

All Theology Is Christology

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In Lutheran denominational politics over the last decade, the phrase “all theology is Christology” has been exhaustively debated. Yet, though the statement and the resulting controversy arise from a particular Missouri Synod context, I submit that the substance of the debate is important to all who stand in the line of the Reformation tradition. Moreover, in an issue of *Modern Reformation* devoted to exploring current debates about classical theology, the centrality of Christology is particularly relevant.

Initially, we should clarify what the phrase “all theology is Christology” *does not mean*, for there are several ways this statement could be misleading, or even wrong. On an elementary level, it could be taken to mean that Christology is the only topic in theology and, hence, the only course in a seminary curriculum. A student studying theology would learn nothing besides the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth and their meaning. Obviously, no serious theologian in either classical Protestantism or the Roman Catholic tradition holds to this view. Alternatively, it might suggest a Christomonism with an anti-trinitarian flavor that would deny or subordinate the existence of the Father and the Spirit to the Son. This would amount to a Jesus religion, a unitarianism of the Second Person of the Trinity (a view which has been proposed by some American sects). If this were true, baptism in the name of Jesus alone would be preferable to one administered in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps more reasonably, one might think that the phrase aims to describe Karl Barth’s theology, which defined the moment of revelation “as an encounter with Christ”. For neither the rationalism of the eighteenth century, nor Friedrich Schleiermacher and his followers (against whom Barth was reacting), properly distinguished between the natural and the supernatural knowledge of God. Instead, religion was simply another category among the arts and sciences. The rationalists came to their conclusions about God from nature, while Schleiermacher used the

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Christian consciousness and culture. In both of these systems, Christ was no longer the only way to salvation. Barth reacted against this de-emphasizing of Christ by insisting that Christ was the first and only revelation of God. So perhaps one might conclude that the phrase “all theology is Christology” applies to his program.

Given the context, orthodox Protestants might have thought that Barth’s *solus Christus* would spawn a revival of Reformation belief. But when Barth redefined this Reformation slogan, it proved disastrous. By making Christ the sole revelation of God, he denied the natural knowledge of God, devalued the Scriptures as the Word of God, and had no necessary role for the Sacraments. Gospel was placed *before* the Law, reversing the Reformation order of Law and Gospel. His encounter theology with Christ proved to be little more than a substitution of his own mysticism for that of Schleiermacher’s Christian consciousness.

Ironically, when his view that Christ was God’s only revelation was put into practice, it produced contradictory results. On the one hand, it eliminated the basis for much common grace activity, provided a blueprint for legalism, and undermined the distinction between Church and society. Not surprisingly, his theology quickly came to resemble the Social Gospel of liberal Protestantism. Yet, on the other hand, Barth’s Christological program, a program embraced by some Lutherans, spawned an antinomianism that had little or no use for the Law. This narrowly defined Christology-relegated biblical injunctions, especially the Pauline ones, to ethical parentheses. It was argued that since Paul intended these regulations for particular churches in specific times and places, they were not universally binding. (This argument was used for women’s ordination.)

Christology became the trump card which took every trick. Freedom in doctrine and practice is allowed as long as the doctrine of Christ remains in place, Barth’s followers argued (and still argue). This position came to be known as Gospel reductionism, a phrase which originated with the majority position of the faculty of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, in the 1970s, and is still used for this radical Christomonism.¹

The Recent Historical Context of the Phrase

More directly than any Barthian inferences, though, the statement that “all theology is Christology” is the product of a controversy at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This debate, however, had more than exclusively Lutheran significance, partly because of the role of Robert D. Preus (1924-1995) at the center of the controversy. Evangelicals will remember Preus as a leader on the International Council of Biblical Inerrancy, and later on the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals. In the course of his lifetime, Preus worked with Carl F. H. Henry, Kenneth Kantzer, and Earl D. Radmacher, as well as with James Montgomery Boice, Robert Godfrey, and Michael Horton. Especially for his *The Inspiration of Scripture*, Preus became recognized as a defender of biblical inerrancy, and thus an ally to many evangelicals.²

To Missouri Synod Lutherans, Preus is better remembered for his role in helping to prevent the denomination from sliding into the liberalism which had engulfed all the mainline Protestant churches by the 1950s. As Barthianism and Rudolf Bultmann’s demythologizing became more entrenched at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in the early 1970s, some wondered if Missouri had yielded completely to that slide. In 1974, a majority of that faculty, many of whom had been strongly influenced by Barth, staged a walkout. Preus then became the chief administrative officer of the seminary, and oversaw much of its reformation.

