

SBJT Forum

SBJT: Why is *solus Christus* (Christ alone) the sweetest truth known to man?

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J. Stephen Yuille: The Reformation was in many ways a struggle between two Latin words: *et* (and) and *sola* (alone). The Roman Catholic Church affirmed the authority of Scripture *et* tradition, salvation by grace *et* effort, and justification by faith *et* works; moreover, it pointed people to Christ *et* saints, masses, pilgrimages, penances, and indulgences, as the way to obtain favor with God. In marked contrast, the Reformers affirmed *solus Christus*—Christ is the only Savior. John Calvin spoke well for the Reformed position when he penned: “We see that our whole salvation and all its parts are comprehended in Christ. [. . .] If we seek strength, it lies in His dominion; if purity, in His conception; if gentleness, it appears in His birth [. . .]. If we seek redemption, it lies in His passion; if acquittal, in His condemnation; if remission of the curse, in His cross; if satisfaction, in His sacrifice; if purification, in His blood; if reconciliation, in His descent into hell; if mortification of the flesh, in His tomb; if newness of life, in His resurrection [. . .]. Let us drink our fill from this fountain, and from no other.”

The Reformers’ emphasis on *solus Christus* is a much needed tonic in today’s church. Regrettably, an increasing number of evangelicals question the belief that salvation is found in Christ alone. According to one recent survey, two-thirds of evangelicals are comfortable with the following statement: “Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and others all pray to the same God, even though they use different names for that God.” Yet this notion of a “Christ-less” approach to God stands in clear opposition to the testimony of Scripture. As the apostle Paul affirms, “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). Because of our sin, we are cut off from God.

Yet Christ—fully God and fully man—bridged the expanse. He who made all things was carried in the womb of a woman, and he who upholds all things was held in the arms of a woman. He clothed himself with our humanity—body and soul. He came so close as to experience life in a fallen world, bear our sin and shame, and taste death for us. He did all of this as Mediator. The 1689 London Baptist Confession elaborates as follows: “Christ, and Christ alone, is fitted to be mediator between God and man. He is the prophet, priest, and king of the church of God” (8.9). Here, the Confession ascribes three offices to Christ’s mediatorship.

First, Christ is the Prophet of the church (Deut 18:18; Luke 4:18–19). Why do we need a prophet? We need a prophet to tell us about God. There’s an immeasurable distance between the infinite Creator and finite creature, but Christ reveals God to us (John 1:18). We also need a prophet to dispel the darkness that pervades our minds. We’re insensible to spiritual truth, but Christ opens our eyes so that we can grasp God’s revelation in his Word (Luke 24:44–45).

Second, Christ is the Priest of the church (Ps 110:4; Heb 7:21–25). Why do we need a priest? We need a priest to mediate between God and us by removing our sin and shame. We are sinners and, therefore, under the sentence of death, but Christ satisfies God’s offended justice (Gal 3:13). We also need a priest to mediate between God and us by giving us what we lack—a righteous standing before God. Thankfully, in Christ we become “the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

Third, Christ is the King of the church (Ps 2:6–7; Acts 2:30–33). Why do we need a king? We need a king to break the power of our sin. Christ is stronger than the “strong man” who binds us. He “attacks him” and “overpowers him” (Luke 11:21–22). In addition, he subdues our will, bringing it into line with God’s will (Rom 6:22). We also need a king to protect us. We’re vulnerable to the flesh, world, and devil, but Christ is invested with all power and authority (Matt 28:18), and he breaks our enemies with a rod of iron.

