Steve Wellum is my favorite living theologian because he masterfully integrates exegesis, biblical theology, historical theology, systematic theology, and practical theology culminating in doxology. He does it again in this book on *solus Christus*.

**Andy Naselli**, assistant professor of New Testament and theology at Bethlehem College & Seminary in Minneapolis; elder of Bethlehem Baptist Church

“Christ alone” is the glue and centerpiece of the five great *solas* of the Reformation according to this magnificent work by Steve Wellum. We see the centrality of Christ in both his person and his work, for the work of Christ is effective because of who he is. Wellum makes his case from both biblical and systematic theology, and he shows he is well versed in philosophy as well. I believe this book is going to be read and quoted for many years to come.

**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior*, Stephen Wellum reminds us that “Christ alone” is not only the center of the five Reformation *solas*, but that it stands as the central doctrine of systematic theology. Without it we cannot fully understand the doctrines of the Trinity, humanity, or salvation. “Christ alone,” argues Wellum, “must connect all the doctrines of our theology because Christ alone stands as the cornerstone of all the purposes and plans of God himself.” Consequently, if we get “Christ alone” wrong, Wellum reminds us, “all other doctrines will likely suffer.” So take up this book, read it, and think on the person and work of Christ in order that you may know, worship, and proclaim the same Christ as the Reformers, who is none other than the Christ of Scripture.

**Juan R. Sanchez**, senior pastor of High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas
Christ ALONE

THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS AS SAVIOR
The Five Solas Series
Edited by Matthew Barrett

Books in Series:
God's Word Alone—The Authority of Scripture
by Matthew Barrett
Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior
by Stephen Wellum
Grace Alone—Salvation as a Gift of God
by Carl Trueman
Faith Alone—The Doctrine of Justification
by Thomas Schreiner
God's Glory Alone—The Majestic Heart of Christian Faith and Life
by David VanDrunen
THE 5 SOLAS SERIES

Christ ALONE

THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS AS SAVIOR

What the Reformers Taught . . . and Why It Still Matters

STEPHEN WELLMUM
MATTHEW BARRETT, SERIES EDITOR
FOREWORD BY MICHAEL REEVES
To Kirk, Colin, and Jonathan,
My brothers by nature and by sovereign grace.
Each of you in your own way has encouraged me
to glory and rest in Christ Alone.
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What doctrines could be more foundational to what it means to be an evangelical Protestant than the five solas (or solae) of the Reformation? In my experience, however, many in evangelical churches today have never heard of sola Scriptura (Scripture alone), sola gratia (grace alone), sola fide (faith alone), solus Christus (Christ alone), and soli Deo gloria (glory to God alone).

Now it could be that they have never heard the labels but would recognize the doctrines once told what each sola means. At least I pray so. But my suspicion is that for many churchgoers, even the content of these five solas is foreign, or worse, offensive. We live in a day when Scripture’s authority is questioned, the exclusivity of Christ as mediator as well as the necessity of saving faith are offensive to pluralistic ears, and the glory of God in vocation is diminished by cultural accommodation as well as by individual and ecclesiastical narcissism. The temptation is to think that these five solas are museum pieces of a bygone era with little relevance for today’s church. We disagree. We need these solas just as much today as the Reformers needed them in the sixteenth century.

The year 2017 will mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. These five volumes, written by some of the best theologians today, celebrate that anniversary. Our aim is not merely to look to the past but to the present, demonstrating that we must drink deeply from the wells of the five solas in order to recover our theological bearings and find spiritual refreshment.

Post tenebras lux

Matthew Barrett, series editor
Foreword

Fiv e hundred years on from the Reformation, there is much to encourage and much to trouble those of us who count ourselves among the heirs of the Reformers. At the same time that the key principles of the Reformation are being forgotten, derided, and attacked at large, we see Reformational teaching faithfully and clearly expounded by an impressive regiment of scholars and preachers.

Yet for all the fresh re-exposition of Reformation theology in our day, there is a danger that it could be distorted into a theological system abstracted from Jesus Christ. The principle of Christ alone (solus Christus) remains as a critical bulwark against that danger—a guardian of the essence of that for which the Reformers fought.

