

THE FIVE SOLAS¹

What characterizes the Reformed Faith? What was it in the Roman Catholic Church at the start of the 16th century that needed to be reformed, and what reforms did the Protestants implement? Five battle cries of the Reformation known as *The Solas* (*sola* means “alone”), give us a profound insight into the theological conflict and what was at stake. They form the solid foundation of what is now called the Reformed Faith:

We are saved by *grace alone*, through *faith alone*, in *Christ alone*,
for the *glory of God alone*, standing on *Scripture alone*.

Because these five fundamental tenets were established in opposition to the practices of the Roman Catholic Church (RC) let’s compare the two views in each tenet.

Sola Gratia – Salvation is by God’s *grace alone*.

There was a heated debate between Augustine and Pelagius in the late fourth century as to whether salvation and eternal life was obtained by God’s grace alone, or if instead man merited salvation by his own good deeds, his *works*. Augustine defended the teachings of Scripture that man’s salvation is necessarily by grace alone without any consideration of his works. As a result of Augustine’s defense, Pelagius was declared a heretic, and his teachings have been consistently rejected throughout Church history. In the early 1600’s, however, a successor to this heresy named Arminius taught that God’s grace did provide Christ as an atonement for sin, but Christ only made us salvable; he did not finally save us. God’s grace extended to all men universally, but it was up to each man to come to Christ individually. Thus, man’s consent was necessary to obtain salvation, and his personal effort was necessary to maintain it. Thus salvation could be accepted or rejected, and it could be gained and lost again. Grace was therefore only provisional, and salvation was cooperative (*synergistic*). The position of the Catholic Church was that grace is “infused” in us in such a way that we are enabled to be righteous ourselves, and to have our righteousness contribute to our salvation.

At issue is the condition of man apart from Christ. The Reformers taught that man is totally incapable of saving himself, and nothing in him desires, understands, or believes the things of God. And so, apart from grace, he cannot come to God. He must be enabled. Man’s salvation is all of God by grace. Man contributes nothing to it. He merely receives what God has graciously offered. Salvation is by grace alone, not grace plus consent...

Sola Fide – Salvation comes through our *faith alone*.

Faith is the unique and solitary instrument by which we receive God’s gracious salvation. We are saved by grace, not by faith. Faith is a necessary condition of our salvation, but it is not the basis of our salvation. It does not cause our salvation. Nor is anything other than faith necessary to receive the gracious gift of salvation that God bestows on the

¹ This article was adapted by William H. Gross from *The Five Solas of the Reformation* written by Brett Baker in 1998. Brett is the pastor of the *Eastside Evangelical Fellowship* in Woodinville WA: <http://www.eefweb.org/index.htm>

elect. Faith alone was the very doctrine that prompted Martin Luther to challenge the Catholic position in his 95 theses. He attacked the sale of indulgences as a false means to obtain salvation. We are not and cannot be saved by the decree or actions of any man, not even our own desire or actions. Rom 9:16, “It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy.” Nor is our faith a meritorious act that binds God to save someone he has not eternally decreed to be one of his elect. It is simply the means by which we receive our salvation according to the will of God (i.e., it is *monergistic*).

The Catholic position in opposition to Luther's *Sola Fide* was that the grace of God was poured into us by His good pleasure. As this pouring or infusing occurred, it made us inherently righteous and thus able to perform good works. By faith, then, our free will would cooperate with grace, perform the necessary works, and *merit* our salvation. Faith, in that sense, is not a gift but a work (in opposition to Eph. 2:8-9)². Justification to the Catholic mind was a process, not an event. Sanctification was not an effect of justification, but the means of justification. The canons of the Council of Trent in 1563 lay out this Catholic opposition to the Reformers.

The Reformers' view is that God *declares* us justified by faith alone. They asserted that the righteousness of the sinner is not his own works, but the works of Christ which are imputed to him. That is, Christ's righteousness is *considered* our own; it covers us, but it is not infused in us (Rom. 4). Our only plea before the Judgment throne is faith alone in Christ's work alone, not faith in Christ plus our own works...

So where do our works fit in? What value does sanctification have? *Sola Fide* means we are saved by grace through faith *alone*, but not through a faith that *is* alone. Faith alone is the basis for our salvation, but our salvation is made clearly evident by our works. But our works are never considered in our justification. We are declared to be righteous on account of Christ alone. We are not saved by anything we do ourselves. Nonetheless, our works are the necessary and visible evidences of our faith.

Solus Christus – The object of our faith is *Christ alone*.

