Class Notes #2

Christology and Preaching

Readings: Buttrick, Chs. 1-3; Moltmann, Ch. II.

As we have learned in previous classes, the basic structure of the RCL is organized according to the Christian calendar, and its overall theological theme of the RCL is Christology. Thus, when we preach from the RCL, we need a theological perspective from which we reflect on Christological events in relation to our contemporary life experiences. Our theological perspective is supposed to help us preach theologically appropriate, culturally relevant, and biblically truthful sermons in relation to the following questions: What does the Bible say about Jesus? Who is Jesus for us today? In what sense does Jesus become our Christ, the Messiah? What does salvation (or the salvation in/of Christ) mean for us? And, how do the salvific events of Jesus Christ in the NT relate to both God’s redemptive acts in the Hebrew Bible and our past and present experiences of the presence and work of God?

Keeping these questions in mind, we need to know that Christology has been understood in various ways in different cultural and ecclesiological contexts. They can be summarized in four different views: (1) Orthodox Christology of the ancient Church Fathers; (2) anthropological Christology of modern Europe; (3) John Hick’s metaphorical Christology; and (4) Jürgen Moltmann’s eschatological Christology. While the first two views are exclusively Christocentric, Hick and Moltmann try to understand Christology in fresh ways in order to respond to our contemporary life experiences and faith issues.

Orthodox Christology

Both Moltmann and Hick criticize that the orthodox Christology is metaphysical, speculating the deification of the human being, Jesus. Hick explains that before the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Chalcedon (451), Christian terminology exalting Jesus as the Lord, Savior, Son of God was used as the devotional, ecstatic, or liturgical terms rather than the literally rigid terms which were exercised later in precise theological formulation. These terms attributed to Jesus were analogous (or metaphorical) to the language of love rather than intending to be taken with “strict literality.” However, in the process of indoctrination of Christianity, the early Church Fathers picked up the term “incarnation” from the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, “And the Logos was made flesh (1:14),” and interpreted that “not as metaphor but as shorthand for the doctrine that Jesus was God the Son living a human life, being both ‘truly God’ and ‘truly man.” He was literally (not metaphorically) God and literally (not metaphorically) human.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Based on this incarnation theory, states Moltmann, the Church Fathers understood the salvation of humanity as entering the eternal, immortal situation of the divine. This salvation became possible by God’s initiative work (“from above”). “God became man so that we human beings should be gods, . . . That is, the eternal Son of God becomes human so that we human beings should receive the divine sonship.” The incarnation is the movement in which the divine and human natures are united in the one person of the God-human being. This “two-nature Christology” based on the concept of the pre-existent deity of Jesus is well represented in the Apostle’s and Nicene Creed, which emphasize the symbol of the virgin birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We often hear some sermons preached based on this two-nature Christology. These sermons emphasize that we wretched sinners can be saved only by believing Jesus Christ as the Son of God or the Messiah who has the power to expiate our treacherous sins. As Moltmann rightly points out, however, such preaching has some theological weaknesses: First, it does not view Jesus as a historical person, but the human form of divinity, so that Jesus’ humanity, including his capacity for feeling, his prophetic proclamation and earthly ministry, and his suffering and death on the cross are reduced to his exaltation and his triumph.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The second weakness of orthodox (metaphysical) Christology is that the concept of salvation, which means entering the immortality of the divine, is actually based on the dualism of Hellenistic anthropology (or Platonic dualism) between body and mind (or flesh and spirit), which is foreign to Jewish anthropology. The early Church Fathers, who were influenced by Hellenistic philosophy and culture, ignored that the Judaic understanding of humanity is holistic and communal, in which humans are both whole beings without the split of body and soul and communal beings whose identities are given by the communities they belong to. Preaching based on orthodox Christology rooted in individualistic dualism ignores the physical, moral, economic, and social sins of humanity in the concept of salvation, and does not challenge the listeners to transform the actual human condition of this world.

The third weakness of orthodox Christology is that it does not take seriously God’s redemptive acts in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, the New Testament is considered the unique source of understanding the relationship between God and humanity. As a result, the preachers who have the orthodox Christological perspective think that their sermons should always talk about Jesus Christ. Their exclusive view of salvation only through Christ Jesus, however, contradicts the Trinitarian concept of God which is presented implicitly and explicitly throughout the entire Bible. Furthermore, their absolute and narrow view of the revelation of God makes it impossible for the Christian Church to have interreligious dialogue to broaden and deepen the understanding of Christian theology.

