

# *Sola Fide: Justification By Faith Alone*

By Pastor Jerome T. Gernander

Bethany Lutheran Church, Princeton, Minnesota

“What if this were not in Scripture? What if God had not chosen to reveal this? What if this were left out or omitted?” These are questions I often ask myself when studying the Bible or preparing a sermon. Sometimes I ask the Bible class: “What if these words of Jesus were not in the Bible? What if St. Paul had not written this? What would we not know? About what important truths might we be ignorant and in the dark?”

Applying such questions to *sola fide*, “by faith alone,” demonstrates why this *solus* is so essential and really an abridged version of the entire doctrine of justification; it summarizes this entire teaching. In the Lutheran Confessions, the doctrine of justification is referred to as “the doctrine about faith” (Augsburg Confession XX).<sup>1</sup> Luther is speaking of the entire doctrine of justification when he says in the Large Catechism that “faith was entirely put under the bench” by the papacy. The longest article in the Lutheran Confessions, “On Justification” (Article IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession), centers on *sola fide*. In the Augsburg Confession, after Article IV (also titled “On Justification”) the phrase “this faith” comes up again and again in the other articles. “Justifying faith” is a synonym for justification.

I learned the singular importance of *sola fide* in a memorable way from a Roman Catholic layman. Shortly after I arrived at the congregation I serve, a St. Cloud (Minn.) man began calling me on the phone periodically. On Scripture and tradition, we sparred agreeably. On the definition of grace we had amiable discussions. But when we came to the Epistle of James on faith and the role of good works in salvation (passages expounded in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, para. 247-253), his friendliness came to an abrupt end. Suddenly he launched into an angry tirade, telling me that if I did not believe good works necessary for salvation, I would go to hell.<sup>2</sup>

This is attempting to deprive someone of *sola fide*. What is lost when this is missing? Everything in Christianity! To put it mildly, this was a major obsession of Martin Luther and the first Lutherans: to prevent people from being deprived of the only true comfort and confidence that a sinner has before God. It is a pastoral concern. This reveals that this is not simply a classroom doctrinal issue. It is a *pastoral* issue. Depriving someone of *sola fide* is nothing less than depriving one of the Gospel.

This came out of Luther’s own experience, recounted by him a year before his death:

---

<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, A Reader’s Edition of the Book of Concord*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Concordia Publishing House, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Evidently he forgot the advice of his beloved St. Augustine: “He is an enemy to righteousness who refrains from sin only through fear of punishment ... For the man who only fears the flames of hell is afraid not of sinning, but of being burned.” Letter 145.4 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers I*, ed. Philip Schaff, 496.

It was a single word in [Romans 1:17], “In it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed,” that had stood in my way. For I hated that word “righteousness of God,” which I had been taught to understand philosophically regarding the formal or active righteousness, with which God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that He was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly I was angry with God and said, “As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with His righteousness and wrath!” Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. Nevertheless, I beat importunately upon Paul at that place, most ardently desiring to know what St. Paul wanted. At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, “In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith’ ” [NKJV]. There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, “The just shall live by faith.” Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.<sup>3</sup>

It would be tempting for someone cynically to respond: “Well, that was just Luther. He was super-sensitive.” Luther would disagree. This is a universal concern, which is borne out by the entire book of Galatians (as shown by Luther in his Galatians lectures).

Luther shows that this is a pastoral issue in his only comment (as far as I could find) in which he uses the *sola* terminology. In a sense Luther started this when he inserted the German word *allein* into his translation of Romans 3:28 (“we are justified by faith *alone* apart from the works of the law”). He was criticized for adding a word to Scripture, a criticism he addressed at another time;<sup>4</sup> evidently his opponents fastened on the Latin word in their intended insult, as we see in this comment by Luther on Galatians 2:16 in his 1535 Lectures on Galatians: “Hence faith alone justifies ... Here we are perfectly

---

<sup>3</sup> “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings” (1545) in *Luther’s Works* 34:336-337.

