



## Reformation History #9: *Sola, Sola, Sola* by Pastor Glenn Huebel

Part of a year-long series on Reformation history and theology, from November 2016—October 2017, in commemoration of the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation.

Lutherans did not get into trouble with the powers of the day because they believed and confessed that grace saves or that the sinner is saved through faith, or that Scripture is authoritative. These propositions were accepted by almost everyone. The problem was, and still is, with the “solas”. The Latin word, solus, is the source of the English word, solo, “alone.” The addition of *sola* to fide (faith), gratia (grace), and scriptura (Scripture) brought forth a strong negative reaction from Rome.

Why would that be? What does *sola* add to the mix that is so repulsive to many? The problem is not what it *adds*, but what it takes away. *Sola* removes all credit, merit, or glory of man’s cooperation or contribution and gives ALL glory to God (Soli Deo Gloria). The Lutheran theological position is traditionally identified by three solas.

### *Sola Gratia*

We are saved by grace alone (Ephesians 2:8). Obviously, neither Rome nor Luther would contend against the basic words of Scripture. The problem is that grace is defined in different ways by the Roman

Catholic and Lutheran churches. In Roman Catholic theology, grace is a power of God infused into the sinner. Without this Divinely infused power the sinner cannot even begin to serve God or obey the commandments, but if the sinner uses this gift of grace to overcome sin and do good works, he can be saved. In this sense Rome may even acknowledge that the sinner is saved by grace “alone” since it is grace alone that gives the power to the sinner to do any good works. Rome, however, still insists that the works of the Christian who cooperates with God’s grace are still meritorious and necessary to salvation. Thus, the sinner is saved by grace and the works which grace produces.

This is not what St. Paul meant when he declared that we have been saved by grace which excludes works and any ground of boasting on our part. Lutherans understand grace to be the unconditional, unmerited favor of God. In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, we say, “Grace excludes our merits and means that the benefit is offered only through mercy.” Luther defined grace this way, “Grace, in the proper sense of the term, denotes God’s favor and good will toward us which He cherishes in Himself.” Scripture clearly attributes our salvation to God’s free grace alone, meaning that there is nothing whatsoever in us that merits it.

### *Sola Fide*

We are saved by grace through faith alone (Ephesians 2:8). Lutherans understand faith to be genuine trust or confidence of the heart, not just bare knowledge of salvation history. Again, the Roman Church acknowledged from the beginning of the Reformation that faith is necessary for salvation. They have strongly objected to the *sola*, to the teaching that we are saved through faith alone. Quoting St. Paul they emphasize that “faith works by love” (Gal 5:6). In their theology,

(Continued on page 2)



#### Inside this issue:

Roles and Goals for the Church	3
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*That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ,  
the Son of God, and that by believing  
you may have life in His name. —John 20:31*

the love that faith produces is meritorious. Faith saves because it produces love, and we are therefore saved through faith AND love (or good works). They also quote many other Bible passages in which God commands and commends the good works of believers. They infer from such passages that works are contributory to salvation.

Lutherans do not deny, but joyfully affirm, that true and living faith produces the fruit of love and genuine good works. The works that flow from faith are pleasing to God and glorify His Name. Lutherans even say that such works are necessary because God commands them and because it is inevitable that faith produces works. A barren faith is a dead faith, which is no faith at all (James 2:17). This does not imply, however, that the works faith produces are meritorious, or that they contribute to our salvation. The true object of saving faith is the work of Christ alone. Christ is *our righteousness*, NOT in the sense that faith makes us righteous within, but that He fulfilled the law in our place. His obedience alone satisfies the Law and opens heaven's gates. God has credited the world with His perfect obedience, His righteousness (objective justification). Faith alone apprehends this righteousness and makes us God's holy children (subjective justification). As soon as the sinner receives the gift of righteousness by faith, he is saved. He is robed in righteousness. The works that follow faith add nothing whatsoever to that robe of righteousness won by Christ and offered in the Gospel. St. Paul clearly affirms, "We maintain that man is justified by faith, apart from the works of the law" (Rom 3:28). Those who deny faith ALONE, deny Christ's work alone. They deny the Gospel itself.

