

“NOTHING SWEETER,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, October 25, 2020

Today we celebrate Reformation Sunday. No one is wearing party hats or waving noisemakers. No big candled cake is about to be wheeled in. But this Sunday could be called the “birthday” of our Protestant churches.

Five centuries ago on the eve of All Saints or All Hallows Day, a monk named Martin Luther, took a hammer to the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany and launched what turned out to be a revolution in faith. Our order of service for this morning displays some humor about it all. Depicted is Luther, hammer in hand, at the church door, talking to some gathered onlookers. “No,” he says to them in our printed image, “the door was fine. I’m just fixing your theology!”

Folks, that’s not an authentic quote. Yet perhaps in the moment on October 31, 1517 Luther really did say something like that. Certainly that was Luther’s aim—to fix the theology of the church, particularly its understanding of the way that God and human beings like ourselves should connect and relate. That challenge, expressed through 95 complaints hammered to the church door, became the heart of what has come to be called the Protestant Reformation. Launched by Luther, it spread far and wide and came to embrace a variety of different ideas and hopes.

To have some grasp of the Protestant Reformation we need to start with its very name--specifically those big words, *Protestant* and *Reformation*. Just this past week, as in past years, I tongue-and-cheek asked our confirmation class of 8th and 9th graders if they knew any Protestants. They all looked at each other in puzzlement, shaking their heads. Then one brave confirmand raised his hand, reporting that he knew a kid in school who was a Protestant. Imagine our confirmands’ surprise when I informed them that we were actually gathering in a Protestant church and that their families—at least to the best of my knowledge—were Protestant too.

I explained to them then, as I share with you now, that the term *Protestant* comes, just as it sounds, from our English word *protest*. Going back further, it is derived from the Latin word, *protestas*, meaning *to witness*. Indeed, historically, the first Protestants, like Luther, were *protesters*, seeking to *witness* and stand up for a more faithful understanding of Christ’s teaching than what was prevailing in their own generation.

Naturally, their protests led them to call for change—a *reformation* of the entire Christian church and many of its practices. *Reformation* actually means just what it suggests—a *re-forming* and *re-shaping* of the status quo for the sake of improvement. In this case, Luther’s goal through change and reformation was a restoration of the church’s moral and spiritual integrity, delivering it from hypocrisy that didn’t respect or honor Christ.

Luther, who was a devout Christian theologian belonging to an order of Augustinian monks, believed heart and soul that the Christian Church he loved had gone off track. In his opinion, it was worshipping and valuing lesser things—or, altogether, the wrong things. Put simply and squarely, Luther believed that the church was violating the first commandment that Moses received from God at Mt. Sinai that we should have no other gods before God. (*Exodus 20:3*)

Luther was particularly offended by the excess splendor of the church's headquarters in Rome, which he saw firsthand, as well as the sale of so-called "indulgences" for sin that allowed folks to literally buy their way to heaven with the church's coffers simultaneously profiting. Luther also objected to a reliance on the church's proliferating saints to reach God in prayer when, in fact, we already have the benefit of direct access through Jesus Christ, God's own son. He took further issue with the whole system of monasteries and nunneries that he personally knew so well. Luther rejected the spiritual perfectionism of those secluded places and the broader notion that you had to retreat from the world to know God or to be really close to him.

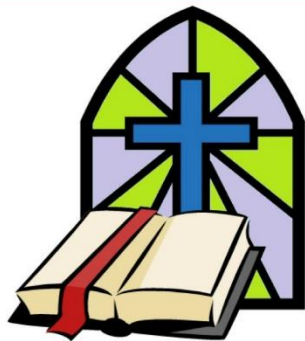
Very differently, Luther envisioned a church where Jesus Christ was once more central—no longer lost among hundreds of saints that were treated like mini-gods. He looked to a new kind of community of faith that was more spiritually-hearted and spiritually-minded, as well as morally grounded, than worldly, materialistic, and greedy.

Last but not least, Luther wanted to see a new church rise up where ordinary men and women, whether rich and poor, could experience and know God's love, grace, and salvation. Our salvation and the fulfillment of Christ's promise of eternal life completely hinged, he emphasized, on God's love and grace, revealed through the prophets and Jesus Christ—not by our own efforts or anything we accomplish. While God certainly wants us to do good things and to live righteously, just as Israel's many prophets declare, we can never, in Luther's estimation, be righteous enough or perfect enough to earn our salvation. (*Micah 6:1-8*) No, Luther insisted, we must instead depend upon God's forgiving generosity which, recognizing both our good intentions and the sinfulness that we can never entirely wash away, leads him to embrace us as Christ's disciples in spite of our profound failings and limitations.

