

The 5 'Solas' of the Reformation

(Text of a sermon preached in Dunfanaghy and Carrigart Presbyterian Churches on 5.11.17)

Ephesians 2 v 1 – 10

31st October was a special day for us. We attended the graduation of our daughter in Chester Cathedral, a landmark occasion for her and her friends.

31st October 2017 was a special date for another reason. It was 500 years to the day from Martin Luther pinned a notice to the church door in Wittenberg Germany, inviting people to discuss 95 Theses about the Christian religion. This is regarded by historians as the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

It was the contention of Luther and others that the mediaeval Church in Europe had strayed badly from her Biblical roots, introducing numerous wrong beliefs and practices. This was a call to 're-form', to be refreshed on the central principles laid down by Jesus and His Apostles in the New Testament.

The main thrusts of Reformation teaching have been summed up in 5 points, all beginning with the Latin word 'sola' which means 'alone':

Sola scriptura – Scripture alone

Sola gratia – grace alone

Sola fide – faith alone

Solo Christo – Christ alone

Soli Deo Gloria – to the glory of God alone.

Let's look at these in turn and consider how they pertain not just to Europe 500 years ago, but to the world of the 21st century.

Firstly 'Sola scriptura' – scripture alone.

These days if we want information on any topic we simply take out our mobile phone and ‘Google it’. There are lots of useful sources on the internet through which we can grow in knowledge and wisdom but Christians hold that there is one ultimate source that gives human beings what we need to know about the most crucial things – how to be right with our Maker – and this source is the Bible.

We call it the Word of God for although it was written over a period of 1500 years by around 40 authors, we believe it to be inspired by the Lord Himself.

In 21st century ‘Postmodern’ culture there are no absolutes. Ideas can change dramatically according to public opinion. Radio and TV shows encourage people to phone, email or ‘tweet’ their views. Never mind the invited experts, what do you think? Causes are won or lost on social media. If popular opinion can be swayed by the number of ‘likes’ something gets on Facebook, governments will change the legislation accordingly.

But Christians don’t just go with the flow. We submit to a higher authority. We look to be guided by Scripture.

With the greatest of respect, the final word about what is true and false, right and wrong does not belong to the Pope or the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Moderator of the General Assembly, not to Presidents or politicians, doctors, scientists, sociologists or the general public. It belongs to the Creator and can be found in His Word, the Bible!

If Ireland repeals the 8th Amendment next year does that mean it is alright to kill children? Christians say ‘no’ for God’s Word teaches the sanctity of human life and while liberal-minded people may applaud the pro-choice agenda understand God will judge each person’s actions by His holy standards!

Which means we have a problem. Scripture sums it up neatly, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3 v 23). All of us face eternal condemnation in Hell unless our sin can be dealt with. What are we to do? Scripture gives the answer which brings us to our next ‘sola’.

‘Sola fide’ – Faith alone.

Our reading in Ephesians finds Paul telling other Christians they have been ‘saved through faith ... not by works so that no one can boast’. Human beings are proud creatures – we would love if we could do some good deeds to make up for our bad ones. We imagine if we could do enough good perhaps it would all balance out somehow. But Ephesians is clear. It’s not by our works we are saved, it’s by faith, trusting in Someone Else’s goodness and what They have done on our behalf.

The dying criminal on the cross next to Christ could not offer any good works in his defence, only trust in the Messiah for mercy and amazingly Jesus promised him, ‘Today you will be with me in Paradise’. Like someone drowning at sea, powerless to rescue themselves, all but lost, this sinful man clutched the lifebelt offered to him and was saved.

This illustrates a third Reformation principle from the Bible –

‘Sola gratia’ – grace alone.

‘By grace you have been saved’ writes Paul. God’s grace. Not from ourselves, it is the ‘gift of God’. The dying thief didn’t deserve to be saved. None of us do. But God loves us so much He chose to come to our rescue. He chose to show us undeserved mercy and kindness.

It is humbling but also precious and comforting that our salvation does not depend on our flawed, weak efforts but on God’s perfect, all-sufficient grace.

This grace was demonstrated very specifically in our fourth ‘sola’.

‘Solus Christus’ – Christ alone.

As the Apostle Peter preached to the Sanhedrin in Acts 4: ‘Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven, given to men by which we must be saved’ (Acts 4 v 12)

We may have great admiration for other people past or present for various reasons but we must be careful to keep a unique regard for Christ. There is one Mediator between heaven and earth, one Saviour and Lord, one Great High Priest in Whom we must trust with all our hearts.

The world suggests many alternatives but only one is needed. Only one is acceptable to God! Jesus, Son of God, died as a Substitute for us on the cross. He took our sin and guilt on Himself, bore the capital punishment that should have been ours so that all who trust in Him might be forgiven, justified, clothed in His righteousness, reborn and adopted as God's children, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Christians are thus made fit for heaven and equipped for life on earth!

Now this redefines the purpose of life. We no longer live to pursue self-centred gratification. Our 'chief end' in life becomes 'to glorify God and enjoy Him forever'. (Westminster Shorter Catechism) We live in gratitude as followers of the Christ. We welcome and do the 'good works which God has planned in advance for us to do'. And here is our final 'sola'.

Soli Deo Gloria – to the glory of God alone. As He judges, as He saves, we will give Him thanks and praise and live to serve His honour and glory.

To sum up, here are

5 'solas' from 500 years ago.

5 central Christian truths from the New Testament.

5 key principles from God on which people in *every* age and place may thrive:

One Word – the Bible

One Method – Faith

One Source – Grace

One Saviour – Jesus Christ

One Response – Glory to God!

Amen