

# THE FIVE SOLAS: A BRIEF REVIEW

— adapted from the Wikipedia online article, “Five Solae,” and the summary of the doctrines on the Redeemer Reformed Baptist Church of Redlands, California, website.

## Introduction

The “SOLAS” of the Protestant Reformation are a set of doctrines held by theologians and churchmen to be central to that period of change in the western Christian church. Each *sola*—from the Latin meaning “alone” or “only”—represents a key belief held by the reformers of the 16th century in contrast to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. The precise number of SOLAS varies, but lists of three and five are common.

The SOLAS were not systematically brought together until the 20th century. But *sola gratia* and *sola fide* were used by the reformers themselves. For example, in 1554 Philip Melancthon wrote, “*sola gratia justificamus et sola fide justificamur*” (“only by grace do you justify, and only by faith are we justified”). All of the SOLAS show up in various writings by the Protestant reformers, but they do not all appear in one place.<sup>1</sup> In the earliest references to the SOLAS, three were typically mentioned: Scripture over tradition, faith over works, and grace over merit. Each of these pairs of terms is intended to highlight how Protestant teaching differs from Catholic teaching.

## SOLA SCRIPTURA (“by Scripture alone”) - 1

The phrase, *sola scriptura*, or “by scripture alone,” asserts that the Bible must determine church traditions and interpretations.<sup>2</sup> All church practices and doctrines must be in unity with the teachings of Scripture, the divinely inspired Word of God. This principle asserts that the Bible is to be interpreted through itself, with one passage of Scripture being useful in the interpretation of other passages. It shows that the Bible is a unified system of truth as well as the revelation of truth. The teachings and customs of the church must align themselves with the Word of God; only then can they be applied with any assurance of God’s approval and of their own trustworthiness.

## SOLA FIDE (“by faith alone”) - 4

The two Latin words, *sola fide*, translated “by faith alone,” declare that good works are not the means by which salvation is attained; neither are they required nor accepted by God for granting salvation. *Sola fide* is the teaching that justification (understood in Protestant theology as “being declared just by God”) is received by faith alone, without the need for good works on the part of the believing individual. Good works are viewed as the evidence of saving faith; they do not determine salvation. The Catholic side of the argument is based on James 2:14-17. “What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

In understanding *sola fide*, it is important to keep in mind the difference between the Catholic and Protestant notions of justification.<sup>3</sup> Both groups agree that it means a communication of Christ’s merits to sinners. Martin Luther used the expression *simul justus et peccator* (“at the same time justified and a sinner”). However, Catholics see justification as a communication of God’s life to a human being, cleansing him of sin and transforming him into a true son of God. It is not merely a declaration of righteousness; the soul is made objectively righteous. The Protestant view, by contrast, is that justification is entirely the gracious work of God. Good works are the result of the

righteousness of Christ having been received by faith; they are the evidence of that righteousness having been reckoned by God to the believer. It is only as a justified person that one is enabled to do anything that is acceptable (good or righteous) in the sight of God.

### **SOLA GRATIA ("by grace alone") - 3**

The idea that a person's merit is excluded from having any part in salvation is expressed in the words, "by grace alone" (*sola gratia*). Salvation comes by divine grace, God's "unmerited favor," and not as something offered, exchanged, or sacrificed by the sinner. Salvation is a gift, an unearned blessing from God for Christ's sake.

While Protestants and Catholics agree that grace is truly and always a gift of God, there are two related concepts on which they differ. First (as Protestants teach), God is the sole actor in grace; grace is his and only his, and always saves without any contribution from man. Second, a man cannot by any action of his own, acting under the influence of grace, cooperate with the grace of God to merit greater graces for himself (which is what the Roman Catholic Church teaches). The doctrine of *sola gratia* asserts divine "monergism" in salvation: God acts alone to save the sinner. Where even a tiny degree of responsibility for salvation lies with the sinner, "synergism" is operating, and salvation is therefore not by the grace of God alone.<sup>4</sup>

### **SOLUS CHRISTUS or SOLO CHRISTO ("Christ alone" or "through Christ alone") - 2**

The expression, *solus Christus*, means "only Christ," and indicates that Christ is the exclusive mediator between God and man. In other words, there is salvation through no other person, on account of no other person's intervention or intercession, whether rector, bishop, or Pope. The phrase is sometimes rendered, *solo Christo*, since salvation is "by Christ alone." This SOLA of the Reformation rejects "sacerdotalism," a term meaning that there are no valid sacraments in the church without the services of a properly ordained clergy.<sup>5</sup>

Most Protestant denominations understand the Bible to teach that there are only two continuing ordinances in the Christian church, baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Roman Catholic Church claims there are seven authorized practices, including baptism and the Lord's Supper. In most cases, these sacraments must be administered by a priestly person in order to possess a holy nature and sanctifying influence.

