

# “The Five Solae, part 1”

Responsive Reading: *Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide* <sup>1</sup>

*Facebook* is always on the hunt for new forms of “clickbait”—new ways to get us to open their apps and be assaulted by the ads by which *Facebook* makes money. One of the more recent tricks is to alert us to the fact that “three years ago today, you were doing this,” or “two years ago today, you became friends with so and so.” So, in that spirit, let me ask what you were doing five hundred years ago this Tuesday?

While most of us have no idea who our ancestors were that far back, and certainly have no idea what they were doing on October 31, 1517, there is one person in the world whose activity on that long-ago day is still known, and is still relevant to us today. His name was Martin Luther, and on that day, the young Professor of Moral Theology at the University of Wittenberg posted a document entitled, “Disputation on the Power of Indulgences” on the door of All Saints Church.

Luther did not intend to set in motion all that followed his posting. He intended to promote academic debate about the medieval practice of indulgences—offering money to the church in order to remove punishment for sin. Luther was disturbed by the church’s efforts to have people pay for “forgiveness” rather than encouraging them to genuinely repent from their sins.

What followed Luther’s posting of his “Ninety-Five Theses” eventually became what history knows as “the Protestant Reformation,” and that “Reformation” is what we’re going to consider today and next week. While “the Reformation” gets most of the press, the Church has actually re-formed itself many times across the centuries in the effort to be more fully obedient to our Lord’s commands. This is just the most prominent of those efforts thus far.

And we Baptists were not actually part of “Luther’s” Reformation. Our heritage comes a little later, in what would become known as “the Radical Reformation”—but that’s a story for another day.

Other “big names” in the Reformation included John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland, and John Knox in Scotland. And, as is unfortunately often the case, there was a great deal of persecution involved in this process, as various groups called one another “heretics” and tried to stamp each other out. <sup>2</sup>

For all the ugliness, though, a number of important theological principles became clearer through the Reformation debates, and we stand in the reformers’ debt, even now. The most famous of these principles have come to be known as “The Five *Solae*” of the Reformation, and it is these five *Solae* we will consider today and next week.

*Sola* is the Latin word for “only,” or “alone,” and *solae* is its plural form.<sup>3</sup> You can find the Five *Solae* listed in various orders, but I think you will always find these five:

*Sola Scriptura* = Only Scripture

*Sola Gratia* = Only Grace

*Sola Fide* = Only Faith

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on October 29, 2017; for the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation.

<sup>2</sup> As Timothy George once noted, “the age of the Reformation produced more martyrs than all the persecutions in the early church.” Neville Callam, “Commemorating the Reformation,” Blog 17 October 2017. <http://bwanet.org/dialogue?view=entry&id=155>

<sup>3</sup> *Solas* is an Anglicized form.

*Solus Christus* = Only Christ  
*Soli Deo Gloria* = Only for the Glory of God

We're going to take a brief look at the first three this week, and the last two next week.

***Sola Scriptura.*** From the Garden of Eden onward, we humans have seldom been content to let God's commands stand alone without trying to shape them to suit ourselves. Isaiah said to ancient Israel, "*This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. They worship me in vain, teaching as doctrines human commands*" (Isaiah 29:13). Jesus charged His own generation that "*You nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down*" (Mark 7:13). And sadly, examples could be multiplied down to this very moment.

One of the "Aha!" moments that led to the Reformation was Luther's re-discovery of the fact that "*the word of God is living and effective and sharper than any double-edged sword, penetrating as far as the separation of soul and spirit, joints and marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart*" (Hebrews 4:12).

In Luther's day, it was not common for most people to have access to the Word of God, especially in their own language. Indeed, most people didn't even know how to read. But as Luther read Paul's letter to the Romans in the original Greek, he was astounded to discover that in those words, the eternal God was still speaking. Luther was astonished to experience God's own Voice through the words of the Bible. He realized that "It's Alive!"

The purpose of the Bible is not really to serve as a Manual for Life—although it can function in that way. The purpose of the Bible is to lead us into intimate and personal relationship with the Living God. The purpose of the Bible is to reveal to us the eternal Story in which we are participants—a Story that began with Creation, was twisted in Eden, was renewed in Israel, was fulfilled in Jesus, and continues today through the Church until the New Creation comes.

We do not worship the Bible. The Bible is our GPS—our "God Positioning System" that communicates God's Word and Will to us through the inspiration and illumination of God's Spirit. The Bible doesn't tell us "everything about everything," but it is sufficient for everything for which it was divinely given.

