

Issues, Etc.

JOURNAL



Sola Fide—By Faith Alone

by Will Weedon

Wittenberg Trail:
Christ, Our First Love

by Donna Harrison

Summer—2023



Greetings in the Name of Jesus.

Was the sixteenth century reformer Martin Luther innovating or in error when he added the word “alone” to his translation of Romans 3:28: *For we hold that one is justified by faith **alone** apart from works of the law?* Pastor Will Weedon answers that question in his article, “Sola Fide—By Faith Alone.”

Also in this edition of the **Issues, Etc. Journal**, Dr. Donna Harrison recounts God’s persistent call out of nominal Christianity through His Word to the Lutheran Confession.

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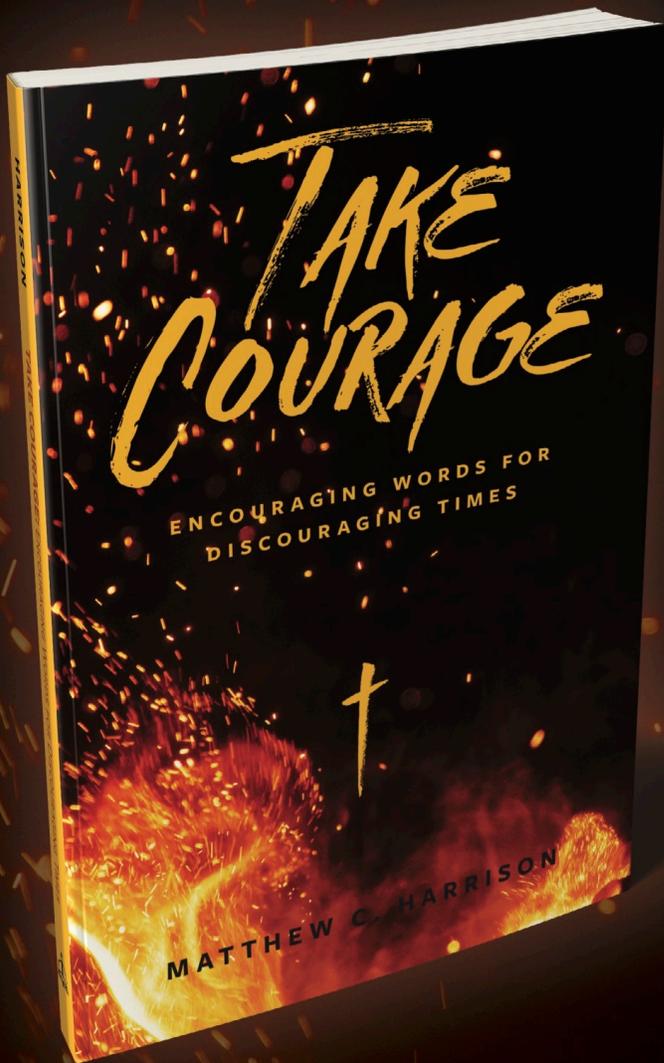
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Sola Fide—By Faith Alone

by Will Weedon

Luther got a lot of grief for the way he translated Romans 3:28 into German:

So halten wir nun dafür, daß der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke, **allein** durch den Glauben.

For we hold that one is justified by faith **alone** apart from works of the law.

The problem, his critics insisted, is with the word I bolded in both German and English. That little word “allein” or “alone” is not actually in the Greek original of St. Paul. This is indisputably true. Luther understood this term to be *implicit* in the Greek. Was this an innovation in Church teaching? His critics insisted that it was not just an innovation, but a quite mistaken one. To buttress this assertion they pointed to another passage in the New Testament: James 2:24. There, the apostle used the term “alone” in order specifically to reject it: “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

Case closed? Roman Catholic critics of Luther in the 16th century thought it was: Luther, in their opinion, had falsified Scripture by adding something to it that patently was not true.

