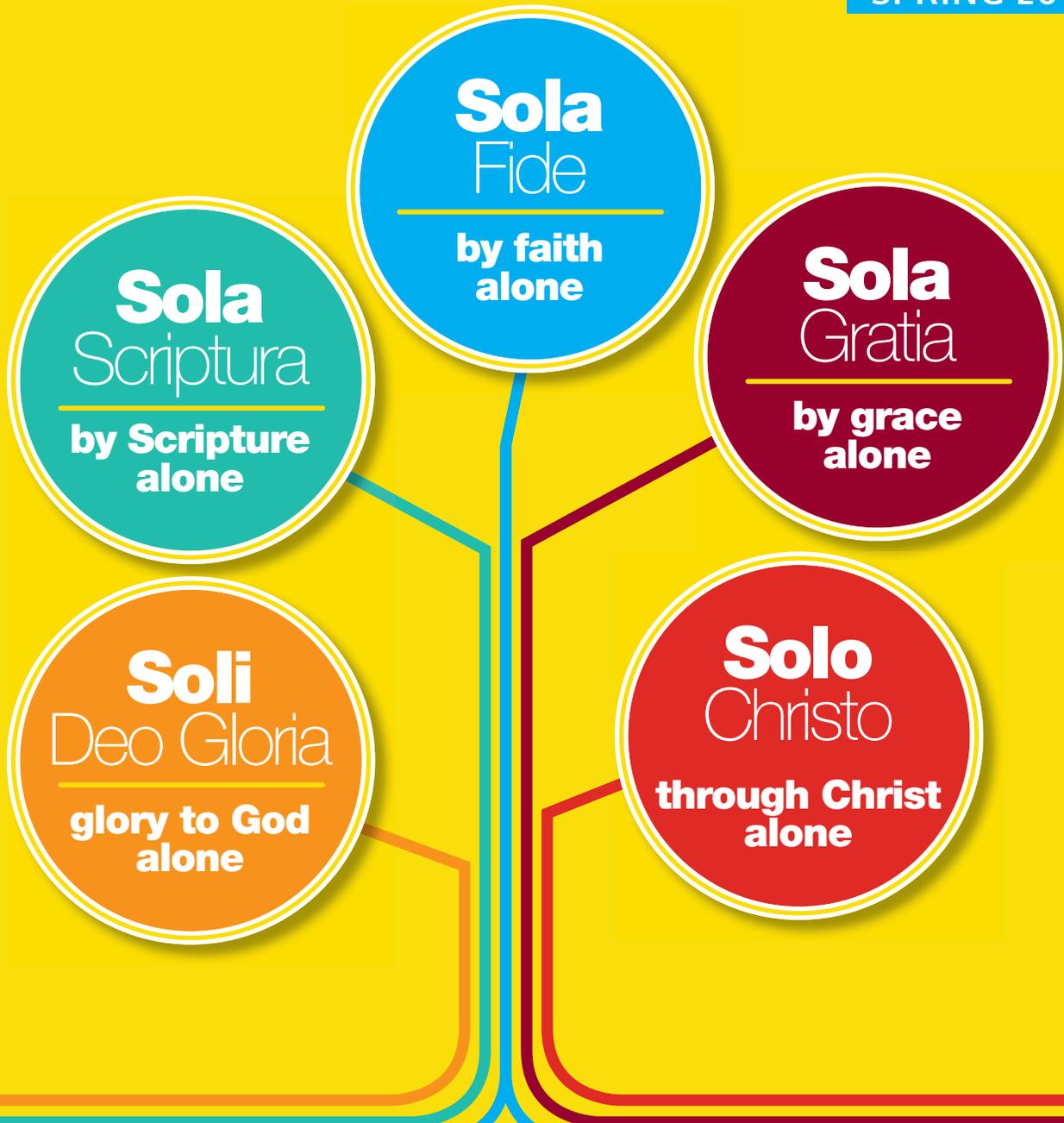


# CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY FORUM

SPRING 2017



**Sola**  
Scriptura  
by Scripture  
alone

**Sola**  
Fide  
by faith  
alone

**Sola**  
Gratia  
by grace  
alone

**Soli**  
Deo Gloria  
glory to God  
alone

**Solo**  
Christo  
through Christ  
alone

500 YEARS  
OF THE REFORMATION

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**CALVIN  
THEOLOGICAL  
SEMINARY**



