

The Five Solas: *Solus Christus*

Colossians 1:15-20

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on October 15, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ When you think of the Reformation, you usually think about the famous 95 Theses that Martin Luther nailed on the door of the castle church in Wittenburg. Scholars point to that singular event as the spark that ignited the Protestant Reformation. It took place on October 31, 1517, which is why we're celebrating the 500th anniversary this year.
 - ▶ But there was actually another set of theses written in dispute of prominent Catholic teachings that also played a significant role in the Reformation, but it doesn't get nearly the same amount of attention. Maybe because there were only 67 theses.

- ❖ **On January 29, 1523 (six years after Luther), Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli stood before the council of Zurich and a crowd of 600 observers, and there he powerfully defended his 67 Theses.**
 - ▶ Zwingli was a Catholic priest who began to do something most Catholics in those days, including priests, rarely ever did. He began to study his Bible in the original languages. Not necessarily because he feared for his own soul (like Luther did), but because he wanted to more properly teach his people. He eventually memorized large portions of the NT in the Greek, and through his study, he realized how many Catholic practices couldn't stand the scrutiny of Scripture.
 - Eventually Zwingli began to openly oppose the practice of pilgrimages and praying to the saints. He questioned the existence of purgatory and the issuing of indulgences to shorten your stay there. He began to argue that Christ's death on the cross was taught in Scripture as a complete sacrifice that had no need to be repeated constantly in the Mass. And the biggest shot against Rome was Zwingli's instance that Christ was the true head of the Church, and that he rules through his Word and not the pope.

- ❖ So you can understand why the pope demanded that Zurich expel Zwingli from his pulpit and hand him over to church authorities. But Zwingli convinced the city magistrates to hold a public disputation on the matters instead. So there he stood in front of the council and 600 others to debate his theological opponents sent from Rome.
 - ▶ Point by point, Zwingli reasoned through his 67 Theses. They were short, pointed statements summarizing the gospel and included a number of church reforms that flow logically from the gospel. **His main point is found in thesis numbers 2 and 3, which perfectly encapsulate this morning's theme of *Solus Christus*:**
 - *"II. The sum and substance of the gospel is that our Lord Christ Jesus, the true son of God, has made known to us the will of his heavenly Father, and has with his sinlessness released us from death and reconciled us to God."*
 - *"III. Hence Christ is the only way to salvation for all who ever were, are and shall be."*

- ❖ Zwingli was masterful in his defense and came away the victor. The council accepted his theses and ruled that only preaching that was biblical would be legal in Zurich. The city authorities became the champion on his ideas and his defender against further persecution.

- ❖ **I believe the power in Zwingli’s defense of his Theses was derived from his assessment of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ – in his unique personhood and his finished work of salvation.** In other words, the power of his defense was rooted in his conviction of *Solus Christus*, Christ alone. This Reformational principle teaches that Jesus is the sole mediator between God and man, who has accomplished everything necessary for our salvation. Therefore, we have nothing to add to his finished work, and we have no need for any human mediator.
 - ▶ That, of course, is a direct challenge to the Catholic priesthood and sacramental system. **But beyond critiquing Catholicism, my goal this morning is to show you how *Solus Christus* is a direct challenge to many our own temptations to add to the work of Christ and to turn to other sources to experience the fullness of God in the Christian life.** We’re going to do that by studying one of the most Christ-exalting passages in all of Scripture. I want to draw out of Colossians 1:15-20 six observations regarding the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ.

- ❖ Now before we begin, you need to understand the background that spurred the Apostle Paul to write this letter to the church in Colossae. It’s believed that there was a dangerous teaching spreading throughout the church. In chapter 2:16, Paul makes indirect reference to someone (cf. 2:18; “*by his sensuous mind*”) who was passing judgment on them.
 - ▶ **Biblical scholars think this false teacher was claiming to have superior insight into the spiritual, angelic realm and was advocating for the practice of ascetic rites and rituals (2:16, 23) and the stringent avoidance of certain taboos (2:21-22) – all as a means of protecting yourself from evil spirits seeking to do you harm (2:8, 20; “*elemental spirits of the world*”).** The idea is that this teacher was influenced largely by blend of Judaism and pagan folk religion where angels were frequently called upon to help ward off evil spirits.

- ❖ **When Paul hears about this false teaching, he recognizes its danger in devaluing the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ.** It’s turning believers away from the fullness of their salvation in Christ and towards a “*self-made*” religion that puts trust in other people and other powers apart from Christ. To that Paul pens a beautiful hymn to exalt Christ.

