

Glory to God Alone: Another Look at a Reformation *Sola*

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Of the five so-called Reformation *solas*, *Soli Deo Gloria* seems like an outlier in certain respects¹. While the other *solas* pertain directly to the two chief points of debate between Rome and the Reformation—the doctrine of salvation and religious authority—*Soli Deo Gloria* is a more general idea. Furthermore, it seems initially implausible to think that a professing Christian of any sort would have reason or motivation to deny the idea that all glory belongs to God: “Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory” (Ps 115:1) is hardly ambiguous! Yet some writers suggest that *Soli Deo Gloria* is the very heart and substance of the other four *solas*.²

Without implying the least disrespect for the life-changing importance of these other four, I too wish to affirm the centrality of God’s Glory Alone. What is ultimately at stake in debates about salvation and authority, after all, is not satisfaction of our curiosity or spiritual needs but the glorification of God Almighty. Every merely human word falls short, every merely human deed misses the mark, every merely human mediator fails to reconcile. Indeed, the Lord was appalled “that there was no justice,” “that there was no man,” and “that there was no one to intercede” (Isa 59:15-16). Thus God himself did

what no one else could: “his own arm brought him salvation” (Isa 59:16). And in so doing, the peoples of the world “shall fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun” (Isa 59:19). It is for the magnification of his glory that God arises to speak to his people and to save them from their sins. The other Reformation *solus* advance God’s glory as the highest end for which this world exists.

The magnificent theme of God’s glory is an inexhaustible treasure. A humble essay can say so little of what might be said, yet reflecting again on this theme in Scripture’s light promises to reward us afresh. I approach our subject here with a defense and an explanation. Over against a difficulty and a distortion, I wish to defend the idea that *Soli Deo Gloria* is truly about *God*, yet in a way that exalts his image-bearers along the way. In so doing, I aim to explain how the theme of God’s glory develops as a biblical story that is central to Scripture’s narrative as a whole.

A DIFFICULTY AND A DISTORTION

It is often helpful for us, when trying to understand an important concept, to consider possible objections and common mistakes. These can sharpen our thinking and alert us to weaknesses in our standard ways of thinking. In this brief opening section, therefore, I introduce a potential difficulty with the doctrine of *Soli Deo Gloria* and a distortion that often appears in the way contemporary heirs of the Reformation speak about the doctrine. Keeping this difficulty and distortion in mind should challenge us to speak about this Reformation theme in as helpful ways as we can.

The difficulty is this: If all glory belongs to God alone, does this not implicitly demean human beings? If all honor is God’s, does that not result in dishonor for us? These are serious questions. Genesis 1 says human beings are made in God’s image, the pinnacle of his work of creation, and Psalm 8:5 interprets this as God crowning us “with glory and honor.” Furthermore, the Christian doctrine of salvation culminates with the idea of *glorification*, describing Christians’ resurrection and new-creation life, an idea well grounded Scripture (e.g., Rom 8:17-18). Hence the Reformation doctrine of *Soli Deo Gloria* presents (at least) a challenge: how can we whole-heartedly affirm that all glory is God’s alone without simultaneously undermining other biblical truths that describe human beings originally created in glory and destined for eschatological glorification?

We should also be alert to a common distortion. If anything in our theology seems to be thoroughly theocentric, the doctrine of *solī Deo gloria* is it. Yet many Protestants today speak about this Reformation slogan in ways that seem surprisingly focused upon themselves. *Soli Deo Gloria*, many of us have heard (and perhaps said), is a call to do all things for God's glory; our worship, our family life, our vocations, and our political activity should be pursued for the glory of the Lord. Of course I do not suggest that there is anything heterodox in the idea that Christians should do all things for God's glory, which Scripture itself teaches. But when *Soli Deo Gloria* is presented as if its heart and essence concerns how *we* live, how *we* carry out our vocations, and how *we* formulate and execute political agendas we might ponder whether what was supposed to magnify God alone has taken a puzzling (albeit unintentional) anthropocentric turn.³ To say that *Soli Deo Gloria* has something to do with Christians' conduct is true, but to make our conduct its main focus is at least a distortion of this Reformation doctrine.

The preceding difficulty and distortion, I suggest, challenge us to sharpen our understanding and presentation of this Reformation *sola*. The difficulty reminds us that in our zeal to ascribe all glory to God alone we must also account for the perhaps paradoxical biblical teaching about humanity's glorification. The distortion encourages us to beware lest zeal to live our entire lives for God's glory unwittingly leads us to focus more on ourselves and our agendas than upon God. As we now consider how best to understand *Soli Deo Gloria* we must strive to account for the proper breadth and depth of biblical teaching in order to avoid one-sidedness that may diminish the helpfulness of our theology of God's glory.

