

## "WHY THE FIVE SOLAS MATTER TODAY"

(Romans 4:1-25)

(John Adair)

Long before the beginning of the Reformation, certain practices in the life of the church, for ordinary people, had ceased to be meaningful expressions of the Christian faith. Rather than relying on God, people entrusted their faithfulness for transformation and took part in established empty rituals regardless of understanding. Over the course of many centuries, certain key Christian teachings atrophied in the church—especially those around the issue of salvation.

In the midst of this decline, the Reformers (such as Martin Luther and John Calvin) sought to define Christian doctrines related to salvation. These pillars—the “Five Solas”—are five Latin phrases that emerged providing a foundation for understanding the basis for the Reformation and creating a bedrock for Christians to continue to build and restore the essential teachings of the gospel. Ironically, these most significant emphases sometimes take a similar “empty” character themselves. Do they make a difference today? If so, how?

### 1. Sola Fide (By Faith Alone)

One of the great temptations in our culture is our propensity to live by sight rather than according to faith. “Seeing is believing” leaves us reliant on our actions to help us feel better about ourselves. When we live as if salvation depends on our abilities, we can easily fall prey to a “gospel” of fear. We hold on to our doubts and anxieties in place of clinging to the true gospel of faith. Fear trusts in the self, whereas faith trusts in God. Fear says, *I have to do something to rectify my situation*. Faith admits, *I can do nothing about these circumstances, it's in God's hands now*.

Adam and Eve, afraid in the wake of their sin, trusted in fig leaves and hiding to “fix” their situation (Gen 3:7–8). Many of us today hide from our need for God. We dismiss God's grace and his provision of salvation through Christ, and we depend on our own merits. We often forget that through restoration and forgiveness we can rediscover the joy of our salvation. Our faith prompts us to place our trust in the only one who can help us overcome the ugliness of sin and death.

### 2. Sola Scriptura (By Scripture Alone)

The Bible occupies a central place in the life of the Christian church. Hopefully, each Christian treats God's Word as true, authoritative, and sufficient to live the life of faith. Over time, however, traditions—localized beliefs and practices—have increased in our church communities and denominations, affecting how we approach Scripture. These traditions draw us away from the more significant and central practices and beliefs of historic Christianity. Every church community has such traditions. To name a few common contemporary examples, think community standards on alcohol, or political affiliations. The Reformation teaching of *Sola Scriptura* meant to rein in these kinds of traditions that had gained prominence in the Roman Catholic Church.

But the Reformers, in advocating for Scripture alone as the supreme authority in matters of doctrine and practice, also appreciated a different category of what we can call Tradition—universal beliefs and practices that unite Christians everywhere. Think of beliefs about our triune God or the person and work of



Jesus, for example. Like the Reformers did, we should also honor Scripture as critical and fundamental to our understanding of our faith. We need to follow the Reformers in drawing upon Tradition, to help us with the disunity we currently face within the body of Christ and to encourage us to read our Bibles in concert with those who have gone before us.

### **3. Solus Christus (Through Christ Alone)**

We live in a pluralistic world. While this has created the promise (and sometimes the reality) of peaceful living among people of many tribes and religions, it also presents particular challenges for Christians today. Should Christianity adapt its doctrine to this new cultural reality by suggesting that we focus our missionary attention on promoting good morals rather than prompting Hindus, Muslims, or atheists to accept the gospel and affirm historic Christian orthodoxy?

The Reformation ideal of salvation states that we come to God through Christ alone, which excludes such a pluralist vision around the issue of salvation. As Christians, we cannot change the doctrine that has animated our faith throughout its 2,000-year history. There is nothing more central to Christianity than the person and work of Jesus. In this, the Reformers help us to clarify one of the core tenets of salvation in the Christian faith, one that Jesus himself emphasizes. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

### **4. Sola Gratia (By Grace Alone)**

Jesus operates according to grace. He continually works with and through people who deserve, at the very least, dismissal and, at the most, the harshest judgment. Need an example of such a person? To find an undeserving co-laborer with Jesus we don't need to look any further than to one of the leaders of the first generation church, Peter—who denied Christ three times.

Despite this emphasis on grace in the ministry of Jesus and the early church, Christians have long struggled with the temptation to make Christianity in general and salvation in particular about following a series of rules and regulations. The testimony of the Reformation is that salvation comes to us not through the careful obedience of clear (and often, not so clear) church rules, but through the gracious gift of the triune God. As Christians we are prone to “rules and regulations” thinking. We would do well to embody a more grace-saturated heart for one another on social media, in our churches, and in our communities.

### **5. Soli Deo Gloria (Glory to God Alone)**

People of all kinds—from children to volunteers to high-powered executives—angle for credit. Everyone appreciates a little recognition for a job well done, and we have a tendency to overestimate our contributions to a completed project. We've seen it before: a basketball player shoots the winning basket for his only two points of the game and gets all the glory from the assembled media. Never mind if he stood alone in a position to hit the game winner because of other teammates who contributed to the final score. Who gets the glory? They all do at some level.

When it comes to salvation, the Reformers made it clear that only God deserves the glory. The Roman Catholic Church of the sixteenth century had a habit of divvying up glory. God got the most, but the sinner deserved a share for their cooperation (in performing rituals and doing good works). The Reformation heritage clarifies for us that we don't get credit for bringing about our salvation (Eph 2:8–9). Only God deserves praise for the glorious new life he brings to his people.

How can we, then, as children of the Reformation, seek to help others appreciate Christian doctrines related to salvation especially in the midst of our culture's decline? Over the course of our lives, we need to strive to live the array of biblical truths that will help others understand salvation and that Scripture is our only final authority. We need to show the world God's love—that God accepts us by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ, and that God often uses the unlikeliest of reformers in different places and circumstances to bring about his will—all working and conspiring to the glory of God.