

**Five Solas
Sola Scriptura
Romans 1:16-17**

One of my favorite classes in seminary was Church History. I enjoyed Church History so much that Neal Manning and I led a class here on Church History a few years ago. You can access the audio for those sessions on our website under the heading of “sermons.”

In my seminary class, imagine my delight when the professor said, “This class will not require you to memorize a lot of dates. It will be more a class on the history of Christian thought than it will be about learning dates for people and events. There is only one date, in fact, that you will need to remember – October 31, 1517. Reformation Day.”

You may need an answer to the question, “What is Reformation Day?” I will tell you in a bit but see if you can guess as we go. If you have done the math in your head – October 31, 1517 – you already know that October 31 of this year will be the 500th anniversary of Reformation Day, even if you do not know what Reformation Day is. A little background is in order. Now, if history is difficult for you, let me say as a paramedic might say to a patient who is about to zone out, “Hang with me – hold on; you are going to be okay!”

By the turn of the 16th century, or, in the early 1500’s, the Catholic Church was a mess – even Catholics will tell you that it was so. Already, the Eastern and Western branches of the church had formally split in 1054 into the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church over geographical and political differences as well as theological and ecclesiastical, or church structure issues. The Roman Catholic Church, in the West, wielded great power in the areas it controlled, and you opposed the Church

at great peril. As Lord Acton would later say, in Great Britain, “Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Much of the Catholic Church leadership was corrupt in the early 16th century.

Martin Luther, who had gone to law school at the age of 13, became a monk in 1505 and was given the role of professor at the seminary in Wittenberg, Germany in 1512. Luther was tormented with the realization that his sins would condemn him to hell and the Church seemed to encourage no means for salvation that made any theological sense to Luther. According to the church, you could do penance for your sins, but what if there were sins you didn’t remember? Guilt was Luther’s constant companion. As professor, Luther began to teach through the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians. In the Scripture, he began to see that justification came, not by good works, but by God’s grace through repentance of sin and faith in Jesus’ finished work on the cross. Luther discovered that acknowledging your sin before a holy God as one who seeks to bring nothing of his own to pay for his sin was different than doing penance and punishing oneself for sin. By faith, I believe that Jesus paid for my sin. Luther’s conscience was free! I will come back to what Luther’s conversion meant to the world in just a bit, but I first want to tell you where I am going with this message and where we will be in this series as we remember the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.

For the next ten Sundays, we will be thinking about the Five Solas. As with the great majority of our Sunday morning series, Scott Shamblee has designed the slides for our power point presentation. One of the reasons Scott does such a great job is that he gets the point of the series. You can see 5 solas highlighted in the main text with each of the five solas listed at the bottom of the title slide. Thank you, as always, Scott! Exceptional work! We will be going

through the solas in the order they are listed at the bottom, which begs the question, “What is a sola?”

Sola is the Latin word for “alone.” Latin, as you may know, was, and is, the official language of the Catholic Church. When Martin Luther and others began to break away from the church, they called themselves “pro-tes-tants,” and all who were part of churches that were at odds with Rome from then on became known as Protestant Churches. One of the Roman Catholic criticisms at the time – and, has been for 500 years, was, “If the Church doesn’t tell you how to interpret Scripture, how can Christians know what is right and wrong? You will have as many ideas about the Bible as you have Protestants.” Indeed, Protestants have divided into thousands of groups, and while that can be problematic, we affirm that Scripture alone is the final authority for everything regarding our faith and the practice of our faith. Scripture alone is one of the five solas that Protestants used to distinguish themselves from Catholics. Actually, there were only three solas originally – Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone – but the other two were added for further clarification through the centuries. Here is how they translate:

Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone

Solus Christus – Christ alone

Sola Gratia – Grace alone

Sola Fide – Faith alone

Soli Deo Gloria – To God alone be the glory

So here is what we are going to do for these next ten weeks. We will take two weeks for each of the solas, presenting the common ground on which Protestants stand. On the first week for each sola, there will be an abbreviated sermon about the topic and then a panel discussion with elders talking about why these solas are important for us to know. The second week on each sola will be a sermon from

a passage in Scripture that informs our thinking about God’s ways and means of salvation and instruction for his Church.

I think you will find these panel discussions quite relevant. We are going to talk about issues like, “Who or what is the ultimate authority in my life?” Is it, like so many seem to think today, “my own heart,” or is there someone or something outside of me, bigger than me, that has the ultimate say in my life? Furthermore, do I believe that my only hope of salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus’ finished work on the cross, or are my thoughts about eternity more shaped by notions of karma than by grace? What makes one person’s thoughts about heaven better than another’s, anyway? Finally, do I get any credit for my salvation because of my good works and or my good sense with understanding the gospel, or does God receive all the glory for my salvation?