God tells us that "*My word will not return to me empty, but it will accomplish what I please and will prosper in what I send it to do*" (Isaiah 55:11). Paul told Timothy that Scripture is "*profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness*" (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible affirms that through it God has communicated everything we need to know in order to know God and to live the life God intends for us (2 Peter 1:3).

*Sola Scriptura* means that the authority of the Bible is God's own authority. Jesus was very clear that "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*" (Matthew 28:18), and the Bible speaks with that same authority.<sup>4</sup>

Luther came to believe that God has made those things that are essential for salvation and for holy living sufficiently plain in the Bible that ordinary people without specialized theological training can discover these principles for themselves, by themselves, under the guidance of God's

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<sup>4</sup> The idea of "Scripture Alone" means that only those principles that are clearly taught in the Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament or that can be validly deduced from Scripture are binding on the faithful. *Sola Scriptura* does not reject other sources of authority such as church tradition, but it does require that all other authorities be subordinate to and corrected by the written Word of God.

Spirit. It was this idea of the singular authority and self-vindicating sufficiency of the Bible that caused Luther—and we Protestants after him—to translate the Bible into the vernacular of the people and to give it the widest possible distribution.

The crucial turning point for Luther came when he suddenly understood that our works do not “*make us righteous.*” On the contrary, God “*declares us righteous*” when we put our faith in what God has done for us through Jesus rather than trusting in what we can do for ourselves. Luther came to believe that the main purpose of the Mosaic Law was to convict us of our utter inability to make ourselves acceptable to God.<sup>5</sup>

***Sola Gratia.*** The idea of “making ourselves acceptable to God” is technically called “justification,” and in order to understand the second Sola, *Sola Gratia*, or “Grace Alone,” we need to think briefly about “justification.”

In normal life, “justification” means to justify our behavior or thoughts, showing them to be correct or reasonable. It is not only persons much in the news who are intent on self-justification in every aspect of life. We all do this, and we do it all the time.

We humans are inveterate self-justifiers and self-vindicators, and we are magnificent rationalizers. We rationalize so well that if the news is to be believed, no one anywhere is ever responsible for anything! Our finger pointing began with the very first humans, and it continues to this day at what seems to be an accelerating pace.

You and I very much want to approach God in this same way, proving—to our own satisfaction, at least—that we are well deserving of God’s favor, and that God is really quite lucky that we are numbered among God’s own. Martin Luther played this game, too, and he was honest enough to admit that it didn’t work. He tried very, very hard to be good, but his conscience was never clear before God.

That’s why, as he read Paul’s letter to the Romans, these words hit young Martin like an explosion: “***For we conclude that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law***” (Romans 3:28). Once he had seen this truth, Luther was then able to see its corollary: “***For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift—not from works, so that no one can boast***” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

These words are so familiar to us today that we easily miss their world-shaking power. However it had happened, the Church had lost sight of these simple truths, overlaying them with guidance that obscured their simple, transforming radiance. What Luther rediscovered is that if any person has a right relationship with God—that is, if we have been forgiven and justified—that condition is not the result of any personal merit or accomplishment that we can claim. Right relationship *with* God comes always and only as a gift *from* God.

*Sola Gratia* simply affirms that our justification—our salvation—is completely and totally the gift of God’s grace. It is “unmerited favor,” not something that we earn or deserve in any way. Our salvation, our reconciliation with God in spite of our sin, is a gift from God entirely on the basis of Jesus’ willing self-sacrifice and subsequent resurrection from death. *Sola Gratia* affirms

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<sup>5</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority after Babel* (Brazos Press, 2016), pp. 72-73. See also John Ortberg, <http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2012/july/biblealone.html?id=96848> Luther’s insight into what actually “makes us acceptable to God” came because he regarded the Bible as clear and understandable, with authority above any earthly church, church council, or church leader. As John Wesley put it in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, “the Church is to be judged by the Scripture, and not the Scripture by the Church.”

that God's grace acts completely above and independently of any action on our part, and that there is nothing whatsoever we can do to merit or to earn our salvation.

Luther knew from his own experience that the Law said, "Do This," yet it was *never* done. His conscience was never clear. His guilt was ever before his mind. But now, to his amazement, wonder, and delight, Luther suddenly realized that Grace says, "Believe This," and everything is *already* done.<sup>6</sup>

My friends, Christian faith is not a way to make ourselves right before God. Faith has nothing whatsoever to do with self-justification. We can only receive the grace of God when we come to God with empty hands—with nothing in our hands at all. God's grace is God's kind and unmerited gift of God's own Life to those who have absolutely no claim on that Life. And it's as true today as it was five hundred years ago, that "it's all by Grace."

