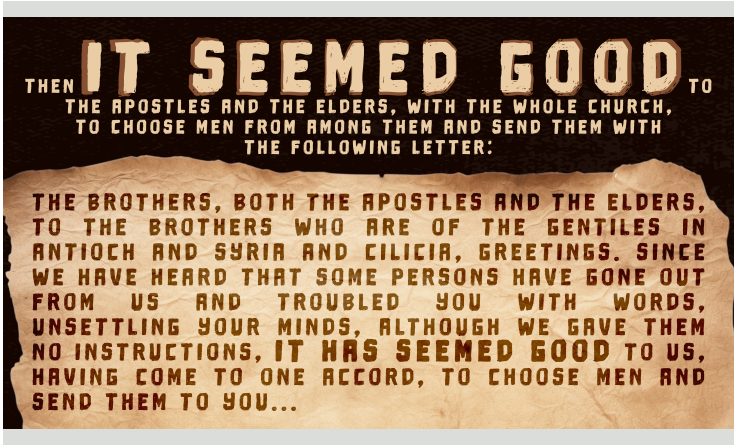
Digging Deeper

November 8, 2026



Peter Addresses the Council

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Before delving into the words of Peter, I have to share two short commentaries from Precept Austin that I found so compelling, both making the airtight case for sola fide (faith alone in Christ alone):

First, from R.C.H. Lenski (Lutheran pastor, 1864-1936):

To add anything to Christ as being necessary to salvation, say circumcision or any human work of any kind, is to deny that Christ is the complete Savior, is to put something human on a par with him, yea- to make it the crowning point. That is fatal. A bridge to heaven that is built of 99/100 of Christ and even only 1/100 of anything human breaks down at the joint and ceases to be a bridge. Even if Christ be thought of as carrying us 999 miles of the way, and something merely human be required for the last mile, this would leave us hanging in the air with heaven being still far away. (The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles).

Second, from Tony Merida (Pastor; Gospel Coalition Board member):

"Sadly, even today we see people disputing the idea that salvation is by grace alone. Many adhere, sometimes without even realizing it, to a Jesus-plus-something-else gospel: Jesus plus baptism, Jesus plus church attendance, Jesus plus quiet times. But if we add ANYTHING to the Gospel, we lose the Gospel. Gospel math works like this: Jesus plus nothing equals everything. The work of Jesus Christ is totally sufficient. This gospel of the saving exclusivity of Jesus by the grace of Jesus will always be disputed because the default mode of the human heart is works-based righteousness, not faith-based righteousness. Salvation by grace alone distinguishes Christianity from every other world religion. Religion is built on human performance, but no one has ever been saved by human performance or religious observance" (Bold added by Precept Austin)

So Peter now chimes in with his observations. Before I examine those observations, let me note that most authorities date this Council meeting as occurring in approximately AD 49. If that is true, recall that when I explored Galatians, it appeared that early epistle was written right about

that same time. Paul doesn't mention this Council in Galatians and also describes his conflict with Peter over this controversy of circumcision (and other Judaic laws) applying to Gentile converts. I'm guessing the timing of the Council and the letter to the Galatians are right on top of each other, because Peter, at least as recorded here in Acts 15, has the right take on this subject.

Peter hearkens back to his visit with Cornelius and his household and their conversion, which was at least ten years prior to this Council. God knew their hearts and filled them with the Holy Spirit, without any intervening requirements like circumcision or dietary restrictions or other Judaic laws and regulations standing in the way. Peter tells the group that they are putting God to the test by asking the Gentiles to put on a yoke of law that even the Israelites couldn't bear! The Gentiles and the Jews are saved through the same grace from the Lord Jesus. This is good commentary from Enduring Word:

Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago: Peter began with a history lesson, recounting the work God had already done. He then made the point that God had fully received the Gentiles apart from their being circumcised (God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us). If God had acknowledged these Gentiles as full partners in His work, then why shouldn't the church? If God received them, so should the church!

In saying, "Made no distinction between us and them," Peter made an important observation. It came straight from his vision of the clean and unclean animals, from which God taught him this principle: God has shown to me that I should not call any man common or unclean (Acts 10:28). Those of the sect of the Pharisees who believed thought that the Gentiles were inherently "common" or "unclean" (in the sense of unholy) and had to be made holy and clean by submitting to the Law of Moses.

Purifying their hearts by faith. Peter showed how the heart is purified: by faith, not by keeping of the law. If they were purified by faith, then there was no need to be purified by submitting to ceremonies found in the Law of Moses. Christians are not only saved by faith; they are also purified by faith.

Why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? Peter wisely answered another objection. One might ask, "What is the harm in bringing Gentiles under the Law of Moses?" Peter was correct when he observed that the law was a yoke which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.

This is demonstrated by a survey of Israel's history. At the birth of the nation at Mount Sinai, they broke the law by worshipping the golden calf. At the end of Old Testament history, they still broke the law by disregarding the Sabbath and marrying pagan women (Nehemiah 13). From beginning to end, Israel could not bear the yoke of the law.

Those of the sect of the Pharisees who believed made a critical mistake. They looked at Israel's history under the law with eyes of nostalgia, not truth. If they had carefully and truthfully considered Israel's failure under the law, they would not have been so quick to also put Gentiles under the law.

Paul made the same argument in Galatians 3:2-3. If the law does not save us, why would we return to it as the principle by which we live? In light of the finished work of Jesus, it offends God to go back to the law. This is why Peter asked, "why do you test God?"

