

Issues, Etc.

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Solus Christus in the Scriptures

from *Christ Alone*
by Rod Rosenblatt

Preface

These are not good days for the evangelical church, and anyone who steps back from what is going on for a moment to try to evaluate our life and times will understand that.

In the last few years a number of important books have been published all trying to understand what is happening, and they are saying much the same thing even though the authors come from fairly different backgrounds and are doing different work. One is by David F. Wells, a theology professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts. It is called *No Place for Truth*. A second is by Michael Scott Horton, vice president of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. His book is called *Power Religion*. The third is by the well-known pastor of Grace Community Church in California, John F. MacArthur. It is called *Ashamed of the Gospel*. Each of these authors is writing about the evangelical church, not the liberal church, and a person can get an idea of what each is saying from the titles alone.

Yet the subtitles are even more revealing. The subtitle of Wells's book reads *Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* The subtitle of Horton's book is *The Selling Out of the Evangelical Church*. The subtitle of John MacArthur's work proclaims, *When the Church Becomes Like the World*.

When you put these together, you realize that these careful observers of the current church scene perceive that today evangelicalism is seriously off base because it has abandoned its evangelical truth-heritage. The thesis of David Wells's book is that the evangelical church is either dead or dying as a significant religious force because it has forgotten what it stands for. Instead of trying to do God's work in God's way, it is trying to build a prosperous earthly kingdom with secular tools. Thus, in spite of our apparent success we have been "living in a fool's paradise," Wells declared in an address to the National Association of Evangelicals in 1995.

John H. Armstrong, a founding member of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, has edited a volume titled *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*. When he was asked not long afterwards whether he thought the crisis was still coming or is actually here, he admitted that in his judgment the crisis is already upon us.

The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals is addressing this problem through seminars and conferences, radio programs, *Modern Reformation* magazine, Reformation Societies, and scholarly writings. The series of booklets on today's issues is a further effort along these same lines. If you are troubled by the state of today's church and are helped by these booklets, we invite you to contact the Alliance at 1716 Spruce Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103. You can also phone us at

215-546-3696 or visit the Alliance at our [website](#). We would like to work with you under God "for a modern Reformation."

James Montgomery Boice, President, Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, Series Editor, Today's Issues.

One Solus Christus in the Scriptures

The Bible is certainly not equivocal or unclear when it speaks about what the Reformation later called solus Christus.

Think, for example, of the angelic announcement concerning the nature of Mary's Son: "She will give birth to a Son; and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" - Matt. 1:21. Or the familiar words of Jesus himself: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" - John 14:6. Or Peter's famous words: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" - Acts 4:12. Nor was Paul equivocating when he wrote, "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" - 1 Tim. 2:5.

Such examples could easily be multiplied from the text of the New Testament because Christianity was exclusive from its inception. It taught that Jesus Christ alone, Jesus Christ and no other, saves sinners.

The Bible Is About Christ

Dr. Mortimer Adler taught at the University of Chicago years ago. He regularly gave an examination to his class on "The Great Books of the Western World," books that in those days comprised the whole reading list for one's undergraduate degree at the University of Chicago. On one occasion Dr. Adler turned to one of his brightest students and casually asked her to summarize the book for the class. She had just gotten a high A on her examination on that book, but she replied, "I have no idea what it was about, Dr. Adler." Adler instantly realized that in giving his students the equivalent of today's "Scan Tron" examinations, he had controlled how they read the book, but he had not taught it to them. His students could get 100 percent on an examination, yet not understand what the book was about! He said he changed his whole approach to teaching that afternoon. From that time on Dr. Adler had his students read a book primarily to learn what the book was about.

1. The testimony of Luther. What is the Bible about? It is about Jesus Christ. Martin Luther, the great Reformer, said that Jesus Christ is the "center and circumference of the Bible," meaning that its fundamental content is Jesus Christ—who he is and what he did for us in his death and resurrection. To miss him as the center and key to Scripture is to remain in darkness and ignorance.

