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STUDIES AND OBSERVATIONS

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The Three Reformation *Solas* and Twenty-First Century Ethical Issues¹

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Most members of our churches – and perhaps not a few pastors – would be hard-pressed to name the “three solas” identified with the Reformation. They are *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, that is, *scripture alone, by grace alone, through faith alone*. While historically important as the rallying cry of the magisterial Reformers, they continue to be important for a church that seeks to uphold the Gospel insights Luther brought to the church. If we are an evangelical and reforming church still, it will be in our upholding of the three *solas*.

Not surprisingly – since it is a relatively modern issue – none of the three *solas* speaks explicitly to many contemporary ethical issues, including the issue of the blessing of longtime homosexual unions. The Bible certainly has passages that concern marriage, but the principle of *sola scriptura* could not for the Reformers, and so cannot now, simply be equated with “the Book” as if the issue requires no more explanation than that.

Given that none of the *solas* deals explicitly with many of the ethical issues now facing the church, how then should they be approached for their guidance? In any debate (and surely there are fewer more controversial subjects than, for instance, the blessing of same-sex unions) definitions are very important, since misunderstandings very often arise in definition even before discussing specific issues. Thus I will begin by briefly defining the three *solas* as I believe the Reformers understood them.

I. *Sola Fide* – By Faith Alone

The first and most important step in understanding *sola fide* is not to identify faith solely and completely with belief. To do so is to follow a path that leads to dead orthodoxy and lifeless dogmatism.

Faith is much more than belief. If it were only belief, then demons could reasonably be said to have faith, since scripture portrays, for example, the demon Legion as believing that Jesus was the Son of God (Mark 5:7). Or as the Letter of James wryly puts it, “You believe that God is one? Even the demons believe – and shudder.”²

Faith is much, much more than simple belief. The Reformers did not choose the term *credentia* (assent, belief) but *fides* understood as *fiducia* (faith, trust). “*Credentia* tends to be an impersonal belief; the authority speaks and we submit our minds and reason to it. But *fiducia*, ‘trust,’ is a term that applies properly only within a personal context”³ *Fides* implies both trust and love. An intellectual, static, and dogmatic adherence to a set of doctrines might be seen as a form of faith, but it lacks the most important component of faith, a relationship with a person. For Christians, that is the person of Christ. We have faith in Christ, and it is therefore Christ who is the centre of *sola fide*.

In light of the Reformation formula, based on scripture, “by grace alone through faith alone,” faith should be seen as our living, dynamic trust in the God who in Christ first loved and accepted us by grace. Faith is not itself a work, even of assent. It is above all an answer – a response called out of us by the act of God in Christ, “reconciling the world to himself ... and entrusting the ministry of reconciliation to us.”⁴ The absolute priority of faith over belief is well expressed in Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Creed in the *Small Catechism*, an explanation shot through with relational verbs: “I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith ...”⁵

II. *Sola Gratia* – By Grace Alone

“Grace” is another of those terms that all Lutherans “agree” with but rarely define for its precise meaning and implications. At issue here for the faithful is nothing less than the nature of justification. What do we, as a church, actually confess and trust that Christ did for us on the cross? What calls forth the *sola fide* we have just discussed?

While there are many descriptions of atonement and how it works, the Reformation’s fundamental insight was that we are reconciled with God and each other, not by what we have done, but

entirely and completely by what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. This is grace. It is solely God's act. It is not – ever – by our works that we can find peace with God. As noted above, even our adherence to a set of beliefs or “rules for living” does not constitute faith, for belief as understood in this way is just another work, and robs God's mercy of its power, God's choices of their unpredictability (who would have imagined Israel? Paul? the Gentiles?), and God's powerful call of its immediacy.⁶ An image that keeps recurring in Luther's writings, for personal as well as theological reasons, is of the person with a terrified conscience who finally finds peace with God in the realization that God's favour is entirely independent of human worthiness. This is, in fact, how Luther, in his commentary on Romans, describes his own coming to peace with God.⁷

Thus a discussion of “human rights” has little place within a theology of grace, which sees God's love as dependent neither on human action nor on any prior human worthiness. None of us has “rights” to the forgiveness we receive from the cross. Rather, as Paul writes: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us.”⁸ God's mercy and grace are for all of sinful humanity. However, one of the distinguishing marks of the present debate over homosexual unions seems to be that a group (gays and lesbians) is defined, not from within, but rather from outside, as intrinsically sinful. It is one thing to come to God, as did Luther, with a “terrified conscience” seeking acceptance and love despite our sins. It is quite another to be identified from outside as being in particular need of that step.

