

## **Christ Alone: The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior**

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Zondervan, 2017

343 pages

### **A Brief Book Summary from Books At a Glance**

#### **About the Author**

Stephen Wellum is professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, and editor of the *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He has authored and co-authored several books, including *God the Son Incarnate*.

#### **Introduction**

*Christ Alone* is part of Zondervan's *5 Solas Series*. In this book, Wellum treats *solus Christus* biblically, historically, and theologically, as well as discussing the relevance of the doctrine in the contemporary life of the church. The uniqueness of Christ is presented, and the absolute necessity and sufficiency of Christ's work alone is defended.

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#### **Summary**

##### **Chapter 1**

##### **The Biblical Identity of Jesus Christ**

The Bible presents Christ's person and work in a variety of ways. He is at the center of God's unfolding revelation, he is Lord and Savior, and he alone is able to accomplish salvation because he is God the Son incarnate. Christ is absolutely necessary for salvation because he is the only one who can save. The only way that God could save sinners was through the incarnation, life,

death, and resurrection of the Son. Today many people are trying to create Jesus in their own image, but we must see Jesus through special revelation, and this means beginning with God. The Bible reveals God as the triune Creator-Covenant Lord. God is unlike everything else; he is absolutely unique. He is holy and marked by covenant love. Salvation is by Christ alone because he is the second person in the Trinity, of the same essence as the Father. He is appointed as our covenant representative and mediator of redemption. The Son is fully God and becomes fully human, living under and fulfilling the covenant. Adam failed in his covenant obligation; the last Adam fulfills all covenant obedience, and also lays down his life as a substitutionary atonement for covenant breakers. God's perfect, holy nature entails that he must punish sin, and God's intention for human beings was that they would be faithful to him in covenant. Their failure to do this, however, necessitates that their sins be punished. If there is to be salvation, there must be a perfect man who is completely faithful to God's covenant so that he can be a fitting representative and substitute, but he must also share in God's lordship and divine nature. Only God can save sinners, and God saves sinners through the work of his incarnate Son. The covenant structure of the Bible, combined with the full data concerning salvation and the Messiah, can only be fulfilled by the incarnate Son. God's kingdom is tied to the inauguration of the new covenant. God must act unilaterally to save, since no one else can, and yet it is promised that salvation will come through a new David, the Messiah. Only the Lord, and only an obedient Son, can fulfill the biblical storyline, and this is exactly how the NT identifies Christ. Jesus is David's great son the Messiah, and he is also the sovereign, saving covenant Lord.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Self-Witness of Christ: God the Son Incarnate**

John's Gospel begins by presenting the Word, who is God and is in relationship with God. The Word is God—God the Son—and the Word takes on flesh. The unique and only Son of God becomes incarnate to be the new covenant head and redeemer, to fulfill God's saving work as a man. In the context of the Bible's storyline we can see that Jesus' self-identity was as the God-man, the Messiah. At the Baptism of Jesus, the Father identifies Jesus as his Son, and Jesus sees himself as the fulfillment of Scripture. In Jesus' life and ministry we see him doing things that are the prerogatives of Yahweh alone, and teaching that he is identified with God. In his death and resurrection Jesus saw himself as the conquering Lord who would destroy Satan and death, and provide life (which only God can do). Jesus was worshiped, something reserved for God alone. His inauguration of the kingdom of God showed his self-identity as God the Son in flesh. Jesus taught that he was the unique Son of the Father, both in eternal nature and in function. He is ontologically the Son, and he also takes upon himself and fulfills the role of "son of God" in Scripture through the incarnation and his work. Jesus refers to himself as the "Son of Man," a reference which must be understood by reading Daniel 7. The Son of Man comes to save the lost through his suffering and death, but he also forgives sins, will be raised to life, and will return in glory. Only God can forgive sins, and this is a right that Jesus claims for himself, setting himself forth as God, and as fulfilling the typological significance of the temple/sacrificial system. Christ's usage of "I AM" in the Gospels explicitly identifies himself as Israel's covenant Lord. He also makes himself the object of faith, a position reserved for God.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Apostolic Witness to Christ: God the Son Incarnate**

