

# **LESSON 37 - THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION**

## **What Was The Protestant Reformation And Why Is It Important?**

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**W**hat was the Protestant Reformation and why is it important? Previously, we examined the 4th century *Nicene Creed*: the oldest, most thorough, agreed-upon summary of beliefs distinguishing true from false Christianity. However, during the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church grew in wealth, power, and influence, and *its version* of Christianity became the dominant religious practice in medieval Europe (c. AD 476-1500). “Christian” at this time meant “Catholic.” The medieval Church distorted early Christian teachings, added contrary, unbiblical beliefs and practices, and regulated believers like a religious dictatorship. Though the rampant corruption of the medieval Church gave rise to early reformers such as John Wycliffe and Jan Hus, they were silenced and massacred by the tens of millions. The Protestant Reformation (the *protest* that led to the *reformation* of Christianity) was the official break from Rome. The most central reforms went back to its earliest roots. They’re captured in the *five solas*: 1) Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone), 2) Sola Gratia (Grace Alone), 3) Sola Fide (Faith Alone), 4) Solus Christus (Christ Alone), and 5) Soli Deo Gloria (Glory to God Alone).

**1. Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone).** The Catholic Church held its own traditions, councils, and decrees as equal status as Scripture. Their unbiblical doctrines were accepted because people believed they *had* authority. But their authority was self-appointed, not from God. Jesus spoke against similar leaders in Mark 7:7-8, “*They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.*” The Protestants rejected their authority to interpret or change what Scripture said. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, “*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*” 2 Peter 1:20-21 says, “*No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*” However good church tradition, councils, or leaders may be - they’re not “God-breathed.” While Scripture has many human authors, the Holy Spirit guided their words, so ultimately God is its sole author. Because God is good, all knowing, and trustworthy, His Word is reliable. Scripture is our sole unchangeable, infallible, inerrant authority. It is also self-authenticating; understandable to the rational and Holy Spirit-illuminated mind; its own interpreter (a principle known as “Scripture interprets Scripture”); and complete and sufficient to be our authority for faith and life. Tradition, reason, experience, and divine revelation do can assist and supplement our faith, but Scripture alone must be the final authority. It’s from the Scriptures that all doctrines of faith and principles for life are derived, including the remaining four solas. (**Scripture over Tradition**)

**2. Sola Gratia (Grace Alone).** Another unbiblical development was the addition of ‘*works with faith*’ as necessary for eternal salvation, meaning believers had to merit or contribute in some way. Typically through obedience to the law or through good works made possible only by faith or an empowering

grace imparted from God. Catholics believed God's grace was like an enabling power that man must *cooperate with*, in order to "merit" greater graces, thus working towards salvation. Protestants rejected this, saying God alone is the *only* savior. God's grace is really just *unmerited favor*, because He loves us. Grace can't be combined with human effort. Romans 11:6 says, "*If by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.*" Salvation isn't deserved nor earned - it's a FREE GIFT from God! Ephesians 2:7-9, "*[God showed] the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*" (Grace over Merit)

**3. Sola Fide (Faith Alone).** Good works aren't a precondition or aid to salvation. Our justification, our declared innocence and righteousness before God, is *alien* to us, outside of ourselves. Through faith *in* Christ we receive the righteousness of Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" Philippians 3:9 says, "*Be found in him [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.*" The Reformers didn't reject the necessity of good works. We're saved by faith alone but not by a faith that is alone. Genuine faith comes with repentance of our sinful rebellion against God, surrendering our lives to Jesus to live in ways that glorify God and bear good works. Whereas the Roman Catholic formula is "Faith + works = Justification," Protestants might say "Faith = Justification + good works." (Faith over Works)

**4. Solus Christus (Christ Alone).** Another unbiblical development was the addition of intermediaries between man and God. First, the Roman Catholic Church established itself as the *official* representative of Jesus and governor of the world. Second, it established a priestly clergy class separate from the "common people" laity class. The laity needed the clergy to receive the "sacraments" and hear God's Word. They were entirely dependent on them to be in right relationship with God. Protestants rejected these divisions created for power, wealth, and control. 1 Timothy 2:5-6 says, "*For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.*" There's also "the priesthood of *all* believers" as taught in 1 Peter 2:5, 2:9; Revelation 1:6, 5:10. Third, the Virgin Mary, deceased saints, and angels had also been given a supportive mediating role, to help believers that *prayed to them*. This contradicts the intimacy given to us through the Gospel. In Christ, we can go to our Heavenly Father directly and rely on the Holy Spirit, our advocate and helper. (Hebrews 10:1-22; 4:14-16; 9:11-15; 1 John 2:1; John 14:15-27). We're saved by Christ alone, as Colossians 1:18 says, "*so that in everything He might have supremacy.*" (No Mediators added to Christ)

**5. Soli Deo Gloria (Glory to God Alone).** Another later development was the veneration of saints, angels, and Jesus' mother Mary. Veneration (*dulia*) is the outward showing of reverence and respect to those, living or dead, identified with a high degree of holiness. Extra veneration (*hyper dulia*) was given to Mary, who was elevated above all humans to, some would argue, divine-like status. Catholic Marian dogmas include: title as "Mother of God;" her being immaculately conceived (born without original sin); her assumption into heaven (never dying); and her status as "Queen of Heaven" and "Mother of the Church." The Protestants rejected all this as unbiblical pagan idolatry that competes with our worship and devotion to God alone. God says in Isaiah 42:8, "*I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols.*" One catechism says, "All of life is to be lived to the glory of God. Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." (God's Glory is not to be shared)

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank You for Your Word, my final authority; Your grace, which saves me; through my faith, in Your Son alone, my Lord. All my life is for Your glory. In Jesus's name. Amen.