

From Rome to the Reformation: The Key Issues Then and Now

Selected Scriptures

October 22, 2017

Tom Pennington, Pastor-Teacher

Countryside Bible Church, Southlake, Texas

Next Tuesday, October 31, is the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. So, the next two Sundays, I want us to step away from the Book of Romans, and I want us to gain a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the Reformation. In one sense it's really impossible to establish a start date for the Reformation. There had been a growing push for reform within the church for nearly 300 years by the time Luther came on the scene. But there is still nearly universal agreement among church historians that the key date that marks, really, the surge toward reform is the day that a young theology professor at the University of Wittenberg there in Germany nailed his Nine-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church. That day was October 31, in the year of our Lord 1517, 500 years ago next week.

It was earlier that year in 1517 that a man named Johann Tetzel had begun his sale of indulgences not too far from Wittenberg. An indulgence (in case that's not a term that's common, to you) is the means by which the Roman Catholic Church claims to provide remission for the temporal punishment of sins, including purgatory. And the way the church believes it can do that is it claims that there is a treasury of collective merit (the merits of Christ, of Mary, of the saints, people who had more merit than they needed), and out of that treasury of merit the pope can extend the remission of the temporal punishment of sins for those who lack merit. So exactly how did you, in the 16th century, in the days of Johann Tetzel, how did you receive an indulgence like that? How did you receive this supposed temporal remission of your sins, even shortening your time or the time of those you loved in purgatory? Very simply, you bought it. Just that crassly.

When Johann Tetzel was traveling through Germany selling the indulgences to simply buy the permission for you to sin or to buy the shortening of those you loved in their time in purgatory, half of the proceeds of Tetzel's indulgences went to the arch bishop there in Germany, Arch Bishop Albert, to help him repay the money that he had personally borrowed in order to purchase his position from the pope. That's where half of the indulgence money went. The other half

Available online at: www.countrysidebible.org

Copyright © 2017 Tom Pennington. All rights reserved.

Unedited transcript for personal use only.

went to build and to outfit Saint Peter's Cathedral in Rome. It was crass marketing, crass sale. One church historian, Lindsey, writes this:

Tetzel sent men before him, strangely dressed, who stuck up notices and who went through the streets along the country roads telling that he was coming and boasting the excellence of the pardon tickets he had for sale. Afterwards came the pardon seller with his assistant and a strong wagon which was drawn up in the middle of the marketplace. Then Tetzel appeared. On his one side an iron cage in which were the pardon tickets hanging from the bars. On the other a strong box into which the money was thrown. And he puffed his wares like a quack doctor at a country fair. He used gross, emotional manipulation.

Here is an excerpt from one of his sermons that was recorded in the sale of these indulgences to these poor, desperate people. This is what Tetzel would say,

“Do you not hear the voice of your wailing, dead parents and others who say, ‘Have mercy upon me, have mercy upon me, because we are in severe punishment and pain [in purgatory]. From this you could redeem us with a small alms, and yet you do not want to do so.’ Open your ears as the father says to the son and the mother to the daughter, ‘We created you, fed you, cared for you, and left you our temporal goods. Why are you so cruel and harsh that you do not want to save us though it only takes so little. You let us lie in flames so that only slowly do we come to the promised glory.’”

Can you imagine being chained in such a system, being presented with that choice? Tetzel's most famous line (you've undoubtedly heard) was, “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”

In response to such gross abuse, on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses against the practice of indulgences to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, as Tetzel approached Wittenberg itself to sell his indulgences. By the way, Luther didn't intend this

to be some dramatic move. Don't picture it that way. Invitations for various debates were often posted on the door there at the Castle Church. In fact, he didn't even intend this to be debated among the populace. He intended it to be an academic debate, because the Theses were actually written originally in Latin, which very few people could read.

But they were soon translated by his students, and they were circulated by means of the new technology, the printing press. According to Luther (and I'll share this with you a little later) according to Luther, when he posted the Nine-Five Theses to the church door in 1517, he had not yet come to an understanding of justification by faith. He was at that time still a faithful Catholic, which is clear, by the way, if you read the Nine-Five Theses. He was simply criticizing the abuse of the system of indulgences, and at that time he actually thought the pope would agree. That simple act, however, formally began the Protestant Reformation.

