

Why We Need Another Reformation

Romans 3:21-31

Covenant Waterfall, 1 November 2020

Read

Pray

Introduction

Yesterday marked the 503rd anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Five-hundred and three years ago, on the 31 October 1517, a German monk named Martin Luther, in protest against the Roman Catholic Church, nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. That set off a series of events that forever changed the church.

How was the church changed? Thanks to the Reformation, the true apostolic gospel has been recovered and we can hear it preached today in God-honouring churches. We also have the Scriptures readily available almost every language of the world. We can worship God in congregational singing in our mother tongue, approach God directly through Jesus Christ and know with certainty that if we repent and call upon the name of Jesus, our sins are forgiven and we will be raised up with him on the last day.

Yet on the other hand, this apostolic gospel that Luther and the other reformers like Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, Bucer and Melancthon recovered is being obscured in some parts of the church. In our own South African context we are seeing a rise of frankly unbiblical practices which are contrary to the gospel. This should not surprise us. The gospel needs to be defended and recovered in every generation because it is so contrary to human nature.

Our human nature says that we need to earn our way up to God through our good works or spiritual practices. The gospel says God has come down to us in Christ and done everything necessary to restore us to him, all as a gift of grace. Not only is the need for another Reformation in our church here in South Africa is even greater than it was in Luther's time,

but all of us continually need a gospel Reformation in our hearts, because the gospel doesn't come naturally to us.

Let's have a look at the five solas of the Reformation – five key points which the reformers believed were central to the Reformation and to the gospel. We'll see what they are, how they are rooted in Scripture, show how much we are in need of holding to them in our church context and how much our hearts still need to be transformed by their truths.

A. Sola Scriptura:

The reformers got the Bible into the hands of the masses because they believed that the Bible was God's Word, his perfect revelation to mankind and that it was authoritative for all believers. Therefore it was essential for every Christian to read it for themselves. For too long had people endured unsound teaching from the Roman Catholic Church. Now people had direct access to the Word themselves and could discern truth from error.

While today we have unprecedented access to God's Word in a way that no previous generation has had, the tragedy is that we still suffer from a general lack of biblical teaching in many churches. On the one hand liberal theology – "progressive" Christianity is making a comeback in many churches. The authority of Scripture is being undermined by people calling for the acceptance of sins like homosexuality and disregarding clear biblical teaching on the roles of men and women within the church. The undermining of Scripture's authority is also seen in the downgrading of preaching from the clear exposition of God's Word to self-help, pop-psychology inspirational talks.

On the other hand there is an increasing denial of the sufficiency of Scripture by the embracing of forms of revelation other than the Bible. Extreme expressions of this are the "men of God" who call themselves "apostles" and "prophets" in our communities. These wolves in sheep's clothing deceive their people by telling them to eat rats, get sprayed by Doom to be healed, exploit them sexually and manipulate them out of obscene amounts of money because they have received "a new revelation from God."

Milder expressions of the denial of Scripture's sufficiency include embracing subjective dreams, visions and experiences as the norm over God's revealed Word to us. These extra-

biblical revelations are being placed on equal footing to Scripture. There is a problem when our first instinct is to desire a “prophetic word” above what God has already revealed to us in Scripture.

In contrast to all this we need to uphold *sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone - God’s perfect, life-giving revelation to us through the Bible is completely sufficient and entirely authoritative over our lives. There’s no need for us to seek after supposed “prophetic words” and “words of knowledge” or try to uncover what God in his wisdom has not revealed to us. God’s Word is enough! Want to hear God’s clear and unadulterated voice? Read the Bible. Come to church, hear the Word faithfully preached. We need nothing more and nothing less than God’s Word. It is truly **“breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, that [we] may be complete...”** (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

B. Sola Gratia:

The Roman Catholic Church believed in grace. Yet their understanding of grace was that it is stuff that helps us do good works. We do our bit and God does his bit and hopefully this will help us to one day merit salvation.

The reformers strongly objected to this and showed that Scripture taught that grace is entirely a gift from God. It’s impossible for any of us to contribute anything good to our salvation as even our good works are tainted by sin. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”**

This idea of “us doing our bit and God doing his bit” is still very much prevalent in the church today. Many of us are taught that God will only bless us (i.e. with money, a good life and material things) if we do certain things for him, whether it be tithing or fasting, or some other form of obedience. Obedience to God is good, but it needs to flow from what God had already done for us in Christ. Otherwise our relationship with God becomes transactional – we work for his grace and strive for blessing. We’re also taught that our disobedience and sin also threatens our standing with God. This means that it is possible for us to fall away

from grace and lose our salvation if we sin too much. The result of this type of belief is that you are never assured of your salvation and are always insecure as to whether you are loved by God.

The truth of *sola gratia* is that our salvation in Christ rests in God's grace alone, which is entirely a gift to us. This gift is given to us by God in spite of ourselves – our good works and our sins – and it can never be taken away. Once we're in Christ, we are his forever! Romans 8:38-39 – **“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** God's steadfast love to us, his promise of eternal life in Christ is purely a gift of grace, which nothing and no one can take away from us!

C. Sola fide:

Rome taught that good works contribute to our justification. Justification is not seen as a once off event, but a life-long process that depends on our co-operation with God's grace. Basically, no one is ever certain of their salvation until they die and meet the Lord. Only then will you know if you've done enough good works to be righteous and justified before God.

