

Reformation Theology: Sola Fide

July 16, 2017 – Rev. Brian Hand

Definition: We are forgiven our sins and counted righteous in God's sight solely by trusting in Christ.

1. **Context:** Concerns our moral standing before God.
2. **Negative aspect:** Something is taken away, it involves the removal of guilt for sin, the clearing of all moral debt.
3. **Positive aspect:** The crediting of a perfect moral righteousness to our account.
4. **Means:** Faith and faith alone in Christ alone. Gospel grace:

Point of clarification on Justification:

1. 'Forensic' justification: a legal declaration by the divine judge.
 - a. This is different from someone actually being made intrinsically righteous...we are counted righteous.
 - i. As it is a declaration, this is an event that takes place in a specific moment of time.
 - b. We do ultimately become intrinsically righteous through the process of sanctification. It is imperfect in this life but perfected in the life to come.

Contrasting RC and Reformed views:

The ground/basis of justification-

RC: Infused Righteousness- Christ's righteousness is placed in us- becomes ours. (Initial Justification). However, it must be maintained (Progressive Justification).

Reformed: Imputed Righteousness (not our own righteousness but Christ's). Christ's righteousness is the ground of God's declaration. It is an "alien" righteousness accounted to us, not "intrinsic" being found in us (Not subject to change).

The instrument/means of justification-

RC: faith+works. Works are characterized as works of charity, of love, devotion, or penance. Since justification is a process in which Christ's righteousness is infused into you, it necessarily must be maintained through works.

Reformed: Faith alone. Christ's righteousness is accounted to you before the judgment seat of God. You cannot add to or take away from Christ's righteousness.

Implications

1. We are fully justified before God from the first moment of faith in Christ. **Think of Fanny Crosby's To God be the glory, "Oh perfect redemption, the purchase of blood. To every**

believer the promise of God; the vilest offender who truly believes, that moment from Jesus forgiveness receives"

2. A genuine saving faith in Christ is sufficient for final salvation (cf. Romans 8:30). The verdict is given and it must stand for it is God's verdict and therefore cannot change.
3. We should put no trust in our own works or efforts to secure our salvation.

Misunderstandings

1. We are justified merely by intellectual assent to the truths of the gospel.

Even the devils have this (James 2) they know and believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

Notitia- Knowledge of the truths of the gospel (content)

Assensus- intellectuall assent to them as truth

Fiducia- personal trust in and commitment to the Savior offered in the gospel

2. We are justified by faith as such (i.e. faith in general, with no specific object). As long as you have faith in something.

Our faith has to have the proper object (Jesus Christ) the object must correspond to the ground of our justification. To put faith in anything or anyone other than Christ is profoundly dishonoring to Christ and cannot be the ground.

3. We can be saved without any good works.

RC misunderstanding. Works are not the means nor the ground of our justification. Yet they are still the necessary fruit or evidence of justifying faith. If a person has saving faith that will be evidenced in a transformed life. RC- Faith+works=justification. Reformed- Faith = Justification+works. Calvin- I wish the reader to understand that as often as we mention Faith alone in this question, we are not thinking of a dead faith, which works not by love, but holding faith to be the only cause of justification. It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is never alone.

4. God accepts our faith as a substitute for good works.

It confuses the instrument of justification with the ground of justification. It is not as though God says “your works are like filthy rags, so I’ll take your faith instead as a substitute work”. This is not just splitting hairs, getting this wrong is devaluing the work of Christ, it makes our faith the main thing rather than Christ.

5. We believe in Jesus by a “leap of faith” without any rational or evidential support, just faith and faith alone.

When we speak about faith alone the “alone” signifies apart from works. It doesn’t mean apart from evidence or reason. Jesus himself called for people to believe on account of the evidence of the miracles, the Apostles appealed to eyewitness evidence and we have the evidence of the Scriptures.

6. Our standing before God depends on the strength of our faith.

It is not “the better our faith the better our justification” It is not a matter of degree with justification, you are either justified or you are not. If it were dependent on the strength of our faith then there would be grounds for boasting and this would negate the doctrine.