<sup>4</sup> “... In Romans 3[:28] I inserted the word *solum* [alone]. Actually the text itself and the meaning of St. Paul urgently require and demand it. For in that very passage he is dealing with the main point of Christian doctrine, namely, that we are justified by faith in Christ without any works of the law. And Paul cuts away all works so completely, as even to say that the works of the law – though it is God’s law and word – do not help us for justification. ... The matter itself in its very core demands that we say, ‘Faith alone justifies.’ And the danger of the people also compels it, so that they may not continue to hang upon works and wander away from faith and lose Christ, especially in these days, for they have been accustomed to works so long they have to be torn away from them by force. For these reasons it is not only right but also highly necessary to speak it out as plainly and fully as possible, ‘Faith alone saves, without works.’ I am only sorry that I did not also add the words *alle* and *aller*, and say, ‘without *any* works or *any* laws.’ ” From “On Translating: An Open Letter” (1530) in *Luther’s Works* 35:195-198, emphasis added.

willing to have ourselves called ‘solafide-ists’<sup>5</sup> by our opponents, who do not understand anything of Paul’s argument. You who are to be the consolers of consciences that are afflicted, should teach this doctrine diligently, study it continually, and defend it vigorously against the abominations of the papists, Jews, Turks, and all the rest.”<sup>6</sup>

This comment has a lot to offer us. It shows that this teaching results in aggressive attacks. Far from being left vulnerable, we are given weapons for this spiritual battle. Luther was speaking to future pastors and theologians. He frames this argument in a pastoral context, he does not shy away from the conflict, and he arms them with *sola fide* precisely to be “consolers of consciences that are afflicted.” They are to think of themselves, and the use of *sola fide*, precisely in this way: its chief benefit is in bringing consolation to consciences afflicted by the burdens of the Law.

As we study this doctrine, it is unavoidable to speak of the doctrinal errors of other churches. We speak of the opponents of this doctrine, both crass (Roman Catholic) and subtle (Evangelical Protestant). But truly there is only one enemy of the Truth: Satan. He is the adversary and opponent who seduces and leads astray those who would be our allies, who comes and takes away the Word out of their hearts lest they believe (Parable of the Sower). The faith-alone doctrine is a pastoral issue because the devil is the chief preacher of misbelief, despair and shame (Small Catechism, 6<sup>th</sup> Petition). Our goal is for consciences – both ours and others’ – which are afflicted by sin and shame, and lied to by the devil, to receive abundant consolation and sure confidence.

### **Faith Alone: The Clear Teaching of the Bible**

The correct teaching of justification by faith alone is so obvious that not only the apostles, but Christians in the early church and in the medieval period prior to Luther believed, taught and confessed this clearly and correctly. (This is harder to find in medieval Christianity with its system of manmade satisfactions for sin, but it is there too.) Luther and the Confessions make the case against Roman error in part with quotations from St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, in support of the Lutherans’ public teaching.<sup>7</sup>

The doctrine of justification by faith alone is the clear teaching of the Bible. It is the central theme that runs throughout all of Scripture.

The “faith alone” doctrine is based on clear Bible passages, of which these are a handful:

---

<sup>5</sup> Luther actually said “solarii” – sola-ists – but Jaroslav Pelikan put this into English as “solafide-ists,” likely because of what is said above, that the shorthand of this doctrine of justification is *sola fide*.

<sup>6</sup> *Luther’s Works* 26:138.

<sup>7</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article VI: “Ambrose says, ‘It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ is saved, freely receiving forgiveness of sins, without works, through faith alone.’” In his comments on the translation of Romans 3:28 in “On Translating: An Open Letter” (partially quoted above), Luther also said: “Moreover I am not the only one, or even the first, to say that faith alone justifies. Ambrose said it before me, and Augustine and many others.” *Luther’s Works* 35:197.

