

October 29, 2017

Alone (500th Anniversary of the Reformation)

Romans 3:19-28; Psalm 27: 1 & 14

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For those of you who were hoping for a history lesson on this momentous occasion of the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses of protest on the door of the Wittenburg Castle Church, you may be disappointed. I've never been a stellar student of history. When it came to history, my grades were always mediocre at best, and remembering precisely how dates and events piece together has never been a strong suit. What I can give you today are a few of my reflections on the major theological bullet points of the Reformation. Theological arguments have always held my interest, and as a pastor, I feel like that's how we live out our lives of faith anyway. We seek to determine if what we have learned about our faith informs how we are going to live our actual lives. The history has interesting bits and parts – but I wonder – do the theological sound bites of the Reformation still hold sway in our lives? Are they still meaningful? With what nuances or corrections for today's world?

So as an exercise, I hope to address all those solas that are printed on the front of your bulletin. You may want to look at them as we go along. As evidenced by multiple accounts and numerous shortcuts to understanding the Reformation, those five statements are ones believed to represent the broadest flavor of Protestantism. Now individual denominations of a Protestant ilk may favor one over another – but taken as a whole – those ideas represent a mindset – and a fairly argumentative mindset – if I do say so myself – beginning with the word “Sola” itself.

Sola, solus, soli in these phrases all mean the same thing – alone. Scripture alone, Christ alone, Grace alone, Faith alone, to the Glory of God alone. Alone – meaning that nothing else will

do, ONLY that. Only scripture can be the standard for understanding what we believe. ONLY Christ is the means to salvation. ONLY by grace do we receive that salvation. ONLY by faith are we justified. And absolutely everything that happens in this world can ONLY be attributed to one thing – that it must be bringing God Glory. Now, these happen to be debatable points, but the debate gets immediately shut off by that one word in every account. It is a silencer, and has been used as such to determine adherence to the orthodoxies created through the initial split from the Roman Catholic Church that then fractured into multiple denominations and now has spawned sub-denominations that Presbyterians seem peculiarly good at creating. This church happens to belong to the largest subset of Presbyterians, the Presbyterian Church USA, but there are also: the Presbyterian Church in America, the Bible Presbyterian Church, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, and the Evangelical Covenant Order of Presbyterians, and that doesn't even count the additional 10 or more splits that stem from the Reformed Presbyterian Church and all her children.

My hunch is that all those splits have something to do with coming back to that reforming obsession with the word alone. Alone is a line in the sand. You stand on this side of alone or that other side. If I say that this is the ONLY way we can believe; then the alternative becomes heresy, false church, or at least a heated disagreement in some church council somewhere. That stubborn mentality is what gave Martin Luther the audacity to nail his list of grievances to the church door. It's encapsulated by the statement, "Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God." His most famous quote.

So how do these particularly reformed arguments stand in our time? Are we still happy with the "alones" or do we have any alternatives? Let's check them out one by one.

I'll go down the list. First - Sola Scriptura – scripture alone is the standard. Standard for what? How do you uphold that standard? Obviously, this is a tough one to maintain. Most of us are guided by scripture, maybe even give a lot of credence to scripture. It may even be the top go-to source among others, but is it all that we ever use for making our life decisions? I dare say that's a pretty hefty "alone" to carry. I don't want my medical care to exclusively be determined by scripture – I'd like a little more science with that please - but there are some who take it even to that extreme.

However, it didn't start out that way. It started, as you will see most of these arguments started, as a corrective to what had become an abusable practice in the church. Adherence to church law was becoming more important than scripture. Only the priests and monks had access to the words of the Bible – because they were in Latin, because they were the ones who knew how to read. The average church-goer learned about the Bible stories through church art – not through the original texts. The Reformers wanted to change that, to wrestle the Word of God out of the tight hands of the priesthood and get it into the hands of the people. They advocated for understanding the original languages of Greek and Hebrew. They sponsored translations – like the Gutenberg Bible, and archeological enterprises that would unearth historical relevance for the texts. They dug into the words themselves and found meaning in them that they weren't finding in their church life. Luther is a particularly good example of that. His reading of scripture for his own life is what convinced him that the Church really needed to change.

