

The five "ALONES" of Faith Ephesians 1:3-14, Ephesians 2:8-9

Many arguments dividing mainline churches these days, have stemmed from ignorance on the part of our leadership (clergy and laity) of those "non-negotiables" of the Christian faith, that have historically been known as the five "*Solas*" (**the Five "Alones" of the Reformation**).

Most Christians these days know little about the events which led up to the **re-formation** of the church. If you asked them what it means to be called a **Protestant**, what it is that they are "**protesting**," they might respond, "*the Catholic Church*," but they would have no idea what the issues were that caused some courageous individuals in the 15th & 16th centuries to willingly give their lives in an attempt to **re-form** the church back to its Biblical basis of faith.

To make the relevance of today's message more personal, ask yourself:

- What are the non-negotiables of my faith?
- What beliefs would I be unwilling to change?
- What ideas form the very heart of what it means to call myself Christian?

On this Reformation Sunday, these questions are what we will briefly explore in the hopes, that along with the insert, they will stimulate discussion, curiosity, and study on your part. Because I hate being accused of ignorance.

To begin, let's compare Christianity with another religion. Every Muslim knows what comprises the 5 pillars of Islam:

1. Profession of their faith statement: there is no god but Allah and Mohamed is his prophet.
2. Ritual Prayer done 3 – 5 times daily
3. The giving of alms (at least 2.5 % annually given to charitable causes)
4. Fasting during the daylight hours in the month of Ramadan
5. And if you are able, at least once, going on the pilgrimage to Mecca.
6. Some would add a 6th pillar called "Jihad," which is mis-translated as "holy war" but actually means "struggling for the faith"

But the idea is, **do these 5 or 6 things and you're a good Muslim** who might make it to paradise "*inshallah*" -- don't do them and you don't qualify.

Christians also have 5 pillars – not based on what we do but on what we believe. Believe these five truths and you at least qualify as an orthodox Protestant Christian. Don't believe these – and you might still qualify as a Christian in God's eyes – since it is God who does the qualifying – but you would have a hard time agreeing with other Christians.

Our five pillars are called **the five "Solas," the five "Alones,"** signaling that these 5 truths stand alone on their own authority and nothing can (or dare) be added to them or taken from them:

Scripture alone
Grace alone
Faith alone
Christ alone
To the Glory of God alone

But why these five and what do they mean for us?

Let's begin with what led up to their composing during the Protestant Reformation of the Church in the 16th century.

In the middles, also known as "the dark ages," roughly a 1000 year period of time spanning from 400 to 1400 AD, the Roman Catholic Church dominated the western world, religiously, politically, even economically. The Church ran everything, ruled over everything, and practically owned everything. It was a time more of superstition than faith when the largely illiterate population viewed Catholic Priests more like magicians than as pastors or theologians. Even among the priesthood, only a very few could actually still read a Latin Bible and only they were allowed.

But, beginning around 1000 AD, several world-changing events began to radically reshape this scene:

- Proving that some good can even come out of the worst tragedies, the Bubonic plague improved the quality of life for its survivors, giving them more leisure time, more money, and the inclination to get an education or take a vacation.
- The Crusades brought back the recorded wisdom of Greek and Roman cultures that had been lost in Europe, but maintained in the Muslim World.
- The rise of nationalism made one proud to call oneself English or German,
- And the printing press, invented in 1450, provided cheap reading material for a growing literate middle class; for the first time in history, anyone could afford to own a book!

So by the 1500's, Europe had a more educated and culturally aware population who wanted to read God's word for themselves – but were still not allowed to because it would mean a loss of power and prestige for the now very rich and corrupt Catholic church, who in the dark ages had formed more religious rules than could be supported by the Bible alone – none of which it wanted to give up.

Some of these non-Biblical rules were that Priests lived in a special relationship with God, that they were more holy than the laity and should be honored as such.

- That whatever the Pope declared was as equally authoritative as the Bible.
- That salvation was acquired at birth through priestly baptism and could be taken away by priestly excommunication.

- And even though made “Christian” by baptism, that one still had to live a holy life to ever hope of eventually getting into Heaven.
- and finally if one hadn’t lived such a holy life, but had enough money, then extra holiness, called indulgences, could be purchased and applied to ones heavenly account.

Through the centuries, there had been multiple individuals, Such as Saint Francis, Saint Benedict, and Jon Wycliffe who had attempted, but failed to bring Catholic religion back to its Biblical base. Many individuals also gave their life trying:, Savonarola, Jan Huss, Ulrich Zwingli, and William Tyndale, to name just a few. It was actually the church’s teaching on indulgences that at last kick-started the Reformation.

