

# Editorial: Christ is Better!

**STEPHEN J. WELLUM**

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**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 PhD from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and he is the author of numerous essays and articles and the co-author with Peter Gentry of *Kingdom through Covenant, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (Crossway, 2012, 2018) and *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Crossway, 2015); the co-editor of *Progressive Covenantalism* (B&H, 2016); the author of *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (Crossway, 2016) and *Christ Alone—The Uniqueness of Jesus as Savior* (Zondervan, 2017); and the co-author of *Christ from Beginning to End: How the Full Story of Scripture Reveals the Full Glory of Christ* (Zondervan, 2018).

Years ago, Francis Schaeffer characterized the difference between a living and dead orthodoxy and liberalism in the following way. A living orthodoxy is reflected by people who are truly regenerated by the Holy Spirit, who gladly embrace the doctrinal truths of the gospel, and who find their central identity in Christ and his people. From this center in Christ, a lifestyle results that aims to please God in their daily lives and which impacts the culture for Christ. A dead orthodoxy, on the other hand, is characterized by people who affirm the truths of the gospel, but their central identity is more in terms of its moral and social entailments. Their first concern is not to glory in the triune God, but instead to transform the culture as a witness for Christ. What the apostle John criticized the Ephesian church for is true of them: they are sound in doctrine and life but they have lost their first love (Rev 2:1-7). From a dead orthodoxy, a liberalism soon follows. Liberalism either denies the truth of Christian theology or more often, re-interprets it through some extratextual grid foreign to Scripture. For liberalism, all that remains of historic Christianity is its social entailments—a “social gospel”—that desires to transform society by political revolution and not by the truth and power of the gospel.

If we apply Schaeffer's analysis to our current state of evangelicalism, I am worried that "dead orthodoxy" describes much of it. Most evangelicals affirm the historic confessions and doctrinal commitments of the church. Yet, if we probe deeper, and analyze, for example, our social media by such questions as: What consumes our attention? What is the primary focus of our lives and churches? I am afraid that what consumes us most is not sound theology centered in Christ but polemics about the cultural implications of the gospel. We are more passionate about debates over social justice than discussions over Christology, election, penal substitution, etc. It is not that these kinds of debates are not important: they are. But it reveals a shift in our focus, and a concern for the entailments of the gospel rather than the gospel itself. What we need more than anything else is a re-kindling of our passion for Christ, and to be re-captured by the truth of what our triune God in sovereign grace has done to redeem us from our sin.

Given our current context, the book of Hebrews is as an important remedy to our problem. Our situation is uncannily parallel to the recipients of this letter. Hebrews was probably written in the mid 60's to Jewish Christians whose world was falling apart. The church not only faced increased external persecution, but also she experienced a more serious, internal compromise regarding her commitment to Christ. The church was not progressing in their sanctification due to not growing in their knowledge of Christ (Heb 5:11-14). Given their precarious situation, the author writes to encourage them to stand firm in Christ and also to warn them of the serious danger of drifting from Christ (Heb 2:1-4). In encouraging them, the author does not minimize their situation or offer them theological pabulum. Instead, he encourages them to persevere by giving them a good dose of theology centered in Christ. By faithfully expounding text after text from the OT, the author presents Christ in all of his beauty, majesty, and splendor. The author knows that what this church needs more than anything else is the proclamation of Christ and the truth of the gospel. Why? Because it is only by knowing, meditating, and gazing on the glory of Christ and thinking through all that he has done for us that they will be awakened from their slumber and strengthened by the Spirit to endure external hardships and to avoid internal compromise. Not surprisingly, the great theme of the book is: Christ is better!

Nowhere is this more evident in the opening verses (1:1-3), which in many ways, serve as the thesis for the entire book. Unlike typical NT letters, the

author dispenses with the usual greetings and lays out his thesis statement in a single, complex sentence, built around the main assertion—“God . . . has spoken.” As the author looks across the panorama of redemptive history he speaks both of the “continuity” and “discontinuity” of God’s work centered in the Son. As he does so, the author teaches us about Christ’s glorious identity, which is then developed in the letter. In fact, these opening verses give us some of the most majestic Christology of the entire Bible. In a nutshell, they capture what the book is about: Jesus, the divine Son made flesh, is greater and superior to anyone else, and thus trust him alone and press on in confidence. Indeed, all that has come before him in God’s unfolding plan has pointed forward to him. As such, if we understand God’s promises given in the OT correctly, they will drive us forward to Christ Jesus who alone brings to fulfillment all that the triune God has planned and purposed.

