

## *Sola Fide and the Total Christ Church*

### **I. Introduction: Confessing *Sola Fide* Today**

Confessing *sola fide* today feels a bit like identifying with a political ideology. No matter how loyal you are to one politically ideology, you will regularly find yourself scratching your head and saying, “They may say they have the same ideology as me, but they don’t represent my understanding of that ideology.”

This is especially true in our total Christ, high gospel, high-church subculture within a subculture (within a subculture?) known as Mission Anabaino. On the one hand, the high gospel crowd has worked hard to highlight the way in which faith draws everything from Christ and contributes nothing. But this formulation has often reduced the church and her ministers to nothing more than an accessory in the Christian life.

On the other hand, the reformed high-church crowd has joined Calvin in believing “Away from her [the church’s] bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation.”<sup>i</sup> But often these congregations and pastors, in their attempts to recover the right administration of the sacraments, downplay the sinner’s subjective experience of faith in Christ. These churches and their liturgical precision often pose stumbling blocks for those exploring Christianity. The goal of this paper is to make a case for the recovery and practice of *sola fide* in our high gospel and high-church congregations.

### **II. *Sola Fide* and the Reformation**

Though a myriad of contemporary debates rage about how justification and faith fit together, it is important that we grasp the situation into which the clear articulation of *sola fide* was birthed. During the time of the reformation, the question, “How is a sinner made righteous?” was ground zero for the debates between Rome and the Reformers.

The medieval consensus was relatively clear: one was made righteous before God through a type of justification received at baptism. This justification included both the renewal of the human being *and* the process of that renewal.<sup>ii</sup> Justification was an ongoing process by which one was gradually made righteous so that one could stand before a holy God.

One example of this would be the approach to justification articulated by the 15<sup>th</sup> century nominalist theologian Gabriel Biel. Luther studied under Biel’s faithful disciples in Erfort and his views were in the background of much of Luther’s debates regarding justification. Biel taught that apart from the sacramental infusion of grace no one could earn any real merit. However, when one did one’s best, it became possible to earn a semimerit (*meritum de congruo*).<sup>iii</sup> God, because of his covenantal promises, committed himself to extending grace to the baptized individual who did his or her best morally.

This view was common from the pulpit. Johannes Geiler of Keisersberg, cathedral preacher at Strasbourg and one of the most popular preachers of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, frequently referenced this idea in his sermons. He would illustrate this view of justification with sailing, instructing his congregation that “a ship cannot receive wind in her sails so long as her sails aren’t up. So also, we cannot receive God’s grace without the preparation of raising the sail!”<sup>iv</sup> Justification was given to every baptized human, but the job of humans was to raise the sails by doing good works so that God’s grace could make

them more and more righteous. It's easy to see the anxiety of a monk like Luther flourishing in this system like this.

It is in the face of this approach to justification that Luther would argue Christ fully and finally accomplished salvation and right standing before God for sinners. And this salvation was appropriated through faith alone. Luther classically argued that a sinner is "justified by faith alone and not any works"<sup>v</sup> The God of the Scriptures was a God who justifies the ungodly and counts his or her faith as righteousness (Rom. 4:5).

But this birthed a subsequent question, "What is faith?" The Medieval church taught that faith, at its core, was simply mental assent to the doctrines of the church. This was called "unformed faith".

Before justification could fully take place unformed faith had to be matched with contrition and expressed in acts of love. When this happened, unformed faith became formed faith. Though the measure of forgiveness extended was commensurate with the degree to which sin was actually overcome through formed faith, this was still gracious on God's part, as his grace in baptism enabled the sinner to one more merit salvation.<sup>vi</sup>

The reformers rejected the notion of "unformed faith" and "formed faith" altogether. "Formed faith" as just one more form of legalism. Justification, for the reformers, was not the goal an individual worked towards, but the foundation of the Christian life. Faith only was the instrument of our justification, and anything more, even defining faith as assent plus works of love, was a distortion of how a sinner was made right with God. As Luther famously translated Romans 3:28, "For we hold that one is justified by faith alone apart from works of the law."<sup>vii</sup> *Sola* became the watchword.

The Reformers were clear, a sinner was not justified *on account of* faith nor could faith ever be considered a human accomplishment or achievement. Faith, by its very nature, is passive in its inability to make any contributions. Though faith actively receives Christ, it makes no offering itself. Faith excludes any possibility of boasting. It draws all its power from Christ, its object. Faith has no power apart from Christ. Faith itself is ultimately a gift from God.

