



500 YEARS OF REFORMATION: SOLA FIDE

Romans 3:21-22

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During the period leading up the Reformation, the process of forgiveness could best be described as an accounting system. The debts you accrued through your sins could be paid in various ways. Going to the confessional and being assigned certain tasks by your priest might include saying various prayers so many times, along with a promise to do your best. But literal payment was also included. One could build a church or endow a Mass on behalf of the dead, to pay for a loved one's sins, thus springing them out of purgatory. Think about this for a moment. Think about someone you have lost. Now picture them trapped in purgatory fulfilling the punishment for sins not yet purified. You would pay most any amount to free them. The church knew this and used it to great financial advantage.

This accounting system of forgiveness became so crass and flagrant there was even a jingle used by the Pope's emissary to raise funds for St Peter's, "Every coin in the coffer rings a soul from purgatory springs." If Jesus had been around at the time, turning over money changers' tables would have been the mildest of his reactions.

Furthermore, it not only cost coin but it tortured souls to keep up with their sins. All sins committed post-baptism needed to be confessed. If one died with unconfessed sins it could mean more time in purgatory or, perhaps worse, eternal damnation. Such beliefs account for Martin Luther's famous marathon confessions. After one especially picayune session, Luther's confessor told him not to come back until he had committed some really "good" sins.

This system of accounting was exacerbated by the belief that the church was *appointed as God's official voice on earth*. This meant paying homage, not so much to God but to God's supposed emissary. As you can imagine, with the church

engaging in wars, torturing heretics, and robbing widows of money, it was especially hard to tolerate for your everyday disciple.

Clearly, dramatic reform was needed and *Sola Fide*, which means "by faith alone", summed it up nicely.

No earthly regent held God's salvific power, nor could any good work or ritual observance earn you a place in heaven.

This problem of works righteousness was not new to the Reformation, however. In fact, religious leaders, claiming to be the authority on people's souls, have always been a problem.

In the time of the Old Testament, it centered on ritual purity. Through avoiding certain foods and people, along with proper observance of ritual animal sacrifice, it was thought one could reconnect to God. Though clearly prescribed in God's law, these rites were never meant to be substitutes for trust and love.

In the time of the prophets, God made his thoughts clear, in no uncertain terms, about the corruption of these rituals. In Amos, God declared

I hate, I despise your festivals,

...Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,

I will not accept them....

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Even though the people were following the ritual observances, they failed in their love of neighbor and love of God. As in Amos' time it was with Paul and so he writes,

But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God

through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

It is solely by God's grace that we are saved and we receive this grace through trust in our Lord, *sola fide*, by faith alone. It was not through endless confessions or baptism. It is not through animal sacrifice or ritual observance. It does not come through an intermediary, but directly from God's heart to your soul.

There is no age that does not distort the path to salvation. In the time following the Reformation, up until today, people have twisted the nature of faith.

Biblically, the faith called for is multi-dimensional. In part, it is an intellectual agreement that indeed Christ is Lord. Scores of evangelistic crusades raced to get people to say, *I believe Jesus is the Son of God*, as if that phrase, in and of itself, had magical power to extricate one from damnation and open the gates of heaven. Almost like believing "*Open Sesame*" can make a locked door dramatically open. It does not work! Believe me, I tried many times as a child!

The deeper concept of faith, the Bible calls us to again and again, is trust. The essence of faith is trust. Faith is not about *believing* all the right things.

It is this entirely, erroneous assumption that has so dramatically and disastrously divided God's house. We have so fooled ourselves, that we believe our opinions about God are more significant than our trust in God. This is a subtle, but fundamentally important, distinction.

Imagine you need lifesaving surgery. You find a surgeon who has a perfect record of saving her patients, 100%! You read an article which delineates the reason for her success and attributes it to her nerves of steel and keen, analytical mind. You're sold! Then you read another article. It claims her willingness to buck conventional procedures in the heat of the moment, in order to find creative solutions in the blink of an eye, makes all the difference.