Solus Christus expresses the biblical conviction that there is “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5 ESV), and that therefore “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 ESV). Christ’s identity is absolutely exclusive and his work entirely sufficient. We have no need, then, for any other prophet to provide us with a new revelation, any other priest to mediate between us and God, or any other king to rule Christ’s church. Christ alone stands at the center of God’s eternal purposes, Christ alone is the object of our saving faith, and therefore Christ alone must stand at the very center of our theology. Stephen Wellum is therefore perfectly right when he argues here that solus Christus is the linchpin of Reformation theology and the center of the other four principles or solas of the Reformation.

Solus Christus is the principle that, if followed, will ensure that we today are as robustly and thoroughly Christian—as anchored in Christ—as the Reformers. It protects us from becoming what Martin Luther termed “theologians of glory” who assume fallen human ideas
of God, grace, faith, and Scripture. *Solus Christus* can keep us instead as epistemically faithful and humble “theologians of the cross.”

In particular, *solus Christus* protects us when we think of grace alone (*sola gratia*) from thinking of grace as a blessing or benefit that can be abstracted from Christ. (That was very much the problem with medieval Roman Catholic conceptions of grace, and remains a problem today where justification and sanctification are divorced.) *Solus Christus* protects us when we think of faith alone (*sola fide*) from thinking of faith as a merit in itself or as a mystical mood or thing without an object. Faith is only that which grasps Christ, in whom is all our salvation. *Solus Christus* is the interpretative key to Scripture so that as we accept Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) as our supreme authority, we know how to read it. And *solus Christus* ensures that it is the glory of the living, triune God we seek when we assert that we think and do all for the glory of God alone (*soli Deo gloria*).

I am therefore delighted to see this superbly cogent exposition and application of the doctrine of *solus Christus*. Stephen Wellum clearly and methodically argues for the exclusivity of Christ’s identity and the sufficiency of his work (and in so doing makes an outstanding case for the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ). He also proves just how vital it is for us today to stand firm on both.

The church—indeed, the world—needs the great truths presented so well in this book. For through them we see the brilliant glory of a unique and supersufficient Savior. His is the light and glory that we happily envisage when we hold up that banner of the Reformation: *post tenebras lux* (“after darkness, light”). His is the only light that can drive away the darkness of this world. And so for his glory and for that end, we must have—and we rejoice to have!—these truths shine out today.

_Michael Reeves_

*President and Professor of Theology, Union School of Theology, UK*
Acknowledgments

What an opportunity to be a part of Zondervan’s series on the five solas, especially in the 500th year anniversary celebration of the Reformation. To remember our forefathers in the faith, to stand on their shoulders, and to proclaim in our day what they confessed and proclaimed, namely, the glorious gospel of God’s sovereign grace, is indeed a joy and pleasure. Furthermore, to have the privilege of writing on arguably the center of all the Reformation solas—Christ alone (solus Christus)—and why we must stand with the Reformers and confess and proclaim the Jesus of the Bible as alone the exclusive and all-sufficient Savior, is truly an honor. I want to thank Matthew Barrett, the series editor, and Ryan Pazdur and the staff at Zondervan for allowing me to be part of the team and this project.

In addition, special thanks go to Michael Wilkinson, one of my doctoral students at Southern Seminary, who helped in the editing of this work. His expertise in editing and prose made this work much better than it originally was, and I am grateful for his help, friendship, and partnership in the gospel. I also want to thank the administration and trustees of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, especially Drs. Albert Mohler, Randy Stinson, and Greg Wills, for investing in me as a professor and serving as a constant source of encouragement to teach, research, and write theology for the church. Michael Haykin, Fred Zaspel, and Gregg Allison, three of my colleagues at Southern, were also great resources to help me think through various aspects of historical and Roman Catholic theology. I also want to thank my colleague Bruce Ware and Southern Seminary for organizing and hosting the 5 Solas theological conference on the beautiful campus of Southern Seminary in September, 2015. It was a wonderful experience, and it allowed all of the contributors to the series to present papers on their respective books and to interact with each other, along with the penetrating questions of the students who attended. What a delight to
spend time reflecting on and discussing the Reformation and what was central to the Reformation, namely, the triune God of sovereign grace and his glorious plan of redemption centered in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Finally, I dedicate this volume to my three brothers, Kirk, Colin, and Jonathan. Growing up in a Christian home and with parents who gladly confessed and proclaimed Christ alone is abundant evidence of God’s grace in my life. Also having three brothers who in their own way encouraged their youngest brother to stand for the truth of God’s Word, to think deeply about theology, and more importantly to glory in our Lord Jesus Christ is further proof of God’s amazing grace and providence in my life. To my brothers: may solus Christus always be your confession, delight, and joy, and may we continue to live our lives under Christ’s lordship so that “in everything he might have the supremacy” (Col 1:18). It is my prayer that all who read this book will not only renew their confidence and trust in the Lord of glory but also will learn anew to stand on the shoulders of the Reformers in our day and proclaim Christ alone as Lord and Savior.
## Abbreviations