The Roman Catholics rightly understood the Protestant emphasis on the *sola* of *fide*. And then responded in the Council of Trent by confessing in Canon IX,

*If any one says, that by faith alone the impious is justified; in such a way as to mean, that nothing else is required to co-operate in order to the obtaining the grace of justification, ... let him be anathema.*<sup>viii</sup>

On the one hand, this canon shows a misunderstanding of the Reformers doctrine of *sola fide*. No Reformer believed faith could be expressed alone. Works always accompanied faith, but faith only was the instrument by which a sinner received justification. The council was clear, the sinner was required to co-operate in order to obtain justification. The canons go on to state that anyone who does not believe our good works merit our eternal life in justification is cursed.<sup>ix</sup>

As the reformation progressed, the reformers and the Roman Catholic theologians only grew more clearly divided on *sola fide*. *Sola fide* came to be the doctrine by which Protestant Christianity distinguished herself, not only from the Roman Catholic tradition, but also from all other religions! To profess the reformation faith was to believe that faith in Jesus was the instrumental cause of our justification. Sinners could receive all the benefits of the salvation won by Christ only through the instrument of faith!

### III. *Sola Fide* and the Scriptures

But did the reformers doctrine of *sola fide* arise out of the scriptures? As any student of theology knows, a quick search of the word “faith” and “alone” will pull up James 2:24, “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” If theology is to be done by proof texting, *sola fide* is out.

It is interesting that the Westminster Confession, far from avoiding this seemingly contradictory passage, actually utilizes it (along with Galatians 5:4-6) in their attack on Rome. In the Roman system, justification is by faith, but that faith needs baptism. At baptism, the sinner is infused with righteousness making the unjust person a just person. The sacrament is the instrument by which unformed faith is infused with grace bringing about the foundation for a formed faith. In this way, faith alone cannot justify, but needs the sacrament and additional works of love.

For the Westminster Divines justification does not come from an isolated faith or a “solo” faith, rather “faith . . . is the alone instrument of justification, yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love” (WCF 11.2). Following James, faith never comes all by itself for the Divines. In the Roman scheme, faith does not save, because faith must be formed by baptism, the real instrument of justification. But the Westminster Divines, with James, cannot conceive of a nude faith, a faith that exists all by itself. To put it bluntly, the Divines reject the idea that one is justified by faith alone if by faith alone we mean a nude faith or a solitary faith. Faith always comes with friends. It is always accompanied by all other saving graces and works of love in the Westminster scheme!

This understanding of saving faith is in line with James. “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” An isolated faith not “accompanied by other saving graces” nor “working by love” is not the faith that justifies. “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:14). Saving faith cannot exist by itself!

This is why James will use Abraham as a perfect case study in this context. The scriptures declare, “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness” (James 2:23; citing Gen. 15:6). But this was no isolated faith, for the righteousness of Abraham was fulfilled in his offering up Isaac. James sees “solo” *fide*, a faith that exists with no other saving graces or love, as a deception. Isolated faith, mental assent only, is a mark of a deceptive faith, not an unformed faith waiting for baptism.

With this understanding of James, we are protected from putting faith in faith. This understanding lines up well with the teachings of Paul. When Paul says in Romans 3:28, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law”, he shows that he does not have a isolated faith in mind by immediately stating that his gospel in the end “upholds the law” (3:31). Justification is only received by faith, and because of that there is no boasting (3:27) and no assuming one is owed a wage from God (4:4-5). Justification does not come through works of the law, nor can faith be construed as a meritorious work. For the Jews and Gentiles it is faith only in Christ that saves (Gal. 2:16)<sup>x</sup>. The foundation of the Christian life is the finished work of Christ applied to the sinner only through faith! But the goal of the Christian life is not to cultivate nude or isolated faith! The goal is to grow in saving grace and make justification’s declaration of “in the right” more clear in the Christian’s life through acts of love!

#### IV. *Sola Fide* and the Totus Christus Church

What does it look like to not only teach, but also celebrate *sola fide* in a Total Christ church today? From the onset, a clear question comes to my mind, what role does Christ's temple presence in his church contribute to our doctrine of *sola fide*?

The reformation did not conceive of *sola fide* apart from Christ's presence. Late medieval piety had a tendency to obfuscate the way in which Christ's presence was experienced. It was only through layers and layers of man-made rituals and practices (e.g. schemes of penitence, indulgences, pilgrimages, etc.) that one could know they experienced Christ and received justification. The Reformers focused on Christ's presence in word and sacrament with focused simplicity. It is through the word and the sacraments that Christ publically, personally and corporately unites himself to his people.