*Abraham believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness. [Gen 15:6; fully expounded in Rom 4:3-4, 22-25]<sup>8</sup>*

*The just shall live by his faith. [Habakkuk 2:4; fully expounded in Rom 1:16-17]*

*“To Him all the prophets bear witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins.” [Acts 10:43]*

*“By Him [this Man ... Jesus] everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.” [Acts 13:39]*

*... That He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. [Rom 3:26]*

*Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. [Rom 3:28]*

*But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness. [Rom 4:5]*

*“... Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.” [Gal 2:16]*

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. [Eph 2:8-9]*

*... Not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith ... [Phi 3:9]*

Whether it is “by faith,” or “through faith,” as the means of receiving the promise of the Gospel this *completes* the picture of God’s justification of the sinner. Faith is the means by which Christ (through the Spirit) presents the person to God reconciled, clean and holy, blameless and without blemish, without fault and above reproach in the sight of God, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing. The real presentation of the sinner to God as a saint, which occurs in the heavenly realm at the moment of death and is seen openly by all on the Last Day, occurs by means of faith every day of a Christian’s life.

This aspect of *sola fide* completing the picture of justification parallels the work of the Holy Spirit, the Person of the Holy Trinity who gives faith (Eph 2:8; 1 Cor 12:3; Rom 8:14-15). He completes the work of salvation: what was planned and prepared by God the Father in the eternal heavenly council (Isa 42:1-7, 49:5-7; 2 Tim 1:9), and carried out by His Son in the work of redemption (John 19:30; Phi 2:5-11; Rev 1:18), is completed as the Spirit creates faith in Holy Baptism and in conversion through preaching and teaching of the Word (Mat 28:19, Tit 3:5), and both gives and strengthens faith through the preached Word (by and through which the Holy Spirit works repentance and faith, Luke 24:47) and receiving of the Sacrament of the Altar (Rom 10:13-17, 1 Cor 2:9-14).

---

<sup>8</sup> All Scripture citations are © New King James Version of the Holy Bible 1982, by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

“By *faith* alone” speaks of the subjective, personal part of justification. “By *grace* alone” speaks directly to “objective justification” – the objectively true work of Christ. Regardless of faith, this is always true. Everyone’s sins are forgiven, the ransom price paid in full, by grace alone. This is the objective aspect of justification. But the only way to benefit from it is by faith. To say the *subjective* or “faith” part is the personal part is not to say the *objective* aspect of justification is *impersonal*; it concerns every person in the world. But subjective justification is personal *in this way*: the individual actually receives the blessings won by Christ. U.V. Koren said in a Pentecost sermon: “Faith is a certainty in your heart that Jesus is not just someone else’s Savior, but yours in particular.”<sup>9</sup>

This is what it means to say “justified by faith.” The word *alone* is added to exclude works from the basis for confidence before God. *Sola fide* keeps one from thinking of God’s forgiveness and acceptance in a conditional way. The sinful heart either will boast that God must be pleased with him based on his good conduct, or will be filled with anxiety that God will not be pleased with him based on his bad conduct. “By faith alone” says God is pleased with you not because you did anything well but since Christ did all things well, and you hold onto Christ to benefit from His work by faith. Alone.

It is good to be reminded of some basic elements of Scripture’s teaching on faith:

- Faith is “receiving.” It is simply the instrument or channel of receiving the gift, compared to an empty hand into which is placed the treasures of salvation.<sup>10</sup> Although “I believe” feels like something I do, faith is passive. “It is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). When a person has faith, trusts the word of promise, and keeps this faith, it is due to God alone.

We are surrounded by Christians who claim to believe in justification by faith alone; but they do not believe faith is passive (Roman Catholics’ belief that faith is a good quality in man; Protestants’ belief that man is able to come to faith by his own free will). This appeals to the Old Adam, but it also puts the burden on you: if you lack faith, it is because you are not working hard enough.

