

Laity Sunday 2017  
**500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Reformation**  
**Sunday October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017**  
**John Witt, Speaker**

Anniversaries are special. They commemorate major events in our personal lives, in our countries and in the history of the organizations to which we belong. On July 4<sup>th</sup> we celebrate the founding of our country. This last June Carol and I celebrated our 62<sup>nd</sup> wedding anniversary.



Joe was in trouble, he had forgotten his wedding anniversary. His wife was angry and told him, "Tomorrow morning I expect to find a gift in the driveway that goes from 0 to 200 in less than 10 seconds." Next morning Joe leaves the house early. When his wife awakes, she looks out the window and sure enough there is a gift wrapped box sitting in the driveway. She quickly puts on a robe and brings the box in the house and when she opens it she finds a new bathroom scale. Joe has not been seen in several days.

On October 31, later this month, we will observe the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation. That singular event of a simple monk with a mallet nailed a document on a church door in Wittenberg, Germany.



It was a call for debate and discussion, but the Pope dismissed the idea that this was the work of a monk who had too much wine. Those 95 theses had two central beliefs: 1. The Bible was the central religious authority. 2. Second, people only achieve salvation by their faith and not by their deeds.



Actually, Luther got his idea from Augustine, the fourth century monk who emphasized the primacy of the Bible rather than church officials as the ultimate authority within the faith. Augustine also believed that people could not reach salvation by their own acts, but only God could bestow salvation by His divine grace.

In the middle ages, the Catholic Church taught salvation was possible through good works that pleased God and that idea led to the church selling indulgences to provide absolution (forgiveness) to sinners.



The Pope was selling indulgences to finance the Sistine Chapel at St. Peters Basilica in Rome.

Luther wrote those the 95 theses in Latin to stimulate debate. He was inviting fellow academics to a “Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences.” He saw what happened when ruling leaders used the church to achieve their ends. **Faith and belief are individual acts; they do not require corporate sanctions or dogmatic regulations.**

That explosive act gave birth to the 600 million protestant followers that we have today in the world including the Methodists which were spawned by John and Charles Wesley from a revival groups of young Christians in the Church of England.



It became a separate denomination after Wesley's death. Vigorous missionaries built the denomination which now claims 85 million followers worldwide.

For some people, history is not very interesting. But history is always important and the **Old Testament asks us to remember the Exodus.**

**The New Testament asks us to remember Christ and His cross.**

**And the Reformation asks us to remember the basic tenants of the gospel.**

Luther's collected writings in German are over 100 volumes. An English version ran 56 volumes. He did it with ink and a quill and moveable type that took hours to set and arrange.



He translated the Bible into the vernacular (German) at about the same time Guttenberg was inventing the printing press. Was this coincidence or Divine incidence?

This was a time of great turmoil and great challenges. Reformers debated and wrote, preached and prayed. Some gave their lives for what they believed. Jan Has, a priest at Bethlehem chapel in Prague proposed printing the Bible in the Czech language, congregational singing and actually preaching the Bible. For these actions he was condemned and martyred.

The Church can't afford to forget the central idea of the reformation was that **the supremacy of the gospel in everything the church does.** If you study the reformation, you see how easy it was for the church to lose its way. The world is quick to pick and choose parts of Christian theology to support its secular thinking. Luther was quoted 100s of

times saying, “The church’s true treasure is the gospel.” Christians who stray too far from it may lose their way.

The reformation brought about an entire revolution in church life, practice and doctrine. Many of the doctrines that Protestants take for granted were foraged in the furnace of the reformers debates. What emerged was five key concepts.

