

“Reformed and Reforming”

Rev. Eric. S. Corbin

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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[Psalm 46 and Romans 3:19-28](#)

Today we commemorate not only All Saints’ Day, but Reformation Day, as well.

Reformation Day commemorates the event that kicked off the Protestant Reformation. Tradition holds that, on October 31st, 1517 – 500 hundred years ago this Tuesday – Martin Luther posted to the church door something known as his 95 Theses, or as he called it, “Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences.” Very briefly summarized, the Roman Catholic doctrine of penance had become abused, with the church selling indulgences – a way to avoid penance. What spurred Luther to action was when the Church began selling a special indulgence to finance the building of St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome, but part of the money paid went to the archbishop to pay off a loan he had taken out to purchase his position. So, Christians were paying money to avoid penance, and that money was going to finance a building and pay off someone’s loan. The prince of the area where Luther lived outlawed the sale of these indulgences, but some of Luther’s parishioners were traveling to purchase them. Luther became outraged, and that resulted in his nailing of the 95 Theses on the subject to the door of the church.

Now, it seems like a minor act of vandalism to nail something to the door of the church, but this was actually the custom in that day for those who wanted something to be read by the members of the church. It was essentially the bulletin board, or maybe today’s Facebook post. Luther actually was just requesting a debate be held on the subject. The first line of the document starts like this: “Out of love for the truth and the desire to bring it to light, the following propositions will be discussed at Wittenberg...” Luther wanted a discussion. He didn’t intend to start a movement that would split the church. The recent invention of the printing press,

however, resulted in his document being printed and distributed widely. You could say his Facebook post went viral. The ideas of Luther came into the hands of people like John Calvin and John Knox. Whereas Luther became the forebear of the Lutheran Church, Calvin and Knox became the forebears of the Presbyterian Church. It all started on Halloween, 500 years ago. Luther's act spread and the result was the Protestant Reformation. We owe a great deal of our church history to Luther, along with Calvin and Knox, and today we commemorate that on a day called "Reformation Day." That's a really rough overview. For more about the Reformation, stay tuned for a special study coming up.

There is a saying that has become attached to the idea of reformation in the church. The church is "Reformed, and always being reformed, according to the Word of God." Luther and Calvin and Knox and others recognized that the church was going astray from the Word of God, and so they sought to right the ship. The spirit of reformation reminds us that we are "always being reformed," but we aren't just seeking change for the sake of change. We seek to be molded more and more into the image of God. The last part of the saying is "according to the Word of God," and so we seek to be shaped always by the Word of God, not just by trends.

That reformation takes place in the church as a whole, and it takes place in each of our lives. The ideals of the Protestant Reformation focused on what are known as the five solas. You'll probably recognize "sola" as very similar to "solo." It essentially means "alone" or "only." The five solas are *Sola Scriptura* ("scripture alone"), *Sola Fide* ("faith alone"), *Sola Gratia* ("grace alone"), *Solus Christus* ("Christ alone"), and *Soli Deo Gloria* ("to the glory of God alone"). Each "solo" or "alone" refers to its own arena. It is not that in our lives the only thing we need at all is faith, or any of the other categories. It is that for salvation, we need faith only, not *also* works. Similar things apply to each of the categories. *Sola Scriptura* means that the Bible is the ultimate authority alone for faith and practice. What we know and do should be interpreted through the lens of Scripture, and we interpret Scripture by the totality of Scripture. We do not take individual verses

out, without considering their context. *Sola Fide* and *Sola Gratia* are a pair. We are saved by faith alone, through grace alone. God grants salvation, not because of the good works we do, but because of God's grace, God's unmerited gift. As we find in Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God." Our good works are a fruit of our faith, but they themselves do not bring about our salvation. *Solus Christus* reminds us that Jesus Christ is the ultimate revelation of God, as fully human and fully divine. Christ is our mediator and example. *Soli Deo Gloria* indicates that *all* that we do should be done for the glory of God alone. As stated in the Westminster Catechism, our "chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever."

These are the watchwords of the Reformation, and are a reminder to us of where our priorities lie. While we look forward to the future God has in store for us, we do so with a basis in these great truths passed down to us for 500 years.

As we also celebrate All Saints' Day today, our gaze is indeed turned towards those who have gone before us. We focus on the lives of the saints – those who have gone before us, in life and in death. We turn to study and learn from those great examples of the faith.

We read in Hebrews 12:1: "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." We believe that those who have gone before us are somehow present with us even today. The PC(USA) Catechism states this about the communion of saints: "Our communion with Christ makes us members one of another." Those who have gone before us are somehow present with us even today. Their lives are a testimony to us and an example for us. When we gather in this place, we are gathering where our ancestors, both related by family bonds and spiritual bonds, gathered on so many occasions before us. We stand on their shoulders. When we gather together, we are part of the witness of our predecessors and we are part of the communion of saints, as we say in the Apostles' Creed. Our worship is part of the worship of the church universal and we are immersed in the witness of those who have gone before us. It is as the line in the Great

Thanksgiving, part of which we regularly use for our Communion services here, states: "we praise you, joining our voices with choirs of angels, with prophets, apostles, and martyrs, and with all the faithful of every time and place, who forever sing to the glory of your name." We never walk alone. We walk alongside choirs of angels, prophets, apostles, martyrs and saints of every age.

Yes, we turn our gaze backwards to reflect on those who have gone before us, but never with the aim of venerating the past, but instead with the aim of applying their example to the present and the future.

Girolamo Savonarola was a Dominican priest and reformer. Early in his pastorate, Savonarola noticed an elderly woman who came to the cathedral every day before mass and knelt before the statue of the Blessed Virgin to pray for an hour. Savonarola mentioned her devoutness to an old priest who had served the cathedral for decades. He smiled and said, "Things are not always what they seem. Years ago, this woman was the model for the statue of the Virgin. She's not worshiping God. She's worshiping who she used to be."

We are called, on Reformation Day, and on all days, to not worship who we used to be. We are called to move forward, seeking to always be reforming, according to the word of God.

Our relationship with God is not based on what we have done. Our relationship is based on God and on God's love for us. We do not deserve the love of God, but are freely given it anyway. Luther was right – there is nothing to be bought or sold in the love and forgiveness of God. The only response is to humbly accept God's undeserved love, and then to go out and share that love with others who don't deserve it, either. We are saved by grace through faith alone. May we humbly look to the future, applying the lessons of the past as we discern God's will for us, always open to the reforming call of the Spirit. Amen.