

## **No “plus 1” Needed or Allowed**

Festival of St. Peter / St. Paul – 6/29/25 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Texts: Acts 15:1-21; Gal. 2:1-10; Mat. 16:13-19

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### **Introduction**

- ✘ It's safe to say that we live in a world today that is what I would call, “Identity challenged.” When you speak with your insurance company, your bank, or just about anyone it seems, you have to verify your identity. Why? because of identity theft or fraud. Who would have ever even thought of such a concern 40 or 50 years ago.
  - ➔ Likewise, according to various resources in the medical field, people today are able to “self-identify” as one of at least 72 different genders at this time, regardless of Genesis 1:27 that says, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”
  - ➔ And because we have grown more sensitive to identifying or including a friend or family member's significant other, along with the heightened concern that we don't dare leave anyone out of anything, it's now popular, when sending invitations out to things like weddings, galas, anniversary celebrations, etc., to allow for that person to bring a “plus 1”.
- ✘ “It's just not acceptable,” our society says, “to limit people's options; to say as God did at Creation that there are only two genders – male and female; to say that since God created the concept of marriage and family, then He's the only one that gets to define it, as He clearly did in Genesis 2:24, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother (that's family) and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh (that's marriage).”
  - ➔ From that point forward in history, God revealed His one, absolute truth in His inspired and perfect Word. We call it the Holy Bible. And it's there, in Holy Scripture, through the prophets in the Old Testament, that God gave the promise over and over that He had one and only one perfect answer to the problem of mankind's fall into sin and rebellion.
  - ➔ He promised to come to earth Himself in the flesh; as a real man in history for the purpose of paying for our sin and conquering Satan and the death that we deserve. That man would be called “the Son of God;” “the Messiah” (in Hebrew) or “the Christ” (in Greek) which means “the one anointed”; the one set apart for the special role of being Savior of the world.
- ✘ Though many people would self-identify over the years as the Christ; providing many options for people to latch onto and follow as their favorite “savior” – just like we today have so many different religious sects, not to mention all of the sports heroes that are worshiped and the music and movie idols that are revered, according to God, there is always and only one option for Savior.
  - ➔ That is why, when we find Jesus in our Gospel Reading today, “He asked His disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’” (Mt. 16:13) It's not that Jesus was going through an identity crisis, but He knew that the people there in the first century AD were.
- ✘ So we see in verse 16 of our Gospel Reading that Peter had the right answer: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mat. 16:16).
  - ➔ That answer, Jesus says, didn't actually come from Peter though, did it? He didn't give the right answer because he was so bright that he thought it up on his own. No, Jesus makes it clear that there is only one way to find that exclusive answer; by Divine revelation from God the Father. “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!” Jesus said, “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mat. 16:17).

- ✘ And the same holds true for you and me, my dear Christians, still today. So if you confess that Jesus is the Christ; that He is the Son of the living God, this is not something great and outstanding that you figured out on your own. And it is definitely not something that means you are now deserving of special praise and worship on par with Jesus. No, it is purely the result of God gifting that faith and understanding to you.

## **I. St.s Peter & Paul Proclaimed the Jesus-alone Gospel**

- ✘ Whatever period of history a person has lived in, there have always been those who question or don't like the idea of God giving things as an undeserved gift. They are quick to agree with someone who says, "We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus alone." "BUT," they will be compelled to add, "only if you obey all of the commandments; only if you repent of your sins and sin no more."
  - ➔ It's as if they are saying that salvation in Jesus must come with a "plus 1". In essence, though they are quick to say that they are "Christian", but they really have created a new religion of their own; what I would call the "Jesus-plus" kind of Christianity. Both Peter and Paul, Jesus' apostles, sent out to spread the saving "Jesus alone" Gospel, teach us that any form of Jesus-plus believing is a dangerous falsification of the true Gospel that Jesus gave His apostles to preach and teach.
- ✘ In today's First Reading in Acts 15 we see that Paul and Barnabas encountered this dangerous and divisive kind of belief in the Jesus-plus men of the circumcision party.
  - ➔ These Jews, said they had converted to Christianity, but they said, "Yes, Jesus is fine, and the Gentiles can be saved through Him just as we are, provided they get circumcised and keep the Law of Moses". Acts 15:2 then says, "...Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them." This was not just a little disagreement about some unimportant theological nuance. No, this was calling the very core of the Christian faith into question.
- ✘ The leaders of that young Christian faith recognized its importance. So they called the first-ever church council in history. Barnabas and Paul headed up to Jerusalem to present the matter to the church there.
  - ➔ And voices were raised at that council by some of the Jews who insisted that the Gentiles must be bound to the Law of Moses in order to be saved. So, it was Peter this time who stood up and spoke God's perfect truth. You see, Peter was the first to speak to the Gentiles of the unsearchable riches of Christ. It was with Cornelius and his household. Peter told the Christian leaders to look at how God used that Gospel proclamation of salvation in Jesus alone. God gave those Gentiles the very same gift of the Holy Spirit that He had given to the apostles themselves on Pentecost. He cleansed their hearts by faith.
  - ➔ So Peter pleaded, "Don't do it. Don't lay on the Gentiles the same yoke that neither we nor our fathers could ever keep. All the Law does is condemn us and show us our great sin and make us tremble." That's its purpose, but the Law does not and cannot save a soul because it promises eternal life only to those who are able to keep it perfectly without ever committing even one little sin. And we all know that none of us has or ever will be able to do that.
- ✘ Instead Peter declared in Acts 15:11, "We believe that we will be saved through the grace," that is the undeserved free gift, "of our Lord Jesus, just as they will."
  - ➔ After that Paul and Barnabas shared more of the "signs and wonders" that God had done among the Gentiles (Acts 15:12) and when James, the brother of Jesus, then whole-heartedly endorsed Peter's words as consistent with God's holy Word, the "Jesus-plus" heresy had been soundly rejected by the Church. It can never be Jesus and obedience to be saved, but Jesus alone; His grace alone saves, period!

