

Truths of the Reformation (5) Christ Alone

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Our subject this morning is another of the 5 *solas* of the Reformation, Christ Alone. So far, we have looked at Scripture Alone, Glory to God Alone, and Grace Alone. Today we will look at the subject Christ Alone. The Idea is that salvation is by Christ Alone.

Now as always with these *solas*, the “alone” is intended to make the claim that man does not contribute. It puts us in our place. It exalts God. In this case it especially exalts Christ. But as is the case with the other *solas*, the alone does not mean absolutely alone as if no one and or nothing besides Christ has any role to play whatsoever. The word “alone” does not exclude the role that parents often play in the salvation of their children or the church in its various ministries. God can and does use other people in various ways to be instrumental in our salvation. When the reformation theologians taught that salvation was by Christ alone, they did not intend to exclude the role of other people completely. They were particularly interested in excluding aspects of Roman Catholic teaching and practice concerning salvation that implied that the work of Christ was not quite enough for our salvation and that it is necessary and possible for ourselves or others to add to what Christ had done in order for us to be saved.

For instance, the Roman Catholic churches taught and teaches that believers can pray to Mary or one of the other saints. That is a denial of the biblical teaching that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man. The Roman Catholic Church taught and still teaches that some of the saints merited more than they needed to skip purgatory and go directly to heaven and that those extra merits could be distributed by the church to those who wanted to shorten their time in purgatory. There is the teaching of purgatory itself which is that your rank and file believer will have to suffer a certain period of time in some place between heaven and hell before they can enter heaven. And there is the Roman Catholic understanding of the mass which teaches that when

the mass is celebrated Christ is sacrificed again – a bloodless sacrifice rather than a bloody sacrifice.

In various ways the Roman Catholic Church taught that what Christ had done was not quite enough. Certain things needed to be added, either by ourselves or by others. The Reformers examined these teachings in the light of Scripture and discovered that the Scriptures teach that Christ alone is sufficient as our Saviour and that what he did and continues to do is sufficient for our salvation. So, what we will do in this sermon is consider some of the ways in which Jesus Christ and what he has done is sufficient for our salvation and that no human being can or need add anything to that.

One of the reasons that salvation is and must be by Jesus Christ alone is that Jesus had to be an utterly unique being in order to be our Saviour from sin and death. Think of those well-known words of Peter recorded in Acts 4:12 “And 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 verse asserts the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the only Saviour. This verse alone does not go all the way to prove that man can add nothing to what Christ has done, but it goes a long way in that direction. What a clear and powerful statement that is! “[T]here is salvation in no one else.” There is no other way of salvation than the way through Jesus Christ.

Obviously, this speaks clearly and unambiguously to the idea common today that there are many ways of salvation. In the face of the plurality of worldviews and religions in our world, some religious teachers feel that it is arrogant and intolerant for anyone to hold that their religion is right and that all other religions are wrong and so they teach that there are many ways of salvation. There is a certain attraction to that position because you do not make yourself popular by asserting that there is only one way of salvation; but that is what we must say if we base our understanding of ultimate truth on the Bible. What Peter says in Acts 4 is but an echo of what Jesus himself taught in John 14:6 when he told his disciples, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

But aside from these direct statements, the Bible also teaches that salvation can only be through Jesus Christ by showing us that Jesus had to be both God and a perfectly holy man in order to qualify as our Saviour. Think of what the angel said to Mary when he told her how Jesus was going to be formed in her. Luke 1:35, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God." Jesus was born holy. He was utterly unique in this. And that was necessary for him to be our Saviour. Remember how the book of Hebrews speaks of the great implication of Jesus' holiness. Hebrews 7:26 "For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself."

Jesus was born without sin. That was necessary to qualify him to be our Saviour. The Bible makes it clear that no sinner can make atonement for another other sinner because each sinner must pay for his own sin unless he is saved by Christ. Jesus was unique in being absolutely holy and that was necessary for him to be our Saviour. And since no one else is holy in that way no one else can contribute to his or anyone else's salvation.

The book of Hebrews also speaks of how Jesus had to be a man in order to save us. Hebrews 2:14 says "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil...." It goes on to say in verse 17 "Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." Jesus had to be a man so that he could die in our place. Jesus had to be a man so that he could be a merciful and faithful high priest to make propitiation for us.

Jesus had to be without sin to be our Saviour. He had to be a man to be our Saviour. He also had to be God.

The book of Hebrews also speaks to this point. It says in chapter 7 that the priests of the OT could not be saviours because they died. Jesus, on the other hand, is eternal and lives forever. "Consequently," says verse 25, "he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them." In chapter 8:1 we read that "we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of Majesty in heaven..." The whole book of Hebrews makes the point that neither men or angels are able to save us because we need a Saviour who is both human and divine.