**Sola Fide.** As we move to *Sola Fide*, "Faith Alone," notice once more that the Bible says, "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift—not from works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Faith is that which connects our lives to Grace, and it is Repentance that connects our lives to Faith.

Remember that the original impetus for Luther's posting of those theses was his concern that repentance was being sidelined, ignored, and overlooked as God's remedy for our Sin. When Jesus began His public ministry, His opening salvo was "*REPENT, because the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!*" (Matthew 4:17). "*The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God has come near. REPENT and believe the Good News!*" (Mark 1:15).

As I'm sure you know, to repent is to turn around. To repent is to do an "about face." To repent is to recognize that our trumped up "righteousness," no matter how impressive from a human point of view, makes no difference at all with our Sin Problem before God (Isaiah 64:6). To repent is to rejoice in the realization that while "the Law is *never* done, Grace is *already* done." To repent is to be amazed that "*while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!*" (Romans 5:8).

John Ortberg has pointed out that "God's grace is good, but it's not soft. Grace is not concerned with making people feel good. One of the lines of the hymn, *Amazing Grace*, points out that 'It was grace that taught my heart to **fear**.'"<sup>7</sup> For us, as it was for Luther, it's not until we realize that we really are "*without God and without hope in the world*" that we finally choose to come to God with nothing in our hands, casting ourselves completely upon God's grace (Ephesians 2:12). That realization is the beginning of faith.

Faith comes to God, as the Prodigal did, saying "*I have sinned against heaven and against you, and I am not worthy to be called your son*" (Luke 15:18-19). Faith says to God, "I confess to you that I have done wrong. There's brokenness inside me, and I can't fix it. I want to be forgiven, and I want to be loved. I am going to stop comparing myself to other sinners. I see now that I can never be good enough. I can never give enough.

"I acknowledge that Jesus died on the Cross in order to save me from my sin, my pride, my selfishness, my hate, and all the darkness inside me. I recognize that He somehow paid the debt I could never pay. He died the death I should have died. Dear God, I want to receive your

<sup>6</sup> Vanhoozer, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> John Ortberg, <http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2012/july/gracealone.html>;  
<http://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2012/july/faithalone.html>

forgiveness and your love, not because of anything I have done, but because of what Jesus has done for me. I receive your free gift of grace. I surrender my life to you.”<sup>89</sup>

Well, here’s the last thing, and it’s important. Jesus told us that “*Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it*” (Luke 18:17). I think it’s interesting that Jesus used the adjective, “*little child*.” Children don’t have to be very old before they learn to be cunning and conniving as they observe us to be. They learn how to “work the system” to get what they want. But *little* children aren’t like that.

In the best of worlds, *little* children bask in their parents’ love without trying to manipulate it for their own ends. That’s another way of saying that faith comes to God “with nothing in its hands,” without guile or self-justification, in the simple wonder of being loved. And that’s how we come to God. It’s the only way we come to God.

My friend, whatever your earthly parents were or were not able to be, you have a Father in Heaven who loves you. You have a Savior who died for you. You have a Spirit available to you, whose purpose in your life is to cause that Life which is in Jesus—that abundant, joyful, overflowing Life—to begin to be what is in you, also.<sup>10</sup> And all of this, from start to finish, is a Gift.

I just can’t imagine how it could get any better than that!

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<sup>8</sup> Ortberg, “Grace Alone.”

<sup>9</sup> Those churches descended from the Radical Reformation (Baptists chief among them) further affirm that “saving faith” can only be exercised by persons old enough to understand willful sin and to repent or to turn from that sin to Jesus by their own free choice; and that prior to such an “age of accountability,” children are under God’s mercy, not under God’s judgment. It is for this reason that churches of the Radical Reformation emphasize “believer’s baptism” as distinct from infant baptism.

<sup>10</sup> Vanhoozer, p. 69.

# Sola Scriptura! Sola Gratia! Sola Fide!

## ***Sola Scriptura!***

Leader: *All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).*

## ***Sola Gratia!***

People: ***God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago (Ephesians 2:8-10).***

## ***Sola Fide!***

Leader: *For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life" (Romans 1:16-17).*

People: ***But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are (Romans 3:21-22).***

Leader: *Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on obeying the law. It is based on faith. So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law (Romans 3:27-28).*

People: ***If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. . . . Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:9, 13).***

Leader: *The Word of God for the People of God.*

People: ***Thanks be to God!***