Is the doctrine of Sola Fide biblical? Yes, despite the objections Roman Catholics raise against it. A lady asked me this today, and my response is below. She wrote,

I am struggling to understand Sola Fide and am hoping you can help me in my attempt to gain a better understanding of it. I am clear on the "dictionary" definition of Sola Fide

I must ask whether you really are clear on the definition, because there is not only one definition of Sola Fide; instead, there are at least two! Do you mean by "Sola Fide" that we are a) *saved* by faith alone, or b) *justified* by faith alone? A common problem in this discussion is that the Reformed definition of Sola Fide is not the same as the Lutheran definition of Sola Fide, and this causes people to misunderstand each other--sometimes Catholics wrongly assume the Reformed hold the Lutheran definition, and sometimes those who are otherwise Reformed actually *do* hold the Lutheran definition.

The Lutheran definition sometimes says that we are *saved* (rather than only *justified*) by faith alone when it equates "justification" with the whole of "salvation," because it holds that after faith, all other benefits of salvation flow from justification, so the order of salvation is faith, justification, union with Christ, adoption, sanctification. For example, Luther evidenced this mistake when he said "Works are necessary for salvation but they do not cause salvation; for faith alone gives life." (Ewald M. Plass, "What Luther says," page 1509, quoted at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sola_fide#cite_ref-21 .) Luther was right to imply that our works do not cause justification (in the sense of a contributing or efficient cause), but wrong to say our works do not cause salvation (as a material or constitutive cause). Further, if as Luther said, "Works are necessary for salvation" as a (as Richard Gaffin helpfully put it in a lecture when I was in seminary) "necessary attendant circumstance" of justification, they are a cause even of justification itself, because a necessary attendant circumstance is rightly termed a "necessary cause." The failure to specify which forms of causality are excluded by the word "alone" remains even in Reformed theologians as capable as Michael Horton, as this review of Horton's Systematic Theology by Richard Gaffin demonstrates: http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=141

(titled “Covenant and Salvation,” published in
Ordained Servant
, March 2009.)
[1]

The Reformed definition of Sola Fide is that we are justified by faith alone, where "alone" means "not on the ground of our own meritorious works." In other words, the Reformed definition specifies the scope of the meaning of "alone" so that the causality denied by the word "alone" is only the causality involved in the nature of a meritorious ground for justification. This sense is evident throughout the Westminster Confession's (ch. 11.1, 2: http://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_11) and Larger Catechism's discussion of justification (http://opc.org/lc.html). In contrast to the Lutheran definition, the Reformed definition of Sola Fide does not deny, but affirms, that in addition to faith and justification, sanctification and repentance are also "saving graces" (Westminster Larger Catechism 75, 76), so while justification is "received by faith alone" (Westminster Larger Catechism 70), salvation is not by faith alone.

Underlying both the Reformed and Lutheran definitions of Sola Fide is a deeper concern to deny that the ultimate origin of man's salvation is in any way found in man himself, and the doctrine of Sola Fide is intended to protect against this error of autosoterism in the details of the doctrine of justification. The Roman Catholic view that God's grace infused into man resulting in good works forms, or allows those works to form, a meritorious ground of forensic justification and the material cause of infused justification ("justice"), despite its attempt to ground God's grace in God alone, nevertheless is in the final analysis a form of autosoterism, because due to its dependence on Aristotle's view that lower forms (entities that are "hylomorphic" or form/matter composites) are not pure form/actuality, such infused grace is not purely from God, but is also from man.

but where my confusion lies might be best captured in the following questions:

1. Is sola fide an essential element of the gospel?

Yes. Galatians 1:6-9 and 2:16 make this clear:

Gal. 1:6-9 "6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel- 7 not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed."

Gal. 2:16 "yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified."

The word "by" in "not justified by works of the law" in Gal. 2:16 is the Greek word *ek*, which commonly means "out of," naturally indicating here a legal basis or ground, rather than the Greek word
dia
, which commonly means "through" or "because of," which would more naturally indicate an instrumental or material cause. The word "through" in "but through faith in Jesus Christ" is the Greek word
dia
, which naturally indicates the function of a receptive instrument (not 1) a creative instrument, because in this context, faith is first “in Christ” the Savior, so implies an ultimate dependence on Christ’s power and agency rather than a creative power inherent within faith itself, and not 2) a meritorious ground, because
dia
indicates an instrument rather than a ground). So it is proper to limit the scope of the word "sola" or "alone" to deny that good works are a meritorious ground of justification, and to affirm that faith is the "alone instrument" (Westminster Confession of Faith 11.2) by which God's legal declaration imputing Christ's righteous standing to us is received by a believer in justification.

So Paul says the doctrine that one can be "justified by the works of the law" (Gal. 2:16) is "not" (Gal. 2:16) the "gospel" (Gal. 1:6-9), but is a "distortion" (Gal. 1:7) "contrary" (Gal. 1:8, 9) to the gospel, and results in its followers being "accursed" (Gal. 1:8, 9) by God. Correlatively, Paul says the true gospel is that justification is received by faith alone--by faith as the "alone instrument" by which justification is received.

2. If anyone rejects sola fide (and knows what they are saying) then have they rejected the gospel?

Yes. If they don't actually believe in Christ as their only Savior (and so also, at least implicitly, in Christ's righteousness alone as the ground of their justification) at some point in their beliefs, they are not saved. Yet people can be, and are, inconsistent in their beliefs, and in their profession. They may reject sola fide knowingly at one point in their beliefs, yet because they truly receive and rest on Christ's righteousness alone for justification at another point in their beliefs, they are in fact believing the true gospel, and truly believing in Christ as their Savior, and so are saved.

3. Can Acts 15:5 be used as a passage that could teach that those that knowingly reject sola fide still be believers?

Yes, they may have been believers while, inconsistent with their true saving faith, they rejected sola fide, but no, they only continue to demonstrate themselves to be believers if they are willing to be corrected when they are shown that rejection of sola fide (understood to mean justification is received by faith alone, and is not on the legal ground of meritorious good works) was an error. The individuals in Acts 15:5 were in fact in error, seeking to "put God to the test" (v. 10), as the final decision of the Council of Jerusalem later in that chapter (vv. 28, 29) demonstrates--the Council did not require the Gentiles to be circumcised as a meritorious ground, or even a necessary attendant circumstance, of justification, and salvation. Acts 16:3 teaches that Gentiles are permitted to be circumcised out of kind deference to Jews who are "weak in faith" (Rom. 14:1), but Gal. 5:2-6 teaches that it is wrong to consider circumcision a meritorious ground for justification.

If you could help me by answering these questions I believe that it would benefit me greatly and I would very much appreciate it.

I do hope this has helped you, and welcome further questions if I can be of further help.

In Christ,

Pastor Tim

1 . See also Mark Garcia's review article "No Reformed Theology of Justification?" at http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=66
, published in
Ordained Servant
, October 2007, the reply by W. Robert Godfrey and David VanDrunen, "Response to Mark Garcia's Review of
Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry
" at
http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=80
, published in
Ordained Servant
, December 2007, his "My Review Article: A Clarification" at
http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=79
, published in
Ordained Servant
, December 2007, John Fesko's review article "A Tale of Two Calvins" at
http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=139
, published in
Ordained Servant
, March 2009, Gaffin's reply "A Response to John Fesko's Review" at
http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=140
, published in
Ordained Servant
, March 2009, and Cornelius Venema's review article "Life in Christ: Union with Christ and Twofold Grace in Calvin's Theology" at
http://opc.org/review.html?review_id=219
, published in
New Horizons
, May 2009.