If faith in Christ is the alone instrument of our justification, we must ask, "Where can sinners find Christ?" This is a question of presence. Where can one lay hold of Christ? Few write with the clarity of Martin Bucer on this subject. He argues that "The Lord is never absent from his church, but is always personally present, personally doing and performing everything in all things."<sup>x</sup> How is he personally present? For Bucer it is through his ministers. He writes,

*Our Lord Jesus is truly present in his church, ruling, leading and feeding it himself. But he effects and carries out this his rule and the feeding of his lambs in such a way as to remain always in his heavenly nature, that is, in his divine and intangible state, because he has left this world. Therefore it has pleased him to exercise his rule, protection and care of us who are still in this world with and through the ministry of his word, which he does outwardly and tangibly through his ministers and instruments.*<sup>xii</sup>

The Lord has ordained ministers to preach the word and administer the sacraments that "people might come to Christ our Lord and be saved."<sup>xiii</sup> Ministers of Total Christ churches must preach as those who believe Christ is present through our words to sinners, and we must call them to believe our words, as they are truly Christ's. When the sheep arrive in Christ's presence in glory the words should sound familiar.<sup>xiv</sup>

Total Christ ministers must prepare and preach as though they believed, with Bucer, that "The Lord wishes to open and close access to heaven through the agency of his ministers."<sup>xv</sup> Citing 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Bucer writes "Paul's preaching was the word of God, not of a man,"<sup>xvi</sup> and this for Bucer is a principal applied to all faithful preaching by Christ's ordained ministers. Preaching in a Total Christ Church must come with a certain dignity and confidence for the sheeps' sake. We must preach as though Christ is truly and personally present through our words to our congregation. What would Christ say to this flock? How would he say it? And what does it look like to challenge our congregation to believe what Christ says about them?

If justification is a public declaration from God that one is righteous before God, our flock must learn what it feels like to publically hear this declaration. Ministers must believe their words give their flock a chance to hear and lay hold of Christ by faith. In my opinion, this is why we should include, not only a time of confession, but also clear words of absolution for our people in our movement of renewal. And though anyone could read Scripture's promises, ministers should delight and see it as their duty to be the means by which Christ's forgiveness is proclaimed over his people.

*Sola fide* and Christ's temple presence should affect our pastoral care. Calvin writes that congregants are to "not less highly value the reconciliation which is offered by the voice of men, than if God himself stretched out his hand from heaven."<sup>xvii</sup> Pastors must minister with the authority of Christ in our pastoral care just as much as in our sermons. Luther understood this. In his Shorter Catechism he teaches a liturgy of private confession as part of pastoral care. After a confession is made to a minister, the minister is to ask the confessing, "Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?" "Yes dear confessor." The minister is to then say, "Let it be done for you as you believe. And I, by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ, forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in peace."<sup>xviii</sup> Ministers are not called to give TED talks in the pulpit nor psychological wisdom releases during office hours. As surely as the workers at an embassy act on the authority of another nation, so also, our words come with the authority of heaven to sheep in times of great need.

While this is certainly true of our use of words, it also must be true of how we administer the sacraments. We need to learn to articulate *sola fide* in a way that does not run in opposition to the role that sacraments play in the Christian life. Far too often, popular articulations of the reformation, especially in groups like the Gospel Coalition, pit *sola fide* as a victory over the Roman "sacramental charades".<sup>xix</sup> We should never forget that the Reformers never disregarded the sacraments, but restored the sacraments to the people as the means by which God evokes and sustains faith.

When Luther was challenged for his high view of baptism in light of his commitment to *sola fide* he wrote,

*"Yes, it is true that our works are of no use for salvation. Baptism, however, is not our work but God's. God's works, however, are salutary and necessary for salvation, and they do not exclude but rather demand faith, for without faith they could not be grasped."*<sup>xx</sup>

He would go on to write, "Baptism is not a work which we do but is a treasure which God gives us and faith grasps"<sup>xxi</sup> The sacraments are tools and means God has given us to sustain and mature the faith of our congregation! Arguing that a high view of the sacraments might detract from *sola fide* is as foolish as arguing that reading the Old Testament might interfere with someone's understanding of John 3:16. Rather than always lamenting that Rome's sacramental system went to far, we need to join with the reformers and say that the Roman system did not go far enough at times!

We also must grow sacramental instincts as it relates to how we talk about assurance. While there is nothing wrong with grounding assurance in simple syllogism like "Whoever believes in Christ is saved. I believe in Jesus Christ. I am saved." We must also never fear sacramental syllogism like, "Christ, by means of a minister, said in my baptism, 'I belong to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.' Christ never lies. Therefore I belong to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." This is what faith holds to, Christ's work and word!

Finally, we must never forget that our declaration of "justified" comes because Christ rose from the dead! We are only justified as we are brought into union with him. We must talk about justification by faith alone. If faith is the only means by which we have been accepted by God, we must accept others by faith as well. Justification by faith alone must not only be taught, but incarnated in our communities as we live out our union with Christ and his people.

