

SOLAS



A Brief Introduction to the 5 Solas

Nick Jones

Introduction

As I write, summer is coming to an end and fall is right around the corner. You can almost feel the cool breeze and taste the pumpkin-infused treats. This time of year has become a favorite for my family. We enjoy all of the seasonal events and are looking forward to visiting the pumpkin patch. However, this time of year holds another type of significance for me and other Christians. These next few weeks are moving toward an important and historic day in the history of the church, the day is October 31st. No, I'm not talking about Halloween. I'm talking about Reformation Day; the day in when the Augustinian Monk, Martin Luther, nailed his 95 Thesis to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany kicking off the Protestant Reformation.

In fact, 2017 marked the 500th anniversary of that momentous occasion and therefore is an opportunity for us to reflect upon the truths that were fought for during those tumultuous times of the 16th century.

“Why?” you may ask. “What was such a big deal about some religious bickering so long ago and why should I care?” I'm glad you asked. For starters, the Protestant Reformation became the impetus for not only religious reform but for political, economic, and social reform. Many scholars today see the Reformation as the signaling of the modern era. The outcomes of the Reformation are wide and varying. For example, the Reformation brought about higher

literacy rates among the common people. Education in general became more desired and available to men and women. Economically, Protestant cities grew more with greater amounts of entrepreneurship. And politically, the Reformation was a key factor in the development of the state system. However, these are not the reasons I believe we should remember and celebrate Reformation Day.

The Reformation's strength is not in its forging new territory, making progressive leaps into the unknown. Rather, the strength of the Reformation was in pointing people back, not to a time or system, but to Jesus Christ. The Reformers desire was not to start a new church or some type of religious insurrection, but to see the church and her leaders move back to the Bible, back to what God has said not what men and their traditions have said. As we take a closer look at some of the issues that the Reformers were dealing with, we will see that they were not simply matters of church politics but were issues that touched to the very heart of the Gospel. "How can a sinful person be made right with a holy God?" As we will see, it was questions like this that Luther and others struggled with. It was questions like this that Luther found no satisfying answer to within the traditions of the church. Only when Luther opened his Bible and the Holy Spirit open his eyes did Martin Luther come to understand a concept so powerful that it shook him to his core. What did he learn of? One word: grace.

Join me in these proceeding chapter as we celebrate the amazing truths of God. Truths that were

not created by the Reformers but that they came to understand from God's written word. So grab yourself a pumpkin spiced latte, open your Bible, and read the Words of truth that have changed so many and that continue to do so today. The Reformation is not over, we continue to reform and conform our lives to the Word of God. So here's to 500 years and counting.

The Battle Cry of the Reformation

In times of war, even the bravest soldier can be crippled with fear as the battle looms ahead. In difficult times, the soldier may forget what he is fighting for or begin to doubt if it is a noble cause. Then he hears the general shout and he is reminded and encouraged. Simple words, yet words filled with meaning and power— just what he needed to hear. We call these words a “battle cry.”

A battle cry could be a yell to rattle the nerves of the opposing forces. Or it could be a political or religious phrase to inspire the men to fight. One of the most legendary of these cries comes from a battle at a small Franciscan mission in southern Texas in 1836. Mexican General Santa Anna and his men outnumbered and outgunned the small band of Texas independence fighters. After 13 grueling days, they stormed the fort. Among those who lost their lives were Colonel William B. Travis, James Bowie, and the famed Davy Crockett. The phrase “Remember the Alamo” became the battle cry of General Sam Houston and his men as they fought and eventually captured Santa Ana at the Battle of San Jacinto.

During the Reformation the same idea applied. The leaders of the Reformation knew the battle ahead would be a tough one. Not only must people be ready for discipline from the church, but also from the state. In fact, many people lost their lives in horrendous ways throughout the battles during the Reformation

era. However, these were not physical battles, men attacking each other on the field of war. No, these were battles of ideas and beliefs. For the Reformers, the weapon of choice was not a sword or a bow, but books, chief of which was the Bible, but secondly, the writings produced and distributed throughout the land.

The Reformation leaders wrote many books and pamphlets in order to show their positions were founded not on their own opinions, but on the Bible. However, they needed a way to make clear the most foundational tenets they espoused. How did they do this? Through the use of the battle cry.

The battle cry of the Reformation is found in five short Latin phrases that succinctly proclaim the protest of the Protestants: *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, *Sola Fide*, *Solus Christus*, and *Soli Deo Gloria*. Each of the Five Solas highlights a Biblical truth that had been eaten up by the traditions of the Roman Church.

