**26th November 2017**

**Reformation 500: Sola Scriptura, Semper Reformanda**

This month we have been celebrating the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation. In 1517 on October 1st martin Luther pinned 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg saying how he felt the church of his day needed to change. It kick started a Reformation of the Church that had wide repercussions not just for Christianity but for the world.

Luther was reacting against the Catholic Church of his day and what he thought was corruption and distortion of the gospel and church practices. The Pope had sanctioned the selling of indulgences which crudely was the buying in of forgiveness. You could do what you liked with your life but if you had enough money you could pay a priest to give you absolution from your sins and you would be guaranteed a place in heaven. Luther said this was just a money-making exercise (it paid for St Peter’s in Rome by the way) and an abuse of the gospel and the church’s responsibility to offer God’s grace. He rediscovered the centrality of Grace in the Christian Gospel – that there is nothing we can do to earn or buy God’s forgiveness. Jesus has done that for us. It is all Grace but we need to receive it by faith.

The reformation had five ‘Solas’ as their slogans. Sola being a Latin word for ‘alone’.[[1]](#endnote-1)

***Sola Scriptura***, (literally: "by scripture alone"), asserts that scripture must govern over church traditions and teachings which are themselves held to be subject to scripture. All church traditions, creeds, and teachings must be in unity with the teachings of scripture as the divinely inspired [Word of God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Authorship_of_the_Bible). So, Luther said, there is nothing in scripture that justifies the selling of indulgences. Although the Pope authorizes it, scripture doesn’t. We must obey the Word of God, not the word of the Pope on this matter.

It is fashionable to be suspicious of people in authority and not trust them today. Such attitudes arguably have played their part in electing Donald Trump and the vote for Brexit. The fight against the establishment or the perceived powerful. Luther, it could be argued, started it all off with his stand against authority and his stress on individual conscience. Yet he would be horrified to think that people had freedom of conscience and thought – because Luther still believed that the word of God had authority for our faith and conduct.

***Sola fide*, or "faith alone**", asserts that good works are not a means for salvation. *Sola fide* is the teaching that [justification](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Justification_%28theology%29) (interpreted in the Lutheran and Reformed theologies as "being *declared* just by God") is received by [faith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faith_in_Christianity) alone, without any need for [good works](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Good_works) on the part of the individual. In classical Lutheran and Reformed theologies, good works are seen to be *evidence* of saving faith, but the good works themselves do not determine salvation. If you really have saving faith – if you really understand what Christ has done for you then that will change your life and issue in a life of gracious service. We will know you are a Christian by your love, by your service, by your humility.

Luther struggled with the letter of James but most reformed Theologians get the point that ‘faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2:14-17, NKJV). You know faith is alive in someone when they are showing signs of Christlikeness. Just like you know a plant is healthy and in good soil because it flowers. If you have faith – if you are daily trusting in Christ and in relationship with him, letting his life change/reform yours, then your life with flower with the blossom of Christ.

This new creation within us is the faith of Christ. If we do not have this faith, then we are ungodly. Indulgences or human prayers add nothing—they are nothing. Everyone has faith — usually a faith in themselves. But we need God to continually destroy self-righteous faith and to replace it with the life of Christ. We need the faith that comes from God through law and gospel, word, works and sacraments.

Luther called Sola Fide, by faith alone, the "doctrine by which the church stands or falls"

As Area minster I know when I go round other churches I want to know are there people there who ‘get it’?

**Sola gratia ("by grace alone")**

or "only grace", specifically excludes the merit done by a person as part of achieving salvation. *Sola gratia* is the teaching that [salvation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salvation_in_Christianity) comes by [divine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_grace) [grace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grace_in_Christianity) or "unmerited favor" only, not as something merited by the sinner. This means that salvation is an unearned gift from God for Jesus's sake.

By the middle of the 20th century, it became common to see the original list of three increased to create five solas. The additions were "Christ alone" and "Glory to God alone".