GOD'S GLORY ALONE: THE PATTERN OF REFORMED ORTHODOX TEACHING

Fidelity to Scripture is the surest bulwark against difficulties and distortions, but the theological labors of our forbears in Reformation Christianity can point us in propitious directions. I wish to focus my remarks on perhaps an unlikely source, Reformed orthodoxy. Reformed orthodoxy refers to a period roughly between the mid-to-late sixteenth century and the early-to-mid-eighteenth century in which many accomplished Reformed theologians consolidated and built upon the efforts of the Protestant reformers. They

organized Reformed theology in coherent ways, worked out doctrines that the Reformers had not considered in detail, defended those doctrines against gainsayers, and taught them to subsequent generations of Reformed ministers. The reputation of the Reformed orthodox theologians languished for much of the twentieth century, as many writers (including many Reformed theologians) wrote them off as cold rationalists indifferent to a warm biblical theology of the heart. Of late a number of competent scholars have helpfully debunked this myth and reintroduced us to the wealth of wonderful theology the Reformed orthodox writers produced.⁴

Their treatment of God's glory provides the sort of thoroughness and precision we would expect from them, and hardly leaves the impression that they were cold and detached from their subject matter. They believed that glory was first of all an attribute of God, an attribute that he reveals in this world. But secondarily they recognized that God glorifies himself in part through the glorification of his people, such that believers reflect God's glory back to him through their worship and holistic obedience. This basic pattern for understanding God's glory provides the sort of nuance and depth that could help to account for the difficulty and distortion considered in the previous section.

The work of Reformed orthodox theologian Edward Leigh (1602-71) provides a nice example. Leigh begins his exposition of God's glory by identifying it as "the infinite excellency of the Divine essence." Glory is "the very essence and nature of God." This constitutes the "internal" aspect of God's glory, which makes God "infinitely worthy to be praised, admired and loved of all." He is thus glorious according to his "own knowledge, love, and delight in himself."⁵ But God's glory is also "external." He makes "all things for himself or his glory." This external glory of God is expressed in "the Heavens and Earth, all these glorious creatures here below, which are said to show forth his glory." "As the glory of men consists in outward ornaments," he adds, "so God's glory consists in having such creatures, men and Angels to be his followers." This external glory is also manifest "when men and Angels do know, love, and obey him, and praise him to all eternity."⁶ When his creatures thus glorify God, they do so "not by putting any excellency into him, but by taking notice of his excellency, and esteeming him accordingly, and making manifest this our high esteem of him."⁷

Although God's internal glory is ultimately unknowable to any other than himself, he manifests his glory in and to his creatures and thereby makes it

known to us. “Ordinarily,” Leigh explains, God manifests his glory in his “word and works.” These works include “those of creation and preservation or providence” and those “upon the hearts of believers.” God also manifests his glory “extraordinarily,” that is, “in the cloud, in apparitions and visions”—he appeals here to the pillar of cloud and fire that led Israel through the wilderness.⁸ Leigh also observes that God has “joined our happiness and his glory together.” “God will hereby give us glory,” and thus we often ought “to think of the personal glory and excellency which the Saints shall enjoy when they come to Heaven.”⁹ At this time our bodies will be raised, our souls freed from all spiritual evil, and we will image God perfectly; our wills will be fully satisfied with God, our consciences at peace, and our affections of love and joy made perfect.¹⁰

In summary, the pattern of Leigh’s exposition of God’s glory, which resembles that of important Reformed theologians before and after him,¹¹ runs like this: God’s glory is ultimately his own internal attribute, known only to himself. But he delights to make his glory manifest in his works of creation and providence, and in extraordinary fashion in visions such as the Shekinah cloud in the wilderness. His glory is also manifest in the worship and obedience of his people in this world, and especially in their glorification in the age to come. This exposition seems to capture what we are looking for. In response to the difficulty considered in the previous section, Leigh understands God to be glorified in part through the glorification of his people. This preserves the truth that all glory is ultimately God’s while accounting for biblical language about human glorification. In response to the distortion noted in the previous section, Leigh does not make human conduct the centerpiece of his treatment of God’s glory. God’s internal glory and his own active manifestation of it in this world enjoy that distinction. Yet Leigh does see an important place for Christians glorifying God in their action, even as he keeps this properly subordinated to God’s action.

Leigh’s work points in helpful directions. But of much greater moment is what Scripture itself says. Thus we turn to consider the Bible’s presentation of divine glory and what it has to do with us. We will find that Leigh’s exposition has quite accurately captured the spirit of the biblical witness.

