

The Ancient Christology Untenable

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Permit me to start from William Benjamin Smith once more. He is in the wrong with his assumption of a purely divine Jesus, who never lived the life of a human being. But he is right in saying that liberal Jesus-research, which acknowledges only a purely human life of Jesus, has not succeeded in sketching a picture of Jesus which does justice to the sources and is credible as it stands. He is also right, as we saw, in the last place, in opposing the assumption itself that the life of Jesus must have been a purely human one. Now, for Smith, it seems, there is no other choice besides these two. The orthodox church doctrine about Jesus is not considered by him worth any serious discussion. He does not deny that it is respectable and venerable in its kind, and to a certain extent even logical and consistent. But still it is not worth his while to spend any time over it. "May it be right or wrong, good or bad," he says, "the human mind has, at last, and once for all, gone beyond it, and it is sheer madness to suppose that the human mind could ever turn back on the road it has once set its foot on. It could not do so even if it would. Reason, in this and the following centuries," he says, "can believe just as little in the God-man as in the geocentric theory of the Ptolemaic system."¹

What is the truth about this assertion, which is far from being defended only by W.B. Smith? To this question we were brought at the end of the preceding

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¹ W.B. Smith, *Ecce Deus*, 6.

lecture. Is the old church doctrine about Christ able to give us the right conception of Jesus, or is it to be set aside as antiquated without the least attempt to vindicate it?

If we turn our attention to this question, we shall first have to take into consideration the orthodox doctrine itself. For inaccurate opinions about it, and very general and superficial conceptions of it, such as are widespread in Christendom, make earnest discussion of the problems of Christology practically impossible.

Christ is, in the New Testament, often called the *Son of God*, and the so-called symbol of the apostles, following the Gospel of John, calls him *the only begotten Son of God* (John 1:14, 18; 3:16). How is this understood in the orthodox tradition of the Christian churches? In two respects, according to the orthodox doctrine, Christ is the *Son* or *the only begotten Son of God*.² He is this, in so far as he was man, because the miraculous overshadowing of the Virgin Mary by the Holy Ghost had formed without the ordinary course of nature the first beginnings of his human body in the womb of his mother.³ He is this, secondly — and this sense is the more important one to the orthodox tradition — as the *Word of God*, as Saint John says (John 1:1), because he is begotten of the Father from all eternity. *Begotten* here surely is a metaphorical expression; its meaning is that the Son is not a creature of God, but educed from the substance of the Father. And this begetting was from all eternity. Just as no light is ever without luster, so the Father is never without the Son. Nor was He ever without the Holy Ghost, who, eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son, is also educed from the same substance. But the Holy Ghost is not said to be *begotten*. And, though we cannot assign a reason why the emanation of the Son and not that of the Holy Ghost likewise is called a begetting, nor understand what begetting strictly signifies here, yet *begotten* is the right word for signifying the eternal relation between the Father and the Son.⁴

This eternal Son of God, of course, is another than the Father and the Holy Ghost. But these three persons, or *hypostases*, as they are called, are of one substance, of one power, of one eternity; and the diversity of “persons,” therefore, does not dissolve the unity of the Godhead. The Trinity, or better Trinity, is the one God, of whom it is said: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord” (Deut. 6:4).

Nevertheless — so the orthodox doctrine affirms — only the second person of the holy Trinity became incarnate, taking man’s nature upon himself in the womb of the Virgin Mary and of her substance. Two natures therefore were, and since that time are, joined together in the *one* person of Christ, the divine and the

² Cp., e.g., Gilbert, Bishop of Sarum, *An Exposition of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England*, revised and corrected by J.R. Page, London, 1839, 51.

³ Gilbert, 1. c.

⁴ Cp. Gilbert, 1. c., 52.

human one. Two natures, I say, not two individuals. For it is not a human personality that the Son of God assumed. He assumed human nature as a potential human individual. And he himself, the one Son of God, became the formative and controlling agency of the two natures, the human nature coming to individual existence in the personality of the incarnate Son of God. The human nature, however, is not altered, nor is the divine; the two natures are united in the one person “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably, the properties of each nature being preserved in the union.”⁵ The two natures, as has often been said since olden time, form a unity like that of body and soul in man. And yet, in a modern exposition of the thirty-nine articles of the Anglican Church, this comparison is expounded in the following way:

