
The Reformation @ 500

Soli Deo Gloria – To God’s Glory Alone A Small-Group Discussion Guide

The start of the Protestant Reformation is often dated to Martin Luther nailing “The 95 Theses” to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany on Oct. 31, 1517. Historians reflecting on the Reformation and its meaning identify five statements or watchwords as central to the movement. These watchwords, called the five “solas,” from the Latin word meaning “only” or “alone,” are: grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone and to God’s glory alone.

This the last of five study guides explores “to God’s glory alone,” using reflections and insights gleaned from presentations made at an event held at Knox College, Toronto in Oct. 2017. The day’s presentations can be viewed at presbyterian.ca/gods-glory-alone. That conversation offered a diverse yet complementary collection of descriptions of God’s glory.

The six sections in the study invite participants beyond a theoretical discussion to reflect on stories of God’s glory from their lives as a way to understand “to God’s glory alone” in our present context.

It would be helpful for each participant to have a copy of the guide so they can have the indented material in front of them.



Section I: Defining “the glory of God”

How would you define the glory of God? Where do you see it?

Both the Rev. Dr. Christine O'Reilly and the Rev. Dr. John Vissers reminded us that John Calvin suggested that the glory of God was evident in three places.

- In creation: “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork” (Ps. 19:1). In *The Institutes* Calvin writes: “Wherever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty”
- In the person and work of Jesus Christ: “He [Jesus] is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb. 1:3). Calvin’s comment on this verse: “Remember that the glory of the Father is invisible to you until it shines forth in Christ.”
- In the people of God: “To them God chose to make known his great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). Calvin’s comment on this verse: “It is a wondrous act of God that the hope of heavenly glory dwells in earthen and fragile vessels.”

Name and describe examples from your experience or the accounts of friends of God’s glory revealed in these three ways.

Section II: Human beings and the glory of God

The first question of *The Shorter Catechism* is “What is the chief end (primary purpose) of human beings?” The Catechism’s answer is “To glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

Irenaeus said, “For the glory of God is a living person; and the life of humanity consists in beholding God.”

Take some time to reflect on these two quotes – one from the Protestant tradition and the other from the Catholic tradition.

- Can these quotes be understood together or do they disagree?

- What do they say about humanity?
 - What do they say about God's glory?
 - What questions come to mind as you reflect on these quotes?
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Section III: Misuses of the Glory of God

- 1 The Rev. Karla Wubbenhorst warned of the cold edge of the glory of God. That focussing on God's glory can lead people to be judgmental of other people and their behaviours when those actions do not meet a preconceived idea of how God's glory is seen in people's lives. (Think of all those dour Scots Presbyterians sitting somberly in hard pews in a cold church.)

When have you experienced the glory of God used as a means of judging others, or a way to impose a particular pattern of life on people?

The Rev. Dr. John Vissers wondered whether we have too quickly jumped over the "enjoy God" part of Catechism's answer. When has experiencing the glory of God filled you with joy?

- 2 The Rev. Jinsook Khang noted that Christians frequently name personal successes in their family's life as evidence of God's glory. For example: a child's acceptance into a prestige university is named as an indication of the glory of God, whereas a child's struggles in school are not named as a sign of God's glory. The Rev. Khang indicated how damaging such an understanding is.

When have you experienced people naming their personal success as evidence of God's glory? How might focussing on "beholding God" (as in the Irenaeus' quote) help move us from narrow personal understandings of God's glory?

Section IV: Beholding God, being changed

Dr. Barbara Leung Lei, Old Testament scholar, demonstrated that those who experienced the glory of God were changed by that experience. Moses beholds the glory of God in

burning bush, and is called to a new pattern of life (Exod. 3). Isaiah sees the glory of God and becomes a preacher of the word (Is. 6:1-8).

When have you or someone you know beheld the glory of God and how did seeing God's glory change you or the person you know?

Reflect on how these stories of beholding God connect to the larger story of God's people beholding God and being changed.

Section V: Opening eyes to the see the Glory of God

The Rev. Dr. Ephraim Radner noted that often the glory of God is hidden, or maybe more accurately we are not trained to see it.

The Rev. Jinsook Khang as a Christian Educator asked: "How do we help young people see/recognize the Glory of God in the world around and in their lives?"

What skills or abilities do we need to hone to be able to behold the glory of God?

How might we help others, in particular young people, to recognize the glory of God?

Section VI: Summing up

Name one way your understanding of the Glory of God has been challenged or re-affirmed by this conversation. Name one thing you will do, say, believe, or begin to change because of this conversation.

The "To God's Glory Alone" event was the fifth of five Ref@500 Project events taking place from 2013 to 2017. Sponsored by the Committee on History and funded through the support of the Ewart Endowment for Theological Education and the Conference Fund of the Life and Mission Agency, these events lead up to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

The project's purpose is to address the questions: What do the five "solos," so central to the Reformation, say to the church in Canada today? Are the 500-year-old theological slogans robust enough to be relevant today? For more information about the Reformation@500 Project or these study guides, contact Peter Bush, 197 Browning Blvd., Winnipeg, MB, R3K 0L1, email peterwwpres@mymts.net or call 204-837-5706.

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