

Today is Reformation Sunday. We are celebrating 500th anniversary of the Reformation. What do we know about the Reformation? A few years ago, when I volunteered as a chaplain, one patient who was in hospice asked me to what church I was going. I said just a Christian church. He asked me again what denomination I belonged to. I didn't want to tell him because a chaplain shouldn't have any prejudice. But, he kept asking me. So I told him that I am a pastor of Christian Reformed Church. He exclaimed, "What! Reformed from what!" Then, he didn't want to see me anymore. Later I found out he was a hard-core Catholic. Again, what is Reformation?

When we talk about the Reformation, three *Solas* come to our minds. They are *Sola Scriptura* (By Scripture Alone), *Sola Fide* (By Faith Alone), and *Sola Gratia* (By Grace Alone). Later more *Sola* doctrines are mentioned, but these three *Solas* summarize the early Reformation movement.

Sola Scriptura. It means that the Scripture alone has the authority over all church traditions and teachings. Church traditions were very important at that time. People didn't need to know the Bible; they just followed whatever the church taught them. However, the Bible is the divinely inspired Word. Traditions could be beneficial, but the Bible alone is sufficient for our salvation, and it also teaches us how we are supposed to live as forgiven sinners.

Sola Gratia. It means that we are rescued from God's wrath by His grace alone. It is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that brings us to Christ out of our bondage to sin. *Sola Gratia* denies any merit that we may receive through our works for our salvation.

Similarly, there is *Sola Fide*. By faith alone we are justified. It is a legal declaration of "not guilty" as we are forgiven by the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God.

As you may know, justification is the beginning of salvation, followed by sanctification and glorification. When we believe in Jesus, our status is changed from sinners to the righteous. We are justified as we confess our faith in Jesus. Paul summarizes our salvation in Ephesians 2:8, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." God's grace is revealed in Jesus Christ who sacrificed himself for our sins, and he did it even before we respond in our faith. It is by grace alone, but how do we know it? It is when "we confess with our mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead, we are saved" (Rom. 10:9). Justification is by grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.

Scripture, grace and faith were not really new ideas coming from the Reformation. They have been the core beliefs of Christianity from the 1st century. But over the years, people added more to them. Church traditions and teachings became more important than the Scripture. People believed that they needed human works and merits for their salvation. That was why the reformers came and used one extra word, "sola." Christianity must be based on Scripture alone, grace alone and faith alone. Particularly, *Sola Fide*, "by faith alone", was what Martin Luther claimed at the start of the Reformation.

Before Luther, the movement already arose by early reformers, such as John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, but it was after Luther's 95 theses that the Reformation actually began. So, let's look at briefly why and how Luther began the Reformation.

Martin Luther¹ was born on November 10, 1483 in Eisleben, Saxony (modern day Germany). In 1501, he entered law school at the request of his father. But, all that changed during a thunderstorm in the summer of 1505 when he was 21 years old. A lightning bolt struck near to him as he was returning to school. Terrified, he cried out, "Help, St. Anne! I'll become a monk!" Spared of his life, Luther dropped out of the law school, left his wife and entered the monastery. Life in a monastery was filled with religious ritual, ceremony, the sacraments and a lifestyle of poverty and austerity. Luther was glad to accept that life style because he, like millions of people today, was looking for peace with God. He joined the monastery in order to save his soul, but he couldn't find a way to have his sins forgiven. He devoted himself to fasting, flagellations (beating himself), long hours in prayer and pilgrimages, and constant confession. However, the more he tried to do for God, the more aware he became of his sinfulness.

Luther realized that the way of confession brought him no relief. So, he tried something else. In 1510, he traveled to Rome, which was the center of the religious world at that time. It was where the Pope and the great cathedrals were. Luther thought that perhaps in Rome, he could find for what he was desperately seeking. However, when he got to Rome, he was sadly disappointed. What he saw there was a disregard for the fundamental truths of the Christian faith. He found priests who were so drunk that they couldn't finish the mass. He found other priests who would give 70-100 masses a day, just running through it as fast as they could. He found some priests breaking their vows of celibacy. Particularly, he was troubled by the veneration of relics – the teaching that by venerating, by worshiping those relics, you could release a soul from purgatory. According to his biographer Roland Bainton, Martin Luther said about Rome, "If there were a Hell, Rome was built upon it."