In man there is a material and a spiritual nature joined together. They are two natures as different as any we can apprehend among all created beings; yet these make but one man. The matter which the body is composed of does not subsist by itself, is not governed by all those laws of motion to which it would be subjected if it were inanimate matter, but by the indwelling and agency of the soul it has another spring within it and has another course of operations. Now, as the body is still a body, and operates as a body, though it subsists by the indwelling and agency of the soul, so in the person of Jesus Christ the human nature was entire, and still acted according to its own character; yet there was such a union and inhabitation of the eternal word in it that there did arise out of that a communion of names and characters as we find in the Scriptures.⁶

Nevertheless, of course, the church orthodoxy of all times continued to hold that the divine Word of God, though being the acting subject in the life of Christ, properly speaking did not suffer or die, but only, in virtue of the personal union with the human nature, took part in the passions of his human soul and body.

This will have to suffice, although it is but a very short survey of the orthodox doctrine. I am sorry that it does not show what deep thoughts are woven into this doctrine and with what ingenuity all the details were thought out. I shall, therefore, illustrate the great amount of mental labor which was devoted to this doctrine by one testimony which will certainly not be suspected. Lessing surely included the orthodox Christology when once he declared about the orthodox system that he knew nothing in the world in which human ingenuity showed and exercised itself in a greater manner.⁷

Notwithstanding I wish at the outset to state quite openly that I cannot hold this old Christology, this old orthodox answer to the question, Who was Christ? And for three reasons. First, because to rational logic the old Christology appears

⁵ So it is defined at the Council of Chalcedon, 451 AD.

⁶ Gilbert, 1. c., 62.

⁷ Letter to his brother Charles, Feb. 2nd, 1774, *Lessings Werke, Hempelsche Ausgabe*, 20, I, 572.

untenable; secondly, because it does not agree with the New Testament views; and, thirdly, because we can show that it was influenced by antiquated conceptions of Greek philosophy. These three points of view will have to determine the order of treatment in the present lecture.

Rational arguments had a bad reputation in the domain of religion up to the time of the so-called Enlightenment. And the Enlightenment which, in religion too, was prepared to recognize only what reason accepted as correct, has not held its own. It is generally admitted now that it expected too much from reason. The religious thoughts which it presumed to retain in the name of reason — the belief in God, the conviction of the freedom of man and the necessity of a moral life, and the belief in the immortality of the soul — these thoughts are today regarded as rational ideas by but a few scientifically trained men. And I believe this modern position can be better defended than that of the Enlightenment. Our reason cannot make any definite assertion about supersensual things. Even the freedom of will is, to say the least, a problem it cannot solve. But, if our reason cannot make any definite statements about supersensual things, it is in reality but a poor critic of religious doctrines. That I grant absolutely. Faith has to do with supersensual things; no reason, no science, can reach up to its objects. Hence, I adduce no rational arguments against the church doctrine of the holy Trinity itself. It is beyond all doubt, I grant, that this doctrine gives grave offense to reason. But it would be wrong to reject the doctrine on this account. It is absolutely impossible for our reason to comprehend God; His eternity, His creation and maintenance of all things, His omnipotence and omniscience are absolutely incomprehensible for us. I can, therefore, very well understand that people keep on saying: We must silence all objections against the doctrine of the divine Trinity, considering that the fact of our not understanding it as it is in itself makes the difficulties appear much greater than they otherwise would seem, if we, while in this earthly life, had sufficient light about it or were capable of forming a more perfect idea about it.⁸ People have even tried, with some appearance of success, to make the idea that the holy Trinity is the *one* God more acceptable to our minds. And this did not happen for the first time in the days when — seventy to eighty years ago — the philosophy of Hegel reigned. Augustine had already tried to make the oneness of the triune God intelligible by analyzing human self-consciousness. He said that, just as in our spiritual being there can be distinguished memory, and understanding, which conceives all that is in our memory, and will, which connects our understanding with the contents of our memory, so also in God we may distinguish the Father, and the Son His intellect, and the Holy Spirit uniting both in love.⁹

But nonetheless we cannot and ought not to exclude reason completely from religious thoughts. Even if we claim that reason should recognize religious truths

⁸ Gilbert, 1. c., 44.

⁹ Cp. A. Dorner, *Augustinus*, Berlin, 1873, 8-16.

that lie beyond its sphere, no one could expect it to approve such thoughts as hopelessly contradict themselves. But the orthodox Christology can be convicted of three such contradictions.

