5 THINGS

you were never taught about the

5 SOLAS

MATTHEW BARRETT
The Reformers experienced this danger first hand. Rome had elevated tradition so high that it became a second infallible source of divine revelation. Teachings contrary to scripture crept into the church and the voice of scripture was muffled. The Reformers believed that the scriptures were the swaddling clothes of the gospel of Jesus Christ. If the gospel was to be retrieved, and with it the other solae (or solas), then scripture had to be elevated once again to the position of final, supreme authority. Sola scriptura meant that only Scripture, as God’s inspired Word, is the church’s inerrant, sufficient, and final authority. With biblical authority back in the pulpit, the believer would hear the message of scripture itself, and in that message the gospel of God’s free grace was born again.
When we think of the gospel our hearts are turned to the cross and rightly so since it’s at Calvary that Christ substituted himself in our place, taking the punishment for our sin, so that we might be forgiven. Calvary, however, is only half the story. We not only need our sins forgiven but we desperately need the perfect righteousness of Christ reckoned or imputed to us. Not only have we broken God’s law, but we’ve failed to keep it as well. While we may not be justified by our own merits, we certainly are justified on the basis of Christ’s good merits. His perfect obedience to the Father means that we not only have our filthy robes removed but the white, clean robe of Christ’s righteousness cloaked over us, speaking for us before the judgment seat of God.
No one argued more passionately that we are justified through faith alone than the Reformers. The ungodly are declared righteous by God not by looking to their own merits (not even in part), but by looking to Christ alone with eyes of faith. What many forget, however, is that sola fide brought enormous criticism in return. If the sinner’s works are irrelevant, then surely all incentive for good works is lost. “Not so!”, the Reformers countered. We may be justified through faith alone, but faith is never alone. The faith that justifies always produces a life of sanctification. Those who claim to be right with God but live like the devil demonstrate that they never rightly understood sola fide to begin with. If one has truly trusted in Christ, then doing anything but living for Christ feels oxymoronic. Sola fide means the sinner has been liberated, set free to obey a new master, not to earn his favor but to enlist in his service as his loyal subject. With a new status, the believer now has a new allegiance.
As Christians, naturally we are drawn to that moment when we were first converted. Yet the Reformation reminds us that our conversion is not the starting point for God’s grace. Before the foundation of the world, God chose us not based on works or faith he foresaw in us, but purely on the basis of his good and loving grace. To be saved by grace alone means we have been predestined by grace alone in eternity. Contrary to popular opinion, God’s electing grace in eternity is not to be the cause of angst but the fountain, the source, of Christian comfort and assurance. Before we were born, or time began, God set his redeeming love on us, setting us apart so that we would receive all the blessings to be gained in Christ Jesus. Fittingly, God alone receives all the glory, which reminds me of another sola.
If we’ve been chosen by grace alone, redeemed by the righteousness of Christ alone, and justified through faith alone, then our worship of our God far exceeds songs of praise on a Sunday morning. Soli Deo gloria is more than a salutation at the end of our conversion to Christ. The entire Christian life is to be lived coram Deo, in the presence of God. Whether one is changing diapers or international policies, the Christian does all things before the face of God.

Matthew Barrett is Associate Professor of Christian Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, as well as the founder and executive editor of Credo Magazine. He is the author of several books, including Salvation by Grace, Owen on the Christian Life, God’s Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture, and Reformation Theology: A Systematic Summary. He is also the series editor of The 5 Solas Series with Zondervan. You can read more at MatthewMBarrett.com.