By the early 1500’s every intelligent, religious, person knew that the Church had become horribly corrupted in its faith and practice, but who could break its stranglehold on power? Along came a young German monk named Martin Luther ^(1483–1546), who was a professor teaching Bible courses at Wittenberg College.

Martin Luther was a fearful young man who had been scared into the priesthood by a lightning bolt that had struck near him. Early on, he had tried diligently to live a holy life – to earn God’s favor – according to catholic disciplines of prayer, study, fasting, confession, and acts of penitence. But, no matter how hard he tried, Luther never felt good enough to merit God’s mercy.

Then one day as he was preparing his class lectures on the Book of Romans, Luther came upon Paul’s declaration “***that the just shall live by faith,***” and the light of the Biblical gospel once again broke through the accrued trappings of Catholic religion. Luther, realized that all he could ever do was to put his trust in God alone for his salvation. ^{(Rom.1:17).}

By 1516 he began quietly teaching these radical concepts to his students – that salvation could only be had by faith alone in Christ alone – these courses became very popular, his classrooms were always packed. Perhaps Martin Luther could have sailed along under the radar for a while, but events in Wittenberg brought the Catholic Church’s desperate need for reformation to a head.

In 1505, Pope Julius II, had decided to rebuild St Peter’s Basilica in Rome as the biggest most splendid church in the Christian world. And, in order to finance such a costly reconstruction, the Pope had authorized a mass selling of “**indulgences,**” sending his best salesmen out into the fields to raise the large sums of needed money.

According to Catholic doctrine, an indulgence was a measure of God’s favor that had been earned by the very holy – sinless – lives lived by monks and nuns in their cloistered monasteries. Being so holy, the monks and nuns didn’t need all of their earned favor just to make it into heaven, so their excess could then be banked and

dispensed by the church to other more needy individuals, who could purchase such for themselves or another loved one.

Eventually one such salesman, a priest named Tetzel came to Wittenburg offering indulgences to all who could buy. Walking through the streets, he yelled, "**once a coin in the coffer rings - a soul from purgatory springs.**"

This so infuriated Luther that, in true college fashion, five hundred and five years ago this coming Tuesday, on the eve of All Saints Day, October 31st, 1517, he nailed a 95 point protest of Church abuses to the Wittenberg Church door – which was the local bulletin board – and challenged Tetzel to a debate.

As you know nothing can cause an event to snowball, like the involvement of lots of money. The debate with Tetzel soon resulted in several trials for Luther. As was their usual practice, the Catholic Church declared Luther's ideas and his writings heretical, ordered them to be burned, and even tried to kill him. Luckily, he was kidnapped and kept hidden by some sympathetic nobility, giving Luther time to flesh out the Five Solas, along with the publication of a German language New Testament in 1522 and the entire Bible, in 1534. With printing presses now operating in every major city, serving a very literate, news hungry populace, Luther's writings quickly spread throughout Europe; the reformation of the church had finally begun.

So now, let us briefly look at each of these five "Solas" of the Christian faith as framed by Martin Luther.

Sola Scriptura – According to Scripture Alone

The Bible says this about itself....

*Every word of God proves true ...
Do not add to his words, or else He
will rebuke you, and you will be found a liar*

Proverbs 30:5-6

But, for hundreds of years people had been taught that the traditions of the Roman Catholic Church and the decrees of the Pope were equal with, even superior to the Bible. The church also taught that the common person could not understand and should not study the Bible for themselves.

Martin Luther and the other Reformers now worked to restore the Biblical truth that Scripture alone is the final authority for Christian faith and practice, not the Pope, not the "Church." Luther made his defense of the singular authority of the Bible very clear in his trial before the ecclesiastical court in Worms, saying ...

*"Unless I am convicted **by Scripture** and plain reason -- I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other -- **my conscience is captive to the Word of God.** I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me, Amen."*

Surprisingly today we find ourselves in a similar difficulty. There are now many people both in popular culture and even in the Church accusing the Bible of being a "paper pope." They declare that what culture decides, not what the Bible teaches, should be the final authority for life and faith. This may sound trite, but I do not want a group of people deciding what is true, what is moral. Just think for a moment what some groups in our own recent past have declared as right and good.

Sola Gratia. Through Grace alone

According to scripture, what then "saves a person?"
What can give you hope of Heaven when you die?

The Apostle Paul wrote ...

For by grace you have been saved through faith,
and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God
Ephesians 2:8

The Catholic Church taught that water baptism administered by a priest was the first step to Salvation – that such baptism is what made you a Christian, which why Catholics call this event a "Christening."

