

By Christ alone: 'Who speaks to God for us?'

The final of four studies.

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One recollection I have from my trips to various countries in Eastern Europe is of going into various churches and seeing them full of people lighting candles and murmuring prayers before icons of the saints. Sometimes, we might watch people doing that, and perhaps we might wonder what's going through their minds, and what is motivating them.

The Reformation took place against the backdrop of the late-medieval cult of the saints. That began some time around the 4th century, with the practice of asking departed Christians to pray to God for you. In time, as certain dead Christians achieved formal recognition as 'saints', the idea grew up that their prayers to God on your behalf were especially effective (remember St James's comment that 'the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much'). By the later medieval period, the saints themselves were seen as the ones able to grant your requests. So you weren't so much asking the saints to speak to God for you, as asking them to grant your requests themselves. Relics of the saints were seen as charged with a kind of spiritual power, which could effect healing. Particular saints came to be seen as concerned with particular problems, so St Jude, for example, became the patron saint of lost causes and lost things (he'd be overworked in our house!). In particular, the Blessed Virgin Mary, as the one who was most completely sanctified, was seen as having special access to her Son. Often, people saw God as remote and forbidding, and tended to forget that Jesus Christ was true man as well as true God. People needed somebody to turn to, somebody approachable. As Calvin put it, people 'have departed further and further from God by inventing one mediator after another' because 'they were possessed by the erroneous notion that God was at a great distance from them, and so they did not know where to turn for help' (Commentary on 1 Timothy 2:5).

One of the great rediscoveries for the Reformers was that **Christ is the only mediator we need**. He is the one who speaks for us, who intercedes for us, to God, and who secures us a welcome into God's presence. We do not need anybody to act as a mediator between us and Jesus Christ, because he has promised to receive all who come to him.

It began with a man who never actually left the Catholic Church – Erasmus. Like a number in the church at that time, he wanted to cut through some of the ideas and practices

which had accumulated in the church over the years, and to get back to the teaching of the Fathers of the early centuries of the church.

One of the Swiss reformers, an ex-priest named Zwingli from Zurich, said that he learnt from Erasmus that Christ is our only mediator, and that we are to trust in him rather than in created things such as saints, sacraments or good works. That, he said, was the point at which he had begun to preach the true gospel. (It's interesting that he came to this discovery about the same time as Luther, but entirely independently)

The consequence of that discovery was that at one stroke, the Reformers cut through all the paraphernalia surrounding the cult of the saints. They saw it as unnecessary, because we do not need the saints to act as our go-betweens, and as distracting, because it takes our attention away from Jesus Christ. Zwingli condemned practices such as pilgrimages to holy places, and so on, because he believed that people tended to place their confidence in these rites rather than in God alone. He regarded it as 'idolatry' to trust in anything other than God, because those who did so were putting the creature in place of the creator, trusting in what we do rather than what God has done. The Reformers still honoured all true saints, but they said that the best way of doing so is to follow their example of godly, Christ-centred living.

Another consequence of this discovery was a shift in understanding of the priesthood. Priests were no longer seen as mediators, because we already have the only mediator we need; but they can stand alongside us, counsel us, declare God's promises of absolution to us, and so on. In such ways, the Reformers asserted, they help us to come to God for ourselves through Christ.

So, the Reformers rediscovered the biblical teaching about Jesus Christ being the one who speaks for us to God as our mediator. **What does it mean to describe Jesus Christ as our only mediator?** Well, it means that the only way to God is through him. St Paul wrote that 'There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus himself said that, 'no one comes to the Father but by me' (John 14:6). St John assured his hearers that 'If any one sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one' (1 John 2:1). The Reformers believed that Christ is able to act as our mediator because of what he is, and because of what he does. Christ alone is both God and man, and the church had long recognized that if that were not so, he could not have redeemed us. As for what he does, Calvin explained that Christ fulfilled his office as mediator by being our Prophet, Priest and King.

As Prophet, Christ on earth made known to us the will

and the rule of God because he was the Word made flesh. By his teaching and his revelation of what God is like, he speaks for God to man.

As Priest, he offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins. (Sometimes we say that he is both priest and sacrificial victim) On the basis of his perfect sacrifice on the cross, he intercedes for us as our mediator at the right hand of the Father. So he speaks for man to God.

