

# 500 Years of The Reformation

**31<sup>st</sup> Oct 1517 – 31<sup>st</sup> Oct 2017**

*(Celebrating with understanding of its relevance today)*



It is a great feeling when one celebrates a 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, 50<sup>th</sup> birthday or 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Do you feel ecstatic if you celebrate a 500<sup>th</sup> birthday?

500 years have gone by since Martin Luther's famous 95 theses were posted on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg in 1517 against the practice of the then Roman Catholic Church in the granting

of indulgences. 500 years is a long time. Yet, this historical event is still ringing in our ears today, attesting to its deep and wide impact on the lives of Christians throughout the world.

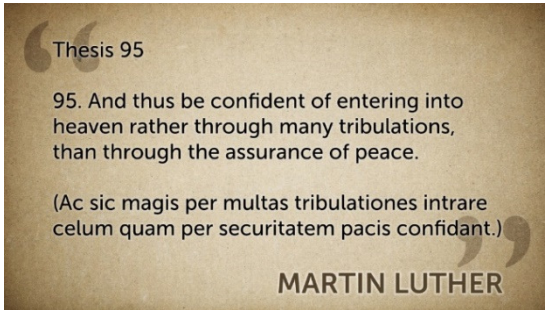
As Christians around the world celebrate 500 years of the Reformation, let us understand that remembering the Reformation is more than proclaiming a celebration. The celebration is far more meaningful if it is infused with a grasp of what the Reformation entails and the relevance of it within the order of Christianity today.

Briefly, some information about this man called Martin Luther (1483 – 1546): Born the son of a miner. Ordained a priest in 1507. Became a professor of moral philosophy at University of Wittenberg in 1508. Became a doctor of theology and professor of biblical exegesis in 1511. He retained this position until his death, which means that the Reformation that he ignited by his 95 theses in 1517 did not in any way affect his scholastic standing in his community.

Here I just list a sample of points raised in the 95 theses to give us an inkling:

- Repentance does not mean sacramental penance (e.g. confession) administered by priests.
- The pope cannot remit any penalties other than those which he has imposed by his own authority or by that of the Canons.
- Christians are to be taught that he who gives to the poor or lends to the needy does a better work than buying pardons.

Luther's protestation is generally known as a disputation against the sale of indulgences (selling of pardons for people to pay money to receive forgiveness for sin). However, it is more historically significant as a seed sown that grew into the bigger and broader Christian Protestantism movement (schism with the Roman Catholic Church) steered by John Calvin, Zwingli and other early reformers.



The movement (to right the wrongs in the Church) was a process that ran its course through a long period of decades, but is commonly associated with Martin Luther as its originator with his famous 95 theses. The following 5 maxims have been held by the reformers as encapsulation of the correct doctrine on salva-

tion as opposed to the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church:

- Sola Scriptura (“by Scripture alone”)
- Sola Fide (“through faith alone”)
- Sola Gratia (“by grace alone”)
- Solus Christus (“Christ alone”)
- Soli Deo Gloria (“glory to God alone”)

As we celebrate 500 years of the Reformation, a great significance of the Reformation is in the persisting relevance that the 5 Solas as a “legacy” of the reformers still embed into our consciousness a true understanding about the source of our salvation.

True understanding of the 5 Solas must also dispense with the misunderstandings that some people might hold.

### **What Sola Scriptura does not mean**



Sola Scriptura does not mean Nuda Scriptura.

Martin Luther said, “Here I am, I can do no other; to go against conscience is neither safe nor honest. My conscience is captive to the Word of God.”

Yes, Scripture is the sole written divine revelation and we turn to Scripture as the final arbiter of any disputes about the truth in human opinions. However, this does not mean that we “read the Bible alone and nothing else” and totally ignore church traditions, creeds and other literatures (e.g. writings of the church fathers) that illumine our heritage of faith or elucidate knowledge in unity with the Word of God. It is unfortunate that due to a misapprehension of the principle of Sola Scriptura, some modern churches have come to apply their “preferred” interpretations of the Bible and deny the wisdom of the creeds to the extent that cults emerge to repudiate the Trinity that the creeds affirm as well.

### What Sola Fide and Sola Gratia do not mean



With reference to Wikipedia<sup>1</sup>, the late op Ting Kuang-shun (Chairperson emeritus of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement and President emeritus of the China Christian Council) “has been accused of replacing the traditional Protestant doctrine with *justification by love*.”

Scripture clearly says that *“it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”* – Eph. 2:8-9

Justification is a gift directly from God by His grace, through our faith alone, rather than by human love. This is the unequivocal biblical teaching that is contradistinctive to the teachings of all other belief systems. The erroneous view of the late Chinese bishop reflected the erosion of faith by Arminianism over the past 500 years – which purveys the liberal view of humanism centred on human values replacing the sovereignty and authority of God.

The gospel is a two-edged sword (Eph. 6:17). It is too sharp for the comfort of many who therefore grind away the sharp edges to adjust the gospel message to fit moralistic narratives that are less piercing to the

“Evangelical Christians in North America sometimes misunderstand the Reformation doctrine of sola Scriptura to mean that the Bible is the Christian’s only theological resource, that it can and should be denuded of its churchly context (hence nuda Scriptura).”

