

The Five Solas

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

The five *solas* of the Reformation, which distinguished the Reformers from the teachings of Rome, include *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), and *solus Deo gloria* (glory to God alone).

SUMMARY

These five statements of the evangelical faith lay at the center of what distinguished the theology of the Reformation from the theology of the Roman Catholic church in the 16th century. *Sola scriptura* is the belief that because Scripture is God's inspired Word, it is the only inerrant, sufficient, and final authority for the church. *Solus Christus* is the assertion that Christ alone is the basis on which the ungodly are justified in God's sight. *Sola fide* maintains that the believer receives the redemption Christ has accomplished only through faith. *Sola gratia* proclaims that *all* of our salvation, from beginning to end, is by grace and grace alone. Because of these things, the Reformers held fast to the phrase *solus Deo gloria*, that only God receives glory for our salvation.

The five *solas* form the nucleus of the evangelical faith. They not only capture the gospel of Jesus Christ and explain how that gospel takes root in the sinner, but they also define where the authority of that gospel resides and to what end that gospel is preached and proclaimed. Although the phrase "five *solas*" may be more recent in its usage, the concepts are rooted in the 16th century Reformation. These five *solas* distinguished Reformers like Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, John Calvin, and so many others from the teachings of Rome. But at the heart of this divide was not merely a theological dispute, but a celebration of the gospel itself. The reformers were willing to lay their lives down for these *solas* first and foremost because they believed the gospel itself was at stake.

Sola Scriptura

Sola scriptura, sometimes referred to as the formal principle of the Reformation, is the belief that "only Scripture, because it is God's inspired Word, is our inerrant, sufficient, and final authority for the church" (*God's Word Alone*, 23). Notice, the basis of *sola scriptura* is Scripture's inspired nature. As Paul says, "All Scripture is breathed-out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). That cannot be said of church tradition, councils, or church leaders, as important as they all may be. While Scripture may have many human authors, it has one divine author. The Holy Spirit, Peter tells us, carried along the biblical authors so that what they said, God himself said (2 Pet. 1:21), down to the very words.

For that reason, Scripture is also inerrant, inerrancy being a corollary of inspiration. Inerrancy means that Scripture is true, without error, in all that it asserts. As the Holy Spirit carried along the biblical authors, he ensured that their human words reflected his own holy character. Hence Scripture is truth because God himself is truth. It is, after all, *God's Word*. Inerrancy is essential not only because it provides warrant for our assurance, giving us every reason to believe Scripture is trustworthy, but inerrancy also distinguishes Scripture from all other fallible authorities. Scripture alone is our infallible, inerrant authority.

Last, *sola scriptura* means that only Scripture is our sufficient authority. Not only does Paul say all Scripture is God-breathed, but on that basis, Scripture is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” Or as the Belgic Confession says so well, “We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein.”

Sola Scriptura teaches us, in the end, that all other authorities in the Christian life serve underneath Scripture, while Scripture alone rules over other authorities, for it alone is God's inspired, inerrant, and sufficient word.

Solus Christus

Scripture, as the Christian's final authority, is a gift from God. It is a gift because in Scripture we are given Jesus Christ himself. God would have been perfectly just and holy to leave us in our sin and condemnation. But our great God stooped down so low as to speak a saving word to us lost sinners, a word that reached its pinnacle in the living Word, the Lord Jesus himself ([John 1:1](#)).

Our temptation is to think, however, that there is something in ourselves, even in the slightest, that can contribute to our redemption. Perhaps it's obedience to the law, or perhaps it's good works that spring from faith itself. But Scripture counters: “None is righteous, no, not one” ([Rom 3:10](#)). God and God alone can save us.

The Father has done just that by sending his Son to “become flesh” ([John 1:14](#)) to represent us, substituting himself on our behalf. Whereas we failed to keep the law, Christ obeyed the law for us; whereas we deserve the penalty for breaking the law, Christ died for us. Christ fulfilled the law we could not keep, and he bore the wrath of God that we deserve ([Rom. 3:21–26](#)). And he did so in full. As that old hymn says, “Jesus paid it all.” That means, then, that the work of Christ, and Christ alone, is the basis on which the ungodly are justified in God's sight.