But what exactly was the Reformation all about? Obviously, it wasn't solely about the sale of indulgences. No, it was the quest to recover the faith once for all delivered to the saints in the Scripture. It was the recovery of biblical truths long forgotten. You see, the Reformation was not innovation, but renovation. The Reformation was not discovery of the truth, but recovery of the truth. The truths that the Reformers recovered, obviously, most importantly from the Scripture, but even from the writings of the church fathers which they quoted liberally, those truths are often summarized in what we call the five solas of the Reformation.

Sola Scriptura: the ultimate authority is not tradition, popes, or counsels, but Scripture alone.

Solus Christus: God justifies us not based on our own righteousness, but the righteous of Christ alone.

Sola fide: God justifies us not because of any human works of any kind, but by faith alone.

Sola gratia: we are saved from God's wrath not by our personal merit or our own initiative, but by Sovereign grace alone.

And Soli Deo gloria: God redeemed us in such a way that we would receive none of the glory, but the glory would go to God alone.

Sadly, today's church has drifted away from these bedrock truths back into the darkness of error and ignorance. In fact, just this week I read the results of the latest survey by Pew Research Center. You can read it online. It's fascinating. But it's a survey of those in the US who claim to be Protestant, who claim to be those who are the fruit of the Reformation. Listen to this. Of those who claim to be Protestant (and obviously, this would include Evangelical Christians); it would also include the liberal Protestant denominations. But of those who claim to be Protestant, 52% say Christians should look both to the Bible and the church's official teachings and traditions for truth, fifty-two percent. Fifty-two percent also say that both good deeds and faith are needed to get into heaven.

Remarkably, just 30% of US Protestants, just 30%, believe in both sola Scriptura and sola fide. That means that 70% of the those who claim to be Protestants in America today now believe Roman Catholic doctrine. That, by the way, is why there is such a move in our day to call Protestants and even Evangelical Christians to reunite with Rome, because they don't see any difference. They believe the same things.

Now this morning, I want us to look behind the five solas and behind the Reformation itself to identify what were really the key, foundational issues of the Reformation: three key, foundational, theological issues on which the Roman Catholic Church and the Reformers irreconcilably disagreed. And by the way, the things we'll look at this morning. We still disagree. Nothing's changed. So, I want us this morning to follow the path that Luther followed in his own recovery of these key, theological issues. I need to warn you, as you can already tell (to some extent), this is not going to be a typical Sunday morning message. It will be a mix of history and theology as well as some exegesis as we look at the text together. But I think it's absolutely important for us to remind ourselves, as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, why it matters. So, first of all, let's look at these issues together.

First of all, Luther and the other Reformers were faced with this key question: what is the ultimate source of authority?

In the year 1501, Luther began to study philosophy at the University of Erfurt. In 1502, he received his Bachelor of Arts. (That's pretty remarkable, in one year's time.) In 1505, his Master of Arts degree. That same year, 1505, he began to study law, the field that his father had encouraged him and desperately wanted him to pursue. Barely a month after he began his studies in law, however, on July 2 of that year, he was caught in a violent thunderstorm. You've heard the story. A nearby lightening-bolt actually knocked him to the ground. And in fear (and he lived in fear) of God.

It's hard to understand unless you know the superstition of the home in which he grew up, of the Catholic Church at the time. His own conscience troubled him. There were other factors that led to this fear. He never, he never talked directly to God. Not one time, because Christ and God were seen as angry figures whom you had to approach through Mary and through the saints.

And so, in fear in that moment, He cried out to the Catholic patroness of miners (his dad was a miner), "Help me Saint Anne, and I will become a monk." Much to his father's dismay, Luther kept his vow. And just a short time later on July 17, 1505, at 21 years of age, he entered one of the strictest of the Augustinian monasteries in Erfurt.

Not long after he entered the monastery, a remarkable thing happened. Think about this. He's 21 years of age, and for the very first time in his life he learns that there is such a thing as the Bible, that you hold in your hand. He thought the Bible was the pustules, the little (think Sunday School) quarterlies that were passed out each week. For the first time he learned that there was such a thing as a Bible. And at the age of 21, for the first time in his life, he actually saw one. This is what he writes, "Finally, I found a Bible in the library, and immediately I took it with me into the monastery. I began to read, to reread, and to read it over again."