But in the late 1980s, Preus was at the center of another controversy. Though the terminology was similar, it is important to understand that the issues were quite different. Unlike the 1974 St. Louis incident, this debate was not about the Bible’s historicity and inerrancy. (All parties in this later dispute were agreed on these points.) Instead, about the same time he was removed by board action as Fort Wayne seminary president (1989), Preus was charged with doctrinal aberration for defending the phrase that “all theology is Christology”. Preus insisted that all doctrines had to be defined Christologically. The debate raged: Could something be biblical and at the same time not be Christological?

The problem originated in an article on sanctification written by a colleague. The piece contained this statement: Any attempt to make Christology preliminary to theology, or even only its most important part, but not its only part, is a denial of Luther’s doctrine and effectively destroys

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the Gospel of the message of a completed atonement.³ In other words, Lutheranism insists that Christology is not a subset of, but is rather the whole of, Christian theology. This position came to be summarized as “all theology is Christology.”

Ultimately, in hearings before district and synod panels, the statement was found to be doctrinally acceptable. Preus’s removal was reversed, and he remained a part of the synod’s ministerium. Nonetheless, the doctrinal charges brought against him reinforced his opponent’s view that he had no place at the seminary and in the church.

The Theological Accuracy of the Statement

After Preus was vindicated of all charges brought against him, he delivered a series of essays that provided specific references from Luther and the Lutheran Confessions to demonstrate the correctness and the necessity of the Christological approach to theology.⁴ While citing Luther may not finally be convincing to the broader evangelical community, the charges brought against Preus had been leveled within the framework of the Lutheran Confessions, to which ministers of the Missouri Synod are bound at ordination. Obviously, within this scheme, Luther’s writings play a special role. It was not simply about what was permissible within the context of biblical revelation generally, but within a conservative Lutheran community particularly.

Since the Reformed also see Christ as the center of revelation, Lutherans do not have an exclusive claim to a Christological approach.⁵ However, different understandings of the relation of Jesus’ human and divine natures will predictably assign different roles to the Christological principle in the theologies of the two great Reformation churches. In unraveling the understanding that all theology is Christology, the defining characteristics of the Lutheran and Reformed churches have to be identified. In Reformed theology, Christology and justification must be coordinated with their view of God’s sovereignty, which is central to their program.

For Lutherans, the central doctrine is justification, which is said to be the doctrine by which the Church stands or falls. Justification becomes operative in the preaching of the Law and Gospel. This principle assumes that the Christian is *simul iustus et peccator*; that is, as long as he lives, he is at the same time condemned by the Law as an unbeliever and pronounced

righteous in Christ. In this scheme, the Gospel, the message of salvation in Christ, is the word of God in a sense that the Law as condemnation can never be. Gospel is God's last word not only because it follows the Law but because it is the true revelation of who God really is. The Law is God's *opus alienum*, a work which he performs to redeem the sinner.

Asserting that "all theology is Christology" does not remove justification as the central doctrine. On the contrary, Christology is the content of justification and completely informs it: Christology is what the Gospel is all about. Therefore, Christology is what the Bible is all about. This does not mean that every part of the Bible or every verse or collection of verses is Gospel by itself, but it means rather that everything in the Bible serves the Gospel. Unless one finds Christ in a passage, the interpreter, no matter how scholarly he is, has not correctly understood it and, hence, cannot preach on it.

Historically this had significant consequences. As is well known, Luther questioned the canonicity of Hebrews, James, and Revelation. Apart from the historical question of their apostolic authorship, these books did not, in Luther's view, preach Christ. For most Lutherans today, his interpretation was wrong, but his principle was right. To demonstrate this, I wrote a commentary on what Luther called "the epistle of straw", the book of James. With the title *James the Apostle of Faith*, the work was intentionally subtitled: *A Primary Christological Epistle for the Persecuted Church*.⁶ Some Lutherans were unhappy with the book, not because I argued for James' canonicity (something to which they already agreed), but because I provided a Christological interpretation. But this was only the application of the Lutheran principle that no word can be God's word unless it is a word about Christ, and a word in which Christ comes. This principle requires that theology (which means a word about God) must be Christolog-a word about Christ. Hence all theology is Christology. In handling James this way, canonicity was not sacrificed for Christology, and Luther's Christological principle was not sacrificed for the sake of preserving a fixed number of books in the biblical canon.

