

Interim Ministry Resources

Chapter 4 Preaching

My Christology and What It Means for My Preaching (7)

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MEANS FOR MY PREACHING

by

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Submitted to Dr. Gerhard Forde in partial
fulfillment of the requirements
for Incarnation 423

Luther Theological Seminary

St. Paul, Minnesota

November 5, 1976

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Jesus Christ is Lord. This has been and is now the elemental confession of the Christian church. Christians down through the ages have struggled to expand upon and to clarify this original affirmation in response to the central question, "Who is Jesus Christ?" Therefore, we, in the present age, are the recipients of a long line of study and reflection on the person and work of Jesus Christ. Recognizing this fact I can not claim that anything I say will be original with myself. Of course this in no way excuses me from the necessary task at hand. For as a student preparing for the ordained ministry systematic reflection is crucial because the shape of my Christology will make a great deal of difference in my preaching. What follows then is a personal formulation of my Christology and what it means for my preaching.

Brief Historical Review

History has many lessons to teach, and therefore it is only prudent for me to look back in order to see some of the boundaries staked out and some of the directions laid down. Also important for my task is to see where new approaches need to be taken due to the fact older formulations do not speak as powerfully in this time as they did in previous ages. From the very beginning I can see that the Christian Church rejected Docetism on the one hand and Ebionitism on the other hand. Docetism reflects Hellenistic thinking in sketching a picture of Jesus Christ as some kind of divinized being

walking around on the earth. The divine Logos only appears to be a man; the latter merely serves as the form of the former. Jesus just seems to be human, while he is really divine. This error stubbornly persists in popular piety today. I regard it as a responsibility of the preacher to counter this by stressing that Jesus Christ was truly man, as well as truly God. On the other end of the spectrum then (and now) was the heresy of Ebionitism. It in turn reflected Jewish thinking and stressed the humanity of Jesus. Clinging strongly to their monotheistic beliefs, the proponents had difficulty accepting Christ's divinity. Instead they thought of him as some kind of deified man who was given the honor of divinity by virtue of his outstanding moral character. This error seems to be commonplace in the thinking of the man on the street today. This too presents an agenda item for the preacher today: to stress that Jesus Christ was truly God, as well as truly man.

The Chalcedonian Definition of 451 has been accepted as the standard for Christological definition. In countering the errors of the above mentioned heresies it stated that Jesus Christ is one person in two natures. He is truly God and truly man. There is an integral union of the two natures rather than a separate isolation. I agree wholeheartedly with the definition, but at the same time I realize that we no longer think in that substantial, ontological terminology. I concur with the commonly accepted criticism that the definition is too static and that it does not do justice to the history of the person or the course of his mission. People today think more in functional, dynamic, and historical terms and, therefore, want to hear a different approach to the answering of the question, "Who is Jesus Christ?"

*Caution!
God is not
hidden in
the cross!*

Martin Luther did not question the Chalcedonian Definition, but rather accepted the two-natures understanding described therein. From there he went on to speak of Jesus Christ in the context of his discussion of the Hidden God and the Revealed God. The former is the God active in the created order, while the latter is his special revelation in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. If we want to know God, we do not take the route of speculation and reason, for naked man can not stand before naked God. Instead, if we want to know God, we must look to his Son Jesus Christ. He is what God is all about. In Christ God is acting for me, on my behalf. The above is hopefully an accurate statement of a specific hermeneutic, one to which the Lutheran church is bound to uphold and one to which I am committed to using as a Lutheran preacher.

Rudolf Bultmann was a modern Lutheran who professed to taking Luther's stress on justification by faith alone and strongly emphasizing it. Seeing the inconclusiveness of the studies on the Jesus of history, Bultmann argued that we preach the kerygmatic Christ in order to bring about authentic existence in the personal life. One suspects in him a sophisticated dectetism in his one-sided emphasis on the Christ of faith. Jesus Christ was truly God and truly man, and that affirmation needs to be maintained in order that the whole Christ be preached.

This brief historical review gives some idea of how I see myself in relation to specific movements and theologians of the past. What follows is a constructive attempt to voice a Christology for the present day which places faith on its proper object, does justice to the Lutheran understanding, and takes due cognizance of current thought forms.

Jesus Christ the Son of God

Wolfgang Pannenberg seems to offer a valid alternative to the problems of the two-natures language with its ontological framework. In chapter 9, "Jesus Personal Unity with God," of his book, Jesus—God and Man, he proposes an approach which is not static in its understanding and which does seem to do justice to the history of the person and the course of his mission. In other words it should be more understandable in an age when people think more in functional, dynamic and historical terms. In addition he deals more appropriately with the specific question of "Who is Jesus Christ?" rather than the metaphysical question of "How is it ^{possible} that in one person there can be two natures?"

