

# How (Not) to Reform a Church: a review of Russ Houck's *Epidemic: Examining the Infected Roots of Judaism and Christianity*

By William J. Rhea

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## Abstract

William Rhea reviews *Epidemic: Examining the Infected Roots of Judaism and Christianity*, by Russ Houck. Houck's book proposes that both Judaism and Christianity have fundamentally misunderstood their own religious texts. Christianity, in particular, is profoundly mistaken in regarding Jesus as fully divine and the Second Person in the Trinity. For these failings, Houck blames Constantine. Rhea responds by examining the biblical development of early Christology as well as the history behind the events at the Council of Nicaea. He seeks to demonstrate a fundamental continuity between the early church's worship of the enthroned Jesus and the confession of Nicaea, as well as the futility of divorcing the Bible from the religions of which it is inseparably a part.

## About the Author

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A review of *Epidemic: Examining the Infected Roots of Judaism and Christianity*

by Russ Houck (Negev Publishing 2009, 444 pages)

*How (Not) to Reform a Church*

Our understanding of the history of Christianity and Judaism is critical to our understanding of the Bible. The various law codes, histories, collections of poems, prophetic anthologies, wisdom treatises, gospels, and visionary experiences that make up the Tanakh and New Testament were written by particular figures from identifiable communities to their own, or other, communities. These recipient communities in turn cherished those writings and passed them on into tradition and history. Along the way, the children and grandchildren of those original hearers may have misunderstood or distorted the message that was presented to their literal and figurative ancestors. That is to be expected, and particular interpretations of individual passages, their emphases and nuances, etc., can be handled solely within the departmental realm of biblical exegesis. But at other times, some have claimed that subsequent generations in direct continuity with the earliest Jewish and Christian communities have completely and entirely subverted the message(s) of those texts. Those communities in ancient Israel, Mesopotamia, western Asia Minor, the Aegean basin, and Rome not only wrote, but received and preserved the texts, and yet the claim is sometimes made that their direct descendants—biological and spiritual—entirely misunderstood their forefathers. When that claim is made it is the responsibility of historians to demonstrate where and how, in the post-biblical history of Judaism and Christianity, whole worldviews were reoriented. Particular readings

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can be lost; but reshaping the entire metanarrative of a worshipping community does not happen accidentally and does not happen silently.

Such efforts are not new, and they have often been linked to programs of reform. The Italian humanist Petrarch divided human history into two eras, the classical age of light and the current age of darkness, and looked forward to a third age of rebirth. This basic scheme—an idealized antiquity, a dark middle age, and a time of renaissance when the classical world would be reborn—shaped the work of the Italian renaissance. For renaissance humanists who followed, the world had turned dark when classical Greek models of art, architecture, literature, and government ceased to inform Roman governance and had led to an eight hundred year period of cultural stagnation. Petrarch's scheme provided the basic format for the Protestant Reformation(s), and some forms of the Enlightenment. In the Reformation, churchmen identified theological corruption as the chief problem. Theological speculation had gone wrong either comparatively recently during High Middle Ages with its crusades, imperial papacy, and scholasticism (according to Lutherans), or perhaps much earlier, in late antiquity, sometime between the triumph of Augustine's theology and the era of Charlemagne and the iconodules (according to the Reformed). And finally, there are Enlightenment figures such as Edward Gibbon, who blame Christianity quite directly for the corruption and collapse of classical antiquity, advancing various visions of Enlightenment as a necessary corrective. Each of these movements attempted to show how western civilization and European culture had gravely misunderstood its own heritage, but each attempted to ground their critique not only in an appeal to ancient texts, but in an understanding of history. Each succeeded to the degree that they appealed to a plausible historical model in addition to their primary *ressourcement*.

