

BY CHRIST ALONE

***a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Sept. 24, 2017
based on Acts 3:1-8, Acts 4:1-12; John 15:4-5***

The sermon this morning is a continuation of a sermon series entitled, “Here We Stand: Sure Faith in Uncertain Times.” The series relates to the fact that this fall is the 500th anniversary of the start of the Protestant Reformation, and so in this series we are using the key points of the Reformation to reflect about how we can stand firm in faith today.

Over the past few weeks we have been progressing through the so-called “five solas”—five central concepts of the Reformation that are each summarized by a short Latin phrase containing the word sola, meaning only or alone. We have considered sola scriptura—the idea that we should look for truth about God in the Bible alone. We have considered sola gratia—the principle that we are saved by God’s grace alone. Last week we focused on sola fide—the principle that we receive God’s salvation through faith alone. This morning we turn our attention to the fourth sola—solus Christus, Christ alone—or it is also sometimes expressed as solo Christo, a Latin grammatical form that means “by Christ alone.” This principle states that salvation happens only through Christ. There is one more sola to go—soli Deo gloria, which means “to God alone be the glory.” We will actually wait until the very end of the series to look at that one, since “to God alone be the glory” is a very appropriate climax for our whole undertaking. So today we focus on the fourth sola: solus Christus—Christ alone. Let us begin with a moment of prayer . . .

The idea that we are saved by Christ alone is a direct challenge to our age, because the popular thinking is that there are all different religious or nonreligious paths that a person can take, and it does not really matter which one you are on. When it comes to spirituality, people commonly think, just do whatever feels right to you.

Certainly there are many areas of life where there are all sorts of different approaches that one can take which all produce a good result. There are many different ways to cook ribs and have them come out tasty. There are many different ways to arrange flowers and get a beautiful arrangement. There are many different ways to cut hair and have a good result—unless you are cutting my hair, where it’s a lost cause. Especially in areas of style and taste, you can choose your own creative approach and find success.

But there are other areas of life where there is only one approach that is actually going to work. In 1969, when our astronauts were approaching the first moon landing, they could not just choose a course that felt good to them; there was one course that would bring a successful landing, and even the slightest deviation would bring disaster. They were highly attentive to being on the right track.

Or I think of an experience I had one summer when I was working at Camp Wanake. There was a teenage boy on staff who had been hired to mow the grass. One day, the camp maintenance director, a crusty old guy named Merle Savage, told the boy that he needed to put oil into the riding mower. Well, this kid had never put oil into anything; but he was too intimidated by Merle Savage to ask for specific directions. So he went up to the mower, opened the engine compartment, and noticed, of course, that there was more than one cap that could be opened into some part of the engine. He just picked the one that looked right to him, and poured oil . . . into the radiator. This did not work. It created quite a mess actually. Merle was not pleased, although, in the end, Merle had mercy on the kid, which is why there now a retreat center dedicated to Merle Savage at Camp Wanake— not just because of this incident, but because Merle gave decades of service to the camp in which he put up with this sort of thing and just persevered in grace and commitment.

The point is that sometimes you can't just do what feels right to you and expect to get a good result; there is one way that actually works.

In the Bible we are dealing with the most difficult and critical problem that humanity faces—our spiritual brokenness: our alienation from God, which leads to endless strife and agony and trouble with one another, and it all ends finally in death. We could dream up all sorts of approaches to try to solve the human problem, and indeed history is full of a great many “answers” that people have put forth for the human situation, which often brought disastrous results. But the Bible is the story of how *God* provides the answer, and the answer is Christ. It is Christ who can heal our spiritual brokenness; it is Christ who can bring us into a fellowship with God, which leads us to live rightly with one another, which lead us into wholeness in life, and which brings us at last into life everlasting.