Well, not so fast. First, let’s dispatch the notion that Luther has introduced some novel interpretation of St. Paul, as his critics have charged. Did he? The surefire way to test that is to check the language of the fathers of the Church when they are dealing with the matter of justification, particularly their homilies. Consider just a handful of passages from some of the major fathers:

From St. Basil the Great:

Indeed, this is the perfect and complete glorification of God, when one does not exult in his own righteousness, but recognizing oneself as lacking true righteousness to be justified by faith alone in Christ. (Homily on Humility, PG 31.532; *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 9, p. 479)

From St. Hilary of Poitiers:

Because faith alone justifies [*quia fides sola iustificat*]...publicans and prostitutes will be first in the kingdom of heaven. (Commentary on Matthew XXI.15)

And above all, the writings of St. John Chrysostom:

But what is the “law of faith?” It is, being saved by grace. Here he shows God's power, in that He has not only saved, but has even justified, and led them to boasting, and this too without needing works, but looking for faith only. (Homilies on Romans 3)

They said that he who adhered to faith alone was cursed; but he, Paul, shows that he who adhered to faith alone is blessed. (Homily on Galatians 3)

Here he shows God's power, in that He has not only saved, but has even justified, and led them to boasting, and this too without needing works, but looking for faith only. (Homily 7 on Romans)

For you believe the faith; why then do you add other things, as if faith were not sufficient to justify? You make yourselves captive, and you subject yourself to the law. (Epistle to Titus, Homily 3, PG 62.651)

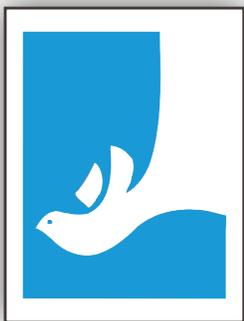
Let us see, however, whether the brigand gave evidence of effort and upright deeds and a good yield. Far from his being able to claim even this, he made his way into paradise before the apostles with a mere word, on the basis of faith alone, the intention being for you to learn that it was not so much a case of his sound values prevailing as the Lord's lovingkindness being completely responsible. (Sermon 7 on Genesis, in St. John Chrysostom, *Eight Sermons on the Book of Genesis*, p. 123, Robert C. Hill translator)

What then was it that was thought incredible? That those who were enemies, and sinners, neither justified by the law, nor by works, should immediately through faith alone be advanced to the highest favor. Upon this head accordingly Paul has discoursed at length in his Epistle to the Romans, and here again at length. (Homily 4 on 1 Timothy)

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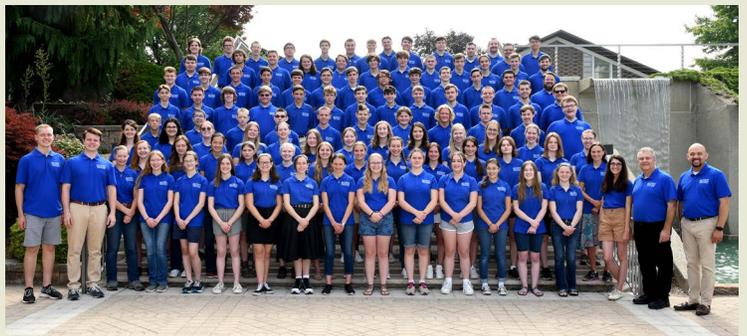
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We need none of those legal observances, he says; faith suffices to obtain for us the Spirit, and by Him righteousness, and many and great benefits. (Homilies on Galatians 4)

There are numerous other passages that could be cited from the fathers, but these ought to suffice. They put to bed permanently the notion that “faith alone” in justification is some Lutheran innovation that fundamentally misunderstands what St. Paul is teaching in Romans (and Galatians). To this day I remain puzzled that Luther didn’t challenge his critics at the time for chewing on him for using the very language of the fathers!

