

In All Things ... Christ Preeminent (Colossians 1:18)

Introduction: *How to ensure that our labors are not lost*

Thomas Hog “ordered his grave to be dug on the threshold of his Highland church, and on the tombstone he bade them write the admonition: ‘This stone shall bear witness against the parishioners of Kiltearn, if they bring an ungodly minister in here’” (A. Smellie, *Men of the Covenant*, p. 421). Yet in a single generation, an unfaithful minister took charge of the congregation, and in the next generation the church was closed. It now lies in ruin in a country field. If we are not to waste our labors, there is only one way: We must abide in Jesus Christ.

“I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. ... If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” (John 15:5-8)

1. “Colossian Heresy?” (2:4-23)

One of the things Paul is clearly doing is warning the church against being led astray. But led astray to what? There are people speaking words that are “persuasive” but are actually “deceiving” (2:4). Paul refers in verse 8 to “philosophy” that can cheat us or rob us, even of our salvation (compare 1:23), things that are according to the “tradition of men” and the “basic principles of the world,” not “according to Christ” (2:8). I’m personally persuaded that Paul is not condemning *one* heresy but *all* heresy, that is, anything and everything that moves us away from the faith and practice that are ours in Christ Jesus.

2. Christ’s Sufficiency (1:15-2:3)

Paul presents in response to this a most dramatic and majestic portrait of the Son of God. Is there anything on heaven and earth that you could need outside of Christ? He created it all. He sustains it all. Paul wants you to be astounded at all that Jesus Christ is, at the greatness of your savior. Why would you look anywhere else, when in Christ all the fullness of God dwells (1:19)? “In whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). He’s saying you have everything you could ever, ever want in Christ. What can the false teachers possibly promise you?

We have, 1:27, “the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” 1:28, “that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” 2:2-3, “Attaining to all [the] riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God ... of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” 2:9, “You are complete in Him.” 3:16, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom.” 2:17, “the substance is of Christ.”

Conclusion: *Using the Key*

This illustrates the miserable and futile experience of Christians who are seeking innovations and human means, all this effort, all this misery, when all the while they possess Christ, who is the key to all. “Of his fullness, we have all received, and grace for grace” (John 1:16). And in Christ, we *have* all received all that we need.

When churches are ruined, it’s not that Christ has failed them. They’ve failed Christ. People haven’t used the key. As we abide in him, we will bear much fruit. “I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain.”

Evening: The Heart of the Gospel (Galatians 2:15-21)

Introduction: *The importance of this study*

Justification by faith is “a most wholesome doctrine, and very full of comfort” (39 Articles, CoE). “The doctrine of justification by faith is like Atlas. It bears a world on its shoulders. The entire evangelical knowledge of saving grace, the doctrines of election, effectual calling, regeneration, repentance, adoption, prayer, church, ministry, and sacraments have all to be interpreted and understood in its light” (J. I. Packer, preface to Buchannan, *The Doctrine of Justification* [Banner of Truth: Edinburgh, 1961]). “If the doctrine of justification is lost, the whole of Christian doctrine is lost. ... We lose simply everything” (Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, ad loc.).

1. What is justification, and how do we receive it (v. 15-17a)?

It’s the opposite of condemnation (e.g. Deut 25:1, 1 Ki 8:32, Job 40:8, Prov 17:15, Matt 12:37, Rom 5:16-18). HC #60 “Q: How are you righteous before God? A: Only by true faith in Jesus Christ: that is, although my conscience accuses me, that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, and have never kept any of them, and am still prone always to all evil; yet God, without any merit of mine, of mere grace, grants and imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ, as if I had never committed nor had any sins, and had myself accomplished all the obedience which Christ has fulfilled for me; if only I accept such benefit with a believing heart.” It is the same as being “justified by Christ” (v. 17).

2. Does this make people more sinful or careless (17a-21)?

No (see also Rom 3:31, 6:1ff). Although we died to the law, Christ lives in us (as often with Paul, the same as having the Spirit in us; see 4:6, 5:16-26). And we live through the one who loved *us* individually and gave himself for us. Luther: “And who is this me? It is I, Martin Luther, a wretched and a condemned sinner” (*Lectures*, ad loc.). “Christ ... infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number, who through Christ’s death not only may be saved, but ... must be saved, and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved” (Spurgeon, “Particular Redemption” [#181]).

Application: *Efforts at reconciliation stumble at this critical point*

“Justification is not only remission of sins, but also sanctification and the renewal of the inner man. It detaches man from sin and purifies his heart of sin” (*New Roman Catechism*, 1992). In 1983, American Lutherans and Roman Catholics produced a document called “Justification by Faith,” stating, “Our entire hope of justification and salvation depends on Jesus Christ and on his gospel. ... We do not place our ultimate trust in anything other than God’s promise and saving work in Christ. ... But this does not exclude the traditional Catholic position that the grace-wrought transformation of sinners is a necessary preparation for final salvation. ... By justification, we are both declared and made righteous. ... God in justifying forgives sin and makes us truly righteous.” Similarly ARCIC 2 in 1987, “Justification is a divine declaration of acquittal. ... But God’s creative word imparts what it imputes. By pronouncing us righteous, God also makes us righteous.” Compare the Diet of Regensburg (1541). “Men cannot be reconciled to God but by Jesus Christ, our only mediator. The righteousness is imputed to us through Jesus Christ and his merits, not by any perfection of righteous which is inherent in us. We are not just or accepted by God on account of our own works or righteousness, but we are reputed just on account of the merits of Jesus Christ only.” Luther: “The scepter of the Lord admits of no bending and joining, but must remain straight and unchanged, the rule of faith and practice.”