

Christ Above All

2 Peter 1:1-2

Paul warned the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-30, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.” False, destructive teaching arises, not only from the outside, but from the inside of the church. Think of how striking it would be to hear the apostle Paul say to a group of elders, “*from among your own selves* will arise men speaking twisted things.” These were men who knew, loved, and trusted each other. And yet, Paul warned, simply knowing someone and trusting that person is not enough of a guarantee that he will avoid poisoning the church with false teaching.

Consider the tragic story of Joshua Harris. Harris was catapulted to leadership at a young age, both as an author of books and as a pastor who succeeded C.J. Mahaney at Covenant Life Church in Maryland. Harris became a young evangelical celebrity and a trusted name among many evangelical leaders. In 2019, he issued a public announcement that he and his wife were divorcing, followed a short time later by a public announcement that he had left the Christian faith altogether. Don’t assume that just because you know a leader and have grown to trust him that he will always be a reliable guide in the truth.

The apostle Peter wrote two letters that are in our New Testament. The first letter was an encouragement to believers in the face of an external threat, namely, the threat of persecution. The second letter is primarily a warning about an internal threat, namely, the threat of false teaching within the church. There is much overlap between 2 Peter and Jude here, so as you read one letter, read it alongside the other. What was the essence of the false teaching Peter confronted? In 2:1, we see that false teachers deny “the Master who bought them.” How do they deny him? If you read chapter 3, it seems they denied specifically his second coming, and if you deny that doctrine, you are denying the reality of his reign, of the coming judgment, of the defeat of his enemies, and of all of the implications of the gospel for our lives today.

False teaching always eventually comes around to dishonoring Christ. Jehovah’s Witnesses deny that he is fully God, equal to the Father. Roman Catholics add Mary, the saints, and the Roman priesthood alongside him as co-mediators of salvation, denying the full sufficiency of his priesthood. Legalists deny that faith is enough to save us, questioning the worth of his atonement, and libertines deny the full effects of his redemption by assuming that we can be saved by Christ without being delivered from the power of sin over us. So if you want to know how to navigate a treacherous world, in which even trusted teachers can succumb to false teaching, what do you do? You hold fast to Christ. You set your heart on him. You long for his Word, his light, his gospel, and you settle in your heart the conviction that nothing will drag you away from him, no matter how many others are being dragged away by the wisdom of the world.

As is typical for a first-century letter, Peter introduces this one by identifying himself as the author, by naming the recipients of the letter, and by issuing a greeting. In all three elements, he puts Jesus Christ front and center. Let’s draw out some wisdom for ourselves based on what we observe from the way Peter opens his letter. All three observations will be drawn from what Peter says about Jesus Christ.

First,

I. Jesus Christ has spoken to us through Scripture.

For most Americans, Jesus Christ is an idea, not a real person. He is a blank slate upon which you can write whatever cultural or political narrative you want. Depending on who you talk to, you may hear about a revolutionary communist Jesus, an LGBTQ ally Jesus, a gun-toting second amendment Jesus, a legalist Jesus, a hippie Jesus, an eastern mystic Jesus, and on and on and on it goes. Everybody wants Jesus on their side, and very few are willing to take Jesus on his own terms. If we want to know the real Jesus, we must be tethered to Scripture, for Scripture is where Jesus Christ himself has spoken to us authoritatively about who he is. Any vision of Jesus that strays from Scripture—all of Scripture taken together—is a vision of Jesus that is leading you into falsehood.

I draw this theological point as an implication of what Peter says about himself when he names himself as the author. Note that in verse 1 he states his name first, “Simeon Peter.” The two names are both Jewish (“Simeon”) and Greek (“Peter”), and taken together they highlight the fact that the Jewish fisherman Simon (or “Simeon” as he spells it here) was called by Jesus and renamed “Peter,” or “rock” when Jesus himself appointed him a foundational member of church. After giving his names, Peter identifies himself as a “servant” of Jesus Christ, that is, as one who is owned by him completely. The title “servant” could be translated “slave” or “bondservant,” and it indicates Peter’s humility, as well as the distinct honor that is his to serve the greatest Master of them all. Although we prize autonomy and personal freedom, we must always remember that the greatest freedom of all is being owned by Christ. True autonomy is actually slavery to sin.

But let me get to the main observation: Peter is not only a servant, but also an apostle of Jesus Christ. As an apostle, he was a witness of the resurrection who was commissioned by Christ to belong to the foundational generation of leadership that would establish the church on the true teaching of the gospel. Writing as an apostle, Peter writes with the authority delegated to him by Christ himself to speak on his behalf.