But now, that phrase scripture alone carries the bumper sticker ring to it of "God wrote it, I believe it, that settles it." Churches call themselves "Bible-believing" - as opposed to those who aren't??? And scripture is manipulated to enforce whatever right belief it is that the particular community wants to hold up as most important. There's less wrestling with the depth and breadth of scripture and more declarations of simply what the Bible permits or prohibits. Is it enough to say

that we are guided by scripture alone if it means we lose sight of things like love, or truth, or kindness, or if we quit caring about new discoveries in our world?

So how about Christ alone? It seems as though that's the almost unquestioned definition of Christianity – Protestant or otherwise. I get it. Who are we if we don't claim salvation – in the name of Christ? Who are we if we begin to let it slide that others might be saved too? But originally, this wasn't our word alone. The Hebrew Bible, or as we call it, the Old Testament, talks about God's saving power in the days before Christ, rather prolifically in fact. It can't all be attributed to prophetic words about Jesus either. Salvation is a gift God is ever ready to give to God's beloved people. Because we happen to know and trust that salvation as it has come to us through Christ, does that give us reason to say that those who have not known Christ, or choose not to worship him, are somehow apart from the possibility of God's love and deliverance?

Our modern version of this question seems to demand greater attention as the world becomes more and more diverse. We cannot claim to live in an exclusively Christian nation, if in deed we were ever able to make that claim. The punishments that Christians have doled out to non-Christians in other time periods would be considered barbaric today, crimes against humanity. We've had enough of religious wars and intolerance. We no longer go on Crusades or paint crosses on our battle gear. The zealotry that came through the age of Constantine and wrapped itself in further colonialism and empire building up through the reformation period, tell some of Christianity's bleakest tales, as it became associated with power and influence, and the hierarchical mindset that lead to racially-based slavery and the harsh treatment of indigenous peoples. Those who have claimed Christ alone have committed atrocities against non-believers to the point at which some would rather give up on religion than seek to redeem the Redeemer.

I do claim Christ as my Lord and my Savior. My doubts are not with that statement of faith. It moves me, and guides my life to put my trust in the life and teachings of Jesus. And yet, when I am confronted by those who wish to have me claim an exclusivity to that statement, I get tongue-tied. I'm unwilling to claim that Christ is the ONLY way, that Christ ALONE has the power to save. It's gotten me into trouble a few times. There are those who might find that to be a juicy tidbit of information about a Christian pastor that she would say that God might have a broader definition of salvation than that, that God's mystery of salvation might have a few more possibilities than just this one. If that's my heresy – I've grown comfortable in my apostasy.

Next - we come to the favorite sola of the Presbyterian tribe. Sola gratia. Grace alone. Calvin's theological masterpiece. And Calvinists' theological noose. Calvin rightly understood that there was nothing any of us could do to earn the love of God. We had it, or we didn't have it. We were either part of the elect or part of the damned, and it was all up to God, not up to us to earn it. Thank you, Jesus. No, really, I mean it, thank you Jesus. You forgave our sin, left it on the cross, so that God could love us. But this understanding comes, in part from Calvin's rather pessimistic view of humankind. In the opening of the *Institutes*, chapter one, part one, he says, *"For, as a veritable world of miseries is to be found in mankind, and we are thereby despoiled of divine raiment, our shameful nakedness exposes a teeming horde of infamies. Each of us must, then, be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God. Thus, from the feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and - what is more - depravation and corruption, we recognize the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone."* Lovely, isn't it? Calvin found us so incorrigible as a species that the only way God could possibly love us is through the cross, and it takes recognition of our own depravity for us to understand just how much we have to rely on the righteousness of the Lord to save us.

I must say that I find some truth and comfort in that. It's the theological soup that I grew up in. It does bring some relief to feel so unworthy, but then to know that God loves us – anyway. We don't have to measure up, or succeed, or get everything right in order for God to love us. God showed us love through the power of life over death, through the grace of one willing to take on the mess of humanity and show us a different ending. It is good news – of a sort – to think of grace alone as our means to salvation. The alternatives, that we would have to be good enough or blameless enough to merit salvation are even more terrifying.

But what Calvin misses and his later followers make even worse is to forget that we were, as human beings, made in the image of God. That goodness, that pureness of the divine is to be found deep within us. We can own that part of ourselves too. We don't have to grovel each and every time we gather for worship about what worthless human beings we are so that grace will come and find us in the pit of our despair. We don't have to wallow in humanity's awfulness quite as much as we do because of this particular theological precept. The Calvinists took Calvin's description of humanity's ugliness to heart, but forgot the second part, that it reminds us to look up, so that we will be overwhelmed with goodness and hope every time we contemplate all that God has done for us.