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Enter Russ Houck and his curious book. Whatever its faults, and however many other diversions he entertains in the course of its 381 pages, he proposes a project as grand as any of these earlier reform movements. His thesis is absolutely clear: not only have both Christianity and Judaism have completely missed the point of the entire Bible (one presumes in its 66 book-version), but in Christianity's case the chief culprit was Constantine. Although Houck recognizes earlier distortions of Christianity like Gnosticism,<sup>1</sup> according to him the mistaken metanarrative of mainstream Christianity is fundamentally a product of the Constantinian religious revolution.<sup>2</sup> That is, the proclamation of the story of Jesus as the ascended and reigning royal messiah who fulfills God's purpose for creation and Israel's hope for redemption is a grave misunderstanding of the biblical texts. So too, therefore, the Christian belief in a loving Triune God is a mass myth based in the complex political and religious world of early fourth century Rome. In place of a wholly manufactured Christianity,<sup>3</sup> he proposes a curious mishmash of pseudo-dispensationalism, Messianic Judaism, and nontrinitarianism. None of that should be surprising, since dispensationalism, Messianic Judaism, and nontrinitarianism have all branded Constantine as the villain in their own narratives of how mainstream Christian orthodoxy somehow triumphed over their own interpretations of Christianity. Nor should it be surprising that with such an odd mishmash, there is no coherent image of what a reformed community of "believers" would look like in practice. What is surprising is the degree to which his book displays a kind of perverse inner logic that ties together elements from a whole host of sects on the fringes of Christianity and Judaism.

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<sup>1</sup> Houck claims certain early Christian documents, like the Didache, are Gnostic, without any attempt to demonstrate that essentially Gnostic themes are present in the text. If he had spent more time in research, he might have learned that Gnosticism teaches the uselessness of material images, symbols, and goods which conflict directly with the Didache's promotion of Eucharistic and baptismal rites. See Kurt Rudolf's *Gnosis*.

<sup>2</sup> See esp. parts 4 and 5, pp. 129-233.

<sup>3</sup> And likewise in place of rabbinic Judaism, to which he devotes an unusual amount of attention. See Part 3.

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Dispensationalism has typically remained within the bounds of mainstream evangelical denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention, and therefore has carved out a place within the world of Trinitarian orthodoxy. However, Houck at least does us the great service of making clear the links between the standard Christian metanarrative and Trinitarian theology; the proclamation of Jesus as reigning king is intimately tied to the proclamation of Jesus as the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity. The connection was obvious enough for the earliest Christians. Jesus' claim that he would be enthroned alongside Yahweh (Mark 14:62, echoing Daniel 7:13-14) and his subsequent resurrection and ascension led them to picture his cosmic priesthood (Heb 8-9), enthronement (Rev 5 and 20), and full sharing in the identity of Yahweh (Phil 2:6-11). Only kings are enthroned, and only God can be cosmically enthroned; any cursory familiarity with Second Temple Judaism could have taught Houck this simple fact.<sup>4</sup> The historical Jesus may not have set up a visible kingdom centered on Zion, ruling over all of Israel's historic enemies from Persia in the far east to Rome in the far west,<sup>5</sup> but he did defeat the cosmic powers of death, sin, and the Evil One in the battle of crucifixion and resurrection, ushering in a Messianic age marked out by the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. Jesus was and is God, and the church proclaims him as such not only because the New Testament clearly states this (most clearly, John 1:1-14), but because, more often, it assumes that its readers know

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<sup>4</sup> For these and all the various other ways in which scholars have understood the emergency of early Christian claims about Jesus within the context of Second Temple Judaism, cf. Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the God of Israel*, N.T. Wright's *Jesus and the Victory of God*, James Dunn's *Christology in the Making*, Brant Pitre's *Jesus, the Tribulation, and the End of Exile*, Larry Hurtado's *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, and numerous other works written in Second Temple Judaism, New Testament exegesis, and historical Jesus studies over the past thirty years.

<sup>5</sup> Many Jews, of course, did not expect any sort of a Messiah, and not all those who did had anything like definite ideas about his role, his identity with the eschatological judge and Son of Man, how many Messiahs there would be, and the timing of the Messiah's appearance, the restoration of Israel's proper covenant relationship to Yahweh, and Yahweh's universal epiphany to the nations. Suffice it to say, mainstream Christian orthodoxy sees all these as having common fulfillment in the critical, axial turn of the Christ-event, from annunciation to Pentecost.

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that there are certain activities that only Yahweh can perform, while depicting Jesus doing just those things.

