

Foundations for Reformation

John 4:23

There's a story in John 4 that takes place early in Jesus' ministry. Jesus has been in Jerusalem, and is making His way back to His home area of Galilee. To get there, Jesus decides to go through Samaria. John tells us, Jesus got tired and sat by a well to rest, while the disciples went into town to get something to eat. As Jesus sits by the well, a Samaritan woman comes to get some water herself. It's hot, Jesus is tired, and He asks her for a drink. What ensues is an age old theological debate between the Samaritans and the Jews – what does right worship look like and where does real worship take place? Is worship, is reverence, love, and respect for God a matter of outward acts and locations or is it about something more, something deeper, something that deals with a changed life because there has been a changed heart? Jesus answers this woman and challenges us with absolute clarity, John 4:23, *“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship Him.”* Jesus says real worship, worship that honors God, worship that demonstrates salvation, worship that is true, the kind of worship that God is seeking is worship that is in spirit and truth.

Many people, like the Samaritan woman, many of the Jews of Jesus' day, and honestly many that sit in the pews of our churches today, often mistakenly think that if they go through the proper externals of “worship”, then things are okay between them and God. As long as they go to a church building, endure another worship service, throw a couple of bucks in the plate, you know go through the religious motions, they figure everything's fine. But they haven't dealt with God on the heart level. They haven't repented of their sins of thought, word, and deed. And Jesus tells this Samaritan woman, and us two millennia later, that it's not the externals that matter as much as the internal. We must make it our priority to become true worshippers of God in spirit and truth. True worship must be “in spirit,” that is, engaging the whole heart. Unless there's a real passion for God, there is no worship in spirit. At the same time, worship must be “in truth,” that is, properly informed. Unless we have knowledge of the God we worship, there is no worship in truth. Both are necessary for satisfying and God-honoring worship. To worship in spirit without truth is to worship false gods. To worship in truth without spirit is to fall into dead orthodoxy. We may be doctrinally correct, but lifeless. God and God alone must be the focus of our worship. God and His gospel, His good news of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone cannot be lost. If we lose the gospel, we lose biblical Christianity.

We'll be taking a break from Matthew to focus for the next six weeks on the Protestant Reformation. 2017 marks the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. On Saturday, October 31, 1517, a 33-year-old Augustinian monk and theology professor at Wittenberg University, named Martin Luther, walked over to the Castle Church in Wittenberg and nailed a paper of 95 theses to the door, hoping to spark an academic discussion about their contents. In God's providence that act would become a key event igniting the Reformation. And here's why I think it's important we take some time to think about and learn about the Reformation as a church – The things that matter most to us all center on the gospel. As Martin Luther often said, “The church's true treasure is the gospel”. Friends, as I said a moment ago, if we lose the gospel, we lose biblical Christianity. If we lose the gospel we have no hope to speak of to this world. And that is why we take time to celebrate and learn from the Reformation, because it was from the Reformation that the true church of the Lord Jesus Christ reclaimed the gospel, and reclaimed worship that was in spirit and truth. My goal today is to set the stage for where we'll be going over the next five weeks. Our focus will be on what are commonly referred to as the five solas or the Reformation. The word sola is Latin for alone, and there were five core beliefs that the reformation recaptured that the church had lost.

A word before we go on. My goal and intent is not to bash Catholics or Catholicism, I realize that some of you come out of Catholic Church, and that some of you have friends and family that are still in the Catholic Church. I do believe there are major and troubling differences between Catholics and Protestants still today. I will be trying as best as possible to represent Catholic teaching fairly and accurately. But again, my intent is not to bash or belittle. But, there are real differences, differences that matter, differences that hold salvation in the balance, differences that either affirm the gospel or deny it. So, please pray for me to be clear, and pray that my pastoral desire to worship God in spirit and truth would come through.

How did we get to the Reformation? Bear with me a moment as we do a 1500 year crash course in church history in less than five minutes. The church was established in AD 33 on what we call Pentecost. We find the story in Acts 2, as Peter gives the first sermon of the church, and 3000 are added to the church on that day. This first century of the church from roughly AD 33 to AD 100 is known as the **New Testament Church and Apostolic era**. This is the birth and founding of the church that will be built upon. Keep in mind that the church is birthed within the Roman Empire, and that Rome was not necessarily friendly to

Christians as time went on. A short time after AD 100, Roman emperors began to actively and systematically seek out the destruction of the church and Christians. This is the era of **persecution as well as the era of the Early Church Fathers**, and this era lasted until about AD 312. AD 312/313 is a major turning point in church history, the Roman Emperor Constantine has come to power, and through a series of fortunate events, for Christians at least, has decided that Christianity isn't such a bad thing and legalizes Christianity as a religion within the empire. About 70 years later, in AD 380 Emperor Theodosius declares Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, and the Holy Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church are born.

This becomes the longest era in church history, from AD 313 – about 1500, and called the **Middle Ages and Christendom**. Christianity takes over all of Western Europe, north Africa, pushes east into modern day Russia, and into Turkey, and large parts of the Middle East. Being born in the empire, means you are Christian, there was no other choice or option. Massive political changes take place during this time. With the birth of the Prophet Mohammed in AD 570, the church sees the **birth and rise of Islam**, which will rapidly begin to take the territories of the Middle East and North Africa, as well as Spain, most of France, and most importantly to the church – Jerusalem. In 1054, **the Great Schism** occurred in which the Roman Catholic Church split in two, with the Roman Church remaining in the west and speaking Latin, and the Orthodox Church being in the east and speaking Greek; this schism has never been healed. As Islam continued to rise, a dark period of church history occurred with **the crusades**, beginning in 1095 and lasting nearly 200 years until 1291. In the 1300's, Black Death or Bubonic Plague would overtake Europe, with some estimates suggesting nearly 60% of Europe's population died. In time Europe recovered, and they entered into what's called the Late Middle Ages, which will culminate with the **Reformation and the Modern Era**, which is what we live in now.

