

The Importance of the Protestant Reformation

The culture of American Christianity is currently one of false unity where it is not generally accepted to point out doctrinal error. The biblical knowledge and theological depth of many Christians today amounts to barely more than “I just love Jesus.” Perhaps you have heard the common mantra “We don’t preach doctrine, we just preach *Jesus*,” or “doctrine divides.” Ironically, that is *true*. Doctrine *does* divide. It divides *truth* from *error*. **Romans 16:17** says,

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.

Or consider **1 Timothy 6:3–4a**,

³ If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, ⁴ he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing.

Also, **Titus 1:9**, regarding the qualifications for church eldership, the Apostle Paul tells Titus, *He [the elder] must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*

Indeed, one of the principal functions of the preaching-teaching ministry of the church is so that God’s people would not be led astray by strange doctrines. **Ephesians 4:11, 14** says, *He Himself gave . . . some pastors and teachers . . . that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting.* (NKJV)

So then, as we consider the Protestant Reformation, we must conclude that it did not arise out of the Reformers’ desire to be needlessly divisive over minor doctrinal issues. The issues of the Reformation *were* not (and still *are not*) an in-house debate on secondary and third-level points of doctrine (such as the mode of baptism, spiritual gifts, or the timing of Christ’s return). One of the great errors Christians often make is to insist that every point of doctrine is something to divide over, but that was certainly not the case with the Protestant Reformers.

There were and continue to be *significant differences* between Protestant and Catholic theology that matter a great deal. Indeed, the very heart of the gospel itself was and still is at stake. So then, it is clearly vital for Christians to be informed about these differences and to understand that being *Protestant* means, fundamentally, that *we accept the Bible alone as our ultimate authority, and that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone.*

The Context of the Protestant Reformation

On October 31, “All Hallows Eve,” 1517, 507 years ago this year (2024), a German Catholic Monk named Martin Luther nailed a document called “The Ninety-Five Theses” to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenburg, Germany. This document was called the “Ninety-Five Theses” because it was essentially ninety-five complaints or *protests* to the theological abuses of the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century. Throughout the medieval period, what we also call the Middle Ages—the thousand years between the 5th and 15th centuries—the Roman Catholic Church had grown increasingly institutionalized and corrupt, and at the beginning of the 16th century, the theology of the Church had degenerated to the point of essentially merchandizing salvation through the selling of *indulgences*—and this really was the tipping point for Martin Luther.

Though there were *many* issues both in the theology and the practice of the Roman Catholic Church that led to the Reformation, the selling of *indulgences* was *the decisive factor* that brought Luther to his breaking point. So what is an indulgence? An indulgence was an official church document approved and granted by the Pope that would bypass the normal rigorous process of penance and provide forgiveness from sins. At the time of the Reformation in the 16th century, the Roman Catholic theology of salvation was a complex sacramental cycle of sin, confession, absolution from a priest, penance, and restoration to a state of grace until more sin was committed, and then the process started all over. *But*, indulgences offered a “shortcut” to forgiveness—it could be purchased with a simple payment of money.

The chief architect of how to effectively sell indulgences was a Dominican monk named John Tetzel. Tetzel used extremely manipulative techniques to pressure guilt-ridden sinners looking for forgiveness into buying an indulgence. Tetzel was a master salesman. A modern-day equivalent might be the faith preachers on TV who promise health and wealth if you will just give to their ministry. In Tetzel’s case, the deception was much worse because the people were *held captive* by the belief that salvation was *impossible* apart from the sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church, so selling indulgences as a promise of God’s forgiveness and pardon was even more insidious than what many of the faith healers today.

Indulgences could be bought for one’s own personal sins or they could be purchased for family members who had already died and were in purgatory—the place, according to Roman Catholic theology, where those whose sins were not completely atoned for in this life can undergo a final state of purification before they are allowed to enter heaven. Tetzel even

had a clever catch phrase, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

Of course, the money received from the sale of indulgences went to the various building projects of the Roman Church, including the repair and remodeling of Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome which began in 1506, eleven years before the dawn of the Reformation. The work on Saint Peter’s Basilica was completed in 1626 and today it is the 5th most visited site in the city of Rome. This was an incredible display of religious corruption and greed. So Martin Luther *protested*. In one of his 95 Theses, Luther says, “*Christians should be taught that if the Pope were acquainted with the exactions of the preachers of pardons, he would prefer that the Basilica of St. Peter should be burnt to ashes, than that it should be built up with the skin, flesh, and bones of his sheep.*” Luther called out the theologically corrupt enterprise that was the Roman Catholic church.

The Continuing Significance of the Protestant Reformation Today

Fast-forward 500+ years to the 21st century, and while Rome may not “sell” the indulgences for money anymore, they still grant indulgences in return for some act on our part—whether that be a pilgrimage to a holy site, or a special prayer before a holy shrine, or some other act of contrition and sacramental devotion. In 2013, Pope Francis offered a *plenary* (i.e. *complete or full*) indulgence to faithful Catholics who attended World Youth Day in Brazil, and for those who couldn’t attend, they could still be granted the indulgence if they did their best to diligently follow the event on TV, radio, and social media. This was not an isolated event, and the granting of indulgences is still a regular part of Roman Catholic practice, but this just *one reason* why all of this still matters today, 500+ years after Luther hammered his 95 theses to Castle Church door in Germany.

The central issue of the Reformation, though, was *not* the sale of indulgences, but rather what the sale of indulgences *represented*, and that was the question, *how can a sinner be made right with God?* Are we made right with God through sacramental devotion and good deeds of merit, or are we made right with God on the sole basis of the finished and sufficient atonement of Jesus Christ granted by *grace alone* and received *by faith alone*? This was the *material* cause of the 16th century Reformation, and it still represents the fundamental difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism today—*how guilty sinners are made right with holy God.*

Still, when we look at the core issues of the Reformation, we find that there were actually *five key truths* that became the rallying cries of the Reformers in their struggle against corrupt Roman Catholic theology and practice. These five truths became known as the “5 Solas” of the Protestant Reformation. “Sola” is a Latin word that simply means “alone” or “only,” and the 5 Solas were: *sola scriptura* (scriptura alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), and *solis deo Gloria* (to the glory of God alone). The operative word here is *alone*. Protestantism affirms that sinful man is made right with righteous God by *grace alone* through *faith alone* in *Christ alone*, whereas Roman Catholic theology insists that salvation is accomplished not by faith *alone*, but by faith *plus* works that earn the sinner *justifying merit* with God.

In the 500 years since the Reformation, official Roman Catholic doctrine regarding the salvation of sinners has gone virtually *unchanged*, and at points it has even been *re-affirmed*. So then, we must continue the work of Luther and the Reformers in the church today and every October the Reformation should be remembered, re-emphasized, and re-applied to our context today. October should also not only be a time of focus on the continued reformation of the *church* but continued *personal* reformation in our lives as well. The Reformation principle *semper reformanda* (“always reforming” according to the word of God) should be the essential principle of both church and life, to the glory of God.

Questions For Reflection and Application

1. How can understanding the history of the Reformation deepen our faith today?
2. How do the five “Solas” of the Reformation distinguish Protestant beliefs from Roman Catholic beliefs?
3. Why is it important to understand that justification before God cannot be earned through merit?
4. What does it mean that the Bible is our *ultimate* authority in matters of faith and practice?
5. How can we promote unity among believers without compromising on important doctrines?