Houck seems to instinctively grasp all of this in ways many dispensationalists do not. If, as dispensationalism asserts, Jesus did not do anything particularly royal in reference to God's covenant people, Israel, then what about Jesus indicated to his disciples and the first few Christian generations that he shared in God's own identity? Dispensationalists have nevertheless remained faithful to Christianity's Trinitarian orthodoxy, if not to its biblical and historical coherence. Houck, however, embraces the flip side of this logic: in order to avoid coming to the conclusion that Jesus as the Christ (Messiah) shares in God's own identity as cosmic king and cosmic savior, he instead deletes any reference to Jesus' messianic role in the New Testament. According to Houck, every single use of "Jesus Christ" or "Christ Jesus" in the manuscript record can be traced to a purposeful early Christian corruption of the textual tradition.<sup>6</sup> Never mind that there is no evidence for this. Never mind that this would have had to have happened at an extremely early date, early enough to influence every subsequent manuscript throughout the world, but at a time so early that it would be well before the New Testament was compiled and any one person or community had access to the entire New Testament library. And never mind that removing the word "Christ" doesn't remove the plethora of messianic themes, references, and actions evident throughout the gospels, not least of which is the present reality of the kingdom of God, the controlling theme of Jesus' entire ministry. Houck rejects Jesus' role as Israel's royal Messiah, and with it his role as savior of the cosmos and Second Person of the Trinity. Jesus is important, it seems, simply in order

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<sup>6</sup> Houck, pg. 73. To his credit, he quotes George Howard, a Hebraist at the fringes of scholarship, who excised the Gospel of Matthew according to medieval Hebrew translations of the text. His work has not been accepted by the academic community.

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to be the vehicle by which God takes out his wrath on humanity for sin.<sup>7</sup> Such a reductionist understanding of Christ's kingly battle upon the cross against the powers of darkness and his triumph over them at the resurrection will inevitably lead to faulty Christology.

*Constantine and the Arian Controversy*

Of course, this is hardly the first time someone has denied the divinity of Jesus. Here Houck sets his sights upon Constantine. In the midst of a series of chapters where Constantine 'steals' everything from 'the Sabbath' to 'the Bible,' Houck blames Constantine for elevating Jesus to divine status and enforcing Trinitarian Christianity upon an unwilling church. This is sheer nonsense.<sup>8</sup> When Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria (not bishop, as Houck claims), began teaching that 'there was a time when the Son was not,' his bishop Alexander forbade him from preaching. After all, Christians had worshipped Jesus in their liturgy, as even Arius admitted.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, we can see traces of these practices in New Testament, wherein references to Jesus' divine identity tend to be doxological (with Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit as a sort of divine triad at the conclusion of Paul's letters), antiphonal (John ch. 1), or otherwise liturgical (Philippians 2, Hebrews 1).<sup>10</sup> However, Arius did not regard Jesus as truly God, but as a sort of quasi-divine being. Here he drew off one possible interpretation of the Christology of Origen of Alexandria, who wrote a century earlier.

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<sup>7</sup> Curiously, Houck does allow Jesus to function as something called the "Messiah Lamb." Is this some shade of the Qumranic priestly Messiah? Probably not, but it is interesting how fringe movements tend to recapitulate errors.

<sup>8</sup> The account of the Arian controversy that follows is taken from the standard histories of early Christianity, e.g., W.H.C. Frend's *The Rise of Christianity*, J.N.D. Kelley's *Early Christian Doctrines* and *Early Christian Creeds*, Leo Donald Davis' *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, etc.

<sup>9</sup> There were some minor exception, like the Ebionites, but these sectarians were already outside the bounds of catholic orthodoxy when Constantine legalized Christianity.

<sup>10</sup> For examination of the connection between the development of high Christology and the setting of worship in either text or reality, see Hurtado and Bauckham.

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This “low Origenism” was influential in Syria-Palestine and Anatolia, where Arius, subsequent to his censure in Alexandria by Bishop Alexander, found defenders of his proposition that the Logos was a fully separate being from God the Father, created subsequent to the beginning of time.