As is evident from the foregoing discussion, Christ’s three-fold office is essential to our salvation. “Salvation,” writes John Flavel, “is revealed by Christ as a Prophet, procured by Him as a Priest, applied by Him as a King. In vain it is revealed, if not purchased; in vain revealed and purchased, if not applied.” In His three-fold office, therefore, Christ alone is “fitted to be mediator between God and man.” God punished Christ, so that he might

forgive us. God condemned Christ, so that he might justify us. In giving himself, Christ revealed the Father's love for us (Rom 5:8). In love, he climbed a shameful cross to bear our guilt and shame, pouring out his soul to death. When we come to Christ in childlike dependence, and look to him alone to save us, God receives us in Christ—his Beloved. By virtue of our union with him, we participate in all of the benefits of his three-fold office. We have communion with Christ in his names and titles; we have communion with him in his righteousness; we have communion with him in his holiness; we have communion with him in his death; we have communion with him in his life and resurrection from the dead; and we have communion with him in his glory.

This makes *solus Christus* the sweetest truth known to man. It's the difference between feast and famine; fullness and emptiness; a refreshing oasis and a crippling desert; an eternity of joy and an eternity of sorrow. And this is the reason we heartily confess with the apostle Peter concerning Christ: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

SBJT: What doctrine, in the view of the great Princetonian theologian, B. B. Warfield, lay at the heart of the Reformation?

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Fred G. Zaspel: B. B. Warfield relished his Reformation heritage, and his esteem for the magisterial Reformers is evident in his thorough familiarity with their lives and writings and in his expressed delight in their theological advances. Because of the number and depth of his numerous expositions of Calvin's teaching Warfield was sometimes referred to as "America's interpreter of Calvin." In terms of particular doctrines, Warfield notes the significance of Calvin as "the theologian of the Holy Spirit," and he argues with reference to the Trinity that in Calvin's insistence that the Son is *autotheos*, the principle of equalization had at last come to its rights. He expresses enormous appreciation both for the Reformation's formal (*sola Scriptura*)

and its material principle (*sola fide*). He revels at length in Luther's *simul iustus et peccator* and expresses hearty agreement with Luther and Calvin regarding the critical importance of the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

But for Warfield the root of the Protestant Reformation lay in in something still deeper. "The central doctrine of the Reformation," he said, was the doctrine of *predestination*.

This may seem strange to some, and it is a claim not often made. But Warfield saw the Reformation, above all else, as a recovery of the grace of God in the salvation of sinners, and it is this doctrine, ultimately, that demonstrates that salvation is, in fact, wholly of grace, and it is the doctrine that secures it as such. Thus, Warfield says, in the Reformers' recovery and exposition of the doctrine of predestination we find "the hinge" on which "their whole religious consciousness and teaching turned."

Warfield cites Martin Luther himself as witness that this was indeed the case: in his famous dispute with Erasmus over the freedom of the will and the sovereignty of grace the Reformer congratulated Erasmus for addressing "the top of the question" (*summam caussae*) involved in the Protestant revolt against Rome. "You and you alone," Luther says to Erasmus, "have seen the hinge of things and have aimed at the throat."

It was in this sense that Warfield described the Reformation as a "revival of Augustinianism." Despite Calvin's famous remark, Warfield did not see Augustine as "wholly ours;" in fact, he described the Reformation effort as Augustine *versus* Augustine: "the Reformation, inwardly considered, was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine's doctrine of grace over Augustine's doctrine of the Church." "It is Augustine who gave us the Reformation," Warfield comments. It was his landmark teaching regarding sin and monergistic grace—so long suppressed throughout the Middle Ages, though glimpses of it arose in Gottshalk and Jansen—that finally "burst all bonds and issued in the Protestant Reformation." This was "the soul of the whole Reformation movement," Warfield says. "The whole substance of Luther's fundamental theology was summed up in the antithesis of sin and grace: sin conceived as absolutely disabling to good; grace as absolutely recreative in effect."

Warfield carefully notes that Luther was not alone in this but was at one with all the great Reformers in it. "The secret of Calvin's greatness," for example, also lay in his profound sense of God and of God's loving, sovereign distribution of grace which not only guards the purity of our theism but is

the “surety of our hope of salvation.” “In one word,” Warfield surmises, this doctrine [predestination] was Protestantism itself. All else that Protestantism stood for, in comparison with this, must be relegated to the second rank.”

