

## **THE REFORMATION @ 500 PROJECT**

The Reformation @ 500 Project was a series of five annual events taking place from 2013 to 2017, exploring “the five solas” of the Reformation: grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone, Christ alone, and to God’s glory alone. Sponsored by the Committee on History and funded through the support of the Ewart Endowment for Theological Education and the Conference Fund of the Life and Mission Agency, these events were to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. The project’s purpose was to address the question: What might these theological concepts, so central to the Reformation, say to the church in Canada today? Are the 500 – year – old slogans robust enough to be relevant today?

The Reformation @ 500 Project brought together theological teachers and ministry practitioners in a series of one-day conversations about the solas. The annual events were held in different regions of the country bringing together presenters from the region in which the event was being held. Each year, the presenters included some voices not widely known in the Presbyterian Church, these presenters deepened the conversations in helpful ways. As well, each year voices from outside the Presbyterian Church enriched the discussions. Over the five events the solas were revealed as robust enough to speak to contemporary culture even 500 years after first being introduced.

The hosts for the annual events are to be thanked: St. Andrew’s Hall, Vancouver (2013); the Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax (2014); The Presbyterian College, Montreal (2015); Westwood Presbyterian Church, Winnipeg (2016); and Knox College, Toronto (2017).

Study guides, for use by individuals or in groups, built on each event are available for download at: <http://presbyterian.ca/gao/history/>.

### **GRACE ALONE (Vancouver, 2013)**

Frances Savill, minister at Richmond, B.C., told a story at the Sola Gratia (Grace Alone) gathering. In the summer of 2013, she took basic training as part of her preparation to be a reserve chaplain in the Canadian Forces. Basic training is grueling, with sleep deprivation and drill sergeants yelling at recruits, constantly reminding them that they will flunk out. It is a harsh, graceless environment. Those going through basic training are warned about the gas hut. There recruits are required to put on gas masks quickly and efficiently as the hut they are in fills with tear gas. Getting the gas in one’s eyes or lungs is an extremely unpleasant experience. This part of basic training is feared.

The sergeant in charge of the gas hut, after sending the drill sergeant away, said to the recruits, “This is my range, I am in charge here. No one fails. We will do it as many times as it takes for people to pass. I have your back.” The sergeant was a sign of grace in a harsh and fearful environment. As Savill noted, the sergeant’s words are similar to words God might speak, “This is my world, I am in charge here. Even when you are afraid, I have your back. You will make it through, because I have confidence I can get you through.” Getting through does not mean life will be easy, things may be difficult, but God has our back.

Savill was one of the keynote speakers last November at St. Andrew's Hall for the first of the Reformation @ 500 series on sola gratia. Other speakers played with Savill's metaphor. Stephen Farris, dean of St. Andrew's Hall, noted the sergeant had rules, which could be called "laws," about how to put on and use the gas mask. Law is not opposed to grace. In fact, with John Calvin's "third use of the law," it is an instrument of grace, revealing the path to be lived as those who have received God's grace.

Diane Stinton, professor of missiology at Regent College, Vancouver, continued the conversation about metaphors for grace when she asked, "What biblical passage predominates our view of grace: John 3:16 ('For God so loved the world ...') or John 10:10 ('I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly')?" Even North American Christians who may respond negatively to John 3:16 cannot escape the fact that their understanding of grace has been informed by that passage. In Africa and other parts of the majority world church, John 10:10 is the biblical metaphor for grace. John 3:16 suggests an individualistic view of grace focused on the offer of personal salvation; John 10:10, on the other hand, encourages a holistic view of grace including communal dimensions as the text is framed in the plural.

Not all North American Christian traditions have adopted individualistic understandings of grace, argued Mary Fontaine, director of Hummingbird Ministries, a Presbyterian ministry with Aboriginal Peoples in Vancouver. The First Nations community lives in hope of communal reconciliation, including reconciliation with creation. Since creation is the first sign of God's grace, honouring and protecting creation is a celebration of the Creator's act of grace in making the universe.

Paul Stevens, author and theologian retired from Carey Hall, built on the grace present in creation, exploring how work is made meaningful by grace. Work, which was given to human beings at creation prior to humanity's fall, is empowered by God's grace. And while work has the potential to enslave, it can also be a means of spreading grace.

