

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Reformation Sunday</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>3</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Romans 11:33-36</b>		
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### THE FIVE SOLAS OF THE REFORMATION

Why did the Reformation occur? What really brought about this great division in Christendom? Although there were other contributing factors, the keys to understanding the reasons for the Reformation are spiritual and theological. The Reformation's understanding of salvation, religious authority, and the church was a major break with the theology officially espoused by the Roman Catholic Church. The Protestant Reformation was then, first and foremost, a theological revolution. The present-day evangelical attitude toward the place and importance of theology in the life of the church is a major reason why the Reformation has been eclipsed in the evangelical church. Theology is either considered a necessary evil or something that is, practically speaking, irrelevant to the concerns of ministry and church growth. Lip service is often paid to the Reformation, but it is rarely more than that. More often than not, today's evangelicals are, in the words of R. K. McGregor Wright, "conditioned more by the thirty-second sound bites than the two-thousand-year-old discourse of Christian orthodoxy."<sup>1</sup>

- I. **THE FORMAL PRINCIPLE OF THE REFORMATION: *SOLA SCRIPTURA*.** Reformational distinctives are usually identified with the five *solas*, and for the sake of brevity these will be used to expound the substance of the theology of the Reformation. *Sola Scriptura* is referred to as the formal principle of the Reformation in the sense that it *forms* and gives direction to what is to be believed. As such it stands at the very beginning of Reformational theology. Scripture stands, not only as the *sole* source for what is to be believed and practiced, but also is considered *sufficient* to that end. The late James Boice captured the essence of the matter when he wrote: "When they used these words the Reformers were indicating their concern for the Bible's authority, and what they meant to say was that the Bible alone is our ultimate authority – not the pope, not the church, not the traditions of the church or church councils, still less personal intimations or subjective feelings, but Scripture only. These other sources of authority are sometimes useful and may at times have a place, but Scripture alone is ultimate. Therefore, if any of these other authorities differ from Scripture, they are to be judged by the Bible and rejected, rather than it being the other way around."<sup>2</sup> Although affirmed in principle by most evangelicals, *sola Scriptura* has actually ceased to exercise a controlling influence on the beliefs of an ever-growing number of professed evangelicals. Many evangelicals who identify with the Pentecostal/charismatic traditions categorically reject *sola Scriptura* because it does not allow for continuing revelation in terms of dreams, visions, and ongoing prophecy.<sup>3</sup> Some who stand in this tradition may protest and declare their allegiance to *sola Scriptura*, but as Reymond has pointed out: "It must be noted that to the degree that one believes that God still speaks directly to men and women today through prophets and glossolalists, just to that same degree he is saying that he does not absolutely need the Bible for a word from God, and accordingly he has abandoned the great Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*."<sup>4</sup> *Sola*

*Scriptura* has been eclipsed in many of our evangelical pulpits – not in the sense that the Bible is not appealed to or read, but in the sense in which the message of Scripture is treated as if it required supplementation by contemporary insights into human behavior. In other words, what may have been sufficient in times past is today inadequate; our present conditions require additional insights provided by techniques and methods that were unknown until modern times.

II. **THE MATERIAL PRINCIPLE OF THE REFORMATION: SOLA FIDE.** Luther called the doctrine of justification by faith alone the *articulus ecclesiae stantis et cadentis*, the “article by which the church stands and falls.” As a result of ECT (“Evangelicals and Catholics Together”) and ECT II<sup>5</sup> *sola fide* (justification by faith alone) has been the subject of intense discussion among a number of concerned evangelicals. At the same time, however, a great many evangelicals are openly indifferent to the seriousness of this debate, considering it hair-splitting or quibbling over petty doctrinal issues that really have no bearing on the great concerns (usually identified in terms of the culture wars being waged between political liberals and conservatives) facing the church in these days and times. The evangelical Lutheran-turned-Roman Catholic Richard John Neuhaus dismisses altogether the notion that *sola fide* is the article by which the church stands and falls and confidently declares: “Those who adamantly hold to this position view themselves as the champions of sixteenth-century Lutheran and Calvinist orthodoxy. The great majority of evangelicals in America and the world do not believe that those schools of theology are normative for their understanding of the Christian faith. Wesleyan, Arminian, Holiness, Pentecostal, and other evangelical traditions are much closer to the Catholic understanding of the connections between faith and the converted life, between justification and sanctification.”<sup>6</sup> While we admit the truthfulness of this remark, it should serve only as a rebuke to those evangelicals whose tradition has departed so significantly from the gospel. Perhaps in light of Galatians 1:6 one should not be greatly surprised by such things. Nonetheless, it should cause us to stop and ponder. Why do a large number of evangelicals desire to maintain a commitment to an Arminian understanding of free will if it entails a distorted doctrine of justification by faith alone?<sup>7</sup> Protests of evangelical Arminians notwithstanding, R. K. McGregor Wright’s analysis is difficult to refute: “The Arminian Presupposition of a free will weakens the Bible’s doctrine of grace to the same degree that it weakens the doctrine of omnipotence. When the Arminian insists that somehow God limits himself at the door of the human will, this can only mean in practice that the sinner must supply something for salvation that God is powerless to supply. That something is the act of saving faith, essentially an autonomous manifestation of a purely natural, innate spiritual competence. In other words, salvation is partly a transcendent act of God’s mercy in providing the necessary circumstances and partly an immanent natural achievement of the sinner’s spiritual competence.”<sup>8</sup>

