

The Five Sola's of the Reformation Transcript

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Well, today, as you know, I've framed our worship service in line with a Christian commemoration of the Protestant Reformation. I can't presume upon anyone's knowledge to be familiar with exactly what the Protestant Reformation was all about, so I want to give you a snapshot overview before I work through what are called the five solas of the Reformation. These are the five doctrinal statements of belief that capture the essence of the movement, which was a critical period of time in church history.

For a quick three-minute history, we return to the landmark day typically associated with the formal beginnings of the Reformation. Keeping in mind, this was ultimately a work of God's providence to purify and revive His church, beginning with Europe. On October 31st, 1517, the German ordained priest and professor of Bible, Martin Luther, submitted a document entitled "Disputation on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" to the Door of the All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany. We all know this document as Luther's 95 Theses, one of the most famous documents in the history of the church. These theses were a scrutiny of the Roman Catholic practice of selling indulgences, which involved the Catholic Church accepting money from people with the promise of a reduction in

the amount of punishment that they or their loved ones would receive in this life or in purgatory.

If you can picture St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, a beautiful, huge building, an incredible megastructure, the early funding of that building was raised through the sale of indulgences, that which Luther was protesting—certainly one of the most egregious theologies to ever emerge from the Catholic Church. Over the next three or four years, Luther became increasingly aware of the deep-seated moral, ethical, and theological corruption in the Roman Catholic Church, and he knew the necessary path forward was a split from Rome. Thus, Luther struck the match, by God's grace, that spread the fires of the Reformation from Germany to Western and Northern Europe, where it was most well received, as the Lord raised up many more capable servants of the Protestant cause, men and women.

At its heart, the Reformation was about a desire to return to the plain faith of the New Testament. For centuries, Catholicism was the increasingly dominant and controlling visible representation of Christianity, to the point where the Church itself had the power akin to that of a nation-state, and the Pope was really a kingmaker, one of the most powerful men in the world. It was heavily corrupted, but in no way did it faithfully represent the Christian faith or message. The name and message of Christ in the Gospel had for centuries, and increasingly so, been obscured. One of the sayings that emerged from the Reformation that succinctly captures the essence of the Reformation is "post tenebraeus lux," from the Latin meaning "after darkness, light."

Before we continue, we ask the question, why is the Reformation so important for you and me this morning? Why is it even worth commemorating? One answer might be that commemorating the Protestant Reformation each year is a much-needed reminder of our responsibility as individuals and churches to carry forward the Reformation spirit. We must be those who are desiring to continually reform according to the Word of God, to always change our ways and practice that we be in accordance with God's Word and not fall trap to

mere tradition. As the saying goes, "the Church reformed always reforming," meaning the work must never be considered done. Every believer and every new generation must take their stand and seek to know, cherish, proclaim, and defend the Gospel of Christ wherever the Lord has placed them.

Another reason the Reformation is important is because front and center was the question of all questions: How does a person get right with God? This is the key question of the Reformation. So let's work through what I call the five solas now and see what we can uncover.

The first sola is "sola scriptura," meaning "scripture alone" from the Latin. Sola scriptura, along with "sola fide," that is "faith alone," were perhaps the two most critical doctrinal discoveries of Martin Luther's. Reformation historians call sola scriptura the formal principle of the Reformation and sola fide its material principle. Sola scriptura is considered the formal principle of the Reformation because Luther and the reformers recognized that establishing the Bible as the only authoritative source of revelation was the necessary stepping stone to establish all other theological inquiry. In other words, if the Bible wasn't the sole authority, then it was hard to establish any other theology from there as final. They came to see that the Bible alone was the authority that is God-breathed.

Now, you might think this is a rather obvious point, but Luther was up against the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which does not hold to sola scriptura. You see, Rome teaches that the dogma and tradition of the church itself, through its bishops and the pope, known as the magisterium, were of equal authority to the scriptures. The Bible was not considered the sole divinely authoritative word to man. The church taught that the magisterium had the authority to bind men and women's consciences to the extent as the scripture. This is incredibly dangerous.

