



## Sola Fidei The Main Principle of the Protestant Reformation

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The principle of *sola fidei*, “faith alone,” emerged in the history of the Protestant Reformation when Martin Luther added the word “alone” to the text of the apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans: "For we maintain that a person is justified by faith [alone] apart from the works of the law" (Rom. 3:28). It is easy to imagine the vociferous attack by the Roman Catholic Church on this audacious Augustinian monk for daring to add a word to the biblical text. Erasmus of Rotterdam, however, came to his defence. Erasmus, a Roman Catholic and renowned humanist scholar, explained that Luther's translation was not contrary to the Bible or the theological intention of the apostle Paul; moreover, it is consistent with other scripture writers who teach that salvation and eternal life are not acquired except through faith alone.<sup>1</sup> The attack on Luther did not abate anytime soon. The Council of Trent (1645-1569), the Catholic Church's most authoritative response to the Protestant Reformation, continued its unyielding opposition to Luther's translation and all of its underlying assumptions. A key passage of the text, written in 1562, is as follows: “If someone says that the faith that justifies is only through trusting in the mercy of God, that iterases sins because of Christ, or that we are justified through that trust alone, let him be proscribed.”<sup>2</sup>

Like so many ideas, philosophies, and movements that have ever appeared in human civilizations, the principle of *faith alone* was a response to controversial doctrines. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, there were three problematic theological ideas that, arguably, distorted biblical faith and confused many simple people. These ideas are the following:

- 1) Pelagianism, which emerged in the fourth and fifth centuries in the time of Augustine of Hippo, asserted that human beings were able by their own efforts to take the first steps towards salvation apart from God's grace. This is based on the questionable idea that human beings are born without original sin – that is, they are born morally immaculate, having no trace of sin at all.<sup>3</sup> Augustine objected to Pelagianism, arguing that salvation is only granted through the presence of the inner grace of God, that the penalty of sin is only mitigated through faith in Christ's atonement, and that a person's ability to do good is only through the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>4</sup> During the Reformation era and in subsequent years, many disagreed with Augustine and Luther. For example, Erasmus expressed his dissent succinctly, writing, “Free will is the power to put one's self in the circle of grace.” Following the Reformation era, such prominent Christian leaders as Jacobus Arminius and John Wesley adopted this idea.

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<sup>1</sup> F. R. Harm, “Solafidianism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter E. Elwell (Ada, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 1032.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> AwadSamaan, *Faith and Works* (Cairo: Dar el Thaqafa, 1982), 177.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 178.



- 2) Semi Pelagianism is the idea that emerged to reconcile the ideas of Augustine and Pelagius. Its name suggests that salvation is due both to the participation of the human will and the grace of God, a position that was adopted by some of the students and followers of Pelagius.<sup>5</sup> It maintains that Adam's sin affected all humanity, robbing each person of the ability to obey God's law without the divine help that comes from heaven. In this scheme, the process of salvation begins when individuals attempt to overcome their human disability by their own effort, while God steps in to help them to overcome that disability completely. The theology of both Pelagianism and Semi Pelagianism are not consistent with the Bible's teaching on the total inability of human beings to obtain grace on their own and their need, therefore, for help from heaven to obtain redemption. This position was formulated by the Reformers as the doctrine of "Total Depravity," which John Piper has summarized in the following way:

Total Depravity means that our rebellion against God is a complete rebellion. Consequently, all we do in that state is sin, and we are entirely unable to submit ourselves to God to fix ourselves, which is why we deserve eternal punishment.<sup>6</sup>

- 3) Synergism is a Greek word that means "work together." It expresses the essence of the idea that the divine and the human must work together for the renewal of the fallen person who needs salvation. This idea emerged in the sixteenth century in opposition to that of Luther's. Philip Melancthon, one of Luther's colleagues, elaborates:

In the renewal there are three factors that work together: the word, the Holy Spirit, and the will that isn't completely idle but resists its weakness. As God draws to himself only whom he wants ... as the will is not a deaf statue, and these spiritual feelings don't come to a deaf statue.<sup>7</sup>

And so, the principle of *faith alone* was in opposition to all the tendencies that tried to put the human will in the position of being the main actor in the process of salvation, or to see it as the main engine powering the wheel of salvation in participation with the grace of God.

