

## The Lordship of Christ

A Sermon on the Lordship of Christ for the Season of Epiphany

What should you do when the Jehovah's Witnesses come to your door? (They believe Jesus is less than God.) Engage in a debate with them? No, thank them and send them on their way.

It's tempting to say to yourself: "I know a Bible verse that will settle it for them." One such verse is 1 Cor 8:6, which is a kind of creed: "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom all things are and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."

In this verse God the Father and God the Son are spoken of in perfect parallelism. But, of course, Jehovah's Witnesses will then say that in the same book, in 1 Cor 15:28, it reads: "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him, that God may be everything to everyone." Therefore the Son is subordinate to the Father.

If we go over to John 14:9, it states that Jesus said to Phillip, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." But then in the same chapter, John 14:28, it says: "The Father is greater than I."

You are probably familiar with John 10:30: "The Father and I are one." But four verses later it states, quoting Psalm 82:6: "You are gods, all of you." And then John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." But John 1:18, when it speaks again of "no one seeing the Father," it is the Son who makes him known. The Son is made a revealer and not made equal.

The same is true in the account in Mark 1:9-11 of the baptism of Jesus. At Jesus' baptism a voice from heaven spoke and said: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Everyone standing around would know that this is a citation from Psalm 2:7, and it goes on to say in that Psalm: "Today have I begotten you." In the Gospel of Mark there is no birth narrative, and therefore it could be argued, as it was by some in the early church, that it was at this point in his baptism that Jesus was adopted and became equal with God.

Typically when we read the New Testament we misunderstand the phrase, "Son of God." We think it is an assertion about Jesus' divinity. But, as you see from Psalm 82:6 ("You are gods, all of you."), it can mean something like "sir." It doesn't mean something divine at all. And when the New Testament uses the phrase, "Son of man," a third of the time it is referring to Daniel 7:13, where it says a heavenly divine figure will come from heaven. In the remaining places in the New Testament, "Son of man" is simply an honorific, a polite way of saying "man."

What does one learn out of all this? One learns that it is a very serious business to use Scripture, and because the Jehovah's Witnesses know these places and most of us don't

know enough about Scripture to deal with this, the sensible thing to do is send them on their way.

But it does raise for us the problem of how to use the Bible. There are several temptations of the Evil One. The first temptation is to say that the Bible is clear and plain and simple to me, and it ought to be to you. We are really facing an argument in philosophy from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries. Locke argued there is something that is self-evidently clear. People get caught in that trap and think that they can settle arguments by saying the Bible is plain, simple, and clear.

On top of that, the Evil One comes with a second argument: "I've got more passages than you do. I have 20 passages and you only have 17." Or someone might say: "We have to weigh passages." But then who's going to do the weighing, and how's that going to happen? The important thing is to remember that everyone uses the Bible, no matter who calls himself Christian.

Shakespeare famously wrote in *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 1: "Even the Devil quotes Scripture." He's referring to the temptation stories that you find in Matthew 4 and Luke 4, where there is a debate, and the Evil One quotes Scripture and then Jesus quotes Scripture.

How do we sort it out? What do we mean when we say: "We use the Bible"? In the Protestant tradition we don't say "the Church" tells us what the Bible means. That's one way to go. When we do that, we are following Roman Catholic and Orthodox ways of thinking.

We need to remember how this Bible developed. There was no final list of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament until 367 A.D (Athanasius, Fourth Easter Letter). People became Christian and people lived in the church for about 300 years with variations in the list of what later became the New Testament. It isn't as if there was only one way that people learned about Jesus Christ.

We can also refer to our *Book of Concord*, which is our base for how we sort things out. In 1537 Luther wrote the Smalcald Articles. He had been asked to write what Lutherans hold because the Pope was going to call another council at Mantua. In Smalcald Article 3:4 he writes that the Gospel has five means of grace: 1) the spoken Word and that is a peculiar function of the gospel, then 2) Baptism, 3) the Lord's Supper, 4) confession and absolution, and 5) the mutual conversation and consolation of the faithful.

What's significant for us at the moment is that we notice that the Bible itself is not mentioned because it is the Gospel, the proclaimed Word, that is decisive and is ruling what we do. Luther famously used a metaphor to describe this: The Bible is the manger in which the Christ child lies. In other words, we don't want to confuse the manger with the Christ child. He also used a famous phrase in German that doesn't translate well: *Was Christum treibet*, which means: What drives Christ. Where you find Christ, you find the truth.

The other thing he said is that we find Christ throughout Scripture, and whatever is not about Christ, we simply set aside. It's irrelevant. Christ is the key to Scripture.

We can illustrate this by something that happened in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue in 1965. When the dialogue began, the Catholics said to the Lutherans: What we'd like to talk with you about is the Nicene Creed because we're not sure that you Lutherans hold the Nicene Creed. The Lutherans were in a state of shock and said: "But of course we do." And so they discussed it together. In the end they together produced a one-page statement which said: "We both affirm the Nicene Creed but for different reasons." The Roman Catholics affirm the Nicene Creed because it is binding tradition produced by an ecumenical council. And the Lutherans said: We hold to the Nicene Creed because it expresses the Gospel.

There's a world of difference between these two ways of working. Lutherans and Protestants in general ask: What is the Gospel?

We sort that out as we look at how the New Testament sorts itself out. There are specific ways that the Apostle Paul writes about this. In 1 Cor 2:2: "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." 1 Cor 1:22-24: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

It comes out in a very explicit way in Galatians 1 and 2, where Paul was writing to the Galatians about the Gospel. What had happened to them? They had fallen away from "the Gospel" and fallen for a different gospel. He goes so far as to say in Gal 2:5 and 14, that there is "the Truth of the Gospel."

In Gal 1:6-9 he writes: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be damned." The word there in Greek is "*anathema*," but the Hebrew word behind "*anathema*" is even stronger. It means "cut off from God forever." This is very serious business. What we ask ourselves is: What is "the Gospel"?, because it has to do with salvation and life forever.

Already in the first generation of Christians, in Paul himself, they used this creed: "Jesus is Lord."

- 1 Cor 12:3: "Jesus is Lord"
- Romans 10:9: "Jesus is Lord"
- Philippians 2:11: "Jesus Christ is Lord"

Many people today think that there is some mysterious being out there called God. And they affirm that Jesus is God but allow that in other religions there are others who are also

God. In this view Jesus does not equal God, but rather that Jesus is included in some general idea of God.

Over against this view is the basic Christian confession: God is Jesus.

This is the meaning of "Jesus is Lord." God is Jesus, and there is no other. As Martin Luther wrote in the Smalcald Articles: "To seek God apart from Jesus Christ, that is the devil" (Smalcald III/8:10). God is Jesus.

Whatever is ahead for you this day and this week, "let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27): Jesus is Lord. Amen