In the Small Catechism we confess: “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe ... but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” Not only is God alone responsible for coming to faith in Jesus; also God alone is responsible for remaining a believer, or returning to faith (Luke 22:32). Luther cites John 6:44: “Whence this faith comes (for no one has this faith of himself) Christ teaches, when He says: ‘No man can come to Me except the Father which hath sent Me draw Him.’ ”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> U.V. Koren’s *Works, Vol. 1: Sermons*, 253.

<sup>10</sup> “Instruments or channels”: *Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration)*, Article III “The Righteousness of Faith Before God,” para. 38. Or, if you prefer the illustration from *Out in Right Field*, popularized by Peter, Paul, and Mary: “... They point at the sky and I look up above And a baseball falls into my glove!”

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics II*, 442.

No determination, commitment or effort on the part of man can produce faith. In fact, Satan *uses* one's determination, commitment and effort to discourage him when faith falters! (See Simon Peter, post-denial). It is comforting to know the keeping of faith is all in God's hands: "Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. ... I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day." (Phi 1:6, 2 Tim 1:12).

- Faith is trust. Although the Bible speaks of faith as "knowing," it is not mere intellectual knowledge or Bible knowledge (Augsburg Confession XX, Apology IV.48, 50)<sup>12</sup>. Faith is believing God's promise of forgiveness, trusting that what God says about me in Christ is true. Although faith is passive and is worked by God, the way we experience faith is as an activity: believing what is not seen – God's promises; relying on God and His Word; clinging to Christ; seeking His grace; beholding the Lamb of God on whom our sins are laid.

Faith is not always even called faith in the Bible. Some of the best pictures of faith may surprise us: Job struggling against himself not to judge God's ways, a contrite tax collector looking down, a woman weeping over her sins, a poor father whimpering: "Lord, help my unbelief!" Weak faith is still justifying faith.

Faith is laying hold on Christ, however hesitantly. In this respect, the emphasis on "having faith" is not always helpful. It leads the natural pietist living inside us to measure faith, ask if I have enough faith, if it is strong enough or too weak, etc. The issue is really what a person's confidence before God is. The next two bullet points that we consider will explore where this is found. For now it is important to see that an accurate picture of faith begins with a person wanting to look away from himself and his sins, praying God not to look upon our sins (Small Catechism, Fifth Petition), and – like the sheep in the last judgment (Matt 25) – knowing only what he has *not* done rather than boast of his faithfulness.

"Then He will summon us. 'You too come forth,' He will say, 'Come forth ye drunkards, come forth ye weak ones, come forth, ye children of shame!' And we shall all come forth without shame and shall stand before Him. And He will say unto us, 'Ye are swine, made in the image of the Beast and with his mark; but come ye also!' And the wise ones and those of understanding will say, 'O Lord, why dost Thou receive these men?' And He will say, 'This is why I receive them, O ye wise, this is why I receive them, O ye of understanding, that not one of them believed himself to be worthy of this.' And He will hold out His hands to us and we shall fall down before Him ... and we shall

---

<sup>12</sup> Hereafter the Lutheran Confessions are abbreviated as AC (Augsburg Confession), Ap (Apology), and FC (Formula of Concord).

weep ... and we shall understand all things! Then we shall understand all! ... and all will understand ... Lord, Thy kingdom come!"<sup>13</sup>

- Faith is connected to the object of faith, what it believes in: Christ and His saving work. "Whenever we speak about faith, we want an object of faith to be understood. ... To believe is to trust in Christ's merits" (Ap IV:55, 67). This truth prevents faith from being an introspective act. Rather than asking: "Do I have faith?" and looking inward – thus playing into the devil's hands who wants the Christian to look away from Christ and instead idolatrously look to himself, his faithfulness, his quality of faith, and for evidence of love and godliness – the Christian asks: "Did Christ die for me?" and looks to the cross. This is about "whether confidence is to be placed in Christ or in our works" (Ap IV:156).