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>ANF</td>
<td><em>Ante-Nicene Fathers</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>BECNT</td>
<td>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>EBC</td>
<td>Expositor’s Bible Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>English Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NDBT</td>
<td><em>New Dictionary of Biblical Theology</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NDT</td>
<td><em>New Dictionary of Theology</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>NICNT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>NICOT</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIDOTTE</td>
<td><em>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</em></td>
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<td>NIGTC</td>
<td>New International Greek Testament Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIVAC</td>
<td>New International Version Application Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPNF(^1)</td>
<td>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>NPNF(^2)</td>
<td>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NSBT</td>
<td>New Studies in Biblical Theology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNTC</td>
<td>Pillar New Testament Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNTSMS</td>
<td>Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>TNTC</td>
<td>Tyndale New Testament Commentary</td>
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<td>TOTC</td>
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<td>WBC</td>
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Introduction

Reformation theology is often summarized by the five *solas*. Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) stands as the formal principle of the Reformation and the foundation of all theology. God’s glory alone (*soli 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. Consider the words of John Calvin:

For how comes it that we are *carried about with so many strange doctrines* [Heb 13:9] but because the excellence of Christ is not perceived by us? For Christ alone makes all other things suddenly vanish. Hence there is nothing that Satan so much endeavours to accomplish as to bring on mists with the view of obscuring Christ, because he knows, that by this means the way is opened up for every
kind of falsehood. This, therefore, is the only means of retaining, as well as restoring pure doctrine—to place Christ before the view such as he is with all his blessings, that his excellence may be truly perceived.¹

While the entirety of Reformation Christology lies beyond the scope of this book, we can begin to recover the Reformers’ basic insights by focusing on two teachings: the exclusive identity of Christ and his sufficient work. These two aspects of Christology, while basic to the Reformers’ theology, have been ridiculed and rejected by many today. And that is why, if the church is to proclaim the same Christ as the Reformers, we must understand and embrace solus Christus with the same clarity, conviction, urgency, and abundance of joy. To do this, we need to consider more closely why Christ alone² is at the center of the Reformation solas and at the heart of Christian theology.

First, Christ alone is the linchpin of coherency for Reformation doctrine. We come to know the person and work of Christ only by God’s self-disclosure through Scripture. Yet, God speaks through the agency of human authors not simply to inform us but to save us in Christ alone. We are saved through faith alone. But the object of our saving faith is Christ alone. Our faith in Christ guards us by the power of God and his grace alone. The purpose of God’s grace, however, 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 Jesus Christ our Lord. 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 Son of God who became a man for our salvation.

Second, the Reformers placed Christ alone at the center of their doctrine because Scripture places Christ alone at the center of God’s eternal plan for his creation. Despite the diversity of human authors, Scripture

². Hereafter, “Christ alone” (italicized) refers to the Reformation doctrine of solus Christus. Without italics, “Christ alone” refers to a particular characteristic, act, accomplishment, or other predicate that is true of no one but Christ.
speaks as a unified divine communicative act\(^3\) 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 of the universe in infinite wisdom and power has chosen to bring all of his purposes and plans to fulfillment in the person and work of Christ. The centrality of Christ 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. So we can agree with Michael Reeves that “[t]o be truly Trinitarian we must be constantly Christ-centered.”\(^4\)

Third, the Christ alone of the Reformation reflects the self-witness of Christ himself. Jesus 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).\(^5\) 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

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3. This term is taken from Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” in NDBT 52–64.
5. Unless otherwise noted, all references are taken from the NIV.
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 preeminence 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 unity to all things in heaven and on earth under 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 heaven and earth by and through Christ alone.

