

*Since the late 1970s, the field of systematic theology has been home to an **explosion of** diverse efforts to produce major dogmatic works: the evangelical, the ecumenical, and the experiential. In assessing the value of such works, however; the norm remains the same: whether they strengthen the life of the church and its witness to Jesus Christ.*

# The Revival of Systematic Theology

## *An Overview*

Gabriel Fackre

*Professor of Christian Theology*

*Andover Newton Theological School*

**AN EARLIER GENERATION** of pastors cut their eyeteeth on the systematic theology of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, and Paul Tillich.<sup>1</sup> Or, short of the giants, a Gustaf Aulén or Louis Berkhof might have found its way onto study shelves.” In those days, theologians were writing comprehensive works, and students, clergy, and church leaders were reading them. It was generally assumed that responsible preaching and teaching in congregations could not be done without careful study of the foundational materials, and that meant “systematic theology” as the visiting of the loci, the “common places” of Christian belief.

The towering figures passed from the scene and with them the writing-and also the reading-of this genre. The 1960s and 1970s brought ad hoc theology to the fore. Theological “bits and pieces” or “theology and ...” were the order of the day. Some on the Continent did continue to write weighty multi-volume works, especially in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions, which **were** translated and used in a few seminaries in this country: Helmut Thielicke, Otto Weber, and G. C. Berkouwer.<sup>3</sup> But systematics classes in mainline academia that sought current homegrown products had only a few to assign students, notably John

Macquarrie's *Principles of Christian Theology*, Gordon Kaufman's *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective*, and Shirley Guthrie's *Christian Doctrine*.<sup>4</sup>

Then came the deluge. Since the late 1970s, over sixty full-scale ventures in "theology-in-the-round" have been published in the English-speaking world. The surge is marked by a much greater variety of points of view, reflecting the theological pluralism of the day. The nomenclature itself expresses the current diversity. Some call the discipline "dogmatics," others prefer "systematics," and still others choose the label "constructive theology," to stress the contextuality of all such writing, and yet others opt for the modesty of "introduction."

In this new quest for the comprehensive, the subject matter is little different from former days. "Dogmatics" or "systematics" or "constructive theology" or "introduction" is a journey through the loci. After methodological prolegomena (authority and revelation), the course of the biblical drama or of the ecumenical creeds shapes the treatment of topics. Not all would use the traditional language, but the sequence usually begins with the doctrine of God, then moves to creation and fall (cosmology, anthropology), the person and work of Christ (christology, objective soteriology), the church (ecclesiology, sacramentology, missiology), salvation (subjective soteriology or its equivalents), and consummation (eschatology). Given the diversity of the day, the order might be rearranged, some topics treated minimally and others maximally, and some not at all ("Israelology," the covenant chapter on the Jewish people, is too often omitted).<sup>5</sup>

For all the differences in perspective, what makes a "systematics" is: **comprehensiveness**, the coverage of the standard places of Christian teaching; **coherence**, a demonstration of the topics' interrelationships; and **contextuality**, the interpretation of the sweep of doctrine in terms of current issues and idiom. A fourth feature that marks classical and enduring works is **conversation**, an engagement with a range of historical and contemporary points of view.

Why the widespread interest in the comprehensive, coherent, and contextual study of Christian teaching? One reason is that pastors and teachers are being asked for help from parishioners faced with the vigorous advocacy of **other** world-views, either specifically religious ones or secular claims to ultimacy. Hence, the plea in many congregations is to attend to Christian basics and, with that, the growth of study groups on "what we believe." The resurgence in the field of systematics is a response, a resource for pastors and teachers.<sup>6</sup>

A second reason is implicit in the first. The quest for clarity about what Christians believe is inseparable from knowledge of the theological *heritage*. Loss of identity in the church is like amnesia in persons. Finding out who one is means recovering one's memory. Hence comes the concern to reinterrogate the tradition. With all the diversity in today's systematics, the subject matter tends to be the beliefs found in the confessional and creedal lore, and in traditional worship and hymnody.

A third reason for such widespread interest is a natural companion to the others. Identity is not only who we were, but who we **are**. Christian convictions have to be communicated in the setting of our own time and place. As circumstances change, what has been said about church basics earlier and elsewhere has to be interpreted anew. The context and categories of the major systematicians of the earlier decades of the twentieth century (and those who preceded them) are different from our own. What we do have in the new momentum in systematics is a generation of teachers—many of them senior or mid-career and most of whom are responsible for introductory courses in theology in their schools—who believe the time has come to restate the ancient faith in terms of the challenges of this day and age. However different the perspectives may be, all the current projects seek to make the Christian faith **understandable** as well as **recoverable**.

Cultural pulse-takers might wonder about all this talk of “world-views” and “systems.” Have the postmodernists not taught us to respect ambiguity and refrain from attempts at synoptic vision? What of Richard Rorty’s assertion that “There’s No Big Picture”?’ Or the comparable advice in some theological quarters: “Just tell your own story for there is no Big Story”?’ The counter-question of most of those writing today’s systematics is: How is the declamation, “There is no big picture,” not itself a Big Picture? Indeed it is, complete with its secular cosmology, anthropology, eschatology, and all the rest. Every one of our little stories assumes some version of a Big Story about how the world works. Better to be clear about this, and thus the need for careful (i.e., systematic) theological self-examination.

## Types of Systematic Theology

Using self-designations found in many current works, the variety of participants and points of view fall into the categories of **evangelical**, **ecumenical**, and **experiential**. We shall use this taxonomy to identify the range of current works. All three types are represented in the subsequent essays in this issue.

### Evangelical Systematics

In the sixteenth century, the word “evangelical” described the mainstream Reformation churches, and it still does in the names of some national churches. Evangelical faith was marked by its formal and material principles: the authority of scripture and justification by grace through faith. “Evangelical” today refers to a subsequent movement shaped by pietism, the Great Awakenings and a revivalism that intensified and interiorized these two Reformation principles. Contemporary evangelicalism is characterized by (1) strict allegiance to, and interpretation of, scripture and (2) intense personal appropriation of justifying faith in a

“born again” experience. For all the variety—from evangelistically-oriented to “justice and peace” emphases in matters of mission, from “inerrantists” to “infallibilists” in biblical interpretation, from premillennial to postmillennial and amillennial views (and their variations) in eschatology—the *commonalities* of rigorous biblical authority and personally intense soteriological piety continue to be defining characteristics of modern evangelicalism.<sup>8</sup>

Self-identified evangelical systematians were among the pioneers of the current systematics recovery. While evangelicalism’s premier theologian, Carl Henry, did not begin his *God, Revelation and Authority* as a systematics, it turned out to look very much like one by volumes five and six, covering as it did almost all the standard topics.<sup>9</sup> In 1978, Donald Bloesch’s two volume *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* appeared and was widely used by evangelical pastors.” Currently, Bloesch is at work on a new seven-volume systematic series, *Christian Foundations*, with the first two volumes now in print (*A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method* and *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation*).<sup>11</sup> About the same time as the earlier works of Henry and Bloesch appeared, Dale Moody wrote *The Word of Truth* with a breadth of scholarship that gave it entree to circles well beyond the Baptist seminaries for which it was intended.” Shortly after these earlier ventures, Millard Erickson wrote *Christian Theology*, a learned three-volume work, currently more widely used as a required text in systematics in evangelical seminaries than any other.<sup>13</sup>

These initial ventures were succeeded in the late 1980s and early 1990s by a number of substantial evangelical works, some of them multi-volume, and each with a special angle or audience. Paul Jewett wrote the first volume (*God, Creation and Revelation*) of a projected series cut short by his untimely death; it includes sermons by a pastor, Marguerite Shuster, to illustrate doctrinal themes.<sup>14</sup> The first volume of *Systematic Theology*, carefully developed by James Leo Garrett, Jr. and directed to both a Southern Baptist audience and a broader constituency, came out about the same time.<sup>15</sup> Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest co-authored the three-volume *Integrative Theology*, which constitutes an attempt to bring systematic interests together with biblical, historical, apologetic, and cultural concerns.<sup>16</sup> Biblical scholar Wayne Grudem wrote his *Systematic Theology*, stressing the accessibility of doctrine in hymns, worship, and practice.” In *What Christians Believe*, co-authors Alan F. Johnson and Robert E. Webber endeavor to blend historical, biblical, and systematic areas of inquiry.<sup>18</sup> Robert Lightner has taken up premillennial interests in *Evangelical Theology: A Survey and Review*.<sup>19</sup> Intersarsity Press has launched a series on the major doctrines, *Contours of Christian Theology*, with three volumes now in print, and has published in one volume James Montgomery Boice’s collected doctrinal works as *Foundations of the Christian Faith*.<sup>20</sup>

Some evangelical works have very explicit ecclesial frameworks. William W. Menzies and Stanley M. Horton’s *Bible Doctrines* was written from a Pentecostal

perspective.<sup>21</sup> Richard Rice's mid-eighties volume, *The Reign of God*, stressed its Seventh-Day Adventist perspective.<sup>22</sup> William Rodman's ambitious three-volume systematics, *Renewal Theology*, was written from a charismatic perspective.<sup>23</sup> The earlier mentioned works by Moody and Garrett are in the Southern Baptist tradition. Stanley Grenz's *Theology for the Community of God*, while introducing an evangelical audience to Pannenbergian themes, is a self-consciously Baptist work.<sup>24</sup> Standing in the same Southern Baptist tradition is the forthcoming 1995 work by A. J. Conyers, *A Basic Christian Theology*.<sup>25</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony defends a "reconstructionist" reading of the Calvinist tradition in his two-volume *Systematic Theology*.<sup>26</sup>

The quality of current evangelical scholarship is increasingly gaining recognition in the academy. In the field of systematics, for example, British theologian Alistair McGrath was commissioned by Basil Blackwell to write *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, which now serves in commonwealth universities as a textbook in historical theology and systematics.<sup>27</sup> He is also writing a multi-volume work in systematics.