This is the judgment and punishment which God permits to come upon those who do not see this light, that is, do not accept and believe God's Word concerning Christ, and then go about steeped in utter darkness and blindness and no longer know anything whatever of matters divine. They now understand no article of Christian teaching: what sin is, what man's ability is, how one gets rid of sin and becomes righteous, what Law or Gospel is, what faith is, what good works are, what the Christian estates are. And since they do not know Christ, they cannot really know and see a Christian, but must condemn and persecute the true church and Christians, who teach the Word of Christ.

Whoever has not accepted or will not accept perfectly and purely this Man, called Jesus Christ, God's Son, whom we Christians are preaching, should let the Bible rest in peace. This is my advice. He will certainly take offense and become blinder and madder the longer he studies. (*What Luther Says*, ed. Ewald Plass [St. Louis: Concordia, 1959], pp. 145-148)

In taking this position, Luther was not dreaming up some new and novel way to read the Scriptures. He knew that he was simply reflecting what Jesus Christ, and later his disciples, said.

2. The testimony of Jesus. Think of the story of the risen Lord walking with the two dejected disciples on the road to Emmaus. In this amazing conversation, Jesus taught the Bible study of all time: "And beginning with Moses and the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" - Luke 24:27. Or more negatively, think of one of Jesus' confrontations with the Pharisees in which he said to them, "You diligently search the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" - John 5:39. Or think of Philip saying to Nathaniel, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" - John 1:45.

It is evident in these and other passages that Jesus really thought he was the major subject of the Old Testament Scriptures—from Moses all the way through the prophets. He believed that they were all writing about him! This is either grandiose monomania, or he was giving his hearers the key to understanding what the whole Old Testament is all about.

3. Inward and outward "knowing." This seems obvious to us today. Not many Christians would object if you were to say, "I'll tell you something really radical: the whole Bible is about Jesus Christ!" Many would yawn as they reply, "Tell us something we don't already know." But ironically, many evangelical Christians have heated conversations about the most obscure subjects touched on in the Scriptures, treating the Bible as if it were some sort of "Encyclopedia of the Universe" and never seeing Christ at all. If we were to read another book in this way, actively ignoring the major character and the plot line, we would never come to an understanding of that book.

It is not at all obvious that today's church encourages its people to know "what the book is about." The Reformers believed the Bible was about Christ—about him from start to finish—and they believed that if one did not see this, he or she would inevitably have no idea what the Bible is saying.

Of course, the Reformers knew that we do not see the centrality of Christ in the Scriptures on the basis of our immediate, intuitive, and inherent rational abilities. The Scriptures tell us that one of the many aspects of the Fall was that our intellects were darkened in respect to any knowledge of our Creator and his will toward us. Any theological or saving "knowing" we have concerning Christ will only be the result of the Father's gracious initiative. As was the case with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he must open our eyes to understand the Scriptures. If God does not so act, we will remain trapped in epistemic darkness concerning the Gospel.

One aspect of this darkness is our blindness concerning Christ as the sum and substance of Scripture. We may, if we are well trained in the art of reading a book, grasp the centrality of Christ in the Bible in what the Reformers called "an outward way." But we will never, on our own, grasp Christ in a truly saving or theological way. The Holy Spirit must use the Gospel in the text to open our eyes to Christ and his work on our behalf.

4. The Gospel and the sacraments. The usual way that God enlightens us to theological truth,

enabling us to see Christ as the One who died for us, is through the Gospel preached and the sacraments administered. Does the Holy Spirit, therefore, not use the Gospel in the text of Scripture as we read that text? Of course he does. Christ is placed before us as Savior primarily when the Gospel is preached, but this is not to exclude the Gospel read. The human organ that most naturally receives the Gospel of Christ is the ear, more than the eye. But in either case, we are not to look within ourselves to find Christ, for he is not to be found there. He is to be heard about as the pastor preaches him as crucified for us and for our sin. The pastor is called to do this by preaching the Gospel from the text of the Bible.

Too, Christ's body and blood are to be tasted by the mouth as the pastor gives us the Lord's Supper. Christ is to be seen in his free, gracious, saving action as the pastor reads the baptismal liturgy and places water on the head of someone in the name of the Trinity. All these—the preaching of Christ crucified, the administration of baptism, and the administration of the Lord's Supper—are Christ in saving action among us. They are also pictures of God's saving us solus Christus.