Grace is both more complete and more powerful than the positions taken in our current ethical debates sometimes seem to recognize. God forgives sin “even without and before our prayer,” according to Luther's explanation of the Fifth Petition of the Lord's Prayer: “and [God] gave us the Gospel, in which there is nothing but forgiveness, before we prayed or even thought of it.”⁹ In other words, God's love for us operates in its grace before and independent of even our repentance.

Since the beginning, with the Apostle Paul, a radical preaching of grace has been criticized for overlooking or perhaps even encouraging sin: “What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin that grace may abound?”¹⁰ Both Paul and the Reformers were critiqued as antinomians, that is, those against the Law.¹¹ Likewise,

Christians who welcome gays and lesbians, and certainly a church that would celebrate with them a committed homosexual union, would be charged by some with going beyond the radical forgiveness of grace to a position of condoning sin. William Hordern lays out the issue clearly:

In theory, the line between condoning sin and forgiving sin can be drawn quite sharply and clearly. To forgive sin is quite different from condoning it, because the very definition of forgiveness implies a recognition that the forgiven one is guilty of something. On the other hand, to condone something means, by definition, that we overlook any guilt that may be involved. But while the difference between forgiveness and condoning is easy to define, it is very difficult to express in practice.¹²

Ultimately, Hordern cannot resolve the dilemma except by appealing to the example of Jesus in the gospels, who befriended those condemned by society, and chided and condemned those whose sins were of a more conventional variety and thus acceptable to society. While I agree with Hordern's assessment of Jesus' example, I would go still further. Attention to particular sins, especially the sins of others, almost inevitably leads us to forget Sin with a capital "S," that is, our alienation from God, and therefore to deny Christ on the cross, the most powerful manifestation of God's grace. It is almost impossible to consider the sins of others without comparing them somehow as being "better than" or "worse than" our own sins, leading us to be "curved in on ourselves" (Luther) – the fundamental posture of not being open to God's freeing and redeeming grace. Self-righteousness, by definition, is the enemy of God's grace, and this is true no matter on which side of a debate we find that self-righteousness.

In their opposition to indulgences and relic-keeping (and to the handily pro-rated purgatorial time-frames that encouraged them), the Reformers showed us that any form of "list-keeping" denies the real power of salvation offered from the cross. We would do well not to substitute modern-day lists of sins and their relative weight for the medieval lists that Luther preached against so powerfully.

III. *Sola Scriptura* – Scripture Alone

If, as the saying goes, "God is a God of details", or conversely, that "the devil is in the details," then surely the details of *sola scriptura* are where Christians, Lutherans among them, are most

likely to misunderstand each other. We modern-day Christians are often prone to historical amnesia, and here especially we need to be alert to whether we are following Reformation teachings or rejecting them, though perhaps not consciously.

The *sola scriptura* principle has been misunderstood to mean that Luther rejected tradition as having any authority at all, and embraced “scripture alone.” In this misreading of Luther, scripture and tradition are mutually exclusive, and tradition is illegitimate as a part of our understanding of proper Christian belief and behaviour. Yet none of the magisterial Reformers – Luther, Melancthon, Calvin – understood *sola scriptura* in this way. What Luther embraced in the Leipzig debate in 1519 was the principle that the church’s authority is derivative from scripture.¹³ In other words, Luther and others rejected the claim that church authority – especially that of the papacy – was sufficient *by itself* to justify a particular teaching. Tradition for the Reformers did not represent the normative and sole interpretation of scripture, but neither was it to be rejected. Rather, because scripture is open to many interpretations, tradition is a helpful tool for understanding scripture.¹⁴ Article I of the *Augsburg Confession*, which deals with the Trinity, opens with the words: “We unanimously hold and teach, in accordance with the decree of the council of Nicaea, that there is one divine essence ...”¹⁵ Again and again Luther and the other reformers made reference to the tradition of the councils and creeds.

