

## Lecture 6. Medieval Christology

In this lecture, we will explore medieval Christology. The Christology that was articulated by medieval theologians was exceedingly rich, as it is found in the writings of Peter Lombard, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus, and others. There is not time to explore all of these authors, so we will focus on Anselm and Thomas Aquinas, Anselm wrote the most famous work of soteriology, that is, an account of the saving work of Christ - a theology of redemption. The Christology of Thomas Aquinas has influenced Christian theology in a very profound way. Contemporary theologians continue to dialogue with Aquinas' thought about Christ.

**I. Themes in the Soteriology of the Early Church:** Irenaeus of Lyons - Christ as the New Adam – Recapitulation. During this period, we see several themes or motifs used as a means of explaining the nature of Christ's redemptive and salvific acts on our behalf: Divinization: Sharing in the life of God - Irenaeus, Athanasius, and many others - "salvation" is understood as transforming communion with God. Sacrifice: In the Bible, sacrifice is a means provided by God to establish or restore communion with God - through Jesus' self-offering on the cross, communion between God and humanity was restored. Education: Christ is the teacher who instructs us in the ways of God through his words and deeds.

Triumph over the devil: The manner by which the devil is defeated in this understanding is interesting. The devil had gained rights over humanity because of sin. Christ was the ransom paid to the devil, who killed an innocent man and thus lost his rights. The devil took the "bait" of Christ's humanity but did not recognize the "hook" of his divinity, and so was overcome. Christus Victor: Christ is the victor over all of the enemies of the human race (cf. Nike)

## **II. Anselm of Canterbury: *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Human)**

Anselm wants to present an understanding of the incarnation for a variety of audiences. Background information: Feudal culture: The bond between the lord and the vassal - respecting the honor of the superior - satisfaction necessary if a superior's honor is impugned. The penitential practice of the Church - penance as "making satisfaction" to God.

Two premises of Anselm's argument: Without the incarnation, the salvation of the human race would be impossible. Salvation is God's intention. The logic behind Anselm's argument: The human race was ruined by sin - sin is an offense against the honor of God - as God is infinite, the offense against God is infinite - requires

either punishment or satisfaction. Humanity cannot make the satisfaction. In order for God's purposes in creating humanity to be realized, God must act to save. Only the God-man can make the necessary satisfaction - God freely submits God's Self to the necessity of doing a kindness. Jesus was not obliged to die because he was sinless, but he freely chose to give his life for the honor of God - the reward that he is owed is assigned to humanity.

Later distortions of Anselm's argument are more extreme. Modern responses to Anselm are mixed: Negative: this soteriology is rigid and legalistic, ignoring the New Testament themes of grace and mercy; Anselm pays no attention to Jesus' public ministry or to the resurrection. Positive: Anselm tries to integrate mercy with justice; the argument accords well with the biblical theology of covenant; Anselm highlights human solidarity in both salvation and disaster.

### **III. Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologiae* - arguments of "fittingness"**

Begins with the incarnation - the most fitting way for God to save but not absolutely necessary. The motive of the incarnation: we do not have sufficient knowledge of God's will to confidently assert that the incarnation would have happened even if there had been no sin. Affirms the true humanity of Jesus - but as the Son of God incarnate, the humanity of Jesus received the maximum perfection of grace, knowledge, power, and sensibility. Jesus' human knowledge had to extend to whatever can be known by people - includes beatific knowledge.

Soteriology: Aquinas' theology of salvation was influenced by Anselm's theory of satisfaction, but it does not uphold the absolute necessity of either the incarnation, or of Jesus' passion and death (though these were the most fitting ways for God to save). It highlights the obedience and charity of Christ. "Christ's passion was the offering of a sacrifice inasmuch as Christ, by his own will, suffered death out of love." Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, 111,47,4, ad 2.

"Thomas saw that Jesus' death saves us not because it was full of pain but because it was full of love." Mary Ann Fatula, *Thomas Aquinas, Preacher and Friend* (Michael Glazier, 1992), 68. "In the last analysis it is God's countering move of love which saves humanity, for Calvary is an example and climax of divine activity struggling with evil in history." Thomas F. O'Meara, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 135.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. Are you struck by any of the soteriological themes from the early Church that were presented in this lecture? Which of these themes have you heard in the prayers of the liturgy or in preaching?

2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Anselm's theory of satisfaction? Does it still have relevance today?

3. Are there insights from the Christology of Thomas Aquinas that you find important and relevant? If not, why not? If so, what are they?