One author wrote that tradition included a host of extra-biblical practices and beliefs that had been received into the church over centuries, whether by common acceptance or by the decisions of popes and councils. Holy writ and holy tradition were both accepted as authoritative sources of

divine truth. Over both stood the church's magisterium, its infallible teaching office, to which belongs final authority in interpreting both tradition and scripture. What the pope said went pretty much; he was the final authority on interpreting the scriptures. No one was in a place to question him, and so his word was elevated to that of the scriptures itself.

Still today, we find a denial of sola scriptura in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. This is available online; you can look it up. In that Catechism, the question is asked: What is the relationship between tradition and sacred scripture? The answer states, "Tradition and sacred scripture are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. They flow out of the same divine wellspring, make up one sacred deposit of faith from which the church derives her certainty about revelation." Furthermore, both scripture and tradition must be accepted and honored with equal sentiments of devotion and reverence. Can you imagine it?

Luther and the reformers were not denying the value of tradition. Church history is important to us, and the teachings and theology of the church that come down through greater minds than we are important to consider as they seek to interpret the scripture. But these are not scripture; they must be held to the standard of the Word alone. The reformers were denying the claim of Rome, which elevated the precepts of the church itself to that of divinely authoritative as a way of keeping the power with themselves.

The critical question then is: What authority source may rightly bind the conscience of God's people and of man? Certainly, the answer is sola scriptura. The scripture alone is the all-sufficient, inspired, inerrant, authoritative word of God to man. Scripture is its own interpreter, meaning the meaning of the text is the text in its context, as the biblical authors intended it, as moved by the Holy Spirit. In this way, man merely discovers the truth of God's word; he may not add to it or take away from it. God's word is true. Our Lord Jesus prayed in John 17:17, "Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth," he said. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All scripture is inspired, that is, it's God-breathed, profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, training, and righteousness." Peter said in 2 Peter

1:20, "Know this first of all, no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God." So that is sola scriptura, scripture alone.

The second sola is "sola fide," that is "faith alone." As mentioned earlier, sola fide was the material principle of the Reformation. That is its substance. The substance of the Reformation was captured in sola fide, faith alone. It directly answers that great question of the Reformation: How can a person be right with God? Luther's gradual realization of Rome's error on the matter of faith and justification came as he gave himself to the study of the scriptures in his tenure as a professor of Bible in Wittenberg. Many in the day had much to say about the Bible, but few—Luther being the great exception—were actually studying it, and the Lord had been working on his heart.

Between the years of 1513 and 1517, when he posted the 95 Theses to the All Saints Church against the sale of indulgences, Luther lectured through the Psalms, Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews. This was a period of monumental change in Luther's life, and this happens to anyone who gives themselves deeply to the study of God's Word; they will undergo a huge transformation in their thinking. This happened to Luther, and historians believe that the moment Luther truly saw the light of the glory of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of justification by faith alone, apart from works, came in the year 1519. He was shut away in his Wittenberg study, examining Romans 1:17, which says, "For in it, that is, the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, but the righteous man shall live by faith."

Until then, Luther had been in a state of perplexity in his soul. He had even expressed that he hated God. He thought that the righteousness of God was a standard for man to arrive at, and as such, he realized that it was a hopeless pursuit. Yet the Spirit of God opened the Word up to him, and then he writes, commenting on Romans 1:17, "I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e., that by which the merciful God

justifies us by faith, as it is written, the just person lives by faith. All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates."

You see, Luther thought that the righteousness of God was something actively sought rather than passively received, which is what the Gospel teaches. But now he saw the reality of the Gospel: that in it, God's righteousness is imputed to the sinner by faith alone. The Roman Catholic Church held and holds today, confessionally, an erroneous distortion of biblical justification. For instance, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we find a blending of justification with sanctification. In other words, justification becomes something we participate in rather than what we receive from God. You'll find these words: "Justification establishes cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom. On man's part, it is expressed by the ascent of faith to the Word of God, which invites him to conversion and in the cooperation of charity with the prompting of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds and preserves his ascent."