In God's providence, a few years later he began to study and to teach it. Here's how that happened. In the year 1511, Luther was sent to Wittenberg University to serve as professor and

to take over the chair of his mentor, a man by the name of Staupitz. A year later in 1512, Luther was awarded the Doctor of Theology degree, and he became a professor in biblical theology, a post that he would hold at the University of Wittenberg for 34 years until his death. He began then to lecture through books of the Bible, studying them in the original languages. From 1513 to 1515 he lectured on the Psalms. From 1515 to 1517 on Romans. And then on Galatians and Hebrews in the following years.

During these years of study and exposition of the Scripture, he developed an understanding of the Bible's unique and supreme authority. And it was his understanding of the unique authority of Scripture that led to his posting of the Nine-Five Theses in 1517, because he argues in those Theses from the authority of Scripture against the abuse of indulgences. In fact, as a result of his study through those years, Luther came to a different conviction about the Scripture than that of the Roman Catholic Church.

Now, just in case you're unclear on that, I think it's very important for you to understand why a reformation was necessary. The Roman Catholic Church taught that the ultimate authority for faith and practice (listen carefully) the ultimate authority resides equally in two sources: Scripture and tradition.

Here's the Council of Trent. You can read it with me on the screen. "This synod." The Council of Trent, by the way, was a mid-sixteenth-century response to the Reformation. They formalized what they believed as opposed to what was being taught by the Reformers. Here's what Trent says: "This synod receives and venerates [notice this] with an equal affection of piety and reverence all the books both of the Old and the New Testament as also the said and [in context] the unwritten, oral traditions." Equal piety and reverence.

You say, yeah, but Tom, that was 500 years ago. Surely that's not still what the Catholic Church believes. Well, let's look at the Roman Catholic Catechism of 1994. This is from the Vatican's website.

The church, to whom the transmission and interpretation of revelation is entrusted, does not derive her certainty about all revealed truths from the holy Scriptures alone. Both Scripture and tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence.

And here's another important point. How do we even know what those two sources, Scripture and tradition, actually mean? Well, the sole authority to interpret them belongs to the magisterium of the church. Again, the Catholic Catechism of 1994:

The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or the form of tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome.

So, understand then, that then and now, for the Roman Catholic Church, there are two equal and ultimate sources of authority: Scripture, but only Scripture as interpreted by the magisterium, the bishops and the pope; and tradition, oral tradition supposedly passed down through the successors of Peter, and that too is identified and explained by the magisterium, by the bishops and the pope. In both cases then (understand this) the ultimate authority is really what? The church. That's the ultimate authority: the bishops in communion with the pope.

That was on one side of the reformation debate. On the other side, the Reformers argued that since the canon of Scripture is complete, the only source of special revelation today and the only standard for determining what we believe and practice is Scripture alone. *Sola Scriptura*. It's called the formal principle of the Reformation, because it's the principle that the forms, that shapes, that gives direction to the other issues at stake in the Reformation. Scripture alone. Now, in Luther's life this came to a head (I told you) through the years of 13 and on, through that period of time he was teaching through the Bible. This issue of the Scripture's sole authority came to a head, however, in the summer of 1519. This is when we really learn where Luther had arrived, because in the summer of 1519 there was a dramatic confrontation between Martin

Luther and a representative of the Vatican, Johannes von Eck, at the town of Leipzig. Luther, in that occasion, publicly admitted his belief that not only could the pope err, but that church counsels could and did err as well. It was at Leipzig that Luther made clear his belief that he had arrived at the place that (contrary to what the church taught) he believed that Scripture alone is the ultimate divine authority. Listen to how Luther captures this. You can read it with me. Luther said this,

Everyone indeed knows that at times they [that is, the church fathers] have erred as men will. Therefore, I am ready to trust them only when they prove their opinions from the Scripture which has never erred.

Now, where did Luther come up with this confidence in the Scripture? He came up with it from the Scripture itself as he studied, and he taught it.

