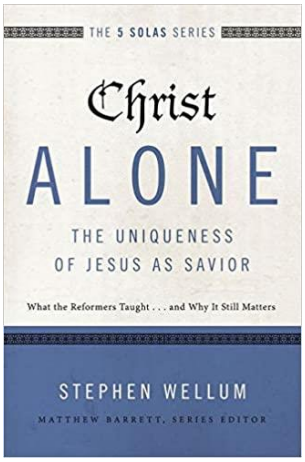
The Biblical Identity of Jesus Christ

Stephen Wellum

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,[1] 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.



This book is **Highly Recommended** and can be purchased at Amazon.

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.

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

[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.

Christ alone a particular characteristic, act, accomplishment, or other predicate that is true of no one but 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?"[2] 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?"[3]

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 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

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[2] Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), I:1.

[3] John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 11.

Christ alone Reformation doctrine of *solus Christus*

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* 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

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[4] Notable advocates include Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Hugo Grotius. For further discussion of the hypothetical necessity view, see Murray, *Redemption*, 9–18; Oliver D. Crisp, "Penal Non-Substitution," *Journal of Theological Studies* 59:1 (2008): 145–53.

[5] On this point, see Murray, *Redemption*, 11–12; Crisp, "Penal Non-Substitution," 145–53; Adonis Vidu, *Atonement, Law, and Justice: The Cross in Historical and Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 45–132.

[6] Notable advocates include John Owen, Francis Turretin, and more recently, John Murray and Donald Macleod. See Murray, *Redemption*, 11–18; Donald Macleod, *Christ Crucified: Understanding the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 194–219.

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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.…

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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.

God as the Triune Creator-Covenant Lord

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.[9] 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).

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[7] Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (London: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1968), 78–79.

[8] This point will be developed in more detail in chapters 11–12.

[9] For an extended discussion of God as the "Covenant Lord," see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 1–115. Cf. John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

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.[10] He rules with perfect power, knowledge, and righteousness (Pss 9:8; 33:5; 139:1–4, 16; Isa 46:9–11; Acts 4:27–28; Rom 11:33–36) as the only being who is truly independent and self-sufficient. 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

[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: Baker, 2004), 15–19; cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 222–38.

[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.

is the God who loves his people with a holy love (Hos 11:9), for he is the God of "covenant faithfulness" (*hesed*).

Often divine holiness and love are set against each other, but Scripture never presents them at odds. We not only see this taught in the OT, but the NT, while maintaining God's complete holiness (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).[13]

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.[14] 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 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.[15]

Second, the *covenantal character* of the triune God shapes the identity of Christ. Here we are not first thinking about the biblical covenants unfolded in history, but what Reformed

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[13] On this point, see D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000). *Christ alone* Reformation doctrine of *solus Christus*

[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.

[15] On this point, see Macleod, *Christ Crucified*, 90–100; John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 20th Anniversary Edition (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 133–62.

theologians have called the "covenant of redemption."[16] 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 *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 *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

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[16] See Macleod, *Christ Crucified*, 90–100; cf. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, eds., *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 201–23, 401–35.

[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

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 and the joy of human beings to maintain a relationship of love and loyalty. To understand who Christ is and what he does in his new covenant ministry, we must go back to the Edenic roots of the creation covenant between God and man. We need to trace the Bible's interpretive link between the charge and curse of the first Adam to understand the coming and crucifixion of the last Adam.

The biblical storyline divides the entire human race and every person in it under two representative heads: the first Adam and the last Adam. In the beginning of time, God created the first *'ādām* from the earth; in the fullness of time, God sent his Son from heaven to become the last *'ādām* on the earth (Rom 5:14). God covenanted with the first Adam as the head of the human race to spread the image of God in humanity over the whole earth.[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

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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).

[18] See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 147–221, 591–652, for a defense of a creation covenant.

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 to guide him into the joy of covenantal obedience. The first tree in the midst of the garden held forth the conditional promise of eternal life.[19] The promise is not explicit, but it is clearly implied when God expels Adam from Eden *so that* he could not "take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever" (Gen 3:22). The tree of life was placed before Adam as a sign of his reward for obedience under God's blessing to fill the earth with God's image. But Adam rejected this reward of the first tree by eating from the second tree. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil came with a clear prohibition against eating its fruit under penalty of death. This tree of death, then, was placed before Adam as a test of his willingness to rule under God and in obedience to his word and ways. But with ruinous effect, Adam disobeyed God in an attempt to rule without God by becoming "like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5).

