

Solus Christus

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We are soon to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of the start of the Reformation, yet the basic truths of the Reformation are still debated and often not well understood. If you asked the typical American what she had to do to be saved, the response would be, "Lead a good, moral life and God will accept you in heaven when you die." The Reformers (Luther, Calvin and others) argued that we are saved by Christ alone (*Solus Christus*). We do no need to rely on our own good works or the mediation of priests or saints or the sacraments of the Church.

People throughout history have been uncomfortable with the doctrine of *Solus Christus*. We all want to add something to what Christ has already done – a good work, a religious observance. This makes us feel better because then we are in control. Ancient Jewish Christians insisted that a person had to become a Jew to be saved. Medieval Catholics insisted that the intervention of saints, the mediation of priests, and the cooperation of Christians with the work of Christ were necessary for salvation. Modern people tend to be content to say that a good moral life is all that God really wants from us. For God, they say, is *Love*, and therefore he will not turn anyone away. The title of Rob Bell's book, *Love Wins*, tells it all. In the end, no one will be rejected because God's love will not allow it. Hence we will all be saved.

The teachings of the Scriptures, of course, run counter to all of these ideas. The Bible insists on something that is unfashionable today, which can be summed up in one word: exclusivity.

In the classic teachings of the Reformers, *Solus Christus* was a doctrine that spoke this essential truth: Salvation was entirely

accomplished for us by Jesus, who paid the debt for our sins on the cross. Just before he died on the cross he said, "It is finished." We do not, therefore, need to add anything to this. We cannot add anything to this. Our job is simply to receive the free gift of grace, which is salvation in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "This is the work that God requires of you – to believe in the one whom he has sent" (John 6:29).

John Calvin taught that this is a wonderfully liberating doctrine. Once we have accepted Christ as Lord and Savior and received the free gift of salvation through grace, we no longer need to worry about our salvation. We don't have to worry about losing it. We don't have to worry about doing one more good deed in order to secure it. We can simply rest in Christ and let his Spirit work in us to live into those good deeds that he has set before us. As Paul said in Ephesians, "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life" (Eph. 2:10).

Issue of Relativism

A key issue at the time of the Reformation was whether the work of Christ on the cross entirely accomplished our salvation. The doctrine of *Solus Christus* answers that question for Protestant Christians. But another issue has arisen in our time for which the doctrine of *Solus Christus* is also relevant: that is the common belief today in religious relativism.

I said earlier, "If you asked the typical American what she had to do to be saved, the response would be, 'Lead a good moral life and God will accept you in heaven when you die." In recent years, many would add: "And it doesn't matter if you are Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu."

We live in a world in which human reason trumps everything else: the Bible, tradition, and theological authorities. Human reason can be functionally defined as "what intuitively makes

sense to a person." For us to say that we are saved by Christ alone (*Solus Christus*) is simply not credible to many people today because it runs counter to what we intuitively think is true. We live in a pluralistic world — one where many different religions hold sway. In such a world, it is difficult (or at least uncomfortable) to insist on the exclusive claims of Christ.

The insistence that human reason is the final arbiter of truth comes to us from the era of the Enlightenment. The claim that all religions are beautiful and true goes back to William Blake, who in 1795 wrote the book, *All Religions Are One*. Stephen Prothero points out in his book *God is not One* (2010) that this is a very odd claim. Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University, writes:

No one argues that different economic systems or political regimes are one and the same. Capitalism and socialism are so obviously at odds that their differences hardly bear mentioning. The same goes for democracy and monarchy. Yet scholars continue to claim that religious rivals such as Hinduism and Islam, Judaism and Christianity are, by some miracle of the imagination, essentially the same 1

The religious philosopher Huston Smith in *The World's Religions* (1958) gives us a popular metaphor that illustrates how the world's religions lead to the same destination. He compares them to different paths up the same mountain. There are many paths that one may take, but in the end they all lead to the summit of the mountain. Smith writes,

At the base [of the mountain], in the foothills of theology, ritual, and organizational structure, the religions are distinct. Differences in culture, history, geography, and collective temperament all make for diverse starting

¹ Prothrero, All Religions are One, (New York: Harper One, 2010), 1

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points....But beyond these differences, the same goal beckons²

Prothero writes that this view, a product of Enlightenment skepticism, was meant to lead to religious tolerance, "and we are doubtless better for it." Those who argue that all gods are one, that all religions are essentially the same, are well motivated. They want to put an end to religious strife, to religion-inspired conflict, violence, and war. Nevertheless, it is wishful thinking. It is disrespectful of the world's religions because it doesn't take their distinctive ideas seriously. And it is dangerous because ideas do have consequences – both in this world and the world to come.