Christ the Only Eternal Son

- ❖ The first point he makes in chapter 1:15 is that **Christ is the only Eternal Son of God.** Look there with me, “*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*”
 - ▶ **Notice Paul’s emphasis on the invisibility of God.** Paul stresses that divine attribute elsewhere in his letters. For example, in 1 Timothy 6:16 he praises God, “*who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.*” (cf. 1 Tim. 1:17).
 - That harmonizes well with what the Apostle John teaches (cf. 1 Jn. 4:12) like in his Gospel in chapter 1:18 where he says, “*No one has ever seen God.*”

- ❖ Now in the OT, Moses is said to have come the closest. **There's this place in Exodus 33 where Moses pleads with God for a chance to see his glory.** "*Please show me your glory.*" (v18) But to that the LORD warns, "*But you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.*" So when the time comes for God to pass by Moses, he shields the prophet's eyes, and only gives him a glimpse of his backside. That's as close as anyone got.
 - ▶ After that, throughout the rest of the OT, any time someone was given a glimpse of the glory of God, they were downright terrified (cf. Judg. 13:21-22; Isa. 6:5). They would fall down as dead and confess their wretchedness.
 - **What that demonstrates is that God is invisible to us – not just because he's a spirit and doesn't have a body – but because we're blinded by sin.** Our blindness to God is not due merely to a physical inability but a moral inability. God is invisible – not because he's hiding himself from us – but because we, in our sinfulness, would be consumed by the sight of his white-hot, radiant holiness.

- ❖ Remember the solar eclipse? **Remember all the warnings against looking directly at the sun?** It'll burn your eyes. It's dangerous. So I remember that day Henry and I were peering into a man-made viewing box. And instead of staring at the sun, we were looking at the image of the sun being cast in the box. It was the only way to see the brilliance of the sun in all its glory without burning our eyes out.
 - ▶ That's a lot like what it means to see God through Jesus, the "*image of the invisible God*". That Greek word for image is *eikon*. It's where we get the English word *icon*. **So Christ is the icon of God.** That doesn't mean he's merely a portrait or figurative representation of God. Rather the emphasis here is on Jesus's ability to perfectly reflect and reveal the fullness of God.

- ❖ **As the icon of God, Jesus lets you finally see God for yourself, and we should add – to do it safely.** Without perishing. Without being consumed by his holiness. John goes on in John 1:18, after he says no one has ever seen God, he says but "*the only God, who is at the Father's side, he [Christ] has made him known.*" Because as Paul puts it later in Colossians 2:9, "*For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily*".

- ❖ Now if you look back at chapter 1:15, Paul goes on to say that Jesus is "*the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*" Don't get tripped up by that term *firstborn*. It's not referring to the order of creation. As if Christ was born first and then everything in creation was subsequently born.
 - ▶ **Firstborn, in the biblical sense, is more focused on being first in rank or honor.** That's why in Psalm 89:27, King David is called God's firstborn. But we know that he was the youngest in his family, and he wasn't the first king of Israel. So in what sense was he the firstborn? He was firstborn in honor, in preeminence.

- ❖ The same goes for Christ. He is the preeminent Son. **And according to the ancient laws of primogeniture, all that belongs to the Father belongs to the Son.** This is why ancient Christians well understood that the Son of God was not created being. But rather eternally exists with God the Father through an eternal sonship.
 - ▶ Jesus – and Jesus alone – is the Eternal Son who perfectly reveals the invisible God for us to know him personally and intimately. That's why Christianity insists 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)
- ❖ **All other teachers and leaders of all other religions merely claim to know the way to God. But Christ – and Christ alone – claims to be the Way, to be God in the flesh** (cf. Jn. 14:6). All other religions are like people telling you it's okay to look at the solar eclipse with your own eyes or with their false glasses. But only through Christ can you see God and not perish. He is the only Eternal Son, who makes the Father known.

Christ the Only Creator

- ❖ If we keep reading in v16, there's a second observation regarding the supremacy of Christ. We see that **Christ is the only Creator of all things.** Look there with me, *“For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.”*
 - ▶ The emphasis is on all things. As John puts it in John 1:3, *“All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.”* **Everything that was made was made by Jesus, which implies that he doesn't fall under the category of things that were made.**
 - Jesus is the Maker. He was present there in Genesis 1. When God spoke, the Word (the *Logos*) created (Ps. 33:6; 1 Cor. 8:6; Heb. 1:2).
- ❖ Now in v16, Paul makes a point of stressing that all things include all angelic beings and demonic powers. The mention of thrones, dominions, rulers, and authorities are recognized by commentators to be references to angelic and demonic forces. They were all created by Jesus. **If that's so – if all heavenly and earthly powers derive their existence from Christ – then why would he need their help to accomplish the fullness of your salvation?**
 - ▶ Paul is bewildered why any Christian would be enticed to pray to angelic beings for help and protection from evil spirits. Why don't you turn to Christ? Call out to him. He's the One who created them all. He's the One who, according to chapter 2:15, by nailing your sins to the cross, *“He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.”*
- ❖ Heavenly and earthly powers have no control over Christ. **So praying to anyone for their help in persuading Christ to act on your behalf is pointless and demeaning to Christ.** This was why the Reformers railed against the mediatorial role of human priests and the practice of praying to deceased saints asking them to intercede on your behalf. The way they were going about it was undermining the glory and sufficiency of Christ.