Luther never forgot Jesus' own battles with the Pharisees, where our Savior emphasized the power of divine and human love as more important than perfected obedience to the letter of the law. (*Matthew 5:17-28*) We hear this also reiterated in our morning gospel passage where Jesus again stresses love as key to true discipleship in his name. (*John 13:34-35*) Luther also dearly cherished the teachings of the Apostle Paul who in his own ministry stressed that our salvation in Jesus Christ comes through divine grace, not by any religious inheritance or human effort and deeds. Indeed, as Paul states in his Letter to

the Romans: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith in this this grace in which we now stand.” (*Romans 5:1*) As Paul affirmed and Luther fully agreed, we discover our own worth and a meaningful life through our trust of God’s complete acceptance of us, abiding thereafter in a joyful appreciation of God’s forgiveness of our sins and his everlasting graciousness to us. As expressed through their own ministries, Jesus, Paul, and Luther all believed that such divine graciousness, proclaimed by Christ and fully trusted by those who have ears to hear and hearts to receive, would spur and prompt us to be loving, generous, and righteous in both outlook and action towards others.

The fundamentals of Luther’s own Protestant teachings later came to be summarized in terms of the famous “Five Solas” as in *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Fide*, *Sola Gratia*, *Solus Christus*, and *Soli Deo Gloria*. Who knows Latin today? But these Latin phrases that Luther invoked simply translate as By Scripture Alone; By Faith Alone; By Grace Alone; By Christ Alone; and Glory to God Alone.



The Five Solas

1. Sola Scriptura (by scripture alone)
2. Sola Fide (by faith alone)
3. Sola Gratia (by grace alone)
4. Solus Christus (Christ alone)
5. Soli Deo Gloria (glory to God alone)

By Christ Alone; and Glory to God Alone.

Basically, in a day when the invention of moveable type printing presses were making Bibles more readily available than ever before, scripture—rather than any august church leader like the Roman Pope—needed to be the ultimate authority for our faith. In turn, as Jesus and the apostles teach through the Bible, our salvation comes to us through our trust in God’s grace revealed most ultimately through Christ alone. Finally, our

purpose as human beings is to glorify God above all else. As the first of the Ten Commandments declares, we should have no other gods before God. We also need to be wary of people and things we might treat even as lesser gods that distract and detract from the full worship of our true God, both our Creator and the father of Jesus Christ.

One of the amazing things about Martin Luther is that as a theologian he could be either abstract or concrete; complex or simple. On the one hand, he wrote some superb tomes of theology. In oral argument and disputation, particularly when he was essentially put on trial for his beliefs, he stood well over and against some of the greatest theological minds of his generation. At the same time, for all his theological sophistication, Luther managed to speak and write in ways that just about anyone could understand. Particularly precious is a collection of his wit and wisdom casually shared over a kitchen table with his students and followers. Still in print, it's called *Table Talk* and full of practical advice for the faithful. But we also hear Martin Luther through a beautiful hymn that he composed for congregational singing which, in a departure from earlier Roman Catholic tradition, he thoroughly encouraged. The hymn is known to us as "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Directly translated from Luther's original German, this great Luther hymn opens celebrating God as "a bulwark never failing; our present help amid the flood of mortal ills prevailing." However, it is the second verse which really goes to the core of Luther's theology. There the hymn declares: "Did we in our own strength confide, our striving would be losing, but there is one who takes our side, the one of God's own choosing... Christ will prevail triumphant!"

Of course, it is the fourth and final verse that Luther delivers his most resounding message of hope in song. That final verse reads: "God's word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them [i.e., earth's devilish powers], abideth. The Spirit and the gifts are ours, through Christ, who with us sideth. Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also. The body they may kill. God's truth abideth still, God's reign endures forever." In several dozen words, Luther underscores that, as declared by God's imperishable word, our life in the Spirit is always more important than all our material goods and possessions and that the joy of eternal life awaits all who give themselves to the loving way of Christ, trust in God's grace as the true path to salvation, and thereafter abide in his Spirit.

Congregation, on this Reformation Sunday how important it is for us all to embrace the legacy of Luther, founded on the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Luther abhorred idolatry in all forms. We should too. Luther also called upon each of us to trust in the gracious, forgiving God revealed through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How blessed and renewed we are when we do so! The truth of God sharing the good news of his love and salvation in Jesus Christ is sweet—indeed, a sweeter treat than any candy that our kids receive this Halloween! Let us honor and cherish it as Christian men and women through the faith and devotion of our daily lives. **Amen.**