The Biblical Basis

To have any standing in evangelical circles, the Christological principle must be derived from and proven by the biblical documents themselves. With some books of the Bible, this is easier than with others. Asserting that

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the Gospels are Christological is in a sense tautological, since they claim to be written about Jesus and contain his word (Matt 28:20; Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31; 21:25). Similarly, the Epistles serve no other purpose than to foster his teachings. The argument for the Christological character of the Old Testament can be advanced on the basis of the claims of Jesus and the apostles that it comes to completion in him (Matt 26:56, 58; Luke 24:26-27).

Nevertheless, the total Christological character of the prophetic books is not held by all Christians. Zionism, a fundamental belief for some evangelicals, finds in the Bible predictions about the modern state of Israel. Alternatively, some exegetes attempt to limit the Christological character of the Old Testament to the predictive prophecies, and only to those types specifically designated in the New Testament. Both of these approaches are hermeneutically deficient, and fail to recognize that all theology is Christology. Let us be clear, though: reading Christology back into the Old Testament from the New Testament is not to ignore the immediate context. Rather, a Christological hermeneutic focuses first on the historical situation in which the words were written, then on Christ, and then on his Church through him (Rom. 15:4).

How does this work? Because of space constraints, we will look at only two challenging examples. First, Ecclesiastes, with its description of the futility of human existence, seems devoid of Christological content (3:20-21). Surely this must be a candidate for the most miserable book in the Bible! For on first glance, it appears to be all Law, and no Gospel but this is deceptive. Only when human beings recognize the vanity of human life are they able to accept God's deliverance. In the end, Solomon confesses that man's spirit will return to God who gave it (Eccl. 12:7). This same message of the uselessness of pursuing earthly treasures reappears in the Sermon on the Mount. Christians look to treasures in heaven where there is no corruption (Matt. 6:19-20).

Another passage that some have argued lacks Christological content is the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But we must recall that Jesus cites their destruction to describe the fate of his unbelieving hearers (Matt. 10:15; 11:24-25). In both cases, destruction comes only after the Gospel has been preached. And we should recognize the Christological imagery of the Genesis story where Abraham's priestly prayers bargain to spare the cities

for the sake of righteous persons (Gen. 18:24-28). This anticipates Christ's prayer to forgive his torturers (Luke 23:24), and his continual prayers with all Christians to the Father for the world's redemption (Heb. 2:17).

Christology and Inspiration of Scripture

The Christological element is so essential to the biblical message that when it is not located, that section is not properly understood. This lack often results in a legalism which requires a behavior of the listeners unrelated to their faith. Some well-meaning Christians crusade for the Ten Commandments to be placed in such public places as court rooms and school rooms, but they fail to understand that the Decalogue was intended for Israel, whom God led out of Egypt, and not for all people, at least not in the biblical form. The Christological interpretation of the Old Testament should not replace grammatical and historical studies of the biblical texts, but it does provide the preacher with the underlying content and purpose of these texts.

Christology also informs the content and the purpose of biblical inspiration, which is almost solely defined in relation to the Holy Spirit. Christ is not only the Bible's content and purpose; he is its author, a point which Luther insisted upon in his *Lectures on Galatians* (1535). So, from the viewpoint of inspiration, theology must be Christological. The Spirit of Christ was working in the prophets (1 Pet. 1:11), but the working of Christ through the Holy Spirit on the writers of the Bible is only the necessary extension of the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. The Spirit who inspires the holy writers proceeds from the Father and the Son. He is as much the Spirit of the Son as he is the Spirit of the Father. Incarnation takes inspiration to another level, albeit a lower and human one, since the Spirit of the Son has become, by the Incarnation, the Spirit of Jesus. The Holy Spirit does not come to the Church directly from God, but through the human nature of Jesus. Perhaps to accept the Bible's inspiration requires that its heavenly origins remain unchallenged, but the most proximate source of the inspiration is Jesus' crucifixion (Matt. 27:50, quite literally Jesus released the Spirit, and John 19:30, quite literally, he handed over the Spirit) and resurrection (John 20:22). The Spirit who shared in the humiliation of Jesus and raised him from the dead is the same Spirit who inspired the biblical writers. Simply on account of this, the Scriptures are thoroughly Christological. If the Son can only know what the Father reveals

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to him (Matt. 11:27), so the Spirit's knowledge of the Father is only through the Son, a knowledge which is further circumscribed by Incarnation with its humiliation.

