

Soli Deo Gloria

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, dear friends in Christ: Thus far in our Lenten meditations we've considered four of the "Sola's" of the Reformation. First, we established that the Church's only source for divine truth and authority is the inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word of God. Building on that unshakable foundation, we have since reaffirmed that our salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone who suffered and died to pay the penalty of our sins and then rose again for our justification.

This evening we come to the fifth "Sola" which flows naturally and logically from these other four. The question is this: Who gets the credit? If everything related to our salvation is the result of God's gracious favor who in love sent his Son to die for us, and this salvation is received only through faith in Christ's accomplished work, and this saving faith itself is a gift of God worked in us by the power of the Holy Spirit when we hear the Gospel proclaimed from the Holy Scripture – in other words, if God does it all – then to whom should go all the glory? The answer is a no-brainer. It's *Soli Deo Gloria*: to God alone the glory.

Unfortunately, it is the nature of sin to rob humans of the proper use of their brains. In his letter to the Romans Paul explains how though people knew God, they refused to honor him as God or give thanks to him. The result was a darkening of their hearts and a twisting of their thinking. Claiming to be wise, they became fools and they began to ascribe the glory due alone to the true God to idols they made that resembled themselves or other creatures. This is how the ancient pantheons of the gods and goddesses of the Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, Greeks, and others were created. People preferred to worship and trust in gods of their own making to worshipping and trusting the God who had made them.

This predilection for making idols is part of the corrupting effect of sin. And since we all have a sin nature, we too incline toward making idols for ourselves. So, it shouldn't surprise us in the least that such idols are created even within the Church. And by the dawn of the 16th century, the Church in Europe had collected its own huge pantheon of hundreds of gods and goddesses. I refer to the cult of the saints and chief among them Mary the virgin mother of our Lord. Collectively they had been elevated to the role of minor deities. Christians were taught to pray to them, to seek their favor, to perform acts of service or self-denial in their honor, to venerate their relics, and to thank them when (it seemed) petitions offered to them were favorably answered.

You may have heard the story of how Luther himself came to enter the monastery. He was traveling on a country road when a furious thunderstorm came upon him. He was terrified and feared for his life. With lightening flashing all around him and thunder crashing down, he prayed (as he had been taught) to Saint Anne, who according to non-biblical sources is the mother of the Virgin Mary. Luther promised Anne that if she rescued him, he would become a monk. As it turned out, he lived, gave thanks to Anne, and kept his promise. I suspect that the Church of Rome regrets that he did because entering the monastery was what began his education in the Holy Scriptures. And that in turn led to his rediscovery of the true Gospel and later, exposed the idolatry that is the cult of the saints.

And let me make this clear: it's entirely appropriate that we remember and give thanks to God for the saints who have gone before us. It's right to hold them up as examples of

faithfulness and devotion to Christ – especially those who suffered for their faith or who were put to death for it. But what was happening in the Church had gone far beyond that. It was as if God himself, the Father, Son, and Spirit, were too distant and inaccessible to people on earth. The heavenly saints, on the other hand, were more like us. They were closer. They could relate. Thus, they were more sympathetic to our problems here below. And so, the honor, glory, and thanks due to God was being given to them.

And that wasn't the only way God was being robbed of his glory. The whole monastic system was built on the notion that a person could by his or her holy life contribute toward their salvation. Committing to lifelong celibacy and thus making the sacrifice of one's sexuality and family life, renouncing worldly comforts and taking a vow of poverty, and submitting to vigorous disciplines of fasting, praying, and other forms of self denial were thought to advance a person vastly toward the heavenly goal. At some point the teaching of redemptive suffering entered in. The idea is that pain and discomfort experienced in a believer's life (when accepted with the proper attitude) counts toward reducing time spent suffering later in Purgatory – at a premium rate, no less: a little suffering here cancels much suffering there. This led some to practice extreme forms of discipline: starving themselves, making pilgrimages on their knees, and performing self-flagellation (that is, whipping themselves), to name but a few. But again, the idea is that Christ in his passion and death didn't suffer enough for the sins of the world. There is more debt to be paid. And whoever pays it ought to take the credit for it. If I suffer some, the glory due God alone goes in part to me. And the sinful nature in me – so full of pride – really likes that. No, more than that: I *glorify* myself by it. And that is exactly the problem: what looks on the outside like Christian piety and long suffering in hardship is actually self worship of the worst kind.

