"VERY GOD OF VERY GOD"

TEXT: PHILIPPIANS 2: 5-11 ESV

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,
being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming
obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on
him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on
earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

CHRISTO-CENTRISM

This middle section of the Creed is the difficult one, as you heard the children read. But it's where we get our Christology, and Christology is a key theological issue — the key theological issue. One theologian said some years ago, "Tell me who Jesus is, and I'll tell you what your theology is." That is absolutely central.

Presbyterians have been accused by some of being Christocentric, Christ-centered, and I say that's absolutely correct — we are Christocentric. People ask, "Well, wait, aren't you Trinity-centered? Aren't you God-the-Father-centered?" And the answer is: yes, but we would have no knowledge of the Trinity were it not for the revelation in Christ. Even our knowledge of the Trinity begins with God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

Remember, from Pentecost until the year 311 or 312, when Constantine converted, the church was spreading and growing in underground communities. All kinds of strange ideas tried to creep into the faith during that time, and that was happening even as Paul was writing his epistles. The authentic Christian faith — the faith of the apostles, the true universal church — has always been under attack. Rarely has the attack been outright disbelief; more often it has been the attempt to partner the faith with things it doesn't belong partnered with.

One of the key reasons the Nicene Creed came together was the Council of Nicaea. The central conflict was between Athanasius, an early church father, and a man named Arius, and the battle between their ideas went on for years. Arianism was the heresy, named for Arius of Alexandria. He was enormously popular — he set his teaching to songs, and ordinary people sang them. He was well loved. But at the center of his teaching was the claim that the Son was subordinate to the Father. His famous phrase was, "There was a time when the Son was not." What this amounts to is that God the Father, at some point, created the Son — which makes Jesus a creature of God, not unlike the angels.

This was disputed heavily, and the Nicene Creed emerged from that conflict. The Creed's words are "begotten, not made." Begotten is not the same as created — it is a mysterious outward impartation of God's own being, something we'll return to shortly.

Grasping

Our text says that though Christ was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped. Other translations use other words, but the Greek word behind "grasped" was actually the flashpoint of the division in the years before Nicaea. Arius took it to mean *seized* — that Christ did not see divinity as something to be grabbed at, sought, and attained. Athanasius read it differently: that Christ did not count equality with God a thing to be *exploited* or used. Remember when the devil tempts Jesus in the wilderness and says, "Turn these stones to bread." We don't doubt Jesus had the power to do it, but he refuses, because he was not there to exploit the power that was his. He had equality with God, but he did not use that equality for his own advantage. He didn't exploit it.

There's a striking contrast here between Christ and Adam. Christ possessed divinity and did not see it as something to be grasped. Adam, a mere creature of God — unlike Jesus, who was not a creature but was God — reached to grasp divinity. That was the promise held out to Adam and Eve in the garden: "You will be like God, knowing good and evil." If Jesus were merely a creature of God, he would be, in effect, another Adam, infinitely beneath the Father. But that was never implicit in Jesus' teaching, nor in the earliest Gospels. We see it as early as Mark chapter 1, at the baptism of Jesus. The Trinity was not a doctrine invented later — it was always there, always implicit, running throughout Paul's writings and the Gospels. When Jesus is baptized in Mark 1, a voice speaks from heaven and the Spirit descends on him like a dove. It's there from the very first chapter. Jesus is the Son — not a son, but the Son, capital S — the second person of the Trinity, God revealed in the flesh.

Very God of Very God

This is difficult material, but it matters enormously. Nicaea did not invent "very God of very God, light from true light." It found the words for what Paul had already confessed: that the Son's equality with the Father was never something to be won, because he never lacked it.

Then verse 7 gives us the other half: "But he emptied himself." God did not create Jesus; rather, there is a *kenosis*, a self-emptying — the Greek word for it — in which God was poured out into the person of Christ, who was God, of the same substance. This was debated for two hundred years. How is Jesus God? How is he human? The church argued it out across generations, wrestling through a series of Latin and Greek terms, until it settled on this: Christ is of the same substance as God the Father — the same essence — not a different substance. God is light from light, very God of very God, true God of true God, begotten, not made.

Because of that, we come to verses 9 through 11: "Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name." That is God's own name. And so, at the name of Jesus every knee will bow — in heaven, on earth, and under the earth — and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. There is no God but the one revealed through the person of Christ.

One of the Best Quotes

When I was in seminary, we studied Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism under a professor who grew tired of strong Christian students pushing him to admit that Jesus was right and the others were wrong — which, of course, we all wanted him to say. It's in our nature. He tried instead to present each religion as fairly and convincingly as he could, and it frustrated us. Whenever someone in class said "God," he would ask, "Which god? Shiva? Buddha? Which god do you mean?" We'd answer, "No — God. God." And that annoyed us further.

One day a classmate — a man who had played professional baseball and was a bit tougher than the rest of us — finally said, "Would you just knock it off? This is a *seminary*. Why can't you just *say* it? *Which god, which god?*" The professor said, "Okay, I'll tell you." Then he paused: "No — no, I won't." He was debating with himself, not wanting to show his hand too soon; there was a method to his madness. What he finally said was one of the best things I heard in three years at Princeton. He said: "It is my understanding that anyone who calls themselves a Christian can make no meaningful reference to God without Jesus."

That's exactly right. Jesus is not one of several satellites orbiting an otherwise unknowable God. Jesus is the knowledge of God. Jesus is God, and there is no God other than the one revealed through Christ. Karl Barth put it this way: there is no God behind Jesus. We tend to picture Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three separate beings side by side. But it is one being. When you see Christ, you see God — and we'll come back to that before we close.

