The Five *Sola*e of the Reformation

I. The Five *Sola*e of the Reformation

**Date:** June 2, 2013  
**Sola:** The Five *Sola*e  
**Aim:** To introduce the historical context for and overview of the five *sola*e of the Reformation.

**A. Overview**

The Protestant Reformation was officially “launched” when Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg on October 31, 1517. He was raising questions about Roman Catholic practices and looking for a theological debate, not a separation or split of the church, although that is what occurred. Martin Luther was excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church on January 3, 1521. Concurrently and subsequently many other Reformers arose to defend Biblical truths against the teachings of Rome, such as Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland, John Calvin in France and Geneva, John Knox in Scotland, etc.

The Reformation sparked by Martin Luther led to many different Protestant denominations being formed in Europe. The Roman Catholic Church responded with a “counter Reformation” in which Catholicism was revived and revised. The Counter-Reformation was a comprehensive effort composed of four major elements:

1. Ecclesiastical or structural reconfiguration  
2. Religious orders  
3. Spiritual movements  
4. Political dimensions

The Counter-Reformation began with the Council of Trent (1545-1563) and ended with the conclusion of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648). The Treaty of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years War, essentially guaranteed freedom of religion and effectively limited the power of the Roman Catholic Church.

**B. The Five Solas of the Reformation**

The five *sola*e are five Latin phrases that emerged during the Protestant Reformation and summarize the Reformers’ basic theological beliefs in contradistinction to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church of the day. The Latin word *sola* means "alone" or "only" in English. The five *sola*e articulated five fundamental beliefs of the Protestant Reformation, pillars which the Reformers believed to be essentials of the Christian life and practice. All five implicitly rejected or countered the teachings of the then-dominant Catholic Church, which the Reformers claimed had usurped divine attributes or qualities for the Church and its hierarchy, especially its head, the Pope.
1. Sola Fide

*Sola fide* is the teaching that justification (interpreted in Protestant theology as "being declared just by God") is received by faith only, without any mixture of or need for good works, though in classical Protestant theology, saving faith is always evidenced, but not determined, by good works. Some Protestants see this doctrine as being summarized with the formula "Faith yields justification and good works" and as contrasted with the Roman Catholic formula "Faith and good works yield justification." The Catholic side of the argument is based on James 2:14-17. "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead." (James 2:14-17, NKJV)

It is well to see a Catholic/Protestant comparison of what is meant by the term "justification": both sides agree that the term invokes a communication of Christ’s merits to sinners, not a declaration of sinlessness; Luther used the expression *simul justus et peccator* ("at the same time justified and a sinner"). Roman Catholicism sees justification as a communication of God’s life to a human being, cleansing him of sin and transforming him truly into a son of God, so that it is not merely a declaration, but rather the soul is made actually objectively righteous.

The Protestant view of justification is that it is the work of God through the means of grace. Faith is the righteousness of God that is accomplished in us. In the founding document of the Reformation, the 95 Theses, Luther said that 1.) "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (Matthew 4:17) He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance," and 95.) And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace (Acts 14:22).

The true distinction, therefore, between the Protestant and the Catholic view of Justification is not an issue of being "declared righteous" versus being "made righteous", but rather it is the means by which one is justified. In Catholic theology righteous works are considered meritorious toward salvation in addition to faith, whereas in Protestant theology, righteous works are seen as the result and evidence of a truly justified and regenerate believer who has received these by faith alone.

The actual effectual means by which a person receives justification is also a fundamental division between Catholic and Protestant belief. In Catholic theology, the means by which justification is applied to the soul is the sacrament of baptism. In baptism, even of infants, the grace of justification and sanctification is "infused" into the soul, making the recipient justified even before he has exercised his own faith (or indeed in the case of an infant who is baptized, before he even has the ability to consciously understand the Gospel and respond with faith). In Catholic theology, faith is not a prerequisite to justification. For the Catholic, baptism functions "ex operere operato" or "by the working of the act", and thus is the efficient and sufficient act to bring about justification. In Protestant theology, however the faith of the individual is absolutely necessary and is itself the efficient and sufficient response of the individual that effects justification.
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The *sola fide* doctrine is sometimes called the material cause or principle of the Reformation because it was the central doctrinal issue for Martin Luther and the other Reformers. Luther called it the "doctrine by which the church stands or falls" (Latin, *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*).