### **Sola Scriptura**

The Medieval Church, through the institution of the papacy, made itself impregnable to reform because it was impossible to appeal to any outside or objective judge or standard of truth. Scripture was honored and revered as a holy book, but it had

been taken captive by the church hierarchy and ultimately the Pope. No appeal from Scripture against church teaching and practice was valid because it was a given that the Pope was the only official interpreter of Scripture. Any interpretation of Scripture which disagreed with the papal interpretation was, by definition, wrong. Though Scripture was and is considered a holy book by the Roman Church, it is, for all intents and purposes, a puppet because it is not allowed to stand alone.

Many other ways have been devised in Church history to confine Scripture's authority and to render it powerless even while giving it lip service. All of these ways oppose the principle of *sola Scriptura*. This is the only principle that truly honors Scripture as the holy word of God and yields to its authority. John Calvin supposed that the interpretation of Scripture must be governed by reason. The enlightenment took that to its natural end by destroying Scripture's authority altogether, as we have seen today. The Baptist principle makes every individual a valid interpreter of Scripture, leading to complete subjectivism. There is no objective truth. There's only your truth and my truth. Over thirty years ago, I had occasion to converse with the local Episcopal priest who was also planting a mission congregation in Keller. He explained to me the Episcopal principle of the "three legged stool." Authority in the Church, he said, is based on three sources: Scripture, tradition, and reason. Authority becomes unstable if any of the three is missing, just as a one or two legged stool is unstable. For some reason I have remembered this analogy through the decades, perhaps because it is so wrong. ANY human authority that stands on an equal status with Scripture reduces Scripture to a figure-head status. Scripture becomes the silent partner upholding the doctrine of men. Luther did not even try to replace the Pope or the priesthood with other official human interpreters of Scripture. He even called reason the "great whore." All other possible sources of authority in this world are corrupted by sin and subject to error.

Scripture alone is holy. Scripture alone is the source and norm of Divine authority in this world. Scripture alone speaks for God.

Many argue that this is a fine theory, but wholly impractical. Because there are so many interpretations of Scripture, it seems that some earthly entity must be given authority to declare the correct interpretation. Scripture MUST have an earthly judge! Do not even Lutherans practice this with their confessions, catechisms, etc.? Actually Lutherans, even in these documents, never raise anything to the status of Scripture. The Formula of Concord (1580) states at the outset, "*We believe, teach, and confess that the only rule and norm according to which all teachings, together with all teachers, should be evaluated and judged are the prophet and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone.* .... However, other writings by ancient or modern teachers – no matter whose name they bear – must not be regarded as equal to the Holy Scriptures. All of them are subject to the Scriptures. Other writings should not be received in any other way or as anything more than witnesses that testify about how this pure doctrine of the prophets and apostles was preserved after the time of the apostles..." (Formula of Concord, "The Summary Content, Rule and Norm")

How, then, does the principle of *sola Scriptura* work out in practice without dissolving into the subjectivity of the principle that everyone interprets Scripture for self? Who judges? The answer is, SCRIPTURE JUDGES. Scripture is its own interpreter.

This principle presupposes several things:

- 1) Scripture is clear, not a dark book,
- 2) Scripture is inerrant and doesn't need a correction in any matter, and
- 3) Scripture is unified and does not contradict itself.