What does it mean, then, to say that we are a church that accepts and in fact clings to the principle of “scripture alone?” It means that like the Reformers we believe the Bible to be the primary authority for our preaching and teaching. Thus in the Preface to the *Augsburg Confession*, the Reformers state: “we offer and present a confession of our pastors’ and preachers’ teaching and of our own faith, setting forth how and in what manner, *on the basis of the Holy Scriptures*, these things are preached, taught, communicated, and embraced [among us]...”¹⁶

But this statement can only be the beginning, not the end, of our examination of the Bible. The above-mentioned example of the Trinity proves the point, for while a concept of the Trinity may be latent in the pages of scripture, it is not developed fully there. *Sola scriptura* meant and means “based on scripture.” It does not mean, and never meant for the Reformers, “ending with and restricted

entirely to the scriptures.” Such a formulation was not only impossible in practice, but undesirable, for it would have meant denying the understandings (such as the Trinity or Christ’s two natures, for instance) arrived at by the ancient church in its councils.

Furthermore, it is abundantly plain from Luther’s works that the Reformer himself never understood *sola scriptura* in the sense of some kind of uniform or “flat” reading of Scripture in which every verse has equal weight to every other. For Luther, *solus Christus* was the “presupposition and ground of *sola scriptura*.”¹⁷ This is evident, among other places, in his negative comments on the books of Revelation and James. Luther practiced what Lotz calls a “Christocentric” interpretation of Scripture: what was truly authoritative and the centre of scripture was what depicted how Christ has overcome sin, death, and hell on our behalf.¹⁸ A doctor of scripture, Luther’s life-long devotion to the scriptures as sacred texts did not mean that he could not parse, compare, and analyze them. Quite the opposite: such was his life’s work, from his early lectures on the Psalms to his final lectures on Galatians. Luther could not have been Luther had he not been an interpreter of Scripture.

The same is true for us. Simply put: there is no scripture without interpretation. Anyone who says otherwise is falling into either ignorance or deceit. In saying this, I wish to make very clear that this statement is not in any way an attempt to undercut scripture or its importance. Rather, it is, I believe, the *only* way to assign the Bible its proper authority. It is not to point out scripture’s vagaries or inconsistencies but rather its unique strengths. Would it be a criticism of a house to say that the beams and joists are more important structurally than the cupboards and mouldings? Hardly. It is being more truthful and, ultimately, more practical.

Moreover, *sola scriptura* does not mean, nor did it ever mean for the Reformers, inerrancy. As Alan Davies writes: “the first principle of the reformation, *sola scriptura*, which, for the first generation of reformers, never signified a literal inerrant biblical text – for Luther, the Bible was the ‘cradle’ of Christ, and for Calvin the Word without the Spirit was a dead letter – became an infallible book or ‘paper pope’ in the hands of the Protestant scholastics.”¹⁹ What is important in the principle of *sola scriptura* is whether something that we hold is warranted by scripture, and especially supported by those parts of scripture that point to the saving and redeeming work of Christ.

IV. The Three *Solas* and the Nature of the Church

When they are properly understood, what kind of church do the three *solas* envision? Daniel Erlander, in his short resource *Baptized We Live*, comments that the Lutheran church is called to be evangelical, reforming, and catholic.²⁰ These three emphases are also what are pointed to by the three *solas*. First comes the cross, for it is there that justification occurs, and the “old Adam” (as Luther put it), that is, our old nature, dies with Christ, to be reborn daily as the new person in Jesus’ own resurrection. “Sins” are all forgiven, along with the greater sin (for it is all one) of being self-obsessed, self-serving, or self-righteous to the point where we deny our need for Christ and his forgiveness.

