

A Christological Confession

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The Christological confession which follows relies heavily on Biblical and historical data and contains an analysis and evaluation of traditional Christology. It is therefore necessary to point out that it is nevertheless “a confession.” I am convinced that a biblical Christology must be rooted in history. To support a strong faith, a confession must be subjected to rigorous analysis, historical, theological, and exegetical. What follows is not just an exercise in cold intellectualism. It is a struggle of heart and mind in quest of a confession which matches the apostolic model in Christology: faith in and commitment to the historical and risen Jesus *as the Messiah*.

“Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 13:8) appears under a bewildering variety of images, if we trace him with Pelican.¹ But are many of these images merely the reflection, as Schweitzer remarked, of “each successive epoch [which] found its own thoughts in Jesus”?—for typically “one created him in accordance with one’s own character.” There is no historical task which so reveals someone’s true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus.² Can the post-Constantinian Jesus really be the Jesus Christ of history? Might it not be that we have recreated Jesus after the imagination of our Gentile hearts?

At a time when theological literature emphasizes a plurality of Chris-

¹*Jesus Through the Centuries*, Harper and Row, 1985.

²*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Macmillan Pub. Co., 1968, 4.

tologies within the new Testament canon, we should not forget that, despite differences of emphasis, there is a common confession throughout all the New Testament documents which embeds itself in the statement that *Jesus is the Messiah*. That is Peter's great discovery, recorded by all four Gospels. Jesus welcomed it as a blessed revelation (Matt. 16:16, 17). John expressly states that the purpose of his entire work is to convince us to believe in Jesus as Messiah, Son of God: "These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may find life in His name" (20:21). In Acts, Peter, Philip and Paul spend themselves in their efforts to proclaim that the historical Jesus is none other than the promised Messiah of Israel, now presented also to the Gentiles. The tendency evidenced by Paul's use of the title "Christ Jesus" (in that order) in his later epistles shows that "Christ" has not for him lost its official, colorful, Israelitic significance. Throughout the New Testament preaching, all are invited to cling to this Jesus, the Messiah long-promised, while counterfeit "Jesuses" hover on the sidelines as a menace to the faith (2 Cor. 11:1-4).

It has perhaps been a strength of the British approach to Christology that it recognizes the dangers of subjectivism. The absence of a surefooted historical approach to Christology opens the floodgates to a vague religiosity, even to anti-Christ. The point is well put by Jon Sobrino.³

"The New Testament as a whole is quite conscious of the danger of breaking with Jesus in the name of the risen Christ. That is why the Gospels were written. Though they are not biographies of Jesus, they do refer the reader to his historical figure rather than to some figure that is or can be easily idealized or manipulated. The Gospels are conscious of the danger of ending up with a cultic deity, or maintaining the religious structure common to other religions existing at the time and simply changing the name of the worshipped deity to Jesus. . . . Christianity has frequently taken the form of 'religion' rather than 'faith'. . . . On the theological level this has been due in the last analysis to a Christology that has preferred to focus on the risen Christ as an abstract symbol of faith rather than on the historical Jesus as the proper key to an understanding of the total Christ. The total Christ is certainly present by virtue of his Spirit. *The real question is whether this Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus or some vague, abstract Spirit that is nothing more than the sublimated embodiment of the natural 'religious' person's desires and yearnings.* If it is the latter, then it is not only different from, but actually contrary to the Spirit of Jesus" (emphasis added).

³Christology at the Crossroads, Orbis Books, 1978, 382, 384.

My purpose in Christology is therefore to attempt to answer first the question, "Who is Jesus in the New Testament?" The question, "Who is Jesus for me?" is certainly not separate from the first. But it cannot precede it. Lest our Christology degenerate into idolatry, we have to be cautioned by the words of R. Alan Cole:

"To worship Christ with the wrong beliefs about Him is to worship a false Christ, by whatever name we call Him; for we, in so doing, falsely imagine Him to be other than He is, and other than He is revealed in Scripture to be. This alone makes sense of the prophetic denunciation of much of the prophetic Yahwism of their day as in fact mere Baal-worship."⁴

Common to much of current Christology is an appeal for a return to the historical Jesus, as distinct from the more abstract figure projected by the traditional creeds. Major theological writers in America and Europe warn us against the peril of reading our Bibles through the prism of the Church Councils. A safer and sounder approach is "from behind," situating Jesus in His own Hebrew context. John A. T. Robinson's long reflection on the New Testament made him critical of the "church fathers" whom he takes to task for "abusing the Johannine texts [relative to Christology] and giving them a meaning which John never intended." He points out that "John was early adopted by the Gnostics as 'their' gospel and the stress in the Johannine epistles on Jesus come in the flesh (1 John 1:1; 4:2; 2 John 2:7) must be seen as a reaction to the docetic impression his [John's] teaching evidently provoked. But the very fact that the reaction was so vehement suggests that this is genuinely a misrepresentation of his intention: indeed it is for him very 'antichrist.'"⁵