The gospel that was proclaimed authoritatively by the apostles of Jesus Christ was written down and preserved in the documents of the New Testament. When we listen to the words of the New Testament written by the apostles and their co-laborers, we are listening to the very voice of Christ himself. Some who claim the name of Christ today call themselves “red letter Christians.” They are alluding to the fact that in some versions of the Bible, the words of Jesus are printed in red letters rather than black. These “red letter Christians” argue that the words of Jesus carry greater authority than the rest of the letters, and in fact may even contradict the other letters at certain points. But this approach to the New Testament simply will not work. You see, Jesus himself never actually wrote a book of the Bible. Every word attributed to him was written down by others, and they were written in the context of a whole narrative that these authors communicated to us. There is no consistent way to be a “red letter Christian,” as though there is any way we could bypass the testimony of the apostles and go straight to Jesus himself. Jesus has not left that option open to us. We cannot accept him and reject his authoritative witnesses. If we reject their words, we are rejecting him, for he commissioned them with his own authority. Make no mistake: the “red letter Christians” are not interested in following Jesus. They are interested in

manipulating his teachings to conform with their own ideas that they have learned from somewhere else. Don't listen to them.

I have argued that the words of the New Testament are the very words of Christ himself, given to us through his apostles. But what about the Old Testament? Can we rightly say that the Old Testament is also Christ's own word given to us? It may not seem like we could say that, since Christ had not come during the Old Testament era. And yet, remember what Peter said in 1 Peter 1:10-11: "Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time *the Spirit of Christ in them* was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories." Yes, not only did the New Testament apostles write for us the authoritative words of Jesus Christ mediated to us through them, so did the prophets of the Old Testament, for it is the same Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, who spoke through both. All Scripture not only testifies to us of Christ, it also comes to us from Christ as his authoritative word.

What this means is that, in your endeavor to follow Christ faithfully, you must be tethered to Scripture. Hear it, read it, study it, pray it, live by it. Above all, let the Bible be the ultimate standard by which you evaluate everything else. If you find an idea that doesn't fit into the truth that Scripture reveals, no matter how appealing it may sound or how many trusted friends you have buying into it, you must stand firm and hold fast to Christ above all. Should the day ever come that you move away from Jackson and must seek out a church elsewhere, let your first criterion for finding another church be its commitment to the exposition of Scripture. You may be attracted to the music, or the liturgy, or the community, but without biblical exposition leading the way, a church is sitting there waiting to be carried away into falsehood. Scripture is our north star, it is our compass, it is our guide, because in it we have the very voice of Jesus Christ to lead us.

We learn more when we turn to look at what Peter says about his recipients. Second,

II. Jesus Christ has united us into one family.

The New Testament bears witness to the fact that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the answer to ethnic divisions in this world. There was no greater wall of separation than that between Jew and Gentile, a division that was rooted in God's election of Israel and the covenant he made with them at Mount Sinai. And yet, in the New Testament church, Jews and Gentiles worshiped together in the same churches, and even in places where they didn't, churches felt kinship with other churches. Have you ever wondered why Paul was so zealous to gather a collection from his churches in Macedonia and Achaia in order to deliver it to Jewish believers in Jerusalem during a time of famine (2 Corinthians 8-9)? Was it simply Paul's zeal for humanitarian efforts? No, it was much more! It was rooted in his theology of Jew-Gentile unity in Christ. Paul saw it as an opportunity to demonstrate and solidify the kinship between Gentile believers and Jewish believers, as Gentiles acted in sacrificial love for their Jewish brothers and sisters.

Note how Paul addresses his recipients in verse 1: "To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ." There is powerful truth packed into that short statement. First, notice how Peter characterizes faith. Faith is not something we produce by our own power; it is something we have "obtained," or "received." It comes to us objectively when God sends someone to herald the good news to us. It comes to us

subjectively when the Holy Spirit produces in our hearts the response of entrusting ourselves to Christ as a result of hearing that good news. Faith is not a work; it is a gift of God.

Furthermore, Peter identifies his readers as those who have received “a faith of equal standing with ours.” Who is Peter talking about when he says “ours”? It’s possible he means himself and the other apostles. In that case, he may mean that the faith of ordinary believers is of the same standing as the faith of the apostles themselves, who saw Jesus with their own eyes. We are not second-class Christians because we did not personally see Jesus in the flesh. On the other hand, it is also possible that by “ours” Peter means Jewish believers. In that case, he would mean that the faith of Gentile believers, who are outside the covenant God made with Israel, is of no less standing than the faith of Jewish believers, with all of their historic privileges. Or maybe Peter has both idea in mind, speaking of himself and the apostles, who were themselves the first believers among the Jews. However we read it, we clearly have here an example of the gospel creating unity by giving the same standing and inheritance to all who receive it in faith. In Christ, there is, as Paul says, “one new man,” no longer two divided along covenantal and ethnic lines (Eph. 2:15).

