

# Are the Five Solas Biblical?

SINCE THE SOLAS ARE TRUE TO SCRIPTURE, ALL CHRISTIANS IN EVERY GENERATION OUGHT TO REMEMBER, EMBRACE, AND PROCLAIM THEM.

**By Stephen J. Wellum**

*Stephen J. Wellum is professor of Christian theology at Southern Seminary and editor of the Southern Baptist Journal of Theology.*



On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther's 95 Theses were posted at the University of Wittenberg to begin a theological discussion about the practice of indulgences, but unbeknownst to Luther, this act was the spark that lit the flame of the Reformation. Over the next century, the Reformation resulted in profound changes both within the church and in the larger society. The Reformation was not a perfect time in history and some have wrongly blamed it for a number of our present problems such as individualism.

Yet the Reformation was a true recovery of the gospel, which is reason enough to celebrate it and to learn from it.

For example, the Reformers rightly emphasized the supremacy of the triune God, the authority and sufficiency of Scripture, a proper view of human dignity and depravity, the necessity of God's grace to save, and the glorious, exclusive and all-sufficient work of our Lord Jesus Christ. In proclaiming these gospel truths, the Reformation returned to a thoroughly biblical view of the world, purged of some of its medieval distortions, and recaptured what is vital and essential to the Bible's entire storyline.

The Reformation *solas* best illustrate this recovery of the Bible's central truths. Reformation theology is often summarized by the five *solas*. Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) is the formal principle of the Reformation and the foundation of all theology. God's glory alone (*soli Deo gloria*) functions as a capstone for all Reformation theology, connecting its various parts to God's one purpose for creating this world and humanity in it. In between these two *solas*, the other three emphasize that God has chosen and acted to save us by his grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*), and grounded in and through Christ alone (*solus Christus*).

What is noteworthy about the *solas* is their mutual dependence; each one only makes sense in relation to the others. Why? Ultimately, because all of the *solas* are grounded in the triune creator-covenant God of Scripture, who alone is the center of the universe, the Lord of creation, history, and redemption, who needs nothing from us but we need everything from him, and who rightly deserves and demands all glory, honor, and praise. In other words, central to the *solas* is a proper view of God and correspondingly, a proper view of humans in relation to him. In this way, the *solas* capture what is key to the entire Bible, namely the creator-creature distinction, with God, as our creator, Lord, and redeemer, receiving all the glory due his name, and us, as his redeemed image-bearers living our lives in worship, obedience, and service as debtors to God's grace.

Since the *solas* are true to Scripture, all Christians in every generation ought to remember, embrace, and proclaim them. Yet, today the faithful proclamation of the Reformation *solas* is especially important for the church.

Since the Reformation, the church, sadly, has drunk deeply from the well of our human-centered world. Since the Enlightenment, Western society has embraced Alexander Pope's famous statement, "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, the proper study of Mankind is Man." Yet the irony is that trying to understand ourselves apart from the God of the Bible is a disaster. Instead of grasping who we are and the purpose of our existence in relation to the triune personal God, rebellious humans have turned from the God of glory to a mess of pottage. We have sought to understand who we are in terms of impersonal origins, which has not led to "enlightenment" but to darkness and societal breakdown. The Reformation *solas* remind us, as John Calvin did in his famous opening of the *Institutes*, we will never know who we are apart from first knowing the glorious triune God as our creator and redeemer.

The *solas*, then, are not mere slogans from yesteryear; they are truths to be received and wholeheartedly embraced. They remind us what is central to Scripture and what is vitally important for the church to teach, preach, and joyously live out before the watching world.

## SOLA SCRIPTURA

Against the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that raised church tradition to an authoritative status on par with Scripture, the Reformers rightly confessed that God alone is the final authority and source and standard of truth and that Scripture judges all human authorities. Scripture, precisely because it is *God's Word*, is our *final*, sole

infallible authority for faith and practice. No doubt, *sola Scriptura* does not deny other “authorities” or even the importance of church tradition. Yet, it does rightly stress that the *final* authority is Scripture *alone*. Only God’s Word deserves and demands our total allegiance, especially on matters that Scripture addresses. The light of Scripture frees human reason and thought from the shackles of error and delusion. God’s Word of truth shines light on our path so that we may truly know God and live rightly.

Why is *sola Scriptura* important? Because it reminds us that God is God and alone trustworthy while humans are completely dependent on him for knowledge. Contrary to secular thought, humans are thankfully not the final arbiters of truth; only God is. Objective truth is real and we can know it because God is its source and standard and he has taken the initiative to speak to us. *All* that we know truly, even of our world, is due to God’s revelation. Both the knowledge we gain from general and special revelation is a subset of “thinking God’s thoughts after him.” *Sola Scriptura* is a truth to be gladly embraced and joyously proclaimed because it reminds us that God has graciously given us a sure Word that will never lead us astray.

## SOLA GRATIA

“Grace” is one of the most beautiful words of Scripture and it is central to the Bible’s message. Yet to grasp rightly “grace alone” we must first acknowledge that God does not need us and that apart from God’s initiative to save, we are hopeless and helpless.

*The Bondage of the Will* is probably Martin Luther’s most significant theological work. In it, he described the serious nature of the human problem, and why if God chooses to save us, he must act in sovereign grace from beginning to end without our cooperation. By emphasizing *sola gratia*, the Reformers stood against the teaching of the Roman Church. Rome did not deny God’s grace, yet in their view sin had only marred our nature and within us, we still possessed the capacity to receive and cooperate with grace. Additionally, Rome also viewed the Church as a continuation of Christ’s incarnation or a “second Christ,” which entailed that she had the authority to dispense grace through the sacraments. Yet, this view introduced human merit into salvation, alongside God’s grace. God infuses us with grace and we do our part. The view then was that “God will not deny grace to those who do what they can.” Sadly, today, people adopt a similar view when they think that “God helps those who help themselves” is biblical.