- ❖ Look, there's nothing wrong with confessing your sins to others and asking other Christians to pray for you. Those are good things. **But the point is to make sure your hope and confidence is not in the holiness or authority of those individuals** – but that it's still in the supremacy and sufficiency of the Christ to whom they're praying on your behalf. They're praying to the only Creator through whom and for whom all things were made.

Christ the Only Sustainer

- ❖ If we keep going in v17, there's a third and related observation. We see that **Christ is the Only Creator and the Only Sustainer of all things**. Look at v17, "*And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*"
- ❖ I'm no scientist, and there are much brighter people here with much more knowledge in physics. But I think I know what $E=MC^2$ means. I know Einstein came up with that formula. **And with it, he figured out that the energy it takes to hold together one singular molecular atom was immense in proportion.**
 - ▶ And I know that Einstein, along with other scientists, determined that if you could somehow harness the energy inside an atom, you would possess a colossal amount. We call it nuclear power. So just think about how an atomic bomb works. By causing a chain reaction of splitting atoms, a massive, destructive amount of energy is created. It contains the power to wipe out entire cities.
 - So when v17 says, "*in him all things hold together*", I'm imagining Jesus holding together every single molecule and particle in the universe within himself. **If one atom holds within itself such immense, unthinkable power, how much more exists with in the One who holds all things together?**
- ❖ Christian, glory with me in the supremacy of Christ exalted in this text. V15 says that Christ alone is fully God. V16 says all things were created through him and for him. And now v17 says by his infinite power he holds every single particle in the universe together.
 - ▶ He lacks for nothing. **So why, if you are in Christ, would you need to turn to anyone else to protect you or preserve you? Why would you need to contribute anything to the work of Christ for your salvation?** Because Jesus is supremely all-powerful, he is totally all-sufficient to save within himself.
- ❖ That's why the Reformers insisted on *Solus Christus*. On salvation in Christ alone – in who he is and all that he has accomplished. **To put hope in your works of penance, to depend on a papal indulgence, to rest your confidence on good deeds – is to devalue and deny the sufficiency of Christ's work and the supremacy of his power.**
 - ▶ To trust in yourself and your good works to contribute to even just the smallest portion of your salvation is like trying to contribute a triple-A battery to a nuclear power plant. It's like adding a grain of gunpowder to an atomic bomb. What's the point of that? **What do you think you're accomplishing when you're adding to the accomplished?**

- ❖ That's why throughout this letter Paul is baffled, especially in chapter 2:16, why anyone who has Christ would turn and submit themselves under a system of salvation with regulations on what you eat or drink or whether you celebrate certain festivals or new moons or Sabbaths. You're just adding to the accomplished. It's foolishness.
 - ▶ And the same could be asked of us. **If we have Christ – who by his supreme and all-sufficient power has accomplished our salvation – then why do we look to our own performance or obedience to add to what he's already accomplished?** Why do we turn to our religious performance as our confidence to stand before God? It's foolishness. Our only confidence should be in the only Creator and Sustainer of all things who has done all that was needed for our salvation.

Christ the Only Head

- ❖ If we keep reading in v18, our fourth observation is that **Christ is the Only Head of the Church**. Let me read it, "*And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.*"
 - ▶ **We see a transition here in Paul's thoughts from Jesus being the Head and source of all creation to the Head and source of God's new creation the church.** Earlier he described Jesus as the firstborn of all creation, but now he's the firstborn from the dead. That means among those who will be resurrected to eternal life, Jesus is our preeminent forerunner.
- ❖ **To be called the head of the church implies ultimate authority.** Christ is the head. He's in charge. To be the head also suggests that Christ is the source of nourishment for the growth and maturity of the church. The stress is on our total dependence on Christ. In chapter 2:19 we're commanded to hold fast to the Head, to hold fast to Christ as the Head of the church.
 - ▶ **To fail to hold fast is to fail to give Christ his preeminent place in the life of our church.** If we give primacy to a pope, a bishop, a senior pastor, or to any other human figure or ecclesial body – then we've unseated Christ. We've cut off the Head of the church. And you can be sure our church will eventually shrivel up and die.
- ❖ **That's why we, at HCC, insist that there's only one Head over our church. There's only one Chief Shepherd.** I might be a pastor. I might be the lead English pastor, but there's only one true Leader of this church. And so you must be careful never to give me or any other leader papal-like authority. Any sermon we preach, any counsel we give, any vision we cast – it all must be submitted under the absolute authority of Christ our Head.
 - ▶ And remember that even the congregation – church members – don't hold absolute authority. We're congregationally-governed, which means the members of HCC hold the final earthly authority over our church. But even so, we're still accountable to the Lord who rules us through his Word. We're still responsible to let the Word govern us. Never forget that Christ, the Eternal Word, is the only Head of our church.

