

David Vandrunen – Soli Deo Gloria

Welcome again to Books At a Glance! I'm Fred Zaspel, and we're continuing our series of brief discussions highlighting the leading features of the Protestant Reformation in this its five hundredth anniversary year. Today we're talking to Dr. David VanDrunen about another of the famous Reformation slogans, *soli Deo Gloria*. Dr. VanDrunen is the author of the book *God's Glory Alone: The Majestic Heart of Christian Faith and Life: What the Reformers Taught...and Why It Still Matters*. It's one of the titles in Zondervan's *The Five Solas* series that we have featured here.

David – Welcome! And thanks for talking to us today!

VanDrunen:

Thank you, it's good to be here.

Zaspel:

Just what is meant by *soli Deo Gloria*? In particular, what is meant by this with reference to the theology of the Reformers?

VanDrunen:

Well, *soli Deo Gloria* is, of course, a Latin term, and it means *glory to God alone*. The basic translation is very simple, and the idea is that God alone possesses glory in and of himself. He alone is majestic and worthy of all honor and adoration and praise in and of himself. Though, it is the case that there are things in this creation which are glorious in a way that anything that is genuinely glorious in this world, ultimately reflects God's own glory. And, I think, as we think about this with reference to the Reformers, it is important to mention and perhaps as you've talked to other authors in the series about this, they've mentioned this too, but these five Reformation *solas* – *soli Deo Gloria*, of course, and *faith alone*, *grace alone*, *Christ alone*, *Scripture alone* – these were not mottos or themes that the Reformers themselves emphasized. As if Luther said, the five *solas* summarize my theology, or something like that. These are themes that later theologians, later Reformation Christians have identified as ways of trying to summarize important aspects of the Reformers' thought.

I would say, with respect to *God's glory alone*, perhaps what's most important there with respect to the Reformers, is that they had a very strong sense of the sovereignty and the majesty of God. That whether we are talking about Luther or Calvin or, actually, many, many others, they were convinced that God is sovereign over this world. He has made everything. He oversees and sustains all things. He works out all things according to the counsel of his will. And all creation, everything that happens in this world, needs to be understood with reference to God. And any good thing in this creation ultimately comes from God, from the father of light from whom comes every good gift. I think this idea of all glory belonging to God alone is, in fact, a really helpful way to think about primary concerns of the Reformers.

Zaspel:

How is this related to the other *solas*? How is it the “glue” that holds all these together?

VanDrunen:

As I was putting my book together, it struck me that in some ways *soli Deo Gloria* is different from the other four Reformation *solas* in this way – in that when we think about the Protestant Reformation, the Reformers had some primary theological and practical issues in mind. It was not as if the Protestant Reformers were trying to change every doctrine that had developed through the patristic and medieval eras. There were a lot of doctrines, like the doctrine of the Trinity or the two natures of Christ, that they continued to affirm with the Church of many centuries. But there are some issues that were at the forefront and the focus of Reformation theology.

I think we would have to say that the two main issues were the doctrine of salvation and the doctrine of authority, which had to do with issues of Scripture and the church and the authority that these different sources had. So, when we think about the other four Reformation *solas*, they really get at those two main issues. *Sola Scriptura* gets at this issue of what is our final authority? Who or what is it that stands above all other claims of authority? It is Scripture alone. And when we think about *Christ alone, faith alone, grace alone*, these really all have to do with the doctrine of salvation and how is it that poor sinners like us can be saved, we who stand by nature under the wrath and judgment of God.

When we think about *God's glory alone*, it's not necessarily immediately evident how this relates to the Protestant Reformation. It's not as if the Roman Catholics of the Reformers' day were denying that God was glorious. It was clear that they denied that salvation comes by faith alone, for example, or that Scripture alone is our final authority; but it wasn't necessarily clear that they would have even rejected the idea of *soli Deo Gloria*. What I have suggested in my book is that *soli Deo Gloria* may be understood as the glue that holds the other *solas* together, in that when we think about those other four *solas*, the key word is *alone*. The late medieval theology or the Roman Catholics of the Reformers' day all would have said, "Of course grace is important, and Scripture is important, and faith, and Christ are all crucially important." But, what they didn't affirm was that it was all these things *alone*. So, if we step back and think about that, when the Reformers emphasize that it's these things alone, what they are really saying is that all the credit belongs to God. It's not God's Word plus some human word that constitutes our final authority, it's God's word alone. When we say it's Christ alone, we're not saying we need Christ as our great high priest plus human priests, but it's Christ alone. And we could keep thinking about that with respect to the other *solas*, as well.

So, basically what it's getting at, is that God alone deserves all the credit, God alone deserves all the praise, it is his word alone which calls us to faith and revives our hearts. It's God's grace alone through the one mediatorship of Christ that is our all sufficient salvation. And when we recognize that, it brings out and highlights why we have to say *God's glory alone* and why Reformation theology does that in a way that Roman Catholic theology doesn't.