III. **AMAZING GRACE: SOLA GRATIA.** The doctrine of salvation by the free grace of God alone is affirmed in the verbal sense by all who call themselves *evangelical*. However, if you probe beneath the surface, you discover all too quickly that *sola gratia* is actually repudiated in its true theological meaning. The notion that people are born sinners and, as such, do not *deserve* grace runs contrary to the widespread popular belief that deep down people are basically good and that God *owes* everyone a chance at salvation. Regrettably this notion has won wide acceptance in many evangelical circles. I am personally persuaded that this is, more than anything else, the reason to many evangelicals (like those traditions that Neuhaus celebrated as having more in common with traditional Catholicism than classic Protestantism) have a truncated understanding of *sola fide*<sup>9</sup> Theologian Donald Bloesch assesses this way: “Catholic theology will gladly accept salvation by grace, but it is adamant

that this is grace that assists human free will and therefore is not grace alone. Likewise Catholics can affirm justification by faith, but this is faith formed by love, not faith alone (*sola fide*). The Council of Trent concluded that even before coming to faith we can dispose ourselves to receive God's justifying grace. Consequently, salvation was portrayed as a cooperative endeavor between the gracious God and the human sinner, though we cannot move toward God on our own apart from His grace. In evangelical Protestantism grace does more than enable our free will; it liberates our will for faith and service. Grace does not simply bring us the possibility of a salvation yet to be realized; it brings us the reality of a salvation already accomplished. Our role is not to cooperate with God in procuring grace or justification but to celebrate and proclaim a salvation won by Christ alone (*solus Christus*). We are not agents of God's saving work but witness to His saving work. His grace when it first comes to us is irresistible, for it breaks down the resistance of the old nature and in effect implants within us a new nature. The decision of faith is a sign that grace is working for us and in us; it is not the condition for receiving grace. One should recognize that modern evangelicalism is probably closer to semi-Pelagianism (which viewed salvation as partly the work of the human subject and partly the work of God) than as traditional Catholicism because of the prominent role assigned to natural human free will in the effecting of salvation. In classical Protestantism faith is not a theological virtue (and thereby meritorious) but an empty vessel that only receives what is given by Christ."<sup>10</sup> Given this perspective, Neuhaus's claim is actually an admission that Catholicism and much of modern evangelicalism really share a common commitment to varying degrees of semi-Pelagianism.

- IV. **OUR ONE AND ONLY MEDIATOR: SOLUS CHRISTUS.** The vast majority of evangelicals readily acknowledge that we are saved exclusively by Christ, but given the blurred nature of so much that passes for evangelicalism, which Christ are we affirming when we declare *solus Christus*? The "Jesus" of the *health and wealth* charismatic crowd, i.e., Kenneth Copeland, as well as the "Jesus" being promoted by the Emergent crowd, i.e., Brian McLaren, Steven Chalke and Rob Bell, bear no resemblance to the Christ of Christian Orthodoxy. The Emergent spokesmen, along with the people like Open-view theist Clark Pinnock, have no reservations about adopting the idea that people attain salvation through the various world religions. *Christianity Today*, in an interview with Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School, had no qualms about suggesting that evangelicals should *not* be overly dogmatic regarding the question of whether sincere worshipers of other faiths are excluded as such from salvation.<sup>11</sup> A recent poll revealed that over 70% of professing Born Again Christians say other religions can lead to heaven!<sup>12</sup> This is a denial of *solus Christus*.
- V. **THE MAJESTY OF GOD: SOLI DEO GLORIA.** I close by once again citing the words of Boice, "Wherever in the church biblical authority has been lost, Christ has been displaced, the gospel has been distorted, or faith has been perverted, it has always been for one reason: Our interests have displaced God's and we are doing his work in our way. The loss of God's centrality in the life of today's church is common and lamentable. It is this loss that allows us to transform worship into entertainment, gospel preaching into marketing, believing into technique, being good into feeling good about ourselves, and faithfulness into being successful. As a result, God, Christ, and the Bible have come to mean too little to us and rest too inconsequentially upon us. God does not exist to satisfy human ambitions, cravings, the appetite for consumption, or our own private spiritual interests. We must focus on God in our worship, rather than the satisfaction of our personal needs. God is sovereign in worship; we are not. Our concern must be for God's kingdom, not our own empires, popularity, or success."<sup>13</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>R. K. McGregor, *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism* (InterVarsity, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>James Montgomery Boice, "Preface," in *here We Stand: A Call from Confessing Evangelicals*, ed. James Montgomery Boice and Benjamin E. Sasse (Baker, 1996), 10.

