. And laws that restricted Bibles to only being printed in Latin, also kept scripture out of the hands of non priests.

In response to this, Martin Luther and the other Reformers championed the Biblical claim that **scripture alone** has the final authority over a Christian's life, not the Pope, not the "Church." At his trial before the ecclesiastical court in Worms. Luther defended himself saying,

"Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason---I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other---my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me,"

Since Martin Luther and the reformers who followed him believed that lay people (non-priests) could and should read the Bible for themselves. thus, one of the first things Luther did while in exile, hiding from the Church's death sentence, was to translate the Bible from the original Greek & Hebrew into German; a task which he completed in 1534.

Two years later, in 1536, after the British Priest **William Tyndale** similarly translated the Bible into English, the Church awarded Henry Eighth with the title "Defender of the Faith," for having Tyndale captured and burned at the stake. One of the ironic twists of the Reformation was that the **Great Bible**, an English translation authorized by Henry in 1539 – after he had broken with the Church over his right to divorce – was largely based on Tyndale's work.

Before the Reformation it was illegal to even recite a text from the Bible in any language other than Latin. But with the reformation of the Church, the Bible no longer was held captive by the Church. Very quickly new versions of the Bible, printed in every language of the people, spread across Europe faster than Church authorities could hunt those copies down and burn them.

Surprisingly today we find ourselves arguing over a different sort of Biblical authority. There are now those in the Church who accuse conservative Christians of **bibliolatry** (worshipping the Bible), and the Bible of being a "**paper pope**." They say that the Bible should not be the final authority over a Christian's life and faith – but that each culture and age should be able to interpret the Bible according to its own more enlightened standards to determine what is right, what is wrong. This may sound trite but I don't want a group of people (culture) voting on what is truth, what is good. Just think for a moment of some of the non-biblical ideas various cultures have in the last hundred years declared to be "Christian" rights and truths; including genocide, slavery, the inequality of women ...

On the last night of his life, Jesus prayed for us...
Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth.
John 17:7

The next day Jesus told Pilate

for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice. "Pilate replied, "What is truth?" before handing over to be crucified. (John 18:37-38)

As God's inspired word, the Bible teaches us the truth about God and humanity. **Scripture alone** is still quite capable of convicting a person of their sinfulness, and need of a savior, the Church's charge is to spread the Bible's message not try to add to or take away from it.

Several of us in the Church are currently reading a book written by Rosaria Butterfield, a former tenured professor of Feminist Studies at the University of Syracuse, and a formerly out-and-proud lesbian. In her own words, In 1999, Rosaria made the mistake of reading the Bible straight through – several times – in preparation for teaching a course on a feminist critique of right wing Christianity. She never got to teach that course. God's word and the hand of God in her life made a shipwreck of her career and everything she once thought true. Like so many before her, the Bible alone along with the loving counsel of a local pastor brought her to her knees in repentance and faith. Now some eighteen years later, Rosaria is a happily married Reformed Presbyterian Pastor's wife, raising four children and writing books on the Christian faith.

the word of God is living and active,
sharper than any two-edged sword,
piercing until it divides soul from spirit,
joints from marrow; it is able to judge
the thoughts and intentions of the heart.
Hebrews 4:12

The Bible alone is "the word of God" it doesn't need us to protect it or interpret it, and as a Church we dare not ignore it or attempt to silence it, when our job is to share it.

2. Next let's look at: **Solus Christus – Christ Alone**

How does a person gain access to God?

- Is it through the hands and prayers of a priest,
- Or through our prayers directed to departed saints, holy angels, or the Virgin Mary, as the Church once taught?

ABSOLUTELY NOT! **Christ alone** is set forth in Scripture as the **only** mediator between God and man (And the only mediator that we need..)

AS the Apostle Paul wrote,

"For there is one God;
there is also one mediator
between God and humankind,
Christ Jesus, himself human;
(1 Timothy 2:5)

Jesus himself said:

"I am the way, and the truth,
and the life. No one comes to
the Father except through me.
John 14:6

So, as the writer of the book of Hebrews declares

*Since, we have a great high priest ... Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.... and **let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.** (Hebrews 4:14-16)*

As followers of Jesus Christ, we have been adopted into God's family. We don't need a Church priest or a dead saint, or Mother Mary to intervene between us and God. We have the privilege of going in prayer directly to God's throne through Christ alone.

Which brings up that sixth truth, though not listed with the "Five Alones," it was also championed by the Reformers, and is still a vital truth for today's church, which is "**the priesthood of all believers**".

