

### Christ Alone!

(2 Corinthians 5:17–21) Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

In Christ alone, dear fellow redeemed,

If you look at our Reformation banner, you may be thinking that our Reformation Celebration has now gone into overtime. After all, during the past three weeks we've covered the three "solas" of the Lutheran Reformation as they are so beautifully displayed on the banner: Grace Alone, Faith Alone, and Scripture Alone. That's all she wrote! Right? So did someone forget to tell this week's preacher it was time to move on? I received no such memo and for good reason. There is at least one more "sola" or in this case, "solus" to consider: Solus Christus – Christ Alone. I would also point out that Christ has in no way been excluded from our banner. He's there, not in name, but he's there front and center just the same. Do you see what I mean? Christ Alone is represented so prominently in Luther's seal as Luther himself explains: *"There is first to be a cross, black in a heart...so that I myself would be reminded that faith in the Crucified saves us."*

For Luther and for us, the Reformation we celebrate is all about Christ – our crucified and risen Savior. For it is in Christ alone that grace finds its meaning, faith finds its object and Scripture finds its message. We'll see these three solas so beautifully woven into the Bible verses before us where St. Paul shows us that Christ Alone 1)is our life; and 2)is our message.

Christ alone had turned Paul's world upside down, giving him a new life that he wasn't expecting and, at the time, didn't want. He had been perfectly content hunting and exterminating Christians. But all that changed for Paul in a blinding flash on the road to Damascus when the Risen Christ called out the sinner and gave him faith to believe that the same Jesus he had been persecuting was, in fact, his one and only Savior. Now it was all so clear to Paul. He could see what a wretch he had been: **"I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man..."** (1 Timothy 1:13). We might wonder how Paul could live with himself and that shameful past of his. But I suppose we better be careful. How does that saying go? People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. We have our own confession to make: **"At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another."** (Titus 3:3).

As we make our sad confession, I can't help thinking about all these scandals we're hearing about in the news. One minute a guy is on top of the world, the next, his life is in ruins because his past has caught up with him. Is that going to happen to us? Not as far as God is concerned. Listen: **"...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"** (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul can live with himself because he has faith that the past is gone and in its place, he and every believer has a new life before God. Each of us is a new creation, a new person in God's eyes. On what is Paul's faith based? On wishful thinking? On a sincere apology? On a promise to be better? No! His faith is in God and what God has done for him and all people through Christ alone: **"All this [his buried past, his new life, even his faith] – all this is from God, who**

**reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:18).**

Reconciliation – When I hear that word, my thoughts go to the many relationships in our world that are shattered by irreconcilable differences. That, of course, is just another way of saying that someone did something so awful that the person who has been offended or wronged, cannot get past it. Maybe something like that has happened in your life. Maybe you are party to a longstanding rift. The truth is, we’re all party to such a thing as the Prophet Isaiah explains: **“Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you...” (Isaiah 59:2).** Our every sin, in and of itself, is an offense to our holy God. To him, who made us to be perfect, there is no such thing as a victimless crime. He takes personally everything we do wrong as well as our every failure to do what is good and right. One sin earns us an eternity apart from him in hell. So what should we do about a lifetime of sin?

That’s the question that tormented a young Martin Luther. So he starved himself, flogged himself, punished himself in every way imaginable, hoping that God might take pity and be reconciled to him. That’s how reconciliation works right? You say something hurtful as you walk out the door in the morning. You know you were in the wrong. You text an apology that goes unanswered. You try calling during lunch but it goes to voicemail. On your way home you pick up some flowers or her favorite candy. Why? You know it’s on you to make up for what you’ve done. It’s on you to reconcile your differences. We think it works the same way with God. But it doesn’t. It can’t. Because our best efforts to make up still smack of the sin that offends him. There’s nothing we can do to reconcile ourselves to God.