Both divine ontology and divine function are combined in the Son's exclusive identity. Jesus is the Son and the Lord because he is the second person of the Trinity, and he is appointed as Son and Lord because of his incarnate life, death, and resurrection. Jesus' sonship is both divine and human. This is Jesus' own self-identity, and it is the apostolic witness to Christ. Although the apostolic writings reveal Christ's identity in numerous ways and numerous places, we will examine four key passages. Romans 1:1-4 teaches that the eternal Son of the Father also became the son of David, fulfilling the role of "son of God" both in its divine and in its human significances. The Son is appointed to be the Son; the resurrected Messiah is appointed the reigning Lord, entering into a new era of ruling in power in heaven. Philippians 2:5-11 has been heavily debated, as it has been used as a support for kenosis Christology. The text is teaching, however, that the pre-existent Son humbled himself and took on the role of human redeemer in obedience to God the Father, being exalted for his accomplished work in his death and resurrection. The Son was fully God, and it was from this full equality as deity that the Son chose to humble himself, become a man, and die for sins. In the incarnation, the Son does not give up the attributes of deity, he adds the attributes of humanity. In the end, the Son is given the name of Yahweh, with all the rule and sovereignty this entails. Colossians 1:15-20 teaches that Christ is the archetypical image of God, identical in nature, and he is also the fulfillment of humanity (the image bearer). He is the firstborn over all creation, referring to his rank and pre-eminence. The Son is not created, he is the creator of all things, and everything exists by him and for him. In the Son's incarnation he has become the redeemer and head of the church, inaugurating the new age by his death and resurrection. All of God's fullness dwells in Christ. The Book of Hebrews considers Christology at length, showing the absolute necessity of Christ's full deity and full humanity. Hebrews 1:1-4 begins the epistle by presenting the uniqueness of the Son as God's full and final revelation. The Son is categorically above all previous prophets, since he is the fulfillment of all that they spoke about. He is the glory of God and shares God's exact nature, and he also sustains the universe by his word. The unified apostolic witness is clear: Christ alone is at the center of God's purposes and salvation.

## **Chapter 4**

### **From Incarnation to Atonement: An Exclusive Identity for an All-Sufficient Work**

Who Christ is determines what he does, and what Christ does reveals who he is. There are reasons behind all of the purposes of God, and the purpose of the incarnation is salvation, since without the incarnate Son atonement for sin and the fulfillment of God's plan could not be achieved. The atonement cannot be separated from the incarnation. The necessary relationship between the incarnation and the fulfillment of God's redemptive purposes is developed at length in the Book of Hebrews. As a human being, Christ fulfills God's original intentions for humanity. He also becomes fully human in order to bring many sons to glory, which required his obedience and suffering—he had to identify with us and die for us in order for there to be atonement. In his substitutionary death and resurrection, he is able to defeat and destroy the work of the devil. The humanity of Christ is necessary for him to function as the great High Priest and to offer himself as a perfect sacrifice. Through his experience as a man, Christ can sympathize with us and know what we experience. Only the incarnate Son alone can represent us before God, fulfill God's saving purposes, and provide us with all that we need in forgiveness of sins.

There is no possible world where sinners could be reconciled to the holy God apart from the nature and work of the incarnate Son of God.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Threefold Office of Christ Alone: Our Prophet, Priest, King**