But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved in the same manner as they. Peter concluded with the observation that it is through grace that all are saved – both Jew and Gentile – and not by obedience to the law. If we are made right with God by grace, then we are not saved by grace and law-keeping.

Peter also insisted there is only one way of salvation: We [Jews] shall be saved in the same manner as they [Gentiles]. Jewish Christians were not saved, even in part, by their law-keeping;

they were made right with God the same way Gentiles were: Through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Peter, the Jew, would normally have said it the other way around. He would have said, 'We believe that they can be saved by grace through faith, just like us.' That is, they can be like us." (James Montgomery Boice) Yet Peter turned it around and noted that all are saved by grace alone through faith alone, Gentiles and Jews.

Some takeaways:

Christians are not only saved by faith, we are purified by faith (our sanctification). We repent and believe and are now turned in a different direction in our lives. Sin loses its attractions and we want to become like Him.

Israel's history is filled with examples of their inability to keep even tiny parts of the law. I was always amazed at how fast the perpetually ungrateful Israelis turned from God to a pagan idol when Moses was up on the mountain for a period of time.

Peter turns the tables on the Council members. He doesn't say that the Gentile "dogs" can be like them (the Jews), relegating the Gentiles to second-class citizens as the believing Pharisees wanted to do and saying the Jewish believers were superior. He says that the Jews can be saved, too, just like the Gentiles, equating everyone under an impartial God.

God looks at your heart, not at your race, your gender, your voting record, your country of origin, your income, your giving, your church attendance, your memorization of creeds, your singing of hymns, your baptism certificate, your confirmation photo or any other "work". True repentance and His grace lead to good works, but you could be the biggest philanthropist in the world and the nicest human being anyone has ever met, yet that won't save you if you don't believe. Here is how Gotquestions.org defines Sola Fide:

Sola fide, which means "faith alone," is important because it is one of the distinguishing characteristics or key points that separate the true biblical Gospel from false gospels. At stake is the very Gospel itself and it is therefore a matter of eternal life or death. Getting the Gospel right is of such importance that the Apostle Paul would write in Galatians 1:9, "As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" Paul was addressing the same question that sola fide addresses—on what basis is humanity declared by God to be justified? Is it by faith alone or by faith combined with works? Paul makes it clear in Galatians and Romans that humanity is "justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law" (Galatians 2:16), and the rest of the Bible concurs.

Sola fide is one of the five solas that came to define and summarize the key issues of the Protestant Reformation. Each of these Latin phrases represents a key area of doctrine that was an issue of contention between the Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church, and today they still serve to summarize key doctrines essential to the Gospel and to Christian life and practice. The Latin word sola means "alone" or "only" and the essential Christian doctrines represented by these five Latin phrases accurately summarize the biblical teaching on these crucial subjects: sola scriptura—Scripture alone, sola fide—faith alone, sola gratia—grace alone, sola Christus—Christ alone, and sola Deo gloria—for the glory of God alone. Each one is vitally important, and they are all closely tied together. Deviation from one will lead to error in another essential doctrine, and the result will almost always be a false gospel which is powerless to save.

Sola fide or faith alone is a key point of difference between not only Protestants and Catholics but between biblical Christianity and almost all other religions and teachings. The teaching that we are declared righteous by God (justified) on the basis of our faith alone and not by works is a key doctrine of the Bible and a line that divides most cults from biblical Christianity. While most religions and cults teach people what works they must do to be saved, the Bible teaches that we are not saved by works, but by God's grace through His gift of faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Biblical

Christianity is distinct from every other religion in that it is centered on what God has accomplished through Christ's finished work, while all other religions are based on human achievement. If we abandon the doctrine of justification by faith, we abandon the only way of salvation. "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:4-5). The Bible teaches that those that trust Jesus Christ for justification by faith alone are imputed with His righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21), while those who try to establish their own righteousness or mix faith with works will receive the punishment due to all who fall short of God's perfect standard.

Sola fide—the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works—is simply recognizing what is taught over and over in Scripture—that at some point in time God declares ungodly sinners righteous by imputing Christ's righteousness to them (Romans 4:5, 5:8, 19). This happens apart from any works and before the individual actually begins to become righteous. This is an important distinction between Catholic theology that teaches righteous works are meritorious towards salvation and Protestant theology that affirms the biblical teaching that righteous works are the result and evidence of a born-again person who has been justified by God and regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit.

How important is sola fide? It is so important to the Gospel message and a biblical understanding of salvation that Martin Luther described it as being "the article with and by which the church stands." Those who reject sola fide reject the only Gospel that can save them and by necessity embrace a false gospel. That is why Paul so adamantly denounces those who taught law-keeping or other works of righteousness in Galatians 1:9 and other passages. Yet today this important biblical doctrine is once again under attack. Too often sola fide is relegated to secondary importance instead of being recognized as an essential doctrine of Christianity, which it certainly is.

"Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.' So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.' Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, 'The righteous will live by faith'" (Galatians 3:6-11).

I may have shared this from Gotquestions.org before when I studied Galatians. I think it is important to hammer the point over and over again and we have that chance now reading Acts 15. After Peter tells the Council his viewpoint, Paul and Barnabas then share the signs and wonders that God had done through them with their ministries to the Gentiles. I can imagine that they also talk about the negative reaction they received from many Jews on their first missionary journey.