

Sola Fide – Living by Faith Alone
Romans 1:14-17, Galatians 2:11-21, Heb 11:1

Friends, this fall we are focusing on training and equipping and preparing ourselves to be obedient to our Lord Jesus who gave us our mission; Go make disciples of all nations.

And certainly “Going to all nations” certainly includes leaving Canada and going overseas to disciple people in other parts of this world

However the grammar in Jesus’ command is ambiguous and it also means “as you are going about your daily business – make disciples!”

And I have to admit that I have a certain bias towards this interpretation because in the same way we say that “Charity begins at home” I also think that “discipleship begins at home.”

Now, that’s not an excuse to avoid going overseas if God tells you to do that, but when we go elsewhere to make disciples

and we neglect our own backyard... or our own family, then a part of our credibility and integrity is at stake and I think we’ve missed taking advantage of the opportunities God’s given us to “bloom where we’re planted.”

Friends discipleship begins at home and in your home church. So, how are we doing?

Because if we are going to start discipling others outside of our home church, outside of our own homes, then it would probably be good, prudent even... to pause and evaluate our efforts so far.

We need to check to see if we’ve actually raised our children and young people to be followers of Jesus or not, if we’ve passed on the apostolic, orthodox Christian faith to them or not.

And it just so happens that a few years ago, in the early 2000’s someone did this for the North American church at large.

A sociologist by the name of Christian Smith – a good name for someone who studies the sociology of religion – conducted a national research project in the United States called “The National Study of Youth and Religion”

And the study revealed a good news bad news situation about how well we’ve been doing in discipling the next generation, and while it’s an American study – the results are fairly representative of what you would find in Canada as well, since we share the same popular youth culture.

So, the good news is that i) Most teens have religious beliefs ii) For a significant minority of teens, faith matters iii) highly religious teens do better than less religious teens

Now for the bad news; iv) Organized religion doesn't matter much to most teenagers – no surprise there... v) Adolescents are incredibly inarticulate about their faith – again not too surprised.

And finally – and this is the worst of the bad news; vi) Teenagers mimic the religious devotion of their parents!

So, if our youth don’t care about belonging to a church, and can’t articulate the Christian faith to save their lives – then there’s a good chance it’s because they are following in our footsteps.

To be sure it’s not always like that, there are exceptions – but for the most part, as we learned last week, “*the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree*” when it comes to making disciples, and Christian scholar and author Kenda Creasy Dean spells out what this says about our overall discipleship efforts in her book Almost Christian (2010)

She writes, “*The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe*”

We are teaching our youth what we really believe... and what is it that we really believe?

Well, Christian Smith's research project uncovered the unofficial religion of North America and he officially called it Moralistic Therapeutic Deism - or MTD for short, but you could just as easily call it Counterfeit Christianity, False Faith, or Dodgy Discipling

And you can summarize what it believes in five points...

I- A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.

II - God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.

III -The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.

IV - God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.

V - Good people go to heaven when they die.

Now, I'm hoping that you're not thinking "so how's that so different from authentic Christianity?"

But I can understand if you were because of how similar these beliefs sound to certain teaching of the Christian faith, or themes in the bible.

And because of that they can attach themselves on to our beliefs without us realizing it – and then they gradually take over and replace our authentic Christianity with this moralistic, therapeutic, deism.

It's sort of like what happens to a tree when it becomes the victim of a plant called the Strangler Fig.

The seeds of the strangler fig get dropped into a crack or a crevice up in the branches of the tree by birds, or animals...

And there they germinate and sprout and grow and begin to send roots down along the tree trunk to the ground, and branches up to reach the sunlight.

And as their root and branch system grows it wraps itself around the tree and gradually envelopes the tree, eventually blocking the sunlight from reaching the tree's leaves and preventing its roots from getting any nutrients from the soil – and so eventually the tree withers and dies.

And what you have left is a plant that is formed in the shape of the tree but is a completely different plant altogether.

In the same way the false beliefs of MTD get dropped into our hearts by the culture we live in.

And there they can germinate and sprout and put down roots and send up branches which form around the substance and activities of our Christian faith and take on its shape but not its true nature.

And eventually, if the false beliefs are not identified and rejected and removed they will strangle our faith - leaving us with something that kind of resembles Christianity – but really isn't.