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

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[19] See G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 29–87.

The covenantal framework establishes the person and work of Christ in representative, legal, and substitutionary terms (Rom 5:12–21). To undo, reverse, and pay for the first Adam's sin, the last Adam will indeed be a "seed of the woman" (Gen 3:15), but this time one who will render the required covenantal obedience. By his obedience, the Christ will demonstrate what a true image bearer is supposed to be: a loving, faithful, loyal, and obedient Son of God. Yet, as we will see below, the reversal of Adam's sin and all of its disastrous effects will require more than a demonstration of true humanity; it will require a representative substitute who will pay the penalty for our sin and give us his righteousness, thereby reconciling us to God.

Human Sin and Divine Forgiveness

With just two of the major pieces to the puzzle of Christ's identity, we have already seen the ultimate purpose of God in his relationship with the human race. The triune Creator-Covenant Lord of the universe has determined to display his glory in the world through a humanity that bears his image by walking with God in peace and covenantal obedience. But what happens, then, when humanity rebels against God and fails to bear the image of his righteousness? Can the divine purpose still be accomplished? Must God choose between covenant peace and covenant obedience? Is covenant peace with God even possible without covenantal obedience? More to the point, can God tolerate sin? And if not, how can God forgive those who sin against him?

The storyline from Genesis 3 forward clearly demonstrates that the first Adam's sinful disobedience brought the human race into corruption and brought us under God's wrath.[20] In Genesis 1:31, "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good." In Genesis 3, Adam disobeys God (3:6) and God expels Adam and his wife from the garden (3:21–24). And by Genesis 6:5, "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time." Due to his disobedience, the first covenantal representative of humanity filled the earth with a corrupt image of God instead of a true image, with wickedness instead of righteousness. Looking back on these days and into the last days of history, the apostle Paul confirms the sinful Adamic nature of all humanity: "There is no one righteous, not even one … for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:10, 23). In short, the first Adam's covenant disobedience turned the created order upside down. By Adamic corruption and through our own sinful acts and omissions, we worship idols of creation, not the Lord of creation (cf. Rom 1:25). We obey our sinful passions, not the Covenant Lord who has created us for a holy happiness in him and his

[20] On this point, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 315; cf. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 611–28.

ways. But still worse, the first Adam's sin that we inherit and imitate brings the entire human race under the divine sentence of death (Rom 6:23). We were made to know, love, and serve God for eternity. But now we live under his just condemnation as enemies of his kingdom and objects of his wrath.

Human sin, however, is only the first part of the third major piece to the puzzle of Christ's identity. We now need to consider what God's response to human sin tells us about who the person must be that will save us from the wrath of God. Standing in the tradition of the Reformers and in their recovery of the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ, we might not at first recognize what John Stott calls the "problem of forgiveness."[21] Considering the divine response to human corruption, it seems that God must do two things that appear to be mutually exclusive: punish and forgive sin in humanity. On the one hand, God must punish sin because that is the just, proper, and glorious response of the one who is the Creator-Covenant Lord of the universe. On the other hand, God created and covenanted with man according to his eternal, unchanging decree to glorify himself in the righteous rule of humanity over creation, not in the destruction of all humanity throughout creation.

As serious as this problem seems to be, however, the "problem of forgiveness" goes even deeper—into the nature of God himself. Since God is *a se* (self-sufficient), holy, and personal, he must punish sin; he cannot overlook it, nor can he relax the retributive demands of his justice, since to do so would be to deny himself. That is why Scripture repeatedly emphasizes that our sin and God's holiness are incompatible (e.g., Lev 18:25–28; 20:22–23; Isa 6:5; 59:1–4; Heb 12:29; 1 John 1:5). God's holiness exposes our sin, and it must ultimately be dealt with.[22] Furthermore, closely related to God's holiness is his wrath, i.e., his holy reaction to sin. Scripture speaks of the wrath of God in high-intensity language, and it is important to note that a substantial part of the Bible's storyline turns on God's wrath. No doubt, God is forbearing and gracious, yet he is also holy and just.[23] Where there is sin, the holy God *must* confront it and bring it to judgment, especially given the fact that sin is not first against an external order outside of God; it is against

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[21] John Stott describes the problem this way: "The problem of forgiveness is constituted by the inevitable collision between divine perfection and human rebellion, between God as he is and us as we are. The obstacle to forgiveness is neither our sin alone, nor our guilt alone, but also the divine reaction in love and wrath towards guilty sinners. For, although indeed 'God is love,' yet we have to remember that his love is 'holy love,' love which yearns over sinners while at the same time refusing to condone their sin. How, then, could God express his holy love?—his love in forgiving sinners without compromising his holiness, and his holiness in judging sinners without frustrating his love? Confronted by human evil, how could God be true to himself as holy love? In Isaiah's words, how could he be simultaneously 'a righteous God and a Savior' (Is 45:21)?" (Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 90–91).