by Jul Medenblik,  
President

# From the President

## More Than a Slogan

2017 marks the 500th anniversary from October 31, 1517, the date when Martin Luther nailed the Ninety-five Theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. That date marks the launching of what later became identified as the Protestant Reformation. This anniversary is a time for reflection, thanksgiving, lament, and commemoration.

“Sola” is Latin meaning “alone” or “only” and the corresponding phrases are:

**Sola Fide**  
*by faith alone.*

**Sola Scriptura**  
*by Scripture alone.*

**Solo Christo**  
*through Christ alone.*

**Sola Gratia**  
*by grace alone.*

**Soli Deo Gloria**  
*glory to God alone.*

This Forum is dedicated to helping us see these slogans as more than a type of “bumper sticker” theology. There is a history and a hope to each of the phrases that our authors seek to illumine for the church of today. May these articles help us join the conversation and the commemoration!

### President’s Note:

Dr. John Cooper is completing nine consecutive years of service on the Forum Editorial Committee. In this role, he has always sought to bridge the conversation between the church and the academy. Dr. Cooper, along with Dr. Dean Deppe, is retiring at the end of this academic year, and both are highlighted in this issue of the *Forum*. Please join us in giving thanks for the ministry of Professors Cooper and Deppe.

### How do you summarize something that happened 500 years ago that still shapes conversations and cultures?

One summary is what became the “Five Solas” of the Protestant Reformation.

The Five Solas are five Latin phrases (or slogans) that summarize the Reformers’ basic theological principles in contrast to certain teachings of the Roman Catholic Church of that day.

# Sola Fide

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## by faith alone

## Through Faith Alone but not through Faith that is Alone



by Jeffrey A. D. Weima

“I do it myself!” That’s what my four-year-old grandson typically says whenever I try to help him with some task. It’s the same thing his mother said to me when she was that age. There is a deep-rooted desire in not just little children but full grown adults to do things ourselves—to reject any kind of help from the outside, thereby allowing us to take pride in our accomplishments.

The same thing is true with our salvation: we want to do it ourselves. Even though we know rationally that we are saved not by our deeds but by grace alone (*sola gratia*), it is tempting to think privately that we are better than most people and so our good works make us worthy recipients of grace. Grace may be, as we sing, “amazing,” but it is also terribly humbling! It is hard for my ego and my self-justifying mentality to accept the fact that I can’t do it

myself but stand helpless and in total dependence on God’s work in Christ.

This is the important biblical truth that the Reformers tried to recapture with the phrase *sola fide*. In a context where the Roman Catholic Church stressed a faith that needed to be supplemented with human acts of obedience, the Reformers boldly asserted that we are justified “through faith alone.” The phrase is a biblical one, as is clear from several passages

of Scripture. Paul, for example, states in Ephesians 2:8-9: “For it is by grace that you have been saved, *through faith*—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” A similar sentiment is found in the apostle’s words in Philippians 3:9: “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is *through faith* in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God *on the basis of faith*.”

The Reformers saw texts like these and many others as teaching that we are sinners who are unable to live up to God’s call to holy living and so stand in his divine presence as condemned. Yet God has graciously provided salvation by means of

This was the charge the Roman Catholic Church raised against those advocating *sola fide*, causing the reformer Melancthon to respond: “Our opponents slanderously claim that we do not require good works, whereas we not only require them but show that they can be done” (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 1531). The Reformers were well aware of texts like James 2:14-26 that teach that a true, saving faith is one that naturally comes to expression in concrete acts of obedience. Works may not be a *condition* of being justified, but they are a consequence of being justified. James Payton, in his helpful book entitled, *Getting the Reformation Wrong*, writes: “For Calvin and all the Protestant Reformers, we are justified by faith alone—but faith is never alone. Justifying faith

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## Grace may be, as we sing, “amazing,” but it is also terribly humbling!

