

The
B E A U T Y
of Divine
G R A C E



GABRIEL N.E. FLUHRER

Endorsements

“We never truly move beyond the gospel nor graduate from the school of Christ. Every person, no matter their years in Christ, has but begun to understand the beauty of His person and work. Here is a book that helpfully sets before us the gospel in all its simple yet profound glory. Pastoral in tone, rich in theology, and an engaging read are a few thoughts that came to mind when reading Dr. Fluhrer’s recent book, *The Beauty of Divine Grace*. If you are a student of Christ, reading this book is time well spent.”

—REV. JASON HELOPOULOS

Senior pastor

University Reformed Church, East Lansing, Mich.

“There is a growing interest in the Reformed faith in our times. Thousands of people from different religious backgrounds have come to the Reformed churches everywhere, hungry for the Word of God. We have felt the need for works by Reformed authors that explain simply and clearly what the central points of the Protestant Reformation are and how they differ from what other traditions teach. This work by Dr. Fluhrer perfectly meets this need. It explains in a clear and succinct way what is at the heart of Reformed soteriology summarized in the five *solas*. Every one of them is explained carefully and the most common mistakes about them are cleared. With a pastoral spirit, Dr. Fluhrer draws in every chapter practical implications of each *sola* for daily life. This is a highly relevant book for our times. I hope it will be translated into Portuguese as soon as possible.”

—DR. AUGUSTUS NICODEMUS LOPES

Vice president of the General Assembly

of the Presbyterian Church of Brazil

Assistant pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Recife, Brazil

The Beauty of Divine Grace

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GABRIEL N.E. FLUHRER



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The Beauty of Divine Grace

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To Bob and Priss Jones, Tom and Tami Wall,
and Robbie and Pam Cole,
and the congregation of Trinity Presbyterian Church,
Travelers Rest, S.C.

Who first taught me to love the doctrines of grace
by precept and example,
with profound gratitude.

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Foreword

Derek W.H. Thomas

The formal and formulaic taxonomy of the five *solas* of the Reformation is a recent phenomenon (mid-twentieth century), but the existence of the *solas* in some form or another is apparent as far back as the early church fathers. Spelled out, they insist on five specific truths:

1. The final authority in all matters of faith and practice lies in what Scripture *alone* (*sola Scriptura*) teaches, apart from any pronouncements of creeds, councils, or the pope (speaking *ex cathedra*).
2. Salvation is by grace *alone* (*sola gratia*), apart from any consideration of human effort (works), achievement, or cooperation on our part.
3. Further, salvation is by grace *alone* through the instrumentality of faith *alone* (*sola fide*), faith understood as a noncontributory means, and itself a gift of God.
4. Salvation is in Christ *alone* (*solus Christus*); He alone provides the necessary substitutionary obedience to the law and its penalty that divine justice requires without

any additional merit from us, the medieval sacramental treadmill, deceased saints, or the mediation of Mary.

5. And by way of a general but equally important truth, all the praise for our salvation is ascribed to the glory of God *alone* (*soli Deo gloria*).

In the thinking of the early Reformers of the sixteenth century, these five restrictive statements were set firmly at odds with medieval Roman Catholicism. Subsequent generations took them up with equal force in the seventeenth century to address the errors of Arminianism. Free will, for example, was viewed as the same generic error as good works or sacramental compliance in Roman Catholicism. If salvation is dependent on our “decision,” freely made without the giving of a God-enabled ability (through regeneration and the renewal of the will from its inherent bondage to sin), then faith is a “work” that we contribute, and salvation cannot therefore be by faith *alone* or by grace *alone*. Nor, in the last analysis, can it be to the glory of God *alone*. The five *solas* thus took on a greater importance in the defense of the groundwork of Reformed and biblical theology.