Jesus Christ was God's revelation to us. If we want to know what God is saying to us, we look at his specific Word for us, his Son, Jesus Christ. Biblical scholarship has demonstrated that it is difficult to believe that Jesus had clear consciousness of himself as the Messiah or Savior. It has been shown rather convincingly that the claims of Jesus Christ, as being what the various titles state, were the work of the post-Easter community in writing the gospel accounts. Jesus Christ was not the Son of God because he was conscious of himself as being the God-man. But, instead, he was the Son of God because he lived in perfect communion with God. *careful!* He did not have to explain the purpose of his mission, as to interpreting who he was. Rather he lived in perfect dedication to his heavenly Father. The will of his Father was his will all through life. He did not know what the result of the mission would be, but in perfect obedience he followed the leading of his Father.

In the cross it looked as if the whole of his life had been
a failure, as if the ridicule and suffering^{he endured} had been in vain.
God had forsaken him! It seemed[?] as if God had forgotten about him, forsaken him at the cross.
From a human point of view he was judged as an egoist and a
blasphemer. When they killed him, they thought they could be
rid of him and that would be that. An unfortunate martyrdom of
a Jewish upstart would be the view of history, so some thought.

But in the resurrection the tables were turned. For God
raises Jesus Christ from the dead, and in effect he says, "This
is the one who has revealed my will. He is what I am all about."
The life and actions of Jesus Christ are confirmed by God the
Father in the resurrection. We find out that from the very
beginning this was God's story of himself for humankind.
God reveals that Jesus Christ is truly his Son. Jesus Christ
had proved himself to be the Son of God by his self-sacrifice
to the will of the Father, going even to the cross, though he knew
not what would be the result. In Jesus Christ we see the True
Man, for in him we see what man was made for—communion with God.
For the whole of humankind the situation was one of broken communion.
But in Jesus Christ we see the life of one who lived life as it
was intended to be lived—in perfect obedience and unbroken communion
with God.

The message the preacher can proclaim^{is} that it is in and through
the Son of God that we can become sons and daughters of God. We
can not try to go around Jesus Christ, for that would be the futile
path of the theology of glory. Rather it is the theology of the
cross as we participate in his Sonship by becoming truly human by
living in communion with God the Father through Jesus Christ the
Son of God.

How?

The Atonement

Atonement means at-one-ment. Two parties are made to be at one with each other. In the commonly understood sense it has come to mean the same as reconciliation. But in a more restricted religious sense it means the work of God in Christ culminating in Calvary. It is God in Christ reconciling us unto himself (II Cor. 5:18f.; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20-22).

Atonement implies a problem, and there is in fact a real problem. Humankind is estranged from God; humankind and God are not at one with each other. This separation is the result of the fall. The word is misleading for it would seem to imply that mankind fell from a higher to a lower state of glory and now needs to somehow regain that saintly perch. But in reality the word fall has to do with man's unwillingness to be man and the desire instead to be like God. This rebellion^{of man} against his appointed state has created alienation between man and God. The wrath of God becomes operative in that the consequences of sin work themselves out in the life of man. The state of sin drives us to commit sins; the scourge of death constantly looms in front of us and eventually takes life itself from us; the forces of evil constantly tempts us to try to be like gods; the law accuses us of what we know to be true, that we are separated from God, and that no effort we make to overcome this will be of any use.

Therefore it is only God himself who can make at one, who can reconcile us unto himself. He has made the initiative on our behalf. It is his purpose and plan of love unfolding. His is a sovereign mercy wholly undeserved by rebellious humankind.

— Use for reconciliation section of path paper —

In the history of the church theologians have reflected upon the atonement, and in their reflection they have often come to refer to the idea of the atonement and to the theories of the atonement. Their actions are understandable in that they wanted to clarify what they thought to be the meaning and importance of the atonement. But the dangers are obvious. One could set down an explanation and then try to argue for its acceptance. In a preaching situation this wrongly implies that we are somehow supposed to ask ^{for} mental assent to the theory. The purpose of theology should be to put faith on its proper object. The proper object of faith is God who in Christ was reconciling the world unto himself. It is more appropriate then to speak of the fact of the atonement rather than the theories.

With that said the question of how to preach the atonement must still be answered. Because the atonement is in a sense such a mystery (as evidenced by the fact that the Church has never felt comfortable enough to set down a doctrine of the atonement) I also do not feel comfortable enough to say that such and such statements are the descriptive explanations for the atonement. (Although I must be discriminative enough to say that there are some which are inappropriate expressions.) To speak of theories, categories, and explanations is somehow to give the impression that it can be nailed down. I would prefer to think of the atonement in suggestive, (rather than descriptive), language, in metaphors, (rather than theories). In this regard then I would like to speak of Christ as Victor, Christ as Sacrifice and Christ as Reconciliation.