The first one Augustine already experienced¹⁰ as a disturbing element, and the scholastic theology of the Middle Ages tried in vain to get rid of it.¹¹ If, as Augustine thinks — and this has been the orthodox opinion since — the distinction of persons in the Trinity is limited to their internal relation to each other within the triune God, how was it possible that only the second person was incarnated? And, on the other hand, if the incarnation of the second person only is certain, how can the oneness of the triune God, i.e., how can Christian monotheism be retained? This unsolvable dilemma, perhaps, may be escaped and the incarnation of the Son only be retained, without endangering monotheism, by emphasizing that the Father and the Holy Ghost were not separated from the incarnated Son.

But then the second difficulty I was going to mention becomes all the greater. Even as it is in itself, the idea of the incarnation, the idea that a divine person became the subject of a human life, restricted with regard to time and space, involves the greatest difficulties. For we cannot imagine the Godhead as being constricted by the limitations of human existence. Then only two alternatives remain. We must either assume that the “Son of God,” when he became man, did not cease, separate from his humanity, to pervade the world in divine majesty. Or, with Luther, we must venture the bold thought that, in virtue of the union of the two natures, the human nature from the first moments of its beginning has been partaking of the divine omnipotence and omnipresence.

This latter view, the Lutheran doctrine of the “ubiquity of Christ’s body,” leads us to absurdities. If we wish to avoid these really unbearable absurdities we are referred to the former view. But does it not destroy the idea of incarnation? Could we still say of the divine person who was also outside the historical Jesus, pervading the world in divine majesty, that he was in reality incarnated? Is not the idea of the incarnation in this manner really changed into the idea of a divine inspiration, an inspiration such as the prophets experienced without any change in God’s position to the world? But then it would be impossible still to say that the second person of the holy Trinity was the acting subject in the historical Jesus. This difficulty evidently becomes greater still if the Father and the Holy Ghost were not separated from the incarnated Son. For in that case it is still more impossible to retain the idea of a real incarnation of the Son. Perhaps these arguments are too difficult to be made intelligible with a few short words. But I may not spend more time on them. I must be satisfied with having just mentioned

¹⁰ Cp. O. Scheel, *Die Anschauung Augustins über Christi Person und Werk*, Tübingen, 1901, 47ff.

¹¹ Cp. F. Loofs, *Dogmengeschichte*, 4th edition, Halle, 1906, 500, note 4; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theol.*, III, 3, 4.

them. This mention of them was necessary. For here lie the greatest difficulties of the orthodox Christology, which cannot be surmounted by any tricks of reasoning.

More easily understood is the difficulty which I am going to mention in the third and last place. The divine Trinity can, if need be, perhaps be thought of as the one God, the triune God, *before* the incarnation of the second person. But how is it after the incarnation? It is orthodox doctrine that the incarnated Son of God retained his human form, i.e. the human nature he had assumed, even after his ascension. Can, then, the distinction between the incarnated Son, on the one hand, and the Father and the Holy Ghost, on the other, be conceived of as being confined to the internal relations in which each person stands to the other within the one Godhead? And if this is not the case, the oneness of the Trinity is dissolved after the incarnation; the Trinity has become something different after the incarnation from what it was before.¹² If neither is the case, then the humanity of Christ stands beside the Trinity. And then, also during the earthly life of Jesus, it could not have stood in a real personal union with the second person of the Trinity. Then the idea of the incarnation here again changes into that of an inspiration. Our dogmatics, I think, does not frankly face these difficulties. This, however, does not overcome them. These difficulties alone are sufficient to wreck the orthodox Christology. Augustine, the creator of the Occidental doctrine of the Trinity, when pressed by others, asked himself whether the exalted Christ could see God with his bodily eyes, and he answered the question in the negative.¹³ This proves that the difficulties we have discussed broke up the dogma of the Trinity and the closely related Christology even for Augustine himself. And the cause of this was not only that Augustine and the whole church orthodoxy as far as the eighteenth century pictured Christ's "body of glory" (Phil. 3:21) too much like an earthly body when speaking of the bodily eyes of the exalted Christ; the difficulties, on the contrary, unavoidably remain so long as the humanity of the exalted Christ is conceived as something different from his Godhead.

There are probably Christians on whom these rational arguments will make no impression. The belief in the triune God, they think, is irrational as it is; a few irrationalities more do not make the matter more difficult. I do not think that such thoughts are pious. In our time, too, we must be on our guard lest it may be said of us: "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you" (Rom. 2:24). But so much is true: no one of us could find fault with Christians for

¹² As F.L. Steinmeyer, once professor at the University of Berlin (1900), did not hesitate to assume when he said: "When had the Father ever received back what he gave in that holy night (Christmas)? What God gives remains for the recipient; it will never be His again in the sense in which He first possessed it" (*Beiträge zum Schriftverständnis in Predigten*, I, 2nd edition, Berlin, 1854, 41).