Christ the Only Temple

- ❖ Let's go on in v19, and we'll see our fifth observation where **Christ is presented as the only Temple** – as the new dwelling place of God on earth. Look at v19, "*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*". **In the OT, God dwelt in one and only one place on earth, the temple.** It was unlawful for you to bring a sacrifice to worship anywhere else. The LORD did not dwell in the high places. He dwelt in the temple. That's where you met him.
 - ▶ But now we're told that all the fullness of God dwells in Christ and in Christ alone. **He's the new dwelling place of God. He's where you meet God.** Worship is still restricted to the temple as it was before, but the new Temple is no longer a building. It's a person named Jesus. "*In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily*". (2:9)

- ❖ When it came to *Solus Christus*, the Reformers disagreed with the Catholic Church when it came to the sufficiency of Christ in our salvation, **but at least they agreed on the exclusivity of salvation in Christ alone.** That's why you could argue the challenge is even greater today and why the Reformation must go on. In our day, both the sufficiency *and* the exclusivity of Christ is challenged outside and inside the Church.
 - ▶ **The idea that the fullness of God would be reserved within one person – found within one religion – is highly offensive to the world.** It's said that Christians are arrogant to think they're the only ones with the truth. Are you saying God's not found in other religions? That true worship of God only takes place in Christ?

- ❖ Yes, that's what we claim because that's what Scripture claims. And why does Scripture claim it? Scripture claims that Christians are the only true worshippers of God – not because of the holiness of Christians or because of the worthiness of Christians.
 - ▶ **No, Christians are the only true worshippers of God because of the uniqueness of Christ – through whom we worship.** That's what it comes down to. Christ is unique. He is one-of-a-kind. Only Christ is the Temple – in whom meet God. And only Christ is the Priest – through whom we are reconciled to God.

Christ the Only Mediator

- ❖ And that leads to our sixth and final observation found in v20. We're presented with **Christ the only Mediator between God and man.** Look there, "*and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*"
 - ▶ Notice how all of us are found in this verse. **This verse implies that all of us – assuming you fit under the category of “all things” – were (or still are) not at peace with God, since peace had to be made.**

- ❖ The very need for reconciliation implies that there lies a deep hostility between us and God. **Scripture identifies the cause to be our rebellious, sinful hearts.** We are rebellious and won't submit to his loving rule, and he is holy and will justly punish us for our rebellion. This is why there's a deep hostility (an enmity) between God and man.

- ❖ But that's when you turn to a mediator. A mediator is a go-between who helps two disputing parties come to the table, to reconcile, to make peace. So we need a mediator.
 - ▶ **And the best kind of mediator is the one who's able to equally identify with and represent both parties.** That's the kind you'd choose. Because you know he has the best in mind for both parties.
 - Friends, this is why Christ stands heads and shoulders above all other possible mediators. **Because only Christ is equally God and man, all in one person. Only Jesus can be a fitting mediator to reconcile us to God.**

- ❖ Notice how the verse says this reconciliation was achieved. It says he made peace "*by the blood of his cross.*" In other words, it was at great personal cost. Don't lose sight of this. **Don't let this idea of God having hostility towards you cause you to commit the greatest of heresies. Don't let it lead you to deny his love for you.** Don't lose sight of the fact that the very same God takes on the entire burden of reconciling himself to you.
 - ▶ To make peace with him, he doesn't ask *you* to make a sacrifice. He doesn't expect *you* to sweat and bleed – to work hard at it – to make peace with him. **No, we're reminded here that our Only Mediator – the Eternal Son of God and the Perfect Son of Man – made his own sacrifice and gave his own sweat and blood to reconcile you to God.** That's love.

- ❖ Christ is an all-sufficient Savior. **It says his blood has the power (the reach) to reconcile all things to himself. That means there is no need for any other blood to be shed.** No need for more sacrifices to be made. This is why the Reformers were against the Catholic Mass, which was being treated as another sacrifice of Christ, another shedding of his blood. The Reformers insisted that Christ's blood was shed once – and once and for all.

- ❖ Christian, that's a reminder for you too. **Isn't it true that very often we beat ourselves up over our sin? We have self-imposed ways of torturing ourselves.** Denying ourselves the comforts of the gospel because somehow that feels too easy. We feel like we need to pay a little bit. We need to sweat it out a little bit. Maybe shed a little blood.
 - ▶ But no amount of self-inflicted penance or contrition will assuage the guilt you feel. It won't bring you the peace you seek. Go back to the cross, and discover once again that peace has been made by the blood of another – by *Solus Christus*. Christ alone.