

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“Five Solae of the Reformation:
Soli Deo Gloria”
Psalm 19:7-11
Romans 9:14-21**

**Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 22, 2017**

Psalm 19:7-11

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

Romans 9:14-21

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?" Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

"Five Solae of the Reformation: Soli Deo Gloria"

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Today is the final installment of a series on the Five *Solae* of the Reformation. These were five doctrinal areas where the Reformers found fault in the Medieval Church. Today's lesson is on *solī deo gloria*, glory to God alone. When I started this series I said that while there are five distinct *solae*, they are not in competition with one another. Truth be told, all of them point to *solī deo gloria*, and while I have left it for last, it is certainly not least. Indeed, we might even say it is the most important of the five. Without a doubt, God's glory is at the heart of the Reformation. *Sola scriptura*, Scripture alone glorifies God's unique revelation of himself and his plan for salvation. *Sola gratia*, grace alone glorifies God's mercy in reaching out to lost sinners. *Sola fide*, faith alone glorifies God's gift of faith to channel his love and mercy. *Solus christus*, Christ alone glorifies God's wisdom and love in sending his only begotten Son. Today, we'll see why *solī deo gloria* was so important by looking at the historical objection, biblical precedent, and modern application of glory to God alone.

Historical Objection

In our discussion on *solus christus*, we learned that the Reformers disagreed with Rome's insistence on papal authority, veneration of saints, and cooperation in grace. They saw these practices as betrayals of Christ's work. They witnessed within the church an encroachment into areas that ought only to be served by Christ. Popes and cardinals were using their authority to coerce everyone from serfs and merchants to kings and aristocrats. Bishops and monks were lining

their pockets with the gifts made to the Church. For instance, both Luther and Calvin disliked the monastic system, because they saw Holy Orders who espoused humility and poverty holding on to gifts of gold and real estate. They saw hypocrisy and corruption at nearly every level of the church. And it wasn't just the leadership. The laity, too, had a perverse misunderstanding of Christian doctrine. I'll share this one tidbit as an example. During the Middle Ages, when the mass was performed wholly in Latin, the priest would quote Jesus as he broke the Communion bread. He would say, *hoc est corpus meum quod pro vobis datur*, "this is my body broken for you." And then he would lay the Communion wafer on the tongue of a parishioner. Well, if this particular parishioner was a farmer, and he was having a very hard year, he might hold onto that wafer and when he got home, would bury it in the field in hopes that Jesus would help his crops. And since the farmer very likely did not know Latin, he would try to repeat the priest's words. Instead of saying *hoc est corpus meum*, he ended up saying, "hocus pocus." Now you know where that phrase comes from.

While that anecdote may or may not be true, what is true is that the church of the Middle Ages had lost her focus. In practice she no longer gave all her glory to God. The Church had stagnated because she became institutional. She no longer relied on God but relied on her own experience and her own devices. *Soli deo gloria*, in essence, was a return to a focus on God's sovereignty. God had lost his sovereignty in the Medieval Church. Well, God never lost it; rather, the Church misdirected sovereignty away from God. God's sovereignty was and remains extremely important for Reformed Christians. The Apostles' Creed, which every citizen in Calvin's Geneva had to memorize, starts "I believe in God the Father Almighty..." To say that God is sovereign is to express his almightiness in every area. Where the Reformers saw Rome had snubbed God's glory were in the areas of redemption and judgment. God alone is sovereign in redemption, a fact that explains why we thank God for our salvation and pray to him for the salvation of others. If the power to save lies solely in man's free will, if it truly lies in our unbraided ability to save ourselves, then why do we even implore God to "quicken," "save," and "regenerate?" The Reformers knew, because of Scripture, that the human race is incapable of self-regeneration. Therefore, the cause and means of redemption lies only in God. God is also sovereign in judgment. When the Reformers read Scripture passages like Romans 9:21, they clearly saw God's sovereignty over judgment, "Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?" Our salvation, God's righteous judgment, displays his glory. Neither the pope nor any other church leader can use his authority to cast judgments on another for political, social, or economic gains. God alone has the final say, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To [God] be glory forever."¹

Biblical Precedent

The famous Baroque composer and musician Johann Sebastian Bach used the phrase *soli deo gloria* on every one of his compositions. He affixed the initials SDG at the bottom of each manuscript to communicate the idea that it is God and God alone who is to receive the glory for the wonders of his work of creation and redemption.² While Bach drew the phrase from the Reformation, the foundation of his adoration comes from Scripture. In the Parable of the Sower, which appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke,³ God is the one who takes the initiative to bring salvation to pass. God is the sower. The seed that is sown is God's seed, corresponding to his Word, and the harvest that results is God's harvest. He harvests what he purposed to harvest when he initiated the whole process. It is God and God alone who makes certain that a portion of his