- ✘ So we see that Peter and Paul were at one in their Gospel proclamation. And Exhibit A was Titus who comes up in today's Epistle Reading from Galatians. Titus traveled along to that first church council as proof; as an example of a Spirit-filled Gentile; a baptized Christian who was not circumcised.

➔ After that, with Peter and Paul's preaching of the Gospel as Jesus and Jesus alone being upheld as the faithful and true saving Gospel, the apostles went forward preaching this apostolic Gospel, confirmed by the pillars of the Church in Jerusalem.

## **II. The Church calls us to cling to Jesus only**

- ✘ So, with that lesson from God's Word, friends...we need to ask, "What is the 'plus one' that you are so tempted to add to Jesus?"

➔ I'm confident it's not circumcision today like it was in Peter and Paul's day. But, could it be loving your neighbor; doing good for others? These remain popular "plus ones" that people add as requirements for their salvation. I can't tell how many times I've heard life-long Lutherans tell me with deep sincerity, "I sure hope I've been good enough to those around me to make it into heaven."

➔ Look, as long as you and I are in this flesh, we will always be tempted to want to stand before God on the day of judgement, not only on the basis of Jesus but on the basis of Jesus and something we've done; something inside of us.

- ✘ And why is this such a struggle for us? because, it's so damaging to our human pride – in fact, it's deadly to human pride – to stand before God and have no plea whatsoever except for a cry for mercy on the basis of Jesus alone!

➔ To cling only to the cross of Jesus; to know that He alone is our forgiveness, our salvation, our hope of eternal life; to know that we not only begin as beggars, but that all our lives we remain poor beggars before God – that He cleanses our hearts through faith so that our trust rests entirely upon nothing inside of us; that our forgiveness and salvation depends solely on His grace; on His undeserved kindness toward us – this is the greatest gift we receive from our Savior Jesus and no one else.

- ✘ How wise the Church of Christ has been through the ages to remind us of this as we come to Jesus' Holy Supper and we sing in the Liturgy. "O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. ... Grant us Thy peace" (*LSB*, p 198). Yes, we come offering nothing. We come receiving all. And we remain nothing but beggars with God daily wiping out our trust in all the "plus ones", so that all that is before us is to rely more and more on Jesus and Jesus alone.

➔ What a beautiful thing God allows us to see and learn. The longer we live with Jesus alone, the more we see how it always had to be that way, for the sin in our lives is very persistent, and despite our Spirit-led efforts to kill and destroy it, it keeps on keeping on. Augustine, 200 years after Peter and Paul, said it right: "If we did not remain under God's pardon until the end, we would be tempted to attribute too much to ourselves."

## **Conclusion**

- ✘ St. Peter and St. Paul's witness to Jesus alone kept them from doing that until the day they left this earthly life. Both of them yielded their bodies and poured out their earthly lives in the glad confession that in Jesus and in Him alone was a life of which no death could rob them.

➔ Peter was crucified upside down by the Roman Emperor Nero, wanting nothing of his own life or even the idea of being crucified like Jesus to get in the way of His "Jesus only" message.

And Paul was beheaded in Rome; risking his life for the chance to proclaim salvation in Jesus alone to Caesar himself.

➔ So we remember today how they both went into death trusting not one little bit in their ability to keep the Law, but instead believing and trusting entirely in the Savior of sinners. May God grant you and me this same trust; this same bold confession that nothing in our lives can ever be added to Jesus.

✂ And may we forever be a people who claim with great joy, “We are saved in Jesus alone.” Amen.