The Sufficiency of Faith
The Reasons to Accept Sola Fide

The Debate over Justification by Faith

*The doctrine of sola fide*… Martin Luther referred to justification by faith alone as “the article of the standing or falling of the Church;” in other words, the test of authentic Christianity is the doctrine of justification by faith alone; the Roman Catholic Church has declared this doctrine as damnable heresy and has pronounced a series of “anathemas” against anyone who sided with the reformers over this doctrine.

*The document from the Council of Trent on sola fide*… In 1547 the Council said: “If anyone says that man is absolved from his sins and justified because he firmly believes that he is absolved and justified… and that by his faith alone absolution and justification are effected, let him be anathema.” This is one of 8 anathemas on those who believe in sola fide.

The differences between Catholic and Protestant teaching on justification by faith alone…

Concerning Protestant Teaching

Justification by faith alone is the hinge and pillar of Christianity; to misrepresent the doctrine of justification is like a defect in the foundation; if the foundation is not right then everything else is off.

The word justification is a legal term; it is a verdict of acquittal to one who is guilty of a crime; perhaps they get off because of some technicality of the law; it is possible for a guilty man to walk out of court a free man as though he never committed the crime.
All of us are sinners before God, but Christ paid the price for our sins; when we put our faith in Him for our salvation we walk out of God’s courtroom totally justified; to personalize it: I am viewed by God ‘just-as-if I’d’ never sinned at all.

Justification is the work of the Triune God: God the Father justifies (Romans 8:33); the Son Jesus justifies (Acts 13:39); the Holy Spirit justifies (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Justification is a one time act of God whereby the sinner, by placing faith in the atoning work of Christ, is totally acquitted of all sins for all time; therefore the one justified is declared holy and blameless before God (Ephesians 1:3-7; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

Concerning Catholic Teaching

Justification comes in two parts: first, when man is moved by God to turn from sin and to accept God’s forgiveness; second, is that man progresses in justification by good works and merits for himself the graces needed to attain eternal life; therefore salvation is partly by grace and partly by works.

The 1994 Catechism of the Catholic Church states: “Like conversion, justification has two aspects. Moved by grace man turns toward God and away from sin and so accepts forgiveness and righteousness from on high. No one can merit the initial grace which is the origin of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit we can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain eternal life.”

However, the Council of Trent in 1547 states that the initial cause of salvation is not by faith only but by “the sacrament of baptism;” so there is an initial justification by faith in Christ plus baptism where by one turns from sin and accepts his forgiveness by God’s grace; from then on justification is progressive and is maintained through the sacraments of the Church and through good works.

The Doctrine of Justification by Faith

It is instantaneous in application... Jesus said to the repentant tax collector... “...this man went down to his house justified” (Luke 18:14).

1. In the promptness of his justification... He was justified before he did any good works (John 5:24).
2. In the past tense of justification... “Therefore having been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

3. In the problem for Catholic teaching... The Council of Trent made this doctrinal statement: “Justification is not instant but gradual as one can increase in justification. This is done through the observance of the commandments of God and of the church, faith cooperating with good works, will increase in that justice received through the grace of Christ and are further justified.”

*It is instituted by God ... “... you were justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God... (1 Corinthians 6:11); it is a forensic reality; a declaration God makes about the sinner in His courtroom.*

The believer gets a new nature, not because he has been justified, but because of the inner dwelling of the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:36; John 3:3); there is a difference between sanctification and justification; sanctification is a lifelong process whereby the believer is conformed to the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18); justification is an immediate divine “not guilty;” we are never told to be justified but we are told to live a sanctified life (John 17:17,19; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 1 Peter 1:5-16; 3:15).

Catholics see justification and sanctification as one and the same; they are inseparable; Father Pacwa said: “The error we see in Protestant theology is they separate justification from sanctification,rather than seeing them as a process... We believe that justification and sanctification are one long process.”

