

## The Five Solas of the Reformation: Introduction (Romans 3:21–31)

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### Introduction

Jesus assured His followers that He would build His church (Matthew 16:18), giving His church the keys of the kingdom. There have always been true churches giving testimony to the truth of Christ's assertion. At the same time, Satan has opposed God's purpose, working to mimic God's kingdom plan with a false gospel and false churches. The Reformation was God's counter move to revive the true gospel within the established church—Roman Catholicism—with its false gospel and false leadership.

### I. History

1. The Reformation is usually celebrated on the date Luther posted his *95 Theses* (arguments against indulgences) on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg, Germany, on October 31, 1517. The roots of the Reformation, however, trace back to the “Morning Star” of the Reformation, John Wycliffe (1330-1384). Why is this important?

a. Wycliffe lived almost one hundred years before Luther was born. In his teenage years, Wycliffe enrolled at Oxford and before long took his own place among the faculty. He lectured and wrote in the field of philosophy, but biblical studies became his passion. He is important because he devoted himself to the study of theology and Scripture. As he did so, he began to realize how much the church had veered off course in so many wrong directions.

b. In the 1370s, he produced three significant works as countermeasures to the church's corruption. The first one, *On Divine Dominion* (1374), took aim at papal authority. His second, *On Civil Dominion* (1376) targeted the Roman Catholic Church's assertion of authority over the English crown and English nobility. He saw no reason for England to be obliged to support a corrupt church. In his third major work, *On the Truth of Sacred Scripture* (1378) developed the doctrine of the authority of Scripture.

Wycliffe's writings were crucial in setting the stage for the Reformation because they found their way to the city of Prague and to the second “Morning Star” of the Reformation, Jan Hus. Even Martin Luther's early writings reveal the influence of Wycliffe. However, as important as these writings were, they do not hold a candle to his most important contribution, the *Wycliffe Bible*.

c. According to Roman Catholic law, translating the Bible into the common language was a heresy punishable by death. The reason for this is obvious: the church wanted to hold power over the people. Wycliffe, on the other hand, was convinced the Word of God held true power, exposing the error of the papal office and the false gospel it embraced. Wycliffe died on December 30, 1384, before the church could get their hands on him. However, in 1415, the Council of Constance (the same council that burned Jan Hus at the stake) declared Wycliffe a heretic. His bones were exhumed, burned, and his ashes thrown into the River Swift.

2. The main issue that drove the Reformation was the question posed in Job: How can a person be right with God? (Job 9:2).

Salvation from sin is man's greatest need; thus, the true gospel must be preached. The issue in the Middle Ages had to do with the authority of the church in the salvation of sinners. The church in the Middle Ages replaced the true gospel with a false one against the clear warning of Paul.

*“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ”* (Galatians 1:6–10).

The established church at the time of the Reformation was wrong on the gospel, teaching that, indeed, Christ was Savior, but holding that the *gospel* was Christ plus the church plus works. The church of Rome established a sacerdotal system based on the Aaronic priesthood. The priests administered seven sacraments of the church, which were deemed necessary to salvation. Anyone hoping to gain eternal life must adhere faithfully to them— (1) baptism (infant), (2) confirmation, (3) holy communion (Mass), (4) confession to a priest, (5) marriage or (6) holy orders, and (7) the anointing of the sick (last rites). The table at the mass became a sacrificial altar on which Christ is continually sacrificed. It is not to the resurrected and reigning Savior (“who saves unto the uttermost all who come unto God by Him,” Heb. 7:25) but to the Roman church, offering a dying Savior confined to a cross and unable to save anyone.

3. The five “*solas*” were the reformers’ answer to correct the errors of the established church and to reestablish the biblical gospel. The issue has not changed today. The accepted religious approach to salvation is that one must earn God’s favor. To do so, he must stop the practice of sinful habits and develop the practice of good works.

First, salvation rests on *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), which is the foundation of salvation. On this foundation stand three pillars: *sola Christus* (Christ alone) by *Sola Gratia* (grace alone) through *Sola Fide* (Faith alone). All this terminates in and supports the end and goal—*soli Deo gloria* (to the glory of God alone).

## **II. The Foundation, *Sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone)**

What gives us authority to make this claim? God is the sovereign unseen Ruler of all. He is known only as He chooses to reveal Himself.

1. What is the final authority—Scripture, tradition, human reasoning, or all three?
  - a. Jesus warned about those who set aside the truth of Scripture in favor of human tradition: “*So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God*” (Matt. 15:6).
  - b. Paul warned of the emptiness of human reasoning: “*See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ*” (Colossians 2:8).
2. Why Scripture?
  - a. Scripture is the wisdom of God unto salvation: “*From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:15-17).
  - b. Scripture is the mind of God revealed to men. “*And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the*

*day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit"* (2 Peter 1:19-2:1).

### 3. Scripture, wisdom, and tradition

- a. Scripture alone must be our first and last resort.
- b. Philosophy must be based on regenerated thinking rooted in Scripture, not on human wisdom:  
*"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men"* (1 Cor. 1:18-25).
- c. Tradition is necessary to preserve right practice, but only if it is rooted in Scripture: *"So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the traditions that you were taught by us, either by our spoken word or by our letter. ... Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us"* (2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6).

### III. Scripture's Self-Testimony

Is Scripture the Word of God? We must settle on the Bible's own self-attestation and not on the futility of human apologetics. The major ingredient in recognizing the authority of Scripture is one's experiencing the new birth, regeneration. But what does the Bible say about itself?

#### 1. The Bible's own claim to be the Word of God—

- a. Second Timothy 3:16 declares that all Scripture is *"God-breathed."* Just as God breathed life into Adam so that he became a living soul, so God has breathed life into the Scriptures so that they are both living and life-giving: *"For the word of God is living and active"* (Hebrews 4:12).
- b. Second Peter 1:20 teaches us the Scripture is prophecy—the mind of God communicated to men via men.
- c. Peter recognized that Paul's epistles were Scripture: *"And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures"* (2 Peter 3:15, 16).

#### 2. Is there an authority higher than God to whom we may appeal?

New Testament writers frequently quote the Old Testament as authority for their message. Note these examples—

Paul wrote in Romans 9:17, *“For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you,’”* citing Exodus 9:16: *“For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you.’”*

He wrote in Galatians 3:8, *“And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed,’”* quoting Genesis 12:3: *“In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”*

Again, in Hebrews 3:7 he wrote, *“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,’”* quoting Psalm 95:7-9: *“Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put me to the test.”*

Jesus viewed the Scripture as the very words of God in Matthew 19:4, 5, addressing the scribes and Pharisees, *“He answered, ‘Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’?”*, citing Genesis 2:24: *“Therefore, a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.”*

## **Conclusion**

1. The Scripture is what the Holy Spirit uses to bring sinners to faith and salvation: *“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”* (Romans 10:17). The Scriptures are the written Word of God pointing us to the living Word. The Lord Jesus Christ is the living Word of God (John 1:1, 14).
2. Without Scripture we could know nothing of God, Christ, or salvation. How much do you value the Word? Do you have a “hearing ear”? Does your hearing ear lead you to submissive obedience? Has the written Word led you to the Living Word, Jesus?