

The Editor's Rambles: How Numbers can Change Over Time

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I have called this the editor's rambles. It is not a typical article but comes from a few throw-away comments I made in the introduction to a lecture I gave in 2017. I share it here in the hope of stimulating some thinking about how we quickly can take things for granted. We should learn to be curious and ask more about the development of concepts so that we do not assume all "reformation lingo" has been established for centuries. So here we go.



I must confess that I have had a nagging instinct for some time that the number five (for The Five Solas) may not be just as exact a way to summarise the theological heart of the Reformation as we have been making it out to be. I am in complete agreement with all The Five Solas of the Reformation – I want that to be made totally clear before I proceed! I have taught these solas for years to many classes of theology students and to others and will continue to do so. No, it is not the *theology* that is the issue in this short article, it is more the issue of the *number five*. Let me begin by asking a question: how many *solas* were discussed and spoken about 100 years ago in 1917, at the 400th anniversary (quadricentennial) commemorative lectures, talks, and celebrations of the Reformation?

1. The 1917 Celebrations

In 1917, the 400th anniversary celebrations of the Reformation were rather muted. After all, Germany was at war with the British Empire and America (America had entered the war just months before – April, 1917). Folks from overseas were generally not heading off for a tour of Wittenberg, Germany that year, unlike the hundreds, even thousands of tourists who went to Wittenberg in 2017—yes, a very different context in many ways.

Nevertheless, many were discussing the Reformation and were meeting, conferring, and writing special articles and books for 1917. I mention only a

few examples. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa may have held the largest set of celebrations for the 400th anniversary. Special articles were produced for their magazine; special city meetings were held (some which had over 3,000 in attendance). The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) and the Presbyterian Church in United States (PCUS) both formed committees to deal with the anniversary and publications ensued. One of its leading speakers for the PCUSA was Dr. David Schaff, son of the noted church historian Philip Schaff. This anniversary did not pass unnoticed.

However, a curious fact can be observed: in all of these celebrations and publications, whether South Africa or the two major American Presbyterian bodies of the time, one will struggle to find any paper or speech centred on the theme of The Five Solas (or any number of solas for that matter!).¹ The one exception in America is the Missouri Lutherans; in 1916 Theodore Engelder of Concordia Seminary published a summation of the fundamentals of Reformation teaching under the rubric of the Three Solas in anticipation of the 400th anniversary: *sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia*.² And it is here that we really begin to see the solas developing from this point forwards throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century, particularly in America. It appears to have begun more with some Lutheran branches in the first half of the 20th century as three solas but not yet as the number five.³

Timothy Schleming suggests that the first reference in American Lutheranism to the three solas was in 1892 when it was etched into the cornerstone of the Missouri Lutheran Seminary building in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin.⁴ This would make sense as in 1916 it was the Missouri Lutheran theologian Engelder who wrote about the three solas. However, Engelder likely received this from Carl F.W. Walther, a Missouri Lutheran who likewise in the generation before Engelder had also used the three sola motif.⁵ What seems to have happened is that late in the 19th century the three solas emerged as a foundational way of understanding Reformational truth and then by the 400th anniversary year a written articulation was made and it comes to us from the conservative Lutheran quarter of the Missouri Lutheran Church. This was a pocket and not universal in the American context as it was not found amongst the Presbyterians in 1917.

¹ <http://www.presbyteriansofthepast.com/2017/01/19/reformation-remembering-400th>

² Theodore Engelder, "The Three Principles of the Reformation" in *Four Hundred Years: Commemorative essays on the Reformation of Dr. Martin Luther and its blessed results, in the year of the four-hundredth anniversary of the reformation*. Ed. W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia, 1916), 97-109.

³ Timothy Schmeling, "Proclaim the Wonders God has Done: *Sola Scriptura*", June, 2017, 1-2 assessed June, 2018.

⁴ Schmeling.

⁵ H.H. Walker, "Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther, D.D. The Luther in America", in *The Lutheran Quarterly*, 12 (1912), 358.