We are going to address all these questions over the next ten weeks. The introduction to today’s message has been, necessarily, an introduction to the series, even though the focus of our panel will be Sola Scriptura – Scripture alone. There are thousands of mountains worth of material on the topic of the Reformation, so you can imagine how difficult it has been to bring it down to this brief introduction. Our text for this morning is an introductory text for the series – Romans 1:16-17. I will not preach an expository message from this text today, although I will return to this text later in the series. If you know a little about the Reformation, you may know that the truth found in these verses was the basis of Martin Luther’s conversion. There were many others who were instrumental in the Reformation and Protestantism, but Martin Luther was the one who rang the bell, loudly. Hang onto that thought – Luther rang the bell that began the movement.

Romans 1:16-17 is our text. It is our custom to stand as the Scripture is being read, and especially on this day as Sola Scriptura is introduced. Would you please stand as God's Word is read?

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

"I am not ashamed of the gospel." The Reformation was not initially an attempt to break away from the Catholic Church, but, rather, an attempt to recover the gospel. In the Reformation Anniversary edition of Table Talk, the devotional magazine published by Ligonier Ministries, Michael Reeves had this to say: "The Reformation was not principally a negative movement about moving away from Rome and its corruption; it was a positive movement about moving toward the gospel." If you think everything Catholic is bad and everything Protestant is good, I would challenge you on both points. John Calvin often quoted authors who would, in the end, be considered Catholic, such as Augustine, John Chrysostom, and Bernard of Clairvaux. If everything Protestant is good, I hope you are willing to claim Joel Osteen, Jimmy Swaggart, and, ultimately, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. Even with problems, we Protestants affirm our belief in the truth represented by the five solas.

It was apparent to Luther and the other Reformers that the gospel had been lost in church doctrine and needed to be recovered. After Luther's conversion, which occurred somewhere around 1515 while studying Romans 1:16-17, he became increasingly frustrated with many of the practices of the Catholic Church that he felt led people away from Christ rather than toward him, even though Jesus' name was used freely. Martin Luther was particularly upset with the practice of some Catholic Church representatives who were selling

indulgences, or, guarantees that you or someone you loved would spend less time in purgatory if you purchased said indulgences. The proceeds of these indulgences were used to finance the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome – the Vatican, where the Pope resides and leads the Catholic Church today.

Two things especially frustrated Luther. First, the enormous church in Rome was being built on the backs of the poor. Second, and more importantly, those who were being sold indulgences were being taught to put their hope in their good works and the giving of money for their justification. There was a ditty in that day – “Every time a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory, springs.” The people were being taught to work their way to heaven, as if one's salvation could be purchased. Luther proposed a debate.

One of the primary ways a challenge for a debate was issued in that day was to publish your theological views and put it in a public place to see if anyone would be willing to debate you. On October 31, 1517, Luther nailed his 95 theses – or, points of debate – to the door of the Wittenberg Church, mostly challenging the notion that purchasing indulgences had anything to do with the hope of salvation. Luther thought that unscrupulous representatives of the church had put salvation up for sale and he was certain that they had done so without the Pope's knowledge.

Luther fully expected the Pope to back him. When, instead, the whole weight of the Roman Catholic Church first sought to dissuade Luther of his views, then to burn his written works, then to condemn him to execution – which, providentially, he avoided – with all of this, Luther and many like-minded theologians established new churches. As Protestants, they taught Scripture according to their understanding, based on centuries of councils who had acknowledged in the past that all men and women – even popes, were subject to the Word of God. The Roman Church contended,

“We, the Church, gave you the Scriptures,” to which the Reformers responded, “No, you did not. Any authority that the Church has comes *from* Scripture. In fact, Scripture alone is the sole authority for instruction about faith and practice.”

Martin Luther’s 95 theses led to the upheaval known as The Reformation, and therefore, October 31, 1517 became known as Reformation Day. And you thought October 31 was Halloween. As I have already stated, Luther did not intend to cause this revolution known as the Reformation. In fact, he wanted to reform the church, not leave it to start a new one. Karl Barth, an important theologian in the early 20th century, had this to say about Luther: “He was like a man climbing, in the darkness, a winding staircase in the steeple of an ancient cathedral. In the blackness, he reached out to steady himself and his hand laid hold of a rope. He was startled to hear the clanging of a bell.”

So, let’s think about the authority of Scripture. With that I will invite to the platform Jim McLaughlin, professor of law at Campbell Law School and an elder at Grace, and Neal Manning, an IT expert and a GCC elder with a great love for Jesus that expresses itself in a passion for church history and all things theological. As we prepare to talk about Sola Scriptura, or, Scripture Alone, I will give you a hint about where we will land as I share next week’s text with you, 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “16 All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”