

# A Critical Analysis of the Christological Discussion in *Faces of Jesus* and *The Present-Day Christological Debate*

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*Faces of Jesus*<sup>1</sup> and *The Present-Day Christological Debate*<sup>2</sup> document the struggle, present and past, to discover who Jesus is. Some would answer the question conclusively by telling us that Chalcedon gave us the definitive word on Christology. Others are asking a different question: “Who is Jesus Christ *today* in Latin America?” The question suggests that Jesus is incognito in Latin America and that he must be unmasked. But is he there at all? Then there is a third question: “Who is Jesus Christ *for us* today?” What is that supposed to mean? “Who is Uncle Jim?” is clear, but “Who is Uncle Jim *for me*?” appears to signify “What does Uncle Jim mean to me?” which poses a different problem. One suspects that underlying the oblique question about “Jesus for me” or “Jesus for us” lies the age-old desire to reinterpret Jesus in terms that will not be too uncomfortable. The remedy for any such theological cowardice is “back to the Synoptics,” where the real Jesus can scarcely be avoided.

The range of answers claiming our attention is bewildering. There are Christs of every complexion. Often in Latin America “Christ” is only “a projection of determinate social conditions and the reflection of these conditions in ideology.”<sup>3</sup> These multiple Christs are then read back into the New Testament, as if this will guarantee the real Christ’s approval of the ideology in question. But “the defeated Christ”<sup>4</sup> or “the powerless

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<sup>1</sup> Jose Miguez Bonino, ed., Orbis Books, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Klaas Runia, InterVarsity Press, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> Bonino, 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

Christ”<sup>5</sup> do not represent the spirit of the living Jesus. In and out of Latin America even the philosophical Christ of Chalcedon is coming under fire, not as previously from a Servetus or radical anabaptists, Christadelphians, and Jehovah’s Witnesses (all of whom have been dealt with summarily by the watchdogs of orthodoxy), but by John Robinson, Schillebeeckx, Hans Küng, Ellen Flesseman,<sup>6</sup> Gustavus Berkhof,<sup>7</sup> and Lamberto Schuurman,<sup>8</sup> with encouragement, if only partial agreement, from Raymond Brown<sup>9</sup> and James Dunn.<sup>10</sup> At least it is becoming respectable to be a “heretic.” The “sectarian” may now appeal to the university theologians for support.

The “heretical” Christ, as opposed to the Chalcedonian one, is the Christ “who transforms history, the liberating Christ, who has been snatched from them [the Latin Americans].” Lamberto Schuurman sketches a new Christological formulation that abandons the language and the ontological, essentialist categories of classic Christology and restores a “functional and practico-political language corresponding to the New Testament tradition.”<sup>11</sup> According to the “new Christology” the Christ as “second member of the Trinity” is “historically inoperative.”<sup>12</sup> He is no better than the one-sided versions of Jesus — the “conquered Christ,” the “celestial monarch,” and the Christ of private piety. What is needed, say the exponents of “functional Christology,” is the Christ “from behind,” the endpoint of a long line of redemptive history who represents God but is not “essentially” God. But can that sharp distinction between a “functional” and an “ontological” Christ be drawn without ignoring some important New Testament evidence?

Complaints that the traditional Christ of Chalcedon is at least partly docetic appear with such frequency that they ought not to be ignored. This criticism does not come only from the radical camp. “In Protestant milieus, as well as among Catholics, one observes a tendency to a certain docetism. Among Protestants emphasis on Christ’s divinity has been so strong that it led to a deformation of his human nature.”<sup>13</sup> The Church

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>6</sup> *A Faith for Today*, Mercer University Press, 1980.

<sup>7</sup> Runia, 47-77.

<sup>8</sup> Bonino, 162-182.

<sup>9</sup> *The Birth of the Messiah*, London: Chapman, 1977.

<sup>10</sup> *Christology in the Making*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980.