In each of these cases we see a picture of:

1. Our utter sinfulness and passivity, as well as
2. Christ being the only "active party" in saving us sinners, as opposed to our being able to somehow "help him" save us, and
3. An implicit rejection of any other "savior" having the ability actually to save.

A Bible Without Christ as Its Center

Anyone who has had to converse with a Jehovah's Witness will know that there are groups who take a very high view of the Bible's inspiration, yet do not acknowledge the centrality of Christ in it. Not only is this a possible position to hold, it is a position actually held by many sects and cults in our day.

It is also held by people who are the intellectual inheritors of the Enlightenment. Although many might be ignorant of the existence and nature of the "Jefferson Bible," they treat the Scriptures the same way Thomas Jefferson did—that is, as a collection of moral lessons for wise living. We may think that mistaken idea was confined to eighteenth-century deism or the theological liberalism of the nineteenth century, and that it is not the case for today's evangelicals. But we must think again. Much of the preaching and curriculum of today's American evangelical churches is just as Christ less as the teaching of the Enlightenment deists. This is evident in sermons and seminars on such topics as "How to Have a More Intimate Marriage," "How to Manage Your Money in a God-pleasing Way," "How to Raise Drug-free Kids" and similar subjects.

Note the parallel of the sermonic diet in many evangelical churches and the folksy sayings in Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac:

An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
A penny saved is a penny earned.

Are these aphorisms so different from many evangelical seminars or sermons? Where is Christ in his saving office, dying as our substitute and for our sin? There was no Christ in Enlightenment

deism other than a "Christ" who was a model for wise living. But often there is no Christ in evangelical preaching either. The "Christ" preached in many evangelical congregations seems to exist in order to aid the hearer in his or her pursuit of successful living—financially, relationally, and psychiatrically.

In Reformation times this sort of thing was labeled for what it was: eudaemonism, the belief that God exists in order to meet our needs. But the biblical claim is that the eternal second person of the Trinity became flesh and died in order graciously to meet our real need (the forgiveness of sins) and not simply to meet our trivial, daily, imagined needs.

Definitions

Let's define some terms.

1. Gospel. By Gospel the Reformers meant the news about what Jesus Christ's death and resurrection accomplished for you and me. The Gospel is summarized by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." In other words, the Gospel has to do with what took place 2,000 years ago outside of you and me, outside our hearts. The Gospel is news about a past event, an announcement about Jesus Christ's historical, objective death and resurrection and what it did for us sinners.

2. Word. The Bible uses word in a threefold sense. First, it refers to Jesus Christ ([John 1:1, 14](#)). Second, it is used as a synonym for the Gospel, often translated "message" ([Acts 4:4](#); [Rom. 9:9](#), KJV; [2 Cor. 5:19](#); [Eph. 1:13](#)). Third, it is used for Scripture ([Heb. 4:12](#)).

3. Sacraments. When the Reformers used this word, they were referring to baptism and the Lord's Supper. Martin Luther believed that the preached Gospel actually delivered to sinners what it described (the forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake) and that baptism and the Lord's Supper did the same. Baptism "Christs"—that is, "christens"—a person, granting the forgiveness of sins. It actually gives to the sinner what the promise promises. The Lord's Supper is given with the words to the sinner, "Eat this, which is Christ's body delivered unto death for your sin; drink this, which is the blood of Christ shed on the cross for the forgiveness of your sin."

The Lutheran branch of the Reformation holds that spiritual benefits (the forgiveness of sin in particular) are communicated to sinners by means of empirical, material stuff—water, bread, wine. Not only does the preached Gospel create faith in the human heart (a heart that, Luther believed, is by nature always utterly devoid of faith and hostile to God), but the Gospel is also "delivered" to us by means of these two sacraments.

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Bible References (NIV)

John 1: 1, 14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 14 The Word became flesh and

made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Acts 4: 4

But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

Romans 9: 9 (KJV)

For this is the word of promise, At this time will I come, and Sarah shall have a son.

2 Corinthians 5: 19

that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Ephesians 1: 13

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit,

Hebrews 4: 12

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

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