### **The Interaction between Theology and History**

It is very important when we are facing a historical study and the meaning behind the principle *faith alone* to stop for a while and focus on the interaction between theology and reality. No matter the subject matter – society, politics, an internal church matter, or something else – this interaction can be observed in all eras.

In his book *The Story of Theology*,<sup>8</sup> R.A Finlayson highlights this idea while tracing the story of the interaction of theological developments with the events of particular periods, beginning with the first Christian era. Similarly, in this paper as I walk the paths of theology that were laid out in past ages, I will comment on the historical contest as we move along.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 178-179.

<sup>6</sup> John Piper, *Five Points: Towards a Deeper Experience of God's Grace*, translation to Arabic by Hamdy Saad (Damascus, Syria: Dar El Fekr Al Engeely, 2017), 35-36.

<sup>7</sup> C. G. Fry, "Synergism" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter E. Ellwell (Ada, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 1063.

<sup>8</sup> R. A. Finlayson, *The Story of Theology* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1969), 19- 47.



For example, since the Church first began to develop its doctrine of the divinity of Christ, it has faced the dilemma of reconciling the divine-human nature of Christ with the traditional Hebrew idea that there is one God. Eventually, the Church expressed the three-fold nature of God and the idea that God is one with the word *Trinity*. This doctrine emerged slowly as theologians meditated and reflected on God's revelation as given in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, focusing on those parts that relate to Christ, to the Holy Spirit, and to the relationship between God and the world of human beings.

One of the foremost contributors to the emerging doctrine of the Trinity was Tertullian (ca. 160 – ca. 220), a North African theologian and apologist of the Christian faith who highlighted the idea that the three persons of the Trinity are distinct from one another and yet one God who cannot be divided.

In the years following Tertullian, the Church continued to affirm Jesus as the son of God, but it increasingly saw the need to emphasize and explain how he could be both human and divine. In the early fourth century, Arius (256-336) highlighted the humanity of Christ at the expense of his divinity, probably being influenced by the philosophy of Plato. Athanasius opposed the Arian heresy, believing that Arian ideas were attempting to make Christ only half divine, like a Greek demigod. Athanasius expressed the divinity of Christ in brilliant pictorial words, saying to his contemporaries:

And that is what we could understand from the example of the picture of the emperor, where the emperor's shape and figure are in the picture, and the figure in the picture is that in the emperor, because the features of the emperor are in the picture. It is completely like him so that whoever looks at the picture sees the emperor in it, and whoever sees the emperor realizes that he himself is the one in the picture. And because there is no difference in features, whoever wants to see the emperor after seeing the picture, the picture could tell him that "I and the emperor are one" because I am in the emperor and the emperor is in me. So as the son also is the image of God, then it must be understood that the divinity of the Father is perfectly reflected in the son. The Scriptures support this position (Philippians 2:6 and John 14:10).<sup>9</sup>

In the evolution of the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, questions were quickly raised about Christ's two natures, divine and the human. In the fourth and fifth centuries there were many attempts to express in exact terms the meaning of the two natures. We see this in the church's earliest ecumenical councils: Nicaea (325), (Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451).

After focusing on what is relative to God, the focus shifted to expressing the relationship between God and man, especially regarding the topic of salvation. This discussion reached its peak in the era of Augustine's lifetime (354-430) and the period immediately following. Augustine summarized the thinking of the church on this subject, emphasizing humanity inability and its need of divine grace. Memorably, he once prayed: "Bless us with what you command, and command us with what you want."

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<sup>9</sup> St. Athanasius, *Third Article against Arians*, translated to Arabic by Magdy and Heba and Noshay Abd el Shaheed (Cairo: St. Anthony Organization, Center of Fathers Studies, November 1994), 16-17.



St. Anselm (1109-1033), continuing the Augustinian tradition, highlighted the features of the doctrine of redemption in the Middle Ages. He was the first to discuss the idea of Christ making satisfaction to God for humanity's sins, thus enabling human beings to gain an undeserved salvation through his redemptive work.

