
The Reformation @ 500

Sola Fide – Faith Alone

A Small-Group Discussion Guide

The start of the Protestant Reformation is often dated to Martin Luther nailing “The 95 Theses” to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany on Oct. 31, 1517. Historians reflecting on the Reformation and its meaning identify five statements or watchwords as central to the movement. These watchwords, called the five “solas” from the Latin word meaning “only” or “alone,” are: grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone, Christ alone, and to God’s glory alone.

This second of five study guides explores “faith alone,” using reflections and insights gleaned from presentations made at an event held at the Atlantic School of Theology, Halifax in Nov. 2014. That conversation offered a diverse yet complementary collection of pictures of faith.

The four sections in the study invite participants beyond a theoretical discussion to tell stories of grace from their lives as a way to understand “faith alone” now.

It would be helpful for each participant to have a copy of the guide so they can have the indented material in front of them.



Section I: Finding a Definition

What is faith? How do you define faith? How do you know it when you see it?

Section II: Theology of Faith Alone

Anna Robbins, Dean of Acadia Divinity School, opened the conversation exploring the relationship between faith and good works. Salvation is by faith alone, not works, the Reformers contended. Yet as James writes in the New Testament, faith without works is dead (James 2:17). Our works bear witness to the aliveness of the faith given to us. Faith is an inner truth which bears fruit in our actions, words, and attitudes. As Robbins noted, this interface between faith and works leaves no room for a privatized faith. Faith is to lead us to do good works in our interactions with others and in our engagement with the world.

The gathering was reminded by Laurence DeWolfe, Professor of Pastoral Theology, Atlantic School of Theology, of two classical theological terms. Salvation by faith alone starts with justification, God's gift of forgiveness in and through Jesus Christ. Justification is an unearned, undeserved gift. It cannot be obtained by wishing for it, by working for it. Both justification and the ability to believe we are justified are gifts from God. Justification is to result in our sanctification, the process of becoming ever more like Jesus Christ, our Savior and our example. Again sanctification is a gift from God, one in which we partner with the Holy Spirit so our discipleship as followers of Jesus is evident in our words, actions, and patterns of life.

- What thoughts and questions come to mind as you reflect on those two paragraphs?

Read Ephesians 2:8-10.

What picture of faith is presented here? What is the link between faith and works? What is the danger of making faith into a work?

Read James 2:14-19

- What picture of faith is presented here? What is the link between faith and works?
 - Are these two passages in conflict with each other? Or do they complement each other?
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Section III: Four Pictures of Faith

The Testimony of Faith

Tim Archibald, minister of King's Presbyterian Church, New Minas, NS, called his hearers to bold discipleship. Faith is not mental agreement with series of statements about God, rather faith is a bold confidence to trust God's call to serve God and the world.

Tim told the following story, a testimony:

The night before he was to be elected Moderator of the Synod of the Atlantic Provinces, he was overwhelmed by his own inadequacy as a minister and as a leader to take on this role. He had had a successful ministry, things were going well, but that night he realized that up to this point he had been relying on his ability alone. That night he realized his ability alone was not enough. Tim could do nothing but turn to God for the strength and ability to fulfill the role as Moderator of Synod, and beyond that to be a parish pastor. Tim experienced the Holy Spirit's presence that night and continues to remember that moment as a turning point in his ministry.

Tom Long describes Testimony as Talking Ourselves into being Christians. Testimony is a way of telling our stories of faith.

- What stories of faith do you have? If you are in a group tell a story of faith from your life to others in the group, if you are doing this study on your own, take time to write a story of faith from your life.

The Obedience of Faith

Charles Cook, minister from Bethel Presbyterian Church, Riverview, NB, told this story:

Cathy Cook, Charles' wife, felt compelled to request that the town of Riverview build a sidewalk in a subdivision in their community so children walking to and from school would not need to walk on the road, and be at risk of being struck by a car. Neighbours told her others had tried to get a sidewalk but had failed. Cathy Cook believed this was God's invitation to her, and despite the discouragements she trusted God would see it through to the end. The sidewalk was built.

- What might God be inviting you to do as you live your faith in service to God and to others? Where are you being asked to step out in faith?

The Consolation of Faith

Cynthia Chenard, minister of Iona Presbyterian Church, Dartmouth and Chaplain for the RCMP and the Halifax Regional Police, said,

"When you are sitting with a family that is hearing of the tragic death of their son, there are no words, no techniques, the only thing the chaplain can bring is faith. Everything else gets stripped away."

- When have you been with people who were in crisis—illness, death, tragedy? What did it feel like to be in that place? Did you feel confident about what to say or do? Did you feel helpless?
 - What does it mean to be a person of faith in those situations?
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The Hope of Faith

Anne Marie Dalton, teaches at St. Mary's University, Halifax, she said:

When I am asked by students who desire fundamental change in the world, how I am able to remain committed to seeking change “without becoming cynical or quitting”? My answer is that faith must carry the person desiring to be an agent of change. Faith fires the ability to keep on serving, believing the Kingdom of God which is here in part will be fully realized someday.

- Name some situations in our world that you want to see changed. What do you need to keep committed to seeking the change you desire? What stops you from becoming discouraged and quitting on seeking change?
 - When in your life has faith in God carried you through discouragement and doubt?
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Section IV: Summing Up

Name one way your understanding of faith has been challenged or re-affirmed by this conversation.

Name one thing you will do, say, begin to change or believe because of this conversation.

The “faith alone” event was the second of five Ref@500 project events taking place from 2013 to 2017. Sponsored by the Committee on History and funded through the support of the Ewart Endowment for Theological Education and the Conference Fund of the Life and Mission Agency of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, these events are leading up to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

The project's purpose is to address the questions: What do the five “solos,” central to the Reformation, say to the church in Canada today? Are the 500-year-old theological slogans robust enough to be relevant today? For more information about the Reformation@500 Project or this study guide, contact Peter Bush, 197 Browning Blvd., Winnipeg, MB, R3K 0L1, email peterwwpres@mymts.net or call 204-837-5706.