

The Pillars of Reformation teaching - The Five Solas

As the protest took shape in the 16th Century, the issues became more and more clearly defined. When the Reformers sought to clarify the main tenants of the Protest, they developed a few phrases or slogans to point to the main theological issues that were at stake. These became known as the “*five solas*.” The Latin word “*sola*” is translated “*only*” or “*alone*” in English. The “*five solas*” articulated five fundamental beliefs of the Protestant Reformation in contrast to those of the Roman Church to which they were protesting. These five summarized what they saw as the fundamental principles of Christian life and faith.

The Five “*Solas*” of the Protestant Reformation

Sola Scriptura Scripture Alone	Scripture <u>ONLY</u> is the final rule of Christian life, faith and practice. It is clear, sufficient and self-interpreting.
Sola Christus Christ Alone	Christ is the <u>ONLY</u> mediator between God and man. Christ’s person and work alone are <u>sufficient</u> to save.
Sola Gratia Grace Alone	God’s grace <u>ONLY</u> is the origin of salvation. All elements of salvation are an unmerited gift from God.
Sola Fide Faith Alone	The <u>ONLY</u> means of Justification is <u>faith</u> , apart from works of the Law. Faith <u>alone</u> appropriates salvation.
Soli Deo Gloria God’s Glory Alone	To God <u>ONLY</u> belongs the glory for salvation. This alone is to be our <u>motivation</u> for life and worship.

Not only did these five fundamental principles summarize the Reformation protest, but they also clearly define the fundamental principles of salvation and Christian faith. These clearly summarize the Gospel message and point to the heart of the issues at stake in the Gospel. This happened because the Roman Church had over a long period of time moved away from the Gospel and the person and work of Christ was no longer central to the life and practice of the Church. This resulted in the pompous display of man-made religion, with all of its rites and traditions, which religion the Reformers were formally protesting. The result theologically was a clarification of the main tenants of the Christian Faith and a renewed focus on the heart of the Gospel message, the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Sola Scriptura – The Scripture alone is the final rule of Christian life, faith and practice. It is clear and self-interpreting. The issue here of course was in *contrast* to the Roman teaching that the Church (tradition and the fathers) was the final authority of faith and practice. More than this, they taught that only the Church and the Priesthood could rightly interpret the Scripture because it was inaccessible to the common man. Sola Scriptura clearly meant that not only was the Scripture (not the Church), the final rule of faith and practice, but that it could be understood by the common man (not only a special priesthood) because it was clear (perspicuous) and understandable because the Holy Spirit could interpret the meaning to each believer. Not only this but Sola Scriptura also meant that the Bible was a “*complete*” revelation of God, in its closed “*canon*,” and that it was “*sufficient*” to address all matters in Christian life and to explain to us what we are to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man.

Sola Christus – Christ is the only mediator between God and man. Christ’s person and work alone are sufficient to save. More than this, Jesus Christ is the only “*incarnate*” self-revelation of God who has come and explained God to us. He is the “*object of faith*” and the focal point of all of human history. This of course was in *contrast* to the special priesthood of the Roman Church and the teaching that only the Church could explain or reveal God to the people. Christ Himself, His person and His work ONLY have sufficient merit to “*justify*” us before God and provide a “*righteousness*” (Rom 3:21-24) for us (not our own, Phil 3:9) that is complete in the sight of God. His life and death are the basis on which the believer is justified (it cannot be merited by good works, Eph 2:8-9), and this is absolutely necessary in the sight of God (John 14:6), being the only sufficient grounds for justification by God. Christ and His teaching are the only way to God, the only true revelation of God in history, and the only Redeemer of mankind.

Sola Gratia – God’s grace only is the origin of salvation. All elements of salvation are an unmerited gift from God. God is the One who has reconciled us to Himself, having planned, purchased and applied (Trinity implied) salvation to each individual believer. He is the One who predestines, calls, justifies, sanctifies and glorifies. In short, salvation is wholly the work of God, from first to last, its origin and completion is His work. Therefore, salvation is “not merited” by any work of man nor can it be, in any sense, merited by anything we can do. This of course was in *contrast* to the Roman teaching of Merit, Indulgences, Purgatory and the like. We cannot work for or buy salvation, nor can we suffer long enough in Purgatory in order to purge sin from us. Rather, salvation is the “*free gift*” (Rom 6:23) of God, “*not of works*” (Eph 2:9), and justification is a “*gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*” (Rom 3:24).

