

Sola Gospel

Galatians 1:6-9

September 10, 2017
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Which is a greater threat to the church—subtraction from the gospel or additions to it? What do I mean? Subtraction would be to take away something. There certainly have been serious subtractions in history. Denying Jesus' true deity or humanity. Take away from the Incarnation and you don't have the true gospel. Other subtractions include denying the bodily resurrection of Christ or denying the existence of God or the supernatural. Those are serious and gospel-altering subtractions.

However, within the church, the greatest danger is not subtraction but addition. Church history shows this to be the more insidious probability. Why? The atheist is easily identified and his gospel is rejected. After the first few centuries of Christians worked out the nature of Christ, anyone denying the deity of Jesus is pretty easily identified and silenced.

However, adding to the gospel is devious and devilish because addition sounds right at first. *Hello friend, what do you believe? I believe in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, born of a virgin, suffered under Pontus Pilate, crucified for sin, resurrected on the third day, coming again. Well then, you must be a true brother and teacher.* Ah, but therein lies the great deception that has led so many away from the one true gospel. Sola gospel.

This fall we are doing a teaching series on the recovery of the one true gospel. It is known in history as the Great Reformation. This October is the 500th anniversary. Noted church historian Phillip Schaff says of the Reformation,

*"The Reformation of the sixteenth century is, next to the introduction of Christianity, the greatest event in history. It marks the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of modern times. Starting from religion, it gave, directly or indirectly, a mighty impulse to every forward movement, and made Protestantism the chief propelling force in the history of modern civilization."*¹

We are not preaching the reformation or history or the key figures. We will be teaching the doctrines that recovered the gospel and created reformation. My hope is that the truths that shook the world would shake our church, our worlds, our homes, and our hearts.

Why the Solas of the Reformation?

All our small groups are doing curriculum that follows along with our series. One of our ladies' small groups got so fired up about this, they went and made their own T-shirts. They gave me one and I'm happily wearing it today.

Sola. What does that mean? **Sola** is Latin. It means "**alone**." For example, *solitary* comes from this root word. Over the years, the doctrines of the Reformation were summarized in "solas." Here they are in Latin with their English counterparts: **Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone)**, **Sola Gratia (Grace Alone)**, **Sola Fide (Faith Alone)**, **Solus Christus (Christ alone)**, **Soli Deo Gloria (God's Glory Alone)**. In each of these categories, the Reformers identified additions that had been made. They said, *No, you cannot add to Scripture. You*

¹ Phillip Schaff as quoted by Steven Lawson, "The Reformation and the Men Behind It," www.ligonier.org, September 4, 2017.

cannot add to grace. You cannot add to faith, Christ, and God's glory. Add to these and you have fundamentally changed the gospel.

Chemistry provides a good illustration of how this works. If you add protons to the nucleus of an atom, it changes the element completely. It has what it had before (all those protons are there) but now it is no longer what it was. Add a proton to hydrogen and you move up the periodic table to helium. A proton is a small thing but adding one proton to hydrogen changes the essential element itself.

The solas identify the irreducible nucleus of the gospel and get rid of all the man-added protons of human merit, traditions, and self-righteousness. The solas say the gospel is no less than this and no more than this. If you subtract from it, it is no longer the gospel. If you add to it, it is no longer the gospel. These things change the nature of the gospel itself.

Sola Gospel

The Apostle Paul planted a church in a region called Galatia somewhere around the year 48 AD. Only **one year** later he learns that the Galatian Christians were in serious jeopardy of abandoning the gospel. He wrote them this,

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed." (Galatians 1:6–9 ESV)

That is very strong language! What had happened? After Paul left, the Galatian church had received teachers and teaching that said, *Yes, you are forgiven your sins by faith in Jesus. But now that you are a Christian, you must obey the Old Testament law. Specifically, you must be circumcised, which was the Old Testament sign of the Abrahamic covenant.* These teachers didn't walk into church wearing a sign that said, *"I'm a false teacher. Believe what I teach and you will end up in hell."*² Rather, they sounded right in the essential gospel. They seemed to be hydrogen. But wait, they added a proton. Their gospel was "hydrogen plus," they were, in fact, preaching a helium gospel. By addition, an essentially different one.

Gospel + Old Testament Law = Salvation (False!)

Paul identifies the error and with apostolic authority condemns to hell anyone who teaches it. *"Let him be accursed."* (v. 8) Then he repeats it in v. 9, *"Let him be accursed."* Let him be damned to hell. Lest you miss how Paul thinks about it, in a few chapters he will say he hopes these circumcising Judaizers will slip with the knife and emasculate themselves. (Galatians 5:12) That's strong, vivid language, don't you think?

