

“roommate wanted,” and “For Sale” signs we see tacked to telephone poles and community boards today. What Luther posted was not an essay or a sermon, but a series of propositions or statements – 95 of them – about which Luther hoped there would be some serious, scholarly debate. Luther hoped to reform the Catholic Church, to make it more faithful to Scripture and to God; he never intended to rip the Church apart or tear it down.

The sign on the door boasted the impressive title, *Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*. Luther’s principal grievance struck at the Catholic Church’s professed belief in the power of our good works to get us into heaven, and of the Church’s practice of selling indulgences. His first proposition gets right to the point: “Our Lord and Maker Jesus Christ, when He said, “repent, do penance” [*Poenitentiam agite*], willed that the whole life of believers should be repentance.” The rest of Luther’s propositions argue similar points.

Luther believed that the sale of these indulgences made sin too easy and too attractive to people. They amounted to “get-out-of-sin-free” cards which released people from the need to truly repent of the bad things they did. Whatever the offense, the Church could (and willingly would) sell the offender an indulgence that pardoned the crime. Indulgences meant no questions asked and no further consequence. As such, it would be easy to sin again, and just pay the fine to make things right.

An indulgence could also be purchased for a loved one to shorten their time in Purgatory – a period of purification and cleansing one endured after death to work off their earthly sins before entering heaven itself. A popular jingle at the time went like this: “As soon as the coin into the coffer rings, a soul from Purgatory springs.”

Luther believed that by this practice the Church taught people to buy their way into God’s Kingdom or into God’s good graces, rather than to live a life of true repentance and faithfulness to God’s Word and way. It distressed Luther that the sale of indulgences favored the rich who could afford to buy them, and it disgusted Luther that the sale of indulgences lined the pockets of the clergy and Church treasury.

Luther based his argument against indulgences on Romans 3:28 (and other texts) which promote faith as the basis of our salvation, and not good works: “For we hold

that a person is justified [saved] by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” Luther further argued that sins could not be forgiven, nor could salvation be gained, by making forgiveness a commercial transaction. God’s forgiveness cannot be bought so cheaply, and God’s Kingdom is not for sale at any price. From these conclusions, Luther drew up five major ideas – the Five *Solas* (“Onlys”) – which continue to influence the way we understand our relationship to God: *Sola Scriptura* (Only Scripture), *Sola Gratia* (Only Grace), *Sola Christus* (Only Christ), *Sola Fidei* (Only Faith), and *Soli Deo Gloria* (Only to God, the glory).

Sola Scriptura means it is only through God’s Self-revelation in Scripture and in the person of Jesus Christ that we can truly know God and know God’s love and will for us. Everything else – even the traditions of the Church – must be weighed against Scripture if it is to be faithful to God. Thus, indulgences and other practices which preach an easy grace, are not Scriptural and therefore have no place in Christian life. God does not sell God’s grace or God’s mercy to the highest bidder; God gives grace and mercy freely as a gift in the person of Jesus Christ.

Sola Gratia means that it is only by God’s grace that we are reconciled to God. There is nothing we can do to earn God’s favor. In Luther’s world, the prevailing view avowed that if you wanted to get into heaven and be saved from eternal damnation, you needed to work for it. And there is a subtle sense in which we still, deep in our hearts, believe that today. We have such a strong sense of the virtue of fairness that we tend to believe that God must also be fair; and being fair, God must give people who try hard, who give it their best effort, and who live a good, clean life a ticket to the heavenly show.

Sola Christus means that it is only by the death of Christ on the cross that we can be saved. Luther stated that no one is embraced by God because of their good works. In fact, there is no work we can do that is good enough to impress God. God’s world is not a meritocracy: we are not chosen for salvation by our good deeds in life. It is only by God’s grace and unmerited favor that we are invited to be a member of the family of God. Luther wrote: “By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping us and calling us to good works.”¹

¹ “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, November 1999.

Sola Fidei means that it is only our faith in Jesus which puts us right with God. Luther called this “justification by faith alone.” Luther’s idea presupposes a great divide between humanity and God, a divide created by human sinfulness, a divide that humanity is unable to bridge without God’s help. When we stood in need of reconciliation with God, God offered that reconciliation at the cross of Christ. Jesus did what we could not do: he died to exchange our sins for God’s forgiveness. We receive this forgiveness only by our faith in the saving work of Jesus at the cross. We did not do it, we did not earn it; it is only by our faith in what Jesus did for us that we are reconciled to God.

Soli Deo Gloria means that only God is worthy of our praise. There are some truly wonderful people in the world who do some pretty amazing things, and we should applaud and encourage them. But true praise belongs to God alone, who in God’s might and mercy, offered us forgiveness, overcame death, and provided a new and eternal life for us with God. Very other human achievement pales in comparison to what God did for us through Christ on the cross, and continues to do for us through the Holy Spirit. To God, only, should our praise be directed.

500 years ago Martin Luther posted a sign on the church door calling Christians to be faithful to God, for the sake of Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, believing only in the grace of God which saves, living faithfully only according to God’s word and will, and giving praise only to God who is worthy of our praise.

“Only” is a very big idea for Luther, and it should be a very big idea for us, too. “Only” keeps our priorities straight, with our hearts and minds focused and our eyes on God. The sign on the door to our hearts so say, “Only You, God.” Only Your Word to guide my life. Only Your Son, Jesus, to gain my salvation. Only Your grace to make me whole again. Only my faith in You to support me. Only to You will my heart give praise. Only. Only. Only. Only.

Prayer by Martin Luther: “With heart and voice before the world, I thank, praise and glorify you, my Lord Christ, that you are merciful to me and help me. This I have received in baptism, that you, and none other, shall be my Lord and my God. Amen.”²

² Thomas McPherson. “Prayers of the Reformers.” (Paraclete Press: Brewster, MA, 2017), 37.

The Sign on the Door

Reformation Sunday, October 29, 2017
The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Romans 3:19-28

Everywhere you go, you see signs on doors. Door signs can be inviting: Welcome! Or “Come, in we’re open.” Or “open hearts. Open Minds. Open Arms.” Door signs list hours of operation, or promise “Back in 5 minutes,” or announce “Closed, but still awesome!”

Door signs give direction: Exit. Please ring bell. Push. Pull. Do not enter. Do not disturb. Please use other door. No-Shirt-No-Shoes-No-Service. “No soliciting. We are too broke to buy anything. We know how we are voting. We’ve found Jesus. So, unless you are selling cookies, please go away!”

Door signs give warnings: No trespassing. Beware of dog. Keep out. Enter at your own risk. “Due to the rising cost of ammunition, do not expect a warning shot!”

Door signs publicize associations: member of the Better Business Bureau. Proud supporter of the NRA, or NPR, or NBA or NHL. “A joint ministry of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the United Church of Christ.”

Door signs tell you what to expect when you open the door: exam room, meeting room, kitchen, or (most importantly) bathroom.

On this Reformation Sunday, we remember Martin Luther and the sign he posted on the church door at Wittenberg Castle some 500 years ago on October 31, 1517. That door sign sparked a revolution that fundamentally transformed the religious and cultural landscape of the world, changing the course of human history forever.

Martin Luther was a Catholic priest and a monk, an academic and a professor of theology at Wittenberg University. He preached on Sundays and debated points of religious doctrine the other six days, often teaching his students over a beer at the local *ratskeller*. As his faith matured, Luther noted some common beliefs and practices within the church that seemed contrary to the Scriptures and to the Christian life.

Luther shared these thoughts by posting them on the church door. Church doors often served as places to post announcements and advertisements, much like the “lost pet,”