

Saved by Faith Alone

Sola Scriptura
Sola Gratia
Sola Fide
Solo Cristo

Following the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation in 2017, our Mission District decided to focus on the four “solas” that define the Lutheran understanding of salvation. Each year since then we’ve concentrated on a different one of the “onlys”. For the year 2020 we turn our attention to the third “sola”—Faith Alone.

Through the centuries theologians have studied, taught and preached about the theology of Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone, and Christ Alone. Thousands of treatises and books have been written about them. Yet the understanding of this critical understanding of how God saves us and how we understand our relationship with the Lord in this way is probably a continuing mystery to most faithful Christians. If we only need one of the four, why do we have the others? And one of the most misunderstood of the “solas” is the one we’re focusing on this year: if we are saved by faith alone, does that mean we can go our merry way, doing whatever we want, without changing anything else we think or do? The apostle Paul addressed this question already in the first century church. This was his answer to the Christians in Rome who seemed to have come to this conclusion about their faith: *What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.* (Romans 6:1-4)

It’s important that we hold the four “solas” together. One of the ways we describe this understanding of salvation is to describe them this way: We are saved by grace through faith in Christ, who is revealed to us through Holy Scripture, the written word of God. Faith must always be in something or someone—the only One who could save fallen humanity was God Himself. He took on human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, lived among us, took our punishment of death for us on the cross, and showed His supreme power in overcoming death in the resurrection. This was not a physical resuscitation, but an eternal return to life. Thus He bestows this gift upon those who turn to Him in faith, giving them an eternal relationship of love and life with God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So, our faith is in Christ Jesus as the One who came to save us from eternal death and bring us into this loving relationship.

How can this be? As we talk about the things of God, it’s easy to become confused. God is the ultimate mystery, beyond our understanding. However, we humans want to understand, and we try to solve every mystery. The problem is that faith is based on trust, not on proof. If we have proof, we don’t have faith. The writer of the book of Hebrews explains faith this way: *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.* (Hebrews 11:1)

Sometimes it's easier to grasp the meaning of a concept by a concrete example, rather than piling words on words. One of my favorite examples for how we hold faith together with grace, Scripture and the Lord Jesus, is the account of the Pharisee, Nicodemus', visit to Jesus, recorded in the Gospel of Saint John. Nicodemus was a scholar and teacher—and a leader among the Jewish religious establishment. He had spent his whole life learning God's laws and studying the writings of the prophets. He was apparently fascinated by Jesus' teachings and wanted to understand—to figure it out. He came to visit Jesus by night—perhaps because he didn't want his colleagues to know he was interested in what Jesus had to teach. As the narrative unfolds, we also see that Nicodemus was literally “in the dark”, apparently unable to understand the things Jesus told him about what it means to be “born anew” of water and the Spirit. While we know “the rest of the story”, since Jesus' death and resurrection, if we had listened in on this conversation at the time, we would probably have been as unable to understand as Nicodemus was. But what Jesus finally tells him is this: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.* (John 3:16)

John 3:16 may be the most popular, and most often quoted, of all Scripture verses. It is sometimes called the “Gospel in miniature”. And it explains the four “solos” and their relationship to each other. “God so **loved** the world” is pure grace—grace is God's undeserved love for us. “He gave **His only Son**”, Christ Jesus, the One who saves. So that “whoever believes in him should not perish”—this is the kind of belief that embodies trust in the person and the message the person brings. And this is all revealed to us through the ancient Scriptures that Nicodemus knew so well—the writings of God's people and prophets through the ages that foretold a Savior. In Genesis 3:15 God Himself promised that one of Eve's offspring would destroy the power of Satan, and throughout the Old Testament Scriptures this promise was renewed. And when the time was right, God sent Jesus—Jesus alone—to save us.

This is what it means that *only* by grace, through faith in Christ, Who is revealed to us through Holy Scripture, can we be saved. There is nothing whatever that we can do to save ourselves. If we could have done that through obedience to the Laws of God, Jesus would not have had to be sacrificed for us. But that still leaves us with the question addressed by the Apostle Paul in Romans 6. If it is only God's grace and faith in Christ that saves us, why does it matter how we live? The answer rests in the nature of “salvation”. God is not in the business of selling “fire insurance”. What He wants is this holy, loving relationship with us. Salvation involves “cleaning us up” in the waters of Holy Baptism, and then adopting us into the family of God. Jesus once told a parable to the effect that if we have been forgiven, we will then be forgiving. (Matthew 18:23-35) The point is, that if we have really received the forgiveness, we will be changed, and our desire will be to share this love and compassion with others. Our Lord spoke of it also as “bearing fruit” (John 15:11-17) He compares Himself to the vine. Those who love Him are attached to Him, as branches are attached to the vine that nurtures them with sap. Dead branches, that don't bring forth the fruits that Jesus Himself came to bring—love, compassion, forgiveness—are lopped off and burned in the fire. These parables express the proper relationship between faith and “works”. Whatever we do as God's children are the expression of the salvation we have received from Christ Jesus. We already have God's grace—unconditional love. We have been given salvation as a free gift through the works and merits of Christ. As we put our trust in Christ, we become conduits through which His grace is poured out to others.

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