Set ablaze in the Reformation and post-Reformation era, these truths have deep historical roots. Take “grace alone” (*sola gratia*), for example. This truth is highlighted in the fifth century in the remarkable conversion of Augustine, recounted in his *Confessions*. It drew the ire of Pelagius, which occasioned Augustine’s *Anti-Pelagian Writings*. *Sola gratia* surfaced again in the experience of Martin Luther as he wrestled with the crippling theology of the medieval church. Justification, he came to understand, must be by grace alone, through faith alone, and as he so painfully confirmed, faith must be given sovereignly by God, for he had tried and failed to accomplish it himself.

FOREWORD

These five truths are especially relevant in our Western culture where the prevailing religion has been identified as *moral therapeutic deism*. This phrase aptly describes folk who believe that our greatest need is to be happy, live decent enough lives, and rest in the idea that everyone is going to “heaven.” For this religion, a sovereign God is not needed. If he exists, he is absent from the day-to-day concerns of human existence. Furthermore, belief, for example, in an inerrant, authoritative Bible has continued to wane, even in the most conservative seminaries. Worship is frequently offered in churches with hardly a reference to Scripture. What our morally and spiritually declining culture needs is a reminder of the source of religious authority (*Scripture alone*) and the source and guarantee of salvation itself—a sovereign, divine, and monergistic intervention in the life of a sinner. Justification—being in a right standing with God—is by *grace alone* through *faith alone* in *Jesus Christ alone*. Our justification, whereby Christ’s righteousness is imputed (reckoned, not infused) to our account and our demerit is imputed to Christ’s account, does not rest on any contribution of our own. Without such justification there is no possibility of eternal salvation. This understanding of justification alone secures the idea that all the glory of our salvation is God’s. All of it! This is biblical Christianity, and the sooner the modern church gets back to proclaiming it loud and clear the better.

Dr. Fluhrer’s expansions and elaborations on these five truths provide you with a sure and careful guide. They will lead you to a greater understanding of salvation and of God. I know this man, and I would trust him with my life. I am delighted to call him a friend. He has the measure of both the truths he expounds and the pastoral and theological concerns you may have. He is resolute in defense of the truth while at the same time winsome in its application. *The Beauty*

THE BEAUTY OF DIVINE GRACE

of Divine Grace will perhaps challenge you here and there, perhaps even confound you, but in the end it will bless you. Truth, said the Apostle Paul, leads to godliness (Titus 1:1), and it is my prayer that as you read this book, you will be driven to the truth of the Scriptures and will behold the majesty of God shining in the face of Jesus Christ. And, by turns, you will mirror the beauty of our Savior, Jesus Christ, in yourself. Yes, this little book is capable, by the blessing of the Holy Spirit, of doing that.

Now, enough from me. Turn the page and start reading.

Preface

Does this sound familiar? “By the last weeks of August, people were dying in Philadelphia at a rate of more than twenty a day. . . . The federal government and most businesses shut down. . . . To avoid contamination people stopped shaking hands and walked in the middle of the streets.”¹ Describing the atmosphere of the United States, one of the country’s leading generals wrote to the vice president: “Patriotism is ridiculed. Integrity and ability are of little consequence.”² You might guess that these quotes were taken directly from the headlines of 2020. They were not. The first quotation described American life during an outbreak of yellow fever in 1793, and the second had been penned by General James Warren to Vice President John Adams four years earlier.

We often think that we are living in “unprecedented times” (to use what now is a nauseatingly familiar slogan) of social and political change. But history tells us a different story. Precedent after precedent in the past refutes the unprecedented of the present.

Knowing history gives us perspective on our current situation. Nowhere is this principle more applicable than in the study of theology. For every supposedly “new discovery” in the theological realm, there are a dozen errors of the past to underwrite it.

But most people today—and sadly, a large number of professing Christians—simply do not know, or care to know, theology.³ Many

factors have contributed to this alarming trend. Chief among them is the rise of scientism, which is the view that the hard sciences alone provide us with truth and that theology is a subjective experience rather than an objective body of truth. In the Middle Ages, theology was known as the queen of the sciences. Today, most people view it as little more than a beggarly peasant in the courts of knowledge.

