What Are the Five Solas?

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The five solas were not exactly Reformation slogans, but they serve as a good summary of the Reformed faith. Neither Martin Luther nor John Calvin nor any other Protestant Reformer summarized his teachings in a tidy list including Scripture alone, Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, to the glory of God alone. Taking flight in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this fivefold summary became the shorthand version of what is known as Reformed theology. While this description of the Reformed faith came later, it still captures well the core of the gospel in all its graciousness and Christ-centeredness, just as it is revealed in the Scriptures. These five solas show the glory of God's gracious way of salvation in a way that sets the tone for true theology, resounding in how we think and live in this world.

Sola Scriptura

Theology must be Scripturally grounded. God's life-giving speech reveals to us His salvation and calls us to faith and repentance. We were once darkness, but now we are light in the Lord (Eph. 5:8). Satan blinds the minds of unbelievers, lest they see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ (2 Cor. 4:4). Yet the God who commands light to shine out of darkness shines in our hearts, giving us the light "of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). God always does this by the Spirit working through the Word. The Holy Spirit is the Author of Scripture, and He speaks through Scripture (Heb. 3:7). The Scriptures teach us everything that we need to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ and to be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:15–17). This is why those who do not speak according to the rule of Scripture have no light in them (Isa. 8:20). Yet without the Spirit, even the Scriptures cannot help us. We are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1–2), our minds and hearts are darkened (Eph. 4:18; Rom. 1:21), and we need someone to raise us from the dead and turn on the lights (Eph. 5:14). If Scripture is sufficient to make us wise for faith and life in Christ, then Scripture alone can be our guide to walking with God. Everything else is both useless and superfluous. Yet we must be born of the Spirit in order to see God's kingdom (John 3:5). Only through the Spirit working by and with the Scriptures in our hearts can we walk in the light with the God who is light (1 John 1:7).

Solus Christus

Theology must be Christ focused. We should believe everything Scripture teaches us because it is God's Word (John 8:47). Christ is the main point of the Bible, and the whole Bible testifies to Him (John 5:39; Luke 24:27; 1 Peter 1:10–12). Without the Spirit, we could not receive God's testimony in Scripture; without Christ, even God's words cannot save us. Theology is Christ-focused because no one comes to the Father apart from Him (John 14:6) and because the Spirit seeks to glorify Him for our salvation (John 16:8–14). Jesus is truly God and truly man. He alone can reconcile God and man, killing animosity and creating friendship (Gen. 3:15). The Father is well pleased with His Son (Mark 1:11), and He is well pleased with us only when we are in the Son (Eph. 1:6). Jesus alone can save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21) because He alone is their Prophet revealing to them by His Word and Spirit the will of God for their salvation; He alone is their Priest who offered Himself as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice for them; and He alone is their King who subdues them to Himself, rules and defends them, and restrains and conquers all His and their enemies (WSC 24–26). There is no fellowship with God apart from Christ, and we count all things loss compared to the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord (Phil. 3:8).

Sola Fide

Theology must be faith driven. Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Heb. 11:6). Like the empty hand of a beggar, faith reaches out to receive Christ. By faith, we believe that He who has promised is able to perform that which He promises (Rom. 4:21). God will fulfill His purposes, but if we do not believe, then we will not be established (Isa. 7:9; 45:17). Faith has no merit before God. We are justified by faith without the works of the law (Rom. 3:28). We are not saved by good works but are saved for good works (Eph. 2:8–10). Knowledge of Christ through Scripture, assent to these truths in our minds, and Spirit–wrought trust from our hearts characterize saving faith. We live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us (Gal. 2:20).

Sola Gratia

Theology must be grace-saturated. If we are saved by faith, then we are saved not by works but by grace alone (Rom. 11:6). Grace is God's generous disposition by which He lavishes us with good things that we do not deserve. Everything we receive from God is by grace, from our daily bread to the final resurrection of our bodies (Ps. 145:8). The grace of God is vested in Christ and He alone gives saving grace to those whom the Father pities in His mercy (Ps. 103:13). This is why the Apostle Paul's letters begin, "Grace and peace to you from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2). The Holy Spirit teaches us through Scripture that salvation is by grace alone because salvation is by faith in Christ alone. Grace is not a sentimental idea leading us to ignore our sins, not caring how we live. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:11–14).

Soli Deo Gloria

Theology must be God-dominated. Each of the three persons of the Trinity saves us in harmonious unity in a way that leads to worship all three divine persons. We have fellowship with the Son in grace, with the Father in love, and with the Holy Spirit in strength and comfort (2 Cor. 13:14; Acts 9:31). Because we have nothing that we have not received (1 Cor. 4:7), we should do all things in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the Father through Him (Col. 3:17). We live by the Spirit and keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). If we should live to God's glory, then should we not listen to the Spirit speaking in His Word, receiving God's grace through faith alone in Christ, all to God's glory alone?

Ultimately, the five solas are not merely a summary of Reformed theology. They guard and clarify the gospel, mounting a friendly offensive attack on an unbelieving world, transforming Christ's enemies into His friends. The word alone is important in the solas. Alone secures the God-centered character of the gospel and of the Christian life. The five solas do not say all that needs to be said about true theology, faith, and life, but they are a good start and a clear guide to keep us on the right track.

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