Theologians speak of the “Solas” from the Latin word **sola** meaning **alone**. These five solas became the pillars of Protestant thought:

1. **Sola Scriptura** meaning the Bible is the sole and final authority for all in life. The Scriptures are the sole infallible rule of our faith and practices.
2. **Sola Gratia** meaning “grace alone”. Salvation comes from the grace of God.
3. **Sola Fide** meaning faith alone. It is not by works. We come to Christ empty handed. This is the widely known **doctrine of justification by faith alone**. That was the cornerstone of the Reformation. This most distinguishes Protestant denominations from both the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.
4. **Sola Christus**, meaning “Christ alone” There is no other mediator between God and sinful humanity but Christ. He alone, because of his death on the cross, grants access to the Father. Salvation is obtained through the atoning work of Christ alone.
5. **Sola Deo Gloria** meaning “to God alone the glory” All life can be lived for the glory of God; **everything we can do and should do are for His glory**. Eight colleges and several high schools have this as their motto. The reformers called this **the doctrine of vocation, viewing our work and all the roles we play in life, as a calling**. Both Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel marked their music S. D. G. to signify their music was produced for the sake of praising God.

The Roman church of the 15th century had lost sight of the sermon, celebrating the Mass instead. The reformers returned the sermon to church services, congregations were encouraged to sing hymns of praise and thanksgiving.

Two hundred years after the reformation, John Wesley developed a theology that was practical and focused on the four legs of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.



Interesting that this helped new Christians focus on their personal beliefs. Each of the legs must be taken in balance, and none of the other three apart from scripture should be viewed as being of equal value or authority with scripture. None of these should be taken in isolation without the balancing effect of the others, and always Scripture should have the central place of authority.

**Scripture:** Wesley insisted that Scripture is the first authority and contains the only measure whereby all other truth is tested. It is a rule sufficient of itself. It neither needs, nor is capable of, any further addition. Scripture references to justification by faith are numerous throughout the Bible. It is God’s guide to salvation and wise living. It reflects God’s wisdom and when we follow its teachings we learn to live in peace. The Psalmist wrote, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (119:105)

**Tradition:** Wesley reminded his followers to “not undervalue traditional evidence.” For him it supplied the links through 1,700 years of Christian history with Jesus and the apostles. The witness to justification and sanctification is an unbroken chain drawing us into fellowship with those who have finished the race, fought the fight, and who now reign with God in his glory and might.

**Reason:** Although scripture is sufficient unto itself and is the foundation of true religion, without reason we cannot understand the

**essential truths of Scripture.** Reason, however, is not a mere human invention. It must be assisted by the Holy Spirit if we are to understand the mysteries of God.

**Experience:** Apart from scripture, experience is the strongest proof of Christianity. Again, Wesley insisted that we cannot have reasonable assurance of something unless we have experienced it personally. John Wesley was assured of both justification and sanctification because he had experienced them in his own life.

Although traditional proof is complex, experience is simple. “One thing I know; I was blind, but now I see.” Although tradition establishes the evidence a long way off, experience makes it present to all persons.

The UMC asserts, “Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, verified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.” Scripture is primary, revealing the word of God so far as it is necessary for our salvation.



Wesley saw his four sources of authority not merely as prescriptive of how one should form their theology, but also descriptive of how almost anyone does form their theology. He thought of this four element concept of how things actually work in human experience.

Thus, when Wesley speaks of Tradition he does not merely refer to ancient Church tradition, but also the immediate and present theological influences which contribute to a person’s understanding of God and Christian theology.

Tradition may include such influences as the beliefs, values, and instruction of one’s family and upbringing. It may also include the various beliefs and values which one encounters and which have an effect on one’s understanding of Scripture.

The United Methodist church understanding is that both laypeople and clergy share in “our theological task.” The theological task is the ongoing effort to live as Christians in the midst of the complexities of a secular world that at times seems to lack a moral compass.



Wesley's Quadrilateral is referred to in Methodism as “our theological guidelines” and is taught to its pastors in seminary as the primary approach to interpreting the scriptures and gaining guidance for moral questions and dilemmas faced in daily living. Whenever in church history, since the reformation, we stray too far from these theological guidelines the church suffers.

So this month we celebrate Luther's willingness to begin the debate that still takes place in Christian churches. We certainly are wrestling with the “Solas” that evolved during the Reformation. Methodists will again test their willingness to use the Quadrilateral as they wrestle with questions that confront the changing culture in which we live.



These are the times that require us to examine the basics of our faith. When Luther was put on trial and confronted church authorities he is said to have uttered, “Here I stand I can do no other.”

Can we at Vista do no other?



In Jesus name amen!