The reformers vehemently disagreed with this and showed that Scripture consistently teaches that we are not justified by the works of the law, but instead by faith in Christ - Romans 3:28 – **“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”**

Not just RC view that good works save us, but this view is deeply imbedded in all of us. Part of our sinful default setting – it's up to us to get right with God on our own terms via obedience, spiritual techniques, good works etc. The problem with this is based on a widely-held assumption that we are basically good people, who err now and then.

The reality is that the Bible describes our condition as far direr than that. Romans 3:10-12

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside... no one does good, not even one.” 3:23 – **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”**

The truth is that we are far worse than we realise. Sin has touched every part of us – our thoughts, emotions, minds, bodies, hearts, making us dead to God (Eph 2:1) – hearts of stone. Even if we think, we're not that bad – that's just evidence of sin's deceitfulness within us. 1 John 1:10, **"If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."** On our own, our inclination is to always run away from God and rebel against him rather than seek him and do his will. We cannot help but sin. We have no natural inclination outside of Christ to obey God. Because God is holy, left in our sins, we deserve to be punished – wages of sin is death – Romans 6:23.

It's for this very reason even the thought that we could possibly seek God on our own terms, through our own supposed goodness, is completely impossible. God has to do all the work and reach down to us in our sins. Every aspect of our salvation is his work. It is the Father who chose us in love before the foundation of the world. It is Jesus who redeemed us by taking the punishment for sins that we deserved on the cross - a propitiation – as Romans 3:25 describes it, and through it, forgave us our sins. And it is the Holy Spirit who raises our dead hearts to life, and seals us for the day of redemption.

This describes our justification – the truth that made right with God, our sins forgiven – once for all when we repent and receive Jesus by faith. At this point our salvation is forever assured and we can have full confidence that we will be raised to eternal life with him on the Last Day. As Romans 8:30 proclaims, **"And those whom he predestined he also called and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified."** Good works flow from being saved, but certainly do not save us.

Justification by faith in Christ alone as the centre piece of Christianity is no longer assumed today. It seems that many churches are preoccupied with things other than this. Whether it be doing miracles, being rich and successful, having a great family life, or any kind of self-actualisation – doing all these things seem such more pressing than the knowledge of our forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus. Legalism – doing things for God to gain his favour – is supplanting the simple gospel truth of *sola fide* that we've been made right with God by faith in Christ.

D. Solo Christo:

The Roman Catholic Church had taught for centuries that we needed mediators between us and God. We could not approach God on our own. Various saints, the Virgin Mary, priests and the pope were the mediators by which we could approach God. The pope was (and is still) seen to be a modern-day apostle who uttered authoritative revelation from God on par with Scripture.

The reformers rejected this as Scripture declares that, **“there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”** (1 Timothy 2:5). Christ alone was the only way to God – no saint, priest, or pope was necessary!

Yet our church context is particularly prone to set up mediators between God and men. The “man of God” theology is rife here. The charismatic church leader is often held up to be the mediator for everyone in the church. Only he hears from God, he gives you fresh prophetic words, his prayers are more effective, his faith is stronger, only he should lay hands on us, and he does the miracles and heals you. They are above criticism and accountable to no one.

Thank God that it is *solo Christo*, Christ alone who is our mediator with God. We have no need of popes or “men of God” to connect us with God. Through Jesus everyone can approach God’s throne in boldness and confidence as his beloved children!

Soli Deo Gloria:

The reformers’ underlying problem with Rome was that it held to a man-centred theology. In the Roman system, man earned his salvation and his good works got him to heaven. In contrast, the reformers held to a God-centred theology. God chose a people for himself before the creation of the world. God did everything necessary in order to save us by sending Jesus to earth to live and die for us and sealed us for eternity with his Holy Spirit, guaranteeing our salvation. From beginning to end, salvation is of the Lord, earned by the works of Jesus himself, and for God’s glory alone.

Our culture is incredibly self-centred and this has had a profound influence on the state of our church today. Much Christian literature out there is simply Christianised self-help therapeutics – how to live your best life now, how to be the best you can be, how to be the

best father or mother, how to have good relationships, how to deal with your past hurts and emotions – all these things re-inforce our obsession with self. Many sermons and worship songs follow a similar vein – they’re about me and my life in this world with some Scriptures tacked on at the end.

Our default sinful setting is to be turned in on ourselves. We need a reformation! What we need with all our being is to look up to God: Father, Son and Spirit; ponder his majesty and glory. Worship him who reigns on the throne and tell of his goodness, grace, might, power and strength. And join with the elders in Revelation 4:11 crying out, **“Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.”**

Soli Deo Gloria – To God alone be the glory!

Conclusion

503 years on from the Reformation and it’s clear that the truth of the gospel that the Reformers recovered, that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, according to Scripture alone, for the glory of God alone, remains the most important, and life-changing truth for everyone on the planet.

Though we are grateful for how the Lord used the Reformers in a mighty way 500 years ago – enjoying much of the fruit of their labour today; we need to pray for a modern-day reformation of the gospel right here in our own land. That that God would once again be the centre in our churches, our worship and our sermons. That the beauty of the gospel of grace would be boldly proclaimed, that pastors would preach the whole counsel of God unashamedly and that above all Jesus Christ would be exalted! This is why a church like ours exists – preach the gospel!

Yes – see reformation in our land, but also in our hearts. Think you can get right with God on your own terms – futile exercise.

Can only receive God’s grace in Christ as an undeserved gift. Trust in Jesus, in his saving work on the cross, that he died in your place, facing the wrath that you deserved, forgiving you your sins in order to restore you to God for all eternity.

Amen