John Robinson's major contribution to the debate initiated by the *Myth of God Incarnate*⁶ (and continued in *Incarnation and Myth, the Debate Continued*⁷) was to suggest and, I think, satisfactorily document, the fact that "John is a typical representative of the New Testament, not the anomalous exception, with one foot in the world of Greek philosophy, that he is so often presented."⁸ This point of view was worked out in his careful exegetical treatment of John's Christology⁹ and later in dialogue with

⁴Tyndale New Testament Commentary on the Gospel of Mark, Eerdmans's, 1983, 199.

⁵Twelve More New Testament Studies, SCM Press, 1984, 142.

⁶SCM Press, 1977.

⁷Eerdmans's, 1979.

⁸Ibid., 178.

⁹Human Face of God, chapter 5, "Humanity and Preexistence," SCM Press, 1973.

James Dunn in the "Theology" magazine.¹⁰ Dunn had already attempted to demonstrate that the notion of the personal preexistence of Jesus was foreign to much of the New Testament material, including Paul's letters. Dunn managed to rescue the traditional doctrine of Incarnation by finding it in John's Gospel only. Robinson argued that not even in John was it really evident. John was thinking in terms of Jesus being foreordained in God's cosmic purpose rather than literally preexistent. Even Dunn¹¹ comes very close to the same conclusion when of John 1:14 ("the word became flesh") he notes:

"Prior to verse 14 we are in the same realm as pre-Christian talk of wisdom and logos, the same language that we find in the wisdom tradition and in Philo, where as we have seen we are dealing with personifications rather than persons, personified actions of God rather than an individual divine being as such. The point is obscured by the fact that we have to translate the masculine 'logos' as 'He' throughout the poem. But if we translated 'logos' as 'God's utterance' instead, it would become clearer that the poem did not necessarily intend the 'logos' in verses 1-13 to be thought of as a personal divine being. In other words the revolutionary significance of verse 14 may well be that it marks . . . the transition from impersonal personification to actual person."

We are here at the very crux of the Christological problem. The issue is that of the nature of preexistence. Once it is maintained that Jesus, as Son, existed before His birth, the whole Trinitarian problem arises. If it can be maintained that Jesus comes into being at His conception, a very different Christology emerges. The debate over all the centuries centers around these questions.

Traditional orthodoxy was plagued by the difficulty of allowing to Jesus a full human personality. The very abstract notion of "anhypostasia" ("Jesus was 'man' without being 'a man'") was developed precisely in order to preserve the concept that He had preexisted as Second Member of the Trinity. British, American, and European scholarship has long been exercised about the latent docetism involved in this classical construct.

Norman Pittenger has written: "In my judgement a fundamental difficulty with the Christology of the patristic age is that while in word it asserted the reality of the humanity of Jesus Christ, in fact it did not take that humanity with sufficient seriousness. . . . The tendency of Christo-

¹⁰85, Sept. 1982.

¹¹*Christology in the Making*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980, 243.

logical thinking in the mainstream of what was believed to be 'orthodox' was far more heavily weighted on the side of the divinity than of the humanity of Jesus. . . . 'Orthodox' Christology, even when the excesses of Alexandrine teaching were somewhat restrained at Chalcedon in 451 AD, has tended towards an impersonal humanity, which is, I believe, no genuine humanity at all."¹²

The same concern underlies John Knox's question: "Is there any conceivable way of being 'man' except by being a 'a man'? Many theologians whose integrity and learning I greatly respect have answered that there is. I can only say, I cannot follow them, either in the sense of agreeing with them or thinking in their terms."¹³

Earlier, D. M. Baillie, in *God Was in Christ*¹⁴ had stated forthrightly that "it is equally nonsense to say that Jesus is 'Man,' unless we mean that He is a man." He is followed in this opinion by the Roman Catholic theologian, Thomas Hart, who says: "The Chalcedonian formula makes a genuine humanity impossible."¹⁵ He notes that another Roman Catholic scholar, Piet Schoonenberg, is "already reformulating the Chalcedonian Christology"¹⁶ by asserting that Jesus was genuinely a man.

