

# **“The Five Solas of the Reformation”**

**by Prof. David J. Engelsma**

## **Speech #1 – “Scripture Alone on behalf of Christ Alone”**

(Speech given on December 30, 2014)

Scripture: **John 5:17-47**

“Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me [Jesus].  
And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life” (verses 39, 40).

### **Introduction**

My wife and I are grateful to God that we can fellowship once again with the saints of the Berean Protestant Reformed Church, and now also with our brothers and sisters of the First Protestant Reformed Church in Bulacan, as well as with other friends in Jesus Christ, some of whom we met on our earlier visit to the Philippines.

I count myself privileged to bring and teach the word of the gospel of grace at this conference.

I was asked to speak on the “Five Solas of the Reformation.” By the five *solas* are meant five fundamentally important truths of the gospel that were recovered by the church and restored to the church at the Reformation of the church of Jesus Christ in the 1500s. Indeed, by these five truths the church, which had fallen away from the gospel, was “re-formed,” or formed *anew*, as the true and faithful church of Jesus Christ.

These five truths of the gospel, which the true church still confesses and preaches, and which distinguish the true church from the false church, are the following: “Scripture alone”; “Christ alone”; “faith alone”; “grace alone”; and “the glory of God alone.”

Each of these truths includes and confesses the word, “alone.” In Latin, the word, “alone,” is the word, “*sola*.” For this reason, we speak of the five “*solas*,” of the Reformation—the five “onlys.”

As we will see in the course of this conference, the “*sola*” is vitally important for the truth of the gospel of salvation by grace in each of the five instances.

At the outset of this conference, I call to your attention two characteristics of all the speeches. First, each will teach and defend two or more of the five great truths that the Reformation proclaimed. This is necessary, since I am assigned only three speeches for the explanation of five *solas*. This combining of two or more of the truths in one speech is not a bad thing. The fact is that all these truths are closely related. One involves the others. One serves and promotes the others. The speeches, therefore, will show the relationship among the five *solas*.

The second characteristic of the speeches will be that they are intensely and thoroughly biblical. Clearly to all, they will be explanations and application of the Bible. In this characteristic, the speeches will display the truth, “Scripture alone.” No one will be able to dismiss the teaching of the speeches by saying, “These are doctrines that the speaker, or his churches, made up.” It will be undeniably evident that the Bible teaches the five *solas*.

In this way, I will be true to the Reformation. The Reformation was biblical—a return to the authority and message of the Bible. Although the Reformation was promoted by great theologians, especially Martin Luther and John Calvin, its power was not profound theology, but the Bible—the very word of God.

The Reformation gave the Bible back to the people of God, from whom the apostate church of that day had taken the Bible away. The Reformation gave the Bible to the people in several ways. First, it translated the Bible into the languages of the people, so that the people could read and study it. Second, it assured the people that the Bible is *clear*, so that believers can understand the Bible’s teachings. Third, the Reformation instructed the people that as believers they had the anointing of the Holy Spirit that authorized and enabled them to read and understand the Bible. Believers possess and exercise the “office” of believer.

All of this teaching about the believer and the Bible is the Bible’s own instruction. Indeed, it is the teaching of Jesus Himself in John 5:39, 40: “Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are

they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.”

Here is the call and command of Jesus to us, and to all believers everywhere, clearly implying the unique, wonderful nature of the Bible; expressing the duty of the believer and the church regarding the Bible; and pointing out the precious relationship of the Bible and Jesus Himself.

### **“Scripture Alone on behalf of Christ Alone”**

#### **Jesus’ Doctrine of Scripture**

Jesus’ words in John 5:39, 40 are a call or command: “Search the scriptures!” In this command of the Lord Jesus is evident a high doctrine of Holy Scripture, making plain that Jesus has the highest esteem for the writings that are the Bible. If the Scriptures testify of Jesus, Jesus also testifies of the Scriptures.

The reference is to the writings of the Old Testament, of course, since when Jesus uttered this command the New Testament had not yet been written. Therefore, the reference is to that part of Scripture that is especially the object of the destructive criticism by unbelieving scholars in the last two hundred years or so. Jesus was referring to the first eleven chapters of Genesis; to the accounts of miracles in the Old Testament; and to the predictions of the prophets.