The threefold office of Christ fulfills the Adamic roles and fulfills the development of these offices in the unfolding progress of salvation history. Every human is sinful and depraved, and it is only the complete work of Christ that can bring salvation. Prophets were called by God to speak an authoritative covenant word from the covenant Lord to his covenant people. Human beings were never meant to function apart from God's revelation and truth—we are dependent on God's words for knowledge. Christ is the source of revelation and the fulfillment of the prophetic witness. He speaks with the full intrinsic authority of his divine nature, and the Scriptures are his word and are about him. As is the case with all three roles, understanding the priestly work of Christ requires understanding the covenantal-typological development in Scripture. Priests were men selected by God to represent people and offer sacrifices. They offered sacrifices for the expiation of sins, covering over them and propitiating God. Forgiveness requires sacrifice and priestly mediation. Christ alone acts as God to save, and as a human mediator and sacrifice. Hebrews shows us that Christ is greater than all previous priests, fulfilling the entire construct; Christ as the perfect high priest is the priest of the new covenant. In Scripture, kingship involved serving as God's vice-regent. Adam failed in this role, and every human king sinned and fell short of what God had called them to be and to do. Christ, however, fulfills this role perfectly, and he exercises sovereign lordship over everything. We tend to think of Christ's kingship displayed in his exaltation and ascension, but all of his work is necessary for his kingship. The resurrection of the Son incarnate inaugurates the new age, the new order, of which he is the firstfruits. Christ is king and has inaugurated the new covenant era. The Spirit is poured out on Pentecost because of what the priest-king has accomplished in ushering in the new age. Christ alone fulfills the threefold office, and thus Christ alone is all that we need for salvation and eternal life.

## **Chapter 6**

### **The Cross-Work of Christ in Historical Perspective**

Although Christ's work is unified, Scripture presents his priestly work and atoning sacrifice as central. Throughout the history of the church, believers have affirmed that redemption and atonement only comes through Christ's great sacrifice for sin on the cross. The Patristic Era did not produce an atonement theology that was as nuanced and articulated as that generated by the Reformers, but they did see Christ's death as necessary for providing forgiveness of sins. Some emphasized that Christ recapitulated Adam's life, living successfully in obedience to God, and then dying for human disobedience. Others held that Christ defeated Satan, offering a ransom price to Satan for the release of his captives, but then conquering Satan by his resurrection. Still, others focused on the payment to God; it was the penal nature of the substitutionary atonement that they highlighted. Elements of these views, of course, were held by the same individuals. In the medieval era, Anselm provided a view of the atonement that has been incredibly influential throughout the rest of church history. He maintained that humans had sinned against God and robbed him of the infinite honor that was his due. As a result, God required satisfaction, and this

was provided in Christ's death. Anselm was right to see the doctrine of God as essential for a proper understanding of the cross, but he failed to be rigorously biblical in his theologizing. The Reformers followed Anselm by keeping God central in the atonement, but they formulated their understanding in more biblical categories, seeing God's holy nature as morally necessitating the punishment of sin. Calvin in particular viewed the atonement through the biblical covenants and Christ's threefold office. The Reformers' view of the atonement was that it was a penal substitution. An essential contribution the Reformers made to the theology of the atonement was to see the relationship between the holy and moral character of God and his law, as well as the relationship that God's nature must sustain to sin. God's law is an expression of his righteous nature, and God must necessarily punish sin and wickedness. God is holy love and he desires to forgive us, but he cannot deny his own character or overlook our sin. Christ, our new covenant mediator, satisfies the holy character and law of God by dying as a substitute to pay the penalty for our sins. If we are to be forgiven, Christ must die and satisfy the righteous demands of God's character. Socinians maintained that God could forgive without requiring atonement, so the death of Christ is merely an example of love which leads us to request forgiveness. This view is commonly held in liberalism today, but is unbiblical. The moral government model of the atonement sees the cross as a hypothetical necessity to uphold God's rectoral justice. God must uphold his moral governance of the universe—he cannot ignore his law. This view fails to do justice to the fact that God's law is tied directly to his holy nature, that Christ's death is a real atonement for sin which propitiates the Father's wrath, and that Christ bears our sins and penalty. We must see that God cannot forgive sin without the full satisfaction of his holy and morally good character and demands.

