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Sola Fide as the Source of Political Unity**
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A Traditional Protestant Formulation of Sola Fide as the Source of Political Unity¹

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Abstract: The doctrine of justification by faith alone does not merely have political implications; it is a political doctrine outright. Of course, this claim runs directly against critics of sola fide who claim that speaking of justice “by faith” guts the word “justice” of the very thing it needs—action or works. But this article argues that a classic Protestant understanding of sola fide is history’s unexpected ground of political unity. Objectively, justification is a covenantal verdict that declares someone righteous before a body politic. Subjectively, *sola fide* robs political actors of the incentives to warfare and domination by giving them that which all people, nations, and armies primarily seek—justification, standing, and the recognition of existence. The person justified by faith must no longer prove or justify him or herself by any earthly measurement: race (“I’m Aryan”), ethnicity (“I’m Serbian”), gender (“I’m male”), class (“I’m aristocracy”), nationality (“I’m Prussian”), wisdom (“I’m Progressive”) and all those things that lead to war and political oppression.

Key Words: justification, politics, church, new perspective, race, covenant

Introduction

Books, articles, and conferences commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation seem will abound this year. In that same vein, I’d like to examine one dimension that probably won’t garner much attention, namely, the political significance of Martin Luther’s *sola fide*. For several centuries now, critics have accused the doctrine of *sola fide* as yielding either political passivity/quietism and/or individualism. Yet I would like to propose that the doctrine of justification *by faith alone* provides the ultimate basis for a just political unity and just political activity. The doctrine does not merely have political implications; the doctrine *is* political. And this is crucial to recognize not just as an academic point, but for the

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pastoral and ecclesial purposes of building unity in our churches, particularly across lines of hierarchy and difference.

Behind every flavor of tyranny, oppression, and social stratification in history is some form of justification grounded in the self and its works: “I’m more righteous, more ideologically correct, more freedom-loving, more tolerant, more inclusive, more wise, more white, more wealthy than you. Therefore, I or at least my ideology should rule over you.” Such self-justification leads invariably to division and exploitation. *Sola fide*, however, removes all human grounds for boasting, and gives one political standing in the community exclusively on the basis of what someone else has done. When my righteousness is vicarious, I have no basis for oppressing, exploiting, lording it over another. Not only, the forensic nature of justification unites us both with God and God’s community. It is first individual, but derivatively corporate. Here there is no Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female. Which is to say, justification by faith alone flattens hierarchies and unites one-time enemies.

The first place we should see such political unity, therefore, is in our local churches. If there is any place on the planet where the ongoing contests, say, between ethnic majorities and minorities should be resolved, it’s in our local churches.

Three Background Comments and a Working Definition

Before unpacking the argument, let me make three background comments, and offer a definition:

Background comment one: The challenge of making this claim about the political nature of *sola fide* are the divergent conceptions that people have about the nature of politics and religion and the relationship between them. The claim that “*sola fide* is political” will sound one way to someone within the tradition of philosophical liberalism, and another way to an anti-modernist, which is closer to where I place myself. To keep things short, I’m not going to unpack this larger conversation any further here and simply refer the reader to my book *Political Church: Local Assemblies as Embassies of Christ’s Rule*. Some of the material which follows is adapted from that book. I hope I can communicate my thesis here even without all the qualifications and definitions one might want.

Background comment two: That said, one risk of skipping over this larger conversation about the relationship between politics and religion is that readers will take the bifurcations of philosophical liberalism for granted—so completely have Christians in the West grown up inside of liberalism’s assumptions. Which means, furthermore, the reader might easily assume that the argument “*sola fide* is political” is an immediate and direct call to public action and social engagement, as if I were arguing, “The church must not operate only in the religious sphere; it must step into the political sphere, too.” After all, many previous arguments for a political or social gospel amount to precisely such a call to social action. One thinks, for instance, of