Why such vehement language? *The gospel of Jesus as given by the Apostles is everything.* It's everything. It is the most precious reality in the entire world because it is the only way for a person to be saved from the wrath of God by the love of God through the complete, finished work of the Son of God in his atoning and substitutionary death and victory over death in the resurrection.

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Galatians: Reformed Expository Commentary*, p. 21.

Paul says the apparent importance or qualifications of the messenger don't matter. Even if an angel appears, if it tells you something different from the apostolic gospel, that angel is under a curse. History shows errant movements like Mormonism beginning with a supposed angel delivering a different gospel. In the 15th century, it was a Pope. Do not listen or believe anything but the one true gospel. No subtractions, no additions. Nothing less, nothing more. No matter who preaches it.

He repeats this in 1 Corinthians, "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." (1 Corinthians 15:1-4)

The essential gospel is of first importance. It is the most important thing.

A Very Brief History of the Reformation

I went on a Reformation Study Tour in 2012 with Moody Church pastor Erwin Lutzer. Days before I left I got engaged to Jennifer and then I left the country. Single men, I would actually make that a recommendation. Get engaged and then get as far away from the wedding planning as possible. Germany will do just fine. On the tour we stopped at significant spots in the life of Martin Luther. Without turning the series into a photo gallery, I look forward to showing you some of them.

The Reformation is much bigger and broader than Martin Luther. There were other key figures before Luther including John Hus and John Wycliffe. Both were burned at the stake as heretics for preaching what we call the one true gospel, or in Wycliffe's case, translating the Bible into English. But this indicates the religious culture of the day in the Western Church. The Western Church is distinguished from the Eastern Church. These split in 1054 and that is why as you drive around town you see Orthodox Churches (Eastern) and Catholic Churches (Western). Did you realize all the church history you pass on the way to the mall?

The Western Church in the early 16th century was led by Leo X. He was from the famous Italian Medici family of Florence. This was the height of the Renaissance. Pope Leo was the one who hired Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He was the Pope trying to build St. Peter's Basilica, the biggest church in the world even to this day. Michelangelos and colossal Basilicas came at a very high cost and Pope Leo was desperate for money.

Enter now into the story Albert of Brandenburg. Albert was a bishop but he wanted to be archbishop in Germany. But he didn't qualify and it was against church rules, yet money talks. So Albert met with Pope Leo X and offered him a massive sum of money to be archbishop. Leo, needing the money, agreed. Albert didn't have the money so he borrowed it from a German bank but now had a huge debt to pay. How would he do it?

Enter a third character: a monk named Tetzl. Tetzl became Albert's fundraiser and they devised a scheme where Tetzl would go into the towns and villages and sell what were known as "indulgences." An indulgence was essentially a get-out-of-so-called-purgatory card or a grace card for a past or future sin for you or a family member. These indulgences

and their sale were endorsed by Pope Leo. What better way to raise money than to monetize the grace of God?

Martin Luther was a Catholic monk. (See picture below.) He became a monk due to a terrifying moment in a lightning storm where he pledged that if St. Anne saved him, he would enter the ministry. It's not the most biblical way in but God does what he wills. Luther was a fastidious monk. He was terrorized by what he called *Anfechtung* – holy terror of God. There are many stories of his extreme measures of bodily denial and confession to try and find peace with God. After graduating from Seminary he was assigned as a professor to a little university in a little town named Wittenberg, Germany.



I have tried by research to prove that the town's real name was DeWittenberg, but thus far have not been successful. While there, Luther lectured through the Psalms, Galatians, and Romans. One verse in particular captivated him, "*The just shall live by faith.*" (Romans 1:17 KJV) His whole approach to God had **not** been living by faith but living by his own attempts at righteousness before God; his own attempts to earn his way to God. But *the just shall live by faith*. God used that verse to open his eyes to what had escaped him all those years as a monk. Salvation is by faith and by faith alone. Not faith plus something else. Not faith plus works or church traditions. He saw that the "gospel plus" was no gospel at all.

Around this time Albert and Tetzel were selling their indulgences to the common people. Tetzel was a marketer and even developed a jingle to help sell them. "*As soon as a coin in the coffer rings / the soul from purgatory springs.*"³ (See picture of indulgence box below.)



³ Johann Tetzel, "Johann Tetzel: Doctrinal Position," www.wikipedia.org.

Luther was dismayed at both the indulgences and the church culture that permitted them. So Luther composed a list of 95 grievances with the church and indulgences and on October 31, 1517 he nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church the 95 theses (see pictures of Pastor Steve below standing in front of the Wittenberg door). This was the 16th century version of posting a blog. It got it out there for public debate.



