

“*Sola Ecclesia*: A Sixth Sola?”

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This is the eighteenth of 18 articles in a series entitled “Who Needs the Church?”

We have seen that Jesus sums up His entire ministry, the central aim behind His incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, session, intercession, and return, as building His church (Mt 16:18-20). The church He is building is an institution that has accountability, members, standards of belief and conduct, means of inclusion and exclusion, a method of discipline, and a form of government. It has the power of “binding and loosing” and the “keys of the kingdom” (Mt 16:18-20; Mt 18:18-20). It is His *body* (1 Cor 12:4ff; Rom 12:4, 5) and His *wife-bride* (Eph 5:22ff; Rev 21:9; 19:9; Song of Solomon; Ps 45). It is our mother (Gal 4:26; 1 Pet 2:2). Its members are to love one another and bear each other’s burdens (Jn 13:34, 35; Gal 6:1, 2).

This leads us to a question that we wish to ask. Should there be a sixth “sola”?¹ The five “solas” are universally recognized Reformation mottos that continue to clarify crucial Protestant distinctives today: *sola scriptura* (scripture alone is our final rule of faith and practice); *solo Christo* (Christ’s atonement and mediation provide the sole *ground* of our salvation); *sola fide* (faith alone is the *instrument* by which salvation is received); *sola gratia* (God’s grace is the ultimate *cause* of our salvation); *solī Deo Gloria* (God’s glory is the final *aim* in all His and our endeavors). The proposed sixth *sola* is this: *sola ecclesia*, the church alone, meaning salvation may be found in the church alone.²

No doubt this proposal would, and should raise eyebrows. Roman Catholics used the motto *sola ecclesia* to refer to the church’s final authority to determine orthodox doctrine. The church, it was and is argued, sits over both Holy Writ and the Holy Tradition of which it is the sole caretaker. It alone, through its teaching magisterium, can formulate from these two sources the theology and practice of the faithful. One seeking to understand how the Roman Catholics have come to believe in Mary’s Immaculate Conception, her bodily assumption, or her titles of co-Mediator and co-Redeemer with Christ need look no further.

Nevertheless, this proposal should be considered by Reformed Protestants in the first instance because it provides the context within which the other solas ordinarily are operative. This was especially evident as we looked carefully at “Jesus and the Church.” We are saved by sovereign *grace alone*, yet Christ has given the means *of grace* to the church: the word, sacraments, and prayer. We are saved by *faith alone*, a faith however which doesn’t leave us alone but unites us to Christ *and* to each other, the church being a creature of the word. *Christ alone* is the Savior and Lord of the church, yet He gives to the church the keys that open the doors of His kingdom

¹ We are not the first to ask this question. See John R. Muether, “At Sixth Sola?” in *Modern Reformation*, August 2, 2007; Bruce Atkinson, “The Seven Solas,” in *Virtueonline*, Dec. 31, 2009; Michael J. Glodo, “Sola Ecclesia: The Lost Reformation Doctrine,” *Reformation and Revival*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Fall 2000. The question has also been entertained by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 29, 176, 198, 211.

² By *sola ecclesia* Vanhoozer means “the church alone is the place where Christ rules over his kingdom and gives certain gifts for the building of his living temple” (*Biblical Authority After Babel*, 29).

(Mt 16:18). *Scripture alone* is the final authority for faith and practice, yet Christ appoints officers in the church to exercise His authority, giving them the power of binding and loosing, even of forgiving or retaining sin (Mt 16:18-20; Mt 18:18-20; Jn 20:23). Salvation takes place in and through the ministry of the church alone.

No salvation outside

Once one sees that the ministry of the gospel (as represented by the mottos) is operative primarily in the church, it is easy to see why the Reformers would have endorsed the church father Cyprian's (200-258 A.D.) doctrine that "there is no salvation outside of the church." There is no hesitation in this regard among the Reformers or in the Reformed Church. John R. Muether has collected a number of classic Protestant confessional statements to prove the point.³ Luther, in his Large Catechism, writes, "But outside the Christian church (that is, where the Gospel is not) there is no forgiveness, and hence no holiness.... Therefore they remain in eternal wrath and damnation.... Outside of [the Christian church] no one can come to the Lord Jesus."⁴ Calvin's catechism teaches the same:

Minister: Why do you subjoin the forgiveness of sins to the Church?

Child: Because no one obtains it, unless he has previously been united with the people of God, cultivates this unity with the body of Christ up to the end, and thus testifies that he is a true member of the Church.

Minister: You conclude from this that outside the Church there is no salvation but only damnation and ruin?

Child: Certainly. Those who disrupt from the body of Christ and split its unity into schisms, are quite excluded from the hope of salvation, so long as they remain in dissidence of this kind.⁵

"No one can be saved out of the Church," Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) insists in his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*. Why? "Because outside the church there is no Saviour, and hence no salvation."⁶ Similarly, in the Second Helvetic Confession of 1562 (Swiss Reformed Church), written by Zwingli's successor at Zurich, Henry Bullinger (1504-1575), we read: "we deny that those can live before God who do not stand in fellowship with the true Church of God, but separate themselves from it."⁷ The Belgic Confession of 1561 (Dutch Reformed Church) teaches that the church is "an assembly of those who are saved, and outside of it there is no salvation." Consequently, "no person of whatsoever state or condition he may be,

³ See also Ryan M. McGraw, *The Ark of Safety: Is There Salvation Outside of the Church?* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018).

⁴ See Muether, "Sixth Sola," cf. *Dr. Martin Luther's Larger Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1935), 126.

⁵ Muether, "Sixth Sola," cf. John Calvin, *Selected Works of John Calvin, Vol. 2: Tracts and Letters*, Henry Beveridge and Jules Bonnet (eds.) (1849; Grand Rapids, Baker Book House, 1983), 52.

⁶ Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidleberg Catechism* (1562, 1852; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., n/d), 292.

⁷ *The Book of Confessions* (Atlanta: The Office of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church [USA], 1985), 5.136.

ought to withdraw himself, to live in a separate state from it” (Article 28).⁸ Finally, Presbyterianism’s *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1648) maintains that outside of the visible church “there is no ordinary possibility of salvation” (XXV.2). The various 19th century commentaries on the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (e.g. Shaw, A. A. Hodge) and 20 and 21st century (Williamson, Van Dixhoorn, Fesko) affirm the same. This is the characteristic conviction of post-Reformation Reformed theologians.

Let’s return now to the setting in which we began our discussion of the doctrine of the church. It’s Sunday morning. My wake-up routine has been completed. What am I now to do? Here is our answer. Do what the Scriptures require and what Christians have done for 2000 years. Go to the public assembly, gathered under the discipline of Christ’s appointed officers to be ministered to by the word read, preached, sung, prayed, and displayed in the sacraments. Gather with those who with you compose the body and the bride of Christ in a given location and to whom you are joined by covenant. Fulfill your responsibility to love and care for the brethren. God’s people should consider no other alternative, nor desire any other option.

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⁸ Philip Schaff (ed.), *The Creeds of Christendom*, Volumes I-III (1931; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1985), III:418.