Is there evidence that the Five Solas were being used in Europe in 1917? To date I have found no such evidence. But I have come across the use of the three solas in 1917 in one quarter in Europe. This comes from the Dutch quarter and celebrations in Amsterdam through the pen of Herman Bavinck for a commemorative volume associated with the Free University. Again, it is not the number five but the number three. Bavinck described these three solas as “this was not a new principle, only the old Gospel.”⁶ Interestingly enough they are the same three solas Engelder was using in 1916 and are the same ones on the cornerstone laid in Wisconsin in 1892. Yet so far I have not seen evidence of other Europeans using this three-solas rubric prior to 1900. If you know of such, please drop me an email as I would like to learn more about this.

So there would appear to be a noticeable change between 1917 and 2017. I will admit that mathematics was not my strong subject in school, but I do understand this much – three has grown to five. Does that mean two solas in the rubric were lost prior to 1917? To date I can find no such evidence. I have concluded that using the rubric of the three solas prior to 1917 was not universal by any means and certainly five as a group were not mentioned. What seems to have happened is that from 1917 to 2017 the concept of the solas grew across many denominational groups; they became fixed first at three and then they grew from three to five by 2017. We can certainly ask, “Why this change in the numerical language from three solas in 1917 (in a very small part of the Reformational family of churches) to usually five solas by 2017 (and virtually across the board of evangelicalism)?”⁷

2. Three, Four, Five and onto 2017

As we have seen, in 1916 the Missouri Lutheran theologian Engelder articulated the three solas. Throughout the 20th century the numbers gradually shifted, as did the configurations. These configurations can be found in various Reformed and Lutheran camps (not all orthodox evangelical), including liberal and neo-orthodox, whether Emil Brunner or Karl Barth or others; many were sifting through the Reformers and slowly adding definition – something which may actually surprise conservatives today.

⁶ Herman Bavinck, “De Hervorming en ons nationale leven,” in *Ter herdenking der Hervorming, 1517-1917. Twee redeveringen, utgersproken in de openbare zitting van den senaat der Vrije Universiteit. Op 31 October, 1517*, eds. H. Bavinck and H.H. Kuyper (Kampen: Kok, 1917), 7. It has been noted there is no use of the term three solas in Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics*.

⁷ On an aside, one does notice that actually the Germans both Reformed and Lutheran were really the first to celebrate the Reformation anniversaries and then slowly it crossed the Atlantic with the German immigrants both Reformed and Lutheran and then eventually the Presbyterians in America also got into the celebrations and commemorations as well.

The one sola that was often omitted (yet it could be argued was understood) is *Christ alone*; yet this sola was articulated in the 20th century by Barth, who viewed Christology as paramount and thus insisted on speaking of Christ alone. Faith and grace were often basically co-joined. Brunner stressed the glory of God over the scriptures – sola Deo gloria. So slowly, by say the 1980s and 1990s the five solas became a common phraseology for evangelicals of various stripes – Reformed, Pentecostal, Baptist, Presbyterian and Independent – but not generally for any Lutheran group. However, it is helpful to recognize the history of how these solas came to be articulated; it has been a slow road and actually quite a varied road. Humility here will help us all. One will find that, depending upon the decade, one can find three, four, or five solas.

In his standard church history textbook (for two generations now) *Christianity Through the Centuries*, the author, Earle Cairns spoke about solas in a very muted way back in the 1950s. Curiously, by his third edition in 1996, he spoke about three solas and referenced one which is not part of the five today for most – more ecclesiastically oriented.⁸ His additional sola seemed to be missed in virtually all Reformation celebrations last year from my limited vantage point. Reading another fairly popular church history text by Latourette, one finds no mention of the five solas as a group but only a reference to a particular sola in that textbook.⁹

In conclusion, from 1917 to about the 1970s we have a fairly loose identification of three, maybe four solas, and then by the late 80s and early 90s five solas became standard fare. My conclusion here is that 1917 was a critical time to establish the rubric of the solas as three and various streams discussed these further throughout the twentieth century and this is why sometimes it will be four and sometimes five. Today it is as if we have had a convention and held a vote to fix the solas at five with no further discussion. Given the long road to get to The Five Solas as a rubric, I want to bring some caution here as just maybe we are not doing justice to the wholeness of Reformational teaching. So I formulate my question as follows for discussion: **“Do ‘The Five Solas’ do justice as a suitable summation of Reformation truth?”**

3. Five plus One or Two: 2017-2117

We must acknowledge that the solas, (and this is in reference to the three but we could also say it of the five), “do not represent the sum totality of the Christian life”¹⁰ though they are extremely important and foundational. So

⁸ Earle Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries: Expanded Third Edition*, original 1954 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 289.