In the context of the Protestant Reformation, the principle of *faith alone* appeared as a defiant response to the medieval theology of the Roman Catholic Church. Some of the things said about this doctrine would be further developed in later periods of the Protestant tradition.

John Calvin, a second generation reformer, gave clear expression to the authority of Scripture, which clearly contains the principle of *faith alone* in contrast to the emphasis on ritual and works that the Roman Catholic tradition called for in this era. Calvin's theological project was to a great extent concerned with pointing to the authority of the word from which we derive all the key ideas that form the Protestant tradition – for example, the role of the Holy Spirit in understanding the Word. For Calvin, it is the Word and Spirit that establish the authority of divine revelation. The Word is the divine revelation while the Spirit is the one who reveals that Word. Together they persuade the human soul of the authority of revelation over human thought and behavior.

From that historical review we come to the understanding that God did not leave himself without a witness in any era; rather, in each age and with every need he raised a person or many persons who took up the burden of expressing theological truth in updated language, rephrasing the traditional language of the faith so that it would speak afresh to new generations. We see this in Tertullian's fresh language regarding the Trinity, in Athanasius' on Christology, in Augustine on soteriology, in Anselm on the doctrine of redemption, in Luther on the doctrine of justification through faith, and in Calvin and the doctrine of revelation.

### **Martin Luther and the Emergence of the Idea of Justification through Faith Alone**

The social, political, and religious context of the Middle Ages played an important role in preparing and leading the church to reaching many points of theology that were posited in the Protestant Reformation. During the centuries prior to the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church deviated from many basic biblical doctrines, most importantly the doctrine of justification that had been one of the theological constants in the church since its earliest centuries. In fact, Luther was not the first to discover or advocate the doctrine of justification through faith as if it were a new idea in the history of the church; rather, he was preceded by many church fathers and theologians who had similar thoughts. For example, Clement of Rome once wrote: "As we are called by the will of God in Jesus Christ, we are not justified through ourselves or our wisdom or our acumen or the purity of our works that we have made with sacred hearts, but through faith, faith through which the mighty God justifies every flesh."<sup>10</sup> Also, Augustine of Hippo wrote, "People are not saved through good works or the free insistence of their personal will, but through the grace of God through faith... and the sinful man needs a mediator and that mediator is Jesus Christ..."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Finlayson, 42-43.

<sup>11</sup> Kenneth Howes, "The 'Solas' of the Reformation," *Table Talk*, 13, no. (November 2006).



And it must be pointed that the Catholic Church had a complete theological order to be followed in how human beings were to experience justification and salvation, which we shall examine only briefly. For nearly 800 years, the Roman Catholic Church maintained the necessity of the presence of human works before and after justification. Before justification, theologians asserted, human beings must have a time of preparation, which includes fostering, in addition to faith, fear of divine justice, hope in God's mercy for the sake of the benefits of Christ, the beginning in God's love, hating sin and healing from its effects, accepting baptism, and starting a new life. All these spiritual works and preparations were referred to with the term *meritum congrui*.<sup>12</sup> Alister McGrath indicates that these types of benefits, according to the prevailing theological thought back then, were weak because they came before acquiring saving grace. Nonetheless, they had value and made a difference; hence, God kept them in mind.<sup>13</sup>

After obtaining justifying grace, a Christian is renewed in spirit, becomes a partaker in the divine nature, and therefore begins to do good works. These works after salvation are referred to as *meritum condigni* (condign merit, or works that afford formal merit).<sup>14</sup> Such works prepare a person to obtain the heavenly prize of eternal life, and they are considered to be a type of satisfaction and to have a higher value because they came after faith in Christ. But because the church tended to exaggerate the value and the effect of these works and connected them to receiving eternal life, over time they led to the doctrines of purgatory and the value associated with the relics of the saints. Martin Luther would come to reject this entire system of condign merits and the merits of the saints, which made up a big part of his well-known *Ninety-Five Theses*.