[22] See Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 124–32.

[23] See Carson, *Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 65–84.

God himself. Now it is precisely this *necessity* in God to judge human sin that creates a severe *tension* in the biblical storyline and the covenantal relationship. God has promised to redeem us and be our covenant Lord who is present with us. But how, when the necessary punishment for sin is death? Ultimately, in order for God to forgive, he must first satisfy himself, which is precisely what he does in God the Son incarnate, who bears our sin for us as our substitute.

At this point, one might think that we are getting lost in the details and losing our focus on Christ's identity. But if we put together the two parts of human sin and divine forgiveness, we have the third piece to the puzzle. And we can now connect the three pieces to get still closer to the biblical presentation of Christ.

With three of the four pieces to the puzzle of Christ's identity, we can summarize our progress with three points. First, because it is God's own perfect nature that makes it impossible for him to tolerate sin, God must provide his own solution to the problem of forgiving sin. Second, because God has determined to spread his image over the earth in the covenantal fidelity of humanity, his solution must be a perfectly obedient man. Third, because of the universal corruption of sin, this last Adam cannot come from the first Adam. And finally, because God must punish covenantal disobedience, this new man of God must be able to bear our sins for our redemption.

This still incomplete interpretive framework already allows a preliminary conclusion: the Christ must somehow identify with God himself in his divine nature and lordship *and* with humanity in our nature and need for both a representative substitute and obedient covenant mediator. The last piece of the puzzle will complete the shape of the biblical storyline and allow a final conclusion regarding the identity of Christ.

God Himself Saves through His Obedient Son

Just as human sin and divine forgiveness bring tension into the biblical storyline, so its resolution raises the question of just *who* it is that will save humans and establish God's kingdom through his saving rule on earth. The covenantal development up to this point has sharpened the focus of our christological query. God will forgive the sins of his people by punishing a substitute for them. And God will establish his kingdom through the rule of a righteous man over the earth when none can be found on the earth. So who is able to bear the sins of others, forgive the sins of others, and rule over the world in perfect obedience to God while simultaneously establishing the rule of God himself? When the

fourth major piece of our puzzle comes into place, the answer becomes clear: Christ alone as God the Son incarnate.

This point is uniquely demonstrated in the unfolding of God's plan *through* the biblical covenants. God's initial promise of redemption (Gen 3:15) is given greater definition and clarity over time. Instead of God leaving us to ourselves and swiftly bringing full judgment upon us, he acts in sovereign grace, choosing to save a people for himself and to reverse the manifold effects of sin. This choice to save is evident in the *protevangelium* (the first gospel), given immediately after the fall to reverse the disastrous effects of sin upon the world through a coming of a Redeemer, the "seed of the woman," who, though wounded himself in conflict, will destroy the works of Satan and restore goodness to this world. This promise creates the expectation that when it is finally realized, all sin and death will be defeated and the fullness of God's saving reign will come to this world as God's rightful rule is acknowledged and embraced. As God's plan unfolds, we discover *how* God will save us in Christ and why Christ's work is absolutely necessary. Let us develop this last point in three steps.

First, God's plan unfolds across time as God enters into covenant relations with Noah, Abraham, Israel, and David. By his mighty acts and words, God step by step prepares his people to anticipate the coming of the "seed of the woman," the deliverer, the Messiah. A Messiah who, when he comes, will *fulfill* all of God's promises by ushering in God's saving rule to this world.[24] This point is vital for establishing the identity of the Messiah, especially the truth that this Messiah is more than a mere man; he is God the Son incarnate. On the one hand, Scripture teaches that the fulfillment of God's promises will be accomplished *through a man* as developed by various typological persons such as Adam, Noah, Moses, Israel, and David, all seen in terms of the covenants. On the other hand, Scripture also teaches that this Messiah is more than a mere man since he is *identified with God*. How so? Because in fulfilling God's promises he literally inaugurates *God's* saving rule (kingdom) and shares the very throne of God—something no mere human can do—which entails that his identity is intimately tied to the one true and living God.[25] This observation is further underscored by the next point which brings together the establishment of God's kingdom through the inauguration of the new covenant.