Scripture Alone (*Sola Scriptura*) means the Bible alone is the sole authority for the church, doctrine, and life. Grace Alone (*Sola Gratia*) proclaims we are saved by God from sin and death because of God's grace, not because we have merited any goodness of our own. Faith Alone (*Sola Fide*) states we appropriate God's salvific grace only through faith in Jesus Christ. There are no outward religious ceremonies that can merit or manipulate God's grace. Christ Alone (*Solus Christus*) means the reason God can be just in forgiving sinners is because Christ was the perfect and complete sacrifice for sin. We cannot

add anything to the perfectly sufficient work of Christ on the cross. Finally, To the Glory of God Alone (Soli Deo Gloria) means that because salvation is 100% a work of God that God alone receives the glory.

Together these phrases make up the battle cry of the Reformation. In hearing them now we are reinvigorated by the amazing grace of God. In studying them, we come to understand how thankful we should be for those who gave their lives for this truth. In shouting them as our battle cry, we are reminded that so many people are still under the yoke of religious tradition today, and that our mission as followers of Christ is not over. We must continue to preach and proclaim these truths to the world!

Sola Scriptura: The Need For Authority

Imagine I'm working on a puzzle. After hours of work, I put in the last piece, smiling as I look at my accomplishment. You look at my work and say, "Something is wrong."

Amazed at your seemingly rude comment, I respond, "What do you mean?" You tell me I did the puzzle incorrectly, that I need to go back and correct it.

"What gives you the right to say that I'm wrong? Who made you an authority on this puzzle?"

“I don’t consider myself an authority. However, if you look at the picture on the box, you’ll see that yours doesn’t match. I may not be an authority, but the puzzle box is.”

I take a deep breath, look at the box, and finally admit you are right. In fact, if I’m honest with myself, I can see that many of the pieces don’t actually fit together but were forced together. As I use the box to correct the puzzle, the picture becomes clear. Originally, my puzzle appeared to be an abstract painting, but now I see that it is a lake with a boat and a big blue sky filled with clouds. It’s a beautiful picture and I almost missed it.

This illustration is meant to highlight one of the foundational issues of the Reformation, the issue of authority. It was never the intention of the Reformers to start their own church; they desired that the church would repent of its errors and return to truth. The call was for reformation, not reinvention. As followers of Christ, the Reformation leaders took long, hard look at the Roman Church, finding errors that desperately needed correcting. Errors so serious, they threatened the very truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In order for the Reformers to know there was error in the Roman Church, they must have a standard and authority by which to judge. Remember how you knew my puzzle was put together wrong? Because the box was the standard by which to judge the puzzle. Similarly, the Bible is the standard by

which the Reformers judged whether or not the Roman Church was in error.

The Bible is like no other book. The Bible is the only book that is literally “breathed out by God” (2 Timothy 3:16) and sustained by Him throughout history. (1 Peter 1:23-25) Therefore, the Bible is our authority on all matters pertaining to life and doctrine. Consider the word “authority”. Within it you find the word “author”. The Bible’s authority is inherent in the fact that God is its ultimate author; as such, the Bible is our tool for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:16) These were very activities in which the Reformers were participating.

A beautiful example of this can be seen in an event in the life of Martin Luther, the German monk turned Reformer. Luther was brought before a council in the city of Worms in 1521 in order that he would recant his Reformation views. Standing before religious and political leaders, including Emperor Charles V, Luther declared that he could not recant because his conscience was “held captive to the Word of God.”

How did the Roman Church end up in such a mess? Again, remember the example of the puzzle. How did I mess up the puzzle? With the box was on the floor, I put the puzzle together based on my own ideas and assumptions rather than the standard of the box. In the same way, the Roman Church strayed from the pure Word of God. Popes, councils, and

traditions took center stage in the life and doctrine of the church; the Bible was subjected to little use. In fact, the Bible remained in a language incomprehensible by the common people. Only clergy and scholars could read the Latin text; even then, they did so through the lens of Roman tradition. This lack of Biblical insight brought about the errors the Reformers were fighting against.

We can see now the importance of having an objective standard. Whether puzzles or the teachings of a church, an objective standard is crucial. What is the objective standard for the church? The Bible alone. This is why the Reformers cried out “Sola Scriptura” — Scripture alone is our sole authority, the standard by which we measure right and wrong. Authority does not lay within any leader or council, but in the Word of God. Everything we do and teach should be founded in the Bible. If something is not, it must be corrected or abandoned. Why? Because we have a standard of authority and that standard is Sola Scriptura!

