

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Proverbs 8:22-36		Mason Depew
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The Glory of Wisdom

Introduction: If you had to guess which chapter the early church quoted more than any other to argue over the divinity of Jesus Christ, you would probably not guess Proverbs 8. You might think it should be Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, or one of several chapters in John (1, 5, 8, etc.), but it was, in fact, Proverbs 8. Both the Arians (who denied that Jesus is eternal God) and the Nicenes (who affirmed that Jesus is) agreed that Proverbs 8 was about Jesus. They sharply disagreed over what Solomon was saying about Christ in this chapter, of course, but they never appeared to disagree over whether it was about him at all. Every medieval and Reformation-era commentator which I have read on Proverbs 8 also plainly teaches that wisdom in this chapter is a picture of Christ.¹ This comes as quite a surprise to those who have only read modern commentaries, which almost without fail present Proverbs 8 as merely a poetic personification of wisdom. If the overwhelmingly strong conviction of the first 1700 years of the church is so different from the consensus now, we have to ask whether we have missed something.

1. Proverbs 8:22-29 - The Wisdom that Created the World.

- a. In these verses Solomon poetically demonstrates that Wisdom is the most valuable thing you can pursue in this world because it actually transcends this world.
- b. Contrasting the verbs used in Proverbs 8:22-25 to describe the origin of Wisdom with the origin of the creation is illuminating. Solomon speaks of God creating the universe with the language of a master craftsman designing and assembling a great building project. God “shaped” the mountains and hills (v. 25), “established” the heavens, and “drew a circle” on the deep waters (v. 27). Every one of the Hebrew verbs which these verses use to describe the origin of Wisdom, on the other hand, is used elsewhere to refer to a woman conceiving, bearing, or giving birth to a child.
 - i. The first verb, “possessed” in the ESV for verse 22, elsewhere describes the conception of the very first child, Cain, in Genesis 4:1, and the Psalmist uses it for his own conception in Psalm 139:13. In these verses, especially the second one, this word refers to the beginning of pregnancy.
 - ii. The second verb, “set up” in the ESV for verse 23, describes the Psalmist being “knit together” in his mother’s womb in Psalm 139:13. This refers to all the complex development that happens in between conception and birth: growing organs, facial features, limbs, and digits.
 - iii. You should be able to guess what the third verb, “brought forth” refers to when it comes to pregnancy. Given the first two, this third one is the easiest: birth! In fact, this is one of the most common words in all the Bible for giving birth.²

¹ Christopher Seitz observes that the early church fathers based a lot of their hermeneutics on what they called “the rule of faith.” He argues the essence of this rule was “that Jesus Christ is one with the God who sent him and who is active in the Scriptures inherited, the Holy Spirit being the means of testifying to his active, if hidden, life in the ‘Old Testament’ and our apprehension of that.” - *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 195.

² You will find it, for example, in Isaiah 13:8; 23:4; 26:17; 45:10; 54:1; 66:7.

- iv. Notice that not only do these three verbs all refer to some part of pregnancy in other passages of Scripture, but they are all in chronological order, too! Conception, development, birth; this is too much of a coincidence to believe it was not intentional on Solomon's part.
- c. Athanasius rightly observed that in Scripture there is a sharp distinction between the Creator and his creatures.³ He argued that the Arians failed to make their minds clear on this because they wanted the Son to be both Creator and creature at the same time.⁴
 - i. When you read Proverbs 8 with that truth in mind, it becomes clear that this is exactly the distinction Solomon intends to draw between Wisdom and the creation. Wisdom is on God's side of the line between Creator and creature, helping him create as his beloved child. God does not design and build Wisdom like he does with the seas, land, and heavens. God conceives, knits together, and gives birth to Wisdom from himself, showing that Wisdom proceeds from his own nature in a way that the creation does not.
 - ii. This also follows the same pattern as John's argument in John 1 and Paul's argument in Colossians 1. They present the Son of God as being with the Father before creation, making absolutely everything, and decidedly not on the creature side of the Creator/creature line.⁵
- d. If Solomon's point were simply that Wisdom is first or preeminent among the creation, he would not have described Wisdom's origin so differently. Furthermore, if Solomon were arguing that Wisdom was God's first creation, that would mean there was a time when God was not wise! Instead, Solomon proves to us that we should pursue divine Wisdom because its very nature transcends anything else we can pursue in this world. Not all the riches, worldly fame, and pleasures of this world put together can claim to proceed naturally from God himself.
- e. The very fact that Jesus is one with the Father as a member of the Trinity encourages us to look for signs of him in the Old Testament. Athanasius capably proved this point in his arguments against the Arians from Proverbs 8.⁶

³ The Psalms poignantly express the manifold ways in which the Lord transcends human understanding and glory, such as when Psalm 144 asks, "O LORD, what is man that you regard him, or the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow" (vv. 3-4). Job's story ends with him recognizing this exact point, that he is utterly beneath God and unworthy to criticize him as the creator and ruler of creation. Ecclesiastes contrasts the endless, cyclical, and fleeting nature of all things on this earth (e.g. 1:1-11), with the permanent and inscrutable purposes of God (3:11-15; 18-20).