GOD’S GLORY ALONE: THE BIBLICAL PATTERN

Scripture speaks so often about God’s glory that it presents many options for approaching it in a theological study such as this. One way that provides a

particularly good entry to the subject, in my judgment, is through the story that unfolds around the pillar of cloud and fire that led Israel through the wilderness—the *Shekinah* cloud, that is, that Leigh identified as an extraordinary manifestation of the glory of God. By tracing its story we traverse through central themes of the whole of Scripture, including God’s election and rejection of Israel, the coming of Christ, the outpouring of the Spirit, and the hope of the age to come.¹² We come to see in wonderful ways how glory truly belongs to God alone, and yet also how Christians’ own glorification becomes part of the story of how God glorifies himself.

God’s Glory Revealed to Israel in the Cloud

The pillar of cloud and fire that guarded and guided Israel through its desert trek toward the Promised Land is a striking part of the Old Testament history. At night the cloud “looked like fire” (Num 9:15-16; cf. Exod 40:38), bright and massive enough to illumine nighttime travel (Exod 13:21). Scripture makes it sound like an imposing storm cloud rather than a puffy white cumulus. It covered Mount Sinai as a “dense cloud” (Exod 19:9), “like smoke from a furnace” (Exod 19:18), and brought forth thunder and lightning (Exod 19:16).¹³ Ordinarily it went in front of Israel to show them their path of travel and where and for how long to rest (see Exod 13:21-22; 19:9; 40:36-37; Num 9:17-23). Once it also moved to Israel’s rear, to serve as a protective wall before the advancing Egyptian army (Exod 14:19-20).

What made this cloud of glory so magnificent was ultimately not its visual splendor but its identity as the dwelling place of God, as celebrated by Psalms 97 and 99. These psalms describe the cloud as a brilliant image or replica of God’s heavenly temple, which in turn served as a model for the earthly tabernacle Moses constructed (see Ps 97:1-2; 99:1-2, 7). The reason Exodus 16:10 comments that the “glory of the LORD” appeared in the cloud, therefore, is because God himself was enthroned in its midst. Scripture confirms and deepens this idea of the divine presence by associating the cloud with the Holy Spirit. The Song of Moses alludes to this (Deut 32:10-11; cf. Gen 1:2) and later texts confirm that for Israel to be led by the cloud was to have the Spirit as their instructor and guide (Isa 63:11-14; Neh 9:19-20; cf. Hag 2:5).

God revealed his glory in the cloud, but during this time in the wilderness a certain troubling pattern emerged that would deepen as Israel’s history advanced. The cloud of glory would at one time be a great blessing to his

people and fill them with joy, and yet at other times bring judgment and curse and fill them with terror. The cloud would sometimes draw near to Israel and encompass them in God's intimate embrace, but sometimes seemed intent on keeping Israel at a distance and excluding them from his presence. If the grand story of Scripture is one of God reconciling his estranged people to himself and drawing them into an even greater fellowship with the Lord than that which they lost at the fall, the account of Israel and the cloud seems to create great expectation of reaching this goal while nevertheless indicating that something much more needed to happen in order to attain it truly and lastingly.

We see the troubling pattern already in the wilderness. The cloud seems to have left Israel for a while after they crossed the sea on dry ground, and when it reappeared they saw it only from afar, at a distance (Exod 16:10). But soon, when they arrived at Sinai, the cloud drew near. It covered the mountain (Exod 19:16-18) and Moses "led the people out of the camp to meet with God" (Exod 19:17). It seems that God was drawing near to bless his people, his "treasured possession" (Exod 19:5), yet this encounter simultaneously communicates a strong sense of exclusion. God required Moses to put a boundary around the mountain to keep the people away, upon pain of death (Exod 19:12-13, 21-24), and only Moses and a few others were permitted to climb the mountain and attain a more intimate fellowship with God (Exod 19:20; 24:1-2, 9-18).

After Moses finished constructing the tabernacle a similar pattern developed. The cloud "covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exod 40:34). God was truly drawing near to his people! Yet he immediately excluded even Moses from it: "Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exod 40:35). Shortly thereafter Aaron and his sons were ordained to the priesthood, and Moses and Aaron were then able to enter the tent of meeting. Leviticus 9:23-24 describes a magnificent scene in which the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people and they shouted for joy. Yet even then all was not well. Only the priests had access to the holy places, and only the high priest could enter the holy of holies, and only once a year at that (Heb 9:7). Even more sobering, immediately after the joyous scene in Leviticus 9, Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu offered "unauthorized fire before the LORD" and were consumed by fire from the presence of the Lord (Lev 10:1-2).