The ruling religious thought in that era was how a person could get rid of the burden of sin and unrighteousness. During this time, the leadership of the Catholic Church amplified the problem. By stressing the sinfulness of people, the church deepened people's feelings of guilt and helplessness so that the religious leadership could dominate them. The reasons for this were at least in part financial. Both Catholic and Protestant historians believe that the pope of Rome used indulgences to gain financial support from the people in order to build the new St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. In popular belief, indulgences guaranteed forgiveness of sins in the past, present, and future; also, they could reach beyond this life to affect the dead in purgatory. The church taught that the excess good works of some people could be counted in the interest of those in purgatory to reduce their stay there. In this scheme, indulgences were the way to transfer good deeds from one account to another.<sup>15</sup> The theology of indulgences affected not only individuals but also the politics within the church and between the church and secular authorities. Roland Bainton tells the story of how indulgences were the issues that sparked the Reformation. It began when Albert of Brandenburg became the bishop of two dioceses, though he had not yet reached the legal age needed to be a bishop. Nonetheless, Albert sought a third bishopric, and the pope agreed on

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<sup>12</sup> Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, Fourth Edition, trans. James Bastible (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1960), 252-253, quoted in Kenneth Howes, "The 'Solas' of the Reformation."

<sup>13</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 201), 169.

<sup>14</sup> Ott, 256- 257. Condign merit (*meritum de condigni*) is an aspect of Roman Catholic theology signifying merit with the dignity of Christ. A person born again in Christ does not merit his own virtue but the virtues of Christ are applied to his work. Therefore, it is God crowning his works. Congruent merit is the equivalent of condign merit but, but the latter are applied to an unregenerate person by the goodness of God.

<sup>15</sup> Abd El Maseeh Estefanos, *The Evangelicals: Names and Concepts* (Cairo: Publications of the First Christian Middle East Center, Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, 2014), 41-42.



the condition that Albert would present twelve thousand golden coins for the twelve apostles. Instead, Albert offered seven thousand golden coins according for the seven deadly sins. They compromised on ten thousand golden coins! But Albert didn't possess that amount, so the Pope agreed that Albert could sell indulgences to obtain the needed money, giving half of what he obtained to the pope to be used to finish building St. Peter's Basilica.<sup>16</sup>

European society in the late Middle Ages was emerging from many long years of ignorance and darkness in the church. Many people had an excessive fear of God and his judgment. They were fixated on God's wrath and the punishment that awaits many in either purgatory or hell. In this context, many people's biggest concern was how to please God. To this end, many sought forgiveness by buying indulgences, self-flagellation, or going on pilgrimage to Rome to ascend the famous twenty-eight steps of the Scala Sancta (Holy Stairs).<sup>17</sup>

Martin Luther was not of course an exception in this climate of fear and superstition. He was born in the year 1483, studied in a grammar school, and then continued on to university. During his years as a student, he often suffered from a deep spiritual trepidation. A fear of the wrath of God had taken hold of him. It was like a dark cloud that hung over his head. He was terrified that death would come early to him, that God would then pour out his wrath on him, and that his soul would then be eternally lost. This feeling grew stronger when he saw one of his friends die because of a lightning bolt that hit him. The Reverend Menese Abd El Noor describes this period in Luther's life:

Martin Luther was always posing questions about things related to death. He was pursued by the idea of death, which seemed at times to overcome his feelings and conscience. When one of his friends died due to a deadly disease and then another was killed mysteriously, Martin Luther wondered: what would happen if I were one of these two friends who suddenly had to meet face-to-face with God? Two days after Easter in the year 1503 when Martin Luther was on his way to his father's house in Mansfield with a friend, a hole in the ground suddenly appeared in front of him. He tried to avoid it but he fell in anyway and suffered a deep cut. His friend helped him home, but Luther bled all and way and so lost much blood. During that frightening experience, Luther wondered: What would be my fate if I had to face God at this moment?<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Roland Bainton, *Horizon History of Christianity*, translated to Arabic by Abd El Noor Michail (Cairo: Dar el Thaqafa, 1978), 108.