The Scripture story that we heard this morning from the book of Acts gives us a powerful illustration of this principle that the answer to our brokenness is Christ. Peter and John encountered a man who had been lame since birth. He was begging, and asked for a donation. But they gave him much more. Peter said, “In the name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk.” (Acts 3:6) And the man was healed.

This caused quite a stir and drew a crowd, which upset the authorities, who threw Peter and John into jail overnight. The next day, as Peter and John stood before the rulers, Peter gave a poignant accounting of what had just happened. He said, “Let this be known to all, that this man is now standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ, whom you crucified, but whom God raised from the dead. There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:10,12)

Right here is the principle of *solus Christus*—Christ alone. “There is no other name by which we can be saved”—because it is through Christ that God has acted to save us. The lame man in the story had doubtless tried many remedies for his ailment, but there

was one answer. So also, Peter was saying, there is one answer for the sickness of our soul, one answer for the brokenness of humanity, and that is the answer that God provides in Jesus Christ. So we are encouraged to look to Christ! As Jesus said, “Come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28)

But does this principle of Solus Christus then mean that only Christians now have hope of salvation, and that Hindus and Muslims and all others are simply lost? I addressed this particular question in depth in a sermon this past summer entitled, “Who Enters Heaven?” which was part of the “Hope of Heaven” sermon series. You can access that sermon online in video, podcast, or print form; so I will not be going into detail here. But it is important at least at this juncture to recognize that there is a huge difference between knowing that Christ is the answer and claiming that my group is the only one that is connecting with that answer.

Perhaps you have heard the old story about a man who went to heaven and who was being shown around by St. Peter. They were floating from cloud to cloud, and on each cloud there was a door which St. Peter would open. On one cloud, St. Peter swung open the door to reveal a large group rolling around on the floor and speaking in strange tongues. “Our Pentecostals,” St Peter said. On another cloud, behind another door, was a serious ritual. “Our Jewish persuasion,” St. Peter explained. On yet another cloud St. Peter opened a door to reveal a group joining in an ancient chant. “Our Eastern Orthodox folks,” said St. Peter. But then they came to a cloud where St. Peter did not open the door at all but instead insisted that they tip toe quietly past. Once they were a safe distance away, the man asked, “What was that all about? St. Peter said, “Those are the Baptists. They think they are the only ones here.”

It is not only Baptists, of course, who like to imagine at times that they are the only ones who are right with God. But one of the major themes of the New Testament is that the grace of Jesus Christ is far broader than people are often inclined to imagine. It is said in the first letter of John, “We have seen and do testify that the Father sent His Son to be the Savior of the world.” (I John 4:14) If God is reaching through Christ with saving grace to the whole world, we certainly do not need to put limits on how far that reach can go.

Indeed whenever we decide that we are the ones who are in with God and others are simply out, that stance can very much affect how charitable we are toward those others. There’s another joke that Baptists like to tell on themselves (I’ve had a number of Baptist friends, and they seem to have a whole lineup of Baptist jokes). This one is about a Baptist who suddenly comes upon a man who is preparing to jump off a bridge. The Baptist quickly intercedes to rescue the man, and asks if he is religious. “Yes, I am religious,” the man says. “So am I,” says the Baptist. “Are you Christian or nonChristian?” “Christian,” the man replies. “So am I,” says the Baptist. “Are you Catholic or Protestant?” “Protestant,” says the man. “So am I,” exclaims the Baptist. “Are you Baptist or other Protestant?” “Baptist,” says the man. “So am I! Are you regular Baptist or Southern Baptist?” “Regular

Baptist,” replies the man. “So am I! Calvinist or Freewill?” “Free will,” the man says. “So am I! Fundamentalist or traditionalist.” “Traditionalist” “So am I! Running water or baptistry?” And so it goes, through endless distinctions that Baptists like to make with one another, until finally there is one doctrinal difference between the two men; and the would-be rescuer kicks the fellow off the bridge.

You know, this goes on too often today—people see differences between themselves and others, and they want to kick the others off the bridge.