Christ alone a particular characteristic, act, accomplishment, or other predicate that is true of no one but Christ.

[24] See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 591–652. Cf. Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), and Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

[25] See David F. Wells, *The Person of Christ: A Biblical and Historical Analysis of the Incarnation* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1984), 21–81 and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other*

Second, how does God's kingdom come in its *redemptive/new creation* sense? As the OT unfolds, God's saving kingdom is revealed and comes to this world, at least in anticipatory form, through the biblical covenants and covenant mediators—Adam, Noah, Abraham and his seed centered in the nation of Israel, and most significantly through David and his sons. Yet in the OT, it is clear that all of the covenant mediators (sons) fail and do not fulfill God's promises. This is specifically evident in the Davidic kings who are "sons" to Yahweh, the representatives of Israel, and thus "little Adams," but they fail in their task. It is only when a true obedient son comes, a son whom God himself provides, that God's rule is finally and completely established and his promises are realized. This is why, in OT expectation, ultimately the arrival of God's kingdom is organically linked to the dawning of the new covenant. This is also why when one begins to read the Gospels, one is struck by the fact that the kingdom of God is so central to Jesus's life and teaching; he cannot be understood apart from it.[26] But note: in biblical thought one cannot think of the inauguration of the kingdom apart from the arrival of the new covenant.

In this regard, Jeremiah 31 is probably the most famous new covenant text in the OT, even though teaching on the new covenant is not limited to it. New covenant teaching is also found in the language of "everlasting covenant" and the prophetic anticipation of the coming of the new creation, the Spirit, and God's saving work among the nations. In fact, among the post-exilic prophets there is an expectation that the new covenant will have a purpose similar to the Mosaic covenant, i.e., to bring the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant back into the present experience of Israel and the nations,[27] yet there is also an expectation of some massive differences from the old, all of which are outlined in Jeremiah 31.

Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). Some specific texts we have in mind are Pss 2, 45, 110; Isa 7:14; 9:6–7; Ezek 34; Dan 7.

[26] In the Gospels, the kingdom is mentioned directly thirteen times in Mark, nine times in sayings common to Matthew and Luke, twenty-seven additional instances in Matthew, twelve additional instances in Luke, and twice in John. Even though John's Gospel does not use kingdom terminology as often, John refers to these same realities in the language of "eternal life" [see I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 498; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 187–90]. For John, eternal life belongs to the "age to come," which is, importantly, identified with Jesus (John 1:4; 5:26; 1 John 5:11–12) since Jesus himself is the "life" (John 11:25: 14:6). In this way, John ties eternal life to Jesus, just as the Synoptics link the kingdom with Jesus in his coming and cross work. Cf. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 123.

[27] The "new covenant" will bring about the Abrahamic blessing in that it will benefit both Israel and the nations. See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 644–52.

What is most *new* about the new covenant is the promise of complete forgiveness of sin (Jer 31:34). In the OT, forgiveness of sin is normally granted through the sacrificial system. However, the OT believer, if spiritually perceptive, knew that this was never enough, as evidenced by the repetitive nature of the system. But now in v. 34, Jeremiah announces that sin will be "remembered no more," which certainly entails that sin finally will be dealt with in full.[28] Ultimately, especially when other texts are considered, the OT anticipates a perfect, unfettered fellowship of God's people with the Lord, a harmony restored between creation and God—a new creation and a new Jerusalem—where the dwelling of God is with men (see Ezek 37:1–23; cf. Dan 12:2; Isa 25:6–9; Rev 21:3–4). That is why it is with the arrival of the new covenant age that we also have God's saving kingdom brought to this world, which is precisely the fulfillment of the *protevangelium*.