Theological conflict in the ancient world had necessarily political ramifications. The world was not conceived of as an isolated universe to which a god or gods might be separated or appended, but as a nested cosmos wherein the good of the state depended upon the religious fidelity of the Roman Empire and its people. The emperor served as the mediator between the divine order and the human realm. Whether or not to worship Christ as fully God (Alexander's position), or to pay homage to Christ as God's envoy (Arius' position), was a political problem in-itself; the civil and secular strife the debate caused in the eastern cities of the empire were concomitant considerations, but conceptualizing the civil and religious issues in isolation from the political is a completely modern approach. Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge over other claimants to the Roman imperium would be naturally seen as part of a cosmic realignment. Whether the cosmic forces at work were the old gods (Apollo, et al.) or the work of new gods often favored by soldiers (Christ, Mithras, etc.), one would not want to risk angering whatever god had brought victory. If it was considered possible that Christ had brought about such a victory, then openness to the Christian faith was a natural response.<sup>11</sup> Constantine henceforth served as a defender of the faith, and part of this defense was ensuring that proper worship was offered to the correct god. Therefore, he summoned the disputants to a council that was held at Nicaea, near his new capital of Constantinople, in 325 CE.

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, it was equally possible that it had been the work of Apollo or some other divine supporter. In my opinion, Constantine's personal cult of Sol Invictus was a way of splitting the difference.

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The bishops from the Latin-speaking, western half of the empire largely sided with Alexander's party. This makes clear what Houck obscures: from the beginning, the 'Nicene' party (as the Trinitarian party came to be called following the council) was not only a slight majority in the east, but was an overwhelming majority in the west. It was not difficult for Constantine to guide the council fathers toward a draft creed that would be accepted by the vast majority of attendees. However, the bishops in attendance also found that purely scriptural terms and phrases could be agreed upon by all parties, since all parties had long used Scripture to defend their various positions. Therefore, they incorporated an extra-biblical term that no Arian could allow: *homoousios*.<sup>12</sup> This term, the Greek underlying the Nicene Creed's phrase "being of one substance with the Father" or "consubstantial with the Father," has a variety of meanings, all of which were abhorrent to the Arians. The basic word *ousia* can mean being, entity, essence, or substance. Houck boldly asserts that it means 'identical' to the extent that the Father and Son are one thing, with no relationship of begottenness or generation that keeps them separate as persons.<sup>13</sup> Again, this simply isn't the case; the Nicene Creed expressly states that the Father begets the Son, and subsequent Christian creeds and theology have been absolutely insistent that while there is one God and that the Father and Son are one God, the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Father. It's entirely unclear whether Houck has ever read the Athanasian Creed, but perhaps he should. In any case, he certainly hasn't read the history of the Nicene or *homoousian* party. If he had, then he would know that the Nicene party disowned one of its own members, Marcellus of Ancyra, for adopting an

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<sup>12</sup> It must be pointed out that this is hardly an example of extra-biblical theology triumphing over a non-creedal, anti-traditional Christianity. Arians and Semi-Arians went on to draft their own creeds throughout the fourth century, and used terms like *homoiousios* ("similar in substance") and *homoios* ("similar") and *anomoios* ("dissimilar") to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son.

<sup>13</sup> Houck, pg. 176. He recognizes that the Nicene Creed proclaims that the Son is begotten of the Father, but believes *homoousios* both contradicts and overrides this assertion, rendering it void.

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interpretation of *homoousios* that bordered on modal monarchianism (or Sabellianism, an earlier heresy that completely identified the three persons of the divine triad as a single person).<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, however, Constantine is to blame, at least according to our author. Houck quotes Eusebius of Caesarea (at first a semi-Arian partisan but ultimately an enthusiastic follower of Constantine wherever the emperor led) as saying that Constantine proposed that the term *homoousios* be included in the Nicene Creed. This much is likely true, but it is not the whole story. Constantine's *aide-de-camp*, Osius of Cordoba, had been the former's personal advisor on Christianity since around the time of the general-*cum*-emperor's conversion (a role we might imagine Eusebius coveting). Very likely, Osius recommended *homoousios*, a literal Greek translation of the Latin *substantia*. As a western bishop he knew that in the Latin-speaking west the term *substantia* was already used to refer to the single divine nature shared by the three persons, and *persona* had already been the favored term to refer to the individuals within the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Unfortunately for the Greek east, the equivalent term for person, *prosopon*, had a sense of 'mask,' and so was generally unsuitable to refer to truly existing and individuated beings. It would be another fifty years before the Cappadocian fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa) settled on *hypostasis* as the appropriate term for each of the three individual divine persons. At the time of Nicaea, *ousia* and *hypostasis* were used as synonyms. *Homoousios*, then, is not a single represents part of a longer process whereby mature western, Latin terminology triumphed over the still-evolving and ambiguous terminology of the Greek-speaking east. Indeed, it

