

Sola Fide: The Faith of Augustana

Morning Devotions, September 15, 2006

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The theme for our Gathering this year is “Sola Fide,” a Latin expression meaning “by faith alone.” The phrase appears on the logo of the Augustana Heritage Association, and it appeared on the official seal of the Augustana Lutheran Church and various documents that the church produced.

Sola fide, by faith alone, is one of the great “solas” that stem from the Reformation. It appears in a constellation with sola scriptura, sola gratia, and solus Christus—Scripture alone, grace alone, and Christ alone.

Any of these could have served as a theme for a Gathering, but it’s fitting that our theme is from the Augustana logo, “Sola Fide.”

We might ask, Where did this phrase come from? Its origins go back to Martin Luther. In 1522, while translating the New Testament at the Wartburg, he had to decide what to do with a particular verse, Romans 3:28, where Paul declares: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” When Luther translated that verse, he inserted a word that does not actually have a basis in the Greek text of Romans, and that is the German word “allein” or “alone” in English. And so in Luther’s Bible the passage came out this way: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith *alone* apart from works prescribed by the law.” That word “allein” stands yet in the most widely used version of the German Bible (1984).

One can debate whether Luther should have inserted that little word “alone” into the text of the Bible. But we should be reminded that translators have often introduced words to clarify a phrase. It happened in the ancient church, and it happens yet today—for good or ill. One can find many examples in English Bibles. In the case of Romans 3:28, one can say that by adding that little word Luther did not falsify what Paul wrote, but underscored it. If one is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law, one is justified by faith alone.

We live in a culture where performance is so important, and it is often taken as a measure of one’s worth. So justification by works didn’t really come to an end with the Reformation. The message of justification by performance is directed at us all while we are still very young. A few weeks ago our little granddaughter was at our house, sitting at the kitchen table, and she started writing her name on a piece of paper. Her name is Valerie. She started out writing V-A-L from right to left. A visitor noticed what was going on and asked my wife, “Is she dyslexic?” My wife turned to her and said, “No, she is three and a half.”

“Sola Fide” is an important, historic phrase. But we should ask how it has operated in our heritage, and how it might operate today. Does it have an abiding significance?

In terms of our heritage, the sola fide emphasis has helped us avoid a lot of the legalisms that have been promoted in the history of the church. In the life of the Augustana Church there was, to be sure, a kind of church culture that could border on legalism at times, depending upon which congregation one is talking about. And yet, as I recall some of the most straight-laced people of those days in my home congregation and beyond, I remember them as people who expressed deep down a graciousness that trumped judgmentalism and even their own piety. I cannot recall that the term “self-righteous” would apply to any of them, and they would not find it acceptable in others. Where I grew up, hypocrisy was one of the worst of sins. I like to think

that that was due to the sola fide theme. Deep down, I admit, maybe the real reason for being against self-righteousness was that we just didn't think it was very nice. Sola fide, Augustana nice, who knows? Maybe a bit of both. In any case, at the heart of the matter of being a Christian is Christ alone, grace alone, and faith alone. I did not list Scripture alone at this point, because there were Christians long before we had our Bibles. You and I were Christians before we could read. At the heart of Christian faith is Christ, grace, and faith. Sola scriptura has more to do with the message of the church, providing a normative basis for preaching.

The ways of being Augustana in the world were shaped largely by a theology of grace. One of Augustana's most influential theologians was Eric Wahlstrom, who taught at Augustana Seminary from 1931 to 1961. In one of his books (God Who Redeems: Perspectives in Biblical Theology [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962], 168-69) he wrote about God's redemptive work and the life of faith in this way:

God takes the initiative. [God] goes out to seek and to save the lost. God came to Adam and Eve, to Noah, to Abraham, to the Israelites in Egypt, and to the exiles in Babylon. Jesus came to a lame man at the pool of Bethesda who did not even have the strength to get down in the water at the right time.

Then Wahlstrom goes on to speak of faith as a response to God's initiative:

The act of faith means that [a person] is overwhelmed and compelled by the redemptive word of God [expressed] in the gospel, but it means also that one says a timid and yet courageous "Yes" to God. Faith means that [a person] gives up the ancient lie that [anyone] can save [himself or herself] and live independently "as God," and instead [a person] trusts solely in the grace of God in Christ for life and salvation.

So there we have it: sola fide. The faith being talked about is not a muscular act where faith becomes a triumphant and glorious good work. Nor is it faith in the sense of can-doism or naïve, pie-eyed optimism. It is a faith that trusts solely in the grace of God in Christ.

But there is a down side to every phrase used as a shorthand expression. The problem with phrases like sola fide is that they become slogans, clichés, or mantras that do not have the power they had when they were formulated. That should not happen in this case. The sola fide theme is still important today for the church and its teachings. Let's explore three areas briefly.

#### I.

First, the sola fide theme has ongoing importance for how the church centers its ministry.

