



HERE WE
**STILL
STAND**
REMEMBERING THE
REFORMATION

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WHY DO THE

5

**SOLAS
MATTER
TODAY?**

INTRODUCTION

The term Protestant has been maligned, misunderstood, and too often misrepresented.

It has been used wrongly by some in a political and social sense to label all non-Roman Catholics. Some evangelicals are reluctant to use the term and instead declare they are simply Christians. Others, while claiming to be Protestants, have embraced the very errors the Protestant Reformers opposed.

The Free Presbyterian Church is unashamedly a Protestant Church. We do not agree with or condone everything Martin Luther and other Reformers taught or did, but we stand where the Protestant Reformation stood on the vital question of how a sinner can be accepted before the Holy God.

The Reformers did not introduce a new teaching but rather rediscovered and re-emphasised the truths of the Gospel as taught by Christ, the Apostles, and the early Church.

The Committee wish to acknowledge the material received from Mr Robert Campbell in the preparation of this booklet.

The Five Solas (Sola means alone) is a term used to designate five great foundational rallying cries of the Protestant Reformers. They are as follows: **'Sola Scriptura'** (Scripture Alone); **'Sola Gratia'** (Grace Alone); **'Sola Fide'** (Faith Alone); **'Solus Christus'** (Christ Alone); and **'Soli Deo Gloria'** (To God Alone Be Glory).

The Five Solas were developed in response to specific corruptions of the truth that were taught by the Roman Catholic Church during the Dark Ages, and they are still extremely relevant today.

Contrary to the claims of ecumenists and many evangelicals, the Roman Catholic Church has not changed its dogmas. They, along with many other professed Christian groups today, speak of Scripture, grace, faith, Christ and God's glory, yet they do not and cannot use the term 'Alone'. To Scripture is added sacred tradition, new revelations, and the teachings of men. Salvation, they claim, is through a combination of God's grace and man's efforts. They maintain that we can be justified by faith and the works that we produce. They cannot declare that we are accepted as righteous before God solely by the merits of Christ. It is Christ plus something. Their teaching means that the glory for a sinner's salvation cannot be attributed to God alone, as is taught in the Scriptures.

In this age of ecumenical concession, charismatic confusion, and evangelical compromise, the Christian church is in danger of returning to the Dark Ages. The Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster is resolutely determined to stand unapologetically for the truths of the Reformed Protestant Faith (Galatians 5:1) and oppose these errors.

We trust this study guide will be used by and among our younger (and older) people to cause us to be built up in our faith, that we may not be tossed to and fro by modern winds of doctrine (Ephesians 4:14)

The Five Solas **define** what the Gospel is and what we must therefore believe. A study of them will enable us to be better equipped to **declare** the Gospel in a Scriptural manner and will also aid us in our **defence** of the faith, for each is a fundamental truth that cannot be forsaken. We pray that this publication will encourage our members to be able to declare, 'Here I still stand!'

Rev Ron Johnstone
Chairman, Reformation Anniversary Committee.

WHY DO THE 5 SOLAS MATTER TODAY?



Large companies spend millions of pounds designing their logos and branding. Should this go wrong, it can be embarrassing and expensive. However, when done well, a firm, institution, or even a concept can gain widespread public recognition and have a huge advantage over its rivals.

In this booklet, we will consider the core message or 'brand message' of the Reformation.

Still going strong

Nearly five hundred years ago, the core message of the Reformation was summed up in the Five Solas. They cover a huge amount of theological ground quickly and memorably. They have stood the test of time, and the fact that we still know and write about them today proves this. Our Reformed forefathers did not use focus groups or slick marketing strategies to create them - in fact, we don't know who thought of them or when or where they first appeared. Not knowing this is a positive, because we focus on the substance of the message rather than personalities!

What are the Five Solas?

The Five Solas (this Latin word means 'alone') of the Reformation are Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Christ Alone, and the Glory of God Alone. They show us the foundation of our faith - the Bible, God's Word, that has been given to us. They bring us to the means of our salvation - "...by grace through faith". We then come to the very centre of our faith - Jesus Christ. Finally, we are reminded that whatever we do, we do it to the glory of God alone. This is summed up in words from the Shorter Catechism, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever".

Are they theological, historical, or practical?

Are the Five Solas theological, historical, or practical? If we try to put them into just one of these boxes, we will miss out! The greatest benefits and blessings will come when we view them in their historical context, realise how succinctly they sum up the central themes of theology, and recognise that they are of great practical use.

The church has been blessed by many clear statements of faith summarising what the Bible says, the Apostles' Creed, the Five Solas, the Westminster Confession of Faith, to name just a few. However, there is no point in simply possessing them as ancient and respected documents; rather, we should apply them in our faith and practice today!