¹³ Ep. 92, Migne, series lat. XXXIII, 318; cp. ep. 161, *ibid.*, 702ff.

accepting these irrationalities if the orthodox Christology, which includes these irrationalities, were presented by the Scriptures.

But that is not the case. This is the second point I have to prove today. It is an extremely wide domain, the whole domain of the Christological views of the New Testament, which we now come to face. It is impossible in a short lecture to enter into these views of the New Testament in all their details. I must be satisfied with calling attention to a few decisive points. Five will suffice.

It is a view of vital importance to orthodox Christology that the historical Jesus is the preexistent *Son of God*. Do we find anything about this in the New Testament? Certainly many New Testament passages assert the preexistence of Christ; that is, they assert or assume that Jesus did not begin to exist when his earthly life began. “O Father,” Jesus says in the high-priestly prayer in the Gospel of John, “glorify me with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was” (John 17:5). But where in the New Testament is this prehistoric, yea, this antemundane, Christ called the *Son of God*? Where are we told that he is as such begotten of the Father before the world? In the prologue of the Gospel of John, the preexistent Christ is not called the *Son* but the *word*, and we are told that this was “in the beginning” (John 1:1, 2). Only one passage in the Pauline epistles might be suspected of referring to an antemundane birth of Christ. In Colossians 1:18 Paul calls Christ “the first-born of every creature.” But here the Greek equivalent for first-born (πρωτο, τοκοj) only means that he was before every creature and above all creatures.¹⁴ Then the only remaining support of the later doctrine is Jesus’ title *Son of God*, which, as we all know, occurs very often in the New Testament. But in the New Testament it is applied to the historical Jesus, either with reference to his birth out of the Spirit of God (Luke 1:35), or because the Spirit came down upon Jesus at his baptism (Mark 1:11), or — without reference to a date of its entrance — because the Spirit of God lived in him (Rom. 1:3), or because Jesus was the Messiah (Matt. 16:16), or because he stood in a unique position of love toward God (Matt. 11:27, and in the Gospel of John). The term *the only begotten Son*, too, only signifies what was mentioned last. For the Greek equivalent for *only begotten* (μονογενη, j) does not mean anything else than unique or peerless.¹⁵ And it was not modern exegesis that first interpreted the term *Son of God* thus. In the first half of the fourth century Marcellus of Ancyra emphatically pointed out that in the New Testament Jesus is called the Son of God only after the incarnation, and not in his preexistence. And

¹⁴ Cp. E. Haupt’s interpretation of Col. 1:15 (*Kommentar über das N.T., begründet von H.A.W. Meyer*, viii and ix, *Die Gefangenschaftsbriefe*, Göttingen, 1897, 25ff.) and Psalm 89:27, where it is said of the King of Israel: “I will make him my first-born (πρωτο, τοκον), higher than the kings of the earth.”

¹⁵ When the widow’s son at Nain is characterized as “the only son of his mother” (Luke 7:12), the same word is used in the Greek New Testament which in John 1:14, 18 is translated “only begotten.”

the older apostolic fathers, the so-called first epistle of Clement, dating from about 95 AD, and the Ignatian letters¹⁶ interpret the term *Son of God* in this manner only.

It is easier to show, secondly, that the idea of the Triune God, as dogmatized later, is foreign to the New Testament. We surely find the belief in the New Testament that God was in Christ, and that the Holy Spirit that lives in the individual Christians and in the whole community is the spirit of God. That God the Father reveals Himself also in the Son and in the Spirit, that is a conviction which is in accordance with the New Testament. But there cannot be the least doubt, nor can we alter the fact, that when the New Testament speaks of *God*, it is thinking only of the one God whom Jesus called his Father and the Father of the faithful, too. This is shown without the shadow of a doubt by the apostolic greeting: “Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹⁷ And the case is not different throughout the New Testament. In the Gospel of John, in the high-priestly prayer of Jesus, we even read: “This is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ” (John 17:3). Also the well-known prayerful wish of the apostle Paul, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Ghost be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:13), points in the same direction. For the apostle does not speak here about three persons in the one God, but about the love of the one God, and in addition — or better, in connection with it — of the grace of Jesus Christ and the communion of the Holy Ghost.