2. **Sola Gratia**

*Sola gratia* is the teaching that salvation comes by divine grace or "unmerited favor" only, not as something merited by the sinner. This means that salvation is an unearned gift from God for Jesus' sake. While some maintain that this doctrine is the opposite of "works' righteousness" and conflicts with some of the aspects of the Roman Catholic doctrine of merit, it might be asserted that this article, taken at face value, conflicts in no way with Roman Catholic teaching; while the doctrine that grace is truly and always a gift of God is held in agreement between both views, the difference in doctrine lies mainly in two facts: that of God as sole actor in grace (in other words, that grace is always efficacious without any cooperation by man), and second, that man cannot by any action of his own, acting under the influence of grace, cooperate with grace to "merit" greater graces for himself (the latter would be the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church). This doctrine asserts divine monergism in salvation: God acts alone to save the sinner. The responsibility for salvation does not rest on the sinner to any degree as in "synergism" or Arminianism.

Protestant Arminians may also claim the doctrine of *sola gratia* (but understand it differently) and generally deny the term "synergism" is appropriate to describe their beliefs. Arminians believe that God saves only by grace and not at all by merit, but man, enabled by what is referred to as "prevenient grace", is enabled by the Holy Spirit to understand the Gospel and respond in faith. Arminians believe that this is compatible with salvation by grace alone, since all the actual saving is done by grace. Arminians believe that humans are only capable of receiving salvation when first enabled to do so by prevenient grace, which they believe is distributed to everyone. Arminians therefore do not reject the conception of *sola gratia* expounded by the Reformation theologians.

3. **Solus Christus**

*Solus Christus* is the teaching that Christ is the only mediator between God and man, and that there is salvation through no other (hence, the phrase is sometimes rendered in the ablative case, *solo Christo*, meaning that salvation is "by Christ alone"). This principle rejects "sacerdotalism," which is the belief that there are no sacraments in the church without the services of priests ordained by apostolic succession under the authority of the pope. Martin Luther taught the "general priesthood of the baptized," which was modified in later Lutheranism and classical Protestant theology into "the priesthood of all believers," denying the exclusive use of the title "priest" (Latin, *sacerdos*) to the clergy.

4. **Sola Scriptura**

*Sola scriptura* is the teaching that the Bible is the only inspired and authoritative word of God, is the only source for Christian doctrine, and is accessible to all. That the Bible requires no interpretation outside of itself is in direct opposition to the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglo-Catholic, and Roman Catholic traditions, which teach that the Bible can be authentically interpreted only by apostolic or sacred Tradition. In the Catholic Church, this teaching authority is referred to as the Magisterium,
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understood to be embodied in the episcopacy, the aggregation of the current bishops of the Church in union with the pope.

*Sola scriptura* is sometimes called the formal principle of the Reformation, since it is the source and norm of the material principle, the gospel of Jesus Christ that is received *sola fide* ("through faith alone") *sola gratia* (by God's favor or "grace alone"). The adjective (*sola*) and the noun (*scriptura*) are in the ablative case rather than the nominative case to indicate that the Bible does not stand alone apart from God, but rather that it is the instrument of God by which He reveals himself for salvation through faith in Christ (*solus Christus* or *solo Christo*). This doctrine is found in Matthew 4:4: "But he answered and said, 'It is written, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.'"

5. **Soli Deo Gloria**

*Soli Deo gloria* is the teaching that all glory is to be due to God alone, since salvation is accomplished solely through His will and action — not only the gift of the all-sufficient atonement of Jesus on the cross but also the gift of faith in that atonement, created in the heart of the believer by the Holy Spirit. The reformers believed that human beings — even saints canonized by the Roman Catholic Church, the popes, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy — are not worthy of the glory that was accorded them; that is, one should not exalt such humans for their good works, but rather praise and give glory to God who is the author and sanctifier of these people and their good works.

C. **The Council of Trent**

Pope Paul III (1534–1549) initiated the Council of Trent (1545–1563), a commission of cardinals tasked with institutional reform, addressing contentious issues such as corrupt bishops and priests, indulgences, and other financial abuses.