By implication, Jesus was referring also to the writings of the New Testament. The New Testament Scripture is rather clearly alluded to in the passage in John 5. In verse 47, which is closely related to Jesus’ command to search the scriptures in verse 39, Jesus connects His words with the writings of Moses: “If ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?” In addition to Moses’ writings, the Old Testament Scripture, there are “my words.” These words of Jesus are preserved for the church of the New Testament in the New Testament Scripture. And now Jesus’ words, in the New Testament Scripture, stand on one line with the Old Testament writings. They are equally authoritative: they must be believed. Jesus’ words, in fact, are the fulfillment of Moses’ writings.

Of these Scriptures Jesus testifies that they are the very word of God, and only the word of God. This was not disputed concerning the Old Testament by the Jews of Jesus’ day. For all their wickedness, they were not so developed in depravity as are professing Christians today, who advocate the critical views of Scripture that have their source in the belief that the Bible is the fallible word of man.

Jesus indicates here that Scripture is the very word of God in two ways. First, He regards the Scripture as the instrument, or means, by which men and women have eternal life. The Jews’ conviction that they have eternal life in the Scriptures was wrong, but only because they divorced Scripture from Him of whom Scripture testifies. But Jesus does certainly teach that the Scripture is the means by which men enjoy eternal life. When one searches Scripture and hears its testimony to Jesus, he comes to Jesus, to have life eternal. This is Jesus’ witness concerning the Bible, by His Spirit who inspired the passage, also in II Timothy 3:15: “...the holy scriptures...are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.”

But if this is so, if Scripture is able to make one wise unto salvation, if Scripture is the means unto eternal life, Scripture must be the word of God, for only the word of God can give eternal life.

Second, Jesus explicitly states that Scripture is the word of God. For Scripture is that testimony of Jesus that Jesus spoke of in verse 37 of John 5: “The Father himself...hath borne witness of me.” When in verse 49 Jesus declares that Scripture testifies, or witnesses, of Him, He identifies Scripture as the witness of the Father, of which He has spoken in verse 37. Scripture is God’s witness, God’s authoritative word, concerning Jesus the Christ.

Jesus also teaches in John 5:39,40 that this Scripture, which is the word of God, is necessary for salvation. For life, one must come to Jesus. To come to Jesus, one must hear the witness of Scripture. To hear the witness of Scripture, one must search the Scripture. We refer here to the ordinary way of salvation. We do not exclude from salvation the infants of believers who die in infancy or the feeble-minded. These, God saves in an extraordinary manner. Ordinarily, the Bible is necessary for salvation.

Scripture is also sufficient for salvation. Nothing more than, nothing beside, the Scripture is needed for salvation. The Old Testament Scripture was sufficient for the salvation of the elect under the old covenant, who

had only the Old Testament. The complete Bible of New and Old Testaments is sufficient for the salvation of God's elect people today. The Bible is a complete and perfect testimony to Jesus. All that is needed is to *search* the Scripture.

To add anything to Scripture, for example, the tradition of the church or the apocryphal books of the Roman Catholic Church, or the various writings of the cults and of the false religions, for example, the Book of Mormon and the Koran, is to contradict Jesus' testimony to Scripture in John 5 and to corrupt the witness of Scripture, which is a witness of *Jesus* as the Christ of God and the only Savior.

Jesus also testifies of Scripture in John 5:39 that it is clear. The command, "search!" implies that ordinary Jewish folk in His day and ordinary Christian people today can, rightly, be expected to read and understand the Scripture and that they can grasp the central message of Scripture, namely, Jesus Christ. Jesus does not suppose that anyone will respond to His command, "Search the scriptures!" by saying, "Oh, but we ordinary lay people are not able to understand the Bible."