THE GOSPEL COALITION

“According to Luther, God declares the sinner righteous through Jesus’ death rather than through human merit or works. Faith entails trust in and acceptance of God’s gift of salvation through the “merits” of Christ”

POCKET DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGICAL TERMS, DOWNERS GROVE, IL, INTERVARSITY PRESS

<sup>1</sup> [http://wikivisually.com/wiki/K.\\_H.\\_Ting](http://wikivisually.com/wiki/K._H._Ting)

ears and more soothing like their favourite chicken soup for the soul.

Sola fide and Sola gratia do not mean justification by love. Primary to our salvation are God's grace and our faith. They also do not mean that good works by Christians are not important.

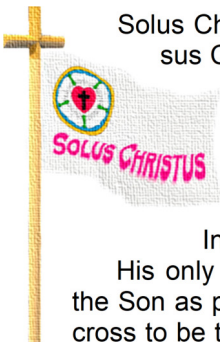
However:

- It is the faith that saves.
- Because of our faith, we are sanctified. ("A human being is sanctified ... when he or she lives according to God's design and purpose.")
- The sanctification due to our faith produces spiritual fruit that testifies to God's glory.

The sequence is not: We do good works → we are saved by our effort of good works → after that, then we talk about faith.

According to Martin Luther, "Faith is a living, busy, active, powerful thing; it is impossible for it not to do us good continually. It never asks whether good works are to be done, but has done them before there is time to ask the question, and it is always doing them."

### **What Solus Christus does not mean**



Solus Christus tells us that our salvation is by the atoning work of Jesus Christ alone. There is no mediator between God and man other than Christ.

Solus Christus does not mean that we deny the work of the Trinity in Salvation.

In John 3:16, we see the Father's love that moved Him to give His only Son. So the Father's decision was behind the availability of the Son as propitiation for our sin. In other words, the Son – dying on the cross to be the propitiation for our sin – was only doing the will of the Father who sent Him. (John 6:37-40)

In teaching Nicodemus (John 3), Jesus says:

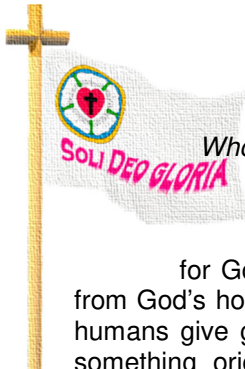
- “no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”
- “You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Those who are born again in the Spirit have the Holy Spirit indwelling them, the invigorating and enduring breath of God that brings them into a right relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ the Son.

Solus Christus affirms the role of the Son (the sole qualified Person; neither priesthood nor saints in the Church) as our redeemer, sent by the Father who first established His covenant of grace with His people and who also sent the Holy Spirit to be the Divine Resident in our hearts (Gal. 4:6), according to the Father’s foreknowledge, to be our sanctifier so that we may turn to Jesus Christ with our obedience. (1 Pet. 1:2)

Solus Christus does not deny the roles of the Father and the Holy Spirit in harmony with the role of the Son where our salvation is concerned.

### **What Soli Deo Gloria does not mean**



*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.” – Isa. 6:3*

*“Who among the gods is like you, LORD? Who is like you— majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?” – Ex 15:11*

God does not have to rely on any creature for His glory, for God is glorious of His own being. The glory of God reflects from God’s holiness and testifies of His resplendent presence. When we humans give glory to God, it is not that we deliver to Him the glory as something originating from us; rather, we affirm by our praises and thanksgiving that whatever we have, whatever we achieve, arose out of the glorious grace (Eph. 1:6) pouring out with His blessings, and we are appreciatively reverting the glory to Him – the glory that firstly streamed out from Him. In gratefulness, we also honour Him with our sincere worship.

The motto “Soli Deo Gloria” points us to the presence of God, but we should not use it so often so casually that it loses its spiritual power to draw us closer in communion with God. It is natural for Christians to celebrate events in praise and thanksgiving – Soli Deo Gloria! However, the “Soli Deo Gloria” is not a licence for us to revel with human interests first; God’s focus, second.

There is a common lament that today’s church life is no longer God-centred; it has become people-centred instead. Worship is turned into entertainment, evangelism into marketing, doing good works becoming doing works that have a high feel-good factor ... The list of twisted human ways – led astray by a lack of understanding of the true meaning of “Soli Deo Gloria” – is long. The testimony becomes one of detachment from the Bible. Obviously, “Soli Deo Gloria” cannot mean “glory to man”.

“Soli Deo Gloria” checks us from veering towards human ambitions and desires at the expense of godliness. Our worship must be centred on God, not to satisfy our personal needs. God is in charge of worship; we are not. We must be concerned with the Kingdom of God, not our own empire.

### **Conclusion**

Martin Luther’s act of posting 95 theses on a German church door created a shock to the church in his generation. The shock waves spread far and wide and have impacted his future generations in deeply profound ways.

500 years of the Reformation – the legacy of the 5 solas brings to light a lot of Scriptural truths that were denied the lay people of Martin Luther’s generation, who didn’t have free access to the Bible. Today, we know better; but are we better in our absorption and application of what the Bible teaches? How have we applied the 5 solas for our spiritual illumination based on the authority of the Bible?

In the church, if the authority of the Bible is lost, Christ is removed from our focus, the gospel is distorted and faith becomes unrecognizable, there is probably only one cause – we have allowed human interests to replace the interests of God.

Salvation is from God, and is also for His glory. The 5 solas are teachings for us to glorify God forever. We must live in the presence of God, under the authority of God.

*“For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.” (Rom. 11:36)*

*John Lee*