

Andrew Cook:

In our series about the Reformation, here on *Serving Today*, we're now going to consider its five main doctrines or theological principles. These are often referred to by their Latin names. Don't be put off by this [...], as Philip Parsons will explain what they mean and what they stand for.

Philip is joined by Derek French.

Philip Parsons:

The first is *Sola Scriptura*, then it's *Sola gratia*, *Sola fide*, *Solus Christus* and *Soli Deo Gloria*.

Now, *Sola Scriptura* means 'scripture alone'.

*Sola gratia* means 'grace alone'.

*Sola fide* means 'faith alone'.

*Solus Christus*, 'through Christ alone'.

And *Soli Deo Gloria* is 'to God's glory alone'.

Derek French:

Well, take us through those one at a time. Let's begin with *Sola Scriptura*, 'scripture alone'.

Philip:

'Scripture alone'.

Well, it wasn't easy for those steeped in the church's teachings and traditions to reject the notion of an infallible church and embrace the infallible scriptures to which the fallible church must submit.

But God gave the Reformers grace to do so and as a result we have the legacy of this first and foundational Reformation principle, which we must hold on to today.

The Reformers believed that all questions of doctrine and life must be settled by scripture. It's true that they were not always able to fully work the principle through into every area of church life. Sometimes this was because of restrictions placed upon them from a hostile state. In some instances it was because they could not let go of some of the traditions which they had held to all their lives up to that time.

But Martin Luther could say '*My conscience is captive to the word of God.*' Can we agree with him today? It's not just of academic interest, for the scripture is always under attack, often in most subtle ways. It may begin with an undermining of a doctrine, such as creation or eternal punishment, but it will always lead to the denial of the gospel. Or it may be that some man-made tradition is put alongside the Scripture and in effect given equal weight with it. Inevitably the tradition will become more important.

No, we must hold fast to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, 'scripture alone' and teach it to our children. It is largely this attitude towards scripture, implanted within me from my earliest days, which has helped me to hold fast to this 'scripture alone' principle. It helped me when I was a student; I wrestled with evolutionary ideas; I came back to the acceptance of the truth and validity of the book of Genesis in the face of supposed scientific views which seemed to contradict it.

Derek:

Yes, I think so important, this point isn't it. Everything must be based on scripture, on the Bible. And in some ways it is sad that here was a church that had really pushed the Bible out and wasn't teaching the Bible to its people.

Philip:

That's right.

Derek:

And it's lovely that the Reformation brought us back to that. We think it's hard for us because we have the Bible in our churches and we've not known any different. It must have been extremely difficult in those days with genuine believers, and the fact that they were genuine believers is really down to the grace of God isn't it?

Philip:

Yes.

Derek:

Okay so that's 'scripture alone'. And then the second one was 'grace alone'.

Philip:

Well, this watchword raises the vital question: does man in any way assist in his coming to Christ? In other words, has he free will to choose to be saved or not?

The answer from the scriptures is that it is all of sovereign grace. Luther saw this very clearly as free will versus free grace. In fact, the first major public debate of the Reformation which took place in Leipzig in 1519 was on the subject of the will, which Luther saw from scripture as being bound and not free. And we need to be reminded of this today.

One of the biggest handicaps to modern evangelism has been the emphasis on free will. Those who indulge in the practice of asking people to make some kind of physical response to the gospel are often betraying the fact that they do not really trust the Holy Spirit to do his work; they have to give him a helping hand.

But God will not share this work with us, however sincere we may be. And so the modern sort of evangelism, which tries to push people into decisions, has been largely a failure and has produced a large number also, unfortunately, of false converts.

It's not modern techniques or modern methods but the old-fashioned gospel of the free grace of God, preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, which will transform the hearts and lives of sinners. And even if God at times withholds his more abundant blessing from such faithful preaching, then we are still not at liberty to introduce novel, anti-scriptural practices.

Derek:

Yes, I think that's a very solemn and a searching but a very vital warning there, isn't it?

Philip:

Yes.

Derek:

We are saved by God's grace and by nothing in us at all. And I think of those words in Ephesians 2, [...] '*We were dead in trespasses and sins*'. We had no life, spiritually. We were incapable. It had to be by God's grace.

Philip:

I think we can be very tempted where we've perhaps seen the beginnings of some spiritual interest and particularly in the case of children. Children will often go along with what you say when there's been no real conversion work. I'm not saying there isn't conversion work in children, there is I'm sure, but we [...] have to be very careful with pressurising children.

Derek:

Yes.