Scripture is not a dark and obscure book. It is not a book that is well nigh impossible to understand. This is what the Roman Catholic Church wanted its members to believe at the time of the Reformation, when the church not only did not encourage the members to read the Bible, but also forbade them to do so. Today, matters are not essentially different with regard to the Roman Church. Although developments have forced Rome to permit her people to have and read Bibles, Rome denies that the believer has the ability to understand and explain the Bible. Instead, he or she must be completely dependent upon the explanation of the church and its teachers. Rome denies the clarity of the word of God and, therefore, opposes Jesus' command to the people, "Search the scriptures."

Today, this wicked view of the Bible prevails in much of Protestantism as well. Scholars, theologians, and ministers promote such views of the Bible as that the Bible contradicts itself; that passages that are plainly presented as historical in fact never happened, for example, the creation of the universe in six days by the almighty word of God; that rather than being the infallible and inerrant word of God it is, in reality, the fallible words of erring and mistaken men; and that the Bible is unreliable because it is time-bound and culturally-conditioned. All of these heretical teachings about the Bible in Protestant churches come down to this, that the Bible is a dark book, which untrained believers cannot rightly understand and explain. The effect is that Christians give up on searching the scriptures, in (understandable) disobedience to Jesus' command.

But the truth is that the Bible is clear—clear not only to the learned theologian, but also to the simple believer. It can be searched by all. Its testimony is loud and clear.

Some will not understand, but the fault is not in Scripture's lack of clarity. They ought to understand, and God will hold them guilty for not understanding.

To borrow the figure of John Calvin concerning this very matter of the clarity of the Bible, when the blind man fails to see the sun shining gloriously in the heavens, the fault is not in the sun, but in the one who cannot see.

The practical activity of searching Scripture depends solidly upon this high estimation of Scripture. Why search Scripture, as a pastor and teacher, if it is not the inspired word of God? Why search Scripture, as a Christian, if it is not necessary, sufficient, and clear? It is simply a fact that wherever there is the denial of Scripture, there is also the loss of biblical preaching and the loss of Bible study.

The exhortation to search Scripture rests squarely, for Jesus, upon the doctrine of inspiration: Scripture is the God-breathed word (see II Timothy 3:16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God," literally in the Greek: "God-breathed," as one's word is breathed out from the one whose word it is).

### **The Call to Search Scripture**

Exactly because the Bible is the word of God by the wonder of inspiration, Jesus commands His audience to search Scripture. Christ's word about the Bible in John 5:39 is practical. He issues a command. If this command held for His enemies, who did not see Him in Scripture, how much more does it not hold for us, His friends, who do see in the Bible the witness to Jesus. To be derelict in searching Scripture is to be disobedient to Jesus.

The command to search Scripture is a call to *read* the Bible. Implied is that the church sees to it that the Bible is available to the people in a good, faithful translation. The King James, or Authorized Version, is such a Bible in English. Most of the modern translations of the Bible into English are unreliable and, therefore, bad versions. One reason for this is that many of the modern translations use a defective Greek text of the New Testament, rather than the inspired, authentic Greek text used by the translators of the King James Bible. For explanation, illustration, and proof of this charge, I refer the reader to my booklet, "Modern Bible Versions," published by and available from the Evangelism Committee of the Crete Protestant Reformed Church, 1777 E. Richton Rd., Crete, IL 60417 USA.

But the people of God must read the Bible, and they must read it carefully. A casual, superficial reading is not enough, for Jesus does not command merely, "Read," but, "Search." Only a careful, deep, thorough study of the Bible does justice to what the Bible is, namely, the very word of God. Only to one who searches does the Bible release its treasures, specifically, eternal life.

God's people search the Bible, first of all, by means of Scripture-searching *preaching*. They must have the preaching of the Bible, and the preaching must be a searching of the Bible. In order to preach rightly, the preacher himself must always be searching the Bible in his study.

Then, the people of God search the Bible by their own study, individually, and as a family, with the father functioning as the teacher.

There is also the beneficial searching of the Bible by means of classes, or meetings, for Bible study on the part of the members of the church. Groups of church members meet throughout the week for Bible study. This is the occasion for careful study of a certain passage of the Bible by the members. When the class meets, all benefit from the study and insights of the others.