The participants at the Sola Gratia event affirmed that "grace alone" speaks to our time, inviting the question 500 years after the Reformation: What metaphors of grace speak today? Where do we find ourselves surprised by grace alone?

### **FAITH ALONE (Halifax, 2014)**

"Sola Fide" ("Faith Alone"), a watchword of the Reformation, was the focus of the second Reformation@500 conversation; a conversation which offered a diverse yet complementary collection of pictures of faith.

Anna Robbins, Dean of Acadia Divinity School, opened the conversation by exploring the much debated relationship between faith and good works. Salvation is by faith alone, not works, the Reformers contended. Yet as James writes in the New Testament, faith without works is dead (James 2:17). Our works bear witness to the veracity of the faith given to us. Faith is an inner truth which bears fruit in our actions, words, and attitudes. As Robbins noted, this interface

between faith and works leaves no room for a privatized faith. Faith is to lead us to do good works in our interactions with others and in our engagement with the world.

The gathering was reminded by Laurence DeWolfe, Professor of Pastoral Theology, Atlantic School of Theology, of two classical theological terms. Salvation by faith alone starts with justification, God's gift of forgiveness in and through Jesus Christ. Justification is an unmerited gift. It cannot be obtained by wishing for it, by working for it. Both justification and the ability to believe we are justified are gifts from God. Justification is to lead to sanctification, the process of becoming ever more like Jesus Christ, our Savior and our example. Again sanctification is a gift from God, one in which we partner with the Holy Spirit so our discipleship as followers of Jesus is evident in our words, actions, and patterns of life.

Tim Archibald, minister of King's Presbyterian Church, New Minas, NS called for bold discipleship. Using the example of George Mueller who operated an orphanage in England, Archibald described faith as the boldness to trust that God would provide what was needed when it was needed; our calling is to step out in faith. Here then faith is not mental agreement with series of statements about God, instead faith is a bold confidence to follow God's call to serve Him and the world.

Lifting up the themes of bold discipleship and the public living of faith, Charles Cook, minister of Bethel Presbyterian Church, Riverview, NB, described how his wife, Cathy Cook, felt compelled by the Holy Spirit to request a sidewalk be built in a subdivision in their community so children walking to and from school would not need to walk on the road, and be at risk of being struck by a car. Neighbours told her others had tried to get a sidewalk but had failed. Cathy Cook believed this was God's call, and despite the discouragements she trusted God would see it through to the end. The sidewalk was built. Faith leads disciples of Jesus to seek change for neighbourhoods, towns and cities, and the world.

Anne Marie Dalton, a Roman Catholic, teaches St. Mary's University. Because of her commitments to the environment and development in Third World contexts, Dalton is asked by students who desire fundamental change in the world, "How do you keep on working on these issues without becoming cynical or quitting?" Anne Marie's answer is that faith must carry the person desiring to be an agent of change. The disciple of Jesus is enabled to keep on keeping on only through faith. Faith fires the ability to keep on serving, believing the Kingdom of God which is here in part will be fully realized some day.

Cynthia Chenard, minister of Iona Presbyterian Church, Dartmouth and Chaplain for the RCMP and the Halifax Regional Police, bore witness to the power of faith in the face of a pastoral crisis. She said, "When you are sitting with a family that is just hearing of the tragic death of their son, there are no words, no techniques, the only thing the chaplain can bring is faith. Everything else gets stripped away." Chenard's stories echoed the faith of Julian of Norwich who when faced by the devastation of the Plague spoke words of hope, "All will be well, all will be well, all manner of thing will be well." When we seek to be with people in crisis, faith is all we have.

This lively conversation added to the stories of faith, thereby enlarging and sharpening participants' understandings of sola fide, faith alone.

### **SCRIPTURE ALONE (Montreal, 2015)**

A Parable: No one was certain why the Park family's dog was at the baseball game, but Rover was there. Rover, deciding to live up to his name, took a walk and ended up in the outfield. Turmoil ensued. Players yelled at Rover, the umpires yelled at Rover, people in the stands yelled at Rover. Confused and scared by the noise, Rover ran all over the field unsure of what to do. Suddenly Rover stopped, perked up his ears and headed straight to a woman on the third base side who was calling out "Rover, Rover." With a yip of joy Rover leaped into Meghan Park's arms. Rover had heard a voice he knew and trusted.

