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Faith and Allegiance

Abstract

"I'd like to devote attention to some ways these books address biblical and theological topics that animated the Reformation debates and continue to garner interest today."

Posting about two book reviews from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/faith-and-allegiance/>

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Faith and Allegiance

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July 20,
2017

Benjamin Lappenga

Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity.

Kevin J. Vanhoozer

Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2016. 288 pages.

\$21.99. Paperback. ISBN 978-1587433931.

Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King.

Matthew W. Bates

Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017. 256 pages.

\$24.99. Paperback. ISBN 978-0801097973.

New books by Kevin Vanhoozer and Matthew Bates (both worth reading and accessible to non-specialists) join a growing slate of works related to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, initiated by Martin Luther's posting of his ninety-five theses in the city of Wittenberg in 1517. During the next school year (2018–2019), my place of work, Dordt College, will join other Christian institutions and churches to reflect upon a related event, the 400th anniversary of the Synod of Dordt.¹ Here, then, I'd like to devote attention to some ways these books address biblical and theological topics that animated the Reformation debates and continue to garner interest today.

Vanhoozer's latest volume, *Biblical Authority After Babel: Retrieving the Solas in the Spirit of Mere Protestant Christianity*, revisits the five Latin slogans that emerged during the Reformation (often called the five "solas" of Protestantism) and argues for a renewed appreciation of their interdependency. Vanhoozer thinks such efforts are necessary because of the weightiness of the charge that Protestant views of Scripture are inherently individualistic and result in "pervasive interpretive pluralism."² These flaws are not congenital, he argues, but arise only when the slogans *sola gratia* (we are saved by the grace of God alone), *sola fide* (we are saved through faith alone in Jesus Christ), *solus Christus* (Jesus Christ alone is our Lord, Savior, and King), *solī Deo gloria* (we live for the glory of God alone), and *sola scriptura* ("according to Scripture alone") are interpreted in isolation from one another. Their interdependency is essential, because their ontological, epistemological, and teleological unity is found in the triune God.³

Matthew Bates' new book, *Salvation by Allegiance Alone: Rethinking Faith, Works, and the Gospel of Jesus the King*, approaches some of the same themes (especially *sola fide*) from his perspective as a biblical scholar. Bates aims to encourage Christians to discard unhelpful definitions and assumptions about the place of "faith" in Christian vocabulary and instead embrace a biblically and theologically grounded understanding of "allegiance" (or perhaps the older term "fidelity").

I don't have the space for detailed reviews, but I'll put these two authors in conversation to address the narrower question of **whether** and **how** the slogan *sola fide* ought to be embraced by Christian believers today. The question of **whether** can be answered straightaway: both Bates and Vanhoozer think the answer is "yes." The question of **how**, though, reveals some differences that will be instructive as we think through this matter for ourselves.

Vanhoozer defines faith as "the means by which believers personally appropriate the benefits of Christ's work."⁴ Drawing especially on the work of Alvin Plantinga⁵ to challenge the accusation that the Reformation begat a crisis involving our ability to *know* (epistemology), Vanhoozer emphasizes faith as the "firm and certain knowledge" that the Spirit impresses on the minds of individuals. In keeping with his thesis that *sola fide* can only be understood when coordinated with the other *solas*, Vanhoozer sees faith as primarily oriented toward Scripture (*sola scriptura*): "True faith has to do... with testimonial rationality and... the trust of God's people in the testimony of God's Spirit to

the reliability of God's Word."⁶ *Sola fide* not only means that faith is occasioned by the hearing of the Word, but also that Christians are saved "apart from works."⁷

Bates, on the other hand, challenges classic definitions of "faith," including Augustine's two-part definition ("the faith which is believed" and "the faith by which it is believed")⁸ and the Reformation-era tripartite scheme (the content to be apprehended, intellectual agreement that the content is true, and a disposition of reliance). Instead, Bates argues that the biblical texts (primarily Paul and the Gospels) reveal three basic dimensions: "*mental affirmation* that the gospel is true, *professed fealty* to Jesus alone as the cosmic Lord, and *enacted loyalty* through obedience to Jesus as the king."⁹ All of this hinges on the important observation that the gospel, for Jesus and for the biblical writers, does not begin with the plight of the individual ("I am lost and in need of saving, and Jesus died to save me"), but rather is the declaration that *Jesus is king* (Jesus preexisted, took on flesh, died, was buried, was raised, appeared to many, is seated at God's throne as Lord, and will come again as judge).

