

Reformation Month

Sola Gracia

Various Texts

Introduction

Last Sunday we commenced a series on the Reformation, and what a wonderful time of study and fellowship we had around those truths. For the sake of those who were unable to attend, I would like to briefly introduce the topic and plan of attack for this month again.

Solar System Compared to Solae System

The solar system is the gravitationally bound system comprising the Sun and the objects that orbit it, either directly or indirectly.

The sun is the center of our solar system; the planets, over 61 moons, asteroids, comets, meteoroids and other rocks and gas all orbit the sun.

Last week we commenced a study on a different Solae System. It is not a scientific or astronomical system, it is a spiritual and biblical system. It too centers around a Son, but this Son is not a spinning ball of hot gas which lights up the world, it is the Son of God who is the Light of the World.

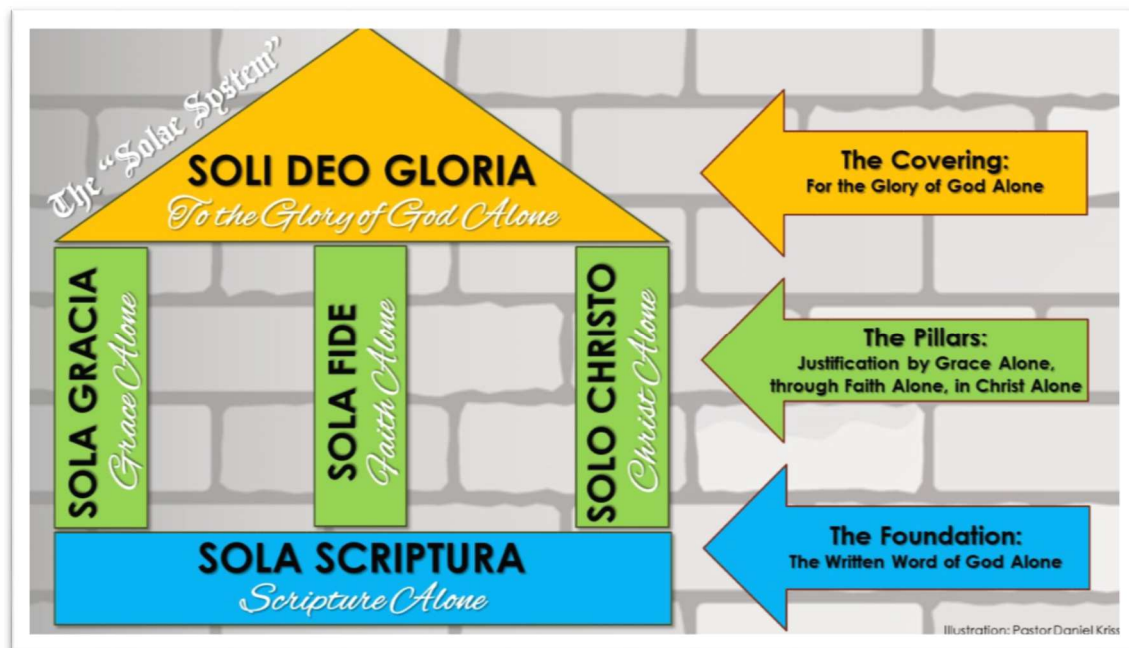
Similar to the Physical Solar System, the Biblical Solae System also includes luminous bodies which orbit around our precious Son. These are the great truths of the gospel. The spiritual moons are the lesser lights and the truths which reflect the glory of the Son.

As we study this spiritual paradigm it is extremely important that we do not lose sight of the central aspect of this Solae System – the Son of God. Sometimes theologians, pastors, teachers, and students become so enamored with the “small rocks and comets of the Solae System” that they lose sight of the central and glorious theme which is Jesus Christ who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16).

I have now demonstrated how the physical Solar System is in some ways similar to the spiritual Solae System. Now I want to show you what the Solae System really is by way of “Building Diagram.”

Solae System Represented by a Building

Last week I told you that when I first came into contact with the Solae System or the “Five Solas of the Reformation”, I immediately came to appreciate how each truth was inter-connected. I started to draw a diagram which quickly took the form of a building, and I think it is helpful to show you the building blocks which form this theological structure.



Plan of Attack

For the five Sundays of October we will be looking at the "Five Solas of the Reformation". Each Sunday will feature a different aspect of the diagram displayed. I presented Sola Scriptura last week. Today we will look at the second facet of this system, Lucas will present the third next week, and then I will wrap up with the final two aspects of the Solae System.

Join me as we consider "**Sola Gracia- The First Pillar of the Reformation.**"

1. A Brief Glossary of Terms

Last week I began the message by defining some key terms of the reformation. On that occasion, we looked at the meaning of "Lollards", the "Roman Catholic Church", and "Penance." Please listen to last week's message or get a copy of the notes so that you are up to speed with our ever-growing glossary of the reformation.