There are so many places we could turn, but I want you to turn to the text I read this morning for our Scripture reading, 2 Timothy 3, 2 Timothy 3. Notice in verse 1, Paul says, “Realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come.” And then he describes these terrible, uncontrolled people. He’s not talking about rank-and-file people. In context, he’s talking about false teachers. Verse 5,

[They hold] “... to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; avoid such men as these.” [They’re the ones] ...who [verse 6] enter into households and captivate weak women weighed down with sins, led on by various impulses, [these are people] always learning [these false teachers] and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

They’re just like the false teachers of old, verse 8. Now, Paul then rehearses (notice in verse 11) his own experience. He said I had “persecutions *and* sufferings ... at Antioch, at Iconium *and* at Lystra.” Huge persecution. And in all three cases (if you go back to the Book of Acts) guess where the persecution came from? False teachers. You see the context here? He’s talking about false teaching, the religious establishment. And in verse 13, in that context, he says understand

this: it's not going to get better, it's going to get worse. False religion will only get worse, verse 13. Now notice the contrast at the beginning of verse 14, "You, however." Timothy, contrary to all of those false teachers with their false teaching and all of their sin,

You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom [you've] learned *them*, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings [the Scripture] which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

You're very familiar with this passage. Paul then goes on to identify several qualities of Scripture. For our purposes and for this question, I just want to identify two of those qualities of Scripture. The first is inspiration. Verse 16, "All Scripture is inspired by God." All Scripture. What does Paul mean? Well obviously, he means (verse 15) the Old Testament. "The sacred writings," that's a shorthand expression for the Old Testament. But he also means the New Testament. How do we know that? Well, in his earlier letter to Timothy (1 Timothy 5:18), Paul quotes from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 25) and he quotes from (Luke 10) the New Testament; and Paul, in 1 Timothy 5:18, calls them both "Scripture." So Paul here, when he talks about all Scripture, is talking about both what we call the Old Testament and what we call the New Testament as well: those books that would be written under the auspicious of the apostles who had been selected by our Lord Himself.

Now, the next word is a crucial word, and it's a word that's confusing in our translation. All Scripture is "inspired". Understand, that word "inspired" literally means "to breathe into." That's not the Greek word that's used. In fact, that word really comes from the Latin Vulgate. It comes from a word that means "to breathe into." But that confuses the issue. The word here, the Greek word translated "inspired" is *theopneustos*. You see in the marginal note in your Bible in verse 16, if you have a *New American Standard*, it says, literally, "God-breathed." That's what it means. All Scripture is God-breathed. It's breathed *out* by God. God didn't breathe *into* the Scriptures. No, all Scripture is the product of the breath of God, just as every word I'm saying right now is the product of my breath. All of Scripture, Old Testament and New Testament, is

the product of the breath of God. He spoke them. This is our source of revelation. There's no tradition here. There's the Scripture, and it is the product of the breath of God.

And that brings us to a second quality of Scripture that's in this text. In 4:1 and 2, it's authority. Because Scripture is the product of the breath of God, it brings with it an inherent authority. Notice verse 1,

I solemnly charge *you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word....

Now that is a fascinating expression, because the word "preach" is the word "kerusso". There are at least 33 different verbs in the New Testament used to describe biblical preaching, thirty-three. But the primary one is this one, "kerusso." It means, literally, "to proclaim after the manner of a king's herald." It means speak with authority. Why? Because I have authority? No. Because of the authority of the Word. It's the product of the King. It's the breath of God. So, proclaim it as a herald representing the King. It has a sense of formality, a sense of gravity. It speaks of authority.

And the authority of Scripture (listen carefully) the authority of Scripture that's reflected here in this verse is greater than any human authority. It's even greater (and stay with me). The authority of Scripture is even greater than the authority of the apostles. Now why would I say that? Because Scripture tells us that. If you don't know this verse, let me encourage you to memorize it, to learn it, to seek it out. Acts 17. If you want you can turn there, or you can listen as I read it. Acts 17:11. This is Luke writing, Paul's traveling companion. And listen to what he says. He says, "These were more noble [speaking of the Bereans] these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, [that is, the preached Word] they received [it] with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so." What things? The things that were preached to them. By whom? The apostle Paul.

So here Luke (writing under the auspices of the apostle Paul himself) says these people were noble because they heard Paul preach, and they went back to their homes, and they got their copy of Scripture, and they examined it to see if that was what the Scriptures teach. Even the teaching of an apostle was to be checked against the Scripture.