Faith can only depend on the objective fact of Christ's finished work and the objectively true promise in the words of absolution: "In the name and by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you all your sin" – or in the objectively true words of Jesus in His Supper: "for you, for the remission of sins." The atoning work of Christ is the foundation upon which faith rests. Therefore, faith – the subjective aspect of justification – cannot exist without the objective aspect of justification. Christ's righteousness is imputed, or credited, to the Christian by means of faith. "His obedience is credited to us for righteousness" (FC III.9).

It is a common misbelief that "as soon as you believe, God will forgive you." This turns faith into the *cause* of justification, whereas faith can only *receive* God's "forgiven" verdict. During a well-attended funeral service in our city after a tragic accidental shooting death of a youth, I heard an evangelical preacher tell the assembly: "If you believe, at that moment God will take away all your sins!" This error is not only found among the Baptists. The late Gerhard Forde, a popular writer among certain Lutherans today, wrote: "When faith is created, when we actually believe God's unconditional forgiveness, then God can say, 'Now I am satisfied!' God's wrath ends actually when we believe him, not abstractly because of a payment to God 'once upon a time.'"<sup>14</sup> This separates faith from Christ as the object of faith and directs faith inward, a form of self-idolatry. To separate faith from Christ's redeeming work ends in just having faith in faith.

If faith is severed from the specific promise of Christ, from His words, and becomes a "general faith," it is on shaky ground. Then a person is tempted to doubt God's love for Him, whether God is forgiving, whether God cares, or whether there is a God. "I am known by My own ... My sheep hear My voice" (John 10). The Confessions say: "We must always run back to the promise" (Ap IV:165).

---

<sup>13</sup> Excerpt from *Crime and Punishment* in *The Gospel in Dostoyevsky*, Orbis Books, 163-164.

<sup>14</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," quoted in *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 76:3-4, "Gerhard Forde's Theology of Atonement and Justification: A Confessional Lutheran Response" by Jack Kilcrease, 282.

- Faith comes only from hearing the Word; it is produced by the Holy Spirit working through His Word and Sacraments. “Justification happens through the Word,” the Lutheran Confessions say (Ap IV:67), citing Romans 1:16: “the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes,” and Romans 10:17: “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”

This truth applies not only in Baptism, where a baby first hears the Word of God and believes it; but every time a Christian hears the Gospel – in the sermon, the Scripture lessons, the absolution, benediction, and the Lord’s Supper where “the main thing in the Sacrament ... are the words” (Small Catechism VI:3), faith is created “when and where it pleases God *in those who hear the Gospel*” (AC V; John 3:7). It is specifically the word of promise, the forgiveness, the absolving word, that creates the faith that justifies.<sup>15</sup> So it is essential that the sermon be an absolution, for as Luther says in the Large Catechism (highlight this in your copy!):

Everything in the Christian Church is ordered toward this goal: we shall daily receive in the Church nothing but the forgiveness of sin through the Word and signs [sacraments], to comfort and encourage our consciences as long as we live here. So even though we have sins, the grace of the Holy Spirit does not allow them to harm us. For we are in the Christian Church, where there is nothing but continuous, uninterrupted forgiveness of sins.

The means of grace, the Word and Sacraments, are not only for delivering the Gospel of forgiveness; through the words of the Gospel faith is given, produced, by the Holy Spirit. “*That we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted*” (AC V.1). So when people keep away from Word and Sacrament, they make themselves vulnerable to losing the faith; their faith is not being formed by God’s Word and they open themselves to being formed by messages that contradict God in His Word.

*I cling to what my Savior taught/And trust it, whether felt or not. (ELH 226:10)*

- Faith produces fruits or good works, which are necessary but not necessary for salvation (FC IV:1-2), meaning they belong outside the question of how a person is righteous before God. Faith *alone* excludes human merit from justification. “The term *alone [sola]* offends some people ... It is, however, the notion of merit that we exclude. Love and works must *follow* faith” (Ap IV:73).

