

What was “Reformed” in the Reformation?

If one wants to know what the Protestant Reformation was all about without reading huge volumes of historical literature, it is perhaps most clarifying to look at the theological results. One should specifically note the rediscovery of five critical biblical doctrines that had been obscured from public view by the medieval version of what we now know as the Roman Catholic Church. And just so you know, Rome still either openly opposes or seriously distorts these doctrines. Using the Latin names given to each, they are:

Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone): The Reformers were united in their belief that the Bible *alone* teaches all that is necessary for salvation and Christian living (cf. 2 Peter 1:1-4). They held the Word of God to be the only standard by which men’s consciences may be bound. Rome, on the other hand, then *and* now, denies *sola Scriptura* by elevating Papal decrees and church tradition to what they say are equal (but are in reality *greater*) positions of authority than that of the Bible. Where the meaning of the Bible differs from the opinion of the Pope or official doctrine (as is *very often* the case) the Word of God plays a mute second fiddle.

Sola Gratia (by Grace alone): The reformers understood that salvation is not a cooperative event carried out by God and man working in partnership. In salvation, sinners are rescued from God’s wrath by His grace *alone* (cf. Titus 3:3-7). God’s grace is His spontaneous and unmerited favor, granted to the spiritually dead and helpless sinner through the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. God mercifully releases those whom He is saving from their own willful bondage to sin and thus enables them to repent and believe (cf. John 3:3; 6:44; Rom. 8:6-8; 9:16). Interestingly, this point of doctrine is disputed today, not only by Rome, but also by many evangelicals.

Sola Fide (through Faith alone): “Justified” is the biblical term that describes a person as forgiven, not guilty, and perfectly righteous in God’s sight. According to Scripture, justification is bestowed on the sinner by grace *alone* through faith *alone*, “not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9; cf. Gal 2:16). According to official Roman Catholic dogma, however, using the word “alone” after the word “faith” will earn you a pronouncement of *anathema* (formal damnation). Rome actually forbids you to believe or repeat what the Bible plainly states! They insist that while justification *begins* with faith, it can only be completed through the sinner’s personal effort. In Roman Catholic

theology, one may not say, “Therefore, *having been* justified by faith,” or “*having now been* justified by His blood” (the exact words of Paul in Romans 5:1 and 5:9, emphasis added). According to Rome, one may only believe that he *is being* justified—by faith *plus* works.

Solus Christus (because of Christ alone): The reformers understood that the salvation of God’s people was the work of Jesus Christ *alone*. His death was a sufficient and effective sacrifice for sin (cf. Heb. 9:12, 26, 28; 10:12, 14). He is the only mediator between God and men (cf. 1 Timothy 2:5). Only *Christ’s* righteousness (not the sinner’s *personal* righteousness) merits the believing sinner’s justification (2 Cor. 5:21). Rome, on the other hand, commands the performance of seven essential works of merit (sacraments) for justification. Rome also insists that Mary (not Jesus) is the dispenser of grace. While Rome denies that *Christ’s* righteousness may be imputed to the believing sinner, Mary is said to have vast amounts of excess righteousness which *can* be imputed to sinners. This form of blasphemy against the Son of God is bad enough, but it culminates in blasphemy against God the Father—the idolatry of Mary worship. Mary is praised as the “co-redemptress” and “co-mediatrix” with Christ. Rome even refers to her in some places as *the* savior of mankind, the one who commands God to save whom *she* will.

Soli Deo Gloria (for the glory of God alone): It is obvious that in Roman Catholic theology Mary receives equal (if not greater) credit than God for the salvation of sinners. Rome *openly* glorifies her. Also, God is robbed of His glory by making the sinner the one who ultimately *performs* (via the sacraments) or *suffers* (via Purgatory) his own way into heaven. But the Bible insists, and the reformers recognized, that God saves sinners *by Himself*. Therefore He alone should receive all praise and glory. And the God of the Bible is a jealous God (cf. Ex. 20:5). He will not share His glory with another (cf. Isaiah 42:8; 48:11).

So what was reformed (or recovered) during the Protestant Reformation? In the final analysis, it was the gospel of God’s grace. And the “church” that stole the gospel the first time will gladly do so again if Christians everywhere do not take seriously the command to “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 3).