

Sola Fide

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As you probably know, this is Reformation month. It's the month [during which] we celebrate the Reformation, [and] talk about what has happened in history and how that impacts us today as the local church of Calvary Bible.

This morning, I would like to address "sola fide," which is one of the Reformation cries. [It means] "by faith alone." I want to start by reading a text from Hebrews 10:36-11:6. You can follow along in your Bibles as I read.

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. **FOR YET IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, HE WHO IS COMING WILL COME, AND WILL NOT DELAY. BUT MY RIGHTEOUS ONE SHALL LIVE BY FAITH; AND IF HE SHRINKS BACK, MY SOUL HAS NO PLEASURE IN HIM.** But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old gained approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.

By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; **AND HE WAS NOT FOUND BECAUSE GOD TOOK HIM UP**; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

The Roman Catholic monk, Martin Luther, grew up hearing about faith. He was taught the importance of faith. Even after his thunderstorm [and] lightning experience, [and] after entering the monastery, he heard about faith all the time—that it was absolutely necessary, and that the Roman Catholic Church talked about Christians living by faith. He knew this. Luther believed, like all good Roman Catholics, that men were justified by faith plus works. The *Roman Catholic Encyclopedia*, referring to the Council of Trent, which was the gathering of Roman Catholics in reaction to the Reformation where they clarified Roman Catholic doctrine, say[s] that: “faith and good works [are] co-ordinate sources of justification, laying the chief stress upon works.”

It is thought [in Roman Catholicism] that justification is not something that happens once. When a sinner places his faith in Christ, justification is a process whereby a believer over the course of time, by doing good works, gradually acquires a little bit more justification before God, never having complete justification. Faith is seen as kind of a spiritual vitamin [that] is infused into the Christian so that he can, over the course of time, do good works [that] gain him justification before God. The Council of Trent made it clear [that] the stress is to be laid on works, not faith. In fact, they condemned all who believed in “sola fide”—faith alone—as accursed.

Hence, the faithful Roman Catholic can live a faithful life, practice the sacraments, do penance, acquire indulgences, and [at] the end of his life,

commit one single, grievous sin and go to hell forever. Why? [It is] because his salvation depends on his doing good works.

This was the hellish system that Luther, and virtually all professing Christians at the time of the Reformation, was caught up in. Luther said that while [living] in the monastery, “I plagued myself with prayers, fastings, wakings and freezings that I almost died of cold. Sometimes I would lock myself up for two or three entire days at a time without food or drink.” He was trying to rid himself of his sin.

Was this the experience of a madman—some sort of extra-fanatic[al] Roman Catholic? No. It is the experience of every Roman Catholic who actually knows what Roman Catholicism teaches. Most Roman Catholics go through the motions never even understanding what they profess to believe. But Martin Luther knew. He was brilliant, he was a hard student, and he had nearly a photographic memory. He knew he was a sinner, he knew that God judged sinners, he knew that God was holy and perfect, and he knew that he could not meet up to that standard. He was afraid to flee from God, knowing that God would find him and judge him, and he knew he couldn’t come to God because he was a sinner.

In the preface of the Latin edition of Luther’s works, Luther wrote of his experience in 1519. He was again teaching through the psalms after having taught through the books of Romans and Galatians. But there was a text that was like a corkscrew in his mind, that twisted itself in there—he couldn’t get it out of his mind. It was Romans 1:17, which says: “For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘**BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.**’” Luther wrote this in the preface to his works:

I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far there had stood in my way, not the cold blood around my heart, but that one word which is in chapter one: "The justice of God is revealed in it."

I hated that word [sic], “justice of God,” which, by the use and custom of all my teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically as referring to formal or active justice, as they call it, i.e., that justice by which God is just and by which he punishes sinners and the unjust.

But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. In silence, if I did not blaspheme, then certainly I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, “Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?” This was how I was raging with wild and disturbed conscience.

I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: “The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: ‘The just person lives by faith.’”

I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: “The just person lives by faith.”

All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from

memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

I exalted this sweetest word of mine, “the justice of God,” with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise.¹

Thus, Martin Luther was finally released from the damning doctrine of works salvation. He realized that God is the one who, through faith and faith alone, justifies the unworthy sinner. That justification was not something the sinner earned, but was something God did to the sinner—[the sinner] was passive while God was active.

Texts like Romans 8:29-30 came to mind:

For those whom *He* foreknew, *He* also predestined to become conformed to the image of *His* Son, so that *He* would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom *He* predestined, *He* also called; and these whom *He* called, *He* also justified; and these whom *He* justified, *He* also glorified (emphasis added).

Amazed, Luther realized that men are passive in salvation. He finally understood texts like Romans 3:20, which says: “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight.” And Romans 3:28, which says: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.” And Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” And 2 Timothy 1:9, where we read that God “has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.”

¹Taken from: <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/luther/tower.txt>

Luther, in understanding these truths, was born again, and then he in turn gave birth to the Reformation. He labored to exhaustion and almost death to make sure that all [of] the common people of the world could know that salvation was to be received as a gift by faith and by faith alone.

That is the tradition that we follow in today. That's what we teach [at] Calvary Bible Church. You can thank God for Martin Luther and the Reformation because we follow in [Luther's] footsteps.

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