

92 *Sola fide* – by faith alone

As I was reminded yesterday, Paul Beverley can get things totally wrong – so easily, with the best of intentions. Multiply that up, and the church can get things spectacularly wrong in all sorts of ways, and being so big it can do some real damage – think Spanish Inquisition and Crusades.

But of course, when it gets it right, it can do massive good. I'm not a church historian, but I'm sure you can think of lots of examples.

And what about the Protestant Reformation, whose 600th anniversary we've just celebrated?

The church had become corrupt, structurally and theologically, and the reformers stood out against various aspects, one of which (I'm reading Romans, remember) produced the rallying cry, *sola fide* – justification by faith alone. (The Wikipedia definition is below.)

In [90], as I was preparing to launch my drone up over the Roman mountain range, I pointed out that Paul said it was about 'a righteousness that is by faith from first to last' (1:17), so it's not surprising that Romans was a key element of *sola fide* (and Galatians, as was made clear when I Googled *sola fide* – see below).

So the Reformation brought us back to the important principle that salvation is by faith, not works, and when people start quoting verses from James about 'faith without works is dead' (Jas 2:17 etc), we bring in an important principle of biblical exegesis, 'let Scripture interpret Scripture'. In other words, if one verse or passage seems to contradict another, you use your knowledge of the vast sweep of Scripture and decide which bit is right and which is, perhaps, 'open to a different interpretation'.

(At this point, I'm tempted to mention [60], where I quoted Jesus' words about how the 'goats' will be told '*Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels*' and '*they will go away to eternal punishment*', and that the 'goats' are those who failed to care for the poor and marginalised... but I don't need to worry, because the vast sweep of Scripture will allow us to interpret Mt 25 in a different way.)

Every time I read John's Gospel, I'm amazed at how JWs can *possibly* say that Jesus didn't see himself as God incarnate – and yet in my experience, JWs really do take the Bible seriously. So as I said in [88] we have to be very careful with any 'the Bible clearly teaches' statements, because it can so easily be me interpreting the Bible to say what I want it to say, or 'what I've always been taught'.

So how can we avoid making such huge mistakes as the JWs make? Well, a good dose of humility might help. It took God to allow me to get into that tiny sect to teach me that knowing God isn't about 'being right'.

But the two principles I've tried to use in looking at Romans are first not to take verses out of context (remember how incandescent I got [52] when I looked at the context for 'the wages of sin is death'?) and second to try to understand the first readers. The books were written for real people in a real situation, and what you say to someone to try to help them has to relate to 'where

they are at'. So when we read a passage of Scripture 2000 years later, if we don't take the trouble to read it first as they read it, we risk getting things very wrong.

And I'm even daring to ask whether some of the theologians (I'm *not* a theologian) of the Reformation could possibly have got some of their interpretations of Scripture wrong.

I think what I'm saying today is that faith is about humbly interpreting Scripture and not about being right; worse still faith is not about *knowing* you're right, as I have done for almost 50 years!

Paul Bev. 12.12.19

Wikipedia

Sola fide, also known as justification by faith alone, is a Christian theological doctrine commonly held to distinguish many Protestant churches from the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Oriental Orthodox Churches

'Biblical answers' website (my emphasis)

Question: Why is sola fide important?

Answer: 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 man 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 man is 'justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law' (Galatians 2:16), and the rest of the Bible concurs.