

HRA Reformation Voice

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SOLA FIDES

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HRA Reformation Voice

Greetings friends in our common faith,

This issue contains a great article by our good friend and regular contributor, Danny Hyde called “OF JUSTIFYING FAITH AND THE JUSTIFICATION OF FAITH.” With questions swirling around in the Christian community regarding Sola Fides, it is good that we regularly receive food for thought that will nourish us, rather than poison us. Thank you Danny for the nourishment.

I also wanted to take the time to ask for your help. We are in need of contributors to the Reformation Voice. Maybe you have a sermon, article or paper that you have written that might fit into our topic for the issue. Or maybe you read a book that you would like to review for our readers. Maybe the topic sparks an idea that you would like to share. The more contributors we have, the better the Reformation Voice becomes. The topic for December is ADVENT. Please send your ideas and contributions to pastorsloan@comcast.net.

We are also interested in hearing what you think the purpose of the HRA should be. We have undertaken this publication ministry, and have attempted Bible conferences in the past. We would like to find out what you want. Are you looking for church to church fellowship and mutual help? Are you looking for opportunities to grow in your understanding of the Reformed faith and the Confessional documents? We would also like to know which of you are part of a Reformed denomination, and which are “independants” looking for fellowship and brotherhood. Please send you any comments to pastorsloan@comcast.net. Subject: HRA Comments.

In Christ,

Rev. Howard Sloan

OF JUSTIFYING FAITH AND THE JUSTIFICATION OF FAITH

Sola Fide in Belgic Confession Article 22

by Daniel Hyde

All you need is faith, and as long as you have faith, you're fine. If you've listened to politicians, watched television, and kept up with the pop philosophy of the culture around us this is a predominant view of spirituality in our day. As long as a person has faith, no matter what that faith is placed in, they are considered a spiritually good person and things will work out for them. Even faith in faith is acceptable today.

In this context we as Reformed churches must hold up one of the great dividing lines between Christian faith and the "faith" of the world just mentioned along with all other faith systems in the world. This dividing line is what faith embraces as its object. In the Holy Scriptures we learn and confess that faith in and of itself is useless to give us a standing before God unless it is placed in Jesus Christ, who is the sole object of faith for justification. We learn this throughout the Reformed confessions and catechisms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here we will look at the Belgic Confession, article 22.

We come to enjoy this benefit of being declared righteous before God by faith. What is faith, then? Article 22 begins by saying, "We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an upright faith."

The Author of Faith

Belgic Confession, article 22, teaches how we come to enjoy the benefit of justification. We come to enjoy this benefit of being declared righteous before God by faith. What is faith, then? Article 22 begins by saying, "We believe that, to attain the true knowledge of this great mystery, the Holy Spirit kindles in our hearts an upright faith."

In order for us, who have "a corruption of the whole [human] nature" (art. 15), to receive the benefits of Christ's work, the Spirit of God "kindles" in us an "upright," or, true faith. This visual language of "kindling" faith in us evokes the imagery of igniting a flame, thus, of creating faith within us. We see this most clearly taught in Scripture in Ephesians 2:8,

where our entire salvation, including faith, is called "the gift of God." As well, Paul says in Philippians 1:29 that it has been granted to us to believe (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 65; Canons of Dort III/IV, 14).

What does this faith do for us? Faith brings us to a true knowledge of a "great mystery." What mystery? The mystery of Jesus Christ and the salvation he brought us. Why does our Confession of Faith speak of the salvation won for us by Christ

as a "mystery?" Throughout the Belgic Confession we learn about Christ and his saving work, which Scripture describes as a "mystery" (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 1:9, 3:3, 4, 9, 6:19; Col. 1:26-27, 2:2, 4:3; 1 Tim. 3:9, 16). We most often use the word mystery to describe something unknown, but there is another way in which this word can be used. The word mystery comes from the Greek word *musterion*, meaning something that was once veiled but now is revealed. In article 21 Jesus Christ is confessed as being ordained a priest in the order of Melchizedek, offering himself on the cross, and shedding his blood

to purge our sins. All this was "as the prophets had foretold." Although the prophets foretold the coming of Christ, it was not fully revealed to the eyes of the world until God raised the curtain of eternity and sent his Son in the flesh. The Spirit of God, then, creates faith within us to see this unveiled truth of who Christ is.

The Object of Faith: Christ Alone

What true faith does in attaining this great mystery of Christ and his saving work is further described for us as the Confession continues, saying, . . . which embraces Jesus Christ with all His merits, appropriates Him, and seeks nothing more besides Him. For it must needs follow, either that all things which are

requisite to our salvation are not in Jesus Christ, or if all things are in Him, that then those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him. Therefore, for any to assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something more is required besides Him, would be too gross a blasphemy; for hence it would follow that Christ was but half a Savior.

Faith “embraces” and “appropriates” solely “Jesus Christ with all His merits.” This is also what the Heidelberg Catechism means when it says in question and answer 20 that only those are saved “who by true faith are ingrafted into Him and receive all His benefits.” We confess Christ alone and his righteousness alone is the sole object of true, saving, justifying faith. Faith looks outside of itself and our own merits and grabs hold of the only One who has done anything good in the eyes of God, the only One who merited, that is, was rewarded with righteousness to give to his people on the basis of his obedience to the Law. We shouldn’t cringe or be afraid of the word “merit,” as if it somehow teaches a Roman Catholic view of salvation. In fact, the Belgic Confession uses the term to do what all the Reformers did in using the term merit. They reformed Rome’s concept of merit to extol the virtues of Christ’s work on our behalf! Rome spoke of congruent and condign merit. Congruent merit was the reward of “trying your best and letting God do the rest.” It was a half-merit that was rewarded not because the demands were met, but because God decided to accept it as if it was fully meritorious. On the other hand, condign merit was the reward of actually meeting the demands of justice, albeit Roman theologians will always say it is “with the help of the Spirit.” Interestingly this “Spirit-wrought sanctity” is being promoted today, ironically, as if it was somehow a way of guarding against the Roman error of justification!