Zaspel:

I don't think I've seen anyone else make that observation, particularly with regard to *sola Scriptura*. I think it's a very helpful observation.

What were the questions at issue in the Reformation that made this such an important point of emphasis, even if they didn't use the slogan itself?

VanDrunen:

Right. Well, I think this picks up on the last point that I was making, that if you think about the doctrine of salvation for a moment. Again, as I was saying, if you had heard a Roman Catholic of that day talking about salvation, he would have talked about grace and faith and Christ, of course; but it was Christ as the savior, but... he was a great high priest but, we also, they would have said you need these human priests who can mediate God's grace to you through the sacramental work of the Church. They would've talked about a faith, but they would've said that it's not faith alone that justifies, it's faith **formed [09:55]** by love; it's a lifelong process of becoming righteous. Yes, we are saved by grace, but God's grace is something we cooperate with so that we can do meritorious works ourselves, which come to form an important part of the basis of our ultimate salvation. So, if you think about those issues, it was very much... It was Christ *and*; it was grace *and*; it was faith *and*, for Roman Catholic theology. And at each of those points, the Reformers said, "No, we need to get rid of that *and*." Christ is an all sufficient high priest, we don't need the mediatorship of earthly priests. Do we still need pastors and teachers, today? Yes, God has ordained them; but we don't need a priesthood. God's grace is all sufficient; we don't need meritorious good works cooperating with this grace in order to earn something beyond what has already been won for us by Christ.

Those issues were certainly central at the time of the Reformation and certainly when we think about Scripture alone that was so important because, again, Roman Catholics would say that Scripture is important. Although they were opposed to translating the Scriptures into the vernacular languages and were not encouraging the preaching of God's Word in language that ordinary people could understand. Roman Catholicism, even though affirming technically that Scripture was important, was emphasizing the magisterial teaching of the church as a necessary interpreter and even, in some cases, in addition to the Scriptures in a way that stood over the Scriptures. If you make the teaching authority of the Church – if you make that an infallible teaching authority that has the unappealable authority to say what the Scriptures mean, then ultimately the Church has higher authority than Scripture.

In all of these ways, the Reformers looked out at the theological landscape of their day and said we need to get rid of all of these *ands*. We need to cling to Christ, to faith, to grace and Scripture *alone*. And when we do that, it brings honor to God and it demonstrates that he is our all sufficient Savior. He is our all sufficient teacher. All truth lies in him and there's nothing that he has done for us that somehow is lacking. And to understand that, is to understand that all glory is God's.

Zaspel:

Glory is one of God's eternal attributes; he is infinite in glory. And yet his external works bring him glory. And *we* may glorify him by our works. How does all that fit together?

VanDrunen:

In some ways, it all seems very complicated; but I think it's also very wonderful and beautiful to try to think about this. I think the first thing we need to recognize, if we're trying to step back and to have a general theology of God's glory, is to recognize that glory is one of God's attributes. When we talk about God's attributes, we're talking about those things that characterize God himself, and we talk about his wisdom and his goodness and his power. And, as we're identifying these attributes, one of them that we need to talk about is God's glory. He is inherently, in and of himself, he is a majestic God and a beautiful God. God didn't have to create

this world in order to be glorious, in order that he might be recognized as glorious. He was glorious in and of himself. And yet he did choose to create this world. What's very clear throughout the Scriptures, is that as God creates and as he sustains this world and as he enacts his plan of redemption through history, that he makes his glory known in this world. We're surrounded by God's glory as Psalm 19 says, "the heavens declare the glory of God." So, just by living in this world, just by being aware of the created order, we're surrounded by God's glory. It's proclaimed to us night and day. And then, as we see God's plan of redemption enacted, we see God revealing his glory. He reveals his glory sometimes visibly, through the cloud that led Israel through the desert, and that filled the Tabernacle and later filled the Temple. Scripture also makes clear that God reveals his glory in his acts of salvation. So, all of these things show us, as his creatures, what a great God he is.

There's so much to say on this, but I guess the one final point that I would make, and you mentioned this in your question, is that Scripture speaks about us glorifying God. In fact, it also speaks about us being glorified. When we think about the benefits of salvation we enjoy, we will talk about our being regenerated, and justified, adopted, sanctified, and usually the last thing we talk about is our being glorified. In some ways that's unusually strange. If all glory belongs to God, then, how is it that Scripture talks about us, Christians, being glorified on the last day? And, I think the answer to that question is that as God glorifies himself in his acts of salvation, as all of those wonderful works bring him glory, ultimately, that as he glorifies himself through our sanctification, through making us holy, then our good works bring testimony to that glory. We glorify God through the holy, godly works that we do.

