

Sola Deo

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I once was asked by a very devout Roman Catholic friend to clarify and explain the meaning of *Sola Scriptura*. After some searches online, I discovered that there is a plethora of writing on this topic as well as the other two “Solos”, *Sola Gratia* and *Sola Fide*, but, their authors often were not from the tradition that started these notions off in the first place; the Lutheran tradition. And honestly, I have found many of these pieces to be strongly apologetic, which cannot be helped to some extent, making them somewhat challenging for use in a truly ecumenical discussion. Also, many times I found the authors got so lost in defending the punch line of the Sola, that they lost the rich theology that the original reformers really were striking at. What I long for, and hope this piece can do, is to provide a simple, non-inflammatory explanation of these topics that one will find useful in their discussions with their fellow Christian brothers and sisters.

With this said, lets give a touch of history to begin. Martin Luther, the Father of the Reformation, lived in a time of true cross roads in the western church. The Age of Reason had begun, and was in full swing by the time Luther was born. The relative power of the church, headed by the pontiff in Rome, was waning as the power of the nation-state in Europe was on the rise. Just 25 years before Luther was to nail his 95 thesis to the door at Wittenburg church, Christopher Columbus, at the behest of the King and Queen of Spain, not Rome, set sail to discover for Europe a “New World”. New thought was streaming everywhere, ideas from the ancient world were being rediscovered, and these changes affected the church as an institution as much as it was affecting the people in it. For centuries Rome had been the center of western civilization, and as a result, it had become the central dominating power in terms of land, power, and thought. This was changing, and Luther was there to take part.

The other thing that was true of this era was that the church was at a crossroads in self identity and message. Because of its enormous power as the central force in every aspect of life, the church as an institution had grown very comfortable with accepting its “right” to dictate how things were to go. Several church leaders of this time felt it was a part of their privilege to decide for themselves when they had to follow the true dictates and teachings of the church and when they could side step a few rules to gain more power, prestige, or simply use the tools that the church offered them for an intent that was never meant to be. This is not to say that this was a new occurrence, no, it was not. Rather, because of the power and prestige the church had gained through the intervening centuries from the fall of Rome to the 16th century, corruption in many forms grew into it just like any other organization on earth. Because the church was no longer the only place knowledge and insight came from, this weakness that had developed was to eventually be revealed and had to be reformed to restore the message of God’s people to the right track.

Luther was not afraid to be the bold person to step out and do this. While I hold Luther in high regard, he is not Saint Luther for a distinct reason, he wasn’t always right nor was every idea he had appropriate for reforming the church (e.g. his exhortations against the Jewish people later in

his life). But it is at the core of Luther's theology, and that of those that followed him into the tenuous chasm between the truth and the establishment, that was resonant amongst God's people of the time in the western world. In reality none of this is new, none was original. What was new was the emphasis, and the power of the masses to hold it to themselves that made the message so powerful. The Lutheran reformers thus grasped onto three key cornerstones of this truth; Scripture, Faith, and Grace.

Sola Scriptura

Sola Scriptura is the first, and I think the most widely confused of these topics that was wrought from the reformation. "Scripture alone" was the punch line for a theology that placed the word of God in its rightful place in the hierarchy of knowledge in the world; foremost. The problem has come that many have taken the theology too far, either in rejection of it, or in enthusiastic expansion of it. The Lutheran notion of the expression is simply this: that Scripture is the only true norm and judge of knowledge in God that we have on this earth. For me this is best explained by use of a two scale balance. When it comes to deriving truth and measure of authority regarding God and theology, if you place tradition, reason, piety, or even history on one side, and scripture on the other, scripture will always, always, out weigh the other. This is not to say that truth cannot be derived from any of these other sources, which would be patently false, rather, when it comes to our knowledge of God, Holy Scripture is the great trump card in the deck of truth cards in this world.

