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1

CHRIST IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

CHRISTIANITY by its very name has always honored Jesus Christ as its historical and theological center. No other person has been more essential to its origination and subsequent history and no set of doctrines has been more determinative than the doctrines of the person and work of Christ. In approaching a study of Christology, one is therefore concerned with central rather than peripheral theological matters. One's faith in and understanding of Jesus Christ involve the most important theological issues anyone can face.

DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

In the history of theological thought concerning Christ until modern times there was always a solid core of doctrine which can be equated with biblical orthodoxy. The early church Fathers, struggling with the obvious problem of the doctrine of the Trinity and how could God be Three and yet One, stated in enduring terms that while God is One numerically, He subsists in three Persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit who are equal in eternity, power and glory, Each possessing all the divine attributes and yet having properties which distinguish Them within the unity of the Trinity. A milestone in the statement of this important doctrine of the Trinity was reached in the Nicene Council in 325 and was matured and restated by the Protestant Reformers.

ORTHODOX DOCTRINE OF THE PERSON AND WORK OF CHRIST

Following the delineation of the doctrine of the Trinity, the subject of the person of Christ incarnate also received major at-

tention in the early church. Discussions concerning the relationship of the human and divine natures finally achieved a standard of orthodoxy when the person of Christ was defined as having a complete human nature and a complete divine nature united in one Person without moral complication (e.g., in the Chalcedonian Creed, 451). Although Calvinistic and Lutheran definitions of the human nature of Christ differ in some details in their doctrine of the person of Christ, a well-defined pattern emerged which can be described as orthodox.

Discussions of the person of Christ inevitably led to study of His work, especially His work in death on the cross. Here again, though definitions varied, the objective fact that Christ died for our sins and by this act of redemption achieved reconciliation of man to God forms the mainstream of orthodox conviction. Generally speaking, within orthodoxy the bodily resurrection of Christ and His bodily second coming to the earth have not been questioned.

EARLY DISSENT FROM ORTHODOXY

From the early days of the church, however, some have dissented from what might be described as the main thrust of orthodoxy. During the third century, the Alexandrian School of Theology with its attempted harmonization of Plato and Christianity tended to regard all Scripture as a revelation in symbolic or allegorical rather than literal and historical terms. An important fourth century event was the challenge by Arius to the eternity of Christ which ended in his condemnation at the Council of Nicaea. The allegorical approach to biblical revelation, which characterized the Alexandrian school, had its counterpart in the later philosophy of Hegel who regarded the biblical record as presenting concepts which belong to the Christian faith in symbolic terms. In various forms this point of view has persisted to the present day and has influenced many diverse systems of theology both conservative and liberal.

RISE OF MODERN LIBERALISM

Another major movement in the history of the doctrine of Christ can be observed in the introduction by Ritschl and Schleiermacher of the concept that the language of Scripture should be studied for its spiritual intent, namely, the ethical and theological

implications rather than the explicit statements of the Bible.¹ This led to contemporary liberalism of the twentieth century which assumes that the Bible cannot be taken seriously in its historical or factual content, but considers Scripture only a means of gaining spiritual insights. Obviously this point of view often resulted in the rejection of the full deity of Christ, the doctrine of the Trinity, and substitutionary atonement as well as questions concerning the bodily resurrection of Christ and His bodily second coming.

The conflict between orthodoxy and modern liberalism had many causes. John S. Lawton traces it first to a shift from a priori to a posteriori method, that is, a change of acquiring and interpreting knowledge from consideration of principles to formulating knowledge by an induction based upon all the facts which could be obtained, an approach in keeping with the modern emphasis on science. A second major factor was the rise of evolution as a means of explaining complex modern life with an emphasis on God's being in the natural process. Hence God is knowable by experience in a way that a transcendent God could never be understood. This in turn laid the groundwork for the third major factor, the so-called historical approach to the Scriptures, and a naturalistic explanation of life as a whole. These approaches undermined the whole superstructure of orthodoxy including traditional approaches to Christology. An attempt to explain God and His world inductively and by a process of natural evolution left no real basis for worship of a supernatural Deity, and this opened the way for the reaction to liberalism which has been called neoorthodoxy.²

RISE OF NEOORTHODOXY

The religious insights of liberalism were so anemic and subjective that they did not provide a living faith for people and nations in crisis. Out of World War I came the new movement known as neoorthodoxy sparked by Karl Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans* which challenged the naturalism of liberalism and

¹Albrecht Ritschl, for instance, refers to orthodox interpretation depending on "its mechanical use of Bible authority for its theological system" and agrees with Schleiermacher in regarding terms like "prophet, priest, and king" in reference to Christ as "metaphorical expressions" and as "typical notions" (cf. *A Critical History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation*, pp. 3-4).