Jesus Christ did battle with the evil powers of this world and emerged the victor. He entered into this world and participated in our sinful situation. He was tempted even as all of us are tempted and he was afflicted with suffering and death much more cruel than any of us will ever experience. In the end he sacrifices his own life in perfect obedience to his Father in heaven. It all looks as if everything has ended in defeat, as if the powers of this world have gotten the best of him. But God raises his Son from the dead and thereby confirms him as being the true Son of God. Sent from God to do battle with the evil powers, he goes back to the Father triumphant. He did not yield to the common temptation of wanting to be like God. Instead he was truly human in that he lived as a man in perfect communion and dedication to the will of his Father.

*Sacrifice!
is your
highway your
Metaphors
here?*

This is good news to proclaim that Jesus Christ defeated the power of evil in this world. Together with that we can announce that he invites us to participate in his life, not by observing from a distance what he has done, but by dying to our old self and being raised by him to the new life.

Christ gave himself as a sacrifice. Our Lutheran heritage has shied away from talk of sacrifice probably because of the horrors of what the Reformers considered to be the distortions in the Catholic mass in the Middle Ages and also because Luther much preferred the writing of Paul to that of the author of Hebrews. For myself I do not think it will be an important homiletical theme, but I do think it is important to understand sacrifice rightly in order to counter much of the popular speculative paying-God-behind-the-scenes thinking.

*do that
historically
true?*

*perhaps it
is important
to be
re-interpreted*

Jesus Christ takes upon himself the penalty and curse of sin. He dies in our place where we should have rightly died. Christ could only do this because he ^{is} was victorious over the powers of the world. He takes our sins upon himself but does not himself sin. In turn it ^{is} because of this that his righteousness becomes ours. Jesus Christ is not the sacrifice man makes to God in order for man to somehow gain God's favor. Rather Jesus Christ is sent from God and in turn offers himself to God in perfect obedience.

*he became
subject to
them + yet
conquered*

God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. As mentioned earlier the ^{implied} problem in atonement, (not only an implication, but a fact in itself), is that there is a state of alienation between humankind and God. The point Paul is making, though, is that God has acted in Christ to provide a solution to the problem. Christ has come into this world to do battle with the forces of evil. It is he who has defeated them. Jesus Christ willingly took upon himself the penalty and curse of sin. Christ was made sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (II Cor. 5:21). God has made provision to create a new relationship between himself and humankind. When we receive reconciliation it is not because of a change of heart on our behalf. Rather it is because God has established a new relationship. The derivative consequence of God's action in Christ is that we can enjoy a restored friendship with God through Jesus Christ.

Much of preaching is psychological in that it is implied that reconciliation comes about by man's change of heart. But the important thing I must remember is that the stress belongs on God's action in Jesus Christ.

Three Uses of the Term, "Word"

In conclusion I would like to discuss the three uses of the term, "Word." It is not because this is a significant Christological issue, but because, when considering Christology and preaching, clarity is important, especially in regards to two common problems in the church today. The Word of God is Jesus Christ himself as John in his gospel states so eloquently. He is God's specific word to man. It is God revealing himself in the man Jesus Christ. God is telling his own story in his very own Son. If we want to know what God is like we must look to his Son Jesus Christ. Scripture is also thought of as the Word of God. It mediates to us the history of God acting in this world. It tells the story of God's Son Jesus Christ coming to earth. We use scripture in preaching, teaching and individual study and devotion, for we would want to learn more about God's message to us in Jesus Christ. Then too the proclamation of the Gospel is considered the Word of God. God has entrusted his good news to ordinary men and women whose responsibility it is to proclaim it.

In the church today many people, with charismatic tendencies, want to know the will of God through prophecies or visions. The message to them must be that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and that is sufficient. There is no need for more unmediated revelations.

Also in the church today there is what almost amounts to worship of the Bible. Due respect for the scriptures is important, but faith must be directed towards its proper object, and that is the Word of God, Jesus Christ. Scripture mediates the presence of Christ rather than sets itself up for worship.

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Pam

This is a very good paper. You write well and express yourself clearly, and show that you are beginning to get a good grasp on the subject. I hope you will continue to investigate the matters concerned! I like the way you attempt to get at Christology and atonement in terms of functional actuality rather than in static and speculative terms. I wonder, though, if you have fully thought through all the implications of that. Here I refer you to some of the things that I dealt with in the final lectures in the course and some of the matters in Moltmann's book relative to the theology of the cross and "doing" the text to the hearers. Perhaps you should continue to work on such matters.

Specifically, here are some issues which I think you might work on.

1. Translating "substantialist" terminology into functional language in terms of death + resurrection and God "doing himself" to us in Christ and in preaching.
2. Looking upon the cross-resurrection event as that which both "reveals" and alienates and overcomes it at the same time.
3. Exercise a little more caution in speaking of Christ in terms of "perfect communion with" and "obedience to" God. True, we want to affirm something that nature, but like the "sinlessness" of Christ, that is a "faith affirmation" made from the point of view of the

eventual outcome of the story—the resurrection, and cannot really
be ultimately rooted, defined, in empirical assessments of Jesus' character
or consciousness