

Of the Person of Christ: A Sermon Study on Colossians 2:8–10

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[This is the seventh in a series of sermon studies on the 12 articles of the Formula of Concord. The Synod's Formula of Concord Anniversary Committee proposed the series to the homiletics department of the Seminary as a part of its planned observance of the anniversaries of the Formula of Concord and of the Book of Concord.]

The Formula of Concord introduces Article VIII by establishing its close connection with Article VII. "From the controversy concerning the Holy Supper a disagreement has arisen... concerning the person of Christ and the two natures in Christ and their properties" (FC, Epit. VIII,1). Zwingli, Calvin, and their Crypto-Calvinistic sympathizers at Wittenberg subjected not only the Sacrament to their rationalistic methodology. They subjected the doctrine of the person of Christ to it as well. In that respect at least they were consistent.

It is evident from Scripture that Jesus of Nazareth was a man, a finite man, much like any other man of His day in stature, appearance, needs, and habits. "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him" (Is 53:2, NIV). In this respect, the Savior was an ordinary man.

It is likewise evident from Scripture that God is extraordinary. He is infinite. He is time-less, space-less, cause-less. He is omnipresent, all knowing, all wise, all goodness and love. His majesty transcends even the heaven of heavens.

It is no surprise therefore that reason rebels at the idea that the person of Christ comprehends or encompasses within himself bodily the infinite fulness and majesty of God. This too "is an hard saying. Who can hear it?" "It is something like saying that all the water in the seven seas is contained in a little pitcher held in one's hand" (N.S. Tjernagel, *The Sentinel*, 6/23/77, p 196).

Calvin was insistent that Jesus was the God-man. But he was equally insistent that *finitum non est capax infiniti*. He therefore denied the communication of the divine attributes to the Savior's human nature. Thus according to Calvin, Jesus possesses divine attributes only in accord with His divine nature. The Christological propositions, "God is man" and "This man is God," are therefore invalid. (See FC, Epit. VIII,25, antithesis 6.) And the ascended Lord is limited by His human nature to a specific place at God's right hand. (See FC, Epit. VIII, 30, antithesis 11.)

That kind of theologizing incensed Luther. Jesus does not make promises, Luther insisted, to be with us literally always and everywhere, and then not keep His promises. The almighty God who has assumed our human nature in the person of Christ has no problem whatsoever transcending the dimension and the limitations of time, space, and movement. So when the One who is sitting everywhere at the right hand of God's power says that He is giving us His real body and blood in the holy supper, that is precisely what He is doing. He *is* present, not locally any more than He is locally present at God's right hand, but supernaturally and almightily. (Note: This is not to suggest that Christ's presence in the Sacrament is identical to His omnipresence in the universe. In neither case is He "locally" present, but in the one case His presence can be apprehended together with the bread, and in the other case His presence cannot be apprehended.)

Self-evidently what Scripture teaches about the Lord's Supper is intimately connected with what Scripture teaches concerning the person of Christ. Article VIII establishes the compatibility of the one doctrine with the other. Gnesio-Lutherans who understood what God's Word teaches concerning the communication of the attributes generally had no problem with what God's Word teaches concerning the real presence. Crypto-Calvinists who had trouble with the one inevitably had trouble with the other. That is what made Article VIII a necessity.

While the specific area of concern involved the communication of the attributes, particularly the *genus maiestaticum*, the formulators appropriately and characteristically chose to give the subject of the person of Christ a full-scale treatment in Article VIII. Their determination to do so is an indication of their conviction that the teachings in Article VIII together with the companion teachings in Article VII provide the acid test as to

whether the fundamental attitude of a church or of a theologian is scriptural and free of any and all rationalistic bent.

Though the subject of this particular study is Article VIII, it should also be noted that Andreae and Chemnitz drafted the Catalogue of Testimonies as an appendix to Article VIII. Their purpose was to demonstrate that what the Formula teaches “concerning the Person and Divine Majesty of the Human Nature of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Exalted to the Right Hand of God’s Omnipotence” squares both with “Scripture and Orthodox Antiquity (cf. the title page to the *Catalogus Testimoniorum, Triglotta*, p 1105). The preacher may wish to supplement his study of Article VIII with a rereading of the Catalogue.