It is easier still to show that orthodox Christology does not agree with the New Testament views in a third respect. According to the orthodox Christology, the personal subject, the supreme I, of the historical Jesus is the second person of the holy Trinity. Does the fact that Jesus prayed harmonize with this? Does the circumstance that he said to Mary Magdalene, “I ascend unto my Father and your Father and to my God and your God” (John 20:17), harmonize with it? We have seen, indeed, that the self-consciousness of Jesus surpassed the measure of a human self-consciousness. But can we deny that in the whole New Testament a human self-consciousness is the frame in which the inner life of Jesus first comes to our notice? His humility, his obedience, his trust in God cannot be interpreted differently. We shall discuss in the last lecture how this view can be reconciled with the fact that the frame of a human self-consciousness proves to be too limited to make the personality of Jesus intelligible. Here it will suffice to have shown that the orthodox Christology which considers a divine person as the personal subject in Christ does not correspond with the New Testament views.

The fourth point I wish to mention is that the experiences of Jesus, like his self-consciousness, are at variance with orthodox Christology. Orthodoxy of all

¹⁶ Written about 110 AD.

¹⁷ Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1.

ages was worried by the fact that we are told of Jesus, with regard to his youth, that “he increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52). Could this be harmonized with the assumption that the real subject of the historical Jesus was the eternal Son of God? Orthodoxy of ancient times considered these two statements as being harmonized by the assertion that the eternal Son of God grew, suffered, and died only according to his human nature. But who will deny that our very self itself is growing during our life? And certainly it sounds very forced to say that the Son of God, who by his own nature could never suffer, suffered nevertheless in his human flesh and in his human soul! Surely such forced constructions are quite foreign to the New Testament.

Fifthly and lastly, I shall have to point out that in the New Testament Jesus, even after his exaltation, appears in such an organic connection with the human race as hardly to agree with orthodox Christology. Especially those very writers of the New Testament who most obviously do not assume that the life of Jesus was a purely human one — Paul and John — make this very clear. For Paul the risen Lord is “the first-born from the dead,” (Col. 1:18), “the first-born among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). The faithful, in Paul’s opinion, are predestined by God “to be conformed to the image of His Son as heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:29 and 8:17). Very similarly we read in the high-priestly prayer in the Gospel of John: “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world” (John 17:16) and “Father, I will that they also, whom Thou hast given me, be with me where I am” (John 17:24); “that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in me and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us...that they may be one even as we are one” (John 17:21, 22); and “Thou hast loved them as Thou hast loved me” (John 17:23). In Revelation we find the same thoughts. Here the exalted Christ says: “He that overcometh I will give to him to sit down with me in my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father in His throne” (Rev. 3:21).

I admit that these words would be misinterpreted if they were used to remove the distance which, according to the New Testament, exists between Christ and his faithful followers. Christ is, according to Paul — and also according to John — “the Lord, in whose name every knee should bow of things in heaven and things in earth and things under the earth” (Phil. 2:10). But the passages quoted show undoubtedly that, according to the New Testament conception, Jesus is “the first-born among many brethren” in a deeper sense than orthodox Christology is able to recognize — for, according to it, Christ, although he was a man because he assumed human nature, yet remained a divine subject.

These five points show that orthodox Christology does not agree with the New Testament views. And those who are impartial enough to see this are thereby convinced that the old orthodox Christology cannot give us the correct interpretation of the historical person of Jesus. And there is hardly a single learned theologian — I know of none in Germany — who defends the orthodox Christology in its unaltered form. And all modifications which can be observed

lie in the direction of removing the most obvious mistake of the orthodox Christology by doing more justice to the humanity of Christ. I shall have to say something about such modifications of the old doctrine in the following lecture.

Today it only remains for me to strengthen the proof that orthodox Christology is untenable by pointing out that this Christology was born under the influence of Greek philosophical ideas which we no longer share.

In going through this proof I shall have to appeal to the closest attention and to considerable mental exertion on the part of my respected hearers. But if I succeed in mentioning only the principal facts I hope to be understood without any difficulty.