Today I have a number of other terms I want to present which will assist you in understanding the backdrop upon which the Protestant Reformation is seen.

Infant Baptism – The Roman Catholic Church practiced infant baptism as a means of "washing away the stain of original sin." In other words, they believed (and still believe) that infant baptism is a necessary pre-requisite to salvation and the forgiveness of sin. Infant Baptism forms one of the many anti-biblical traditions imposed by the Roman Catholic Church. Although many of the reformers had been baptized as infants, and some went on to believe it was still relevant (Luther, Calvin and others), NONE of them believed that it was required for salvation as the Roman Catholic Church asserted.

Anabaptist - Formally speaking, the term applies to those who challenged the scriptural basis for infant baptism. The issue came to the forefront in the process of the Zurich reformation and the term 'catabaptists' (or 'antibaptists') was initially coined by Ulrich Zwingli. The Anabaptists came to be the most visible and the most attacked congregations of 'radicals' in the protestant reformation.

Eucharist – The term literally means "thanksgiving" and in a Roman Catholic setting is often called "The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass". At the time of the reformation (and

today), partaking of the Eucharist was essential to sins being forgiven. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) which was an ecumenical gathering of the Roman Catholic Church, was formed as a direct response to the Protestant Reformation, and makes the following statement regarding the Eucharist: *"...By the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation."*

The Eucharist was therefore considered a central sacrament which made atonement for sins. Failure to partake would leave one in their sins and under the condemnation of God until restitution was made by partaking of the "actual" body and blood of Christ again.

Confirmation - One of the seven sacraments (accepted by St Thomas Aquinas) and formally affirmed as an article of belief at the council of Florence in 1439.

Candidates for confirmation were "anointed with unction" by the confirming bishop in the sign of the cross to confirm their baptism. The protestant reformers were united in regards to confirmation as a sacrament only. It had, they said, no scriptural basis, contained no divine promise, and was not essential to salvation. Although the service continued (albeit in various contexts), the practice of anointing at confirmation was abandoned by the protestant churches.

Good Works – The Roman Catholic Religion teaches that good works are essential to entry into salvation and the maintaining of it. Good works were generally defined as prayers, fasting, alms-giving, pilgrimages, indulgences, obedience to papal authority, participating in mass and the Eucharist, all religious disciplines, and the fulfillment of the seven sacraments.

These are some of the terms you will need to be familiar with on our journey into the lives of the reformers and what they stood against.

2. The Definition of "Sola Gracia"

Turn to Ephesians 2:8-9

This favourite passage of the reformers is critical to an understanding of what they believed and why it was so important to them.

Before we can define the meaning of the phrase "Sola Gracia", we must first understand the term "Grace".

Sadly, "Grace" has become so common a term that its rich meaning is largely lost in today's Christian culture. In seeking to understand the reformation and all that it stood for, we must first return to an understanding of terms such as "grace".

Let me begin by explaining what "Grace" is not:

Grace is not *"simply a divine sentiment, a decision or tendency in God to overlook sin as an overindulgent parent might when dealing with a naughty child"*¹ Grace is not *"God turning a blind eye to human rebellion"*, nor is it *"a free pass to do whatever one chooses."*²

What is grace?

¹ Carl R. Trueman, *Grace Alone* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2017), 17

² Ibid.

"Grace" is simply the "unmerited favour of God". This definition, though simplistic, speaks volumes of truth and we need to understand this in greater measures.

The "unmerited favour of God" is typically categorized in three ways:

1. Common Grace
2. Salvific Grace
3. Sanctifying Grace

Again, please do not let this terminology scare you, we are about to explain and simplify these terms.

1. Common Grace:

When reformers spoke of "common grace" they referred to God's "general" attitude towards His creation in allowing them to flourish in this earthly realm regardless of their acceptance of salvation or not.

In other words, God's common grace is seen in the provision of food, sight, marriage music, laughter, sunshine, rain, wealth, clothing, supplies, materialism etc. Common grace is God's kindness towards fallen people who don't deserve these blessings.

Scripture teaches the concept of common grace in various places:

Psalm 145:9 *The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.*

Matthew 5:45 *So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*

Luke 6:35 *But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.*

Acts 14:17 *Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."*

God's "common grace" is an expression of His character, but it can in no way bring about the saving of the soul from the penalty of sin.

2. Salvific Grace:

"Salvific Grace" simply refers to that "special grace" associated with a sinner's conversion. Sometimes we refer to this as "justification" or "regeneration".

Although we perceive God's unmerited favour towards us in creation and His common grace, we observe a far weightier example of grace in the gospel which brings about salvation.

