

# *Solus Christus*: What the Reformers Taught and Why It Still Matters

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Reformation theology is often summarized by the five *solas*<sup>1</sup>. Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) stands as the formal principle of the Reformation and the foundation of all theology. God's glory alone (*solī Deo gloria*) functions as a capstone for all Reformation theology, connecting its various parts to God's one purpose for creating this world and humanity in it. In between these two *solas*, the other three emphasize that God has chosen and acted to save us by his sovereign grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*), which is grounded in and through Christ alone (*solus Christus*).

If we are to learn from the Reformers, we do well to begin with these summarizing *solas*. But if we are to understand the substance of the Reformation *solas* and profit from them, we must bear in mind two points. First, all of the *solas* are interrelated and mutually dependent; you cannot have one without the others. Second, the five *solas* are just as important today as they were in the Reformation for capturing what is at the heart of the Gospel. Without minimizing this mutual dependence, however, we will also need to consider that one *sola* plays a distinct part in connecting the others to bring us the full glory of God in the Gospel.

*Solus Christus* stands at the center of the other four *solas*, connecting them into a coherent theological system by which the Reformers declared the glory of God. For this reason, we need to attend closely to what the Reformers taught about our Lord Jesus Christ. The entirety of Reformation Christology lies well beyond this presentation and my forthcoming book. I can only sketch where the book goes, but the basic point which the book seeks to recover from the Reformers is the *exclusive identity* of Christ and his *all-sufficient work*. Although in recent years the exclusivity and sufficiency of Christ have been rejected by many, if the church is to proclaim the same Christ as the Reformers, we must understand and embrace *solus Christus* with the same clarity, conviction, and urgency as they did.

In this article my goal is threefold. First, I want to consider more closely why *Christ alone* is at the center of the *solas* and the entirety of Christian theology. Second, I want to develop *Christ alone* along the lines of the book, by focusing on the challenge of confessing *Christ alone* yesterday and today. Here I will note the historical context in which the Reformers confessed *Christ alone* and how that context has changed for us, thus creating new challenges for us. Third, in light of our present challenges, I want to offer a sketch of how and why *Christ alone* must be confessed today with the same conviction, precision, and care as the Reformers.

### **CHRIST ALONE AT THE CENTER OF THE SOLAS AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY**

Why is *Christ alone* at the center of the *solas* and Christian theology? I offer five reasons. First, *Christ alone* centers all Reformation doctrine. We come to know the person and work of Christ only by God's self-disclosure through the Scriptures. Yet, God speaks through the agency of human authors not simply to inform us but to save us in Christ alone who we receive by faith alone. Our faith in Christ guards us by the power of God and his grace alone. The purpose of God's grace leads to and culminates in our reconciliation and adoption through Christ alone. In the end, the ultimate goal of God in our redemption is his own glory, even as we are transformed into a creaturely reflection of it. And yet, the radiance of the glory of God is found in the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. The word spoken by God, the faith given by God, the grace extended by God, and the glory possessed and promised

by God cannot make sense apart from the divine Son who assumed our humanity for our salvation.

Second, the Reformers placed *Christ alone* at the center of their doctrine because Scripture places Christ at the center of God's eternal plan for his creation. Despite the diversity of human authors, Scripture speaks as a unified divine communicative act by which God reveals himself and the whole history of redemption—from creation to new creation. And this unified word of God has one main point: the triune God in infinite wisdom and power has chosen to bring all of his purposes to fulfillment in Christ. The centrality of Christ, then, does not diminish the persons and work of the Father and the Spirit. Scripture teaches, rather, that all the Father does centers in his Son and that the Spirit works to bear witness and bring glory to the Son.

Third, the *Christ alone* of the Reformation reflects the self-witness of Christ himself. Our Lord understood that he was the key to the manifestation of God's glory and the salvation of his people. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus explained his death and bore witness to his resurrection as the Messiah by placing himself at the focal point of God's revelation: "Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:26-27). He confronted the religious leaders for not finding eternal life in him as the goal of humanity: "These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40). And he was remarkably clear-minded and comfortable in his role as the anointed one entrusted with the end of the world: "the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him" (John 5:22-23). To follow Jesus as his disciples, then, the Reformers confessed that Christ alone is the person around whom all history pivots and the focus of all God's work in the world.

Fourth, the Reformers emphasized the centrality of *Christ alone* because they accepted the apostolic witness to the person and work of Christ. The opening verses of Hebrews underscore the finality and superiority of God's self-disclosure in his Son: "In the past God spoke . . . at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . . the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being . . ." (Heb 1:1-3a). Paul comforts us with the cosmic pre-eminence of Christ: "For in him all things were

created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col 1:16-17). And Paul encourages our hope in Christ by declaring that God’s eternal purpose and plan is “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Eph 1:9-10). In other words, Jesus stands as *the most important figure* in God’s new creation work—a work that restores and even surpasses what was lost in Eden. God brings forth a new, redeemed and reconciled new creation by and through Christ alone.

Fifth, beyond the other Reformation *solas*, *Christ alone* is what makes all Christian theology coherent. More than a century ago, Herman Bavinck rightly taught that the center to all Christian theology is Christ: “The doctrine of Christ is not the starting point, but it certainly is the central point of the whole system of dogmatics. All other dogmas either prepare for it or are inferred from it. In it, as the heart of dogmatics, pulses the whole of the religious-ethical life of Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> In short, all of our efforts at theology ultimately rise and fall with *Christ alone*. Only a proper understanding of Christ can correctly shape the most distinctive convictions of Christian theology. *Christ alone* connects all the doctrines of our theology because Christ alone stands as the cornerstone of all the purposes and plans of God himself. But if we misinterpret who Christ is and what he does in his life, death, and resurrection, then all other doctrines will likely suffer. Retrieving and learning from the Reformers’ teaching on *solus Christus*, then, brings both sobriety and joy. Misidentifying Christ will cause confusion in the church and harm our witness in the world. However, if we rightly identify Christ in all his exclusive identity and all-sufficient work, then we can proclaim the same Christ as the Reformers with the same clarity, conviction, and urgency. *Christ alone* is not a slogan; it is the center of the *solas* by which the Reformers recovered the grace of God and declared the glory of God.

## **THE CHALLENGE OF CONFESSING CHRIST ALONE YESTERDAY AND TODAY**

### ***Christ Alone in the Reformation***

What exactly where the Reformers confessing especially given the fact that the Reformers and the Roman Church agreed on *who* Christ is in his unique

and exclusive identity? In fact, from the Patristic through the Reformation era, *all* segments of the Church spoke in a unified voice regarding Christ's identity as God the Son incarnate. So in affirming *Christ alone* what were the Reformers confessing and standing against?

Primarily the Reformers were standing against Rome's sacramental theology and confessing the *sufficiency* of Christ's work. As Timothy George notes: Calvin, along with the other Reformers, affirmed Chalcedonian orthodoxy but "he recognized that adherence to correct doctrine was not sufficient to prevent the abuses he saw about him in the dependence on relics, indulgences, the rosary, and the Mass."<sup>3</sup> Alongside the confession of Christ's exclusivity was also required an equal emphasis on the glorious sufficiency of his work *and* its direct application to us by the Spirit by *sola fide*.