1 SCRIPTURE ALONE

Above all else, the Reformation was a return to the Bible. This return is as relevant and needful now as it was then. The society we live in has more or less rejected the Bible. Even among professing Christians, some doubt the authority, authenticity, or accuracy of the Bible.

Others happily believe prophetic utterances that contradict the Bible. Some are guided by a 'traditionalism' that shapes the Bible to suit what they believe, rather than vice-versa. Eventually the Bible, on a practical level, is ignored or rejected by those who claim to honour it!

Always Challenged

From the earliest times, reliance on the Word of God has been challenged. God's arch enemy lied to our first parents regarding eating of the tree, telling them, "Ye shall not surely die," (Genesis 3:4) when God had told them the opposite. There have been constant attempts over the centuries to erode our foundational belief in the Bible. Every generation of Christians will face this challenge afresh in some form or other. Although it constantly comes in new forms, its aim remains the same! So the Church and Christians need to be alert to this today.

A Strong Foundation

Examining where the Bible came from, what it contains, and why it was given, helps us understand why Scripture Alone is so foundational.

The contents of the Bible came from our Triune God. Paul tells the young minister Timothy, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Timothy 3:16). "Inspiration of God" is a single Greek word, "theopneustos", meaning 'God-breathed'. Therefore, the Scriptures are 'inspired by God'. 2 Peter 1:21 elaborates, "For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

The Bible was written over 1500 years by more than 40 authors. These authors came from different backgrounds and from three different continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe). The Bible contains 66 separate books; 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. The Bible starts with creation, tells of the Fall of man into sin, of the coming Messiah, Jesus; then gives a synopsis of Jesus' life on earth - His virgin birth, His ministry, His death, His resurrection and ends with the prophecy of His return and final judgement.

The Westminster Confession states,

"...the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture".

(Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 1 Section 10)

Presbyterians also believe,

"The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man".

(Westminster Shorter Catechism Q&A 3)

The "Just my Bible and me" attitude

Scripture Alone does not mean that we should not have creeds, confessions, or statements of faith. Rather, these documents are useful to clarify theology. The best theological minds of each generation have debated them in the light of Scripture to ensure that they concur with Biblical teaching.

So "the real question is not, as often pretended, between the Word of God and the creed of man, but between the tried and proved faith of the collective body of God's people, and the private judgement and the unassisted wisdom of the repudiator of creeds".

(Archibald Alexander Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, p. 2)

The Reformers' insistence on Sola Scriptura brought the church firmly back to a position of adherence to the Scriptures as the final authority. It is good to recall what has taken place in the past. It is even more important to grasp the relevance and benefits that a reliance on Sola Scriptura will bring to our lives, our community, and our government.

2 GRACE ALONE

Grace has been described as “undeserved kindness”; “everything for nothing to those who deserve nothing;” the acrostic G-R-A-C-E that stands for

“God’s - Riches -At - Christ’s - Expense.”

By God’s Grace Alone we are saved! Professor John Murray explained the absolute necessity and depth of God’s grace:

“We cannot think of sinners as merely undeserving; they are all so ill deserving. The grace of God to sinners is, therefore, not simply unmerited favour; it is also favour shown to the ill deserving, indeed to the hell deserving”.

(J. Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray Volume 1*, p. 119)

What is Sin?

Do you understand what sin is? Do you realise that everyone, including you, is a sinner? As the Shorter Catechism explains:

Q. 14. What is sin?

A. Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

Scripture tells us “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Only when we understand what sin is and its consequences, do we even begin to understand the greatness and wonder of God’s free grace!

Terry L Johnson points out, “Grace, by definition, is that which is not required but given freely anyway...grace is the un-required, un-obligated, self-determined, self-motivated, freely given mercy of God in Christ”. (Johnson, *The Case for Traditional Protestantism*, p. 111)

Old, yet ever new

Grace Alone is particularly relevant in a society that places a huge emphasis on self reliance. In the past, this was simply called works religion! When individuals and groups simply rely on their own self effort to gain acceptance with God, they, consciously or not, have rejected God’s grace.

Only the facade left

Many once-great denominations maintain a facade of adhering to the Gospel while rejecting Grace Alone. In many town redevelopments, planners keep the facade of old buildings while changing the inner structure. Tragically, when Grace Alone is removed from the message of a church it may look the same but the substance is gone!

The reality of grace

Today many speak about grace, but their message is not salvation by Grace Alone. In Galatians 1:6-9, Paul condemns in the strongest terms such departures from the message of Grace Alone. He exposes it as a false Gospel and those who teach such as ‘perverters’ of the true Gospel.

It was grace that moved John Newton to write the words,

**’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed.**

It is by Grace Alone we are saved.