Christology and the Trinity

Christians do not have an equal or direct knowledge or access to each person of the Trinity; our access is only through Jesus to God. In Jesus, we know God as Father by the working of the Spirit who is sent by Jesus. Thus, a prayer to God or the Father without reference to Jesus not only offends this Christological principle, but is a clear denial of the faith. Hence, the ancient prayers of the church are directed to the Father through Jesus Christ in unity with the Holy Spirit. God is not first known in himself or even in his trinitarian majesty, but in Mary's child and the man who hung on the cross. Luther gets to the heart of Christian faith in saying that we must look at no other God than this incarnate and human God. The crucifixion is the only door to heaven and the only key to understanding God. Thus, we confess that all theology is Christology. Modern charismatic gifts are suspect not merely because they lack biblical warrant, but because, in their claim to great faith, they obscure the Christological principles of self-effacement and self-sacrifice.

All doctrines have a Christological focus. The Augsburg Confession states that original sin has its ultimate meaning in baptism where infants find salvation in Christ. A denial of original sin, thus, destroys the glory of Christ's merits and benefits. The Lord's Supper is at the same time a participation in and proclamation of Christ's death, which is, after all, what Christology is all about. Justification is only the other side of the coin from Christology. The article on Christ in the Augsburg Confession anticipates justification, and the article on justification is thoroughly Christological in that it directs Christ's benefits to believers. Lutherans had little or no quarrel with Rome's Christology. The problem was that, by insisting that salvation was by faith and works, Rome was taking away with one hand what it had given with the other. Lutherans saw that justification by works was unacceptable not only because this doctrine lacked biblical support, but chiefly because it deprived Christ of his glory.

Christology and Sanctification

The area of theology where the principle that “all theology is Christology” is most frequently undermined is probably sanctification. This is so even among those who are committed to the principles of *solus Christus* and *sola gratia* in their doctrine of justification. Whereas synergism is disallowed in defining justification, a bit is often seen as permissible in sanctification. But if this is so, then Christology is not an all-permeating principle for doctrine or biblical interpretation. Pelagians and Arminians pointed to the use of the grammatical imperative to support the view that Christians can cooperate in their salvation. But such an argument is completely overdrawn. For Jesus’ *command* (imperative) to Lazarus to come out of the grave no more allows for his cooperation than the commands to believe or do good works allow for it. An imperative can also be a form in which the Gospel is presented: “Come unto me all ye who labor.”

Understanding sanctification from a Christological perspective sees good works as Christ’s sacrificial life and death *played out* in the lives of Christians. Their good works are not admirable simply because they refrain from moral evil, but because they do the good works Christ did, especially in sacrificing themselves for others. So the Good Samaritan, in danger to himself, comes to the aid of someone who is not only helpless, but an enemy. Here is the purest form of the sanctified life, but at a second glance, here the Good Samaritan is Christ himself. Even in the doctrine of sanctification, “all theology is Christology”.

The strength of Luther’s explanations of the Ten Commandments is not focusing on the negative behaviors forbidden to the Christian (hurting the neighbor), but on the good he is required to do: help him in every bodily need. It is not a matter of refraining from gross idolatry; rather we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. Like all controversies, the one over whether “all theology is Christology” had bitter personal consequences for those who were charged, even though they were later vindicated. On the positive side, though, it allowed for this most important aspect of biblical theology to be more fully developed. This aspect still needs even more complete development, for it will never be exhausted until Christ becomes all in all for us.

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Notes:

1 This phrase was adopted to describe the position of Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis, in the 1970s. Carl Braaten, an Evangelical Lutheran Church in America clergyman and then a professor at its Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, who had supported the “Gospel reductionists,” as those who held this position were called, is now described as “dissatisfied with ‘gospel reductionism.’” (Philip E. Thompson, “A New Question in Baptist History: Seeking A Catholic Spirit among Early Baptists,” *Pro Ecclesia* 8/1 [Winter 1999]: 51). “Gospel reductionism” has more recently allowed the ELCA to enter into full fellowship with churches whose doctrines are condemned by the Lutheran Confessions.

2 His fifth chapter was dedicated to the topic of inerrancy, a term, ironically, which was not known by the seventeenth century Lutheran dogmaticians about whom he wrote.

3 David P. Scaer, “Sanctification in Lutheran Theology,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 49/2 and 3 (April/July 1985):194.

4 Robert D. Preus, “Luther: Word, Doctrine, and Confession,” *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* 32/4 (December 1992): 3343. This series of essays was delivered on October 28-29, 1992, at Bethany Seminary, Mankato, Minnesota, three months after he was restored to his post.

5 Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, trans. by John Hoffmeyer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 30.

6 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1983). See especially pages 87-96.