There is no other name by which a man can be saved other than the name “Jesus”. (Acts 4:11) Jesus intercedes on our behalf (Hebrews 7:23-28). His sacrifice is sufficient to atone for the sins of the Church. There is no biblical basis to turn to anyone but Christ for intercession. The priesthood of the individual believer (1 Peter 2:4-10) makes any intercession by a church priest or leader unnecessary. Every Christian is able to approach the throne of God with Christ alone as his Intercessor and Advocate; there the saint is free to declare his praises, confess his sins, and offer his supplications. And so salvation is by Christ alone. He is the sole cause of our salvation. Everything necessary to atone for our sins and to provide the righteousness necessary to please God, was finally and completely done by Christ in his life, death, and resurrection. He is the sole focus and object of our faith and the only source of truth. He is the one on whom we are absolutely dependent for our salvation. “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but

² Eph 2:8-9 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not of yourselves – it is the gift of God; not by works so that no one may boast.

by me.” (Jn 14:6) Salvation is never attained or maintained by anything that is either obtained apart from Christ, or offered in addition to Christ. Saying that we need Christ plus *anything* in order to be saved is a blatantly false teaching...

The Catholic Mass is based on the belief that Priests actually break the body of Christ and offer his atoning blood each time they administer the Lord’s Table. The sacrament thus becomes a means and not just a sign of salvation; the priest is acting as our intercessor in place of Christ. *It is Christ plus*. The Catholic Church also elevated Mary beyond the role the mother of Jesus, and made her the mother of God, thus deifying her. She became central to the salvation of the world, a co-redemptrix with her Son. As such, Mary became an additional intercessor between man and God. *And that is Christ plus*. Lists of recognized Saints became intercessors on behalf of men, and prayers began to go up to these departed saints. *And that too is Christ plus*. We are forbidden from placing our faith in anything or anyone other than Christ alone.

Soli Deo Gloria – It is all to the *glory of God alone*.

One of the central issues during the Reformation was the improper exaltation of the officers in the Church. Even during the third century, the highest form of worship toward God could only be offered by those in full time ministry. And so the clergy and laity were separated, with greater glory going to the clergy, thus drawing glory to themselves instead of giving glory to God alone. The service of God was considered the only worthwhile "calling," while all other vocations were common and inferior. They believed that ordinary work was necessary, but demeaning. In response to this false teaching, the Reformers began to use the term “calling” to refer to *any* vocation that God equipped someone to perform. They believed that whatever work God had given us to do, if it was done faithfully, it would glorify Him in the same way as any other faithful work. In *1Cor 10:31*, Paul teaches that whatever we do, it should be done by faith to the glory of God. The Reformers made no distinction between spiritual or temporal; sacred or secular. They believed that God had created us to be workers or producers. Whether you were in the pulpit, the field, or the home, *everything done by faith would bring glory to God*.

Sola Scriptura – The source of all authority is *Scripture alone*.

This means that the Scriptures are the final and infallible authority for faith and practice. This *does not* mean that the Bible is the only place where truth can be found. It *does not* mean that the Bible is equally clear to all people. It *does not* mean that the instruction of the Church is not helpful and authoritative. Nor does it imply that we may be our own teachers ("just-me-and-my-Bible"), rejecting all other instruction by those gifted to be teachers (Rom 12:7). However, all other authorities, even if what they teach is valid, are fallible; therefore their instruction must always be subordinate to the teaching of the Scriptures which alone are our authority. This was a rejection of the hierarchical nature of the Roman Catholic Church in which the dictates of the pope (by *papal bull*) and the rule of tradition often superseded the clear teaching of God’s word. We are ruled by God with Christ as the head of the Church, because the word of God is supreme in our life (“Thus says the Lord...”). “Heaven and earth will pass away , but my words will never pass

away,” Matt 24:35. The dominion and authority of Christ is exercised through his word, and therefore we acknowledge his Lordship by our submission to his word:

Luke 22:25-26 Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.

Matt 23:8-12 "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi ,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." NIV

Note on the Authority of the Bible

Unfortunately *Sola Scriptura* has not produced unanimity among Christians. Differing interpretations of the same Bible have produced a splintered religion. Churches and denominations compete with one another to obtain their own vested constituencies. Attitudes toward the Bible in contemporary Protestantism range from radical literalism by fundamentalists on one end of the spectrum, to cynical reconstructionism by liberals on the other end of the spectrum.³

In response to this current myriad of views, the Modern Reformation movement has produced a series of documents to restore a reformed understanding of the role and authority of Scripture in the Christian life. It would be beneficial for any believer to obtain, read, and seriously consider the Chicago Statements on *Biblical Inerrancy*, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, and *Biblical Application*.

³ Read J. Gresham Machen's powerful rejection of liberalism as a Christian belief system at all in *Christianity and Liberalism*.