3 FAITH ALONE



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“Real faith in Jesus can exist only when the lofty claims of Jesus are taken as sober fact, and when He is regarded as the eternal Son of God, come voluntarily to earth for our redemption, manifesting His glory to those who commit their lives to Him. The truth is that in great sections of the modern Church, Jesus is no longer the object of faith, but has become merely an example for faith...”.

(J Gresham Machen, *What is Faith?*, 1925)

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Faith is not an abstract notion. It has a focus, and that focus is Jesus Christ. It is not enough to ‘have faith’ if the object of that faith is not Christ. If we do this, we have created a works religion built on our own righteousness or good works. We trust that our faith in our good works will be enough to gain salvation rather than relying wholly on Jesus Christ and His death on the cross. Ephesians 2:8-9 warns us about this: *“For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.”*

Luther’s faith discovery

The great cry of the Reformation, ‘Faith Alone’, was no new discovery but a rediscovery of Biblical teaching. Luther, seeking for acceptance with a Holy God on the basis of his works, found nothing but total despair. He wrote, *“I did not love God. Yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuringly greatly; I was angry with God.”* Prior to his conversion, he wrestled with Romans 1:17, *“...The just shall live by faith”*. Night and day, he meditated on the word ‘righteous’.

Luther came to realise that sinners are justified (or declared righteous by God) by Faith Alone without works. This great insight led Luther to write that he, *“...thereupon felt altogether born again and entered paradise through open gates.”* He now praised God, *“...with a love as great as the hatred with which [he] had before hated the words ‘righteousness of God.’”* (Martin Marty, *Martin Luther a Life*, p. 38)

False Faith

Many have flawed thinking on the subject of faith. For example for some it is little more than a feeling. If they just think and feel something to be true, then it is true for them. This may lead to the denial of the primary fact of Christianity that Jesus death on the cross is enough - He paid the full price! Yet, in spite of such denials, these people still claim to be Christians! Paul declares in Romans 3:25 that it is by *“faith in his [Jesus’] blood”* that sinners are declared righteous before God.

Biblical Faith

Faith is knowledge based, and this knowledge comes from the Bible: *“So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”* (Romans 10:17) Therefore, it is our responsibility to take what God has declared and proclaim it. We should always remember that one of the hallmarks of the Reformation was a resurgence of the centrality of Bible preaching.

Holy Spirit-led

God the Holy Spirit takes the Word and applies it to individuals: *“...when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment.”* (John 16:8)

Christ Centred

Our faith is in Christ Alone - who He is; why He came; and what He did. Ultimately, where we spend eternity is dependent on our faith in Him!

Faith Illustrated

On 30th June 1859, the French acrobat Blondin first crossed the Niagara Falls on a tightrope. In the days following, he walked across it on a tightrope, blindfolded, pushing a wheelbarrow and actually sat down midway while he cooked and ate an omelette.

When he announced to the thousands who witnessed his amazing feats that he could carry a man across, many publicly declared they believed he could do it. However, in spite of their professions of faith or belief in his ability, only one man was prepared to actually trust Blondin with his life - his manager Harry Colcord.

That story paints a real life picture of what faith actually is.

Many profess their belief that Jesus Christ the Just One suffered in the place of sinners so that He might bring us to God (1Peter 3:18), yet they are not prepared to personally trust Him.

Harry Colcord was brought safely across the tightrope because he placed his reliance upon Blondin’s ability. Saving faith places full reliance upon the Lord Jesus Christ to bring us to God.

4 CHRIST ALONE

Our view of Jesus Christ is paramount because it is the hub that holds the other 'Solas' together; it is the hinge they swing on; it is the strong foundation they stand on. Our personal view and understanding of Christ influences every part and aspect of our lives.

Who is Jesus?

Some people do not believe that Jesus existed. Others believe He was a real person, but only the son of Mary and Joseph, or a Roman soldier. They may view Him as a good man, or even a great man, but not the 'God-man.' Others correctly believe that Jesus is the eternal and virgin born Son of God, but wrongly conclude He is beyond knowing personally. However, the Reformers rediscovered the great truth that sinners can come to know Jesus Christ personally.

To understand who Jesus is, it may be helpful to consider His life in two parts; firstly, His humiliation - His birth to His death- and secondly, His exaltation - everything from His resurrection onwards.

The Only Way

In this age of 'inclusivism' the Bible declares that Jesus Christ is not a way to heaven nor the best way to heaven but is the Only way.

"Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

Jesus' Humiliation

Jesus humbled Himself throughout His entire life on earth. He was subject to the law which He kept perfectly. He was afflicted with the miseries of this life, temptations of Satan, and bitter hostility from sinners. He did all this in order to keep the law of God perfectly.