With the establishment of Christendom, the church was always tied directly to the state. In reality, there was no distinction made between church and state. In time, the bishop of Rome, became the Pope and the supreme and absolute ruler of all of the Holy Roman Empire and the Roman Catholic Church. The church owned vast portions of European land, the nobles, lords, and kings of the day were all subjects of the Pope, and paid him allegiance. This set the stage for the issues that would be addressed in the Reformation. With the church having such absolute, unchecked, and unbridled control there was **rampant corruption in the Church**. Feeding the corruption were **Papal and priestly abuses of authority**. Luther himself tells a story of visiting Rome when he was a young monk. Rome had always been described as heaven on earth, but when he arrived there he found a city in squalor, prostitutes and a variety of other immoral treats being openly flaunted, priests paid little attention to their duties often performing them for the mere spectacle. And the Pope was preoccupied with great architectural achievements and conquering nations rather than souls. Specifically for Luther and what really sparked Luther's desire to bring reform to the church, and his desire truly was reform and not the splintering and dividing of the church, was the practice of **selling indulgences**. Boiling it down to its essence, an indulgence was a piece of paper that someone could purchase from a church official in order to remove some of the years of punishment they might have to endure in purgatory. The selling of indulgences was used by the Pope in Luther's day to help fund the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Indulgences offered the person a way of being able to pay for a guarantee of God's grace without having to actually repent and turn from their sin or put their trust in Christ. Luther's nemesis in selling indulgences was a man named Johann Tetzel who was an excellent salesman of indulgences and had a clever jingle, "When the coin in the coffer rings", he would say, "... the soul from purgatory springs." By the way,

while the corruption of selling indulgences has been roundly condemned by the Catholic Church, indulgences can still be obtained to this day from the Catholic Church for yourself or others. There were many other issues that led up to the Reformation's spread, but these were some of the primary and more significant issues.

There were four questions that drove the Reformation, and they are questions that continue to drive many Christians today. The first is, **how is a person saved?** The second, **where does religious authority lie?** The third, **what is the church?** And the fourth, **What is the essence of Christian living?** These are questions we still ask today, and the answers the Reformers gave call us to consider how we would answer ourselves. To the question, how is a person saved the Reforms answered – not by works but by faith alone. To the question, where does religious authority lie, the Reformers said – not in the visible Roman church but in the Word of God found in the Bible. To the question what is the church the reformers replied – the whole community of Christian believers. And to the question what is the essence of Christian living, the Reformers boldly proclaimed – serving God in any useful calling, whether ordained or lay. Out of these questions, over time arose what we'll look at for the next five weeks – the five pillars or the five solas of the Reformation.

To give brief introduction, the five solas are **sola scriptura – Scripture alone**. Sola scriptura is called **the formal principal of the Reformation** meaning that the Bible gave the skeletal framework on which to build everything else. The other four solas flow from sola scriptura, because it's in the Bible that we find God's revealed word.

The second sola is **sola fide – faith alone**. Sola fide is called **the material principal of the Reformation**, which means it was in sola fide that the Reformers found their courage, passion, and boldness to call and work for reform in the church even as that would mean many of their deaths. Luther's life and many of the Reformers were deeply challenged by the Bible's insistence that the just, those who are made right with God, shall live by faith.

The third sola is **sola gratia – grace alone**. This is where the Reformers recaptured the essence of gospel teaching. Salvation is found in God's free gift of grace alone, not in the veneration the worship of saints, or pilgrimages to monasteries, or in acts of penance or piety. There is no way to earn salvation, it is God gift alone to give, and He freely gives it to whomever He pleases.

The fourth sola is **sola Christus – Christ alone**. If sola gratia, grace alone recaptured the essence of the gospel, in sola Christus, Christ alone the only mediator between God and man, the Lord Jesus Christ was again understood to be the only one who could pay the penalty for sin and bring us into a reconciled relationship with God.

The fifth sola is **solus deus – to God's glory alone**. Solus deus means *all the glory is due to God alone*, since he did all the work — not only in the atonement of Christ, but even granting the faith which unites us to Christ and brings us into the salvation provided by His sacrifice. God gets all the glory and is alone worthy of all the glory.

One last thing, it's not a mistake that the word alone is so prominent among the five solas the five pillars that the Protestant Reformation is built on. The word alone begs the question, does alone mean necessary or sufficient? Everyone in Luther's day would agree that the Bible is necessary, everyone in Luther's day and even in our day would agree that faith is necessary, that grace is necessary, that Christ is necessary, that God glory is necessary. But the real question in Luther's day was, are the scriptures, is faith, is grace, is Christ, is God's glory sufficient, are they adequate, are they alone enough to be saved from our sins and make us the kinds of worshippers God seeks, those who worship in spirit and truth. That was the central question in Luther's and the Reformer's day, and it remains the central question today.