



For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

*Romans 3:23-25*

## Study #2 Reforming Christ

*"I will cling to my Lord Christ as a burr on a coat"*

Katie Luther (last reported words)

### Background

Because the Reformation was driven by the Bible, it drove people to the Jesus of the Bible. In particular, it was the recovery of the Bible's teaching on the Cross of Christ that became central to the reformers' understanding. Christ's death as both essential and sufficient lay at the heart of the Gospel message.

This was contentious. No-one argued that the death of Jesus wasn't essential for forgiveness and salvation. The issue was over whether or not the death of Jesus 'alone' was sufficient to save. If so, it brought into question many of the churches practices, how our relationship with God was understood and how both the church and the individual were even to relate to Jesus.

But even more than this, the reformers were adamant that the Scriptures revealed not just the sufficiency of Christ's work for us (freeing us from meriting salvation through other means), but also the offence of relying upon something/someone else to secure forgiveness and salvation. Salvation is achieved and made possible through Christ alone. To suggest otherwise was to undermine Christ's perfect and finished work, and therefore promote a false Gospel.

The most important pastoral questions of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (and every century) in regards to how we can relate to God are questions like these:

- What must I do to be saved?
- How can I gain access to the favour of God?
- How can I attain forgiveness and be righteous before God?

On the eve of the Reformation any answer to these questions had to involve the sacraments<sup>1</sup>. Sacraments were seen as the means by which God's grace was dispensed so as to be infused within the individual. Without them and the grace they brought, there was ultimately no hope of salvation.

Further, the church had elevated the status of especially holy ones from the past (saints). Because of their extraordinary holiness and extra merit before God, it was believed they could be of special assistance to the rest of us who were so sinful and lacking. None were more special than Mary, who, as the mother of Christ, had special access to him. To honour Mary meant benefiting from her as mediator.

<sup>1</sup> The Catholic church still retains 7 sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist (mass), Confession, anointing the sick, Holy Orders, Marriage).

## The way of Salvation

With all this in mind, the question then of how you could gain salvation was answered in two broad ways:

### The old “Aquinas”<sup>2</sup> way

1. An infusion of God’s grace received through baptism
  - 2. doing one’s loving best with the help of further grace via the sacraments
  - 3. reward of eternal life as a just due

### The new “Via Moderna”<sup>3</sup> way

1. Doing one’s moral best through natural ability
  - 2. An infusion of God’s grace as fitting reward
  - 3. doing one’s best with the help of grace via the sacraments
  - 4. reward of eternal life as a just due

## Some questions for your group

- What uncertainties do you think you would have been left with if you were taught either of these views?
- For the especially conscientious (or conscience stricken), what would either of them potentially lead to?
- While it is true that without God we cannot be righteous in either view, what else clearly must be at work to make us righteous?
- What does this then assume about our capacity?
- And the Sunday school question: Who is conspicuously absent from both systems?

## The reformation way – Christ is all

Reflect on some of the following verses and consider what they reveal about the nature and means of salvation:

- Ephesians 1:3-8
- Colossians 1:15-22
- Titus 2:11-14
- How would you critique the ‘old’ or ‘new’ way with verses like these in mind?

## The reformation result – Assurance because of Christ (alone)

Read through Romans 5:1-11

- In vv.1-5, grace is not a substance to be infused through a sacrament, but the unmerited kindness given through a saviour. What amazing effect can this have upon the believer even in the midst of suffering?
- Vv.6-11 reveals the joy of Christian assurance.
  - How might you use these verses to help a Christian who feels uncertain about their salvation because they don’t feel good enough?
  - How might you use the logic of these verses to help a Christian who feels uncertain that Jesus work for them is enough?

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the most influential Catholic theologian and one of the world’s most influential thinkers of the last 1000 years.

<sup>3</sup> This way asserted that certain requirements be met from what lies within a person as they strive for moral progress and purity. It assumed at least some innate ability, which by obligation must be exercised if grace is to benefit. Early 15<sup>th</sup> century teaching based on the writings of William of Ockham (1287-1347).

## Calvin on Christ alone

On Sunday Marcus read out the following from Calvin's Institutes.<sup>4</sup> You may wish to read these words out and consider how significant these sorts of messages must have been at the time. Though of course, we still need to be hearing them just as much:

*We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ (Acts 4:12).*

*We should therefore take care not to derive the least portion of it from anywhere else.*

*If we seek salvation, we are taught by the very name of Jesus that it is 'of him' (1 Cor.1:30).*

*If we seek any other gifts of the Spirit, they will be found in his anointing.*

*If we seek strength, it lies in his dominion; if purity, in his conception; if gentleness, it appears in his birth.*

*For by his birth he was made like us in all respects (Heb.2:17) that he might learn to feel our pain (Heb.5:2).*

*If we seek redemption, it lies in his passion; if acquittal, in his condemnation; if remission of the curse, in his cross*

*(Gal.3:13); if satisfaction, in his sacrifice; if purification, in his blood; if reconciliation, in his descent into hell;*

*if mortification of the flesh, in his tomb; if newness of life, in his resurrection; if immortality, in the same; if inheritance of the Heavenly Kingdom, in his entrance into heaven; if protection, if security, if abundant supply of all blessings, in his kingdom; if untroubled expectation of judgment, in the power given to him to judge.*

*In short, since rich store of every kind of good abounds in him, let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other.*

## Your ongoing reformation?

- In what ways are we in danger of wanting to add to Christ's work of salvation? Why do we want to do this?
- How can we ensure we keep being reformed by his abundant blessings, and not 'deformed' by our own?

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<sup>4</sup> Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 2, chapter 16, section 19