

Fall 2017 Luther Lecture 5
Hope Evangelical Lutheran Church
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Luther on Christ's Person and Work

In theological studies, Christology is the study of the person and work of Jesus Christ. For Luther, Christology is central to his understanding of God, of the human condition, and of salvations, otherwise referred to as **soteriology**. We cannot know who God is without turning to Jesus Christ, for he is the revelation of who God is for us. In Christ, we also understand the human condition, for it is in the work of Christ that we see the powerful enemies we are up against—sin, death, and the devil. We cannot know anything about our salvation without turning to Christ for it is in his life, death, and resurrection that we see God's victory over the enemies we face. Apart from Christ, there would be no hope for us. With Christ, we see victory because through faith, his victory is our victory. This is where I wish to begin our reflection on Luther's Christology.

In our discussion on Luther's doctrine of sin and evil, we noted that Luther accepted the traditional doctrine of original sin. Because of the fall of our original parents from grace, all human beings are born in sin, separated from God and enslaved to disobedience and idolatry. Sin is not only what we do. It is our inherited nature. Because we do not live in the love and grace of God, disobedience and idolatry are inevitable. We routinely succumb to temptations that lead us away from God. Complicating this is the fact that Luther believes the devil is still in the business of using his power to lead us away from God and into misery. The consequence of this is death, for only God lives eternally and therefore only union with the grace and love of God overcomes the power of death.

These powers--sin, death, and the devil—are the cause of human misery. On our own, we do not have the power to overcome these enemies of life, joy, and hope. Thus, on our own, we are constantly vulnerable to falling into fear and despair. Human flesh apart from God is weak and constantly under possible assault due to sickness, grief, depression, sadness, and feelings of hopelessness. While we may be able to avoid these things on a temporary basis, everyone will eventually have to face them. It is simply the way things are for us.

For Luther, another complicating factor is the law of God. Through the law, we face what appears to be a wrathful and angry God. The law stands before us as an accuser, threatening punishment and damnation. On the one hand, we understand that the law is God's standard for what is and is not righteousness. It is impossible to deny the law's validity because we know it intuitively. In fact, all people recognize the law's validity, for all societies in one way or another strive to live by God's law. Therefore, in some places, Luther refers to the law as "natural law." We know it by nature.

At the same time, we routinely transgress the law because we don't have the strength or inclination to live by it. Guilt, feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness before the law are

unavoidable. Attempts to live up to the law only lead to false pride, and our vulnerability to temptation and the assaults of the devil will lead to failure and loss of pride.

From the purely human standpoint therefore, our condition looks completely hopeless and bleak. Like the rich man in Jesus' parable who felt secure in his wealth, where will all of this lead in the hour of death? We are all like this rich man in one way or another. We put the trust of our hearts in worldly pursuits. These turn out to be mere idols in the end because they cannot protect us from common forms of misery, suffering, and death. Apart from God, there is no hope.

Christology, the study of the person and work of Christ, is God's word to a lost and forsaken humanity. While we are powerless to change the dower situation we face, God is not. Here is a shaft of light, a ray of hope, the power to liberate us from the sin that binds us and the death that ends our lives. What we couldn't do for ourselves, God did for us. Christology is all about how God rescues us from sin and death and grants us salvation as a free gift.

For Luther, and for Christian theology in general, there are three aspects to our reflections on the person and work of Christ. First, there is atonement or the meaning of Christ's death. Second, there are the two natures of Christ. And third, there is what Luther called "the great exchange" that takes place when we lay hold of Christ through faith.

The meaning of Jesus' death on the cross by which he made an atonement for our sin is an historically complex matter. There have been several theories offered throughout church history. For example, one perspective suggests that Jesus' death made satisfaction for our sin before an angry God. In other words, it was to satisfy the just anger of God over our sin that led to Jesus' death. He took on our punishment in our place.

Another idea is that Jesus had to save us from the power of the devil. We are all under the devil's control, and this leads to death. Jesus, by dying and then rising from the dead, tricked the devil out of his victory and opened a way for us to be liberated from satanic power.

As is the case in terms of other doctrines, Luther seems to employ several perspectives depending on which of his works we are reading. However, one thing is for sure. For Luther, Jesus' death on the cross was the revelation of God's love for us. It was not primarily, if at all, a matter of assuaging the anger of God. On the contrary, that Jesus was willing to give his life for us—to die in order that we might live. This was a clear demonstration of the fact that God was willing to do whatever it took to save us from sin and death. This needs to be the primary assumption when dealing with the issue of Jesus' willingness to submit to crucifixion: that it was an act of divine love.

Secondly, Christology is a topic that deals with the so-called "two natures of Christ." The word **incarnation** means that God assumed the flesh of human beings and became man. This clearly indicates that Jesus had two natures, one being human and one being divine.