This being said, I think I need to tell you what Sola Scriptura is not. Sola Scriptura is not a rejection of tradition as a source of truth. Sacred Tradition is not without merits and without the power to reveal God to us in our lives. It is only when tradition runs contrary to scripture; scripture that has the power of "reproof" as Saint Paul writes, that this "revealed truth" is called into question as a simple creation of humanity. Sola Scriptura does not mean that the Word of God is trapped and incarcerated within the black and white text of scripture. We cannot deny that the messages of God can be stark in the words provided in scripture, but we also have to be cognoscente that the gospel which the scriptures pronounce, is the Living Word that cannot be captured by any literalist reading of our poor human attempt to capture the infinite knowledge of the Creator. Thus Sola Scriptura is not asking us to gouge out eyes, or to cut off limbs, but to accept that God's Word, as glimpsed at through scripture, provides us a clear guide path to our understanding of him. Sola Scriptura does not turn the message of the Gospel into a law book for theologians and for those quick to judge a way to condemn the world, but provides the scriptures as a gift of stories and rich histories to allow us to mirror Christian virtue in all that we do and say. Sola Scriptura does not reject reason and science as sources of fact and truth in our world. It has always been God's intent that we discover, dominate, and understand the world that he created for us, and continues to create every day. What Sola Scriptura does, however, is tell us that the power of reason and science can lead us astray, and justify thoughts and concepts that would be hurtful to this creation, thus we are called to reflect back on the Creative Word, to provide the proper perspective of rational thought in this exploration. Sola Scriptura does not counter act the power of the Holy Spirit to act upon the soul and provide truth to us in new and mysterious ways. Rather it upholds the Spirit as the true author of scripture itself and empowers those who receive its Good News to speak boldly in word and action as witnesses of this message throughout the world. Sola Scriptura does, however, call into question those who

proclaim a message in the name of scripture but fail to speak the true language of the Gospel through their acts and in harshness towards the Lord's flock on earth. Sola Scriptura does not mean we can read anything we, as individual humans, want into the message God offers to us. No matter how pious our intent, Sola Scriptura recognizes that it is through his flock, gathered as "one body," that the fullness of his message is revealed. While we may wish to use scripture for our own purposes, this wonderful message transcends time, space, and every poor human attempt to block its inerrancy of revealed truth in our lives and the lives of humanity everywhere.

The great Roman Catholic biblical theologian Scott Hahn rightly asserts that in a very real sense the Bible, as we have it today, does not outline, in a legalistic sense, a strict notion of Sola Scriptura (meaning the scripture is the only source of truth). Without reservation, I want to say that the original reformers never made this claim. But this does not discount the fact that the scriptures are the fundamental and best source this world has to the knowledge of God. For this reason, the reformers, being challenged by a confusing message of unattainable salvation, wanted to counter with the best bedrock that could be found and was revealed to mankind for all times, the Scriptures. It is without question that we find today that it was through the blessings of the written texts of scripture, prayerfully canonized, deliberately recalled and written by the hand picked prophets and apostles, and derived by the inspiration of God himself, that the cornerstone of all Christian faith can be found. Without this fundamental norm of truth about the Almighty, our human weakness would only further propel us to believe the untruths of the principalities of darkness. It is for this reason one must conclude that it is in scripture alone, that we can trust in the protection that is revealed in the Word that became flesh and that walked upon this earth.

Sola Fide

The next Sola that I feel so compelled to discuss is Sola Fide. It is without great study that most anyone who was taught about the Reformation in one way or another can recall the revelation by Luther and his associates that we are "justified by faith alone!" Reacting to an age where purveyors of the tools of the western church were using every means at their disposal to prey upon and imprison souls to despair that they would never find favor with God, this statement, this punch line, needed to be screamed out loud with a vengeance. The problem is that for the modern ear, this seems to be an endorsement of the "anything goes" epicurean philosophy of the notion that God is all Mr. Feel-good and there is nothing for me to do but say I have faith, and I will be alright. Without any question, this is a misnomer of what Sola Fide really means.

Sola Fide is a theology that teaches that faith, true faith, is what saves us from God's wrath and enables us to enter God's tender mercy. As Luther repeats over and over again in his Small Catechism, when discussing the ten commandments of Mosaic Law, if "... we fear and love God ..." we will be provided with justification when we are called upon to answer for our deeds in this life. This is not a blank check for us to go on a sinful path forever and just brush off God's commandments, but rather a powerful responsibility to remain true to the Gospel in everything we do. Many in Luther's time criticized his exhortations that it was through faith, and faith alone we are saved, as if Luther had stated that how this faith was reflected in our lives was unimportant.