Word falls upon good ground. A critical error in interpreting this parable would be to assume that the good ground is the good disposition of fallen sinners who make the right choice responding to and cooperating in God's prevenient grace. The Reformers' understanding of the good ground, however, is that if the ground is receptive to the seed that is sown by God, then it is God alone who prepares the ground for the germination of the seed. Only God is sovereign in the process of redemption. Not individuals and certainly not the institutional church. To claim otherwise would detract glory from God. The Word of God is sown and germinated where God wills. We read this morning Paul quoting from the Old Testament. There, God says of Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show *my power* in you, and that *my name* might be proclaimed in all the earth." The work of salvation is not for our glory but to show God's glory in his perfect justice and mercy.

Another passage central to *solī deo gloria* comes from Paul's letter to the Romans. There he writes of "the *depth* of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How *unsearchable* are his judgments and how *inscrutable* his ways!"⁴ No individual person and no collective of churches can ever fully dive into the wisdom and knowledge of God. Paul describes it as "the depth of the riches" of God. The collected wisdom of every genius throughout human history could never reach the depths of God's knowledge. Total comprehension of God is impossible. That doesn't mean we can't know God. We certainly can and we do through his self-revelation in Scripture. But the reality is we cannot know *everything* about God. This is why Paul calls God's judgments "unsearchable" and his ways "inscrutable." The only way we can comprehend God is if God allows us a moment of perception. Because of God's sovereignty, no Church can ever bind the human conscience to a doctrine that suggests we can influence God and our redemption before him.

We must constantly remind ourselves that we are speaking of a glory that is ultimately beyond any comparison in creation. "The glory of God" is how we designate the infinite beauty and the infinite greatness of the Person who was before anything else. For example, Jesus prays, "Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."⁵ God's glory exists without origin, without comparison, without analogy, without being judged by any external criterion. God's glory is the all-defining, absolutely original standard of greatness and beauty. All created greatness and beauty comes from it and points to it, but such things do not comprehensively or adequately reproduce it. "The glory of God" is a way to say that there is an objective, absolute reality to which all human wonder, awe, veneration, praise, honor, acclaim, and worship ought to point. Scripture teaches we were made to find our deepest pleasure in admiring the infinitely admirable—the glory of God.

Modern Application

The Reformed tradition latches on to this when we ask the first question of the Westminster Larger Catechism: What is the primary and highest purpose of human beings? The answer is: to glorify God and to enjoy him completely forever. Human beings were made to enjoy God's sovereign presence and glorify him forever. *Solī deo gloria* today is the same as it was nearly five centuries ago. All glory is given to God for our salvation. Redemption is not something we earn nor is it something we do. Therefore, as Paul says, we have no room to boast. Glory given to the self or to another is misplaced glory. The reason why a person is saved is not that he or she made the right response to God's grace and others made the wrong response. Let's say, if a person is reckoned as righteous because of a good response to God then that person has something of which to boast,

namely the goodness of their response to God's grace. If that were the case, then the logical answer to the question of why are you saved would be "Oh, the reason I'm a believer is because I'm a better Christian than my neighbor." That's absolutely absurd. What the Reformation teaches is that the believer makes the right response because God, in his sovereignty, changes the disposition of the heart to affect a good response.

Not only does God initiate salvation, not only does he sow the seed, but he also ensures that the seed germinates in the heart by regenerating a person from the inside out by the power of the Holy Ghost. *Soli deo gloria* means our response to faith and grace through Christ is living out the Gospel. It's us responding to God's love by sharing that self-same love. Glory to God alone means we respond with a graciousness of our own. We respond with evangelism and praise. Seeking justice, kindness, and peace. In *soli deo gloria* we hold our leaders, churches, and even ourselves accountable to the Gospel. Though we may not affect our own salvation, we can and we must transform our lives to be conformed to Christ, by which we give all praise, and honor, and glory to God the father, now and always.

Please join me in prayer. Almighty God, Creator of the universe, we come humbly before you, knowing we are not worthy. You, O God, alone are worthy of our trust. You, O Christ, alone are worthy of our adoration. You, O Holy Ghost, alone are worthy of our attention. Guide us, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to be your faithful disciples. Show us your grace that we may be gracious to others. To God be the glory.

¹ Romans 11:36

² R. C. Sproul, "Soli Deo Gloria: To God Alone Be the Glory" on *Ligonier Ministries Blog*, <http://www.ligonier.org/blog/soli-deo-gloria-god-alone-be-glory/>

³ Matthew 13:1-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:1-15

⁴ Romans 11:33

⁵ John 17:5