Galatians 1. You can also turn there if you want, Galatians 1. And in verse 8 Paul is dealing with the Judaizing heresy in the Galatian churches, and he says this about what's going on there. He says, "... even if we," (This is Galatians 1:8.) "... even if we," Who does he mean "we"? He means himself. Paul often uses that sort of plural pronoun to speak of himself. He said

... even if ... [I showed up, if an apostle or someone claiming apostolic succession (we can say)] "or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!" [Let him be damned.] "As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary [and here's a technical term] to what you [have received]." [He's talking about what you've received in the Scripture.] "He is to be ... [cursed]!"

You hear what Paul is saying? If an apostle's teaching on the gospel was contrary to the gospel presented in Scripture, let that apostle or angel be damned. Scripture has a greater authority than the oral teaching of an apostle, because even apostles, when they weren't writing under the inspiration of the Spirit, even apostles could err. If you doubt that, read Galatians 1 where Paul had to confront Peter about a compromise of the gospel. Scripture in its entirety is breathed out by God. It is authoritative, because it is uniquely the product of the breath of God without error. It alone is the ultimate authority over what we believe and over how we live.

So understand, then, in the 16th century the debate over sola Scriptura focused primarily on two issues: the uniqueness of Scripture alone as the source of divine revelation versus the Roman Catholic Church's tradition, the fanatics with their mysticism and extra biblical revelation; and the authority of the Scripture alone over our faith and practice versus the authority of church counsels and popes and the magisterium.

Now let me ask you, does this question still matter today? Nothing could be more relevant today. In fact, let me just say it bluntly. The very fact that you have a copy of the Scripture in your own language in your own hands is because of the Reformation. It's because they asked this question. If this question had never been asked, if the Scriptures had never been opened to them, then you might very well be today just like Luther was at the age of 21. You might not even know that there was a Bible, and you certainly wouldn't have a copy to read and to study on your own.

The Bible alone is the only source of revelation, not tradition. Not extra biblical revelation, whether it's mysticism (where God talks to me somehow), or whether it the charismatic extra-biblical revelations. No, the Bible alone is the only source of revelation. And the Bible alone is the ultimate authority in all matters of faith and practice, not church councils, not popes, not the magisterium, not (are you ready for this?) not the collective, cultural pressure, whether it comes from the secular world or whether it comes from the professing Christian community. The question is never, what do most people think? The question is, what does God say?

A second key, theological issue behind the Reformation was this: who is the head of the church? Who is the head of the church? Now as a monk from the year 1505 on, Luther believed the pope was the head of the church. He believed Roman Catholic theology. But as he studied the Scripture, and as he eventually concluded that the Scripture was the final authority (as we saw in the first question), he gradually came to disagree on the issue of who is truly head of the church. Again, Roman Catholic doctrine is clear. The Roman Catholic Church taught that the pope was the head of the church. This was really quantified and codified in a papal bull by Pope Boniface called Unam sanctum in the year 1302. Here's what it says, "Consequently, we declare, state, define, and pronounce that it is altogether necessary to salvation for every human creature to be subject to the Roman pontiff." This created, as you might imagine, no small stir.

The very first to lose his life over this issue was a hundred years before Martin Luther, a pre-Reformer by the name of Jan Hus. On July 6, in the year 1415 (again, about 100 years before Luther), they took Hus from his cell, they (he was dressed in his priestly garments.) They took him out and they stripped him of those garments one by one. Then they tied him to a stake, and

in that situation, they demanded that he recant. When Hus refused, they burned him alive. Hus died for one reason: the headship of Jesus Christ over His church. There was one primary issue (there were several) but there was one primary issue that the Roman Catholic Church opposed in Hus' teaching. And it was this: Jesus Christ Himself is the head of the church. not the pope, not the priest. It was primarily again a question of authority. Hus taught that Christ and His Word are sovereign over the church. Here's what Jan Hus said,

If the papal utterances agree with the Law of Christ, they are to be obeyed. If they are at variance with it, then Christ's disciples must stand loyally and manfully with Christ against all papal bulls whatsoever and be ready (if necessary), to endure malediction and death. When the pope uses his power in an unscriptural way, to resist him is not a sin; it is a mandate.

