

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA**

October 31, 2021 – REFORMATION SUNDAY/ALL HALLOW'S EVE

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: "*Sola Scriptura, Sola Fide, Sola Gratia*"

Jeremiah 31:31-34	(God will write His laws on His people's hearts)
Psalms 46	(The Lord is our refuge and strength when we are in trouble)
Romans 3:19-28	(We are justified with God by faith apart from our works)
St. John 8:31-36	(Jesus sets us free from being enslaved by sin)

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Today is not Halloween. In the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions, it is All Hallow's Eve, the day before All Saints' Day. And, in the Protestant tradition, it is Reformation Sunday. Historically, Lutherans have taken the last Sunday in October and set it aside as "Reformation Sunday," an occasion to give thanks to God for the life and work of Martin Luther and the other reformers of the Church, who, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, once more shined light on the truth of the Gospel.

By the time Luther—a Roman Catholic monk—was ordained a priest in Erfurt, Germany in 1507, the truth of the Gospel had become obscured. The Church was teaching that people could contribute to their own salvation, in fact, they *had to*. If you said the right prayers enough times, paid enough money for an indulgence, and did enough good works, you could reduce the amount of time you were sentenced to punishment after death—in a state of suffering called purgatory—before you could be admitted to heaven.<sup>1</sup>

An "indulgence" was not the granting of *forgiveness* of sin; supposedly, it offered the individual either full or partial reduction of *punishment for* sins, either here on earth or after death, in purgatory. Just so you know, the Roman Catholic Church finally outlawed the buying of indulgences in 1567, but the teaching of salvation *through* good works and charity—not as *a result of* salvation—continued.

In Luther's time, the Church also taught that purchasing an indulgence could release a *deceased loved one's* soul from purgatory—for the right price, of course. This system of works-righteousness tortured Luther to no end. He spent countless nights in his cell, whipping his body, exposing himself to the cold, sleeping on the floor, depriving himself of food, among other tortures, in an effort to atone for his sins. Instead of finding comfort and assurance, he only fell further into despair, never knowing if he had done enough to appease God. He saw Jesus Christ as an angry judge, waiting to condemn him to an eternity in hell.

Not until Luther began to study the Scriptures in his role as a Bible Professor did he discover the truth about Christ. He came across Ephesians 2:8-9: "It is by *grace* you have been saved through *faith*. And this is *not your own doing*; it is a *gift of God, not a result of works*, so that no one may boast." And Romans 3:23-25 (CEV): "all need to be made right with God by *his grace*, which is a free gift. They need to be made free from sin *through Jesus Christ*. God sent him to die in our place to take away our sins. *We receive forgiveness through faith* in the blood of Jesus' death."

In these and other Bible passages, Luther discovered the Scriptural truth that salvation is not dependent on our works or efforts, but completely and *only* on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By returning to the Word of God and finding the truth of the Gospel, Luther was at last freed from slavery to his sin. And he wasn't about to keep this message to himself! He preached it from the pulpit, taught it in the university classroom, and started writing about it. In an effort to debate the practice of indulgences with other theologians, Luther wrote 95 theses, or statements, about the abuses of this teaching, and nailed them to the doors of the Castle Church in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. Little did Luther know that God would use that hammer and nail to bring the Gospel back to most of Europe and far beyond, with transformative power lasting for centuries afterward.

By 1450 Johannes Gutenberg, a native of Mainz, Germany, had perfected his invention of the printing press. Because printers were able to copy Luther's theses and distribute them to the people, his rediscovery of the Gospel spread like wildfire throughout Germany. News of it reached Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, which became strongholds of the church that would eventually bear the name Lutheran. Luther's original intent of sharing the good news of salvation by God's grace through faith was not to establish a new church, let alone have one named for him. His original hope was to simply reform the Catholic Church of his day.

Unfortunately, Pope Leo X wouldn't hear of it. Instead of a debate, Luther was called before Cardinal Cajetan the following year, and told to recant his position, for questioning the authority of the Pope. Luther refused. Instead, he kept writing about, preaching, and teaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. By 1520, Pope Leo had had enough. He sent Luther a Papal edict, giving Luther 60 days to recant, or be excommunicated from the Church and be branded a heretic. This was no small deal. At the time, it was taught that there was no salvation outside of the Roman Catholic Church. In addition, the Holy Roman Emperor had the power to brand Luther an outlaw, meaning anyone could kill him at any time. His very life was at stake.

But that didn't stop Martin Luther. He refused to recant, and as a result, was forbidden to receive Communion, or "excommunicated." Even so, Luther continued to preach, teach, and write to the Church of his day that the "reformation words" of Jesus were true for all time. One of the Bible verses he often shared was John 8:36: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." Luther boldly proclaimed that it is *only* through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ that we are saved from our sins and given the assurance of eternal life—in heaven with God. He no longer believed in purgatory, where the Church taught that sinners had to spend time to expiate, or atone for, their own sins.

Luther's ground-breaking ideas sailed across the ocean to England, where they were picked up by theologians such as Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury under Henry VIII. Today, we know him as the architect of our *Book of Common Prayer*. In 1534, the Church of England separated from Rome and the English Parliament passed "The Act of Supremacy," making the British monarch—not the Pope—Head of the Church. Then, by order of the King, each parish was to own a Bible in English, which existed in Miles Coverdale's 1535 complete translation. In 1526, William Tyndale's English New Testament was published. Yet Henry VIII had Tyndale tried for heresy and burned at the stake in 1536, not for his scholarship, but because Tyndale opposed the annulment of Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon.