Suddenly, the Twittersphere is exploding with heated debates. People are calling each other names because of their opinions on this surgeon. You believe the analytical group is right. It is her keen mind that makes all the difference.

In the end, despite all the heated debate and despite your own opinion, none of this matters. Your life does not depend upon your opinions concerning this surgeon's gifts nor the opinions of others; your life depends upon your willingness to go under the knife. It depends on your trust in her. She is the one who will do the saving.

Sadly, since the beginning, Christians have been divided, sometimes deeply and sometimes to the point of murder, over differences on how Christ saves. Some of these differences are important, but none more important than this simple truth. Jesus saves us; not our correct beliefs. All we are called to is trust, even though none of us fully understand.

The Lutheran Catechism says it this way, "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord."

Once we understand that the essence of faith is trust, we can also clear up the debate between faith and works.

Our instincts tell us that good people go to heaven and bad people don't. This is because of our inherent sense of fairness. But Jesus turned fairness on its head and Scripture tells us that no one is righteous, not even one. There are no people who are "good enough" to get to heaven on their own.

For Luther, the role of faith in salvation was so central that he even wanted to take James' epistle out of the Bible. Phrases like "faith without works is dead" gave him pause.

But works have always been central to Scripture's call for believers. Paul's point in Romans is that we must not fool ourselves into believing that our good works will cause our salvation. Instead, those works are an outgrowth of it.

Sola fide, that is we are saved through faith alone, was not meant to eradicate the tension

between faith and works. Rather, it was to underscore the necessity of faith, on the one hand, and the impossibility of our works earning us a ticket to heaven, on the other.

And yet, since faith is ultimately trust in God rather than simple belief in God, works will inevitably follow. Trust, by definition, demands action and risk taking, based on belief. If you don't act on your trust, then it is not really trust. Galatians teaches us that a true, living faith works by love.

A living faith works by love. I've known this concept my whole life. But it has never hit me between the eyes until recently. This past week I met someone who embodies this love, courage, and risk for his faith, perhaps better than anyone alive today.

India is plagued by slavery – over 18 million. One man, Pastor Praveen Chakravarty, daily risks his life to rescue child slaves sold into open-pit mines to live their short lives in brutal conditions. During the day they work in the devilishly, hot sun and at night they endure the cruelest of abuse at the hands of their captors. The worst stuff of nightmares you can imagine. I told you a portion of this story about Pastor Chakravarty some months ago but, when I met the man, it multiplied my sense of awe at his love and courage. He told us about how his family became Christian.

His grandfather was a snake charmer – literally. He made his money entertaining crowds on the street. One day, he fell in the river and was drowning. He called on his gods but none came to help. He decided to reach out to Jesus: "If you save me Jesus, I will follow you." Someone thrust their hand in the river and snatched him out and he devoted the rest of his life to the gospel ministry.

Praveen follows in his footsteps, spreading the gospel, and he has built a network of thousands of pastors all who risk their lives to spread the love of Christ.

Without any sense of drama, self-pity, or fear he described how he became enemy number one of the quarry miners. By freeing their labor force

and finally getting the government to enforce the laws, he cut into their profits.

He wasn't worried; that was until they began to threaten his mother as well. Once they realized fear and threats would not shake him, they began threatening her. His mother is fine but don't let that fool you. These are not idle threats. Last year over 160 pastors in his network were murdered, martyred for their faith.

But he does not hesitate. For his purpose is born out of love. Love for Jesus Christ who redeemed and saved him. Love for these forgotten children, thousands of whom now have someone who loves them back. Even during his brief week in America, 700 more children were rescued through his organization.

We access God's grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. It is easy to believe. But deep faith requires risk, which means courage and action. Let's not only put our faith in Jesus to rescue our souls, let's trust that his way is the right way and act in bold love in his name for the most vulnerable in our world. Amen.