## **Ecumenical Systematics**

About the same time that evangelicals began again to write systematic theologies, "ecumenicals," too, showed new interest in theology-in-the-round. An ecumenical systematics strives to honor the historic faith and its biblical grounding, but gives extended attention as well to the contemporary context and actively engages in the current ecumenical exchange.<sup>28</sup>

Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof, long active in the ecumenical movement, was one of the first to return to the task of writing systematics. His book *Christian Faith* (1978), which restates Reformed theology in light of contemporary issues, has proved to be a durable work and is now in a revised edition.<sup>29</sup> Another European theologian active in the ecumenical movement, Jan Milič Lochman, has written a self-designated "ecumenical dogmatics," *The Faith We Confess*.<sup>30</sup> In this country, Owen Thomas first had his *Introduction to Theology* published and, later, its companion piece, *Theological Questions*.<sup>31</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, a key drafter of ecumenical documents (among them sections of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*) penned the one-volume *Doxology* as a systematics written within the framework of worship.<sup>32</sup> Among this initial spate of books on ecumenical systematic theology was also the writer's *The Christian Story* (1978).<sup>33</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, the momentum in ecumenical systematics went forward, continuing to the present time. Further, systematic works in specific denominational traditions, in both ecumenical and evangelical perspective, became a feature. One of the first of these works was the two-volume *Christian Dogmatics*, edited by Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson and written in conjunction with eight other Lutheran theologians.<sup>34</sup> *Responsible Faith*, a one-volume *systemat-*

ics by Hans Schwarz,<sup>35</sup> and *God-The World's Future*, by Ted Peters,<sup>36</sup> which is a self-declared “postmodern” effort, are Lutheran contributions. Daniel Migliore, in dialogue with liberation theologies, writes in *Faith Seeking Understanding*<sup>37</sup> as a Reformed theologian. John Leith's *Basic Christian Doctrine* is also a systematic in Reformed perspective, grounded in the author's long-time work in the history of doctrine.<sup>38</sup> Gordon Spykman's *Reformational Theology* stands in the Calvinist tradition, appropriating the Dutch-Christian philosophical and cultural traditions of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd.<sup>39</sup> Anglican bishop Hugh Montefiore writes out of his tradition in *Credible Christianity*, but with the concerns of the “Gospel and Culture” movement associated with Lesslie Newbigin.<sup>40</sup>

Roman Catholic systematics also had its fresh start in the late 1970s. Karl Rahner, though numbered among the great figures of the century for his many publications and much influence, never wrote a Roman Catholic *summa* comparable to Karl Barth's *Dogmatics*. But his *Foundations of Christian Faith* (1978) with its philosophical prolegomenon, helped to launch a parallel recovery of systematic theology in Roman Catholic circles.<sup>41</sup> Richard McBrien's *Catholicism* (1981), just republished, has had a large readership in both academia and church; its purpose is to bring the *aggiornamento* program of Vatican II into the teaching of doctrine.<sup>42</sup> More recently, Frans Jozef van Beeck has begun a multi-volume work in Roman Catholic systematics linking “creed, code, and cult.”<sup>43</sup> For their part, Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John Galvin assembled a group of leading Roman Catholic theologians to write on the major doctrines in their two-volume *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*.<sup>44</sup> And in *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, Avery Dulles first engages a range of Christian thinkers from the fathers to the twentieth-century giants and then sets forth his own “systematics synthesis.”<sup>45</sup>

Alongside the authors from Roman Catholic and magisterial Reformation traditions, Protestants of free-church perspective have likewise produced their own works. Thomas Finger's two-volume *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach* stands in the stream of the left-wing Reformation.\* James McClendon's two-volume *Systematic Theology (Ethics and Doctrine)*, which emphasizes “practice,” draws on the Baptist heritage.<sup>47</sup> And Michael Pomazansky, in his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, writes out of the Eastern Orthodox tradition.<sup>48</sup>

“Ecumenical systematics” is obviously a capacious rubric. Some who place themselves within it stretch the boundaries toward either the evangelical side on the one hand or the experiential side on the other. One self-identified ecumenical, Thomas Oden, gives a “paleo-orthodox” turn to most Christian doctrines in his three-volume *Systematic Theology*; primarily, he draws on patristic, medieval, and Reformation writers.<sup>49</sup> By the same token, there is also a wing of ecumenical theology, which finds a significant place for scripture and tradition, that gives major attention to some aspects of contemporary experience. Gustavo Gutiérrez has both been a pioneer in the recovery of systematic theology and, in his groundbreaking book, *Liberation Theology*, sought to reconstruct Roman Catholic

theology within the context of Latin American struggles for justice.<sup>50</sup> Fred Herzog in *God-Walk?* and Douglas John Hall in his projected trilogy, *Thinking the Faith, Professing the Faith*, and *Confessing the Faith*, situate classical belief, in dialogue with liberation concerns, in a North American context.<sup>52</sup> With special attention to issues of gender and sexuality, Christopher Morse's *Not Every Spirit* (1994) underscores the "disbeliefs" required by Christian faithfulness.<sup>53</sup> In some ecumenical works, currents in philosophy play a large role, as in the influence of process thought in Kenneth Cauthen's *Systematic Theology: A Modern Protestant Approach*<sup>54</sup> and Langdon Gilkey's *Message and Existence*.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the widely used seminary textbook edited by Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King, *Christian Theology: An Introduction to Its Traditions and Tasks*, includes writers who fall in both the ecumenical and experiential categories, depending on the extent to which today's context is seen to require a "new paradigm" for systematics.<sup>56</sup>

Notable among ecumenical theologians writing systematic theologies are Jirgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Of worldwide influence, both have assisted in the recovery of systematics, though Moltmann refers to his five-volume project as "systematic fragments." Pannenberg and Moltmann have both taken eschatology as an organizing theme, though in different ways. Moltmann's project, *Messianic Theology (The Trinity and the Kingdom, God in Creation, The Way of Jesus Christ, and The Spirit of Life)*, draws out the sociopolitical import of the coming reign of God at every doctrinal juncture.<sup>57</sup> Pannenberg's *Systematic Theology*, two volumes of which are now in translation, is distinguished by its stress on the coherence of Christian claims with a universal rationality and eschatological verification.<sup>58</sup> When speaking of the premier theologians, do we add here the reappearance of Karl Barth himself in the first volume of his never-before translated *The Göttingen Dogmatics*?<sup>59</sup>

## Experiential Systematics

The word and the concept "experience" are notorious for the variety of interpretations current and possible. Here, "experience" refers to the range of universal human sensibilities that lie beyond the boundaries of scripture and Christian community: "the world" outside "the Bible" and "the church."<sup>60</sup> "World" so understood has its affective, rational, and moral dimensions: "thinking," "doing," and "feeling."<sup>61</sup> The world, of course, is much concerned with Bible and church. Scripture and Christian community are also enmeshed in experiential habitats and cultural contexts, challenging hermeneutics to discern that which is abiding within that which is transitory.

In the current examples of this type of systematics, "experience" functions both normatively and descriptively. Its exponents see it as operating both positively and negatively: negatively, without acknowledgment in alternative theological programs; and positively, in their own efforts in theological reconstruction.

As such, the major current expression of experiential systematics rises out of an ethical protest against both received interpretations and restatements of faith. Descriptively, “the way things are” is analyzed by a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” Thus traditional theologies, whether “conservative” or “liberal,” are viewed as the creatures of social, economic, or political power. Normatively, “the ways things should be” is stated through a victim-oriented hermeneutic. Hence, the texts and traditions of the Christian community are reframed in terms of the experiential concerns of the powerless.

