

Christ Alone – The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior: What the Reformers Taught ... and Why It Still Matters (The Five Solas Series)

Stephen Wellum

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352 pages

It would be difficult indeed to find a topic more vital to the gospel than the topic taken up in this book: *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior*.

I'm Fred Zaspel, executive editor here at Books At a Glance, and today we are talking to the author of this important new book, Dr. Stephen Wellum, Professor of Systematic Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and long-time friend here at Books At a Glance. Steve, welcome back—always great to talk to you.

Stephen Wellum:

Great to be with you, Fred.

Fred Zaspel:

Summarize for us—what is the significance of the mantra, “Christ Alone”?

Wellum:

It's one of the Five *Solas* of the Reformation that we come to summarize Reformation doctrine. It's an interesting expression, “Christ alone,” because you have to think through it a little bit. Because, in the Reformation, the reformers, as well as the Roman Catholic Church, held much in common in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity, the person of Christ, I mean they were all Chalcedonian in their Christology. Christ is God the son incarnate, fully God, fully man, so that when you say, “Christ alone,” when you think of our own day, you think of his exclusivity, his after uniqueness in an age of pluralism. Well, that wasn't the case in the Reformation period. So then you have to say, what is “Christ Alone” really getting at? And I think it's at that point that we are really turning to Christ's work and the application of his work to the believer. What the reformers were arguing is that Christ is not only unique and exclusive Lord and Savior, that he is the son of God from eternity who has become flesh, but he has done a work that is sufficient, is enough, that there is nothing to be added to it. And of course, now this is beginning to go against the sacramentalism of the Roman Catholic Church, where they are affirming Anselm's view of the atonement. Christ satisfies God's wrath, he pays for our sin, yet in its application to us, there is the role of the church. Christ's death will remove our eternal sins, but as we sin, there needs to be coming back to the church, receiving the sacraments of the church, penance, the Mass, and ongoing forgiveness. It's not Christ alone in his all-sufficient work that's enough. And then, of course, that spills over into other areas such as faith alone and then justification, and so on. So that's really at the key of “Christ alone,” his all-sufficient work that's unique; Lord and Savior, they held that in common; yet, his work is enough for us; there's nothing to be added to it; it's to be received with the empty hands of faith; and then our lives are lived in faith union with Christ.

Zaspel:

How does this “*sola*” relate to the others? What is the connection between “Christ alone” on the one hand, to, say, “grace alone” and “faith alone” on the other?

Wellum:

All of the five *solas* are interrelated, interconnected. You can't have one without the others. Of course, everything is grounded first in the authority base. I mean, how do we even say anything about salvation, about who God is, ourselves, apart from God's revelation of himself through *sola Scriptura*? But then as you move from the authority base, you think of faith alone. Well, what's faith alone getting at? Well, it's not faith *plus* what we bring in terms of our works or through the sacramental system of the church, coming back to receive forgiveness through the mediation of the church. It's “faith alone in Christ alone.” So the object of our faith is Christ alone. And of course that goes back to *solus Christus* where Christ alone has, in his person and work, done everything necessary to pay for our sin, to forgive us, to bring us all the blessings of the new covenant I mean are ours in him. And then of course, all of that is by grace alone. We don't receive it apart from God's initiation from beginning to end. He provides from eternity past in terms of, obviously, our election; but in provision of the Redeemer, he alone does the work for us; he is the obedient son who obeys on our behalf. And of course this, then, gets tied into justification, the act of obedience of Christ, his death on the cross paying for our sin, passive obedience, we receive that in faith, repentance and faith, conversion by faith alone in Christ alone. And so all of them are brought together giving us the object of the faith in Christ and all that he has done for us.

Zaspel:

So, because Christ alone does the work that saves, it can be received by grace alone; and because by grace alone, can be taken by faith alone; and after all of that, only God can receive the glory for it.

Wellum:

Yep. That's exactly right. I do think at the center of the *solas*, obviously, at the heart of the Christian faith, is the triune God in sovereign grace bringing about his own purposes including our salvation. And at the center of that is the work of the second person of the Godhead, Christ alone. Not independent of the Father or Spirit, but he is the one who becomes our mediator; he is the one who becomes incarnate; he is the one who stands on our behalf; and we receive all of that by faith alone, grace alone, in Christ alone. We think of union with Christ that brings all of that together for us.

Zaspel:

You've mentioned how this clashed in the Reformation period with Roman Catholic sacramentalism. Can you explain that, flesh that out a little bit more for us? How is this the point of issue with them? What was the sacramentalism, the idea of it, and how it clashed with this principle of “Christ alone?”

