



The Doctrines of Grace

Pillars of the
Reformed Faith



John A. Bouwers
and Ronald L. Scheuers



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Reformed Faith

Rev. John A. Bouwers
and Rev. Ronald L. Scheuers

The Doctrines of Grace: Pillars of The Reformed Faith

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I am grateful to each of the authors for diligently preparing these lessons written out of their experiences as pastors, teachers, and parents who show their deep love for the Word of God, our confessions, and young people and others who will benefit from their insights. I deeply appreciate the careful attention to details demonstrated by our editors, including Rev. Doug and Grace Barnes, Laura Darnell, Annette Gysen, Glenda Mathes, Dr. Scott Swanson, and Marcia Vander Pol who each had a part in editing various aspects of the curriculum. The input and leadership of the members of the Committee of Oversight have been very valuable. Members have included Dan Dundon, Mike Meeks, John Rietkerk, Stacy Soerens, Geoff Vanden Heuvel, Larry Vanden Berge, and Wilma Van Dyk. Joan Dundon, our church secretary, has graciously contributed in far too many ways to list. Special thanks goes to Jeff Steenholdt and his staff, as well as Henry Gysen, for the wise counsel they have offered and the professional work they have accorded this project.

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Rev. Ronald Scheuers
January 2011

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The Publications Committee of the Reformed Church in the United States graciously allowed us to use their introduction to the Canons of Dort. We thank them for this opening page of the Canons which appears in the back of this volume for easy reference.

I am grateful to my wife, Faye, for her diligence in editing this volume, her attention to details, and her encouragement to finish this book. She loves the Word of God, and shares it openly with her friends and with a class where a number of community women attend. She and I both stand in awe of God's sovereign grace to us, and delight in the glorious truth that our salvation is all of Him from beginning to end. We thank Him for His surpassing love and great mercy to us.

Rev. Ronald Scheuers
January 2011

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LESSON 1

The Sovereign Love of God

PILLARS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

When we publicly profess our faith, we are asked, “Do you heartily believe the doctrine contained in the Old and the New Testament, and in the articles of the Christian faith, and taught in this Christian church, to be the true and complete doctrine of salvation, and do you promise by the grace of God steadfastly to continue in this profession?” To honestly answer “Yes” to this question, we must have a good grasp of the doctrines or teachings of the Scriptures. What are those basic teachings of our faith? In this volume, we want to explore some of the key doctrines of the Bible so that we will come to appreciate more fully God’s work for us as believers.

Let’s compare the Christian faith to a building that is held up by a number of pillars. If you take a trip to the ocean, perhaps you will see a pier, a restaurant, or even a home that is near or on the water and is supported by pillars. The pillars are sunk down deep into the soil, and therefore they stand firmly. The waves would destroy that building if it were not supported by the pillars. What would happen if you took away any of the pillars? Obviously, the building would be seriously weakened and soon would crumble into ruin. The pillars of the Christian faith are biblical truths securely holding up the entire “building” of our faith. If we take away any of the pillars, the entire building is weakened and begins to crumble. In these lessons, we want to discover some of the main pillars of the Christian faith.

All the pillars of the Christian faith stand on the *sovereignty of God*. It is easy to remember the meaning of the word “sovereign” by looking at its parts. It means that God *reigns over* all things. Our God especially demonstrated His sovereignty when He saved us from His wrath against our sins. He saved us completely, from beginning to end, showing us the greatness of His sovereign love. We shall see that all of the pillars of our faith point to and stand on the sovereign love of God for us.

In the first part of our study, we will consider five great pillars that were rediscovered at the time of the Protestant Reformation. They are called the *solas* of the Reformation because they emphasize the word *alone*—*sola* in Latin. These five pillars of our faith are Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone, Christ Alone, and the Glory of God Alone. In the second and major part of our study, we will consider the so-called *Five Points of Calvinism* clarified for the church by the Synod of Dort. These five points are: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. In the final section we will study God’s covenant, how we are to engage our world, witness to others, and live out our faith in Christ’s church. Each of these is an important pillar of the biblical faith.



KEYS TO BETTER UNDERSTANDING

1. What do we mean when we say God is sovereign? _____



FOR MEMORY

2 Timothy 1:8–9

So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.

