

Solus Christus (In Christ Alone)

Five hundred years ago, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the Door at Wittenberg, the Protestant Reformation officially began (though he did not see it that way). As we saw last week, Luther was highlighting what he thought to be erroneous teachings by the Catholic Church that did not accord with the Bible. And, in his day, certainly there weren't "5 Solas" that Luther or the other reformers wanted to express. These "Solas" developed later, especially as we look back upon what we call the "Protestant Reformation." These "Solas" (which means alone) include: "Scripture alone," "In Christ Alone," "by faith alone," "by grace alone," and "to the glory of God alone." And each of these *Solas* emphasizes an important, and even essential, doctrinal departure from the Roman Catholic Church. And, as a "Protestant" church, we still hold to these truths.

Today, we come to another "Sola" of the Reformation, *Solus Christus*, which means "In Christ Alone." And really, this one, and the next two, ("*Sola fide*," "by faith alone" and "*sola gracia*," "by grace alone") pertain to the larger subject of SALVATION. Why, how, and on what basis is a person saved? And really, how we answer these questions determines what we believe about the Gospel itself! Roman Catholics and Protestants answer these questions differently? It is this 3rd question I would like to answer today? On what basis? In other words, "*How can God look down upon you as a sinner and say, 'You are righteous'?*" Or, we might ask, "*How is a sinful person 'justified' before God?*" According to Luther there is nothing more important than the doctrine of justification calling it "*the summary of Christian doctrine*" and "*the article by which the church stands or falls*." John Calvin, another reformer, calls justification, "*the main hinge upon which religion turns*" and "*the sum of all piety*." If *Sola Scriptura* is the "formal" principal of the reformation, "*justification by faith*" is the "material" principal of the reformation. It is this doctrine (historically) that divides Roman Catholics from Protestants.

Martin Luther came to see himself as an unrighteous, unjustified, sinner before a holy God. And the Catholic Church of that day taught that a person could be saved, "*become righteous*" through faith in Christ and good works through the sacraments (7 in total).

Luther began his "religious" quest as a hard-working monk, maybe the hardest working of any monk. But, all of his religious deeds could not bring assurance. When a close friend died, Luther became terrified about the thought of the judgment of God. And the theology of the day did not help. RC theology saw sin as a problem that needed "healing." And this took place through the sacraments of the church. According to this teaching the Christian is "suspended between the grace of God (which comes through the sacraments) and the judgment of God. At the time of Luther, the church distinguished between "*actual*" grace and "*habitual*" grace. "*Actual*" grace gave forgiveness of sins, provided they were professed to the priest. But "*habitual*" grace changed people down deep, in their very being—overcoming the problem of original sin. Well, Luther's problem was that since only actual sins were forgiven, he was obsessed with not overlooking sin. He would spend hours confessing to his superiors. And he would think of other sins, and sins of the heart (wondering if he really meant what he was confessing) and come back the next day, confessing again. Finally, his superior said, "*Look here brother Martin. If you're going to confess so much, why don't you go do something worth confessing? Kill your mother or*

father. Commit adultery. Stop coming in here with such flummery and fake sins!" This was all around the year 1512. But in 1519 something happened with his understanding as he lectured through the Psalms. He said "I had a burning desire to understand St. Paul in Romans cp. 1:17: **"The righteous (just) shall live by faith."**

Speaking of the Gospel, he thought of the words *"The justice of God is revealed in it."* He said *"I hated that word, justice of God. I had only understood this term philosophically as that act where God is just and by which he punishes sinners and the unjust. But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. (speaking of his works) . . . I got angry with God. I said, 'Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?"* After much meditation and prayer over time he says, *"I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice . . . All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates . . . I exalted this sweetest word of mine, 'the justice of God,' with as much love as before I had hated it with hate."*

With this in mind, let me ask, *"What exactly did Luther understand?"* *"What, all of a sudden, changed his heart and mind, from 'hate' of God and his justice to 'love' of God and his justice?"* Really, what happened, is that he saw the basis of his salvation change; a salvation not dependent upon works and his own righteousness, but based upon the righteousness found in Christ alone. Let me explain with some differences (RC and Protestant).

The Catholic view of justification was an act of healing. We need to be healed. And this process of healing begins at baptism and goes through life. But Luther began to see justification as a forensic act. In other words, it is not that a criminal needs healing. He needs the judge to declare him "not guilty."