One of the problems bequeathed by the medieval era, partly due to Anselm's work, was filling the gap between the exclusivity of Christ's person and the sufficiency of his work *for us*. Beyond dispute Anselm's *Why God Became Man*?<sup>4</sup> was a key theological work on the atonement in the medieval era. Yet, for all of Anselm's stress on the incarnation, in failing to locate Christ's work within its biblical, covenantal context, he does not adequately develop Christ's covenantal representation and substitution. Anselm does not explain how Christ's obedient life and death as the incarnate Son is the basis for our salvation and how it becomes ours. By not thinking of Christ's mediatorial work in terms of his obedience as our covenant head, Anselm does not unpack the biblical rationale of how Christ's righteousness becomes ours, how Christ's death fully satisfies God's righteousness, and how we benefit from his work by faith union with him.<sup>5</sup>

By not explaining *how* Christ's glorious work is applied to us in fully biblical categories, Anselm opens the door to distortion, which is precisely what happened in Aquinas (1224-1274). Aquinas developed Anselm's idea that Christ did a work of supererogation, which is then applied to us by several means, but most significantly, through the mediatorial role of the church *in the sacraments*. As Aquinas states, "Christ's passion [suffering] works its effect in them to whom it is applied, through faith and charity [love] and the sacraments of the faith."<sup>6</sup>

Specifically, the sacraments include baptism, which removes original sin and actual sins committed before baptism, and penance, which deals with our actual sins subsequent to baptism. In salvation, then, Christ's superabundant

work pays for our eternal punishment, but alongside his work, our actual sins are forgiven by our participation in the sacraments mediated by the church. In Aquinas, the church's role fills the vacuum left unexplained by Anselm on how Christ pays for our sin *and* how it is applied to us. In this way, as Gregg Allison notes, "Aquinas held that a human cooperation with the work of Christ is necessary. Faith, love, and the participation in the sacraments unite people to the atonement of Christ and become a necessary part of it."<sup>7</sup> In this way, the exclusivity of Christ's person is affirmed, but the sufficiency of Christ's work is compromised. Christ's work by itself is *not* sufficient; what is also necessary for our salvation is the role of the church in applying Christ's work to us through the sacraments.<sup>8</sup>

It is on *this* point that the Reformers rejected Rome's sacramentalism and unequivocally affirmed *solus Christus*. For them, Christ alone entails the confession of Christ's exclusive identity *and* his perfect, complete, and sufficient work as our mediator. In Christ alone, given *who* he is and *what* he has done as our representative and substitute, we can add nothing to his work; it is enough in its accomplishment and application to us. By God's grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone, we are complete, and nothing can separate us from God's grace in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:1-4, 28-39).

Here are a few examples of Reformation teaching over against Rome's sacramental theology stressing the *sufficiency* of Christ's work.

- *Heidelberg Catechism* Q 30: "Do such then believe in Jesus the only Saviour who seek their salvation and happiness in saints, in themselves, or anywhere else?" *Answer*: "They do not; for though they boast of him in words yet in deeds they deny Jesus the only deliverer and Saviour: for one of these two things must be true that either Jesus is not a complete Saviour or that they who by a true faith receive this Saviour must find all things in him necessary to their salvation."
- *Ulrich Zwingli*. "The First Zurich Disputation:" "We know from the Old and New Testaments of God that our only comforter, redeemer, savior and mediator with God is Jesus Christ, in whom and through whom alone we can obtain grace, help and salvation, and besides from no other being in heaven or on earth." Or, in "The 10 Conclusions of Berne (1528):" (3) "Christ is the only wisdom, righteousness, redemption, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. Hence

it is a denial of Christ when we confess another ground of salvation and satisfaction.” (6) “As Christ alone died for us, so he is also to be adored as the only Mediator and Advocate between God and the Father and the believers. Therefore it is contrary to the Word of God to propose and invoke other mediators.”

The Reformers, then, in affirming *Christ alone*, were predominantly opposing Rome’s sacramental theology that undercut and compromised Christ’s all-sufficient work. Yet, it is important to recognize that *solus Christus* also functioned to oppose other theological errors. No doubt, the Reformers chiefly opposed Rome’s sacramentalism, but they also opposed the rise of various heretical movements that advocated theological views which both Protestants and Catholics held in common with the entire Church. The seeds of these ideas and movements were sown in the Renaissance but in the Reformation era they began to bloom, and eventually they would reach their fruition in the Enlightenment era and beyond.

For example, people like Michael Servetus (1511-1553) and movements like Socinianism (16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> centuries) rejected *both* the sufficiency of Christ’s work *and* his exclusive identity. And, of course, along with this rejection of orthodox Christology, they also rejected its doctrinal entailments—the Trinity and penal substitution—along with the entirety of Christian theology. In many ways, the rise of these heretical movements was a throwback to the Patristic era where the Church had to stand against heresy and defend the biblical truth regarding the triune nature of God and the exclusive identity of Christ as God the Son incarnate.

In the end, the Reformation confession of *solus Christus* sought to counter *all* of these variant views, chiefly Rome’s sacramentalism, but also increasing errors which denied Christian orthodoxy. Yet, with the increased attacks on orthodoxy, a new era began which would demand a full-blown defense of Christian orthodoxy, something the Reformers did not have to do to the same extent. As the Enlightenment era unfolded, and as it morphed into modernism and postmodernism, the need to confess *solus Christus* shifted to a full exposition and defense of *both* Christ’s unique and exclusive person *and* his all-sufficient work. This is important to remember since the challenge of confessing *Christ alone* today is similar yet different than what the Reformers faced—a topic I now briefly address.

### CHRIST ALONE TODAY

No doubt, today, we face a similar challenge as the Reformers did, but now in a reversed order. Instead, of first responding to Rome's sacramental theology, we now must chiefly expound and defend Christ's exclusivity and uniqueness before we unpack his all-sufficient work. Obviously, these two areas are interrelated, but it is the former which requires our chief attention today which allows us to unpack and account for the latter.

What has brought about this change in focus? In the book, I recount some of this familiar intellectual history which has resulted in this change due to crucial epistemological and theological shifts which occurred in the Enlightenment to our own day. David Wells has nicely captured these shifts in *Above All Earthly Pow'rs*. Wells rightly observes that Christian theology, and specifically Christology, now occur within a twofold reality: first, "the disintegration of the Enlightenment world and its replacement by the postmodern ethos"<sup>9</sup>; second, the increase of religious pluralism. These two intellectual and cultural developments pose a number of serious challenges for *solus Christus*, the most important being the need for a defense of the uniqueness and exclusivity of Christ in a day of rampant philosophical and religious pluralism.

In addition, given our present context, it is also crucial to note that the conditions of belief in the Reformation era have been replaced by an entirely different set of *plausibility structures*. No doubt, there is nothing new under the sun, but given these shifts, it is vital to remember that the Reformation era is not the same as our own. Our culture does not begin with the basic truths of Christian theology as a given, which most did in the Reformation period. The secularization and pluralization of the West has altered the way people think, tied to entire worldview shifts.

In his magisterial work on the cognitive impact of secularization, Charles Taylor traces these epistemological changes over three distinct time periods, pivoting around the Enlightenment: before the Enlightenment, people found it impossible not to believe the Christian worldview; starting with the Enlightenment, it became possible not to believe in the basic truths of Christianity; and now 300 years after the Enlightenment and the rise of postmodern pluralism, most people find it impossible to believe in the objective truths and ultimate concerns of the Christian worldview.<sup>10</sup> What

Taylor has observed in Western thought impacts how *Christ alone* will be viewed in terms of its plausibility, credibility, and logical coherence.

One major implication is that for many, *Christ alone* is viewed as inconceivable. Lessing's old question: How could the life and death of this one man nearly 2000 years ago have universal significance and relevance for all humans? Pluralism's response is that if there is a place left for Jesus at all, it is only as another religious leader, but not as an exclusive Lord and Savior. To confess *Christ alone* today, this specific challenge must be taken seriously.