But the Lord God will not give his glory to another; not to idols we make, nor to you and me when we make idols of ourselves. And this is yet another reason that we should give thanks to God for the work and perseverance of the reformers whom the Lord used to restore the true and simple Gospel to the Church and to return to himself the glory due his name. But let us not make idols of these reformers. They were but instruments in the hands of God – as are we in our day. Instead, let's recognize that the work to keep out of the Church the idols people make continues even now.

The Roman church's teaching on Mary and the saints remains unchanged. So also their teachings on redemptive suffering. And bad theology leads to bad practice. You may know that Mother Theresa of Calcutta is on the fast track to being declared a saint by the Church of Rome. A huge part of her ministry was providing hospice care for the poorest of India's poor. It's noble work, to be sure, to feed, clothe, and care for the terminally ill who would otherwise be left to die alone in the gutter. What many do not know, however, is that Mother Theresa and the nuns who carry on her work make no effort to evangelize the people in their care, the vast majority of whom are Hindu or Muslim. It's because of that doctrine I mentioned last week about how they believe pretty much everyone is a Christian whether they know it or not. Yeah, right. Jesus is cool with that—not. Anyway, the nuns' care for the dying never includes any kind of medicines for pain relief. Though they have the resources to pay for them and could, they won't because they believe that the suffering the dying endure now is knocking off some of the time they will have to spend later in Purgatory. They honestly believe they are doing their patients a favor by allowing them to suffer and die in agony.

What's more, it's taught that redemptive suffering is transferable. Suppose I have a toothache, or I throw my back out (again). Instead of seeking pain relief, I can accept the misery, and have it count off the time I owe in Purgatory. Or, if I'm feeling particularly generous,

I can pray to have the suffering I endure credited to someone else's account. Why, I can help get you out of Purgatory quicker – which makes a mini-god of me. And yes, you're welcome. I'm glad to be of service. You may begin to glorify me now. (No. Please don't.)

I wish I could say that the churches that are heirs of the Reformation are immune to misdirecting the glory due to God alone; but that's not the case. And of the many examples I could provide of this, the most common by far is the whole mentality behind what are called praise services. You can find these in just about all church bodies including our own. And they are becoming increasingly popular.

Now, maybe you're wondering what I have against people praising the Lord. The answer is nothing. But that's not what the typical praise service does. In Lutheran theology, we've always seen our gatherings for Word and Sacrament to be cases of Divine Service; that is, God is here serving us, giving us the gifts of his grace in Christ, washing away our sin, strengthening our faith, giving us the Spirit, and so on. We gather to receive from God. And yes, in response we give him thanks and praise.

The typical praise service doesn't work that way. It has a different theology altogether, another mindset. It's this: I have something that God wants, namely my praise. We gather to give to him. And you have only to look at the words of the most popular praise songs to see who the main actor is. It's always me. "Lord, I worship you. I lift up my hands. I glorify you. I give you my praise. I, I, I." The songs aren't about the Lord and what he's done. They're about me and what I'm doing. And when it's over I go home patting myself on the back thinking what a good boy I am for doing such a great job praising God today. Under the pretense of glorifying God, I'm actually glorifying myself.

It won't do. God does all the work for us. He gets all the glory. Therefore, to our Triune God, the Father who created and sustains us, the Son who became our brother in flesh, shed his precious blood on the cross, and gave his life to redeem us, and the Holy Spirit who called us by this Gospel, enlightened us with his gifts, sanctifies and keeps us in this one true saving faith—to this God, and to this God alone, be all the glory now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!