

Editorial: Reflecting on the Greatest Person Imaginable: God the Son Incarnate

STEPHEN J. WELLUM

Stephen J. Wellum is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and editor of *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He received his Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he is the author of numerous essays and articles and the co-author of *Kingdom through Covenant* (Crossway, 2012) and *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (forthcoming Crossway, 2015).

The well-known church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, famously begins his book *Jesus through the Centuries* with the following observation: “Regardless of what anyone may personally think or believe about him, Jesus of Nazareth has been the dominant figure in the history of western culture for almost twenty centuries.”¹ Pelikan’s observation is no overstatement on a number of fronts. Even to this day a large portion of the human race continues to divide world history into BC and AD by reference to Jesus’ birth, signaling how important he is for world history. The importance of this particular Nazarene, however, goes far beyond natural historical observation.

Thinking biblically and theologically, it is unequivocally the case that there is no greater person to study than our Lord Jesus Christ. Such a study is what theologians label “Christology,” and it is no exaggeration to say that such a disciplined inquiry takes us to the very heart of the Gospel and to all of Scripture. The Bible is not a random collection of documents thrown together. Scripture is God’s self-revelation progressively revealed through the writings of human authors. And since Scripture is *God’s Word*, despite its

diversity, there is an overall unity to it which unfolds God's unfailing plan—a plan that Scripture asserts is ultimately centered and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In fact, Jesus himself teaches the God-giveness of Scripture and the divine unity of its storyline. As the men on the road to Emmaus wrestled with how to make sense of Jesus' death, and as they heard strange reports of his resurrection (which made no sense to them), Jesus came alongside and began to expound the Scriptures. Jesus chided them for not believing all that the prophets had spoken in these famous words, demonstrating his conviction that *he* was the focal point of Scripture: "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:26-27, ESV). Or think about Jesus' statement in John 5:39-40 as he confronted the religious leaders: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life." Jesus viewed himself at the center of God's plan and ultimately as the one in whom was found eternal life (see John 17:3).

But it was not only Jesus who emphasized his own centrality; all the biblical authors do so. Think of how the opening verses of Hebrews begin, underscoring the superiority and finality of God's self-disclosure in his Son (Heb 1:1-2a). As the author there reminds us, in the coming of Christ "in these last days," the "at many times and in many ways" character of God's speech has now come to termination and fulfillment in the "Son." God's previous revelation through prophets was fragmentary, incomplete, and anticipatory; but now, that revelation has reached its terminus in Christ. Or think of Paul's sweeping statement in Ephesians 1:9-10: God's eternal purpose and plan hidden in the past is now made known in Christ, and "in Christ" God's purpose is to "unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." In other words, Jesus stands as *the most important person* in God's new creation work—a work that restores and even surpasses what was lost in Eden. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ brings forth a new, redeemed and reconciled heaven and earth by and through the glorious person and work of his Son. Paul explains that all of the Triune God's work of redemption, indeed the very purpose of history, is rooted and grounded in Christ Jesus

the Lord. Paul gives us the same truth in Colossians 1:16-17 (ESV) in terms of the cosmic pre-eminence of Christ, the creator and sustainer of all things: “For by him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”

In light of such biblical teaching, it is not difficult to discern why Christology takes us to the very heart of the Gospel and all of the Scriptures. But we must go one step further: the study of the person and work of Christ is also the predominant theme and subject matter of *all* theological reflection. As Herman Bavinck so aptly reminded us a century ago in his magisterial *Reformed Dogmatics*, “The doctrine of Christ is not the starting point, but it certainly is the central point of the whole system of dogmatics. All other dogmas either prepare for it or are inferred from it. In it, as the heart of dogmatics, pulses the whole of the religious-ethical life of Christianity. It is ‘the mystery of godliness’ (1 Tim. 3:16).”²

It is for these reasons (and many more) that no further warrant is required to devote this entire issue of *SBJT* to Christology. In a wide-ranging and diverse set of articles, our contributors will investigate, mediate upon, and explicate the person and work of our Lord Jesus. From biblical reflections on Christ’s incredible and incomparable cross work, to theological discussions regarding the nature of the incarnation, to historical debates of our forefathers on crucial Christological matters, to current debates in Christological formulation, our essays will cover a wide array of topics in Christology. However, despite the diversity of topics, all of the essays are united in their attempt to grasp better the majesty and beauty of Jesus the Messiah, the Word made flesh, and the Lord of Glory who has become one with us in order to save us from our sins. It is my prayer that this issue of *SBJT* will lead us to a greater biblical-theological knowledge of Christ and thus to more love, worship, and obedience to our glorious Lord and Savior—the great Shepherd of the Sheep and the one we will love and adore for eternity. May our Lord Jesus Christ be praised and adored in his church, and may this issue help the church to better proclaim our Lord Jesus to the nations until that day arrives when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that he is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:9-11).

- ¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 1.
- ² Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 274.