Repeatedly, therefore, we see blessing accompanied by curse, intimacy by exclusion. Clearly Israel enjoyed a great privilege by having God's glory near them in the cloud (see Rom 9:4; Ps 85:9), and they were terrified at the thought of losing it (Exod 33:1-4, 15-16). Yet their persistent sin made the glorious presence of God a liability. A holy God cannot endure a corrupt people (Exod 33:3; Deut 5:24-27). The cloud itself became the executor of God's judgment several times in the wilderness (Lev 10:1-2; Num 14:10; 16:19, 42). The revelation of the glory of the Lord seemed to bring more trouble than benefit.

The pattern repeats itself after Israel entered the Promised Land. Although the cloud itself seems to have disappeared after Israel took possession of Canaan, the people regarded the tabernacle as the place where God's glory continued to dwell (e.g., 1 Sam 4:21-22; Ps 63:2). When Solomon built the temple to replace the tabernacle as the permanent residence for the ark of the covenant and the other holy things, however, God's visible glory made a triumphant return. In a scene reminiscent of the tabernacle's consecration in the wilderness (Exod 40; Lev 9), the ark entered the temple and "the cloud filled the temple of the LORD. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled his temple" (1 Kings 8:10-11; 2 Chron 5:13-14). Solomon blessed the people and "fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled it. When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the LORD above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD" (2 Chron 7:1-3).

This is another scene of blessing and joy. The Israelites probably judged that they now would enjoy God's glorious presence in the temple on Mount Zion in a stable and secure way that they had not experienced through the portable tabernacle trekking through the wilderness. In certain respects this was the case, yet the housing of God's glory in the temple did not really resolve the problems of exclusion and judgment that had plagued the people before. The holy places in the temple continued to be off limits to most of the people most of the time. The experience of many of the prophets testified that God's glory was in fact far more magnificent than what the people had ever witnessed (Isa 6:1-4; Jer 23:18; Ezek 1; 3:12-15), but even the glory of the Lord with which the people could commune through the temple and

its rituals proved to be too much for them: as in the wilderness, God's holy glory could not abide with a rebellious people.

For many centuries God was longsuffering, bringing many minor judgments on his people but withholding the full brunt of his wrath. Yet the Mosaic law had threatened more than minor judgments. It threatened exile from the Land (e.g., Lev 18:26-28; Deut 28:63-68), and even prophesied that Israel's sin would inevitably trigger this catastrophe (Deut 30:1). First God brought the Assyrians to scatter the northern ten tribes and then he raised up the Babylonians against Judah to dethrone their king, destroy the temple, and drag most of the survivors into exile in Babylon. As these latter events began to unfold, God gave Ezekiel eyes to see what was really going on: the divine glory was departing from Israel. Ezekiel first saw "the glory of the God of Israel" in the temple court (Ezek 8:3), but then "the glory of the God of Israel went up from above the cherubim, where it had been, and moved to the threshold of the temple" (Ezek 9:3). At this point "the cloud filled the temple and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the LORD" (Ezek 10:4). Next, Ezekiel reports, "the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground.... They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the LORD's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them" (Ezek 10:18-19). The cloud of glory that came to rest on the tabernacle and later the temple now got up and left. The glory of the Lord abandoned his sinful people. God cast his polluted people away from his holy glory.

God's Glory in the Incarnation of His Son

The story of God's glory in the Old Testament, focused upon the *Shekinah* cloud, is in many ways magnificent and awe-inspiring. Yet it also leaves us disappointed and puzzled. The Old Testament story provides much reason to declare that all glory belongs to God alone, but also much reason to doubt whether the Reformation's message that *Soli Deo Gloria* is part of the good news of the gospel could possibly be true. The exile brought to culmination a theme building throughout preceding centuries: the advent of God's glory may have exalted Israel for a moment, but in the end it consumed them.

By God's grace, the story of his glory did not end with the exile. While human wisdom could envision no happy ending to this story, divine wisdom

had an answer surpassing all expectation. In the incarnation of his Son God would reveal his glory in yet greater ways and, in so doing, ensure that it meant unambiguous nearness and blessing. In Christ God would glorify himself supremely, in part through the glorification of his people.

