



# Truth

## On Tough Texts

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## The Five Solas of the Reformation (1)

### Selected Texts

**WHAT WAS THE REFORMATION? WAS IT** just a time of religious confusion? Was it merely a bunch of Christians who were fighting among themselves? Was it simply two factions in the church that were making mountains out of molehills? Further, was the Reformation a mistake, a black mark on the church's history caused by a bunch of intolerant, narrow-minded troublemakers who divided an otherwise unified church? Should we today try to reverse what occurred then and return to the days prior to that tragic, divisive event?

For the last several decades, there has been an enormous amount of misunderstanding about what the Reformation was about. Worse, there have been a series of attacks against the Reformation, most of which have insisted that it was, indeed, a mistake that needs to be undone.

Whatever view one takes of the Reformation, at the heart of it was a five-fold foundation, five key truths that defined the movement. Each beginning with the Latin word *sola*, meaning "alone," they formed the rebuilt "pillars" of Biblical Christianity that had been demolished by the Roman Catholic Church over the preceding 1,000 years. These five pillars were: *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), and *solus Deo gloria* (to God alone be glory).

In the past couple of years, I have had the honor and privilege of speaking on this subject in various churches and even at the Haiti Bible Institute.<sup>1</sup> Space does not allow that entire series to be reproduced here, but I would like to share the basics of those days and demonstrate how all this applies to our own day.

Why? Because those pillars of Christianity are once again in jeopardy. They are once again being demolished by contemporary thought. True Christians need to be aware of what is happening in the church today and how crucial it is that we "earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

This two-part article will introduce, in fact, another (in the September issue) on historic Christianity and how these doctrines have been attacked for centuries by every major departure from biblical Christianity that has arisen.

### The Roots of the Reformation

To say that the 16<sup>th</sup>-century church was in sad condition is the height of understatement. Just as it is darkest before the dawn in our physical world, there was a thick veil of spiritual darkness over the church and even society itself. Gone were the simplicity of faith, the fervency of love, and the assurance of hope that was true of the Apostolic Age. There was no joy, no peace, no certainty, and certainly no truth. Outwardly, there was pomp and regal display, but inwardly there was emptiness. Worship was hollow and "preaching" was devoid of content. Sermons were not in the language of the people but were in Latin, which amounted to little more than "profane and vain babblings" (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 2:16) because only scholars understood it, leaving the people in ignorance and superstition.

Beautiful cathedrals were built in the Middle Ages (more accurately the Dark Ages from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries), but within their walls lived no truth whatsoever. The gravest of errors were taught (and are *still* taught) by the Roman Church. Added to the two simple ordinances

established by the Lord Jesus (which were never meant for a means of salvation but were only memorial and testimonial in nature), the Roman Church founded a seven-fold sacramental system that it says is the way God's grace and merit are earned by the sinner. Those sacraments are: holy order of the priesthood, infant baptism, confirmation as a youth, marriage as an adult, receiving mass (eating Christ's literal body and drinking His literal blood) regularly throughout life, penance for confessed sin throughout life, and extreme unction on one's deathbed (also called anointing the sick and Last Rites). As is made clear in its own *Baltimore Catechism*, Catholicism teaches "that among the chief means provided by Christ for our sanctification are the sacraments. They are outward signs instituted by Christ to give grace. . . . When the sign is applied to the one who receives the sacrament, it signifies inward grace and has the power of producing it in the soul."<sup>2</sup>

If that is not clear enough, one of the most authoritative works of Catholicism, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, by Ludwig Ott, states:

Scholastic Theology coined the formula: *Sacramenta operantur ex opere operato*, that is, the Sacraments operate by the power of the completed sacramental rite. The Council of Trent sanctioned this expression which was vigorously combated by the Reformers. . . . All Catholic theologians teach that the Sacraments are not merely conditions or occasions of communication of grace, but true causes (*causae instrumentales*) of grace. . . . The Council of Trent declared against the Reformers, who, following the precedent of Wycliffe, denied the sacramental character. . . . As there are various Sacraments having various signs, and as the differences in the sacramental signs also point to a difference in the effecting of grace, it must be assumed that each individual Sacrament, corresponding to its special purpose, conveys a special or specific sacramental grace.<sup>3</sup>

Salvation in Catholicism, therefore, is not by *faith* but by *works*, by the infusing of grace into man by means of his practicing the sacraments. While the Reformers staunchly combated this as the apostasy it is, many today are trying to say that such theology is Christian.