My very devout Roman Catholic friend was quick to point out to me, in our discussions, that as Luther translated the Bible into the vernacular German, he made two very strong personal impositions that my friend found strongly questionable. The first is the insertion of the word “alone” after the word “faith” in Paul’s exhortations on that topic in his epistle to the Romans. The second is Luther’s unabashed commentary on the differing books of the Bible and his belief’s about their worthiness, or lack thereof, especially the Book of James, wherein it can be read “You see that a person is justified by what he does, and not faith alone ... faith without works, is dead” (of note, Luther made a point of including all the books of the vulgate cannon regardless of his views, as he felt all scripture was inspired by the spirit and, regardless of his views, was meritorious to be a part of the Bible). So does scripture, the bedrock of the faith, which I just spent considerable effort defending above as the only norm on which to judge truth, disprove Luther and Sola Fide? Hardly! Rather, it is precisely the message that it is in faith that we are justified that makes this scripture so powerful. I offer that Luther agreed that without a person acknowledging the obligation to show forth their faith in the world, true faith, the faith that saves is still some distance away.

“I cannot change at all what I have consistently taught about this until now, namely that “though faith” (as St. Peter says) we receive a different, new, clean heart and that, for the sake of Christ our mediator, God will and does regard us as completely righteous and holy. Although sin in the flesh is still not completely gone or dead, God will nevertheless not count it or consider it. Good works follow such faith, renewal, and forgiveness of sin ...” “Furthermore, we also say that if good works do not follow, then faith is false and not true.”

- Dr. Martin Luther, Smalcald Articles, 1537

The question of the reformation on faith was, in a nutshell, do good works develop faith, or does faith push the soul to do good works as evidence of its control over a person’s heart? Sola Fide offers the answer to this “chicken before the egg” kind of question. The answer is that for a work to truly be good, it must stream from faith, a faith from the one that is goodness itself, Christ. When it comes to justification, which is Sola Fide’s primary intent, one must evaluate good and evil based upon who is judging, and ultimately it is God who has to make this call. So while people can easily do things that appear in our human limited vision as “good,” we are told to not judge by the evangelist, but rather let God be the judge of all. God looks deeper and more clearly than any set of human eyes can, and what he seeks is a heart that is pure and ready to accept him without question. So in essence the only real mark upon which he will judge is faith, faith that is true, faith that is wholesome in his eyes; and faith that is active through our very body and soul.

Luther himself is credited with developing a name for a heresy that is counter to what Sola Fide really means, “Antinomianism”, meaning “to designate ... [that] as good works do not promote salvation, so neither do evil works hinder it;... so as justified Christians, they are incapable of losing their spiritual holiness, justification, and final salvation by any act of disobedience to, or even by any direct violation of the law of God” (definition taken from the “Catholic Encyclopedia” at newadvent.org). Luther was quick to defend his compatriot Philip Melancthon in his assertion that true faith stems from repentance, stating that loss of faith that

is not active through good works requires constant renewal. Thus Sola Fide is not a free lunch, but a call to repentance, just as echoed by John the Baptist and Christ himself. Sola Fide provides Christian freedom, without question, but more importantly it calls us to faith, a faith that is true, and a faith that drives us to do something with it. As Paul states, and as Christ showed, the law of old was not abolished, but instead it was fulfilled by the living example of the word of God made flesh on this earth.

