

All Theology Is Christology

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; dear friends in Christ: One of my seminary professors – a brilliant theologian, to be sure, even if a bit cantankerous – was fond of making exaggerated statements to drive his points home; that is, he would overstate an idea in order to make his students really think about what he was trying to impress upon them. Jesus himself employed the method on occasion, like when he said, “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it away from you; for it is better to enter life half blinded, than with two eyes to be cast into hell.” It wasn’t Jesus’ intent that his hearers should immediately begin to maim themselves; rather he was stressing just how serious sin and its consequences are. Anyway, one of the things this professor of mine used to say is “All theology is Christology”.

Think about that. If you just take the statement as it is, what it says is that it is impossible properly to speak of God without speaking of Jesus Christ. That’s literally what it means, for *theology* means “words about God” and *Christology* is “words about Christ”. So if the statement is true, then you can’t know or believe *anything* that’s true about God apart from Jesus Christ. Now, as it happens, the professor’s repeated assertion of this as a fact caused him to run afoul of a number of pastors, teachers, and other sundry synod bureaucrats. They complained that to say “All theology is Christology” is to deny the other two persons of the Trinity. As I recall, one fellow (whose own theology was in some ways doubtful) brought the professor up on charges of teaching false doctrine. He demanded to know “What about God the Father? What about the Holy Spirit? What about all other teachings of Christianity like the Sacraments, the Church, sanctification, and so on? You simply cannot say ‘All theology is Christology’. There’s a lot more to it than just Christ.”

So he said – while raising a big stink and causing all kinds of trouble for the professor. Now, most people who knew the professor assumed that the offending statement was just another of his wild exaggerations used for teaching purposes, so they didn’t take the charge very seriously. Besides, they knew the professor relished nothing more than a good theological dogfight *and* getting the other guy’s goat whenever he could, so they figured that might be part of it too. But the more I think of it, especially in light of today’s Scripture readings, not only is it not an exaggeration to say “All theology is Christology”, it’s the only way to look at it.

There are several angles from which we can approach this to prove the point. The first and perhaps most obvious has to do with the nature of God’s self disclosure. I mean, how do we know *anything* about God? The answer is that we have to go to the Holy Scriptures because that’s how he’s chosen to reveal himself to us. That’s where we find what’s true about God. So if we want to do *theology*, that is, to speak “words about God”, the place to go is to the words that God himself has spoken. Apart from his words about himself we can only be dealing with the speculations about God made by fallen humans, which are surely going to be filled with wild guesses and errors. That’s no way to do theology truthfully or accurately. No. To do theology right we have to go to God’s Word and to God’s Word alone.

Okay, suppose we do that. What will we find there in God’s Word? What does it say? Or better yet, what’s it all about? If we could boil the entire Scripture down to a single topic, what would it be? The Bible’s own answer to this question is that from cover to cover, it’s about Jesus Christ. Jesus himself confirms this, for he said, “Search the Scriptures, for in them you

think you have eternal life; *but these are they that testify of me.*” He says the whole thing is about him. Therefore if I am approaching theology correctly and using God’s own Words to talk about God, I must necessarily be speaking of Christ because he’s what God’s Word is all about.

Actually there’s more to it than that, for as I have been stressing to you throughout my ministry, the Word of God is not *an it*, *he’s a who*. The Bible calls the Second Person of the Trinity, that is, the Son, the Word of God. So when we’re dealing with the Holy Scriptures, we’re not just having information about God come into our ears; no, we’re actually encountering the person of Jesus Christ and receiving *him* into ourselves. Or, to say it another way, Jesus Christ is not only the *subject* of the entire Scripture, he is also the *content* of the entire Scripture. He *is* God’s Word. And because this is true, it necessarily follows that all theology based on God’s Word must be Christology.

Now, someone might object that there is a way to discuss theology apart from God’s revealed Word. There is what we call the natural revelation of God; that is, the things we can deduce about him from observing his work of creation quite apart from Holy Scripture. Just by looking around and seeing the wonder and majesty of the universe, for example, and the intricate complexity of life in all its forms, and the beauty of the natural world – all these things are like God’s fingerprints that tell us something about him. From these things we can deduce that God is very wise and imaginative and powerful. Some people I know prove that God must have a highly developed sense of humor. You probably know people like that too. But the fact that we can make such observations about God would indicate that it is possible to do at least some theological study apart from speaking of Jesus.

The trouble is that’s not theology in a proper sense. Sure, if we want to pursue theology as “the study of God” in the same sense that entomology is the study of insects, in which we consider God to be the subject of scientific inquiry and observation, I suppose there may be something to it. But that’s not what theology is about. The goal of theology is not to know *about* God and compile a list of handy facts about him; but rather it’s to *know God*, and to enter into a relationship with him. It’s to know his plan and will for us is both in time and eternity. This can only be accomplished through Jesus Christ who is the bridge and reconciler between God and man. But even if we were to allow that there’s something we could know about God from observing his Creation, we’d still be talking about Christ because, as today’s Old Testament reading indicates, it’s Christ’s handiwork that we see in the Creation. The inspired writer of Proverbs describes the Son of God as the Divine Wisdom and Master Craftsman through whom God the Father created all things. St. John says the same thing in his Gospel. Speaking of Jesus he writes, “Through him all things were made; and without him nothing was made that has been made.” So again, even if we confine our discussion of God to what is revealed about him in the natural world, we’d still be talking about Christ because it’s his fingerprints we’re seeing.