### **Reason for Searching Scripture**

The reason given by Jesus for His call to search the scriptures is that "they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). Scripture testifies, or witnesses, of Jesus. In the passage in John 5 in which the call to search the scriptures occurs, Jesus is concerned with the witness, or testimony, of Himself. If He bears witness of Himself, His witness will not be accepted as true by His audience (v. 31). John the Baptist bore witness to Jesus (vv. 33-36), as we read in John 1:36: "Behold the Lamb of God!" Jesus' own works, particularly His miraculous healing of the lame man at the pool of Bethesda, which occasioned Jesus' comments about Scripture in John 5, bore witness to Him. Concerning His works as a witness to Himself, Jesus spoke in John 5:36: "I have a greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me."

Among all these witnesses to Jesus, and not the least, is the Scripture. The scriptures, says Jesus, "testify of me." Jesus is their one, single, central message. Since Jesus in the passage in John 5 was referring mainly to the Old Testament, Jesus is the message of the Old Testament, from Genesis 1:1 to Malachi 4:6. They are a pointed, clear witness, unmistakably identifying Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Mary, as the Christ of God and the only Savior. As John the Baptist once pointed his finger at Jesus and said, "Behold the Lamb of God!" so the entire Bible is God's finger pointing to Jesus as God declares concerning Him at whom the Bible points, "Behold my son in whom I am well pleased, the Savior of the world!"

Scripture is a stupendous, marvelous, awesome witness. Such was the witness of the Baptist to Jesus. We ought not underestimate what John testified of Jesus to the very same Jews to whom Jesus was speaking in John 5. John testified that Jesus is the sin-bearing, justifying Lamb of God for the world; the Messiah, or Christ; the only-begotten Son of God in human flesh; the one who baptizes with the Spirit of regeneration, sanctification, and glorification. And this is the testimony of Scripture.

The witness of Scripture to Jesus is authoritative. Since Scripture is the word of God, its witness is the witness to Jesus of God Himself. The witness, therefore, is as true, as reliable, and as demanding of being heeded as is the witnessing God Himself.

The witness is also powerful. By the Spirit, God's witness is mighty to draw the elect to Jesus and then mighty to hold us in the union with Him of saving faith. As God's witness to Jesus, Scripture is a *living* word. It accomplishes what God designs with it. It testifies to Jesus in such an effective way that unbelieving men and women believe in Him, knowing Him as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and trusting in Him for the forgiveness of their sins and for eternal life.

Even when men and women reject the testimony of Scripture, and many do, Scripture is not ineffective. Rather, it accuses these unbelievers (v. 45). It condemns them. Although they saw and knew, they would not come to Jesus by believing on Him on account of their hard hearts and perverse wills. Nor does Scripture merely leave them in the spiritual condition in which it found them. But it hardens them in their unbelief, according to God's reprobation of them in His eternal counsel.

In the next chapter—John 6—Jesus teaches that the coming to Him spoken of in John 5:40, which is the effect of the witness of Scripture, is God's drawing of those who come: "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). This divine drawing, with its resultant coming to Jesus on the part of those who are so drawn, according to John 6:37 has its origin in God's eternal election of these persons unto salvation: "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me."

Those who do not come to Jesus by believing on Him, in disobedience to the witness of Scripture, are themselves responsible for this wickedness and folly, but their not coming is in accordance with the eternal counsel of God. God has not elected them, or given them to Christ, but has decreed that they perish in their unbelief and other sins. This is God's reprobation of some persons.

The witness to Jesus of Scripture is effectual, whether to bring to faith or to harden in unbelief.

## Scripture Only

And Scripture is the *only* witness to Jesus. This surely is Jesus' thought in John 5:39, 40. Scripture is to be searched—*Scripture* is to be searched—because Scripture, and Scripture *alone*, testifies of Jesus. Many secular books, especially at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, testify that there is no savior and salvation for sinful, corrupt, and dying humans. They shut humans up to despair. Many religious books, including the supposedly holy books of the cults and false religions, point men and women to other saviors than Jesus, whether men and women themselves by their own works and will, or some dead hero or heroine, or some idol god.