<sup>11</sup> Bonino, 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

must “critically examine the distorted images that have so sadly abounded in its message until now.” It is difficult to resist a conclusion in the following vein:

Protestant preaching has by and large been *characterized by a functional docetism* in its Christology (as also by a deism in its doctrine of God, a dualism in its concept of the human being and legalism in its ethics). The “heavenly” or “spiritual” Christ has been real and personal for believers. But he has not been Jesus of Nazareth in all his humanity and historicity. The Church has maintained the humanity of Jesus as orthodoxy and the incarnation as dogma. But it does not appear to have taken the reality of the incarnation seriously — as a demand, a call to degnosticize our faith and to convert it into discipleship and practice.<sup>14</sup>

Blame for the Gnostic tendencies is laid upon the Greek “logos” Christology. “It is the Greek ‘logos’ that has so long been manipulated by the theologians as if it had been the only possible logos and the best of all possible logoi.”<sup>15</sup> What a tremendous contrast the resulting docetic Christ presents to the Christ of the Synoptics.<sup>16</sup> “Today we need a new Christology.”<sup>17</sup> Runia supports the cry for the new Christology to this extent:

R.T. France pointed out that at least in popular evangelical piety there is a strong tendency to a form of unacknowledged docetism — a Jesus about whom the real truth is that he is God and whose humanity is a convenient temporary vehicle, but not to be taken very seriously when it comes to discussing the possible limitations of his knowledge or his power.<sup>18</sup>

Raymond Brown, who elsewhere states that traditional incarnational concepts have led to an unconscious monophysitism, is cited by Runia: Incarnation in the classical sense “is characteristic of Johannine Christology but not about 90% of the rest of the New Testament.”<sup>19</sup> Runia also admits that Schillebeeckx, who has abandoned Chalcedon,<sup>20</sup> might

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 44, emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> See Bonino, 42.

<sup>17</sup> Bonino, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Runia, 88.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-58.

“theoretically at least be closer to the way in which the New Testament speaks about Jesus for it is obvious that the councils spoke in the theological (and philosophical) language of the fourth and fifth centuries.”<sup>21</sup>

A reasonable hypothesis is that the docetism which threatened the New Testament (1 John 4:1-3; 2 John 7) may later have scored a significant victory. One cannot rule out, on the basis of some supposed doctrine of the indefectibility of the Church, that the councils enshrined in their decisions an attenuated docetism. The remark of Lamberto Schuurman is of interest at this point:

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 Neoplatonic 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.<sup>22</sup>

If the threat of docetism was not effectively warded off, it may well be that blatant docetism was cast out of the Church, while a more subtle form entered by the back door. The probability that other Christs and in particular “another Christ” took a central place in the post-apostolic Church must be taken seriously. The model for such a development is found in 2 Corinthians 11:4. The Corinthians, all baptized members, were “putting up beautifully” with another Jesus, another gospel and another spirit. The Galatians were rapidly moving away from the true gospel (Gal. 1:6, 7), and Paul predicted the appearance of false teachers not sparing the flock, after his death (Acts 20:29, 30). Diotrefes and John seem to have been on opposite sides of the debate about Christ (3 John 9, 10), the “docetic” test (2 John 7) being the only one which would effectively distinguish between the true and false views of Jesus. The Corinthian tolerance of “another Jesus” presented by the self-styled apostles suggests that Christians who did not remain under the watchful eye of an Apostle easily fell prey to a counterfeit Jesus. Since the norm

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>22</sup> Bonino, 166, emphasis added.

amongst those protesting their loyalty to Christ is to be deceived (“many” will say “Lord, Lord” and not be recognized as genuine Christians; few will find the way to life, Matt. 7:14, 21, 22, and “many” will corrupt the Gospel, 2 Cor. 2:17), there is *prima facie* evidence that Christology may largely have gone wrong, not right. The entire absence in the discussion about Christ of a personal Satan as a major force working for the distortion of Christianity makes one suspect that he may have achieved more than he has been given credit for.

Since the doctrine about Christ cannot be separated from right Christian praxis, it is fair to ask how well traditional Christianity has done in its imitation of Jesus. The liberation theologians have done us a service by pointing out that Jesus was treated “as a rebel against the established order . . . He provoked a conflict with the status quo. And in the status quo He perished, accused of political and religious sedition.”<sup>23</sup>

History shows that the name of Christ, far from being the symbol of subversion of the establishment, has been invoked over systems in which Jesus would have refused to have any part. Being Spanish and being Christian have sometimes been equated,<sup>24</sup> but this could never have happened while the Apostles survived! The most blatant example of the military Christ appears in the Catholic Church when evangelization first began in Latin America.

There was an effort to take certain Indian traditions and rework them, transform them in terms of the Christian faith . . . The Spaniards oppressed others with the most horrible slavery to which human beings have been reduced. “It is pleasing to God to kill and rob other believers,” they said.<sup>25</sup>

Mary’s Son and Lord has been a stranger and sojourner in conquered America “from Columbus to this day.”<sup>26</sup> In the name of another Christ the new cadets swore allegiance to the Chilean military academy,<sup>27</sup> but for all they knew it was the real Christ. How far all this is from the Christology of the suffering servant who fights only with spiritual weapons. The latter Christ, if embraced, would lead to a complete break with all the

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

“Constantinian concubinages in which the churches have installed themselves down the centuries.”<sup>28</sup> The call for radical reformation and radical peacemaking comes from George Casalis.