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<sup>14</sup> Indeed, not only did the Nicene party eventually disown him, but the first canon of the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE anathematized "the Marcellians," identifying them with the Sabellians. Davis, pg. 261.

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should come as no surprise that Nicaea's most able defender, Athanasius, was conversant both in the Greek theology of his native Alexandria and the Latin theology of the west where he spent considerable time in exile. And the Nicene Creed, ultimately triumphant in the generation following Constantine's death (with the work of the Cappadocian fathers and the second ecumenical council held at Constantinople in 381 CE), likewise represents the triumph of church practice—the worship of Christ as fully and truly God—and functional theology over the speculative theology of Alexandrian priests.<sup>15</sup> It certainly does not represent Constantine “stealing God.”

Oddly enough, while Houck is willing to dismiss all evidence to the contrary and eliminate every reference to Jesus as the Christ throughout the New Testament on the grounds that they are all textual interpolations in the manuscript tradition, he is nevertheless willing to admit that the New Testament refers to Jesus as God.

Although he is painfully vague about his theology, he seems to understand Jesus in a basically Arian way:<sup>16</sup> something like God, created by God by means of paternal generation within time, a co-worker with God in creating the universe (but subsequent to the creation of time itself, thereby separating time and space in a way modern physics simply does not allow), and the means by which God reveals his will for creation and carries out certain elements of those plans, but not God in any true sense.<sup>17</sup> Houck expounds, therefore, precisely the sort of heresy the Nicene Creed was composed to combat. Ironically, both Houck and the ancient Arians reintroduce a sort

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<sup>15</sup> A similar triumph of function over speculation in theology would occur in the fifth century debates over Christology, in which the incarnational-narrative Christology of Pope Leo and his *Tome* would cut through many of the abstract debates around the person and nature of Christ.

<sup>16</sup> N.B. Houck actually rejects Arianism because he thinks that Arius taught the creation of the Son as something distinct from the generation of the Son in time, pg. 352.

<sup>17</sup> Most of this can be found in Part 8, pp. 311-348. It is especially telling that, as in some interpretations of Islam, the supreme God has no spiritual counterpart, and therefore is physically imaged as having “back parts,” a “face,” “hands,” and a real “body” (pg. 323).

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of polytheism in their efforts to protect the particularity of God the Father. Instead of a gulf between Creator and creation that is only overcome in the *Theoanthropos* (the “God-man,” an ancient title for Jesus Christ), we have a whole realm between God and the universe that is densely populated with semi-divine creatures. Is this the God of Scripture and the cosmos of ancient Israel? I would strongly contend that both Arius’ and Houck’s worlds look considerably more like the complicated worlds of Greek polytheism or the Gnostics.

*The Bible and the Church*

Yet one ultimately has to ask: Why seize upon the sacred text of Christianity apart from Christianity? Houck remains dedicated to belief in the inspiration and inerrancy of Christian Scripture while rejecting the Christian religion in all other respects. What is so special about this particular religion’s sacred text when the entire religion is removed? If the entire Christian community has gotten the biblical metanarrative so completely wrong, and therefore completely misunderstands our place as individuals within that larger story, why should we believe these books at all? And how does this particular ancient library operate in the contemporary world in complete isolation?