It is significant that in the story we heard about Peter and John, they do not ask the man whether he has even heard of Jesus or believes in God at all. They find out that he is hurting, and Peter says, “In the name of Jesus Christ, rise up and walk.” (Acts 3:6)

This is a clear model for us. It is not our calling to pass judgment on other people. It is our calling to be instruments of God’s grace. We are called, like Peter and John, to reach out to others in the name of Christ, to be vehicles of the love and healing of Christ, and to lift up the saving power of Christ.

In the Protestant Reformation, when the Reformers accented the principle of *solus Christus*, they were actually not thinking about whether or not Buddhists are saved. It is all too easy today to want to focus on that question of whether or not the other guy is right with God. The Reformers were focused on the question, “Are you and I right with God?” We leave it to God to be the Judge of the world; we need to focus on setting our own lives aright and living in the way that God is leading us. Precisely here the principle of *solus Christus* is decisive.

The principle tells us, first of all, that we need to look to Christ as the answer to our deepest needs. In the Middle Ages, the Catholic church acknowledged that Christ is the Savior, but the Church added that there are also a bunch of things that you need to do, or that the priests of the church need to do for you. Thus, in medieval Catholic teaching, we are saved through Christ *and* all kinds of additional actions that need to be taken. This sort of thinking is also widespread today. Many people in America would say, “Yes, I believe that Jesus is the Savior”; but when it comes to actual living, people look for values and strength and hope in all sorts of other things, and live in such a way that Jesus is rather much on the sidelines. Thus the perceived answer to life’s challenges is Christ *and* the many other steps that people are taking and the imagined solutions after which they grasp.

The Reformation countered this sort of thinking by replacing the “Christ and . . .” with the principle of Christ alone. The answer that we need is Christ; or as the book of Acts expresses it: “there is no other name by which we must be saved.” We must put our faith in Christ, and not be trying to find hope in something else, which can never deliver. There are of course many things in life which can be helpful in one way or another in daily living; but when it comes to the deep need of our soul, it is Christ alone who can set us right with God, and it is Christ who can bring us into a genuinely bright future.

Of course, once we are centered on Christ, we will naturally engage in all sorts of activities in this world, but everything that we do will only work—it will only bear fruit—when we are connected to Christ. This was exactly Jesus' point in his famous image of the vine and the branches, which we heard earlier, where the branches must be connected to the vine, for, as Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Another key implication of the Christ alone principle is that it enables us to recognize the true nature of God's saving power, because that power is uniquely expressed in Jesus. Peter referred to this in the passage we heard from Acts, when he spoke of Jesus as the one who was crucified and then raised from the dead. When we look to Christ alone for salvation, we are moved to see that Christ is the perfect picture of how God works, and it is stunning then to recognize that the center of God's saving action through Christ is the *cross*; for it is on the cross that Jesus gives his life for our sin and so enables us to be forgiven and reconciled with God. But what we see on the cross is extraordinary, for there we perceive that God's saving power is expressed through self-sacrificial love.

This flips our usual human thinking on its head. We typically want to imagine that salvation—victory over all that threatens us—will be achieved through the power of wealth and the exercise of human might. But when we look to Christ alone, our perception is radically changed; we see how God works through self-emptying, and we are moved then to join ourselves with Christ and reach out to the world in mercy and compassion and self-giving. It is then that the healing spirit of Jesus can truly be at work through us.

As people are faced with the many challenges and threats and uncertainties in life, they are typically inclined to go their own way and just do whatever seems right to them. The result is the mess that we see in today's world. But there is an alternative, and that is to look to the saving action of God as God reaches to us in Jesus Christ. Through the cross of Christ, God rescues us from our sin and alienation and restores us into real fellowship with God. Through the resurrection of Christ, God delivers us from death and opens the way into eternal life. Through the Spirit of Christ with us, God leads in ways of love that will bring healing and hope to others. Christ is the answer; or as Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." (John 14:6)