But here’s the amazing truth that Luther rediscovered in the pages of Scripture. What we cannot do for ourselves, God in his grace has done for us. He took on the role of Reconciler. Can you imagine that? When has that ever happened in your life? You were the one to sin, but it was the offended party, your parent, your spouse, your friend who repaired all the damage, making everything right between you. That’s never happened. But that’s exactly what God has done. How? In Christ alone. Listen: **“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” (2 Corinthians 5:19).** Paul cracks open the door of heaven for us today. He lets us peer into the courtroom of the Almighty where the Divine Bookkeeper is at work. I shudder to look at the ledger for there I’m sure to find the sin that is mine from conception, sin that has shown itself in ways I’m too ashamed to think of and would certainly never want you to know. It must all be there, even the faults I’m unaware of. But as it turns out there’s not one sin charged to my account. The page is empty! Yours too. It’s just as clean – no sin – none whatsoever. How can this be? Has the Bookkeeper lost it – his sense of right and wrong? Not at all. He’s the same yesterday, today, and forever. He’s just as holy AND he’s just as loving as he’s always been which is how Paul explains it: **“God made [Christ] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God.”(2 Corinthians 5:21).**

There you have it! Christ alone is our life. He was born here to be the Substitute of every sinner of all times. Our holy God charged to Christ’s account our life of sin. This is what he suffered as he hung on Calvary’s cross. There, in his body, he endured all alone the eternal torment of God’s wrath that should have been our hell. “It is finished” he promised with his dying breath. There’s nothing left to suffer. He took it all and in its place where once there was only our sin, there is now only his righteousness. Because the God of all grace has given every sinner credit for Christ’s perfect life of love. In God’s courtroom we are charged with all of Christ’s sympathy, all of his compassion, and all of his kindness. This is what God’s sees when he looks at our life – He sees Christ alone.

Is this not the most comforting truth you will ever know? No matter what a sinner you have been, no matter what evil you have done, no matter what good you have failed to do, in Christ, God sees

you as his perfect child. There is no sin to hold against you, no past waiting to catch up with you. There is only peace with God now and forever. You can bank on it. Because God has committed to you this message of reconciliation. He cannot and will not go back on his Word. He wants you to live in the joy of this truth. This is what he wants for you and for all for whom Christ has lived and died and risen. In other words, he wants this for all people. You and I are just the people to pass the word. Why?

**“We are...Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” (2 Corinthians 5:20).** The news of what Christ has done for us and our world is just too good to keep to ourselves. I’m not on Facebook too often, but when I log on, my page is filled with things my friends have liked: My Pillow, iPads, Starbucks, the list goes on, reminding me that good news begs to be told. We believers in Christ have the best news of all times: Our gracious God has saved this world of sinners for himself. Of course, you don’t know them all, but every person you do know or will ever meet is one of those sinners. Unless your relative, your coworker, your neighbor, your acquaintance knows Jesus, sin is busy ruining that person’s life, earthly and eternal. Unless that person learns of Jesus, she lives with a lifetime of guilt and fears an eternity of misery. She may pretend otherwise, but the fact remains, she’s only pretending. You can change that. You have the life-giving gospel of Jesus. Christ has made you his ambassador. As such, you must speak only the message he’s given you – nothing more, nothing less. And what is the message? It’s Christ Alone! It’s the good news you cherish – the news that Jesus has suffered the sinner’s punishment in his place and with his holiness has earned the sinner unending bliss in the presence of God. We ambassadors of Jesus are here for one reason: to implore sinners on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.

This is what the Reformation was all about for Luther. He wasn’t looking to have a denomination of Christians named after him. He lived to share the saving name of Jesus at every opportunity. Like the time he wrote to an Augustinian monk by the name of George Spenlein. George had spent some time in Wittenberg. While there he incurred a debt that he was not able to repay before leaving town. So, he left a few of his possessions in Luther’s care for Martin to sell and with the money pay his debt. Luther writes to tell the man that the sale canceled most, but not all the debt. And then, in an almost seamless transition, he goes on to talk about the man’s debt of sin before God: *Now I should like to know whether your soul, tired of its own righteousness, is learning to be revived by and to trust in the righteousness of Christ...[People] try to do good of themselves in order that they might stand before God clothed in their own virtues and merits. But this is impossible. While you were here, you were one who held this opinion, or rather, error...Therefore, my dear Friar, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to praise him and, despairing of yourself, say, “Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given to me what is yours.”*<sup>1</sup>

Though he was a learned theologian, Luther shows us how to share the gospel in such simple terms with people we know well and with those we hardly know at all. We can point everyone to Christ alone and tell them without hesitation that like us, they live life dearly loved and completely forgiven by God for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

<sup>1</sup>Luther, M. (1999). *Luther’s works, vol. 48: Letters I.* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 48, p. 12). Philadelphia: Fortress Press.