Fifth, beyond the other Reformation solas, Christ alone is the linchpin of coherency for all Christian theology. More than a century ago, Herman Bavinck wrote his magisterial *Reformed Dogmatics*. In this masterful integration of Christian teaching, Bavinck kept his eye on the key to its coherency: “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.”*6* In the late twentieth century, J. I. Packer used the helpful analogy of a central hub that connects the spokes on a wheel. Packer helpfully explained that “Christology is the true hub round which the wheel of theology revolves, and to which its separate spokes must each be correctly anchored if the wheel is not to get bent.”*7* And most recently, theologians like Michael Reeves recognize the integrative force of Christ alone. Reeves urges that “the center, the cornerstone, the jewel in the crown of Christianity is not an idea, a system or a thing; it is not even ‘the gospel’ as such. It is Jesus Christ.”*8* In short, all of our efforts at theology ultimately rise and fall with Christ alone. Only a

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proper understanding of Christ can correctly shape the most distinctive convictions of Christian theology.\(^9\)

Four quick examples will give us a better grip on the centrality of Christ to Christian theology. One of the most distinctive teachings of Christianity is the *doctrine of the Trinity*. Still, this fundamental of the Christian faith comes fully to us by the divine Son’s incarnation. The church confesses the triunity of God because Scripture reveals the coming of God the Son as a man in eternal relation to the Father and the Spirit. Christ alone opens our eyes to see the Father, Son, and Spirit working distinctly yet inseparably as the one Creator-Covenant Lord. Being human, we might see the *doctrine of humanity* as intuitive, easily accessible and comprehensible on its own. But we cannot understand who we are in all of our dignity and fallenness apart from comprehending the person and work of Christ. Christ alone is the image of God, the last Adam, the beginning and end of humanity. And Christ alone is the hope of humanity. The *doctrine of salvation* brings us even closer to the center of theology because it brings the other doctrines to intersect as God’s eternal plan progresses to its end. And yet again, even more clearly now, it is Christ himself, unique in his person and sufficient in his work, who makes sense of the why and how of divine-human reconciliation.

Finally, at the heart of the gospel stand the cross of Christ and the *doctrine of the atonement*. In his classic work, *The Cross of Christ*, John Stott argues that fully understanding the biblical language regarding the *death* of Christ requires correct conclusions regarding the *person* of Christ and especially making sense of the cross as penal substitution.\(^10\) After surveying a number of options in Christology, Stott draws this crucial conclusion: “If the essence of the atonement is substitution . . . [t]he theological inference is that it is impossible to hold the historic doctrine of the cross without holding the historic doctrine of Jesus Christ as the one and only God-man and Mediator. . . . At the root of every caricature of the cross lies a distorted Christology. The person and work of Christ belong together. If he was not who the apostles say he was, then he could not have done what they say he did. The incarnation

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Christ Alone

is indispensable to the atonement.”¹¹ Also, by understanding Christ’s substitutionary death, we can look through his atonement to gain still more clarity in all other doctrines: for example, the problem of human sin; the mercy and grace of God in sending his Son; the wisdom and goodness of God in his redemptive plan; God’s sovereign power in overcoming evil and restoring his creation. The glory of God in all his ways depends upon Christ alone.

Simply put, Christ alone must connect 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, urgency, and abundance of joy.

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. Christ alone integrates the purposes and plans of God as he has revealed them in Scripture and as we represent them in theological formulation. Yet we cannot afford to pursue Christ alone as a mere academic interest. We must proclaim the excellencies of Christ alone “who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Pet 2:9b). Living under the Lordship of Christ, it is our privilege to follow Paul and “proclaim [the supremacy of Christ alone], admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ” (Col 1:28). For this proclamation, we want to stand with the Reformers to declare and delight in Christ alone to the glory of God alone.

