

SOLI DEO GLORIA

by Rev. Chuck De Groat

GLORY TO GOD ALONE. The battle cry of the Reformation. In many ways, every other doctrine and every other slogan falls under this majestic truth. It embodies the many books, the many personalities, and the many changes that came from one of the darkest, and brightest, moments of history.

Yes, it was dark. The church had become infested with man-centered theology, economic corruption, abuse and scandal. Want forgiveness? Donate some money. Want answers? Don't ask God, ask your local priest. Want peace in your life? You'll never have it - life is a constant chess match with a wrathful and judgmental God. Many were frustrated.

And then there was light. His name was Martin Luther, a monk, a priest, and a university professor disenchanted with the corruption within the church. His response was ninety-five theses, or "statements of concern," about the unbiblical practices within the Roman Catholic Church. For instance, thesis number 7: "The pope himself cannot remit guilt, but only declare and confirm that it has been remitted by God." Luther was concerned with the increasing power of the pope and the priesthood. Thesis 28 expands on this: "It is certainly possible that when the money clinks in the bottom of the chest avarice and greed increase; but when the church offers intercession, all depends in the will of God." Luther was concerned about the increasing corruption of greed. Thesis 37 declares: "Any true Christian whatsoever, living or dead, participates in all the benefits of Christ and the Church; and this participation is granted to him by God without letters of indulgence." Luther's point. It is God that saves, and not man. Salvation cannot be sold, nor can it be earned by purchasing indulgences (letters declaring a person forgiven for contributing money). It is a gift of God alone, by faith alone (*sola fide*), all to the glory of God (*soli Deo gloria*).

But Luther was, by no means, the only light of the Reformation. He embodied the feeling of many that the Roman Catholic Church had strayed far from the original message of Scripture. Luther and the other Reformers called for change within the Church. Their point and purpose was not to split, to break away, or to start a new movement. It was always to reform what already existed in the Roman Catholic Church.

But it soon became clear that the Church would not cooperate. Not all within the hierarchy of the Church opposed reformation, but the ones that really counted did. Putting God's word back in to the hands of the laymen, committing to justification by grace alone (*sola gratia*), and affirming the centrality of God's glory would take away from the very thing they were attempting to achieve, the Church's glory: big buildings, beautiful cathedrals, the kinds of places we like to visit on tours of Europe today. The Church had fallen victim to the age-old sins of pride, greed, empire building, and human glory - all things that would rob God of the Glory he deserved and desired, and rob man of the opportunity to trust fully in God's goodness and grace.

Perhaps this is the most important thing we should remember on Reformation Day. The Reformation was a reclamation and a re-affirmation of *soli Deo gloria*. But there are other lessons to learn.

Today, Reformed believers worship in churches that stand in the proud tradition of this Reformation heritage. We affirm that our ultimate authority is God's word alone (*sola Scriptura*), and we preach that man is saved by grace alone. But human nature is prone towards the very things to which the Roman Catholic Church fell victim. The church today, in its various forms and denominations, is not immune to corruption, greed, and sins of all kinds. Indeed, the sad fact is that the very opposite seems to be true. It is den of idolatry. We become sick at the sight of television evangelists using guilt to motivate people to donating money. We are offended at the corporate enterprise the church has become. It seems to be a competition, a race to market the best product. We are saddened that the church has become a personality cult, where the most charismatic leader gets the most followers. We are disheartened that the church has ceased to be a place of prayer and has become a place of programs.

So, on Reformation Day, we should combine celebration with a sobering look at ourselves, our own churches, our own lives. If we believe the church needs to be *semper reformanda* - always reforming - then we need to look inside to see how God would have us reform. John Calvin, the father of Reformed theology, was right on when he began his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by talking about the relationship between knowing God and knowing ourselves. He said you can't have one without the other. To glorify God fully and to enjoy him fully, you have to look deeply at yourself and at what keeps you from deeper intimacy with him. Calvin called the heart an "idol factory," a place where addictions and idols place walls between us and God. Calvin called people, and the church, to a continual process of dying to these idols.

But looking inside is difficult. It's difficult for me, and it's difficult for you. If I'm really honest with myself, there are things that keep me from a *soli Deo gloria* life right now. My addictions run deep. In fact, what I'm doing right now - writing - is one of my most twisted addictions. Reading and writing, though food for my soul, often keep me from relating to others, praying, or spending moments of silence with God. Another idol of mine is busy-ness. I love to keep active; I'm a driven person. For Christians, this can look very sanctified. We are praised for our "work-ethic." But busy-ness congests the arteries of my soul, robbing God of my full presence with him. Another idol is my own shame. Because my soul longs for intimacy and relationship, I deeply desire to spend time with God and with people. But because I am afraid of exposing my weaknesses and showing my fear, I wear a mask of self-confidence and competence. Scared of being shamed, I claim an idol that robs me of being myself.

What are your idols? Reformation Day is a day to reform the soul, to engage God deeply in prayer, to search yourself, and to discover what is keeping you from deep intimacy with the Father.

Where are our churches conforming to the world instead of Christ? It's happening, no question about it. Our churches, our staffs, our elders, our pastors - we all deeply desire to follow Christ. And it's sometimes tough for us to admit that we are following our own desires rather

than his. Pray for us faithfully. Pray that we'd recognize and die to our idols no matter what they are and no matter how much it hurts.

And so we join with you in celebration and in soul-searching on this last Reformation Day of the second millennium, not because we're out to be the biggest and the best, but because we want to live *solī Deo gloria*. May the church of Jesus Christ be his pure and beloved bride in the next millennium.