More than any time I can remember, churches are working hard—very hard—to get new members. There are all kinds of factors feeding into that. Each of us could produce a list of reasons. In the scramble to get a market share of religious consumers in North America, the temptation is there to substitute other expressions that might appeal to the unchurched—and not only to the unchurched, but also to those who belong to churches already, but who might be shopping around for something new. The phrases we hear today are usually moralistic, self-help, and success oriented.

A while back I attended a church in the Twin Cities area. I hasten to add that it is not an ELCA congregation, but it was at one time until the pastor led it out of the ELCA. The theme of the pastor's sermon was "People don't plan to fail; they fail to plan." I heard that line over and over again until I almost "tossed my cookies," as we used to say. The rest of the sermon was all about having faith, so it sounded like a sola fide sermon. But it was all about faith in one's own abilities, and faith in God, which will result in success.

Almost every week I receive emailings and snailmailings that promise ways to fix my life, my ministry, and my congregation with purpose and power. A church near our home keeps sending out mailings with the words “Real and Relevant” prominently emblazoned. Then comes an invitation to come and enjoy worship in a friendly atmosphere with real Bible teaching that is relevant for all. “Read and Relevant” is the slogan.

The sola fide theme is crucial for our thinking. It can help to keep us on track of being the church of Jesus Christ. It opens the way for us to add other central commitments of our larger Lutheran and Christian heritage, such as the theology of the cross and what the apostle Paul calls “the justification of the ungodly” (Rom. 4:9). When these things are in place, we are more likely to be the church of the Christ revealed to us in the Scriptures, who seeks the lost, has fellowship with sinners, and teaches his disciples to be gracious in their dealings with others, benevolent, and on the side of justice for the poor and for those on the margins of society.

## II.

There is a second arena where the sola fide has importance. It can help us cope with new realities in our rapidly changing world.

I was reminded of this a while back when a seminary student became troubled by a passage in the New Testament that didn’t fit his cookie-cutter theology. {It is fun to teach Bible in a seminary. I find that the Bible upsets people’s faith all the time.} He got to talking about the only way to salvation, talking about how only those who have a stalwart and conscious faith can be saved. All others are lost. He had God’s ways all figured out. He had his theological assertions all lined up decently and in good order.

I can hardly believe what I said this to him, but I did. I said, “Look, unless your version of salvation can accommodate people with Alzheimer’s Disease, I don’t want to hear it.”

Sometimes I guess a seminary teacher has to be rather direct with a student. It reminds me of a day in church history class at Augustana Seminary. A student made a remark in class. I don't remember his name, but let's call him Anderson. Professor G. Everett Arden took off his glasses, looked at the student directly, and boomed out in his baritone voice, "Anderson, you need a rewiring job."

There are times in our modern world, where we face new issues. All those end of life things are coming at us in new forms. What to do about them? Simplistic versions of the Christian faith are inadequate. There are times when we must entrust others purely to the grace of God. Faith alone is all that we have going. That's true at the beginning of life, when we bring our infants to the baptismal font before they are able to respond to the gospel in a conscious way. And it's true at the end of life, when our loved ones cannot speak, perhaps cannot even believe for themselves, and perhaps even turn ugly and downright irreverent. All we got going for us and for them is faith alone in a gracious God, who gave his Son to seek and to save. To have such faith, in a corporate sense, is to be the church.

And doesn't this way of sola fide thinking apply also to another new reality in our world?

I am thinking here of religious pluralism. It's here to stay. More and more we are aware of people who are different from ourselves religiously. In the end, we must commend them to a God whose grace and love are more encompassing than we can imagine. We must join the apostle Paul in the wider hope we have in Christ, who will restore all things to God. We must have faith that that is so, if we are thoughtful persons, or we shall go insane from the consequences.

I did my doctoral degree at Union Theological Seminary in New York. I arrived there with my theology well honed at Augustana Seminary, but I had a life-changing experience at

Union. It did not call me away from my heritage, but made go deeper into it, making me draw out of the Augustana tradition something that was always there, but in my case had never been tested.

The first year of my studies at Union, Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York was a visiting professor. He taught a course in the theology of ancient Judaism. Well, my specialty was New Testament studies. The New Testament came out of the world of ancient Judaism, so the theology of ancient Judaism is an important topic. I took the course.

Rabbi Heschel invited each student to his office for a conversation. I still recall the day I went to his office. He was sitting behind a desk with the autumn sun coming from behind him, and he was smoking a cigar. The smoke curled up above his white hair and his white beard, and the sun was shining through it all. I thought for a moment that this was Moses on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Heschel asked me what denomination I was. I said, "Lutheran." He coughed a bit, and I realized that I might have said a bad word to this survivor of the Holocaust, a man quite familiar with Luther's invectives against the Jews. But what he said surprised me. "Luther," he said, "was one of the few persons of genius in his tory who ever understood God. Luther understood that God is in search of man." This was prior to the use of inclusive language. So it was, in his words, "God in search of man." And then, immediately, I remembered the title of one of Heschel's wonderful books, *God in Search of Man*.