So, Jesus is uniquely qualified to be our Saviour. The Bible makes it clear that he had to be holy, that he had to be a perfect human being and that he had to be God. The Bible goes to great lengths to show how Jesus was unique and that that uniqueness was necessary for Jesus to do the saving work that his Father had sent him to do. No one else comes close to that. No mere human being is able to even come close to adding to what Jesus has done. When the Roman Catholic Church teaches that there is a treasury of merit that comes from both Christ and the saints that is distributed by the church, it is an attack on the sufficiency of Christ.

This teaching is not that merits of Mary and the other saints can be applied to sinner to get them into heaven. The teaching on this subject is significantly more complicated than that. It has to do with the relieving of temporal punishment in purgatory. All we need to know for our purposes is that in Roman Catholic teaching certain saints can add to a treasury of merit in heaven which can be applied to other believers and help them in some way. The biblical teaching is that no human being besides Christ has been without sin. Paul wrote in Romans 3:10, "None is righteous, no, not one." No saint is able to add to any treasury of merit. The only one who has any righteousness impute to others is Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures present Jesus as utterly unique. No one else comes close to being like Jesus. No one else is a perfectly holy human being. No one else is God and man in one person. The Scriptures present Jesus as the only Saviour. And while the church has a role to play in leading sinners

to Christ, no human being can add to what Christ has done and so contribute to our salvation.

It is worth reflecting a moment on Jesus as the only one who is perfectly suited and equipped to be our Saviour. He was perfectly holy. He lived a perfectly holy life. He kept the law perfectly. It is one of the ways that he fulfilled the law on our behalf. As the perfect spotless lamb, he was qualified to be our substitute so that he could suffer for our sins. This was also the reason he had to be a human being. He had to share in our flesh and blood so that he might die in our place according to Hebrews 2:14. He had to be human so that he can sympathize with us in our weakness. He was tempted as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). But he also had to be divine so that he could send the Holy Spirit to apply salvation to us. The Bible makes much of that fact that Jesus ascended into heaven and is seated at God's right hand and that he is coming again to judge and to completely overthrow all our enemies. Jesus has promised that he will always be with us. He is "head over all things to the church" (Ephesians 1:22). Jesus is not only a perfectly holy human being, he is also God almighty who is able to "save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him" (Hebrews 7:25).

So, the biblical and reformation teaching that Christ alone is sufficient for our salvation begins with Christ's person. He is the only one who is capable of saving us and there is no one else in the whole universe that is like him and therefore there is no one else who can contribute to our salvation. The church can help us by telling about Christ, but other human beings cannot do anything to enhance our standing with God.

We will now reflect on how the work of Christ is sufficient for our salvation and particularly we will consider the sufficiency of Christ's atonement for our salvation. And the foil here is the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, "All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven." So, there is some kind of suffering after this life to purify believers "to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven," according to Roman Catholic teaching.

The biblical and reformation teaching is Christ has done all that is necessary for his people to enter the joy of heaven when we die and that there is no suffering for us after we die. We do not contribute in any way to our salvation. What Christ has done for us is sufficient. Nothing is added to it. Nothing that we do or suffer adds anything to our righteous standing with God if we are in Christ.

Let's look at the biblical teaching of the sufficiency of Christ's work for our salvation. Consider Isaiah 53:5, "But 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." This is referring to what Jesus would do on the cross. The verse says that because of what Jesus did for us on the cross we have peace and we are healed. There is no hint of suffering that we have to undergo that would add to what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

Now it is true that suffering is part of the Christian life. The Bible has a lot to say about the suffering of the people of God. That suffering is always for our spiritual growth. So, Paul for instance, writes in Romans 5:3-4, "[W]e rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope...." But there is no hint that our suffering lessens our time in purgatory or anything like that. The passages that speak of Jesus suffering on our behalf make it clear that there is nothing to be added to what Jesus has done for us.

Hebrews 10:12-14 makes this especially clear. ¹²"But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. "[B]y a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." The atonement has been made. Nothing needs to be added to it. The suffering for atoning purposes is complete. We are perfected for all time.

Just before Jesus died on the cross he said, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Colossians 2:13-14 says that God has, "forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." All our sins are

forgiven. The penalty for all our sins has been paid. We do not have to add anything to what Christ has done. Indeed, we cannot add anything to what Christ has done. We cannot make up for one sin. One sin is enough to condemn us forever. But Christ has suffered in our place so that we might be considered perfect in God's sight. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says "For our sake he has made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

This is very important from the perspective of the confidence and the certainty that the Bible teaches is the norm for the people of God. If Christ did all that is necessary for our salvation, we can be confident that all that is necessary has been done. But if we must look to ourselves or to the saints or to the church, how can we ever be sure that there is there is enough righteousness or enough merit to get us into heaven? And the doctrine of purgatory itself teaches that most believers will have to suffer in purgatory until they are purified enough to enter into heaven. These various aspects of Roman Catholic teaching result in uncertainty concerning what happens with to when we die.

