

The Reformation in Biblical Perspective  
“A Three-Fold Reformation”  
Colossians 1:15–20  
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October 31, 2021 • Sunday Morning Sermon

This is the Word of God. Colossians 1:15–20 says [12] *He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God* (through His Incarnation He has given us through His visibility the glory and majesty of the invisible God), *the firstborn of all creation* (Christ’s inheritance position whereby He inherits all that God has created through Him). [16] *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.* [17] *And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.* [18] *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.* [19] *For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,* [20] *and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.* The grass withers, the flower fades, the Word of our God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

In a moment I believe you will see why it is so important that we use this text for Reformation Sunday but I’d first like to respond to an excellent, thoughtful and insightful question I received about Nehemiah Day we have here at Briarwood which we have been doing now for about five years. This person has appreciated the time of refreshment and renewal we set aside on this day of singing, confessing, reading and being in God’s Word together plus the time we have of coming to the Table of the Lord. The question they asked was ‘Why are we doing it on Reformation Sunday when we typically do it either before or after this Sunday?’

There are multiple reason why this year we are doing it on Reformation Sunday, but I want to give you the most important reason for me as to why it’s on this particular Sunday. It has to do with something that is directly related to Reformation Sunday and that is that this nation is in desperate need of a Gospel awakening. I know many people, with many concerns, with multiple motivations that say if this happens then we can turn the nation around from its freefall into cultural dissipation, depravity and rebellion against God. It’s clear that is there and there is no reason to deny it. This nation has no hope apart from a Gospel awakening that sweeps this nation from shore to shore. When God does Gospel awakenings He first revives His church because that is where it comes from and to revive His church He does a Reformation in the leadership of the church.

Whenever God decides to do something, He always raises up leadership, key leaders yes, but teams of leaders. In this study I’ll be talking about Luther, Calvin, Knox and Cranmer for those are great Reformers. There wouldn’t have been Cranmer without Latimer and Ridley, in God’s providence. There wouldn’t be Luther without Staupitz, Knox without Goodman, and Calvin without Beza. God surrounded these leaders He raised up with other leaders and through that God brings renewal, revival, and a robust movement of a love to Christ that infiltrates His church so that the members of the body of Christ aren’t consumed about themselves, but consumed with a passion about the preeminence of Christ in all things which is what this Colossians 1:15–20 text is about.

It’s not me, my feelings, or what I want for all of that we die to. When Christ moves in His church we embrace Galatians 2:20 which says [20] *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no*

*longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.* As I am crucified with Christ I am dead to myself but now I have a new life to Christ which I live by faith in Christ who loves me, saved me, redeemed me and set me free from my sins. That kind of a church is what God begins to use to ignite the fires of a Gospel awakening. This is one of the reasons Reformation Sunday is so important because that's exactly what He did – God moved powerfully throughout the world.

Because of our great need for a Gospel awakening in this country we have a great need for revival and that means we have a great need for Reformation, which means we have a great need for prayer and the Word. That's what our Nehemiah day is but it's not just for that day but praying on Nehemiah day that it would become that on every day in the lives of His people. One particular principle out of the Reformation undergirds this. This Colossians 1 text highlights one of the solas that came out of the Reformation and that is Sola Christus – meaning Christ alone saves us. The concept comes from many texts of Scripture, the Biblical truth is affirmed throughout Scripture but one place we see it so gloriously is in this Colossians text.

I became a Christian when I was 21 years old but heard of Christianity due to the fact I grew up in the church. Almost immediately people began to tell me that when you're called to the ministry there is an internal calling and an external calling. I didn't have much internal calling although I didn't think I was called to the ministry, but there was some external calling in the wonderful, little church my wife and I were apart of. When I was told by people they thought I was called to the ministry my response was 'No, I think I'm called to make money to support men who are called to the ministry.' I was in the struggle for over two years. I actually surrendered to the call to the ministry at 1:30 in the morning in a tobacco field in Greenville, North Carolina. I went in, woke up my wife and said 'Honey I think I'm called to the ministry.' Her response was 'Ok.' I had already tried some things at East Carolina where I almost got kicked out the school for some things I wouldn't let pass from the professor, where I knew I could do a lot of ministry but I wasn't going to get a lot of training for the ministry.

My wife also shared with me after I told her I felt called to the ministry that when she went forward at 13 years old to recommit her life to Christ that she had told the Lord she either wanted to be a missionary or a pastor's wife. In essence she said she had been waiting for me to find out which one I was going to be so that I could catch up with her. Then I was trying to decide where I wanted to go to school to get training. I looked into a number of different schools but a man who I called my spiritual father whose wife had graduated from Covenant College told me I should go to Covenant College. My wife and I drove over and the first thing I saw was the college verse which was this one in Colossians – that Christ would have preeminence. Then I sat down with a professor there who explained what that meant – where I needed to develop a Christian mind, by believing in the infallibility, inerrancy and the sufficiency of God's Word, then frame every thing I think and filter every thing that comes to me through those "glasses" – and that is what he said they would try and help me do at that college. He said if I do it right then my focus will be Christ – in all things Christ would have preeminence.

