

FAITH ALONE
Sermon Series: Distinctiveness of Presbyterians
Ephesians 2: 1-10 June 21, 2015 Fathers Day
The Church of the Covenant

By now as this series on the “5 Solas” unfolds we begin to see the formula of the Reformed Tradition and its historic belief structure unfolding –*Scripture Alone* testifies to the fact that we are saved *BY CHRIST ALONE, BY GRACE ALONE, THROUGH FAITH ALONE...to the GLORY OF GOD ALONE*. Today we focus on Faith Alone... There are multiple meanings we use when we say the word “Faith”. For some it means “What I believe”; it is the complex pattern of beliefs we hold to; it is a synonym for an entire belief structure. You have to have Faith; you have to believe this or that; you have to believe this part of the scriptures or that part of the Creeds. Your correct believing is essential; you have to believe perfectly before you can unite with the church; you have to hold to the essential tenets of the Reformed Tradition or we won’t let you be a Presbyterian minister; you have to believe correctly or the Lord God Almighty won’t let you into heaven. People will say things to me like: “Well, I can’t join the church yet because I haven’t figured this all out and when I do THEN I can join the church.” All of that, in my opinion, is not what it means to “have faith”. All of that is not what is meant when the Apostle Paul notes in our scripture today, “*For by grace you have been saved THROUGH FAITH...*” (Ephesians 2: 8)

As Presbyterians, because we are perfectionists at our core, we somehow think we have to “get it right” and THEN God will accept us. First of all, if I may seek to get you out of the thought patterns of perfectionism, we will never get it right nor be perfect in this life; we will never completely figure it out why Jesus had to live and die and be resurrected for me; we will never understand why God has chosen to be grace-filled and merciful to me personally. I can’t earn it; I don’t deserve it; nothing I can serve up to the Almighty can buy my entry into heaven; my perfect understanding or my attempts at perfect behaviors does not grant me entry into the presence of God. It is by Christ Alone, through Grace Alone; not through what I have done; it is by what Christ has done for me. AND it’s the same thing with Faith. Don’t say to God “And now it is my responsibility to figure this all out, to “be good” apart from you, Thanks, Jesus, for what you have done, but this faith piece, well, this is my part of the bargain, this is where I have to do the work, figure it out, offer up to you the perfect statement of faith, believe rightly, correctly and perfectly.”. Nope, nope, nope. Then it wouldn’t be by Christ Alone would it? And it wouldn’t be by Grace Alone would it? Nope. It would be by “STU ALONE”. It would be about me, and me figuring it out, and my perfect believing. By making Faith about me, instead of about Jesus, the whole construct of by Grace Alone, through Christ alone, by Faith alone would fall apart. No beloved, Faith is every bit a gift from God that Grace is. Faith is God’s working in our life just as much as Grace is.

As Presbyterians sometimes I think we suggest that Faith really is about perfect believing. We ask our Confirmation Class to write their personal statements of faith. These are presented to the session and I suppose if the session didn’t like one of them, the session could choose not to vote a young person into church membership. We ask ministers-in-training to put together their statements of faith and then grill them on the floor of Presbytery. I remember when I was a young seminarian. I figured that if I was going to be a Presbyterian then I had better study thoroughly the Book of Confessions, the 266 page statement of beliefs of the Presbyterian Church. I studied every Confession in detail. I read every footnote. I read every scripture verse and researched every scriptural allusion in every confession. And when I came to write my statement of faith I quoted either the Bible, or the Confessions or John Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion for every statement I made in my statement of faith. I thought I had written an iron-clad statement of faith. How could the Presbytery dare question the Bible, the Confessions or John Calvin himself? I recently ran across a copy of that statement of faith and today it

embarrasses me, because it was all about me, about my need to “get it right”, about my need to appear knowledgeable and perfectly orthodox in my believing. On the floor of presbytery they asked me if I was trying to “out-Calvin, Calvin.” They asked me if I had any original thoughts after 1546. It was called “stump the seminarian” time and finally when they couldn’t trip me up on the Bible, the Confessions or my reading of Calvin someone stood up to start asking me questions about controversial social issues -- If we can’t get you one way, Stu, we’ll get you another. It was then that Dr. Mac, The Reverend Dr. Harold H. McConnell, Jr. then Pastor of The Church of the Covenant, this church, stood up and hurriedly said: “Mr. Moderator, I move we arrest the examination.” Praise God, I had just experienced GRACE ALONE. But my endeavors to “get it right” were not appreciated by Washington Presbytery. And so I took that original statement of faith, when I found it, just in the last year, and I threw it away in the trash, where it belongs.

St. Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian of the early church, who wrote the *Summa Theologica*, on his deathbed repudiated all his vain attempts to put into words the majesty and the grace and the mystery of God. I had a dear friend in seminary who was trying to write the perfect Biblical Hermeneutic, the perfect way of perfectly interpreting the scriptures, stayed up night after night, working and writing and striving, only to realize in the end that he had created an idol to himself and his own mind, idolatry most foul, Pride vaunteth himself not the Lord, his hermeneutic actually getting in the way of his relationship with the Holy and put in a superior position over scripture itself. And one night he took his hundreds and hundreds of pages of notes and writings and ripped them up into tiny pieces and threw them all away in the garbage. Karl Barth, the great Reformed theologian, who wrote *Church Dogmatics*, just one volume of which on the Doctrine of Reconciliation is 467 pages long, when finally asked to summarize his work said simply: “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” Through Scripture Alone he knew it was by Christ alone and through Grace alone. The Apostle Paul, no slouch in the theology department, the Pharisee of the Pharisee, as he called himself, trying to get every detail perfect and just right, the Apostle says “*Indeed I count every as loss (everything as filthy rags, everything as garbage) because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.*” (*Philippians 3: 8*) All of his own words, all of his sermons, all of his letters, all of his writings, all of his own knowledge are just so many filthy rags by comparison to knowing Jesus Christ as Lord. We seek to KNOW CHRIST, not a bunch of stuff about Christ. It is FAITH *in* Christ, not in a bunch of statements *about* Christ. There is a difference.