**Solus Christus or "through Christ alone")**

excludes the priestly class as necessary for sacraments. *Solus Christus* is the teaching that [Christ](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jesus_in_Christianity) is the only mediator between God and man, and that there is salvation through no other. This principle rejects [sacerdotalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sacerdotalism), the belief that there are no sacraments in the church without the services of priests ordained by [apostolic succession](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apostolic_succession). [Martin Luther](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther) taught the "general priesthood of the baptized", which was modified in later [Lutheranism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lutheranism) and classical [Protestant](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Protestant) theology into "the [priesthood of all believers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priesthood_of_all_believers)" denying the exclusive use of the title "priest" ([Latin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Latin) *sacerdos*) to the clergy. This principle does not deny the office of the holy ministry to which is committed the public proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. But states the importance of us going to God directly through faith in Christ's forgiveness rather than with the priest and the church as mediating entities. It would also lead to power in the church resting in councils rather than in individuals. The priesthood of all believers would discern the mind of Christ on matters affecting the church.

**Soli Deo Gloria ("glory to God alone")**

The reformers believed that human beings – even saints [canonized](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canonization) by the Roman Catholic Church, the popes, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy – are not worthy of the glory that was accorded them; that is, one should not exalt such humans for their good works, but rather praise and give glory to God who is the author and [sanctifier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanctification) of these people and their good works.

Five Solas – five slogans – that helped to rally people to the Reformed faith and still do. They define our distinctiveness.

There was one other important slogan too: Semper Reformanda: Always reforming, always changing. Sixteenth century Europe was turned upside down by the Reformation. It was part of a wider movement in culture at the time – the Renaissance, led by people who believed the whole world needed a re-birth (which is what renaissance means) of culture and religion. Certain movements went hand in hand with the Reformation. The discovery that the earth was not flat. The invention of the printing press. The popularity of the vernacular language, for example German for Germans and English for the English. Humanists like Erasmus who cherished scholarship and the search for truth going back to the ancient classical sources.

So those in the reformed stream like or own William Tyndale, would go back to the original sources of Hebrew Old Testament and Greek new Testament and bring out an English Bible that could be read by English people in their own tongue and not in Latin. It was a new age, change was in the air.

But of course, change is always threatening to those who don’t like change, whether because they are used to the old ways or they have an investment of power in the old order. The reformation unleashed a lot of violence and persecution across the continent. Bishops Ridley and Latimer were burned at the stake for their Reformed faith in 1555. If you go to Oxford you can see the Oxford Martyrs memorial to them. Latimer is quoted as having said to Ridley:

Play the man, Master Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hugh_Latimer#cite_note-8)

People don’t like change. Jesus was crucified because the religious authorities were threatened by him and his interpretation of the law. Jesus called for people to change. He said ‘repent, turn around – for the kingdom of God is upon you. Jesus wanted people to live as if they were under the rule of God – citizens of the kingdom – and that meant changing the way they behaved and thought. It still does. To be a Christian, to follow Christ is to be counter cultural. To go against the grain of society in so many ways.

Our Bible Reading notes this week came from Matthew 23 where Jesus says don’t be like the Pharisees who want status and power and respect. Instead ‘the greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’ Unlike the rest of the world, we’re not trying to get on in life and be more comfortable. We’re about trying to serve others and in doing so serve Christ. We’re not so much thinking about what is in it for us – as to what am I doing for Him?

Luther’s catchphrase ‘semper Reformanda’ Always reforming’ came about because he believed the church of his day had lost its way. It had become corrupt and abusive and had lost sight of what it was there for and the gospel it held. It needed to change.

The articles in our church’s magazine Reform[[2]](#endnote-2) are one sentence answers from many opinion makers and opinion holders as to how the church should change today. I’m sure you will all have your own views.