One wonders if the picture of the biblical Christ, who is also the risen Lord Messiah (Ps. 110:1), might not be clearer if Christians were to take seriously his demand for love within the international Church (John 13:35). Since the time of Constantine, the Church has held hands with the State and killed its own members, and the enemy, with shocking regularity. But the test of genuineness is clear: “By this shall all men recognize you as my disciples: if you have love one for another” (John 13:35). “There is no Jew, Gentile or barbarian or Scythian” (Col. 3:11). If the gift of Truth is related to submissive obedience to the word of Christ (John 8:30-32), could it be that the gift of Christological insight has been removed from churches who do not require of their members that they give up the right to take each other’s lives?

To avoid a docetic Jesus, and to ensure that we are rooted in the New Testament faith, we must return to the Synoptics. “If the concrete life of Jesus is not taken seriously, cross and resurrection are sailing in the clouds.”<sup>29</sup> Taking the Synoptic Jesus seriously means taking the Synoptic Christological message to heart, as the mature product of inspiration and reflection, certainly not “primitive” or undeveloped. At once it is obvious that Synoptic Christology finds its dynamic in the model provided by the Old Testament. Jesus is the “One who is to come.” (The method is obvious in John also.) To save the Church from “implicit and explicit Gnosticism great emphasis must be placed upon the Old Testament.”<sup>30</sup> The priestly, prophetic and royal roles of the Old Testament reach their climax in Jesus. But none of these leads to the classical definition of Chalcedon. Son of God (Ps. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14) is a royal title, when taken in its Hebrew context. “Lord” is likewise a Messianic title par excellence (Ps. 110:1; 45:11). Psalm 110:1 is of incalculable significance to the New Testament. “It is certainly no coincidence that Psalms 2 and 110 become the most important pillars of the early Church’s Christological argument from Scripture.”<sup>31</sup> How little significance they had at Chalcedon! Again:

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>31</sup> Hengel, *The Son of God*, SCM Press, 1976.

“Psalm 110 is quite decisive for early Christology . . . the most important proof-passage for the development of Christology.”<sup>32</sup>

The fact that Jesus was from the beginning known as the Son of God and even “Lord” (Messiah — Luke 1:43; 2:11; Rom. 16:18) is hardly surprising. It is not that in a Jewish context these titles were “extremely bold.”<sup>33</sup> It was indeed bold to proclaim that *Jesus* was the promised Son of God, but the Messianic titles Son of God (Ps. 2), lord (Ps. 110:1; 45:11), Son of Man (Dan. 7; Ps. 8), and even “god” (Ps. 45:6; cp. Ps. 82:6; John 10:34-36) were already at hand waiting to be applied to the “right man.”

Runia, summing up the debate, says: “Careful reading shows that both the terms Son of God and the concept of preexistence (the two cannot be separated) are more than just ways of expressing the unique and universal significance of Jesus in creation and redemption.”<sup>34</sup> But where is the evidence that Son of God implies preexistence automatically? The Son of whom it is said “Today I have begotten thee” (Ps. 2:7) is not eternally preexistent. The Synoptics offer no evidence of a Son in the incarnational sense. Peter’s confession, so critically important for New Testament Christology, is the recognition of Jesus as Messiah/Son of God. We simply may not pretend that “Son of God” = “God the Son.” Long after the resurrection Luke presents us quite explicitly with a Son of God who “comes into existence as son of Mary and Son of God simultaneously by the creative act of God.”<sup>35</sup>

A Regius Professor of ecclesiastical history in the University of Edinburgh observed that:

according to what Matthew and Luke relate of Jesus’ origin, Jesus is divinely generated . . . But He has not preexisted. He is represented as coming into being in the womb of the virgin by the generation of the Holy Spirit . . . No one can reasonably maintain that according to the versions of His supernatural generation given by Matthew and Luke Jesus existed before this creative divine act.<sup>36</sup>

In a single paragraph, Howard Marshall<sup>37</sup> claims to find a preexistent Son of God in Galatians 4:4, John 3:17, 1 John 4:9, 10, 14, and Romans 8:3. But this critically important point is not established with any

<sup>32</sup> Hengel, 62, 80.

<sup>33</sup> Runia, 90.

<sup>34</sup> Runia, 93, 94.