The goal of this book is to learn from the Reformers’ solus Christus so that we might proclaim the same Christ in our context today. Exploring the fullness and richness of this glorious Reformation doctrine is a lifelong pursuit—and well worth the effort. Our guide to understanding the basic insights of the Reformers is to focus on two

teachings: the *exclusive identity* of Christ and his *sufficient work*. But our focus is not the Reformers themselves—it is to grasp that their teaching on *Christ alone* is worth recovering because it encapsulates the teaching of Scripture. Ultimately, we want to follow the Reformers to proclaim who Christ is and what he has done according to what Scripture says about him. So we need to spend time looking at the identity and work of Christ as they are presented in the Scriptures, and we need to take seriously the differences between the cultures and contexts of the Reformation era and our day. Theology is never constructed or communicated in a cultural vacuum. As we pursue *Christ alone* for today, we must avoid the particular pitfalls that are presented by the dominant patterns of thinking, and we must embrace the responsibility of meeting the challenges imposed by that thinking on our witness to the exclusivity and sufficiency of Christ.

Part 1 of this book establishes the exclusive identity of Christ from the storyline of Scripture. The first chapter traces the Bible’s storyline according to its structures, categories, and *intratextual* dynamics to arrive at the biblical identity of Christ. The covenantal development of the biblical storyline helps us grasp who Jesus is and what he has done for us and our salvation. Chapter 2 considers the self-witness of Christ that he is God the Son incarnate. From his baptism through his life, death, and resurrection unto the inauguration of God’s kingdom, Christ knew his divine-human identity and the authority given to him. He knew that he would accomplish the works of God and receive the praise of man. Chapter 3 confirms the self-witness of Christ by considering the witness of his apostles. Looking at a few key texts, it becomes clear that the apostles knew Christ as the promised God-man. Moreover, the apostles confessed this exclusivity of Christ not just because he told them but because he opened their hearts and minds to see and receive the revelation of God developed through the OT—on the Bible’s own terms. Finally, chapter 4 begins the transition from a focus on Christ’s person to a focus on his work by connecting them in the incarnation. The incarnation and the incarnate Son’s life and death reveal who Jesus is *and* how his divine-human identity is necessary to accomplish our reconciliation.

Part 2 takes up the sufficiency of Christ in Scripture to determine the nature and necessity of his sacrifice. Chapter 5 follows the typological
development of the biblical storyline to find Christ as our peerless prophet-priest-king. Through this one threefold office, Christ alone brings us into his all-sufficient revelation, mediation, and lordship for a comprehensive salvation. Chapter 6 looks more closely at the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement on the cross. A brief survey of different atonement theories demonstrates that the Reformers brought a key insight into the debate: what we say about the atonement must align with who God has revealed himself to be. In the end, the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning work is determined by who he is and the identity of God himself. And chapters 7 and 8 argue for penal substitution as the atonement theory that best accounts for the biblical presentation of Christ’s sufficient work. Looking at Jesus’s own understanding, the work required for our forgiveness, and the various perspectives on the cross in Scripture, we can conclude that Christ became our substitute to bear the penalty for our sins as an absolute necessity of God’s determination to save us. And because he is God the Son incarnate, Christ’s sacrifice was perfect and its effect was sufficient to accomplish all that God planned and promised. The penal substitutionary death of Christ propitiates God’s wrath, redeems and reconciles a sinful people, presents them justified before God, gives Christ the victory over all God’s enemies, and gives us an example for our own lives.

Part 3 concludes by looking at why the Reformers taught Christ alone and how intellectual shifts over the last five hundred years have created a different cultural context for us. These shifts have not changed who Christ is and what he has done for us, and they have not removed the duty and joy of knowing, praising, and proclaiming his exclusivity and sufficiency. But today’s intellectual culture does present unique challenges. Chapter 9 highlights the Reformers’ continuity with orthodox Christology, and chapter 10 explains their special focus on Christ’s sufficiency as a reaction to Rome’s sacramental theology. Chapter 11 proposes that while we must always maintain the sufficiency of Christ, we must now specifically argue for his exclusivity, something the Reformers simply assumed along with the entire Christian tradition. The reason why this is so is due to a shift in plausibility structures that determine whether people will accept something as probable or even possible. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a shift from an acceptance of orthodox Christianity to a rejection of its basic tenets that
has greatly impacted our confession of Christ alone. Chapters 11 and 12 focus on this shift, first in the Enlightenment and second in our own postmodern era, followed by suggestions on how to proclaim faithfully an exclusive and all-sufficient Christ today.