These presuppositions are not arbitrary inventions to support the *sola Scriptura* principle. They are all clearly taught in Scripture itself under

*(Continued on page 3)*

the doctrine of “verbal inspiration” (1 Tim 3:16). If we believe that God chooses to communicate with the world through the medium of language, then we allow the language used to rule the message or interpretation. Words mean something and we interpret according to the common usage of words unless it is clear from context that God is using a word in an unusual way. In other words, we are not allowed to define words according to our subjective bias. Furthermore, that interpretation is correct which is in accord with the grammar of the sentence. Grammar

rules over our private interpretation. That interpretation is correct which accords with context, both narrow and wide. In the widest sense we acknowledge that there is, drawn from Scripture, the “analogy of faith.” This is the system of clear teachings that can be proven from the clearest passages of Scripture, such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the vicarious atonement, justification, etc. No passage is correctly interpreted that violates the analogy of faith derived from Scripture. If we follow these and other such presuppositions and rules, we are restrained to allow Scripture to speak

for itself rather than to impose our ideas upon it. All of this assumes that the Christian will come humbly before God’s written Word, ready to hear and receive what God has to say rather than to prove and support our opinions and perceived notions. Without strict adherence to the sola Scriptura principle, every doctrine will eventually collapse into uncertainty and God’s Word will be replaced by the doctrines of men.

**SOLA GRATIA! SOLA FIDE!  
SOLA SCRIPTURA!**

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## ***Roles and Goals for the Church*** by Pastor Tom Chryst

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*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph. 4:11-16)*

In this passage from Ephesians 4, Paul lays out some “roles and goals” for the Christian congregation at Ephesus. These may also serve as a model for any Christian congregation.

In light of some recent discussions about Messiah’s own mission, I’d like to add some comments to the mix in the next several months. What follows will be a series of articles, based on this passage. I’ll focus on these key ideas inspired by the Holy Spirit and set forth through St. Paul to the Ephesians:

- Different gifts and roles
- Unity of Faith
- Knowledge of the Son of God
- Mature Manhood

Speaking Truth in Love  
Grow in every way

### **Grow in every way**

The Christian life is not static. We live in time, with a beginning and an end (death - the gate to eternal life). And so the Christian life is, and ought to be, a life of growth. Both individually and corporately, the church grows. Individually, we grow in many different ways. Jesus himself grew: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.” Luke 2:52 We ought to grow in our understanding of the truth of Scripture, and in our knowledge and familiarity with it. We ought to grow to a more mature faith, trusting in Christ more deeply all the while. We ought to grow in the gifts that he has given to each of us, learning to use them more and more for the good of neighbor and to the glory of God.

Growth, itself, is part of God’s design for life. The opposite of growth - decay, leading to death - is part of the wages of sin. And so it makes sense that St. Paul, inspired by the Holy Spirit, would encourage Christians to “grow up in every way”.

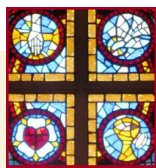
### **Growth isn’t just numerical!**

But a major caveat is in order. While a church that grows numerically can be a very good thing, it is not itself the goal of the church to grow in

number. This is the basic error of the so-called “Church Growth Movement”. Pastor Huebel has been writing and teaching and warning about these wrong-headed ideas for many years. Sadly, for some, numerical growth becomes the end-all-be-all of a church’s “success” and health and the only measure that seems to count. “Making Disciples” becomes an end in itself, to the exclusion of other important Christian values like faithfulness, truth, and doctrine. For some, greater and greater concessions are made in order to “fill the pews” to the point that the central article of the faith itself might become obscured! Churches may avoid teaching about sin in order to not offend potential new members. Churches may preach what “itching ears” wish to hear, rather than the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ and letting the chips fall where they may. Even faithful, rock-ribbed LCMS pastors are sometimes tempted to speak (or not speak) for fear of offending people, or with too much concern for appealing to what people want.

But all of this goes against what this very passage (Ephesians 4) teaches us about speaking the truth in love. Surely, we must speak the truth. Luther said it well, “peace if possible, truth at all costs!” We might echo,

*(Continued on page 4)*



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Church Office: (817) 431-2345

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Sunday Worship: 8:00 a.m. & 10:45 a.m.

