

## Part Two: The End of *Sola Fide* —"By Faith Alone"

Peter Ditzel

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As pointed out in the last installment of this series, five of the central beliefs of the Reformation took expression in what have been called the Five Solas: 1. *Sola Scriptura*—"By Scripture Alone," 2. *Sola fide*—"by faith alone," 3. *Sola gratia*—"by grace alone," 4. *Solus Christus* or *Solo Christo*—"Christ alone" or "through Christ alone," 5. *Soli Deo Gloria*—"glory to God alone." As might be expected given enough time, over the years individuals and individual churches that once adhered to the Five Solas have wandered from them. In many cases, the wandering has resulted in a return to Catholic doctrine, the false doctrine the Reformers were challenging.

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*Sola fide*, by faith alone, is a doctrine that is clearly taught in the Bible. It is confessed by many individuals and churches. The problem is that so many so misunderstand *sola fide* that they wind up teaching gross error. The misunderstandings concerning *sola fide* are so common, in fact, that there is a very good chance that the average reader of this article who thinks he or she believes *sola fide* does not understand it.

### Definitions

Before we see how *sola fide* has been corrupted by many modern churches, let's define our terms. *Sola fide* is the teaching that we are justified by faith or belief or trust alone. The Greek word for faith in the New Testament is *pistis*. It means "faith," or "belief," or "trust." Those English words are really synonyms. It is a false argument to say, as some do, that I can believe something but it is not real faith until I trust it.

The example often given is that I can believe in a chair but I don't really have faith in the chair until I sit on it showing that I trust it to hold my weight. That is sloppy reasoning. The problem is that the object of faith changes during the example. The change is not in a supposed difference between the word belief and the word trust. The change is from simply believing that the chair exists to believing that it can hold my weight. It should be worded, I not only believe that this

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chair exists, but I also believe that it will hold my weight. And to show this, I will sit on it. Notice that "trust" and "have faith" can be substituted for "believe" without having any effect on the meaning.

From this example, we see what we are to do with Jesus Christ. We are not only to believe that He existed as a historical figure; we are to believe in Him as our Savior. This is the same as trusting in Him as our Savior and having faith in Him as our Savior.

So, *sola fide* is intended to mean, "by faith or trust or belief in Jesus Christ as Savior alone." But *what* is by faith alone?

### **Justification by Faith Alone**

The answer is justification. The great tenet of the Reformation was justification by faith alone.

Justification in the New Testament is in a family of Greek words—nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs—that mean to be or to be declared just, right, or righteous. I don't want to repeat what I have said in other articles, but I will simply point out that before we trust in Jesus as our Savior, we are legally guilty and under God's condemnation as sinners. After we trust in Jesus as Savior, God declares us not guilty because of the payment Jesus made for our sins. He also imputes to our account Jesus' righteousness that He earned for us by His perfect obedience to the law. Because of this, we cannot be condemned. This is an essential part of the New Covenant, which is a covenant that contains no condemnation (Hebrews 8:6-13; Romans 8:1). This understanding is crucial, as I will point out later.

### **"By" Not "Because"**

In the April 1996 issue of *The Trinity Review* ("How Can a Just God Forgive a Sinful Man?" <http://www.trinityfoundation.org/journal.php?id=169>), John Robbins asked a multiple choice question: "On what basis does God accept a man?" The choice of answers he gave are: "1. A life of complete obedience to the Law, 2. Faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, 3. Some other way." What would you answer? Robbins continued: "Most people choose Number 2 rather than Number 1 because they do not want to appear to be legalists. Most people choose faith in the Gospel of Christ because they think it is against legalism. But answer Number 2 is actually the legalistic answer." What Robbins wrote is shocking but true.

Most of us assume answer 1 to mean a life of *my* complete obedience to the law. But it does not have to mean "my." And, in fact, the life it refers to is not yours or mine; it is Jesus Christ's. Answer 1 is the only correct answer. God accepts man because Jesus Christ perfectly obeyed the law for us. We are not justified *because* of our faith. We are justified *because* of Jesus' obedience.

It is a corruption of the doctrine of *sola fide* to say that God justifies us *because* of our faith. As we will see, faith is important, but it is not the basis of our justification. Some distort *sola fide* so far as to say that Jesus dying on the Cross saved everyone, but it is applied only to those who exercise faith. (I address Scriptures that seem to say that Jesus died for "all," "the world," etc. in Book L of the Tulip Series <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/limitedatonementfp.pdf>). But think about it. If, because of Jesus' atonement, God has actually forgiven the sins of the entire world, but those who don't believe this are still punished, then God would be unjust for punishing people for whom Christ has already died.