Finally, I will offer some closing comments on how the exclusivity and sufficiency of Christ alone applies to our Christian lives. As God the Son incarnate, Christ deserves and demands our total allegiance. All we think, feel, do, and say should be given exclusively to Christ alone and governed by his Spirit as worship. And by the sufficiency of his work, Christ supplies our every need in abundant and eternal life. The new covenant accomplishments of Christ merit every spiritual blessing to strengthen us for joyful obedience in the world unto the consummation of his kingdom over the world.

From beginning to end, this book confesses with the Reformers that Jesus Christ bears the exclusive identity of God the Son incarnate and has accomplished an all-sufficient work to fulfill God’s eternal plans and establish God’s eternal kingdom on earth. We confess both the exclusivity and sufficiency of Christ alone because Scripture reveals that “[w]hat Christ has done is directly related to who he is. It is the uniqueness of his person that determines the efficacy of his work.” Just as the five solas are mutually dependent, the exclusivity and sufficiency of Christ alone are bound together to bring us fullness of joy in covenant with God.

May Christ alone fill our hearts with wonder and thanksgiving and open our mouths for praise and proclamation. And may this work encourage the church to love and follow Christ alone, especially in the tests of faith, until he comes again: “Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Pet 1:8–9).

PART 1

Christ Alone: The Exclusivity of His Identity
CHAPTER 1
The Biblical Identity of Jesus Christ

Our understanding of who Jesus is and what he does must be developed from Scripture and its entire storyline. And while the full complexity of the Bible’s structure, categories, and intratextual dynamics lies beyond the scope of this volume, the Bible’s own terms provide us with a clear picture of Christ’s identity and work: Christ alone is Lord and Savior, and therefore he alone is able to save and his work is all-sufficient.

There are four major pieces to the puzzle of Christ’s identity and his accomplishments: who God is, what he requires of humans, why sin creates a problem between God and humans, and how God himself provides the solution. These four pieces fall into place as the biblical covenants develop across time to reveal Christ in the fullness of time. The covenantal storyline of Scripture unfolds both God’s plan of redemption and the identity of Christ who accomplishes it. Over the next few chapters we will consider the teaching of Jesus himself and his apostles, but first we will consider how the structure and storyline of Scripture create the expectation and necessity that the Christ will bear a specific, exclusive identity. This covenantal storyline reveals both the necessity and identity of Christ and his work as the one person who (1) fulfills God’s own righteousness as a man, (2) reconciles God himself with humanity, and (3) establishes God’s own saving rule and reign in this world—all because, and only because, Christ alone is God the Son incarnate.

1. For further discussion on this point, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 21–126.
The Necessity of Christ and His Work for Our Salvation

The structure and storyline of Scripture reveals the necessity of Christ and his work. At the heart of solus Christus is the confession that the salvation of humanity depends upon the person and work of Christ. Necessity is a tricky concept in theology. To say that Christ is necessary for salvation is true in a number of ways, some of which can mean things that are unbiblical. Our immediate task is to define in what way Christ is necessary.

Anselm begins his famous Why God Became 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?” As Anselm practices a “faith seeking understanding” by wrestling with the why of the incarnation and the cross, especially in light of the awful cost both were to the eternal Son, 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 infinite knowledge and wisdom, have planned another way to save fallen creatures? Or were Christ and his work the only way? This is the question of necessity. Walking in the footsteps of Anselm today, 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?”

These questions demand some kind of explanation, not only for the sake of the church’s theology in general but to warrant and establish Christ alone in particular. 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

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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, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In what we might call optionalism, God is able to forgive our sin apart from any specific Savior acting on our behalf to satisfy God’s righteous demand. In the Reformation era and beyond, this view is found in Socinianism, various forms of Protestant Liberalism, and present-day 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 under no necessity to punish sin in order to forgive us. On the other extreme stands the hypothetical view of fatalism. 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.

Beyond the extremes, 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.4 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.5

The other orthodox option is consequent absolute necessity, the view favored in post-Reformation theology.6 This view argues that consequent

6. Notable advocates include John Owen, Francis Turretin, and more recently, John Murray and Donald Macleod. See Murray, Redemption, 11–18; Donald Macleod, Christ
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 decision to save sinners. Obviously, the absolute sense of necessity is stronger than the hypothetical sense. Simply put, 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 the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of God the Son.