The Old Testament itself provided much assurance that the exile would not be the end of God's relationship with his people. Many prophets foretold a day when glory would return to Zion and its new temple in a way much more majestic than in the past (e.g., Isa 4:2-6; Ezek 43:2-5; cf. 44:4; Zech 2:5; Hag 2:7, 9). The nations abroad would stream in to enjoy it (e.g., Isa 60:3; 62:2; 66:19). The experience of the Judean exiles who straggled back home under King Cyrus and rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple was obviously not the ultimate fulfillment of these prophecies. The rebuilt temple was less impressive than the first (Hag 2:3) and the nations never flocked to Jerusalem to worship there. What the prophets were really announcing was the glory of God dwelling with his people in a new heavens and new earth (Isa 65:17-18; 66:19, 22), in an eschatological temple (Ezek 40-48). This would not be realized until the coming of the one "desired by all nations" (Hag 2:7). Isaiah, who "saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him" (John 12:41), associated the eschatological glory of Zion with the glory of the Branch, the Root of Jesse (Isa 4:2; 11:1-12). Only through the Messiah would God's glory shine upon his people in unmitigated, everlasting blessing.

The Lord Jesus was indeed "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb 1:3), the "glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), the "Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2:8). His appearance was not a detour from or alternative to the story of God's glory in the Old Testament cloud, but the organic fulfillment of that story. Of old the cloud came to rest on the temple, and Jesus was the true temple (John 2:19-22), "God with us" (Matt 1:23), the dwelling of God among men (John 1:14). Of old the Spirit manifest himself in the Shekinah cloud, and so also the Spirit overshadowed and empowered the work of Christ (e.g., Isa 4:4; 11:1-2; 42:1; 61:1; Matt 12:28; Mark 1:34; Luke 1:35; 4:17-21; Heb 9:14). As prophesied in the Old Testament, the New Testament shifts attention from God's glory revealed in the cloud to God's glory revealed in Christ, but treats them as aspects of one organically united story.

But the story of God's glory continued in Christ proceeds in a shocking yet profound way—the way of humiliation. God chose to reveal his glory

supremely through a human being, and one who bore humanity's "low condition."¹⁴ Although he had no sin (2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15), Christ came "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom 8:3). His appearance was "disfigured" and his "form marred" (Isa 52:14), having "no beauty or majesty to attract us to him" (Isa 53:2). He was indeed the "Lord of glory," but became the Lord of Glory *crucified* (1 Cor 2:8). To worldly wisdom it seems appalling that the living God would reveal his glory in his own abasement, yet this truth stands at the center of the Christian gospel and becomes the great explanation for how the message of *Soli Deo Gloria* becomes good news for sinful people. In fact there is no other way for us sinners to enjoy fellowship with God. As Martin Luther put it, "It is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross."¹⁵

The theme of glory revealed in humility emerges at the beginning of the Gospels' account of Jesus' life and continues all the way to Calvary. On the night of Jesus' birth the theme appears perhaps as strikingly as anywhere. An angel of the Lord appeared to a band of shepherds "and the glory of the Lord shone around them" (Luke 2:9), a scene (not coincidentally) reminiscent of the Old Testament cloud. "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests'" (Luke 2:13-14). The message they announced was one of supreme joy, for the Messiah had been born in the city of David (Luke 2:10-11). Yet what a strange detail: this newborn king was "wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). The angelic throng proclaims God's glory above for a child born in a stall below.

This theme of glory-in-humility continued as Jesus commenced his ministry. His first miracle, changing water into wine, "revealed his glory" (John 2:11) but he performed it behind the scenes, in the presence of servants (John 2:1-9). Christ's disciples "saw his glory" at the transfiguration (Luke 9:29-30, 34; 2 Pet 1:16-17), yet Luke sandwiches this account between Jesus' reminders that he and those who follow him must suffer (Luke 9:22-23, 44, 57-62). Christ raised up Lazarus "for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it" (John 11:4), but this glorification would only take place by way of death (John 11:25) and the miracle of Lazarus's resurrection resulted not in earthly triumph for Christ but persecution (John 11:45-47).

The glory-in-humility theme especially colors the final days of Jesus' earthly ministry. The Gospel of John reflects on how Jesus had brought glory to the Father through his lifelong obedience (in striking contrast to the Israelites before him) and how the Father in turn had glorified Christ (John 12:28; 13:31-32; 17:1, 4-5). But these texts make clear that this intra-Trinitarian glorification is about to take place *through* Christ's crucifixion (and not simply *after* it). Jesus proclaims, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified," and explains that a kernel of wheat must fall to the ground and die if it is to produce many seeds (John 12:23-24). He continues, "Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, glorify your name!" (John 12:27-28). On the night he was betrayed Jesus stated, "Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him" (John 13:31), and he later prayed, "Father, *the hour* has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you ... I have brought you glory on earth *by finishing the work* you gave me to do" (John 17:1, 4). The climactic work of Christ at Calvary was the ultimate in humiliation, shame, and reproach, but this was precisely what sinners needed for salvation. God willed to be glorified through reconciling us to himself, and he accomplished this only by way of the cross.