Sola Gratia: Too Good To Be True?

A sage piece of advice passed on to me at an early age is the old saying, “If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.” Nowhere did I learn this more than in my constant struggle with television advertisements for toys.

I would turn on the TV and the coolest toys would pop up. The commercial would show all it could do, laying it on thick about why I should get this toy. After saving up my hard-earned money, I'd readily hand it over for some well-advertised product, only to discover that without all of the flashing lights, smoke, and moving camera angles, the toy wasn't nearly as great as I had imagined.

I'm sure you could think of plenty of instances where you have found something too good to be true. I think the biggest one, however, happens to also be a true one. What am I talking about? The gift of eternal life.

You see, Bible-believing Christians stand together on one very crucial teaching: that eternal life, or Salvation, is solely given by the grace of God. There is no payment or religious ceremony one can do to merit eternal life. How then can broken, sinful people be made right with God? How can we get to heaven and have eternal salvation? The Bible says we must "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." (Acts 16:31)

Sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? That's exactly why so many people throughout history and even today have tried to distort the beautiful simplicity of the gospel. Our sin-stained minds find grace to be too good to be true, and so we add onto it. We say grace plus something else. Grace plus ritual, grace plus money, grace plus organizational membership, grace plus anything... is a false gospel.

It was this matter which triggered Luther to nail his 95 Thesis to the church door. Luther didn't realize what this act would set in motion; he simply wanted to debate the anti-Biblical sale of indulgences that was becoming rampant in the Roman Church. Indulgences were a way for the Roman Church to make lots of money in a short period of time. Simply put, indulgences meant one could pay money in order that a deceased loved one might leave Purgatory sooner. Johann Tetzel was one of the many men who was granted authority to travel around selling indulgences for the Roman Church. Tetzel quickly became known for his pithy saying, "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from Purgatory springs."

Luther and others were outraged at the selling of indulgences. Having their minds saturated in the words of Holy Scripture, the Reformers saw indulgences (a way for people to buy salvation) as a completely false practice. The idea is utterly repugnant to the teachings of Christ, and the Reformers proclaimed it.

How can spiritually dead people give themselves life? They cannot—they are dead. What dead people need is to have life supernaturally given to them. According to the Bible, that is exactly what happens when someone becomes a follower of Jesus.

In Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul explains we are completely hopeless apart from Christ. Paul says we are "by nature children of wrath." However, he

doesn't leave us hopeless. Paul goes on to show how God has stepped in to intervene in the lives of His people. "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ..." And what was the payment we gave for this salvation, this "being alive together with Christ?" Was it something we did? Paul continues, "It is by grace you have been saved." (Ephesians 2:4-5)

Seems too good to be true. The amazing thing is that it is true. Salvation is a gift of grace. Salvation cannot be earned by anyone doing anything. Instead of fighting this truth, the call of God's Word is to "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God." Submit to the fact that you cannot save yourself. Then turn to Christ in repentance and faith, call out to Him, and trust in His amazing grace alone.

Sola Fide: The Vehicle of Grace

Everyone loves Will Smith films. Will Smith is one of those likable guys, and when he is on the screen, people watch. One of Smith's films that my wife and I recently rewatched is "The Pursuit of Happyness" (Yes, that's the correct spelling of the title.)

In one scene, Will's character Chris meets a man who is parking an expensive sports car. "Man, I got two questions for you: what do you do? and how

do you do it?” Chris has a desire to have the luxuries this man has and he recognizes that in order to get them, he’ll have to do something. Namely, one must work hard and earn money in order to appropriate wealth.

In fact, no one would believe it if I said that in order to gain the riches of the world, you must not work but instead have faith and it will be yours. Our world is built around the basic concept that working is the way one receives the benefits one desires. The Bible supports this idea when it comes to earthly matters. (2 Thessalonians 3:10) However, the Bible seems to flip this very idea on its head when speaking of eternal matters.

The Bible teaches that if we want to obtain the most wonderful riches we could possibly imagine, we must not work for it; instead we must have faith in Christ and it will be ours. What “riches” am I talking about? Eternal life. The Apostle Peter calls this an “inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1 Peter 1:4). All the other riches of the world will eventually pass away, but the riches of God, His eternal salvation, remains forever. How does one achieve this? Simply put, you can’t.