While the Reformation was certainly not perfect, what it accomplished, and gloriously so, was bringing the Church out of 1,000 years of darkness and was the first major attempt to return to Biblical Christianity. Its primary accomplishments were the bringing back of salvation truth and a return to the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. While also not perfect, the Reformers themselves attempted a return to Scripture and its pure doctrines of salvation.

In his commentary on Revelation, Harry Ironside provides us with one of the best summaries of Roman Catholicism ever offered:

Romanism is Christianity, Judaism, and Heathenism joined together; and the Lord abhors the vile combina-

tion. God gave Rome space to repent, and she repented not. Go back to the days of Savonarola (Italy), Wickliffe and Cranmer (England), John Knox (Scotland), Martin Luther (Germany), Zwingli (Switzerland), Calvin (France)—all those mighty reformers whom God raised up throughout the world to call Rome to repent of her iniquity, but she repented not. *If she had any desire to get right with Him, she would have repented in the sixteenth century* [emphasis added].

That last statement is extremely important. Contrary to popular thought, and as shocking as it is to most ears, *Roman Catholicism is not Christian* and has never repented from her idolatry. The Church was apostate in the extreme and was in need of a return to God. There is also today a critical need to return.

So, at the root of the Reformation were five key truths:

- *Sola Scriptura*, our Only Model
- *Sola Gratia*, our Only Method
- *Sola Fide*, our Only Means
- *Solus Christus*, our Only Mediator
- *Soli Deo Gloria*, our Only Motive

We could put these together in one statement that summarizes the true, biblical Christian faith:

It is *Scripture* alone that declares that salvation comes by *grace* alone, through *faith* alone, in *Christ* alone, by which *God* alone is glorified.

So pivotal, so essential, so axiomatic are these truths that neither the Reformation nor Christianity itself can in any way be understood apart from them.

That is what this brief two-part article is about—it is *about the very core of the Christian faith*. Without these truths, in fact, Christianity does not exist. To *distort* even *one* of them, is to *destroy all* of them, for they are, indeed, one indivisible truth. These truths also enable us to evaluate the church as a whole and individual churches in particular. The existence of these truths reveals the orthodoxy of *the church* (or *a church*), while their absence reveals, to use a biblical image, *ichabod*, "the glory is departed" (I Sam. 4:21). As we will see, much of the glory of God has departed from the church (and churches) simply because these truths have all but vanished. Today's church is a blur of activity, but without the compass of truth she has lost her way and is in need of a return to the Truth.

What drove the Reformation? What were the key truths that powered it? It was the "five solas" that fueled the Reformation and returned light to a world that had been in darkness for a thousand years. In a day when even so-called evangelicals are saying that the Reformation was a mistake, these truths need to be reemphasized and loudly proclaimed like never before since the sixteenth century. *To abandon these truths is to return to darkness and even to deny the work of the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Spanish-born American philosopher and writer George

Santayana (1863–1952) made the famous statement (which is often misquoted), “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Well, the church as a whole has, indeed, forgotten the past and is repeating it. As these biblical truths fueled the Reformation, they are desperately needed again today to revive a dying Evangelicalism.

### *Sola Scriptura, Our Only Model*

Among the last words that Paul wrote before his martyrdom, he challenged Timothy concerning the singular place Scripture must have in his life and ministry (2 Tim. 3:14–17). He made it clear that **wisdom**, and **salvation** itself, come from **Scripture** alone. He went on to say that **Scripture** alone is **profitable** (*ōphelimos*, useful, beneficial, advantageous) for four things. First, there is **doctrine**. It is the only way to teach spiritual truth, although this has all but vanished in our day.

Scripture is also **profitable** for **reproof**. What a word this is! It is the Greek *elegchō*, which, as Greek authority Richard Trench writes, “means to rebuke another with the truth so that the person confesses, or at least is convinced, of his sin.”<sup>4</sup> In his commentary on Ephesians, John Calvin adds, “It literally signifies to drag forth to the light what was formerly unknown.”<sup>5</sup> What a vivid picture! We must drag error kicking and screaming into the light to expose it, but that too is very unfashionable in today’s church.