### **HOW DO WE ESTABLISH AND DEFEND SOLUS CHRISTUS TODAY?**

The answer to this question involves a number of areas. It involves the area of apologetics since a defense of Christ's exclusivity requires a full defense of the entire Christian worldview. In addition, it requires a biblical-theological exposition and defense, which is the primary goal of the book. Part of our task is to lay out the internal logic of Scripture by laying out its storyline. It is vital to demonstrate that it is not only a few individual texts that teach Christ's uniqueness and sufficiency; the entire canon teaches it. Individual texts are never isolated from the whole Bible; in fact, they only make sense within the larger storyline. In other words, Jesus does not come to us *de novo*. *Who* he is and *what* he does comes to us rooted in the Bible's storyline and presented to us in the Bible's categories and framework. Thus, a crucial part of our exposition and defense of *Christ alone* is to establish his unique identity and all-sufficient work from the entire Bible.

In fact, in the book, I contend that if we trace the Bible's storyline, through the biblical covenants, the entire Bible teaches that Jesus is *God the Son incarnate* (and thus utterly unique), and that it is *Christ alone* who does a work that no creature can do. Thus, in terms of the Bible's own presentation, Christ is *alone* precisely because of *who* he is and *what* he does and that apart from *him* and his work, there is no salvation as the Bible describes it. In the remainder of this article I can only sketch this overall argument by developing two points. First, discussion of *Christ alone* will be linked to the debate regarding how *necessary* Christ's person and work is for our salvation. Second, four foundational biblical-theological building blocks will be sketched, which help warrant and make sense of *Christ alone*.

### ***The Necessity of Christ and His Work for Our Salvation***

To speak of *Christ alone* requires some kind of *necessity* to God's plan of salvation. In theology, "necessity" is a tricky concept. Our immediate task, then, is to define *in what way* Christ is necessary such that there can be no salvation apart from him.

In historical theology, to talk of the necessity of Christ and his work is fairly common. For example, Anselm begins his famous, *Why God Become Man?* with these words: "By what logic or necessity did God become man, and by his death, as we believe and profess, restore life to the world, when he could have done this through the agency of some other, angelic or human, or simply by willing it?"<sup>11</sup> As Anselm practices a "faith seeking understanding" by wrestling with the *why* of the incarnation and the cross, the question of necessity naturally arises. Was the incarnation and the cross merely *one* of God's chosen ways to save us, or was it the *only* way? Could the triune God, in his omniscience, planned another way to save fallen creatures? Or was Christ the *only* way? This is the question of necessity. Walking in the footsteps of Anselm, John Murray also stresses the importance of Christ's necessity: "To evade [questions of necessity] is to miss something that is central in the interpretation of the redeeming work of Christ and to miss the vision of some of its essential glory. Why did God become man? Why, having become man, did he die? Why, having died, did he die the accursed death of the cross?"<sup>12</sup>

These questions demand some kind of explanation, especially in warranting and establishing *Christ alone*. Why is Christ the unique, exclusive, and all-sufficient Savior? Scripture answers: because *he* is the *only* one who can meet our need, accomplish all of God's sovereign purposes, and save us from our sin. Christ and his work are necessary to redeem us, and apart from him there is no salvation. But what exactly is the nature of this necessity? Since there are a range of options, we can first reject the extremes and then focus on the remaining two possibilities.

On one end of the necessity issue, some argue that our salvation does *not* require the incarnation and work of Christ. In what I will label *optionalism*, God is able to forgive our sin apart from any specific kind of Savior and his satisfying God's righteous and holy demand. In the Reformation era and beyond, this view is found in Socinianism, various forms of liberalism, and current religious pluralism. In all of its forms, optionalism argues that God's justice is a non-retributive, voluntary exercise of his will uncoupled from his nature.

God is simply under no necessity to punish sin in order to forgive us. Yet on the other extreme, *fatalism* argues that God is under an external necessity to act as he does in salvation. This view removes our salvation in general and the entire Christ event in particular from the sovereign freedom of God. He is bound not by his own divine nature and character but by some standard external to God. The standard for God's actions is not God himself. Both extremes, however, err in the same way. Optionalism and fatalism both fail to understand the nature of God and the biblical presentation of his plan of salvation in Christ.

Within historic orthodox theology, two options remain: *hypothetical* necessity and *consequent absolute* necessity. Throughout church history, many fine theologians have affirmed the hypothetical necessity of Christ and his work for our salvation.<sup>13</sup> This view argues that Christ is necessary because God in fact decreed that salvation would come through Christ as the most "fitting" means to his chosen ends. But this necessity is hypothetical because God could have chosen some other way of salvation.<sup>14</sup> The other orthodox option is consequent absolute necessity, the view favored in post-Reformation theology.<sup>15</sup> This view argues that *consequent* to God's sovereign, free, and gracious choice to save us, it was *absolutely necessary* that God save us in Christ alone. There was no Christless and crossless way of salvation after God made the free decision to save sinners. Obviously, the absolute sense of necessity is stronger than the hypothetical sense because the view of consequent absolute necessity claims that while God was not obliged to redeem sinners, once he did decide to redeem us there is no possible world in which that redemption could be accomplished apart from Christ.

Historic Christianity has affirmed both of these views of necessity, so this is not a matter of orthodoxy. Yet hypothetical necessity appears to have more fundamental problems because it seems to assume that there is nothing about God's nature that makes his forgiveness of our sins depend upon a representative substitute, sacrifice, and covenant mediator who works on our behalf. This understanding focuses exclusively on God's sovereignty, simply positing that in such freedom God could have chosen other ways of salvation. In contrast, the consequent absolute necessity of Christ arises from the perfections of God's own nature. This view understands that the inherent holiness and justice of God are not limits on his freedom but the nature in which God acts perfectly within his freedom.

While both views of necessity are orthodox which is more biblical? This

is an important question because it recognizes that within orthodox Christology, some views make better sense of the biblical teaching than others. The best way to answer the question is to let Scripture speak for itself. As we think through the foundational building blocks of the Bible's storyline, I will argue for consequent absolute necessity: Christ and his work is not merely one way to save us among a number of possible options, it is the only way. Let us now turn to some of these crucial building blocks which not only warrant and establish Christ alone but also point in the direction of the *absolute necessity* of Christ and his work.

### ***Foundational Building Blocks From the Bible's Storyline Establishing Christ Alone***

#### *1. God as the Triune Creator-Covenant Lord*

To establish *Christ alone* biblically, we must first begin with the identity of the God of Scripture. Scripture begins with God creating the world out of nothing and continues with God relating to his creation according to his own character, will, and power. Who God is, then, shapes the entire course of human history and gives unity, meaning, and significance to all of its parts.

Who is the God of Scripture? In a summary way, we can say that he is the triune Creator-Covenant Lord.<sup>16</sup> From the opening verses of Scripture, God is presented as the uncreated, independent, self-existent, self-sufficient, all-powerful Lord who created the universe and governs it by his word (Genesis 1-2; Ps 50:12-14; 93:2; Acts 17:24-25). And this fact gives rise to the governing category at the center of Christian theology: the Creator-creature distinction. God alone is God; all else is creation that depends upon God for its existence. But the transcendent lordship of God (Ps 7:17; 9:2; 21:7; 97:9; 1 Kings 8:27; Isa 6:1; Rev 4:3) does not entail the remote and impersonal deity of deism or a God uninvolved in human history. Scripture stresses that God is transcendent *and* immanent with his creation. As Creator, God is also the Covenant Lord who is fully present in this world and intimately involved with his creatures: he freely, sovereignly, and purposefully sustains and governs all things to their eternally-planned end (Ps 139:1-10; Acts 17:28; Eph 1:11; 4:6). And yet this immanent lordship does not entail panentheism, which undercuts the Creator-creature distinction of Scripture. Even though God is deeply involved with his world, he is not part of it or developing with it.