But still, what about the tension with what St. James wrote in 2:24? This is specifically treated in two places in the Lutheran Confessions: Apology V:123-132 and Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III:41-43. I recommend that folks look up both, but I’ll cite from just some portions of the latter in summary:

Faith lays hold of God’s grace in Christ, by which a person is justified. Then, when the person is justified he is also renewed and sanctified by the Holy Spirit. From this renewal and sanctification the fruit of good works then follow. This should not be understood as though justification and renewal were separated from one another in such a way that genuine faith sometimes could exist and continue for a time together with evil intention. Only the order of causes and effects, of antecedents and consequents is indicated, how one comes first or follow from the other. What Luther has correctly said remains true: “Faith and good works well agree and fit together; but it is faith alone, without works, that lays hold of the blessing. Yet it is never, ever alone.” (FC SD III:41)

And to this effect the Latin edition of the Apology says, “St. James teaches correctly when he denies that we are justified by a faith that lacks works, which is dead faith.” (FC SD III:4)

None has perhaps explicated this matter so simply or so well as Paul Speratus in his great hymn, *Salvation Unto Us Has Come*. He expressed Luther's essential insight in a little verse:

Faith clings to Jesus' cross alone
And rests in Him unceasing;
And by its fruit true faith is known,
With love and hope increasing.

For faith alone can justify;

Works serve the neighbor and supply

The proof that faith is living. (*Lutheran Service Book 555:9*)

Which is to say, Luther's "alone" is neither mistaken, nor is it what St. James is taking aim at, as a careful reading of St. James 2 reveals. James is going after a notional "faith" which rests on knowledge of this or that fact, like the demon's "faith" that God is one (James 2:19). St. Paul (as Luther correctly interprets him), is explicating living faith as God-given, God-wrought trust.

I'd like to offer one last testimony to the veracity of Luther's insight here, albeit from a most unusual source. I refer to Pope Benedict XVI's General Audience of 19 November 2008. He taught that day:

Being just simply means being with Christ and in Christ. And this suffices. Further observances are no longer necessary. **For this reason Luther's phrase: "faith alone" is true**, if it is not opposed to faith in charity, in love. Faith is looking at Christ, entrusting oneself to Christ, being united to Christ, conformed to Christ, to his life. And the form, the life of Christ, is love; hence to believe is to conform to Christ and to enter into his love. So it is that in the Letter to the Galatians in which he primarily developed his teaching on justification St Paul speaks of faith that works through love (cf. Gal 5: 14).

That particular papal audience did not please many of my traditional Roman Catholic friends, for whom Luther has been a whipping boy for centuries. But it shows the great care with which scholarly Benedict had read the Reformer. Thus the pope concedes that Luther's phrase "faith alone" is simply true, provided it is not set against love. And the pope knows that the

Reformer, in any case, did not ever do so. As Luther wrote (in a passage our Confessions cite): “Thus it is impossible to separate works from faith, quite as impossible as to separate heat and light from fire.” (FC SD IV:12)

Luther was neither innovating nor in error with his little “*allein*” in Romans 3:28. Still, I can’t help but wonder if Luther might have saved himself and the Lutheran Church a lot of aggravation if he had followed a convention the Authorized Version (King James) wisely adopted. Translators of the English Bible sometimes determined that something was implicit in the Greek or Hebrew, but not spelled out in the original. In these cases, they inserted the clarification, placing the interpolated word in *italics*. Thus, a reader of the Authorized Version can immediately spot when something has been added to clarify something that would have been implicit to the Greek or Hebrew reader. This convention continues in both the King James and the New King James Bibles in English. A pity, then, Luther didn’t write his “alone” thus: *allein*!



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Wittenberg Trail: Christ, Our First Love

by Dr. Donna Harrison

I grew up a cultural Roman Catholic, attending weekly church services, attending a parish school, being baptized and communed and confirmed along with the herd, but I did not see a life of faith lived in a lay setting. My home situation was very difficult. But despite being in a nominal faith community, I did not find my parents or any other family members or friends that I knew clinging to God's Word or conforming their lives to His. Weekly church attendance gave a one-hour reprieve from the constant fighting and bickering that went on in their daily lives. Most of my eight other siblings, similarly reared, could not articulate who Christ is, or the basic tenets of Christianity.