So what then is the definition of “faith” that I believe “FAITH ALONE” is about? “*Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” Notes the New Testament book of Hebrews (Hebrews 11: 1) We walk by faith and not by sight. We believe that what Jesus Christ has done, through His life, death and resurrection, Jesus Christ has done for me. Well, how exactly is that going to work out? And how exactly do I receive this faith from Jesus? And exactly what does life ahead hold for me? How exactly will this all perfectly work out? And how exactly will I get into heaven when I die? No, no, no –we walk by FAITH and not by SIGHT. We believe Jesus will lead us and get us through every danger, toil and snare; we trust Jesus at His Word; we believe HE has gone ahead to prepare a place for us, a place in heaven that where He is we shall be also. We don’t know how this is going to work and we never will. But we trust in Jesus to get us there. We trust in His promises through Scripture Alone. We trust that by Grace alone He will do it for us. This supreme trust in the all sufficient work of the person of Jesus Christ (in HIS work not in ours) and this supreme confidence that what He has done for us, that we could not do for ourselves alone, is what I believe it means when it says, “*By grace you have been saved through faith...*” (*Ephesians 2: 8*)

I think that some people think that faith is like a mountain climber, trying to climb their way up Mt. Everest into the presence of God. It is struggle and work. It is dangerously and precipitously dangling

off the precipice of life. I think that faith is more like hang-gliding off that precipice. Out over the abyss, throwing ourselves off, taking that huge leap of faith out into the unknown, and soaring and flying and rising on the power of God, on wings provided by the grace of Jesus, through Christ alone, soaring into eternity and into God's presence. The wind raises you up; you don't raise yourself up. Christ gives us faith just as Christ gives us grace; it is the same gift really; it is all about HIM and His perfected work; it is not about our trying on our own to work our way up to God. No, no, no, *Christ* lifted me. My supreme trust that it is Christ alone who does it is my expression of my faith. I am confident in HIM; I am skeptical of my own abilities. Scripture alone testifies that it is Christ alone, by Grace alone and through Faith alone that we are saved.

It was terrible and tragic that the Washington City Mission all but burned down last week. The expensive commercial grade kitchen gone; the dining room gone; the chapel, the sleeping quarters ruined and made uninhabitable by smoke damage. I was praying about it one morning and I was urged and nudged I believe by the Spirit to take leftover hotdog and hamburger buns down there to help. Then I thought to myself, "No, and I better bring a check with me." So I did. But I had the distinct feeling that there was something else for me to do. That there was another assignment from the Lord God, but I didn't know what it was quite yet. So I went into the lower level of the Bible Chapel over on Wheeling Street, where lunch was going on, and there I saw Dean Gartland, who is the Director of the Mission. And then I knew why God had sent me. You can imagine how discouraged he must feel, having his entire ministry go up in flames and struggling to find ways to make it work. And I said to him, "Dean, I believe God has sent me to you today to remind you that out of the ashes God is going to raise you up, Phoenix-like, bigger, better, stronger and more faithful than ever. And in the process God is going to raise up this entire community and every church within it to support you, pray for you and to make sure it happens." He got all teary-eyed. I knew that he had been praying and that morning I was God's answer to Dean Gartland's prayer. So how could I have the supreme confidence and trust to announce that to my friend and in advance of any logical reason to do so? Because we walk by faith and not by sight; it is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not yet seen. It is having read and re-read and re-read again the scriptures and the promises of God; it is watching God's hand at work all around me for more than 35 years of ministry; it is seeing how God hears and answers prayer; it is watching the way the Bible and the Confessions and the reality of God's action and intervention in the world always works. It is my FAITH that was speaking. I don't know exactly how this will work out but I trust my Savior to work it out better than I could ever hope to do it. I don't have it all figured out but I don't have to—I know the ONE who accomplished it all on a cross. I don't know the future but I know the One who holds the future in His hand. So I have faith in Christ Alone to do what I cannot do and to have figured out already what I can never figure out. I have faith in the Mission Committee and the extraordinary resources of faith and hope and love of this congregation. God is faithful and so I can have faith in Christ.

By the way, on your worst, no good, terrible bad day, on the most awful day of your life, on whatever day is most like the entire Washington City Mission going up in flames and all you have worked for and hoped for going up in smoke, on that day can you say, "I don't know exactly how this is going to work out but I believe it will"? Then you have FAITH. You have supreme trust. You believe in Christ Alone, by Grace Alone, through Faith Alone, testified to by Scripture Alone, to the Glory of God alone. Someday I hope I have the courage to stand up on the floor of a presbytery meeting when asked my statement of faith and say just this—"I believe that what Christ Alone has done, Christ has done for me...and for you." And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*