

The Five Solas: Sola Fide & Sola Gratia

Various

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Introduction:

In his autobiographical account of his conversion, Martin Luther tells about what finally brought him to a saving knowledge of Christ. He writes this,

“Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience... I did not love, [instead] I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, 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... without having God add pain to pain... by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!’ Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience...

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words [of Romans 1:18], namely, ‘In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.”’ 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, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live.’ Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates.”¹

Luther came to understand that the righteousness God demanded was not something he had to muster up himself but instead it was given to us by God through faith. This revolutionary insight became the principle issue lying at the heart of the Reformation: we are saved by faith alone. So this morning, we’re going to continue in our sermon series on the five Solas of the Reformation by examining the second and then the third of the five Solas, starting with Sola Fide (“Faith Alone”) and followed by Sola Gratia (“Grace Alone”). It would not be an exaggeration to say that more than anything else that divided Protestants from Roman Catholics was the question of the grounds on which a person was made righteous in God’s sight.

So much like we did last week, we want to consider each Sola by asking three questions of them: What is this affirming? What is this protesting? and What does this mean for us? Let’s begin then by focusing first on Sola Fide and answer our first question...

1. What is this affirming?

To believe in Sola Fide is to believe our salvation comes by faith in the promises of God and not by any other means, namely, works of obedience. When we trust in the gospel message that Christ suffered in our place on the cross, faith alone is all that is necessary for God to declare us righteous in his sight.

We've spent the past year studying the first six chapters of the book of Romans and this principle - that salvation is by faith alone, apart from works - has been the central theme. You might remember that the argument from 1:18 through 3:20 was that all people - Jews and Gentiles alike - were under the wrath of God for their sin. There was absolutely nothing they had done in accordance with the law of Moses or their own conscience to make themselves acceptable to God.

But do you remember how Paul transitions out from the wrath of God to the good news of the gospel in Romans 3:21? Let's review that for a moment by turning your Bibles open to Romans 3. I believe you can find it on pg. 941 of the pew Bibles should you be using one of those this morning. Paul says this in v. 21-22 of Romans 3, *"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it - the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe."*

In other words, we're declared righteous not because of what we've done but rather we're trusting in what Christ has done. We don't need to jump through any hoops to be righteous in God's sight; it is given to us by God when we believe. Faith alone is the means by which we're declared righteous. Look a few verses ahead in Romans 4:5, *"And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness."* The apostle Paul excludes all works as a basis for our salvation. It is by believing in Christ, by faith and only faith in him, that God counts us to be righteous in his sight.

Sola Fide was essential to Martin Luther and the Reformers because the Roman Catholic church had added works as part of the necessary requirement to be saved. So moving on now to our second question, we need to consider...

2. What is this protesting?

While the Roman Catholic church doesn't deny that faith is necessary for salvation, they don't believe that faith alone is sufficient. It must also be wedded to good works which contribute to one's justification. The difference can be found in two words: "imputation" and "infusing." *Imputation* is the Protestant word that describes how we receive the righteousness of Christ. We don't possess it but it is imputed to us such that it is credited to our account. We add nothing to it and can contribute nothing.

Infusing, on the other hand, is the Roman Catholic word that describes how through keeping the sacraments such as doing penance and confession, God's righteousness is infused into believers more and more over time so that through our deeds we can become more righteous. Thus for a Protestant we understand that through faith we are declared fully righteous, not because of our works, but because Christ's sinful life is imputed to us as if it were our own. For a Roman Catholic, faith must be coupled with good works, through which God infuses us with even increasing righteousness. So for a Roman Catholic, you have to avail yourself to means of grace so that you can begin to be more and more righteous by your deeds.

In light of this, one can understand the necessity of purgatory and the role of indulgences in Roman Catholic theology. Since most people don't amass enough righteousness in their lifetime to merit heaven, they need to spend time in purgatory where their sins are purged and they are made more righteous and therefore fit for heaven. But since some saints lived such holy lives, they have extra righteousness (referred to as a "treasury of merit") that can be made available to other believers through indulgences. In short, in Roman Catholic theology, a believer almost always falls short of the needed righteousness while in Protestant theology, a believer has the full righteousness of Christ credited to him and so has no need of anything further to justify him in God's sight, thus we have no need for purgatory or indulgences.

As you can see, these are two radically different understandings of justification. The Reformers believed Scripture was clear that works could not contribute in any way to our justification and that therefore it could only be faith alone. The Roman Catholics strongly disagreed. In response to the Reformation, at the Council of Trent, they made it clear what they thought of Sola Fide. In Canon 9, they said this, "If anyone says that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such wise as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of Justification, and that it is not in any way necessary... let him be anathema." So understand this, that if you believe that salvation is by faith alone, then you stand condemned under Roman Catholic doctrine.