the paradigmatic social gospeler himself, Walter Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch rightly perceived that sin and evil manifest themselves within society's institutions and "structures" (as we say nowadays). He argued, furthermore, that the gospel promised to regenerate society outside the church in the here and now, not just in the eschaton. Hence, he lamented those who "postpone social regeneration to a future era to be inaugurated by the return of Christ";² "postponement in it today means a lack of faith in the present power of Christ and paralyzes the religious initiative."³ His social gospel, therefore, sought to evoke "faith in the power of God to redeem the permanent institutions of society from their inherited guilt of oppression and extortion."⁴ Yet Rauschenbusch's entire argument rested on the assumption that politics and religion are separate, if overlapping, domains. Suppose, however, we jettisoned that assumption and asserted that all of life is political, and that all of life is religious, even while maintaining that church and state possess separate and distinct authorities and jurisdictions (my own perspective).⁵ In that case, the claim that "*sola fide* is political" would most immediately apply to the people of the gospel, the church. Any applications for society's institutions and structures would be secondary and (perhaps) indirect. I don't need the reader to presently adopt my broader perspective on politics and religion, but I do hope every reader will at least agree that good theology always starts with the primary and works out from there to the secondary. Along these lines, this article will defer to another day the larger and crowd-drawing question, "What does all this mean for how churches engage society?" Instead, it will simply focus on the doctrine of *sola fide* itself and unpacking my assertion that the doctrine does not merely has political implications, but that it *is* political.

Background comment three: A distinctive of political institutions is that they are concerned with the principles of justice. Feminist political theorist Iris Marion Young has observed, "The concept of justice is coextensive with the political."⁶ That is, however far a government's rule reaches, that far its concept of justice reaches. Young's comment, the first time I encountered it, felt to me like a cracked door with light coming through it ("What's through there?"). If Young is right, and the concept of justice is coextensive with the political, any claims about justification would seem to be political claims. The theology student, in other words, must put on the political scientist's hat.

Definition of political unity: Let me offer a working definition of political unity. Political unity is premised on a common ultimate authority—an authority with imperium (the ability to make heads roll). Political unity, more precisely, refers to *the*

2. *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1913): 345.

3. *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 346.

4. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1917): 5.

5. See *Political Church*.

6. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990): 9.

relationships that abide between subjects of the same governing authority, particularly as that governing authority obligates those individuals toward one another according to its rules of justice.

And unless we only want to speak metaphorically, as when one speaks of “team politics” or “university politics,” then this body politic’s submission to this governing authority needs to take precedence over any other earthly authority. People need to regard it as possessing imperium over all others.

Critics of *Sola Fide*

What my argument is set against is the tradition of those who would debunk a traditional Protestant formulation of justification by faith alone as yielding both individualism and quietism, that is, political autonomy and political passivity, which would seem to be the opposite of a just political unity and activity.

Sola fide is critiqued by both the political philosophers and theologians. For instance, Alasdair MacIntyre, in his *A Short History of Ethics*, describes Martin Luther’s theology by observing, “The true transformation of the individual is entirely internal; to be before God in fear and trembling as a justified sinner is what matters... what matters is *not the action done or left undone*, but the faith which moved the agent.”⁷ Luther presents us, continues MacIntyre, with “a new identity for the moral agent.” The individual no longer defines him or herself within “a web of social relations” but merely as “one who has the legal power to make contracts.”⁸ At the heart of this is the individual standing in relation to God alone: “The crucial feature of the new experience is that it is the experience of an individual who is alone before God. It is as such, stripped of all social attributes, abstracted, as a dying man is abstracted, from all his social relations, that the individual is continually before God.”⁹ There’s your individualism.

Another political philosopher, Jean Bethke Elshtain, sees the same strict division between the significance of faith and works in Luther. Elshtain argues, “For Luther to claim, as he does, that an individual’s works—his deeds—have, or may have, ‘nothing to do with this inner man,’ is an unsettling claim. If one took Luther at his word, the person who, say, tortures his pets tells us nothing about himself in so doing: neither does the woman who spends a lifetime ministering to the untouchables and undying. Surely Luther cannot have meant this, yet it remains a linchpin in Lutheran theology.”¹⁰

7. Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Great Britain: Routledge, 1998): 78.

8. Ibid, 80.

9. Ibid, 81.

10. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981): 81-82. See also, *Sovereignty: God, State, and Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2008): 78-87.

