

# Sharing the Good News

from the pen of the Mission Interpreter



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## By Grace, by Faith, by Scripture

*Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura* (by grace, by faith, by scripture alone) direct us to understand Martin Luther, the central figure in the Reformation we celebrate every October 31. Luther posted his 95 theses 504 years ago. We are his beneficiaries. His primary question, "Am I good enough to please God?" caused him great mental anguish and despair. He could find no answer in the teaching of the (Roman Catholic) church, and a trip to Rome, the seat of the church, only set him more on edge as he saw at first hand the corruption and absolute decadence on open display there. It was through study of scripture as he prepared for his lectures as a theology professor at the University of Wittenberg that he found the answer in the book of Romans: **Salvation is a gift that comes by grace through faith in the resurrected Christ.** *And it is for all who accept that gift.*

In many ways Luther was a man created for his time. The stage was set at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th centuries. Feudal Europe had evolved from the fall of the Roman Empire and consisted of three classes--the nobility, the church, and the serfs. The nobility represented secular power and land ownership, the church was the educated elite who also owned a great deal of land and wielded spiritual power, and the struggling peasants who made up 90% of the population and did most of the work. Oppressed people are always looking for opportunities to change their status for the better. By the late 1400's, things were beginning to change politically, socially, technically and economically. More lay people were being educated. Copernicus had redefined the place of earth in the universe, Columbus had landed in America, Machiavelli rethought politics, DaVinci was making scientific discoveries. The new thinking that came from the Renaissance revealed a new understanding of human existence and emphasized the importance of the individual. An ex-monk named Martin Luther preached sermons and wrote documents that provided needed spiritual insights.

And there was the printing press. Invented in the mid-1400's, the printing press allowed new ideas to circulate as never before. When Luther posted his 95 theses (debate points) concerning indulgences, printers began distributing the document throughout Europe. Copies reached as far as Spain in ten days. Within his lifetime Luther was the most widely read writer in Europe. His translation of the New Testament was also printed and distributed throughout Germany making scripture in the vernacular available to anyone who could read.

Martin Luther's influence reached beyond individual spiritual freedom. His emphasis on people being able to read scripture for themselves led to his translating the New Testament into German which both standardized the German language and paved the way for public education. His idea of vocation shifted the definition of "call" from being strictly for those serving in the church to the "priesthood of all believers." In Luther's understanding everyone received God's call to vocation and there was a God-ordained job for everyone. His insights lifted up women and children; he saw them as blessings from God. He revitalized the worship experience as German became the language of the Mass, and more hymns and music were introduced. He himself wrote the words for many hymns. And he wrote the catechism for instruction to supplement the teaching of the clergy.

When people in the newly formed Protestant church began calling themselves *Lutherans*, Dr. Luther objected. It was not his word but the word of Christ (scripture) that people believed. He was simply the vessel who brought back to light that we are free in Christ to love and serve our neighbor. We are Christians. The name, *Lutheran*, has held, and we at Emanuel's, celebrating being a congregation for 150 years, continue Luther's legacy.

*Sola Gratia, Sola Fide, Sola Scriptura.*

Adapted from "Why Luther Matters" by Ed Klodt, *Thrivent Magazine*, Sept. 2017