Outside the building called the Lateran, there were holy stairs that had been transported from Jerusalem to Rome. It was known that Jesus walked on those stairs outside Pilate's hall. The church taught that if you got on your hands and knees and crawled up the 28 stone stairs, and if you said an "Our Father" on each one of the stairs, by the time you got to the top stair you would have released a soul from purgatory. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims would come and climb those stairs on their hands and knees. Martin Luther – now deeply troubled – tried that too. He got on his hands and knees and crawled up those stairs, kissing each one as he crawled and saying "Our Father" along the way. When he got to the top, he looked back at the stairway and asked himself a question, "What if it is not so?" Luther could not see how saying prayers over some stairs could have anything to do with the righteous and holy God.

Luther went back to Germany, now even more troubled than before, and began to investigate the way of justification. The turning point in his life came in the year 1515 when he studied the book of Romans. Romans 1:16-17, *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the*

¹ <http://www.christianity.com/11583597/>

gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"

To Martin Luther, God had been always just and fearful. The righteousness of God always punished sinners. He couldn't get the assurance of forgiveness, and that was why he couldn't have peace with God. He couldn't connect the righteousness of God with the statement "the righteous will live by faith." After prayer and study day and night, he finally understood the righteousness of God and also of man. He realized the righteousness of man has nothing to do with his works. It is given by grace alone. Also, he found that the righteousness of God is revealed through Jesus Christ. Without Jesus, yes, there is no forgiveness, no peace with God, but just punishment and judgment. However, when by faith we believe that God's righteousness is revealed in Jesus, which means, we believe all the necessary punishments of our sins are paid by the blood of Jesus, God declares us "not guilty!" In God's righteousness, Jesus had to pay for our sins. By faith in Jesus, we become righteous. This is what the reformation is all about. So, do you believe Jesus paid for your sins? Amen? Do you believe you are righteous by grace alone through faith alone? Amen? This is why we are celebrating the Reformation today.

As Luther realized that he was justified by grace alone through faith alone, he began to question about the Catholic teachings. For example, he couldn't agree with the church's teaching that salvation was possible through good works. He could not stand with the church's practice of granting "indulgences" to provide forgiveness to sinners. So, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed 95 theses on the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany. Luther didn't mean to lead the reformation. Even though he condemned the Pope for abuse of authority and the church for granting indulgences, he didn't totally deny the Pope's right to sell indulgences and the existence of purgatory. What he did was an intention to have debate at the university, but the 95 theses went out to the public and became the spark for the Reformation.

As the movement continued to spread to other countries in Europe, several denominations arose. There were Lutheran (Luther, Melancthon) churches, Reformed churches (Calvin) in Switzerland and Netherland, the Anglican churches (Henry VIII) in England, Presbyterian churches (John Knox) in Scotland, and Baptist churches. As you may know, our church has roots in the Reformed church in Netherland at that time.

Personally, I have experienced different churches. I grew up in a Pentecostal church; I worked in a Baptist church; I spent most of my time in a Presbyterian church. After I studied church history and different kinds of doctrines, I decided to join the Christian Reformed Church. To me, it was the most biblical. So, I took an examination to be ordained in the CRC. During the examination, one denomination deputy asked me, "Peter, what is Reformed?" That was an easy question. So, I explained about Calvinism; I explained about God's sovereignty, covenant and kingdom as those are the characteristics of our denomination. But, I could see that he wasn't satisfied with my answer. He said, "Reformed means Reforming."

The Reformation has begun 500 years ago, but it is not over yet. We are still reforming. I am not saying that we need to reform against a certain church, but we need to be reformed in ourselves. The church, the body of Christ, needs to be reformed. Traditions cannot take over the genuine heart of worship. For example, no matter what worship style we have, whether we like or not, we

must leave the church with the fullness of peace and joy because we worship God who saved us by grace alone. Every morning, we should be renewed and refreshed spiritually even though we may not feel healthy physically. Every day we should grow in our faith and fellowship with Jesus. How are you reforming your soul? We open our Bible once again. We praise God for his grace and mercy. We do good works in thanksgiving for our salvation. We will continue to reform until Jesus comes. We do all this for *Soli Deo Gloria* (“To God Alone Be Glory”). Amen.