

Ephesians 2:1-10

The Five Solas of the Reformation

Sola Gratia – Grace Alone

Responding with gratitude to God's gift of grace

October 31, 1517, a lone priest took his long list of concerns dealing with faith and practice in the Roman Catholic Church and nailed them up on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. In that moment Martin Luther knew that he was challenging the status quo. He knew he would have to answer for his actions, in fact he was hoping to start dialogue and renewal within the church, but he did not anticipate having to go into hiding for his words and actions, and he certainly did not expect to break from the church that he loved.

Yet here we are on the door steps of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, the heirs of a movement that changed the world. So much is made of Luther's actions that some of the history gets lost. Luther did not come out of nowhere with his frustration. His was the frustration of other priests and church goes at the time for whom the church had become a place of rules and regulations, practices and formulations that seemed to have little to do with faith but rather about the power and prestige of those in power in the church, including the Pope. The person in the pews and those who were no longer in the pews, but yet were believers, were struggling with having a faith that had little relevance to their lives.

This does not seem to far and distant from what is happening now. Our churches are declining in part because people have not heard from the pulpit or experienced in their dealings with other Christians the basic tenants of faith. Ephesians 2:8-9 teaches, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast."

Today I am starting a five-part series on the Five Solas of the Reformation. These are not words that the reformers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, or John Knox would necessary have used, but the Solas have come to represent the five core affirmations in which the reformers found their grounding.

These five affirmations are

Sola Gratia/Grace Alone

Sola Fide/Faith Alone

Solus Christus/Christ Alone

Sola Scripture/Scripture Alone, and

Soli Deo Gloria/To the Glory of God Alone

If you want to know and understand what the very basics of our faith as Christians are this list sums it up. This is, in good part, why we do what we do and believe as we do.

So I am spending all of October looking at these core affirmations of our faith. Beginning with Sola Gratia/Grace Alone.

There is a story told about C.S. Lewis, in which he entered into an “august gathering of theologians in Britain in the last century. They were debating how Christianity differed from other religions. Was it the doctrine of the Incarnation? No, some argued, they found stories of gods appearing in human form in other religions, though not in the precise form as the Gospel. So was it the Resurrection? No, argued others, there are stories of people rising from the dead in other religions, though not in the precise form as the Gospel. Eventually, Lewis, the great Oxford scholar, [who had] wandered into the room asked what the rumpus was about. When told that they were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution to the world’s religions, he said, ‘That’s easy. It’s grace.’”¹

Grace is the hallmark of Christianity. It is because of God’s great love for us, seeing us in our trespasses and sin that mars every human life, following the ways of the world left unchecked, it was in that mess that is life that God made a way for us to live as forgiven people and live life fully. Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians that their sin made them dead. Not just crippled, not just needing a helping hand to get through the day, but dead. Dead means no life.

Let’s just sit with this a moment. God is a god of love. That is the overarching theme of the Bible. God wants to be in relationship with people, that is the why of creation, God loving relationship with the Son and with the Holy Spirit was so great that it overflowed into creation and into the creation of human beings. But we screwed it up, whether you hear the story of Adam and Eve as word for word truth or you hear it as a story to explain the fallenness of humanity, we screwed up life and it took us far from God and knowledge of God’s love for each one of us.

It was because of love that Jesus came to live and die. This was so that we could once again live in close relationship with God, in personal relationship to God. But God is holy. Sin cannot be a part of the relationship. Where there has been wrong, justice needs to prevail, and offerings of sacrifice made to right the wrongs. But human beings in and of themselves can never get it right all the time, there is nothing that we can offer that can take away sin. The gift to cover all that was the life of Jesus. It was because of God’s great love that grace entered the world through Christ Jesus.

¹ Author: Stan Mast <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/lent-4b-2/?term=Ephesians%202:1-10>
Accessed September 24, 2017

Grace is one of those intangibles like love. It is not something you can touch or quantify. It doesn't have a way to be tested, it just is. And it is a gift. When you offer another grace, you offer them a gift that is not able to be repaid. Grace is always a gift freely given. Grace cannot be bought or earned. Grace just is. But with all gifts, if we never hear about the gift, if we never accept and unwrap the gift, then we never know about it. It just sits in the wrapped box.

Then there are those who want to earn the gift of grace. They go about their lives trying to be the best they can be and do the best they can so that they can earn God's gift of forgiveness, grace, and love. But that is not needed. That is the thing about gifts, there are supposed to be just that. A gift.

Still there can be a response to a gift that is appropriate. If I give you a gift and you choose to hug me, or do a crazy happy dance that is wonderful. When it comes to God's gift of grace there is an appropriate response as well. The response is gratitude. Gratitude that you don't have to get it all right all the time, gratitude, that despite not having it all together, God loves and forgives you anyway when you are truly humbled and turn from your sin. I say this knowing that, like the scripture that says you must be willing to forgive others seventy-seven times, in other words, over and over, God is willing to do the same for me and you.

So to respond to the gift of grace in gratitude is to love others, to work to build a more welcoming church, serve in the community, do stuff. But it is the attitude of the heart. If it is done in recognition that the gift was freely given and you don't have to earn it, that whatever you do you do because you love God, then we have a heart for God and our works are an appropriate response to that love.

Grace and gratitude. A gift freely given and a response to that amazing gift. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” but always lived in gratitude for what God has done.

Today know that you are forgiven, forgive others, live in gratitude and grace. In Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.