Despite the nominal Christian culture, God still provided His witnesses in my life. Faithful nuns inspired me with a vision of strong, godly, single womanhood. These women had dedicated their lives to Christ and had the guts to live it out. I also had the stories of the past martyrs, which simultaneously both scared the wits out of me, and filled me with a vision of courage in the face of deadly force. And in that day, major media occasionally made movies like *The Robe*. Their dated graphics still told a story of courage and faith that I wished I had but knew I didn't.

I was ill-equipped personally, socially or spiritually for the tumultuous times facing adolescents in the 1970s and 80s. I searched for truth in the sciences. Here, I thought, was the best human beings could do in discerning truth. I naively believed that all scientific endeavors were pursued with purity and

selflessness, by people willing to let go of their personal bias and conform their work to truth as we can best discern it. After all, Newton's laws of gravity were true for all people, regardless of their beliefs, ethnicity, or miserable family backgrounds. In science, I would find and join a brotherhood of truth-seekers who would recognize that I was also seeking after what is true. I would be the first in my family of nine children to go to college. It helped that my brain was wired in a way that made science and math understandable and easy for me. Three different scholarships made it possible for me to attend a state university where I dual majored in chemistry and biochemistry, 19-21 grueling credits a semester.

In the heady air of super-smart college professors, I thought I found what I was searching for. Then I started research. My first research project involved testing for a gas product produced by a certain type of soil bacteria. The procedure was straightforward, but when I repeated the experiments for verification, I kept getting inconsistent answers. After trying to change a lot of things about the experiment, I went back to test the equipment to find out if there was something wrong with the equipment. Sure enough, I proved through a set of experiments that the equipment itself was faulty, so any results produced when using that equipment would be unreliable.

I couldn't wait to tell my major professor, who would be so impressed that I had found this error. He would of course, immediately recognize the need to change the equipment to something more reliable for the experiments we were doing. When I showed him my results, he was less than pleased. "Donna, we have a grant which is funding this project. Now you may be correct about the equipment, but that would mean that all the work we have published so far is invalid, and we would risk losing our grant. We cannot risk losing the grant. Thank you for your work."



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That was a cataclysmic moment for me. The concrete foundations on which my idol rested were collapsing under the earthquake. I left the project realizing that some, maybe even a lot, of what is published in scientific literature was published for the sake of obtaining grant money so the researchers could survive. This is, of course, the opposite of truth-seeking.

Was anything true? I decided to finally explore the mystical. I studied New Age Silva Mind Control while simultaneously pursuing the Catholic “Reaffirmation of Faith” series. I also entered a Bible study with two college colleagues: Mark the Methodist (a fellow Biochemistry student), and his roommate, Joe the Baptist. I thought it would help to pursue all angles.

What eventually became clear to me is that there are two, and only two, self-consistent paradigms about reality and about God. Both were logical. What differed radically between them was their underlying, or *a priori*, assumptions. These are the things that we take as “given” before we even start to think about what that given implies.

So, here they are: Either I am my own god. Everything that exists, exists in my head. I can have complete mastery over reality because the only reality that exists is what I create in my mind. And that reality is “my truth.” This is where our society, in general, is at right now. Or, I am a creature. If I am a creature, that implies immediately that there is a Creator. And that implies that I am in some sort of a relationship to the Creator. That implies reality outside of myself, a reality that I must deal with, which I did not create, and which I do not ultimately control.

Scary stuff. Mutually exclusive paths always are.

So, which path was I going to take? I thought about the first paradigm: being my own god. It occurred to me in that moment that the concept was strikingly similar to Eve’s temptation to *know good and evil*. She alone would

decide what good and evil would be since she would now be *like God*. There would be no room for any other entity in her self-created universe which would be able to challenge her deity. She would rule, absolutely alone.