Let's look at the issues more carefully. What do people say is wrong with *Solus Christus*? I will summarize this in three common statements made today.

(1) It is arrogant to say that one religion has an exclusive claim on truth. Groups tend to stereotype one another, which makes dialogue impossible. This is what leads to religious violence and wars. This is what was behind the Crusades and the Inquisition; and it is what is behind religious terrorism today. When a suicide bomber blowers herself and others up in an office building or night club, we can be sure that the bomber was inspired by some exclusivist religious truth. It is this kind of thinking that leads to the "clash of civilizations," which results in endless conflict and may someday produce a world war. The world, therefore, says: "Let's reject the exclusive truths of religion. They are dangerous. They cause divisions. They lead to strife."

It is the exclusive claims of religion that in recent years have led to the rise of the New Atheists – or some would say *Brights* because of the stigma attached to the word *Atheists*. These

² Ibid.

authors include Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and others. It is said that their ideas have gained traction today for three reasons: (1) the rise of Muslim immigrants in Europe, and the threat they pose to civil life in the West; (2) the rise of the Christian right in the U.S., with its focus on divisive issues such as abortion; and (3) the rise of Islam-inspired violence in the world, especially the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001.³

Because of these three ideas, religious exclusivism is seen as a supreme danger to our world today. Yet there is irony in the case of those who claim that religious exclusivism leads to intolerance and ultimately to strife and war. In the twentieth century those countries that sought to repress religion became among the most intolerant and repressive regimes in history. Alister McGrath points to Communist Russia, Communist China, Khmer-Rouge dominated Cambodia, and Nazi Germany as examples of nations that explicitly rejected God and sought to "transcendalize" something else with the result being the murder of millions of their own people.⁴

Moreover, it has been said that the twentieth century produced more Christian martyrs than all the pervious centuries combined. Yet these crimes against humanity were not committed by religious people showing intolerance to others; rather they were perpetrated by atheists who wanted to destroy religion in order to impose their own secular visions on the world.

Despite the wishful thinking of relativists, it is simply not true that all religions are equally valid paths to God and basically teach the same thing. A person who says this probably considers himself to be enlightened and those who deny this truth to be

³ Ibid., 320.

⁴ Alister McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (Downers Grove, II: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 81 cited in Timothy Keller *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 53.

religious bigots who are dangerous in our pluralist, evershrinking world. But this position will not bear close scrutiny. We can't say that all religions are equally valid paths to God when some religions, such as Buddhism, do not even believe in a personal god. We can't say that all religions take us to the same destination when Buddhists and Christians have very different understandings of what that destination is. A Buddhist believes that her destination is to fall as a drop into the great ocean of soul and be absorbed and disappear as a unique individual. This is very different from a Christian who believes that her unique identity will be affirmed and perfected in a new age in which she will have a resurrected body. We simply can't say that both views are correct or partially true. If one is true, the other is false. The evidence and simple logic will lead to no other conclusion.

It is not fashionable in our day, I know, to say that any religion is false. I feel the force of this position. We would rather say that God has gone before us into all cultures and religions; and hence we can find at least some light of truth in them, some bridge of understanding over which we can meet. I believe this, and it informs my thinking as a Christian as I encounter those of other faiths. The day of totally demonizing other religions is long past. But this does not mean that we have eliminated the distinction between truth and falsehood. The practice of child sacrifice in the worship of Moloch is not only religiously mistaken and false, it is evil – it is demonic. If we can't say this then we have thrown away our moral compass, and we are in danger of saying that good is evil, and evil is good. This we cannot do and be faithful to ourselves, let alone to the gospel.

(2) Religious relativists often assert that all religions are partially true and none is completely true because we all see only part of the whole. According to this view, all religions are essentially the same – that is, they all teach the same essential truths, which if we follow them, will make for a good world and lead us to heaven. The truths they have in mind are really ethical

truths. All religions, it is said, teach different forms of the "Golden Rule"; they all teach us to respect our neighbors; they all teach us not to lie, cheat, steal, or kill.

Moreover, the theological differences between religions are basically superficial and ultimately unimportant (what Huston Smith would call the foothills). What alone matters is leading a good life (what Smith would call the summit). This point is often illustrated with a story that comes from India from many centuries ago. It is the story of blind men examining an elephant. One blind man feels the elephant's trunk and says, "This creature is long and flexible like a snake." Another blind man feels one of the legs of the elephant and says, "No, this creature is thick and round like a tree trunk." A third blind man feels the elephant's side and says, "You're both wrong. This creature is large and flat."