I must follow a somewhat circuitous path. The Gospel of John, as we all know, begins with the words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," and in the fourteenth verse of the same chapter we read: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." John here undoubtedly speaks about Jesus Christ; of him, he says that the word of God was made flesh in him. But it is not so certain what is meant by this expression *the Word*. At the time when the Gospel of John was written philosophical speculations were current which employed this expression in a peculiar sense. The Greek term for *word* (lo,goj) has two meanings, "word" and "reason." In the latter sense the term had been used by the pantheism of the Stoic philosophy when it described God both as the primitive matter of the world and as the "Logos," i.e., the reason which pervades the world. This Stoic idea of the "Logos" was modified in a peculiar way by the Jewish — and, with regard to his thoughts, also Greek — philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus. Philo did not, like the Stoic philosophy, consider God immanent in the world. With Plato he held the transcendence of God, and in his teaching there was even a sharp dualistic antithesis between God and the world, between the supreme Being and matter. Philo, therefore, could not imagine any action of God upon the world of matter save through intermediate powers. The central power of God, comprehending in itself all subordinate powers, is for Philo the *Logos*. He, too, considers this Logos as the reason which pervades the world. But, in divergence from the Stoic philosophy, Philo distinguishes the Logos from God. He calls him "the first-born Son of God," "the second God," "the organ of the creation." But on the other hand he combines this Logos so clearly with God that people have asked again and again whether the Logos is conceived of as personal by Philo or whether all the personality ascribed to the Logos by Philo is only meant figuratively. However this may be, for Philo the Logos, i.e., the reason of God pervading the world, is certainly to some extent one with God and again to some extent a second beside Him.

Now, people have not been wanting who asserted that the term *Logos* in the Gospel of John is to be taken in this philosophical sense advocated by Philo and circulated widely after him. In favor of this they quoted what John, too, says of

the Logos: “All things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3). There was also a time in German theology when everyone who did not interpret the term *Logos* in John in the philosophical sense was considered behind the times and unscientific. This time is not quite past, but it is approaching its end. I, for my part, never considered this hypothesis probable. For it is quite plain that the beginning of John’s Gospel refers to the beginning of the first book of Moses. There we have the same introduction: *In the beginning*. And every schoolboy knows what the medium of creation was here. The word! For *and God said* is repeated in the narrative like the burden of a song. It is likewise well known how often we read in the prophets of the Old Testament: “The word of the Lord came unto the prophet.”¹⁸ John, in my opinion, was thinking of these two circumstances. God first revealed Himself in the creation, and then to Israel, especially when His word came to the prophets. Jesus Christ not only brought the word of God, as the prophets did; he was the Word in everything he said and did; the word was made flesh in him. I do not believe that there is an incarnation theory behind these words. The sentence, “The word was made flesh,” means more than when we say, e.g., “In this man all the amiable qualities of his forefathers are personified.” But this way of speaking in my opinion comes nearer to the meaning of what John says, “The word was made flesh,” than the later incarnation theories. But this is of minor importance. What I want to say is this: in the Gospel of John the term *Logos* has nothing to do with philosophy. Here it simply means “word.”

I may adduce two arguments in favor of this assertion. In the book of Revelation the term *Logos* also takes a prominent place. In a grand picture, in which the seer describes Christ’s return for the last judgment, he says: “I saw the heaven opened, and behold a white horse, and he that sat thereon was called Faithful and True...and he hath a name written [upon him or upon his horse] that no one knoweth but he himself” (Rev. 19:11, 12). Then, in the next verse, it is said: “And he is arrayed in a garment sprinkled with blood, and his name is called ‘The Word of God.’” Here it is not the preexistent Christ who is called the Logos. Hence, there is no room here for the logos-idea of Philo. The returning Christ, who fulfills all the words and prophecies of God, and who is therefore called *Faithful and True*, is called the Word of God for this very reason, that God’s Word becomes full truth in him. No less convincing are two passages in the letters of Ignatius, written about 110 AD. These letters are strongly influenced by Johannine thought. For this reason it is important that Ignatius calls Christ the “Word of God coming forth out of silence,”¹⁹ i.e., the Word of revelation with which God breaks the silence which He had observed up to that moment. In the same sense Ignatius also calls Christ “the truthful mouth, through

¹⁸ Cp., e.g., 1 Sam. 15:10; Jer. 1:2; 2:1; 7: 1; Ezek. 6:1; Hosea 1:1; Joel 1:1; Jonah 1:1; Micah 1:1; Zeph. 1:1; Haggai 1:1; Zech. 1:1.

¹⁹ *Ep. ad. Magnes.*, 8, 2.

which the Father has spoken.”²⁰ Here, in Ignatius, there can be no doubt that the term *Logos* has nothing to do with philosophy. And, as Ignatius is dependent on John, his conception may give us a clue for the correct interpretation of the term in John.