Anthropological Christology

If orthodox Christology is “Christology from above” centering on the divine nature of Christ, anthropological Christology is “Christology from below.” That is, the center of anthropological Christology is the **human nature** of Jesus of Nazareth rather than the exalted or pre-existent divine nature of Christ.

This view represents late 18th- and 19th-century liberalism flourished in Europe. Since the Enlightenment, human dignity and human rights became the foundation of modern political constitutions. The development of science and technology made people think that the fate of the human world was neither determined by the forces of nature nor the divine power, but rather by the will of human beings. The primary concern for modern people was how human beings could find the way to their humanity or their authenticity. Here, “the idea of humankind in its morally complete perfection” became the goal of the individual human being. When people began to approach the Bible with this modern mind, the modern readers discovered the earthly human Jesus. In Jesus’ life and personality, they found the primal image of humanity, sinlessness or moral perfection, well-pleasing to God.

In this manner, Jesus was viewed by modern people in an anthropological foreground as “the prototype of humanity” (Kant). The divine nature of Christ and the eternal Logos in orthodox Christology were now replaced by the pattern of moral perfection of Jesus of Nazareth. This anthropological Christology is soteriologically related to the existential experience of the individual self. Salvation means moral “sinlessness” and is gained by the individual’s complete commitment to God, that is, the imitation of Jesus.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Anthropological Christology has been found, not only in the 17th-century Puritan sermons in New England, but also in the sermons of the 19th- and early 20th-century liberals in Europe and the U.S. (e.g., Philips Brooks and John Broadus). The sermons emphasizing moral perfection as a way of salvation are also heard in our contemporary preaching. In the worst case, some preachers overstress human sinfulness in relation to the doctrine of the Original Sin and control the listeners’ minds to regard themselves as perishable, hopeless sinners. These preachers then force their listeners to repent, not only by words, but also by their changed behavior, such as their strong commitment to the church.

Anthropological Christology has the following weaknesses: First, it privatizes the Christian faith by emphasizing individual moral perfection at the personal and psychological level. It ignores the interconnectedness of the individual life with the external conditions of the society which the individuals belong to.

The second weakness of anthropological Christology is that the concept of salvation limited to individual moral perfection reduces the Christian gospel to individual morality. In the Christian gospel, however, salvation is a much broader concept, not only in the personal but also in the social and cosmic dimensions, including the restoration of all creation by God’s sovereign power.

The third weakness of anthropological Christology is that it overlooks the central theme of the Bible. More precisely speaking, the Bible is the history of God’s redemptive acts in many different times. Biblical narratives that include from the creation stories and patriarchal history throughout the prophetic pronouncements and to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the witnesses and confessions of the communities of faith on the presence and work of God in human history. Moreover, God’s redemptive acts are still going on for the fulfillment of God’s promise in Christ’s Second Coming. The view of anthropological Christology, however, is not fully aware of the significance of the theological implications of such biblical narratives. Now, the critical question is whether these traditional views are sufficient to preach the gospel to the listeners who are situated in our contemporary, postmodern, and pluralistic culture. How could we preachers respond to the listeners’ theological concerns and existential questions emerging from their particular historical and cultural context? In relation to these questions, contemporary theologians Moltmann and Hick offer alternative views on Christology. in our present context.

Metaphorical Christology

Hick’s basic approach to Christology is to recover the original intention of the Christological language that was applied to Jesus in the Bible. While biblical writers used such Christological language as Jesus the Messiah, the Savior, and the Son of God metaphorically, the early Church Fathers and later theologians absolutized those Christological terms by literalistic interpretation in order to both institutionalize the Christian Church and theologize the Christian gospel. According to Hick’s thesis, Jesus is Christ metaphorically.

Considering that “metaphor is a form of non-literal or figurative speech along with metonymy, irony, synecdoche, hyperbole, simile, idiom, and meiosis,” metaphorical interpretation of Christology means that Jesus is Christ because Jesus was a human being, exceptionally open and responsive to the divine presence. In so far as Jesus was “the ideal of human life” by doing God’s will, that is, “living a life of self-giving love, or agape,” God incarnated life in Jesus. In other words, Jesus “incarnated a love that is a finite reflection of the infinite divine love. . . . In Jesus, we see a man living in a startling degree of awareness of God and of response to God’s presence.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

In this way, Hick’s metaphorical understanding of Christology rejects the two-nature Christology. For him, Jesus was not the Second Person of the Trinity, but a man responding totally to divine grace and doing the will of God. Hick’s emphasis on the humanity of Jesus seems to reflect anthropological Christology of modern liberal minds. Yet, there is a difference between them. While the anthropological view still presupposes the deity of Christ by idealizing Jesus’ humanity (i.e., Jesus is the divine because he is morally perfect as God is perfect, and hence our goal is to be perfect by imitating Jesus), the metaphorical view regards Jesus as an enlightened person inspired by the divine Spirit. Hick raises the following questions against anthropological Christology: “How could we establish on historical grounds that Jesus was perfectly sinless, . . . or that he was in all respects morally and spiritually superior to every other human being who has ever lived?”[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, in Hick’s metaphorical Christology, Jesus does not entail the unique status as the supreme point of contact between God and humankind. Rather, he is one of the saints in human history who discovered the truth or the way of humanity.

