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THE SOLAS IN CHURCH HISTORY: THREE CASE STUDIES

Wherever genuine Christianity has flourished, those biblical truths that have been termed the five *solas* of the Reformation have been in evidence.¹ The leaders of the Reformation unitedly confessed that:

- Christ alone (*solus Christus*) was the Saviour of his people—not Christ and Mary, not Christ and the saints, but only the God-man;
- Grace alone (*sola gratia*), not the merit of fallen human beings, is the cause of their justification;
- Faith alone (*sola fide*), not human works, was the instrument or means by which the sinner lays hold of the Saviour Jesus and so is justified;
- Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) was the sole authority for the Christian life, not Scripture and tradition;
- Glory to God alone (*soli Deo gloria*) is the end result of this thinking about salvation.

The joyful and awe-filled affirmation of these truths is, of course, not limited to the time period of the Reformation. Usually the Church has had to defend the affirmation of these doctrines because of the denial of one or the other of them. I say “usually” because sometimes the Church’s declaration of these truths has been in a context relatively free of controversy. The first of three examples of the *solas* in Church History that we will look at in this article comes from just such a polemic-free context.

Affirming *solus Christus* in the second century

The *Letter to Diognetus*, an anonymous, spirited defence of the truth of the Christian faith, is from the late second-century. Avery Dulles, in his *A History of Apologetics*, describes it as “the pearl of early Christian apologetics.”² It stems from the joyous faith of a man who stands amazed at the revelation of God’s love in his Son and who is seeking to persuade a Graeco-Roman pagan by the name of Diognetus to make a similar commitment to Christianity.

The author has been arguing that God revealed his plan of salvation to none but his beloved Son until human beings realized their utter and complete inability to enter the Kingdom of God by their own strength. One might expect the author at this point to talk in terms of God empowering men and women so as to enter the Kingdom. Rather, he picks up the Pauline language of substitution, justification, and imputation.

¹ The other articles in this issue and the next issue seek to show that these truths are indeed biblical.

² *A History of Apologetics* (New York: Corpus Instrumentorum/Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 28.

When men and women had become conscious of their sin and impending judgment, God, the author says,

did not hate or reject us or bear us ill-will. Rather, he was long-suffering, bore with us, and in mercy he took our sins upon himself. He himself gave his own Son as a ransom for us—the Holy One for the godless, the Innocent One for the wicked, the Righteous One for the unrighteous, the Incorruptible for the corruptible, the Immortal for the mortal. For what else was able to cover our sins except his righteousness? In whom could we, who were lawless and godless, have been justified, but in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange! O the inscrutable work of God! O blessings beyond all expectation!—that the wickedness of many should be hidden in the one Righteous Man, and the righteousness of the One should justify the many wicked!³

Humanity's radical depravity, the author affirms, has been definitively dealt with by the Son's complete righteousness. Two rhetorical questions spell out in deeply Pauline terms what the work of Christ has accomplished. "Lawless and godless" men and women have been justified *solely* in the Son of God and their sins hidden within his righteousness.⁴ Drawing from the theology of imputation in Pauline passages like Romans 5:15-19 and 2 Corinthians 5:21, the author makes the same point again as this passage comes to a close: the Son has taken the wickedness of sinners upon himself while giving them his righteousness.

There is no evidence within this text that the author was seeking to defend these great truths of justification by Christ alone and the imputation of Christ's righteousness in the face of their denial. Rather, they seem to form the theological air he breathes and when he speaks of God's way of salvation, he can think of it in no other terms.

Augustine, theologian of *sola gratia* and true freedom⁵

How different is a second example of the affirmation of the *solas* two hundred years later. The North African Latin-speaking theologian Augustine (354-430) found himself compelled for the sake of the gospel to undertake a passionate defence of the doctrine of grace in response to the writings of another theologian named Pelagius (fl.400-420). Pelagius, a British monk who was resident in Rome during this time, maintained, in the words of R.C. Sproul, that "though grace may facilitate the achieving of righteousness, it is not necessary to that end."⁶ Pelagius also denied the doctrine of original sin, argued that essentially human nature is good and thus quite able to fulfill the commands of God.