And how has this unity been accomplished? According to Peter, it is “by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.” This is one of a handful of verses in the New Testament that explicitly identifies Jesus as God. He is fully God and fully man, he who alone has the ability to unite God and man. And it is specifically his “righteousness” that has accomplished the unity of one new family from all nations. In the Old Testament, God’s righteousness is often connected to salvation and deliverance. Consider Psalm 31:1, where David prays, “In your righteousness deliver me!” God acts in righteousness when he delivers his people because in doing so he is setting right something that has gone wrong in his world. When Peter refers to the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ, he speaks of Christ as the one who has acted to bring salvation to sinners, including forgiveness of sins, deliverance from the devil, and unity with fellow believers in a new family that is not limited to ethnicity or class. It is Christ’s righteousness, not our own, that has saved us.

We are at a moment when the ethnic divisions of our country are at the forefront of everyone’s minds. The issues involved in these divisions are complex, but I want to speak briefly to them in light of what Peter says here. It seems to me that there are two ditches we should avoid in our approach to these questions. On the one hand, there is a ditch that has no category for corruption and injustice in the systems of our society. I understand this impulse. I’m a man on the political right, and I think it’s important that we emphasize personal responsibility for our actions. But at the same time, as Christians, it should not surprise us at all to apply our doctrine of sin to the systems of society. When sinful people create and manage systems of law and culture, is it any surprise that those systems can be corrupted by sin? Here’s one example that I think most all of us could probably agree on: the federal government continues to fund Planned Parenthood, an organization that specializes in abortion services and has been exposed as trafficking in body parts of its victims, to the tune of half a billion dollars per year. There have been many calls for this funding to end, but powerful interests have kept it in place. This is a problem that is in the system. So yes, I think we do need to see that such problems exist and need to be addressed.

But the other ditch I want to avoid is addressing problems of systemic injustice on the world's terms. The dominant way of thinking in our universities, media, entertainment industry, and big corporations is a set of ideas known as "critical theory." Critical theory divides human beings into categories based primarily on race, gender, and sexual orientation. Some groups are oppressor groups, and others are oppressed groups. Included in this way of thinking is an idea known as "intersectionality," which claims that the various categories of oppression to which you belong intersect, or combine in certain ways to enhance your status as one who is oppressed and, therefore, to enhance your power in the discussion. So a black man would be regarded at a certain level of oppression, but a black transgender woman would be at a much higher level. This is why in critical theory racial justice and the LGBT movement cannot be separated. They are all part of the same movement of oppressed vs. oppressors.

In this system, your own personal actions don't determine whether or not you are righteous or guilty. What matters is the group to which you belong. And if you happen to belong to an oppressor group, you have various rituals of atonement that you are expected to perform to try to address your guilt. If you belong to an oppressed group, you have power to make demands of the oppressors.

What is most troubling about this way of thinking is that it reduces all human relationships to power dynamics. All that matters in critical theory is power and how it is exercised toward others. That is because critical theory is rooted in a philosophy that goes back to Karl Marx, who was an atheist and a materialist. As a materialist, Marx believed that all things—us included—are nothing but matter and energy. There is no spiritual component to man, nothing that transcends this physical world. In a materialist world, power is the only things that matters. As such, critical theory will always divide people from one another. It will not achieve unity, for it will always promote divisions between categories of people. Contrast that with the beautiful vision of gospel unity given to us in the New Testament. The gospel gives us all a new identity. It doesn't erase our ethnic identities, but it does transcend them. It tells us all that what matters most is not skin color, ancestry, gender, or the social class to which we belong. What matters most about each one of us is that we either stand before God in Adam or in Christ. And if we are in Christ, our faith is of an equal standing, and that faith works through love to unite us to one another as family. There are no second-class citizens in the kingdom of God.

I'm not a sociologist. I don't have all the answers about what we can do as a society to heal our divisions. But I am a pastor, so I can speak to what our church can do, and in fact what I believe we are already doing: we can embody the truth that we confess in the Apostles' Creed about the church. In the creed we say that we believe in "the holy catholic church." What does that mean? It doesn't mean the Roman Catholic Church. The word "catholic" simply means "universal." When we confess our belief in the holy catholic church, we confess that the church is a worldwide family of people drawn from every nation, tribe, and tongue, and that none of us are second-class citizens. And so, no matter who you are, what color you are, what your background is, what class of society you belong to, if you confess the name of Christ, you are a brother or sister in this church. Peter's address to his recipients is full of powerful truth that addresses us right where we are at this cultural moment.