In our pluralistic world, the metaphorical view contributes to interreligious dialogue. It opens a door for Christian preachers to have dialogue with other religions with equal status. It has, however, at least two theological problems: First, Hick’s understanding of the Christological events is partial, by emphasizing only the life and ministry of Jesus and ignoring his suffering, death, and resurrection. In fact, the resurrection and *parousia* (the Second Coming) of Christ is the foundation of the Christian faith, according to the New Testament. If the concept of the incarnation is understood metaphorically, Hick should also help us understand the resurrection and *parousia* of Christ metaphorically.

The second problem of metaphorical Christology is that it fails to connect the history of God’s promise in the Old Testament to the Christological events in the New Testament. Christology should be understood in the larger framework of God’s redemptive works both in the Old and New Testaments, rather than simply focusing on the life of Jesus. At this point, Hick’s metaphorical Christology needs to develop the coherent theological theme of God’s redemptive works.

Eschatological Christology

Moltmann describes our contemporary world in three ways from the socio-political perspective and raises critical questions: (1) In our world-wide economic system, inequality and injustice are increasing. Who is Christ for the poor in developing countries? Who is Christ for us, when we make use of their poverty for our own purposes? Who really is Christ for “the new poor” in developed countries? (2) Our world is under the threat of nuclear weapons. Who really is Christ for us today, threatened as we are by a nuclear inferno? (3) We live with increasing destruction of the natural environment, increasing annihilation of vegetables and animal species, increasing exploitation of the earth’s irreplaceable energy resources and pollution of the earth, water and air through poisonous waste and fumes. Who really is Christ for dying nature and ourselves today?[[7]](#footnote-7)

In order to answer these contextual questions, Moltmann approaches Christology from the eschatological point of view. For him, the core of Christology is the Easter message that “Jesus has risen from the dead and became the first-fruit of our resurrection.” The resurrection of Christ is an eschatological symbol, which reveals God’s eternal moment, i.e., the presence of God in the Spirit. The experience of the risen Christ is the experience of the Spirit, and that makes it possible to relate the humanity of Jesus with the divinity of Christ dialectically. On the one hand, the confession of faith in the risen Christ exalted Jesus of Nazareth to be the Son of God, and this exaltation became the cognitive ground for the incarnation and history of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the incarnation and history of Jesus Christ is the “true”’ ground for his exaltation and presence. The interpretation of the Easter event as the eschatological revelation signifies that, in the crucified Christ, the future of human history—the annihilation of death and the new creation—has already begun. God is now present among us in the Spirit and is working in and through the Spirit for the fulfillment of God’s future promise for the Kingdom of God.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In this eschatological view, Christology is understood within the Trinitarian framework. God’s work of creation and redemption in the OT continued in the NT through the work of the Holy Spirit in, with, and through Jesus. Moreover, God continues to participate in the present human history through the Spirit in order to fulfill God’s promise. In the Trinitarian concept of God, ultimate salvation means the consummation of God’s future promise, i.e., the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God on earth. In this eschatological concept of salvation, the three dimensions of the cosmological (or metaphysical), personal (or anthropological), and ecological (or cosmic) are interdependent, because salvation does not simply mean to enter the paradise after death nor the individual freedom from personal moral sins. Rather, it means the new creation of the whole world by the restoration of the sovereignty of God.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Moltmann’s eschatological view implies that preaching should help listeners remember what God promised through the Christological events and should evoke a vision for the future of the human community. This kind of preaching can be prepared through three steps: First, the preacher must realize the reality of our world, including the vicious evil powers in human history, and critically analyze it. Second, Christological texts should be interpreted from the eschatological perspective as a source for Christian hope. Third, the preacher needs to have pastoral sensitivity and knowledge gained by interdisciplinary studies, through which he/she can envision a future society, concretely and practically, and invite the listeners to participate in the ministry of God’s Kingdom.

1. John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Jurgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 47-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 51-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Hick, 106. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Moltmann, 65-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., 75-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 75-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)