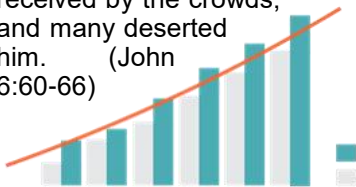
Sunday School & Adult Bible Class: 9:30 a.m.

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"growth if possible, truth at all costs!" Even Jesus experienced the opposite of "Church Growth" when some of his teaching was not received by the crowds, and many deserted him. (John 6:60-66)



The truth is also this: A congregation may stay about the same size, and yet continue growing in other ways - in knowledge of the truth, in faithfulness to Christ, and in service to our neighbor and community. In fact a church may do all of this even as she shrinks in size!

And finally, the church may grow in one place while it shrinks in another. Jesus promised that the gates of hell wouldn't prevail against the church, but He never promised that the church would always thrive and grow in any particular place. Luther compared the pure Gospel to a passing rain shower that doesn't stay in the same place very long. Historically speaking, the "seat of Christianity" may be said to have shifted, from Jerusalem, to Europe, to (perhaps?) the Western Hemisphere, and now recently sub-Saharan Africa and the Far East. The Holy

## Roles and Goals, cont.

Spirit moves when and where He will to bring growth - and that's true for individual Christians, congregations of Christians, and even on the global scale.

Where the church seems to fail, or decline, it may or may not be the church's fault. We ought to be honest enough to admit our own faults and failings, the ways that we take a hand in impeding growth (numerical or otherwise). As a congregation, we may not be as friendly and welcoming as we ought. As individuals, we may not be as eager to share Christ as we ought. And as a church body, we certainly have our flaws. There's plenty of sin and repentance to go around. There's always something more we can do to grow - if not one way, then another. The fact that sometimes churches decline apart from our fault, and in spite of our faithfulness, is no excuse to become lazy about the church's work, or become complacent about the mission of Christ to make disciples by baptizing and teaching.



### Growth is always God's gift.

But when the church does grow - numerically or otherwise, we can say this: "Thanks be to God!" We may or may not be to blame for decline, but we are never ultimately to receive credit for growth. God gives the growth. God gets the credit. Consider Paul's words to the Corinthians:

*What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. 1 Corinthians 3:5-9*

We humans wish to take credit for far

too many things that are truly gifts of God. Some do it when it comes to salvation, thinking they somehow have a hand in their own coming to faith. Some do it when it comes to sanctification, thinking even as Christians we can do anything good apart from the blessing of the Holy Spirit. And some might think that when our church grows we can pat ourselves on the back and lay claim to some share of the glory. But no. To God be the glory. It is He who gives all good things.

### Sin, Death and the Devil get in the way of growth.

We recently heard as our Sunday Gospel reading the parable of the sower and the seeds. There, Jesus painted a picture of the kingdom in which growth doesn't always happen. The sower is never to blame, but there are many things that can get in the way of the plant's healthy growth. There are any number of spiritual enemies that seek to hinder the growth of the Christian, and of the Church. Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, mind you (Ephesians 6:12). And he doesn't explain why it happens this way, but simply says "The kingdom of heaven is like...". Perhaps part of the idea is that we focus on the spreading of the seed, the word, and worry less about what gets in its way. God will give the growth where he gives it, and some will bear fruit even a hundred fold!

### Grow up "into Christ"

And let's not pass over this little phrase, sprinkled throughout the Ephesians passage, "into Christ". The church, the Body of Christ, is never apart from Him. We would never, could never grow in any way from where He is or would have us be. Christ is the center of all things for the church and for the Christian. We never grow out of the Gospel. Therefore all growth is growth in Him. We grow to be more Christ-like. We grow to be more Christ-trusting. We grow to one day attain the full measure of Christian maturity, which doesn't mean self-sufficiency, but rather complete dependency upon Christ.

