

REFORMATION 500:

Heart & Sola

by James Gimbel

The Latin word *sola* (*solus, soli*) means “alone.” Luther and the Reformation theologians used this term to modify some important points of Reformation theology that ran counter to popular and church opinion. How many solas are there in the Lutheran Reformation? If you are familiar with Luther’s writing, three are prominently used together: *sola gratia* (“grace alone”), *sola fide* (“faith alone”), and *sola Scriptura* (“Scripture/God’s Word alone”). In Luther’s writing, he is very clear about the pre-eminence of another *sola*: *solus Christus* (“Christ alone”). If you do a Google search, you will likely see a fifth, *soli deo gloria* (“to the glory of God alone”), which emerged from later Calvinist theology and for various theological reasons is generally not included with the Lutheran four.

SOLA GRATIA

WE ARE SAVED BY GRACE ALONE

Luther learned his theology in the Augustinian tradition of the one universal Christian Church in Western civilization: Roman Catholicism. The church of Luther’s day had drifted from early Christianity; the church of Luther’s day was “stingy” with God’s forgiveness and even sold it for a price.

The roots of Christianity for the first four centuries emphasized a message which is also clear in Lutheran theology today: although God is just, He is also merciful and gracious. God’s justice comes through His laws and decrees and expectations for all humanity, including believers. God’s mercy was shown through the pages of biblical history when He chose not to completely and immediately destroy sinners—and every person is a sinner through Original Sin and Actual Sin. God’s grace was shown as a free gift from God—forgiveness, eternal life, and salvation—for humanity.

Grace is, above all, a gift. It is not earned or bought. Grace is not something that is attached to lineage or to a nominal association with a group (like the chosen nation or the church) or to anything a person could use to attract God’s attention and favour. Instead, grace is God’s gift of Jesus and His righteousness to give us forgiveness, reflecting

God and His graciousness. Human salvation originates in God’s amazing, unexplainable love for a fallen world—for sinners. St. Paul writes in Romans 5:8: “God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” And St. John echoes in 1 John 4:10: “This is love: not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His son to be the propitiation [appeasing of wrath] for our sins.”

Luther’s message was revolutionary, and eventually reforming. He didn’t believe that God wanted the Church to withhold forgiveness from the penitent sinner, peace from the anxious and fearful, strength from the weak, or hope from the doubting. Luther didn’t barter God’s grace for human effort or action; he gave God’s gifts freely, as he himself had been freed from guilt and shame and fear by the Bible’s message of a loving and forgiving God.

Although there is an element of Lutheran thinking that posits *sola fide* against a person’s good works, at the core, it is *sola gratia*, God’s gracious gift, that puts a person’s efforts at bay. Forgiveness, life, and salvation are given by God (a gift, *gratia*), not earned by human effort of any kind. God wants to give this gift to every human; God goes to tremendous sacrifice to make this a reality. Justice is appeased by God’s gift of Jesus as a sacrifice

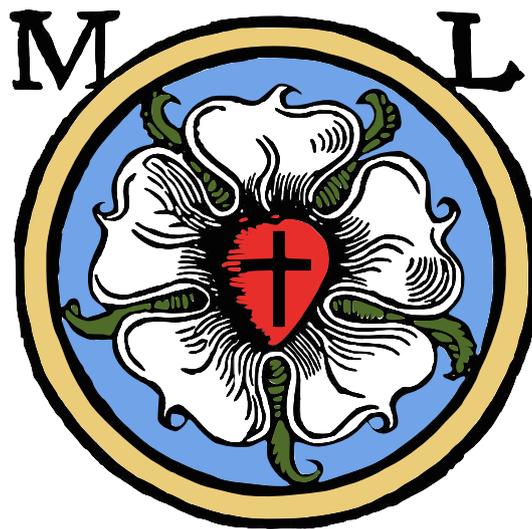
for the sins of the whole world (John 3:16).

Sola gratia—grace alone, not human action or effort or attraction, brings salvation.

