

Five Solas: Christ alone

Scripture alone, Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, and glory to God alone – called the Five Solas - is a helpful summary for knowing God and ourselves ("sola" means "only" in Latin).

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man: Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.

- 1 Timothy 2:4-6

One mediator

A mediator heals a breach between two people. Sometimes this is via compromise. We have all had times where we have had to make concessions for the sake of peace. For us, Christ heals the breach that we have with God as our mediator. Yet, He did this *not* by working for a compromise solution, which would lessen God's holiness. Instead Christ Jesus gave Himself as the intermediary between God and us, so that the result is reconciliation and the absence of hostility. In doing so, He maintains the integrity of God, so that He truly is holy.

Each of the five solas was developed in response to error or incorrect teaching within the Church, and yet their truths are for every generation. In the case of *Solus Christus*, or 'Christ alone,' the error was not over *who* Christ Jesus is, but over *what* He achieved in His life, death and resurrection. In the West, many medieval churches had come to teach a system of works, so that a person was given righteousness through following rituals and duties that supplemented what Christ had done at the cross. In this way, people were tethered to the Church - and their own performance in the Church's eyes - in order to receive grace enough to save.

But this raises the question: what do we, or anyone else for that matter, contribute to our salvation? Does Christ mostly save us and we must do the rest? Or are His life, death and resurrection everything that we need to be perfectly and forever reconciled with God?

In 1563, the Heidelberg Catechism, question 29, asked and unequivocally answered that question by saying;

Question: Why is the Son of God called "Jesus," meaning "saviour"?

Answer: Because he saves us from our sins; and because salvation is not to be sought or found in anyone else.

What does God require of us?

All of this presupposes that God actually requires something of us, which we have not fulfilled. What is it? God as our Creator made us to live by His laws. We owe Him obedience as a matter of right, whilst also understanding that God's laws are for our best. The problem with this is that whilst God's law is good, it doesn't have any power in and of itself to make us good people in right standing with God. In fact, like a mirror, God's perfect law shows up the ugliness of our sin. In Romans 3:20, Paul says that the law cannot set us free, "since through the law comes knowledge of sin." This is the first step in leading me to Christ my Saviour. Martin Luther summarized it this way: "The law discovers the disease. The gospel gives the remedy."

Luther's stairs

In 1510, Martin Luther was a zealous monk who travelled from Erfurt, Germany, across the Alps, to Rome, Italy. He visited the *Scala Sancta*, or holy stairs – twenty-eight white marble stairs that are thought to be the steps that the Lord Jesus climbed on his trial before Pontius Pilate. The mother of the emperor Constantine had relocated the stairs from Jerusalem to Rome in 326 A.D.

Luther ascended the stairs on his knees, reciting the Lord's Prayer on each step. He had been taught that by doing so he would receive from dead saints some of their good merits, which could reduce the time spent in purgatory by his loved ones. But when he reached the top he said, "Who knows whether this works?" Later, Luther said, "If ever a monk got to heaven by monkery, it was I." He was beginning to realise that the best efforts were not enough.

He returned to Erfurt in despair. Yet, in God's kindness, he soon began to believe that Christ had achieved all that he desired and to trust *other* ways was, in fact, unbelief. He would later say, "The cross alone is our theology."

No one else could achieve what Christ achieved

What did Christ achieve? In Revelation 5, the Apostle John saw a vision that left him weeping. A challenge was issued to all of creation: "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" That is, can anyone unlock the promises and judgments of God, ultimately to reconcile God with sinful humanity. John wept because the situation looked helpless. Nobody could be found. But then, John is told, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals (Rev.5:5)." Christ Jesus alone could bring eternal peace and reconciliation with God.

Christ's achievement

In Ephesians 1:7-8, Paul sets out what Christ Jesus achieved for us clearly: "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight." The whole of our redemption and forgiveness is due to Him. He does not half redeem or half save, but He wholly has brought us into God's family (Eph. 1:5). One of the best ways of understanding what Christ Jesus has done is through the Biblical pictures of prophet, priest and king;

Prophet: as our prophet, Christ spoke God's Word. In the past, God spoke through prophets, but now He has spoken through His Son (Heb. 1:1-2). The Holy Spirit continues to make us wholly willing to listen.

Priest: as our priest, Christ intercedes to God for us. In fact, He is both sacrifice and priest, satisfying the demands of justice fully by His death on the cross. He now lives and actively intercedes for us before God the Father.

King: as our king, Christ inherits the promises God gave to David of a kingdom that would never end. Christ rules universally and sovereignly, never to be toppled.

In a letter to a fellow monk on 7th April, 1516, Luther was starting to grasp *Christ alone*. He wrote, "At present, the temptation to rest in one's own works is very powerful, especially with those who long to be good and pious. They are ignorant of God's righteousness, which has been so richly bestowed on us in Christ without money and price... But they never get thus far... Therefore, dear brother, learn Christ and Him crucified. Praise and laud His name, and despairing of self, say to Him, "Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness, but I am Thy sin. Thou hast taken what is mine, and given me what is Thine. Thou hast assumed that which Thou wert not, and given me what I had not.""

No place for boasting

We contribute nothing to our salvation, but our sin and sinfulness. Christ has done it all. Hence, there is no place for boasting before God or others. We rightly sing;

In Christ alone my hope is found.