I discovered that day that here was a person of another faith, who had an understanding of God that was very much like the one bequeathed to me in my Augustana upbringing, the claim that God is in search of each human being to reclaim him or her for an eternal kingdom. So

Heschel and I had something in common that I had not expected. My stereotypes of Judaism did not fit this most interesting man.

Each of us here can probably recall stories of persons of other faiths whom we have met and who have surprised us with a spiritual kinship. At least I hope so. And we wonder what the pluralism we experience means for our faith.

I am not one to denigrate the so-called pietism of Augustana. I think it has conditioned us to be able to understand deep piety in others, even if it is of another religious tradition. It takes one to know one.

It might have been OK for people to think, as some did early on in the twentieth century, that the whole world could be Christianized in one generation. And it might have been OK to think, as recently as the middle of the last century, that everyone is a potential convert to Christianity. Well, maybe so. But it does not appear to be working out that way. The religions of the world are coming to our neighborhoods, and it seems that sometimes their adherents have more commitment to their traditions than those of Christian heritage.

I do not want to be misunderstood. We need to reach out with the gospel of Christ to every person. Since Christ has died for all, each person has a birthright to hear the gospel. But the invitation will often be turned down. And so, we must join with Paul and other New Testament writers in the belief that in the end there is room for a wider hope for the redemption of all things. We hold on to that not by sight, but by faith alone.

If we take sola fide seriously, it will mean that we entrust others to a gracious God made known to us through the gospel of Christ. It also means that we can witness to Christ with humility and authenticity. Knowing that we are justified by faith alone, we can enter into conversations with persons of other faiths with freedom, not thinking that our only reason to talk



to them is to convert them. It's in such freedom that we can be most authentically Christian, showing the love of Christ in word and deed. We cannot assume a posture of superiority. We can only assume the posture of the One who came to serve, the One who came to seek and to save the lost.

### III.

Finally, there is a third broad area where the sola fide theme is important. That has to do with two of the major problems that we face today—human suffering and divisions among people.

In the past few years we have seen instances of almost indescribable suffering in the world due to natural causes in our country and abroad and to warfare and violence—again, in our country and abroad. As Christians we cannot close our eyes to the realities of suffering around us.

We have also entered an era in which people are divided and polarized in regard to cultural issues, political views, human sexuality, and economic conditions. As Christians we cannot close our eyes to the realities of division among peoples.

These two things—human suffering and divisions among people—are surely two of the greatest problems that we face in our day.

As heirs of Augustana, we should bring forth the best of our tradition. Two of the hallmarks of that tradition are social concern and ecumenical good will. Out of social concern, we should seek to alleviate human suffering. And out of our ecumenical good will, we should seek to bring people together, and hold them close to us and to one another, rather than to be agents of division.

These hallmarks of social concern and ecumenical good will are the fruits of sola fide. They arise out of hearts made generous by the grace of God in Christ. Living by faith alone, we put aside any preoccupation we might otherwise have with ourselves and turn to the needs of the world.

As Christians, we long for the day when suffering will be no more and people are united in peace and mutual care. To be sure, that is a hope that is not likely to be fulfilled on earth, but only in heaven. But the church is the community of the world to come, planted already here on earth; and in its ongoing life in this world, it gives witness to the reign and love of God. That which God has in store for humanity is made evident already in the community that baptizes, preaches, communes, and cares for a troubled world. It's the community that lives sola fide.

And so, sola fide cannot be simply a slogan learned from the past. The sola fide theme can have a vitality yet today in these three ways and more. First, it can guide us theologically so that we are not caught up in fads that offer a gospel that has no family resemblance to that of the Bible. Second, the sola fide theme can help us cope with a strange new world, ever changing, and help us witness in a world that is hard to understand, but loved and redeemed by God in Christ. And, finally, the sola fide theme can mobilize us to care for the neighbor and the world at large, alleviating troubles and reconciling people in a world that is too much divided. And with that in mind, may God order our days and our deeds in peace. Amen

Let us pray:

Good and gracious God, you have come in Jesus Christ to rescue your fallen world, a world of rebellion, suffering, and division. We give thanks for the gift of your Son, who brought

healing and reconciliation in his ministry on earth, and who seeks to bring healing and reconciliation through the ministry of his church.

We ask for your blessing upon your church throughout the world that it may continue in its faithful witness in word and deed. Bless the institutions of the church that they may be instruments of your love and will.

As we meet in this lovely place, we are mindful of the needs of the world. We ask for peace among nations and among peoples. Guide those who lead and those who work for the well-being of people everywhere.

We give thanks for those who have gone before us and who now abide in your eternal care. They have given us blessings, memories, and examples of lives lived by faith alone. May your Spirit continue to inspire us in these days and throughout our lives that we may be a blessing to one another and to those who come after us.

All this we pray in the name of your son, Jesus. Amen

Let us sing together hymn #56, "Jesus, Lord and Precious Savior."