When Warfield identifies predestination as “the central doctrine” of the Reformation, it is clear that although he does indeed have predestination itself, narrowly considered, in view as the root issue, he understands it as central to and representative of its necessary entailments regarding the (monergistic) grace of God—a grace that, having determined to save, restores and changes the disposition of the heart, thus bringing us trustingly to take refuge in the only One in whom justifying righteousness may be found.

For this reason Warfield further observes that the Protestant Reformation gave rise to a distinct “evangelical” piety, a piety—again, tracing back to Augustine and then to the apostles—whose leading trait is that of a trusting and grateful dependence upon the grace of God. It is this notion of grace that the Reformers above all else sought to recover—a grace that finds expression in the doctrine of justification by faith alone and a grace that is established, finally, in the doctrine of predestination.

SBJT: Today many evangelicals misunderstand *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone). For example, some think that *sola scriptura* means “me and my Bible” alone and thus approach the Bible with a very individualistic mindset. This typically leads to a suspicion of tradition and the history of the church. How does a proper understanding of *sola scriptura* correct such an imbalance?

Matthew Barrett: Reformers like Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin did not pose a strict either/or dilemma: Scripture or tradition. The Reformers may have rejected Rome’s understanding of tradition and upheld the supremacy and final authority of Scripture over tradition. But we would be mistaken to think the Reformers did not value tradition or see it as a subordinate authority in some sense. Indeed, the Reformers believed tradition was on their side!

Naturally, the Reformers became frustrated when certain radicals sought to discard tradition altogether. These radicals did not defend and practice *sola scriptura*, but instead turned to *nuda scriptura* (“bare Scripture”). Perhaps this disregard for tradition is best captured in the bombast of Sebastian Franck: “Foolish Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome, Gregory—of whom not

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one even knew the Lord, so help me God, nor was sent by God to teach. Rather, they were all apostles of Antichrist." No wonder Alister McGrath concludes in his book *Reformation Theology*, "In the hands of such radical thinkers, the *sola scriptura* principle became radicalized."

I wish I could say that all evangelicals today have a crisp, accurate grasp of *sola scriptura*. I am hopeful that many understand how a Protestant view of Scripture and tradition differs from Rome's position. However, I am less confident that evangelicals understand the difference between *sola* and *nuda scriptura*, for in some cases the latter is assumed to be the identity of the former.

Consequently, some evangelicals, intentionally or unintentionally, have followed in the footsteps of Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) who said, "I have endeavored to read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me, and I am as much on my guard against reading them today, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority, or system whatever." Ironically, such a view cannot preserve *sola scriptura*. Sure, tradition is not being elevated to

the level of Scripture. But the individual is! The final standard is not the Bible but the individual's opinions. To be sure, such a view lends itself more in the direction of individual autonomy than scriptural accountability.

There are several ways, however, that we can correct this mistake. First, we must guard ourselves from an individualistic mindset that prides itself on what "I think" rather than listening to the past. In order to do so, we must acknowledge that "Scripture alone" doesn't mean "me alone."

Second, tradition is not a second infallible source of divine revelation alongside Scripture; nevertheless, where it is consistent with Scripture it can and does act as a *ministerial* authority. The historic creeds and confessions are a case

in point. While the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Creed are not to be considered infallible sources of divine revelation, nevertheless, their consistency with Scripture means that the church spoke authoritatively against heresy.

Therefore, it should trouble us, to say the least, should we find ourselves disagreeing with orthodox creeds that have stood the test of time. Innovation is often the first indication of heresy. Hence, as Timothy George explains in his insightful book *Reading Scripture with the Reformers*, the Reformers sought to tie their “Reformation exegesis to patristic tradition” in order to provide a “counterweight to the charge that the reformers were purveyors of novelty in religion,” though at the end of the day the fathers’ “writings should always be judged by the touchstone of Scripture, a standard the fathers themselves heartily approved.”