Rosemary Radford Ruether’s *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983) is one of the first, and clearest, expressions of a protest systematics, revising traditional content and categories in terms of the experiences of oppression and liberation, especially as these have been sensed in “women-church.”<sup>62</sup> The more recent *Lift Every Voice*, edited by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel, is a reconstruction of the received tradition “from the underside” by representatives of lesbian and other marginalized or emerging communities.<sup>63</sup> With closely related social justice and feminist concerns, Dorothee Soelle’s *Thinking About God* contrasts her liberation perspective on the loci with “conservative” and “liberal” interpretations.<sup>64</sup> James Cone’s *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970) was the manifesto of a new movement.<sup>65</sup> Although brief in scope, a case could be made that it was, as well, the first example of an experientialist systematics, redoing the classical teachings in the categories of African-American experiences of oppression and liberation, and repudiating earlier readings as the ideology of white wielders of power. James H. Evans’s recent *We Have Been Believers* is in the same tradition, asserting biblical authority but holding it to be open-ended, inviting the imaginative “conjuring” of its meaning in terms of the African-American struggle for justice.<sup>66</sup>

Experientialist systematic theologies have recourse to determinative philosophical as well as social-ethical frameworks. Modified process-theological perspectives supply the orientation points in the earlier volume of Marjorie Hewett Suchocki, *God Christ Church*<sup>67</sup> and the recent work of Robert Neville, *A Theology Primer*,<sup>68</sup> although each has other issues (Suchocki, feminist concerns and Neville, Methodist accents). *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context*, by Ninian Smart and Steve Konstantine, espouses a “soft relativism” for religiously pluralist times, calling for attention to the contributions of university religious-studies programs.<sup>69</sup> Paul van Buren also ventures a pluralist revision of standard topics, in this case vis-à-vis one religious tradition, Judaism, reconceiving the loci in a post-Holocaust framework in three of four projected volumes (*A Theology of Jewish-Christian Reality*).<sup>70</sup> Gordon Kaufman, who wrote the earlier systematics noted, subsequently judged the enterprise no longer viable but returned to it in his *In the Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (1993) with the tools of “deconstruction” and “imaginative” reconstruction.<sup>71</sup>

Peter C. Hodgson in *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology*,



which is wary of evangelical and ecumenical retrievals, takes a “revisionist” tack shaped by pluralist interests and “transformational praxis.” “\* **Reconstructing Christian Theology**, edited by Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor, approaches the loci from the postmodern premises of pluralism, *deconstruction*, reenvisioning, and praxis that mark the foregoing experientialist works, including essays from some of their authors.”<sup>73</sup>

## Concluding Observations

How can clergy and church leaders help prepare their congregations for both “the culture of disbelief” and the wave of new religious passions and perspectives? One resource is the company of those asking the same questions in the systematics forums. Basic theological works of the kind surveyed need to be found, once again, on the shelves of pastors and teachers.

Such serious work cannot today be done solo. “Support systems” in theology are required, just as they are for other needs. A weekly theological study group of one’s peers, pressing chapter by chapter through an important work in systematics, will add depth and excitement to preaching and teaching. So this writer has found in a twenty-three year weekly Theological Tabletalk gathering of Boston-area pastors.

How does one select a systematics for group study or as a ready reference in the study bookcase? Choose those that have the marks of the pioneers and exemplars of the discipline, the stigmata of a Calvin, Thomas, Barth, or Schleiermacher:

(1) Indwelling the tradition. A work worthy of this heritage will be fluent in scripture, knowledgeable about its interpretation, at home in the classical lore (however revised or reinterpreted), and written in and for the church.

(2) Engaging the culture. Good systematics knows its time and place, whether it chooses to challenge the *Zeitgeist* or appropriates critically cultural accents and premises.

(3) Inclusivity and integration. *Systematics* worthy of the name will be comprehensive in the treatment of the standard topics and coherent in showing their interrelationships.

(4) Conversation with the community. Great systematics is catholic, entering into dialogue with the fathers and mothers—the voices of the ~~past~~—and the sisters and brothers of today’s church universal.

If pastors and teachers were to do this kind of disciplined study of the commonplaces *of* Christian conviction, the resurgence in the writing of *systematics* would achieve its purpose, which is the strengthening of the life and witness of the church. And if a *common* work on common things were done—pastors and

teachers being heard by the systematians as well as vice versa-the works written would be nourished by the ecclesial matrix in which great dogmatics has been done. May that conversation go forward.

## NOTES

1. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vols. I/1–IV/4, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Thomas Torrance, *et al.* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1955-1969); Brunner, *Dogmatics*, Vols. I-III, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950-1962); Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vols. I-III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963).
2. Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, trans. Eric H. Wahlstrom (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960); Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982).
3. Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, Vols. I-III, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974-1982); Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981, 1983); Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1962-1976).
4. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968); Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977). Southern Baptists in this period continued to put a premium on systematics, as in William Wilson Stevens, *Doctrines of the Christian Religion* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1967); Guthrie's Reformed-oriented work has just been revised and re-published, *Christian Doctrine*, 1968; rpt. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).
5. For a review of representative works in the current revival, see the writer's "The Surge in Systematics: A Commentary on Current Works," *JR* 73 (April 1993): 223-37 and "In Quest of the Comprehensive: The Systematics Revival," *RelSRev* 2 (January 1994): 7-12.
6. For one attempt to take systematic learnings into the congregation, see Dorothy and Gabriel Fackre, *Christian Basics* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991, rpt. 1992, 1993) and the video course based on the book.
7. See his accessible essay, "There's No Big Picture," *Chicago Magazine* 86/4 (April 1994): 18-23.
8. See the writer's "Evangelical, Evangelicalism," Westminster *Dictionary of Evangelical Theology*, eds. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), pp. 191-92.
9. *Cod, Revelation and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco: Word Publishing Co., 1976-1983).
10. *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, 2 vols. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978, 1979).
11. *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992) and *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994).
12. *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981).
13. *Christian Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983-1985).
14. God, *Creation and Revelation: A Neo-Evangelical Theology*, with sermons by Marguerite Shuster (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991).

15. *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical and Systematic*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990).
16. *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987, 1990, 1995).
17. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Harper/Zondervan, 1994).
18. *What Christians Believe: A Biblical and Historical Summary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989).
19. *Evangelical Theology: A Survey and Review* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990).
20. Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993); Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993); Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994); James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1986).
21. *Bible Doctrines: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Springfield, MO: Logion Press, 1993).
22. *The Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-Day Adventist Perspective* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1985).
23. *Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective*, Vol. I: *Renewal Theology: God, the World, and Redemption*; Vol. II: *Salvation, the Holy Spirit and Christian Living*; Vol. III: *The Church, the Kingdom, and Last Things* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988, 1990, 1992).
24. *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994).
25. *A Basic Christian Theology* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995).
26. *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1994).
27. *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993). McGrath has on the drawing board a multi-volume systematics work.
28. Ironically, in spite of professions of ecumenicity, the theological reach of much ecumenical systematic theology does not engage the work of evangelical theologians.
29. *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith*, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979; rpt. 1986).
30. *The Faith We Confess: An Ecumenical Dogmatics*, trans. David Lewis (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).
31. *Introduction to Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Greeno, Hadden and Co., Ltd., Publishers, 1973); and *Theological Questions: Analysis and Argument* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1983).
32. *Doxology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).
33. Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story*, Vol. I: *A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978, rpt. 1995); Vol. II: *Authority: Scripture in the Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987).
34. *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).
35. *Responsible Faith: Christian Theology in the Light of Twentieth Century Questions* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986).
36. *God-The World's Future: Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
37. *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991).
38. *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

39. *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992).
40. *Credible Christianity: The Gospel in Contemporary Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994).
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*In his letter, the author of Hebrews declares that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (13:8). True as this is, it is also true that this same Jesus Christ is so inexhaustibly rich that he can, definitively, be neither encompassed by any single christology nor encapsulated by any creedal formula.*

# Christology in Context

## *The Doctrinal and Contextual Tasks of Christology Today*

Daniel L. Migliore

*Professor of Systematic Theology*

*Princeton Theological Seminary*

**CHRISTOLOGY** TODAY lives in the tension between continuity with the church's doctrinal tradition on the one hand and, on the other, openness to the new experiences and understandings of Christ arising out of the particular contexts of suffering and hope. In the past quarter century, there has been an unprecedented awakening of local or contextual christologies that speak of Christ and salvation in strikingly new ways. These contextual christologies are making a significant impact on all christological reflection. At the same time, the recent outpouring of works in systematic theology, ranging from single to multivolume works, is a sign of a deeply felt need to identify and affirm what binds all Christians together and to express this common faith in a full and coherent manner.

These two concerns—the doctrinal concern for the unity of faith in Christ and the contextual concern for expressions of that faith appropriate to particular situations—stand in tension with each other, as every pastor can attest. But these concerns are not mutually exclusive; ecumenical christological doctrines and local christologies can strengthen and correct each other in the task of theology and ministry today. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8); yet, this same Jesus Christ is inexhaustibly rich and cannot

be definitively encompassed by any single christology or christological formula.

In this essay, I will consider several contemporary efforts in christology that refuse to choose between classical doctrines and contextual understandings. Whereas each effort manifests a commitment to do christology in context, the intent is by no means to diminish the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, all these efforts aim to underscore in new ways the uniqueness of Christ's person and the universal significance of his saving work.

### **The Incarnation as Basis for Contextual Christology**

The New Testament itself bears witness to Christ in context. We possess not one but four Gospels, plus numerous other New Testament christologies. Each reflects something of the distinctive situation in which it was written and read.' Still, while biblical christologies are remarkably diverse, at their center is the common confession that in Jesus Christ God is uniquely present and at work for the reconciliation and renewal of the world (II Cor. 5:19).