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the death and resurrection of Christ—a salvation not based on our works but one appropriated through faith alone. Faith is the means by which we are united to Christ and so take hold of the righteousness that he accomplished on our behalf.

### But Faith is Never Alone

But though we are justified through faith alone, such faith is never alone. In other words, there is no room for the logic, “Since I am saved not by works but by grace through faith, it doesn’t matter how I live!” There is no just cause to recite the following ditty about salvation: “Walk the aisle! Pray the prayer! One-time faith will get you there!” Such misguided thinking leads to the charge of “cheap grace”—the accusation that an emphasis on a grace received through faith alone will result in an “anything goes” lifestyle.

leads to good works, performed in love toward God and our neighbors, in grateful obedience to God. . . . No Protestant Reformer ever allowed that a justifying faith could be solitary—no, not one” (InterVarsity Press, 2010: 127).

All those today who, like Luther, struggle painfully with the mistaken notion that they must do enough good works before God will accept them ought to be comforted by the Reformation slogan *sola fide*, since this phrase expresses the gospel news that they are justified through faith alone—no good works required! Nevertheless, all those who glibly cite *sola fide* to ease their conscience about any unChrist-like conduct in their life ought to be challenged by the reality that true faith naturally leads us to delight in God’s law and, with the empowering help of the Holy Spirit, to live a life full of love and good works.

# Sola Scriptura

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## by Scripture alone



By John W. Cooper

**Sola Scriptura: by Scripture alone.** What a courageous Reformation motto! But what does it mean? I remember a Sunday school song: “The B-I-B-L-E, yes, that’s the book for me.” So far, so good. But then we sang, “I stand alone on the Word of God.” That did not lift my little soul. I pictured myself standing all alone on my Bible, and socializing with the other kids was already tough enough without standing on the Bible.

A cute misunderstanding. But what does *sola Scriptura* mean—that the Bible is God’s only revelation? No. Jesus Christ is God’s greatest self-revelation, and all creation reveals God in a general way as well. Well then, is Scripture the only book we need to live a good life? No, we need to know many things not taught in the Bible. Maybe it means that Scripture is the only way to know about the gospel. But many people have come to faith without a Bible through the testimony of others. So what does “only the Bible” mean?

The issue at the time of the Reformation was the definitive source of Christian truth about God, the world, Christ, sin, salvation, the church, and the Christian life. The question was this: does true doctrine come only from Scripture, or from Scripture as interpreted

and elaborated by the Spirit-led church? The pre-Reformation church believed that the Bible is inspired and infallible, but it also claimed that the church infallibly defines its teaching.

Reformers such as Luther and Calvin countered that Scripture alone (*sola Scriptura*) is the definitive source. Most Reformers agreed that the church has responsibility to interpret Scripture, and Protestant church assemblies adopted catechisms (e.g. Heidelberg) and confessions (e.g. Belgic, Westminster) as standard summaries of biblical truth. But the Reformers insisted that the church is obligated to test and revise its interpretations according to Scripture, not the reverse. (A minority of Protestants avoided official doctrinal statements and left Bible reading to individual believers and the Spirit.)

Thus *sola Scriptura* means that the Bible is the final authority about “the will of God completely and everything one must believe to be saved” and “the entire manner of service which God requires of us.” Thus we may not put “human writings . . . nor custom, majority, age, nor the passage of time or persons, nor councils, decrees, or official decisions above the truth of God” revealed in Scripture (Belgic Confession, Art. 7).

During and after the Reformation, when almost all of Europe was officially Christian, denominations debated and sometimes fought with each other over details of doctrine. But already in the 17th century, deists and some progressive Christians used philosophy and science to challenge basic Christian doctrines affirmed by Catholics and Protestants alike. They trusted modern philosophy, moral intuitions, and the scientific worldview (which

Meanwhile, most historic Christian churches and their theologians, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, have sought to remain faithful to their creeds and doctrinal standards. Most have also not isolated themselves from science, culture, politics, moral sensibilities, and intellectual trends. Instead they have engaged and evaluated modern developments from their biblically based perspectives, incorporating what is compatible, rejecting what is not, and contributing helpful insights. Confessional and evangelical Protestants have attempted to practice the Reformation principle that Scripture alone is the final authority. This is certainly true in the Dutch Reformed tradition that generated Kuyper, Bavinck, and the CRCNA.