That would take a bit of unpacking, but language such as this only obfuscates the Gospel and makes justification a process rather than the one-time act on God's part, wherein the sinner truly believes upon Christ and so receives pardon for sins in the true and final sense. Part of the Catholic Church's response to the Reformation was to convene what is called the Council of Trent in 1546. One of the statements of many in that document opposing the doctrine of sola fide states this: "If anyone shall say that justifying faith is nothing else than confidence in the divine mercy, pardoning sins for Christ's sake, or that it is that confidence alone by which we are justified, let him be accursed." In other words, if you believe in justification by faith alone, you are to be accursed, as the Council of Trent ruled, and there are a number of statements where they repeat that very thing in different ways.

What does the scripture so plainly say in response? Romans 4:5 states, "But to the one who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness." So friends, consider the Apostle Paul who writes in Romans 3:20, "Because by the works of the

law no flesh will be justified in his sight, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin. But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe, for there is no distinction." Justification through faith alone—there are no ifs or buts about it. The sinner who repents and puts their faith in Jesus Christ is assured of legal standing of righteousness before God. All sins removed, wiped out. "From the East is from the West. So far, the Lord has removed our transgressions from us." We can be justified, you see.

The next sola is "sola gratia," that is "grace alone." When the reformers spoke of the grace of God in a person's salvation, they meant that every facet and dimension of our salvation comes apart from ourselves, for it comes out of God's unmerited favor bestowed upon us through faith in Christ. The starting point to understanding sola gratia is to understand what is the human condition outside of faith in Christ. The Bible clearly teaches that all people are by nature slaves of sin, whose will, unaided by God, is unable to act contrary to what is in our nature. That's what it means to be enslaved to sin. In other words, sinners can in no way perceive accurately the things of God unmoved by the Holy Spirit. To use the language of the Apostle Paul, he says in 1 Corinthians 1:23 that the spiritual things are foolishness to the natural man. You see, he's enslaved to sin, and so the things of God are foolishness to him by nature. All people are therefore either slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness. There's no middle ground in the biblical view.

So the question then is: How can a person move from being a slave of darkness to a slave of the light? The answer, as the reformers taught, was the grace of God alone. Rome, as with so many of its doctrines, fumbled this concept of divine grace badly, using the term but in a very different way than what the Bible does. Rome held to what we call semi-Pelagianism. We haven't got time to develop that, but which risks oversimplification. Semi-Pelagianism is the idea that humans participate in their salvation and thus a denial of salvation by God's grace alone, independent of man. It's an idea that Luther would write against in

perhaps his most widely recognized work, which is available to get for free on the internet, "The Bondage of the Will."

But Rome went further and treated God's grace like a commodity to be passed around. It's something that could be transacted by the actions of man. That's how Rome treated the grace of God. It would teach that through a person's participation in the rights of the church, through the sacraments, baptism, the Lord's table, they would even add marriage as a sacrament and more, they could say grace is communicated by God to the sinner through those means—saving grace. Hence, it is misusing the term.

What does the scripture mean when it speaks of God's saving grace? It means that our salvation is, as Jonah would say, "salvation is of the Lord." Beginning to end, it's of Him. There's no salvation for anyone apart from divine mercy extended to the sinner. It cannot be won, cannot be earned, cannot be merited. It comes vertically, originating with God and coming to the sinner by God's gracious and sovereign choice. Grace is that place, as Luther said, we must let God be God.