Many have latched onto this concept of Sola Fide especially when they see Christ's example of challenging the Pharisees and Sadducees during his life. Many read correctly that Christ criticized the Pharisees and the temple leadership for upholding the tenants of Judaic law, but neglecting its deeper, more important, central meaning. Sola Fide calls us to focus first on the heart, the faith, and its disease, before we simply try to cure the symptoms exhibited in our works. But, what we cannot forget is that Christ focused on these leaders, not because they were so wrong in what they were trying to do in their lives, but because they were so close to the realization they could not see it for themselves, or more importantly for the world around them. Sola Fide is the essence of Christian liberty, it emboldens us to know that we are justified and we are poised for the ultimate reward, but it obligates us, nay, requires of us, for the world's sake (of which we are an integral part), to obey the commandments of the essence of the law, and act upon them to infect the world with the one true and holy faith: "Love your God with all your heart, all your mind, and all your soul. And Love your neighbor as yourself."

Solus Christus and Sola Deos Gloria

Before I tackle the final primary Sola that I opened with, Sola Gratia, I feel that it is critical to mention and describe two other important Solas of the Reformation, which I believe have now gained strong consensus across the Christian world; Solus Christus and Sola Deos Gloria.

Solus Christus, meaning "Christ alone", is a simple manifesto of universal Christian belief. Christ is the center, beginning, and ending of what it is to be Christian. It was once said that without Christ, there is no salvation. That statement is truly the heart of the matter when it comes to this Sola. As John offered so beautifully in the opening to his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made ... The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us." Thus Christ is for all believers the living word, the living scripture, through whose example the kingdom of heaven is revealed. Likewise it is through Christ and his redeeming sacrifice in his passion that we are made right with God. Again John is so poignant in stating, "For God so loved the World that he sent his only son, so that all those that believe in him, shall not perish, but have eternal life." Lutheran faith is thus Christ centered, centered upon his revelation of truth to us in this world, and upon whom all Christians cling for their salvation. For this reason we look to Christ as the one and only mediator between God of the Law and God of the Gospel. Both the letters to Timothy and to the Hebrews (1 Timothy 2:5-6, Hebrews 9:15) distinctly specify Christ as the mediator for us before the judgment seat. It is Christ who stands in for us, the lamb who was slain, when it comes time for us to answer for ourselves before the Lord.

If there is any discontinuity in the Christian world on Solus Christus, it probably lies in this last emphasis. Roman Catholic teaching offers that Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ (and thus God), is “co-mediator with Christ.” This would seem to be a direct affront to Scripture and Solus Christus, and if taken too far, it indeed can. I would submit that as time and revelation of the Holy Spirit works in our world that “co-mediator with Christ” will move more and more to “director to Christ.” A deeper and fuller understanding of both Solus Christus and this aspect of Mariology reveals that Mary’s contemplative example towards Christ and his entrustance of her care to the beloved apostle, John, places her as a winnowing fork of belief in Christ himself, and not in herself. In a very true sense Solus Christus makes Mary’s testimony in the Gospel even stronger as she consistently points her way to Christ as the one and only mediator for us, and her, forever.

Sola Deus Gloria, or for the Glory of God alone, is a call to make our lives one with the Glory of God in all that we do. In essence this is a doctrine of unabated love for God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. C.S. Lewis, perhaps, provides the best explanation of this love in his text “The Four Loves”, wherein he explains God-love, and thus love of God, as a love that is selfless in every way, “Agape”. Sola Deus Gloria is a call for us to obey God’s commandment to have no other gods but him and to “love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.” It is a call to not only “buy-in” to God’s love ethic, but to surrender to it; to glorify him in every way and in everything we do. Sola Deus Gloria is a beautiful expression of a doctrine that holds the Golden rule as something that we cannot avoid, it is a call to love selflessly, to give selflessly, to be selfless, period. It refutes a worship of false idols whether they are relics, icons, people, money, sex, or any other god/visage/tangible good we might wish to desire for ourselves. It is a call to be one with what God calls us to be, Faithful servants of the one and only everlasting kingdom. Like with the famous hymn, Sola Deus Gloria calls us to exclaim, Gloria in Excelsis Deo; Glory to God in the Highest!

Sola Gratia

Now we get to the last, but certainly not the least of the Solas, Sola Gratia. For Lutheranism as a movement in the Church catholic, this is the very foundation. Grace alone. Something about that phrase has more power that I can even fathom. Lutheran’s often state, “We are saved by grace alone” as if it was just a simple matter, or a thing to be taken matter-of-factly. For my part I cannot deny that feeling sometimes. But in a real sense, Grace is the thing that is so awesome it should cause us to shiver in our boots. Grace, grace is God power, it is the essence of the Holy Spirit acting in the world, it is the revelation of Christ to humanity, and it is the light, the truth, the way.