Scripture is also designed for **correction**. Here is another fascinating word, *epanorthōsis*, which actually consists of three words. The root *orthos* means “upright, straight, correct” and is where we derive such English words as *orthodontist* (who corrects and straightens teeth), *orthopedics* (the correcting of bone injuries, deformities, and diseases), and *orthodox* (conforming to correct doctrine or belief). Add to this the prefix *epi*, “to” or “upon,” and the prefix *ana*, denoting repetition (as in the word *again*), and the result is “to set upright again, to straighten again.” Scripture, then is the only thing that can set things right, bring them back to where they are supposed to be.

Finally, Scripture is meant for **instruction in righteousness**. **Instruction** is *paideia*, deeper training and discipline, so in this case, in the things that are right. The result of all that, Paul concludes, is so Timothy will be **perfect** (*artios*, suitable, complete, capable, and sound) and also **thoroughly furnished** (*exartizō*, fitted out, altogether fitted, fully equipped) **unto all good works** (that is, for worship, holy living, and Christian service).

Those verses vividly demonstrate that in the early church *Scripture was elevated to its rightful position as sole, sufficient authority*. It was absolute and ruled unilaterally in all matters. It was the sole and sufficient authority *in everything and for everything*.

What is absolutely crucial to understand here is that Roman Catholicism actually *does* accept the authority of Scripture. It readily admits its authority and infallibility, but that is what is misleading and is why many do not rec-

ognize Catholicism as being a cult. While it recognizes the Scripture’s *authority*, it rejects Scripture’s *sufficiency*, that it *alone* is the authority. It maintains that the Church’s traditions and teachings, as well as the Pope’s *ex cathedra* (“from the chair”) declarations, are equal to Scripture authority. In practical application, these are actually superior to the Scriptures, for if the Pope declares something that is unscriptural, it is that declaration, not Scripture, that is followed. This makes Catholicism not one bit different than a cult such as Mormonism, which also recognizes the Bible but elevates the Book of Mormon over it.

It was the Reformation, however, that met this apostasy head-on and *rejected it in its entirety*—it did *not*, as is fashionable today, “make peace” with false teaching. In July 1519, at the Leipzig Debate with John Eck, when Eck accused Luther of appealing to Scripture alone and not papal authority, Luther responded:

A simple layman armed with Scripture is to be believed above a pope or a council without it. . . . [N]either the Church nor the pope can establish articles of faith. These must come from Scripture. For the sake of Scripture we should reject pope and councils.

In October 1520 came a papal bull (Latin, for “seal,” as in a seal on an official document) condemning Luther and his writings and demanding that he recant. Luther defiantly refused; instead of burning his own writings, he publicly burned the papal bull, saying that the bull condemned Christ Himself. What a scene!

It was then in April 1521 that Luther was summoned to the final showdown at the Diet (assembly) in the city Worms. The Roman Church requested that Emperor Charles V, himself a Roman Catholic, deal with the case of Luther, which he agreed to do. On that fateful day, the gathered crowd was enormous, so huge, in fact, that it was difficult for Luther and his supporters even to reach the conference hall. Besides the Emperor, there were 206 high ranking officials, including dukes, archbishops, bishops, ambassadors, and papal nuncios. The diet began on April 17 with the brilliant Johann von Eck serving as the presiding officer. He asked Luther pointedly if he was the author of the numerous writings that had been placed on a table in the conference hall and asked if he was willing to retract the doctrines in them that contradicted the accepted doctrines of the Church. Luther admitted he was the author but asked for some time for reflection before answering the other charge. After all, Luther knew that his answer might very well cost him his life, and we can only imagine the pressure he felt. After a night of much prayer, Luther was asked again in the crowded hall if he was willing to retract his teachings. To this he replied the now famous words:

Unless I am convinced 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 re-

cant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen.<sup>6</sup>

The hall exploded in uproar, with everyone speaking at once. The Emperor was enraged and left the hall, later saying that “he could not see how a single monk could be right and the testimony of a thousand years of Christendom wrong.” What a scene indeed!

Do we not hear similar words today? We hear, “That’s the way we’ve always done it,” or, “That’s what I was taught,” or, “That’s the tradition of our denomination,” or, “That’s what the newest “Christian guru” says. As in Luther’s time, there is much in the Church today that not only is not *based* on Scripture, but much of which even *contradicts* Scripture.