Sola Fide – The only means of Justification is faith, apart from works of the Law. Faith alone appropriates salvation. This of course was in *contrast* to the Roman teaching that justification is complete only after we have become righteous in our own persons, through faith AND perseverance in good works to the end of life. The Bible clearly teaches that salvation cannot be earned or merited in any way by people (Eph 2:8-9), but that it is a free gift from God’s good pleasure (Rom 5:16-17) to give it. Further that Christ’s righteousness alone is sufficient as merit before God in order to justify a person, being the only Redeemer (Eph 1:7) and full payment for sin and Provider of righteousness having fulfilled the Law in His perfect life (Rom 10:4). Therefore, Justification, indeed reconciliation to God can only be appropriated to us by faith alone (Rom 5:1), which object is Christ alone (Rom 5:9), and this comes as a gift by God’s grace (Rom 3:24) alone to us. There is no other means of justification but faith (Rom 3:28), and this is “*apart from the works of the Law.*”

Soli Deo Gloria - To God only belongs the glory for salvation. This alone is to be our motivation for life and worship. Because salvation is wholly the work of God, from first to last, it is to God alone that glory and worship is to be given (Rom 11:36). This is in *contrast* of course to the Roman teaching of Papal exaltation, and the veneration of Mary and the Saints. Salvation is something God gives as a free gift and He is to be acknowledged as the sole provider of it. The exaltation of people, even the best of saints, is a diabolical form of idolatry which is wrongfully robbing God’s glory from Him (Rev 19:10, 22:8-9). Rather, if someone is a great saint, we should rightly be thankful for their good service in the Church, but God alone is to be glorified and venerated for working such grace in that saint. Moreover, the only right motive for worship, service and good works is in fact to glorify God (Matt 5:16) so that in our worship of God people might see Him (Phil 2:15-16) and His glory and virtue would shine through our life as a witness (1 Pet 2:9) to God’s good virtue, which is in us only because of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22).

The Main Thing

It is no small thing that these “*five solas*” were given in order to clarify the essentials of Christian teaching. They show us what is at the heart of the Gospel, the message of the person and work of Jesus Christ. They teach us exactly what is central to the Christian Faith and what is required to have an orthodox or genuine profession of the Historic (what the true Church has always maintained) and Apostolic (what Jesus and the Apostles taught) Christian Faith. In other words, they teach what the “*main thing*” in Christianity really is. How could the Church have gotten so far from the central teaching about Christ and salvation? Well the truth is, we are in a constant struggle to reaffirm the truth of the Gospel to each successive generation because our enemy the Devil is waging war against the truth of the Gospel in every generation. He is always reinventing old lies into new ways to deceive us and obscure the true Gospel. He represents himself as a beacon of light and truth with false prophets and teachers, but their message is only a bit of truth, perverted into a devious lie which robs the Gospel message of its power to save.

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 - 13 For **such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.** 14 And no wonder, **for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.** 15 Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness; whose end shall be according to their deeds. NASB

As we look around in our world, just as with any period of Church History, we can see perversions of the Gospel by false prophets and false teachers abounding everywhere. This has been true ever since the first century when the Apostles contended for the truth of the Gospel in their own generation. Of this fact, our Lord and the Apostles strictly warned.

Matthew 24:11 - "And **many false prophets will arise**, and will mislead many. NASB

2 Peter 2:1-3 - But false prophets also arose among the people, just as **there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies**, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves. 2 And many will follow their sensuality, and **because of them the way of the truth will be maligned;** 3 and in their greed they will exploit you with false words; their judgment from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep. NASB

Therefore it is incumbent upon each new generation to clarify and to preach the Gospel with conviction and with clarity. Lest we think that we will not succumb to the deceitfulness of Satan or his schemes of deception, we must keep the main thing “*THE Main Thing!*” We must continually test ourselves and the things we believe in order to always maintain the purity and simplicity of the Gospel.

2 Corinthians 11:2-4 - 3 But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, **your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ.** 4 For if one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or you receive a different spirit which you have not received, **or a different gospel which you have not accepted**, you bear this beautifully. NASB

1 John 4:1 – 1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but **test the spirits to see whether they are from God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world.** NASB

From the Reformers then, we have learned a huge and unmistakable lesson about essential Christian Doctrine. They have clarified and recorded for us the essential message of the Gospel and the doctrine of Salvation. These “*five solas*” then are great way for us to keep the essentials always before us. Let us not enthrone the Reformers or the banners that they carried, but let us instead enthrone the Lord Jesus, the living Word and know and understand the truth and principle about Him that the Reformers clarified so well for us. The heart of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God is the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is the center of Christian salvation and the centerpiece of Christian worship. Let us not forget to keep Him as the “*main thing*” and always keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus! Let us say with the Apostle Paul, “*I am determined to nothing but Christ and Him crucified!*”

1 Corinthians 2:1-2 - 2 And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. 2 For **I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.** NASB