Rev. Jennifer Cameron, in telling this story at the *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture Alone) event held in October, drew the analogy: when people who have been formed by scripture hear the voice of God in the word they are drawn to it, knowing it to be their primary allegiance, the way to follow.

The *Sola Scriptura* gathering was part of two-day event at Presbyterian College, Montreal. The previous day Dr. Edith Humphrey of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary spoke on "*Prima Scriptura*," the primacy of scripture over tradition, reason and experience. The speakers at the gathering the following day spent little time defending the Bible as the word of God or addressing questions of inerrancy, debating points of an earlier time. Instead the invitation was to reflect on the ways scripture forms and shapes the lives of followers of Jesus both individually and as communities of faith.

Beginning with baptism, an unusual place to start a conversation about scripture, Rev. Dr. Roland De Vries of Presbyterian College demonstrated the ways scripture shapes the life of the believer. Describing three scenarios—a baptism in the early church, a contemporary baptism of an infant, and a contemporary adult baptism—De Vries showed baptism arises from allegiance to scripture. The individual or the parents, having been shaped by scripture, come to be baptized or bring their children to be baptized in allegiance to those same scriptures. Further, parents promise to nurture their children in a family (both at home and in the church) informed by scripture and those baptized on their own profession of faith promise to continue allowing scripture to shape their lives.

The panel of Jason Zuidema (from Concordia University and pastor at Église Réformée St-Paul, Repentigny, Que.), Hillary Kaell (from Concordia University), Kaye Diviney (minister at St. Andrew and St. Paul, Montreal), and Sybil Mosley (at Livingstone, Montreal) deepened the understanding of what allegiance to scripture means in the contemporary context. Kaell, whose research explores modern "pilgrimage" to the Holy Land, noted that Christians who engage in daily personal Bible reading and attend small group Bible studies are far more likely to make a trip to the Holy Land than are those who do not. Engagement with the biblical material feeds a desire to see where the events described took place, giving a lived experience to the ongoing reading of scripture as "the Bible comes alive" through visiting the Holy Land.

Zuidema, Diviney and Mosley recounted how scripture has shaped the life of the very different communities of faith in which they are involved, ranging from the multi-ethnic community at Livingstone, to the city church that is St. Andrew and St. Paul to the Francophone congregation at Église Réformée St-Paul. The scriptures' ability to form faith communities crosses ethnic, linguistic and cultural lines.

### **CHRIST ALONE (Winnipeg, 2016)**

The fourth Reformation@500 gathering took place at Westwood Presbyterian Church, Winnipeg on Oct. 29, 2016. The conversation, focused on *Solus Christus* (Christ Alone), demonstrated this Reformation watchword is robust enough to fire minds and hearts today.

Peter Bush, Westwood Church, Winnipeg, began the day highlighting the Reformers' affirmation of Christ as the only mediator between God and human beings. Linking that with Paul's statement that in Christ God was reconciling all things to God's self (Col. 1:18,19), Bush argued only by Christ's mediatorship is reconciliation between people alienated from one another possible. Christ alone brings reconciliation across ethnic divides, between neighbours, and within families.

Wendy Beauchemin Peterson, Metis and editor the North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies (NAIITS) Journal, asked: "Can Christians carry only Christ with them when they preach the gospel, or is culture inseparable from gospel proclamation?" Peterson demonstrated the Canadian church's inability to separate Christ from culture, much to the gospel's detriment and the harm of First Nations people. Those failures, however, do not mean the gospel should not be proclaimed cross-culturally. For within the Indigenous community, as Peterson noted, are many Jesus-followers finding Indigenously-inculturated paths to follow Jesus.

The afternoon's panel conversation continued the conversation. Daryl Climenhaga, Providence Theological Seminary, contrasted bounded sets (people joined by common practices, rules, actions) and centered sets (people joined in commitment to a common center). Climenhaga suggested *Solus Christus* provides such a center; making the church the people who are centered on Jesus regardless of background.

