8. The Five Solas: the Reformation's summary and the Catholic response

The five *solas* ("alone" in Latin) summarize the Reformation's break with Rome. The Reformers used these phrases, but not as a numbered set: "three solas" appears in the early 1900s, the "five solas" became standard in the mid-20th century, and the Reformed Cambridge Declaration (1996) popularized them as a set. Luther himself stressed faith and Scripture most. Catholics broadly accept three of the five when properly understood and reject two as the Reformers defined them (the Orthodox column of the table below shows the same pattern); a common summary is that Catholicism says "both/and" (grace and cooperation, faith and love, Scripture and Tradition, Christ and His Body) where the Reformers said "alone."

Sola Scriptura

Scripture alone

Reformation meaning: The Bible is the only infallible authority; tradition and councils are subject to it.

Key texts: 2 Tim 3:16–17; Acts 17:11

Catholic response: **Rejected.** Scripture and Tradition, interpreted by the Magisterium.

Orthodox: Rejected; Scripture within Holy Tradition.

Sola Fide

Faith alone

Reformation meaning: Justified by faith alone; Christ's righteousness credited to the believer.

Key texts: Rom 3:28; Eph 2:8–9; Gal 2:16

Catholic response: **Rejected as defined.** Faith is the root of justification, but saving faith works through love, and justification renews inwardly.

Orthodox: Rejected; salvation as theosis and synergy.

Sola Gratia

Grace alone

Reformation meaning: Salvation is entirely God's unearned gift.

Key texts: Eph 2:8; Titus 3:5

Catholic response: **Affirmed**, with free human cooperation enabled by grace.

Orthodox: Affirmed with synergy.

Solus Christus
Christ alone

Reformation meaning: Christ is the only mediator; no priest, saint or Mass adds to His work.

Key texts: 1 Tim 2:5; Heb 10:10–14; John 14:6

Catholic response: **Affirmed**, with others sharing in His work in a subordinate way.

Orthodox: Affirmed; saints intercede.

Soli Deo Gloria
Glory to God alone

Reformation meaning: All glory belongs to God, not saints, the Church or human achievement.

Key texts: 1 Cor 10:31; Isa 42:8

Catholic response: **Affirmed**; honoring saints glorifies God's work in them.

Orthodox: Affirmed.

The Greek of Romans 3:28, the main text cited for *sola fide*, has no word for "alone": Luther's German New Testament (1522) rendered it "allein durch den Glauben", "by faith alone", and defended the word in his *Open Letter on Translating* (1530). The only verse in which "faith" and "only" stand together is James 2:24, "not by faith only". See question 21 for Lutherans and question 17 Catholics ask.

▼ **Sola Gratia (grace alone): affirmed, with one difference**

Agreement: Salvation begins, continues and ends in God's grace. No one can earn the first grace of justification (Trent Sess. 6, ch. 8 and canons 1–3; CCC 1996–2005, 2010). The Council of Orange (529) had already condemned the idea that a person takes the first step toward God unaided.

Difference: Grace enables a real human response; a person moved by grace can freely cooperate or refuse (Trent, canon 4). Good works done in grace are called "merit," but only because God freely chose to reward His own gifts; the Catechism places the line "in crowning their merits you crown your own gifts" at the head of its section on merit (CCC 2006–2011).

Key texts: Phil 2:12–13; 1 Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 6:1.

▼ **Solus Christus (Christ alone): affirmed, with "participation"**

Agreement: Christ is the one mediator, and His sacrifice is the only source of salvation (CCC 1544–1545). No creature can ever be counted alongside the incarnate Word (*Lumen Gentium* 62).

Difference: Christ shares His work with His Body without dividing it. Priests share in His one priesthood; the Mass makes His one sacrifice present rather than adding a new one (CCC 1366–1367); Mary and the saints intercede in a role wholly dependent on His. All salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church, His Body (CCC 846).

Key texts: 1 Tim 2:1–5; Col 1:24; 1 Cor 3:9; Rev 5:8.

▼ **Sola Fide (faith alone): rejected as defined**

What Trent condemned: that a person is justified by faith in the sense that nothing else is required to cooperate (canon 9); that justification is only the imputation of Christ's righteousness without inner renewal (canon 11); and that justifying faith is only confidence in God's mercy (canon 12).

- Faith is "the beginning, foundation and root" of justification (Trent Sess. 6, ch. 8), and absolutely necessary.
- Justification forgives sin *and* renews the inner person by pouring God's love into the heart (ch. 7; Rom 5:5). God makes the person righteous as well as declaring him so.
- Saving faith is faith formed by love (Gal 5:6; 1 Cor 13:2); faith without love is the "dead faith" of James 2.
- Justification is first received in baptism, the "sacrament of faith" (CCC 1253). It can grow (ch. 10) and can be lost by mortal sin and restored (ch. 14–15).
- The "works of the law" Paul rejects are the Mosaic law (circumcision, food laws) or works done to put God in one's debt, not obedience produced by grace, which is why Paul can also say God repays each according to his works (Rom 2:6–7).

Key texts: Jas 2:14–26; Gal 5:6; Rom 2:6–13; Matt 25:31–46; John 3:5; Titus 3:5.

Recent nuance: the Catholic–Lutheran *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (1999) says both can confess salvation "by grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part," and Pope Benedict XVI (2008) said Luther's "faith alone" is true if faith is not set against charity. Disagreement remains on imputation, assurance and merit.

