

# REFORMATION “SOLAS” IN THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

The Reformers of the sixteenth century were not sectarian innovators who set out to create a new Church. They were Catholic theologians who knew that Christ had established His Church and had promised to preserve it until the end of time, and they professed continuity with the Church of the Apostles and the Fathers. They were Reformers, not rebels. The word *Reformation* means a return to an earlier normal condition, and that is just what they sought to do.

The four pillars of the Reformation are Scripture Alone (*Sola Scriptura*), Grace Alone (*Sola Gratia*), Faith Alone (*Sola Fide*), and Christ Alone (*Solus Christus*).

What did they mean by Scripture Alone? Article VI of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion says, “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an Article of Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.” The Formula of Concord defines *Sola Scriptura* this way, “the Word of God alone should be and remain the only standard and rule of doctrine, to which the writings of no man should be regarded as equal, but to which everything should be subjected.” More than a thousand years earlier, St. Augustine of Hippo put it this way, “the established authority of Scripture must outweigh every other” (Reply to Faustus the Manichean 13, 5).

This is not, of course, the version of “*Sola Scriptura*” that is held by most contemporary “evangelicals,” which includes the right of private interpretation, divorced from the historic Church; and that is used by Roman Catholic polemicists to attack the the Reformation. Holy Scripture cannot be interpreted according to the whims of the individual, and the Reformers had nothing but disdain for such ideas.

At the same time however, the Anglican Church teaches in Article XX, *Of the Authority of the Church*, that while the Church is a witness and a keeper of Holy Scripture, it is also subject to it. The Article says, “Wherefore, although the Church be a witness and a keeper of Holy Writ, yet, as it ought not to decree any thing against the same, so besides the same ought it not to enforce anything to be believed for necessity of salvation.”

What follows is an anthology of quotations from the writings of the Church Fathers and two important Medieval theologians, St. Bernard of Clairvaux and St. Thomas Aquinas, arranged topically under the headings of the four great “Solas” of the Reformation. These Fathers and theologians are in a very real sense contributors to the theology of the Reformation and therefore to classical Anglicanism.

If the Reformers believed in *Sola Scriptura*, what then is the Reformation view of the Fathers? Martin Chemnitz, one of the greatest theologians of the sixteenth century, put it this way, “For we love and venerate the testimonies of the ancient and purer church, *by whose agreement we are aided and confirmed*, but our faith must rest on the Word of God, on no human authority. Therefore we do not set the testimonies of the Fathers over the Scripture, but subordinate them to it” (italics added). The writings of the Church Fathers then, are “the testimonies of the ancient church” and “by whose agreement we are aided and confirmed”; but, as St. Augustine said, “the established authority of Scripture must outweigh every other.”

The Anglican Church is an ancient Catholic Church, but it is also a Church reformed in the sixteenth century. Anglicanism is thoroughly Evangelical and fully Catholic, just as the early Church was. Classical Anglicanism is a Reformed Catholicism, a Catholicism cleansed of Medieval and Tridentine errors

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and abuses, and restored to an earlier normal condition. As Queen Elizabeth I said in 1563, in defense of the Anglican Church, “We and our people - thanks be to God - follow no novel and strange religions, but that very religion which is ordained by Christ, sanctioned by the primitive and Catholic Church and approved by the consentient mind and voice of the most early Fathers.”

## **Church Fathers on Sola Scriptura:**

“The holy and inspired Scriptures are fully sufficient for the proclamation of the truth.” - St. Athanasius (Against the Heathen, 1:3)

“Regarding the things I say, I should supply even the proofs, so I will not seem to rely on my own opinions, but rather, prove them with Scripture, so that the matter will remain certain and steadfast.” - St. John Chrysostom (Homily 8 On Repentance and the Church)

“Let the inspired Scriptures then be our umpire, and the vote of truth will be given to those whose dogmas are found to agree with the Divine words.” - St. Gregory of Nyssa (On the Holy Trinity)

“We are not entitled to such license, I mean that of affirming what we please; we make the Holy Scriptures the rule and the measure of every tenet; we necessarily fix our eyes upon that, and approve that alone which may be made to harmonize with the intention of those writings.” - St. Gregory of Nyssa (On the Soul and the Resurrection)

“What is the mark of a faithful soul? To be in these dispositions of full acceptance on the authority of the words of Scripture, not venturing to reject anything nor making additions. For, if ‘all that is not of faith is sin’ as the Apostle says, and ‘faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God,’ everything outside Holy Scripture, not being of faith, is sin.” - St. Basil the Great (The Morals)

“We are not content simply because this is the tradition of the Fathers. What is important is that the Fathers followed the meaning of the Scripture.” - St. Basil the Great (On the Holy Spirit, Chapter 7, par. 16)

“For concerning the divine and holy mysteries of the Faith, not even a casual statement must be delivered without the Holy Scriptures; nor must we be drawn aside by mere plausibility and artifices of speech. Even to me, who tell you these things, give not absolute credence, unless you receive the proof of the things which I announce from the Divine Scriptures. For this salvation which we believe depends not on ingenious reasoning, but on demonstration of the Holy Scriptures.” - St. Cyril of Jerusalem (Catechetical Lectures)