<sup>17</sup> A. Morrison described these stairs, saying, "It consisted of 28 steps on top of each were pointed nails. And Catholics thought that ascending these stairs is the biggest religious act that could be done. They claimed that it creates a new nature in the human being that carries righteousness and holiness and a confirmation of the forgiveness of sins... that made hundreds of people from all over the world ascend them on their knees. And the Pope "Leo the fourth" in the ninth century has promised to grant forgiveness for a duration of nine years for each step that anyone ascends on their knees, on the condition that they repeat specific prayers on each step." A. Morrison, *Martin Luther: The Great Reformer*, translated to Arabic by BakySadaka (Cairo: The Christian Dar el Thaqafa, 1977), 31.

<sup>18</sup> Menese Abd El Noor, "Justification by Faith," *Huda Magazine*, 864, no. 74 (February 1984):9.



Things for Luther became worse when an epidemic in one German village soon spread to other villages and then to the cities. Many people died because of it, which deepened Luther's depression. Consequently, he decided to take a break by returning to his family home. When he was on his way back to the university, a terrible storm arose that changed his life.<sup>19</sup> Luther was positive that God spoke to him through the storm. As a result of the storm and the other accumulating incidents already described, Luther concluded that he must seek his salvation in a new way. Due to the general spiritual ignorance that existed then, which is largely attributable to the teaching of the Catholic Church, Luther believed that the safest way for him to avoid a worldly life would be to immerse himself in the spiritual world of the monastery. Therefore, he decided to join the Augustinian monastery at Erfurt, a city in Germany. About a year later, on April 4, 1507, he was ordained a priest.<sup>20</sup>

Luther was committed to the monastic life. He said, "I was a good monk, and if any monk ever went to heaven because of his monkishness, it would have been me."<sup>21</sup> Despite this devotion to monastic duties, his mind continued to be filled with a sense of impurity and unworthiness. He believed that, despite his many good works, he was still not acceptable in the eyes of God. He said of himself at this time, "What good works could come out of a heart like mine, and how could I stand in front of the judge with impure works from an impure source?"

During these years, Luther was sent on a mission to meet the pope of Rome. He thought that this visit would have a good effect on his spiritual life because he was going to the capital of Christianity where he expected to see marvelous examples of chastity and piety. Instead, he was shocked by the evil, foolishness, and immorality that he saw. In despair he commented, "If there is a hell, Rome is built upon it."<sup>22</sup> It was during this visit that Luther decided to climb the twenty-eight steps of the Scala Sancta. He did this on his knees while repeating the Lord's Prayer on each step. In this way he sought God's forgiveness. Yet, when he was finished he did not feel any better about his spiritual state. Reverend Doctor Faye Fares describes that historical moment in these words:

And in front of the church of Rome there were the sacred stairs that were known as Pilate's stairs, with its twenty-eight steps... and having ascended the steps, Luther later commented: "I wanted to save my grandfather from purgatory, so I ascended Pilate's stairs and said on each step the Lord's Prayer, but as I reached the top I wondered to myself: Who knows if it is true?"<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lots of people see this incident that almost took away Luther's life, and his survival from the weather strike that almost hit him as the main reason behind his decision to join monasticism, and as result of that in one of his speeches dated 16<sup>th</sup> of October 1519 he wrote saying that the lightning destined his future. Hanna Girgis El Khodary, *Martin Luther* (Cairo: Dar El Thaqafa, 1983), 36.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>21</sup> John Stott, *The Incomparable Christ*, translated to Arabic by Nicholas Nessim (Cairo: Episcopal Publication House, 2010), 119.

<sup>22</sup> Morrison, 30.

<sup>23</sup> Faye Fares, "Martin Luther: A Reformation's Spark that lit Thinking and History," *Huda Magazine*, 762, no. 73 (December 1983):24.



According to some traditions, Luther in that moment heard a voice say to him “The just shall live by faith.” Though the story is no doubt apocryphal, it is certain that in the year 1503 Luther made, as Thomas Carlyle puts it, one of his “most blessed discoveries.” Luther at this time was studying the epistles of the apostle Paul. Previously he had been avoiding Paul’s writings because the topics of righteousness and condemnation terrified him. Nevertheless, he studied Paul, especial his epistles to the Romans and Galatians. The fruit of his study was the main impetus behind the Protestant Reformation. This was his discovery of the principle of justification by faith alone.

