Sōlā Scriptūrā: Lost in Translation

By Bernard Taylor

Ever since the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in Alexandria, Egypt, beginning around 250 B.C.E.—the first known translation of a major work from one language to another—translators have struggled to transfer adequately the meaning of source languages to target languages. Very few words have a one-to-one correspondence from one language to another, so words in the target language are pressed into service even though their semantic range barely intersects that of the source language. Thus, in a real sense something is often lost in translation.

In fact, the same phenomenon can be seen within languages. The expression "the exception proves the rule" is from another era, but continues to be repeated even though in today's linguistic context it is clearly factually incorrect. Exceptions do not prove rules, they disprove them, and it has been interesting over the years to hear (erroneous) attempts to explain the conundrum. What is overlooked is the semantic shift in the meaning of the word "prove." At the time the proverb was created, "prove" simply meant "test," and exceptions clearly do test rules.

At the word level, Latin has proved to be a prolific source for English vocabulary. Almost all English theological words—such as "justification," "sanctification," "glorification," and "redemption"—are Latin based, coming into English through the influence of the Latin Vulgate on both the French and English languages. At the phrase level, Latin has impacted English on a number of different fronts such as literature, legal terminology, religion in general, and in particular the five best-known catch phrases of the Protestant reformers: *solus Christus, soli Deo gloria, sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide.*

Long familiarity with the use of such words and phrases in English coupled with a general lack of understanding of

the semantics and syntax of Latin grammar has at times led to new meanings significantly different from those originally intended. Ironically, this is more likely to occur when the Latin word has either become an English word or has a close English counterpart, such as the Latin adjective *solus* and English *sole* and *solo*. Thus, one finds for the five phrases of the reformers such translations as "Christ alone," "to the glory of God alone," "Scripture alone," "grace alone," and "faith alone." However, only the first one is correct. To understand why requires some understanding of Latin nouns and adjectives.

Latin Nouns and Adjectives

To translate a Latin noun or noun phrase it is necessary to know its function in the sentence, which is contained in three pieces of information: gender (masculine, feminine, or neuter), number (singular or plural), and case (nominative, the subject; genitive, possession; dative, indirect object; accusative, direct object; ablative, *inter alia*, separation[1]). Gender is an inherent property of Latin nouns; it is predetermined and does not change.[2] Number and case are indicated by the various endings, or suffixes. Latin has five sets of endings known as declensions, only three of which are necessary to understand the translation of the five phrases under discussion.

Scriptura, *gratia*, and *gloria* belong to the first declension; *christus* and *deus* belong to the second declension; *fides* belongs to the fifth declension. These words decline in the singular according to the following paradigms:[3]

	Nouns			Adj. solo	
	1st decl.	*2d decl.*	*5th decl.*	*masc.*	*fem.*
nom.	grātia	deus	fides	solus	sola
gen.	grātiae	deī	fidei	solius	solius
dat.	grātiae	deō	fidei	solī	solī
acc.	grātiam	deum	fidem	solum	solam
abl.	grātiā	deō	fidē	solo	solā

When an adjective such as *solus* is used to modify a noun, it agrees with the noun in gender, number, and case.[4]

Armed with that information, we can now begin to understand the five phrases. As can be seen by comparison with the second declension paradigm above, *solus Christus* is unambiguously in the nominative case, and hence means "Christ alone."

The second phrase, *soli Deo gloria*, is more complex. By comparing the two tables, we can see that *soli Deo* is dative.[5] On the other hand, because diacriticals are not usually written in Latin, *gloria* is either nominative or ablative. However, context indicates that it is nominative, so the translation is "glory to God alone."[6]

The third and fourth phrases, *sola Scriptura* and *sola gratia*, appear to be either nominative or ablative since, again, diacriticals such as accents—which would serve to distinguish the two cases—are not normally used. In contrast, the final phrase, *sola fide*, Luther's famous catch phrase that embodies the heart of the Reformation, is unambiguously ablative, being translated as "by faith alone."

The reformers coined these five pithy sayings to encapsulate key truths, and it is important that we understand them correctly. As we have seen, the first two are not in question; they make simple statements in the nominative case: "Christ alone" and "to God alone be the glory." The last one, "by faith alone," is in the ablative. Only the third and fourth phrases are formally ambiguous.

