

The Gifts of the Reformation: By Grace Alone, by Faith Alone, by Scripture Alone

Ephesians 2:4-10; Romans 1:16-17; Romans 3:21-24

Theologian Phyllis Tickle has said that about every 500 years the Church has a giant rummage sale. One of those rummage sales was the Protestant Reformation. Today is Reformation Sunday in the Protestant church around the world. So I want us to some of the gifts of the Reformation.

We are at another 500 year inflection point today, but that's another sermon!

The Reformation threw out some things that needed to go, and it kept or recovered some things that had been lost. There are three gifts of the Reformation I want to highlight today. They are contained in three Reformation slogans: *sola gratis*, by grace alone; *sola fide*, by faith alone; *sola scriptura*, by scripture alone.

I

To understand these we look at the focal figure of the Reformation, Martin Luther. What turned this young monk bedeviled by a sensitive, maybe even tyrannical, conscience, fearful of hell and damnation, despairing of his goodness,

into the founder of the Reformation? I'll give the short answer, then tell some of his story. Short answer: *He was gobsmacked by grace.*

As a young man he entered the university to be a lawyer. It was his father's dream for him. He had decided, however, to change his studies. He dreaded telling his father he didn't want to be a lawyer, so he delayed.

One day returning from home to the university a terrifying thunderstorm arose, and lightning struck so near that he was knocked off his feet onto the ground. Terrified he cried out, "Saint Anna, help me! I will become a monk!" And so he did. He threw one last party for his friends and entered the monastery. It was an attempt to save his soul. If he became a super-monk he might gain salvation.

He had, as I mentioned, an overly sensitive conscience and feared he would never be good or righteous enough to earn God's favor, to be put right with God.

The monastic community had prayers seven times a day, but if seven are good, fourteen are better, so he doubled his prayers. He went to confession so often his priest said, "Stop bringing to me all these petty confessions!" If fasting *one* day would bring him closer to God, he would fast three days. His fellow monks would find him in his cell on the floor, unconscious after days of self-

deprivation. Self-doubt and depression consumed him. Hyper-religiosity was not working.

I've read a spiritual memoir by Maggie Rowe entitled *Sin Bravely*. She tells her story, that of a young girl and teenager terrified of going to Hell. Her own tyrannical conscience would not let her go.

She was told as an evangelical girl that if she prayed what's called "The Sinner's Prayer", she would be saved. She did, but it didn't relax her fear and spiritual anxiety.

Do you know what I mean by The Sinner's Prayer? It is at the center of the evangelical way to be saved. Billy Graham crusades used it for people who came down the aisle to be saved. I make no fun of it. It has been a turning point for many lives. It goes:

Dear Lord Jesus Christ, I know that I am a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness. I believe you died for my sins and rose from the dead. I turn from my sins and invite you to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow you as my Lord and Savior. Amen.

But saying the prayer did not work to allay Maggie's fear and spiritual anxiety. Did she say it the right way? Was she sincere enough? Were the motives of her heart pure? Her health began to suffer.

Her alarmed parents sent her to a Christian Psychiatric facility. By the grace of God she was assigned the right therapist who helped her understand that her spiritual fears were not because she was spiritually deficient but because she suffered a kind of psychological problem called severe “scrupulosity”, a spiritual perfectionism and a tyrannical conscience that kept her in knots. And she began to recover. She had begun to journey from a House of Fear to a House of Love.

II

Martin Luther had tried and tried to save his soul through a fastidious and sometimes self-punishing spiritual program. And he had failed.

His supervisor at the monastery grew alarmed and recommended that Martin go back to the University and get a doctoral degree and become a professor of theology. As he helped others he might himself be helped, his supervisor hoped.

His study of scripture opened the goodness of God to him. One day he was reading Romans and one verse was illumined for him, Romans 1:17: “*the just shall live by faith.*” He had tried to be righteous enough to be saved, but now he saw it. The righteous shall live by *faith*, faith in the goodness of God.

Here’s how Ephesians says it: For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God...

Grace had found him, and grace had led him home into the loving presence of God.

Salvation by grace means this, Frederick Buechner writes:

There's nothing *you* have to do.

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There is an important place for good works in the Christian life, but not as a *condition* of salvation, rather an expression of salvation, as Paul wrote:

For we are God's work of art, *poemia*, created in Christ Jesus for good works

Good works flow from a grace-filled heart. Theologian Paul Tillich described grace in these luminous words that broke through as light in my own darkness, earlier in my life.

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel our separation is deeper than usual.... It strikes us when, year after year the longed-for perfection of life does not appear...Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as through a voice were saying: "You are accepted. *You*

are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!*” If that happens to us, we experience grace.¹

Faith at its heart is accepting such grace, and even faith itself is the gift of God.

III

By grace alone, by faith alone, and now *by scripture alone*. All our religious traditions should be tested by the plain reading of scripture. Luther began to study scripture (he translated the whole Latin Bible into the German tongue). He saw that much of the tradition of the church had little to do with scripture and sometimes obscured it.

So on All Hallows Eve, (Halloween), 1517, Martin Luther posted on the door of the church at Wittenberg his *95 Theses*. It was his enumeration of the errors of the church. One of these was the selling of indulgences to obtain eternal security of one’s salvation. There was a poem priests used: “When a coin in the coffer clings a soul from purgatory springs.” We see a lot of it still, especially with T.V. preachers. Grady Nutt used to quip about the 50-foot praying hands in front of

Oral Roberts University. When a Cadillac drove by, one hand opened for a contribution.

A theological firestorm arose, and four years later, Luther was brought up before the church leaders and the Holy Roman Emperor, charged with heresy. They demanded he recant and repudiate all he had written. Luther said to them:

Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils.... My conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither safe nor right. God help me, here I stand, Amen.

So flowered another gift of the Reformation—*the freedom of conscience*—which the theocrats trying to take over our nation today want to strip away from us all.

Luther failed at religion and discovered a God he could love with all his heart and mind and soul and strength. Besotted by grace he still points us to the astonishing grace of God.

I love the name of our church, don't you? For Grace is the first and last word of our existence as children of God.

Writer Madelaine L'Engle writes of watching birds as she crossed a sea on the ferry boat. One was a pigeon. It would flap and flap its wings to get even with

the ferry, then a wind would come and blow it way back. So the pigeon would flap and flap its way back to the boat, when another burst of wind would blow.

The other bird was a seagull who glided not against the wind but on the wind and with the wind.

Some Christians try to get saved by being super-pigeons. Seagulls fly with and on the winds of God's grace. Let's be seagulls.

1. Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted", *The Shaking of the Foundations* (N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948),161-2.

I hope you have found freedom in those words today and I hope you can rejoice in the grace that forms the name of our church.