²Cf. John S. Lawton, *Conflict in Christology*, pp. 1-23.

its doctrine that God is immanent or in the world, but not transcendent or greater than the world. Barthianism restored revelation to a supernatural communication of the infinite God to finite man, communication in which Jesus Christ is the principal medium.

Although Barth tended to reestablish Jesus Christ as the virgin-born Son of Mary who was in fact God and Man at the same time, his failure to be clear on the role of history in revelation and his tendency to regard real communication as suprahistorical has tended to make the main facts concerning Christ experiential. Hence, the Christ of the Scriptures is to some extent supplanted by the Christ of experience, and the resulting doctrines become subjective in contemporary theology rather than historical and revelatory in absolute terms in the Scripture.

Karl Barth is sometimes charged with Christomonism, the reduction of all theology to Christology.³ Although the charge is only partially true, Barth has emphasized the incarnation as the major act of God's self-revelation to man. The major question of theology is how to understand God's communication in the incarnation of Christ. It is through the incarnation that God speaks to man and reconciles man to Himself.

Introducing the subject of "Jesus Christ" in his *Dogmatics in Outline*, Barth writes,

The heart of the object of Christian faith is the word of the act in which God from all eternity willed to become man in Jesus Christ for our good, did become man in time for our good, and will be and remain man in eternity for our good. This work of the Son of God includes in itself the work of the Father as its presupposition and the work of the Holy Spirit as its consequence.⁴

A discussion of Barthian Christology is a major field of contemporary theology. While agreeing with most orthodox doctrines relating to Christ as illustrated in his treatment of the Apostles' Creed in *Dogmatics in Outline*, Barth's approach is more philosophic and experiential in that the Bible is considered a channel of experiencing Christ theologically, but Barth does not hold with orthodoxy that the Bible is factual revelation. He is, however, closer to orthodoxy than most in the neoorthodox

³Cf. Arnold B. Come, *An Introduction to Barth's "Dogmatics" for Preachers*, pp. 133 ff.

⁴Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, p. 65.

school, and unquestionably believes in the deity of Jesus Christ, His virgin birth, and His death and resurrection, in contrast to Reinhold Niebuhr, who seems to question all of these important doctrines.⁵ All theologians classified as neoorthodox tend to emphasize contemporary experience rather than historic revelation as embodied in Scripture. The work of Emil Brunner *Revelation and Reason* is a classic expression of the neoorthodox concept of revelation.

RISE OF BULTMANNISM

The swing to a more supernatural God with its resulting effect upon the subject of the person and work of Christ in the period following World War II was followed by a movement back to a more liberal concept crystallized in the writings of Rudolf Bultmann. Seeking to establish the viewpoint of the early church, Bultmann adopted the approach of demythologizing Scripture and with it *Formgeschichte* as the main means of determining the real meaning of the New Testament and the viewpoint of the early church. Bultmann holds that "the so-called social gospel" as well as "eschatological preaching"—the idea that the kingdom of God is wholly future—are both unsatisfactory.⁶ He prefers "*de-mythologizing*," an attempt to get behind "the mythological conceptions" of Scriptures to their "deeper meaning."⁷ In his attempt to eliminate the supernatural and arrive at a nonmiraculous interpretation of the New Testament, Bultmann tended to dilute the facts concerning the historical Jesus in the Bible with emphasis on what he believed the early church held rather than what the Bible itself actually teaches.

Bultmann's concept of demythologization is based on a technical definition of a myth, not as a fantasy, or a mere fiction, but the sense in which it is used in comparative religion where it is a statement of man's experience. Jesus, according to Bultmann, spoke in the terms of His day, and thus taught that He had descended from heaven, that He was contending against Satan, and used the concept of a three-story universe, that is, the heavens above, the earth, and that which is below the earth. This was coupled with reference to miracles and other supernatural events.

⁵Cf. Hans Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, or any of Niebuhr's many works.

⁶Cf. Rudolf K. Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, pp. 11-18.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 18.

According to Bultmann, all these are ideas clothed in language which now must be stripped of its superficialities and invested with the true intent of the teaching. We must get away from the pictures to the event itself.

The return to the historical Jesus is complicated by the fact that Bultmann considers the Gospels merely a record of what the early church believed Jesus thought and did. Actually, according to Bultmann, all the facts presented in the Bible were filtered through the mind and faith of the church, and probably Jesus did not do the things and say the things which the Scripture ascribes to Him. The process of demythologizing is to get back to the experience of the early church which prompted scriptural accounts. Their experiential encounter with Christ is the *kerygma*, or the message which must be repeated today, even though the precise details of the Bible may be uncertain.

