

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, October 29, 2017**

HERE WE STAND

Galatians 2:16-21

As you may have heard (!), this Tuesday marks the 500th anniversary of the event that sparked the Protestant Reformation. On October 31, 1517, the religious “shot heard ‘round the world” was fired by a 34-year-old Roman Catholic monk and theology professor named Martin Luther, who posted a document containing 95 “theses”, or arguments, disputing the Roman church’s practice of selling indulgences by which people could “buy” forgiveness for their own sins or for their loved ones who were, as the church taught, in purgatory. To invite discussion and debate on the practice, Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, which served as a community bulletin board.

Luther’s intention was to instigate a debate among church and university leaders in Wittenberg. But others, utilizing the power of the printing press, which had been invented by Johann Gutenberg only 60-some years before, published his list of grievances against the church’s practice, and soon all of Germany was talking about it.

Luther stated his motive in the preface to his 95 theses: “Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light,” he said, he intended “to defend the following statements and to dispute on them” with any and all who wished to engage him.

The sale of indulgences as a way of raising money for church projects was nothing new. Beginning with the Crusades to recapture the Holy Land from the infidels, indulgences had been promoted for a variety of purposes for centuries. In Luther’s day, the pope authorized the sale of indulgences to help fund the building of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The pope’s “salesman” in Germany was a priest named Johann Tetzel, who marketed indulgences with the jingle: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.” He led peasants to believe they could get their departed loved ones out of purgatory and into heaven for a fee *and* earn credit against their own sins. He played on the emotions and biblical ignorance of the common people by saying: “Listen to the voices of your dear dead relatives and friends, crying out to you: ‘Pity us. Pity us. We are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance. Do you not wish to?’”

It was more than Luther could take. The Bible, he rightly believed, taught that forgiveness of sins could not be bought or sold or earned, but is offered freely by God through the meritorious death of Jesus Christ on our behalf. So, using the power of his pen, he drafted his 95 theses in the hope of correcting this abuse and reforming the church. Only God knew the revolution that would result, one that has altered the religious and theological landscape of the world right down to this moment.

As you may know, Luther’s spiritual journey was a tumultuous one. The son of a miner, he distinguished himself as a student and was studying for a doctorate in law in 1505 when, caught in a violent thunderstorm he believed to be a judgment from God on his soul, he cried

out: “Help me, St. Anne, and I will become a monk!” Much to his father’s disappointment, he left the study of law and entered a monastery to prepare for the priesthood. In 1512 he received his doctorate in theology and began lecturing at the university in Wittenberg.

What is remarkable about Luther, among many things that are remarkable about him, is that when he was ordained as a priest and began lecturing on the Scriptures, he was still tormented by an overwhelming sense of his own sinfulness and the righteous, wrathful judgment of God. He had no assurance of his own salvation. And no clear understanding of the gospel itself. The exact date of his conversion to a saving faith in Christ cannot be pinpointed. He was a work in progress for a period of several years. The spiritual turning point in his life did not occur until sometime *after* October 31, 1517 – probably sometime in 1519. Here is Luther’s own testimony, written in 1545, the year before his death:

“Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that I was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said: ‘As if, indeed, it is not enough that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the Decalogue [i.e., the Ten Commandments], without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with His righteousness and wrath!’ Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience.

“Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, ‘In (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.”’ There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: The righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.”

“Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me. Thereupon I ran through the Scripture from memory. I also found in other terms an analogy as, the work of God, that is, what God does in us, the power of God, with which He makes us wise, the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. And I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word ‘righteousness of God.’ Thus that place in Paul [Romans 1:17] was for me truly the gate to paradise.” (Quoted in R. C. Sproul and Stephen J. Nichols, eds., *The Legacy of Luther*, 27-28.)

SOLA FIDE

This was the discovery – or re-discovery – of the gospel that transformed Luther’s life. This is the biblical doctrine of justification (or salvation) by faith alone that Paul declares so insistently in both his letter to the Romans and his letter to the Galatians.