Was England heading toward Protestantism? No. Henry VIII felt strong bonds to Catholicism, and in 1539 he wrote the "Six Articles," adopted by Parliament which resolutely condemned Luther's ideas. The King sought to found a Church separate from Rome's authority, but still true to Roman doctrine.

In opposition to Henry, Archbishop Cranmer was a scholar appreciative of Luther's ideas. He even went so far as to secretly marry one of Luther's nieces. Upon Henry VIII's death in 1547, since his son Edward VI was only 9, the Regency Council together with Cranmer opened wide the gates of England to the Reformation. Reformers swarmed in from the Continent. John Knox became Edward VI's chaplain. Martin Bucer, a reformer from Strasbourg, France, became a professor at Cambridge University. He convinced Cranmer to embrace the whole of reformed theology.<sup>2</sup> The Catholic Latin Mass was abolished, and a new liturgy in English was implemented using *The Book of Common Prayer*, the first edition of which was completed in 1549.

It seemed that England would finally be free of unbiblical teaching and that Britons would experience the joy of worshipping in their own language. But in 1553, Mary Tudor, a pious Roman Catholic who was the daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, was crowned Queen of England and Ireland. Very quickly, she sought to restore British Catholicism under the Pope's authority. Persecutions of Protestants began immediately. Three hundred were burned alive, among them several bishops, including Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury for 20 years. These executions so deeply shocked the public, Mary Tudor was nicknamed "bloody Mary." When she died without an heir in 1558, Elizabeth I succeeded her and would reign until 1603.

Elizabeth was the daughter of Henry VIII and Ann Boleyn, and it was the Protestants who brought her to the throne. It was unclear whether she was a Protestant at heart, but she needed their support in order to reign. Elizabeth reinstated the Supremacy Act, thus asserting her position as Queen and sole Head of the Church of England.

She appointed new bishops to revise the doctrine of the Church. The result was a text titled “The 39 articles”—derived from Luther, Bucer, and John Calvin—which Anglicans adopted as foundational. Today, you can find these at the back of our *Book of Common Prayer*, on pages 867 to 876. They are now titled the “Articles of Religion,” as established in 1801 by The Episcopal Church in the United States of America. Article 6 (p. 870), “Of the Justification of Man” states: “We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by Faith, and not for our own works or deservings.”

Article 7, “Of Good Works” declares: “Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God’s judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith ... Faith may be evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.”

Evidencing its strong Protestant bias, Article 22 (p. 972), “Of Purgatory,” protests: “The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory [and] Pardons ... is ... vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.” Yet, showing its Catholic roots, Article 28 (p. 873), “Of the Lord’s Supper,” proclaims: “The Supper of the Lord is not only a sign ... but rather, it is a Sacrament of our Redemption by Christ’s death: insomuch that to such as rightly, worthily, and with faith receive the same, the Bread which we break is a partaking of the Body of Christ; and likewise the Cup of blessing is a partaking of the Blood of Christ.”

Elizabeth I never totally broke away from the Catholic tradition, nor did the Church of England, of which we are a part. The worship service and the organization of Anglican churches still keep traces of our Roman heritage. As such, Elizabeth brokered a compromise between Protestant and Catholic elements, resulting in the term often given to Anglicanism, “the middle way” or, “*via media*.”

In our 21<sup>st</sup>-century Episcopal branch of Anglicanism, we continue to retain both Catholic and Protestant features. But regardless of our worship style, whether one likes incense or devotion to saints, etcetera, we must always ground our lives in the essential truth of the Gospel which Luther and Cranmer proclaimed: Only Scripture, only faith, only grace. *Sola Scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia*. Meaning: Only in God’s Word can we find out what is necessary for our salvation—Jesus Christ—and then, we are saved from sin, death, and hell only through faith in Him, which is enabled and empowered only by God’s grace.

### Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, throughout the ages, You have revealed Your Word to us through the Scriptures. You sent your Son among us, as Your incarnate Word, not only to reveal Your will for our lives, but also to give His life for our salvation. Through the power of Your Holy Spirit, empower us to seek, hear, and believe Your Word for our lives, and grant us the will to embrace its truth as our own, that we might boldly proclaim the good news to those around us, in thought, word, and deed. This we ask in Christ’s holy name. *Amen*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Christopher Martin, “Abiding in Jesus’ Reformation Words” [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/abiding-in-jesus-reformation-words-christopher-martin-sermon-on-bible-truth-140484), 25 October 2009 <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/abiding-in-jesus-reformation-words-christopher-martin-sermon-on-bible-truth-140484>> 25 October 2021. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Adapt. “The Anglican Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century,” [Musée Virtual du Protestantism](https://museeprotestant.org/en/notice/the-anglican-reformation/) <<https://museeprotestant.org/en/notice/the-anglican-reformation/>> 26 October 2021. Used with permission.

<sup>3</sup> Adapt. Ronald Harbaugh, “It’s Time for a New Reformation,” [SermonCentral.com](https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/it-s-time-for-a-new-reformation-ronald-harbaugh-sermon-on-grace-113244), 24 October 2007 <<https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/it-s-time-for-a-new-reformation-ronald-harbaugh-sermon-on-grace-113244>> 25 October 2021. Used with permission.