## **Chapter 7**

### **The Cross of Our All-Sufficient Savior: Penal Substitution, Part 1**

Penal substitution is the best theological formulation for understanding what the Bible reveals about Christ's atonement. Crucifixion was regarded with horror by the Romans and as a curse by the Jews, yet the church gloried in the crucifixion of Christ because it was absolutely necessary for salvation, and it was central to God's redemptive plan. Jesus taught repeatedly that he must (*dei*) suffer and die. When Christ institutes the Lord's Supper, he teaches that he is the fulfillment of the Passover. He is the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, the willing substitute who bears the penalty for the sins of God's people. The Lord's Supper also shows that Jesus is the priestly mediator of the new covenant, which is inaugurated in his shed blood. In Gethsemane, Jesus' prayer to the Father reveals that there is no other way for there to be atonement for sin than for Christ to drink the cup of God's wrath. Although his trial was unjust—as was the verdict—Jesus chose to be judicially condemned in our place. Christ's cry of dereliction on the cross shows us the agony of bearing sin and wrath; the work of the triune God would not include this unless it was necessary. The previous facts show that Jesus' death was penal, paying for human sin before God. The atonement is offered by God, to God. God satisfies his own righteous demands in the willing sacrifice of his Son. At the heart of the cross, God is the object, and the cross meets God's holy demands. Sin is against God, and God's moral character cannot allow sin to be ignored. God loves us, but he cannot bypass sin and deny himself. God in grace can choose to forgive sin, but he cannot disregard his holy justice when he does so.

## **Chapter 8**

### **The Cross of Our Glorious Redeemer: Penal Substitution, Part 2**

Romans 3:21-26 and Hebrews 9:15-28 are very clear passages for teaching the necessity of the cross. The former explains the *why* of the cross more explicitly than any other biblical passage. Paul has argued that everyone is condemned before God because of their sin, and the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven. Yet God also reveals his righteousness in salvation, providing a way for sinners to be justified by grace through faith. Under the terms of the old covenant, there was no genuine atonement—God could not forgive unless there was something greater than the old covenant system could provide; what was needed was Christ alone. Hebrews 9:15-28 teaches that the old covenant sacrifices and priesthood could never actually take away sins. Christ is the high priest and atoning sacrifice of the new covenant, paying for sins before God, satisfying his law—these realities necessitate penal substitution. Some have claimed that penal substitution is reductionistic, but it actually has the best explanatory scope for the diversity of the biblical data concerning the cross. The Bible’s diverse teachings are not contradictory, but are unified and coherent. These diverse themes include obedience, sacrifice, propitiation, redemption, reconciliation, justice, conquest, and moral example. When they are studied in their biblical canonical context, these themes establish that the atonement is a penal substitution. As our covenant head, Christ is our priestly representative who perfectly obeys the Father. As the atoning sacrifice, Christ stands in our place, acts as our substitute, and takes away our sin. God must punish sin, and his holy character generates wrath when confronted by sin. As objects of wrath, we need a propitiatory sacrifice that takes our place and satisfies God’s holy wrath. Redemption is not deliverance by fiat, but deliverance by the payment of a price, and this price is paid by our sin-bearing substitute. Christ reconciles us to the Father, removing enmity and bringing us into a peaceful covenant relationship. It is not merely our attitude towards God that needs to be changed—God’s wrath and hostility towards sinners must be removed. Because Christ dies for us, we are united with him and considered just in the sight of God. Christ achieves a great victory on the cross, and we share in this victory because Christ’s death has taken care of our problem of being sinners before a holy God. The atonement is a moral example in a myriad of ways, but it is not an illogical moral example—its moral power is based on what Christ was accomplishing in his death. All of the biblical data taken together reveals that Christ’s atonement is a penal substitution.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Chalcedonian Unity: Agreement on Christ’s Exclusive Identity in the Reformation**

During Jesus’ lifetime, there were many different opinions about who he was and what he was doing. Today, in contemporary society, there is as much confusion and uncertainty as ever. At the time of the Reformation, the Reformers shared a lot of common ground with Roman Catholics about Christology, since they all subscribed to the Creed of Chalcedon, 451 A.D. This creed set forth the great standard of orthodoxy for Christology, teaching that Christ was one person with two natures. The Son of God was the subject of the incarnation; the Son who was fully God took on full humanity. The one person of the Son took on a second nature, keeping the divine nature and the human nature unmixed. It is the person of the Son who acts through the natures—whatever Christ does is done by the Son, and whatever Christ experiences is experienced by the Son. The Son acts in both natures.