Wellum:

When we talk about sacraments, and that's a perfectly fine term, in certain circles we call the sacraments ordinances, reduced to two from the seven of the Roman Catholic Church, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. But in Scripture, and, obviously in the Reformation, there are differences over Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but they were not viewed in a kind of, the Latin phrase, *ex opere operato*, in the sense of *by the work performed*, that they weren't that which conveyed grace to us. And so, in the Roman Catholic through the mediation of the church, they would say that Christ has established the church to be his incarnation, Christ's incarnation on earth, that grace is given through the operations of the church. So the hierarchy of the church has authority as you come to it to dispense grace to you and through then the seven sacraments. Beginning very early with baptism, all the way through to death. Christ has paid for our sin, yet, we have ongoing sin in terms of our daily lives that need to be dealt with in penance, in receiving the sacraments, the washing away of our sins. And of course this is where it gets tied in with justification. Justification isn't just the declaration that we are in Christ. Christ alone has obeyed for us: he has paid for our sin; we are declared in faith union with him, righteous; even though we are still being sanctified and glorified; but the verdict of the judge is that we are righteous in Christ. Well, in the Roman Catholic view, it's, well, we are becoming righteous. We are in Christ, we are tied to the church, but there is sanctification and justification blended. And this is where it's not *alone* Christ, it's Christ *plus* the work of the church or coming to the church, there are sacraments received from the church. And so there's a big difference between Reformation teaching of this point, even though there's differences among reformers, and the Roman Catholic Church that undercuts the sole sufficiency of Christ alone. We don't come through mediators; we don't come through even the sacraments don't convey grace to us in the sense of saving grace to us or transforming grace to us. The reformers would've held to a means of grace. They are part of our growth and sanctification, yet, we receive them by faith; we receive them in relation to Christ. All that he has done for us is enough. So there are some of the differences that the reformers would have with the Roman Catholic system.

Zaspel:

And how is this doctrine important in our own context today? Obviously "Christ Alone" is vital to every age, but are there challenges to it today that need specific addressing?

Wellum:

Yes. I think in our own day, living in the twenty-first century, it's not exactly the same as the Reformation. There's a sense in which there is nothing new under the sun, right? So, the same old issues show up over and over again. We have to be reminded of that. I think one of the challenges we face, and I think the reformers began to face this a little bit at the end of the Reformation. And then it began to take full bloom in the later Enlightenment and it's come into our own day, is that there was an undercutting of the entire Christian worldview, right? So at the end of the Reformation you have the Socinians, you had those denying the Trinity. Well, now we're not just in just a Catholic/Protestant debate. We're in a debate whether Christianity is at all true. And today that's blossomed into a full-blown pluralism, so when we affirm "Christ alone," first we must say to people, "Christ alone is Lord and Savior." There is no other Savior; there is no other way to be right with God; there's only one view of God who is true, and the Christian view is true over against other religious views. Christ is exclusively Lord and Savior. And then, of course, as it also applies, we have the same issues today as you would in the Reformation,

right? So people may affirm Christ's exclusivity over against, say, a pluralism, yet there is always the tendency to add our own sufficiency, our own works, even in evangelical circles. It's not Christ has done everything necessary, it's our works that we may bring. I mean there's lots of confusion as there was in the Reformation period, as there was in the first century where Paul is dealing with Judaizers, all of that continues today. So "Christ alone" is for us the exclusivity, the uniqueness, of Christ, plus an-sufficient work. He is all that we need. There is nothing more that can be added to him. So even in our growth in our Christian lives, it's ultimately by grace; it's ultimately in relation to Christ; it's ultimately by faith alone, by grace alone in him and by the power of the Spirit. But all of those are areas where it has to be applied to us today in our local churches and in our lives as Christians.

Zaspel:

Okay, so far we've talked about the topic—let's talk about your book. Give us a brief overview so our readers can know what to expect.

Wellum:

This is in the context of the five *solas* books that Zondervan has put out in remembrance of the five hundredth year of the Reformation now in 2017. The book deals with some historical elements. It deals with current defense elements. I begin with introduction to the role of "Christ alone" in terms of the *solas*. We then spend time establishing, from the storyline of Scripture, Christ's exclusivity and uniqueness, because that's important in our day, and work through some of the biblical data. So, more on his person, who he is from the Scriptures, and then turn to his all-sufficient work. So, the two themes of *exclusive, unique, Lord and Savior* and *all-sufficient work*. There are some chapters on the atonement and trying to argue, not only a Reformation view, which was penal substitution at the atonement's heart and core; but also tried to show that biblically as well. As we get to the end of the book, it deals with, alright, here is Christ's exclusivity, all-sufficient; how did that showed up in the Reformation? What were the debates there? And how does that show up in our contemporary day in terms of pluralism? The book, as you work through it, gives the biblical, theological defense of Christ's exclusivity, all-sufficient cross, all-sufficient work that he does for us, and arguing that that's what must be maintained, not only in the Reformation period, but today in the twenty first century as well with the challenges that we face.

Zaspel:

We're talking to Dr. Stephen Wellum, author of the new book, *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior: What the Reformers Taught ... and Why It Still Matters*. It's an excellent work on a perfectly wonderful theme. We encourage you to get a copy and read and enjoy! Steve, congratulations on your book, and thanks for talking to us today.

Wellum:

Thank you very much.

Note: This interview first appeared on [Books At a Glance](#) and is used with permission.

