

“The Five Solas of the Reformation”

by Prof. David J. Engelsma

Speech #2 – “Grace Alone by Faith Alone unto the Glory of God Alone - and Assurance of Salvation”

(Speech given on December 30, 2014)

Scripture: **Romans 4**

“Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all” (verse 16).

Introduction

We heard earlier at this conference from the mouth of Jesus Himself that Scripture witnesses to Him — to Him alone as the only Savior. “They [the scriptures]...testify of me [Jesus]” (John 5:39). They testify of Jesus in such a powerful way that God’s elect people come to Jesus and have life in Him (John 5:40). Jesus is the Savior—the only Savior—that Scripture reveals to us, and points to, as once John the Baptist pointed to Him. In Jesus—in Jesus alone—is the salvation of which we, with all humans, are in need.

In Romans 4, particularly verse 16, Scripture makes known what the salvation God has planned and prepared for us is, and also how we receive this salvation—how God is pleased to give this salvation to us sinners, and how we enjoy this salvation.

Obvious in Romans 4:16 are two of the “solas” of the Protestant Reformation, which, I remind us, are two truths that are essential aspects of the gospel of the Bible. The two truths are “faith” and “grace.” Romans 4:16 teaches that it is “of faith” and “by grace.”

Clearly, the text relates these two truths very closely. Because it is “of faith,” it is also “by grace.” If it were not “of faith,” it could not be “by grace.” Indeed, the very purpose of God in determining that it is “of faith” was that it be “by grace.”

If two “solas” of the Reformation are expressed in Romans 4:16, a third “sola” is implied: the glory of God alone. Because it is “of faith” and “by grace,” it glorifies God. It glorifies God only.

And then, there is expressed in Romans 4:16 an extremely important, very practical, truth, which, even though it is not one of the five “solas” of the Reformation, was vitally important to the Reformation, as it is to every believer still today: the assurance of salvation. The text teaches the assurance of salvation in the words, “the promise...[is] sure to all the seed.” This assurance of salvation, in time and to all eternity, is the confidence of every one who is saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ by faith alone.

“Grace Alone by Faith Alone unto the Glory of God Alone — and Assurance of Salvation”

What is of Faith Alone

“It is of faith,” we read in Romans 4:16. Literally, the apostle simply wrote: “Therefore, of faith, so that by grace,” etc.

Our question is: “What is of faith and by grace?”

The text itself does not answer our question.

But we learn what “it” is in the preceding verses in the chapter. That which is “of faith” and “by grace” is being an “heir,” being “heir of the world” (v. 13). This is the subject of verses 13-15. God made a promise to

Abraham and his seed that they would be “heir of the world,” that is, that they would inherit the world.

This promise of being heir did not come to Abraham through the law, but through the righteousness of faith (v. 13). No one can be an heir “of the law.” Therefore, verse 16 states, “It,” that is, being an heir, is “of faith.”

To be an heir is to be designated as one who will inherit the estate of God—the riches of the treasures of God. An heir in earthly life is the one to whom the father’s will is made out. In the case of Abraham and his seed, God willed them the great good of the “world.” It is worthy of note that God did not merely will to Abraham and his seed the land of Canaan. But the inheritance is the world, the universe of the heaven and the earth that God created in the beginning. In the day of Christ, the universe, having been purged by fire, will be renewed as a glorious heaven and earth (Rom. 8:19ff.; II Peter 3). The heirs will live in this new world; they will own it and rule it under Christ. One day, the world will be ours, our inheritance.

This world will be our dwelling-place with God, in Jesus Christ.

This is what we Christians look forward to.

This is a reason why we do not cheat and steal to get a little part of the world now.

This is why, if need be, we patiently suffer the loss of aspects of the world in this life.

The day is coming when the entire world, with all its riches and beauties, will be ours.

This being an heir is “of faith” and “by grace.”

Being an heir implies several other glorious truths about us. First, we, who are Abraham’s seed, are adopted by God as His sons and daughters, for only children inherit.

Second, we, who are heirs of the world, will be raised from the dead—raised from the dead in the resurrection of our body—for dead people cannot inherit the world.

In one word, “it” in Romans 4:16 is salvation. Salvation is of faith.

This salvation—our being heirs of the world—depends on our being righteous. Therefore, the answer to our question, “What is of faith?” must also be: “righteousness!” Righteousness is “of faith.” No one who is unrighteous may inherit God’s glorious world in the day of Christ and live in it with the holy God. Verse 13 explicitly states that the promise of being heir is “through the righteousness of faith.”