³ *Diognetus* 9.2-5.

⁴ Andreas Lindemann, "Paulinische Theologie in Brief an Diognet" in Adolf Martin Ritter, ed., *Kerygma und Logos* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1979), 344-345.

⁵ I am indebted to John Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2000), 56-63 for the development of this section on Augustine and for some of the quotes from Augustine.

⁶ "Augustine and Pelagius", *Tabletalk* (June 1996), 13.

Pelagius was accordingly horrified when he heard read at a dinner party in Rome a prayer from Augustine's *Confessions*: "Give me the grace [O Lord] to do as you command, and command me to do what you will! ...O holy God...when your commands are obeyed, it is from you that we receive the power to obey them."⁷ The British monk considered this to be a frontal assault on the fact that men and women are truly free and have moral responsibility, and on the integral goodness of their nature. If God has to give men and women what he commands them to do, it must follow that they are not able to carry out his commands in their own natural strength. In Pelagius' thinking, this would mean that God could not hold human beings to be responsible for disobeying him and his moral law.

Augustine's response was a complex one and was worked out over fifteen years or so. In his *On the Spirit and the Letter* (412), he stressed first of all the bondage of the will and thus the need for God's radical intervention in grace alone to save lost sinners:

A man's free-will, indeed, avails for nothing except to sin, if he knows not the way of truth; and even after his duty and his proper aim shall begin to become known to him, unless he also take delight in and feel a love for it, he neither does his duty, nor sets about it, nor lives rightly. Now, in order that such a course may engage our affections, God's "love is shed abroad in our hearts" not through the free-will which arises from ourselves, but "through the Holy Ghost, which is given to us" (Romans 5:5).⁸

Yet, Augustine was totally committed to the moral accountability of the human will. When pressed for an explanation that satisfied fully human reason, he was quite willing to rest with the "profound mystery" of this issue in Scripture. This can be well seen in this quote, also from *On the Spirit and the Letter*:

Now, should any man be for constraining us to examine into this profound mystery, why this person is so persuaded as to yield, and that person is not, there are only two things occurring to me, which I should like to advance as my answer: "O the depth of the riches!" [Romans 11:33] and "Is there unrighteousness with God?" [Romans 9:14]. If the man is displeased with such an answer, he must seek more learned disputants: but let him beware lest he find presumptuousness.⁹

This Pauline approach to grace correspondingly means, as John Piper points out, that Augustine's thinking about human freedom is radically different than that of Pelagius. For Pelagius, freedom entails the will being autonomous to the point that it is sovereign in the choice of good or evil.¹⁰ For Augustine, as John Piper helpfully summarizes his position,

freedom is to be so in love with God and his ways that the very experience of choice is transcended. ...The ideal of freedom is to be so spiritually discerning of God's beauty, and to be so in love with God that one never stands with equilibrium between

⁷ *Confessions* 10.31, cited Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 56.

⁸ Cited Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 60-61.

⁹ Cited Piper, *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 61.

¹⁰ *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 62.

God and an alternate choice. Rather, one transcends the experience of choice and walks under the continual sway of sovereign joy in God.¹¹

***Sola scriptura*: Baptist response to the Quakers**

Baptists emerged from the matrix of English Puritanism in the seventeenth century, and like their Puritan forebears, they were deeply indebted to the *solas* of the Reformation. For example, just as the Reformation and Puritanism were first and foremost movements centred in Scripture, so this Word-centredness was true of the Baptist movement as well. When one of the key Baptist leaders of the seventeenth-century, the London pastor William Kiffin (1616-1701), was asked to speak at the funeral of a fellow Baptist, John Norcott (1621-1676), some of his remarks well articulated the Word-centred nature of the early Baptist movement. According to Kiffin, Norcott

steered his whole course by the compass of the Word, making Scripture precept or example his constant rule in matters of religion. Other men's opinions or interpretations were not the standard by which he went; but, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, he laboured to find out what the Lord himself had said in his Word.¹²

One clearly sees this desire to live according to the rule of Scripture in the seventeenth-century Baptist response to the Quakers. The Quaker movement arose in the late 1640s when George Fox (1624-1691), a shoemaker and part-time shepherd, began to win converts to a perspective on the Christian faith which rejected much of orthodox theology. Fox and the early Quakers proclaimed the possibility of salvation for all humanity, and urged men and women to turn to the light within them to find salvation.