The creeds of Nicea (A.D. 325) and Chalcedon (A.D. 451) established the limits within which confession of Christ faithful to the gospel and consonant with the worship of the church should proceed. In the well-known phrases of Chalcedon, Jesus Christ is fully God, fully human, two natures perfectly united in one person, without confusion, change, division, or separation. While cast in the metaphysical conceptuality of their time, the intent of Nicea and Chalcedon is profoundly soteriological. They aim to preserve the biblical witness that only God can be the agent of our salvation and that God's work of salvation is accomplished in and through a fully human life.

It would be a serious mistake, however, to think of the affirmations of the classical christological creeds as antithetical to the concern for contextual authenticity in Christian witness and theology. These creeds arose within and spoke to a specific context with particular questions and issues that urgently required attention. The truth claims made by Nicea and Chalcedon are not properly understood if they are thought to prohibit fresh witness to the living Christ in new contexts. On the contrary, classical christology provides theological foundation for bearing witness to Christ with attentiveness to context. A doctrine of the real incarnation of God in the particular person and history of the first-century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth is the basis for a theology and ministry that takes the risk of entering deeply into the particular and diverse situations of life in order to communicate the good news of God's salvation in Christ.

Karl Barth is arguably the most creative defender and reinterpreter of Chalcedon among twentieth-century theologians. He is, however, far from wanting to repeat slavishly its formulas. Barth is sensitive, for example, to the fact that classical christology can be misinterpreted and misused if, in the confession of the union of true divinity and true humanity in Christ, we assume that we know in advance what true divinity and true humanity are apart from the

concrete history of the incarnate Lord.\* In this history, the true God humbles self and becomes a servant in our midst and for us, undergoing judgment for our sake and in our place. At the same time, in the history of Jesus Christ humanity is exalted to partnership with God. Living in free obedience to God and in solidarity with others, this human being gladly honors God's name and does God's will. By speaking not just of divine and human natures united in Jesus Christ but of a life history that is at once the self-humbling of God and the gracious exaltation of humanity to partnership with God, Barth provides an impressive reinterpretation of Chalcedon.

Some of Barth's critics charge that his theology is diametrically opposed to all concern for contextuality. This is a colossal mistake in understanding his work. His insistence on the Jewishness of Jesus, his central role in the writing of the Barmen Declaration of 1934, his strong and frequent criticism of the excesses of capitalism in the name of Jesus Christ—who lived and died in a way that “ignored all those who are high and mighty and wealthy in the world in favor of the weak and meek and lowly”<sup>3</sup>—are but a few indications of the way in which his christocentric theology was indeed addressed to and, in important ways, shaped by the cultural and political context of theology and the church of his time. Important in this regard, too, is the letter in which he encourages Christians in Southeast Asia not to repeat his theology but to do their own theology in their time and place with the same freedom and joy born of confidence in the gospel that he tried to exercise in his own situation.<sup>4</sup>

## **Christology in a Hispanic Context**

**When we speak of christology in context, it is the various liberation theologies that first come to mind. The influence of these theologies has been extensive and has not yet abated. Increasingly, the liberation theologies of Latin America, Asia, and Africa, as well as African-American, Hispanic, and feminist North American liberation theologies, are finding systematic expression.<sup>5</sup>**

**It is obviously impossible to offer even a brief summary of what has been said by these theologians about the person and work of Christ. I will concentrate here on the christology of Justo Gonzalez, a Cuban-American theologian whose book *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective*<sup>6</sup> is a one-volume systematic theology self-consciously shaped by the author's experience as a Hispanic in North America.' Gonzalez's work demonstrates how classical doctrine and contemporary context may mutually inform each other rather than clash in the work of christology.**

For the Hispanic church today, Gonzalez finds life and death significance in the affirmations of the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon. In confessing the eternal divinity of Jesus Christ, Nicea raised a protest against the “Constantinization” of God. By “Constantinization” Gonzalez means the accommodation of the God of the gospel to the understandings of divinity familiar to



the Hellenistic world. The temptation to abandon the living God of scripture and settle into a “theology of the status quo” was acute then and continues to be so now. To affirm that the same Jesus who proclaimed good news to the poor and who was crucified is one with God constitutes a scandal to all who think of God as a superemperor.

In the creed of Chalcedon, Gonzalez sees the church as continuing its struggle against Constantinization and its damaging impact upon the very souls of the oppressed. People in bondage are often tempted to find theological justification for their condition. Such justification was available in the early centuries of the church in the form of **gnosticism**, whose christology was docetic. According to docetism, Jesus was only apparently human, a purely heavenly being untouched by the realities of human suffering in a broken world. In affirming the full humanity of Jesus Christ, Chalcedon flatly rejected docetism and, in so doing, repudiated a heresy that is still a temptation to Christians today. Speaking to Hispanic Christians in particular, Gonzalez writes:

In our “massified” society, individuals feel lost and powerless and therefore wish to hear a “gospel” that tells them not that they are to act on the basis of the promise that “all things” are theirs but rather that they are to forget about the present life and think only of the one to come. This is the reason for the success of so many “electronic” preachers, whose message is essentially gnostic.’

Chalcedon rejected not only docetism; it also said no to adoptionism, Apollinarianism, and Nestorianism. Gonzalez relates each of these christological heresies to temptations still present today, again with particular reference to the life of Hispanic people in North American society. Adoptionism, for example, lends theological credence to the myth that, in America, everyone can make it to the top if he or she tries hard enough. “The oppressed, however, must know the myth for what it is, for otherwise they must accept the conclusion that their lower status in society is the result of their lower worth.”<sup>8</sup> Jesus Christ must be more than “the local boy who makes good.” He must be “the Redeemer, the power from outside who breaks into our closed reality and breaks its structures of oppression.”<sup>9</sup>

While finding the affirmations of Chalcedon of continuing importance in a Hispanic context, Gonzalez thinks that classical christology does have some shortcomings. He agrees with critics who say that the creed depicts humanity and divinity as static essences and fails to make it clear that true humanity and true divinity are to be defined not by our preconceptions of what these terms mean but by the biblical witness and particularly by the concrete history of Jesus Christ. As proclaimed by the Gospels, Jesus lived and died for others and, in doing so, revealed both the depths of divinity and the true nature of humanity as intended by God. “It is precisely in his being for others that Jesus manifests his full divinity, and it is also in his being for others that he manifests his full humanity.”<sup>10</sup> For Gonzalez, therefore, it is clear that the voice of Chalcedon still

needs to be heard today in the Hispanic context. The christological creeds provide important interpretive guides for a contextualized proclamation of the gospel of God's unmerited grace in Jesus Christ.

### **Christology in a Feminist Context**

Like other liberation theologies, feminist theology begins with the experience of suffering, exclusion, and powerlessness. Out of their particular history of subordination and abuse within a patriarchal world, women reread and reappropriate the scriptural and theological tradition and discover there both resources and barriers to faith. In the context of women's experience the christological tradition is examined, critiqued, and reclaimed. Feminist christologians ask whether traditional christology is irredeemably patriarchal or whether it contains resources that can be drawn upon to form a christology of healing and liberation. Christian women worldwide—women of many colors, nationalities, ethnic groups, and denominational affiliations—are participating in this quest. Like other liberation theologies, feminist theology is finding systematic expression.<sup>11</sup> I will attend here to the work of the Roman Catholic theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson, whose writings show systematic power and depth as they combine a deep respect for the christological tradition with a passionate commitment to the full inclusion of women in Christian ministry and doctrine.<sup>12</sup>\*

According to Johnson, "The basic problem identified from the feminist academic perspective is that Jesus Christ has been interpreted within a patriarchal framework, with the result that the good news of the gospel for all has been twisted into the bad news of masculine **privilege**."<sup>13</sup> Johnson contends that the problem is not the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was male. The problem is how this fact has been used to bolster sexist theology and practice. Johnson identifies three ways in which this has happened: first, Jesus' maleness has been used to buttress an exclusively male image of God; second, Jesus' maleness has been used to support the claim of men's superiority over women and the right to dominate them; and third, the focus on the maleness of Jesus has seemed to imply that since maleness is constitutive for the incarnation, female humanity is not assumed by the Word made flesh, thus putting women's salvation in jeopardy.

Johnson rejects these views as disastrous misinterpretations of classical christology. She notes that the Nicene Creed, in **affirming** that the Word of God "was made human" (*homo factus est*), rather than "was made man" (*vir factus est*), confesses the solidarity of Christ with all humanity. According to Johnson, "The intent of the christological doctrine was and continues to be **inclusive**."<sup>14</sup> She writes further:

Theology will have come of age when the particularity that is highlighted is not Jesus' historical sex but the scandal of his option for the poor and marginalized, including women, in the Spirit of his compassionate, liberating Sophia-God. That is the scandal of particularity that really matters. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Johnson's purpose, then, is clearly not to denigrate, let alone repudiate, the classical christological tradition. Rather, she wants to reclaim, renew, and expand it, to allow "its ancient inclusivity to shine through."<sup>16</sup> Her central argument is that new possibilities for understanding the inclusivity of Christ and salvation *are* opened by rediscovery of the wisdom (*sophia*) tradition. Johnson contends that, although neglected until recently, the wisdom tradition in general and the title of 'Wisdom of God' for Jesus in particular were of great importance in the development of the doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity. For the church today, "the figure of personified Wisdom offers an augmented field of female metaphors with which to interpret the saving significance and personal identity of Jesus the Christ, and the choice of metaphors matters."