Practical Implications

At this point we have exhausted the information able to be gleaned from the form of the words. It is time to consider context. All the phrases share in common some form of the adjective *solus*, and indicate that in some manner each of the nouns is "alone" in the sense of standing separated from something, hence they are in the ablative. In contradistinction, *solus Christus* is in the nominative, indicating that Christ stands alone; he
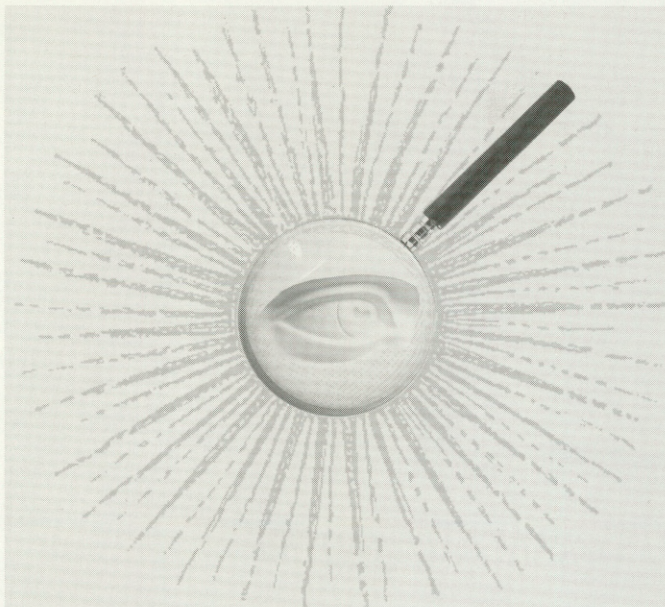
is all sufficient. In the light of this first statement, the second is made: since Christ is alone and all sufficient, "to God alone be the glory." No human merit is mingled in the salvation that "Christ alone" has provided.

In this context it is critical to understand what gave rise to the *sola scriptura* cry. In the original context, the battle that raged was whether truth was determined by Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*), or by Scripture aided by centuries of interpretation and tradition. Luther and the other reformers thundered "*solā scripturā*," using the ablative: "by Scripture alone!" The response from the other side was "*prima scriptura*," "by Scripture first (and, by direct implication, tradition second)," but definitely not "*sola scriptura*," "by Scripture alone."

Although *sola gratia* is formally ambiguous,[7] it is quoted in English only in the ablative form: "by grace alone." In fact, this and *sola fide*, "by faith alone," stand together in the ablative. The first indicates that salvation on the divine side is "by grace alone," that is, unmixed with any human works; the second indicates that on the human side one receives the *sola gratia* (by grace alone) salvation *sola fide*, "by faith alone," again unmixed with any human works.

Given the unequivocal *solus Christus* in the nominative, it would have been blasphemous to add to that *sola scriptura* in the nominative. There can only be one *solus*; primacy is to Christ alone. This is not to suggest that expressions of the past can never be reinterpreted. It is to say that when they are one cannot at the same time claim to be true to the original intent, in this case

the words, phrases, and ideas of the reformers.

Solā scripturā meant "by Scripture alone." Standing as it does in the ablative, it proclaims the all sufficiency of Scripture in matters of faith and practice with reference to tradition. It was never intended to be an eternal dictum standing in the nominative proclaiming Scripture to be alone, on a par with *solus Christus*, Christ alone, any more than *solā fidē*, "by faith alone" is somehow intended to deny a role to reason. May the meaning of *solā scripturā* not be lost in translation.

Notes and References

1. The sixth case is the vocative, used for direct address, but it is used only in direct speech, and in most instances is indistinguishable from the nominative, and so is not listed in the paradigm below.

2. "Gender" is a grammatical term, and bears no necessary relationship to sex. Although usually nouns referring to males are masculine and nouns referring to females are feminine, objects are arbitrarily masculine, feminine, or neuter.

3. A paradigm is a pattern, and it is used to show how the endings change to represent number and case. Other similar nouns in that declension decline in the same way, for example, the endings for the various cases indicated for *gratia* are the same ones used with the other two first declension nouns to create the respective cases for these nouns.

4. Due to details beyond our concern, the form of the endings for the adjective for any particular number and case are not necessarily the same as those for the noun and the adjective qualifiers, even though they agree in gender, number, and case.

5. Because the adjective *soli* is dative, it cannot modify the noun *gloria*, since adjectives agree with the noun in gender, number, and case, and the noun is not dative.

6. This is the minimalist translation. Since it is a nominal phrase (that is, it includes no verb), some form of the verb "to be" can be supplied, which results in the more standard translation: "To God alone be the glory." However, it can also mean, "To God alone is the glory." The present tense is supplied because for the past or future tenses Latin usually included the respective form of the verb "to be."

7. Again, either nominative or ablative.

Bernard Taylor is scholar in residence at Loma Linda University Church of Seventh-day Adventists and editor of the *Bulletin for the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies.*