Heidelberg Catechism

1Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own,

but belong—

body and soul,

in life and in death—

to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,

and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.

He also watches over me in such a way

that not a hair can fall from my head

without the will of my Father in heaven:

in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him,

Christ, by his Holy Spirit,

assures me of eternal life

and makes me whole-heartedly willing and ready

from now on to live for him.

Westminster Larger Catechism

1Q. What is the chief and highest end of man?

A. Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him for ever.

Westminster Shorter Catechism

36Q. What are the benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification?

A. The benefits which in this life do accompany or flow from justification, adoption, and sanctification, are, assurance of God's love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, increase of grace, and perseverance therein to the end.

THE CONFESSIONS SUMMARIZE THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

As you may know, the *Belgic Confession* (1561), the *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), and the *Canons of Dort* (1618–19) make up what we call the *Three Forms of Unity*. These are three documents that we, as Reformed Christians, believe and hold as our confessions. Other Reformed Christians believe and hold to other Reformed confessions, such as the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms*.

Together we say that this is what we believe. *Together* we are convinced and agreed that this is what the Word of God, the Bible, teaches. When a church believes and holds to its confessions, it is a *confessional church*. We don't hold to these teachings alongside of the Bible, over against the Bible, or instead of the Bible. We believe these confessions because they teach what the Scripture teaches. Even the confessions themselves tell us that it is to the Bible, and to it alone, that we must go to find the truth. Article 7 of the *Belgic Confession* reminds us, "We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein." To be a confessional church, then, means that together we will stand for, fight for, live out of, and love these confessional truths because they are plainly and clearly derived from the Bible alone.

We can see that the church takes this commitment to the confessions seriously. The office bearers (elders, deacons, and ministers) are required to take an oath by signing what we call the Form of Subscription. This oath is a promise ". . . diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine. . . ." In that oath the *Canons of Dort* receive special mention when our office bearers are called to promise ". . . not only [to] reject all errors that militate against this doctrine. . ." but also ". . . to refute and contradict these and to exert ourselves in keeping the church free from such errors."

Besides office bearers, *all of us* are called to love these truths. When we profess our faith we declare that we "heartily believe" these doctrines taught in our church. As we study the doctrines of grace from the pages of Scripture, may these teachings become wonderful to us. By His grace, may we become more and more impressed with the greatness of our sovereign God and the depth of His love. How great is the love of our sovereign God toward His people!



KEYS TO BETTER UNDERSTANDING

2. List some of the benefits of having confessions for our church.

3. Which members of the church are to love the biblical truths of the confessions?

Where is that stated? _____

4. Why is it important for you to have a good understanding of the confessions?

THE BACKGROUND OF THE PILLARS

All of the Protestant reformers stood together against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church by affirming that our standard for faith and life is the Scripture *alone*, and not the Bible plus the traditions of the church. They all agreed that we are saved by grace *alone*, by Christ *alone*, and through faith *alone*. Similarly they stressed that in our salvation and life, God *alone* is to receive all the glory. These five solas were among the pillars of the Reformation and were taught throughout Europe. As a result, the Reformation spread rapidly and became deeply rooted in a number of countries.

One of the main leaders of the Protestant Reformation was John Calvin. He is most widely recognized as the reformer who, by God’s grace, recovered the Bible’s truths that we are totally depraved, saved by God’s unconditional election, through Christ’s limited atonement, by the Spirit’s irresistible grace, and preserved forever as His saints. These truths were eventually called the *Five Points of Calvinism*. Reformed churches hold to these biblical truths taught by John Calvin.

Calvin did not invent these five truths. He simply reclaimed them from the Scriptures just as Augustine had done more than 1000 years before. These teachings are the same as those of the apostle Paul, who wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They are biblical. That is what we hope to understand and appreciate through this study.

After the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Reformed believers in Holland suffered intense persecution by the Roman Catholic Church under the Spanish rulers Charles V and Philip II. Under the leadership of Holland’s Prince William of Orange, the Dutch fought hard against their oppressors and won independence. As a result, Calvinism became the official religion of the land. Soon it seemed everyone wanted to be a part of the Reformed churches. People began joining the church for social and political reasons, seriously weakening it from within.