The Text: Colossians 2:8–10

St. Paul wrote the letter to the Colossians to assist Epaphras in his struggle against the theosophic heresy which was disturbing the Colossian Christians and undercutting the gospel in their midst. While the specifics of the false teachings Paul refuted are not known, it is apparent that the heresy obscured the uniqueness of the God-man and the completeness of His atoning work for mankind. The Colossian heresy was yet another gospel-plus distortion of God’s truth, a misrepresentation which Paul counteracted with repeated reminders that in the gospel Jesus offers everything one needs to be complete in Him (cf. 2:2,3,9,10).

In this text Paul initiates the attack against the heretics in verse 8. Then in 9f he lays the *basis* for the full scale attack which follows later in the chapter (16ff).

Verse 8

βλέπετε μή is followed by the future ἔσται—a one time construction in the New Testament. The *Expositor’s Greek New Testament* suggests the indicative indicates a more serious, imminent danger than μή with the subjunctive. Συλαγωγῶν may mean merely “rob you” of something. More likely it means “lead you away as prey” (booty), or as the RSV has it, “make a prey of you” in a seductive manner.

How did the theosophists propose to accomplish this objective? Διὰ τῆς φιλοσοφίας καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης. Note that there is no repetition of the preposition and the article. Thus the second phrase explains the first. The “philosophy” which threatens the Colossians is not really philosophy at all. It is nothing more than empty deceit, a figment of the wild imaginings of the false teachers who are disturbing the church at Colossae. Here we have another example of the gospel-plus-reason approach of those who do not appreciate the *sola Scriptura* principle.

Three prepositional phrases (κατὰ) follow. All three amplify what Paul is saying about this deceitful philosophy. First he generalizes by designating it as κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν τῶν ἀνθρώπων, mere human tradition as opposed to divine revelation. Then he adds appositionally and explanatorily that it is κατὰ τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου.

We do not intend to add to the reams written on στοιχεῖα. Let it suffice to point out that A-G cites Burton and Goodspeed among those who take it to refer to “the elementary forms of religion, Jewish and Gentile, which have been superseded by the new revelation in Christ,” while Bauer, Moffatt, and the RSV are arranged in A-G on the side of those who “hold that the reference is to the elemental spirits which the syncretistic tendencies of later antiquity associated with the physical elements” (earth, air, fire, water). The latter can hardly be what Paul had in mind.

This false philosophy which gives credence to cosmic στοιχεῖα, Paul insists, is οὐ κατὰ Χριστόν. It does *not* accord with what He teaches, though doubtless the false teachers insisted that it did. Such teachers generally do insist that they do give due honor to Christ and His Word.

Verse 9

What is it that makes Paul’s pronouncement valid regarding the emptiness of the theosophists’ philosophy? Two things. Because in Christ dwells bodily (σωματικῶς, corporeally) all the fulness of the Deity (θεότητος, abstract for θεός), and because (repeat the ὅτι) in Him you have been made complete. And He, remember, is the One “who is the head of all rule and authority” (ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας). So why look for something more? Why let anyone try to add to what the Savior offers when you are already complete in Him?

“All the fulness of the Godhead” means exactly what it says. Fulness (τὸ πλήρωμα) includes all of God’s attributes without exception. They all dwell bodily in Jesus Christ, not only in the Son of God (FC, S.D., 57), but also in the Son of Man. Paul is asserting the divine mystery that the divine attributes κατοικεῖ in Jesus because of and in connection with His human nature. The indwelling of the attributes is corporeal (Luther, *leibhaftig*), not merely spiritual, “not in the spirit of Christ alone, but in his whole human nature” (Lenski).

In Christology this verse is one of the primary passages which offers evidence for the doctrine of the communication of the attributes. Our particular concern is with the *genus maiestaticum*, especially with the communication of the divine omnipresence to the human nature of Jesus Christ. The Nestorian/Zwinglian error separated the Deity of Christ (together with all the divine attributes) from the human nature (the σῶμα) of Christ Jesus. Thus according to the Zwinglians, Jesus could not be present everywhere except in a spiritual sense to faith. That error obscures the truth that the body Jesus gave for us and the blood He shed for us on the cross redeemed us because all the fulness of the Godhead dwelt in that body and blood. His blood was “holy, precious blood” because it was divine blood (cf. FC, Epit, 14 also Luther in the FC, S.D., 44).

