

Christ Alone

Hebrews 7:23ff.

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The world of 16th-century Western Europe was different in many ways from ours and in the most important ways the same. They had no electricity or the technologies and lifestyle comforts we enjoy. We have to watch reality shows like *Survivor* to get closer to understanding what living was like back then.

One clear way it was different was religiously. The medieval church was the only church in town. Nobody had a Bible and nobody thought, *I should have a Bible*. It just wasn't the way it was. There was one religious voice in the town—the priest of the church. He represented God to you and you to God. You went to him to confess your sins. You saw him handle the sacraments believing he was handling the very body and blood of Jesus. He led the Mass re-creating Jesus in its beliefs and rituals. He told you how to get heaven. He spoke for God. He was your priest. Your Father. Your human intermediary between you and God. The church taught that it was the dispenser of grace through sacraments and indulgences. The vestments of the priests reminded you that you were not set apart to God like the priests were. The cathedrals, candles, and rituals were dark, foreboding, shrouded, and everything seemed mysterious. Unknowable.

What was the same was that the people were just like you and me. They pondered the meaning of life. They wondered about their futures and the future of their children. They longed to know their Creator personally. They wanted the same answer we do, *what happens to me when I die?*

Into that medieval culture came light—light in the form of truth even older than the papacy, the Mass, and the basilicas. What was it? The gospel of Jesus Christ *rediscovered* out of the spiritual fog and corruption of the medieval church. How? As we have been learning in our Sola series, through Sola Scriptura. Not from the teachings and opinions of men but from the actual text of Scripture itself. What? Sola Gratia (Grace Alone). Not our reaching to God but his sovereign grace reaching to us. How? Sola Fide (Faith Alone). Christ's righteousness given to us as a gift by faith. At the bedrock of it all was and is a "who." The object of the faith that alone justifies, was and forever will be Jesus Christ. This became one of the solas. Solus Christus. Christ Alone.

As we have seen with the other solas, Solus Christus was the Reformers' reaction against adding anything to Jesus' work. It was a question of sufficiency. As Sola Scriptura whittled off of Scripture anything added to Scripture, Solus Christus insists that Jesus' person and work is all-sufficient. Jesus doesn't need any help from us. His death on the cross was a one-time satisfactory payment for sin. One and done.

If the Reformation had a systematic theologian it was John Calvin. His legacy work is *The Institutes of Christian Religion*. They have been read, debated, and treasured for 500 years. It was Calvin who summarized Jesus' ministry as a threefold office: prophet, priest, and king. His work is complete as *prophet, priest, and king*. This threefold office provides the outline of teaching today on Christ Alone. Let me quickly explain prophet and king as I want to spend most of my time on priest.

Jesus our All-Sufficient Prophet

A prophet is someone who speaks for God to people. He is a truth speaker. Famous biblical prophets include Moses and Elijah and John the Baptist. Prophets speak the truth with clarity and without compromise.

More than Elijah and Moses and Isaiah or any other prophet, Jesus fulfilled this office by speaking the truth to us. Indeed he himself is the truth.

- *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* (John 14:6 ESV)
- *"For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."* (John 1:17)
- *"For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me."* (John 17:8)

Prophets speak for God to us and Jesus did that perfectly.

Jesus our All-Sufficient King

Here at Bethel we spent all last year on Jesus as King of the kingdom of God. Son of David. Messiah. Human and divine royalty. I hope there's an echo of memory here. Jesus preached the kingdom of God everywhere he went. Pilate asked him if he was a king and Jesus said *"My kingdom is not of this world."* (John 18:36) Pilate then trolled him by placing over his cross, *"Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews."* (John 19:19) But the tragic joke is on Pilate and anyone else who fails to bend the knee of faith and pledge allegiance in this life to Jesus' kingship. Someday every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Philippians 2:10-11). He is the King of kings and Lord of Lords. All praise be forever unto him our King.

Jesus our All-Sufficient Priest (Heb. 7:23 – 8:2)

"The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, 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. 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. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man." (Hebrews 7:23-8:2)

A prophet represents God to man. A priest represents the people to God. He is a mediator between God and man. This language flows out of the Old Testament and the Levitical system of worship in the temple and tabernacle. The high priest and the other priests supervised the animal sacrifices on behalf of the sins of the people. The New Testament says that we are a kingdom of priests with Jesus as our high priest. Remember, when Jesus died the veil was torn in the temple. The old covenant was replaced with a new. No more

animal sacrifices because Jesus' death was the once-for-all sacrifice. No more earthly temple. Our temple is in heaven and so is our high priest Jesus as he represents us to God the Father.