This central difficulty involved in the orthodox doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity, particularly the matter of the "anhypostatic" nature of Christ, forces us to seek out a different approach. The humanity of Jesus so evidently portrayed in all the Gospels can, I believe, only be preserved if we lay aside the traditional notion of preexistence. In the synoptics there is no question but that Jesus came into being at his conception. This has been amply demonstrated by Raymond Brown in *The Birth of the Messiah*.¹⁷ "Both [Matthew and Luke] develop the Christological insight that Jesus was the Son of God from the first moment of His conception. . . . In the commentary I shall stress that Matthew and Luke show no knowledge of preexistence: seemingly for them the conception was the becoming of God's Son." F.C. Baur¹⁸ is no less convinced that the Christology of the synoptic gospels cannot yield a portrait of Jesus in Nicean/Chalcedonian terms:

¹²*The Word Incarnate*, Nisbet, 1959, 89.

¹³*The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*, Cambridge University Press, 1967, 63.

¹⁴Faber and Faber, 1961, 87.

¹⁵*To Know and Follow Jesus*, Paulist Press, 1984, 46.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁷Geoffrey Chapman, 1977, 31, 561.

¹⁸*Church History of the First Three Centuries*, n.p., 65.

"First we have the Christology of the synoptic gospels, and here it cannot be contended on any sufficient grounds that they give us the slightest justification for advancing beyond the idea of a purely human Messiah. The idea of preexistence lies completely outside the synoptic sphere of view. Nothing can show this more clearly than the narrative of the supernatural birth of Jesus. All that raises him above humanity—though it does not take away the pure humanity of his person—is to be referred only to the causality of the 'pneuma hagion', which brought about his conception. This spirit, as the principle of the Messianic epoch, is also the element which constitutes his Messianic personality. The synoptic Christology has for its substantial foundation the notion of the Messiah, designated and conceived as the 'huios theou'; and all the points in the working out of the notion rest on the same supposition of a nature essentially human. God raised him from the dead, because it was not possible that he should be holden of it (Acts 2:24)."

If we focus upon a Christ whose humanity is real and whose conception is supernaturally caused, as Luke presents it, we avoid the abstruse arguments prompted by the "church fathers" whose reading of John 1:1 may be challenged. This challenge is no innovation upon the theological discussion. The Bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata, found himself in 260 AD unable to accept the notion of a "second, preexisting Person," which seemed to complicate the Bible's cardinal monotheistic tenet. Professor Bethune-Baker is convinced "that Paul of Samosata had behind him a genuine historical tradition to which, in our reconstruction of doctrine, we must return. Loofs¹⁹ comes to the conclusion that . . . 'he is one of the most interesting theologians of the pre-Nicene period, because he stands in the line of a tradition which had its roots in a period before the deluge of Hellenism swept over the Church.'"²⁰

Precisely the same concerns over the humanity of Jesus motivated Michael Servetus to question the traditional Trinitarian formulations—and pay for it with his life at the hands of Calvin—and the same theme is taken up in anabaptist circles first by Adam Pastor²¹ who was excommunicated by Menno Simons, but whose convictions were later fully shared by the Polish Brethren at Racow. The same tendency is revealing itself in the current debate, in which both Catholic and Protestant theologians call

¹⁹Paulus von Samosata, n.p., 322.

²⁰*Essays on the Trinity and Incarnation*, ed. Rawlinson, Longmans Green and Co., 1928, 259.

²¹See "Adam Pastor, Antitrinitarian Antipaedobaptist," by Henry Newman, *Papers of the American Soc. of Church History*, Vol. 5.

us to a reevaluation of Christology forged in terms of Greek philosophy and invite us to a critique of long-held dogma.

The common drift of this alternative Christology is well summarized by Lamberto Schuurmann:²²

"It cannot be denied that it is the ontological language that has long predominated. Clearly, this is due for the most part to the hegemony exercised by Neo-Platonic philosophy, and its claim to constitute an adequate vocabulary for the articulation of theological affirmations. It is not easy to say whether the whole tradition, over all these centuries, has been a distortion of the gospel. The well-known fact that Hebrew has no way of making ontological statements is evidence by itself of the enormous changes certain Hebrew concepts must have undergone in their transition to a Hellenistic milieu. . . . In a word, what is lacking in the great majority of these images [of Jesus] is the relationship between the symbolism projected and the concrete, historical life of the historical Jesus. With all due respect to the Protestant churches, it is to be noted in their case that this shortcoming is due in large part to an almost total disregard for the Old Testament. Jesus is approached from an individualist and liberal need, in which what is decisive are values such as immortality and future reconciliation. I believe that it is the Old Testament that must save the church from this implicit and explicit gnosticism, as it has so often done in history. Hence great emphasis should be placed on the Old Testament in catechesis and preaching."