The Council upheld the basic structure of the Medieval Church, its sacramental system, religious orders, and doctrine. It rejected all compromise with the Protestants, restating basic tenets of the Roman Catholic faith. The Council upheld salvation appropriated by grace through faith and works of that faith (not just by faith, as the Protestants insisted) because "faith without works is dead", as the Epistle of James states. Transubstantiation, during which the consecrated bread and wine were held to be transformed wholly and substantially into the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ, was also reaffirmed, along with the other six Sacraments of the Catholic Church. Other practices that drew the ire of Protestant reformers, such as pilgrimages, the veneration of saints and relics, and the veneration of the Virgin Mary were strongly reaffirmed as spiritually commendable practices. The Council officially accepted the Vulgate listing of the Old Testament Bible which included the deuterocanonical works (also called the Apocrypha, especially by Protestants) on a par with the 39 books customarily found in the Masoretic Text and the Protestant Old Testament. This reaffirmed the previous Council of Rome and Synods of Carthage (both held in the 4th century, A.D.) which had affirmed the Deuterocanon as Scripture. The Council also commissioned the Roman Catechism, which still serves as authoritative Church teaching (the Catechism of the Catholic Church).
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While the basic structure of the Church was reaffirmed, there were noticeable changes to answer complaints that the Counter-Reformers were, tacitly, willing to admit were legitimate. Among the conditions to be corrected by Catholic reformers was the growing divide between the clerics and the laity; many members of the clergy in the rural parishes, after all, had been poorly educated. Often, these rural priests did not know Latin and lacked opportunities for proper theological training (addressing the education of priests had been a fundamental focus of the humanist reformers in the past). Parish priests were to be better educated in matters of theology and apologetics, while Papal authorities sought to educate the faithful about the meaning, nature and value of art and liturgy, particularly in monastic churches (Protestants had criticized them as "distracting"). Notebooks and handbooks became more common, describing how to be good priests and confessors.

Thus, the Council of Trent attempted to improve the discipline and administration of the Church. The worldly excesses of the secular Renaissance Church, epitomized by the era of Alexander VI (1492–1503), intensified during the Reformation under Pope Leo X (1513–1522), whose campaign to raise funds in the German states to rebuild St. Peter’s Basilica by supporting use of indulgences served as a key impetus for Martin Luther’s 95 Theses. But the Catholic Church would respond to these problems by a vigorous campaign of reform, inspired by earlier Catholic reform movements that predated the Council of Constance (1414–1417): humanism, devotionalism, legalism and the observantine tradition.

The Council, by virtue of its actions, repudiated the pluralism of the secular Renaissance which had previously plagued the Church: the organization of religious institutions was tightened, discipline was improved, and the parish was emphasized. The appointment of bishops for political reasons was no longer tolerated.

**D. The Treaty of Westphalia**

The Reformation led to a series of religious wars that culminated in the Thirty Years’ War (1618–1648), which devastated much of Germany, killing between 25 and 40% of its population. From 1618 to 1648 the Roman Catholic House of Habsburg and its allies fought against the Protestant princes of Germany, supported at various times by Denmark, Sweden and France. The Habsburgs, who ruled Spain, Austria, the Spanish Netherlands and much of Germany and Italy, were staunch defenders of the Roman Catholic Church. Some historians believe that the era of the Reformation came to a close when Roman Catholic France allied itself, first in secret and later on the battlefields, with Protestant states against the Habsburg dynasty. For the first time since the days of Luther, political and national convictions again outweighed religious convictions in Europe.

The main tenets of the Peace of Westphalia, which ended the Thirty Years’ War, were:

All parties would now recognize the Peace of Augsburg of 1555, by which each prince would have the right to determine the religion of his own state, the options being Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and now Calvinism (the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*)

Christians living in principalities where their denomination was not the established church were guaranteed the right to practice their faith in public during allotted hours and in private at their will.
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The treaty also effectively ended the Pope's pan-European political power. Fully aware of the loss, Pope Innocent X declared the treaty "null, void, invalid, iniquitous, unjust, damnable, reprobate, inane, empty of meaning and effect for all times." European sovereigns, Roman Catholic and Protestant alike, ignored his verdict.

**E. Key People, Events, & Documents**

Crucifixion, Resurrection, & Ascension of Jesus (c. 30)
Apostle Paul of Tarsus (c. 2 – c. 67)

Edict of Milan (313)
Augustine of Hippo (354-430)
Pelagius (c. 390-418)

Martin Luther (1483-1546)
Ninety-Five Theses (1517)
Diet of Worms (1521)
John Calvin (1509-1564)
Council of Trent (1545-1563)
Belgic Confession* (1561)
Heidelberg Catechism* (1563)
Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609)
Five Articles of Remonstrance (1610)
Synod of Dort & the Canons of Dort* (1618-19)
Westminster Assembly & Confession of Faith (1643-1649)
Treaty of Westphalia (1648)

*Three Forms of Unity