As King, he rules over all things, protecting his church and bestowing upon it the gifts which God has for it.

Catechisms used to be a popular way of providing basic instruction in the Christian faith. I suppose catechism classes were the 16th-century equivalent of the Alpha course. And I noticed when I was in Romania a couple of years back, that those who were being prepared for baptism in a Baptist church I preached at stayed behind after the service for 'catechism'. The Heidelberg Catechism, which appeared in 1563, summarises what we have just said about Christ:

Q. 31. Why is he called 'Christ', that is anointed?

A. Because he is ordained of God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Ghost, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption; and to be our only High Priest, who by the one sacrifice of his body, has redeemed us, and makes continual intercession with the Father for us; and also to be our eternal King, who governs us by his word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in that salvation, he has purchased for us.

What is the relevance of this to today? Perhaps Zwingli's warning against trusting in anything and anyone other than Christ is still worth heeding, whether our trust is in the saints, or in ourselves because of our good works, or in someone else, perhaps a minister whom we respect as someone close to God.

Or perhaps we have an opposite problem: we don't see that we have any need of someone to mediate between us and God. The Reformers would remind us that we cannot approach God directly because he is holy and we are not. Someone has to speak on our behalf.

Either way, the Reformers insisted that we both *need* and *have* one who acts as our go-between. And he is approachable. When St Paul describes our mediator as 'the man Christ Jesus', that reminds us that he is one who shares human nature, who knows what it is like to live in this world, and who is therefore able to help us in the challenges and difficulties we face (cf. Hebrews 4:14-16). In Calvin's words, 'the Son of God holds out to us the hand of a brother and is joined to us by sharing our nature' (Commentary on 1 Timothy 2:5). It's because Jesus Christ is the only mediator, that we present our prayers in his name: when we pray 'through Christ our Lord' or 'in Jesus' name' we are acknowledging that although we do not deserve to be heard for our own sake, we confidently trust God's promise to hear the prayers of

those who approach him through his Son.

Conclusion to series: Over these studies, we have looked at some of the beliefs which motivated those who sought to reform the church during the 16th century. We saw that the Reformers insisted that we are saved 'by faith alone', because God has made the first move to reconcile us to himself. So we have entered into a personal relationship with him 'by grace alone'. And we saw that what we need to know about God is revealed to us in 'the Bible alone', and that the church is called to be a 'witness and a keeper' of God's truth. Here we have reflected on the fact that 'Christ alone' is our mediator, the one who acts as our go-between and secures our welcome in God's presence. These aren't merely interesting pieces of historical information, about what certain people believed half a millennium ago. It's true that we may not express our faith in quite the same way as the Reformers sometimes did, but nevertheless I believe that the fundamental convictions underlying what they said are ones which the church always needs to hear. They are truths about God, and about what he has done to rescue rebellious human beings, and about how we can know him, which are still changing people's lives today. St Paul wrote to the Romans that he was 'not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, because it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes' (Romans 1:16). In other words, it is as we begin to know God that we begin to make sense of life's ultimate questions.

But what about the invocation of the saints? It's a subject which has sometimes come up when I have been talking with Orthodox Christians. Calvin commented that in his day, the Reformers all acknowledged that the saints in heaven pray for their fellow-Christians on earth. That wasn't the problem. The problem was whether we are right to, or indeed whether we can, ask them for their prayers. Calvin explained that when we ask other Christians to pray for us, it is Christ who presents their prayers in heaven and who makes them effective (3.20.19). Our intercession for one another is grounded in Christ's intercession for us. Our prayers for the coming of God's kingdom join with those of the saints of all ages. But, he said, we have no Scriptural justification for asking departed saints to pray for us, whereas we do have justification for praying for one another here on earth (3.20.24). True prayer is grounded in faith in God's promises, and faith in those promises comes from hearing God's word (Romans 10:14-17).

To sum up, why engage in the practice of asking the saints for their prayers, a practice which so often becomes full-blown prayer to the saints themselves and thus amounts to idolatry? There are no biblical grounds for believing that there is any point to this practice, whereas there are so many promises held out to those who approach God in prayer through his Son. We need not be afraid to approach him, for the hallmark of Christian prayer is reverent boldness. So we are invited to 'draw near with full assurance of faith, that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help us in our time of need' (Hebrews 4:16).]