I then walked into the chapel and heard 500 students singing the college hymn which was

*All For Jesus* that said;

*All for Jesus! All for Jesus!*

*All my being's ransomed pow'rs,*

*All my thoughts and words and doings,*

*All my days and all my hours.*

I know that nobody would do that perfectly but to say that intentionally that in all things Christ would have preeminence which is what Paul tells the people at Colossae who are being enculturated and swept away by vain philosophies of men. Wisdom is from God, revealed in His Word and it all points to the preeminence of Christ.

Paul then gives three things about that Christ in preeminence. One, He is the Creator. The Father created all things through Him and for Him. Two, Paul brings the preeminence of Christ in redemption. Christ is the head of His church, the Redeemer of His elect and we are at peace with God, set free from power and penalties of sin because of Jesus that He might be preeminent. Thirdly, Christ in His providence is our Sustainer for in Him all things hold together. He upholds us by the Word of His power. He is the One that gives us life and breath. He is preeminent in creation, redemption and providence. He will be preeminent on the Day of Judgment, when all of humanity stands before Him and your only hope in that day is whether your name is in His Book, the Lamb's Book of Life.

That's the glorious truth of the preeminence of Christ, but that had become clouded and shrouded, not simply by the surrounding culture of the 16<sup>th</sup> century but by the church itself. The predominant church of that age had actively clouded, distorted and adulterated the majesty of God, the authority of His Word, the glory of the Father, the preeminence of Christ and the grieving of the Holy Spirit. Then a nondescript, relatively unknown professor in a relatively unknown, out of the way college, in a relatively unknown city in Germany called Whittenburg early on an October 31<sup>st</sup> morning arose and went to what was basically the social media of the age – the bulletin board – and nailed the 95 Theses on the door of castle church, calling for a debate with the authorities and clergy of the Roman Church, over these issues. Little did Luther know the firestorm he was about to ignite and nothing would be the same as a Reformation would lead to a revival that would lead to an unbelievably spread of Christianity that wouldn't stop until it began to circle the entire globe in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>, and then later on in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Do you ever get the idea that God loves to use ordinary people in ordinary places to do extraordinary things? Would have thought what Luther nailed to that church that morning would start that but that's what happened. As it began to spread there began to unfold what I call a three-fold Reformation for there were three things that began to happen out of the Reformation. First of all, was a Reformation that reclaimed the Gospel. If I were to ask you if everything in the Bible were true, I would hope I would get a yes. If I were to ask you if everything in the Bible were important, I would hope I would get a yes. If I were to ask you if everything in the Bible were profitable, I would hope I would get a yes. If I were to ask is everything in the Bible as important as everything else in the Bible, then I would hope I would get a no. There are some things that are of first importance.

The Bible identifies some things of importance that are of first importance and if you get that wrong you will get everything else wrong. What is of first importance? It is the Gospel and we see this in I Corinthians 15:3–4 which says [3] *For I delivered to you as of **first importance** what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.* The Gospel is what was reclaimed in the Reformation.

The Reformers were the ones who gave us the five solas based on the Scriptures. Salvation comes by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fida*) in Christ alone (*sola Christus*) to the glory of God alone (*solus Deo gloria*) and the Scriptures alone (*sola Scriptura*) is

our only rule of faith and practice. This began to be preached and people were loosened from the superstitions and the corruptions.

Why did Martin Luther nail those 95 Theses that morning to the church door? I believe he did that looking for a debate or academic debate and I think he did that for three reasons. One reason had to do with him being utterly devastated by a recent trip to the headquarters in Rome and saw the corruption, manipulation, emptiness, and the immorality of the leadership of the church. Then secondly, he had been commissioned to teach on the book of Romans and he had been exposed in his study of the Bible to the Gospel of God. I am currently doing a series in Romans for I believe this book is as important for us today in our situation as it was for Luther in that day where the Reformation was so desperately needed. Thirdly, across the river from Whittenburg was a sister city where a man, named John Tetzel, had arrived who had been commissioned out of the papal authority in a money-making scheme using the selling of indulgences to people as to how they could free their loved ones from purgatory through offerings. He had a theatrical presentation with little songs or jingles to catch people's attention. The one Tetzel would use went like this; "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs." Luther was committed to make sure Tetzel did not come to Whittenburg.