The challenge has not passed. Our commitment to *sola Scriptura*—the Bible is the decider—is currently tested in the CRCNA on many issues.

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## Does true doctrine come only from Scripture, or from Scripture as interpreted and elaborated by the Spirit-led church?

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typically denied the possibility of supernatural miracles) more than the content of Scripture. Modern intellectual culture became the highest authority. Biblical revelation was relegated “beyond reason” and re-interpreted to fit enlightened modern paradigms.

In the last two centuries, modern theologians have reimagined Christianity in terms of various intellectual perspectives—romanticism, idealism, historicism, existentialism, pragmatism, liberationism, and scientific naturalism. Much postmodern theology has abandoned the notion that there is one true meaning of Scripture and celebrates a pluralistic group-hug of Christianities, sometimes including other religions.

For example, what do we mean by a Christian perspective on learning and culture? Is it still to understand all subjects and activities from a biblical-Reformed perspective, as Kuyper and Bavinck held, or is it creatively rereading Scripture and doctrine to accommodate current perspectives? In politics, is Scripture’s view of social justice best expressed by (conservative) liberal individualism, (progressive) social pragmatism, or something else, and if so, what? Most basically, our culture is overwhelmingly hedonistic—driven by desire to feel good. Are our life-styles and spiritual disciplines shaped more by Scripture or culture? Do we really live by *sola Scriptura*?

**May God guide and preserve us by his Word and Spirit.**

# Solo Christo

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## through Christ alone



by Karin Maag

“In Christ alone my hope is found / He is my light, my strength, my song.” These first two lines of Keith Getty and Stuart Townend’s popular hymn resound with the believer’s confident statement of total reliance on Jesus Christ. Yet in the Reformation era, the assertion that faith rested on Christ alone, “solus Christus,” was not necessarily a straightforward or widely-accepted claim. Today, this statement is equally controversial, albeit for different reasons.

For Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli, and John Calvin, the affirmation of Christ alone as the source of salvation stood against what they perceived as the Roman Catholic Church’s over-confident assertion of its own role in salvation. In particular, the Reformers rejected any power of the papacy—or the Catholic church’s clergy more generally—to offer salvation through the sacraments of the church, especially baptism, penance, and the Eucharist.

Another source of concern for the Reformers was the role assigned to saints and to the Virgin Mary in interceding for believers before God. According to the Reformers, ascribing such intercessory powers to human beings was to deny Christ’s rightful role as the sole mediator and intercessor for the faithful. So, for instance, Huldrych Zwingli proclaimed in his sixty-seven articles (presented to the city council of Zurich for debate in 1523), “The

summary of the Gospel is that our Lord Christ, true Son of God, has made known to us the will of his heavenly Father and has redeemed us from death and reconciled us with God by his guiltlessness. Therefore, Christ is the only way to salvation of all who were, are now, or shall be.”

It is important to note that the Reformers’ emphasis on Christ alone as the agent of salvation needs to be understood in the broader context of the other four solas. In fact, the Reformers’ focus on Christ alone stood at the center of their theological approach. It was because salvation came through Christ alone and for God’s glory alone that Christians were justified by grace alone and through faith alone. Human deeds and effort, no matter how worthy, could not make a person right with God. And Christ’s pivotal role in salvation was revealed in Scripture—hence the Reformers’ emphasis on Scripture alone as the source of authority in the church.