The denial of the communicated omnipresence was at the bottom of the Reformed/Philippist denial of the real presence. That made Article VII a necessity. That same denial also made Article VIII with its thorough treatment of the hypostatic union a necessity in the Formula.

Verse 10

There is something correlative to the truth that all the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Christ, καὶ ἐστὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πεπληρωμένοι. You have been, you are, and you always will be made full in Christ. The One who is full of the fulness of the Godhead fills you so that no need in your life will ever be left unmet. No empty, deceitful philosophy which originates in men’s minds and which concerns itself with this-wordly stuff could ever add a thing to anyone whom Jesus has already made complete. In things divine, addition is always subtraction. When you try to add, you lose.

The text concludes with the reminder that the One who makes you complete is the One who is head of all rule and authority, i.e. of all created powers. What abject folly to think that things made could somehow supplement the saving work of Him “by whom all things were made.”

Homiletical Considerations

Article VIII deals with the Person of Christ. To treat this entire doctrine in a single sermon which devotes one part to the divine nature, another to His human nature, would inevitably result in a sermon that says a little about a lot. It would only scratch the surface. Furthermore, such a sermon would likely tend to be a review of truths generally well-known by our people.

Hence we have selected a sermon text and are offering a sermon outline which focus on the point of issue, specifically in Christology on the *genus maiestaticum*, and particularly on the communicated omnipresence. The denial of that aspect of Christological truth is closely related to the denial of the real presence in Article VII (cf.: FC, S.D. VIII,3). Thus the sermon will attempt to narrow the scope of the presentation to the particular point of issue in controversy, though Article VIII itself is broader in scope in that it treats the doctrine of Christ’s person in its entirety. The theme idea of the sermon is treated especially in paragraphs 67–80 of the Thorough Declaration. We offer the following outline for your consideration.

The Outline

Introduction: The truths confessed in Articles VII and VIII of the Formula of Concord provide the acid test of a church's teaching. Incorrect teaching with regard to the real presence in the Lord's Supper is invariably linked with incorrect teaching with regard to the Person of Christ.

Those who deny the real presence do so in part because they confine Christ's body locally to a place at the right hand of God. That false notion fails to reckon with the truth St. Paul sets forth in this text.

Theme: The Human Nature of Christ Shares in the Divine Majesty of God Or: The Savior's Body, A Residence of Divine Majesty

- I. The profound meaning of this truth v 9
 - A. Setting: Paul helps Epaphras oppose the Colossian heresy with a statement
 1. About *who* Christ is, and
 2. About *what* He has accomplished for His people
 - B. The "fulness of the Godhead" includes all the attributes of God, especially:
 1. Omnipotence Mt 28:18
 2. Omniscience Jn 21:17b
 3. Omnipresence Mt 18:20; 28:20
 - a) Not local, or in the sense of ubiquity as though He occupies space at every moment in time
 - b) But in a transcendent way and in a supernatural mode of existence
 4. Honor Php 2:9-12
 - C. The divine attributes indwell the Savior "bodily"
 1. This is why the blood He shed for me has infinite value
 2. This is why I can count on His presence "every passing hour"
 3. This is why my mind need not stagger when He says, "This is my body...blood"
- Transition: Provide a summary statement of the truth we confess concerning the union of the natures and the communication of the attributes, either your own, or pertinent quotes from the Epitome. God has revealed this truth to us, not to exercise us intellectually, but because it has important practical significance for His people.
- II. The practical significance of this truth vv 8,10
 - A. It assures you that Jesus makes you a complete person v 10
 1. The false teachers told the Colossians, "You need Jesus plus..."
 2. Paul reminded the Colossians, "You need Jesus only!"
 - a) He fulfilled all righteousness for me
 - b) He cleansed me from all sin
 - c) He sends His Spirit to sanctify me wholly
 - B. It exposes the vain deceit of rival teachings v 8
 1. The truth about Jesus enables us to distinguish between the true and the false, according to tradition, or according to Christ
 2. The traditions of men are rooted in reason
 - a) In Colossae
 - b) Sacramentarians and Philippists, too

- c) They still are
- 3. The truth about the person of Christ is incomprehensible to reason
- 4. Beware!

Conclusion: The name Lutheran was no assurance of right teaching at the time the Formula was drafted. Nor is it today. Apply the acid test. *Know* the truth. We aren't called to explain it rationally, only to confess it faithfully.