So what is Grace? Grace is the free gift of God that enables us to know him, to love him, to make our way to salvation. Grace cannot be earned; it cannot be given a price, at least one we can understand. Grace is the result of Christ’s atonement for our sins on the Cross, it is the redemptive act that removes all blemish from us without our even lifting a finger. It refutes any attempt we might have to earn our way into God’s good stead, and tells us that we are to simply entrust ourselves to it and we will be filled with something greater than the world can offer. Grace has many names: Sanctifying Grace, Sufficient Grace, the Grace the Saves, the Grace to

Empower, the Grace to Love. Grace is the cornerstone of the relationship we ought, and want, and can, have with God, if we only accept it in our lives.

Wow, this grace seems like something well beyond time, space, history, or even me, you say? Well, I ask you a simple question, what is the limit of God's power? Where is it our place to question what God can and cannot do? For my part, I take it as face value that I do not limit God; I don't place him in any box that I might create for myself. Sola Gratia forces us to know that God is infinite, limitless, and beyond our comprehension; but also alive and in us, and with us always. It is the very essence of his love for us that allows us to know, be, and hear his word in the world. Grace, if you will, is the state that Adam and Eve had at the opening Chapter's of Genesis. Creation was made "good" in the eyes of God and it wasn't until Chapter 3 that we see the serpent calling humanity away from this blessed state. In the story of the scriptures the power of God cannot be missed, nor the impact denied.

Let us then start in the beginning, when God, grace, and creation were born. For many years now a debate has rang loudly in our ears regarding Creationism and Darwinism. For one who lives in Grace this debate is simply made mute. How is it that we can limit God's creative power to 7 calendar days? How is it that we can take as pure random chance God's plan for the universe? Genesis provides for us what God created in this world; light and darkness, heavens and earth, beast and fowl, and creature of the sea. He provides for us the nature of our creation, a likeness of himself, created to come to know him and his being (this creation) better, and to worship him in speech, life, and action. Genesis also provides for us the knowledge that the Word of God is creative, in any time and in any place. God's Word has power to make our hands take actions we would otherwise ignore. God's Word challenges us to realize our shortcomings, and to know that we are short of his creative goals. The story of the original act of defiance lets us know that God's creative plan has been disrupted by free will, not accepted, and that we should and ought to long for the reconciliation that grace can bring to us. Sola Gratia means that we entrust God with the power to create and re-create in time and space; to trust that his grace can empower man, his image, to be redeemed and saved, for the sake of all creation.

Creation and re-creation then leads us to Baptism, announced by John the Baptist, and affirmed by Christ's act in the Jordon. Baptism rightly is a sacrament, given to us, by the grace of God. As Luther announces in the Smalcald Articles:

“Baptism is nothing other than God's Word in the water, commanded by God's institution, or, as Paul says, ‘washing by the word.’”

- Dr. Martin Luther, Smalcald Articles, 1537

Original sin, that sin of selfishness we inherit by our first parents, is thus made clean by the Word. Does this mean that we are not forever corrupted by the fall presented by Adam and Eve in the opening book of Scripture? No! As has often been quoted, “we are mere dung that has been covered by snow.” Because we were tainted by original sin before Baptism, we remember, act upon, and have knowledge of good and evil, thus, we are alas sinners that are in constant need of redemption that is in Christ. But it is only by the power of grace that this dung heap is able to break from its cold, dark mold and come to realize the joy that is the salvation in Christ.