<sup>35</sup> John Robinson, *Human Face of God*, SCM Press, 1973, 114.

<sup>36</sup> James Mackinnon, *The Historic Jesus*, Longmans, 1931, 375.

<sup>37</sup> *Origins of New Testament Christology*, InterVarsity Press, 1976, 121.

certainty. Eternal *Sonship* stands or falls with these texts. We may well ask why it is that no one will argue for preexistence in Mark 1:38 (“To this end [the preaching of the gospel] came I out,” which Luke alters to “was I sent”). The sending amounts only to commissioning or being provided by God to fulfill a mission in the world. Where is the proof that it does not have this meaning in Romans 8:3 and Galatians 4:4?

The crux of the Christological debate lies in this matter of preexistence. Runia’s association of the Son of God with preexistence seems to stem from his traditional view rather than from the hard evidence of the New Testament. It is not difficult to see how under Gentile influence the Lord Jesus could be transformed into a cult-deity, divorced from the Messianic categories of the Old Testament. Nor is it hard to understand how the “logos” of John could later be identified one-to-one with Jesus when the human being who came into existence in the womb of Mary was “read back” into the preexistent “logos.” Only if the Lukan “conception Christology” is laid aside is the path open for the “eternal Son.” Since the word “son” must imply a separate conscious person with his own will, it is hard to see how the orthodox formulation can avoid some sort of ditheism.

Even if one speaks of a preexistent Son, there is no need to posit an *eternally* existing Son. Only when the logos was read as fully personal were the materials at hand for thinking of a second uncreated divine being. But at what cost to the unitary monotheism of both Testaments supported by the clearest “one God” statements in John (5:44; 17:3) and elsewhere in the New Testament (1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:4-6)?

What of the extensive subordinationist language of both Old and New Testament, placing the Messiah always in subjection to the One God, his Father (1 Cor. 15:28, 11:3)? The “equivalence” language in John, surely, is not that of equal substance, but of purpose, character and function, a oneness of action desirable also for all Christians (John 17:21, 22). But there *is* an “ontological” equality of Son and Father. It stems not from their being two uncreated “persons,” but from the fact that Jesus is a uniquely begotten human being and therefore more than “just a man,” but a man unlike no other who appeared as one inserted miraculously into the human family. The secret of the divine origin of Jesus is to be looked for with Matthew (1:18 — his “genesis”<sup>38</sup>), Luke, and John, read without

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<sup>38</sup> Cp. Krister Stendahl, “Quis et Unde?” W. Eltester, ed., *Judentum, Urchristentum, Kirche, Festschrift für Joachim Jeremias, Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, Beiheft XXVI, 1960, 94-105.



benefit of Greek-Chalcedonian theology, in the virginal conception. Through this miracle God transmitted something of His own personality to Jesus as fathers do to their sons.<sup>39</sup> Because of his royal status Jesus may receive the staggering honor of being addressed as “God” (always in a secondary sense as in Ps. 45:6; cp. Heb. 1:8; Ps. 82:6; cp. John 10:34-36). Jesus functions for God and displays the character of God. “Representation easily becomes identity in Judaism,”<sup>40</sup> but the two must not be confused, just as the “angel of the Lord” is not *actually* Yahweh though he may bear His name (Ex. 23:21). In the New Testament Jesus is God’s plenipotentiary, but not “the One God” (1 John 5:20 is no exception).<sup>41</sup> As reflecting the divine majesty Jesus may be worshipped as Messiah. But “worship” may be offered to human beings (Rev. 3:9).<sup>42</sup> The model for the “worship” of the divine representative par excellence is found in 1 Chronicles 29:20. Another word (λατρεύειν) is reserved in the New Testament for religious service offered to the Father.

Our four Gospels unite to tell us, before all else, that Jesus is the promised *Christ*, the Son of God (Matt. 16:16; John 20:31). That is the New Testament’s thesis statement. Chalcedon said something rather different — hence the tensions so clearly manifested by the current search for a non-docetic Christology which does full justice to a fully human Jesus, uniquely God’s Son, foreordained from eternity and manifested as God’s last word (1 Pet. 1:20; Heb. 1:2; Rev. 13:8).

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<sup>39</sup> Cp. John 1:18.

<sup>40</sup> Oscar Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament*, SCM Press, 1959, 140.

<sup>41</sup> The pronoun “this” refers to God, the Father, and the statement harmonizes with John 17:3 where the “only true God” is distinct from Jesus, the Messiah.

<sup>42</sup> Where the Greek is “προσκύβειν.”