Some try to get around this by saying that Jesus died for all sins but the sin of unbelief. But in saying this, they only jump from one ditch into another. What they are saying is that the only thing that distinguishes saved people from the unsaved is that saved people believe. Both groups have the blood of Christ applied to them. Both have their sins forgiven. According to this false gospel, what distinguishes saved people is their belief. And this makes these saved people their own saviors! They are not saved because of what Jesus did any more than unsaved people are. They are saved because they believe. This is a works salvation. It is legalism. It is an unbiblical belief that in its various shades through the years has had the name Amyraldism, Fullerism, and Four Point Calvinism.

I'll quote John Robbins again:

To say that faith is the basis of acceptance with God is legalistic, because it offers to God something that is within me as the basis of acceptance with God. (That God gives faith makes no difference to the principle. Faith is still a quality within me.) If you take the time to look at the decrees of the Council of Trent on justification, you will see that Number 2 [in the multiple choice questions above] is the classic Roman Catholic answer. The Reformers and the Bible stood against that position. In this century of theological decline, however, the Biblical and Reformation

doctrine was eclipsed by the Arminian and Roman doctrines, which hold that faith is the basis of our acceptance with God—that faith is a work that we do, a quality that we have, that makes us acceptable to a holy God.

Believers are justified because they have Christ's perfect righteousness applied to them. Their belief, trust, or faith is the instrument through which they receive Christ's imputed righteousness. God gives this instrument only to His elect, the only people for whom Christ died.

Unbelievers are not saved because of the simple truth that Christ did not die for them. To say that Christ died for everyone's sins except the sin of unbelief weakens Christ's atonement. Weren't we all unbelievers at one time? If Christ's atonement does not forgive our unbelief, then, as I said before, we who eventually become believers must be saving ourselves by our work of belief. Thus, justification because of faith is seen as legalism.

Faith is the instrument by which we receive the justification that Jesus Christ has earned for us. Jesus died for His elect. This is something determined in eternity. But justification actually happens in time (see "A Rebuttal to George M. Ella's 'John Gill and Justification from Eternity'" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/justificationfrometernity.htm>). In the course of time, God gives an elect person the gift of belief. With this gift, the elect person grasps his salvation. But the gift didn't save him; Jesus did.

Remember the illustration of the chair? Faith is not the chair. Faith is resting on the chair. But our resting on the chair is not what is keeping us up. It is the chair. The chair is Jesus Christ and the work He has completed for us. It is His perfect lawkeeping on our behalf—His keeping all the law including His dying on the Cross (once He took our sins upon Him, the law required that He die, and He was perfectly obedient to that). So we rest on that chair. In fact, we rest on that chair alone, not leaning over onto something else just in case the chair gives out.

### **Not Faith Plus Works**

Another corruption of *sola fide* is the simple error of faith plus our own works. This assertion is often based on Romans 3:25: "Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the

forbearance of God." Some people take hold of the "remission of sins that are past" part. They say that, when we exercise saving faith, Jesus' death for our past sins is applied to us, but we must then go on to obey the law. Salvation is a matter of justification from past sins by faith in Jesus' death for those sins coupled with our righteousness by keeping the law from now on. If we slip and sin, we must ask for forgiveness of that as a past sin and start all over again. Obviously, this takes the *sola* out of *sola fide*. Justification is no longer by the instrument of faith alone; it is justification by the instrument of faith plus the addition of our works.

The reason Romans 3:25 speaks of "the remission of sins that are past," is because our justification is two-fold. When Jesus died, He died to pay the penalty for our past sins. But He also lived a perfect life under the law. He never sinned. When we are justified, not only is Christ's death applied to our sins so that the penalty for our sins is paid, but His perfect obedience to the law—His perfect righteousness—is also applied to our account. Once we have Christ's righteousness applied to us, it is no longer possible for us to be condemned (Romans 8:1). Another way of looking at this is as Paul says it in Romans 6:14: "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace." This, as I said earlier, is being under the New Covenant. The New Covenant contains no condemnation; it is all of grace. So, instead of the lie that Jesus died for our past sins and now we must do the rest, the truth is that Jesus died for our past sins and has done all of the rest, too.

The doctrine of *sola fide*, then, is the teaching that by the instrument of faith, we lay hold of the justification that Jesus, because of his perfect obedience, was able to provide for us. We are justified because of Jesus' works, but we receive it by the gift of faith. Thus, our being right with God and His saving us is all of His works and none of our works; it is all of grace. And *sola gratia*—"by grace alone"—will be the next installment in this series.