And as we think about our glorification on the last day, well, we might say that's the last of those mighty works that God does in his work of salvation. He exalts us, he brings us with Christ into everlasting heavenly glory. And we come to share in that; we come to see Christ face-to-face; we come to be perfectly holy; and that is our glorification. But, ultimately, it doesn't end with us, because whatever glory we come to share with the Lord Jesus Christ just brings glory to God, because it's not because of any works of our own hands, but it's because of what he has done. I think it's really wonderful. If we think about the broader story of history, we see how God's wonderful plan of bringing glory to himself ends up glorifying us, and our glorification glorifying God. It's this wonderful dynamic that I think should bring us great joy and gratitude as Christians.

Zaspel:

So, he brings us to share in his glory, to his glory.

VanDrunen:

That's a good way to summarize it.

Zaspel:

In what contexts today has this become particularly important in a way that may need this focused emphasis?

VanDrunen:

Well, I think there are all sorts of things that we could talk about. I can mention a couple of things that I discuss in my book. One of the things I think is really important for us to think about as we think about how we are called to glorify God, is through our prayer and worship. When Scripture calls us to glorify God, it's primarily thinking of that in terms of the worship that we offer. Certainly, there are a lot of topics we could talk about there. I think about, in fact, just the things that we do in worship. There's a lot of things that are called worship, that are actually very human centric, that are very much about *me*, and about how *I'm* feeling, and what I think *my* needs are. Our glory needs to be God centered, and I think that's a really important aspect of this. But, it's not just what we do in worship, but it's also how we worship. If our worship is going to be glorifying to God, if it is the prime way that we glorify him, then one of the things we really need to think about is devotion of heart. God wants worshipers not just to worship him in the right external ways, as important as those are, but he wants worshipers who call upon him with focus, with integrity, with a kind of zealous devotion. As I was thinking about this topic, and preparing my book it really struck me that in our present age we have so many distractions. We have our phones and our iPads and our computers and we're constantly being bombarded with texts and emails and calls. We hear so much about the good of multitasking and all that, and I think there's a real danger that both intellectually and spiritually we lose our ability to focus. And I think if we are to be a people who really worship and pray to God as we ought, then we need to be a people that learn again how to settle our minds and our hearts and to focus upon God and to set aside the distractions of the world and focus upon him. So, I think that's one way. Another thing I might mention, which I discuss in my book, is the whole temptation to narcissism and vanity in our own day. Through our social media, especially, I think there's so much temptation to be promoting ourselves and making ourselves look good and just thinking a lot about our image before the world. Boy, when you think about the topic of God's glory, we really have to think about our own humility. If we're really serious that all glory goes to God, then it really calls for a deep humility on our part. It calls for a real fear of God on our part. So, I think that those issues of the temptation to narcissism and vanity really need our attention, because it's really easy to slip into this kind of self-glorification, self-promotion that I think is so much at odds with what we are called to acknowledge and how we are called to live as those who really are devoted to the idea that all glory belongs to God.

Zaspel:

Before we sign off, tell us about your book. Can you give us an overview?

VanDrunen:

When I wrote the book, I was trying to follow the basic idea that the editor of the series gave me and I opened with a couple of chapters that are really historical in focus. I try to think about this theme of *solus Deo Gloria* broadly, and in relation to the Reformers and some of their theological concerns. Some of the ideas that we were talking about earlier, about *solus Deo Gloria* as the glue that holds the other *solas* together, and I also try to trace some of the ideas about God's glory that you find in some great Reformed theologians over the centuries.

And then, in the central part of the book, Chapters 3 through 5, I try to trace the theme of God's glory through the Scriptures. I really try to focus upon the story of God's work of redemption in the Old Testament with Israel, and as it comes to fulfillment in the incarnation and death and resurrection and ascension of Christ, and then that hope of his return and that glory of the new

creation. I try to help readers see how this theme of God's glory alone is not just something abstract, it's not just a kind of theoretical doctrine; but it's really a central thread of the whole story of Scripture. I certainly hope that those who read those chapters will gain some kind of deeper understanding of the story of Scripture and an appreciation for God's glory through that historical dynamic of God's relation to us as his people.

In the final section, Chapters 6 through 8, I try to discuss some practical issues for the present day as we try to renew this great idea that all glory is God's. I talk about some of the things that we were just discussing, about being people of prayer and worship in the midst of all these temptations to distraction, and being people who fear the Lord with a deep humility even in the midst of being tempted to narcissism and vainglory.

I close the book with some discussion of how we can glorify God in this present age, which is a passing age. We live in what Paul in Galatians calls this "present evil age," even as we are looking forward to that age to come in which God's glory will shine in an unveiled way. I try to reflect there on living for God's glory, in the midst of this present age in which so often it seems that God's glory is veiled, and it seems like God's plans are struggling or even failing. I try to put some of these questions and perspective for us as pilgrims in this present age.

Zaspel:

Well, in my opinion, you've accomplished your goals very well. It's a wonderful book. We're talking to Dr. David VanDrunen, author of the new book, *God's Glory Alone*—a massively important theme on which every Christian should be very clear. We encourage you to read this excellent book that takes up into it, really, every other concern. Thanks for listening in! David, thanks for talking to us about this theme and about your book!

VanDrunen:

My pleasure. Thank you.