▼ **Sola Scriptura (Scripture alone): rejected**

One deposit of revelation is handed on in Scripture and apostolic Tradition, and authentically interpreted by the Magisterium, which "is not above the word of God, but serves it" (*Dei Verbum* 9–

10; CCC 80–86, 95). Catholics agree with Jesus' condemnation of human traditions that nullify God's word (Mark 7:8–13) and distinguish apostolic Tradition from changeable customs (CCC 83). The full case for and against is Chapter 1.

▼ **Soli Deo Gloria (glory to God alone): affirmed**

All worship and ultimate glory belong to God alone. Honoring the saints glorifies God, because their holiness is His work: Christ comes "to be glorified in his saints" (2 Thess 1:10). The Church distinguishes the worship owed to God alone (*latria*) from the honor given to saints (*dulia*), a distinction set out at the Second Council of Nicaea (787; CCC 2132). The Catechism also quotes Irenaeus: "the glory of God is man fully alive" (CCC 294).

Key texts: 2 Thess 1:10; Ps 68:35 (God wonderful in His holy ones, Douay); Matt 5:16.

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Catholics affirm grace alone, Christ alone and glory to God alone when rightly understood, with free human cooperation enabled by grace and a subordinate sharing in Christ's work by His Body. They reject Scripture alone and faith alone as the Reformers defined them: revelation is handed on in Scripture and Tradition and interpreted by the Magisterium, and justifying faith works through love and renews the person inwardly.

Sources: Council of Trent, Session 6, chs. 7-8 and canons 1-4, 9, 11, 12; CCC 80-86, 95, 846, 1366-1367, 1544-1545, 1996-2011, 2132; Dei Verbum 9-10; Lumen Gentium 62.

Orthodox

The Orthodox Church affirms grace, Christ and God's glory, but not the Reformation "alones." Scripture is read within Holy Tradition, and the Church's witness is "not of inferior authority" to it (Dositheus, Decree 2); Tradition is needed to interpret Scripture rightly (Philaret, Q 24). Grace goes before and cooperates with human freedom (synergy), so faith alone is rejected (Decrees 3, 13). Christ is "the only mediator," yet the saints intercede (Decree 8), and salvation is lifelong union with God (theosis).

Sources: Confession of Dositheus (Synod of Jerusalem, 1672), Decrees 2, 3, 8, 13; Longer Catechism of St. Philaret (1830), Q 16-24; Encyclical of the Eastern Patriarchs (1848), section 17; OCA, The Orthodox Faith, vol. 4, "Man".

Lutheran

Reformed

Lutherans gave the Reformation its centre: justification for Christ's sake through faith is the "first and chief article," of which nothing can be yielded (Smalcald Articles II.1; Augsburg IV). Scripture is "the sole rule and standard" of doctrine; the creeds and Lutheran confessions are witnesses to how it has been understood, not judges over it (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Rule and Norm 1, 7-8). Christ is the one Mediator and Intercessor, so saints are honoured as examples but not invoked (Augsburg XXI).

Sources: Augsburg Confession IV, XXI; Smalcald Articles II.1; Formula of Concord, Epitome, Comprehensive Summary, Rule and Norm 1-2, 7-8.

Reformed confessions teach that all things necessary for salvation are set down in Scripture or deduced from it, and that the supreme judge in controversies is "the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture" (Westminster 1.6, 1.10; Belgic 7). Faith is only the instrument by which we embrace Christ, our righteousness (Belgic 22); Christ is the one and only Mediator and Intercessor (Belgic 26). Good works earn nothing, and any reward is "not of merit, but of grace" (Heidelberg 63).

Sources: Westminster Confession 1.6, 1.10, 11.1-2; Belgic Confession 7, 22, 26; Heidelberg Catechism Q 60-64.

Anglican

The Articles teach that Scripture "containeth all things necessary to salvation" and nothing beyond it may be required as an article of faith (VI); the Church may not ordain anything contrary to God's Word written, and general councils may err (XX, XXI). We are accounted righteous only for Christ's merit, by faith, without our own works (XI), and grace must go before any good will (X). Evangelical and Anglo-Catholic Anglicans weigh the Articles differently.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles VI, X, XI, XX, XXI, XXII, XXXI.

Methodist

Wesley's Articles of Religion (1784), an abridgment of the Thirty-Nine Articles, keep their Reformation core: Scripture contains all things necessary to salvation (V), we are justified "by faith, only" (IX), works of supererogation are rejected (XI), and Christ's one offering is complete (XX). Methodists stress that prevenient grace goes before every good will (VIII) and that grace aims at holiness; in Wesley's words, "Grace is the source, faith the condition, of salvation."

Sources: Articles of Religion (1784) V, VIII, IX, XI, XX; John Wesley, Sermon 1, "Salvation by Faith" (1738), introduction 3.

Baptist

Baptists hold the solas in their Reformation meaning: the Bible is the only infallible authority, justification is by faith alone with Christ's righteousness credited to the believer, salvation is entirely God's unearned gift, Christ is

the only mediator, and all glory belongs to God alone.

Sources: Baptist Faith and Message 2000, arts. I, IV; Second London Confession (1689), ch. 11.

See also: which parts of each reformer Baptists kept, and why.

Last reviewed November 10, 2026