As Creator and Covenant Lord, rather, God sovereignly rules over his creation perfectly and personally.<sup>17</sup> He rules with perfect power, knowledge, and righteousness (Ps 9:8; 33:5; 139:1-4, 16; Isa 46:9-11; Acts 4:27-28; Rom 11:33-36) as the only being who is truly independent and self-sufficient. And in this rule, God loves, hates, commands, comforts, punishes, rewards, destroys, and strengthens, all according to the personal, covenant relationships that he establishes with his creation. God is never presented as some mere abstract concept or impersonal force. Indeed, as we move through redemptive-history, God discloses himself as tri-personal, a being-in-relation, a unity of three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. In short, as the Creator-Covenant triune Lord, God acts in, with, and through his creatures to accomplish all he desires to do in the way he desires to do it.

Scripture also presents this one Creator-Covenant Lord as the Holy One over all his creation (Gen 2:1-3; Ex 3:2-5; Lev 11:44; Isa 6:1-3; 57:15; cf. Rom 1:18-23). The common understanding for the meaning of holiness is “set apart,” but holiness conveys much more than God’s distinctness and transcendence.<sup>18</sup> God’s holiness is particularly associated with his aseity, sovereignty, and glorious majesty.<sup>19</sup> As the one who is Lord over all, he is exalted, self-sufficient, and self-determined both metaphysically and morally. God is thus *categorically different in nature and existence* from everything he has made. He cannot be compared with the “gods” of the nations or be judged by human standards. God alone is holy in himself; God alone is God. Furthermore, intimately tied to God’s holiness in the metaphysical sense is God’s personal-moral purity and perfection. He is “too pure to behold evil” and unable to tolerate wrong (Hab 1:12-13; cf. Isa 1:4-20; 35:8). God must act with holy justice when his people rebel against him; yet he is the God who loves his people with a holy love (Hos 11:9), for he is the God of “covenant faithfulness” (*hesed*). Often divine holiness and love are set against each other, but Scripture never presents them at odds. We not only see this taught in the OT, but the NT, while maintaining God’s complete holiness (Rev 4:8), it also affirms in 1 John 4:8 that “God is love.” But it is important to note, in light of who God is, an incredible tension results in how God will simultaneously demonstrate his holy justice and covenant love, which is only truly resolved in Christ and his work. It is the Son incarnate alone, who becomes our propitiatory sacrifice and reconciles divine justice and grace in his cross, who alone saves (Rom 3:21-26).<sup>20</sup>

This brief description of God's identity is the first crucial building block that grounds Christ's identity and provides the warrant to *Christ alone*. God's identity as the holy triune Creator-Covenant Lord gives a particular theistic shape to Scripture's storyline and framework, and in turn, it is this interpretive framework which gives the specific theistic shape to Christ's identity. To help make this point, we can quickly consider three specific examples.

First, the *triunity of God* shapes the identity of Christ. Jesus views himself as the eternal Son who even after adding to himself a human nature continues to relate to the Father and Spirit (John 1:1, 14). But it is precisely his identity as *the eternal Son* that gives the Jesus of history his exclusive identity. In fact, it is because he is the divine Son that his life and death has universal significance for all of humanity and the rest of creation. Moreover, Jesus' work cannot be understood apart from Trinitarian relations. It is the Son and not the Father or the Spirit who becomes flesh. The Father sends the Son, the Spirit attends his union with human nature, and the Son bears our sin and the Father's wrath as a man in the power of the Spirit. And yet, as God the Son, Jesus Christ lived and died in unbroken unity with the Father and Spirit because they share the same identical divine nature. Christ is not a third party acting independently of the other two divine persons. At the cross, then, we do not see three parties but only two: the triune God and humanity. The cross is a demonstration of the Father's love (John 3:16) by the gift of his Son.<sup>21</sup>

Second, the *covenantal character* of the triune God shapes the identity of Christ. Here we are not first thinking about the biblical covenants unfolded in history, but what Reformed theologians have called the "covenant of redemption."<sup>22</sup> Scripture teaches that God had a plan of salvation before the foundation of the world (e.g., Ps 139:16; Isa 22:11; Eph 1:4; 3:11; 2 Tim 1:9; 1 Pet 1:20). In that plan, the divine Son, in relation to the Father and Spirit, is appointed as the mediator of his people. And the Son gladly and voluntarily accepts this appointment with its covenant stipulations and promises that are then worked out in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. This eternal plan establishes Christ as Mediator, defines the nature of his mediation, and assigns specific roles to each person of the Godhead. None of the triune persons are pitted against each other in the plan of redemption. All three persons equally share the same nature and act inseparably according to their mode of subsistence—*as Father, as Son, and as Spirit*. Finally, the

covenant of redemption provides for our covenantal union with Christ as our mediator and representative substitute. The work of Christ as God the Son incarnate, then, is the specific covenantal work designed by the Father, Son, and Spirit to accomplish our eternal redemption.

Third, the *lordship* of the triune covenant God shapes the identity of Christ. As noted, Scripture begins with the declaration that God is the Creator and sovereign King of the universe. He alone is the Lord who is uncreated and self-sufficient and thus in need of nothing outside himself (Ps 50:12-14; 93:2; Acts 17:24-25). And as the Lord, he chooses to enter into covenant relationships with his creatures through the first man, Adam. As the Lord he demands from his image-bearers a complete loyalty and perfect obedience, a point we will return to below.

In thinking of God's Lordship, the word which beautifully captures the sense of God's self-sufficiency and independence is *aseity*, literally, "life from himself." But, as John Frame reminds us, we must not think of aseity merely in terms of God's self-existence since aseity is more than a metaphysical attribute; it also applies to epistemological and ethical categories. As Frame notes, "God is not only self-existent, but also self-attesting and self-justifying. He not only exists without receiving existence from something else, but also gains his knowledge only from himself (his nature and his plan) and serves as his own criterion of truth. And his righteousness is self-justifying, based on the righteousness of his own nature and on his status as the ultimate criterion of rightness."<sup>23</sup>

Why is this crucial to stress, especially for correctly identifying Christ and his work? Because it is within this conception of God that Jesus is placed, and especially the emphasis on God as the moral, just standard of the universe. Repeatedly, the triune God is identified as the holy One, the Judge and the King. As the divine king, Yahweh is the just judge, able to enforce his judgments by his power (see Deut 32:4). Abraham pleads God's justice as he intercedes for Sodom. Abraham's appeal binds God to absolute standards of justice—God's own standards: he is the supreme and universal judge. In this important way, the Bible grounds the concept of a moral universe in the nature of God himself, which is crucial to grasp if we are to make sense of human sin before God, and the tension sin creates *for God*, if he chooses to forgive our sin and remain true to himself as the Judge of all the earth (Gen 18:25).

Today, this point is especially significant in light of the “New Perspective on Paul.”<sup>24</sup> Although this view is diverse, it unites in linking “righteousness” and “justice” to the concept of “covenant faithfulness,” that is, God is righteous in that he keeps his promises to save. No doubt, there is much truth in this: God’s faithfulness means that he will keep his word. Specifically, he will keep his promises to his people and he will execute justice for them, and act to save them. Yet, if this is all that God’s righteousness is, it is too reductionistic. At its heart, it fails first to see that in Scripture, “righteousness-justice-holiness” is tied to the nature and character of God, which entails that God’s faithfulness also means that he will punish wrong. It is this latter emphasis which grounds the biblical concept of God’s retributive justice, which many today simply dismiss as a Western construct of law.

