

The Sola Church

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Five hundred years. Five centuries. Half a millennium. How could something so long ago be relevant today?

It is in so many ways but here is one example. In 1934 an African-American pastor from Georgia named Michael King fulfilled a dream of seeing the Holy Land. After the tour he attended a conference of Baptist pastors in Berlin. While there in Germany he became so impressed by the life and ministry of Martin Luther that upon returning to the United States he decided to change his name. He went from Michael King to Martin Luther King. His 5-year-old son was also named Michael King. Michael King Jr. Dad decided to change his name too and he became the man known around the world as, Martin Luther King Jr. ¹

How about another example? The Reformation created religious conflict. The story of England's history after the Reformation is largely shaped by the effects of the Reformation and struggles for religious freedom. 103 years after Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the door of the Wittenberg church, a group of Reformation-believing Christians in England were persecuted by King James, King of England. This is the same King James whose name ironically is on the King James Bible. The intolerance of the Sola doctrines led them to leave England for Holland and then from Holland to embark on the scary, dangerous trip across the Atlantic to the New World. They wanted somewhere that Reformational faith could be practiced without persecution. These Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock and I hope you know the rest of the story. We sit here today and trace our freedom of religious expression in the US through them to a certain monk who nailed 95 theses to a door on a church in a small town in Germany. Look how God can use small actions to change the world.

Why the Solas?

This fall our series has been the Sola series. An easy way to remember the Solas is with this symbol (+). Christianity has its subtractions and many heresies are subtractions from biblical truth (Not recognizing Christ's deity or humanity, denying bodily resurrection, etc.). That is not the primary issue which the Reformers reacted against. It was the additions to the gospel that were the problem. The ancient church had added layer upon layer of rituals and man-made traditions. They became the church of the bells and smells instead of gospel and truth. Mostly they inserted the church and its creeds and teachings and leaders into places that biblically only God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit fulfill. Even the most basic question of how we are saved from our sins and guilt was added to with human merit and effort and religious doings. It was justification by doing instead of justification by faith. All of it obscured the gospel.

The Solas represent the key doctrinal categories where the Reformation chopped off extra-biblical, extra-gospel practices and beliefs of men. Let's review.

Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone)

This is the foundational question of authority. After the death of the apostles, where does authority come from? The medieval church said it comes from the Bible plus the church.

¹ Eric Metaxas, *Martin Luther*, p. 1

Since no one had a Bible (and if you had one it did no good because it was in Latin), the church became the de facto sole authority. The cry of Protestantism is, *where is that in the Bible?* The Bible and its teachings are the final authority over the church.

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (2 Timothy 3:16 ESV)

Sola Gratia (Grace Alone)

How are we saved? The medieval church taught we are saved in some measure by the earning of our justification by a righteous life lived according to the traditions of the church. It further said you could buy God's grace through an indulgence purchase. It taught that the church was the granter of grace from the Treasury of Merit, all the righteous works of Jesus and the apostles and the saints. They literally robbed Peter to pay Paul and Joan and Frank. The Reformers said, *we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus alone*. God alone grants his grace and this is on the basis of nothing we do.

Sola Fide (Faith Alone)

The means to justification is the imputed righteousness of Jesus which comes to us by faith. Faith is the instrument and is also a gift from God.

Solus Christus (Christ Alone)

Jesus is our all-sufficient prophet, priest, and king.

Soli Deo Gloria (To the Glory of God Alone)

God's goal in salvation and everything else is his glory. This Sola is the glue that holds all the others together and forms the basis of the reformed faith. God's glory is the starting point. The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism is, *"What is the chief end of man?"* *"Man's Chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever."*² I read an article yesterday that said the Reformation was about happiness. Joy in God, in life, and assurance of life eternal. Sola Joy! The Reformation was about God-centeredness instead of man-centeredness. Its starting point was God, His Word, his gospel, his Son, and a salvation that allows no man to boast or brag.

Why have we done the Sola series? Certainly not to put any human being on the pedestal. That would be very un-Reformational. Certainly not to embrace everything the Reformers taught and did because they were as flawed as we are. We celebrate on Reformation Day what they did get right and hold those things out as aspirational goals for us. We long to be a Sola church filled with Sola Christians delighting in the Sola doctrines pursuing them with passion for Soli Deo Gloria. What would a Sola church or a Sola Christian be like?

The Sola Church

"I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

² The Westminster Shorter Catechism, www.shortercatechism.com.

*He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.” (1 Timothy 3:14–16)*

Paul is writing to his right-hand man Timothy. Timothy is pastoring the church in Ephesus which Paul himself planted (Acts 18). 1 Timothy is somewhat for Timothy but also for the Ephesian Church itself. How? Timothy would refer to what Paul wrote and say, *see, Ephesian Church, this is how we are to conduct ourselves. These are the priorities according to the Apostle.* From qualifications to elders to the role of teaching and preaching, this whole letter is a sola scriptura authority statement from Paul to Ephesus.

We know this because in verse 15 he makes it clear, how one ought to *"behave in the household of God,"* and then a second, *"the church of the living God."* These are the priorities of a biblical church.

As we wrap up our Sola series, please see what we are called to and what the church for a thousand years in Western Europe largely failed to do. *"A pillar and buttress of the truth."* (1 Timothy 3:15) The NIV goes with *"Pillar and foundation of the truth."* What truths are pillars and which ones are foundational? He flows right into a Christology in verse 16. This was likely a first-century hymn or creedal poem. You'll notice the indentations. It looks like a psalm. He is quoting a familiar early church creed about Christ. We aren't getting into the creed but I want you to see that the Christology of verse 16 is the foundation and pillar of truth of verses 14-15.

