

The Mystery and Clarity of the Christ

by Todd Pruitt

Phillip Melanchthon, Martin Luther's faithful friend and successor in the German reformation wrote in his *Loci*, "We do better to adore the mysteries of deity than to investigate them." To be sure, there is much mystery in contemplating such divine themes as the incarnation, the virgin birth, the self-emptying, and the dual nature of Jesus Christ. Who, for instance, can fully explain the fact that Jesus was both fully God and fully man? Surely Melanchthon was right that these grand doctrines are far more than fodder for scholastic investigation. What is called for is worship and wonder. Indeed, Paul's doxology in Romans 11 should be readily on the lips of all those look to the biblical witness to Christ:

*Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom
and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable His judgment,
and His paths beyond tracing out!...
To Him be the glory forever!*

We hear a lot of talk these days in evangelical circles about mystery. When difficult theological questions are raised we often retreat to the safe confines of the, "We just can't know" defense. True, there are many questions that will not be fully answered in this lifetime. Indeed, who in their right mind would suggest that we can know all there is to know about God? However, let us not retreat to mystery in response to those doctrines where Scripture speaks with clarity. After all, God did not inspire the 66 books of the Bible so that everything would be hopelessly draped in mystery. For instance, Paul's words quoted above about the depths and unsearchableness of the knowledge of God are expressed only after 11 chapters worth of rigorous theological instruction on such doctrines as original sin, the substitutionary atonement, God's wrath, God's grace, election, and predestination.

Melanchthon was right to a degree. Certainly, to the one whose faith is not much more than intellectual investigation I would join the chorus: "We do better to adore than to investigate!" However, this is an oversimplification. The fact is: how can we properly adore what we do not know? How do we rightly worship what we have not come to understand? The answer is: adore *and* investigate; study *and* worship; know *and* thrill.

It is fashionable in certain circles within evangelicalism to deconstruct Jesus. Rob Bell, popular author and emergent church pastor affirms that such key doctrines as the Trinity, virgin birth, and resurrection of Christ are dispensable. He likens those doctrines to springs on a trampoline. According to Bell, you can disconnect those springs and still bounce on the trampoline (his metaphor for Christianity). Brian MacLaren the unofficial leader of the emergent movement openly dismisses the substitutionary atonement, the doctrine of hell, and the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation. It is one thing for brothers and sisters in Christ to wrangle over the various theories of the end times and the exact role of Israel in God's plan but when the

atonement, the resurrection, and the uniqueness of Christ are jettisoned then what is left is not orthodox Christianity.

The objection from within the emergent movement and other liberal Protestants is that certainty is arrogant. In the words of Brian MacLaren: "Certainty is overrated." They tell us that Christians should embrace a more "humble apologetic" or "generous orthodoxy." But one wonders. Is it more humble to say about what Scripture makes plain: "We just can't know"? Is it humble to constantly question doctrines that God Almighty has revealed with such care in His Word?

Jesus is under attack both from within the church and from the outside. However, it is not the atheists like Christopher Hitchens who disturb me so much as the prominent Christians who dismiss much of what the Bible makes plain about Christ. How can these men and women with a simple wave of their post-modern skepticism put asunder what God has made so clear? The arrogance is breathtaking. They have reduced Jesus from the eternal Son of God, propitiation for sinners, and returning King who will judge the living and the dead to a political radical and environmentalist who bears little if any resemblance to the Christ of Scripture.

The Reformers and Puritans spoke of the *perspicuity* or clarity of Scripture. This was to affirm that God has not left His people in the dark. The doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity declares that God desires His people to know Him well; that our worship and devotion might be undergirded with clear knowledge. During this season of Advent may we all linger long over the precious words of God's clear and abiding Word concerning our Savior. May we adore the pre-existent, virgin born, divine and human, atoning, and risen Christ. He is worth our careful study and exuberant praise.

Good Books:

[The Jesus Gospel](#) by Liam Goligher

[The Person of Christ](#) by Donald MacLeod

[Dethroning Jesus](#) by Bock & Wallace