SOLA FIDE

WE ARE SAVED THROUGH FAITH ALONE

Luther lived in a world where the church and culture taught that God was not only demanding and angry, but also distant, unapproachable, and inaccessible. The pope was the vicar (substitute representative) of Christ until Christ would return; those who served the pope and the church held that they were closer to God (and thus received more of God’s favour). Pilgrimages that took one closer to Rome and the pope were an opportunity to “get closer” to God. Attending



the local cathedrals or churches brought a person closer to God, but the whole of God's grace (like the blood of Christ in the Sacrament of Holy Communion) was kept back for the local priest and not given to the ordinary person. Attendance at church was expected as a step toward God, whether or not the Scriptures, liturgy, hymns, or sermon were understood or meant anything to the worshiper.

Luther radically changed two things. First, he articulated that faith itself is the work of God's grace, by the Holy Spirit through Word and the Sacraments. These Means of Grace initiate and maintain a relationship with God. Luther emphasized God's promise of grace to create faith. God's Word, the liturgy, the message, and prayers were meant to be in the vernacular of the day. Luther translated the Bible into a profoundly beautiful German language. He retained many components of the historic liturgy but translated it into German and accompanied it with vigorous new, sing-able hymns. Music was used to teach, encourage, and unify the people in worship.

Second, Luther focused on faith as a relationship. He marveled at the Incarnation of Jesus Christ as a tiny baby, born on earth to be among us and live and die as one of us. Luther proclaimed the "Great Exchange" of Christ living with and for us so that we might live with and for Him. Luther envisioned the Sacraments as real interactions of God coming to us, entering into a relationship with us, beginning and sustaining a living and vibrant relationship of faith. In the meaning to the First Commandment, this relationship is described as one that fears, but also loves and trusts in God above all things. God was not detached from the world, but came to the world to save sinners.

Luther offered that real, living, loving, caring God for the hurts and needs and sins and strengthening of the world, through faith: *sola fide*—faith alone.

SOLA SCRIPTURA

WE ARE GUIDED BY SCRIPTURE ALONE

In this *sola*, Luther was seen as a rebellious heretic challenging the authority and power of the pope and all things Catholic, but also upsetting the structure of society. His main premise was that the Word of God must remain as the authority and source of life and belief. He believed that the Bible was God's Word and the ultimate guide for the Church, even the pope. He also believed civil authority rightly proceeded from God's will for the common good.

Whereas the ordinary laymen and even priests had been forbidden from studying the Scriptures (for fear that they might not understand or might misapply what was written), Luther encouraged and expected clergy and laity to read, learn, study, mark, and inwardly digest the Word of God.

If and when there were questions about what was to be believed and practiced by the Church, Luther insisted that the Word of God was to be the guide. Luther hoped in this regard to correct and redirect the Roman Catholic Church. After being excommunicated by the pope, however, he instead exerted his influence in shaping how the heirs of the reformation would practice the Christian faith. Scripture alone was to guide all doctrine and belief, even if human reason, tradition, and practice suggested otherwise.

Although the direct quote is a bit uncertain, Luther's famous "Here I Stand" statement was backed by an equally important confession of faith: "Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason, I cannot and will not recant." *Sola Scriptura*—Scripture alone, guided and empowered his stance.

SOLUS CHRISTUS

WE ARE SAVED BY CHRIST ALONE

In this *sola*, we see Luther's greatest passion: Jesus Christ. Whatever else we may read and hear about Luther, Jesus was his most priceless treasure. He never wanted to stand in the way of Jesus Christ at work in his life and through his writing.

Luther marveled at Jesus' incarnation, the creator of the universe becoming subject to the created forces and people—for our salvation. Luther marveled at Jesus' miracles, often imagining what others might be thinking or saying as the miracles occurred. Luther marveled at the transfiguration, was thrilled by the resurrection of Jesus, and expected to see Jesus return for him before he died. Luther was absolutely humbled by the sacrificial atonement for the salvation of humanity, but ultimately, Luther was astounded that Jesus could live in love and save him. Luther was always in awe that Jesus the Christ would know and care for a sinner like him.

Luther said, "If anyone would knock at my heart and say, 'Who lives here?' I would respond 'Not Martin Luther, but the Lord Jesus Christ.'" *Solus Christus*—Christ alone, for us and in us.

IN CONCLUSION...

At the heart of the matter, Holy Scripture (alone) says, we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. As St. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this not of your own doing, it is a gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."

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