Contrary to Rome, the Protestant Reformers taught that we had neither type of merit. Thus, when our Confessions and the Reformers use the term “merit,” they use it to say there was only one kind of merit that could stand before the justice of God—the condign merit of Jesus Christ! The Dutch Reformed theologian, Herman Witsius (1636–1708), described it this way in 1677: the “merits of Christ” were “a merit of condignity, as it is called; such as no mere creature is capable to acquire.”¹ But if no man can acquire that righteousness of God that is demanded by the law and needed by the sinner to stand without fear before God, how can we stand before God? The

Heidelberg Catechism tells us that we are righteous before God only because God “grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sins, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me” (Q&A 60). Notice that! What this means is that we are not only unable to condignly merit God’s love and favor, but also this means that we cannot congruently merit that favor either. Our works have no place before God, only Christ’s do! And thus we confess that our only righteousness is that of Jesus Christ. And furthermore, because we “embrace” and “appropriate” his merits, our Catechism teaches that we are as righteous as Jesus Christ. God looks at us and he sees us as if we had “accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled” for us.

Because of this doctrine of the sufficiency of Christ’s merit we confess that our faith “seeks nothing more besides Him.” Therefore we either have all that we need for salvation in Jesus Christ alone, or we do not. And if we do, then “those who possess Jesus Christ through faith have complete salvation in Him.” Any doctrine that asserts the merits, works, obedience, or faithfulness of any one or any thing besides our Lord Jesus is “too gross a blasphemy” making Christ “half a Savior.” This led John Calvin’s colleague and successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza (1519–1605), to say, “Our unworthiness is covered and swallowed up by the holiness of Jesus Christ, which is far more powerful to sanctify us before God than natural corruption is to pollute us.”²

Faith Alone

The final paragraph of Belgic Confession, article 22, is a conclusion. Based on what was just said about faith embracing only Jesus Christ and his merits, we confess,

Therefore we justly say with Paul, that we are justified by faith alone, or by faith apart from works. However, to speak more clearly, we do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all His merits, and so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead, is our righteousness. And faith is an instrument that keeps us in communion with Him in all His benefits, which, when they become ours, are more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.³

When the Apostles Paul says, “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28) he is concluding an argument, contrasting works verses faith. There is no middle ground. Thus we teach justification sola fide, through faith alone. No one is justified by obedience to the law, for, as Paul says, the law as a way of justification can only reveal our sin (Rom. 3:20). The righteousness which justifies is that which is “apart from the law...through faith in Jesus Christ” (Rom. 3:21–22), no matter if the one who believes is Jewish or Greek, since both are sinners (Rom. 3:22–23 cf. 3:9), and since justification is a matter of God’s gift, not man’s merit (Rom. 3:24). As Paul says in possibly the most remarkable statement in all of Scripture,

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly his faith is counted as righteousness” (Rom. 4:4–5).

This does not mean “faith itself justifies us.” What it means is that faith “is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our righteousness.” Being only an instrument, faith is simply the means by which we are justified, not the ground, as we said above, which is Christ. This what Paul is saying in Romans 4: 4–5. Notice again, that if you try to earn your salvation through strict obedience, or even in more pious terms as “covenant faithfulness,” you will get what you deserve. Your wages, whether heaven or hell, will be on the basis of what you did. But if we trust in the God who justifies the ungodly, that is, stripped of his works, naked and without claim, we shall be declared righteous. Faith simply trusts in another, it rests in the mercy of God, who, because Christ was condemned in our place, can bestow salvation upon us. It is amazing just how simply this is. We either save ourselves, or are saved by another. We either rely on our merits, or

Christ’s. We either bring before God our works, or the “so many holy works which He has done for us and in our stead.” Our Lord took upon himself every single one of our filthy rags of self-righteousness and replaced them with his holy works, his merits. But even more than that, he imputed to us not one holy work for each sin, but his entire righteousness! And because his righteousness is that of the infinite Son of God, it is greater than all our sins past, present, and future—and thus it is “more than sufficient to acquit us of our sins.”

To conclude, then, we do not proclaim “faith” apart from its object. We proclaim that faith alone must be placed only in Jesus Christ in order for one to have “peace with God” (Rom. 5:1). This is such an amazing truth. God the Father sent his eternal Son to become a temporal man in our place and that the Son satisfied the wrath of God and merited the righteousness needed to stand before God. And in beautiful harmony, God the Holy Spirit has done the wonderful work of kindling the faith to embrace Christ and be justified, and, as we shall see later, the faith which begins to burn brighter in the life of sanctification.

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(Footnotes)

¹ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank (1803; Phillipsburg: P&R, 1990), 1.191.

² Theodore Beza, *The Christian Faith*, trans. James Clark (East Sussex: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1992), 23.

³ Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 61.

Q. 21. What is true faith?

A. True faith is not only a certain knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in his word, but also an assured confidence, which the Holy Ghost works by the gospel in my heart; that not only to others, but to me also, remission of sin, everlasting righteousness and salvation, are freely given by God, merely of grace, only for the sake of Christ’s merits.