The three *solas* seek to define a church where God’s grace is preached in both word and sacrament,²¹ and in full expectation that disciples will follow in the path of Christ, to the cross if need be. What the three *solas* do not in any way envision or allow room for is a static church which sees itself as a guardian of public morality.

Eric Gritsch, in his *A History of Lutheranism*, puts it thus: “Luther viewed the church as the gathering beset by evil, the devil, but sustained by word and sacrament; it is a militant and cruciform church. ‘Therefore whoever desires to see the Christian Church existing in quiet peace, entirely without crosses, without heresy and without factions, will never see it thus, or else he must view the false church of the devil as the real church.’”²²

There is no place in this kind of church for the timidity that avoids issues such as welcoming of gays and lesbians or blessing of same-sex unions, or euthanasia, or other disputed issues because they might be politically costly or because they might “cost us members.” Despite his many faults, the Wittenberg Reformer was never accused of timidity. Nor should we be. *Sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *sola scriptura* are challenges to move ahead, even to make mistakes, secure in the faith that knows we are forgiven and loved, and in the knowledge that it is Christ’s church, not ours, that we are called to serve.

Will we make mistakes? Clearly. The history of the Reformation churches shows just how quickly radical and graceful insights can become their own oppressive laws. In discussing the Protestant movement, Alan Davies writes that “self-righteousness is no stranger to revolutionaries, who having discovered a higher truth, usually

situate themselves on the highest conceivable moral ground.”²³ Likewise, the tendency to disallow criticism of those who have been victimized is neither helpful nor honest, but sets up its own ideology of self-righteousness hostile to grace.

Ultimately, grace confirms only the righteousness of God but never self-righteousness. Its aim is always comforting, never accounting. Luther in his explanation of the Fifth Petition of the Lord’s Prayer writes that the Gospel, through word and sacrament, works to “strengthen and gladden our conscience.”²⁴ It is remarkable how often, throughout Luther’s writings, the term “comfort” is used. Where is “comfort” needed in the current debates? This will help answer the question of where and to whom the three *solas* are currently speaking.

V. The Role of Comfort: A Pastoral Approach

We are all familiar with the image of Luther’s posting of his 95 Theses on All-Hallows Eve on the church door in Wittenberg, theses which one might say contained the three *solas* in embryonic form. But his act had specific motivations that were less academic than they were both personal and pastoral. He was concerned for the people of his region, concerned as both a Biblical theologian and a pastor for their state of mind and soul.

There are at least two pastoral concerns in the most pressing of the ethical and social issues currently facing our church: our pastoral care for those members who are openly gay and lesbian, and our pastoral care for those members who feel set adrift by a church that is potentially moving in directions they feel uncomfortable with or threatened by. Ironically and disturbingly, the cry of both groups is really the same: “*Is there a place in the church for me?*” If we set aside the political and practical fears that often drive the debate (splitting of congregations, foundering of ecumenical efforts, division and debate, rancour and ill-feeling), we are left with a basic ethical conundrum: there are two competing groups that want the church to include and represent them and to legitimate their status.

An oversimplified but still fundamental difference between these two admittedly ill-defined groups is that one is already “in” and one is “out.” Adding the “out” group to those included in the church would, for some, seem to exclude the “in” group. Thus, the inclusion of one group (gays and lesbians) will, it is feared, bring about the

exodus of significant numbers of the other group (those who identify gays and lesbians as actively and publicly sinful). Do the three *solas* speak to this situation?

Regarding the Biblical portrayal of marriage, I will only note here that I believe scripture portrays it, in general, as the union of one man and one woman in a life-long relationship of mutual support and fidelity. We are all, I hope, also aware of the role of polygamy and other paradigms, including celibacy, in the Bible. Such historical remnants, enshrined in both testaments, remind us that the Biblical paradigm of marriage is not immune to change. For example, while polygamy is not an issue in our church, and very few practise celibacy as a religious choice,²⁵ I think we are all quite aware that we commonly unite divorced couples in marriage despite the strictures on such in the gospels.²⁶

In an article titled “Adiaphora” published in the *Eastern Synod Lutheran*²⁷ I have written that I believe the Bible portrays same-sex intercourse as a sin. This should not be either hidden or denied. At the same time, I believe it is only honest to note how *very* rarely the Bible discusses this in comparison with other actions and attitudes that it identifies as sin which are much more common among the regular and faithful members of our churches.