• Humbled in Life

The following quotation from AA Hodge helps us grasp who Jesus is and what He did:

"Jesus of Nazareth was a true man, possessing all the essential properties of humanity, conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost in the womb of the Virgin Mary, of her substance...He was absolutely without sin.. He was no less very God, the eternal Son of the Father...That nevertheless this God and this man is one single person...That this personality is the eternal person of the divine Son, who in time took a union with himself.. That although one person, the divine and the human natures in Christ are not mixed or confounded in one, but remain two pure and distinct natures, divine and human, constituting one person forever."
(AA Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, p138)

• Humbled in Death

Jesus was also humbled *in death*. He was betrayed by one of His twelve disciples, Judas; He was forsaken by His other disciples; He was scorned and rejected by the world; He was condemned by Pilate and by His Jewish persecutors. He alone bore God's wrath for sin, voluntarily laying down His life as an offering to cover sin; He endured the painful, shameful, and cursed death of the cross (Philippians 2:5-8); He was buried, continuing in the state of death and under the power of death for three days.

The Exaltation of Christ

The exaltation of Christ is demonstrated by His resurrection from the dead. He rose from the dead by His own power and was seen by many people after His resurrection. He arose in the same body that had been nailed to the cross, and He is no longer subject to death (Revelation 1:18). Forty days after His resurrection, He ascended into heaven (Acts 1:9-11). He is sitting at the right hand of the Father in a position of honour and authority (Psalm 110:1). He will come again in great power and glory to judge the world in righteousness.

5 THE GLORY OF GOD ALONE

The previous four solas logically lead us to 'Sola deo Gloria' or the Glory of God Alone! Psalm 19:1 reminds us that God displays His glory in creation: *"The heavens declare the glory of God."* Just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, the Christian should reflect the glory of God. This should be the desire, objective, and purpose of a Christian.

Our Declaration in Life - The Glory of God Alone

Those who are justified by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, will give evidence of this by a life of holiness (Ephesians 2:8-10). The believer's 'good works' are the evidence of a sinner's acceptance before God and not the cause. How we live expresses what we have become in Christ.

James Buchanan highlights the theological division between 'actual' and 'declarative' justification:

"...good works being the effect and evidence of faith, and, as such, the sign and tokens of justification..." He shows us that good works "...cannot form any part of the ground on which faith relies, or on which justification depends. Nor can they come in, as an intervening cause or condition, between faith and justification, for they follow after faith, whereas every believer is justified as soon as he is united to Christ. They are the works of believing and justified men; and no works can be acceptable to God while men remain in a state of unbelief and enmity."

(James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, p. 358)

It is very important to understand that we live a certain way because we are a Christian, but this does not make us a Christian or keep us a Christian.

Our Duty in Life - The Glory of God Alone

How do we glorify God in our lives? We glorify God by trusting in Him. Abraham was strong in faith which gave glory to God (Romans 4:20). We glorify God by keeping the atoning work of Christ central in our life and witness. In Galatians 6:14, Paul states: "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." We also glorify God by dealing with others in a Christ like manner. Romans 15:7 commands us to receive others as Christ received us, "...to the glory of God".

In 'A Body of Divinity', Thomas Watson deals with the question, "What is the chief end of man?" We are reminded that God is glorious in His very being, and that we are to give all glory to Him:

"...we aim purely at His glory preferring God's glory above all other things. We glorify God by an ingenious confession of sin, by believing, by being tender of His glory, by fruitfulness, by being contented in the state in which Providence has placed us, by working out our own salvation, by living to God, by walking cheerfully, by standing up for his truth, by praising him, by being zealous for his name, when we have an eye to God in our natural and in our civil actions, by labouring to draw others to God; by seeking to convert others, and so make them instruments of glorifying God. We glorify God in a high degree when we suffer for God, and seal the gospel with our blood, when we give God the glory of all that we do, by a holy life."

This entire chapter is worthy of our study.

(Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, pp10-18)

Something for Everyone

Before the Reformation, it was believed that the only way to serve God was by taking holy orders and removing yourself from the normal world. People with 'ordinary' jobs were viewed as second class citizens, and this led to a two tier system of clergy and laity. The Reformation changed this. It was accepted that all work and activity that was not sinful could and should be done to the glory of God - whether a plough boy or dish-washer, a shelf stacker or barista, a managing director, or consultant surgeon.

God calls people to different roles, situations, and seasons in life, so that He can be glorified in all places, at all times. Since it is God's eternal purpose that His people live to praise His glory (Ephesians 1:6), it is therefore the Christian's responsibility in life to do all to the glory of God. Remember, *"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."* (1 Corinthians 10:31) Let us therefore purposefully live to the glory of God in our lives!

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