And the worst part is that we might not even realize this is happening... because it's so subtle and slow.

So we need something to help us, each of us individually and as church, evaluate if what we currently believe is truly authentic Christianity – so that our young people and children will mimic our devotion to what is actually the truth – and not something that just looks or sounds like it.

And friends - the 5 Solas of the Reformation are the perfect tools to counter the 5 beliefs of MTD and are at the heart of what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

A disciple lives and disciples Sola Gratia – by Grace alone, Sola Fide – by Faith Alone, Sola Scriptura - by Scripture alone,

Solus Christus – by Christ alone and Soli Deo Gloria - for God's glory alone.

These 5 Solas have already proven very effective in identifying and cutting away all sorts of false beliefs and superstitions that had sprouted and taken root in the Medieval Catholic church in the 1500's and there is no doubt they can do the same for us today.

Even just hearing these five solas – we can already start to get a sense of how they are so different from the beliefs of MTD.

And today we are going to look more closely at what Sola Fide - living by Faith alone, really means and what it doesn't mean.

And we've already started on that by identifying the core beliefs of MTD, and if we ask the question "Why?" we'll discover that these beliefs are based on a kind of faith.

Why do you believe that good people will go to heaven?

Why do you believe the central goal of our lives is generally about being happy and feeling good about ourselves?

Give me proof that this is true – that this is the way it is...

And they will respond; and I know because I've done this with people – *"well, that's just how it is, if there is a God he must be fair and understanding, that's just how I think it is, that's what I believe – I have faith!"*

Friends what most people believe, is simply what they hope for and nothing more.

They have no real proof that it will turn out that way but they believe - and we typically call that *"having faith."* And faith alone – gets misunderstood as your own personal beliefs which don't require any sort of basis – just faith alone.

And it would even appear that the bible defines faith in this manner as well.

We read Hebrews 11:1 *“Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”*

Most people in our society are very confident that being good leads to heaven, even those there is no basis to believe that.

And they assure themselves it’s true that our goal in life is to be happy and feel good about ourselves – because what else could it be? This is “faith.”

But is this what Sola Fide means? That you don’t need any sort of proof or evidence for your beliefs – you can just have your personal beliefs on their own?

Well Friends, I deliberately took Hebrews 11:1 out of its context to make this point and so that you can see how easy it is to read our own understandings into Christian and biblical teaching MTD style.

In context Hebrews 11:1 is preceded by a whole chapter which elaborates on and defines what has been “hoped” for and why

we can have confidence, and shows how faith has been lived out like that by people in the bible; going from Abel all the way up to the time just before Jesus was born.

So living by “*Faith alone*” does not mean that you live according to your own personal private beliefs, which you alone have the right to determine...

And no one else has the right to criticize those beliefs or tell you they are right or wrong or tell you what you should believe instead – that is not what Sola Fide means.

By Faith alone means that it is **only** by Faith, or through Faith, that Jesus Christ’s work is applied to our lives to deal with the guilt that results from our original sin, illustrated in our specific sins - and thus save us from death and an eternity apart from God, which are the consequences of being incorrigible Covenant breakers.

This is what, as Heb 11:1 says, *we hope for and are assured of- even though we do not see it.*

And our two scripture passages, from Galatians and Romans further expand on how Christ is this hope and how faith alone appropriates it for us.

So Paul writes in Romans 1:17 *“For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”*

Now when you hear the word “righteousness” in the bible – try not to think about doing all sorts of good deeds and being a good person – it’s better to understand “righteousness” in terms of covenant loyalty to God.

Because loyalty ties both our actions and our motivations and feelings into our relationship with God and it means that all we are and do is because of our loyalty to God and his agenda.

So what Paul is saying here is that the good news (the gospel) is that God is providing someone who is able to be a loyal

covenant partner – that’s the righteousness of God – that’s Jesus Christ.

And from the start to the finish of Christ’s life he was a loyal covenant keeper with God and that accomplishment: that righteousness – from his birth, his ministry all the way to his death and resurrection and ascension - can be ours – only through faith.

As it is written the righteous shall live by faith! Christ’s life brings us life through faith.