Regarding the death of Jesus, Johnson rejects interpretations that view the cross as required by God in repayment for sin. Here again it is *important to see* that Johnson is not dismissing the importance of atonement doctrine, nor denying the saving significance of the cross. She questions certain understandings of the death of Christ for us in order to lay claim to an interpretation that stresses the awesome power of compassionate, sacrificial love. "Guided by wisdom categories, the story of the cross, rejected as passive, penal victimization, is reappropriated *as* heartbreaking empowerment." Johnson goes on to speak of the cross as "part of the larger mystery of pain-to-life, of that struggle for the new creation evocative of the rhythm of pregnancy, delivery, and birth so familiar to women of all times."<sup>17</sup>

According to Johnson, the reappropriation of the wisdom tradition as filter and focus of the significance of Jesus has wide-ranging repercussions for the whole of Christian theology and ethics. Christology and other *doctrines* of the faith are rethought in new categories such as friendship, connectedness, compassion, and holistic rather than dualistic patterns of relationship. Moreover, 'wisdom Christology done in the struggle for women's equal human dignity also contributes to right behavior in at least three other major areas of current concern: justice for the poor, respectful encounter with other religious traditions, and ecological care for the *earth*."<sup>19</sup>

In Johnson's view, then, the classical christological tradition speaks profoundly to women's experience even as that experience prompts reform of certain construals of the tradition.

**While Jesus the Christ has been interpreted in distorted ways to support male hegemony in the doctrine of God, Christian anthropology, and ecclesial structures, "something more" also flows through the Christian tradition: the**

**dangerous memory of the liberating prophet of Sophia and the power of her Spirit let loose to renew the earth?’**

## **Christology in a “Mainline” North American Context**

A surprising number of systematic theologies have recently been written by “mainline” North American theologians.<sup>21</sup> I will focus on the work of the Canadian Reformed theologian, Douglas John Hall, who is completing a three-volume systematic theology, the subtitle of which is “Christian Theology in a North American Context.”<sup>22</sup> In my title to this section I have added the adjective “mainline” because I think it more accurately describes the actual audience Hall has in mind, namely, members of the mainline Christian churches of North America who are predominantly white and middle class. Like the other christologies, I have reviewed, Hall’s work includes both classical-doctrinal and contemporary-contextual concerns. On the one hand, he insists that “a contextual theology worthy of the gospel does not sit lightly to Scripture, the history of doctrine, and the global discourse of the contemporary church.”<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, he recognizes that we live in a time of creative reimagining of the Christ of christological dogma and that a period of startling, even wild experimentation may accompany the process.

Hall believes we must ask the bold question: Who is Jesus Christ for us who are immersed in the middle-class, North American context? We cannot assume that the mere repetition of the titles and concepts associated with the Christ in the New Testament will work in the same way in our context.

Accepting the Chalcedonian affirmation of Jesus as both truly human and truly divine, Hall explains that, for contextual reasons, he is especially anxious to underscore the real humanity of the savior.<sup>24</sup> He argues that in the dominant culture of North America, the really serious spiritual problem is the glorification of dominative power, control of others, success in business, and victory in the competitive struggle in the personal, social, and international spheres of life. Relating to Jesus either as solely divine (the christological heresy of the right) or as a great, heroic human being (the christological heresy of the left) effectively ignores the full humanity of the Jesus of the biblical witness. That is a serious matter because if Jesus did not enter into the depths of our lostness, brokenness, darkness, and failure, he is unable to be our savior.

Hall’s central concern is most evident in his reflections on the work of Christ. It is here that the inherently contextual character of Christian faith is most visible. Classical theories of the work of Christ “for us” speak to particular experiences of the human predicament: the Christus Victor theory focuses on the experience of bondage to demonic powers; the satisfaction theory speaks to the predicament of guilt and condemnation; the moral influence theory addresses our experience of rejection and unlovability. Hall does not doubt that

each of these theories once possessed enormous power to communicate the gospel message in the past and, in certain contexts, may still do so. But unthinking repetition of them “so predisposes the believing community to certain assumptions about what is wrong with the world that the community fails to remain sensitive to changes in the human predicament.”<sup>25</sup> According to Hall, the predicament as experienced by those who belong to the dominant culture of North America is one of meaninglessness and despair, indifference and lack of purpose, loss of vision and passionate commitment.

Attacking the assumption that mainline North Americans can be au courant theologically by simply appropriating the language and themes of liberation theology born in other contexts, Hall contends that such a maneuver evades the responsibility of hard analysis of what is existentially needed for majority cultures in North America. Borrowing from the struggles of others may lead only to subterfuge and triumphalism. What Christians in the mainline churches must learn is that Jesus, the crucified one, is with us in our decline, our extremity of soul, and the failure of our dream of a new world of our making.<sup>26</sup> We suffer, according to Hall, from the malaise of modernity. “The failure of modernity is nothing more nor less than its failure as a system of redemptive meaning,” and we who experience its failure are tempted to give in to apathy, boredom, and purposelessness.<sup>27</sup> Our greatest need is for a theology of the cross, for a christology that focuses upon God’s coming in Christ into our life of negation, darkness, and failure. Jesus represents God who comes to us in our sin and godforsakenness; at the same time, Jesus represents us to God in all our failure and hopelessness. For Hall, Jesus’ cry of abandonment from the cross becomes “the clarifying moment of the whole story.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Christology in a Messianic/Cosmic Context**

Among the major challenges faced by christology in our time is rethinking the relationship of the person and work of Christ to the cosmic process as described by modern physical and biological sciences. Along with **Wolfhart Pannenberg**, who is completing a three-volume *Systematic Theology*,<sup>29</sup> **Jiirgen Moltmann** is one of the prominent theologians of our time who has taken up this challenge. Well-known as author of *Theology of Hope* and *The Crucified Cod*, Moltmann’s recent volume, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, offers a messianic christology, by which he means a christology that is set within the context of the messianic hope of Israel for the renewal and transformation of all things.<sup>30</sup> Because the hope of Israel is concerned for this earth and is all-encompassing, messianic christology is necessarily also cosmic christology.

*The Way of Jesus Christ* is one of a series of volumes by **Moltmann** in a project entitled Contributions to Systematic Theology. Previous volumes in this series focused on the doctrine of God and creation. In his christology, **Moltmann**

wants to move beyond both classical christological dogma based on a metaphysics of substance and modern christology based primarily on the category of history. He proposes a “postmodern” christology “which places human history ecologically in the framework of nature.”<sup>31</sup>

In fact, the encompassing theological context of Moltmann’s christology is neither history nor nature as such but the activity and purposes of the triune God, who is Creator, Redeemer, and Consummator of all things. Christology finds its proper context within the eschatological activity of the triune God. Viewed within this framework, Jesus Christ is not an afterthought of God for a world gone awry. As the one through whom and to whom all things are, he is the “cosmic Christ,” the one who brings creation to its completion as well as the one who redeems humankind from sin. It is necessary to see the **Spirit-empowered** work of Christ in its fullness, whereby the poor have good news preached to them, the sick are healed, sinners are forgiven, and the dead are raised. It is also necessary to see the consummation of the work of Christ in the coming glory of God and the fulfillment of the promise of justice, reconciliation, and peace throughout the creation. Moltmann’s messianic christology aims to expand our understanding of the work of Christ to include the whole of human life and all of creation. It also encourages a shift of thinking about the work of Christ from exclusive concentration on the paradigm of sin and forgiveness to the more comprehensive paradigm of death and new life.

With its cosmic scope, Moltmann’s messianic christology clearly has in view the ecological crisis of our time. It regards the purposes of God, and specifically the work of Christ, as addressing not only the sin and suffering of humanity, but also the groaning of all creation for fulfillment.

### **Christology in the Context of Global Mission**

Does the preceding sketch of four “christologies in context” confirm the suspicion of some that christology, and indeed all theology today, is in danger of becoming sheer Babel? I think not. Conclusions that are more encouraging can be drawn from these christologies, especially if we attend to the co-presence in them of respect for classical christological doctrine and openness to contextual reformulation.

(1) Each of these christologies affirms that Jesus Christ is central for Christian faith and life. Each is convinced that what Christians **affirm** of Christ deeply affects the whole of their theology and every aspect of their existence.

(2) Each of these christologies holds that faithful witness to Jesus Christ involves energetic interpretation of scripture and creed on the one hand and critical participation in a particular social and cultural context on the other.

(3) Each shows awareness that the christological tradition has often been

misinterpreted and misused and that the sufferings and hopes of people in particular contexts are occasions for the reform and *reappropriation* of the tradition. If the context calls for reinterpretation of the classical tradition, the classical tradition in turn questions the unexamined assumptions present in the context.

(4) Each of these christologies recognizes that Christians live in many different contexts. Each assumes that we can and should learn from our fellow Christians who confess Christ in contexts different from our own. Christ is always greater than we think or imagine him to be.