As we saw in our study of Paul's letter to the Romans, the word *justify* or *justification* means to declare righteous or not guilty. It is a legal term that, in its New Testament context, refers to a judicial act of God apart from any human merit by which God freely pardons, forgives, acquits, and accepts undeserving sinners as His children and heirs of eternal life. In Galatians 2, Paul states categorically that justification is by faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. As a Jewish believer in Christ, a man steeped in the Jewish law, Paul says in Galatians 2:16: "We know that a person is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too" – referring to his fellow Jewish believers in Christ – "have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified."

The Message paraphrase puts it this way: "We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know? We tried it – and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! Convinced that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we believed in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah, not by trying to be good" (Galatians 2:16, *MSG*).

What Paul declares, and what Luther came to see and embrace, is that no one can be saved by being good enough. No one can earn the "merit badges" needed to satisfy the requirements of God's righteousness. You can't achieve it by your performance. You can't do it by buying forgiveness through the purchase of indulgences. You can't do it by means of your family connections or any other way. The only way for a sinner to be justified or declared righteous before God is through faith in Jesus Christ.

The doctrine of justification by faith is one of the core affirmations of the Reformation and of the gospel itself. Luther called it "the chief article by which the church stands, (and) without which it falls." John Calvin, our forefather in the Reformed tradition, spoke of this doctrine as "the main hinge on which religion turns." The Puritan Thomas Watson called it "the very hinge and pillar of Christianity."

Justification by faith alone, expressed in the Reformation rallying cry of *Sola Fide* (by faith alone) is really shorthand for the biblical principle of justification (or salvation) by grace alone (*Sola Gratia*) through faith alone in Christ alone (*Solus Christus*). As theologian R. C. Sproul explains: "Faith is the means by which we are linked to Christ and receive the benefits of His saving work. Faith is not only a necessary condition [to be saved], it is a sufficient condition for Christ's righteousness to be imputed [or credited] to us" (Sproul, *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology*, 66). (If you want to understand "the heart" of Reformed theology, which is the theological tradition in which we stand as evangelical Presbyterians, Sproul's book, which is also published under the title *What Is Reformed Theology?* is a great place to start.)

"Faith," as Sproul says, "trusts in and lays hold of a righteousness that is not our own" (Sproul, 67). This faith in Christ is not the source of our justification. It is the God-provided *instrument* or *means* by which we receive the righteousness of Christ in salvation. Paul makes it clear in Galatians 2 as well as Ephesians 2:8-10 that we are not justified *because of*

our faith, nor (as the Roman church of Luther's day taught) because of meritorious works produced by faith, but *through*, or *by means of* faith, which is itself a gift from God, not a good work for which any of us can take credit.

Luther's discovery (or re-discovery) that it is all by grace is what fueled the Reformation. It is all by the grace of God that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like him. And me. And you. Luther's liberation from his tormenting fear of the righteous wrath of God came when he learned that there is nothing he could contribute to his salvation. There is nothing you and I can contribute to our salvation. The only thing we contribute to our salvation is our sin. The only thing you contribute to your salvation is your desperate need for it and your inability to do anything to bring it about.

John Stott has written that if anybody insists that justification is by works, and that we can earn [or contribute to] our salvation by our own efforts, we are undermining the foundations of the Christian faith. We are declaring the grace of God null and void, because if salvation is by works, or by some combination of grace *and* works, then grace is not enough. And we make Christ's death superfluous, because if salvation is our own work, then what Christ did was unnecessary. (Cited in James Boice, *Galatians: The Expositor's Bible Commentary*.)

GOD HELPS THOSE WHO CAN'T HELP THEMSELVES

I don't think it is unfair to say that the teaching of the Roman church in Luther's day was akin to the popular idea that "God helps those who help themselves." Lots of people mistakenly believe it comes from the Bible. But you won't find it there. In fact, as an approach to salvation, it is the opposite of what Luther and Calvin came to believe and teach. It is the opposite of what Paul believed and taught. It is the opposite of what Jesus believed and taught. It is the opposite of the biblical message of salvation by grace.

The idea that God helps those who help themselves has roots that go at least as far back as a Greek fable from the 1st-century AD. A 17th-century English thinker named Algernon Sidney is credited with the familiar wording, "God helps those who help themselves." Benjamin Franklin made it popular when he included it in his *Poor Richard's Almanack* (1736). The holy book of Islam, the Quran (13:11), expresses a similar sentiment: "Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves."