I thought about the second paradigm: being a creature and being created by God, a God who knows me so personally that He formed me in my mother's womb. He knows more about me than I know about myself, because He made me. He was calling me, through His Word, to love Him with my whole heart, mind, soul and strength: "What do you want, Donna?"

"I want to be Your creature."

In that instant, I finally understood what God had been trying to tell me through years of liturgy: *I love you, and I'll never leave you. And, You will be more yourself by abandoning yourself to Me than you ever would be as god of your own empty universe. And, My kingdom is here now.*

Instantly, the world changed. I was no longer alone. The sky was blue, the grass was green, and the God of all Creation loved me with a love beyond all understanding. I realize that stuff like that isn't supposed to happen to a Lutheran. But it did happen to me, and it changed my life forever.

But that episode in my life only got me as far as knowing with certainty that God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit exists. So then, God, who has a tremendous sense of humor, used Mark the Methodist and Joe the Baptist. They caused me for the first time to read Scripture and wrestle with the ideas contained there. God caused them to choose the Gospel of John as our first Bible study. Though I had never read Scripture before, I recognized that the vast majority of the liturgy comes almost directly from the Gospel of John. The more I read, the more I fell in love with both the power and the beauty of what is contained in the Scriptures. And some of that love spilled over onto Mark the

Methodist. So, two years later, Donna the Catholic and Mark the Methodist got married, and headed off to medical school.

The twin crucibles of medical school and marriage forced Mark and I to refine what we would have to die for, and what we could let go of. That time required us to carefully examine church history, denominational teaching and liturgical practice. Neither of us could live with going to separate denominations. We also had to come to terms with a viciously secular environment that mocked all faith except utilitarian humanism. In order to survive, we had to find a faith stronger than Caesar.

For a few years, we attended both Roman Catholic mass and then immediately afterward attended an Evangelical church. We were bitterly disappointed by our priest who was pro-abortion and preached it from the pulpit in direct contradiction to clear Roman Catholic teaching. We were also bitterly disappointed by our Evangelical pastor who read the Words of Institution at Communion but went on to preach that Christ didn't mean what He clearly said.

We realized we needed to find a church that was historically sound, whose doctrine was based on and consistent with the revealed Word of God, and who would provide us with the nourishment we needed from the Liturgy and the Sacraments. We ended up with two practical possibilities: either Greek Orthodoxy or Confessional Lutheranism. Neither of us is Greek.

I was still struggling against Lutheranism, when a medical school colleague handed us a copy of *Luther's Large Catechism*. Mark and I could see that the *Large Catechism* was the best explanation of the Ten Commandments we had ever encountered. But I think that the *Large Catechism* especially struck me since Luther wrote as a devout man grieved by the errors of the Church who found Christ in the Scriptures. So, we decided to dip our toes into Lutheran waters.

We found the Lutheran Confessions to be historically coherent, and consistent with God's Word. We found many Confessional Lutheran churches to rightly preach the Gospel and rightly administer the Sacraments. So, the Confessional Lutheran Church has been our home for the last 30 years.

With all that great endorsement of Confessional Lutheranism, why do I title this a cautionary tale?

Sometimes I see my beloved Confessional Lutheran brothers and sisters leaving their first love, to chase after things clearly adiaphora, just as I saw when I was growing up. What almost took me away from the promise of God in my Baptism was failing to find a pulpit teaching that was consistent with God's Word, and failing to find brothers and sisters who even tried to love the Lord their God with their whole heart, mind, soul, and all their strength. I'm not talking perfection. I'm talking honesty. We have to be able to answer the question: "Why are you going to church? What do you really believe? What has Christ ever done for you? How does that affect your life?" We need to cling tightly to our first love, not only for our sake, but for the sake of the many who are saying, "Who can show us any Truth?" If we honestly don't consider Christ as our first love, we need to wrestle with Him until He breaks our hip and blesses us. My only hope in this dark time is to cling to His Word and draw my life and strength from a believing liturgical community who lives life together to and from the Altar.