So then, Sole Fide is a rejection of the Roman Catholic teaching that works are a necessary addition to faith by which we are justified and an affirmation of what Paul in Romans and the rest of Scripture repeatedly state is true: we are justified by faith alone, apart from works, so that no one can boast. Now I'm going to save the final question of "What does this mean for us?" until the very end of the message so we can talk about it at the same time as we do the next Sola that we're going to give our attention to this morning, which is Sola Gratia, which means, Grace Alone. So again, let's go back to our guiding question and begin by asking,

3. What is this affirming?

To state that salvation is by grace alone is to say that God was under no obligation to grant salvation to anyone, but that he acted freely according to his sovereign will to bring his elect to saving faith to which man contributed nothing. This principle of the Reformation was most clearly articulated in Luther's book, *The Bondage of the Will*." In it, Luther responded to a book written by a highly respected scholar named Erasmus. Erasmus had argued in favor of free will, claiming that the human will had the power to "apply himself to those things that lead to eternal salvation, or turn away from the same." ²

Luther, on the other hand, argued that according to Scripture, man's will was bound rather than free. Thus the phrase, "the bondage of the will" means we are totally unable to save ourselves because our sin has so radically damaged us that we're dependent upon God's grace alone to bring us to faith. If I might quote Luther for a moment, he said this, "'Man through sin has ceased to be good. He has no power to

please God. He's unable to do anything but continue in sin. His salvation, therefore, must be wholly of Divine grace, for he himself can contribute nothing to it; And any formulation of the gospel which amounts to saying that God shows grace, not in saving man, but in making it possible for man to save himself, is to be rejected as a lie. The whole work of man's salvation, first to last, is God's." ³

This idea can be seen clearly in a number of places in Scripture, although I will just briefly highlight two. The first is Ephesians 2. Please turn there with me. It can be found on pg. 976 of the pew Bibles. Paul describes our spiritual condition apart from Christ like this, starting in v. 1. *"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience - among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind..."*

This means that in our natural selves, we were dead to the things of God. We weren't able to respond to the gospel in our own power because we didn't possess that power. Dead people can't choose to respond to anything! Thus God must do for us what we cannot, which is exactly what Paul says in v. 4-5 of Ephesians 2. Look there in your Bibles with me. *"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved..."*

Since our wills were in bondage to sin, we were entirely dependent upon the grace of God to make us spiritually alive so that we would believe in Christ. This is also plainly seen in 1 Corinthians 2. Go there with me. It's a few pages back, specifically on pg. 953 of the pew Bibles. Look at v. 14 of 1 Corinthians 2. Paul says, *"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned."* Notice the words "not able." The natural man does not possess the facilities to respond in faith to the gospel. No one is free to either choose or reject Christ: our wills are in bondage to our sins so that we can only choose to reject Christ unless God by his grace grants us repentance and faith through the new birth.

Thus the Reformation principle of Sola Gratia is not that God by his grace makes salvation merely possible, but then leaves it in our hands to respond; that would imply we were able to choose between God and our sin, which Scripture tells us we are "not able" to do because we are dead in our sins. Rather, Sola Gratia affirms that even faith itself is a gift of God's grace, that we could never muster up such faith ourselves due to the enslavement of our wills to sin's dominion, and thus it is only by God's sovereign grace alone that anyone is saved.

So why is this so important? What was it that the Roman Catholic Church was teaching that Luther and the other Reformers were reacting to? Let's move on now to our fourth point to answer the question of...

4. What is this opposing?

One can sum up the position of the Roman Catholic church that the Reformers were reacting to with the theological word “synergism.” We talked about this word before, back when we were going through the book of Philippians, but let me refresh your memory. The word *synergism* comes from the combination of two root words: “syn” meaning “with” or “together” and “ergism” meaning “work.” So the word synergism means “working together” which in theological terms means God works together with us in salvation. The Roman Catholic church views salvation as a joint project. God provides the means for us to be saved through Christ’s death and the sacraments and we must provide the faith and obedience to seal the deal.

The Reformers, on the other hand, understood Scripture to teach “monergism,” which is the combination of the word “mono” meaning “alone” with the word for work. Thus for the Reformers they emphasized that salvation was monergistic, meaning that God alone works to bring about salvation. We don’t contribute anything to our salvation: God does it all for us because we cannot and thus it is all by grace alone.