Abandoning *nuda scriptura* does not require us to go to the other extreme, namely, elevating tradition to the level of Scripture. But it does require the humility to realize that we are always standing on the shoulders of those who came before us. For the Reformers, the early church fathers were valuable (though not infallible) guides in biblical interpretation. In that light, we would be wise to listen to Luther: “Now if anyone of the saintly fathers can show that his interpretation is based on Scripture, and if Scripture proves that this is the way it should be interpreted, then the interpretation is right. If this is not the case, I must not believe him” (*Luther’s Works* [LW] 30:166; *Weimar Edition* [WA] 14:31).

SBJT: Islam is in the news today. How did Martin Luther and John Calvin view Islam in their day? Did Luther and Calvin know about Islamic texts, specifically the Qur’an?

Tony Costa: In order to understand the views of Luther (1483-1546) and Calvin (1509-1564) on Islam, it is imperative to understand the historical context of their day. One of the major cataclysmic events that sent shock waves across medieval Europe was the sacking and fall of Constantinople (modern day Istanbul) by the Muslim Turks of the Ottoman Empire in 1453. Constantinople was the center and bastion of Eastern Christianity, and the capital of the Byzantine Empire. With the fall of Constantinople into the hands of the Turks, the threat of Islam to Christian Europe became a serious concern that could not be ignored. This threat became even more evident in 1529 with

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the Ottoman siege of the city of Vienna, Austria. Muslims had taken control of the Balkans and southern Hungary, and the fear in Luther's day was that the Muslims would inevitably invade Germany. Luther was 46 years of age at this time, and Calvin was 20 years old. Luther wrote more on this subject than Calvin. Prior to 1529, Luther spoke well of the Turks and their virtues including their iconoclastic position on images and relics. However, this gentle tone changed dramatically after the siege of Vienna.

Both Luther and Calvin in their works refer to Muslims as "Turks." Both Luther and Calvin believed that Islam was a false religion, based on blasphemies specifically against Christ. Luther and Calvin saw Islam operating as a false religion in tandem with the Roman Catholic Church.

Luther went so far as to say that the Muslim prophet Muhammad was the "son of the devil," but that he was only second in wickedness to the Pope. Luther wrote a tract *On War Against the Turks*, which was published in 1529, outlining the responsibility of the secular authorities to protect the citizens of Germany against the potential Islamic threat. Luther argued that the Church was not to be involved in any warfare whatsoever with the Turks (Muslims). This was the duty of the civil authorities alone. Calvin's approach to Islam was primarily theological and polemical. In his works, he sought to expose Islam as part of the kingdom of the devil, following in a train of heresies from the beginning of the Church. Like Luther, Calvin also saw the Papacy and Islam as working together in opposing the Gospel, even referring to Muhammad as the companion of the Pope.

Calvin's knowledge of Islamic beliefs was limited in comparison to Luther. Calvin knew that Muslims denied the deity of Christ and the Trinity, and charged them with placing an idol in the place of Christ, namely Muhammad. Both Luther and Calvin held Muhammad responsible for destroying the souls of men through his false teachings. Calvin went so far as to suggest that Muslims who place Muhammad in the place of Christ commit a grievous sin, and would be subject to the death penalty for heresy, a common practice