These concerns are probably best illustrated by comparison to other major world religions. When a non-Muslim looks at the Qur’an, they necessarily do it through a critical lens. For scholars, this can entail source and redaction criticism on the Qur’an, reading the Qur’an as a rhetorical tool within its socioreligious setting in seventh century Arabia, or even trying to understand how the Qur’an functions within the Islamic community today; for non-scholars, this might just mean reading the Qur’an at a distance, with some suspicion. However, if one understands the Qur’an as being the eternal word of Allah, revealed to Muhammad by the angel Jibril, by which humans learn how to obey Allah’s rules for right living and assure their place in Paradise, then that person is clearly no longer bracketing out all of the Muslim

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religion. Even if they reject all subsequent collections of traditions regarding the life of Muhammad (*hadith*), all collections of Islam law (*sunnah*), and all later conversations among the *ulama* (the global community of Islamic religious scholars) regarding the application of *shariah* in circumstances throughout history, not only is that person still a Muslim, but one has to ask why they would adopt a critical stance toward all elements of Islam except the Qur'an. Why call everything in question about a religion except its fidelity to a particular sacred text? A critical stance toward a religion demands at least a partially critical stance toward its sacred text; if one wants to treat an ancient text as a sacred object in one's spiritual life, how does one do that without any reference to the larger religion of which that text is an integral part? I, and many others working in religious studies, tend to view both Scripture and church history with critical eyes in our academic work, but view both the church's sacramental life and Sacred Scriptures as worthy of veneration in our personal and spiritual lives. Houck wants to treat church history academically (and fails), and to treat the Bible as a sacred text (and fails there as well).

The likely response is that Houck and those like him are simply believers in the standard Protestant doctrine of Sola Scriptura. Of course, Sola Scriptura, as understood by Houck and others, means that Scripture functions primarily as a source for information that excludes other sources. Whether one believes in Sola Scriptura or not, this is not the classic formulation of Sola Scriptura as defined by the Lutheran and Reformed churchmen of the sixteenth century. True, Scripture was understood by the Protestant reformers to be the sole "formal principle" in theology, the sole final authority ruling on the content of doctrine. For them and for Houck, the priority of Scripture over later texts was critical to the project of returning the faith to its most ancient roots. Yet for the reformers, the content provided by Scripture was always organized by the "material principle," the doctrine of a person's justification before God by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Whatever one thinks about

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that particular formal principle, belief in Sola Scriptura has always been tied to a belief in Christianity's preexisting metanarrative: God-in-Christ saving sinners. The doctrine of Sola Scriptura exists together with the doctrines of Sola Gratia and Sola Fide, and especially the doctrine of Solus Christus. And none of these make sense if "Christ alone" excludes God. For "Christ alone" to be anything but heresy, and therefore for "Scripture alone" to be anything but heresy, "Christ alone" must mean "God alone saves through the power of his Word, in grace alone, received in faith alone."

Scripture's religious function in Christian life is not mainly as a source of information about what God and his people did sometime in the past, but is especially God's active word in the present. God's Word is his Yes and No, condemning and killing through the power of the law and forgiving, making alive, and raising up new creatures in Christ through the power of the Gospel. For Augustine, Luther, and Barth, this is the main way in which the church uses Scripture: reformers may use Scripture as a source of information to call the church back to its roots when it goes astray, but Scripture is primarily a tool of the church, for the church, to be used by the church in carrying out the mission of the gospel. It exists in order to guide the church in its proclamation of the historical work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the lives of ancient Israelites and the first Christians, and to deepen that work by bringing believers into their own intra-Trinitarian life of love.<sup>18</sup> The Bible is most truly the Bible when it is the church's book.

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<sup>18</sup> A theological reminder: Only a Trinitarian God can *be* love. Other gods may love or claim to love, but only if God is three real persons share in one substantial life—where the Father begets the Son, the Son reflects the Father, and together they share in mutual love through the Holy Spirit—can 1 John 4:8 and 16 say "God *is* love." The interpenetrative dance of these Three-in-One is most beautifully explored in the work of the aforementioned Cappadocian fathers.

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Furthermore, it baffles the mind to wonder why exactly this particular collection of ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Judean texts has any appeal or credibility apart from the active, living faith of the church. In the same way Sola Scriptura cannot be isolated from other Reformation doctrines like Sola Fide and Sola Gratia, so too the canon cannot be isolated from other marks of the early church like common liturgy, creeds, and leadership. Just as the reformers linked Scripture to the central doctrine of the gospel and to the preaching of the gospel, the ancient churches linked Scripture to the central doctrine of God as encapsulated in creeds and the encounter with the Triune God in worship. One reason the Christian Bible was assembled was in order that congregations would have texts that could be read in a worship ceremony at which early Christians worshipped Christ as God. Many of the early manuscript collections of the Christian Scriptures are not in the canonical order one would find them in a modern published Bible, but are lectionary readings. In addition to the act of worshipping Christ, there was the declaration of Christ's divinity.