Luther keenly felt the sting of synergistic theology as a young monk. While he knew God had done his part by sending Christ to the cross and giving us the means of grace through the sacraments of the Mass and penance and confession, Luther was never certain he had adequately done what was required on his end. Had he prayed sincerely enough? Did he confess all of his sin? Was he taking the Mass in a proper manner? Was his own righteousness enough and his faith strong enough to meet God’s expectations? If salvation is synergistic, then we will always be left in uncertainty of whether we’ve adequately measured up to our end of the deal.

But monergistic theology leaves doubt at the door. Salvation is all by grace. We contribute nothing to it, for even the faith we need to be declared righteous is a gift of God, given to us through the new birth. God does more than merely make salvation possible, provided on our end we muster up the faith and good works necessary to gain it and keep it; God makes salvation actual by actually saving people fully and completely. To use an illustration: we are not someone who is drowning and God throws out a life preserver and waits for us to do our part to grab it. Rather, it’s more like this: we are lying at the bottom of the ocean, dead, utterly unable to respond, and God comes and pulls us out of the water and breathes life back into us.

Or to use another illustration that has been made popular by a well-known painting: Jesus doesn’t stand at the door and knock, helplessly waiting for us to do our part and open the door to him. Rather, we’re lying dead on the floor, unable to do anything to help ourselves, and Jesus crashes through the door and calls us back to life by his power. That’s what *Sola Gratia* means. God’s grace alone is what saves us. We do not contribute anything to the equation. We were spiritually dead and so God must do everything to bring us to spiritual life otherwise we will never come.

So then, *Sola Fide* and *Sola Gratia* are central Reformation principles that we believe are clearly taught in Scripture and, in many ways, go hand-in-hand. For if

salvation is by faith and not by works, then even faith itself must be a gift given to us by grace, lest it become another work which we are responsible to muster up for ourselves. But now I want to turn our attention to our final question that we need to answer this morning, which brings us to point number five...

5. What does this mean for us?

Sola Fide and Sola Gratia are still important for us today because we can still so easily forget them. Our culture is permeated with the notion that we're saved by our good works such that it even affects church-going Christians. I've been interviewing people who want to become members of the church for many years and one of the key questions I ask them is this, "If you were to die today, and standing outside the gates of heaven God asked you, 'Why should I let you in?' what would you say?" Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for the person to answer with something about how they lived a good life and didn't do anything particularly terrible but yet they say little to nothing about faith in Christ.

So to begin with we need to constantly reaffirm that salvation is by faith alone not only because the Roman Catholic church to this day still rejects it but because so much of the rest of our culture denies it as well. Whether you are placing your hope in your baptism or your good works or your church attendance: none of those things will save you. Scripture is clear that what justifies us in God's sight has nothing to do with anything we did or did not do to merit God's favor: it is purely by faith alone.

And secondly, we need to affirm that salvation is by grace alone because so many people think they have to do their part in order to complete the deal. They think, "God did his part, now I need to do mine." We must not think faith is something on our side of the ledger that we need to balance out the salvation transaction. We can do nothing, including believe. God must grant us the faith to believe and thus all of salvation, from first to last, is by grace because we have no power to bring anything to the table to contribute to it.

Admittedly, the idea that salvation is through faith alone by grace alone is a difficult one for us even still today. It strikes at our pride. It undercuts our notions of independence and self-sufficiency. It challenges our American idealism of being a self-made man, one who is in charge of his own destiny. But our culture doesn't set the parameters of our theology: Scripture does, and Scripture has been clear: we were dead in our sin, unable to respond to the light of Christ in the gospel and only by God making us alive in Christ as an act of sovereign, unconditional, irresistible grace, can we be saved.

Conclusion:

So then, let me wrap this up by encouraging you to be boldly Protestant in affirming these Reformation commitments to Faith Alone and Grace Alone. But we don't want to affirm these merely because Martin Luther and the other Reformers did so, but because like them we see that these Solas reflect the very heart of the gospel as revealed in the

Word of God. I'm glad that Martin Luther and John Calvin and the other Reformers of the 16th century rightly challenged the church of their day, but more important is that these are the very same truths taught by the apostle Paul and Peter and John and most importantly by our Lord Jesus Christ himself. So because we stand on Scripture Alone, we must also affirm Faith Alone and Grace Alone because that is what it teaches. We needed bold men and women to stand for the truth of the gospel 500 years ago and we no less today in our modern age need those who will boldly affirm that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. Let's pray.

Endnotes

1. http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/mar_luther/CH.Luther.conversion.html
2. Bondage of the Will, Historical and Theological Introduction, pg. 137
3. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

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