(5) Each christology holds that what may be most needed or appropriate in the confession of Christ in one context may not be what is most needed or appropriate in another context. This does not mean that we are left with an “anything-goes relativism.” Instead, it means we must recognize that none of us possesses all the truth that is in Christ and that we must have the humility to listen carefully to unfamiliar voices bearing witness to Christ.

(6) Each of these christologies raises the claim that we are accountable to the gospel and to the church ecumenical as we pursue witness to Christ in our particular contexts. Every reimagining of Christ and salvation must be tested by the scriptural witness to Christ and by the extent to which it enriches the faith of the ecumenical church in the gracious God who is decisively present and active for the salvation of the world in Jesus Christ.

Today, it is becoming increasingly clear that christology must be pursued in both local and global contexts. The path to truth moves from the particular to the universal. We must eschew both an abstract universal christology and absolutized local christologies. Our concern for the unity of the faith in Christ and our commitment to local, contextual expressions of that faith should serve the purpose of the global mission of the church, which is to share in the ministry of the One in whom God has reconciled the world and broken down all walls of hostility (Eph. 2:12-14).

As an invitation to christology in the context of the global mission of the church today, I would propose the twin images of Christ as gracious host who offers God’s hospitality to all, and unexpected guest who awaits our hospitality.<sup>32</sup> In an age of deadly ethnic struggles and hardening divisions among *people* both outside and inside the church, and in a time when tens of millions of refugees have no place to call home, the church does well to recover the gospel message of God’s hospitality to strangers in Christ (Rom. 15:7) and to reflect on the nature of the church’s ministry in that *light*.<sup>33</sup>

The New Testament community was convinced that the forgiveness and grace extended to the world in Jesus Christ overcame not only the estrangement of humanity from God but also made possible a new relationship among human beings who were formerly strangers and aliens to one another. According *to the*

description of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25, welcome to strangers is one of the criteria determining relationship to Christ. God shows hospitality to us through Christ the stranger, and we are called to extend hospitality to strangers.

One of the paradoxes of the Gospel narratives is that God comes to us in Christ as both our gracious host and our unexpected guest who awaits our hospitality. Jesus enters our world as an outsider, a stranger born in a stable. While he is still an infant, his parents must flee with him from persecution, and they become political refugees and guests in a strange land. In many Gospel stories Jesus is a stranger in need of hospitality. Yet, in some of these stories he reverses roles and becomes the host offering hospitality to others (Luke 7:36-48; John 4:7-10). Jesus is the host at the Last Supper, but shortly thereafter he becomes the abandoned stranger to whom no one shows hospitality.

The mission of the church shares in this paradox of the work of Christ as both a gracious host offering God's hospitality to all and as a vulnerable guest awaiting the welcome of others. In mission, we encounter those who are strange to us and we to them. In this encounter of strangers invited to new friendship by the grace of God, there is reciprocal giving and receiving. Too often the church has thought of its mission solely as that of the welcoming host who invites guests to the banquet table. Mission in the name of Christ, however, includes not only readiness to welcome others but also the humility to be the guests of others, not only giving but also receiving, not only speaking but also listening. When we recognize that we are guests as well as hosts in ministry and mission, we are able to learn from others who are strangers to us and whose culture and ways of life differ markedly from ours.

A christology of God's hospitality is grounded in the eternal hospitality of the triune God whose life is constituted by mutual sharing of love and joyful welcoming of the other. The church is to be a community of hospitality where all are welcome (Heb. 13:2) and where all are invited to live in mutual love and support by the working of the Spirit who empowers new community among strangers (Acts 2:1-11).

A christology and ecclesiology of hospitality provide the foundations for an ethics of hospitality. We are called to be hospitable to the poor, the weak, and the outcast, and paradoxically, this often involves our willingness to be their guests, to listen to them, to receive from them gifts of insight, wisdom, and perhaps also forgiveness. The proper care of the earth must also be a major theme of an ethics of hospitality. We are called to show welcome to the earth that has welcomed us, living among our fellow creatures as thankful guests as well as welcoming hosts. Sensitive to the global mission of the church today, a christology that emphasizes both God's hospitality to strangers in Jesus Christ and God's willingness in Christ to be the vulnerable guest of strangers could surely assist the church in accomplishing the purposes God has set for it.



## NOTES

1. See Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).
2. See *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), IV/Z, 26, where Barth speaks of the “fatally easy” misunderstandings of the doctrine of the two natures of Christ and consequently of the “serious need of interpretation.”
3. *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2, 168.
4. See Barth’s open letter “No Boring Theology!” in *Southeast Asia Journal of Theology* (Autumn 1969), pp. 3-5.
5. A few of the many possible examples are: for the African-American perspective, James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); and for the Latin-American perspective, *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993).
6. Justo Gonzalez, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 145.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
11. See Anne E. Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).
12. See esp. Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1992); and “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).
13. Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” p. 118.
14. Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 165.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
17. Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” p. 122.
18. Johnson, *She Who Is*, p. 159.
19. Johnson, “Redeeming the Name of Christ,” p. 132.
20. *Z&id.*, p. 134.
21. A brief list: Shirley C. Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); Peter C. Hodgson *Winds of the Spirit: A Constructive Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993) ; Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991); Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994); Ted Peters, *God—The World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).
22. Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989); *Professing the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
23. Hall, *Professing the Faith*, p. 497.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 402.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 405.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 496.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 503.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 537.

29. *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991, 1994).

30. Jiirgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990).

31. *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

32. I am indebted to Mercy Amba Oduyoye for suggestions contained in her essay, "The Christ for African Women," in *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, ed. Virginia Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), and to Kathleen D. Billman who read an early draft of this article and offered helpful comments on the images of Christ as host and guest.

33. For a stimulating recent study of the theme of hospitality in relation to public worship and evangelism, see Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger: A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

*Because of their deep conviction concerning the importance of Christian doctrine, evangelicals both contribute to, and derive benefit from, the current resurgence of systematic theology. With confidence, evangelicals proclaim a gospel that speaks of the nature and person of Christ and thus offers, to a world beset by fear and despair; the hope of salvation.*

# Evangelical Christology and Soteriology Today

Millard J. Erickson

*Research Professor of Theology*

*Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary*

EVANGELICALISM HAS EXPERIENCED a resurgence of popularity, or at least a new level of visibility and influence, in the latter half of the twentieth century. With the loss of the fundamentalist-modernist controversy by about 1930, fundamentalism, the form evangelicalism took at that time, seemed doomed to inevitable decline and obscurity. During and immediately following World War II, however, a group of younger evangelicals resolved to reverse fundamentalism's tendencies toward anti-intellectualism, neglect of the social application of the gospel, and separatism with respect to the church. By 1976, George Gallup estimated that approximately one-third of the persons in the United States were evangelicals, or born-again Christians.<sup>1</sup> While more liberal or old-line denominations have steadily declined in every statistical measure, evangelical groups have grown, especially in the area of missions. The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada now acknowledges "a preponderance of evangelical schools" in its membership.<sup>2</sup>

What of the resurgence of theology? Evangelicals, by their very nature, have always emphasized the importance of doctrine. Evangelicalism can be defined as that branch of Christianity that emphasizes the authority of the Bible, the full

deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, and the necessity of supernatural regeneration for salvation, through faith in Christ. Other aspects of the person of Christ considered crucial to proper belief are his virginal conception and sinlessness, bodily resurrection, substitutionary atonement, and future personal and visible return. For evangelicals, christology is also crucial to the proper view of salvation. Because of Christ's substitutionary death, God can account his righteousness to all who believe, thus justifying such persons by grace through faith. The supernatural transformation of person, which is termed the new birth, initiates a lifelong process of growth in spirituality termed sanctification.

## Christology

Since evangelicals believe that the orthodox theology articulated at **Chalcedon** expresses the teachings of scripture, the goal of their christology is to retain that theology but to do it in a fashion that takes into account the intellectual and cultural considerations of our time. This is no small task, for a number of challenges have been raised to Chalcedonian christology.

(1) The historical problem is whether it is possible by the methods of historical research to know enough about Jesus of Nazareth to build a christology, a full-fledged theory of his person and work. Historical criticism of the Gospels, especially form-criticism, has seemed to render this outcome rather unlikely.

(2) The metaphysical problem pertains to the categories used to account for the twofold nature of the incarnate one, Jesus Christ. The original formulation of the two natures in one person in Greek metaphysical categories is basically untenable for someone living in the late twentieth century. How, then, is it possible to maintain this teaching of the incarnate character of Jesus? Some even consider metaphysical categories unbiblical.

(3) The logical problem is both narrow and broad. The narrow form is found in the apparent contradiction, or at least paradox, of a person who was both God (unlimited) and human (limited). How can one person be both? The broader form of the logical problem concerns the very nature of language. How is such a conception as incarnation to be taken literally? Surely this must be a myth, a literary form used to communicate a great spiritual truth.

(4) The sociological or political problem stems from the concerns of various minority or underprivileged groups. Women may find it difficult to relate to Jesus, a male. Correlatively, the incarnation has been made the basis for a hierarchically structured view of God and of society. The Jesus of traditional Christianity has become a justification for exploitation of the powerless.