In this issue of *SBJT*, it is our privilege to reflect on various themes and truths from the book of Hebrews. Given the theological breadth and depth of this letter, we can only scratch the surface. But before we do, let me set the table by offering a brief reflection on these opening verses in two steps that reminds and orients us to the main truth of the book: Christ is better!

- [1] In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, [2] but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. [3] The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (NIV).

First, by three contrasts, the author asserts that God has spoken definitively in the Son. The first contrast focuses on the eras of God’s speaking: “in the past” vs. “in these last days” (vv. 1-2). The author divides redemptive history into two successive ages and views the Son as the one who inaugurates the “last days,” i.e., God’s sovereign rule and reign. Here is a clear identification of the Son with Yahweh and thus deity.

The second contrast stresses the superiority of God speaking in the Son. “In the past,” God spoke “at many times and in various ways,” but now, in the Son, God’s speech is complete. This is not to say that the OT prophetic revelation was inferior. Rather, it was incomplete and anticipatory, which

is reinforced by the third contrast: “through the prophets” vs. “in Son” (vv. 1-2). The author presents Jesus as more than a prophet. This does not downplay the authority of the OT prophets. Rather, it stresses that in Christ the previous revelation has been made complete. The Son is greater because he is the one about whom the prophets spoke. Even more, the Son is the one in whom all of God’s revelation and redemptive purposes culminate.

Second, the author identifies the Son as *God* incarnate to substantiate his claims that God speaking in the Son is far greater than anything that has preceded him (vv. 2b-3). How? He gives us five identity statements, weaving together the Son’s deity and humanity, thus presenting us with the only Lord and Savior, who deserves all of our worship, love, and obedience.

*First*, the Son is “appointed heir of all things” (v. 2b). This appointment is due to the work of the *incarnate* Son who is *now* installed at God’s right hand as the messianic king, David’s greater Son (see Ps 2; cf. Rom 1:3-4; Phil 2:9-11). Yet, although Jesus’ appointment is directly tied to his incarnation and saving work as a man, the author is clear: we must not think of the Son as merely another David (1:5; 5:5) because he is also *God the Son* from eternity.

*Second*, the Son is the agent of creation (v. 2b): “through whom he made the universe.” The text also speaks of the roles of the Father and Son in creation; it is *through* the Son that the world is made. God’s creation work is a triune work. But the Son is God.

*Third*, the Son’s full deity is further underscored in v. 3a: “He is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” Both statements teach the Son’s deity.

*Fourth*, the Son, in v. 3b, is the Lord of providence: “sustaining all things by his powerful word.” The verb stresses that the entire created order comes to exist, is sustained, and is carried to its appointed end by the Son. Attributing these cosmic functions to the Son describes his deity in unambiguous terms, identifying the incarnate one as *God the Son*.

*Fifth*, after stressing the *deity* of the Son, the author returns to his work as the *incarnate* one. The Son is now presented as the only Savior of humans, presupposing that he has taken on our humanity and accomplished a work for us as our great high priest—a work that no human (or angel) could achieve. In this way, the Son is presented as the all-sufficient Savior (v. 3).

As already noted, these verses are some of the most glorious Christology of the entire Bible. Yet it is crucial not to forget why the author begins

his letter with these verses. Given the situation of this church, what they most needed was to rekindle their first love. They needed to be reminded of Christ's glory in order to renew their confidence in him. Today, given our situation, we also need this same reminder. As this issue of *SBJT* reflects on this wonderful letter, may it renew our love for Christ and his centrality in our lives and the church. Apart from doing so, we will inevitably drift away and be captivated by matters that are secondary to our love and devotion to Christ Jesus our Lord.