But after your Christening, you must still live a holy life, not committing any unconfessed mortal sins, or too many venial sins, in order to eventually get yourself out of Purgatory – which is not a place ever mentioned in the Bible – and into heaven.

In response, the Reformers noted that the Bible teaches salvation as entirely by God's grace. Salvation is exclusively a divine work, absolutely sovereign and free, in which sinners play no part and make no contribution. To finish Paul's quote, *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, **not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*** (2:8-9)

You now understand why Luther, having once again found freedom and forgiveness through faith in the work of Jesus Christ – alone, responded so strongly against the selling of indulgences. Because "*The way to Heaven lies not over a toll-bridge, but over a free-bridge; even the unmerited grace of God in Christ Jesus.*" (Augustus Toplady)

Sola Fide.

So, how does one access this gracious mercy which God offers?
How can a person be made right with God?

By faith alone. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Roman Church, that phrase which turned Martin Luther's life around ...

For in [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; **as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'**

Romans 1:17

This Biblical doctrine of 'justification by faith alone' is the central truth of Christianity and the real test of a church's fidelity to the Gospel. When God justifies sinners, He declares them to be exempt from punishment and entitled to reward solely on the ground of what Christ has done for them (Romans 3:24; 5:9).

Our act of declaring our faith is simply the sinner's personal response and reliance on Christ to be our Savior (Ephesians 1:13). For Christians, salvation is an "all or nothing at all" proposition: either by His own merit and ability, Christ is able to save all who come to Him in faith, or nothing can save us.

As Paul wrote to the Church in Galatia:

*Knowing that we are not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: **for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified*** (Galatians 2:16).

Solus Christus – through Christ Alone

What, or who then is the mechanism by which God's grace might be offered to the faithful? In other words, who is it that gives us access to God?

The Church of Rome alleged that this was only through the hands of priests, or through prayers to departed saints, or to the Virgin Mary.

ABSOLUTELY NOT!

The Apostle Peter preached to all who would listen...

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.' Acts 4:12

Christ alone is set forth in Scripture as the **only** mediator between us and God. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "**For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus;**" (1 Timothy 2:5) The Bible teaches that through our faith in Christ alone, we can boldly approach God's throne of grace to receive mercy and make our requests known. (Hebrews 4:16)

Finally there is
'Soli Deo Gloria' – to the Glory To God Alone

Through the prophet Isaiah, God declares ...

I am the Lord, that is my name;
My glory I give to no other,
nor My praise to idols
Isaiah 42:8

As we read in today's scripture lesson,

*In Christ we have obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of [God] who accomplishes all things according to His counsel and will, so that we ... who set our hope on Christ, **might live for the praise of His glory.*** (Ephesians 1:11-12)

Since, God alone is responsible for our Salvation, and did so for His own glory, the Reformers rightly rejected the Roman Church's doctrine that exalted the Pope and priests above the laity, even above the Bible. They rightly saw that Catholicism, like Islam and most other world religions, had become a "works-centered" religion, based on what you do not on what you believe; this was very far removed from the message of simple faith proclaimed in the New Testament. Their struggle to protest these abuses within the Catholic Church and to reform it back to a Biblically based faith, would take another 100 years and at the cost of many lives as Catholics and Protestants battled for the heart of the Church.

What Luther had successfully accomplished in Germany, was next attempted by an English priest named William Tyndale. When forbidden by his superiors from translating the Latin Bible into English, he replied, ***if God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plow, shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.*** He then fled to Europe where, by 1536, he had translated and published the first small, easily hidden, New Testament in the English language before being caught, condemned, and burned at the stake.

Ironically, in 1534, in need of a divorce which the Pope would not allow, Henry the Eighth – who would later authorize the arrest and death of Tyndale – had already split the Church of England away from Rome. In 1539, Henry then approved the publication of an English edition of the Bible, mostly based on the work of Tyndale, to be read aloud in every church every Sunday.

There you have the five “Solas” of the Christian faith that reformers of the 16th century fought so dearly to restore to the Church. Today it is not surprising that these five “Alones” are once again under attack by those who would have no other authority over us other than our own. But these solitary, unchangeable Biblical truths remain either to guide or judge us.

We are saved by GRACE ALONE through FAITH ALONE in CHRIST ALONE according to SCRIPTURE ALONE, for the GLORY OF GOD ALONE.
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These five “Alones,” are the very foundation and support of what it means to call ourselves Christian. If we leave or lose the five “Solas” – may God in His mercy help us, because he is the only one who can.

Let’s pray about this.