The Catholic view of justification looks more like a hospital, where the sinner is brought in to be healed, and this healing comes through the sacraments of the church. But Luther saw justification as taking place in the court of law. Think about the hospital. Everyone goes there to be healed. But, when you get out, something else will happen. So you go back again. Etc. But in a court of law, the judge's decision is final. Justification is like this: a one-time act.

The Catholic view of justification is inherent righteousness. In other words, this righteousness belongs to the person (in some way). We aren't quite as bad as we think. And it is within every man/woman. We only need God to help us and make us more holy. And again, this happens through the authority of the church and all its works. But Luther saw righteousness very differently. He called it and "alien" righteousness. It's not because it comes from outer space. He says this because the righteousness WE NEED to justify us before God, is not our own.

The Catholic view of justification was one of "impartation." God "imparts" righteous to us. In other words, He "infuses" righteousness to us over a lifetime which help our justification, until

we finally land in heaven. And this “infusion” of righteousness is inherently ours. It is intrinsic. But Luther saw justification differently. To him, righteousness was “reckoned” to us from the outside. It was extrinsic. Our salvation is not based upon our own righteousness. It is based on the righteousness of Christ.

(Give example of Father/Son “clean room” – speak also of our bank account – speak of Adam’s sin imputed to us and Christ’s righteousness imputed to us)

The Catholic view of justification begins with faith and continues through sacraments and good works. For Luther, justification was through the means of “faith” alone. You see, we are declared righteous in this way by faith alone. Luther saw people as passive in the process of justification. We cannot initiate this process. WE are powerless and enslaved. WE have nothing to contribute to our salvation. And so justification is—and can only be—by faith and by faith alone. For Luther, faith is simply taking hold of Christ. It is receiving what Christ has done.

The Catholic church says we are justified now based on what we shall become. But Luther came to believe we are justified now on the basis of the finished work of Christ.

For the Catholic church we have an uncertain future. And this is because one isn’t quite sure if his/her sins are paid for. This is why one must continue to confess sins to a priest. But Luther became assured of his future. His sins were laid upon Christ! And they were laid upon Christ Alone!

This is why Jesus can say, “**Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest**” (Matt. 11:28).

Luther came to truly see that “**There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus . . .**” (1 Tim. 2:5). He came to understand that “**there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved . . .**” (Acts 4:12). He came to know that “**Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus**” (Rom. 8:1).

And the same goes for us this morning as we take the Lord’s Supper. As we remember the death of Christ, we remember what happened; namely the righteousness of God was revealed. And this righteousness is found in Christ Alone! Rom. 3:21-26: “**But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**”

And let me say that this doctrine of justification is just the beginning. We must know that EVERY blessing we receive in this life and the life to come flows down from the person and work of Christ. Jesus is Lord! In Christ alone, we find God’s true prophet. In Christ alone, we

find God's true King. In Christ alone, we find God's true priest. Christ alone is our mediator. Christ alone is the obedient 2nd Adam. The name of Christ alone is worthy and in his name our salvation is found. Christ alone is our redeemer. Christ alone is the author and finisher of our faith. Christ alone is our righteous judge. And He is our legal substitute. Christ alone is our merit. Christ alone is our example! Christ alone is the Son of God. Christ alone is our savior!

And because of this truth, we have peace with God. We have joy in trials and tribulations. In Christ alone we have victory, knowing that upon this ROCK God is building his church. And these things we remember.

At the end of Luther's life, just before he died he wrote down some words. And someone found them beside his bed. At the end of he said, "*We are beggars. This is true!*" This understanding sums up Luther's approach to the Christian life. The posture of the human toward God is one of UTTER receptivity. We can claim NOTHING on our own righteousness! We have no legs of our own on which to stand. No mystical "ground of the soul" can serve as a basis for our union with Christ. We can earn no merits that will purchase for us a standing before God. WE are beggars—needy, vulnerable, totally lacking the resources with which to save ourselves.

One thing about Luther (from what I've read): he was blunt and he had quite the sense of humor. He once remarked that his insight into the gracious character of God had come to him while was "*on the toilet.*" This was a common metaphor in medieval spiritual writings which referred to a state of utter helplessness and dependence on God. Where else are we more vulnerable, more easily embarrassed, and according to Luther more open to demonic attacks. If our righteousness is not our own . . . then what can we do?

At 14 years of age Luther's daughter died of the plague. And God did not heal her body. But when they nailed the coffin shut, he screamed with a loud voice, "*Hammer away! On doomsday she'll rise again.*" He had confidence and boldness that no Catholic priest or sacrament or not even the pope could give him. "*The just shall live by faith.*" And, "*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*"

In Christ Alone!