To recast a familiar phrase, spiritual life abhors a vacuum. So everything from Eastern mystical practices to downright pagan rituals have rushed to fill the theological vacuum of “Christian” America. Christians should be concerned by the decline of interest in sound theology, but they should not lose hope.

Return to the Reformation

Given that past is often prologue (as Shakespeare said), we should not be surprised that we find ourselves in much the same predicament as Martin Luther at the dawn of the Protestant Reformation. Centuries of ignorance darkened what little gospel proclamation remained in Europe and around the world. As Luther and the other Reformers attacked the religious darkness with the light of God’s truth, the glorious gospel of grace began to shine. Our present cultural moment calls for the same kind of *reclamation* by *reformation* that the early Protestants spearheaded.

Central to the recovery of the gospel in the Reformation were what came to be known as the five *solas*. Scholars debate when the five *solas* were categorized as such, but all of them are articulated at some point in the writings of the Reformers. Regardless of when they were formalized (we can leave that debate to church historians—it does not matter for our purposes here), the *solas* have long served as a summary of the major distinctives of evangelical Protestantism.

Sola is the Latin word for “alone.” Because Latin was the language of scholarship at that time, the truths of the Reformation were crystallized in these five phrases as a convenient summary of the biblical gospel: *sola Scriptura* (Scripture alone), *sola gratia* (grace alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), and *solī Deo gloria* (to the glory of God alone). Or stated differently, the gospel is revealed in Scripture alone, accomplished by God’s grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone to the glory of God alone. Ultimately, any and every spiritual, theological, and philosophical error that we will ever encounter is a result of denying one or all of the *solas*.

Therefore, we ignore these foundational biblical truths to our peril. Despite this urgency, many Christians are unfamiliar with the five *solas*. But a little understanding goes a long way when it comes to such basic realities. If we can grasp how these five biblical teachings offer us a different worldview—a different life!—then we will be well on our way to being part of a new, desperately needed reformation.

Two Themes, One Goal

Before we launch into our study, we need to identify two themes that will surface again and again in this book. The first theme is the difference that one word makes. The second, following from the first, is that the gospel summarized in the five *solas* differs from every other worldview and religion. Each of these deserves a brief explanation.

Words matter. Look no further than what Proverbs teaches: “The tongue of the wise commends knowledge, but the mouths of fools pour out folly” (15:2). “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits” (18:21). In the New Testament, the Apostle James gives us a summary statement on the power of our words:

Look at the ships also: though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. (James 3:4–10)

James was simply following the teaching of his half brother, Jesus. Our Lord put great emphasis on the importance of words: “I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36–37). Our words matter more than we think they do.

When it comes to what we believe about salvation, one word means the difference between eternal life and eternal death. It is the word *alone*. The medieval Roman Catholic Church, out of which the Reformers emerged, cheerfully affirmed that Scripture reveals that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ to God’s glory. Do you see what’s missing? One simple word.

Rome understood how the word *alone* changed everything about its understanding of Christianity. Once this word was added

by the Reformers, persecution began (and continued long after the death of the first Reformers). People were martyred for believing the five *solas*. These brave men and women gave their lives for one word.

Although our earthly lives may not be at stake, our eternal destiny is. If we miss this one word, we miss the gospel. Therefore, *sola* and the destiny of our souls are inseparably linked.

The second theme is that the gospel summarized by the five *solas* differs categorically from every other religion or worldview. We will return to this observation time and again in this book. It comes back to one word.

To give just a few examples, liberal Christianity gestures at the authority of Scripture but scoffs at Scripture *alone* as our only standard. Various forms of Eastern spirituality pay homage to Christ, but they would never say that Christ *alone* is the way to be saved. There is no concept of grace *alone* as our only hope of salvation in Islam. The list goes on.

