

# The Five Solas of the Reformation

## Sola Scriptura - Part 1

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Deuteronomy 31:9,12-13; 32:46-47

*9 So Moses wrote this law and delivered it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel...<sup>12</sup> "Gather the people together, men and women and little ones, and the stranger who is within your gates, that they may hear and that they may learn to fear the Lord your God and carefully observe all the words of this law,<sup>13</sup> "and that their children, who have not known it, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land which you cross the Jordan to possess."*

*46 and He said to them: "Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe—all the words of this law."<sup>47</sup> "For it is not a futile thing for you, because it is your life, and by this word you shall prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to possess." NKJV*

- **Outline**
- **Sola Scriptura**
- Solus Christus
- Sola Gratia
- Sola Fide
- Soli Deo Gloria
- **Historical Background - The Reformation in a Nutshell**

Sadly, modern Christians are absolutely clueless about a significant period of time called the Reformation. If you ask most Evangelical Christians today whether they were Catholic or Protestant, they would know just how to answer the question and say without much thought, Protestant. Although they would know that they weren't Catholic, they would not be able to give a good answer as to what it means to be Protestant. "So, what is it that you are protesting?" you might ask them. The brave might respond, "the Catholic church." It would become painfully obvious that these protesting "soldiers" were unaware of why they were in battle and unsure of who the enemy really was.

The term Reformation is the historical name given to a period of time beginning in the sixteenth century where a cry went forth in the western European church for reform. The dominant Catholic church was corrupt; its courts were corrupt; the church's magisterium had confused its role with the role of the *civil* magistrate. When it comes to reform like this however, it is always messy, but necessary. This was especially true of this Reformation because it encompasses parallel movements in various countries, primarily Switzerland, Germany, England, Scotland and France. There were faithful works for reform in the region and there was plenty of unfaithful. The cry for reform for some was at times not uniform; some felt the most important thing to reform was the incumbents holding office in the church; others felt that the officer's agenda should shift from secular matters to spiritual; others felt that it was the vitality that needed polishing to attract those who had left; and still other felt the heart of reform began with theology.

Given our high altitude consideration of the Reformation, we will say that there were four primary movements during the Reformation. Most historians would say that the starting gun of the Reformation was Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenburg, Germany. The second large body of commotion started in Switzerland by John Calvin in Geneva. The later large movement in Reformation centered not on an individual, but rather a group called the Anabaptists. Lastly, a fourth major movement in the Reformation was the counter attack (called the counter Reformation) mounted by the Catholic church in response to the success of the Reformers. These events encompass a period of roughly two and a half centuries during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.

The term Protestant frequently is used to refer to anyone who favored the Reformation. Technically though, this term began in Germany in 1529 by the leadership in response to the Catholic vote at the Second Diet of Speyer which declared their intolerance of the movements toward reformation in Germany. Prior to this the proponents of the Reformation were referred to as Evangelicals.

- **The Historic Problem of Tradition**

The difficulties of applying tradition have been ever present. We as humans tend to enjoy the predictability of our traditions and given the short duration of our lives and the manner in which truth is handed down generationally, traditions have a habit of becoming law. We see this very thing happening in Jesus' day as He rebukes the Pharisees for elevating the traditions of men above or even parallel to the commandments of God. (Mark 7:5-13)

Since the time of the Apostolic church, there have been those who faithfully attempted to institute a tradition for the faithful handling of

the Scriptures. Most likely beginning with Irenaeus in the second century, who developed a formal method for the interpretation of Scripture (now called biblical hermeneutics) to today where we have defined rules called higher and lower textual criticism, these traditions are very useful for ensuring that we come as servants of the Scriptures rather than princes over it.

The Catholic argument was that God had given not only the Scriptures to the church for authoritative instruction, but had also given the authoritative traditions as well as the authoritative magisterium. This position is argued from the Scriptures by drawing from the fact that before the canon had been closed, oral, Apostolic instruction was authoritative and that this pattern of both oral and written authority was something to continue until Christ's return.

A second problematic tradition was the Catholic belief that the Church Magisterium was the body where truth was not only *defended* but also *preserved*. Their belief in Papal descent (lineage of Popes coming through Peter) was the means by which this preservation would be accomplished. This meant that the Scriptures could not be faithfully understood by the laity and the casual reading and study of the Scriptures was discouraged (and at times forbidden through law). Obviously when the Magisterium becomes corrupt, so too their pronouncements and thus the exact scenario that lead to the cry for reform. At the heart of this cry was a demand for reforming the theology of the Church which the Reformers believed had departed from the Biblical, Apostolic teaching as well as the historic teaching of the faithful church. The theologies in question are the five topics of this series.

- **A Biblical Defense of Sola Scriptura**

This Latin phrase which translated means "Scripture alone" is the starting place for our study because from it emanates our other topics. Before we consider what this means, let's consider what it does *not* mean.

- It *does not* mean that the Bible is the only place where truth can be found.
- It *does not* mean that the Bible is equally clear to all people.
- It *does not* mean that the instruction of Church is not helpful and authoritative.

It does mean however, that the Scriptures are our only ultimate and infallible authority for faith and practice. We are not talking here however about "solo Scriptura" which might be what we would call those who want themselves to be the only teachers (the "just-gimme-me-and-my-Bible" group) and to repudiate all others. We are however saying that the Scriptures are our final authority and that they are infallible. All other authorities, even though equally as valid, are subordinate to the Scriptures and are fallible.

*"14 But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them,<sup>15</sup> and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.<sup>16</sup> All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,<sup>17</sup> that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."* 2 Timothy 3:14-17 NKJV

Central to the question of Sola Scriptura is the question of sufficiency. The Protestant understanding is that the Scriptures are complete and that they are absolutely sufficient for all that we need for instruction in righteousness, faith and salvation. There is a distinction to be made between formal sufficiency and material sufficiency. The first pertains to whether the Scripture alone (apart from instructors, parents, and church discipline) is sufficient for all training. The second concept states that the message or content of the Scripture is sufficient. The Protestant position is that God has given the offices and authority to the Church as a blessing for her. However in all cases the content of the Scriptures is ultimately authoritative.

- **Historical Objections**

**The Protestant Church is a dismal failure due to all of the factious denominations.** - While this charge is painfully true about the Protestant movement, it is still equally true of the Catholic church which has not avoided to any measure the divisions and factions with its walls. Where the Catholic church has maintained a common name yet divided under one roof, the Protestants have broken into multiple names and multiple roofs. However, it is Christ who will sanctify the Bride and prepare her for the wedding feast. We believe that our victorious Lord will accomplish this sanctification and the Church will one day be unified.

**Oral instruction as well as written instruction are equally authoritative in the Scriptures.** - This comes from 2 Timothy 1:13 (and others) and is motivated by the belief that the pattern of oral and written instruction prior to the canonization of the Scriptures was normative and that the Church is responsible for providing the equally infallible and authoritative oral instruction.

**You use circular reasoning by claiming that the Scriptures are the word of God because it claims to be.** - Guilty as charged. Although this claim does not necessarily come from the Catholic/Protestant debate it is raised frequently when discussing Sola Scriptura. The argument is misguided though because everyone uses circular reasoning when they are defending their ultimate source of authority. When defending ultimate authority you are always forced to borrow from it in order to defend it's authority. The primary way we defend the authority of Scriptures is prophetic authority, Apostolic authority and the example of our Lord Jesus.