The glorious gospel of three aliens

Text: 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

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**Scriptures:** Zechariah 3:1-5; Hebrews 11:8-16; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL]

Series: Belgic Confession (Article 22)

Theme: Justification through faith in Christ is founded upon the imputed ‘alien’ righteousness of Christ credited to the unrighteous and their unrighteousness, which is ‘alien’ to Christ being imputed to Him with the result that all those who are in Christ are new creations, living in this ‘old’ world as ‘aliens’ desiring their heavenly home in the new world.

Proposition: There are three ‘aliens’ at the heart of the gospel

**Introduction**

What do you first think about when you hear the word ‘alien’? Most likely a creature from outer space, an extra-terrestrial (ET), Martian, a ‘little green man’. That kind of alien is ‘a hypothetical or fictional being from another world’. The word ‘alien’ is also used to describe something strange, foreign and/or not natural. This is the sense of the word which I have used in the title of this sermon ‘The glorious gospel of three aliens’.

At the heart of the gospel is the Biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone. This is helpfully defined in the Westminster Shorter Catechism 33: *Justification is the act of God's free grace by which He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight. He does so only because He counts the righteousness of Christ as ours.* So central is this truth that justification in Christ, that Martin Luther described it as “*the article of a standing or falling church*”, John Calvin as “*the main hinge on which religion turns*” and more recently, the late R.C. Sproul “*The doctrine of justification by faith alone is the central affirmation of historic evangelicalism*”

Guido de Bres, the author of the Belgic Confession used strong language of those who oppose this key Biblical truth. In the article we read earlier about ‘our justification through faith in Christ’, he refers to the ‘terrible blasphemy’ that it is to ‘assert that Christ is not sufficient, but that something else is needed besides him; for the conclusion would then be that Christ is only half a saviour’. The background to these words is the official teaching of the Roman Catholic church, both back when de Bres wrote these words in the 16th century and today when that teaching remains unchanged. This afternoon we are going to look at the glorious doctrine of justification through faith in Christ under three headings which reflect the strange, foreign, alien nature of the glorious gospel:

1. The ‘alien’ unrighteousness of Christ
2. The ‘alien’ righteousness of the saved
3. The ‘alien’ new creation living in the old
4. **The ‘alien’ unrighteousness of Christ**

In writing to the church in Corinth about the need to be reconciled to God, the Apostle Paul captures the heart of the gospel in these words: “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor 5:21). Christ Jesus ‘knew no sin’. Unrighteousness was ‘alien’ to Him, it was ‘strange’ and utterly foreign to Him. He is perfectly, completely and consistently without any fault. He had never displeased His Heavenly Father in any way.

During His life on this earth He was not somehow protected by supernatural powers which acted to prevent Him from falling into sin. Quite the contrary He was like Adam before the fall. A human being with the potential to sin and also the potential not to sin. He was tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:15). His comprehensive obedience to God His Father is reflected in:

1. The fact that he grew up ‘favour with God and man’ (Luke 2:52).
2. He lived in such a way that His Heavenly Father declared at his baptism and again at the Transfiguration "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*" (Matt 3:17; 17:5).
3. No just charge could be laid against him either in the Jewish court of Caiaphas the high priest, nor of Pilate in the civil court of Rome

Christ ‘knew no sin’, having a perfect righteousness of His own. The sin of others caused Jesus, ‘Holy one of Israel’, great pain. For example “*And he looked around at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart*” (Mark 3:5). Ungodliness, moral uncleanliness, was and is completely foreign to Christ. What is true of God the Father is true of God the Son. In the words of the prophet Habakkuk, He has “*purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong*” (Hab 1:13). The purity of the glory of Christ was visibly revealed at his transfiguration when ‘*his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light*’ (Matt 17:2).

Imagine a person dressed in the cleanest of clothes with their body completely washed of any dirt or grime. Like the most careful and diligent bridegroom on his wedding day. Then the most filthy, smelly, disgusting substances are poured over him, soiling his clothes, smearing his body, but even more somehow entering into every pore, every cell, every fibre of his body.

This is a woefully incomplete picture of the horror of what took place at the cross when God the Father made His own beloved Son to be sin. Sin, which was completely, utterly foreign, alien, to Christ. For the sake of His chosen people, God imputed their sin to Christ and then punished Him for the sin which was not his. In this Jesus the righteous one substituted Himself for the unrighteous. My words fail to convey the enormity of this alien unrighteousness which was put on Christ. Isaiah prophesies: **“***Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all*” (Isaiah 53:4-6).

Just as God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac – just as his father Abraham was poised to slaughter his only son as a sacrifice (Gen 22), soGod ordained animals (like the scapegoat in Lev 16) to be sacrificed as a substitute for the people of Israel. Just as the goat on the Day of Atonement symbolically substituted for the people in Old Testament times, so Christ actually substituted Himself for people when he died. He willingly accepted the awful natural unrighteousness of people like you and me to be credited to Him as if He had sinned, even though He was without sin.

As a result of Christ’s obedience, God, in an act of free grace, accepted the ransom fully paid by His Son. The blood of the perfectly innocent God-man Jesus being fully sufficient to provide redemption for all the sin-bound captives for whom He died. God put Jesus forward as a propitiation (to appease His righteous wrath against sin) by his blood, to redeem the guilty. In the words of Matthew 20:28 he gave his life as “*a ransom for many*"

Justification is much more than God declaring us to be ‘just as if we hadn’t sinned’. It is also God declaring us to be positively obedient with a righteousness which is not of our own making. This ‘alien righteousness’ is the subject of our second point:

1. **The ‘alien’ righteousness of the saved**

It was Martin Luther who first described the imputed/credited righteousness of Christ as an ‘alien righteousness’. It is naturally foreign to us, but it is Christ’s natural righteousness because He is without sin. How then does the righteousness of Jesus which is ‘alien’ to us become ours? The answer is by faith.