Bultmann opens his treatment of *Theology of the New Testament* with the statement

The message of Jesus is a presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of that theology itself. . . . But Christian faith did not exist until there was a Christian kerygma; i.e., a kerygma proclaiming Jesus Christ—specifically Jesus Christ the Crucified and Risen One—to be God's eschatological act of salvation. He was first so proclaimed in the kerygma of the earliest Church, not in the message of the historical Jesus. . . . Thus, theological thinking—the theology of the New Testament—begins with the *kerygma* of the earliest Church and not before.⁸

Bultmann, however, acknowledges that Paul's theology shows frequent use of primitive Christian tradition. Vincent Taylor, for instance, cites numerous passages in Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* where Paul is said to rely upon earlier traditions of the church.⁹ Significantly, Bultmann by this confession relates Paul more intimately with the early church than would otherwise be the case.¹⁰

⁸Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, I, 3. For a summary of Bultmann, cf. John Lawson, *Comprehensive Handbook of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 35-38.

⁹Vincent Taylor, *The Person of Christ*, p. 36. Taylor cites Bultmann, *Theology of . . .*, I, 46-47, 50-52, 81, 98, 125, 129, 131-32.

¹⁰For a broad discussion of influences leading from Schleiermacher to Bultmann and the contemporary revolt against Bultmann, see Carl E. Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics*, pp. 130-59.

CONTEMPORARY CONFUSION

When Bultmann was overtaken by age and infirmity, his disciples tended to return to the search for the so-called historical Jesus with the implication that the Bible is not an accurate presentation of the actual Jesus of history. All varieties of divergent opinion can be observed from the relatively conservative point of view of Oscar Cullmann, who considers as fact that Jesus regarded Himself as the Messiah, to the more radical disciples of Bultmann such as Herbert Braun and Manfred Mezger, who have reduced revelation almost entirely to personal communication between God and man with corresponding neglect of Scripture.¹¹ At the beginning of the final third of the twentieth century, the pendulum seems to be swinging back again to a position more friendly to Barth, but still far from historical orthodoxy.

EMERGING FACTORS IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTOLOGY

In surveying contemporary Christology, certain major factors emerge. First and probably most important is the fact that any Christological system can be no better than the view of Scripture on which it rests. Orthodoxy historically has assumed the accuracy, authority and the inerrancy of the Scripture record. Hence, the search for the historical Jesus as well as the theological facts concerning Him are determined under this point of view by what the Scriptures actually teach. It is significant that aside from a few cults, whose teachings are quite contradictory, students of Christology who have accepted the Bible as the inerrant and authoritative Word of God have invariably also accepted the deity of Jesus Christ and the historical accuracy of His virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary death and bodily resurrection. Variations on these major aspects of Christology almost always stem from a denial in some form of the accuracy and authority of the Scriptures.

A second major fact in Christology has been the hermeneutics or principles of interpretation of Scripture. Those who, like the ancient school of theology at Alexandria, deny that the Bible is normally to be considered in its grammatical and historical sense and who substitute a symbolic interpretation, have also tended to question the major facts concerning Jesus Christ. If the Bible is

¹¹Cf. Carl F. H. Henry (ed.), *Jesus of Nazareth: Saviour and Lord*, p. 7.

not to be taken literally, then the virgin birth, the miracles of Christ, His death on the cross and His resurrection as well as the theological explanation of these historical facts are all left in question. The search for a true Christology which is not linked to the authoritative Scriptures is therefore endless and almost fruitless.

Modern confusion and the multiplied divergent views concerning Christ which have arisen in the twentieth century are the product of this uncertainty as to whether the Bible speaks authoritatively and in factual terms. The pendulum will, therefore, continue to swing erratically between those who take the Bible more seriously than others such as Barth and those who attempt to rewrite the Scriptures completely as does Bultmann. The fact that these theoretical interpretations have their rise and fall often within the same generation is a testimony to their lack of objective connection with the Bible and with any norm of truth which endures the scrutiny of succeeding generations.

MAJOR TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTOLOGY

Unquestionably, the modern world does not accept the orthodox definition of the person and work of Christ. As John Baillie wrote in the context of liberalism following World War I, "In most of our communities there is to be found a surprisingly large number of men and women who are prevented from a whole-hearted sympathy with the Christian teaching and a whole-hearted participation in the life of the Christian Church by the necessity of making some kind of reservation."¹² He goes on to state that the modern mind has no problem with the doctrine of God the Father, and its human need can be met by divine love and acceptance of many Christian ideals. But he states, "The doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation and the Atonement have never been anything else to them than a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence."¹³ The attitude of a friendly interest in Jesus Christ, but an unwillingness to accept the theological statements of the Bible concerning Him as a Member of the Trinity, as virgin-born and incarnate, and His death as a real redemption from sin, continues to grip a major section of the church today.