What the Lutherans react to in the Confessions is the Roman Catholic belief that grace is a process – a lifelong process of self-improvement – in which faith is a virtue, a good quality in man, that begins the process. It “makes” a person right-

---

<sup>15</sup> Gottfried Martens, “Certainty of Salvation,” *Logia* XIV:2, Easter 2005, 17ff.

eous, that is, empowers a person to become better. Lutherans confess that justification is God's declaration which forgives your sins wholly and entirely.<sup>16</sup>

What does this have to do with good works? Allow an example from (somewhat) recent history: On November 19, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI said to the crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square: "Luther's phrase: 'faith alone,' is true." Was he turning his back on the Council of Trent: "If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification let him be anathema [accursed]"?<sup>17</sup> No; the pope immediately added a condition that doomed any hope of Luther's doctrine being honored: "... *if it is not opposed to faith in charity, in love*" (emphasis added). The *if* is the problem. "*To believe is to conform to Christ and to enter into his love. ... In a faith that creates charity, the entire Law is fulfilled ... Thus justice is decided in charity. ... We can only pray the Lord that he help us to believe. Believing thus becomes life, unity with Christ, the transformation of our life. And thus, transformed by his love, by the love of God and neighbor, we can truly be just in God's eyes.*"<sup>18</sup> In the Roman view, faith is not complete as a justifying factor unless and until it expresses itself in love. Faith only begins a process of improvement and is focused not outwardly (Christ for you), but inwardly on the transformation of one's life and being conformed to Christ (Christ in you), as seen outwardly in charity and other expressions of love. In other words, you evaluate that you are justified before God by looking at your works of love, not at Christ.

In contrast to this, we confess that God's wrath cannot be appeased by human works but only by Christ's merit and atoning sacrifice; that without faith it is impossible to love God and perform good works; and that love follows faith. In the Lutheran Confessions we confess that works of love are necessary, that our works are pleasing to God because of faith, but that our love does not justify (Ap IV:218-287, where 1 Corinthians 13 and James 2 especially are dealt with).

To be clear: It *is* God's will that we use the moral law as a guide to do His will with the help of God; but it is the Gospel that frees us not only from the curse of sin but also from the rule of sin, giving us strength to live according to His will (FC IV:9-15, 38-40). "The Holy Spirit renews us, so that we are able to do keep the Law, to love God and God's Word, to be submissive to God in afflictions, to be chaste, to love our neighbor, and so on. Even though these works are far from the perfection of the Law, on account of faith they please God" (Ap IV:293).

---

<sup>16</sup> David Maxwell, "Luther's Augustinian Understanding of Justification in the Lectures on Romans," *Logia* V:4, Reformation 1996, 13-14.

<sup>17</sup> [www.ewtn.com/library/COUNCILS/TRENT6.HTM](http://www.ewtn.com/library/COUNCILS/TRENT6.HTM) (accessed 04 June 2017)

<sup>18</sup> [w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2008/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20081119.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20081119.html) (accessed 14 Feb 2017)

## Faith Alone: Finding a Context

It is one thing to “have faith” or to have the right doctrine of faith. But it is another thing to use it. The devil has temptations specific to confessional Lutherans. He delights in leading them to take sinful pride in their doctrinal stance or their doctrinal heritage. *Sola fide* becomes a slogan to boast in, and ceases being used. So “faith alone” needs a context. We have to learn once again why Luther considered it so essential. If justifying faith is specific faith, it needs to be specific to the daily attacks of Satan.

### How we see ourselves, and what we want to do about it.

You say you have faith, and yet you feel guilty or you feel worthless. This is where we must learn again what justifying faith is. It is not simply: “Do you believe all the articles of faith are true?” It is about having confidence before God. It is about having a good conscience. Too often, our confidence is based not upon the solid foundation of Jesus’ work for us, but upon our own achievements, progress, or recognition from others.

What we want do to about it is usually to work harder, try harder, or find measurable improvement. A troubled conscience is knowing we have failed. A terrified conscience is knowing that we will be judged by God to be lacking. Yet it seems we hardly ever seek rest for our conscience in God’s promises. We seek everywhere else.

