

## SOLAS

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2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

For the past five weeks, I have preached a sermon series on the creeds and confessions of the Presbyterian Church—the statements of faith which emerged during the period of church history that we know as the Protestant Reformation. The occasion for this series was to commemorate that this year marks the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther’s posting his objections to the church’s practice of selling indulgences. An indulgence was like a text message to heaven pleading for a loved one to be transferred from purgatory to paradise. An indulgence was normally obtained through prayer. There were priests, however, who were selling these indulgences for money. Martin Luther found this practice abhorrent on many levels, and on October 31, 1517, he made public his 95 objections to the selling of indulgences.

In the grand scheme of things, the matter of indulgences was not that great of an issue. It was a symptom of wider issues within the church. Imagine that the city council of a town has been taken over by the mafia and someone posts a message to Facebook complaining about burned out street lights not getting repaired. Street lights are not the problem. They are an indicator of a problem. It was the same with indulgences. They were not the problem, but Luther's complaint struck a nerve. It enabled people to rally and say, “Yes, I thought something was wrong.” The demand for reform of the church swept across Europe.

Those people calling for this reform were called the Reformers. Initially, the Reformers sought reform within the church. But the church fought back and forced the Reformers to create new places to worship. These were the Protestant—or protestor—churches. Presbyterians fall into that category.

Each week through October we looked at a different Confession of our church—those documents of faith expressing our beliefs. Today, I want to step back and consider what links those confessions together.

I believe we would all agree that humans have a tendency to complicate things. We believe that more is better—more stuff, more money, more control, more power. This was certainly the fate of the church in the 1500s when, without a doubt, many were using the church for their own personal or political gains. In some places, for example, men would purchase the office of bishop because of the political benefits of that position. The bishops controlled the church and the church controlled the government.

Setting aside the pure and blatant abuses of power, we could say that the church was victim of people simply attempting to do what they felt was right by

instituting new rules and ordinances to guide the faithful. Over the centuries, these rules and regulations piled up like an episode of Hoarders. The intent may have been well-meaning, but the results were stifling. Martin Luther may have objected to the selling of indulgences, but he lit a fuse under the expanding desire to reboot the church.

Let's give the church the benefit of the doubt and say that over fifteen centuries the church had accumulated various practices that weren't in keeping with the core beliefs of Christianity. John Calvin diplomatically called them “innovations.” Modern scholars have looked back and been able to ascertain common objectives running through the efforts of the Reformers, common themes linking their work together. We call these themes the *solas*. The word *sola* (s-o-l-a) is Latin for ‘alone.’ Scholars have identified five such *solas*. They call them *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, and *solus Deo gloria*. In English, these mean scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone, and to the glory of God alone. It would be compelling to think that the Reformers were running through the streets of Europe on their way to storm the cathedrals chanting *sola fide*, *sola fide*. But they weren't. These terms had not been formulated yet. The ideas do appear in the writings of the Reformers. For example, Philip Melancthon, a Lutheran reformer, wrote in 1554, “only by grace do we justify and only by faith are we justified.” While these *solas* are found throughout the Reformation, they weren't systematically articulated until the 20th century. We call these the ‘great watchwords’ of the Reformation.

This morning, I would like to look at three of the *solas* to give you an idea of their importance.

The first is *sola scriptura*—literally ‘by scripture alone.’ To us today, the Holy Scriptures are omnipresent. We have Bibles at home, at church, at hotels, even in our phones. What is your native language? We have a Bible for that. We have different translations, paraphrases, study bibles, children's bibles. There is the Cotton Patch Bible—a folksy, plain-spoken bible written by a farmer from Georgia. There is the Redneck Bible which includes verses such as, “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his favorite shirt with the sleeves cut off.” My own uncle, Andrew Edington, paraphrased the gospels into a book he called, *The Word Made Fresh*. He covered the New Testament and then moved to the Old Testament releasing the books as he finished them. He once said that he got a letter from a lady in Texas asking him to hurry up. She was getting old and wanted to know how the story ended.

The easy access to Scripture that we enjoy today was not the case before the 1500s. Bibles were rare, expensive, and only available in your choice of Hebrew, Greek, or Latin. The work of translators coupled with the development of Gutenberg's movable-type printing press, made the Holy Scriptures available to people in their native languages. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, weekly home Bible studies became immensely popular in cities such as Zurich in the mid-1500s.

This freedom to study scriptures also brought the freedom to interpret scripture. Up to this time, the church held tight control over God's Word. The people, for the most part, were at the mercy of the priests for interpretation. Furthermore, over time, the church had accumulated a large body of tradition concerning the interpretation of scripture. The Catholic church today continues to assert that scripture is to be understood through the twin lenses of scripture and tradition.

The Reformers, however, held that scripture alone takes precedence over any church tradition or interpretation. Scripture interprets scripture. The Reformers were led by the Letter of Second Timothy which says, *All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness* (3:16). The Reformers embraced this new freedom to know God's Word, and to know it alone.

The second *sola*—*sola fide* or 'faith alone'—is the assertion that good works are not a requirement for salvation. Salvation is a result of faith—faith alone—and is not contingent upon actions such as attending mass, making charitable donations, praying to the saints, or anything else. Such works, according to Reformed theology, are a response to faith. For example, we give because we are saved, not to earn our salvation. We attend worship because we have been saved. Paul's words in his letter to the Romans are clear, *For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law* (3:28). The Reformers' call for faith alone freed them from the stifling bond the church had placed over them.

The third *sola* is *sola gratia* or 'grace alone.' This one maintains that salvation comes by divine grace. Salvation is a gift. It is not something we've earned or deserved. Yes, this sounds similar to faith alone, but grace alone adds an element of equality—no individual is better or more deserving in God's eyes than another—no queen, no archbishop, no prince. No one is penalized because they are not born good enough. Furthermore, because God's grace is free we cannot influence God by our works or deeds. Imagine how freeing it would be to people living in a class system of nobility and commoners to be told that the peasant is as valuable to God as the duke or bishop.

The remaining two of the five *solas* are 'Christ alone' and 'glory to God alone.' I'm not going to cover these this morning, but I encourage you to look at them on your own.

Standing back, we can see the *solas* as representing the efforts of the Reformers to strip away from the church of what they viewed as excesses that had accumulated over the centuries, excesses that hindered or even prevented people having a relationship with God.

The motto of the Reformation is *Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, which means ‘the church reformed, always being reformed.’ The Reformation is not over. We know that we are always going to slip back into the old ways. But being always reformed means that we must take every measure to monitor ourselves and identify anytime we might be keeping someone away from God, whether intentionally or unintentionally, that we are not doing anything to hinder someone’s relationship with their Lord. So to be Reformed means to be opening our arms day by day to the world, and to find those times when we might have inserted what Calvin called those “innovations.”

And so we are concluding this discussion of the Reformation and the Confessions and what they have taught us. On this All Saints Sunday I think they are a wonderful reminder of how those saints who have gone before have been our teachers and guides so that we might have our church, our beliefs, our faith today. And as we reflect on the Reformation let us always remember “scripture alone, faith alone, grace alone.” Amen.