What truth is the church to hold fast and hold high? It always comes back to the doctrines surrounding Jesus and salvation through him. The gospel.

The Church is the Foundation (Protector) of Truth

If the gospel is going to be preserved against the cultural and doctrinal drifts over time, the actual people of the church will have to know it, care about it, and be ready to stand for it. The words of Luther at the trial at Worms should ring in our hearts. *"I will not recant anything...Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise."*³ Why for 500 years have those words motivated us? Because we see in Luther the boldness of a man who knows he has the biblical truth by the neck and he's not afraid of anyone, not the emperor, the pope, or even death. Listen to his confidence in the gospel:

*"When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: "I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also."*⁴ (Martin Luther)

The example of Hugh Latimer who refused to recant the Sola doctrines and cries out to his friend Ridley as they stand in the middle of a fire as martyrs to die, *"Play the man, Master*

³ Martin Luther as quoted by Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther*, p. 183.

⁴ Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, pp. 86-87.

*Ridley; we shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out.*⁵

Who cares enough these days about anything to die for it much less talk like that? For this series I read extensively and one of my takeaways is that the 16th-century was a time when people cared about religious beliefs far more than today. Even the city magistrates would punish perceived heretics. Can you imagine the Lake County Commission taking up the matter of justification by faith? It's so implausible as to be laughable, which is exactly the point. No matter what side of the Reformation you were on, you at least cared about spiritual truth. Our age is one of massive distraction and passivity for matters of eternal significance. One second after we die we will realize what actually mattered.

What matters is the gospel—the gospel of Christ. Who is the protector of that gospel? Not the government or the schools or social agencies or the military. The church is the protector of the gospel and if the church abdicates that role, there is no known gospel. And if there is no gospel, there is no salvation from the eternal wrath of God.

"For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?" (Romans 10:13–14)

The gospel is the most precious reality in the world. If we could but for a moment peer into hell we would become zealots for the gospel and gospel ministry.

I had a moment recently with my 4-year-old daughter. Jennifer was away on an overnight trip with family and I had the girls by myself. We have a home security system. In the middle of the night Kiralee accidentally set it off. The siren is loud but over the siren I could hear her scream of fear. I quickly got the alarm off but that was weeks ago and I'm still haunted by the shriek she gave. What I wouldn't do in the day or night to protect her or save her from that terror. I love her.

Why was the Reformation so wonderful? If we could only hear the shrieks of hell and the cries of those who are under the wrath of God, we would treasure the gospel. How many of them are shocked to be there because they had an indulgence in their hand or were following the teaching of the errant church in that day? Hell is real. The cries of the lost are real. What is the only way, truth, path to eternal life? Sola Christ! By Sola Grace. Through Sola Faith. That's it. There's no other name. There's no other way. Once you die there's no other chance. I'm haunted by that sound from my daughter and it lasted like three seconds. If we could hear the shrieks of hell, how we would treasure the gospel and very willingly say, *"Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise."*

Only the church will protect the one true gospel. Where should our time, money, energy flow? We celebrate on Reformation Day God's people protecting the foundation. Holding it fast.

The Church is the Pillar (Proclaimer) of Truth

"If I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth." (1 Timothy 3:15)

⁵ Hugh Latimer as quoted by John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, p. 309.

Foundations hold things fast; pillars hold things high. Pillars put things on display. Think Athens or Rome and those ruins still have pillars and columns standing upright. They are still doing their job centuries later.

The church is called to display the gospel by proclaiming the gospel. This is our outreach. This is our evangelism. This is our lives lived as salt and light. This is God's love through us to others.

Now the pillar stands on the foundation. In fact, the larger the foundation, the higher the pillar can go. I remember when we built the Auditorium at Crown Point. I was astounded at the size of the concrete foundations. People don't notice foundations; they notice pillars. But a pillar with no foundation won't last very long. It's precarious, like palm trees in a hurricane. Similarly, a foundation with no pillar is ineffective. Nobody notices a foundation in the ground unless something is on top of it. The pillar reveals the foundation.

There are three types of churches around. There are *foundation-only churches*. They are very doctrinal, but they cloister. They are a secret society. They are vaults of truth. There are churches that are *pillar-only churches*. They are incredibly effective at getting peoples' attention. They go very high. They can draw a crowd, BUT they are big pillar, small foundation. These churches come and go.

The true church, the Sola Church, is both foundation and pillar. They hold fast with passion the biblical doctrines. They pass that passion on to their children who share passion and pass it on. They are not ashamed of the gospel of Christ (Romans 1:16). That solid foundation allows the church to hold high God's truth in their community. Luther didn't merely discover the true gospel in the pages of Scripture, he nailed it to the door of the church. He filled Germany with books and pamphlets. Wittenberg became a Sola Church with a massive doctrinal foundation and a pillar that rose so high that Rome saw it and 500 years later we still see it today.

Sola Church. Foundation and Pillar. Hold it fast. Hold it high. Bethel, are we a Sola Church? Foundation and Pillar? Truth and Love? Deep and high?

Next Sunday is a very special Sunday for us as a church. A top 10 important one in our church's story. Why? Our elders have been prayerfully considering our next chapter as a church. We will share about this next week. But I want you to see next Sunday as the real-life application of Reformation Sunday. Passion for the foundation. Passion for the pillar. Your leaders want to go deeper, and we want to go higher.

So next week I'm going to explain this:



But you will have to come back next week.

*How firm a foundation ye saints of the Lord,
Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said,
To you who for refuge to Jesus hath fled?*

*The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never, forsake!⁶*

Sola Scriptura. Sola Gratia. Sola Fide. Solus Christus. Sola Church. Soli Deo Gloria. Happy 500th!

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016)*.
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⁶ John Rippon, *How Firm a Foundation*, 1787.