

Solus Christus

In the name of Jesus, dear friend in Christ: In our evening devotions we've been reviewing the "Sola's" of the Reformation. Thus far we've covered the big three that are on the banner behind me. First, we established Scripture alone as the Church's source of all authority and divine truth. And then in the last two weeks we reaffirmed that our salvation is by God's grace alone through faith alone. So far, so good.

But we have to ask, "Faith in what?" It isn't simply a question of believing, as if faith itself were all it took to be saved. Everyone believes something. An atheist believes that there is no God. That's his faith. But it's not a faith that saves. If we say faith alone saves and just leave it at that, then our faith is in our faith, and whatever it is we actually believe doesn't matter. You just have to believe. But it doesn't work that way. Faith needs an object: something to believe in. And whatever that something is, it needs to be reliable and true and powerful unto salvation; otherwise faith is in vain. It's faith in something that can't save.

Early in their instruction, I ask my confirmation students, "What is a Christian?" The most common response I get is, "Someone who believes in God." "Oh", I answer, "Jews believe in God. Deists, Hindus, adherents of Native American religions all believe in a god of sorts. Are they Christians? Do they have a faith that saves?" "Well ... no." So, I'll ask again, "What is a Christian?" This time the response will likely be, "Someone who believes in Jesus." "Really?" I say, "Muslims believe in Jesus. Mormons believe in Jesus. Jehovah's Witnesses believe in Jesus." Are they Christians?" "HmMMM ...". It's at this point that it dawns on students that their instruction is going to be more challenging than they anticipated. Despite the belief they'd long cherished, they didn't learn everything there is to know about theology in their first couple of years of Sunday school.

With the reformers we confess the *Christian* faith. And that means that the *object* of our faith is Jesus Christ – and not just any "Jesus Christ" but specifically the one who reveals himself to us in the Holy Scriptures *and* precisely *how* he reveals himself to us in the Scriptures. The Jesus's of the Muslims, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses are critically flawed distortions of the real person. All three of them deny his essential deity and his equality in the Godhead with the Father and Spirit. The upshot is that their versions of Jesus can't save anyone.

For a faith that saves, it's necessary to get the person of Jesus Christ right. This Jesus is the eternal Son of God who came down from heaven and became incarnate – that is, he took on human flesh and blood. He is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary in time. As such he is the perfect mediator: he can fully represent God to humankind, and he can fully represent humankind to God. Take away either his humanity or his deity, and he can't. The correct and biblical understanding of Jesus Christ is this: he is fully divine and fully human, the divine and human natures combined together in one person.

That's *who* the real Jesus is, and it's necessary to believe it; but for a faith that saves it's not enough just to correctly understand his identity, it's also necessary to know and trust in what he did to work salvation for us. Namely that he lived a life of love perfectly free of sin, and then he gave that life over to pitiless torture and death on the cross in order to pay the debt of our sin. As Isaiah foretold, "He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our

iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed ... the LORD ... laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

And you see, the person and work of Jesus go together to make salvation possible for us: he had to be human in order to suffer and die as a human, but only a person who is also God could carry the staggering weight of the world’s sin. Thus, Jesus Christ our Savior had to be both God and man to carry out his mission to reconcile sinners to his righteous and holy Father.

These truths about who Jesus Christ is and what he did to achieve our salvation are summed up succinctly in the second articles of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. They’ve been part of the Church’s confession since day one. And all true Christians believe them – otherwise you’re not a Christian no matter what you call yourself. Jesus Christ saves. That’s the Christian faith. The reformers, standing squarely on the revealed truth of Scripture, took it a step further and insisted on Solus Christus, that is, Christ *alone* saves.