This emphasis on the light within, which the Quakers variously called the indwelling Christ or Spirit, often led them to elevate it above the Scriptures. The Quakers did not deny that God could and did speak to people mediately through the written text of Scripture, but insisted that they also knew and enjoyed immediate inspiration like the saints of the New Testament era.¹³

For Baptists, on the other hand, since the Scriptures were, as a 1651 Particular Baptist tract against the Quakers asserted, “the infallible word of God...declaring his mind, making known his counsel, being able to make the people of God wise unto salvation,” they were “not to be slighted and undervalued as a dead letter, a bare history, a carnal empty story.”¹⁴ The nature of the Spirit's *inspiring* work in the authors of Scripture thus was unique and restricted to the past. The Spirit was now *illuminating* that which he had

¹¹ *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy*, 62.

¹² Cited Joseph Ivimey, *A History of the English Baptists* (London: B. J. Holdsworth, 1823), III, 300. I have capitalized the term “word.”

¹³ T. L. Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb's War: The Baptist-Quaker Conflict in Seventeenth-Century England* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 26-27, 32-33.

¹⁴ *Heart Bleedings for Professor Abominations [Confessions of Faith, and Other Public Documents, Illustrative of the History of the Baptist Churches of England in the 17th Century]*, ed. Edward Bean Underhill (London: Hanserd Knollys Society, 1854), 304].

inspired and all Christian experience of the Spirit was to be tried by the Scriptures. As the Lincolnshire Baptist leader Thomas Grantham (1634-1692) explained: “When the Quakers tell us that they have the Holy Ghost, and that what they speak they speak as they are moved by the Holy Ghost, etc. Then indeed we say we are to try what they thus tell us, by what the Spirit hath said in the Scripture.”¹⁵

A succinct summary of Baptist convictions regarding *sola scriptura* can be found in the *Second London Confession of Faith*, which would become the classic expression of transatlantic Particular Baptist doctrine until the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁶ Following the order of the *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration*, the *Second London Confession* begins with a lengthy article on Scripture. Apart from an introductory sentence and a concluding phrase it reproduces verbatim the parallel articles of the *Westminster Confession* and the *Savoy Declaration*. This introductory sentence, though, is a valuable gauge as to where seventeenth-century Baptists stood with regard to *sola scriptura*.

“The Holy Scripture,” it states, “is the only sufficient, certain, and infallible rule of all saving Knowledge, Faith, and Obedience.”¹⁷ “Only”—a translation of the Latin *sola*—emphasizes that apart from the Bible there is no other source of ultimate religious authority. The implications of this term are spelled out further on in the confession. The power to properly interpret Scripture belongs to neither “new revelations of the Spirit”—a remark aimed at the Quakers—nor the “traditions of men”—a statement which probably has in view the Church of England or the Roman Church—can be elevated to authoritative status alongside Scripture.¹⁸

A concluding word

In a world awash in false religions, ranging from Islam, which denies Christ alone as the way of salvation, to Mormonism, that rejects *sola scriptura*, the joyful affirmation of the *solas* is as needful in our days as in the history of the Church that we have briefly looked at through these three case studies.

Dr. Michael Haykin’s “The ‘Solas’ in Church History: Three Case Studies,” first appeared in *The Gospel Witness*, 84, No.12 (May 2006): 3-5. It is used here with permission.

¹⁵ *Christianismus Primitivus* (London, 1678), 50 (cited Underwood, *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb’s War*, 22).

¹⁶ For the text of this confession, see William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (2nd. ed.; Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 241-295.

¹⁷ *Second London Confession* 1.1 (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 248).

¹⁸ *Second London Confession* 1.6 (Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions*, 250).