Scriptural Support:

Genesis 15:6

Abraham believed (didn’t do anything). Abraham was counted righteous on account of his faith. Not because of something he did. It is important to note that he was counted righteous prior to circumcision and the outward mark of the covenant.

Matthew 5:20,48

Might appear to say that it is our work, however, if the standard is perfection, then no one can be saved. Therefore, it must be some other standard than our own righteousness.

Luke 18:9-14

This parable is one of the clearest teachings for the basis of Justification by faith alone. 1. Note to whom it is directed (those who trusted in themselves). 2. Note the pharisee and what he said about himself and why he considered himself righteous (he actually possessed moral righteousness). 3. Pharisee had a religious righteousness (fasting, tithing). 4. The Pharisee believed his righteousness was a gift from God (he thanked God that he was what he was). 5. The tax collector doesn't point to his own righteousness because he has none, so he cries out for mercy. 6. Jesus tells us only one of these men went home justified and it was not the Pharisee. If the RC view was correct, the Pharisee should have been justified on the basis of his intrinsic righteousness.

Luke 23:39-43

2 criminals on the cross beside Jesus- the thief is promised paradise but there was no way that he could have been justified based on his own righteousness. (Side note- not in purgatory but paradise, today)

Romans 3:21-31

Commentator Leon Morris calls vv. 21-36 "possibly the most important paragraph ever written". Clear that we are talking about an alien righteousness (outside of us, the righteousness of God) received by faith. No person has a righteousness intrinsic to them that meets God's standards (all fall short) and are justified as a gift to be received through faith.

Romans 5:1

Clear statement

Galatians 2:16

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, ...by works of the law no one will be justified.

2 Corinthians 5:21

Righteousness for us is only found "in him"

Isaiah 53:4-6,8,10-12

See the account of the suffering servant. In this passage we see that the people for whom the servant suffers don't have an intrinsic righteousness of their own. Yet God imputes their unrighteousness to the servant, it is the will of the Lord to crush him and he is crushed for our iniquities. Through this servant many are accounted righteous.

Additional Scriptures

Matthew 9:22,29; 15:28; Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42- All variations of Jesus saying, "Your faith has healed/saved you".

John 1:12; 3:14-16,18,36; 5:24; 6:40,47; 11:25-26; 20:31- "whoever believes" πιστις same Greek word for faith

Acts 16:31; Romans 1:16-17; 4:1-12; 10:3-4,10; Galatians 3:1-14; Ephesians 2:8-9; Philippians 3:1-9

Summary Argument/ Theological Basis:

1. We are fallen in sin and all our moral efforts are tainted by sin.
2. Therefore, we cannot be counted righteous (justified) before God on the ground of our own righteousness.
3. Therefore, we can only be counted righteous (justified) before God on the ground of an 'alien' righteousness: Christ's righteousness imputed to us.
4. It would not be fitting to receive Christ's righteousness by means of good works.
5. Therefore, we must receive Christ's righteousness by means of faith alone.

Objections:

1. James 2:24 clearly states that we are not justified by faith alone. We have seen that Paul does in fact teach justification by faith alone. We may have a problem of contradiction but Paul is clear. However what may appear to be a contradiction is only a contradiction if terms are being used in the same senses. Are Paul and James using terms in the same way? If God is the primary author through human writers we would not expect to see contradiction. It doesn't take much reflection to see that Paul and James are not talking about the same thing, they are dealing with different

errors. Paul is dealing with a legalistic issue. James is dealing with antinomianism. Are they using “faith” in a different way? James says even the demons have “faith” (2:19). Would Paul have said this in the way he uses faith? No! James seems to be referencing an intellectual assent without the heart commitment. James also distinguishes between a living faith and a dead faith and argues that dead faith cannot justify anyone, Paul certainly would agree with this. Is there reason to think that they are using “justify” in a different sense? Paul says Abraham was justified when he believed God, James says he was justified when he offered up Isaac but also says the Scripture was fulfilled that he was justified by his belief. For James it seems to confirm a living faith. Reformed theologians have always insisted that good works will necessarily flow from genuine faith and confirm it.

Paul is speaking of initial justification and James speaking of final justification.