⁴ "As creator, he should be restored to the Father and confessed to be Son by nature. Otherwise, if he is simply a creature, let it be confessed that he has the same rank which the other creatures share among themselves. Let it be said of these creatures also: "a creature but not as one of the creatures; an offspring or made but not as one of the offsprings and things that are made." For you have said that an offspring and an object that is made are the same thing, writing, "begotten or made." But even if the Son has a relative precedence over the others, he would still be none the less a creature, just as they are." - Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians*, NPNF Vol 4, 2.20.

⁵ Even Robert Alter, a Jewish commentator, can't help but notice the similarities between Proverbs 8 and John 1. "The poem that begins with verse 22 has a cosmic framework rather than a pragmatic one: Lady Wisdom's self-celebration goes back to the role she played as God's intimate before He launched on the work of creation. The cosmic and cosmogonic prominence of Wisdom may well have provided a generative clue for the prose-poem about the Logos in the first chapter of John's Gospel." - *The Wisdom Books*, 130.

⁶ Athanasius made a compelling argument against the Arians that they were abusing Proverbs 8 to undermine the very reason for seeing Christ in Proverbs 8. That is, by arguing that Jesus was created and therefore not eternally one with the Father, they stripped out the theological foundation for seeing Christ throughout the Old Testament. If he is not eternal God, we have no reason to assume that he is central to God's self-revelation. And so the Arians were "not realizing the scope of divine Scripture." - *The Letters of Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, 162.

2. Proverbs 8:30-36 - Wisdom Delights in the Children of Man.

- a. Verse 30 transitions away from describing Wisdom's role in creation ("beside him like a master workman") toward Wisdom's love for humanity.
 - i. Notice that God and Wisdom have a wonderful affection for each other: God delights in her and she rejoices before him always. If you are now thinking that this may well be a type of Christ after all, this mutual love sounds very much like a type of the eternal fellowship of the Trinity.
 - b. Verse 31 tells us that Wisdom was continually rejoicing in the inhabitants of God's creation, and especially man. This idea that Wisdom is not just an object of love but actively loves *others* is difficult to explain if you are committed to arguing that Wisdom is merely a personification of an abstract concept. It's easy enough to imagine how God loves Wisdom or how we should, but it's very difficult to see what Solomon means by Wisdom loving God and us if there is no typology going on here.
 - c. Then Wisdom addresses us directly, starting in verse 32, commanding us to seek after her and find her. This is returning to the earlier portrayal of Wisdom in this chapter, where she was calling out by the roads and in the cities for men to follow her and learn well.⁷ This also fits a typological interpretation very well, since Jesus came from the Father's side to dwell among us as a man and call for many to follow and learn from him. And indeed, all who find Christ do find life and favor from the Lord (v. 35) and all who hate Christ injure themselves and find only death (v.36).
 - d. We should be careful to note that Christ is much more than the Wisdom of God incarnate.⁸ He is, of course, the Word, the Power, and the Love of God incarnate, as well. But he is not less than the Wisdom of God, and in modern commentaries we have too often neglected the wise reflections of earlier saints on Scripture.
3. Even when he was born, and when he was learning to talk and take his first steps as a boy, all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge were hidden in Jesus (Colossians 2:3). If you receive and rest in him as your Savior, those treasures will belong to you, too. He came to earth on a mission that seems utterly foolish to the world, but is nothing less than the wisdom and power of God for our salvation.

⁷ "On the heights beside the way,
at the crossroads she takes her stand;
beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud:
beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud:
O simple ones, learn prudence;
O fools, learn sense."- Proverbs 8:2-5

⁸ Sean McDonough writes on Colossians 2:3, "Wisdom, once again, is in the Messiah, which is not the same thing as saying Wisdom is the Messiah. ... Subordinating Messiah to Wisdom (i.e. the 'preexistent' Messiah is really just an expression for God's Wisdom) reverses the relationship defined in 2:3." - *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 183.

If you want to read Proverbs and learn its wisdom without falling into the moralistic trap of tying more and more burdens on your back, this is the key. Jesus your Savior is the greatest possible revelation of God's wisdom. Therefore when you are reading Proverbs always remember that you are not learning from a cruel and vindictive schoolmaster who will have you expelled if you slip up. You are learning from the Wisdom that designed and created all things, including yourself, and that same Wisdom took on the form of a man who gave his life for great fools like Peter, Thomas, Paul, you, and me. Paul even tells us that in God's infinite wisdom, he deliberately chose to convert many who were *not* wise in the eyes of the world in order to display his power and wisdom above all: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" - 1 Corinthians 1:25-29