The enduring significance of the Reformation’s emphasis on Christ alone is hard to underestimate. In Protestant areas, especially in

Yet today, the phrase “Christ alone” can be challenging for the church, in a number of ways. First, the phrase makes strong claims about Christ’s unique role as savior, a stance that clashes with more pluralist or inter-faith approaches. Second, some churches and believers may tend to put Christ at the center and under-emphasize the Father and the Holy Spirit, weakening or distorting the rich blessing of fully-orbed Trinitarian theology. Third, within modern-day churches, the proclamation of Christ alone as the source of salvation runs counter to a growing trend of congregations preferring a gently-couched message of moral self-improvement under the eyes of a benevolent God.

At its root, the assertion that salvation comes through Christ alone means that human beings can do nothing out of their own efforts to make themselves right with God. But in a culture and a time in which few are willing to acknowledge their fundamental brokenness, Christ is more often viewed as the greatest moral example, wise teacher, or superhero of the faith. For instance, I have a friend, a faithful church-going Christian,

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## The enduring significance of the Reformation’s emphasis on Christ alone is hard to underestimate.

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Reformed territories, the veneration of the saints and the Virgin Mary largely ceased, and their images were removed from places of worship. At the same time, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper became understood as signs of God’s grace and covenantal promises, but not sources of salvation in and of themselves. Thus, the proclamation that Christ alone saves dramatically reconfigured both worship practices and theology from the Reformation onwards.

who told me that she struggles with the weekly confession of sins in worship because while she makes mistakes and has faults, she does not see these as sins. For her and others, the message that Christ alone saves us from our sins and reconciles us to God has lost its power. So the strong Reformation proclamation of Christ as the source and author of salvation is highly relevant today. The church needs to proclaim again that salvation is through Christ alone, not through human merit or efforts.

# Sola Gratia

by grace  
alone



by Lyle D. Bierma

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me.” Martin Luther never knew this song, but if he had known it, he would have sung it with gusto. Luther was schooled in a theological tradition in which the sound of grace was not always so sweet. He had been taught that God grants saving grace only to people who merit (earn) it with acts of love for God and neighbor. “Draw near to God,” his teachers told him, quoting James 4:8, “and he will draw near to you.” Divine favor was not so much a gift as a reward.

So Luther tried it. He became a monk, taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. He prayed to God almost nonstop, confessing the tiniest sins he could remember. He flogged himself, deprived himself of sleep, and starved himself so severely that, according to one report, “his belly button touched his backbone.” But rather than drawing

nearer to God, he felt himself slipping further away. It was not until he began an intensive study of the Book of Romans that he finally realized that our right standing in the eyes of God is not something we must earn; it is God’s gift to us *sola gratia*—by grace (undeserved favor) alone. “All at once,” Luther later recalled, “I felt that I had been born again and

entered into paradise itself through open gates.” Grace had never sounded so sweet.

The Reformation emphasis on salvation by grace alone soon led to the accusation by Catholic opponents that Protestants no longer valued good works; they wanted their grace on the cheap. The Heidelberg Catechism framed the concern

creatures, each of us is deceitful at the very core of our being (Jeremiah 17:9) and spiritually “dead in [our] transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1). We are like people who have fallen into a pit and are lying unconscious at the bottom. The only way out is a rescue from above—someone who reaches down to us, revives us, and pulls us to freedom. As the Canons of Dort put it, humanity is in

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## God is not only willing and able to save wretched people like us, but—*sola gratia*—he actually does.

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this way in Question 86: “Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why then should we do good works?” The catechism makes clear in its response that the *sola* in *sola gratia* does not mean that good works are no longer important in the Christian life. Our works do not merit salvation, but they are expressions of gratitude to God for our salvation. They can also be means of praising God, assuring ourselves of true faith, and winning our neighbors to Christ. In making this point, the catechism resonates with Ephesians 2:8-10, where Paul famously states that “by grace you have been saved, through faith . . . not by works,” but then immediately adds that we are “created in Christ Jesus for good works.” Good works are not the basis of our salvation but its fruit.

At the heart of this doctrine of salvation *sola gratia* is not just the nature of God but the condition of humanity. God’s grace is so amazing because we are so in need of it. Contrary to what Luther had once been taught, we do not have the inner resources to find our way back to God. As fallen

such a sorry state that “without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit [we] are neither willing nor able to return to God” (III.3).