2. The Reformed view of justification involves a legal fiction (God declaring something false). Accusation from RC critics. If God legally declares someone righteous who isn't righteous it would be an empty lie without foundation. 1. God's declaration does have a foundation in the righteousness of Christ rather than the righteousness of Christians. Actually the best foundation there could be. This is really an objection of imputation which we ultimately can't get away from in other points of theology. Original sin would be done away with as well.

3. Jesus told the lawyer (Luke 10:25-28) and the rich young ruler (Luke 18:18-20) that they had to do good works to gain eternal life. Jesus' real point is the exact opposite, his purpose is to get people to see that they cannot do good works to attain eternal life by setting an unreachable standard. Note also that the parable of the rich young ruler follows the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

4. The reformed view of justification comes from Paul, not Jesus.

1. Even if it came only from Paul that would be enough since Paul's writings are divinely inspired. If Paul teaches it essentially Jesus is teaching it. 2. We see that Jesus is teaching it in Luke 18.

5. Paul nowhere uses the phrases "by faith alone" or "through faith alone". Example of the word concept fallacy, i.e. if a word isn't there then the concept can't be there. (JW's try to argue this way about the Trinity) We get the concept from phrases like "apart from works of the law"

6. The reformed view of justification leads to antinomianism. Even if we are justified apart from the law it does not mean that the law doesn't apply to us. Reformed theologians have always insisted that works will be the necessary fruit of true faith.

Importance to the Christian Life

1. *Sola Fide* means that the gospel really is "good news" for sinners! *If my justification depends on my ability to keep the law of God that is not good news. This is bad news. But if I am offered the righteousness of Christ and the absolute forgiveness of my sins by trusting him that is wonderful news.*
2. *Sola Fide* means that we can be free from guilt and the fear of God's righteous wrath. *We can relate to God as a loving father rather than a wrathful God. This relationship is changed radically and permanently at the moment of faith*
3. *Sola Fide* is a necessary foundation for petitionary prayer. *This would be outrageous for sinful humans to approach a holy God and expect a favorable response apart from sola fide.*
4. *Sola Fide* is a necessary foundation for assurance of final salvation. *If God has already rendered his verdict on us then that verdict will stand for eternity. If it is based on Christ's righteousness rather than ours then it is not in danger of being lost based on some future sin I may commit.*
5. *Sola Fide* encourages us to pursue ever-greater knowledge of our Savior, Jesus Christ. *If the proper object of justifying faith is none other than Jesus Christ it should be an encouragement to always be seeking greater intimacy and knowledge of the one in whom we have put our trust.*
6. *Sola Fide* reinforces that we have been saved by grace alone. *If the means of justification is faith alone apart from good works then the source MUST be grace alone. These two go hand in hand in pointing us away from our own efforts and to Christ.*

7. *Sola Fide* cultivates humility and guards us from taking pride in our good works.
8. *Sola Fide* reminds us that we are not justified on the basis of our good doctrine. *Some reformed believers are so eager to point out that saying we are justified on the part of good works is bad doctrine that they end up seemingly saying that we are justified based on our doctrine. This Doctrine is so opposed to being a ground for pride that we need to be careful.*
9. *Sola Fide* cultivates a deeper personal appreciation for the great hymns of the faith. Ex. *Rock of Ages* (verse 3), *To God be the Glory* (verse 2) , *And Can it Be, Before the Throne of God Above*.

Faith which receives Christ is a simple an act as when your child receives an apple from you, because you hold it out and promise to give him the apple if he comes for it. The belief and the receiving relate only to an apple; but they make up precisely the same act as the faith which deals with eternal salvation. What the child's hand is to the apple, that your faith is to the perfect salvation of Christ. The child's hand does not make the apple, nor improve the apple, nor deserve the apple; it only takes it; and faith is chosen by God to be the receiver of salvation, because it does not pretend to create salvation, nor to help in it, but it is content humbly to receive it. *Faith is the tongue that begs pardon, the hand which receives it, and the eye which sees it; but it is not the price which buys it.* Faith never makes herself her own plea, she rests all her argument upon the blood of Christ. She becomes a good servant owns that grace alone entrusted her with them.

(Charles H. Spurgeon, *All of Grace*)