The fundamental doctrine of our sinful flesh is this lie: if God is mad at me because of my sin, then He will be happy with me because of my good works. The old theologians named this doctrine the *opinio legis* ... This is a deceived conscience abiding in the false comfort of our good works. The falsely comforted conscience is at the root of every idolatry and ideology, every false religion, false god and false Gospel. It is the “peace” that the world gives, a false peace.<sup>19</sup>

The article on Justification in the Apology addresses the solution repeatedly:

Consciences cannot be set at rest through any works, but only by faith, when they take the sure ground that for Christ’s sake they have a gracious God. This whole doctrine can only be understood in the conflict of the terrified conscience. (AC XX:15, 17)

Consciences never are at rest unless they hear God’s voice clearly promising the forgiveness of sins. (Ap IV:257)

A terrified conscience is eventually quieted when it takes hold of Christ as Mediator and believes the promises given for His sake. (Ap XII:64)

This is an issue for our youth, who often receive their image of self worth from many sources that just plain lie to them, beginning with the changing standards of their peers, and involving social media comments, opinions of popular celebrities, etc. Their self

---

<sup>19</sup> Bryan Wolfmüller, “Teaching the Conscience to the Youth,” in *Seelsorger: A journal for the Contemporary Cure of Souls II*, 25.

image easily can be negative. There are a host of potential bad outcomes from what amounts to a distorted self-perception based not on the reality God creates but on unfounded judgments (which may come from very real words and real exclusion by others). The task of the church with its youth is to teach them how to have a good conscience, to impart to them the clear message that they are so important that Christ came down from heaven for them; they are of great value and worth to God and pleasing to Him for Jesus' sake. This is the reason for them to come to church: for a good conscience to be delivered to them as Jesus' blood is sprinkled on them through the Gospel.

Pastors are not masters when it comes to this. Their sense of guilt and unworthiness can be acute, partly because they judge themselves harshly for their stewardship of God's people and especially because it is a challenge for them actually to be on the receiving end of the Gospel. In a time of need I received this helpful communication in a personal e-mail from a brother pastor of our synod: *"It's pretty amazing to think that God sees such immense worthiness in you that He gave His dearest Treasure to make sure you could be in His presence forever. It's a bit ironic that - due to our weakness and sin - we can at times struggle with a sense of worthiness, when from God's perspective the entire plan of salvation is all about our great value to God. I remember Mark Harstad saying to us in seminary (I paraphrase): 'Creation is not primarily about the power of God, but rather we should view creation through the cross. God has always wanted Man to be in communion with Him. The sending of Christ is all about restoring Man to his proper place of tremendous value to God.' "*

*Sola fide* in this context - to see ourselves by faith alone - is to see that God accepts and approves of us for Jesus' sake. The one who judges us is the Lord (1 Cor 4:3-4), and He judges us righteous, holy and innocent. He is pleased with you! We are not to judge ourselves by our successes *or* failures, but listen to His declaration of His favor upon us.

### **How we see others, and how we see the church.**

To see others *sola fide* is not to judge with our eyes but with the eyes of faith. We judge others by their words and actions, and we might say: "What else do we have to go on?" But we do have something else to go on. Christ died for them. He even died for the sins they do against us. His blood cleanses us of all sin - the sins we commit as well as the sins done against us. To see them redeemed by the blood of Jesus is living *sola fide*.