Righteousness by faith—by faith only—is the main subject of Romans 4. Verse 5 declares the theme of the passage: “But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” Righteousness with God consists of the forgiveness of sins and being accounted obedient to all the demands of the law.

“It” is of faith! Being heir of the world; living with God in the new creation; adoption as a child of God; resurrection from the dead; and righteousness with God, that gives the right to all this—all is “of faith.”

That Salvation is of Faith

Thus, Romans 4 sounds the great theme of the 16th century Reformation of the church: Righteousness and all of salvation are “by faith.”

“Of faith” in verse 16 is, literally, “out of faith.” The question that the apostle is answering is really this: What is the source of being an heir, of being a child of God, of all of salvation? Where must I look for this, and where can I find it and enjoy it?

The answer is: “out of faith,” that is, out of knowing Jesus Christ as the crucified and risen Savior from sin and death, and trusting in Him for salvation. This is not because faith in itself can give all these wonderful blessings. But it is because faith unites you to Jesus Christ and draws from Christ the riches of salvation, beginning with righteousness. Christ and the riches of salvation become ours by faith.

It is all of faith, and it is of faith only!

Nothing of all this salvation can be received other than out of faith. Salvation is not partly of faith in Christ Jesus and partly of something else. This is plainly the thought of the text. I do justice to this word of God if I understand it to say, “It is of faith only (sola).” I contradict the text if I try to read it as teaching, “It is of faith and of my own good works,” or “of the law.”

The apostle has just shown, in Romans 4, that salvation from the law, that is, by obedience to the law, is impossible. Verse 13 has denied that being an heir is possible “through the law.” Verse 15 affirms, on the contrary, that “the law worketh wrath.”

Becoming an heir of God’s promise, that is, salvation, cannot be found from the law. Do not look for salvation in the law. Salvation is of faith—of faith only.

This was the message of the Reformation. This is still the message of the true church of Jesus Christ in the world.

This gospel-truth is denied by the Roman Catholic Church. Rome’s official doctrine, as set down in the decrees of the Council of Trent, is that righteousness and salvation, including being an heir of the new world, are “of faith and of the good works of sinners who cooperate in their salvation.

But there was yet another truth of the gospel at stake at the Reformation, a truth even more basic than salvation by faith alone. This was the truth that salvation is by grace—by grace only.

Romans 4:16 proclaims this essential truth, and points out its relation to the truth that salvation is of faith: “that it might be by grace.”

In the Service of Grace Alone

“It... [is] by grace,” we read in Romans 4:16. “It” is the same as the “it” that is of faith. The “it” that is by grace consists of being an heir of God, being a child of God, resurrection from the dead, and the righteousness that makes one worthy of salvation. That is, in sum, salvation is by grace. Romans 4:16 plainly and emphatically teaches that salvation is of faith, so that salvation might be by grace.

All of salvation is gracious. Nothing of salvation contradicts grace. Salvation is due, ultimately, to grace—God’s grace.

Salvation, therefore, is not our own work. Salvation is not something we deserve. Salvation is not merited by us, by our good works of obedience to the law.

Grace is the undeserved favor of God toward guilty, damnable sinners. It is the favor or love of God towards those who deserve the very opposite of His favor—His wrath, curse, and damnation.

And grace is the reason why God makes us heirs of the world, adopts us as His children, raises us one day from the dead, and gives us eternal life in the new creation—yes, and the reason why He declares us righteous, so that we have the right to all of this salvation.

The deepest origin of this grace is God’s eternal counsel, His election of us in eternity, as II Timothy 1:9 teaches: “Who hath saved us...not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.”

In this eternal grace towards us, God gave His Son, Jesus, to die for our sins. In this grace, He will raise our body from the grave. In this grace, He will privilege us to live with Him forever in the new world. And in this grace, God works faith in us, uniting us to the Savior, so that we receive all the blessings of salvation.

Salvation is wholly gracious. Salvation is due to grace alone. This is plainly what Romans 4:16 teaches: “by grace (alone).” Add “and by our own merits,” that is, “by our own deserving salvation because of obedience to the law,” and you simply negate and overthrow everything the apostle is teaching. Nothing of salvation is deserved by us. Nothing of our salvation depends upon our good works.

The Relation of Faith and Grace

Now we must carefully and correctly note the relation between “of faith” and “by grace” in Romans 4:16.

There is a relation, a close relation, such a relation that to deny “of faith” would be necessarily also to deny “by grace.” The word of God reads: “of faith that it might be by grace.” The word, “that,” establishes a precise and intimate relation between faith and grace.