Salvific grace refers to God's unmerited favour towards fallen sinners who deserve to experience the full weight of His wrath and condemnation for all eternity, but instead, are set free from sin's penalty by means of Christ's atoning work on the cross, and His subsequent resurrection from the dead. This "gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8) is wholly a work of God and cannot be earned or bought by the sinner.

3. Sanctifying Grace:

"Sanctifying grace" refers to that ongoing grace or favour of God that does not save us from our sins only, but also brings about our maturity in the faith, and our conforming to the character of Christ.

It is impossible for an individual to experience God's "salvific grace" without venturing into the realm of God's "sanctifying grace."

Before we move on to defining "Sola Gracia", let me make one other essential comment regarding this matter of grace:

The Supreme Manifestation of Grace

Since the creation of the world, humans have experienced God's grace. God has always been gracious and He always will be. This is because grace is intrinsically connected with His character. He does not simply have an inclination towards grace, He is the very definition and origin of grace.

Although God's grace is seen clearly on every page in the Scriptures, and throughout history, the supreme manifestation of God's grace is Jesus Christ.

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

One cannot speak of God's grace without speaking of God's Son. He is the embodiment of graciousness and the means of common grace; as creator, sustainer, and the giver of all good things (Colossians 1:16); salvific grace, as the redeemer and propitiation for sin (Colossians 1:13-14); and sanctifying grace, as the One who lives in us and for us (Galatians 2:20).

So now, back to the original point- defining "Sola Gracia".

What is "Sola Gracia?"

Sola Gracia is a biblical doctrine upheld by the reformers which acknowledges that salvation is wholly a gift of God, and cannot be earned. It stands in direct contrast to the Roman Catholic teachings, sacraments, and traditions.

Sola Gratia means that there is nothing in us and nothing we do that moves God to forgive us. God is gracious to us because of Jesus Christ and because of Him alone.

Let's consider a number of important Bible passages that explain this truth more fully:

Romans 3:21-25

This great reformation text clearly states "*justified by his grace as a gift...*"

Romans 11:5-6

In the midst of a discussion surrounding the righteous remnant of Israel, Paul gives us a wonderful statement about Grace: "*if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.*"

Ephesians 2:8

This portion of Scripture is considered the most definitive argument for Sola Gracia. It not only speaks of grace, but also the importance of faith as being a gift from God, unobtainable by the works of the flesh.

The reformers clung to this portion of Scripture with their life, and even to their death!

What did the Reformer's have to say about Sola Gracia?

Martin Luther:

In his sermon on Titus 3:4-8, Luther asserts the following:

"Yes, dear friend, you must first possess heaven and salvation before you can do good works. Works never merit heaven; heaven is conferred purely of grace."

"He who does not receive salvation purely through grace, independently of all good works, certainly will never secure it."

"We receive absolution [forgiveness] and grace at no cost or labor on our part, but not without cost and labor on the part of Christ."

"Our salvation must exist, not in our righteousness, but...in Christ's righteousness. ...Let his righteousness and grace, not yours, be your refuge."

Ulrich Zwingli:

"Christ is our justification, from which follows that our good works, if they are of Christ, are good; but if ours, they are neither right or good."

"Since Christ is our righteousness, our works are good only insofar as they are of Christ."

John Calvin:

"Our assurance, our glory, and the sole anchor of our salvation are that Christ the Son of God is ours, and we in turn are in him sons of God and heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven, called to the hope of eternal blessedness by God's grace, not by our worth."

"If people mean that man has in himself the power to work in partnership with God's grace they are most wretchedly deluding themselves."

Having considered the "Definition of Sola Gracia" let's now consider the final point:

3. The Implications of "Sola Gracia"

In this third and final point, I want us to understand what "Sola Gracia" meant to the reformers in a practical sense, and then what it means for us today in 21st century Christianity.

Sola Gracia and the Reformers:

1. Grace vs. Sacraments

We have already discussed the Eucharist (mass) which was upheld as a salvific rite in the Roman Catholic Church.

The "Lord's Table" or the "Communion Table" was of vital importance to the reformers. It was viewed as a serious and blessed event. However, it was also a point of great contention and controversy. Some who had been active in the Roman Catholic Church still maintained that the elements **did** mystically transfer into the actual body and blood of Christ. However, they did not believe that this was necessary to procure their ongoing salvation, but rather that Christ was present with His church at this celebration in a very real way.

Others held the communion table in the highest esteem, but understood that the elements were simply representations of Christ's body and blood and were to be treated with honour and respect, but not to the point of becoming a nervous wreck like Luther, who would not touch the elements because he was "handling God."

As with all matters, the Scripture must be our final authority, and the Bible does not teach anywhere that the Lord's Table consists of Christ's actual body and blood, but rather that they are to be "representative" as we "do this in remembrance" of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:24-25).