This is also a protection against one of the devil's weapons against the church. The church on earth is often a culture of criticism, whereas Christ instituted it to be a place where His blessing and peace are freely dispensed. We enjoy receiving - inhaling - the Gospel but struggle to actually exhale the Gospel, breathe it out and give it to one another in word and deed. The devil's backdoor attack upon Christians is to highlight in your mind a perceived offense from someone, to brood over it, to judge them guilty, and sabotage the life of the Church by increasing criticism and condemnation, and simultaneously diminishing prayer and compassion.<sup>20</sup> We live *sola fide* in this context by

---

<sup>20</sup> John Kleinig, *Grace Upon Grace*, 201-202, 234-236.

turning to prayer and joining our intercessions with Jesus, who intercedes for us. As we pray "Our Father," we are reminded that *sola fide* is not only about individual faith but the Holy Spirit *gathers* His Church. I am part of a "we," and I *believe in* one holy Christian Church. It is not based on what I see in others, but what they are by faith in Jesus. *Sola fide* – especially as I kneel with the saints at the Lord's Table – helps me to see this Church and not abandon anyone, as Christ effects solidarity at His Table.

### **How we see trials and suffering.**

We believe that God sends crosses in order to test our faith in order to strengthen it, as with Abraham (Gen 22:1). "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:6-7).

But what if your faith does not *feel* stronger but only weaker? What then? How do we live *sola fide* in trials and suffering? We often feel this as condemnation. There are unlimited afflictions which we could discuss at this point, all of which the devil uses for condemnation and accusation. Employment reverses. Financial distress. Getting bullied in school. Loneliness. Lack of friends. Infertility. Death of a child. Death of a spouse or parent. Relatives leaving the faith. Critical or terminal illness. A friend or loved one moving away. Abuse. Divorce. Separation during wartime. A catastrophe or natural disaster. Lack of communication from family members. Persistent grief.

Let us take as an example one of the afflictions which often is suffered in silence: the scourge of depression, living under a cloud of despair. A person who is afflicted by depression may be unable to find joy, and the Gospel may seem to "bounce off him." Does such a person conclude he has no faith, or very little? How does a congregation view depression? Unfortunately the church too often has treated it as a faith problem, almost a sin. It is also a common reaction of the church to introverted people. "You have no idea how many people I treat clinically who cannot and who will not go to church because they tell me that they would have to 'fake being happy' and explain to everyone who *is* happy why they are not happy,"<sup>21</sup> says Dr. Beverly Yahnke, a Christian psychologist (a co-director of *Doxology: The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care and Counsel*).

How welcome is the counsel of the late Robert Preus concerning pastors who suffer depression (but which he applies to all Christians):

Pastors who suffer stress and affliction, like any Christian in similar circumstances, may be tempted to look to their faith as a reason for self-esteem and assurance, rather than to the only object of faith, Christ and His pardoning Word. They conclude that failure and inability to cope are due to weak faith

---

<sup>21</sup> "When God's Good Gifts Are Defiled: The Sinner and the Sinned Against," quoted in *Seelsorger I:1*, 51.

or the lack of faith altogether. They are viewing faith as their act rather than as their reception of God's mercy.<sup>22</sup>

This is consistent with the Lutheran Confessions: "This faith – that confidence lies in the forgiveness of sins freely for Christ's sake – sustains and enlivens hearts in the most violent conflict with despair" (Ap XX:85). C.F.W. Walther says: "Do not forget that the blessedness of Christians is not based on pleasant feelings but on the assurance that, despite the bitterest feelings imaginable, Christians are accepted by God"<sup>23</sup> for Jesus' sake.

The crosses and trials endured by the Christian are where *sola fide* is lived. Living *sola fide* in trials and suffering is when the crosses draw a person more and more to Christ Crucified. Their sufferings bring them closer to the Suffering Servant. They walk by faith, not by sight. *Sola fide* views affliction through Christ's compassion demonstrated on the cross and delivered in the means of grace. This is true confidence – not the *feeling* of confidence, but concentrating upon the blessed *fact* of God's favor that is delivered in the means of grace, the unchanging word of the Gospel (Absolution) and the Sacraments (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) that declares God's unbounded love for you.

*Sola fide* is not a slogan. It is a lifeline.

---

<sup>22</sup> "Clergy Mental Health and the Doctrine of Justification," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 48 (2 & 3), 120.

<sup>23</sup> Walther, 347.