Another reason we don't need a priest to talk to God for us or interpret the Bible to us, is because in Jesus Christ we have all been made priests of God (With Jesus – not the Pope – as our high priest). The pre-reformation church made a false distinction between regular Christians and ordained priests. Priests were considered in some spiritual way to be closer to God, more holy than the laity. What Martin Luther rediscovered in the Bible – which eventually led to himself leaving the ordained priesthood – was that all followers of Jesus Christ are equally considered priests of God. As the Apostle Peter wrote:

you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood,
a holy nation, God's own people, in order
that **you may proclaim** the mighty acts of
Him who called you out of darkness into
His marvelous light. 1 Peter 2:9

Thus, **my job as your pastor is to equip you, my fellow priests to do the work of ministry,** to train you how to offer up to God your sacrifice of praise and a holy life. There really is no more difference between us other than what gifts God has given each of us to serve the other; to help us both grow up together the body of Christ.

Which brings us to: **Sola Gratia – Grace Alone.**

- What is it that actually "saves a person?"
- What can give you hope of Heaven when you die?

The pre-reformation Church taught that water baptism administered by the hands of a priest is what saved a person – that is what made anyone a Christian. Which is why people were so anxious to have their newborn children **baptized** as soon as possible ("**Christened**" literally means "Christianized"), .

But then following baptism, you had to live a holy life – not committing any mortal sins or too many venial sins. Unless of course you had sufficient funds to purchase indulgences to speed up your journey to heaven.

In response the Reformers noted that the Bible teaches salvation is entirely and only by God's grace. It is exclusively God's work, absolutely free of any human authority. **Every single individual can only attain salvation by personally accepting Christ's offered gift of forgiveness..** This is what the Bible says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God not the result of works, so that no one may boast.
Ephesians 2:8-9

Which brings us to: **Sola Fide – Faith Alone.**

"How can a person live in a right relationship with God?"

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith ... as it is written, ***The one who is righteous will live by faith.*** Romans 1:15-17

This is the Biblical truth which made a shipwreck of Martin Luther's former life, rebirthing him as the father of the reformation.

Now you can understand why Luther, having found such freedom and forgiveness through faith in the work of Jesus Christ – alone – responded so strongly against the ideas of salvation through priestly baptism, striving to live a holy life, and especially the selling of indulgences. Because "*The way to Heaven lies not over a toll-bridge, but over a free-bridge; even the unmerited grace of God in Christ Jesus.*" (Augustus Toplady)

The Reformers never tired of saying that '***justification is by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.***' This doctrine of '**justification by faith alone**' is the central truth of Christianity and the real test of a church's fidelity to the Gospel. When God justifies sinners, He declares them to be exempt from punishment and acceptable to Heaven solely on the ground of what Christ has done for them (Romans 3:24; 5:9). Faith is simply the sinner's personal reliance on Christ has done for us (Ephesians 1:13). As Paul wrote to the Church in Galatia:

we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, ... because no one will be justified by the works of the law (Galatians 2:16).

That is why in such hymns as "The Rock of Ages" we sing, *nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.*

Finally there is: **'Soli Deo Gloria' – for the Glory To God Alone**

As God declared to the world through the prophet Isaiah.

I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols
Isaiah 42:5-8

*Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon
it and spirit to those who walk in it..*

*I am the Lord, that is my name; **my glory I give to no other**, nor my praise to idols
Isaiah 42:5-8*

God made and rules the world and all living things. God (Father, Son, and Spirit) devised and carried out the only plan capable of restoring His wandering children back to Himself. **NO Church, no human agency has any say in the matter.** All the glory for our life and salvation should go to God alone.

As the Apostle Paul wrote *"[it is God] who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to His own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began," 2 Timothy 1:9*

For the glory of God alone. That is why the Reformers rejected the Church's doctrine that exalted the Pope, priests, and even the Church above God; all these were stealing God's glory.

They rightly saw that Church had become a human-centered religion, a works-centered religion -- very far removed from salvation as taught in the Bible. And so the Reformers worked and even gave their lives --as martyrs - to bring the church back to giving the glory to **God – alone.**

1. Scripture alone
2. Christ alone
3. Grace alone
4. Faith alone
5. To the Glory of God alone.
6. And the priesthood of all believers

So there you have the "Five Solas" and the sixth – priesthood of all believers. Five-hundred years ago, these rediscovered Biblical truths pushed the restart button on the Church, launching the Protestant Reformation.

But today these Biblical truths are once again under attack by those both within and without our church who would have no other than their own authority over their lives.

These solitary, unchangeable Biblical truths of very foundation and support of what it means to call ourselves Christian. If we leave or lose these – may God in his mercy help us by raising up someone to once again press our restart button.