Though Luther was the first to proclaim the principle of justification by faith, it appears that the idea was at this time was taking shape in the minds of many of his contemporaries. One of these was Johann von Staupitz, the General Deputy of the Augustinian monks. He believed that there was no salvation through works, but perhaps he did not publically assert this principle for fear of losing his position or because he wanted it to be presented in a pacific manner that would not draw too much attention to him. Luther said of the typical Christian of the time, “If they do not find in themselves any good works by which they can stand before the wrath of God and His judgment, they resort to the death of Christ and His sufferings for them and get saved through this simple faith...”

And as a final and inevitable result of all Luther’s internal conflicts, visions, studies, and insights, which seemed to have assailed him from all directions, this Augustinian monk took the courageous and revolutionary step of tacking *his Ninety-Five Theses* on the church door of Wittenberg on October 31, 1517, the day before All Saints’ Day. This document included lots of intimations of the principle of justification through faith without announcing it explicitly. One indication of Luther’s thinking is found in the sixth thesis of his document: “The pope cannot remit any guilt, except by declaring and showing that it has been remitted by God; or, to be sure, by remitting guilt in cases reserved to his judgment. If his right to grant remission in these cases were disregarded, the guilt would certainly remain unforgiven.”

In Luther’s view, a person seeking absolution should be very careful about any doubt that God has forgiven his sins; however, if he is forced to abide by another man’s judgment, he must be certain that his belief in his forgiveness is not based on the word of a bishop or priest. It must be based on the word of Christ, who never lies. It was Christ who said, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19). The faith that comes from this word is what inspires peace because the priest grants absolution only according to the word of Christ. All those who seek peace in some another way, for example, by way of public recognition or even by obtaining a million pardons from the pope himself, are testing God, and they will not know inner peace until they believe in the promise of the one who said, “Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Christ gives us peace but only through faith. To support this point, Luther gave the example of Simon, the pharisee who invited Jesus to his house, and a sinful woman, who may have been Mary Magdalene. Jesus said to Simon, “I have forgiven her many sins,” and certainly he meant that she had received forgiveness through God’s grace. Yet prior to this she had not experienced the grace of God because there was no peace in her life until Jesus said to her “yours sins are forgiven” and “your faith has saved you, go in peace” (Luke 7: 48 and 50). Jesus was saying that her faith and trust in Him resulted in the forgiveness of her sins. Similarly, in the Old Testament, people obtained the forgiveness of their sins because



God had appeared to them in visions, revelations, burning sacrifices, and the cloud that settled on Mount Sinai. God indicated through these things that he was satisfied with their offerings; also, he promised to continue to forgive their sins through the ministry of Israel's priests.

Similarly, God's people in Luther's time could be confident that their sins could be forgiven through the ministry of Roman Catholic priests, for Jesus said, "Whatever you loose..." (Mathew 16: 19). It follows that when people lack confidence, their sins will not be forgiven, and in the end they will perish. Therefore, divine forgiveness produces grace, and the priest's forgiveness provides peace, both of which are gifts from God because it is faith that lies in the core of both forgiveness and grace.

Naturally, all reformers agreed that salvation is by grace, not works. John Calvin wrote in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "Faith is sufficient in itself, meaning that there is no dual basis of faith and good works, as we lean on God's love and his mercy alone."<sup>24</sup>

### Necessary Clarification

That doctrine of *justification by faith alone* is one that all the Reformers affirmed. And those who have subsequently embraced the Protestant Reformation have never disputed it. The apostle Paul clearly proclaimed it in his epistle to the Ephesians: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and *this is* not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (italics mine, Ephesians 2:8-9). The words in this verse "this is," which I have italicized, are a translation of the Greek word *τὸυτο*. In the context of the verse and in its neuter form, this word points to both grace and the faith together as a gift from God. Hence, faith is also a gift that God gives to man for his salvation. Yet it would be unbiblical to argue that human beings have no role at all in their own salvation. The Scriptures clearly teach that human beings have a role in believing in Christ, for it is individuals who believe, takes steps of faith, use God's gifts, and put their trust in what Christ has done. Yes, God is the founder of faith from beginning to end, but human beings must decide either to accept that salvation through faith given to them from God or to reject it and remain trapped in their old lives of sin. That's what we call "human responsibility, which is something that cannot be set aside because the Scriptures assert that God created human beings free, having been created in God's image. Hence, Abraham "believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Galatians 3:6). Also, "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved" (Romans 10: 9-10).