“Neither dare one agree with catholic bishops if by chance they err in anything, but the result that their opinion is against the canonical Scriptures of God.” - St. Augustine (De unitate ecclesiae, chp. 10)

“The reason is that only canonical Scripture is a measure of faith.” - St. Thomas Aquinas (Commentary on the Gospel of John)

## **Church Fathers on Sola Gratia:**

“We have acquired the forgiveness of our sins and have been justified freely by the mercy and grace of Christ.” - St. Cyril of Alexandria (Commentary on Romans)

“But when the Lord Jesus came, He forgave all men that sin which none could escape, and *blotted out the handwriting against us* by the shedding of His own Blood. This then is the Apostle’s meaning; sin abounded by the Law, but grace abounded by Jesus; for after that the whole world became guilty, He took away the sin of the whole world, as John bore witness, saying: *Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.* Wherefore let no man glory in works, for by his works no man shall be justified, for he that

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is just hath a free gift, for he is justified by the Bath [Baptism]. It is faith then which delivers by the blood of Christ, for *Blessed is the man to whom sin is remitted, and, pardon granted.*” - St. Ambrose (letter 73, to Irenaeus, a layman)

We are righteous, therefore, when we confess that we are sinners; and our righteousness does not consist in our own merit, but in God’s mercy.” - St. Jerome (Dialogue Against the Pelagians)

“After speaking of the wages of sin, in the case of blessings, he has not kept to the same order: for he does not say, the wages of your good deeds, but the gift of God: to show, that it was not of themselves that they were freed, nor was it a due they received, neither yet a return, nor a recompense of labors, but by grace all these things came about. And so there was superiority for this cause also, in that He did not free them only, or change their condition for the better, but that He did it without any labor or trouble upon their part: and that He not only freed them, but also gave them more than before, and that through His Son.” - St. John Chrysostom (Epistle to the Romans, Homily 12, Rom. 6:23)

“And he well said, ‘a righteousness of mine own,’ not that which I gained by labor and toil, but that which I found from grace. If then he who was so excellent is saved by grace, much more are you. For since it was likely they would say that the righteousness which comes from toil is the greater, he shows that it is dung in comparison with the other. For otherwise I, who was so excellent in it, would not have cast it away, and run to the other. But what is that other? That which is from the faith of God, i.e. it too is given by God. This is the righteousness of God; this is altogether a gift. And the gifts of God far exceed those worthless good deeds, which are due to our own diligence.” - St. John Chrysostom (Homily on Philippians 3)

“Suppose someone should be caught in the act of adultery and the foulest crimes and then be thrown into prison. Suppose, next, that judgment was going to be passed against him and that he would be condemned. Suppose that just at that moment a letter should come from the Emperor setting free from any accounting or examination all those detained in prison. If the prisoner should refuse to take advantage of the pardon, remain obstinate and choose to be brought to trial, to give an account, and to undergo punishment, he will not be able thereafter to avail himself of the Emperor’s favor. For when he made himself accountable to the court, examination, and sentence, he chose of his own accord to deprive himself of the imperial gift. This is what happened in the case of the Jews. Look how it is. All human nature was taken in the foulest evils. ‘All have sinned,’ says Paul. They were locked, as it were, in a prison by the curse of their transgression of the Law. The sentence of the judge was going to be passed against them. A letter from the King came down from heaven. Rather, the King himself came. Without examination, without exacting an account, he set all men free from the chains of their sins. All, then, who run to Christ are saved by his grace and profit from his gift. But those who wish to find justification from the Law will also fall from grace. They will not be able to enjoy the King’s loving-kindness because they are striving to gain salvation by their own efforts; they will draw down on themselves the curse of the Law because by the works of the Law no flesh will find justification.” - St. John Chrysostom (Discourses Against Judaizing Christians. Discourse I:6-II:1)

“The righteousness of God is not that by which God is righteous but that with which he clothes man when He justifies the ungodly. To this the Law and the Prophets bear witness....It is a righteousness of God apart from the law, since in that case it could not have been witnessed to in the law. It is a righteousness of God apart from the law

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because God confers it on believers through the Spirit of grace without the help of the law.” - St. Augustine of Hippo (The Spirit and the Letter)

“All the commandments of God are kept when what is not kept is forgiven.” - St. Augustine of Hippo (Retractions)

“God leads us to eternal life, not by our merits, but according to His mercy.” - St. Augustine of Hippo (Confessions, IX:13)

“God crowns His gifts in us.” - St. Augustine of Hippo, (Grace and Free Will)

## **Church Fathers on Sola Fide:**

“Similarly we also, who by His will have been called in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, or our own wisdom or understanding or godliness, nor by such deeds as we have done in holiness of heart, but by that faith through which Almighty God has justified all men since the beginning of time. Glory be to Him, forever and ever, Amen.” - St. Clement of Rome (Letter to the Corinthians, par. 32)