The Reformed Church believes that there are important things in the past which need to be remembered. But we also have in our name the call to change things that need to be changed because people and times change. Reforming not just individuals, but churches and also the world. We are citizens of the kingdom of God – wanting God’s change in our world.

When I first arrived here as minister 17 years ago this January, my son hadn’t been born. Now Sam is taller than me and I have to look up to him to tell him off. We all change through the years, growing in experience and experiences that form us and change us. We are all different with all different tastes.

I drove all the way to Burnley the other week to scatter my mother’s ashes oh and to see my football team win again. My son joined me for the day which sadly meant I had to listen to his music. He put his rap hip hop music on and it was dreadful. I said it sounds like a bunch of reprobates asking girls to smoke dope and have sex with them. You wouldn’t want your daughter going anywhere near them. Sam said, ‘oh Dad you make me laugh – you’re so old!’. I suffered a very long hour of it and then made him turn it off. I’ve tolerated your stuff now put up with mine. We agreed to disagree.

But I understood, like designer labels, image conscious people see music as a public statement of who and what they are. You play their music and they will feel at home.

As I am approaching my 52nd birthday I well know that put me in a group of young people I find myself coming out with stories of ‘what it was like in my day’.

This church was very different 17 years ago. Somethings have changed, some have stayed the same. If you go back further than that you may remember what the church was like 40 years ago, 60 years ago. Our collective challenge is to work for a church that will still be relevant and alive in ten years’ time, twenty years’ time, thirty years’ time and so on. You might say ‘well I’m not going to be here then – so I don’t care. But you should care, because we all as Christians must have a concern that the gospel of Jesus Christ will continue to change lives and make a difference in our society. We are servants of that gospel; the gospel does not serve us. We serve the Church. The Church does not serve us.

Back in 2008-9 we put together a Vision 2020 – what we saw as our priorities and main task for the next ten years. Here we are on the brink of 2018 and looking back at that document we have achieved an awful lot of it and more. Things that we didn’t plan for like the youth centre conversion of the Parsonage have happened. You can’t always predict or manage the future. That is both exciting and scary. You can prayerfully plan and seek God’s guidance but often it is only each step of the way. Nothing is assured but God’s grace.

The management guru Peter Drucker said ‘*left to themselves, institutions develop resistance to change. In a service institution particularly, yesterday’s success becomes today’s policy, virtues, conviction, if not holy writ, unless the institution imposes on itself the discipline of thinking through its mission.’[[3]](#endnote-3)*

I led a vision day for a church in Gloucester the other week and they were asking themselves where they were going for the future. Where did they want to be in ten years? It was a congregation that were mainly over the age of 60 and they were anxious that they were not attracting younger people which obviously was giving them some concerns for their future existence, never mind their future plans. ‘*How do we get younger people into our church’* they said? I said be careful what you wish for. If younger people, by some miracle, did start turning up at your church they are only likely to stay if you allow them some ownership. They will come with their ideas, their hopes and dreams, their outlook on life, their music, their interest, their way of doing things. You can bet your life it won’t be your music, your interest, your way of doing things. Are you prepared for trouble and tension, disagreements and accommodation and compromise? Because that is what you will get in a truly all age, all generational church. It will be a church that struggles within itself to find the appropriate change necessary to keep everyone together, otherwise it will splinter and you will just go back to being all of like mind and usually of the same generation. Then you will stagnate.

A Reformed Church, brought up with the slogan of ‘Always reforming’ will always be thinking about the best way to show God’s love to the world. Sometimes that means keeping things the same and sometimes it means doing things differently. As we stay faithful to the gospel by grace alone, by faith alone, by scripture alone, in Christ alone to give glory to God alone, may we seek God’s guidance for the changes we need to make to keep the light of the gospel of Christ shining in this place and bring Reformation to our world.

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_solae> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.reform-magazine.co.uk/2017/08/ninety-five-more-theses-part-two/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. P Drucker, Management, Harper and Row, 1974, p523 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)