Of course, we would hardly recognize the glory of the cross if God had not exalted Christ thereafter. With his resurrection and ascension Christ began to shed the cloak of humility and make his glory manifest in ways he never did during his earthly ministry. Peter proclaimed that God "glorified his servant Jesus" by the resurrection (Acts 3:13, 15) and wrote that God "raised him from the dead and glorified him" (1 Pet 1:21). Paul likewise explained that Christ "was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father" (Rom 6:4) and now has a "body of glory" (Phil 3:21).¹⁶ And as in his earthly ministry, the Holy Spirit was instrumental in Christ's glorification through resurrection (Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15:44; 1 Pet 3:18).

Following the resurrection, Christ ascended into heaven, entering the new creation and sitting at his Father's right hand. The one who "was made lower than the angels for a little while" is "now crowned with glory and honor" and thereby attains the original destiny of the human race (Heb 2:5-9). What the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem could never fulfill is finally achieved in this new creation, the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem. Christ the great high priest ministers there in a sanctuary not made with hands, presenting at

last a blood efficacious to expiate sin and ever living to intercede for us (see Heb 5:7-10; 7:26; 10:10-18). One hundred million angels there proclaim his “power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise” (Rev 5:11-12). And from there Christ will one day return to complete the biblical story of God’s glory. Christ will return in a glorious *cloud* (Matt 24:30), in “his Father’s glory with the angels” (Matt 16:27). The long journey of the *Shekinah* cloud—finally—reaches its destination at Christ’s *parousia*.

On that day Christ will be glorified in the conquest and judgment of his enemies (e.g., Ezek 39:21; Rev 14:7; Matt 25:31-32). More amazing still, Christ “comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed” (2 Thess 1:10). In this light it is no wonder that our “blessed hope” is “the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). The New Jerusalem that will then come down out of heaven (Rev 21:1-2) will shine “with the glory of God” (Rev 21:11), not needing “the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (Rev 21:23).

While the story of God’s glory closed its Old Testament chapter with disappointment and unrealized expectations, the New Testament brings the story to its finale, and there is no disappointment in sight. Christians await this finale with sure hope and firm assurance, knowing that, through Christ, the advent of God’s glory will never again mean exclusion or curse.

God’s Glory in the Glorification of His People

Considering how God brings glory to himself through Christ’s incarnation, humiliation, exaltation, and second coming has required me already to speak about our place in the story. The glorification of God means the salvation of his people. It is now time to bring this idea into focus. In so doing, we return to the difficulty considered at the opening of this essay: if all glory belongs to God, does this not demean human beings? Or to put it more positively, how can the affirmation that all glory belongs to God be compatible with Scripture’s teaching that God crowned human beings in glory at their creation and destines them for glory in the new creation?

The answer, in short, is that as God glorifies himself, he chooses to do so in part through the world he has made. In particular, he delights to glorify himself through human beings, magnifying his love and mercy through redeeming sinful people, enabling them to glorify him in their sanctified conduct, and

glorifying them on the last day. The idea of believers' glorification is not opposed to the principle of *Soli Deo Gloria* because our glorification is God's own work and redounds to the supreme glorification of our Lord.

God made us originally in his image and glory (Gen 1:26-27; Ps 8:5-6; 1 Cor 11:7), but "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Sinful humanity has undertaken a grand project of self-glorification (see e.g., Isa 14:13-14; Rev 18:7), and ironically has ended up degrading itself (Rom 1:21, 23). But God, in Christ, has embarked on a great mission to bring us to the destiny to which he originally called us, ruling with him in the age to come (Heb 2:5). Christ humbled himself and has now attained "glory and honor" (Heb 2:9)—a human being is already glorified at God's right hand. And in Christ God is "bringing many sons to glory" in his train (Heb 2:10). The gospel message is about God's glory: Paul speaks of "the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God" (1 Tim 1:11); but this gospel also entails our glorification: "He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess 2:14). Paul preached Christ, and him alone, but his preaching Christ alone compelled him to proclaim how Christ gives us a share in his glory: "What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord ... For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:5-6). The glory of God, the glory of Christ, the glorification of believers—all, it seems, are part of one grand gospel message.

Three aspects of our participation in Christ's glory are worth considering briefly: the role of the Holy Spirit, the call to suffer here and now, and our glorification on the last day.

