



The Five Reformation Principles

Study 3: Sola Fide (Gal 3:1-14)

o The doctrine of “sola fide” states that faith (in Christ) alone is the means by which a person is declared not guilty by God, and treated as righteous instead, based on the righteousness of Christ imputed (credited) to him.

I. Recovery of the doctrine.

1. The imputation of Christ’s righteousness by faith was a doctrine taught in the early church up to the time of Augustine (354-430) of Hippo. Augustine himself wrote on this subject in his work, “The Spirit and the Letter”. His emphasis, however, was upon the grace of God in salvation, as he battled against Pelagianism. As the Roman Church gained ascendancy, the doctrine of justification by faith was perverted.
 - The *ground* of justification was changed from the righteousness of Christ to the righteousness infused in the individual. In other words, it is no longer Christ’s imputed righteousness that saves, but the individual’s righteousness that saves.
 - The *means* of justification was changed from faith in Christ to the sacrament of baptism. In the case of infants, they are justified even before they have the ability to understand the gospel and respond with faith. Baptism functions "ex opere operato" or "by the working of the act".
 - The *definition* of justification was changed. Instead of a judicial act of declaration, justification became confused with sanctification. The RC Church began to teach that justification was pardon plus renewal, a position formalised at the Council of Trent (1547, session VI). Based on James 2:14-17, the RC Church claimed that acts of faith and deeds of repentance are the basis for pardon by God.
2. Martin Luther, while teaching through the book of Romans in 1516, never had assurance of salvation. He was particularly troubled by Romans 1:17, ‘For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “The just shall live by faith”.’
 - The RC Church was teaching that God manifests His righteousness to condemn those without faith. The light broke upon Luther some time in 1517. It dawned upon him that Romans 1:17 was talking about the imputed righteousness of Christ. He later found additional support from Augustine’s writing on the subject.
 - Luther’s understanding on the subject developed as he expounded on Galatians, and published the commentary in 1531. By that time, the Reformation was well on its way.
3. Martin Luther’s theology and spiritual life had been challenged and shaped by the teaching of the Moravians. The Moravians, in turn, were to use Luther’s writings to influence others.
 - As the Reformation spread, the doctrine of justification by faith became known as “the material principle of the Reformation”. Martin Luther said, “On this article rests all we

teach and practice.” John Calvin also commented that justification is “the main hinge on which religion turns.” The Puritans wrote much on this doctrine. John Owen’s book “The Doctrine of Justification by Faith”, published in 1677, became a classic (Works: Vol 5). The perversion of this doctrine is a perversion of the gospel itself (cf. Gal 1:8-9).

- When the 18th century dawned, John Wesley had graduated from, and Charles Wesley was still studying at, Oxford University. Together with George Whitefield, they founded the “Holy Club” and became known as “Methodists”. In 1735 the Wesley brothers sailed to Georgia in America on a mission trip. John Wesley wrote of his experience, “I went to America to convert the Indians; but, oh, who shall convert me?” Upon their return, they attended the Aldersgate Street meetings held by the Moravians in London. On 21 May 1738, Charles Wesley came to faith through hearing Martin Luther’s commentary on Galatians read. Three days later, on 24 May 1738, John Wesley was converted through hearing the Preface to Martin Luther’s book on Romans.

II. Implications of the doctrine.

1. In the NT, “sola fide” is taught in order to counter reliance on law-keeping. During the Reformation, “sola fide” was taught to counter reliance on the sacraments.
 - The Puritans upheld “sola fide” while doing battle against nominalism, in which professing believers showed no holiness of life. In their preaching, they emphasised the necessity of conviction of sin for there to be true conversion. The law does not save, but the preaching of the law is necessary to secure conviction of sin (Rom 3:20; Gal 3:24-25).
 - John Calvin wrote of the “Threefold Use of the Law”: the pedagogical use, the civil use, and the moral use. The Puritans were emphasising the first use of the law in order to secure the third use of the law. While maintaining a clear distinction between law and gospel, both must be preached together.
 - The emphasis on the preaching of the law together with the gospel was wrongly criticised as “preparationism” by those who held a low view of conversion. A Scotsman called Robert Sandeman (1718-1771) began teaching the idea that “faith alone” excludes conviction of the heart, or feelings. In other words, faith is mere intellectual assent to the truth of the gospel. Sandemanianism became the fore-runner of “easy-believism” of latter years.
2. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, evangelicals were cooperating in missions and social issues, while under-emphasising doctrine. The Confessions of Faith fell out of use.
 - In the late 19th century, Modernism arose which attacked the doctrine of “sola scriptura”, thereby undermining “sola fide”. A theological movement called Neo-Orthodoxy arose to provide itself as an alternative to Modernism, but its emphasis on subjective experience at the expense of propositional truth was not acceptable to the Fundamentalists. Fundamentalism (or old evangelicalism) managed to check the spread of Modernism, but sadly became fragmented after 1925.
 - The Second Great Awakening (c. 1790-1840) in America brought numerical increase to the churches but weakened the gospel with “easy-believism”. The doctrine of “sola fide” was wrongly used to support the idea that faith in Christ is all that is needed to be a Christian, without the need of holy living. The idea of the “carnal Christian” was introduced to describe those who have “made Christ their Saviour but not their Lord”. A “crisis experience” of some kind is needed to bring them to a higher level of spirituality.
 - In the 20th century, the rise of the Ecumenical movement and the Charismatic movement drew the Neo-Evangelicals and Roman Catholics together by the common concerns over secularism and social issues (poverty, abortion, divorce, drug-addiction, suicide, LGBT, etc.) The doctrine of biblical separation was ignored (2 Cor 6:14-18; Rom 16:17-18; 2

John 10), while easy-believism spread. (Early Neo-Evangelicals leaders would include Billy Graham, Carl H. Henry, etc.)

3. In the 21st century, the Seeker-sensitive movement seeks to draw into the church as many as possible of the unchurched people by giving them what they want. Jokes, music, good lighting of the premises, and relationship issues are maximised while doctrine is minimised, with the result that the gospel of “justification by faith” is muted. The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) attempts to redefine the doctrine of justification along Barthian line, in which it is claimed that justification is finalised on judgement day. (Karl Barth, 1886-1968, the Father of Neo-Orthodoxy.)
 - The New Calvinism movement, although emphasising adherence to the Five Points of Calvinism, does not uphold the Five Principles of the Reformation in letter and in spirit.
 - With advances in technology, transportation, and communications, globalisation is taking place at a breathtaking pace. The extensive movement of people means the need to reach out to “all the nations” with the message of “justification by faith, in Christ, alone”.
- = Martin Luther rightly called “justification by faith” “the doctrine by which the church stands or falls”.

Review Questions

1. Define “sola fide”.
2. What three things about “justification by faith” was changed by the Roman Catholic Church?
3. What phrase in which verse of the Bible troubled Martin Luther?
4. What was the doctrine of “justification by faith” called as the Reformation spread?
5. Which commentary of Martin Luther was used by God to convert Charles Wesley?
6. How is “sola fide” used in the New Testament and how was it used during the Reformation?
7. What did critics of the Puritans call their approach of preaching the law with the gospel?
8. How does easy-believism misuse “sola fide” and how is it similar to Sandemanianism of the 18th century?
9. How is “sola fide” side-lined in the Seeker-sensitive movement?
10. Why is the New Calvinism movement not truly “Reformed”?

Assignment/Discussion

Why is “justification by faith” the doctrine by which the church stands or falls”?

Memory Passage (Gal 3:10-11)

10 For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.” 11 But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for “the just shall live by faith.”