The question is how can one person be both human and divine at the same time? These are two mutually distinct natures. Humans are mortal, limited, and weak. God is eternal, all-wise, and all-powerful.

At the Council of Chalcedon in the 5th century, called to clarify the meaning of the incarnation, the church defined orthodoxy as the belief that Jesus was one person with two natures. The natures are not mixed, creating a hybrid. Neither is Jesus to be understood as being two persons—one divine and one human. Rather, he was one person with two natures, both unified in him.

This, however, leaves the relationship of the natures undefined. How are the divine and human natures related to one another? In order to describe this, Luther employed the Latin concept of *communicatio idiomatum*. This means “the communication of attributes.” In other words, the divine nature takes on the characteristics of the human nature and vice versa. Luther believed that this was clear in Jesus’ words to his disciples at the last supper. This is my body and this is my blood.” This indicates that physical elements—bread and wine—become vehicles for divine benefits. Jesus’ divine nature is conveyed to us through physical means. The physical takes on the divine and thereby enables us to receive grace, forgiveness, and new life through our participation in the sacrament.

This also led Luther to affirm that in Jesus Christ, God suffers. This was a controversial issue because it means that his divine nature was subject to change. For some theologians, this was an unpalatable claim because the nature of the divine is its unchangeability. Luther, however, cited a passage in Philippians where Paul quotes an early Christian hymn:

“Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross.”
(Philippians 2:6-8)

Here it is clear that Paul is affirming the idea that the divine took on the form of the human—the attributes of divinity took on the form of humanity. This idea is called **kenosis**. And it results in the conclusion that God actually suffers for our sake. While this may not be philosophically coherent, it nevertheless is faithful to the apostolic witness.

For Luther, it was important to maintain the idea that God embodies himself in the physical. During the Middle Ages, there was a tendency to separate the spiritual from the physical. In other words, in order to become spiritual, we had to renounce physical entanglements and live an ascetic life. If this were the case, it would be impossible to maintain that God embodied himself in a human being, or that God was present sacramental in the water of baptism or in the bread and wine of holy communion. Clearly, the separation of the spiritual from the physical is not a biblical idea. This was one of the principle reasons that Luther opposed monasticism. The strict ascetic life of monks and nuns suggested that a person had to renounce the world in order to grow close to God.

One of Luther's most important contributions to the study of Christology is the idea of "the wonderful exchange." According to this idea, Christ takes on our sin, suffering, misery, and death in order to remove its deleterious effects from us. Luther expressed it this way. "It's as if Christ became Peter the denier, Paul the persecutor, and David the adulterer." He literally takes our sin and its consequences on himself in order to remove them from us. In exchange, he gives us his blessedness, forgiveness, love, and eternal life.

This "blessed exchange" takes place through faith. According to Luther, we actually take hold of the presence of Christ through faith. "Christ is present in faith." Faith is not an irrational belief in doctrines. It is not a world view. It is not an abstract belief system—as some think of faith today. Rather, through faith, the Holy Spirit actually conveys the presence of Christ to us so that we can participate in his divine gifts. Forgiveness, joy, hope, and new life are the result of God's presence in us. Christ makes this divine presence available to us because he takes on our weak and sinful nature in order to grant us his divine life. This is why salvation is in Christ. Apart from him, we have no access to God. God meets us in our humanity through Christ. When he lives in us, God lives in us, and when God lives in us, we experience salvation.

In order to distinguish the believer from any possible fantasies a believer may have about the presence of Christ, Luther calls the presence of Christ "an alien presence." In other words, there is no confusing myself with the presence of Christ in me. Christ conveys a blessedness, well-being, freedom from sin, and new life that I could not conjure up in myself. As the presence of the divine in me/us, Christ conveys gifts that we by our own power, could not create in ourselves. Only Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, could create the gifts of faith, hope, and love in us. Apart from his presence, sin, death, and the law hold sway. This leads, not to faith, but to despair.

Here is one of the many quotes we may provide. This one comes from Luther's 1535 commentary on Paul's letter to the Galatians.

But faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that he and you are as one person, which cannot be separated but remains attached to Him forever and declares: "I am as Christ." And Christ, in turn, says, "I am that sinner who is attached to me, and I to him. For by faith we are joined together into one flesh and one bone." Thus, Ephesians 5:30 says, "We are members of the body of Christ, of his flesh and his bones," in such a way that this faith couples Christ and me more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife. Therefore this faith is no idle quality; but it is a thing of such magnitude that it obscures and completely removes those foolish dreams of the sophists' doctrine—the fiction of a "formed faith" and of love, of merits, our worthiness, our quality, etc."

Here, one can clearly see why the person and work of Jesus Christ are central to Luther's theology. With Christ, everything else falls into place. "*Sola fide*," "*Sola gratia*," "*Sola scriptura*" all refer to the fact that salvation is a gift of God in Jesus Christ received by faith. Without him, we have nothing. With him, we have to fullness of God's salvation.