But what we do not have in John and Ignatius we find in later times. And we must admit that the characterization of Christ as the *Logos* in John made this possible. The Greek apologists of the second century, educated Christians, who tried to defend Christianity against the pagans, combined the philosophical logos-idea of their time with their Christology. To them the preexistent Christ was the reason of God pervading the world, His *Son*, because before all worldly time he was produced by God, being a second one beside the God of the universe, but of the same kind with him, as produced of his substance. There we have the foundation of the orthodox Christology. But only the foundation. For to the apologists the *Logos* and God were two in number without any restriction, and, besides, the apologists did not regard the *Logos* as being eternal; he is begotten or created by God (they do not yet make a sharp distinction between these two) at the time of the creation of the world and with the purpose that he might be the creative organ.

The latter was the first to be corrected by the later development. Origen, the greatest theologian of the old Greek church, who died in 254, made this correction. He was highly educated in philosophy, and his philosophical thoughts were akin to those of the first teachers of the Neoplatonic philosophy which arose in his time. These Neoplatonists regarded as the eternal core of this sensible world, if I may say so, an eternal ideal world of immaterial beings, which existed also before the created world. An eternal ideal world, I say. That did not exclude the idea of God in their thought. God, in their opinion, is the original source of this ideal world. Eternally He calls this world into existence, as light always radiates splendor and brightness and heat. Thus, too, Origen thought. The first of the immaterial spiritual beings of the immaterial world which he derived from God is the *Logos*. Through him the Holy Ghost and all other immaterial beings, the angels and the souls of men, were created. Here, for the first time, we have the idea of the eternal begetting, that is, the idea that the *Logos* or *Son* was begotten of the Father from all eternity. In the case of Origen, this idea was not a strange one. For just as the *Logos* is begotten of the Father from all eternity, so all other immaterial spirits are eternally created through him by God. For Origen the idea of an eternal begetting of the *Son* was, therefore, nothing irrational, but rather a special case of the eternal causation of the immaterial ideal world by God. Later on the Origenistic idea of an eternal immaterial world was abandoned. But the idea of the eternal begetting of the *Logos*, or *Son*, remained, now nothing more than an irrational fragment of a total conception which was formerly more intelligible.

²⁰ *Ep. ad. Romans*, 8, 2.

The second shortcoming which, as we saw, the thoughts of the apologists, when compared with the later church doctrine, show, was not remedied even by Origen. Just as for the apologists God, the creator of the universe, and His Logos were two in number — occasionally, Justin, one of these apologists, also adds the Spirit and the whole angelic host²¹ — so for Origen the supreme God and the Logos and the Holy Ghost were three in number, a Trinity, not a Triunity, three *hypostases*, or essences, as he called them. In the fourth century, after long struggle, which I cannot describe here, the point was reached where a distinction was made between the terms which for Origen still had the same meaning, between hypostasis and essence. Now it became orthodox doctrine: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have one essence or substance, but they are three hypostases — or “persons,” as the Occident said. The Orient has, on the whole, not gone beyond this conception. The doctrine of the Trinity there retained a tritheistic character. For to the orthodoxy of the Orient the Godhead is one, because the Son and the Spirit only derived their origin from the one Father-God and because they are with Him of the same kind or substance, of the same power, of the same eternity. We may find it strange that this was considered as doing justice to Christian monotheism. But it becomes more intelligible when we consider that our clearly defined idea of personality was unknown in those times. God was looked upon as the highest essence, and as long as no other equally high Being was placed side by side with Him, people thought monotheism was preserved intact, even if two further hypostases were regarded as having emanated from this one highest essence.

In the western church Christian monotheism has been restored by the great Augustine (430). For him the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are the *one* God. He, too, in thinking so was influenced by philosophical ideas. As a philosopher, he considered the idea of oneness and the idea of simplicity indispensable to the idea of God. God is for him the highest absolute indivisible and, therefore, simple Being or essence, in contrast with the world, which exists only conditionally in its manifoldness and changeableness. But biblical ideas, too, induced Augustine to modify the older doctrine of the Trinity. He wished to do justice to monotheism, to do justice to the Old Testament word: “Hear, Israel, the Lord our God is one God” (Deut. 6:4). For this reason he said that with regard to the world the Father, the Son, and the Spirit always act together as the one God. The distinctions of the persons were in his mind limited to the internal relations within the Godhead, that the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and the Son. This is the origin of the orthodox doctrine about the Son of God and the holy Trinity or, better, Tri-unity, in the western church.