Sadly, by the time of Luther in the 16th-century, the church over the centuries had wiggled its way into key aspects of salvation designated to Jesus and God the Father. When the Reformation took off people were so accustomed to the church and the priests representing them to God, it was a big stretch to the biblical teaching.

But Jesus to the average Jew, and the Reformation to the average European, required a re-wiring of their basic DNA approach to God. Hebrews emphasizes that Jesus is our high priest according to a different priesthood and he pulls out this enigmatic character Melchizedek to whom Abraham offered sacrifices in Genesis 14. Abraham was the great grandfather of the Levitical tribe and yet Abraham tithed to Melchizedek. Jesus a Levite? No. Even greater, like Melchizedek, a high priest forever.

Hebrews further points out the problem with human priests. They die. *"The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office."* (Hebrews 7: 23) What's the problem with priests, pastors, and popes—even the ones you like? They die. Their ministry is short-term. They are all too human.

But Jesus is a permanent priest. He lives forever as eternal God. Therefore his mediation for us lasts forever. Don't trust in a teacher or pastor or author. They're good for a couple decades but then they are gone. But Jesus is eternal. Our eternal priest.

Jesus fulfills the Old Testament priesthood by representing us to God in his death as our representative and his ongoing ministry of intercession for us. Hebrews 7:25, *"Consequently, 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."*

Who is "them"? Those who come to God by faith. There's the gospel. There's personal trust in Jesus. What does Jesus do as our priest? Intercession.

Intercession = the priestly work of Christ in which he represents us and our needs to the Father and prays for the application of covenantal promises and blessings to us which the sacrifice of his own life made possible.

How qualified is he to intercede to the Father on our behalf?

"For 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. Let 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." (Hebrews 4:15-16)

So we have this amazing combination in Christ of perfect identification and perfect representation. He perfectly identifies with our weaknesses because he has a human nature that experienced weakness. No matter what you are going through today, Christ can identify with it. He has *been there, felt that*. He perfectly identifies with us. He's one of us. At the same time, he perfectly represents us as priest to the Father and prays that the Father would fulfill his promises to us, in our trials and in our pains. In our sorrows and in our joys. He takes our feeble prayers and cries and appeals to the Father according to the Father's will for us.

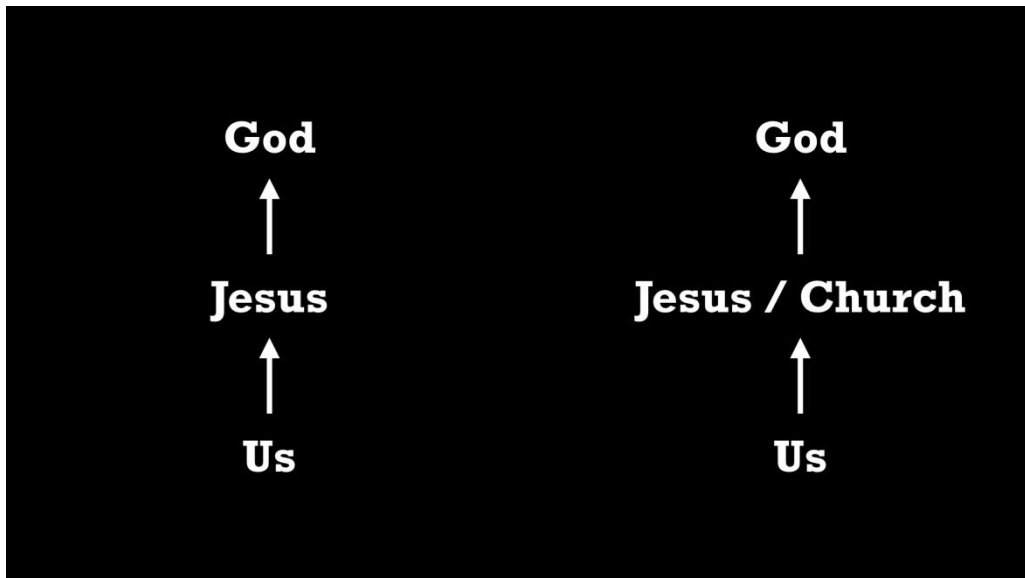
Chrysostom, 4th-century preacher, told the story of a young boy whose father was away on a trip and wanted to present his father with something that would please him. His mother sent him to the garden to gather a bouquet of flowers to give to his dad when he returned. The boy gathered a handful of plants, weeds and flowers all together. But when his father returned home, he was presented with a beautifully arranged bouquet. How? Mom had intervened, removing all the weeds, and presenting the flowers.