This brings us to yet another issue prominent during the Reformation: the vehicle with which God imparts His grace to sinners. The Roman Church agreed that grace was needed in salvation. However, the issue was the sufficiency of grace and the question “How does one obtain grace?” Can grace be

purchased? Can grace be earned by participating in a religious ritual? Or is grace a gift of God that comes solely through faith in Christ? What did the Reformers say? Sola Fide: it is only through faith alone that God justifies the wicked.

You see, the reason the Reformers made such a big deal about this issue is because the Bible itself is replete with information on this topic. The Apostle Paul dealt ad nauseam with false teachers who taught that in order to obtain God's grace, there were certain works one must do; otherwise salvation would not be achieved. However, Paul is straightforward in his attack against such thinking. "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." (Romans 4:4-5) Paul wanted to make it clear that in order for salvation to remain as a gift from God, it could in no way be achieved through human working. Salvation is not due to one who works and earns, but is a gift from God given freely by Him.

Even faith is a gift from God and cannot be a reason to boast. The Reformer, John Calvin comments on 2 Thessalonians 2:13 by saying, "This passage briefly reminds us that faith itself is produced only by the Spirit." It is only when the Holy Spirit of God grants faith and repentance to a broken sinner that he can truly be saved, truly be granted the gift of eternal life.

Theologian R.C. Sproul puts it this way: “If we believe that we are capable of working up faith in our souls, we cannot boast in Christ alone. But if we understand that we have faith only because of the work of the Holy Spirit, then we can truly give God all the glory for our salvation.”

To that I say “Amen”! God alone receives the glory for saving sinners because it is not the sinner’s works, but God who grants faith. Therefore, we declare that we are saved sola fide, by faith alone!

Solus Christus: It’s All About Jesus

“Can’t go over it, can’t go under it, can’t go around it, got to go through it!” Do these words ring any bells? They are the lyrics from one of my favorite musical activities as a kid, which eventually became a book: “Going on a Bear Hunt”.

In elementary music class we would stand in a circle as the music played, and we would go on an imaginary bear hunt. As we came to different obstacles on our journey (tall grass, a wide river, or a dark cave), we had to recognize only one route was possible for each. We couldn’t go around the river or fly over it; we had to wade through it. We finally came to the bear and we ran back through the obstacles once more, ending with a room filled with laughing 2nd graders.

As I think about those memories now, I can't help but notice an important principle present in the song: the idea that at times, you come to something with only one way to get through it. The question is, will we accept that way, or foolishly try to go another?

This brings us to another issue at the time of the Reformation, one that is still prevalent today. "Is Christ the only way?" The question has two important aspects we must look at: 1) Christ plus nothing is sufficient for salvation and 2) Christ is the only way to God.

Firstly, as I've mentioned in previous chapters, the Roman Church did not deny the need for Christ, faith, or grace. However, the issue the Reformers brought to the forefront was whether or not Christ, faith, and grace were alone adequate to save sinners.

The Reformers pointed to the Bible's teaching that Christ's sacrifice on the cross not only made salvation possible, but actually achieved salvation for His people. "It is finished!" (John 19:30) Jesus speaks these last words on the cross signifying that the task before Him had been accomplished. What was His task? The angel that appeared to Joseph in his dream makes it very clear. "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21) Did you catch that? Jesus WILL save His people. It was the very reason Jesus came to earth, the very reason that God became flesh, the very reason He suffered and went to the cross. And He did not fail.

The Apostle Paul, dealing with false teachers who were also teaching Christ plus something for salvation, writes that “If righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose.” (Galatians 2:21) Paul’s point out is that it is all or nothing. Either you put your faith in Christ and are saved 100% by Him, or you can try to follow religious laws and rituals, but by doing so you are separating yourself from the grace of God. (Galatians 5:4) Christ alone, His righteous life and sacrificial death is all we need for salvation.

Secondly, because so many have an unfettered desire to be liked and accepted by the pop culture, the idea that Jesus is simply one way among others to get to God is rampant. However, this idea is not only antithetically to the teaching of the Bible, but completely disregards Jesus’ own words.

Speaking to His disciples Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6) Jesus is making a bold claim, that He alone is the exclusive way to God. To be a true follower of Christ is to recognize that apart from Him, no person will be justified before the righteous judgment of God.

The world cringes at such statements. However, Jesus was not the only one to say this. The Apostle Peter, preaching to the religious leaders in Jerusalem about Jesus, says “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (Acts 4:12) Likewise, the Apostle Paul writes

“There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” (1 Timothy 2:5) It is Bible passages such as these that should cause us, as it did the Reformers, to proclaim that we believe in Solus Christus, Christ alone. For it is only in Christ that we have any hope of salvation.