Baptism allows us to know this joy, to know this grace, and it is the power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that makes this sacrament real in our world in all times and in all places. It is for this reason that Lutherans hold true to the charge of evangelist, regardless of the age or status of the person being baptized, to “baptize all nations, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Let us next take the story of Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus Christ, as an example of Grace in our world. Here we have a simple Jewish woman, full of piety, and ready to answer the call of God in her life. Mary, not unlike you and I, was utterly human. Mary, by Grace, was to become the perfect mother, the matriarch of all times. Many would hold that Mary was without original sin, but for me this cheapens God’s Grace. For me Mary, a devout and pious woman, was born with original sin. This takes not away from Mary, but in my mind makes her more significant, that God would choose to purify her, to fill her with his grace to bare his son, the salvation of all mankind. *Sola Gratia*, in this sense, means that for Lutherans we do not have to conceive Christ’s birth in Mary as having been pre-determined, been pre-decided by God. While I cannot speak to God’s grand plan, to me it is more powerful to believe that God chose Mary, not by some grand design, but by his Grace, to purify her, to make her his ark of the new covenant that was in Jesus. My Roman Catholic friend offered to me a text entitled “Refuting the attack on Mary” by Father Mateo, wherein the immaculate conception of Mary is described in detail, and the Roman Catholic position defended at length. While sympathy can be granted for the attempt to say that God pre-ordained Mary to carry Jesus in her womb (which I would not deny the possibility thereof), I find it much more compelling to believe that the fright that Mary had when the angel Gabriel appeared to her was nothing other than original sin at work. And that it was the power of “The Holy Spirit [that] will come upon you ...”, e.g. Grace, at work, which made her the carrier of the savior of the world. For me when I hear, “Holy Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” I hear the power of God’s Grace to make one of the human race, a woman of simple means, his carrier into this world. For me this does not diminish Mary in any way; rather it singles her out, like Noah, as a woman of pure heart set on the Lord ready to receive him and God’s Grace in tow.

Sola Gratia then leads us to the sacrament most holy and divine, the Eucharist. Let me blunt in saying for me, the separation that is felt in Christ’s church is most grievously felt when we cannot share in this most holy of sacraments. Here is something all Christians should have no question was incepted and created by the Word made flesh, Christ Jesus. For me this sign of God’s grace is potent beyond comprehension. God takes regular worldly elements and, with his love power, re-creates himself outside, through, and within them. *Sola Gratia* demands that we understand that God’s Grace is centrally in this sacrament. But it also demands that we understand that it is only because of his Grace that the elements he pre-ordained at creation are blessed. Confused? Well it need not be so.

You see, God created the Earth as “good.” This means that at the core of the worldly, a pure holy creation can be distilled. For this reason, when a priest, a pastor, properly ordained, consecrates the elements they are truly transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. The reality of Christ at the Last Supper re-transforming the elements into the original creation, the original Word, the original God (made flesh), cannot be denied in this sacrament. But it also means that the essence

of bread and wine cannot be washed away. God created bread and wine, thus they are good, thus they are a part of creation, thus they are God. As a result, transubstantiation is without merit as it denies God's power to purify his creation from its original sin and make its elements holy. Likewise to believe that God cannot transform mere creation into the pure holy elements of his body and blood is to deny the Word, the truth and the light of the Gospel. Like Christ, it is without question, in Lutheran belief, that Christ as Eucharist, and otherwise, is both fully real/human and holy/divine. Sola Gratia calls us to understand that the means of Grace are both corporeal and incorporeal; and thus when we celebrate the Eucharist we are entering the world divine and real simultaneously; thus "real presence" has a whole new meaning. It is my earnest hope that in time, Grace will prevail in attaining a consensus in all Christianity on this most precious of Sacraments, so that we can all be one in faith and belief, as Christ called us to be at his Last Supper.

Sola Deo

So with that we end our short discussion of Sola Scriptura, Sola Fide, and Sola Gratia. In reality we have been discussing one thing, God; "Deo." If you have gathered anything from the above it is that God calls us to be witnesses of his truth in this world. Thus it is a witness to God, triune in the Son and Spirit that enables us to praise, worship and serve him in this life and the next.

In our pluralistic world it is easy for us to make the free will choice to "choose not God." After all, Einstein invites us all to believe, "everything in relativity." This is the question of Lutheran belief at its core ... Do we choose to live by grace, or not? The answer is we choose to accept God (Sola Deo) and his merciful Grace for all times and all places, Amen.

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