Arianism Still Alive and Kicking

I want you to know that Arianism is alive and well today, in different clothing. **Jehovah's Witnesses** are, functionally, Arians — they believe Jesus was created by God, a lesser being. That means, strictly speaking, they are not *Christians*. They may love Jesus; they may even believe he died for their sins. But the Jesus they believe in is not the Jesus of Christianity.

Mormonism holds a similarly different metaphysics — its Jesus is a spirit creature of God the Father, not one in essence with the Father, not the same substance. It is not Christianity in the historic, confessional sense, even though Mormons, too, will say Jesus died for their sins and was the Son of God and Savior.

Unitarianism, which flourished in England and in the founding era of this country, held that Jesus was a great prophet, perhaps even God's uniquely favored and chosen one — but not that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That, too, falls outside Christian orthodoxy.

Deism and **Theism** emerged as philosophical positions out of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Deism pictures God as a clockmaker who winds the world up and then steps back, uninvolved. Theism is weaker still — simply the belief that some God exists, without much more said about it; essentially an agnostic belief. Neither qualifies as Christianity. Some of the Founding Fathers have been labeled *deists*, but that label is used more loosely than it should be — most of them were far more thoroughly Christian, at least in their formation, than the popular stories about them allow, even if their adult convictions weren't especially *evangelical*.

Liberal Protestantism is harder to pin to any one denomination — any church body that recites the Nicene or Apostles' Creed as part of its liturgy retains, at least on paper, an orthodox confession. But

liberal Protestantism as a movement, largely a product of the academic world, can hold that Jesus may not have *literally* risen—bodily—but only "seemed" to rise; that he didn't really perform miracles, but was nonetheless a special moral exemplar — the model of the life we should aspire to live. That is nonsense, frankly, and it remains widespread in academic circles today.

And the Jesus of **Islam** is likewise a *creature* — a prophet, but not the second person of the Trinity. Broadly speaking, any belief system that does not confess Jesus as the second person of the Holy Trinity — the Son, one with God, of the same substance as the Father — falls outside the Christian faith.

Exclusivity of Christ

I want to name briefly what this section of the Creed covers theologically — its statement of faith, even though we can't unpack all of it today. It affirms the two natures of Christ: wholly divine and wholly human — not fifty percent one and fifty percent the other, not more God than man or more man than God, but fully human and fully divine. It affirms the virgin birth. It affirms the atonement — that his death was for our sins. It affirms the resurrection, not as something merely spiritual or symbolic, but real and bodily — a claim the world still finds hard to accept. It affirms the ascension, that the risen body of Christ now dwells in the presence of the Father, having received all authority in heaven and on earth. There is no God other than the one we know in Christ — no Son standing out in front of the throne with some otherwise unknown Father behind it. They are one and the same. And the Creed affirms the Parousia, what we often call the Second Coming — Paul's word for our blessed hope, the confidence that history is moving toward its final completion in God's purpose. All of that is there in the Nicene Creed. To know Christ is to know the Father; there is no knowledge of God apart from Christ.

I always come back, on this point, to C. S. Lewis and Mere Christianity — what we now call Lewis' Trilemma. Quoting Lewis' Mere Christianity:

> *A man who was merely a man, and said the sort of things Jesus said, would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level of a man who says he is a poached egg — or he would be the devil of hell. Given what he claimed, Jesus is either liar, lunatic, or Lord.*

That is the question put to every human being who has ever lived: who is Jesus? Liar, lunatic, or Lord — those are the only honest answers. Our theology remains Christocentric, Christ-centered, and at the same time fully Trinitarian, because those two things are not in tension. In John 14:9, Jesus says, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father." I've been in interfaith settings where the counsel is, "Don't mention Jesus — just speak of God (i.e., the amorphous, unknown God)." But here is the truth: we know no God other than the one revealed through Jesus Christ.

Light From True Light

There was an event at Brick Presbyterian Church in Manhattan — a debate involving a well-known and popular New England preacher, theologically well to the left. His image for the faith was the inside of a cathedral: "You come into the cathedral, and over here is a stained-glass window of Moses, over there one of Muhammad, over there one of Buddha, and over there one of Christ. We are all inside the same cathedral, and it is the same light shining through every window."

At that same event, a man named Diogenes Allen — a professor at Princeton Seminary — was invited to offer a response. After that expansive, glowing image of the cathedral and its many windows, he asked. something simple: “How can you be *inside* the cathedral and *outside* of it at the same time?" The preacher asked what he meant. Allen said, "The rest of us are confined to the inside. If you are inside the cathedral, how can you possibly know that it *is in fact the same light* coming through every window?"

We can't. As Christians, we confess light from true light, and the only God we know is the one revealed through the person of Christ. Jesus is the complete and sufficient self-revelation of God — God poured out into human form, and yet with the humility not to exploit that oneness with the Father, but instead to empty himself and take the form of a servant. That is our God, capital G, and we know his face — we know his image — in Jesus. And it is right for us to share this Christ with a world still lost among false ideas and false Christologies, in every loving, winsome, and gentle way we can find — this Jesus who, for seventeen hundred years, has been proclaimed one with the Father, perfectly one with the Holy Spirit.

Will you pray with me?

Lord, what you have revealed to us is not ours to manipulate, to change, to dumb down, or to force into whatever categories are convenient for us. Lord, we take you as you are, and we worship you, acknowledging that only you know yourself in perfection. We have a hard time with the Trinity, and a hard time with the two natures of Christ. But we proclaim them because they are what you have revealed, what your Scripture testifies to, and the faith for which those from the very beginning laid down their lives for the love of your name. Lord, let us follow them. Let us walk boldly and confidently, for you have given us all things in Jesus. And we receive, we follow, we respect, we acknowledge — that at the name of Jesus, our knees, too, will bow. Go with us, we pray, in Christ's name. Amen.