For those reasons Luther nailed those 95 Theses to the church door and that cut loose first of all a capturing of the Gospel. I want to clarify something here. When we say you are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, we are not saying that grace is alone. No, for when God's grace comes there are changed lives, but your changed life doesn't save you. Your changed life is the evidence that you have saving grace. Faith is never alone and we see this in the book of James, for faith has the evidence of works. What comes through grace – a changed life, what comes through faith – obedience to the Lord, does not migrate to your justification. I pray you know the joy of obedience and the great testimony of a transformed life, but you will never be more justified than you are right now. In fact, you will never be more justified than the day you were converted, because you are not justified by your works, you're justified by the work of Christ. Your works are the evidence that your Savior who has ascended and did the work for your justification, is now working on you for your sanctification.

So, if my works don't cause the Lord to love me more what does it do? It gives you more intimacy with the Lord. It makes you more effective for the Lord. It gives you great joy. There is no greater joy in your life than to honor the Lord with a changed life and with obedience, but it doesn't add to your justification. The existing church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century would have said you are saved by grace through faith in Christ, but what they wouldn't have put was, alone. They would have said what you do is necessary to effectually accomplish your salvation – your baptism positioned you as saved and your works were necessary to bring forth that salvation. We believe that works are there to give glory to the Savior. Our salvation is in the finished work of Christ.

So, there was a second Reformation of the Gospel which was that there was a reformation of worship. We currently have a Bible and a hymnal in every one of our pews at Briarwood. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century whoever would have put those there would have been killed for that. That is only there because people died to get that in your hands. Up until then worship was something the clerics did behind the screen and every once in a while, they would lift up the bread or wine to let those in the congregation see it. They could be heard but they weren't understood because they worshipped in a language people didn't know. The people were just superstitiously supposed to show up and that was part of their penance, part of what would save you back then, but the people didn't participate in worship and they didn't have a Bible in their language. All the ways we participate now in church would not have been done back then, but there was a

reformation of God-centered worship that was Trinitarian, not church-centered worship. After the Reformation the church then said we can only do in worship what God's Word tells us to do. There now is Biblically framed elements of worship with congregational participation. Worship was a verb, not a noun – naming an event that you went to. It was a noun describing what we did when we came together – what we were to do – to worship Him in spirit and in truth.

I like the way my friend Larry Roff said it. He said Luther was really consumed in that first part of the Reformation as he so wanted people to get the Gospel right. Then along came Calvin who said 'yes and the other doctrines as well' so he writes the institutes of the Christian religion – six editions of it. Then Calvin said that worship needed reforming as well and so they began to work their way through it. Then it took a Presbyterian to bring it home and his name was Knox. Roff says that when Luther went to the Reformation of worship, he said some of this stuff isn't right so he reached into the pot of worship and picked out what ought not to be there. Calvin came along and said that wasn't enough so Calvin took the pot, emptied it and put back in the pot what he thinks belongs there. Knox came along and said thanks to both of them but decided to buy a new pot. Knox wanted to get to the key of what a worship service would be that is framed by the essentials of God's Word. So that's how we had a reformation of worship.

Thirdly, we had a reformation of leadership – men of God, preachers of the Word, leaders in the church who were called forward to serve the Lord. What did we have up until then? We had corruption of doctrine and of leaders. Leaders had been corrupted and were corruptible. This is where we began to see piety return to the leadership of Christ's church. Obviously, that happens when we become committed to the preeminence of Christ, but something else happened in the Reformation is this where I want to bring this study to a conclusion.

Those three issues all had something in common. There was no way to get the Gospel right, worship right and leadership right unless you got this one thing right – sola Scriptura. The Scripture alone gives me the Gospel. The Scripture alone tells me what Christ's church mission, message and ministry is and the Scripture alone says what it means to lead the flock of God. Satan's strategies have not changed. Satan wants to intimidate, infiltrate and imitate. Infiltration is something Satan has always done and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the Scripture had been hidden, distorted and set aside. Sadly, this was done formally by the church for the church said that the final authority were the Scriptures and the traditions of the church.

There can be no two authorities for it says in Matthew 6:24a, [24a] *No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.* One will rise above the other and in the 16<sup>th</sup> century the traditions of men and the church rose above the Scripture, but Luther said along with the other reformers that men err, counsels err, popes err, bishops err, for all men err but God's Word abides forever (I Peter 1:25). So out of this came first the infallibility of Scripture (sola Scriptura), then secondly, the inerrancy of the Scripture where God's Word is trustworthy, then thirdly, the sufficiency of Scripture where all that we need for life and Godliness is in the Scripture and fourthly, the clarity of the Scripture.