In the same way we may show that the doctrine of the two natures in Jesus Christ originated in the culture of the Greco-Roman world. Quoting Goethe’s

²¹ *Apol.*, I, 13, 1-3.

Faust, we may speak of *two souls* which we feel in our breast, a lower one with sensual desires and a higher one which is open to everything ideal. In ancient times people would in such a case speak of “two natures” in man. We even know of a more developed form of this idea by not a few Christians of the second century, which, by combining philosophical thoughts and Christian traditions, tried to form a general view of the world and its history. I refer to the so-called Gnostics. Many of them distinguished three elements in the world — the spiritual, the psychical, and the material. Man according to them had or could have three natures — a spiritual, a psychical, and a material or bodily one. The question how the unity of self-consciousness was to be realized in such a case did not cause these speculators any great difficulty. The strongest of these natures in each case was considered as the leading one, which really ruled over the others. In a modified form this terminology of different natures was even applied to animals. We possess a book on the peculiarities of several animals, the so-called *Physiologus*, which is preserved in a later Christian revision, but is in its original pagan form perhaps as old as the second century. Here the characteristic peculiarities of the animals which are mentioned are called different “natures” of these animals. Thus, we are told of the lion that he has *three natures*: the first is that he, when scenting a hunter, wipes out his footprints with his tail; the second, that he sleeps with open eyes; the third, that his whelp is born dead but begins to live on the third day.²² Here “natures” means nothing else than characteristic peculiarities.

Now, it is natural that Christians at a very early date — I believe from the very beginnings of Christianity — observed characteristics of human lowliness and characteristics of divine majesty and glory in Jesus Christ. Under these circumstances it was not strange for that time that people as early as the end of the second century spoke of “two natures,” the human and the divine one, which were to be distinguished in Christ. The question how the unity of such a person was to be imagined did not cause any difficulties for more than three centuries. In the eastern church many theologians as early as the fourth century considered the higher nature, the divine nature — that is, the divine Logos — as the actual subject in the historical Jesus, while his humanity was looked upon as not having a personality of its own. In the western church people for a long time thought differently. But ultimately the Greek view prevailed.

If you look back upon all I have gone through, I hope you will understand why orthodox Christology could seem quite acceptable as long as Greek culture survived. It harmonized with the culture of the time. The incarnation question, too, caused no difficulty to Greek thinkers. When Celsus, the pagan controversialist, mockingly asked whether the Logos left his throne vacant when he became a human being, Origen opposed him with the argument that God fills all in all, that He does not vacate one place in order to betake Himself to another,

²² F. Lauchert, *Geschichte des Physiologus*, Strassburg, 1889, 229ff.

and that, therefore, He descends to men only by means of His grace.²³ And, as I have already said, all Greek theologians clung to this view, thinking that the Logos, the divine reason pervading the world, after his incarnation, in spite of his being in Christ, retained his position toward the world, i.e., continued to pervade and to govern the world. Even about the year 200 Clement of Alexandria, the teacher of Origen, still said quite naively that the Logos was made flesh also in the prophets.²⁴ In short, in the early Church the idea of “incarnation” was not yet sharply distinguished from that of a divine inspiration, but in the course of time the distinction became more and more defined, and this made the church doctrine more irrational than it had been at first when people began to use the term *Logos*.

And that is the case with the whole Christology of the early Church. In the older times the terms of Greek culture were the natural forms by which the people of those times tried to do justice to that which the New Testament says about Christ. What *we* find unsatisfactory in those forms remained hidden to them. No age knows itself sufficiently. In those forms people had their faith in Christ as far as it was understood by them.

But the case is different with us. We either think that human philosophy can form no tenable ideas at all about God and things divine, or if we think differently we have, at any rate, other views than Philo and the Neoplatonists. Hence, the orthodox doctrine about Christ, which was derived from the Christology of the ancient Church, contains elements which to our mind are contradictions. We also notice, therefore, what remained hidden to the theologians of the ancient Church: in how many points the old Christology does not do full justice to the New Testament views. It is, therefore, our duty to concede that orthodox Christology does not give us an appreciation of the person of Christ which is able to satisfy us.

²³ *Orig. c. Celsum*, 4, 5 and 4, 14, ed. Koetschau, Leipsic, 1879, I, 277 and 285.

²⁴ *Excerpta 19, Opera*, ed. W. Dindorf, Oxford, 1869, III, 433, 5.