Satan was attacking the churches as error crept into their teaching. The gospel was distorted as God’s sovereignty was denied and man was given too much credit for his own salvation. Some in the church who were doctrinally weak rejected the teaching of *Heidelberg Catechism* A. 8, that “. . . we are totally unable to do any good and are inclined toward all evil.” They also said that the *Catechism’s* teaching that we are justified by faith alone was too extreme. They showed sinful pride which refuses to admit the seriousness of sin. And they considered themselves capable of making their own choice to believe.

When Jacob Arminius, a prominent minister of the Reformed Church in Amsterdam, was asked to defend the *Catechism’s* explanation of biblical truth by writing against these new errors, he realized he did not agree with the *Catechism*. Instead, he became a leader of those who opposed our confessions. Those who opposed the Reformed faith would come to be called the Remonstrants. Though Arminius himself died in 1609—before these issues were fully resolved—today we use the term “Arminianism” to describe this error.

Finally, a synod was held in the city of Dordrecht in the Netherlands from the fall of 1618 until May of 1619. Delegates of the Reformed churches were sent from all over the Netherlands, as well as from the Palatinate (a part of Germany), Switzerland, England, and Scotland. Except for the Reformed Church of France (the Huguenots), which was prevented by persecution from coming, most of the Reformed churches of Europe were represented. At this synod meeting, the Remonstrants presented their opposition to the *Heidelberg Catechism* with five main points. Their five erroneous points were rejected by the Synod. These will be discussed in later chapters. The Synod’s decisions promoted the true understanding of the sovereign love of God. As a result, today we have in our hands the *Canons of Dort*, which we will study together in the middle section of this volume.



KEYS TO BETTER UNDERSTANDING

5. On which five basic truths did all of the reformers agree?

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____
- e. _____

6. Why are the five *solas* so important? _____

7. Give a brief summary of the background of the *Canons of Dort*.

8. How would you summarize the teachings of the *Canons of Dort*?

9. Circle the letter before the one true statement below.

- a. Calvinism is only a man-made teaching.
- b. The *Heidelberg Catechism* teaches that we are partially depraved.
- c. The five *solas* are biblical truths.
- d. Calvinism teaches that we can lose our salvation.

10. Was the apostle Paul a Calvinist? Explain your answer.

KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS

John Calvin (1509–1564) – This central figure in the Protestant Reformation wrote and taught in Geneva, Switzerland.

Calvinism – A system of teaching which gets its name from John Calvin. Its basic principle is that God is sovereign over all, and its purpose is the glory of God.

Jacob Arminius (1560–1609) – Arminius was a minister and professor in Amsterdam who opposed the biblical teachings of Calvinism.

Arminianism – This system of teaching, held by most evangelical Christians today, emphasizes the responsibility of man for his own salvation in such a way that God is robbed of His glory.

Remonstrant – This is the historical name for the Arminian party in the Netherlands. A “remonstrant” is one who protests, just as the Remonstrants were protesting against the biblical and Reformed understanding of the Bible.

Canons – *Canons* are a set of rules, principles, or standards for the church. In the case of the *Canons of Dort (named after Dordrecht)*, these teachings define what we believe from the Scripture.

THE PILLARS OF SOVEREIGN LOVE

LESSON 2

The Scripture Alone

A VERY IMPORTANT WORD

At the time of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the reformers used a small word that became very important. This particular word held great meaning for the reformers and the churches which had recovered the truth of God's Word. The word was **alone**. Although it is a common word, it packs a lot of power. If you say, "My friends and I lifted a 200 pound weight together today," or if you declare, "I lifted a 200 pound weight *alone* today," that word "alone" makes a big difference. If your four friends lifted two hundred pounds with you, each of you would have lifted only forty pounds. But if you can lift two hundred pounds *alone*, all by yourself, you are very strong.

The reformers discovered that the Bible often emphasizes the idea "alone" ("*sola*" in Latin). Scripture teaches that we are not saved by what Christ does for us, *plus* what we do for ourselves. It teaches that we are saved **by Christ alone**. The reformers also understood from the Bible that we are not saved by grace *plus* our good works, prayers, or good intentions. We are saved **by grace alone**. In addition, the churches of the Reformation reclaimed the Bible's teaching that we are saved **through faith alone**, and that this is done **for the glory of God alone**.