<sup>3</sup>cf. William DeArtega, *Quenching the Spirit: Examining Centuries of Opposition to the Moving of the Holy Spirit* (Creation House, 1992), 82. Jack Deere, while more guarded in his language, is nonetheless equally emphatic in his rejection of the Reformation's understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture since the Bible, according to him, *must* be supplemented by ongoing contemporary revelations. See his *Surprised by the Voice of God: How God Speaks Today Through Prophecies, Dreams, and Visions* (Zondervan, 1996).

<sup>4</sup>Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), 59. Evangelicals should recognize the inherent danger involved in claiming *any* ongoing direct revelation from God. Our society is awash in such claims, as witnessed by the immensely popular books like Betty Eadie's *Embraced by the Light*, and Neal Donald Walsch's *Conversations with God: An Uncommon Dialogue*. The Gnostic and New Age nature of these works should give pause to those evangelicals who insist that the Bible *must* be supplemented by new revelations. Added to this is the embarrassing number of times that evangelicals of this persuasion have emphatically claimed that they had a direct word from the Lord on some matter that eventually proved to be not true. Two instances come to mind. In May 1994 John Hinkle, charismatic pastor in southern California, gained nationwide attention (appearing with Paul Crouch on Trinity Broadcasting Network [TBN] and receiving the accolades of Pat Robertson) for claiming that God *personally* told him "in a very loud, firm voice, as clear as a ringing bell and with such power and clarity there was no way to doubt it" that on June 9, 1994, God was going to "rip the evil out of this world." Mr. Hinkle was absolutely sure that this meant that there was going to be a great cleansing and destruction of evil forces and power in the world. "It is not the Rapture," he said, "but God's Love and Glory overcoming all evil." We later were told that this prophecy was *really* fulfilled, but in a strange and mysterious way! Pat Robertson has been guilty of this sort of thing as well. He announced prior to the 1992 presidential election (on the 700 Club) that God *personally* told him that George Bush would win the election. After Clinton was elected, Robertson said "obviously God must have changed His mind for some reason or another!"

<sup>5</sup>cf. Charles Colson and Richard John Neuhaus, eds., *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Towards a Common Mission* (Word, 1995) and Timothy George, "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A New Initiative," *Christianity Today*, December 8, 1997, 34-38.

<sup>6</sup>Richard John Neuhaus, "The Catholic Difference," in *Evangelicals and Catholics Together: Toward a Common Mission*, 199. Neuhaus is so impressed with this that he later repeats it (210): "It is necessary to recall that the claim that *sola fide* is the article by which the Church stands or falls is hardly representative of evangelicalism." Keith A. Fournier, who identifies himself as an evangelical who just happens to also be a loyal, confessional Roman Catholic, has also sought to convince evangelicals to distance themselves from Reformational distinctives; cf. his *A House United: Evangelicals and Catholics Together: A Winning Alliance for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (NavPress, 1994), and my review in *Reformation and Revival Journal* 5, no. 1 (1996); 155-64. The sad irony here is that the editor of that now deceased journal, John Armstrong, has done a 180 and now is an enthusiastic supporter of ECT.

<sup>7</sup>Even evangelical Arminianism, as illustrated by none other than John Wesley, shows this tendency; cf. J. I. Packer, "Arminianism," in *Through Christ's Word: A Festschrift for Dr. Philip E. Hughes*, ed. W. R. Godfrey and J. L. Boyd III (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), esp. 140-43; cf. also the work of the nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterian theologian John L. Girardeau, *Calvinism and Evangelical Arminianism: Compared as to Election, Reprobation, Justification and Related Doctrines* (reprint; Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1984). Recently Roger Olson attempts a defense of Arminianism, but ends up declaring that even open-view theism, with its denial of God's omniscience (the inevitable outcome of Arminianism, as Olson admits), is a legitimate form of Arminianism. cf. his book *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (IVP, 2006). A better subtitle would have been: Calvinism in the hands of an Angry Arminian! cf. my article with that title at Phil Johnson's blog *Pyromaniacs*, Nov. 2010.

<sup>8</sup>Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty*, 104.

<sup>9</sup>Gabriel Fackre (*Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective* [Eerdmans, 1993], 83), in analyzing the historic evangelical position, noted: "The article by which the church stands or falls is the evangelical word to the sinner: *sola fide*. But it cannot be torn from a sentence that includes *sola gratia* in its full covenantal range, and *solus Christus* in its historical particularity. Justification is God's gracious work from beginning to end, as well as in its personal application to the contrite sinner."

<sup>10</sup>Donald Bloesch, "Is Spirituality Enough? Differing Models for Living," in *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us*, ed. John Armstrong (Moody, 1994), 155.

<sup>11</sup>Advocates of this position include Clark Pinnock, "An Inclusivist View," in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips (Zondervan, 1995); idem, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Eerdmans, 1992); John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Eerdmans, 1992); idem, "Inclusivism," in *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (InterVarsity, 1995).

<sup>12</sup>cf. *The Christian Post*, Oct. 21, 2021.

<sup>13</sup>Boice, op. cit. p. 18.