The Belgic Confession Article 22 describes faith as the ‘instrument by which we embrace Christ our righteousness’. Faith is the meansby which justification is effected. Just as a piano does not produce music by itself, but rather it is the **means** by which the skilled pianist conveys a beautiful sound, so, faith itself does not make a person right with God, but rather is the **means** by which God’s free acts of grace in justly justifying are wonderfully conveyed to the unjust sinner who is saved.

The ‘alien’ righteousness of the saved is picture in the vision of Zechariah when the Angel said: " *I will clothe you with pure vestments." And I said, "Let them put a clean turban on his head*." These pure clothes reflect the glorious sinless perfection of Christ. Justification does not change our nature; it is a change of legal status before God. To be justified is helpfully described by Heidelberg Catechism LD23A60, ‘*as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me*’.

Justification is a wonderful work of God’s grace, but you might ask “Was God just – that is to say ethically, morally right to do this? – to put the ‘filth’ of our sin, which is alien to Christ, on Him and His pure sinlessness, which is alien to us, brothers and sisters, on you and me?”

In considering this, it is important to remember that Christ died willingly. He was not forced to ransom the lives of others by giving up his own. The Scriptures leave us in no doubt here. Jesus willingly freed slaves captive to sin. He said: “*For this reason the Father loves me, because* ***I lay*** *down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but* ***I lay*** *it down of my own accord*” (John 10:17-18). At Gethsemane, Christ’s willingness to pay the price of redemption with his own life is clear: "*My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."* (Matt 26:39).

The righteousness/justice of God was evidenced/indicated/shown:

* by His free act of grace at the cross where Jesus Christ the innocent man was sacrificed as a substitute for the guilty, thereby turning God’s righteous/just wrath away from them and directing it upon himself.
* by accepting the ransom payment made by Jesus in buying back all of God’s people at the price of His life.
* by the removal of the filthy garments from Joshua in Zechariah 3:4 which pictures justification in Christ.

Those filthy garments were put on Christ when He who knew no sin was made by God His Father to be sin. God’s generous grace gifts the righteousness of Christ to people like you and me. There is no injustice in God’s great generosity, just mercy and love.

How then can we respond to the alien righteousness given to us in Christ? With love, thankfulness, joy and amazement. We’ll express some of this response soon as we sing the hymn “*And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour’s blood? Died he for me who caused his pain for me who him to death pursued Amazing love! How can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me?”* The alien righteousness with which we, who are in Christ, have been credited makes us aliens living in a foreign world. This brings us to our third point.

1. **The ‘alien’ new creation living in the old**

In civil law, an ‘alien’ is any person (including an organisation) who is not a citizen or a national of a specific country. In Genesis 15:6 we see revealed that Abraham was justified by faith in the promised seed of the woman (Gen 3:15) who was yet to come. “*And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness*”. The writer to the Hebrews recalls that“*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land*” (Heb 11:8-9). Noting also that Abraham, together with Abel, Enoch, Noah ‘*died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth*’.

Those who are justified by faith in Christ live as strangers, foreigners, aliens on this earth – a place which is not their eternal home. We, brothers and sisters are foreigners in a strange land. We are pilgrims progressing towards the celestial city. We have blessings of which the unbelieving world has no knowledge or experience. The Belgic Confession reminds us that Christ “*imputes to us all His merits and as many holy works as He has done for us and in our place*”.

What are some the merits of Christ which are imputed to us as part of our justification?

* Peace with God. His righteous wrath has been fully satisfied by Christ (Rom 5:1). In Christ our debt to God has been fully paid.
* Free access to God. We can draw near with confidence in prayer to the Lord’s Throne of Grace (Heb 4:16)
* An imperishable and secure inheritance (1 Pet 1:4) sealed with the promised holy Spirit (Eph 1:13).

These ‘unsearchable riches of Christ’ are ours, brothers and sisters.

Our lives on this earth are fundamentally different to those who do not know Christ; who are as yet ‘*dead in their trespasses and sins*’ (Eph 2:1). In Christ we are new creations in an old world which is groaning and will pass away when Christ returns. Being an alien, a foreigner, can be unsettling and uncomfortable. Many of us are immigrants to New Zealand, or else we are the children or grandchildren of those who were. For most ‘aliens’ living in a country not their own there is a need over time to adjust to their new environment and to assimilate into the culture around them.

For the spiritual aliens, justified in Christ, this is not so. In fact, it is quite the opposite, we must remain aliens if we are not to deny the one who has taken our unrighteousness upon Himself and from whom we have an alien righteousness. We must not assimilate into the unbelieving culture around us. In the words of Romans 12:2 “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect*”. It’s hard not to be conformed to this world which is like John Bunyan’s ‘vanity fair’ – a place where pleasure is pursued as the highest goal. A place where, in today’s terms, we might say people aim to ‘be true to themselves’.

Brothers and Sisters, we are ‘sojourners and exiles’ (1 Pet 2:11) in this world. We are aliens in Christ. Not fictional beings from another world, but justified saints who have been credited with the ‘alien’ righteousness of Christ – who has taken on Himself our unrighteousness which is ‘alien’ to Him. **“***For our sake he (God the Father) made him (God the Son) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor 5:21).

How much this world needs to hear us, the true aliens, speak the ‘glorious gospel of three aliens’, so that they too may come to know Christ; that is if the Lord grants them the instrument of faith.

AMEN