Next stop – the Lutherans. I'm not Lutheran so I can't speak to everything about their tribe, but the precept of faith alone is their hallmark. The scripture reading from Romans we read this morning was claimed to be the impetus behind Luther's aha moment. Like Calvin, he was a brooding angsty type. But his transformation occurred when he realized that he could be the absolute perfect Brother in his monastery, and it wouldn't matter for anything without the faith to go along with it. The church was selling works-righteousness hard in his time. Heaven came with a check-off list attached. Baptize your babies. Take communion according to a certain structure. Confess. Receive absolution. Do everything the church tells you to do, and if you're worried about

whether your dead relative did enough, you can buy their way into heaven with a few indulgences. For Luther, those scripture passages that talk about a reliance on our faithfulness and not on what we do were critical to his own understanding of salvation, and spoke critically to the church of which he was a part.

Again, this understanding has lingered past the time of being a corrective to maybe having its own difficulties. Saying you “believe in Jesus” but then turning around and doing absolutely nothing of what he taught is something the church is getting charged with today. Perhaps we want to hold the church a little more accountable for looking like it’s doing Jesus’ work in our own time period. The assent to faith can be hollow and meaningless if you can’t see the church doing acts of love and justice. Maybe we want to be acknowledged for our work, and our faith can take a breather for just a bit. Maybe we want to see Christians being known by their acts of love – not just their membership on a church roster somewhere noting that they “accepted Jesus.” A little less Romans, a little more James might help us get a balance back in perspective. Remember, Luther hated the book of James, wanted it removed from the Bible because it’s where it says, “Faith, without works, is dead.”

And finally, on to the very last sola, the one that exemplifies the absoluteness of the Sovereignty of God so prevalent throughout the Protestant theological premises. To the glory of God, alone. What does that mean? It means that all things, read ALL THINGS, come through God and are perfectly designed to give God glory. That’s the good, the bad, and the ugly of it. Kittens and mosquitoes. Beautiful rainbows and devastating hurricanes. But it tends to be a cop out. We’ve called some pretty ungodly things God-ordained, and this is how we got away with it. We spoke for God, quite out of turn. It took the emphasis off of the priests being the only mouthpiece of God on earth, but what it did was give us permission to use all those terrible cliché’s anytime anything bad happens, or even anytime anything good happens. It destroys the concept of human agency and free

will. Something the Baptists, at least some of them, were willing to let back into the understanding of who God is and who we are apart from God. But the Protestants who trace their lineage back to this movement always have that problem with a much too powerful God who doesn't seem all that loving if he's not using his power then to help us move onward toward the good.

Does the world, the whole of creation, the magnitude of the universe speak of God's glory and power? Yes, I absolutely believe it does. But does God control the minutia of every outcome? I'm not so sure. And that would put me at a difference with, once again, that pesky little work ALONE.

ALONE. The ONLY way. The exclusively correct interpretation. Ugh. I'm not sure the Reformation did us any favors by trying to make their points so definitively. They may have done the opposite.

But way before, and during, and now after the Reformation, there's always been a minority report in religion that lifts up the great Mystery of what it means to live a life of faith. Most of the time, it's somewhere in the paradox where we find the greatest truth. Faith and works go together. Grace is not only found when we recognize ourselves as saved sinners, it's when we recognize ourselves made in the image of God. Scripture is a blessing to the extent it isn't trapped in time or space or narrow views. The more we open ourselves to the words, the more the Word will open itself to us. Christ is our salvation because of his deep love for all people, not because he's worshipped exclusively by a segment of those people. God's glory is defined by both power and love. God can seem to be in our daily lives and God can be transcendently Other and beyond our greatest understandings of the universe. I find myself in that spot most often – affirming scripture, and Christ, and grace, and faith, and God's glory – but not with the sense that they are without other understandings that come into play. I am shaped by the history and theology of the Reformation,

but hopefully not trapped by it. But if I were going to go with a statement that helps put all others in perspective – maybe it would be to say that Jesus aligned himself most closely with Love Alone.

Love as the greatest gift, the most enduring commandment. Even Paul, belligerent Paul, is willing to say that of faith, hope, and love, Love is the greatest, and what is most needed in our world. Amen. -