That is not the gospel. The gospel, as Luther discovered, is not a self-help approach to salvation. It is, in fact, the exact opposite. For the Bible teaches that God helps those who cannot help themselves. By His grace shown to us in the incarnation, sinless life, atoning death, and bodily resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ, God saves those who are helpless to save themselves. Which means there is hope for sinners like us. Because Jesus is our only hope.

GREAT NEWS FOR BAD PEOPLE

The message of the gospel, as Luther and Calvin and their compatriots in the Reformation declared, is not "good news for great people." It is not good news for people who think they

are good enough to merit God's approval and acceptance. No. The gospel is "great news for bad people." It is great news for unworthy people, for unrighteous people, for undeserving people who know their salvation is dependent on Christ and Him alone, for people who embrace the gospel truth that salvation comes from God alone and is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone.

This is the heart of the gospel. And it is the heart of the Protestant Reformation whose 500th anniversary we celebrate today with joy and gratitude to God.

SOLA SCRIPTURA

It is fitting to highlight one other defining mark of the Reformation today. It is fair to say that the core issue of the Reformation was the doctrine of justification. But the issue underlying, as has been the case with so many controversies in the Christian church over the last 500 years, was the question of authority in the life of the church and in the lives of Christ's followers. Along with *sola fide* (faith alone), *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone) became the Reformation's rallying cry.

The church of Luther's day did not dispute or deny the infallible authority of the Bible. That was not the problem. The problem, as Luther and Calvin after him came to see, lay in the church's assertions that the church's traditions, the pronouncements of popes, and the decrees of church councils carried an authority equal to that of the Bible. Luther, Calvin, and other Reformers saw this as a source of corruption in the church's teaching and life. They argued vigorously that the Bible alone is the final and ultimate authority for the faith and life of God's people. As with the doctrine of justification by faith alone, this was not the discovery of something previously unknown, but the recovery or re-discovery of historic Christian doctrine drawn directly from the Bible itself.

Calvin said that the Bible doesn't depend on the church for its authority. The church doesn't give the Bible its authority. Rather, the church recognizes the Bible's authority, accepts it, and submits to it. *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, adopted by our Reformed ancestor in England in the 1640s, says: "The Bible speaks authoritatively and so deserves to be believed and obeyed. This authority does not depend on the testimony of any man or church but completely on God, its author, who is Himself truth. The Bible therefore is to be accepted as true, because it is the word of God" (WCF, 1.2).

Sola Scriptura, as theologian Michael Horton notes, does not mean that the Bible is an all-encompassing and all-sufficient textbook for everything under the sun. The Bible does, or should, inform and, in some cases, transform the way we think about all of life, but it does not address every issue or question we have in life. Nevertheless, we affirm that in the Bible God speaks. In the Bible God reveals Himself, His mighty acts in history, His ways, and His will. Above all, the Bible reveals the bad news of our innate sinfulness, the good news of God's gracious work of salvation for us in and through the person of Jesus Christ His Son, and how we are to live in light of the gospel. (Adapted from Horton, "Scripture Alone: Luther's Doctrine of Scripture" in Sproul and Nichols, eds., *The Legacy of Luther*, 119.)

Some churches in our day have jettisoned the authority of the Bible and set aside, or outright rejected, some biblical teachings in order to fit in with the dominant popular culture. That is a danger for any church in any culture in any era. So we must guard against it.

HERE WE STAND

Because of his criticisms of the church's practices and teachings, Martin Luther found himself increasingly in hot water with the church. In January 1521, he was excommunicated from the church because of his teachings. He was summoned to appear before an imperial council in the city of Worms in April of that year, where he would go on trial for heresy. When given the opportunity to recant his teachings, Luther requested a night to think it over. The next day, when the court reconvened, Luther made his famous confession:

“Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience” – meaning a conscience that is subject to God's Word. “I cannot do otherwise,” said Luther. “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

We who follow in the Reformation tradition of Luther and Calvin and faithful servants of God through the centuries also affirm the Bible to be the inspired (“God-breathed,” 2 Timothy 3:16), inerrant, and authoritative Word of God, the final and only infallible rule for faith and life.

Like Luther, here we stand. Here we will stand. Lord, let it be so, to the glory of Your name. *Soli Deo Gloria*. To God alone be the glory. Amen.