Unfortunately, the truth of salvation by grace alone often gets overshadowed in North American Christianity because it is so countercultural. We are a performance-oriented society, dominated by a can-do spirit. We work for good grades in school, earn victories on the basketball court, compete for awards, receive merit pay at work, and get demerits if we misbehave. In the midst of all this striving and achievement, it is not easy to admit that when it comes to meeting the deepest need of our existence, our restlessness for God, we can do absolutely nothing ourselves. We are totally reliant on outside help.

That is why the grace that Luther rediscovered five hundred years ago is so amazing. We don’t deserve it. We can’t earn it. And yet God is not only willing and able to save wretched people like us, but—*sola gratia*—he actually does.

**At the heart of this doctrine of salvation *sola gratia* is not just the nature of God but the condition of humanity.**

# Soli Deo Gloria

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## glory to God alone



by Matthew J. Tuininga

The Westminster shorter catechism famously begins with the question, “What is the chief end of man?” Its answer is pithy and to the point: “To enjoy God and glorify him forever.” My parents taught me this truth when they told me that I could do whatever I wanted in life, just so long as I did it for the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31).

This concern for the glory of God lay at the heart of the Reformation. To be sure, the Roman church at the time did not deny the principle of *Soli Deo Gloria* in any explicit sense. But its teachings often undermined the principle in practice by shifting Christians’ attention away from the sovereign grace of God given in Christ toward all manner of human efforts at securing or mediating salvation.

For example, the church encouraged believers to pray to saints rather than directly to God in time of need. It called them to seek salvation through acts of penitence, pilgrimage, or

patronage, or through participation in the sacraments of the church, rather than by trusting in the cross of Christ. And it insisted that sinners could prepare themselves to receive God’s grace and had to cooperate with that grace if it were to be effective in their lives. On top of all that, the Roman church claimed for the papacy and the church hierarchy a glory that should have been reserved for Christ himself.

The net effect of all of this was to rob God of the sole credit and glory for salvation. It was to distract human beings from the God on whom we depend for every good thing.

To be sure, the Reformers recognized that Jesus shares his glory with believers by inviting us into the Trinitarian communion of love (John 17:22-24). Indeed, they affirmed, the whole creation will be brought into the liberty and glory of the children of God (Romans 8:21). And those whom God justifies and sanctifies, he also glorifies (Romans 8:30).

Still, they insisted that because all of this is God's work, from start to finish, all the glory for it

comes from in the first place, or why it even matters. Though science gives us greater and greater knowledge of the glory of creation, we neither glorify God nor give him thanks (Romans 1:21). We continue to exchange the glory of the immortal God for idols of our own making.

Still, as has always been the case, our sin merely serves to advance God's glory as our judge and as our savior (Romans 3:7; 10:12-13). And it does so in mind-boggling fashion. As Jesus taught his

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## **We live in a time when men and women believe their ultimate duty is to be true to themselves above all**

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ultimately belongs to God, from start to finish. As the Apostle Paul memorably concluded, "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them?" For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen" (Romans 11:35-36).

We live in a time when men and women believe their ultimate duty is to be true to themselves above all as they seek happiness and fulfillment in life. Indeed, a body no less august than the Supreme Court of the United States has declared a person's right to determine ultimate meaning for him or herself a most basic and inalienable human right. Never has God's claim to glory been more suspect in the eyes of his own creatures.

And yet, the more we trumpet our own inviolable dignity and glory as human beings, the more we struggle to explain where that dignity and glory

confused disciples, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. . . . And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:23-24, 32).

God's character is most clearly revealed—and his glory must be most clearly proclaimed by the church—in the willingness of his son to set his glory aside in order to become a suffering servant on our behalf, even to the point of death on a cross (Philippians 2:9-11). In the final analysis, the glory of God redounds to our benefit and then back to him, so that, as Paul reminded the Corinthians, "the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God" (2 Corinthians 4:15).

**...because all of this is God's work, from start to finish, all the glory for it ultimately belongs to God, from start to finish.**