The point of the story is that each blind man is like one of the world's religions. Each accurately comprehends part of the truth, but none of them is able to comprehend the whole truth. The story teller, therefore, is posing as a humble person who is saying that religious truth is greater than any person or any religion can fully comprehend.

The fallacy of this story is that it is told from the perspective of someone who is not blind – someone who can see the entire elephant. After all, how could the storyteller know that none of the blind men has comprehended the whole elephant unless he is able to see the entire elephant. The storyteller, therefore, only appears to be humble. Actually he is arrogantly claiming to have a religious knowledge that is superior to all the world's religions. He is claiming to have a vantage point to comprehend the elephant that relativizes all the claims of the world's religions. Yet no human being has such a vantage point. We are all limited to the same tools. We must all rely on experience, testimony, history, argument, and personal insight. The storyteller is claiming that no religion has a superior knowledge of the truth

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while claiming that he has such knowledge. He is either a hypocrite or is self-deceived.

(3) To hold that one religion is true and all the rest are false is to condemn the bulk of the world's population and to make God a merciless tyrant. A young woman from Rwanda wrote to me a few years ago to ask about this question. She said, if Christ is the only way to heaven, then what will happen to all my ancestors who lived in the centuries before Christian missionaries came to tell us about Christ? It's a good question. It's a difficult question.

Before his ascension, Jesus inaugurated the Church and gave it the task of discipling the nations (Matt. 28:19); and in a liturgy of the early church, which the apostle Paul records in 1 Cor. 11:23-26, it is clear that the Church is to "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" – that is, the Church is to continue teaching, preaching, and witnessing to the truth until Christ returns. This truth includes the message that salvation is in Christ alone.

In our pluralistic, post-modern world, the exclusive claims of Christ have been difficult to square with the universality of God. Yet, as Lesslie Newbigin argues in *The Open Secret*, the doctrine of election maintains that God chose to work through one people (Israel), to be supremely represented in one person (Jesus), and to have one religion that is the bearer of God's truth (Christianity). This should not be a matter of pride or presumption for Christians as election does not give its bearers a privileged status, a point the prophets made repeatedly.⁵

Christians should reject a universalism that argues from the love of God to the conclusion that all will be saved. This

⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, [1978]1995), 66-91.

position is inconsistent with Scripture, which gives room for free choice, allowing human beings to have freedom even to reject God. As for those who have embraced other religions, Christians need to be careful to avoid two extremes, either demonizing them as wholly false or seeing all religious distinctions as relative. Demonization is inconsistent with the Scriptures, which affirm that God made the nations, allotting their times and boundaries (Act 17:26) and not leaving them "without a witness" (Acts 14:17).

As Newbigin puts it, the light shines in the darkness, from which he argued that there is a clear difference between darkness and light but also that no part of the darkness is without at least some light. In effect, this is an argument for "respectful witness."

Jesus strongly implies that it is not for Christians to speculate on the fate of those of other religions. When Jesus was asked, "Lord, will only a few be saved?" he answered, "Strive to enter by the narrow gate" (Luke 13: 23-34). In other words, Jesus does not want us to speculate about other people's fate; rather, salvation is a question that is addressed to each of us individually.

Christians' lack of knowledge about the fate of unbelievers should not be an excuse to deny the exclusive claims of Christ or to embrace universalism; rather, it should energize us for greater evangelistic efforts.

The Bible and Religious Relativism

What does the Bible have to say on the subject of religious relativism or pluralism? Many Christians have come to accept religious relativism in recent years in part, I believe, because they are simply reflecting a trend in the general culture. But many have clearly accepted it because they believe that the biblical God is radically inclusive. Did Jesus not embrace the religious outcasts of his day? Did he not embrace notorious sinners – prostitutes and tax collectors?

Yet to say that God is radically inclusive is not sufficient to justify relativism. Jesus forgave the woman caught in adultery (John 8), but he didn't say, "Now go and do whatever you want." He said, "Go and sin no more." He told his potential followers to first count the cost, because there is a cost. To quote Dietrich Bonoeffer, grace is free but it is not cheap. It requires repentance, and it requires taking up a cross. It requires not simply calling on Jesus as "Lord, Lord" (Matt. 7:21), but it requires actually following him.