And then, third, we come to Peter's word of greeting, from which we glean this truth:

III. Jesus Christ has given us the knowledge of God.

In the ancient world, the word “greetings” was sufficient to start off a letter. But instead of a simple “greetings,” Peter says, “May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.” When Peter speaks of “grace and peace,” he speaks of the experience of God’s favor. In this opening greeting, Peter prays that his readers will grow more and more in taking hold of God’s love for them. This happens, Peter says, “in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.” Here God and Jesus are distinguished from one another but set on equal footing. Can you imagine if Peter had said, “May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Paul the apostle?” Or, “. . . in the knowledge of God and of Michael the archangel?” Such greetings would be blasphemous for setting mere creatures on the same level as the Creator! And yet, Peter speaks freely of Jesus our Lord on the same level with God (meaning God the Father), indicating that, while the Father and the Son can be distinguished from one another, with regard to the divine essence they are identical.

So you have the Father and the Son, but no mention of the Spirit. Or is there? It’s a quite common practice in the New Testament for God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son to be named as the source of “grace and peace.” I would argue that the grace and peace that God gives to us is nothing other than the gift of himself, in the Person of the Holy Spirit. So at least implicitly, if not explicitly, we have here the hints of the doctrine of the Trinity: God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But why does Peter focus on knowledge? “Knowledge” is an important word in 2 Peter. It does not refer merely to intellectual understanding, though it doesn’t exclude that. The knowledge of God and of Christ that Peter speaks of is the knowledge of personal relationship that grows by sharing the experience of life with God the Father, and with Jesus our Lord, in the Holy Spirit. It’s similar to the way a husband knows his wife, or a mother knows her children, or a friend knows a friend. It grows out of love for one another, devotion to one another, and walking through experiences of life together. Do you know God in this way?

Of course, there is a way of knowing God that isn’t like this. Paul speaks of pagan idol-worshippers in Romans 1:21, where he says, “For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” The knowledge of God is naturally implanted in us as human beings, because we are made in the image of God. We can’t escape him. And yet, in our sin we suppress the truth of this knowledge so that we can chase after idols instead. Our minds are darkened, and our desires are disordered, as we have been cut off from fellowship with God. The only one who can deliver us from this darkness is Christ. In John 14:8, Philip said to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus replied, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” To know Jesus Christ is to know God, for he who is fully God and fully man has made God known to man.

And what that means for us is that there is nothing more important in our lives than knowing Jesus Christ. In the words of the great preacher Charles Spurgeon, “Wherever Christ is highly esteemed, all the faculties of the spiritual man exercise themselves with energy. I will judge of your piety by this barometer: does Christ stand high or low with you? If you have thought little of Christ, if you have been content to live without his presence, if you have cared little for his honour, if you have been neglectful of his laws, then I know that your soul is sick—God grant that it may not be sick unto death! But if the first thought of your spirit has been, how can I honour Jesus? If the daily desire of your soul has been, O that I knew where I might find him! I tell you that you may have a thousand infirmities, and may even scarcely know whether you are a child of God at all, and yet I am persuaded, beyond a doubt, that you are safe, since Jesus is great in your esteem. I care not for thy rags, what thinkest thou of *his* royal apparel? I care not for thy wounds, though they bleed in torrents, what thinkest thou of *his* wounds? Are they like glittering rubies in thine esteem? I think nothing the less of thee, though thou liest like Lazarus on the dunghill and the dogs do lick thee; I judge thee not by thy poverty: what thinkest thou of the King in his

beauty? Has he a glorious high throne in thy heart? Wouldst thou set him higher if thou couldst? Wouldst thou be willing to die if thou couldst but add another trumpet to the strain which proclaims his praise? Ah! Then, it is well with thee. Whatever thou mayst think of thyself, if Christ be great to thee, thou shalt be with him ere long.”¹

The Christ who has spoken to us in Scripture, who has united us all into one family, and who has made God known to us, is the Christ to whom we must hold always. There are dangerous, destructive, soul-destroying ideas out there, and there always have been. Many of them are proclaimed from the pulpits of churches, for the church has never been immune from false teaching. In the face of this danger, let your hold be upon Christ above all. Amen.

¹ Charles Spurgeon, “The Rose and the Lily,” in *Spurgeon’s Expository Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 3:95.