This is why Jan Hus lost his life. This was also the issue, one of the issues at the core of the Reformation. A hundred years later Martin Luther said this,

The chief cause that I fell out with the pope was this. The pope boasted that he was the head of the church and condemned all that would not be under his power and authority. Further, he took upon him power, rule and authority over the Christian church and over the Holy Scriptures, the Word of God, claiming that no man must presume to expound the Scriptures but only he and according to his ridiculous conceits; so that he made himself lord over the church. I am persuaded that if at this time Saint Peter in person should preach all the articles of Holy Scripture, and only deny the pope's authority, power and primacy, and say that the pope is not the head of all Christendom, they would cause him to be hanged.

That's the kind of issue that it was in the Reformation.

This is so contrary to the entire sphere and teaching of the New Testament. Turn to Ephesians 1, Ephesians 1. At the end of the first chapter, Paul is in the midst of praying for the church. And in the midst of that prayer he reminds us what God has done in response to the resurrection and

Christ's work. Verse 22, "... He [has] put all things in subjection under ... [Christ's] feet and gave Him as head over all things to the church." What does that mean? Well, go over to 2:20.

The church has "... been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets...." That's the New Testament apostles and the New Testament prophets, their revelation. That was the foundation that was laid, and Jesus Christ Himself was the cornerstone from whom the building is built. He is at the very foundation of the church. He is its cornerstone, its head. He is also the One who gifts the church.

Go over to Ephesians 4:11. In light of His ascension, verse 11, "He gave some [to the church] *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists...." We've already talked about apostles and prophets. We found them back in 2:20. Their teaching was the foundation of the church now contained in the Scripture. "... evangelists, and some *as* [literally, pastor-teachers]." I'll come back to that, but go over to Colossians 1. I want you to see one more reference, Colossians 1:18. Speaking of Christ in His exaltation, "He is also [the] head of the body, the church...."

You see, Christ is the head of the church, and believers are His body. And understand what we've just read together: the only leaders He gave to His church were the New Testament apostles and prophets, who through the revelation given to them laid the foundation of the church. Foundations are only laid once. They're laid at the beginning. That's exactly how it works with the church. And then, He gave the church evangelists. We think of them as missionaries, front-line missionaries who go and see people come to Christ, preach the gospel, and plant churches. And he gave to the local church its leaders: pastor-teachers, elders. And Christ Himself is the One who resides as head over those local churches.

Turn to Revelation 1. Revelation 1, and you see this picture of Christ here. In verse 12, John the Apostle turned to see the voice that was speaking with him there on the Isle of Patmos.

... And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands; and in the middle of the lampstands I saw one like a Son of Man, clothed in a robe reaching to the feet, and girded across His chest with a golden sash.

This is Christ. This is a revelation, a vision of the resurrected Christ in His glory. Verse 16, “[Christ] in His right hand held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword....” Now, what are these lampstands, and what are these stars? Well, go down to verse 20. “As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, [Jesus says] and the seven golden lampstands: the seven stars are,” literally, the “angelos”. Not always “angels.” In fact, more often the word is translated here as “messengers.” That’s the idea in these first two chapters. The messengers. These are the leaders of the church. “And the seven lampstands are the seven churches.” Remember, he’s about to give seven letters, dictate seven letters to seven churches and its leaders. So, the seven lampstands represent the churches. Jesus is walking among the churches, and He holds in His hands the leaders of those churches.

So, you tell me, where does the vicar of Christ on earth fit into that scenario? It clearly doesn’t. There is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. He’s the Chief Shepherd. And He has appointed under shepherds, and He holds those under shepherds in His hand. They’re responsible to Him. There is no vicar or substitute for Christ on earth. There is no apostolic succession. There are no modern apostles, as the New Apostolic Reformation branch of the charismatic movement claims. Christ is the head of His church. And He leads His church, now as then, through His Word: His Word read directly by individual believers, and His Word taught by the gifted men that He gave the church, pastor-teachers. But like the apostles, their teaching also must be carefully checked against the Scripture. Christ is the head of the church. There is no substitute. That’s what the word *vicar* means. There is no substitute for Christ on earth. He walks among the churches. He holds the leaders of the churches in His hands. There’s a third key theological issue behind the Reformation, and nothing could be more important to us than this question. How is a man or woman made right with God? How are we made right with God? What Rome teaches about this question of how a person is made right with God (about justification), what Rome teaches about this was codified at the Council of Trent. They’d already been teaching it, but it was put together in formal response to the teachers

of the Reformation. Again, the Counsel of Trent was a mid-sixteenth-century Catholic response to the Reformation. In 16 chapters and 33 canons they set forth what they believe about justification, and those truths were reaffirmed in the Roman Catholic Catechism of 1994.