And because our sinful nature always wants to add on to what Christ has done, to say that we made some sort of contribution to his work so that when we doubt we can assure ourselves we’re in good standing, by what we’ve done – the Reformers needed to emphasize it is by faith ALONE.

Friends this is a very tempting thing to do, because what we receive in Christ, from Christ in many respects is intangible, invisible and we don’t fully possess it yet.

For example – let's say that you have a criminal record. And because you have a criminal record you are not allowed to cross over in the United States or go to many other countries. You are not allowed to get certain jobs or have certain opportunities - regardless of whether you feel badly about this conviction or not.

Your status is criminally guilty.

Now – one day the Prime Minister decides – out of sheer grace, and not because there's an election coming up – that He is going to give you a full pardon of your criminal record; He will assume your criminal record and give you his clean record instead.

The pardon comes into effect immediately but it's going to take a few years before all the paperwork is completed and you actually have a document in your hands which proves your new status, in the meantime you'll have to take him at his word this this has happened.

He's promised you this is true – and despite the fact that he's a politician – you accept this promise in faith, which means you trust it and you act on it.

So if by faith you trust this – then you are not going down to whatever gov't dept handles your past record and keep checking up on it – just to make sure, or calling the justice department every couple days - just to make sure.

And by faith you act on this – you book your plane ticket to go to Disney World and cross a boarder that you previous couldn't cross – even though you don't have the documentation to prove it, you are confident nothing will come up on the system because your record is clean.

You don't go making up some sort of fake document stating that the Prime Minister of Canada swapped his record with you to show to the U.S. Customs.

In fact doing that will just raise suspicion and get you into unnecessary trouble.

It's the same with how we trust and act based on the promise that God has made to us that Jesus Christ is our new life – he is the new human being without sin, fully loyal to God and eventually when Christ returns we will become like this too.

But until then, we have to accept this is our new reality by faith – we don't have the full proof of it yet.

And so because we can't see our new life fully complete in us yet, the temptation is to make up our own proof.

And so we live by faith plus emotion – if we can feel emotions about our salvation then that's the proof we need.

Or we live by faith plus reason – if we can understand how it all works, that's the proof – that gives us assurance it's real.

Or we live by faith plus circumstances – if life goes well for us and we see God's blessing in our lives –we are assured of our good standing before God.

Friends – the trouble is that emotions, understanding, circumstance and whatever else we might try to look at as proof that our status before God is settled, they can all change – and when that happens does that mean our status before God has changed?

No – because that wasn't the proof of our salvation to begin with. Christ is the only proof we have of our salvation and we receive that in faith.

That's why Paul was getting so worked up with Peter in the Galatians passage we read - because Peter was wavering in his faith that he was completely justified in Christ and he didn't have to worry about observing the Mosaic Law anymore, and he was falling back on old proofs to assure himself.

So Paul calls him back to faith, He writes *“So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.”*

So, in spite of how we feel otherwise, in spite of how we don't understand from time to time, and in spite of the fact that circumstances seem to indicate God has it out for us – we trust, we don't doubt and we take actions that say we have faith.

To be sure – God affirms our faith with confirmations: we have feelings which confirm our faith, we understand things that confirm our faith, our circumstances confirm our faith - but they are never the basis for our faith – because we live by Faith Alone, we disciple by Faith alone.

So we don't need to add our own beliefs, like “good people go to heaven” to our faith in Christ for extra assurance that we really are saved.

Why do you need to draw up that kind of forgery? That's foolishness – we're not good to begin with.

You have the righteousness of God, claimed by faith and based on the promise of God which means that not only do

we go to be with Him in heaven when we die – but that we will inherit the new heavens and the new earth when Christ returns – this is settled.

Believe that, act on that – not on nice sounding moralistic platitudes that are just there to make you feel good about yourself but only get you into more trouble.

Sola Fide! Living by Faith alone

And what is faith - friends let me leave you with the definition that your minister lives by and hopes you will mimic as well.

Faith is a quiet confidence and trust, produced in my by the Holy Spirit and evidenced in my actions - that who Jesus is, and all that Jesus has done stands in my place before God, and that through Christ all I am and all I do is turned into something pleasing to God.

Sola Fide – Soli Deo Gloria

By Faith alone – to God be the Glory alone, amen