⁹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present*. Original 1975 (reprint, Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1997), 707. Latourette rightly stressed the centre of Luther’s understanding as *sola fide* of the Christian faith.

¹⁰ Schmeling. Schmeling writes about the use of the solas prior to 1517 which is something often ignored. Luther brought a biblical clarity where there was often

what may need to be added if anything? I would suggest that there needs to be recognition of the priesthood of all believers and Christian vocation. Now does this start to move us in the direction of six or even seven? Maybe.

However, more importantly, such a discussion highlights two things. First, quick numeric summaries cannot capture things in totality. There is a parallel here with the issue of the Five Points of Calvinism which also truncates such Reformed theology and divorces it from a wholistic perspective theologically. The same can be said about The Five Solas. They are foundational pillars but not the sum total. For Luther the priesthood of all the believers was extremely important in the context of his struggles with the European Catholic Church but also for the Christian life. Closely related to this is also the matter of vocation.

Early in the 21st century, Michael J. Glodo wrote an article about “Sola Ecclesia: The Lost Reformation Doctrine”, which as a title surely echoes back to the Reformation Solas.¹¹ What Glodo is attempting to do is bring a balance back to the central doctrines of the Reformation, namely a proper emphasis on the place of the church in the life of Christians. Kevin Vanhoozer’s recent book, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* also draws out aspects of using the five solas as a united front towards recovering an ecclesial catholicity, thus moving towards a virtual sixth sola.¹² This is not exactly the same thing which Glodo was saying but again highlights an underlying issue: defining the core doctrinal pillars of the reformation and taking them into the life of the church today. With this in mind, recent discussions about sola ecclesia must be considered. Some of these discussions may well be rejected, hopefully not all, and maybe a refining process will continue. It certainly strikes me that a refining process took place between 1917 and 2017.

So I ponder the year 2117 and Reformation celebrations for that year, D.V. I wonder if the generations to come might be discussing six or seven solas in 2117. Will these include sola ecclesia or something about the universal priesthood of believers and calling?

Conclusion

What important applications and lessons can be drawn from this question about how and when the number five for reformation solas began? First, it is

confusion, nevertheless the language did exist prior to Luther and to a certain extent can be found in the late medieval period before Luther.

¹¹.Michael Glodo, “Sola Ecclesia: The Lost Reformation Doctrine”, *Reformation and Revival*, 9:4 (2000), 91-97. See also John Muether, “A Sixth Sola?. *Modern Reformation*, 7:4 (1998), 24-28 which preceded Glodo’s article.

¹² Kevin Van Hoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016), 29,288.

reminder that church history and theology must be properly placed in context in order to attempt to understand the flow of ideas or concepts. We will often discover some strange bedfellows along the way and will find that ideas take a long time to develop. Learning how a concept arose can be highly instructive.

Second, yes, The Five Solas can be extracted from the writings of the Reformers who laboured in various locations, but the concepts of these solas are not laid down quite as neatly as we use them today. Maybe we have missed something in the process. The Five Solas grasp the nexus of the subject of our salvation but might there also be a need to ensure that we see how all must be seen within the framework of a robust biblical ecclesiology? When we focus only on the five, may we also be limiting the message of the Reformers? I believe that we are, so I offer a challenge to think about the six solas, to make sure that the discussion continues. As I have said, I agree with all that is said in the content of the five solas: the Bible alone, Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone, and the glory of God alone. BUT there is at least one missing matter theologically that Luther and other Reformers saw as very important and foundational: the priesthood of all believers and Christian vocation.

Over to you.

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