Q: What was Luther’s struggle that led him to his convictions about Scripture and the Gospel? What were the questions he struggled with and did he ever find an answer to them? What was his struggle with the Catholic Church?

A: Luther struggled with the question I think every human heart struggles with, “how do I please and get right with God?” Luther went to extraordinary lengths in order to grant himself the assurance that he was pleasing to God. Joining the Augustinian Monastery was the pinnacle of this pursuit, as he embraced monkery with a fervor unlike anything his teachers had seen. Luther would remain in confession for hours, deprave himself almost to the point of death (by sleeping outside in the snow) and himself confesses that his horribly aggressive years as a monk, beating himself and depraving his health shortened the years of his life. Quoting Luther from my memory, “If there was ever a monk who could have earned his way to heaven through his monkery, I was surely it.” It was not until Luther was sent on orders to Rome, the holy city, because of his impressive performance as a monk, that Luther’s eyes began to open and his journey to an answer began.

With the highest of pious expectations, Luther was shattered, angered and set ablaze when he came to Rome to find the Catholic church to be a very human and broken institution of greed. Through this experience and through his refuting the Catholic practices Luther did find the answer to his question and pursuit of pleasing God; we are justified before God by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ, not by works or indulgences, but by the receipt of God’s gracious gift delivered to us in baptism. This proclamation was first penned in the 95 Thesis which spread faster than the plague of that day among the people who were starving for truth and relief from the papacy. Luther’s works came to be the catalyst of the Reformation and the restoration of the apostolic faith taught in the Scriptures.

The Reformation slogan, if you will, that Luther established through and that guided his own teaching was “Sola Gratia. Sola Fide. Sola Scriptura” or “By Grace Alone. By Faith Alone. By Scripture Alone” It is by these three alone that salvation is received and faith given and edified by the power of the Holy Spirit. If it were not for God’s gracious disposition toward us, having mercy on us despite our being enemies of God and sinners (Romans 5:8), all humanity would be condemned and lost already. God is gracious, it is who God is. We earned nothing except death through our rebellion and it is only by God’s merciful love toward us that He sent His Son to pay the price for our sins rather than laying even the slightest ounce of judgement on our head (Romans 8:32). By grace alone salvation is made available and is by which salvation is given and received. Faith alone receives God’s gift of grace, and faith itself is a gift from God, leaving no room for the works of boasting of men for the work of their salvation and redemption (Ephesians 2). Faith is not an intellectual assent, for even the demons believe and know that God exists and that Jesus is Lord (James 2:19). Faith is trust in the Lord Jesus as the Lord and Savior that He and the Scriptures testify that He is, “And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek you.” Psalm 9:10. Finally, it is through Scripture alone that we learn of God, know of His love and hear the Gospel that is all sufficient for salvation (Romans 10:17). From the beginning it has been God’s Word that has sustained us and
testified to who He is, even with Eve in the Garden as evidenced by God's Word being the first thing Satan attacked. Reading all the way through the OT beginning with the 10 Commandments, the Law and the Prophets, all of which Jesus Himself said testified to the salvation He would bring as Messiah (Luke 24), we see that God's Word is still the "power of salvation for all who believe" - Romans 1:16. Without God revealing Himself to us through the Scriptures and ultimately through the Incarnate Son, to which the Scriptures and Holy Spirit point us to, we would not know of God nor of His great love for us, leaving us damned and hopeless.

This differed from the Roman Catholic teaching and still does today (even with some Christian teaching out there) in 2 basic ways. 1.) The Romans teach a “gratia infusia”, or infused grace. Though they do hold that God must have revealed Himself in order for us to know Him, they falsely teach that faith in that revelation and in Jesus Christ is now a work of man; against Ephesians 2. In addition to faith being a work, they teach that Christ’s atoning work on the cross only provided the opportunity for us to be saved by way of our works, following Roman Catholic rites and other stipulations. They teach that the grace of God is not what provides, delivers and sustains our salvation, but rather, through Christ God has “infused” or given us enough grace to earn our way into heaven. Thus, salvation is not by “faith alone” nor is it by “grace alone” as God’s grace, but according to their doctrine Christ only provided yet another way for us to fail at upholding His Law. 2.) The Roman Catholic Church does not hold that Scripture alone is the only revelation of God sufficient for knowing the will of God or for salvation and for a life of faith. Though they would now deny the infallibility of the Pope, which was for a long time a doctrine of the church, Romans still hold that the Pope is Christ’s Vicar on earth, bearing the authority and perfection of Christ in his declarations, additions to and teachings of Scripture and of things not in the canon of Scripture like the Apocrypha (another way “Scripture alone” is not attested or believed). In teaching, the Pope is able to renounce certain teachings and add certain teachings under the assumption that it is as if Christ Himself is speaking. Of course, this is a horrific teaching and one that should frighten any man after God’s own heart, as it did Luther.

Martin Luther’s Reformation was new in the sense that the Apostolic teaching and orthodox faith of the Scriptures had been lost under the cloud of man’s and the Catholic Church’s work-righteousness, desire for political power and earthly riches. Given the condition of church at the time, for all intensive purposes one could say the true teachings of Scripture, justification by grace through faith in Christ, had been “lost”. Generations had grown up under this false doctrine of the Church, so that when Martin Luther’s Reforming doctrines were propagated, it appeared as a new teaching and doctrine. However, as Martin Luther himself attested and showed by using Scripture alone in his doctrine, Luther was not writing or inventing new doctrine, only making clear once again the teachings of the Scriptures, apostles and Christ Himself. By casting all human reason, desire, understanding and opinion aside and at the Mercy Seat of God, Luther returned the Church to the true essence of faith in Christ’s words and teaching. Much like when the apostles declared Jesus’ teaching about eating His flesh and blood to be a hard teaching, one they could not understand, but yet threw themselves at Christ in faith and trust saying “to whom else should we go, you have the Words of eternal life?”, so to this is how Luther returned us to the apostolic faith.
and practice - only engaging in the ceremonies and sacraments that the Lord gave us in Scripture and adding nothing of human work to the Word or work of the Lord. Keeping all of this in mind would be of certainly great importance for any church serious about God's Word, and as they understand their identity as a church, their formal documents and their mission together in the Lord’s work. Knowing and understanding the mistakes of the past as well as the faithful witness and work of saints like Luther will only embolden us to carry on the tradition of the Early Church and apostolic faith as well as that of the early reformers to whom we rightly thank for being the heralds that God used to bring us once again the glorious Gospel of God’s grace and salvation by faith alone in Jesus Christ.

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