And we can look at this two ways: first, in the sense that he doesn’t need any help from us. This was a huge issue at the time of the Reformation. Then the Church was teaching that salvation is very much a cooperative effort. They taught that every sin committed carried two kinds of penalties: eternal penalties that could only be paid in hell, and temporal penalties that could be paid during one’s life or, if not, after death in a place called Purgatory. The idea was that Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection took care of the *eternal* consequences of your sin; but it was up to *you* to pay the temporal penalties, again if not here in your life on earth, then later in Purgatory (think of it as hell with a time limit). And there was definitely an advantage to paying now rather than later. Here in life you had the graces dispensed by the Church to help you. In Purgatory you didn’t. So, for comparatively little time and effort spent here, you could save yourself thousands, perhaps millions of years of torment later on.

Three big problems here: first, it’s not biblical. There’s not a word in Scripture about this distinction between temporal and eternal penalties for sin. (But then, who needs Scripture when you have other sources of divine truth?) Second, it takes the focus of faith off of Christ. His part is already done. You need to get busy with *your* part. And the Church came up with more and more creative ways for you to do your part with pilgrimages and ascetic disciplines and relics to venerate and, of course, indulgences by which you could buy time off of your sentence to Purgatory. And the third problem was that you never knew; there was no way to tell if you’d done enough. Thus, people were driven by fear of flames to do more and more to escape suffering. And oh, my how the money rolled in – and with the money, corruption in every form.

In asserting Solus Christus, Christ alone, the reformers confessed that Jesus Christ worked *complete* salvation for us. There is no more debt to be paid. When on the cross he said, “It is finished”, it was.

The second way in which the reformers confessed Christ alone is in the sense that there is no salvation apart from Christ. He alone is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through him. As also Peter declared, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other *name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”

This second sense of Christ alone was not a big part of the argument at the time of the Reformation. Both sides more or less agreed on it. Oddly enough, it’s only in modern times, since the second Vatican Council held in the early 1960s, that it has become a point of contention between us and the Roman Church. These days they’re teaching a sort of

universalism. The notion is that pretty much any form of religious devotion or faith, it doesn't matter if the person is Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, whatever, as long they're sincere, their faith *really is* directed toward Jesus – they just don't know him by that name. They're doing the best they can with the little light they have, so it still counts as faith in Jesus. Ugh! I don't even know where to go with that. It is so contrary to what the Scriptures actually teach. And you can guess what it does to evangelism. If the followers of all those other religions already have faith in Jesus and simply don't know it, why bother taking them out of their comfort zone by telling them the truth about him? Let them be. They're believers. God will work it out.

No. Christ alone must always remain the sole object of saving faith. He did it all. And there is no other path to life and salvation except through him – and through him by name and proper understanding of his person and work.

And it's important that we continue to proclaim this truth of Christ alone especially in our day. The Roman Church still teaches that salvation is a cooperative effort between man and God and that distinction between the eternal and temporal penalties for sin. In practice it's not quite as crass and corrupt as it was back in the 1500s, but the theology behind it is every bit as broken leading people to trust in their own ongoing works rather than in Christ's accomplished work.

Sadly, the same is true in many Protestant and Evangelical churches where it's taught that faith in Jesus gets you in the door, so to speak, but then it's up to you to live the proper Christian life in order to stay there. So, instead of steadily proclaiming Christ and him crucified reconciling sinners to God, they give all kinds of messages about moral living, rules for achieving success, how to have better relationships, and so on. In so doing they proclaim the Christian rather than the Christ, our works rather than his – and thus they lead people to despair of whether they are doing enough.

So also, in many of the more liberal churches they teach various forms of universalism: the idea that everyone is saved no matter what they believe. The teachings vary, but the thought behind them is pretty much the same, and it's this: it's not fair. How could a gracious and loving God make it so that there was only one way to salvation? It's inconceivable. Therefore, there must be many paths up the mountain. Choose your own path. They're all good.

As attractive as the idea is, it's utter nonsense. If God made two ways to salvation, they'd complain that there aren't three; if three then not four, ad infinitum. But they're not looking at it correctly. The thing to see is that we don't deserve even the one way that God in his grace and mercy gave us: through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. What these people are really saying is that they want to do it *their way* – which is what our sinful rebellion against God is all about: my way, not his.

Instead of rebelliously complaining, let's be thankful for the one way that we *have* been given. And let us rejoice now and ever that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!