In this lesson we will study **Scripture alone**, the other great *sola*. Scripture alone, or *sola Scriptura*, is a very important pillar of the Christian faith. Without it the whole of the Christian faith falls into ruin. Everything else depends on this vitally important teaching. If we do not build on the Word of God alone, we are left to build our faith on what we think or what some great person taught. That's the basis of a man-made religion. The Christian faith, however, is built on what God tells us alone.

THE BACKGROUND OF THIS TEACHING

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church was teaching—and it continues to teach today—that there is more than one standard or authority for our faith. The Roman Church taught that the Bible is true, that it is God's Word, and that it has authority for believers. However, it also declared that the Bible alone is not the only authority for the Christian faith. Because the Church had determined that the Bible is not sufficiently clear for the common believer, it taught that we need something more than the Scriptures to govern our faith and life. Since it claimed that the Bible cannot stand alone, the Roman Church said that the traditions and teachings of the church are needed, in addition to the Scripture, as a sure foundation for the Christian faith. Through the years many decisions had been made by the popes and church councils. The Church claimed that these decisions or traditions possessed authority equal to that of the Bible. In fact, the Council of Trent, held

between 1545 and 1563, openly declared that Scripture *and* the church's tradition have equal authority. Both must be accepted and honored with equal reverence.

Confronting this unbiblical teaching, the reformers declared "*sola Scriptura*"—Scripture alone. Martin Luther, for example, said that the church's teaching must come from the Bible and not from church tradition or councils, which sometimes make mistakes. He claimed that the Bible *alone* is our standard. In 1521 Luther was ordered by Emperor Charles V, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, to appear at a meeting called a diet in the German city of Worms. There he was required to give an account of what he believed. He was told to recant, publicly admitting that what he had written was false. Instead, Luther declared that only the Bible could persuade him to change his teachings. "My conscience is captive to the Word of God," he courageously told the court. "I will not recant anything, nor do I wish to, for to go against conscience is neither honest nor safe. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me. Amen." All the other reformers stood with him in his declaration that the Bible alone is the final authority for the church. Popes, councils, and the traditions of the church have no authority when they do not agree with the Bible. The Bible is enough. We do not need anything else, in addition to the Bible, as the final standard or authority for the Christian faith.



KEYS TO BETTER UNDERSTANDING

1. What does the Church of Rome teach about the value or place of tradition in the church?

2. Do you think this teaching of the Church of Rome about tradition is wrong?

Why or why not? _____

3. How did Martin Luther show his confidence in God's Word at the Diet in Worms?

WHAT SOLA SCRIPTURA DOES NOT MEAN

The truth of *sola Scriptura* as one of the pillars of the Christian faith could be misunderstood by some people. We must clearly understand what the words “Bible alone” do not mean.

1. *Sola Scriptura* does not mean that all truth is found only in the Bible. God has revealed Himself to us in two ways. **Special revelation** is God’s written Word, the Bible. God also reveals Himself in His creation; we call this **general revelation**. From general revelation we learn many fascinating, helpful, and necessary truths about medicine, geography, history, and science, among other things. We do not learn these from the Bible. To be sure, all that the Bible tells us is true, no matter what the subject is, but it does not tell us everything about everything. Special and general revelation never contradict each other because both of them come from God who speaks only the truth.

2. When we use the term, “the Bible alone,” we do not mean that every verse in the Bible is clear to every believer. There are passages which still perplex even the most knowledgeable theologians after many years of study. The message of God’s grace, however, is so clear to all who read it in faith that we do not need the church to explain it before we can believe it.

3. Emphasizing “Scripture alone” does not mean that the preaching and teaching of God’s Word by the church and its ministers are of no help in understanding the Bible. *Sola Scriptura* does not mean that we don’t need good instruction from those appointed by God to explain the Word. This pillar must not be misunderstood to mean that the church is unnecessary.

4. *Sola Scriptura* does not mean that we may be disobedient to others who have authority over us. We must be obedient to the laws of our land and to our parents, teachers, and elders. God’s Word clearly indicates that this is our duty. But the final and ultimate authority remains the Word of God.