Understanding grace begins with understanding a person's starting point, allowing us to see that there are no alternative means of salvation. In Romans 3:23, the Apostle Paul, citing the Old Testament, recites, "As it is written, there is none righteous, not even one. There is none who understands. There is none who seeks for God. All have turned aside. Together they have become useless. There is none who does good. There is not even one." That's our starting point. Commenting on this passage, Luther would write these words: "I am astounded that when Paul so often uses these comprehensive terms, all, none, not, never, without, I am amazed how it has happened in the face of these comprehensive terms and statements that others that are contrary, yes, contradictory to them should have one acceptance."

When we look at Ephesians 2, we find a definition of what God's grace does to the sinner. Ephesians 2:4 says, "But God being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were

dead—there's our starting point—dead in our transgressions made us alive together with Christ. By grace you have been saved and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus so that in the ages to come, he might show the surpassing riches of his grace and kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."

Grace makes those that are spiritually dead—in that state of "there is none who seeks, there is none who does good," and so on—alive. That's what God's grace does. God awakens the soul of the sinner and He says to Lazarus, "Come forth." Paul says that the grace and faith operative in our salvation comes from God. That's why he says in Ephesians 2, "and that not of yourselves," indicating the previous clause, that grace and that faith—that's not of you, Paul is saying. It does not come from self but comes from God. The reformers said *sola gratia*: we are saved by grace alone.

A fourth sola is "*solus Christus*," that is "Christ alone." The reformers understood that God could grant our salvation only through the accomplishments of our Lord Jesus Christ alone. His perfect law-keeping and His once-for-all atoning death provide the believer by faith with this eternal promise: Romans 8:1, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." You see, the work is complete. The God-man Messiah has paid our debts in full by giving His life on the cross in our place. He died so that we might be free from judgment and dwell eternally with our God.

Rome's error on this doctrine again is substantial and marks one of its major breaks from the biblical faith. For instance, encouraged by Rome is praying to the saints of the past and to Mary, the mother of Christ, for extra merit stored in these supposed merit storehouses that they teach, composed of extra works that the saints accomplished on earth and it's available for us supposedly and at the Pope's discretion to distribute. That's not Christ alone.

Furthermore, Rome transforms Mary, the mother of Jesus, into a fellow redeemer. While the unique mediation of Christ on behalf of His people is affirmed by Rome, in the Catholic catechism again you will find these words: "Taken up into heaven she, that is Mary, did not lay aside this saving office but by her manifold intercession continues to bring us the gifts of eternal salvation. The blessed virgin is invoked in the church under the titles of advocate, helper, benefactress, and mediatrix." That is, friends, that is blasphemy.

Then there is the Catholic mass and the doctrine of transubstantiation, which I've talked about earlier. Catholicism holds that when the priest takes the Eucharist, it's the bread and the wine of the Lord's Supper, he is re-offering the body and blood of Christ for sins. It's a horrendous abrogation of scripture and again part of the controlling influence of power that Rome has over the people, where the people have to come to the mass so they can receive forgiveness of sins. It becomes something where they are drawn in; they never have the assurance of true salvation of sins.

Then there is the supposed office of the Pope making himself out as the earthly head of the church instead of Christ Himself, who said to His disciples in Matthew 28:20, "And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." That presence of Christ is through the Holy Spirit, the advocate and helper of the Lord's people. These are all woeful deceptions and distortions of the biblical faith, producing as its fruit a people with a great outward religiosity but seldom the true knowledge of Christ. I say that first-hand with a great deal of my family being Roman Catholic and my father being a convert from Roman Catholicism.

But we must confess with the reformers: Christ alone. The writer to the Hebrews says in Hebrews 9, "But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, he entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation, and not through the blood of goats and calves but through his own blood. He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption." You see, Christ was sent into this world to redeem His

people, and such was His suitability and purity to be your substitute. When He died, it was finished. That's why He said, "Tetelestai" on the cross: it is finished. Full redemption for His people. He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption—paid in full. So He need not be sacrificed again as Rome would teach.