## V. Conclusion

While so much more could be said,<sup>xxii</sup> I hope this paper has shown that *sola fide* is not an idiosyncratic doctrine birthed out of peculiar late medieval debates. *Sola fide* is the good news we must continue to confess. However, we must work to protect *sola fide* from our anti-ecclesiological and anti-sacramental time in church history. I believe *sola fide* can thrive in our age with our Total Christ spirituality. We need covenant and temple together to show that justification is received through faith in Christ only. But this Christ has seen fit to make his presence known in the church. And its there we should expect to see people truly lay hold of him and receive all that is offered in the gospel.

---

<sup>i</sup> John Calvin. Trans. John T. McNeill, and Ford Lewis. Battles. *Calvin: Institutes of Christian Religion*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960. 4.1.4. p. 1016.

<sup>ii</sup> This is extremely reductionist. For a more full treatment see McGrath, Alister E. *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Book 1. p. 40-41, 50.

<sup>iii</sup> George, Timothy. *Theology of the Reformers*. Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2013. p. 66. My understanding of Biel is greatly indebted to George.

<sup>iv</sup> McGrath, p. 116.

<sup>v</sup> Martin Luther. "The Freedom of a Christian." *Three Treatises*. Trans. W. A. Lambert; Rev. Harold J. Grimm. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970. p. 280.

<sup>vi</sup> Louis Berkhoff. *Systematic Theology*. Digital Reprint found at [www.biblicaltraining.org/library/systematic-theology-louis-berkhof](http://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/systematic-theology-louis-berkhof). p. 464. Here I am also greatly influenced by Sinclair Ferguson's "Sola Fide" in *Some Pastors and Teachers*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2018.

<sup>vii</sup> Even Roman Catholic Scholar Joseph Fitzmyer agrees this captures the text and is not an imposition (Fitzmyer. *Romans*. AB. New York: Double Day, 1993. p. 360-362.

<sup>viii</sup> Session VI Canon IX.

<sup>ix</sup> Session VI Canon XXXII: If any one says, that the good works of one that is justified are in such manner the gifts of God, as that they are not also the good merits of him that is justified; or, that the said justified, by the good works which he performs through the grace of God and the merit of Jesus Christ, whose living member he is, does not truly merit increase of grace, eternal life, and the attainment of that eternal life,-if so be, however, that he depart in grace,-and also an increase of glory; let him be anathema.

<sup>x</sup> I realize there are tremendous debates about works of the law, especially with the New Perspective on Paul. For the purposes of this paper, I cannot engage these debates.

<sup>xi</sup> Martin Bucer. *Concerning the True Care of Souls*. Trans. Peter Beale. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2016. p. 13.

<sup>xii</sup> Bucer, p. 17.

<sup>xiii</sup> Bucer, p. 21. Bucer goes as far as to even teach a catechism of sorts for anyone that would reject or downplay the role of the church by stating "I wish to maintain the order of my Lord, who ordains in his church his appointed ministers, through whom it is his will to gather me into his kingdom, to pardon my sins, to give me new birth to keep me, teach me, and lead me to eternal life. I intend to listen to them and their word and work in this ministry as the Lord himself, so long as they exercise their ministry

---

according to the Lord's appointment, not as their own word and work but as the word and work of my Lord Jesus Christ which they truly are, hearing and receiving them so that they may work in me too, to the praise of the Lord and the salvation of the elect." Bucer, p. 23-24.

<sup>xiv</sup> John 10:27, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." Part of how God works is through means, and the means by which they hear Jesus' voice is the voice of a minister.

<sup>xv</sup> Bucer, p. 19. While this passage is usually applies to church discipline, Bucer sees it as having application to preaching.

<sup>xvi</sup> Bucer, p. 20.

<sup>xvii</sup> John Calvin. *Commentary on the Gospel of John. Vol. 2.* Trans. Rev. William Pringle. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1989. p. 272. This passage is found in Calvin's comments on John 20:23.

<sup>xviii</sup> Martin Luther. *Small Catechism. V. Confession.* Found at: "Luther's Small Catechism." Luther's Small Catechism by Dr. Martin Luther. Accessed April 07, 2018. <http://catechism.cph.org/en/confession.html>.

<sup>xix</sup> "4 Ways the Reformation Changed the Church." The Gospel Coalition. Accessed April 07, 2018. <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/4-ways-the-reformation-changed-the-church/>

<sup>xx</sup> Martin Luther, *The Larger Catechism.* Holy Baptism. Paragraph 35. Cited from Martin Luther. *The Larger Catechism of Martin Luther.* Trans. Robert H. Fischer. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1959. p. 85.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxii</sup> So much more could and should be written on *sola fide* and the New Prospective on Paul, or the Lordship controversy, or the use of Confessional booths, or works, or Norman Shepherd's view of Justification.