I suggest that an original misreading of the "logos" Christology of John by Justin Martyr and others of the Alexandrian school led to an eclipse of the Messianic Christology of the New Testament. The germ of the later, rigid formulations of Nicea and Chalcedon was thus introduced. It had been Philo who had mixed philosophy with Hebraic theology and came close to positing a "second God." How far this "second person" was conceived in personal terms is hard to say. But when Justin works out his Christology, the "Logos" has become one-to-one identified with a pre-human Jesus. The Trinitarian problem and the arguments about the hypostatic union of natures in Christ are the result of this concentration on one section of Scripture, treated in a non-Hebraic manner, to the exclusion of the clear humanitarian Christology of Luke and Matthew. A reconstruction of Christology must, I think, reckon with this unfortunate historical development. If the "word" of John 1:1 is understood, with many modern scholars, as "God's self-expressive activity," similar to the

²²*Faces of Jesus, Latin American Christologies*, ed. Bonino, Orbis Books, 1984, 166, 176.

wisdom which was also “with God” (Prov. 8:30), rather than a preexistent “Person,” the Trinitarian complexities are avoided. At the same time the identity of Jesus as Messiah, fully and uniquely representing God, is preserved. On this model the abstraction into which Jesus was changed by Greek metaphysics is replaced by a real human person embodying God’s word to man. “God was in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19), not that God *was* Christ. Such a formulation has the enormous advantage of maintaining intact the uncompromising unitarianism of Hebrew Old Testament theology—not to mention the unitarianism of Jesus recorded in the Gospels (Mark 12:28-34). It also allows us to perceive the wonderful thing God has graciously done through and in man, that is, in Jesus, the second Adam.

I believe that *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*²³ sensed correctly that “there was perversion amidst progress in the development of Christianity after the death of the Apostles.” We have not yet fully reckoned with the fact that “there were characteristics of the Greek speculative genius and of the practical Roman ethos not altogether harmonious with the distinctive character of the gospel. . . . The salt in seasoning did lose some of its savour.” The effect on Christology was a dissipation of the vital energy of the original confession of Jesus as Messiah and hope for a successful outcome of history. A “demessianized” and consequently “de-apocalypticized” Jesus is a pale reflection of the Jesus of our Christian documents. By contrast the Messianic Jesus of Luke’s Annunciation account (Luke 1:32-35)—and throughout his Gospel—is witness to the mighty fact that God has reached down to touch flesh, interrupting but working within the human biological process to bring forth His New Creation. Jesus is the Son of God precisely because (*διὸ καί*) He is conceived under the influence of “holy spirit” (Luke 1:35). Luke knows nothing at all of a Son of God antecedent to the virginal conception.

The appropriation of this Lukan Jesus (who, I believe, is equally the Jesus of John when the latter’s Gospel is read in its own Jewish context) will reinstate a vital Christology and initiate a renewed appreciation of the common faith of Scripture. It will remedy the problem expressed by William Thompson,²⁴ by recapturing the essential apocalyptic/Messianic Jesus:

“I think we gain a new appreciation for the so-called ‘apocalyptic

dimension’ so present in the preaching of Jesus. As we shall see [and here the author identifies the crux of our problem], scholarship has had a difficult time coming to terms with this element in Jesus’ ministry. Either scholars have ignored apocalyptic altogether, because it won’t fit the sentimentalized and romanticized picture of Jesus so beloved to many, or even when its presence is acknowledged, scholars often don’t know what to do with it. Apocalyptic becomes an unfortunate and outmoded inheritance of an all-too-Jewish Jesus.”

Those of us who espoused an “anabaptist” tradition should be amongst the first to make available a Christology which invites “restoration,” the typically anabaptist exercise of going behind the Councils to origins in the first century. This Christology will embody the best in reverence for God’s Son without the overlay of the largely meaningless abstractions with which Jesus was later vested in post-apostolic times. Needless to say, this Jesus will be nonviolent, in true pre-Constantinian style. A Christology along these lines will not be an innovation. It will find its roots not only in the New Testament, but at Antioch and amongst a significant strand of “anabaptism.” It will also find support in the modern trend to expose the serious distortions of the traditional formulation. It will not, however, be a denial of the “divinity” of Christ, which can be traced with Lukan Christology to the divine action of God bringing into being His unique Son.

This Jesus, the Messiah, bearer of the Good News of the Kingdom, is more real to me than ever. I find Him in the Christian documents and wherever hearts and minds are willing to seek His Father and Him in spirit and in Truth.

²³Vol. 3, ed. by James Hastings, 588.

²⁴*The Jesus Debate, A Survey and Synthesis*, Paulist Press, 1985, 30, 31.