Moving from political philosophers critical of Luther to political theologians yields a similar set of critiques. That's not surprising among Catholic theologians like Jacques Maritain who (in his early anti-modernist phase) spoke critically of Luther's "swollen consciousness of the self" which had the individual "stand(ing) solitary and naked before God in Christ in order to ensure its justification and salvation by its trust."¹¹

More striking is when the critique shows up among Protestant writers such as Jürgen Moltmann. Moltmann's critique of two kingdoms begins with the division between faith and works in *sola fide*: "When the person is justified before God by faith alone, then works fall out of this justified relationship to God." This division between faith and works corresponds to a division in the person: "In faith the human being is a Christian person; in works, a world person."¹² As a result, Christians will remain unconcerned with the state: "The impression of a dualism reasonably ensues and has led Lutheran theologians again and again to conform to unjust structures of the state and economy because the criterion for justice in the kingdom of the world was missing."¹³ In short, Luther's doctrines of *sola fide* and two kingdoms, says Jürgen Moltmann, has tempted generations of Christians to conclude that faith is world-less and that the world is faith-less, that God is unreal and reality God-less.¹⁴

To sum it up in my own words, the standard critique of Luther and *sola fide* goes something like this:

- i. Luther's doctrine of *sola fide* bifurcates the human person into the inner person of faith and the outer person of works since God is said to free and to justify only the inner person by faith;
- ii. this anthropological yields a political bifurcation, where Christian virtues are privatized and therefore peripheralized; and it leaves Christians themselves passive in the face of unjust and tyrannical states since the state cannot touch their 'inner person', which is already free.¹⁵
- iii. In a nut shell: so heavenly minded, no earthly good.¹⁶

11. Jacques Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* (New York: Thomas V. Crowell, 1970): 35.

12. Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, translated by M. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984): 71.

13. *Ibid.*, 72.

14. *Ibid.*, 75.

15. See Michael Kirwan, *Political Theology: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2009): 73-78; also, Walter O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theory* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 209.

16. Perhaps this is why at least several Protestant theologians who do not want to divorce the political and spiritual domains also adopt doctrines of justification that lean in the direction of the New Perspective on Paul, which sets itself in contrast to Luther, e.g. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994): 212-27; Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame and SCM, 1983): 93-94. Cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice in Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011): 260-66; 271-76.

I don't adhere to Luther's two kingdoms theology, and so I'm not going to attempt to defend it, *per se*. But I do maintain his view of justification.

At first glance, one can sympathize with these political thinkers. The idea that a person can in some sense be considered just "by faith" and not by his or her activity, to a political philosopher, sounds like cheating the system. It sounds like a hollow claim that goes against the very thing that is needed to produce a just society—just actions. Political philosophy is a meritocratic enterprise. It concerns itself with how people live, and it awards the title of "just" to those with the right behavior, however defined. To speak of justice "by faith," then, seems to gut the word "justice" of the very thing it needs in a body politic—action or works. So no wonder that some critique *sola fide* outright, while others, particularly those who embrace *sola fide*, treat the doctrine as non-political.

On the other hand, the Augustinian and medieval instinct to subsume the whole of the Christian life and sanctification under the aegis of justification provides a basis for justification to *mean* something from a political philosopher's point of view.

I propose, however, that a traditional formulation of justification by faith alone, albeit covenantally construed, does just the opposite of what the critics suggest: it provides a foundation for a truly just and united people.

To see that, we should think about *sola fide* and what God's justifying Word is objectively, and then what it means subjectively.

Objectively: Justification is a Covenant Verdict with Corporate Implications/Significance

The basic thing I want to say here is, justification in the New Testament occurs within a covenantal framework and is what Michael Horton calls a "covenant verdict."¹⁷ What's more, a properly covenantal and forensic conception of justification involves a corporate component in that it creates a body politic.

