

# FOUR GOSPEL SLOGANS

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Four hundred years ago God used some humble men to point to his grace in Jesus Christ, and medieval "Christianity" was shaken to its roots. Those reformers summed up their gospel message with four Latin slogans. A sinner's justification before God, they said, is solely by grace (*sola gratia*), solely by Christ (*solo Christo*), solely by faith (*sola fide*) -- and these truths rest solely on the authority of Scripture (*sola Scriptura*).

All these mottoes actually said the same thing in different ways: Salvation is "of the Lord." God, not man, is wholly responsible -- and he is therefore due all the glory. This flew directly in the face of the established religion of the day, which gradually had become man-powered, man-pleasing and man-praising. Today, both Catholicism and Protestantism have changed in many ways. Some Catholics understand these gospel principles better than some Protestants. This is not a partisan subject. These principles can help us all put the spotlight back on God where it belongs. And they can help us all get a better grasp on biblical teaching.

## A SINGLE STRING OF GOSPEL PEARLS

Justification, the reformers insisted, is by grace alone, through the work of Christ alone. It is received on the principle of faith alone. And all this is established by Scripture alone. By this they took a firm stand in terms of choices. If we envision a ballot with two columns, one side honoring God and the other side honoring human beings, they were marking the God-honoring side of the ballot in clear repudiation of the human-honoring side. Each motto sounded a challenge to the humanistic system of medieval Catholicism. The truth is that they still challenge all humanistic religion today -- whether found in Catholicism, Protestantism, or in other Christian groups or movements that see themselves as somehow distinct from both of those categories.

### Solely Grace

Justification is by grace alone (*sola gratia*), the reformers said, and by that they checked the ballot under *gift*, not *merit*. It is by *grace*, not of *debt*. It is *given*, not *earned*. Paul explicitly affirms this truth at least two times. In Romans 4:4 he says, "Now to the one who works, wages are not considered to be a gift but what is owed." And in Romans 1 1:6 he repeats, "And if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works. If it were, grace would no longer be grace."

At this point we have but two choices. Either God saves us because we *deserve* it (debt), or he saves us although we do *not* deserve it (grace). There is no middle ground. It is *altogether* deserved, or else it is *altogether* undeserved. It is finally a matter of grace or merit. There can be no compromise. The reformers therefore insisted on *sola gratia* -- solely by grace -- and, saying that, they took their stand with Paul.

### Solely Christ

God created human beings to enjoy sweet fellowship with himself. But instead of obeying God, we have broken his laws, ignored his wishes, displeased him and sinned. We are part of a sinful race (Rom. 5:19), "by nature" subject to divine wrath (Eph. 2:3). We also are sinners personally (Rom. 3:23). As surely as human life is God's gift, just that surely the consequence of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). How can a just and merciful God pronounce sinners "not guilty" and treat them as if they have done exactly what he desired? If he shows mercy, he will not be just. If he does justice, he will not show mercy. Humanly speaking, grace seems an impossible dream.

God resolved this dilemma in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God himself took on human nature and became a baby boy in the womb of the Virgin Mary. In Jesus, the offended came to the offenders. In a human body, created for that purpose, Jesus gave God the perfect human obedience he had always wanted but had never before received (Heb. 10:5-10). By doing that, Jesus showed God's law to be both great and glorious (Isaiah 42:21). In one of his last prayers, Jesus could say, "I have finished the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:4).

Jesus then offered that faithful life "for sin," in his body on the cross, fulfilling the Isaiah prophecy of one who would "make his life an offering for sin" (53:10). On the cross, Jesus both received and gave. Like a great lightning rod suspended between heaven and earth, Jesus *received* and absorbed into his own body and soul all the consequences of human sin -- consequences culminating in his death. At the same time, Jesus *gave* God the Father the only life ever lived in perfect loving obedience to him. Jesus could therefore shout from the cross, "it is finished!" and with the satisfaction of an accomplished work, die satisfied (John 19:30; Isa. 53:11). God's grace did not come *cheap*, although for its recipients it is absolutely *free*.

In the work that *accomplished* salvation, there is no such thing as "God's part" and "our part." For it was wholly God's work to reconcile, justify and redeem, and he did that in Jesus, once for all. Our work comes *after* God has finished his work, and it is totally a *response to* God's work -- of grateful obedience and praise. Not until we have accepted the "it is finished!" concerning Jesus' work are we ready to hear "It is beginning" concerning his own work. And God's saving work is what he did in Jesus, not something he does in us. It was *outside* of us, *for* us.