Are there things in the Bible that are hard to understand? Yes, but because the Bible is infallible, inerrant, and sufficient then nothing in the Bible can contradict. So, if I come to a difficult text I can certainly ask for help from pastors, commentators and others but if I want the ultimate answer to that issue I go to the clearer passage, because whatever that is that is hard to understand, it cannot contradict what is clear. So, we have the simplicity of Scripture and the clarity of Scripture. Fifthly, we have the accessibility of Scripture. We have God's Word in our language and His Word is preached in our language – the voice of God to your heart and life.

I'm so glad that our Nehemiah day fell on this day, October 31, 2021 because we're going to put into practice what we have seen in this study. We are going to pray, sing, confess, share, hear God's Word and then we will display God's Word together in the Lord's Supper.

I want to get the Gospel to every nation in this world but I don't want to skip over the nation I live in. I have no problem saying 'no' to nationalism that wants to make Jesus the tribal God of America, but I say 'yes' to King Jesus taking this nation for the work of the Kingdom and that just burns in my heart and here.

The Reformers were facing the same thing we are. Go look at what the Swiss Reformer Ulrich Zwingli said did for Switzerland. Go look at what Calvin did for he sent 100 missionaries in 1563 to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil before there was Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Calvin had a heart for the world but he sent 1300 missionaries right back to France, the birth of the French Huguenot church, his home nation. Calvin trained up Knox who went home under a death warrant from three different queens all named Mary. When he landed on the shore, knowing a death warrant had been issued for him, he said 'Give me Scotland or I die.' Then there is Cranmer, Latimer and Ridley. They all died at a stake in Oxford in 1565. As they were being lit and the flames were leaping it was Latimer who said to Ridley, "Play the man, be of good cheer for by God's grace we shall light a candle for Christ that shall not be put out in England."

So, I make no bones for praying for a Gospel awakening in my nation and a revival but please don't look out to the world for it to start. We look in our church – God, start it in here, start it in me, not out there and come to me. If God does it that way then praise the Lord and if it gets to me, I want to be ready. Start it in me, Lord. Start it in us and it starts with prayer and the Word. I see all the shrinking numbers of the evangelical church and I understand what is being said but the problem in the Reformation was magisterium – that is something that royally rules.

What royally ruled in the days of the Reformation? What royally ruled in the church was the cleric – ecclesiastical magisterium. What rules today? What rules today is cultural magisterium. The church is gaging and forming its message to the culture to be accepted and applauded. We must embrace Biblical magisterium. The Scripture alone is our only rule of faith and practice and then something will be seen different. What does the culture of self, marked by immorality, insanity, absurdity, lethality, confusion, chaos and death, bring? It brings anger and disappointment.

What does Biblical authority bring? Biblical authority brings a people who love Christ and love one another. Out in our world is division - politically and socially. In the world, there is the anger of man, despair and destruction. In here, the church, should be the preeminence of Christ, marked by the love of the brethren – the communion of the saints, people being disciplined, everyone evangelizing everybody everywhere, marriages being shepherded, families being guided, God's people being equipped to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, with lives that will attract people.

There was a man I talked with just this morning on my way in to church who has been befriending his neighbor. The neighbor began to talk with him and his family and continued for a while to talk with them, eventually sharing an immoral, ungodly, blasphemous, profane, lifestyle, addictive sin as if it was nothing, yet he keeps coming back to talk with them. The neighbor said to our church member, 'Can I just spend time with you all, because your family seems to be filled with hope. Your family loves each other and I just like being with you, can I?'

That is not going to get someone saved for you have to be saved by faith and faith comes by hearing the Word, but a people who love the Lord and one another including their enemies, who are growing in grace – the culture will try to kill it but at the same time, it is attracted to it,

because they don't have it and have no hope for it. May God grant that to us through a reformation of leadership and family. I realize we're losing numbers but have you noticed that whenever God does something extraordinary, He raises up leaders and He gets us to the size He wants us. With Gideon 300 was enough – God loves to bring awakenings through a Godly remnant who love Him and are committed to Him.

Here is the takeaway. A great commitment to the Great Commission and within our midst the culture of the Great Commandment – love the Lord with all your heart, soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:27). Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the privilege of worship and praise to our God today. Would You allow this Lord's Day to be special for Your glory and our growth in grace? Father, I pray that Your people will be built up to the praise of Your Name. Thank You for all we have been able to hear today and it's all because of Jesus and amazing grace. I pray this in Jesus' Name, even as we bathe in amazing grace, Amen.

Power Point

SOLA SCRIPTURA

1. Infallibility
2. Inerrancy
3. Sufficiency
4. Clarity
5. Accessibility

LIFE TAKEAWAY

*A Great Commitment to the Great Commission and Great Commandment*