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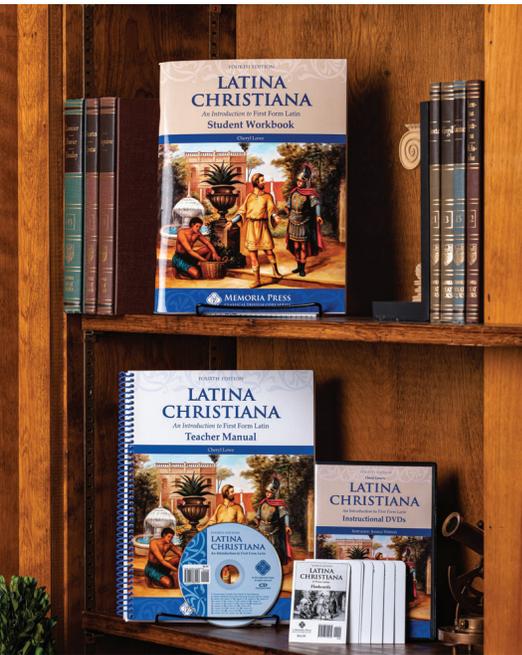
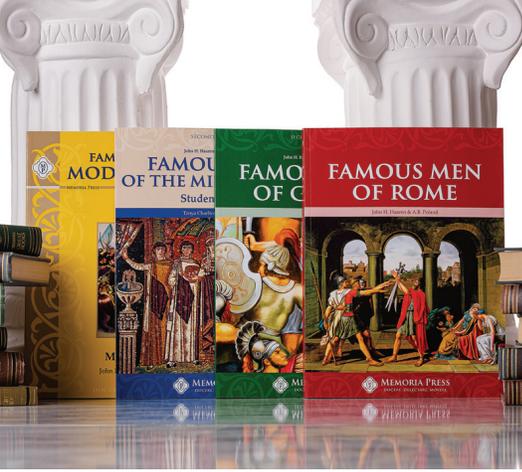


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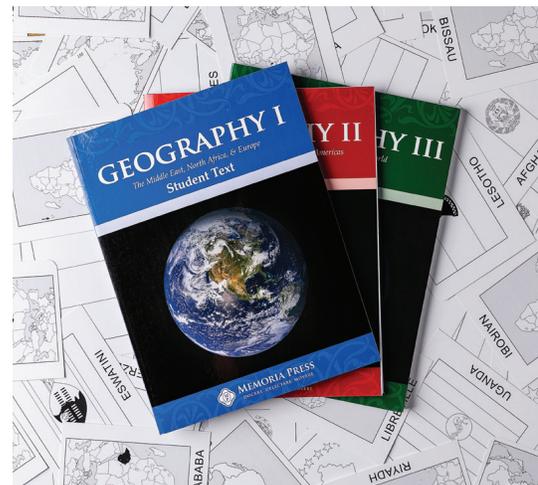
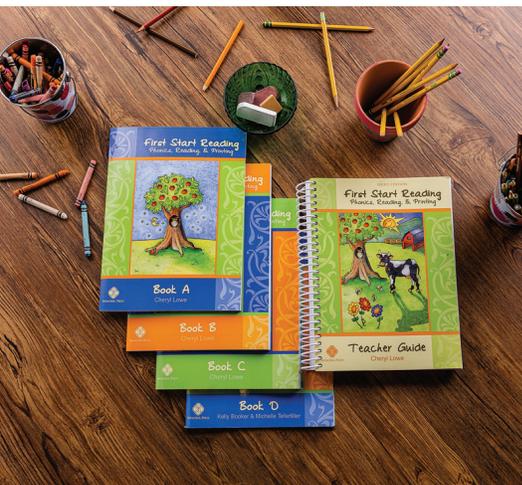
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