This claim might seem to embroil me in the controversies surrounding the New Perspective on Paul. After all, it is N. T. Wright who has famously proposed that Paul's doctrine of justification refers to "the declaration (a) that someone is in the right...and (b) that this person is a member of the true covenant family."¹⁸ Yet it's worth bearing in mind that both friend and foes of the New Perspective affirm the covenantal nature of justification. Not just Michael Horton, but occasional Wright-critic Simon Gathercole agrees: "I am entirely in favor of understanding righteousness in covenantal terms; there is no chance to return to a previous generation's attempt to

17. Michael Horton, *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007): 121.

18. N. T. Wright, "New Perspectives on Paul," in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006): 258.

generalize the Jewish and Pauline understandings of righteousness as generic good deeds, and the polemic of Wright and others against this line is important.”¹⁹

Gathercole’s phrase “covenantal terms” gets it just right. The basic idea here is that God’s declaration of a sinner as “righteous” must be specified according to institutional terms. It is like rooting through the file drawer to find a signed contract in order to re-read all the terms and conditions. God does not legislate, adjudicate, or justify arbitrarily; he always respects the legal terms previously set. To say that justification produces a “right standing with God” is true, but it remains institutionally underspecified. Right standing by what institutional terms? Does he justify sinners according to the standards of the U.S. government? An imam? Moses? A personal pact between a sinner and God? God as he has expressed himself how?

Consider the debate between NT Wright and Douglass Moo about justification in Galatians 2:15-16. “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith.” Wright looks at the context and argues that “to be justified” mean “to be reckoned by God to be a member of his family.” Moo maintains that we interpret *dikaioō* as “declare righteous.”²⁰

Wright, I propose, wrongly imports *the institutional context* of justification into the *definition* of justification by defining it *as* covenantal inclusion.²¹ He confuses justification’s “content” and “scope,” to borrow language from Gathercole.²² Moo, however, would do well to offer a little more institutional specificity: “declare righteous” by what institutional norm? Can we please open the file drawer and find the contract that specifies the terms and conditions?

Or, to portray both sides positively, Wright rightly calls attention to the significance of the covenant, while his critics rightly guard the definition of justification. With Wright’s critics, I believe we should define justification as “declared righteous” or “reckoned as righteous.” What the critics may underappreciate, however, is the political significance of the covenantal context of justification and how that affects what justification does.

19. Simon Gathercole, “The Doctrine of Justification in Paul and Beyond,” in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006): 236-37.

20. Douglas J. Moo, “Justification in Galatians,” in *Understanding the Times: New Testament Studies in the 21st Century*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard W. Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011): 174.

21. N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009): 116.

22. Simon Gathercole makes a helpful distinction between the “content” and the “scope” of justification, with Gentile inclusion belonging to the latter. I understand Gathercole to mean that inclusion is something that justification *does*, but is not what the term *means*. In “Justified by Faith, Justified by his Blood: The Evidence of Romans 3:21-4:25,” in *Justification and Variagated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004): 156.

To read Galatians 3 is to find the file folder and read the fine print. Galatians 3 alludes to the covenantal history of God's people, from Adam as the first son of God, to Abraham and the covenantal promise of blessing, to the Mosaic guardianship which taught that righteousness would not come through the law (3:21, 24), to the promise of the Spirit in the New Covenant. Then it effectively crowns Christ as the covenantal head who has fulfilled both Abrahamic promises and Mosaic curses in order to grant everyone with faith a covenantal identification with him and a covenantal identification with one another.

In short, a Christian's "extraordinary righteousness"²³ (to use Stephen Westerholm's term) is not a British or Muslim or even Jewish righteousness; it is a covenantal righteousness, meaning it is measured by the standards of the Bible's entire covenantal storyline. What then is justification? It is being declared in the right according to the terms of the covenant—a "covenant verdict."²⁴

Why is all this significant for our political enquiries? Quite simply, the covenantal context of justification gives it a corporate significance. It means it constitutes (as a consequence of the covenantal verdict) a politically united people. It creates them as a body politic.

Classical Protestantism often affirms that justification is forensic. But what is important to recognize is that the new forensic relationship that abides between an individual and God also abides—as a result of the same atoning act and justifying word—between everyone else justified according to the terms of that covenant. The age-old debate between legal/forensic and moral/transformational accounts of justification locates the discussion in the relationship between the individual and God: is the individual *made* righteous or *declared* righteous before God?²⁵ The "forensic" side of the debate (which is where I place myself) then ties the topic of justification to the domain of the court, and conceives of the transaction as a two-way drama between defendant and judge in which the judge renders judgment based on the merits of the case.