But this will not do. If we are rightly thinking of God’s aseity in relation to his moral character, Scripture views God’s holiness, justice, and righteousness as reflective of God’s very nature. And furthermore, as we will develop below, it is such an understanding of God’s moral character that, in light of sin, creates a huge tension regarding how God will forgive sin. Precisely because of *who* God is as the moral standard of the universe, sin against *him* requires or, even stronger, *necessitates* for *him* to judge and punish sin and to stand against it in his holy wrath. Ultimately, in Scripture, death is viewed as the wages of sin (Rom 6:23) and it is a penal suffering, which, as the Bible’s storyline unfolds, either we pay or Christ pays in our place. But such an understanding of Christ and his work makes no sense apart from being viewed in light of God’s identity, and conversely, God’s identity helps us rightly grasp Christ’s identity and work.

## 2. *The Requirement of Covenantal Obedience*

At the heart of God’s complex relationship with humanity lies the concept of covenantal obedience. Simply put, it is the demand of God and the joy of human beings to maintain a relationship of love and loyalty. To understand who Christ is and what he does in his new covenant ministry, we must go back to the Edenic roots of the creation covenant between God and man. We need to trace the Bible’s interpretive link between the charge and curse of the first Adam to understand the coming and crucifixion of the last Adam.

The biblical storyline divides the entire human race and every person in it under two representative heads: the first Adam and the last Adam. In the

beginning of time, God created the first 'ādām from the earth; in the fullness of time, God sent his Son from heaven to become the last 'ādām on the earth (Rom 5:14). God covenanted with the first Adam as the head of the human race to spread the image of God in humanity over the whole earth. This Adam's headship then had a deeper privilege than ordinary fatherhood. It also had the dignity of defining what it means to be human: a son of God and his true image-bearer. Yet the first Adam would fail in his headship over humanity, thereby creating the necessity for a final Adam who would prevail in his headship over a new humanity. But if we pursue the necessity for a new Adam too quickly, we will miss an important clue to his identity.

The second major piece to the puzzle of Christ's identity is that God requires covenant obedience from humanity. This requirement flows from God's own identity and becomes apparent in his charge to Adam and in his curse following the rebellion of his first vice-regent. As Creator-Covenant Lord, God requires perfect loyalty and obedience as the only proper and permissible way to live in covenant with him. Also, the Lord created and covenanted with Adam for the purpose of bearing God's image in human dominion over creation. Adam was called to rule over creation under God's rule in obedience to his commands and ways of righteousness. Yet, it is precisely at this point that Adam fails to the ruin of the entire human race.

We can look at the two trees of Eden to see the inherent nature of this requirement for covenantal obedience. When the Creator-Covenant Lord placed Adam in the garden, he gave the man two trees in particular to guide him into the joy of covenantal obedience. The first tree in the midst of the garden held forth the conditional promise of eternal life.<sup>25</sup> The promise is not explicit, but it is clearly implied when God expels Adam from Eden *so that* he could not "take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever" (Gen 3:22). The tree of life was placed before Adam as a sign of his reward for obedience under God's blessing to fill the earth with God's image. But Adam rejected this reward of the first tree by eating from the second tree. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil came with a clear prohibition against eating its fruit under penalty of death. This tree of death, then, was placed before Adam as a test of his willingness to rule under God and in obedience to his word and ways. Adam was to fill the earth from within the abundant provision of Eden through an abundant heritage trained in the righteousness of the Lord. But with ruinous effect, Adam disobeyed God

in an attempt to rule without God by becoming “like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5).

This glimpse back into Eden shows us how the requirement of covenantal obedience shapes the Bible’s storyline to help present us with Christ’s identity. The historical drama of the two trees and Adam’s charge and curse dramatically illustrate that covenant loyalty lies at the heart of the relationship between God and man. It is generally true that where the first Adam failed, the last Adam must prevail for our salvation. More specifically, we can now say that as the last Adam, the Christ must be someone who can walk in complete covenantal obedience with the Creator-Covenant Lord to spread his glorious image over the earth.

This particular covenantal framework establishes the person and work of Christ in representative, legal, and substitutionary terms (Rom 5:12-21). To undo, reverse, and pay for the first Adam’s sin, the last Adam will indeed be a “seed of the woman” (Gen 3:15), but this time one who will render the required covenantal obedience. By his obedience, the Christ will demonstrate what a true image-bearer is supposed to be: a loving, faithful, loyal, and obedient Son of God. Yet, as we will see below, the reversal of Adam’s sin and all of its disastrous effects will require more than a demonstration of true humanity; it will require a representative substitute who will pay the penalty for our sin and give us his righteousness, thereby reconciling us to God. Ultimately, to reverse the effects of sin, a divine Son, a greater Adam, will be needed because he is the only one who can also satisfy God’s own moral demand against us. It is in this covenantal context that the rationale for why the Son *must* become incarnate and do the kind of work he does, is placed. Yet to make sense fully of *why* it is Christ alone who can do this work, we must add a third piece to the puzzle.

### 3. *Human Sin and Divine Forgiveness*

With just two of the major building blocks to the puzzle of Christ’s identity, we have already seen the ultimate purpose of God in his relationship with the human race. The triune Creator-Covenant Lord of the universe has determined to display his glory in the world through a humanity that bears his image by walking with God in peace and covenantal obedience. But what happens when humanity rebels against God and fails to bear the image of his righteousness? Can the divine purpose still be accomplished? Must God

choose between covenant peace and covenant obedience? Is covenant peace with God even possible without covenantal obedience? More specifically, can God tolerate sin? And if not, how can God forgive sin against him?

In the Bible's storyline, the importance of Genesis 3 is incalculable. Not only does it describe how, in history, sin and evil entered the human race, and thus the desperate nature of human depravity, which *God alone* can remedy. It also gives us God's initial promise of redemption—a promise that takes on greater clarity and expansion in the subsequent biblical covenants. Let us highlight both of these emphases, and especially the tension that is created by them and how the rationale for the necessity of Christ and his work is further established.

First, let us think about the nature of human sin. Scripture, from beginning to end, takes the reality of sin seriously. In moving from Genesis 1-2, we see how quickly humans move from a "very good" world (Gen 1:31) to an abnormal and cursed one (Gen 3:14-24), one now under God's judgment and the sentence of death. Adam, as our covenant representative, disobeyed the direct command of God (Gen 2:17), and willfully rebelled against his Creator-Covenant Lord, thus turning the created order upside down. In choosing to worship and serve created things rather than the Creator, the human race is now under the sentence of death (Rom 6:23). But worse than the terrible results of sin on humans, we, who were made to know, love, and serve God, are now enemies of God, living under his judgment and wrath, and no longer in a living relationship with him. As Genesis 3 unfolds, the punishment of sin is described in diverse ways, but in the end, it results in spiritual death before God (Rom 8:7; Eph 2:1-3; 4:17-19), culminating in our physical death. This is graphically portrayed in Eden by God casting Adam and Eve from his covenantal presence and blocking their access to the tree of life, which later culminated in the sad refrain of Genesis 5—"and they died."

There is also no doubt that Adam's representative sin is passed on to the entire human race. Genesis 4 recounts the murder among Adam's children, the genealogical record speaks of everyone's death (Genesis 5), followed by God's judgment of sin in the flood (Genesis 6-9), and it only gets worse as the storyline of Scripture provides ample confirmation to Paul's sweeping statement: "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Given the nature of sin and the human problem, Scripture is clear that the only way back to Eden, or the only way to reverse the effects of sin

is death, is if God takes the initiative to save, provide, and rescue us from our helpless estate. Ultimately, the only hope for Adam's helpless race is found in another Adam, the last Adam, who, unlike the first Adam and the entire human race, obeys, and who accomplishes in his life, death, and resurrection our redemption and justification. In fact, that is the significance of the initial promise of salvation in Genesis 3:15, to which we now turn.