As we go on our “bear hunt” and come to the wide river, what can we do? We have to go through it. We can’t fly, it’s too wide to jump across, there is no bridge in sight; therefore we must get wet. Do me a favor today and take a long look at yourself and your heart. The Bible says that we all have sinned and we all deserve punishment. Do you recognize that? Can you be honest with yourself for a moment and see how your whole life is filled with sin, with lying, thieving, sexual immorality, lust, anger, jealousy, hatred... How are you going to get through it, to the other side of the “wide river”? There is only one way in the song and there is only one in life. The way to have your sins forgiven is through Christ. So jump in and run to Christ alone.

Soli Deo Gloria: All Glory Is His

Do you remember your first job? Mine was in high school when I was hired to be a bagboy at a grocery store. It was a good summer job. I met a lot of new people and did lots of tasks throughout the store. However, the thing I remember most was when I received my first paycheck. The manager said, “Nick, it has been a joy having you here. Because I am so

gracious, I have a gift for you. Here is a check, my free gift to you, because I am such a generous person.” I was so overcome by his gift that I began praising him for being such a magnificent manager.

Wait a second... What? Yeah, I made that up. But you understand how ridiculous that would be. Anyone who has ever had a job would think it crazy if your boss told you he was giving you your paycheck as a gift, and therefore we should honor him as if he had done a gracious thing for you. No, a paycheck from an employer is not a gift; you’ve earned it through your hard work. A paycheck is your due. The company you work for owes you your paycheck and if they do not give it to you, they are in the wrong.

This is the exact point the Apostle Paul makes in the book of Romans. “Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.” (Romans 4:4) Paul shows that if there were anything that people added to their salvation—if they worked for it— then salvation wouldn’t be a gift from God but rather what God owes people. Therefore, people would rightly be able to boast before God and receive glory for a job well done.

The Reformers faced opposition when they taught that you cannot buy salvation through indulgences and you cannot work for salvation through church rituals. No, the Reformers agreed with the Apostle Paul that salvation is completely a gift from God. Salvation is not earned or merited, and therefore no one is able to boast and God receives all

the glory. “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Throughout this little booklet I have been focusing on key issues of the Reformation, issues that are still relevant today. Each summarized in brief Latin phrases we call the Five Solas. In this section, we end with the last sola, the one that is the outpouring of the other four, Soli Deo Gloria: Glory to God Alone.

This vital teaching is what Paul is arguing for in Romans 4, what the Reformers proclaimed, and what true Biblical churches hold to today. God alone receives all the glory!

The Bible is crystal clear in that everything we are and have is a gift from God. (James 1:17) It follows, then, that God is due all of the praise and glory for His goodness and mercy towards us. The Apostle Paul goes as far as telling us that even meager, daily activities should be done to God’s glory. “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” (1 Corinthians 10:31) The Westminster Divines got it right when they wrote, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.”

Soli Deo Gloria was important to the Reformers because they recognized that salvation, going to

heaven, being made right before a holy God, all were possible only because God had made them possible.

God receives all the praise and glory because He has done the work on the behalf of His people. “To the one who does not work but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” (Romans 4:5) Stop trying to work and earn something from God. Stop trying to be a good person, thinking that it may gain you some merit before your Creator. Instead, give up “working”. Humble yourself and recognize that even your supposed “good works” are actually more like filthy rags before a holy God. (Isaiah 64:6) Have faith that Christ died for your sins and rose again for your justification. Turn to God and call out to Him for mercy and grace. Do it all, not for your glory, for the glory of God alone!

These 5 Solas are foundational tenets of the historic Christian faith. As Luther and the other Reformers began to bring Christians back to the faith that was “once for all delivered to the saints”, their aim was to point believers back to God’s word. Each of the 5 Solas reminds us of the truths the Bible clearly teaches. In the church, we must continue to proclaim these truths throughout every generation, being prepared to defend them with patience and endurance, always remembering our call to “Sempre Reformada”: that we are always to be reforming and conforming to the image of Christ.

Nick Jones serves as the pastor of Maranatha Baptist Church in Globe, Arizona where he resides with his lovely wife Laura and their daughters, Kate and Samantha.

Learn more about Maranatha by visiting our Facebook page: facebook.com/MBCGlobe

Email: Nick.MBCGlobe@gmail.com

Nick's Blog:
www.CrossHopeBible.com

Weekly Sermons:
www.youtube.com/NickJonesArizona