But courts act before an entire body politic. Judges don't speak for themselves but for entire legal systems, and the legal cannot be divorced from the political. Courts do not put detached individuals on trial, they try subjects and citizens. They seek to apply the conclusions of law, a law that structures the public life of a nation. The work of the court is forensic in that it occurs "of or before the forum," as the Latin term would have it (*forēnsis*), or, one might say, of and before the entire public or

23. This is Stephen Westerholm's term for the gift of righteousness that Christians receive in justification. In *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004): 273-84.

24. Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, 121.

25. For a history of this debate, see Alistair E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Defense of Justification*, 3rd (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 46-49; 59-72; 209-10; 212-15; 225-26; 237-41; 246-47; 252-55; 260-61; 263; 270-77; 295-307; 326-9; 339; 343; 355; 408; 416-18.

nation. “Forensic” is a relational concept that is both judicial and political, bi-lateral and multi-lateral. When an individual is declared “not guilty,” the judgment defines his or her relationship not just with the judge, but one is acquitted before the judge, the bailiff, the janitor who sweeps the courtroom, the mayor’s office, the newspaper editorial staff, and every other citizen and institution in the country.

Hence, defendants of the traditional position correctly defend the individual aspects of justification.²⁶ But we must also recognize that the individual’s justification occurs within a covenantal body politic, which means it has a corporate consequence. A horizontal derives from the vertical.²⁷

To put it another way, a covenantal head necessitates the existence of a covenantal people (Rom 5:12f). Or think of Peter and these two parallel statements: “Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet 2:10). We could also look at Ephesians 2: 11-21.

Christ’s performative and forensic word of justification—his covenant verdict—establishes people as citizens of a new body politic.

Subjective: Exposition of Self-Justification, with the Help of Oswald Bayer

It is also worth reflecting on the nature of justification and self-justification subjectively. To do that, we go to the original point of conflict in the Bible’s plotline—that moment when Adam and Eve decided they could be—in the serpent’s words—“like God” (Gen. 3:5). The words are worth meditating on. It would seem that Adam and Eve decided they were morally equivalent to God. “God might be *x*, but I am also *x*. God might be *y*, but I am also *y*. I am his moral equal.” And this sense of moral equivalency enabled them to step onto his throne and make moral decisions for themselves: “If I am his moral equivalent, I can make up my own mind about right and wrong. I can do as I please because my moral instincts are just as good as his.”

In other words, Adam and Eve’s self-enthronement depended upon an argument—call it a self-justifying argument, or self-justification. The argument can first be spoken by a serpent, a spouse, or the structures of society, but at some point a human actor must believe and adopt the argument before it means anything for that actor. And here we discover *the inseparable relationship between self-enthronement and self-justification*. Self-justification is self-enthronement’s legitimation, ground, basis. A person enthrones him or herself over against God only after justifying that action

26. E.g. Andrew Hassler, “Ethnocentric Legalism and the Justification of the Individual: Rethinking Some New Perspective Assumptions,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 54.2 (2011): 311-27.

27. See Michael Bird, *The Saving Righteousness of God: Studies on Paul, Justification, and the New Perspective* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2007), 100-03, 110, 113-54 (esp. 152-54); Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007): 6.

with a reconceived identity of being God's moral equal—being “like God.” The person must judge him or herself as somehow worthy or deserving or justified to rule. Even a cartoonish evil villain like Lex Luther who laughs off moral convention has convinced himself, by some tortuous route, that his desire to kill Superman and rule the planet possesses a moral justification. He thinks he *deserves* it. So it is with the one year old in the high chair who angrily screams at her mother when her mother pulls back the spoon. Self-justification and self-enthronement are inseparable correlates. The first is the argument or rationalization for the second.

