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R. C. SPROUL

Was the Reformation Necessary?

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Chapter One

Faith Alone: Part 1

What was the matter with the Protestant Reformation? It might seem like a strange question. Some might say that there was nothing the matter with the Reformation, that it was the acme of spiritual recovery of biblical Christianity in church history and therefore was a sort of golden age of biblical faith. Others might say that the matter with the Reformation was that there was one at all, since it produced the largest schism in church history.

That's not what I mean, however, when I ask about what

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was the matter with the Protestant Reformation. I'm not using the word *matter* in the normal way, which typically indicates that something is wrong. When we ask, "What's the matter with you?" we are assuming that something is wrong or that we're looking for fault. What I mean, by contrast, is this: What was the essence, the substance, or what is called in philosophy the *material cause* of the Protestant Reformation? Another way to ask it would be this: What was the chief issue that provoked such massive consequences as this split that occurred in the sixteenth century?

When historians consider the causes of the Protestant Reformation, they often use distinctions originally set forth by the philosopher Aristotle, and they distinguish between the *formal cause* and the *material cause*. The formal cause, the intellectual background to the issue, was a dispute over the seat of final authority that binds the Christian conscience. We'll look at that under the heading of *sola Scriptura*. The *material cause*, however, the substantive issue that was the core point of dispute, was the doctrine of justification. The Protestant view of this matter is expressed in the shorthand of the Latin phrase *sola fide*.

This is the first of the Latin slogans of the Reformation known as the five *solas*. They are *sola fide*, justification is

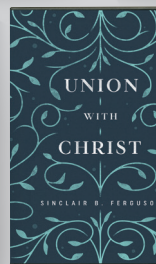
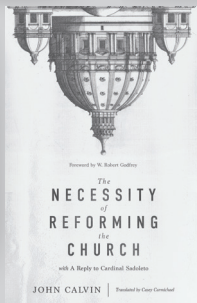
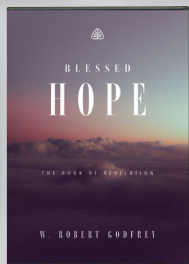
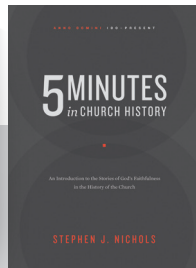
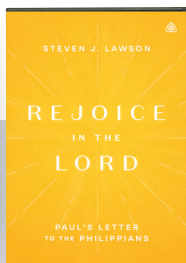
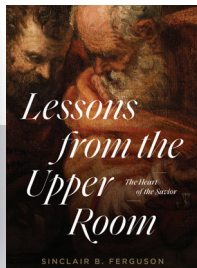
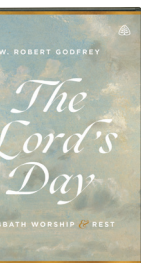
by faith alone; *sola gratia*, salvation is by grace alone; *solus Christus*, salvation is through Christ alone; *sola Scriptura*, the sole authority that binds the conscience of the Christian is the Bible alone; and then, finally, *solī Deo gloria*, to God alone belongs the glory.

Sola fide is shorthand for the central issue of the Reformation, the material cause, which was the question of justification. The Protestant Reformers set forth a doctrine that our justification is by faith and by faith alone without any mixture of good works or merit on our part.

To understand *sola fide* in its historical context, we have to understand something about the theological dispute based on the Roman Catholic understanding of justification. At the heart of this dispute was not a tangential debate over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin or a needless controversy over pedantic points of theology that only academics care about. Rather, this issue touched the very heart of the Christian faith because the question of justification is designed to answer this deeper question: How can an unjust person possibly survive the judgment of a just and holy God?

In our day, the doctrine of justification has been degraded in terms of its perceived importance. Historically,

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