In my humble view, in fact, the key to Luther’s statement is that to go against a conscience that is “captive to the Word of God . . . is *neither right nor safe*,” for that is precisely what is happening. The church is simply not captive to Scripture, not driven by God’s Word alone. In his wonderful book, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace*, his final book, in fact, before his promotion into glory, Dr. James Montgomery Boice, incisively wrote:

The most serious issue [facing the church today], I believe, is the Bible’s *sufficiency*. Do we believe that God has given us what we need in this book? Or do we suppose that we have to supplement the Bible with human things? Do we need sociological techniques to do evangelism, pop psychology and pop psychiatry for Christian growth, extra-biblical signs or miracles for guidance, or political tools for achieving social progress and reform?<sup>7</sup>

Ponder this a moment: By what is today’s church really guided? In the final analysis, virtually every aspect of the church today is driven by *popular culture*. Instead of pointing people to God’s Word *alone* for answers to life problems, they are given “therapeutic counseling” to make them feel better about themselves in their world. Instead of giving people the biblical Gospel of sin, salvation, and service, we appeal to their felt needs so they will feel comfortable. Instead of preaching the pure truth of Scripture, we entertain the MTV generation so it will enjoy coming to church. Everything today, from Bibles, to church programs, to tee shirts, is marketed using a pretty wrapper that appeals to what people want, that is, to their flesh. Again, it is *culture* that rules the Church not *Scripture*.

Tragic beyond words is the fact that the principle of *sola Scriptura* has all but vanished once again in our day. So central was this, that it has been called the “formal principle” of the Reformation. By “formal” is meant that this principle is the authority that *forms and shapes* the entire movement from beginning to end. Scripture alone, then, gave form to everything involved in the Reformation. Without that, there could be no form, no content, and no

truth because all those demand an authority. Without authority, there can be nothing else.

*The purpose of sola scriptura, then, was to reposition the Bible as the sole, singular, and sufficient authority over the Church.* It was, indeed, the only *model*. That is why we deal with it first. Without it, the other “solos” are meaningless because they have no foundation or authority; they are no more than the theological opinion of “a bunch of dead guys.” While Roman Catholicism had elevated the Church and the Pope over Scripture, and therefore made the Scripture inferior to the Church, the Reformers (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and others) reaffirmed the authority of Scripture. To them Scripture was not a *norma normata* (determined norm), rather it was the *norma normans* (determining norm). Scripture is not determined by anyone; rather it is the “The Determiner.”

Many Scriptures proclaim the centrality and sufficiency of Scripture. In addition to 2 Timothy 3:14–17 mentioned earlier, there are many more: Deuteronomy 4:2; Psalm 19:7; Hebrews 1:2; and Revelation 22:18–19.

Especially powerful is 1 Peter 4:11: **If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God** In other words, *if a man has something to say, it had better be the Word of God.* Does this say that whatever a Bible teacher or preacher (or Pope, for that matter) says *is* the **oracles of God**? On the contrary, the verse declares that whatever a man says must *conform* to **the oracles of God**. Today, of course, we have just the opposite. A preacher can get on TV or radio and utter anything about God and most Christians think it’s great. “After all,” they say, “he’s talking about Jesus so it must be good.” But the question this verse demands we ask is: *Do his words really conform to the oracles of God? Is this man really speaking the utterances of Holy Scripture?* If not, he must be silenced.

Let us pray for true, godly Christians and Christian leaders who will commit themselves to *sola scriptura*. We’ll conclude our look at the Reformation next time.

Dr. J. D. Watson  
Pastor-Teacher  
Grace Bible Church

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This two-part article is a condensation of a six-part message series. Pastor Watson is available to speak on this subject.

<sup>2</sup> John A. O’Brien (prepared by), *Understanding the Catholic Faith: An Official Edition of the revised Baltimore Catechism No. 3* (Ave Maria Press, 1941, 1955), p. 189.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Tan Books and Publishers, 1955, 1960, 1974), pp. 329–330, 332–333.

<sup>4</sup> *Synonyms of the New Testament* (Hendrickson Publishers edition, 2000), pp. 29, 30.

<sup>5</sup> *Calvin’s Commentaries: Ephesians* (electronic edition; *Online Bible*), comment on Ephesians 5:11.

<sup>6</sup> As reported by Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand* (Abingdon Press, 1978), p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace* (Crossway Books, 2001), p. 72 (emphasis in the original).

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*Like many ministries, TOTT is feeling the impact of these tough economic times. We would like to ask our readers for their prayer support in meeting these needs so that this ministry can continue.*