And wherever you have human beings engaging in self-rule (everywhere), you have human beings engaging in self-justification, which is to say, a kind of legalism. They're always concocting arguments to justify that rule. And they are going to use whatever law you place before them for the ends of self-justification, regardless of what purpose the law was intended to serve. Laws, whether the Mosaic Law or the laws of a contemporary secular ideologically progressive worldview, provide the terms and categories by which we seek to justify ourselves: as in “I kept that law. The person I am must be good/smart/upstanding...And being good by my own merits, I am capable of exercising moral judgment over good and evil. I am able to evaluate and judge and, if need be, condemn you.”

Along these lines, Lutheran theologian Oswald Bayer helpfully argues that the theme of justification “embraces the totality [of life]. All reality is involved in the justification debate.”²⁸ The battle for justification, Bayer says, is at the center of our individual lives, as well as at the center of “the histories of great social groups or movements” and “the histories of alliances, nations, and blocs.”²⁹ After all, Adam and Eve rejected *not only* God's law, they rejected God's justifying word: “This is very good” (Gen 1:31). And ever since, all people and all nations have had to labor continuously “to legitimate our existence. We have [had] to demonstrate each moment that we deserve to exist, to be noted, addressed, welcomed, and honored, even if it is by contradiction.”³⁰ It's ironic that *sola fide* is accused of promoting individualism, when in fact self-justification is the source of all social division.

To have a truly just and righteous society, there must a group of people who are willing to step off the throne that belongs to God alone—to be dethroned. But the only way rebellious human beings will be willing to step off God's throne is to first discover that their self-justifications are futile and foolish, that self-enthronement is illegitimate, that God's condemnation of them is correct, that they are not his moral equal, and that they require not a self-justification but a divine justification. A divine justification, however, is possible for rebels only if God does something to satisfy his

28. Oswald Bayer, *Living by Faith: Justification and Sanctification*, trans. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003): 9.

29. *Ibid.*, 4.

30. *Ibid.*, 10.

own requirements of justice—if he can be both just and the justifier (Rom 3:26). What all this points toward is justification by faith alone, or *sola fide*.

In other words, *sola fide* offers the greatest hope for a truly just body politic because it vanquishes self-justification and, therefore, self-enthronement. Just as self-justification and self-enthronement are correlates, so justification by faith and repentant obedience are correlates.³¹ Just as self-justification divides humans from one another and from God, so *sola fide* covenantally and politically unites them. It creates a new body politic.

As I observed a moment ago, the idea that a person can in some sense be considered just “by faith” and not by his or her activity, to a political philosopher, sounds like cheating the system, gutting the word “justice” of the very thing it needs—action or works. I believe the opposite is the case. *Sola fide* is history’s unexpected ground of political unity, because it robs political actors of the incentives to warfare and domination by giving them that which all people, nations, and armies primarily seek—justification, standing, the recognition of existence. Ever since God was dismissed as our source of standing, we have had to find it in ourselves, which leads to one-upsmanship, boasting, war. But the person justified by faith must no longer prove or justify him or herself by any earthly measurement: race (“I’m Aryan”), ethnicity (“I’m Serbian”), gender (“I’m male”), class (“I’m aristocracy”), nationality (“I’m Prussian”), wisdom (“I’m Progressive”) and all those things that lead to war and political oppression (see James 4:1-2).

There are two things going on here: First, the presence of faith presumes that the self has run out of resources and therefore has no choice but to forsake its self-justifying arguments. Faith, says Bayer, means “dying both to justifying thinking and justifying action,” so that “both thinking and acting are renewed.”³² Or listen to how John Barclay puts it in *Paul and the Gift*: “Faith is not an alternative human achievement nor a refined human spirituality, but a declaration of bankruptcy, a radical and shattering recognition that the only capital in God’s economy is the gift of Christ crucified and risen.”³³ Being free from self-justification, faith is free—indeed, can afford—to think and work entirely for the sake of the other, not for the sake of validating or vindicating oneself.³⁴

Second, therefore, faith involves the end of self-enthronement. At the heart of faith is the idea of submitting to the authority of another. The anti-faith Ayn Rand, in the form of one of her characters, put this well in an anti-faith exhortation, “Redeem your mind from the hockshops of authority...an error made on your own is safer

31. Graham Cole offers an analogous observation in *God the Peacemaker: How Atonement Brings Shalom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009): 115-17.