The Reformers rightly rejected Rome’s view of grace as unbiblical. It not only underestimated the nature of human sin but it undercut the truth that God *alone* must save us from beginning to end. Salvation is not a cooperative effort between God and us. Sin has left us spiritually dead in our sins and wanting nothing but our own rebellious way. Yet, our triune God, who does not need us, has chosen to act in undeserved favor toward us. Although we only deserve God’s wrath and condemnation, he has chosen to redeem us. In us there is nothing we can do to earn favor before the holy and just God of the universe, but our triune God has taken the initiative to redeem us, to meet his own demand in his Son, and to raise us from spiritual death to life by the Spirit. Hope is

not found in us, but solely in the triune God of grace. For those who know and feel their sin before God, *sola gratia* is indeed good news.

## SOLUS CHRISTUS

This *sola* illustrates best the interdependence of the *solas*. As the Reformers recaptured the centrality of God's glory and grace, all of the *solas* find their rationale in Christ—his *exclusive identity* and his *sufficient work*. After all, we only come to know Christ's person and work by God's self-disclosure in Scripture. Yet, God speaks to us not merely to inform us but to save us in Christ alone by faith alone *in him* as the object of our faith, which we receive by grace alone. The purpose of God's grace leads to and culminates in our reconciliation and adoption through Christ alone. In the end, the ultimate goal of God in our redemption is his own glory, even as we are transformed into a creaturely *reflection* of it. And yet, the *radiance* of God's glory is found in our Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot make sense of the word spoken by God, the faith given by God, the grace extended by God, and the glory possessed and promised by God apart from God the Son who became a man for our salvation.

In the Reformation, "Christ alone" specifically focuses on the sufficiency of Christ's work since Rome and the Reformers both embraced an orthodox view of Christ's person. Yet Rome taught that faith alone in Christ's work was not the *sole* ground of our justification. Instead, we are justified before God by a combination of Christ's work plus our sacramental incorporation into Christ by the mediation of the church.

Against this view, the Reformers rightly argued that Christ's obedient life and death is enough for us. In Christ alone God's righteous demand against sin is definitively and completely satisfied. Precisely because Jesus is God the Son incarnate, his merits alone are sufficient; there is nothing more that we can add to his work. Furthermore, we become the beneficiaries of his work by faith alone because our Lord lived and died for us as our mediator and as our great prophet-priest-king. The bond between Christ and his people is unbreakable. Christ's obedient life and death is now ours and the Spirit directly unites us to Christ. In Christ alone, we are declared righteous because *he* acted as our covenant representative and substitute. In Christ alone, we have a redeemer who truly saves and in whom we are complete.

## SOLA FIDE

This *sola* is probably the most famous due to the Reformation recapturing the biblical truth that sinners are declared just and righteous before God by faith alone in Christ alone. As Martin Luther correctly reminded us, justification by grace through faith is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls. As with the other *solas*, it reminds us that before the holy and just judge, we have no standing in ourselves. It is only if the triune God acts in grace in the provision of his own dear Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, that we are justified before God.

After all, what else would the triune God of majesty and glory demand from his image-bearers? This is *his* universe and we were made for *him*. But in Adam and in our sin, we did not render perfect obedience and thus we deserve nothing but God's righteous judgment against us.

But wonder of wonders, apart from anything that we contribute, God has chosen to save us and to accomplish our salvation from beginning to end. In God's plan centered in Christ, he has satisfied his own righteous demand and we are the beneficiaries of it by simply raising the empty hands of faith and receiving all that Christ has won for us. We contribute nothing to our salvation; God does it all.

## SOLI DEO GLORIA

This *sola* is the capstone of the other *solas*, connecting God's one purpose for creating this world and humanity in it. As with the other *solas*, it speaks of God first and rightly notes that *he* is the highest object of praise, worship, and devotion. This universe is *his*, and we are made for *him*. The history of the universe is the story of God's self-celebration. What other higher end could there be? Yet, secondarily and wonderfully, this *sola* also speaks of ourselves, telling us why God created us, what our purpose is, what life is all about, and what our chief end is. Humanity's goal in every area of life is to be lived for God's glory so that by every word and deed all glory, laud, and honor is God's alone.

Although the Reformation was not a perfect time in history and it resulted in various theological divisions, its *solas* beautifully recaptured the heart and soul of the gospel. In giving us a proper view of God and correspondingly, a proper view of ourselves, the *solas* encapsulate what is central to the entire Bible. They remind us that all that we have, in every area of life, is from our creator-covenant triune God. In our creation and redemption, God alone is central because from his plan in eternity-past to its enactment in time, he has initiated it from beginning to end. Although we are the recipients of God's good and gracious gifts, we receive these gifts by grace alone. The *solas* protect us against human pride, they remind us that we are gloriously dependent creatures, and that we have been created for a reason, namely to know, love, and obey God as his servant-kings.

On this 500th anniversary of the Reformation, let us give God thanks for the Reformation and for its recovery of the gospel. And may we stand on their shoulders, especially in our secular, pluralistic age, and proclaim the gospel of God's sovereign grace found in Christ alone for God's glory and the life and health of the church.

[Link to the original article.](#)