(5) The anthropological problem also has two forms. On the one hand, with so many good and sincere adherents of other religions, how can one

maintain that there is only one God and that Jesus is the only way to God? This strikes particularly at the question of the incarnation because the doctrine of the incarnation asserts that Jesus is unique.

A broader facet of the anthropological problem is the contention that the whole culture has changed. Both the premodern and the modern worlds have been displaced and replaced by the postmodern. Because postmodernism involves a wholly different understanding of the very nature of language, it now finds the traditional approach to christology meaningless.

To be viable in the present time, evangelical christology must be constructed in such a way as to meet these challenges. Positively, this means one must show that the traditional orthodox view of the incarnation can be maintained even in light of the considerations raised. Negatively, this means one must continue to critique the developments and objections being raised by contemporary critics.

## **Biblical Studies**

Throughout its history, evangelical theology has maintained that there was a genuine incarnation, both metaphysically and epistemologically. Some twentieth-century theologians, such as Karl Barth, have maintained that Jesus was truly the God-man, but tended to deny the efficacy of the historical Jesus as a basis for understanding the incarnation. To put it differently, these theologians have shown skepticism about deriving the knowledge of the second person of the Trinity, the divine Christ, from examination of the historical Jesus. Still, even if the latter could be done successfully, the divine revelation would lie not in the words and actions of Jesus per se but in God's special self-manifestation to persons, through Jesus' words and actions.

An earlier generation of evangelical biblical scholars tended to be quite negative regarding the use of critical methods of biblical research. Today, however, contemporary evangelical scholars, though insisting upon scrutinizing the presuppositions of the historical-critical method, nonetheless make full use of it. Indeed, one development that has made evangelical scholars more inclined to use the Gospels as sources of christology is their growing confidence in the historical reliability of the Gospels on the one hand and, on the other hand, their determined rejection of more radical forms of criticism."

One factor in this move toward greater confidence in the historical reliability of the Gospels has been a change in their dating. A key element in the more radical varieties of form-criticism is the belief that a rather lengthy period of time elapsed between the events and their recording. During this period of the oral tradition considerable modification, including incorporation of more supernatural elements, took place in the accounts. Obviously, if this period of the oral tradition were to be shortened, it would diminish the possibility of

growth of the tradition. One scholar who raised doubts about the generally accepted dates was John A. T. Robinson. He noted, for example, the absence of any unambiguous reference in the Gospels to the fall of Jerusalem. In terms of conventional form-critical theory, such absence could be expected to make an enormous difference in the way the “situations-in-life” (*Sitze im Leben*) of the respective Gospels were to be reconstructed. With the latter in mind, Robinson questioned whether it might be the case that the Gospels make no unambiguous reference to the fall of Jerusalem because, when they were written, Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed? But if this were the case, would it not follow, Robinson reasoned, that all of the Gospels, including John’s, would have to be assigned a date earlier than A.D. 70?<sup>4</sup> Using the methods of Gospel-criticism and drawing upon the results of archaeology, evangelicals were generally able to show that the Gospels are, historically, surprisingly dependable materials.<sup>5</sup> Of special significance was the changed estimation of the status of the Gospel of John. Here again it was Robinson who noted what he termed a “new look on the Fourth Gospel.” Following the lead of C. H. Dodd and others, he claimed that John’s Gospel is more historically reliable than many scholars had previously argued.<sup>6</sup>

At one time, evangelical scholars had conceded that Jesus did not make any overt or explicit claim to deity. Since it was Christ’s deity that was in dispute in the earlier part of the twentieth century, the “self-consciousness” of Jesus, as it had come to be known, was a major issue. Since then, evangelicals have done major work in calling attention to implicit claims to deity made by Jesus. Three evidences can be mentioned.

The first evidence is a set of Jesus’ expressions that indicate he was aware that he possessed unique authority. One of these expressions is the word *amēn* (“truly”). Customarily, *amēn* was used in Old Testament times, both by the individual and the community, to declare that a particular saying was valid and binding upon them. For Jesus to associate *amēn* with his own sayings shows that he considered them to carry divine authority simply because he spoke them. A second such expression is Jesus’ use of *abba* for “Father,” which Jeremias and others suggest reflects an understanding of Jesus’ relationship to God as different from that of other persons. Finally the phrase *egō de legō* (“but I say”) as an antithetical formula in the Sermon on the Mount is said by scholars such as Ernst Käsemann to “embody a claim which rivals and challenges that of Moses.”

A second evidence is found in the way Jesus used the scriptures of the Judaism of his time and especially in the way he applied them to himself. Some passages Jesus applied to himself are nonpredictive, and among them one discovers some that were originally applied to Yahweh. Examples are: Daniel 7:13–14, cited in Matthew 24:30; 26:64; Zechariah 12:10, cited in John 19:37; and Zechariah 13:7, cited in Matthew 26:31.<sup>8</sup>

A third evidence surfaces in Jesus’ parabolic teaching. The use of parables

**in teaching was a common occurrence among rabbis**, with two characteristics distinguishing Jesus' use of them. Unlike the rabbis, Jesus spoke of himself in his parables. Further, he applied to himself images that, in the Old Testament, had been used to refer to God. Three of these are the "sower," the "shepherd," and the "bridegroom." Philip Payne summarizes, "His [Jesus'] sense of identification with God was so deep that to depict himself he consistently gravitated to imagery and symbols that in the OT typically depict God."<sup>9</sup>

Beyond Jesus' self-understanding there is the New Testament teaching of other persons about him. A number of evangelical scholars point to "testimonies" that imply the full deity of Christ. For example, Murray J. Harris, in his book *Jesus As God*, exhaustively discusses ten major texts that appear to apply the word "God" to Jesus.<sup>10</sup>

Evangelical scholars have had to deal with the evolutionary thesis developed by Wilhelm Bousset and Ferdinand Hahn, who argue that the early church moved through three stages of christological thought: that of the Palestinian Jewish church; that of the Hellenistic Jewish church; and that of the Hellenistic gentile church. Allegedly, christology progressively came under the influence of Hellenism. By the time Paul received the tradition, therefore, it was already strongly influenced by Greek thought. Against this, however, I. Howard Marshall has shown that the boundaries between these three alleged stages **are so fluid** that the very existence of the third stage at an early date is questionable."

In addition to the specifically didactic passages of the New Testament that appear to bear witness to the deity of Jesus, there are also certain practices and implicit convictions of the early church that reflect a belief in, and teaching regarding, the deity of Jesus Christ.

The first of such phenomena is what C.F.D. Moule has termed the corporate Christ. In *The Origin of Christology*, Moule calls attention to unusual language use with respect to Jesus. Repeatedly, the New Testament writers, especially Paul, refer to believers as being "in Christ." This peculiar expression, which would not be used with reference to any rabbi or other human leader, points to a belief in Christ as one upon whom the writers' very existence **depended**.<sup>12</sup>

The second of these phenomena is the early church's worship of Jesus Christ, which took several forms. One such form is the doxologies that explicitly include Jesus Christ. Clear instances of these are Romans 9:5; II Peter 3:18; and Revelation 1:5b-6. A second form is the prayers addressed to Jesus: Stephen, in Acts 7:59-60; Paul, in II Corinthians 12:9; and the expression *Maranatha*, in I Corinthians 16:22. A third form of worship is the three benedictions one **finds** in I Thessalonians 3:11-12, and in II Thessalonians 3:5 and 3:16. As many think, these benedictions refer to Jesus Christ as well as to God. At the basis of the worship of Jesus Christ by the early church, therefore, was at least an implicit belief in his deity.<sup>13</sup>

The third phenomenon in question concerns Jesus and judgment. In the Old Testament, there are references to four types of judgment: the daily task of administrative judgment; the judgment upon nations by conquerors; the judgment at the coming day of the Lord; and the judgment pronounced upon the inner attitude of the individual. While the first two can, and frequently are, delegated by God to human agents, the last two are not. In several of his earliest writings, however, Paul depicts Jesus as coming in, and executing, judgment: I Thessalonians 3:13; 5:23*b*; II Thessalonians 1:7–10; I Corinthians 4:4–5; 5:10. Thus, the idea that Paul's high christology appears only in his later writings has been rejected, for example, by Arthur Wainwright.<sup>14</sup>

## Metaphysical Issues

The foregoing are arguments for at least an implicit belief in the deity of Jesus from an early time. Still, the further question one must ask concerns the nature of that deity. One objection to Chalcedonian christology is that it represents a Greek metaphysical way of thinking, foreign to the categories of the New Testament. According to this objection, the basic biblical mentality is Hebraic, and the Hebrews were not metaphysical in their thinking. Rather, their thinking was functional. They spoke of what something did, rather than what it was, in some ultimate metaphysical sense. Oscar Cullmann was one who advocated such an interpretation, at first contending that the church's later metaphysical description represented a distortion of the basic biblical testimony.<sup>15</sup> Later, however, Cullmann modified his position to say that, though it is different from the biblical testimony, the metaphysical description was not contradictory to it.<sup>16</sup>

A number of evangelicals have argued that, though not explicitly ontological, the biblical understanding of Jesus was at least implicitly such. R. T. France and Richard Longenecker have emphasized the complementary, rather than the contradictory, relationship between the functional and the ontological elements. Both also hold that the functional element contained the ontological as a sort of assumption inherent in the substratum of the thought of the New Testament writers.”