¹²John Baillie, *The Place of Jesus Christ in Modern Christianity*, p. 1.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

Baillie goes on to restate in simplest form basic Christian doctrine almost totally rejected by the modern mind.¹⁴

Carl Henry has summarized the major trends of the past century in these words:

The rationalistic liberalism of Schleiermacher, Ritschl, and Troeltsch was the dominant religious force in the forefront of our century. Classic modernism, a theology of intensified divine immanence, so neglected God's transcendence in relationship to man and His universe that it left no room for miracle, special revelation, or special redemption. The Christian religion was viewed as a variety of religion in general—even if it had certain unique features, and could in some respects be viewed as "higher" than the others. Compatible with this basic outlook, Christian religious experience was viewed as a variety of universal religious experience. Against this speculative immanentism, Karl Barth reasserted God's transcendence and special divine initiative, His wrath against man as sinner, and the reality of miraculous revelation and miraculous redemption. So contagious was this "theology of crisis" that by 1930 most German theologians conceded the death of rationalistic modernism, or classic liberalism, which Barth had deplored as heresy. They proclaimed the triumph of dialectical theology over immanent philosophy.¹⁵

Although Bultmann overtook Barth in many areas and to some extent supplanted him, his supposed victory is now seen to be transitory and fading. As Henry says,

The central problem of New Testament studies today is to delineate Jesus of Nazareth without dissolving Him as the Bultmannians did, without demeaning Him as many dialectical theologians did, and without reconstructing Him as nineteenth-century historicism did, so that it becomes clear why and how He is decisive for Christian faith.¹⁶

The revolt against Bultmann is described by Henry as the *Heilsgeschichte* school, with more emphasis on the historical and factual character of the Bible than was allowed by Bultmann. Henry summarizes it,

The *Heilsgeschichte* school reflects important points of agreement with evangelical positions. First, divine revelation and redemption are acknowledged as objective historical realities. Second, the sacred events are considered as know-

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 5-10.

¹⁵Henry, p. 4.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 16.

able to historians by the methods of historical research. Third, the Old Testament is interpreted as the history of God which was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and the New Testament is interpreted as the fulfillment of the Old Testament. Fourth, the meaning of these events is held to be divinely given, not humanly postulated.¹⁷

Henry may be overly optimistic in considering this a partial return to an evangelical position, but the rising and falling of opinions concerning Christ in the Scriptures illustrates the dilemma of the modern mind attempting to avoid commitment to the factual accuracy of divinely inspired and authoritative Scripture and at the same time trying to achieve normative truth concerning Christ and the Christian faith in general.

PRINCIPLES GOVERNING A BIBLICAL CHRISTOLOGY

In the study of the person and work of Christ, the theological and hermeneutical principles assumed will dictate to some extent the resulting interpretation. A student of Christology must necessarily decide in preliminary study such important questions as to whether the Bible is an infallible and authoritative revelation concerning the facts of Jesus Christ. Historically, the view of Scripture assumed by any interpreter is almost determinative, and those who assume the infallibility and verbal inerrancy of the Bible, generally speaking, support the orthodox view of Christ.

Important in basic principle is the dictum that the Bible is factual and propositional in its presentation of truth. Neoorthodox theologians such as Barth, Brunner and Niebuhr regard Scripture as a channel of revelation rather than an objective factual record and, while attributing some authority to Scripture, do not regard it as inerrant or infallible. Bultmann and his school of thought regard Scripture as a much edited and amended record of first century teaching which cannot be taken at face value. Liberal theologians in general deny an authoritative character to the Bible and, to varying degrees, question both the facts and presentation of Scripture as truth. Obviously a Christology can be no better than the scriptural premises upon which it stands.

Within orthodoxy there are a number of problems of interpretation. The four Gospels presenting four different treatments of

¹⁷*Ibid.*

the life, death and resurrection of Christ are an area of specialized study. Generally orthodox scholars adopt the principle that theological and factual harmonization of these accounts can be achieved, although solutions to some problems are obscure. Although the four Gospels present four different portraits of Christ, orthodoxy assumes that the variations do not constitute contradictions, but rather different pictures of the same Person.

Any system of Christological interpretation must also rely not only on the gospel narratives but on the interpretation of facts about Christ given in Acts and the Epistles as well as the book of Revelation.

The task of the Christology student is to take the facts presented in Scripture and organize them into theological statement. Contemporary theology has erred because of premises which do not recognize the accuracy of scriptural revelation, unwillingness to take as factual scriptural pronouncements concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ, and emphasis upon experiential contemporary revelation rather than the Scriptures. The Christ of contemporary experience provides no norms, and a variety of Christological concepts resulting from this approach characterizes modern Christology. The biblical approach, while accounting for all genuine spiritual experience, relies upon the historic and theological record of Scriptures, and upon this a biblical Christology must be built.