*Solus Christus* does not deny the office of ministry in the church, to which is committed the public proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. On the contrary, it affirms that Christ is the only priest (the High Priest) of his church, and that no saving grace at all is communicated to human beings except through him. His ministers (his pastors and teachers) are commissioned by him to bring the light and life of salvation to the attention of saints and sinners, but they are not the "administrators" of salvation in any other sense than being messengers and "managers" of Biblical truth.

### **SOLI DEO GLORIA ("glory to God alone") - 5**

*Soli Deo gloria* teaches that all glory is due to God alone, since salvation is accomplished solely through his will and his action. Not only the gift of the all-sufficient atonement of Jesus on the cross, but also the gift of faith in that atonement, created in the heart of the believer by the Holy Spirit, is the sole work of God. The reformers believed that human beings, even saints and popes and clergy canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, are not worthy of the glory that has been accorded them.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

The Protestant reformers were convinced that certain teachings of the Bible were necessary for a true understanding of the way of salvation. The Christian faith stood in jeopardy of being overthrown unless these doctrines were taught with precision, power, and persuasion. They continue to be upheld in most Reformed churches today and in many evangelical churches as well. SOLA SCRIPTURA, the Bible alone is our final authority in every area of life because it is the Word of God. SOLUS CHRISTUS, Christ alone, in his perfect life and atoning death in the sinner's place, is the basis for our acceptance by God. SOLA GRATIA, the grace of God alone in Christ and not works of human merit or effort is why God saves sinners. SOLA FIDE, faith alone is the means by which sinners receive or appropriate this grace of God. SOLI DEO GLORIA, to God alone belongs the glory for saving sinners and for everything else in this life and the life to come.

## FOR FURTHER READING

1. "The Five Solas of the Reformation: A Brief Statement" by Gregg Strawbridge, Ph.D. This document was originally written for the 1993 Reformation Celebration at Audubon Drive Bible Church in Laurel, Mississippi, as part of a worship service (<http://www.fivesolas.com/5solas.htm>).
2. "What are the five solas?" (<http://www.gotquestions.org/five-solas.html>).

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<sup>1</sup> In 1916, Lutheran scholar Theodore Engelder published an article titled "The Three Principles of the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura, Sola Gratia, Sola Fides*" ("only scripture, only grace, only faith"). In 1934, theologian Emil Brunner substituted *solus deo gloria* for *sola Scriptura*. In 1958, historian Geoffrey Elton, summarizing the work of John Calvin, wrote that Calvin had "joined together" the "great watchwords." Elton listed *sola fide* with *sola gratia* as one term, followed by *sola scriptura* and *solus deo gloria*. Later, in commenting on Karl Barth's theological system, Brunner added *Christus solus* to the litany of SOLAS while leaving out *sola scriptura*. The first time the additional two SOLAS are mentioned is in Johann Baptiste Metz's *The Church and the World* (1965).

<sup>2</sup> This particular SOLA is sometimes called the Formal Principle of the Reformation, since it is the source and norm for knowing the gospel of Jesus Christ that is received *sola fide* ("through faith alone") and *sola gratia* (by God's favor, "by grace alone"). The adjective, *sola*, and the noun, *scriptura*, are in the ablative case rather than the nominative case, the grammatical part of a sentence which indicates a function rather than a subject. The Bible does not stand alone apart from God. It is God's instrument by which he reveals himself for salvation through faith in Christ alone (*solo Christo*).

<sup>3</sup> In Catholic theology, righteous (i.e., good) works, in addition to faith, are considered meritorious toward salvation. The means by which justification is applied to the soul is the sacrament of baptism. In baptism, even of infants, the grace of justification is "infused" into the soul, making the recipient justified; faith is not a prerequisite to justification. However, in Protestant theology the faith of the individual is absolutely necessary, and is itself, as the gift of God, the efficient and sufficient response of the individual for justification. The doctrine of *sola fide* is sometimes called the Material Cause of the Reformation; it was the central issue for Martin Luther and other reformers. Luther called it the "doctrine by which the church stands or falls" (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*).

<sup>4</sup> Protestant Arminians may also claim the doctrine of *sola gratia*, and generally deny the term "synergism" to describe their beliefs. They believe that God saves only by grace and not at all by merit, but that man, enabled by what is referred to as "prevenient" grace, can, by the influence of the Holy Spirit understand the gospel and respond to it in faith. They claim that this is compatible with salvation by grace alone, since all the actual saving is done by grace. In other words, Arminians are convinced that human beings are only capable of receiving salvation when first enabled to do so by prevenient grace, yielding a potential disposition to believe the gospel which is (according to most of them) distributed to everyone.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther taught the "general priesthood of the baptized," which was modified in later Lutheranism and classical Protestant theology as "the priesthood of all believers," denying the exclusive use of the title "priest" (Latin, *sacerdos*) to the clergy.

<sup>6</sup> The extent to which such veneration in practice is actually approved by the Roman Catholic Church is not always clear. Its official position, contained in the documents of the Second Vatican Council (1964), seems to say that God alone is deserving of glory.