Positively, salvation is gracious only if the means by which we receive salvation is faith. This is easy to demonstrate. If we become heirs of the salvation that God promises in His word by working, we deserve salvation. Then, salvation is not a gift, but payment of a debt that God owes us. Then, salvation is not gracious, but merited.

In contrast, if we receive salvation, not by working, but only by believing on Jesus, salvation is a gracious gift to us.

This is why Luther and Calvin, and the entire work of God in the 16th century that we call the Reformation of the church, fought so vigorously for the truth that salvation is “of faith alone.” What was at stake was the truth that salvation is the work and gift of God’s grace alone.

The truth of salvation by faith serves the still more fundamental truth of salvation by grace: “that,” or “so that,” salvation might be by grace (Rom. 4:16). God’s purpose in making faith, and faith only, the way of salvation was that this way of salvation serves, proclaims, and protects His grace. It is as if, in eternity, in planning our salvation, God was thinking, “What is the one way of salvation that can save sinners and that will praise My grace?” He decided, “Ah, faith in Jesus Christ! Faith will magnify My grace!”

For faith is not just another human work, but the renouncing of all human effort, all human merit, and the casting of oneself on the grace of God alone for salvation.

And this faith is itself the gift of God to elect sinners, as Paul teaches in Ephesians 2:8: “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that [faith] not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.”

With His design of salvation “of faith” and “by grace,” God had great and wonderful purposes.

The Purpose of His Own Glory

That the ultimate purpose of God in designing salvation “of faith” and “by grace” was His own glory, His own glory only, is not expressed in verse 16 of Romans 4. But this is a theme that runs through the entire book of Romans. As Paul is teaching justification by faith alone, he asks in Romans 3:27 the rhetorical question, “Where is boasting then?” Salvation by faith alone shuts the mouth of boasting man. All the glory of salvation belongs to God alone.

The conclusion of the entire section of Romans in which the apostle proclaims salvation by grace alone is Romans 11:36: “For of him and through him and unto him are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”

If our salvation is gracious, it glorifies God. And what a glory! The righteous God freely justifies the ungodly; the holy God adopts totally depraved men and women. And He justifies and adopts at the cost of the life of His own beloved Son. God lavishes the riches of His estate upon men and women who in our first father, Adam, had turned God’s world over to Satan.

The glory of God—that was the heartbeat of the Reformation. That was the incentive to men and women to stand for the gospel of grace, to fight for it, and to suffer, lose all, and even die for it.

We today will be faithful in preaching and confessing the gospel of grace only so long as it is a fire in our hearts, that God must be glorified.

The Purpose of Our Assurance of Salvation

There is yet another purpose of God, why salvation is and must be of faith alone and by grace alone. This purpose, although not one of the “five solas,” is stated in Romans 4:16: “to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed.”

In His grace, God wills that all of His children enjoy the certainty of their salvation—certainty that we are saved now and certainty that we will be saved everlastingly. God wills the assurance of salvation. In the language of Romans 4:16, God wills our certainty about the promise of God to His children.

But assurance of our salvation, now and forever, is possible only if salvation is of faith and by grace. By

believing for salvation, one has assurance that he or she is saved, and will be saved forever. Because salvation is by grace, one has certainty of salvation, because his or her salvation depends only on the gracious, faithful God, not on oneself.

If on the other hand it is not of faith and, therefore, by grace, our salvation is uncertain—highly uncertain. In this case, we must live and die in doubt and fear. Now, our salvation depends on us ourselves. Now, we may lose our salvation. Now, God's promise is uncertain and may fail. This is blasphemy against God. It is also terrifying to us. This is, in fact, the terror of all Roman Catholics, whose salvation, they suppose, depends upon their works. This is also the terror of all Arminians, whose salvation, they suppose, depends upon their own will, or decision.

From this terror, which is the ultimate terror—a terror more frightful than any other, involving as it does the possibility, if not the likelihood, of eternal damnation in hell—God has delivered us by the gospel of salvation by grace alone, of faith alone. By this gospel of faith and grace, we who believe on Jesus Christ for our salvation have assurance of our salvation.

God makes a promise to us, not according to our merits, but according to grace. It is a promise, not to workers, but to believers, a promise embraced, not of the law, but of faith. The promising God neither lies nor changes. And the promise itself is gracious: its source is the grace of God; its basis is the grace of God; and its realization depends on the grace of God.

We will inherit the new world and dwell in it with God as our Father in Jesus Christ forever.

The promise is “sure to all the seed”—“sure” regarding its fulfillment, and “sure” with regard to our certainty.