32. Bayer, *Living By Faith*, 25.

33. John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015): 383-84.

34. Bayer, *Living Faith*, 21-22.

than ten truths accepted on faith.”³⁵ To take something “on faith” is to take it “on the authority” of another, whether the topic is medical counsel, investment advice, or the way of righteousness and salvation. It is to submit to someone else’s expertise. Or think of Matthew 8:8-10: “‘Lord, say the word and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority’....When Jesus heard this he marveled...‘with no one in Israel have I found such faith.’” To have faith in God is to submit to God, and having faith in Jesus’ person and work is, among other things, a political act involving submission to his kingdom. It is to submit to Jesus as possessing ultimate, sword-bearing authority, an authority that transcends all other political allegiances.

How then is justification by faith alone history’s unexpected source of political unity? First, it unites people around not just *a* lord, but *the* Lord. Second, it brings self-justification to an end and grants a vicarious and alien righteousness, which means that people lack the incentives to war and domination and one-upsmanship. The most politically powerful phrase in the Bible just might be “Where then is boasting!” (Rom 3:27). Boasting is the root of all domination and coercion. We quarrel, fight, and murder because we desire and do not have, covet and cannot obtain (James 4:1-2). But now the need to say, “I follow Paul” or “I follow Apollos” or “I am a Communist” or “I am a Democrat” or “I am Hutu” or “I am a Tutsi” is extinguished because no one should “boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, and you are Christ’s and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor 3:21-23). In an assembly or gathering of those justified by faith there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11). Those political categories that divide the world are erased.

Conclusion

At the beginning, I defined political unity as *the relationships that abide between subjects of the same governing authority, particularly as that governing authority obligates those individuals toward one another according to its rules of justice*. This is precisely what the objective and subjective aspects of justification yield. Objectively the verdict itself is a covenantal verdict that, first, gives us righteous standing before the judge and, second, righteous standing before an entire covenantal community. Subjectively, *sola fide* requires an individual “to reach the end” of him or herself, and his or her self-justifying arguments for self-enthronement. This broken and regretful self therefore asks for a free gift of righteousness, yields the throne once more to God, and embraces those who were once enemies but are now fellow citizens.

Does Christ possess imperium over and against those who belong to this body politic? Of course, which is why you have a tradition of Christian martyrdom and why our Christian identity transcends national boundaries.

35. Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, centennial edition (New York: Plume, 2005): 1058.

The gift of Martin Luther to the church was putting all this together: the first and continuous thing a sinner must do to keep the first commandment—“You shall have no other gods before me”—is to have faith in God alone for justifying grace.³⁶

Sola fide does not divide Christians, it unites them, and it yields an ethic of walking by the Spirit in obedient freedom.

The political unity of the church, then, begins with its fundamentally political message. The church’s political nature begins with its own life—with its preaching, evangelism, member oversight, and discipline. To put real flesh on the idea, it begins with the two crumpled old women sitting over there in the church pew. Both have persevered in the faith for decades. Both have listened carefully week after week to their king’s words heralded from a pulpit. And year after year, decade after decade, through the ebb and flow of seasons, through the raising of children and the temptation to compare whose children rise higher, through the petty jealousies of friendship and maybe even an injury inflicted, through the divergent paths of financial prosperity and the attendant threats of covetousness and condescension, through ethnic contrast and conflict, through hasty words and hurt feelings, through times good and bad, those two old women, unrelated by blood, enemies by birth, have, by the power of the Spirit, found their worth and justification in a vicarious righteousness. And so, relieved of the burden to boast in themselves, they have discovered the freedom to forgive one another’s hasty words, to surrender the desire to compete and compare, to outdo one another only in showing honor, to fight for sisterly love and justice amidst everything that would have torn them apart. Here between these two old women is where we find a model political life, one that confronts, condemns, and calls the nations.

36. Martin Luther, commentary on the first commandment in “The Large Catechism,” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000): 386-89; also, *A Treatise on Good Works* (Rockville, MD: Serenity, 2009): 28.