October 27, 2020, for online circuit Reformation Service, November 1, 2020.

***“You are… members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” (Ephesians 2:19-20)***

***“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)***

A famous comedian/director once said, “I handed in a script last year and the studio didn't change one word. The word they didn't change was on page 87.” [Steve Martin] It’s not just directors who feel this way about their scripts. If you don’t like change, the 21st century may not be your favorite century—not that you have much choice in the matter.

We are continually invited or forced to embrace new things. We are urged to be inclusive, and it gets tiring. Now being inclusive isn’t all bad. The rugged individualist—the opposite of inclusive—has a continual temptation to put himself before other people. He has a tough time looking at the world from other people’s perspectives. Yet while inclusivism has virtues, it has its own troubles. There are many ways to look at the world, but some truths that can only be looked at in one way. (If you think 2+2=5, fine. But pardon me while I go look for another tax preparer!) And so times come to draw the proverbial “line in the sand.”

But actually, that’s not new. Five hundred years ago the Reformation drew lines in the sand. Those reformers drew lines, at the risk of offending many, and at the risk of their own safety. They had to draw these lines because, on the basis of God’s word, they had come to realize that outside these lines are only spiritual lies. Outside these lines, life in God’s eternal presence rapidly becomes impossible. What are these lines in the sand that define the Reformation?

The Reformers drew these lines in the sand with the non-inclusive word “alone”—or maybe if you have been a Lutheran a while, you’ve heard it in Latin—“*sola*.” It isn’t just one alone, one *sola*, it is several *sola*s. Now some people say there are four Reformation *solas*, some say five, but originally, it was three—not to say the others are bad; I’m just saying, let’s keep it simple. The three original *solas* are *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fidei*; Scripture alone, Grace alone, Faith Alone.

The first “alone” is *Sola Scriptura*: Scripture Alone. A personal encounter in my life helped me understand why this “alone” was so important in Martin Luther’s life. Several years ago a Catholic clergyman told me the basis for his Catholic faith. He said, “You Lutherans, you have a problem. You put both feet on Scripture. We Catholics have a more steady base than you Lutherans. We have one foot on Scripture and one foot on church tradition.” I just about fell off my chair. “You can’t be serious!” I thought. No wonder Martin Luther had to say to his opponents, “Unless you show me *from the Word of God* where I have erred, I cannot recant.” [A summary rather than actual quotation.] I guess that clergyman hadn’t read Ephesians 2:20, ***“You are… built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.”*** No Thomas Aquinas in that one!

But one infinitely greater than Brother Martin revealed this long ago. When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert, he responded, *every time*, *“It is written…”* Jesus corrected his Pharisaic opponents saying, *“Have you never read…”* and then took them to the Law and the Prophets. He did not direct them to the Jewish rabbinic teaching already so prominent in Jewish religious thought. The apostle Paul directed his apprentice Timothy to devote himself to the reading of the Scriptures (1 Timothy 4:13), not Greek philosophy. The Holy Spirit praised the Bereans who cross-checked the Apostle Paul’s teachings with God’s written word, not their inner voice or last night’s dreams.

At every moment in life, whether we are talking of things in the church, or our Christian lives in the world, Scripture alone, *Sola Scriptura*, has the final say. Other faiths are inferior and save noone. Philosophers bubble over with human thoughts, not God’s thoughts. Our own minds prefer what works for us. All must be made captive to the word of God. That’s why we encourage reading our Bibles, or Scripture based devotions, *every day*.

Reformation Day is the annual reminder to recommit, or to return to the place within that line in the sand, Scripture Alone, *Sola Scriptura*.

Scripture alone reveals the other two “alones”: “Grace alone” and “Faith alone.” Please hear how one Bible passage puts both *solas* together: ***“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”*** (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Salvation is 100% God’s gift, and 0.00% our achievement. Grace alone.. And God has decreed that his gift comes to us through trust in Jesus as our Savior from our sin. Faith alone. We were and are sinners who would be condemned to hell except for the forgiveness Jesus won for us. There is no other way about it.

In 1517, when the Reformation began, Christians had long been told Christ won some forgiveness, but that they needed to make up the rest. They were told that they could reduce the sin’s punishment with living a better life, or even a silver coin put into a box to buy a pope-autographed piece of paper called an indulgence. In that non-grace way of being saved, people with sensitive consciences walked about all day thinking of how God was hounding them to always do better—and they never could! In that non-faith way of being saved, people with calloused consciences said, “Hey, I put my money in the offering plate. Get off my back. Let me live the way I want to live.” Neither looked at God as a loving Father, nor Jesus as the all-sufficient Savior from all sin, nor themselves as dearly beloved children living in thanks for God’s gift. They just didn’t “get” God’s completely free, undeserved grace. They didn’t understand that only through faith, through trust, not doing something, was Christ’s all-sufficient blood-bought forgiveness made theirs.

That was 1517. But today? We’ve moved beyond that, right? Not really. When a preacher tells people to invite Jesus into their lives, he has spiked Grace Alone with good works. When your neighbor reflects that her recently departed mother is surely in heaven because she was such a caring woman—she has jumped outside the Faith Alone line in the sand. She has said that her mother was too good for grace, that faith in a Savior really wasn’t what she needed.

And that is where every person is born. Every single one of us is born in rebellion against God’s plan of salvation. We are born in ignorance of our Savior. And the only reason we have been brought into God’s kingdom is God’s undeserved favor through Jesus Christ. Grace Alone, through Faith Alone, that is revealed by Scripture Alone.

May the joy of those truths, and the fact that we stand not alone, but in the great cloud of witnesses, energize us to run with perseverance the race that God has marked out for us. Amen.

Long ago in another life—not actually another life, but when I was an overseas missionary—I remember learning a word in the local language: Alone. I then asked my language teacher what the word for “lonely” was. And he his reply was, “We don’t have another word. It’s the same word. When you are alone you are lonely.” Whoa, whoa, whoa! This was instant culture shock to someone from a culture that idealizes rugged individualism.