Here's what the Counsel of Trent teaches about justification. It says that justification occurs in three stages. First of all, there is preparation. In adults this involves repentance, faith, and the intention to be baptized. That's just preparation for justification.

Then there is the beginning of justification, as they call it, and this is baptism. At baptism, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, according to Trent itself, God infuses grace "whereby an unjust man actually becomes just." He's not declared just. He becomes just.

And then the third stage of justification is what's called increase, and this happens by obedience and good works. Again, Trent puts it very clearly, "Through the observance of the commandments of God and the church, faith cooperating with good works, believers may increase in that righteousness received through the grace of Christ, and by their good works are further justified."

Now in case that wasn't clear enough for you, Trent made it crystal clear by declaring what the Bible teaches and what you and I believe to be damnable teaching, anathema. Here again is the Counsel of Trent, "If anyone says that the righteousness received in justification is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works, but that those works are merely the fruits and signs of justification obtained [which is exactly what the Bible teaches] but not the cause of its increase, let him be anathema." Let him be damned. So, the Roman Catholic Church taught and still teaches that God-enabled good works contribute to your right standing before God.

But what does the Bible say about the teaching that our good works contribute to our standing before God? Well, we just saw it in Galatians 1. That's what the Judaizers did, and Paul calls it a false gospel. You understand, the Judaizers taught almost exactly what the Roman Catholic Church teaches about how a person is made right with God. They believed in Jesus Christ. They believe He was all He claimed to be. The Judaizers believed that Christ died for them and died for their sins. They believed that they were saved by grace through faith. Not by grace alone.

Not by faith alone. But yes, grace and faith are involved in salvation. This is what the Judaizers believed. In fact, the Judaizers were orthodox in every way except this: they believed that their obedience to God's commands was part of what gave them a right standing before God. And because of that, what appears to be a small deviation on the surface, Paul said they weren't true Christians. They had embraced a false gospel.

Now folks, this is a grave warning for us just on a pastoral front. Let me say to you this morning that if a single thread, if a single thread of your hope of heaven is based on something that you have done (even if it's something God commanded you to do) if it's based on absolutely anything but Jesus Christ and His perfect life lived in your place and His sacrificial death died to satisfy the justice of God, if it's anything but that, then you're not in Jesus Christ. And you have embraced a false gospel.

To the Roman Catholic position on justification, the Reformers replied that our right standing before God has nothing to do with us and our good works. In fact, our only hope is in a righteousness completely outside of us, external to us, what they even called an alien righteousness. It's alien to us. It's not ours. Here's how Luther put it,

Christian righteousness is not a righteousness [he's talking about justifying righteousness now] is not a righteousness that is within us and clings to us as a quality or virtue does, but it is an alien righteousness entirely outside us; namely, Christ Himself is our essential righteousness and complete satisfaction.

That's what the Scriptures teach. Our only hope is what the Reformers called solus Christus: by Christ alone. Or more directly, by the righteousness of Christ alone. Again, this is throughout the Scripture. We've seen this throughout the early chapters of Romans, haven't we? again and again.

But turn back to Romans 5, Romans 5 and see it one more time. Romans 5:19. Paul is here talking about the legal basis for justification. How can God declare the sinner who simply believes in the work of Christ to be just? And his response to that is, because God has appointed

Him as our legal representative. And we get the credit for what He does, just as we did with Adam. Go to verse 19, “For as through the one [man].” (That’s Adam.) “The one man’s disobedience the many.” And remember, in Romans 5 that means all those that He represented. Whom did Adam represent? All humanity. So “the many” in this case is everybody. “For ... though one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners.” In other words, were constituted sinners, were put in the category of sinners and treated as sinners. You received the guilt of Adam’s sin before you ever committed a sin. So, it’s not that you **were**, you became a sinner in the sense that you sinned. No, you were constituted a sinner. You were put in the category of a sinner by God and treated as if you were a sinner.