Second, Genesis 3 also gives us God's initial promise of redemption—a promise which drives the entire storyline of Scripture and ultimately leads us to Christ. Instead of God leaving us to ourselves and swiftly bringing full judgment upon us, he acts in sovereign grace, choosing to save a people for himself and to reverse the manifold effects of sin.<sup>26</sup> This choice to save is evident in the *protevangelium* (Gen 3:15), given immediately after the fall to reverse the disastrous effects of sin upon the world through a coming deliverer. This promise, in embryonic form, anticipates the coming of a Redeemer, the “seed of the woman,” who though wounded himself in conflict, will destroy the works of Satan and restore goodness to this world. This promise creates the expectation that when it is finally realized, all sin and death will be defeated and the fullness of God's saving reign will come to this world as God's rightful rule is acknowledged and embraced.

But how will this come about? By an act of power or deliverance? By a human example? As Scripture unfolds, it becomes clear that to restore the creation, to destroy death, to reverse the effects of sin, to make us right before the triune Creator-Covenant Lord, something more than a power encounter is needed, or even some kind of suffering which upholds the moral governance of the universe. Instead, what is needed is a substitute, who stands representatively and legally in my place. One who will obey perfectly as we ought *and* who bears my sin and guilt before God by propitiating divine wrath and satisfying God's righteous moral demand against me.

Why is this so? Because of *who* God is and what Stott calls the “problem of forgiveness.”<sup>27</sup> What is this problem? It is collision course of bringing together God, in all of his holiness, moral purity, and justice, and sin. Since God is, *a se*, holy and personal, he must punish sin; he cannot overlook it, nor can he relax the retributive demands of his justice, since to do so, would be to deny himself. That is why Scripture repeatedly emphasizes that our sin and God's holiness are incompatible. God's holiness exposes our sin, and it must ultimately be dealt with.<sup>28</sup> Also, closely related to God's holiness is

his wrath, i.e., his holy reaction to sin. Scripture speaks of God's wrath in high-intensity language, and it is vital to note that a substantial part of the Bible's storyline turns on it. No doubt, God is forbearing and gracious, yet he is also holy and just.<sup>29</sup> Where there is sin, the holy God *must* confront it and bring it to judgment, especially given the fact that sin is not first against an external order outside of God; it is against God.

Now it is precisely this *necessity* of God to judge human sin which creates a severe *tension* in the biblical storyline and the covenantal relationship. God has promised to redeem us and be our covenant Lord who is present with us, but how will he do so? Two necessities are in collision: the punishment of sinful humanity and the forgiveness of sinful humanity to fulfill God's creation plan. How can God save us and satisfy himself simultaneously? Or, how can God who is righteous forgive sinners he created to be righteous and be both "just and the justifier" (Rom 3:25-26)? How can he initiate in his love and grace to save yet remain just and holy in his forgiving our sin? Ultimately, in order for God to forgive, he must first satisfy himself.

As we fast-forward redemptive history, Scripture's answer to this problem is that *the triune God himself* must solve the problem, given that the problem of forgiveness is *intrinsic* to him. In fact, God himself—the Creator-Covenant Lord—will have to take upon himself the initiative to save; he will have to act in perfect justice consistent with his own righteous requirements, yet also simultaneously demonstrate his amazing grace. If there is going to be a solution at all, *God alone must act to satisfy his own righteous demands*. This is why the problem of forgiveness *necessitates* not only a substitute for us, but a specific kind of substitute—a *divine* substitute. And this is precisely what God has done in Christ—the divine Son who has become flesh. In Christ, God the Son incarnate, the problem of forgiveness is solved. Ultimately, it is this reason *why* it is *Christ alone* in his person and work. Our sin before God is of such a nature that only one person—the divine Son incarnate—can represent us as a man, and pay for our sin as God, and thus satisfy perfectly and completely *God's own demand*.

In current discussions of the cross, it is *this* problem of forgiveness that people often miss. For example, in recent criticisms of penal substitution and denials of the absolute necessity of Christ's person and work for our salvation, the impression is given that God can simply forgive sin without the full satisfaction of his own holy, righteous, and just character. Joel Green

and Mark Baker seem to think this. In their discussion of Charles Hodge, a proponent of penal substitution, they give the impression that they reject a view of God who must be true to his own holy character and thus judge sin. They state in relation to Hodge, “Within his penal substitution model, God’s ability to love and relate to humans is circumscribed by something outside of God—that is, an abstract concept of justice instructs God as to how God must behave.”<sup>30</sup> They state further: “It could be said that Hodge presents God who wants to be in relationship with us but is forced to deal with a problem of legal bookkeeping that blocks that relationship. The solution is having God the Father punish God the Son.”<sup>31</sup> They intensify this criticism by appealing to Robin Collins who wants to ridicule the substitutionary view by trying to insert it into the story of the prodigal son. Quoting Collins, they write: “When the son returns and recognizes the error of his ways, Collins has the Father respond, “I cannot simply forgive you ... it would be against the moral order of the entire universe ... Such is the severity of my justice that reconciliation will not be made unless the penalty is utterly paid. My wrath—my avenging justice—must be placated.”<sup>32</sup> And remarkably, they think that it is instructive that Jesus pronounces forgiveness to the paralytic in Mark 2 “without reference to the sacrifice of any animal and without reference to his own, still-future death (Mk 2:1-12).”<sup>33</sup>

What are we to make of these statements? Can God simply forgive sin without atonement? In what sense is the cross *necessary* for our salvation? And what is the relationship between sin, punishment, law, and God? If we follow the Bible’s storyline and link together the three pieces of the puzzle so far, we must conclude that there is a major tension between God and human sin—a tension which *necessitates* a unique and exclusive Savior and an all-sufficient work. In fact, this point is reinforced as we turn to the last piece of the puzzle, which further underscores the necessity of *Christ alone*.

#### 4. *God Himself Saves through His Obedient Son*

Just as human sin and divine forgiveness bring tension into the biblical storyline, so its resolution raises the question of just *who* it is that will save humans and establish God’s kingdom, i.e., his saving rule and reign on earth. The covenantal development up to this point shows that (1) God will forgive the sins of his people by punishing a substitute for them, and (2) God will establish his kingdom through the rule of a righteous man over the earth when

none can be found on the earth. So who is able to bear the sins of others, forgiven the sins of others, and rule over the world in perfect obedience to God while simultaneously establishing the rule of God himself? When the fourth major piece of our puzzle comes into place, the answer becomes clear: *Christ alone* as God the Son incarnate.

This point is demonstrated in the unfolding of God's plan through the biblical covenants, which gives greater definition and clarity to God's initial promise (Gen 3:15). As God's plan unfolds, we see *who* and *how* God will save us and *why* Christ and his work are absolutely necessary. I will develop this last point in three steps.

First, as God's plan unfolds across time and as God enters into covenant relations with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David, step by step, God, by his mighty acts and words, prepares his people to anticipate the coming of the "seed of the women," the deliverer, the Messiah. A Messiah who, when he comes, will *fulfill* all of God's promises by ushering in God's saving rule to this world. This point is vital for establishing the identity of the Messiah, especially the truth that this Messiah is more than a mere man; he is the divine Son incarnate. On the one hand, Scripture teaches that the fulfillment of God's promises will be accomplished *through a man* as developed by various typological persons such as Adam, Moses, Israel, and David, all seen in terms of the covenants. On the other hand, Scripture also teaches that this Messiah is more than a mere man since he is *identified with God*. How so? Because in fulfilling God's promises he literally inaugurates *God's* saving rule and shares the very throne of God—something no mere human can do—which entails that his identity is directly tied to the one true and living God.<sup>34</sup> This observation is further underscored by the next point which brings together the establishment of God's kingdom through the inauguration of the new covenant.