Why should we point out tirelessly how the biblical gospel stands in contrast to everything else? First and foremost, because God commands us to proclaim His uniqueness. But also because people are weary from life. We are burdened, exhausted, and frayed. We are looking for anything to give us just a shred of relief. So we catch a glimmer of hope when someone hands us a book promising us the way to true spiritual enlightenment. Or we feel a bit more optimistic when a local guru promises that he or she is a sure guide to wholeness.

But the result is always the same. We end up right where we started. Self-help books fail us. The excitement of a new spiritual journey fades as we continue down its path. Another guru comes along to replace the outmoded promises of the ones who have come before. Then the cycle starts all over again.

We can find rest from this dreary spiritual treadmill in only one place: Jesus Himself, as He is offered in the gospel. And only the gospel captured by the five *solas* presents Him as He is. Not a watered-down Jesus, who is impotent and ineffective. Not a harsh Jesus, who saddles us with one more thing to do. Not a demanding Jesus, whose stern gaze saps whatever strength we have left.

No, the five *solas* offer us the biblical Jesus. The One who was unswervingly committed to the inerrancy and final authority of the Scriptures (John 10:35). The One who taught us that grace alone (Matt. 20:1–16), through faith alone (John 5:24), is the way of salvation. The One who glorified God alone through every minute of His life (John 17:4) because He knows that we cannot.

This is the Jesus that we need. This is the Jesus that the world needs. We will meet Him only if we embrace the five *solas*. Because every other world religion and worldview rejects them, the importance of these five truths cannot be overstated.

Conclusion

The substance of this book first appeared in a sermon series I did on the five *solas* on two separate occasions. The first time I preached through them was at the First Presbyterian Church of Columbia, S.C. The second time was in the church I currently have the privilege of serving, First Presbyterian Church of Chattanooga, Tenn. I am indebted beyond words to these two congregations for their patience and encouragement!

I am also grateful to Ligonier Ministries for publishing this work. It is an honor to work with people such as Thomas Brewer, Kevin D. Gardner, and their team, who did a yeoman's job of editing, cleaning up, and presenting this book. Moreover, W. Grayson

PREFACE

Lambert once again lent his considerable editorial proficiency to the first draft. More than being a skillful editor, he is a dear friend, whose suggestions, comments, and revisions made this work immeasurably better. Any remaining faults in what you read belong to me alone.

I would also like to thank my dear friend and pastor Dr. Derek Thomas for writing the foreword. His care of me and my family when we were in Columbia puts me in his debt for the rest of my life. Also, thanks to George and Cathy May, Lee and Lisa Paris, J.R. and Aimee Murphy, Jimmy and Betsy Easterby, Robert and Susan Mims, Jerry and Kittie Stauffer, Bill Moore and his family, Ransey and Mary Wells Bowers, Claude and Julia Bowers, Brian Habig, Ed Norton, Richard Phillips, Charles McGowan, and Jane Brown for their friendship, love, and encouragement while I was working on this book. I would be remiss if I did not also thank the faculty and administration of Reformed Theological Seminary, with whom I have the pleasure of working regularly. I am deeply grateful to all these brothers and sisters.

Finally, to my dear wife and children, none of this would be possible without you. The happiest time of my day is when I see all of you. You are the greatest earthly blessing that God has given me.

Soli Deo Gloria!

One Standard: Scripture Alone

*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching,
for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,
that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

2 TIM. 3:16–17

As you might have guessed from the introduction, I am fascinated by the history of Colonial America, particularly with the events that led up to and followed the Declaration of Independence. John Adams commissioned two hundred official copies of the declaration, which were completed around 1823 and then distributed. He and his fellow signers knew that they were making history, and they wanted to preserve the moment.