## **Chapter 10**

### **The Sufficiency of Christ: The Reformation's Disagreement with Rome**

The main disagreement that the Reformers had with Rome in regards to Christology revolved around the sufficiency of Christ. The Reformers rejected the sacramental theology of Rome. In the Roman Catholic view, Christ's work was necessary for salvation, but it was also necessary for the church to apply this work to people in the sacraments. Grace was infused into people through the sacraments, and grace lifted people from the realm of nature to the supernatural. The Reformers rejected this and held to a monergistic salvation. In their view, grace freed people from sin, not from nature. For Rome, the church was necessary, since Christ and grace were mediated through her—for the Reformers, it was Christ alone. The Reformers rightly saw the unity of Christ's person and work, and that his glorious work was complete—nothing could be added to it. We share in all of Christ's work and benefits because God has chosen us to be united with his Son. Against the Roman system of priestly intercessors, the Reformers set forth Christ's perfect high priesthood and mediation as completely sufficient. Saints did not offer themselves for us, and they are only saved because of Christ; they are not fit to be our mediators and cannot be since that work is Christ's alone. The Roman Catholic Mass was also rejected by the Reformers, since it denied the sufficiency of Christ's one time sacrifice on the cross, as well as his perfect priestly work. It is a compromise of the gospel to teach or practice anything that undercuts the sufficiency of Christ's work.

## **Chapter 11**

### **The Loss of Christ's Exclusivity: Our Current Challenge**

In our contemporary society, we need to affirm the sufficiency and necessity of Christ alone by standing on the uniqueness and exclusivity of Christ's person and work. Today's postmodern cultures find it impossible to believe that Christ alone is the exclusive Lord and Savior. Before the Enlightenment, Christology was formulated on the basis of God's revelation. In the Enlightenment, however, revelation was replaced by the authority of human reason, and the world was interpreted as making sense without God's involvement. The turn to the subject in Enlightenment rationality placed the human mind in the position of judging God's revelation. Kant excluded God from being known rationally, since God was not an object of our experience in the phenomenal realm. Deism set God outside of personal involvement in the universe, and this view paved the way for naturalism. These Enlightenment views were antithetical with the biblical revelation of Christ, and they entailed a denial of his exclusivity. Given Enlightenment presuppositions, Christ could not be the Son of God incarnate. The Bible's claims about Jesus were rejected, since they did not match the governing philosophical and epistemological categories of the day. Scripture was seen as a faulty record of the church's interpretation of Jesus, so a wedge was driven between the historical Jesus and the Jesus depicted in the Bible. On the basis of an application of the principle of analogy, miracles in the Bible were rejected, since such things were not observed in the present. Naturalistic historical methodologies have been applied in various quests to discover the identity of the real historical Jesus, but this will never reveal Christ for who he is; nor have the presuppositions behind such methodologies been established and defended.

## **Chapter 12**

### **Reaffirming Christ Alone Today**

Postmodernism and the Enlightenment project undercut Christ's sufficiency and exclusivity. Religious pluralism must reject the Bible's unique claims about Christ. Postmodern thinking has arisen as a logical extension of the Enlightenment's turn to the subject and skepticism towards revelation. Human beings cannot be autonomous from God and also have objective knowledge. Postmodernists point out that given the autonomous human situation, all knowledge claims are contextual and relative. The Bible is seen as a human product, and therefore it contains merely human perspectives. Some postmoderns have engaged in theology, adopting an evolutionary, process view of theism that rejects the depiction of God in Scripture, as well as the incarnation of Christ. Not only do these thinkers reject the idea that Jesus is the God-man, they also legitimate all interpretations of Christ as equally valid, and place Jesus on par with all other religious figures. As Christians, we must not subscribe to the current intellectual trends and non-Christian worldview—on the contrary, we must reason from revelation and the biblical worldview. We must stand on *sola Scriptura* in order to defend and proclaim *solus Christus*.

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