“Human beings can be saved from the ancient serpent in no other way than by believing in him who, when he was raised up from the earth on the tree of martyrdom in the likeness of sinful flesh, drew all things to himself and gave life to the dead.” - St. Irenaeus (Against the Heresies, IV, 2, 7)

“Indeed, this is the perfect and complete glorification of God, when one does not exult in his own righteousness, but recognizing oneself as lacking true righteousness to be justified by faith alone in Christ.” - St. Basil the Great (Homily on Humility)

“They said that he who adhered to faith alone was cursed; but he, Paul, shows that he who adhered to faith alone is blessed.” - St. John Chrysostom (First Corinthians, Homily 20)

“For you believe the faith; why then do you add other things, as if faith were not sufficient to justify? You make yourselves captive, and you subject yourself to the law.” - St. John Chrysostom (Epistle to Titus, Homily 3)

“To declare His righteousness.’ What is declaring of righteousness? Like the declaring of His riches, not only for Him to be rich Himself, but also to make others rich, or of life, not only that He is Himself living, but also that He makes the dead to live; and of His power, not only that He is Himself powerful, but also that He makes the feeble powerful. So also is the declaring of His righteousness not only that He is Himself righteous, but that He doth also make them that are filled with the putrefying sores of sin suddenly righteous. And it is to explain this, viz. what is ‘declaring,’ that he has added, ‘That He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus’ [Rom. 3:26]. Doubt not then: for it is not of works, but of faith: and shun not the righteousness of God, for it is a blessing in two ways; because it is easy, and also open to all men. And be not abashed and shamefaced. For if He Himself openly declareth Himself to do so, and He, so to say, findeth a delight and a pride therein, how comest thou to be dejected and to hide thy face at what thy Master glorieth in?” - St. John Chrysostom (Homilies on Romans 3)

“What is *the principle of faith*? This is salvation by grace. Here Paul shows God’s power in that He has not only saved, He has also justified and led them to boast in a different way - not relying on works but glorying only in their faith.” - St. John Chrysostom (Homilies on Romans 7)

“We should believe both that we should be penitent and that we shall be pardoned, in such a way that we hope for pardon from faith just as faith obtains it from the written agreement.” - St. Ambrose of Milan (On Penitence Against the Novatians, II:9)

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“Paul shows clearly that righteousness depends not on the merit of man but on the grace of God, who accepts the faith of those who believe without the works of the law.” - St. Jerome (Against the Pelagians)

“Justification is obtained by faith. ... By the law we fear God, by faith we hope in God. But to those who fear punishment grace is hidden; laboring under this fear, the soul by faith flees to the mercy of God, that He may give what He commands” - St. Augustine of Hippo (The Spirit and the Letter)

How should the law be upheld if not by righteousness? By a righteousness, moreover, which is of faith, for what could not be fulfilled through the law is fulfilled through faith.” - St. Augustine of Hippo (Augustine on Romans)

You must believe, first of all, that you cannot have the forgiveness of sins except by the forbearance of God; but add further that you also believe that through Him your sins are forgiven. This is the witness that the Holy Spirit brings in your heart, saying, ‘Your sins are forgiven you.’ For thus the apostle [Paul] concludes, that a man is justified freely by faith.” - St. Bernard of Clairvaux (Sermon on the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary)

## **Church Fathers on Solus Christus:**

“Take therefore first, as an indestructible foundation, the Cross, and build upon it the other articles of the faith.” - St. Cyril of Jerusalem (Catechetical Lecture 13:38)

“God is a great lover of man. He did not hesitate to surrender His Son as prey in order to spare His servant. He surrendered His only-begotten to purchase hard-hearted servants. He paid the blood of His Son as the price. O the philanthropy of the Master! And do not tell me again, ‘I sinned a lot; how can I be saved?’ You cannot save yourself, but your

Master can, and to such a great degree as to obliterate your sins. Pay attention very carefully to the discourse. He wipes out the sins so completely that not a single trace of them remains.” - St. John Chrysostom (Homily 8 on Repentance and the Church)

“The fact that we who were such terrible sinners were saved is a very great sign, indicating how much we were loved by Him who saved us. For it was not by angels or archangels but by His only begotten Son that God saved us!” - St. John Chrysostom (Homilies on Romans 9)

“Christ is Master by virtue of His own essence and Master by virtue of His incarnate life. For He creates man from nothing, and through His own blood redeems him when dead in sin; and to those who believe in Him He has given His grace. When Scripture says, ‘He will reward every man according to his works;’ (Matt. 16:27), do not imagine that works in themselves merit either hell or the kingdom. On the contrary, Christ rewards each man according to whether his works are done with faith or without faith in Himself; and He is not a dealer bound by contract, but our Creator and Redeemer.” - St. Mark the Ascetic (ca. 425, On those who think that they are made righteous by works - in the Philokalia)

## SOLI DEO GLORIA

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This article was written by Father V. E. Novak. For more of his articles visit his Parish website at:

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