But the biblical teaching of the sufficiency of what Christ has done for us can and ought to translate into a confident hope and expectation that nothing is missing or lacking as far as our salvation is concerned. Christ has done for us all that we need.

Think of the many verses that express this confidence. Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). "[W]e ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23). "²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself" (Philippians 3:20-21). "¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with

our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:19-22).

The kind of confidence expressed in these and many other passages is based on the sufficiency of what Jesus Christ has done for us. This kind of confidence is not possible if salvation depends on us to any extent, or if we must suffer in purgatory, who knows how long, before we enter into heaven. The faith of the NT is a confident faith because it is based on the finished work of Jesus Christ.

This is not to say that we never struggle or have questions about our state before God. If we are half-hearted in our struggle against sin we might wonder whether we are truly saved. Sometimes our faith is weak so that we are not resting in Christ as we ought. We might be living through a period of depression where everything looks dark. Struggles with assurance are part of the Christian life. But the sufficiency of what Christ has done for us is a wonderful help to give us assurance of salvation and confidence concerning our eternal destiny. This is the foundation of our hope. We are sinners. But "the blood of Jesus ... cleanses us from all sin" 1 John 1:7." The NT speaks of the saving work of Christ as all that we need to be right with God and to be adopted by God and to be fit for heaven.

The WCF echoes this biblical teaching when it says in chapter 8:5, "The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience, and sacrifice of himself, which he, through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him."

What a wonderful gospel this is! Nothing that we or anyone else can do can add anything to what Jesus has done for us! Indeed, any work that we do is a result of what Jesus has done for us. Our works are part of the outworking of that salvation. They add nothing to what Jesus has done.

And there is no place or no need for any saint to come in between us and our Saviour. One of the Roman Catholic teachings that the reformers rejected was the practice of praying to Mary and other saints.

This was and is an attack on the sufficiency of Jesus as the only mediator between God and man. This practice of praying to the saints arose in the middle ages. And it happened in connection with a shift in the teaching about Jesus where the focus was on Jesus as a frightening judge. Michael Reeves in his book on the Reformation called *The Unquenchable Flame*, has written concerning the rise of prayers to the saints, "As much as anything, what seemed to fuel the cult was the way in which Christ became an increasingly daunting figure in the public mind through the Middle Ages. More and more, the risen and ascended Christ was seen as the Doomsday Judge, all-terrible in his holiness. Who could approach him?" (22)

So, Catholics pray to Mary and to Saint Anne and to other saints that they imagine hear their prayers and intercede for them with Jesus. According to the Council of Trent, "...the saints who reign together with Christ offer up their own prayers to God for men. It is good and useful suppliantly to invoke them, and to have recourse to their prayers, aid, and help for obtaining benefits from God, through His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, Who alone is our Redeemer and Saviour."

The Bible, however, teaches that we are to pray to "Our Father who is in heaven." And it stresses that Jesus is a sympathetic and merciful high priest who understands our weakness and is ready to intercede for us. Think of those wonderful words of Hebrews 4:14-16, ¹⁴"Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

The Bible does not teach us that we should pray to the saints. It teaches us that God is our Father and that he is ready to hear our prayers. It teaches that Jesus Christ understands our weakness and our struggles and it invites us to "draw near to the throne of grace" with confidence. The practice of praying to the saints suggests that they are more ready to hear and more sympathetic than God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. That practice dishonors God by diminishing his warm and tender

compassion and the sensitive and loving concern that both the Father and the Son have towards those who come to them in prayer.

What a great comfort the teaching of the Bible gives us. Matthew 7:11, "¹¹If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" Matthew 11:28, "²⁸Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

How thankful we should be because of the clarity that we have on all these things because of the Reformation. The tendency of sinful man is always to obscure the gospel in one way or another. By God's grace we have inherited the biblical gospel of "Christ Alone." He is the only one qualified to be our Saviour. He has done all that needed to be done. There is no need or even a possibility of adding to it. And we are invited and urged to pray to both the Father and the Son directly without any human mediator.

And because of that we can live with confidence in our salvation and in our acceptance with God. We have sinned and come short of the glory of God. But if we are believing in Jesus Christ, we have everything because Jesus Christ and what he has done is all that we need. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places..." (Ephesians 1:3).