

Editorial: Celebrating the Reformation by Remembering the Legacy of Martin Luther

STEPHEN J. WELLUM

Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and editor of *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He received his PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he is the author of numerous essays and articles and the co-author with Peter Gentry of *Kingdom through Covenant* (Crossway, 2012) and *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Crossway, 2015), and the co-editor of *Building on the Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Crossway, 2015 with Gregg Allison), and *Progressive Covenantalism* (B&H, 2016 with Brent Parker), and author of *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (Crossway, 2016) and *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior* (Zondervan, 2017).

The 500th anniversary of the Reformation took place in 2017. On October 31, 1517, a relatively unknown professor, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses at the University of Wittenberg to begin a theological discussion about the practice of indulgences. However, what resulted from this seemingly insignificant action was a spark that lit the flame of the Reformation. Over the next century the Reformation resulted in profound changes both within the church and in the larger society. As many historians have noted, the Reformation was not a perfect time in history. In fact, some scholars have wrongly attempted to attribute a number of our present ecclesiastical and cultural problems to the Reformation. For example, Michael Legaspi traces the beginning of the “death of Scripture” to the rise of an “academic Bible” to the Reformation (see *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical*

Studies [Oxford, 2010]. Or, Brad Gregory argues that our present secular, pluralistic culture is an unintended consequence of the Reformation (see *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* [Harvard, 2012]), and the list could go on. Such analyses are highly problematic since at their core they fail to do justice to the theology of the Reformation *and* to the Reformers as men who faithfully stood in their time for the recovery of the Gospel in all of its truth, beauty, and glory. On this point see the well-argued case of Kevin Vanhoozer in *Biblical Authority after Babel* (Brazos, 2016).

Although the Reformation resulted in various theological divisions for a variety of reasons, at its heart the magisterial Reformers recaptured the central truths of Scripture, which is reason enough to celebrate it and to learn from it. For example, the Reformers correctly taught the preeminence of the triune God, the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, a proper view of human dignity and depravity, the necessity of God's grace to save, and the exclusive and all-sufficient work of our Lord Jesus Christ. In proclaiming these gospel truths, the Reformation returned to a thoroughly biblical view of the world purged of some of its medieval distortions and recaptured what is vital and essential to the Bible's entire storyline.

The best illustration of the Reformation's recovery of the Gospel and its ongoing significance is its exposition and proclamation of the five *solas*. Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) is the formal principle of the Reformation and the foundation of all theology. God's glory alone (*soli Deo gloria*) is the capstone for all Reformation theology, connecting its various parts to God's one purpose for creating this world and humanity in it. Between these two *solas* the other three emphasize that God has chosen and acted to save us by his grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*), and grounded in and through Christ alone (*solus Christus*). What is noteworthy about the *solas* is their mutual dependence; each one only makes sense in relation to the others. Why? Ultimately because all of the *solas* are grounded in the triune Creator-Covenant God, who alone is the center of the universe, the Lord of creation, history, and redemption—who needs nothing from us but we need everything from him—and who rightly deserves and demands all honor, adoration, and willing obedience.

In other words, central to the Reformation *solas* is a proper view of God and correspondingly, a correct view of humans in relation to him. For example,

sola Scriptura reminds us that God alone is trustworthy and that we are completely dependent on him for knowledge. Contrary to secular thought, humans are not the arbiters of truth—only God is. Objective truth is real and we can know it because God is its source and standard and he has taken the initiative to speak to us. *All* that we know truly, even of our world, is due to God's revelation. *Sola Scriptura* is a truth to be joyously embraced and proclaimed because it reminds us that God has wondrously given us a sure Word that is true.

Or, think of *sola gratia* that rightly acknowledges that God does not need us and that apart from *his* initiative to save, we are without hope. In contrast to the teaching of Rome, the Reformers knew that sin did not leave us merely with a marred nature and the capacity to receive and cooperate with grace. Instead our sin has left us spiritually dead in our sins before God. Salvation, then, is not a cooperative effort between God and us. The triune God in sovereign grace must act to save us, which gloriously he has done in and through Christ alone (*solus Christus*), which we receive by faith alone (*sola fide*). In God's plan centered in Christ, our triune God has satisfied his own righteous demand and we are the beneficiaries of it by simply raising the empty hands of faith and receiving all that Christ has won for us.

The *solas*, then, beautifully illustrate the importance of the Reformation and its ongoing legacy despite some of its divisions. In the Reformation's recovery of the Gospel, it correctly captured what is central to the entire Bible and Christian theology, namely our triune God who receives all the praise due to his glorious grace. All Christians in every generation ought to remember and give God thanks for the Reformation, and more importantly, faithfully stand on their shoulders and gladly proclaim the Gospel as represented by the Reformation *solas*. The *solas* are not mere slogans from yesteryear; they are truths to be received and wholeheartedly embraced. They remind us what is central to Scripture and what is vitally important for the church to teach, preach, and joyously live out before the watching world.

In addition to celebrating the legacy of the Reformation, it is also important to reflect on some of the key Reformers whom God raised up to bring about the Reformation. God's work in this world never occurs apart from real people who are first captured by the truth of the Gospel and then faithfully live and

work to see the Church reformed. We often idolize some of these past heroes of the faith, but we must never forget that they were in the words of Francis Schaeffer, “little people” in “little places,” who were used powerfully by God to do mighty things for the sake of the Gospel. In this issue of *SBJT*, our focus is not only on the Reformation but also on its most famous Reformer—Martin Luther. After all, the date marking the start of the Reformation is attributed to him! Yet, as we know, before Luther there were others whom God used to bring reform to the church, as well as those in his lifetime and long after his death. Throughout the ages, God has always raised up faithful people to proclaim the Gospel in all of its depth and breadth, but Luther is certainly a central figure of the Reformation.

In fact, apart from the legacy of Martin Luther, it is hard to imagine the Reformation as the Reformation. For this reason, in this issue of *SBJT*, our primary focus is on the life, theology, and influence of Luther during the 16th century and beyond. In the various essays, we will focus on the theology of Luther, especially on issues that were central to him such as *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. In other articles, we will focus on Luther’s influence on John Calvin and later Baptist theologians who built off his work, especially in terms of the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. We will also investigate how Luther’s theology was practically worked out in life with special focus on how he encouraged Christians *to live and die* well in Christ for his glory. Our Forum pieces will continue to focus on Luther’s theology and the influence of his life. We have also included a sermon of John Calvin’s from the Reformation which offers a sample of the kind of preaching the Reformers did as they sought to admonish and encourage the Church to embrace the truth of the Gospel and live it out in their daily lives.

As already noted, the Reformation was not the “Golden Age” in church history which we must restore today. We live in a different time and era. Yet, the Reformation should be viewed as a mighty work of God by which he revived his Church and called people back to Scripture and the truth of the Gospel. What needs to be passed on today are the same central truths of the Gospel that the Reformation clearly taught, expounded, and defended. Martin Luther was a central figure in the Reformation, and it is an honor to remember him so that we can learn from him today by faithfully knowing and proclaiming our glorious triune God of sovereign grace.

Editor Note: Errata for SBJT 21.3 (2017): 43. “It is also interesting that the readers’ pagan readers do not call them Jews, but identify them as Christians (1 Pet 4:16)” *should read* “It is also interesting that in the midst of the readers’ sufferings, their pagan neighbors are not to confuse them as Jews, but they are to be identified as Christians (1 Pet 4:16).”