Historic Christianity has affirmed both of these understandings 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 dependent 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, however, which one is more biblical? This is an important question because it recognizes that some orthodox Christologies make better sense of the Bible than others. The best way to answer the question regarding the necessity of Christ is to let Scripture speak for itself, and in the next section we will trace the biblical storyline from the identity of God to the obedience he requires, to the disobedience of humanity and to God’s response. Throughout this unfolding story, Scripture creates both the *expectation* and *necessity* that God would bring salvation in the person and work of Christ. This implies that we must affirm no *less* than the hypothetical necessity of Christ, and as we shall see, the Bible’s own logic demands that in his unique identity and work, Christ alone is absolutely necessary given God’s choice to redeem a sinful humanity. It is not that Christ and his

work are merely one way to save us among a number of possible options. Who Christ is and what he does is the only way God could redeem us.

The covenantal storyline of Scripture reveals the necessity of Christ and his work. And the same covenantal development also reveals the identity of Christ and the nature of his work. Christ is the one person who (1) fulfills God’s own righteousness as a man, (2) reconciles God himself with humanity, and (3) establishes God’s own saving rule and reign in this world—all because, and only because, Christ alone is God the Son incarnate.

The Covenantal Development of Christ Alone

Nearly fifty years ago, Francis Schaeffer put his finger on a serious problem that remains today. He wrote:

I have come to the point where, when I hear the word “Jesus”—which means so much to me because of the Person of the historic Jesus and His work—I listen carefully because I have with sorrow become more afraid of the word “Jesus” than almost any other word in the modern world. The word is used as a contentless banner . . . there is no rational scriptural content by which to test it . . .

Increasingly over the past few years the word “Jesus,” separated from the content of the Scriptures, has been the enemy of the Jesus of history, the Jesus who died and rose and is coming again and who is the eternal Son of God.7

Schaeffer was right. The name “Jesus” has become a mostly meaningless word due to its separation from the content and storyline of Scripture. Jesus is now anything we want him to be, except the Jesus of the Bible. Imposing a foreign worldview on the biblical text, as many do today, necessarily obscures God’s authoritative revelation of Jesus’s identity.8 To proceed intratextually toward the Bible’s Jesus—who is the real Jesus of history—we need to read the Bible on its own terms. We must interpret Jesus within the revealed categories, content, structure, and storyline of Scripture. And this revelational reading starts with the identity of God himself.

8. This point will be developed in more detail in chapters 11–12.
Starting with who God is to identify Christ might seem to be an inefficient or needless investigation when the words and life of Christ are recorded for us in the New Testament. But we must start with the identity of God to make sure that we come to the Bible on its own terms. Scripture begins with God creating the world out of nothing and continues with God relating to his creation according to his 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, then, is the God of Scripture? In a summary way, we can say that he is the triune Creator-Covenant Lord. 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 (Gen 1–2; Pss 50:12–14; 93:2; Acts 17:24–25). This reality gives rise to the governing category at the core of all 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 (Pss 7:17; 9:2; 21:7; 97:9; 1 Kgs 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 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 his desired 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. He rules with perfect power, knowledge, and righteousness (Pss 9:8; 33:5; 139:1–4, 16; Isa 46:9–11; 97:9–11).


10. For a discussion of God’s existence and actions as a personal being, see Feinberg, No One Like Him, 225–31; Frame, Doctrine of God, 602; see also Herman Bavinck, God and Creation, vol. 2 of Reformed Dogmatics, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).
Acts 4:27–28; Rom 11:33–36) as the only being who is truly independent and self-sufficient. 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 progress through redemptive history, God discloses himself not merely as uni-personal but as tri-personal, a being-in-relation, a unity of three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit (e.g., Matt 28:18–20; John 1:1–4, 14–18; 5:16–30; 17:1–5; 1 Cor 8:5–6; 2 Cor 13:14; Eph 1:3–14). In short, as the Creator-Covenant triune Lord, God acts in, with, and through his creatures to accomplish all he desires 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; Exod 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.11 God’s holiness is particularly associated with his aseity, sovereignty, and glorious majesty.12 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).