WHAT SOLA SCRIPTURA DOES MEAN

Sola Scriptura means that everything necessary for our salvation, and for living the Christian life, is so clearly taught in the Bible that believers can understand these truths for themselves. The Bible alone is the basis of all that we believe and the standard for living the Christian life. Is there anything besides the Bible that is needed in order for us to know the truth of God for our salvation? Do we need someone to interpret the Bible *before* we can believe in God and trust His Word? The resounding answer is, “No.” The Bible alone is sufficient. If anyone suggests that we need the Bible *plus* something else, that suggestion is a formula for error. *Sola Scriptura* says the Bible is enough.



KEYS TO BETTER UNDERSTANDING

4. List four things *sola Scriptura* does not mean.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____

5. In one sentence tell what *sola Scriptura* means. _____

6. If we hold to the Bible’s teaching about *sola Scriptura*, is the preaching and teaching of God’s Word necessary?

Why or why not? _____

WHY DO WE CONFESS SOLA SCRIPTURA?

In the Old Testament, God Himself teaches that Scripture alone is sufficient as the final authority for our faith. In Deuteronomy 31:9, “. . .Moses wrote down this law. . .” that he had been teaching the people. Verse 12 commands that these words are to be read to the people “. . .so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law.” Then Deuteronomy 32:45–47 say, “When Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel, he said to them, ‘Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you—they are your life.’” In other words, the Scripture was sufficient for their life, their salvation. They didn’t need something else before they could know the truth. The words written down were enough.

In the New Testament, Paul gives the following command to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:14–17:

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Because the Bible is indeed the very Word of God, breathed out by Him, it is completely true. It is entirely without error. We cannot say this about any other book. We cannot say this about the decisions of the pope or councils of a church. They are only human and full of sin, while the Bible is divine and never fails. So the Bible alone is our final authority.

Why is it so crucial that we uphold this pillar of the Christian faith? It is because God's Word is the truth, and only the truth will survive as the standard for our faith and life. Jesus confessed to God the Father in John 17:17, "Your word is truth." God's Word is the truth because it alone is inspired by God. Man's word is filled with error because he is sinful. God knows all things, but our knowledge is limited. God's Word is fully sufficient (2 Timothy 3:16–17), but our word is inadequate. "The Word of the Lord stands forever" (1 Peter 1:25), but man's word will pass away. We firmly hold to the pillar of *sola Scriptura* because the Bible alone is the very Word of God. Man is not the standard for truth. God is! This pillar teaches that the Bible alone is our final authority because the sovereign God is its author.

If we believe the Bible isn't enough, and we honor man's word as much as God's Word, we end up with a mixture of truth and falsehood. God will judge us—not on the basis of man's word, but on the basis of His Word, His standard. That's why He declared in Revelation 22:18–19:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

FOR MEMORY



2 Timothy 3:15–17

... From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Belgic Confession, Article 7

We believe that those Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. [We may not] consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures... Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule....

Westminster Confession I, 10

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.



KEYS TO BETTER UNDERSTANDING

7. List five ways in which the Bible is different from man's word.

- a. _____
- b. _____
- c. _____
- d. _____
- e. _____

8. Why is *sola Scriptura* important to you? _____

KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS

The Protestant Reformation – The Reformation is the period of church history (1517–1648) in which God brought about major reform in the church and returned it to the biblical faith.

Sola Scriptura – The Scriptures alone are our final standard for truth, faith, and life, not the Bible plus the church's traditions.

Special Revelation – Special revelation is God's written Word, the Bible.

General Revelation – General revelation is God's creation which tells us about His wisdom and power but does not tell us about how we can be right with God through Jesus Christ.

Life in Christ

Instructional Materials for Young People

INTERMEDIATE

Not My Own: Discovering God's Comfort in the Heidelberg Catechism

An Introductory Course on the Heidelberg Catechism

God's Unfolding Promise: From Shadows to SONlight

A Course that Traces God's Covenant History of Redemption from Genesis Through Revelation

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Christ's Living Church: A Journey from Then to Now

A Course on the Church and the Reformed Faith in History

Faith of Our Fathers: Studies in the Belgic Confession

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HIGH SCHOOL

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