Second, how does God's kingdom come in its *saving/redemptive/new creation* sense? As the OT unfolds, God's saving kingdom is revealed and comes to this world, at least in anticipatory form, through the biblical covenants and covenant mediators—Adam, Noah, Abraham and his seed centered in the nation of Israel, and most significantly through David and his sons. Yet, in the OT, it is clear that all of the covenant mediators (sons) fail and do not fulfill God's promises. This is specifically evident in the Davidic kings who are "sons" to Yahweh, the representatives of Israel, and thus "little Adams," but

they fail in their task. It is only when a true obedient son comes, a son which God himself provides that God's rule finally and completely is established and his promises are realized. This is why, in OT expectation, ultimately the arrival of God's kingdom is linked to the dawning of the new covenant. This is also why when one reads the Gospels, one is struck by the fact that the kingdom of God is so central to Jesus' life and teaching; he cannot be understood apart from it. But note: in biblical thought one cannot think of the inauguration of the kingdom apart from the arrival of the new covenant.

In this regard, Jeremiah 31 is probably the most famous new covenant text in the OT, even though teaching on the new covenant is not limited to it. New covenant teaching is also found in the language of "everlasting covenant" and the prophetic anticipation of the coming of the new creation, the Spirit, and God's saving work among the nations. In fact, among the post-exilic prophets there is an expectation that the new covenant will have a purpose similar to the Mosaic covenant, i.e., to bring the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant back into the present experience of Israel and the nations, yet there is also an expectation of some massive differences from the old, all of which are outlined in Jeremiah 31. Probably what is most *new* about the new covenant is the promise of complete forgiveness of sin (Jer 31:34). In the OT, forgiveness of sin is normally granted through the sacrificial system. However, the OT believer, if spiritually perceptive, knew that this was never enough, as evidenced by the repetitive nature of the system. But now Jeremiah announces that sin will be "remembered no more," which certainly entails that sin finally will be dealt with in full. Ultimately, especially when other texts are considered, the OT anticipates a perfect, unfettered fellowship of God's people with the Lord, a harmony restored between creation and God—a new creation and a new Jerusalem—where the dwelling of God is with men (see Ezek 37:1-23; cf. Dan 12:2; Isa 25:6-9; Rev 21:3-4). That is why it is with the arrival of the new covenant age that we also have God's saving kingdom brought to this world, which is precisely the fulfillment of the *protevangelium*.

Third, let us now take the Bible's basic covenantal storyline and see how it identifies who Christ is and establishes *why* he is unique and necessary. If we step back for a moment and ask—*Who* is able, or what kind of person is able to fulfill all of God's promises, inaugurate his saving rule in this world, and to establish all that is associated with the new covenant including the

full forgiveness of sin?—in biblical thought the answer is clear: it is *God alone* who can do it. Is this not the message of the OT? As the centuries trace Israel's history, it becomes evident that the Lord *alone* must act to accomplish his promises; *he* must initiate in order to save; *he* must *unilaterally* act if there is going to be redemption at all. After all, who ultimately can achieve the forgiveness of sin other than God alone? Who can usher in the new creation, final judgment, and salvation? Certainly none of these great realities will arrive by the previous covenant mediators since they have all, in different ways, failed. Nor will it come through Israel as a nation for her sin has brought about her exile and judgment. If there is to be salvation at all, God *himself* must come and usher in salvation and execute judgment; the arm of the Lord must be revealed (Isa 51:9; 52:10; 53:1; 59:16-17; cf. Ezek 34). Just as God once led Israel through the desert, so he must come again, bringing about a new exodus to bring salvation to his people (Isa 40:3-5).<sup>35</sup>

However, as the biblical covenants establish, alongside the emphasis that God *himself* must come to redeem, the OT also stresses that the Lord will do so *through* another David, a human figure, but a human figure who is also closely identified with Yahweh himself. Isaiah pictures this well. This king to come will sit on David's throne (Isa 9:7) but he will also bear the very titles and names of God (Isa 9:6). This King, though another David (Isa 11:1), is also David's Lord who shares in the divine rule (Ps 110:1; cf. Matt 22:41-46). He will be the mediator of a new covenant; he will perfectly obey and act like the Lord (Isa 11:1-5), yet he will suffer for our sin in order to justify many (Isa 53:11). It is through him that forgiveness will come for he is, "The LORD our righteousness" (Jer 23:5-6). In this way, OT hope and expectation, which is grounded in the coming of Yahweh to save, is joined together with the coming of the Messiah, one who is fully human yet also one who bears the divine name (Isa 9:6-7; Ezek 34).

This covenantal storyline serves as the framework and background to the NT's presentation of Jesus, and it teaches that Christ and his work are utterly unique. *Who* is Jesus? According to Scripture, *he* is the one who inaugurates *God's* kingdom and new covenant age. In him, the full forgiveness of sin is achieved; in him, the eschatological Spirit is poured out, the new creation dawns, and all of God's promises are fulfilled. But, in light of the OT teaching, *who* can do it? Scripture gives one answer: The only one who can accomplish such a task is the one who is both the LORD *and* the obedient Son, which

is precisely how the NT presents our Lord Jesus.

The NT clearly teaches that this *human* Jesus is also the LORD since he alone ushers in *God's* kingdom. He is the eternal Son in relation to his Father (see Matt 11:1-15; 12:41-42; 13:16-17; Luke 7:18-22; 10:23-24; cf. John 1:1-3; 17:3), yet the one who has taken on our flesh and lived and died for us to redeem us (John 1:14-18). In him, as fully human, the glory and radiance of God is completely expressed since he is the exact image and representation of the Father (Heb 1:3; cf. Col 1:15-17; 2:9). In him, all the biblical covenants have reached their *telos*, terminus, and fulfillment, and by his cross work, he has inaugurated the new covenant and all of its entailments. But it is crucial to point out: to say that he has done all of this is to identify him *as God the Son incarnate*, fully God and fully man, who does a work that is enough.

For this reason, Jesus is in a category entirely different from any created thing. To turn Lessing's on his head: Jesus is the historical particular who has universal significance for all humanity because of *who* he is as the divine Son incarnate. In fact, Scripture so identifies him with Yahweh in all of his actions, character, and work that he is viewed, as David Wells reminds us, as "the agent, the instrument, and the personifier of God's sovereign, eternal, saving rule."<sup>36</sup> In Jesus Christ, we see all of God's plans and purposes fulfilled; we see the resolution of God to take upon himself our guilt and sin in order to reverse the horrible effects of the fall and to satisfy his own righteous requirements, to make this world right, and to inaugurate a new covenant in his blood. In Jesus Christ, we see the perfectly obedient Son, who is identified as the Lord, taking the initiative to keep his covenant-promises by taking upon our human flesh, veiling his glory, and winning for us our redemption. In him we see two major OT eschatological expectations unite: he is the sovereign Lord who comes to rescue and save his people, who is simultaneously David's greater Son. In this way, our Lord Jesus Christ fulfills all the types and shadows of the OT, and as the divine Son, is identified with the Father and God-equal to him. The biblical covenants as developed along the Bible's own storyline beautifully identify who Jesus is, and provide the biblical warrant for his unique identity and work.