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11. See Willem VanGemeren, New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 3:879; see also Feinberg, No One Like Him, 339–45. 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, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 497–503. Even though we must demonstrate care in elevating one perfection of God, there is a sense in which holiness defines the very nature of God.

12. See Muller, Divine Essence and Attributes, 497–503.
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 (see Rev 4:8), also affirms that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). It is important to note, in light of who God is, the biblical tension regarding how God will simultaneously demonstrate his holy justice and covenant love. This tension is only truly resolved in the person and work of Christ, who alone became our propitiatory sacrifice and reconciled divine justice and grace in his cross (Rom 3:21–26).

This brief description of God’s identity is the first crucial piece of the puzzle that grounds Christ’s identity and provides the warrant for Christ alone. God’s identity as the holy triune Creator-Covenant Lord gives a particular theistic shape to Scripture’s interpretive framework. And so this interpretive framework gives a particular theistic shape to the identity of Christ. To help make this point, we should consider three specific examples.

First, the triunity of God shapes the identity of Christ. As we will see in the next chapter, 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’s 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 some third party acting independently of the other two divine persons. At the cross, then, we do not see three parties but only

14. All other “theistic” frameworks (deism, panentheism, etc.) are incompatible with the unique biblical-theological framework of Scripture established by its specific metaphysical-moral identification of God. And so only the Bible’s particular theistic framework can provide the correct identification of Christ.
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.\\footnote{On this point, see Macleod, \textit{Christ Crucified}, 90–100; John R. W. Stott, \textit{The Cross of Christ}, 20th Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 133–62.}

Second, the \textit{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.” 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, which 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 \textit{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 (Pss 50:12–14; 93:2; Acts 17:24–25). Throughout history, theologians have captured the majestic sense of God’s self-sufficiency and independence with \textit{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. 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.”17 Yet in his aseity, God chooses to enter into relationships with his creatures. From the first Adam to the last Adam, the lordship of God has consequences for his covenant partners. God’s lordship determines who can be a fitting covenant partner with him. To mediate the new and eternal covenant, the Christ must be one who is able to satisfy the demands of covenant life with the Covenant Lord.

With just these three examples, we see how the identity of God functions as the first major piece to the identity of Christ. We will develop this connection in more detail in the next few chapters. Here we can simply note how the particular theistic shape of the Bible’s interpretive framework gives particular meaning and significance to the New Testament description of Jesus Christ as the Son of God who mediates a new and eternal covenant as the last Adam. To be this person and do these works, Christ must be identified fully with humanity and with God himself.

**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

17. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 602. The Bible grounds the concept of a moral universe in the nature and character of God. In Scripture, God is the Holy One, Judge, and King. As the divine king, Yahweh is the just judge, able to enforce his judgments by his power (see Deut 32:4). Abraham’s appeal binds God to absolute standards of justice—God’s own standards: he is the supreme and universal judge (Gen 18:25). Today, this point is significant in light of the “new perspective on Paul.” Although this view is diverse, it unites in linking “righteousness” and “justice” to “covenant faithfulness,” i.e., God is righteous in that he keeps his promises to save. No doubt there is truth in this: God’s faithfulness means that he will keep his word. Specifically, he will keep his promises to his people and will execute justice for them and act to save them. Yet this is a reductionistic view of God’s righteousness. At its heart, it fails to see that “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 is often dismissed as merely a Western construct. But this is incorrect. If we are rightly thinking of God’s aseity vis-à-vis his moral character, then God’s holiness, justice, and righteousness are tied to his nature; this is why God must punish sin. On the new perspective on Paul, see Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).
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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 ʾādām from the earth; in the fullness of time, God sent his Son from heaven to become the last ʾādām 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.\(^\text{18}\) 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 the first 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. Moreover, the Lord created and covenanted with Adam for the purpose of bearing God’s image in human dominion over creation. This dominion, therefore, must be a vice-regency. Adam was called to rule over creation under the rule of God in obedience to his commands and ways of righteousness. Yet it is precisely at this point that Adam fails and ruins 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

\(^{18}\) See Gentry and Wellum, Kingdom through Covenant, 147–221, 591–652, for a defense of a creation covenant.