When Scripture was assembled, it was not done in isolation; even in the New Testament there are traces of early Christian creeds. The growth of these creeds can be traced from Paul's reformulation of Deuteronomy 6:4 in 1 Corinthians 8:6 (where 'Hear, O Israel, Yahweh your God is Lord alone' becomes 'there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist'), then in the baptismal liturgies found in second century Christian texts, through other texts like the Old Roman Creed, straight up until Nicaea. The liturgy of the early Christians was characterized by the creedal affirmation that 'Jesus is Lord' and the worship of Jesus as God. In that sense, when the Christian Scriptures were written in the first century, and as the canon compiled over the next couple centuries, the texts were formed within the liturgy, between the double controls of creed and worship. Even for classic

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Protestantism, which recognized these links only weakly, Sola Scriptura functioned as a critique of Christianity from the inside.

Early Christians likewise held to rigorous standards of authorship, demanding that each New Testament document must have been written by an apostle or under the authority of an apostle. This reflects the standard of apostolic succession as a criterion for recognizing bishops. The earliest Christians shaped their identity and recognized each other in creeds and in the liturgy, and grounded the invisible communion of saints through the mutual recognition of bishops in apostolic succession. These elements of early Christianity were critical in shaping the canon. Those four interdependent and inseparable realities—creed, liturgy, episcopacy, and canon—marked out the church against its many enemies. Having these four visible signs in common allowed Christians to recognize each other throughout the empire and beyond. Scripture is always part of that larger complex. Furthermore, it should be no surprise that an author who does not recognize that his readers' recognition of Christian Scripture as an authoritative text is inextricably woven into a tapestry that equally includes mutually recognized creeds, liturgies, and lines of apostolic succession has woven himself a makeshift theology with no integral vision for the believing community's acts of corporate worship, let alone general human flourishing. Apart from the credal and liturgical Christianity of history and our lived-out experience of that historic faith in worship and practice I see no reason to venerate this particular collection of ancient sacred texts, and I cannot fathom why Russ Houck would either.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, the question is not how seriously to take Scripture, but how seriously to take Mr. Houck. He is the epitome of a pseudo-scholar, the sort of person who knows how to make scholarly sounding claims without providing any evidence. At no point does he seriously engage with any scholars working in the

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fields of Second Temple Judaism, New Testament studies, historical Jesus studies, Christian origins, Gnosticism, patristics, or rabbinics.<sup>19</sup> On almost every page there is an outrageous or erroneous claim, from calling the Didache a Gnostic text, to informing readers that the name Yeshua means “salvation now,” to the assertion that Christians did not worship on Sundays until Constantine decreed it so. This is all verifiably nonsense and outside the bounds of scholarship, conservative or liberal, or even popular religious literature grounded in expert discussion. This judgment can, in fact, stand for the book as a whole. Whereas the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment all grounded their efforts to restore and enrich western civilization in the best scholarship available in their day, Houck instead has attempted to reshape Christianity according to his own idiosyncratic vision uninformed by any serious research. One hopes he will not succeed. Not recommended for any collections.

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<sup>19</sup> The above references aside, it is worth noting that there are many scholars who would disagree with my presentation of Christian origins, but would nevertheless find Houck's presentation laughable. For scholars of a more evangelical Protestant persuasion who would be somewhat more optimistic about the ability to Scripture to carry out a fully sovereign function within the church, see Kevin Vanhoozer, Stanley Grenz, Michael Horton, Keith Mathison, D.A. Carson, and William Lane Craig; for authors who use negatively evaluate pericopes wherein Jesus claims messianic stasis, and who would see the church's development of a high Christology of divine identity are generally divorced from the life, teachings, and immediate experience of the historical Jesus, see Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Geza Vermes, Richard Horsley, and Bart Erhman.

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