Here are two of the 95 Theses:

1. *"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*
62. *The true treasure of the church is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.*"⁴

Most mark this event as the official beginning of the Reformation. Let's fast forward. Luther began writing more. The invention of the printing press allowed literature to be mass produced like never before. Luther's ideas and books flooded through Germany. The common people who had no Bible in their own language and simply trusted the teaching of the church, for the first time were exposed to the gospel of God's grace granted not by the church or a Pope or an indulgence but by repentance and faith in God. Pope Leo described Luther as a "wild boar loose in the vineyard." Luther was called to account and at the famous Diet of Worms, or better, trial in the city of Worms, made his most famous statement. Facing excommunication by the church he refused to recant.

*"Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Holy Scriptures or by evident reason-for I can believe neither pope nor councils alone, as it is clear that they have erred repeatedly and contradicted themselves-I consider myself convicted by the testimony of Holy Scripture, which is my basis; my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Thus I cannot and will not recant, because acting against one's conscience is neither safe nor sound. God help me. Amen."*⁵

⁴ Martin Luther, "95 Theses," www.luther.de.

⁵ Martin Luther, Speech at the Diet of Worms, translated by Heiko Oberman, as quoted by Eleshia Coffman, "What Luther Said," www.ChristianityToday.com, August 8, 2008.

For his own safety Luther was kidnapped to the Wartburg castle and spent 10 months in hiding. While there he translated the Greek New Testament into German in 10 weeks—an astonishing accomplishment. His translation was widely popular for it allowed the common German people to read the Bible for themselves. All of this was wind that continued to feed the firestorm.

Reformation fever swept through Western Europe. Other figures were highly influential like Zwingli in Switzerland and Calvin in Geneva and John Knox and others. They preached and preached and wrote and wrote. They “protested” the teachings of the Western Church, hence the title Protestants. It is sometimes called the Protestant Reformation. There is so, so much more but that is a quick history.

Why Does the Reformation Matter Today?

Gospel + is still rampant

“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one.” (Galatians 1:6-7 ESV)

Paul writes this **one year** after he plants the church. In one year they were adding to the gospel. Fiddling with the gospel. Changing the gospel. The tragedy is when you add to it you don’t have it anymore.

Here we are 2,000 years post-apostolic age. If one year beyond apostolic teaching in Galatia could produce such a warning, how much more should we beware 2,000 years later? Think of all the mischief that can be done in 2,000 years. Think of all the “get used to something not the gospel” that can happen in 2,000 years. We see that gospel + is still rampant all around us. Paul doesn’t say these alternative gospels are options of personal preference, he says anyone with an alternative gospel should be condemned to hell.

Today most people, even Christians, shrug their shoulders with *whatever*. Is it no wonder there is so much gospel+ even in churches that claim to be Christian churches?

Gospel + works = salvation
Gospel + emotional experience = salvation
Gospel + social causes = salvation
Gospel + tradition = salvation

These are all false gospels. Millions of people continue to attend churches where it is not Grace alone, Faith alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone, God’s glory alone. Paul makes it clear that there is no other gospel. There is no other salvation. There is no other way. All other gospels be damned to hell because they lead people to hell even as they think they are on the path to heaven.

How many gospel+ believers wake up in eternity to find out they were not trusting in Christ’s atoning work alone? Their trust was in Jesus but Jesus plus something. That is not the gospel that saves. There is no other name under heaven whereby men might be saved including Pope, pastor, apostle, or your name. Only Christ saves and the true gospel is nothing less than Christ but must be nothing more.

The Reformation recovered the gospel for the Western Church and the gospel is in persistent need of rediscovery in every generation including our own.

We are in constant need of reforming which the gospel alone provides

The reason this is true is that we are prideful people and we desperately want to save ourselves. We want to be our own Messiahs and our own Saviors. So we constantly try to justify ourselves before God.

But the gospel says the opposite. We cannot justify ourselves before God. The church cannot justify us before God. No one justifies us but God alone through Christ.

Luther highlighted this with what he called alien righteousness. Righteousness that comes to us from outside us. It comes from God for he alone can justify the ungodly. Indeed, the just shall live by faith. Not by works or tradition or man's ideas or man's righteous attempts. We live by faith in Christ and him alone.

We always need what the gospel provides. It pounds us with the reality that we are great sinners but Christ is greater than all our sin. The love of God is a sovereign, gracious love bestowed freely apart from the Law of Moses, the traditions of man, and the religions of man.

It is Sola God, Sola Gospel, Sola Grace, Sola Faith, Sola Scripture, Sola Glory, Sola Christ. We don't preach the reformation and we don't preach the reformers. We preach the gospel and celebrate its recovery, renewal, revival, and reformation wherever it goes. And cry out in this teaching series, *Revive us, O God! Renew us, O God! Reform us, O God! Sola God. Sola gospel.*

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