Ah, but there’s still another objection that might be raised against the idea that all theology is Christology. After all, there are many people who read and study the Holy Scriptures who aren’t Christians. They know God’s Word, they hold it to be true; but they don’t approach it through Christ or from a Christological point of view. Modern Jews, for example have the Old Testament Scriptures. Muslims recognize the entire Bible as a sacred text, and give it a place of honor second only to their Koran. And then there are Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and several other groups who, though they don’t really know or trust in the Christ of Scripture, they are nevertheless students of God’s Word—which means they’re doing and discussing theology, right?

No, that's wrong. This is made clear in today's Gospel reading. In it Jesus is having a heated discussion with the Jewish religious scholars. These are men who have devoted their lives to the study of God's Word – or so they think. But they haven't got much respect for Jesus. As the text begins they're firing at him what they would have considered their two most hateful insults: "Isn't it true that you are a Samaritan and that you have a demon?"

Jesus is not fazed by their slurs. Instead, he continues to reach out to them, telling them that he has the Words of Life, which, if anyone keeps in faith, he will never see death. And Jesus, we know, *is* that Word of Life. He's inviting them to do their theology right, that is, through him. But they refuse. They use his claim against him, "Just who do you think you are?" Jesus responds that *he* doesn't make himself to be anyone. He doesn't glorify himself; rather it's God the Father who has put him forward for the purpose of glorifying him. And then Jesus makes this remarkable statement, "You say, 'He is our God.' But you have not known him."

Understand what Jesus is saying: if you do not recognize Jesus the Son, you do not know God. You can be the most knowledgeable Bible scholar in the world; but if you don't know and trust in Jesus, you're only playing at theology. You don't know a thing. It is impossible to know God apart from the Son. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me." Or, as I've been saying from the start: all theology is Christology.

And that may seem to be a rather strange thing to be emphasizing today of all days, because this is Holy Trinity Sunday. It's the day set aside in the church year to reflect upon the mystery of the Godhead, and how he is one divine essence and yet three distinct persons. Why then all the stress on only the person of the Son? It brings us back to the charge made against the professor. By stressing the Son aren't we somehow disrespectfully overlooking the Father and the Holy Spirit and failing to give them their proper due?

No, not at all. In fact, by stressing the Son and work of Jesus Christ for our salvation, we are doing exactly what the Father and the Holy Spirit want us to do. How do I know? It's because it's what they do. The Father sets the Son before us and calls upon us to worship and glorify him. We see it at the Baptism of Jesus and again on the Mount of Transfiguration. On both occasions the Father points to the Son and says, "Here he is. This is the One I love. Listen to him." The Holy Spirit too: it's his goal is to reveal the Son and make him known to us. It's the Spirit who works in us to convict us of our sins and give us faith in Christ and his work of atonement on the cross. The Spirit never goes around saying, "Hey, look at me!" No. He always points us to Jesus. The Spirit keeps the spotlight on him. There's a reason we call this the *Christian* Church and not the Church of the Holy Trinity.

And yet, the truth that God is the Holy Trinity is essential to our Christian faith. That's why we celebrate Trinity Sunday. And what we're actually celebrating is the triumph of a doctrine. There arose a bitter conflict in the early centuries of the Church. Specifically, the conflict came about because there were people in the Church who denied the divinity of Jesus. They said he wasn't God. Some said that he was just a man. Others said he was an angelic being of some kind. Still others allowed that he might be a "God-like" creature, as long as it was understood that he was less than equal to God. Over and against all such false teachings, the Church fought to preserve the biblical truth that Jesus Christ is both true man and true God – even as he says in today's text: "Before Abraham was, I am." So saying, Jesus is claiming to be God. And after many years of hard fought battles, those who believed that Jesus is something less than God were finally driven out of the Church. The correct teaching of the Holy Trinity prevailed. But what I'd have you see is that those who denied the Trinity were doing it because they, like the Jews arguing with Jesus, wanted to make him out to be something less than who

and what he is. The proper understanding of the Holy Trinity is ultimately about honoring Jesus and giving him the glory he deserves.

Because all real theology is Christology. And this is the thought I'd like to impress upon you on this Trinity Sunday: today in the world around us there is much talk about people being spiritual, and seeking God, or believing in God, or obeying God, or following God, or seeking God's will, and everything else you can think of that has to do with *God*. People speak of all the things God has done for them, and how he has blessed this nation in years past because we as a people supposedly gave honor to God. There are programs on television that make reference to God and cast religion in a positive light. We hear the name of God mentioned in songs like *God Bless America* and in so many praise ditties that you can listen to on certain radio stations. We even have God's name on our currency – and lots of folks are fighting to keep it there. And all this talk of God creates the impression in many minds that there's something good and wholesome and religious about it. "It's wonderful that so many are speaking of God. It means we're *Christian*."

It means nothing of the sort. All the pious talk in the world about a generic, unnamed, nonspecific "God" doesn't amount to diddly-squat. To speak of God apart from Jesus Christ is to speak of a being who doesn't exist. The only God there is, is the One who is revealed to us through the person and work of Jesus Christ. He, Jesus, is the One we are to focus upon. He is the One to trust in. He is the One to speak of. And he is the One we are to glorify for the work of salvation he accomplished for us by his death and resurrection.

So, let's do that. Let's correctly confess that all theology is Christology. And let's give all praise and honor to Jesus Christ our Lord who loved us, who gave himself for us, and who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!