Maybe you've seen the original declaration in Washington, D.C., and witnessed firsthand the high level of security that protects this priceless founding document. The copies commissioned by Adams are almost as valuable. We know where most of them are located, so the story of Michael Sparks is all the more astonishing.

In 2007, Sparks, a Nashville music equipment technician, stumbled across an incalculable treasure in a most unlikely place. He was browsing through a local thrift store and saw what he took to be a souvenir copy of the declaration, which looked older than but very similar to countless others sold around the world. He was in for a surprise.

When Sparks got home, he realized that there was something unique about the old parchment he had found. “This one was so beautiful I thought it was an engraving. I look for things that have quality to them.”¹ Today, the copy Sparks bought at Music City Thrift Store is considered to be the most well preserved of the two hundred copies from 1823. He purchased it for \$2.48 and sold it to an auction house for around \$477,000.

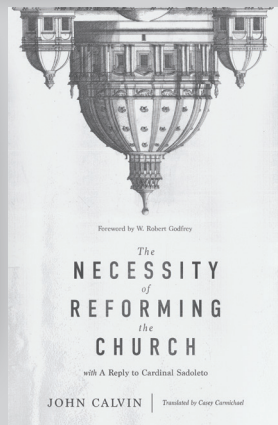
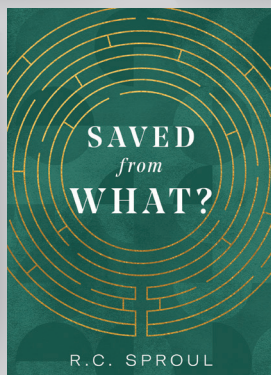
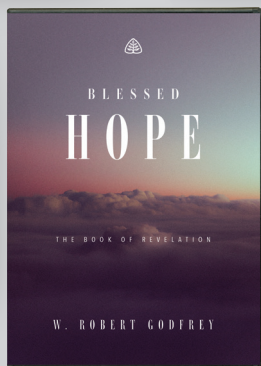
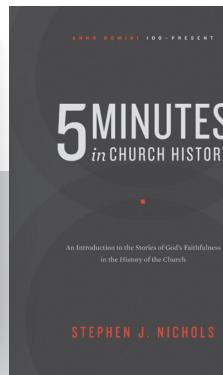
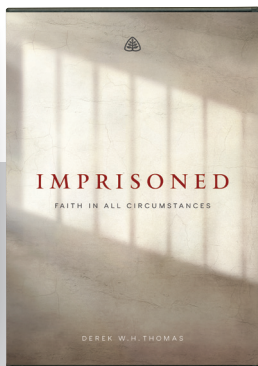
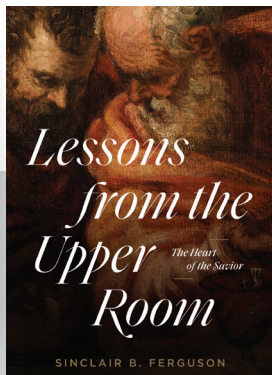
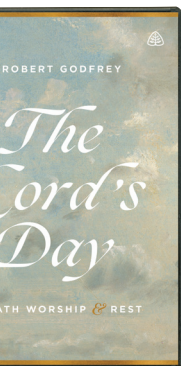
The point is, we can miss the value of something if we don’t know what it is. Imagine how many shoppers had casually walked by the copy of the declaration, day after day. Think of how the shop owners felt when they realized what a treasure had been in their possession all along! What would you do if you found out that you had a nearly half-million-dollar prize sitting around the house?

In reality, we have something better than what Sparks found. We have God’s Word, safeguarded through millennia, at our fingertips. But we can miss it if we don’t know what it is. God wants to help us avoid such tragedy, so He tells us, over and over, what His Word is. In what follows, we’ll examine a central biblical text about the nature and function of God’s Word.

Paul’s Last Words

Second Timothy is one of the last letters Paul wrote. It is one of three books of the New Testament known as the Pastoral Epistles

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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