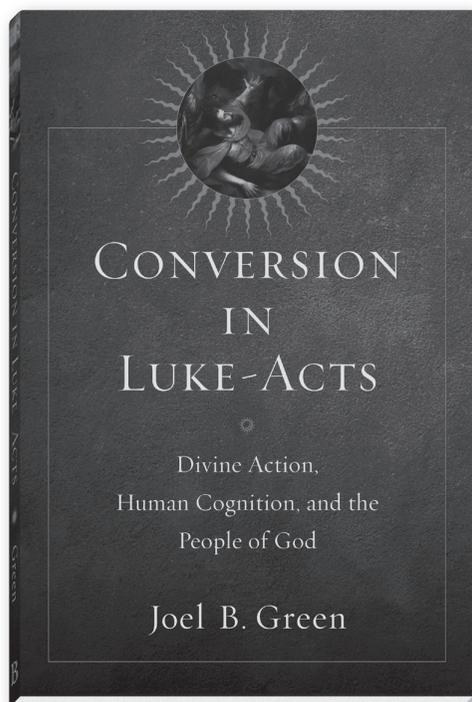
in medieval Europe. An extremely important point to be made in the case of Luther is that he saw the rise of Islam and its militaristic expansion into Christian lands as a judgment from God against Christian Europe. This was due to a lack of repentance. Luther refers to Islam as “a rod of anger and a punishment of God upon the unbelieving world.” He describes the Muslim as “the rod of the wrath of the Lord our God and the servant of the raging devil.” Here Luther views Islam as that which God uses as part of his judgment against apostate and unrepentant Christian nations.

In terms of the familiarity of Luther and Calvin with Islamic texts such as the Qur’an, Luther appeared much more aware of Islamic texts. Luther did have access to some readings of the Qur’an, but not all of them by his own admission. He compared the Qur’an to a German book of sermons and doctrines similar to the Pope’s “decretals.” In this respect Luther does show an interesting insight into the textual genre of the Qur’an as it is composed mainly of didactic lessons, discourses, and imperatives, with very little or no interest in narrative materials. Luther had hoped to translate the sections of the Qur’an he possessed into the German language to demonstrate that it is a “foul” and “shameful” book. Luther is aware of the Christology of the Qur’an in that it presents a Jesus who is merely a human prophet and not the divine Son of God. He is also aware of the Qur’an’s assertion that Muhammad is the final prophet, and that the Qur’an mandates warfare (*jihad*) against unbelievers who refuse to submit to Islam. Luther saw the Qur’an’s denial of Christ’s deity as a serious doctrinal breach that virtually eradicates the very truths of Christianity. Luther was also well aware that the Qur’an taught a doctrine of works in respect to salvation. Luther also displays an interesting insight into the Qur’an as a pastiche of beliefs of Jews, Christians, and pagans.

Calvin displayed very little knowledge of the text of the Qur’an. He was aware of the theological claims of Islam found within the Qur’an, and he attempted to refute these claims in his works with biblical proofs. Calvin’s approach again was a polemical and theological one.

Luther actually encouraged Christians to study and become acquainted with the Qur’an, in order to better equip themselves to engage Muslims. In this respect, Luther set the stage to some degree in Christian apologetics towards Islam. For modern Christians, it is imperative that if they seek to dialogue and/or reach Muslims for Christ, they need to become familiar with the text of the Qur’an.

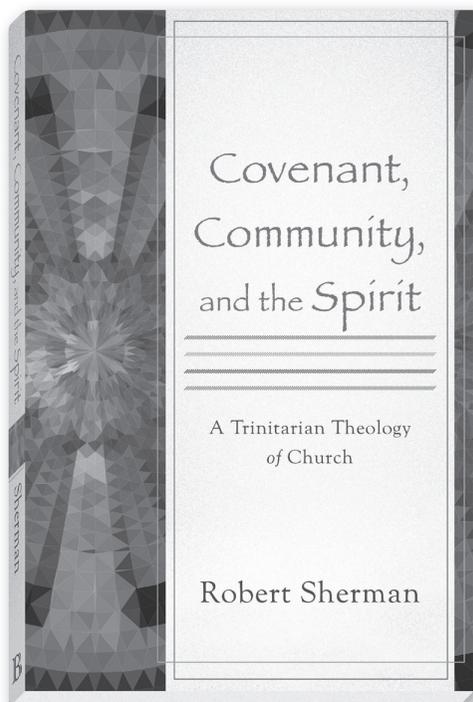
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