### Practical and Pastoral Issues

- (1) The principle of "faith alone" puts before us the necessity of thinking once again about the theology of the Reformation. The church should only reform itself based on its own best principles. It should never subject itself to teachings that are opposed to the teachings of the Bible. Reform should also be undertaken in a humble spirit and openness to accept change for the better. Martin Luther believed as a matter of principle that human beings are justified and sinful at the same time: *simuljustus et peccator* (Latin for "at once justified and a sinner). Therefore, Christian should be willing to continue reforming the church as long as reformation is undertaken with a humble spirit and in submission and reverence to God.

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<sup>24</sup>John Calvin, *The Christianity of the Bible: A Simple Summary for the Book of the Christian Institutes*, translated to Arabic by Abd El Kareem Kirillos (Cairo: The Middle East Reformed Fellowship, 2002), 86.



- (2) The principle of “faith alone” places before us the issue of the ethical and behavioral integrity of the servants of God. The Protestant Reformation was necessary because the medieval church had deviated from the truth by its willingness subvert biblical commands to serve worldly interests. Erasmus, one of the pioneers of the Reformation, described the ethical deviations of the church in this way: “The war that was waged by the popes against those who took over their land was opposed to the spirit of Christ, for Christ, who came to bring peace to the earth, does not need unethical defenders. How angry would He be to see guns carried in the names of His saints Paul and Peter.”<sup>25</sup>
- (3) The principle of “faith alone” helps us to reconsider worship in the contemporary church. Christ is supposed to be the center of worship because it is only through faith in Him that human beings can receive salvation, yet this is not always true. If the church followed this principle today, it would reform its worship practices so that all worship would revolve around Him. We see this practice in the New Testament in which all the worship songs of the early church revolved around the work and the character of Christ and not around anything or anyone else. (For examples see Philippians 2:6-11, Colossians 1: 15-23, 1 Timothy 3: 16, Hebrews 1:1-3, and Revelation 5: 6-14).
- (4) The principle of “faith alone” brings us back once more to the need for preaching salvation in our worship programs. Luther, while a dedicated monk, lacked a heartfelt relationship with God through faith. How many people attend our worship services without enjoying Christ’s salvation and his redemptive work? In fact, it is very dangerous to think that all those who attend church, especially those who have been attendees of the church for a long time, are people who have experienced faith and renewal through Christ’s work. Pastors, therefore, need to add the message of salvation as a regular theme of their sermons.
- (5) The principle of “faith alone” should affect the way that Christians relate to one another. I have often observed that how Christians treat one another tends to be based on the principle of works rather than the principle of grace. This suggests that there are many standards – perhaps unconsciously assumed – for accepting people in the church community that are more worldly than Christian. These can include social standards, financial contributions, practical accomplishments in ministry, family history, and standing with the pastor. Such things can become the conditions upon which we decide to accept, love, and serve other people. But the principle of “faith alone” recalls us to the biblical principle of *agape* love, the unconditional love of God in His dealing with us.
- (6) The principle of “faith alone” extends to cover all the struggles that a believer goes through in life. Amid all the circumstances of life, we as pastors need to contend for the importance of faith – faith understood as loyalty and faithfulness to God. Such faith does not insist that God will remove all of the difficult circumstances in our lives; rather it maintains that God will be present with us in every situation, and conversely, it holds on to God and remains faithful to him in good times and in bad.

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<sup>25</sup> Bainton, 104.



Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful....

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. (Hebrews 10: 19-23, 32-36.)

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