### **Solely Faith**

Because the work that accomplished salvation and reconciled us to God was done solely in the representative life and death of Jesus, it is a *finished* work. Since it was done completely in Jesus Christ, outside of us and before we were even born, we cannot contribute anything to it. We can do nothing to make it more acceptable than it has already been declared to be by Christ's resurrection (Rom. 4:25). We can do nothing to make it more certain than it already is seen to be in Christ at God's right hand (Eph. 2:6). Because it is *done*, we cannot do it, whether by climbing as high as heaven or stooping as low as hell (Rom. 10:6-8). We can only confess that Jesus is Lord, and believe that God has raised him from the dead -- and God pronounces us "not guilty" and we are rescued from our guilty condition (Rom. 10:9, 10). Or we can refuse to believe and continue under judgment. We cannot *achieve* salvation. We can only *receive* it. It is not ours by *trying* but by *trusting*. That is what the slogan "solely faith" actually means.

## Solely Scripture

All this we learn in Scripture alone, and the authority of Scripture is sufficient to teach us the gospel regardless of what any man or group of men may say. Justification is therefore *sola scriptura*, the reformers said, completing the string of gospel pearls. What they said was not original. It was but a well-phrased summary of a single text in Romans 3:21, 22. For there Paul makes these same four points about our justification or acquittal before God. It is a righteousness, he says, which is (1) "of God" (*sola gratia*); (2) "by faith of Jesus Christ" (*solo Christo*); (3) "unto all and upon all them that believe" (*sola fide*), (4) "witnessed to by the law and the prophets" (*sola scriptura*).

## THE RESPONSE OF NEW LIFE

The gospel is the good news that in the representative person of Jesus Christ, God has reconciled us to himself. It is the good news of our salvation (Eph. 1:13). When the gospel is not resisted by unbelief, the Holy Spirit gives those who receive it new life from above (John 3:3ff). And that new life strains to express itself to the world -- just as a flower bursts from the ground in Spring following a long, cold winter. Gospel baptism is a tangible expression of this new life. It is our formal appeal for a good conscience (subjectively, *inside* ourselves) on the grounds of what our faith perceives (objectively, *outside* ourselves) in Christ's resurrection (I Pet. 3:21).

## Old Testament Analogies

Baptism is like the flood-water which *saved* Noah from his sin-filled *generation* (I Pet. 3:19-21). It is like the waters of the Red Sea (I Cor. 10: 1, 2) through which God *saved* Israel from *Pharoah's army* (Ex. 14:13, 30). Through his faith, Noah was righteous, perfect in his generation and was walking with God before the Flood ever came (Gen. 6:9; 7:1), but God's purpose called for Noah also to be saved from the old world by water. Israel had passed from death to life by faith through the blood of the lamb, when God's judgment came on Egypt (Ex. 12), but God's purpose also called for Israel to be saved from Pharoah's army by water (Ex. 14). And God's purpose today is that one who believes and receives Christ (John 1:1 2) and lives (John 3:15,16; 5:24) should not hesitate for a moment to be *saved* by water from his own *crooked generation* (Acts 2:40).

## A New Testament Illustration

We see this illustrated in the case of a certain jailor whose world was changed after an earthquake cracked open his jail and let all the prisoners escape. First he cried out in despair, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30.) The apostle Paul, who had been one of his prisoners, answered: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). Paul then explained who Jesus was and what he had done for sinners (Acts 16:32) and the jailor was promptly baptized with his whole household (Acts 16:33).

Go preach the gospel, Jesus commanded. Tell the good news of a finished salvation! Baptize

those who believe. Then teach them all things. This is the divine order (Matt. 28:18-20). Some have preached the gospel, but have been negligent about baptizing believers. Others have expended every energy to baptize people, but sometimes without ever truly having preached the gospel. And many have baptized believers, then neglected to nurture them afterward in the apostolic teaching. Let us pray God to grant us grace to believe all that he has promised, to obey all that he has commanded, and to rejoice in the salvation that he alone has accomplished through Christ alone, to be received by faith alone, as testified in Scripture alone.

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