Anybody pray some weed-filled prayers this week? *I want this and I want that. Take this out of my life. I don't want this person around me anymore. I am tired of this issue in my life.* On and on. Weeds of selfishness in our prayers with a little flower or two in there. As you prayed those prayers, while perfectly understanding the weakness that produced the prayers, our great high priest takes out the weeds, gathers the flowers and adds a few of his own, and presents the bouquet of requests to the Father. He intercedes for us.

- We pray, *God take this pain away!* The Father hears from Jesus, *Father, give her grace to meet every trial.*
- We pray, *God give me money because I want this or that.* God hears, *Give him more of yourself that you might be his satisfaction.*
- The discouraged prays, *God give me different circumstances, I can't take it!* The Father hears, *Let him know that your grace is sufficient.*
- The dying prays, *God, I am afraid of what is going to happen.* The Father hears, *Let her know that you will never leave her nor forsake her and there is nothing to fear.*

And God always answers the intercessory prayers of Christ because Christ intercedes for us according to the Father's will. He ever lives to pray for **us**.

Can any sinner do this? No. Regardless of whether your title is pastor, priest, or pope, no. Here is where the Reformation applied Christ alone to the church of the day. The medieval church over the centuries had wormed its way into spiritual roles the Bible says are God's.



On the left side of this diagram (above) is what Hebrews teaches. On the right is what was going on in the 16th-century church. And since the people didn't have a Bible, they didn't actually know what Jesus was doing. So essentially, it was the church that had placed itself between the people and God.

I heard an interview with Evangelical Anglican Phillip Jensen and he pointed this out.¹ I had never considered it before. What does Pope mean? Father. Yet Jesus said, "*And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.*" (Matthew 23:9) God the Father needs no replacement.

The Pope was called the Vicar of Christ. What does Vicar mean? Substitute. The substitute for Christ. Jesus needs no replacement; certainly not by a human. He alone is the perfect priest for us.

Another title, Pontiff. What does Pontiff mean? Pontiff means bridge. The bridge between man and God. But who is the bridge for us? Any human priest? No. Christ and Christ alone is the way, truth, and life. (John 14:6)

St. Paul's church in London, while Anglican, has a similar falsehood as you walk in, a sign above the door of the church that reads, "*This is the gate of heaven.*" What does Jesus say? "*I am the door of the sheep...If anyone enters by me, he will be saved.*" (John 10:7, 9) Buildings and relics and the like are Christ *plus* which doesn't actually add anything and ends up subtracting from Christ's perfection and all-sufficient work. They imply Christ was not enough. Yet we don't need any other intercessor whether that be priests or Jesus' mom or Peter himself. That is what the Reformers said so powerfully. Christ's work is all-sufficient. He is our perfect prophet, priest, and king. We need no other.

Some years ago a group from our church did a Steps of Paul tour. We went to places like Ephesus and Athens. It was a great trip. One stop was Rome. In our group was a woman in her 20s who had grown up just like Martin Luther. She had grown up in the same faith tradition. Like Luther she had a conversion experience and realized salvation was by faith alone. She went on the trip. I'll never forget when we were in Rome and had our first moments in St. Peter's Basilica. It's an amazing and huge building. Beautiful and eerie at the same time. Over here is a centuries old pope enshrined in a marble tomb carved in his likeness. His papal clothes are on the statuary. Over there is the foot of a statue that millions have kissed and the line is long to get your chance. It is astonishingly huge with wonderful artwork by Michelangelo and Bernini and others. The architecture is second to none. It is the biggest church in the world paid for by the very indulgences Luther wrote against when he nailed the 95 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg.

I gazed at the splendor and sacramental rituals all around. I glanced over at this young woman and she had tears streaming down her face. I said, "What's wrong? What are you thinking as you see all this?"

She said to me, "These are all the things that got in the way."

What did she mean? Got in the way of what? Got in the way of seeing Christ and him alone. Got in the way of realizing the all-sufficiency of what Jesus did. Got in the way of realizing his death was once for all. Got in the way of getting between us and Jesus.

Jesus doesn't need any help. He is our perfect and complete prophet, priest, and king forever. Do you know him as your prophet, priest, and king? Sola Gratia. By God's grace alone. Do you know him with sola fide, by faith alone? Is your trust in Christ and in him alone for your eternal salvation? Only Jesus saves. Solus Christus. Christ alone.

¹ Philip Jensen, "The Reformation Meets *Trellis and Vine*, T4G.org, *We Are Protestant* (2016 Conference Panel Video) at 24:40.

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