And then verse 19 goes on to say, “Even so through the obedience of the One.” This is Jesus Christ. Through His entire life of obedience, perfect obedience to God culminating in His death for sins on the cross. “Through the obedience of the One the many....” Who’s the many? Not everybody. It’s those He represents. It’s those who have believed or will believe in Him. Through His representation, through His obedience, those whom He represents will be constituted as righteous, same word, same idea. You’re not made righteous as in virtuous. No, you are put in the category of righteous, and you are treated as righteous by God because of the work of your representative. This is how we’re made right with God. Of course you know one of my favorite verses is 2 Corinthians 5:21. “[God] made [Christ] who knew no sin *to be* sin [for us] ... that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

Turn to Philippians 3. Paul states it so clearly here as he shares his own testimony. In the first half of this chapter he talks about how he has abandoned all hope in everything he used to put confidence in: all of his own credentials; all of his own background; everything that he took pride in including his own righteousness, his obedience to the Law, his external obedience. ... he says I count (verse 7)

I ... [count] ... all those things loss.... “More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish....”

Paul uses the most polite word he can use for excrement. That's what he says. It's excrement compared to the value of knowing Christ. And then in verse 9 he talks about these two potential ways to be right with God. He says I want to be found in Christ; I want to gain Christ. Now here's the wrong way to pursue a right relationship with God: "Not having a righteousness of my own derived from [my keeping of] *the* Law." That's not what I'm after. I'm not trying to be made right with God by my own good works, by my own obedience, by my own righteousness. No. Notice verse 9. ... but, I want to be found in Christ having "the righteousness which *comes* from God." Remember what we saw in Romans 6:23. That free gift, that's what I want. And received by faith. This is what the Scriptures teach. This is what Luther came to understand.

As the years advanced and the Reformation advanced, in the year 1545, Martin Luther wrote an autobiographical introduction to his Latin writings. And in the year 1545, he reflected back on when he came to understand how a person's made right with God. He places it in the year 1519, two years after the Ninety-Five Theses. This is what he writes,

I labored diligently and anxiously to know how to understand Paul's word in Romans 1:17, where he says that '... *the* righteousness of God is revealed ... [in the gospel.]'" He goes on to say, I didn't get it. "I thought righteousness was the justice of God, and that God was actually adding insult to injury by not only convicting me of sin through the Law but bringing His justice through the gospel.

It's like, I have no hope. In fact, he says of those years, "Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that He was placated by my satisfaction." He got it. He understood that. And then he said, "As a result I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners." But then he says this, "Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul in that place." In other words, I just kept hammering to understand Romans 1:17. What's he talking about?

... desiring to know what Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the

righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’” There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” [And then he adds this.] Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.

After he came to understand justification by faith alone, he saw that the reform of the church was impossible, because it was teaching a false gospel. And the Reformation was truly born. So, those are the key theological issues in the Reformation. Scripture alone is the ultimate source of authority. Christ alone is the head of His church. The righteousness of Christ alone is the ground of our justification. And faith alone is the means of our justification. Do you understand why the Reformation matters? The Reformation matters, because through it you got the Scripture. You wouldn’t have the Scripture in your language were it not for the Reformation. They didn’t, and you wouldn’t either.

Do you understand that because of the Reformation we understand that Christ (and no man) is the head of His church, and through the Reformation Christ’s work and not ours is the basis on which are made eternally right with God? Nothing should be more precious to you than the recovery of those foundational truths by which we live and have hope. Thank God for His providential working in history to bring us to this point.

Let’s pray together.

Father, we thank You with all of our hearts that while the grass withers and flower falls, the Word of our God stands forever. We thank You that it cannot be buried. It cannot be erased. It cannot ultimately be added to or have things taken away, because Your Word will stand. We thank You, Father, for those through whom You have brought it to us, even as we sang this morning.

Lord, help us to remember that, truly, martyr's blood stains each page. May we love Your Word. May we consider it our greatest treasure on earth. And may we seek to understand it, to live it, to pass it on to the next generation, to be faithful.

Thank You that our Lord is the head of this church and of the universal church, and no man. And thank You, O God, for the grace You have shown us in justification.

Lord, if You left us to ourselves, if we had to contribute at all to our justification, our situation would be hopeless. But it's all Christ. It's all His work, and that ensures that we who have believed in Him will be ushered into Your eternal presence blameless and with great joy.

Lord, help us in our day to preserve these truths whatever it costs us.

We pray in Jesus' name, amen.