Third, let us now take the Bible's basic covenantal storyline and see how it identifies who Christ is and establishes *why* he is unique and necessary. If we step back for a moment and ask—*Who* is able, or what kind of person is able to fulfill all of God's promises, inaugurate his saving rule in this world, and establish all that is associated with the new covenant, including the full forgiveness of sin?—in biblical thought the answer is clear: it is *God alone* who can do it and no one else.[29]

Is this not the Old Testament message? Is this not the covenantal message? As the centuries trace the history of Israel, it becomes evident that the Lord alone must act to accomplish his promises; he must initiate in order to save; he must *unilaterally* act if there is going to be redemption at all. After all, who ultimately can achieve the forgiveness of sin other than God alone? Who can usher in the new creation, final judgment, and salvation? Certainly these great realities will never come through the previous covenant mediators because they have all, in different ways, failed. Nor will it come through Israel as a nation because her sin has brought about her exile and judgment. If there is to be salvation at all, God *himself* must come and usher in salvation and execute judgment; the arm of the Lord must be revealed (Isa 51:9; 52:10; 53:1; 59:16–17; cf. Ezek 34). Just as he

[28] The concept of "remembering" in the OT is not simple recall (cf. Gen 8:1; 1 Sam 1:19). In Jer 31:34, for God "not to remember" means that under the terms of the new covenant a full and complete forgiveness of sin will result. See William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Milton Keyes: Paternoster, 2002), 181–85, for a development of this point.

[29] See Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 184, who argues this point. Bauckham labels this teaching of the OT "eschatological monotheism." By this expression he stresses not only God's unique lordship, but also as sole Creator and Lord there is the expectation that "in the future when YHWH fulfills his promises to his people Israel, YHWH will also demonstrate his deity to the nations, establishing his universal kingdom, making his name known universally, becoming known to all as the God Israel has known." Cf. N. T. Wright, "Jesus," *NDT* 349.

once led Israel through the desert, so he must come again, bringing about a new exodus in order to bring salvation to his people (Isa 40:3–5; cf. Isa 11).

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

It is this basic covenantal storyline which serves as the framework and background to the New Testament's presentation of Jesus and which identifies Christ and his work as utterly unique. *Who* is Jesus? According to Scripture, *he* is the one who inaugurates *God's* kingdom and new covenant age. In him, the full forgiveness of sin is achieved; in him, the eschatological Spirit is poured out, the new creation dawns, and all of God's promises are fulfilled. Yet in light of the OT teaching, *who* can do such a thing? Scripture gives only one answer: The only one who can do it is one who is both the Lord *and* the obedient Son, which is precisely how the New Testament presents Jesus.

The New Testament unambiguously teaches that this *human* Jesus is also the Lord since he alone ushers in *God's* kingdom. He is the eternal Son in relation to his Father (see Matt 11:1–15; 12:41–42; 13:16–17; Luke 7:18–22; 10:23–24; cf. John 1:1–3; 17:3), yet the one who has taken on our flesh and lived and died among us in order to win for us our salvation (John 1:14–18). In him, as fully human, the glory and radiance of God is completely expressed since he is the exact image and representation of the Father (Heb 1–3; cf. Col 1:15–17; 2:9). In him, all the biblical covenants have reached their *telos*, terminus, and fulfillment, and by his cross work, he has inaugurated the new covenant and all of its entailments. To say that he has done all of this is to identify him *as God the Son incarnate*, fully God and fully man.[30]

NASB New American Standard Bible

[30] Wells, *Person of Christ*, 38, insists on this point. He develops Christ's significance in inaugurating the kingdom and the new covenant age, which, in biblical thought, *only God can do*. He writes: "This 'age,' we have seen was supernatural, could only be established by God himself, would bring blessings and

It is for this reason that Jesus is utterly unique and that the NT presents Jesus in an entirely different category from any created thing. In fact, Scripture so identifies him with the Lord in all of his actions, character, and work that he is viewed, as David Wells reminds us, as "the agent, the instrument, and the personifier of God's sovereign, eternal, saving rule."[31] In Jesus Christ, we see all of God's plans and purposes fulfilled; we see the resolution of God to take upon himself our guilt and sin in order to reverse the horrible effects of the fall and to satisfy his own righteous requirements, to make this world right, and to inaugurate a new covenant in his blood (Rom 3:21–26; 5:1–8:39; 16:25–27; 1 Cor 15:1–34; Eph 1:7–10; Heb 8:1–13). In Jesus Christ we see the perfectly obedient Son, who is also the Lord, taking the initiative to keep his covenant-promises by taking upon himself our human flesh, veiling his glory, and winning for us our redemption (Phil 2:6–11; Heb 2:5–18; 9:11–10:18). In him we see two major OT eschatological expectations unite: he is the sovereign Lord who comes to save his people, and he is simultaneously David's greater Son (Isa 9:6–7; 11:1–16; 59:15–21; Jer 23:1–6; Ezek 34). In this way, our Lord Jesus Christ fulfills all the types and shadows of the Messiah in the OT, and he is also the eternal Son, identified with the covenant Lord and thus God—equal to the Father in every way. The biblical covenants as developed along the Bible's own storyline beautifully identify who Jesus is and provide the biblical warrant for his unique identity and work.