When it comes to *sola fide*, then, Bates has no quarrel with the claim that "we must hold certain intellectual truths as real or factual,"¹⁰ but unlike Vanhoozer, he sees the biblical usage of the word "faith" (Greek *pistis*) as *itself* denoting allegiance to Jesus as king. Vanhoozer would also readily affirm that the Christian life is one of allegiance to Jesus, but, perhaps constrained by the dogmatic claims of some of the Reformers, Vanhoozer would not use the language of "faith/belief" as a biblically-grounded vocabulary for expressing such allegiance. In addition, for Bates the notion of "faith apart from works" (a catchphrase very much at home in Vanhoozer's framework) is challenged: if *pistis* in salvation-oriented contexts is best understood as *allegiance*, then by its very definition it includes "concrete acts that are inseparable from allegiance."¹¹

On display in this comparison is the long-running tension between biblical studies (and even "biblical theology") and systematic theology.¹² <http://inallthings.org/hearing-gods-voice/>) On the one hand, Vanhoozer offers a deeply considered theological appropriation of the insights of the Reformers, and he opens space for Protestant believers to have confidence in our doctrines about faith and the kind of knowing that faith involves (informed, robust, and Spirit-given). On the other hand, Bates reexamines the biblical texts themselves and redirects our thinking about the place of "believing" in salvation, suggesting that intellectual assent is but a minor piece of a much richer call to allegiance to Jesus the King.

Can it be both? Must we choose between Vanhoozer's faith as knowing and Bates's faith as allegiance? In some respects, perhaps this tension (like many mysteries at the heart of Christianity) is better left unresolved. So, rather than propose an answer, I recommend we read some relevant passages with both emphases in mind and consider how each reading might be formative for our lives. For Vanhoozer (V), I've substituted what is usually translated "faith" or "belief" with "firm knowledge of God's goodness." For Bates (B), I've substituted with the words "allegiance to Jesus the King." Begin with these, but I encourage you to keep thinking whenever you encounter the words "faith" and "believe" in passages related to salvation in the New Testament, as well as when you read or hear mention of *sola fide* (by *allegiance* alone) throughout this anniversary year.

Ephesians 2:8:

(V) For by grace you have been saved through *firm knowledge of God's goodness*, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

(B) For by grace you have been saved through *allegiance to Jesus the King*, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

1 Corinthians 1:21:

(V) For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who *have a firm knowledge of God's goodness*.

(B) For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who *give allegiance to Jesus the King*.

Acts 11:17:

(V) If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we *came to a firm knowledge of God's goodness* in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?

(B) If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we *gave our allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ*, who was I that I could hinder God?

James 2:14, 17:

(V) What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have *firm knowledge of God's goodness* but do not have works? *Can firm knowledge of God's goodness save you? ... So firm knowledge of God's goodness by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

(B) What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have *allegiance to Jesus the King* but do not have works? *Can allegiance to Jesus the King save you? ... So allegiance to Jesus the King by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

Footnotes

1. There are various ways of spelling the name of the city, the synod, and the college in Iowa; I have chosen to use "Dordt" to refer to all three for the sake of consistency. ↩
2. On this topic, see Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), 1–54. Against those like Hans Boersma who approach the events of the sixteenth century with a posture of lament, Vanhoozer hopes to celebrate rather than disparage the Reformation. Likewise Herman Bavinck: "The Reformation...did not reject all tradition as such; it was reformation, not revolution. It did not attempt to create everything anew from the bottom up, but it did try to cleanse everything from error and abuse according to the rule of God's Word. For that reason it continued to stand on the broad Christian foundation of the Apostles' Creed and the early councils. For that reason it favored a theological science, which thought through the truth of Scripture and interpreted it in the language of the present" (*Reformed Dogmatics* [ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 1:493). ↩
3. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority*, 26–33. In this Vanhoozer is largely dependent on the work of John Webster; e.g., "[the connection of *sola scriptura* to the principles *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, and *solo verbo*, all under the primary principle *solus Deus*] tied Reformation teaching about Scripture to a wider set of doctrinal materials and thereby ensured its integration into the scope of dogmatics" (Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001], 10). ↩
4. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority*, 74. ↩

5. See Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and *Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). [↔](#)
6. *Biblical Authority*, 107. [↔](#)
7. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Authority*, 79. [↔](#)
8. Vanhoozer specifically refers to this schema (*Biblical Authority*, 83). [↔](#)
9. Bates, *Salvation*, 92. [↔](#)
10. Bates, *Salvation*, 25. [↔](#)
11. Bates, *Salvation*, 22. [↔](#)
12. For more on this, see my recent post: [↔](#)