In fact, the primary message of the covenants is this: unless *God himself* acts to accomplish his promises, we have no salvation. After all, *who* ultimately can remedy his own divine problem of forgiveness other than *God*? If there

is to be salvation at all, the triune God himself must save, which is what he has done in and through the incarnate Son. The Son is absolutely necessary to act as our new covenant representative and substitute, and apart from *him* there is no salvation.

It on these basic building blocks, that *Christ alone* is established. In the book I develop this point more, but I finish here with this conclusion: it is only Christ, in his exclusive identity and all-sufficient work, that all of God's plans and purposes are fulfilled. In Christ alone, we see the resolution of God to take upon himself our guilt and sin to reverse the horrible effects of the fall and to satisfy his own righteous requirements, to make this world right, and to inaugurate a new covenant in his blood. In Christ and him alone, is our glory! To think anything less of him is to rob him of his glory and to rob us of the Redeemer we need. Before the triune God, we need a Redeemer who can save us completely, fully pay for our sin, stand *for us* as our representative substitute, secure the Spirit's work, and fulfill perfectly God's salvation plan.

But the truth is, we only appreciate this glorious truth, when, by God's grace, we come to realize our own lostness and sin before God. Our greatest need as humans is to be reconciled and justified before the holy, righteous and just Judge. This is something our secular, postmodern era does not understand given its rejection and substitution of Christian truth for false worldviews. But to understand the biblical Jesus correctly we must know something of our own guilt before God and why we need the kind of Redeemer Scripture presents him to be. For it is not until we know ourselves to be lost, under the sentence of death, and condemned before God, that we can even appreciate and rejoice in a divine-human Redeemer who can meet our every need. Once we see ourselves as fallen rebels against God, we gladly rejoice in Christ Jesus. Once again, Wells gets it right: "[T]o understand Christ aright, we must also know something about our own guilt. We must know ourselves to be sinners . . . The New Testament, after all, was not written for the curious, for historians, or even for biblical scholars, but for those, in all ages and cultures, who want to be forgiven and to know God."<sup>37</sup> Unless this is a reality in our lives, it should not surprise us that we, or anyone else, will be baffled by the biblical Jesus and not acknowledge or appreciate the truth and glory in *solus Christus*.

- 1 This article is adapted from a paper presented at The Southern Seminary Theology Conference on September 24-25, 2015 at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY. It is taken from chapters in Stephen J. Wellum, *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior: What the Reformers Taught and Why It Still Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017).
- 2 Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 274.
- 3 Timothy George, *The Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1998), 219.
- 4 Anselm, *Why God Became Man?* in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, Oxford World's Classics, intro. and ed., Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- 5 See George, *The Theology of the Reformers*, 221-222, who makes this point. For example, in Calvin, there is a strong emphasis on Christ's active and passive obedience for us (see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960] 2.16.5).
- 6 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, reprint, 1981), pt. 3, q. 49, art. 3.
- 7 Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 398.
- 8 See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, pt. 3, q. 61, art. 1.
- 9 David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 5.
- 10 See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).
- 11 Anselm, *Why God Became Man?* I:1.
- 12 John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1955), 11.
- 13 Notable advocates include Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Hugo Grotius. For further discussion of the hypothetical necessity view, see Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied*, 9-18; Oliver D. Crisp, "Penal Non-Substitution," *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, 59:1 (2008): 145-153.
- 14 See Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied*, 11-12; Crisp, "Penal Non-Substitution," 145-153.
- 15 Notable advocates include John Owen, Francis Turretin, and more recently, John Murray and Donald Macleod. For further discussion of the consequent absolute necessity view, see Murray, *Redemption, Accomplished and Applied*, 11-18; Donald Macleod, *Christ Crucified: Understanding the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 194-219.
- 16 On God as the "Covenant Lord," see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 1-115.
- 17 For a discussion of God's existence and actions as a personal being, see Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 602; D. A. Carson, *The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 222-238.
- 18 See Willem VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 3:879. For a discussion of the belief by past theologians that holiness is the most fundamental characteristic of God, see Richard A. Muller, *The Divine Essence and Attributes*, vol. 3 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 497-503.
- 19 See Muller, *The Divine Essence and Attributes*, 497-503.
- 20 See D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000).
- 21 See Macleod, *Christ Crucified*, 90-100; John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 133-162.
- 22 See Macleod, *Christ Crucified*, 90-100.
- 23 Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 602.
- 24 On the New Perspective on Paul, see Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004); Guy Prentiss Waters, *Justification and the New Perspectives on Paul* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004).
- 25 See G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 29-87.
- 26 God's plan is an eternal plan and does not originate in time. Stating it as I have done only seeks to reflect the drama of the story; it is not meant to deny that God's plan is eternal (see e.g., Ps 139:16; Isa 14:24-27; 46:10-11; Acts 2:23; cf. 4:27-28; 17:26; Rom 8:28-29; 9-11; Gal 4:4-5; Eph 1:4, 11-12; 2:10).
- 27 See Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 90-91.
- 28 See *ibid.*, 124-132.
- 29 See Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 65-84.
- 30 Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary*

*Contexts*, 2nd edition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 174.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

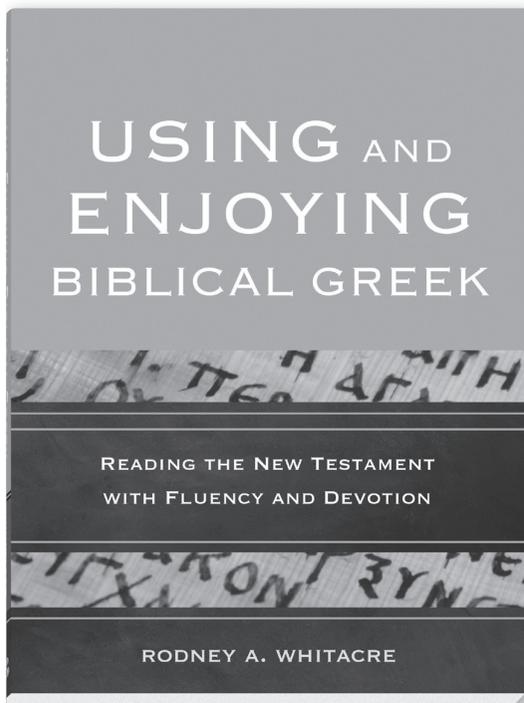
<sup>34</sup> On this point, see David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ* (Westchester: Crossway, 1984), 21-81.

<sup>35</sup> See R. E. Watts, "Exodus," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander, et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000): 478-87.

<sup>36</sup> Wells, *Person of Christ*, 172.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

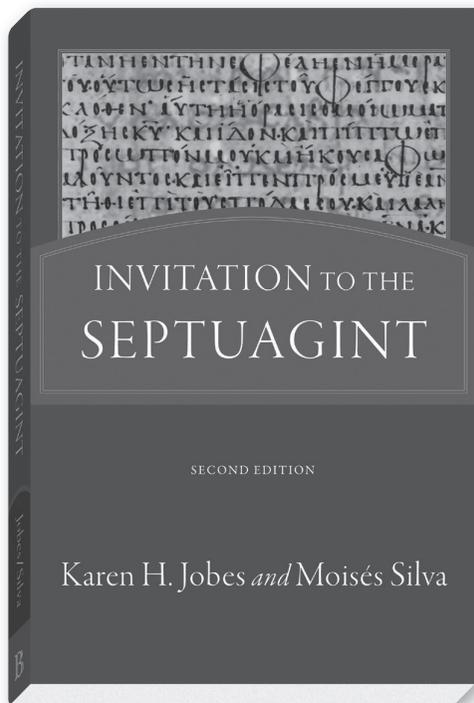
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