Don Draayer, Covenant Christian Reform Church, Winnipeg noting the Reformers' affirmation was about salvation, asked the question: what was the purpose of salvation? He argued the salvation offered is to be lived now; salvation is evidenced in discipleship. The statement Christ Alone becomes motivation for living life following Jesus.

Irma Fast Dueck, Canadian Mennonite University, is a participant in a dialogue between the Mennonite Central Committee and some Shia Muslims from Iran. She encouraged Christians in dialogue with followers of other religions to listen respectfully, build friendships, and be

unashamedly Christian in their speaking. A Christian in inter-religious dialogue, she contended, while being humble, is called to be committed to the Jesus' way.

Germaine Lovelace, First Presbyterian Church, Kenora, ON, served congregations in Jamaica before coming to Canada. One congregation was across the valley from Rasta City. Instead of complaining about the Rastafarians, Lovelace crossed the valley and entered a Rastafarian worship service to build relationship. On that first visit he was invited to tell a Bible story. From then on he regularly visited Rasta City, being invited to tell more Bible stories. A passion for Christ Alone drives Jesus-followers to build relationships with others.

### **TO GOD'S GLORY ALONE (Toronto, 2017)**

What is "the glory of God"? And can we see it in the world around us? These were the questions with which the presenters at the fifth and last of the "Sola" gatherings struggled. The gathering held at Knox College on Oct. 27, 2017, was the culmination of the Committee on History's five-year project exploring the meaning in our time of the five "Solos" (onlys or alones) of the Reformation.

John Vissers, Principal of Knox College, noted that John Calvin suggested the glory of God was evident in three places: in creation "the heavens are telling the glory of God" (Ps, 19:1); in the person and work of Jesus Christ: "[Jesus] is the reflection of God's glory" (Heb. 1:3); and in the people of God. Calvin marveled that "the hope of heavenly glory" could dwell in human beings, "earthen and fragile vessels" that we are.

Christine O'Reilly, Pastor at Knox Church, Thedford demonstrated from her life as a parish pastor how these three aspects of God's glory appear. The glory of God appears not only in moments of joy. But when sorrow is turned to joy, and tragedy becomes the opportunity for God's redeeming work, God's most glorious act, to be revealed. Such a recognition of God's glory grounds our worship in the proclamation of the worthiness (glory) of God, moving us beyond our feelings in the moment to God's never-ending glory.

Ephraim Radner, Professor of Historical Theology, Wycliffe College, deepened the conversation, noting that God's glory is often hidden or at least not evident, in such a world he wondered if human speech about God's glory needs to be humbly contingent. This deepening was enhanced by Jinsook Khang, Christian Education Minister, Vaughan Community Church, noting we easily name the good things happening in our lives as evidence of God's glory, but are slower to describe difficult occurrences as being signs of God's glory. Both Radner and Khang, challenged the simplistic equation linking God's glory with "everything is going great."

The glory of God can become a cold, austere rule in our lives, Karla Wubbenhorst, Minister at Westminster-St. Paul's, Guelph, warned. Insisting that all things be to God's glory can become a weapon used to hold people in line, a new kind of law. The antidote is read to God's glory alone in combination with grace alone, Wubbenhorst insisted. Vissers agreed, wondering is the answer to the first answer in the Shorter Catechism for human beings "to glorify God and enjoy God forever" how much attention is given to the second part of the pair.

To enjoy God is part of glorifying God. Radner reminded the gathering of the early church leader, Irenaeus, who said, "The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God." Humanity living "fully alive" brings glory to God, thereby avoiding the danger of the glory of God being used as an austere rule.

Barbara Leung Lai, Research Professor of Old Testament, Tyndale Seminary, noted that in the Old Testament the glory of God brings about transformation in the individual. For example, Isaiah sees the glory of God in the temple and is transformed into a prophet. The glory of God, Lai argued, changes human beings into God's instruments in the world. Encounters with the glory of God changes human beings.

Jinsook Khang neatly grounded the entire day's conversation in her searching question: How do we teach the next generation to recognize God's glory?