In fact, the primary message of the covenants is this: unless *God himself* acts to accomplish his promises, we have no salvation. After all, *who* ultimately can remedy his own divine problem of forgiveness other than *God alone*? If there is to be salvation at all, the triune God himself must save, which is precisely what he has done as a triune work, in and through the incarnate Son. The Son is absolutely necessary in his person and work to act as our new covenant representative and substitute, and apart from *him*, there is no salvation.

In order to identify Christ and his work correctly, we must place him within the Bible's covenantal storyline. Yet something else must also occur. To grasp the truth of Christ alone and to glory in *him alone*, we must also, by God's grace, come to realize our own sin and lostness before God. Our greatest need as humans is to be reconciled to the holy God and Judge of the universe. Our secular, postmodern culture does not understand this

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benefits which only God could give, would achieve the overthrow of sin, death, and the devil (which only God could accomplish), and was identified so closely with God himself that no human effort could bring it about and no human resistance turn it back. If Jesus saw himself as the one in whom this kind of Kingdom was being inaugurated, then such a perception is a christological claim which would be fraudulent and deceptive if Jesus was ignorant of his Godness."

[31] Wells, *Person of Christ*, 172. Cf. Gerald Bray, "Christology," *NDT* 137, who makes the same point. Christ alone a particular characteristic, act, accomplishment, or other predicate that is true of no one but Christ.

because of its rejection of Christian theology for alien worldview perspectives. But to understand the biblical Jesus correctly, we must also know something of our own guilt before God and why we need the kind of Redeemer Scripture presents him to be. Not until we know ourselves to be lost, under the sentence of death, and condemned before God can we begin to appreciate and rejoice in a divine-human Redeemer who meets our deepest need. Once we see ourselves as fallen rebels against the holy God of the universe, we gladly rejoice that there is such a Redeemer for human beings. Once again, Wells gets it right when he observes the priority of knowing our sinfulness: "This means that to understand Christ aright, we must also know something about our own guilt. We must know ourselves to be sinners.… The New Testament, after all, was not written for the curious, for historians, or even for biblical scholars, but for those, in all ages and cultures, who want to be forgiven and to know God."[32] Unless this is a reality in our lives, it should not surprise us that we, or anyone else, will be baffled by the biblical Jesus and will fail to appreciate the truth and to glory in Christ alone.

Identifying Christ Alone in Scripture

Scripture alone identifies Christ alone. Reading the Bible on its own terms—according to its own covenantal storyline, in its own categories, and in its biblical-theological framework—we discover that the Jesus of the Bible is utterly unique in his person and work, and that apart from him there is no salvation. It is in this way that the whole Bible is *Christocentric*, since the entire plan of the triune Creator-Covenant God for humanity and all of creation centers in *his* unique identity and work. In addition, as we trace out the Bible's storyline through the biblical covenants, we also discover that Scripture is also *Christotelic*. The entire plan of God moves to its conclusion in Christ. *He alone* is the *telos*, the terminus and fulfillment of God's promises and covenants. He is life and life eternal (John 17:3).

All of this provides the biblical warrant, rationale, and theological grounds for *Christ alone* in his exclusive identity and all-sufficient work. Scripture is clear: In Christ alone is our salvation, the hope of the future, the worship of heaven, and the adoration of his people.

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[32] Wells, *Person of Christ*, 175.

Christ alone a particular characteristic, act, accomplishment, or other predicate that is true of no one but Christ.

Christ alone a particular characteristic, act, accomplishment, or other predicate that is true of no one but Christ.

Christ alone Reformation doctrine of *solus Christus*

Christ alone a particular characteristic, act, accomplishment, or other predicate that is true of no one but Christ.

Christ alone is the one who fulfills God's righteousness as a man, reconciles God with humanity, establishes God's kingdom in this world, and achieves the forgiveness of sin because, and only because, *he* is utterly unique as God the Son incarnate.[33]

- Chapter 1 of *Part 1: Christ Alone: The Exclusivity of His Identity*.

Christ alone a particular characteristic, act, accomplishment, or other predicate that is true of no one but Christ.

[33] Wellum, S., & Barrett, M. (2017). *Christ alone—the uniqueness of jesus as savior: what the reformers taught…and why it still matters* (pp. 31–53). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.