We considered above the centrality of the Spirit for the revelation of God's glory, in the cloud and especially in Christ. The Spirit was at work in the Old Testament saints, but Scripture indicated that after Christ's coming New Testament believers would enjoy a much richer measure of the Spirit's power (e.g., Ezek 36:26-27; John 7:37-39; 16:13-14), a blessing they began to enjoy at Pentecost. Texts such as John 7:39 and Acts 2:32-33 clarify that it is specifically with Jesus' glorification to his Father's right hand that believers attained this enriched experience of the Spirit and, with it, a blessed participation in Christ's glory. As Peter puts it, "the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you (1 Pet 4:14). More expansively, Paul writes: "Now the Lord is

the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Cor 3:17-18). This Spirit unites us to Christ (e.g., 1 Cor 12:12-13), not only individually but also as a corporate body, the church (1 Cor 12:12-27; John 15:1-11). The nearness of God in the pillar of cloud and fire under the old covenant was only a mixed blessing. But under the new covenant, the nearness of Christ through his Spirit brings us into a most intimate and unbreakable fellowship.

Second, our participation in Christ's glory comes through the way of suffering. The present indwelling of God's Spirit of glory is a great blessing, but Christ also calls us to walk the same path he walked. As he attained his glory only through the dark valley of the cross, so he calls us to take up our cross and follow him (Matt 16:24-25) as a prelude to our glorification. Paul explains: "If we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Rom 8:17-18). When we consider that our sufferings are not random or meaningless, but a share in *Christ's* sufferings, and that the blessing of the glory to come far surpasses the pain of our sufferings now, we can appreciate Peter's very difficult exhortation to rejoice in our hardships. He writes: "rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet 4:13). Peter never treats sufferings as though they are no big deal or not that bad. But he wishes us to draw strength from the fact that the Spirit of glory rests on us even in the midst of them (1 Pet 4:14), that we "will share in the glory to be revealed" (1 Pet 5:1), and that our rejoicing in trials proves the genuineness of our faith and brings praise, glory, and honor to Christ on the day of his return (1 Pet 1:6-7).

Third, our participation in Christ's glory will be fully realized at his return, what theologians helpfully term our "glorification." From eternity God has predestined his people for eschatological glory (Rom 8:28-30; 9:23-24), and when his Son comes again he will accomplish this great divine purpose. Already our lives are "hidden with Christ in God," Paul explains, but "when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:3-4). Peter adds that the "genuineness of our faith," forged

through various trials through which we rejoice, will “result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Pet 1:6-7). At this time, when the “Chief Shepherd appears” we “will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (1 Pet 5:4). As the Spirit raised up Christ in glory, so also he will raise up his people (Rom 8:11), and thus we “eagerly await a Savior from [heaven], the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:20-21).

At the beginning of this article I noted that many Christians seem to distort the *Soli Deo Gloria* theme by focusing upon how *we* are to do all things for God’s glory. I claimed that although God indeed calls us to live for his glory, we ought to be careful about slipping into anthropocentric ways of thinking that make *Soli Deo Gloria* ironically more about ourselves and our moral agendas than about God. This article has thus discussed God’s glory in terms of how God glorifies himself by his own action—in the pillar of cloud and fire, through the humiliation and exaltation of his Son, and through the glorification of his people. But having established this necessary foundation we now fittingly conclude by considering our vocation to glorify God. In doing so we should not view this as an anthropocentric turn at the end of a theocentric study, for even our God-glorifying conduct is ultimately the power of the Spirit of God at work in us. I mention three primary ways by which Scripture calls us to glorify God: by faith, by worship, and by humble service.

First, we glorify God by our faith. Since our salvation in Christ comes by faith alone, and since faith is the root from which all of our good works flow (Rom 14:23; Heb 11:6; James 2:14-26), it is no surprise to find faith and glorifying God indelibly connected. In a wonderful discussion in 2 Corinthians 1, Paul rebuts suspicion that his message vacillates, for it is never “yes” and “no,” but is always “yes,” “for no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ” (2 Cor 1:18-20). He concludes: “And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God” (1:20). Paul’s preaching was always “Yes” because it always pointed to Christ, and thus our “Amen” in response can be nothing other than the act of faith. When we hear of God’s promises and their fulfillment in Christ, our basic and fundamental response is to say “Amen”—so let it be. And we utter this Amen “to the glory of God.” We glorify God by faith in his promises. A similar dynamic is at work in Romans 4, in which Paul discusses faith at length and

presents Abraham as the father of all believers (4:16). According to Paul, Abraham had every earthly reason to doubt God's promise that he and his wife would have a son in their very old age, but "without weakening in his faith... he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God" (4:19-20). Instead, he "was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God" (4:20). Paul's reasoning suggests that Abraham gave glory to God precisely through this act of faith.¹⁷

