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Pastoral Letter, October, 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As I write, the Reformation has just completed its 500th year. What a time for us to recall and give thanks to God for His gracious revival of His church! When the Reformation began on October 31, 1517, the authority of the Word of God had been trampled on and lost many years before. The Roman Church had exalted the words of man to be the authority over the Word of God. Of course, this had always been and remains true outside the church, but for God's people to lose God's Word was tragic. It meant a loss of the true gospel. In the absence of the Word of God, Christianity had warped into just another false religious system.

The formative principle of the Reformation was ***Sola Scriptura—the Word of God alone*** was the key to the recovery of the authority of God's Word in Christ's church. When the Reformation began, the European church had been without a Bible in a language the people could read for nearly a thousand years! But leading up to the Reformation, men began to read the classic languages again and discovered the Greek New Testament. When Martin Luther and others like him began to compare the New Testament to the man-made doctrines of the Roman Catholic church, they began to discover just how lost the church had become.

What followed was a miraculous intervention of God to recover the authority of His Word in His church. Now, compelled to know the Scriptures, the Reformers began to discover that Rome had destroyed the New Testament gospel by adding the ideas of man. Instead of a person being saved by ***faith alone***, the church was teaching that it was by faith *plus* works. Instead of being saved by God's ***grace alone***, man must be saved by grace *plus* merit. Instead of being saved by ***Christ alone***, man would be saved by Christ *plus* the church *plus* effort. It was the 'alones' that got so many faithful Reformers and their followers into trouble. Yet, the same principles turned the world upside down as the Bible and the gospel were recovered.

Whenever the church begins to stray from the Bible, whenever she begins to play with Scriptural truth so that it fits the culture, so that it's easier for people to accept, the church undermines the authority of God's Word, and begins a tragic slide away from God. It seems that so many never learn this lesson.

The so-called "Evangelical church", a product of the Protestant churches that grew out of the Reformation, have been so eager to grow their numbers and influence over the last few decades that they have been willing to treat Roman Catholicism as though they are Christian, most notably through the signing of the "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" document in 1994 and "The Manhattan Declaration" of 2009. In proclaiming such partnerships, the true church confuses the biblical gospel, and loses much of the ground that the Reformation recovered.

Last year on October 31, Pope Francis announced that after five hundred years, Protestants and Catholics now "have the opportunity to mend a critical moment of our history by moving beyond the controversies and disagreements that have often prevented us from understanding one another." He makes it sound like the Reformation and the separation between true Protestants and the Catholic church was over a miscommunication, a misunderstanding. Many people today, even in Protestant churches, seem to think that the Catholic church itself has reformed in some ways, and we should make a greater effort to understand and befriend them. But the Catholic church has not reformed; they still preach the same gospel, a false gospel.

In 1517, the Reformation began when Luther called for debate about the practice of indulgences, papers bought by the faithful to have the church remit their sins and the punishments of those sins. At the time Martin Luther asked: "Why does not the pope empty purgatory for the sake of holy love and the dire need of the souls that are there if he redeems an infinite number of souls for the sake of miserable money with which to build a church?"

How ironic it is that the Pope's recent call for cooperation was offered near the end of the "Year of Jubilee" that he himself had proclaimed to begin December 8, 2015. What was this year of jubilee? The Pope declared that the holy doors of the church would remain open during that year and that by passing through the holy doors, the faithful could earn indulgences after fulfilling the usual conditions of prayer for the pope's intentions, confession, and detachment from sin, and communion. Five hundred years later, I have the same question as Luther: If the Pope can forgive all men's sin for a year, why not always?

In fact, the Pope cannot forgive sins. No one can be saved by a religion that depends on man. **Scripture alone** reveals that we are saved and declared righteous by God by **grace alone** through **faith alone** in **Christ alone**, and this for the **glory of God alone**. Thanks be to God for His gracious recovery of this precious gospel!

Thanking God for the Reformation,

PASTOR HOUSE