2. Grace vs. Baptism

One of the hottest topics of debate at the time of the reformation and even until our day is baptism. The Roman Catholic Church taught (and teaches) that water baptism is necessary for salvation.

The reformers believed that salvation was by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone. The Eucharist and water baptism were both ordinances exclusively for those who had **already** received the grace of God in salvation.

Although the reformers display some variance in their understanding of baptism, it is clear that they were all agreed on the fact that baptism was not a means of regeneration but a command for one who had already experienced the grace of God.

3. Grace vs. Works of the Law

The Roman Catholic Church had placed an insurmountable yoke on the laity. They had taught the people that salvation was obtained by baptism, indulgences, confessions, fasting, prayer, partaking of the Eucharist, and many other man-made traditions.

The reformers repudiated and fought against every element of a works-based salvation in order to show the people that salvation is by **grace alone**.

There are so many other things that could be said at this point but I must quickly turn our attention to our day, and the specific application and implications of Sola Gracia for us as a church.

In this final aspect of the message I would like to borrow some points from Carl R. Trueman who has written a book entitled "Grace Alone: Salvation as a Gift of God".

1. A Grace-Alone Church Takes Sin Seriously

Since grace is not simply a sentiment or attitude in God, but rather, His unmerited favour to sinful people, it is important that we do not "cheapen His grace" but underestimating its value, and the seriousness of our sin.

Prosperity gospel advocates "use" grace as a means of self-fulfillment, and somehow twist its beauty and grandeur to that of an antidote for our self-esteem issues.

Until the church returns to an understanding of the absolute depravity of man, and the exceeding heinousness of sin, there will never be an appreciation for God's redeeming grace.

We must take sin seriously so that we can enjoy more fully the immeasurable riches of God's grace.

2. A Grace-Alone Church Takes Christ Seriously

Since God's redeeming grace came by means of His Son, we must not simply look at grace as some distant object that was given to us to deal with sin. Grace came

through Jesus Christ. If we talk of grace without talking of Christ, we are not speaking biblically of grace.

A church that believes in salvation by grace alone must proclaim Christ as the center and means of that grace.

3. A Grace-Alone Church Takes Assurance of Salvation Seriously

The reformers understood that God's grace was not simply for justification, but also assured them of His ongoing work in sanctification, and finally brought them home to glorification.

"God's sovereign grace meant that Christians could be confident that God was their God and would love and care for them until they were safely home."³

4. A Grace-Alone Church Takes the Corporate Gather of the Church Seriously

A grace-alone church does not come together to secure their salvation as the Catholic Church asserts, but rather because it is essential to their growth and discipleship.

Understanding the grace of God will invoke a great desire to meet as often as possible with the people of God and to serve together side-by-side in building the Kingdom of God.

5. A Grace-Alone Church Takes the Bible Seriously

Last week we learned about the importance of Sola Scriptura. If we take grace seriously, we WILL take the Scripture seriously since it is the means of understanding this grace.

6. A Grace-Alone Church Takes Teaching/Preaching Seriously

Preaching was central to the reformation because it accomplished one of two things: it either hardened hearts or brought people to their knees in repentance.

Today preaching has been reduced to short little anecdotes that may or may not include the Scripture. It is designed to tickle the ears but never impact the heart.

One preacher described it this way: *"we have sermonettes for Christianettes, who drive Corvettes, worship in discotechs, while chewing Nicorette's."*

The church that is serious about God's grace will be a church that longs for God's truth. Preaching will be a priority in all that is done.

7. A Grace-Alone Church Takes Water Baptism Seriously

Since a Grace-Alone church knows the truth about water baptism, they should teach about it, and call people to obey this biblical ordinance.

8. A Grace-Alone Church Takes the Lord's Supper Seriously

Today the church needs to recover an understanding of the Lord's Table. We need to be careful not to over-emphasise the elements, but also not to under-emphasise the importance of this wonderful occasion.

³ Carl R. Trueman, *Grace Alone* (Michigan: Zondervan, 2017), 237

It must be esteemed highly as a celebration of remembrance that invokes in us both a quiet time of self-examination, and a time of exuberant joy as we remember God's amazing grace.

9. A Grace-Alone Church takes Prayer Seriously

Finally, a church that believes in grace alone will inevitably take prayer seriously because she knows that she exists only in complete and total dependence on the Lord who bought her.

Since prayer is “our heartfelt dependence upon God expressed”, and grace is entirely a work of God on our behalf, it is only right that the church is characterized by prayer, both corporately and privately.

Conclusion

As you can see from last week and from today, our studies on the Solae System are both rich and full, and time is our enemy. We must now close and as we do, I urge you to consider afresh the words of a slave-trader who was confronted by God's grace and wrote:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.
'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.*

SOLA GRACIA!!