The difference between justification and sanctification is that justification is our positional standing before God where He declares us holy and blameless; sanctification is our practical standing before God where we are admonished to live the life that God has already positioned us to be; we are called to practice our position; to live as God has already declared us as being.

Sanctification is an ongoing process and there are three aspects to it: we were sanctified in the past through Christ’s death (Hebrews 10:10); we are presently growing in sanctification as we seek to do the will of God (1 Thessalonians 4:3); prophetically we will be permanently sanctified when we receive our glorified bodies (Philippians 3:21).
It is imputed by God to us through the righteousness of Christ...Christ’s righteousness is “accounted” or credited to those who believe (Romans 4:4-5; 8:5; 17-19; 2 Corinthians 5:21); Catholicism claims justification is a lifelong process in which the individual increases in righteousness; it is initially infused by God at conversion and then increases when the believer participates in the sacraments.

It is initiated by faith alone... Salvation is based on grace through faith alone; the phrase “faith alone” never appears in Scripture; James uses the phrase “faith only” (James 2:24) but in a negative sense; Paul made it clear that we are saved through faith and not works (Ephesians 2:8-9; Romans 11:6; 4:5; Acts 16:31).

The Council of Trent stated: “If anyone says that by the said sacraments of the New Law, grace is not conferred through the act performed, but that faith alone in the divine promises is sufficient for the obtaining of grace, let him be anathema.”

Since grace is undeserved favor, how can one merit grace through performing good works?

The Duty of Good Works Apart from Justification by Faith

Some theologians believe Paul and James contradicted one another over faith and works as they relate to salvation; Luther referred to James as “the straw epistle” and should not be part of the New Testament canon; they do not contradict each other but complement each other; let’s clarify this seeming contradiction.

The responsibility of the justified is obedience to God.

Paul spoke of the necessity of good works (Ephesians 2:10) as did Jesus (Matthew 7:21).

The right response of the justified is to demonstrate love to God.
Jesus said, “If you love Me keep My commandments” (John 14:15); to do good works out of love for God demonstrates a personal relationship with God; some want an intellectual understanding of God more than a relationship; we need to learn all we can, but if the learning does not translate into a loving fruitful relationship, then it is questionable that they are truly justified.

The recognition that those justified bear good fruit.

Jesus said that those who are truly His disciples bear much fruit (Matthew 7:16-17); James would agree (James 2:14-26); there are two kinds of faith: faith by affirmation and faith by action.

Affirming faith is the intellectual awareness that you believe God exists; the devil has that kind of faith (James 2:19); a do nothing faith is nothing more than an affirming faith.

An active faith is a saving faith that makes one justified before God; the difference between Paul and James is their emphasis; Paul focuses on God’s part of faith---justification; James focuses on man’s part of faith---validation.

Scripture affirms that Abraham was justified by both faith and works; he obeyed God’s call to leave his home in Ur and go to the land that God would show him; once in that land he was told that he and Sarah who was barren and old would have a child; when Isaac was a teen ager God tested him by asking him to offer him as a sacrifice and Abraham never questioned God.

Abraham becomes a pattern of faith; “And Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness” (Genesis 15:6; Galatians 3:6-9); James thinks of these same stories and mentions Abraham’s willingness to offer his son Isaac on the altar; then he writes, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works?...” (James 2:21); no contradiction here: Paul uses Abraham’s faith to declare that we are justified by faith alone; James uses Abraham’s works to validate his faith; you cannot separate faith from works; that is why faith without works is dead.

When the reformers taught salvation by faith alone, they were not denying that man should not do good works; they were saying a saving faith will produce good works; however, their emphasis was on faith and not works; to put the
emphasis on works is to nullify God’s grace; if works saves us we don’t need grace.

We are not saved because we do certain works like go to church, study the Bible, try to live by the 10 Commandments; there are two words which explain a saving faith: self-renunciation and reliance; justification begins when you put no trust in yourself for salvation; self-renunciation leads to reliance on Jesus Christ who alone can save. Amen!