Sola Fide

But how does the believer receive the redemption Christ has accomplished? Through faith and faith alone. Rather than trusting in ourselves, we trust in another: Jesus Christ.

The Reformers loved to talk about a “great, marvelous exchange.” Christ has taken our sin and its penalty on the cross. What have we received in exchange? The perfect, spotless, righteousness of Christ. Not only have we been forgiven, and our debt been paid in full but imputed to our account is Christ's perfect record of obedience.

That means, then, that God declares us right with him not on the basis of something in us but only on the basis of an alien righteousness, a righteousness that is *extra nos*, outside ourselves. Of course, it is none other than the righteousness of Christ (2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9). Faith, then, is the instrument through which we receive this alien righteousness. Through faith in Christ that blessed status in Christ, which God alone can give, is reckoned to us. Hence Paul warns Christians that no one will be justified by works of the law but only through faith in Christ (Gal. 2:15–3:14).

Sola Gratia

If the work of Christ is the basis of our right standing before God, and if we are justified by God not on the basis of our works but only through faith in the works of his Son, then it follows that our salvation is by grace and by grace alone.

Sola gratia, however, is not limited to our justification, but spans all of salvation from start to finish. In fact, the grace that saves us is, as John Newton so famously sung, “amazing,” because it does not originate with us at all but stems from God’s mercy in eternity. As Paul says, God “chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4).

“But wait a minute,” you might say, “Surely my will and my choice must be the determining factor.” Not according to Paul: God’s election “depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy” (Rom. 9:16) His choice, in short, is not conditioned on us; that would give us reason to boast. Rather, his electing grace is unconditional.

And if his grace in eternity is so free, then so too must his grace be unconditional when applied by the Holy Spirit. The God who has chosen us by grace alone, is the one who alone can call us out of darkness into the light of his own Son (effectual calling; John 6) and raise us from spiritual death to spiritual life (regeneration; John 3). His grace is not synergistic, as if it depends on our will for its success. No, it is monergistic, for he alone works to bring us dead, lifeless sinners to new life in his Son. Moreover, he alone can grant us the faith that believes and work such belief within us so that we embrace Christ as our Savior and Lord (Acts 13:48–50; Eph. 2:8–10; Phil. 1:29–30; 2 Pet. 1:1).

Soli Deo Gloria

Only if our salvation is by grace alone will God alone receive all the glory. If there is something of our own we can claim, then we no longer boast in Christ alone. But if he is the author and finisher of our salvation then he alone is to be magnified for his sovereign grace. As Christians, these *solas* should cultivate an attitude of total humility. Whether it is in our secular vocations or our praise on a Sunday morning, to God alone be the glory.

FURTHER READING

- Carl R. Trueman, *Grace Alone: Salvation as a Gift of God*. See an author interview [here](#).
- Carl R. Trueman, [Video lecture on sola gratia](#).
- David VanDrunen, *God's Glory Alone: The Majestic Heart of Christian Faith and Life*. See an author interview [here](#).
- David VanDrunen, [Video lecture on soli Deo gloria](#).
- Jared Wilson, Video interview: [Can justification give me confidence to preach?](#)
- Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture*. See an author interview [here](#) and [here](#).
- Matthew Barrett, ed., *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls: Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Pastoral Perspective*
- Matthew Barrett, [Video lecture on sola scriptura](#).
- Matthew Barrett, Video interview: [The Modern Challenge to the Doctrine of Justification](#)
- Matthew Barrett, Video interview: [The Question at the Heart of Christianity](#)
- Matthew Barrett and Stephen Dempster, Video: ["Is Justification in the Old Testament?"](#)
- Stephen Wellum, *Christ Alone: The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior*. See an author interview [here](#) and [here](#).
- Stephen Wellum, [Video lecture on solus Christus](#).
- Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification*. See an author interview [here](#) and [here](#).
- Thomas Schreiner, [Video lecture on sola fide](#).

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