A second way by which Christians glorify God is *worship*. If faith in God's Christ-centered promises brings glory to God, then we would expect Scripture to describe our good works—the fruit of faith—in the same way. Among the fruits of faith, none is more fundamental than worship, by which I refer to a distinct activity in which we set aside other tasks and set our minds and hearts upon the Lord, in order to receive his word and to respond back to him in prayer and song. Again, therefore, it is no surprise to find abundant biblical exhortation for God's saints to glorify him in worship. I cannot begin to do justice here to all that Scripture says on this matter. What Psalm 86:12 declares—"I will praise you, Lord my God, with all my heart; I will glorify your name forever"—Scripture repeats time and again. In glorifying God in worship we echo the worship of the angels in heaven (e.g., Rev 5:9-12; 7:12; 15:3-4; 19:1-8), and at times God's saints even call the angels to worship (e.g., Ps 29:1-2; 103:20-21). This anticipates the coming day when believers will join the angelic host in person in a great heavenly throng that proclaims: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" (Rev 5:12-13). The fact that worship is an immensely unproductive activity from an earthly perspective provides helpful reminder that *Soli Deo Gloria* is really not about our own achievements: God most delights to glorify himself through us when we rest from our seemingly productive labors and call upon his name in truth.

Finally, God nevertheless glorifies himself *in all that we do*. This is not a major theme in Scripture, contrary to what we might expect, but it is still important to recognize this great truth and be thankful that we enjoy such a privilege. The most famous text to this end is 1 Corinthians 10:31: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Paul's point is not that eating and drinking are mundane activities that illustrate how glorifying God should permeate even the little things in life. In context Paul has been discussing disputes about food and drink in which

people were trampling on the consciences of those who disagreed with them. In short, Paul encourages us to glorify God in all things by seeking the good of others, for the ultimate goal of seeing people saved and the church strengthened. Perhaps the most sweeping biblical text calling us to glorify God in all things is 1 Peter 4:10-11: “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, [he] should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, [he] should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised [literally, glorified] through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and power for ever and ever. Amen.” Peter thus encourages us to use all of our gifts to serve. God glorifies himself through our whole-hearted service to one another.

CONCLUSION

This discussion of *Soli Deo Gloria* has, I hope, provided an answer to the difficulty and distortion I mentioned at the beginning of this article. The glorification of God alone hardly entails the demeaning of human beings, for God delights to glorify himself in important part by glorifying his people and allowing them to magnify his name. And *Soli Deo Gloria* really does revolve around God and his own action, even while granting a place for us to glorify him through our faith, worship, and humble service. As Reformation believers turn to Scripture alone to hear the message of salvation through Christ and his grace alone, received by faith alone, we find that blessed gospel woven into the great story of God’s glory. Glory belongs to God alone—and that is truly good news for sinners saved by grace.

¹ This article was first presented at The Southern Seminary Theology Conference on September 24-25, 2015 at the The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY.

² E.g., John D. Hannah, *How Do We Glorify God?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 9; and R. C. Sproul Jr., “*Soli Deo Gloria*,” in *After Darkness, Light: Distinctives of Reformed Theology: Essays in Honor of R. C. Sproul* (ed. R. C. Sproul Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 191.

³ I have no desire to polemicize against anyone in particular, but there may be something of this unintentional anthropocentric turn in John Hannah, *How Do We Glorify God? Basics of the Reformed Faith Series* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 6-7, 9, 19-35, 38-40; and in Terry L. Johnson, *The Case for Traditional Protestantism: The Solas of the Reformation* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2004), chaps 6-7.

⁴ E.g., see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy*,

- ca. 1520 to ca. 1725 (4 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003); and *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (eds. Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark; Carlisle, PA: Paternoster, 1999).
- ⁵ Edward Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity* (London, 1662), 111-13.
- ⁶ Leigh, *Treatise*, 113.
- ⁷ Leigh, *Treatise*, 116.
- ⁸ Leigh, *Treatise*, 114. Cf. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.541.
- ⁹ Leigh, *Treatise*, 118, 120.
- ¹⁰ Leigh, *Treatise*, 120.
- ¹¹ See e.g. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.5.1; 1.5.3; 1.14.20; 1.15.3; 3.2.1; 3.13.1-2; Jonathan Edwards, “Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8, *Ethical Writings* (ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation* (ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 252.
- ¹² For a good short summary of this cloud’s story through biblical history, see Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 17.
- ¹³ On the cloud’s appearance, see e.g. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 70-71; and Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, vol. 2 (Kampen, the Netherlands: Kok, 1996), 254.
- ¹⁴ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Answer 27.
- ¹⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 31, *Career of the Reformer: I* (ed. Harold J. Grimm, gen. ed., Helmut T. Lehmann; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), 32.
- ¹⁶ My translation of Phil 3:21.
- ¹⁷ See e.g. the arguments in John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 151; and in Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul: Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 29.

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