There is not space here to discuss the distinction between church and state, and how Luther, especially, saw the role of the state as being distinct from that of the church even while God could use government and its laws (including those on marriage) for the security of all people.²⁸ Another important issue for exploration is, I believe, the nature of ecclesiology as seen by the Reformers. Our Lutheran heritage envisages a church that is both larger (the church universal or catholic) and smaller (the local congregation) than was the standard conception in medieval Christianity. It is possible that such a view of congregational life can allow for the church to reflect more closely the particular and local culture of its members with regard to this and other issues.

Finally, my own presuppositions and biases are to view the issue of homosexual unions from a pastoral point of view. In my pastoral work I regularly turn down couples who come to me for marriage, on the grounds that they are not sufficiently associated with the parish and that there are other options open to them. I believe this to be a pastoral approach that focuses on relationship rather than “rightness.”

Were a homosexual couple who were members of my church to come to me asking for me to participate in some kind of ceremony of blessing of their union, I would, as their pastor, feel compelled in the light of grace to respect their request to pray for them and for their love. I am fully aware that the Reformers themselves would likely have seen homosexual couples as aberrations and their unions as repugnant or even scandalous. Yet it is the Reformers' theological insights and not their personal reactions that form the basis of this paper. The three *solas*, I believe, are related to each other in a way in which *sola gratia* is the precondition for *sola fide*; it is also the governing interpretive principle by which to understand *sola scriptura* (Hegedus and Buck 2004). In light of this relationship between the three *solas*, there may be room for us to emphasize God's loving grace, in our pastoral care, in our time and place.

Notes

- ¹ This essay was commissioned by the National Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, in order to help the church assess the question of blessing same-gender unions. It is reprinted here by permission of that church body.
- ² James 2:19.
- ³ William Hordern, *Living By Grace* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press: 1975), p. 109.
- ⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:19.
- ⁵ Theodore G. Tappert, trans. & ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 345.
- ⁶ Mark 1:16-20; Acts 9:3-6.
- ⁷ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, vol. XV, ed. Wilhelm Pauck, *Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), pp. xxxvi-xxxvii.
- ⁸ Romans 5:8.
- ⁹ Tappert, "Large Catechism," p. 432.
- ¹⁰ Romans 6:1.
- ¹¹ Tappert, "The Augsburg Confession," Art. XX, p. 41.

- 12 Hordern, p. 85.
- 13 Craig D. Allert, 2004 "What Are We Trying to Conserve? Evangelicalism and Sola Scriptura," *Evangelical Quarterly* 76:4 (2004): 331.
- 14 Allert: 337.
- 15 Tappert, p. 27.
- 16 Tappert, p. 25; emphasis added.
- 17 David W. Lotz, "*Sola Scriptura*: Luther on Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 35 (1981): 273.
- 18 Lotz: 272.
- 19 Alan Davies, "Tradition and Modernity in Protestant Christianity," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 34:1 (1999): 20.
- 20 Daniel W. Erlander, 1981 *Baptized We Live: Lutheranism As A Way Of Life* (Holden Village, Chelan, Washington, 1981), pp. 16-19.
- 21 Tappert, "Augsburg Confession," Art. VII, p. 32; for the consolation of all Art. XX, pp. 43-44.
- 22 Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 258. Here he is citing Martin Luther's "The Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Church [1538]," in gen. ed. Helmut T. Lehmann, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 34 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), p. 214.
- 23 Davies: 28.
- 24 Tappert, "Large Catechism," p. 433.
- 25 Matthew 19:12; 1 Corinthians 7:7.
- 26 Mark 10:10-12; Matthew 5:31-32.
- 27 *Eastern Synod Lutheran* (the official publication of the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada), Oct/Nov 2004 issue.
- 28 Robert A. Kelly, "Toward a Lutheran Theology of Marriage" (<<http://www.elcic.ca/docs/2005/blessings.html>>).