*Only* Scripture witnesses of Jesus, according to Jesus Himself: "the scriptures...are they which testify of me" (John 5:39).

Today, even the other witnesses that are referred to in John 5, namely, the witness of John the Baptist and the witness of Jesus' own works, we have only as parts of the witness of the scriptures.

On the basis of Jesus' witness to Scripture, the Reformation confessed, and the churches faithful to the Reformation today confess, "Scripture alone."

Inasmuch as Scripture is the witness to Jesus, a warning concerning the reading, and hearing the preaching, of Scripture is in order. It is possible to read and preach the Bible wickedly and to no profit. This is done when one reads Scripture, or hears Scripture preached, without seeing Jesus; when one reads Scripture while rejecting its witness of Jesus; when one reads Scripture without faith in the Jesus Christ who is the message and content of the book. Then there is no eternal life in the book. Then Scripture only accuses and condemns the reader or hearer. Life is not in the Bible; life is in Jesus. For life, one must not come to the Bible; one must "come to me" (v. 40). One comes to Jesus by believing in Him.

Here is an urgent warning to some professing Christians. There are some who read the Bible as a book about many religious matters, including a good man, Jesus. There are some who read the Bible without seeing Jesus as the only Savior from sin, death, and hell and the only Savior unto eternal life. There are some for whom the reading of the Bible is a kind of magical charm, apart from living faith in Jesus.

Jesus instructs us *how* we are to read the Bible and *how* we are to hear the preaching of the Bible. We are to come to the Bible as the Greeks came to Philip, according to John 12:21: "Sir, we would see Jesus."

## **Jesus Christ Only**

Scripture witnesses of Jesus. It witnesses of Jesus *only*. Since Jesus is rich and full—“in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9)—the witness of Him in Scripture is also rich and full. It testifies His person and work. It testifies both His natures. It testifies His humiliation and His exaltation. It testifies the promise of His coming and work (the Old Testament) and the fulfillment of the promise of His coming in two advents, one past and the other yet in the future (the New Testament). It testifies His work of past redemption; His work of present salvation; and His work of future resurrection and glorification. It testifies that He is Savior, and it testifies that He is Lord. It testifies the sovereignty of His saving work, and it testifies His accomplishment of salvation by exhortations and admonitions.

Nothing in the Bible is unrelated to Jesus. Everything in all the Bible is, in one way or another, and fundamentally, witness of Jesus. Scripture has no other message than Jesus. It is God’s witness of Jesus. It is God’s witness of Jesus *only*. God has nothing to say to us elect, believing humans but “Jesus.” Jesus is the only name given under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12), unto the glory of the triune God (Phil. 2:11). Every book, every chapter, every verse, every word is “of me” (John 5:40).

## **The Purpose of Searching Scripture**

This indicates the practical purpose of reading the Bible, of Bible study, and of preaching and hearing the preaching of the Bible. The purpose is not to find salvation in the book apart from faith in Jesus Christ, whether by obeying the various laws contained in the Bible, or by a thorough, but merely intellectual, knowledge of the Bible’s doctrines, which is disparagement neither of the commandments nor of doctrine.

Positively, the purpose of searching the Scripture is to hear its witness of Jesus, so that we come to Him in faith. This, the believing hearer of the witness does, not once, but his or her life-long. Coming to Jesus by faith in Him, as the effect of Scripture’s witness of Jesus, one receives eternal life: “that ye might have life” (v. 40). Coming to Jesus also results in confessing Him, following Him, and worshipping the triune God, His Father, who sent Him.

This then is the ultimate purpose of church membership and attendance at the services of divine worship, where Scripture is read and preached; of personal and family reading of the Bible; and of the classes of instruction in Scripture in the church: coming to Jesus!

For this coming to Jesus for life, the searching of Scripture is necessary.

There is no finding of life in Scripture apart from Jesus, and coming to Him.

But neither is there any coming to Jesus and finding of life in Him apart from Scripture and its teaching.

Therefore, “search the scriptures!”