It is Christ alone who possesses the merit of righteousness that we need imputed to our account. We don't need the merits of the saints or of Mary; we need the righteousness of Christ alone. He is our only mediator. The Bible teaches in 1 Timothy 2:5, "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." So there's nothing left for us to do but receive Christ. If there was anything for man to add to what Christ has accomplished for us, then the scripture says Christ has died in vain. In other words, if salvation was 99% of Christ and 1% of you, do not think so highly of yourself that you would accomplish that 1%. Paul says this in Galatians 2:21, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died needlessly."

In a letter entitled "Concerning Christian Liberty," Martin Luther wrote to Pope Leo X these words: "The first care of every Christian ought to be to lay aside all reliance on works and strengthen his faith alone more and more, and by it grow in the knowledge not of works but of Christ Jesus who has suffered and risen again for him." And so we must confess with the reformers: Solus Christus, Christ alone.

We have one more to go: "Soli Deo Gloria," that is "to God alone be the glory." This is a fitting conclusion to the solas. It is a summary ensuring that the end of our doctrine and theology, as we have seen in the previous four, are directed where they ought—that is, the glory and praise of God and the truths of the gospel that man would glorify and magnify the God of heaven who loved us and sent His Son to be a ransom for us. The proper end of all theology and knowledge attained of God in this life is worship.

This congregation here at Woodlands, as I understand, came about through the initial efforts of Presbyterian settlers who first began establishing networks of churches in the south from 1848 onwards, and

this parish emerged from their efforts by God's providence as a Presbyterian church. Presbyterianism as a denomination finds its way back to John Knox, the powerful Scottish reformer, one of the main reformers of the church in Scotland. It also goes back to John Calvin, the French reformer who spent most of his life in Geneva, Switzerland. The biographies of both men are readily available and well worth your time. I'm working through a newer one on Calvin at the moment. Calvin, in particular, was of such an incredible mind and ability to pass and interpret the scriptures that his sermons and writings continue to be readily drawn upon resources for students of the scriptures today.

For instance, I have digital access to all of Calvin's commentaries as well as his magnum opus called "The Institutes of the Christian Religion," and I still often find myself going to Calvin when I need certain passages I'm not quite sure how they fit together. I still find that his insights into passages far exceed that of modern commentaries available to me, even though modern commentators have far more tools and resources at their disposal. Such was Calvin's gifted mind that the Lord gave him. It should be said that the reformers were all just fallen human beings with their own faults and hang-ups, like us all. But we are all earthen vessels, and the strongest among us are but simple and foolish, and this is God's way. In His providences, He uses weak vessels for His own glory and honor in the world, and that's exactly what He did through the Reformation.

On "Soli Deo Gloria," Calvin, in particular, was zealous for the glory of God. He would write in his "Institutes on the Christian Religion" these words: "We are not to seek our own, but the Lord's will, and act with a view to promote His glory. Great is our proficiency when almost forgetting ourselves, certainly postponing our own reason, we faithfully make it our study to obey God and His commandments. For when Scripture enjoins us to lay aside private regard to ourselves, it not only divests our minds of an excessive longing for wealth, power, or human favor, but eradicates all ambition and thirst for worldly glory and other more secret pests. The Christian ought indeed to be so trained and disposed as to consider that during his whole life he has to do with God. For this reason, as he will bring all things to the disposal and estimate of God, so he will religiously

direct his whole mind to Him. For he who has learned to look to God in everything he does is at the same time diverted from all vain thoughts." Incredible words.

So we ought to say Amen and confess with the reformers that the Scripture alone is our divine and guiding light in the world in all things that pertain to God; that salvation is by faith alone apart from works; that we are saved entirely by an act of God's grace; and that even our faith comes as a gift from God and not from us; that in Christ alone is salvation; that He is our sole champion who leads us into glory through His life, death, and present mediation until His return. In these truths, we point glory to God; we praise the God who was and is and is to come, and we cry out as His people, "Lord Jesus, even so come."

And so there is an introduction to the five solas of the Reformation. Shall we pray?