Some Christians say, rather blithely, that the Bible teaches that we are all God's children – hence an argument for relativism. This however is simply not biblical. As John's Gospel put it, Jesus came into the world so that those who follow him <u>might have the right</u> to become the children of God (John 1:12). We are not inherently the children of God; rather, Christians are God's adopted children.

Jesus made a number of key exclusive claims during his earthly ministry that are recorded in the Gospels: "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30); "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one goes to the Father except through me" (John 14:16); and "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Jesus' teaching on this subject is also reflected in other passages of the New Testament. For example, Luke reiterates this in Acts 4:12: "There is no salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved; and Paul tells us in 1Timothy 2:5: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus."

C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity* makes an important point about the New Testament passages in which Jesus asserts his divinity:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher; he'd either be a lunatic – on a level with a man who says he's a

poached egg – or else he'd be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come up with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.⁶

This is Lewis's famous "trilemma" argument: Jesus was either a lunatic, an evil demagogue, or exactly who he said he was – our Lord and God. Lewis, too, accepted the absolutist and exclusivist claim of Jesus.

When I was in graduate school, Harold Bloom had just published *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). He argued that Americans had embraced relativism because they see it as a way of being tolerant towards others and because, more importantly, they see it as being opened-minded – that is, being open to the truths of other faith traditions. Yet, ironically, Bloom pointed out that relativists are the least open-minded people of all. They have closed their minds to the possibility of there being any absolute truth. For them, all truth is relative, and all religions have only a part of the truth. Hence, no religion has any absolute claim on them.

Bloom was writing of the closing of the American mind, but he might as well have said he was speaking of the closing of the Christian mind – at least those Christians who have mistakenly rejected the doctrine of *Solus Christus* and embraced the modern heresy of relativism or religious pluralism.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins ebooks, [1952] 2009), 52.

The Power of the Gospel

I suspect that some Christians are uncomfortable with *Solus Christus* because, caught up in the concerns of pluralism, they have forgotten how powerful and liberating the gospel can be – especially for those who have never heard or understood the message.

Miriam Adeney tells a wonderful story of the gospel's power in one woman's life. Dr. Adeney is a storyteller, who wrote, Kingdom without Boarders: The Untold Story of Global Christianity. She tells the story of an Asian woman who was a Muslim and became curious about the gospel message, but there was no church or minister or Christian friend that could explain the message to her. One day she happened upon a Bible and decided to read the Gospel of John on her own. She was awed by the majesty of the prologue that declared Jesus to be the Word of God that became flesh. She marveled at the story of Nicodemus, the learned man who came at night to discover that he must be born again to enter the kingdom of God. She delighted to read of the Samaritan woman at the well, whom Jesus taught to seek for that water that will never run out, that will rise like a spring of living water from within. But then she came to the story of the woman taken in adultery who was brought as a test before Jesus to see what he would do. And she couldn't read on because she knew – or at least she thought she knew – what was coming: Jesus would impose the age-old double standard, ignoring the sin of the man and condemning the woman. She put the Bible away for a long time, but eventually out of curiosity – and perhaps a prompting of the Spirit – she returned to it and finished the story. Tears came to her eyes when she read that Jesus did not condemn the woman. Rather, he said, let he who is without sin cast the first stone – thus challenging these hypocritical men.

We have to conclude that every human being needs to hear the gospel message because every human being has need of the Savior. Not a savior, but the Savior – the unique son of God who

came into the world, full of grace and truth, the one in whom there is life, the "life that is the light of men" (John 1:4).

Conclusion

Solus Christus is a culturally unfashionable message because it holds that there is an absolute truth, and Jesus is that truth. Moreover, since Christians have an exclusive claim to truth in Christ, other belief systems must be or incomplete or at least partially false. Such exclusive truths have always been difficult to maintain Ancient Jewish-Christians wanted to add to the doctrine of Solus Christus that becoming a Jew was necessary for salvation. They were wrong, and the Early Church rejected this position (Acts 15). The Medieval Church wanted to add to the doctrine of Solus Christus to say that human beings cooperate in their salvation by doing good works, participating in the sacraments of the church, and seeking the mediation of priests and saints. The great Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century rejected this view, returning to the pure biblical view that salvation was won by Christ alone. Today, many Christians would set aside the doctrine of Solus Christus because it seems intolerant and arrogant in our religiously pluralistic world. But if we do this, we will deny a fundamental truth of the gospel.

The apostle Peter, standing before the Sanhedrin and in danger of imprisonment, torture, and death, said it as clearly as it has ever been said: "There is no salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

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