This is an important point. In the height of the Biblical Theology movement, it was customary to draw a sharp distinction between the Hebrew mind and the Greek mind, with the Hebrew being regarded as more authentically biblical. Hebrew thinking was understood to be concrete, nontheoretical, and nonspeculative. It would betray no interest in such matters as the “natures” of Christ or, in the ultimate sense, the “nature” of anything.<sup>18</sup> Hence, anything resembling the Chalcedonian, metaphysical understanding of the incarnation was foreign to the truly biblical way of thinking.

This way of rejecting the metaphysical understanding of the incarnation, however, was dealt two blows. The first was the growing awareness that it did not



really fit the nature of the Old Testament materials. James Barr undertook a masterful analysis of “the Greek mind versus the Hebrew mind” in his work *Semantics of Biblical Language*. He showed that the characteristics of the two alleged mentalities did not survive a linguistic analysis of Greek and Hebrew.<sup>19</sup> Brevard Childs’s comment about Barr’s work is to the point: “Seldom has one book brought down so much theological superstructure with such effectiveness.”<sup>20</sup> Childs spoke of “biblical theology in crisis,” one dimension of which was loss of belief in the existence of a “distinctive biblical mentality.”

The second blow came from the examination, along the lines suggested by Reginald Fuller, of the true nature of Old Testament conceptions. It became apparent that, underlying the conception of what God had done, was a conception of what God was, of God’s nature. For example, throughout the recitation of the plagues in Egypt there runs the theme that God was causing these “that they may know that I am the Lord” (e.g., Exod. 10:2;12:12). Similarly, at the end of the contest on Mount Carmel between Jehovah and Baal, the people cried out, “The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God” (I Rings 18:39). In fact, the purpose of the contest was that the God who sent down fire from heaven would therefore be shown as the true and living God (18:24, 36-37). The Book of Psalms contains a continual rehearsing of the accomplishments of Yahweh. These are demonstrations, however, of the greatness of what God is (e.g., 47:2;93:1–2;147:5). In light of this, it appears that there is no inherent biblical reason for rejecting a metaphysical interpretation of God.

## The Importance of the Resurrection

In the past half century, the resurrection of Jesus has taken on greater importance in theology. Part of this has come about through the insistence of a number of scholars, Wolfhart Pannenberg most prominently, upon the historicity and cruciality of the resurrection. Pannenberg reversed the emphasis of Bultmann, who divided history into *Historie*, or factual objective occurrence, and *Geschichte*, or significant history (the impact upon the experience of believers; the subjective dimension). Bultmann considered the resurrection of Jesus the latter type of phenomenon, something that happened primarily to the disciples instead of to Jesus himself. Pannenberg, on the other hand, insists upon one kind of history, claiming that the resurrection is an objective event, provable like any other historical fact.

Evangelicals have taken encouragement from this reversal of German theology. They have argued for the resurrection both positively and negatively. Positively, evangelicals have appealed to three kinds of evidence: the empty tomb, the appearances, and the rise of Easter faith. Cumulatively, evangelicals have argued that these evidences render quite likely the hypothesis of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Negatively, they have rebutted the objections to the

possibility of miracles. They find Bultmann's view of science strangely obsolete, actually representing nineteenth-century conceptions. They have also shown the arguments of David Hume and a contemporary defender of his view, Antony Flew, to be circular, presupposing what they claim to prove.<sup>22</sup> Evangelicals find in the resurrection of Christ the supreme miracle that sets him apart as unique among all humans who have ever lived, an important consideration in light of the religious pluralism we shall examine **shortly**.<sup>23</sup>

## **Logical Problems**

Finally, evangelicals have taken the logical problems of the incarnation seriously. They have benefited by the presence in their midst of a number of philosophers, whose analyses have been most helpful in finding potential solutions to, or at least alleviations of, the problem. Some of these proposed solutions constitute variations on an earlier theme of kenosis, the idea that at the incarnation the second person of the Trinity voluntarily divested himself of some of the attributes of deity. Stephen Davis speaks of Christ giving up only those attributes of deity incompatible with humanity and as taking on only those attributes of humanity not incompatible with deity.<sup>24</sup> Thomas Morris proposes a two-mind theory, according to which the human (limited) mind of Christ did not have access to the content of the divine (unlimited) mind unless the latter permitted the former such access.<sup>25</sup>

Evangelicals have further alleviated the paradox of the incarnation by insisting that we tend to misjudge the issue because we think of humanity as we find it in our own experience, always separate from deity, and of deity in abstraction, or independent of humanity. To think this way is to think of humanity and deity only in the abstract. We know, at least to some extent, what deity and humanity are like when separate from one another, but we do not really know what deity and humanity are like when combined. Further, all our experiences of humanity are of sinful, fallen humanity. This humanity is an incomplete version of the humanity that Jesus possessed, if indeed he was sinless.

Some evangelicals maintain that Jesus was divine but that he could exercise the perfections of deity only in connection with the limitations of the humanity he had voluntarily assumed. Jesus, as God, had all knowledge, but as the incarnate God-man, had access to that knowledge only when God so enabled him. At other times such knowledge perhaps resided in the unconscious portion of the human personality. This approach, sometimes referred to as "kenosis by addition," emphasizes not what Christ gave up, but what he added, and the consequent new state of affairs under which he then functioned. Although it does not totally solve the question of the divinity of Christ, this approach at least suggests a mode of understanding it.<sup>26</sup>

## Salvation

We noted earlier that, for evangelicalism, salvation and the person of Christ are closely linked. Recent evangelical discussion of salvation has centered on two topics.

### **The Nature of Salvation**

The concept of salvation stems in part from the way one understands the human predicament. The traditional view has been that, by nature and choice, all humans are sinful and therefore in need of divine forgiveness, spiritual transformation, and restoration to favor with God. This view, often referred to as total depravity, fell into disrepute in the twentieth century because of the common belief in the continual moral betterment of humanity. Despite the tragedies of two world wars and an economic depression, the threat of nuclear war and ecological self-destruction, optimism about human nature has nevertheless persisted as a sort of perennial philosophy.

With the erosion and even crumbling of the modern world- and life-view, however, this optimism and confidence in the goodness of human nature has come into question.<sup>27</sup> Progressive evangelicals see themselves as “postmodern,” in the sense that the postmodernism they espouse is, as David Ray Griffin has termed it, “restorationist” or “conservative” in nature.\*\* Whereas this view emphasized going beyond modernism, it also holds that there are elements of modernism worth retaining, namely, those it shares with premodernism. Thus, evangelicals insist upon a return to the earlier view of the radical guilt and corruption of the human, here joining hands with some secular existentialists. In this connection, evangelicals also affirm the need for a forensic or declarative justification of the sinner by God and a supernatural transformation of the person resulting from belief in Jesus Christ.

Where the approach to salvation of many evangelicals today differs from a previous time is in their deeper understanding of the nature of sin. Earlier, evangelicals had treated sin as a purely spiritual or religious matter, a conscious or rational choice by the person. This was something like the more recent approach in popular culture of “Just say no!” Currently, evangelicals have a much greater appreciation for the contribution of the behavioral sciences and thus recognize the psychological and social influences that can be at work when a person sins. For example, evangelicals today are more inclined than were their predecessors to consider obsession and compulsion as factors in the commission of sin. Similarly, the role of genetic and other biological factors in depression, homosexuality, and other behaviors is recognized, and must be dealt with. The popularity of the writing of such psychologists as James Dobson, Larry Crabb,

and Gary Collins attests to evangelicalism's interest in a more than purely theological understanding of sin.

This is to say that evangelicalism's understanding of salvation is more holistic than often was the case earlier. Still, such holism is interpreted differently by different groups of evangelicals. The emphasis falls upon natural benefits, which leads to a gospel of health, wealth, and happiness. For others, holism entails a realization that sin is not only individual but also institutional, racial (in terms of the human race), and structural. Thus, unlike in the early decades of the twentieth century, evangelicals today appreciate the importance of the issues associated with peace, justice, and other matters having to do with the social application of the gospel. While retaining the conception that society cannot be ultimately transformed with regeneration of the individuals within it, evangelicals nonetheless take the view that direct action may be required if the social dimensions of sin are to be negated.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Extent of Salvation**

The final area for consideration is contemporary evangelicalism's view of the extent of salvation. Traditionally, both Catholicism and Protestantism have been exclusivistic, believing that there is not salvation outside of an explicit faith in Jesus Christ and, in the case of Catholicism, apart from connection with the church. In recent years, John Hick and Paul Knitter have contended that there are multiple avenues to salvation or that the different religions are essentially the same. Such views have found no favor among evangelicals.

Another view of salvation is that it is inclusivistic, found only in Jesus Christ but not requiring conscious faith in him. In Roman Catholicism, especially since Vatican II, this view has given rise to such ideas as that there are degrees of membership in the Catholic Church or that there are "anonymous Christians," as Karl Rahner avers. In evangelical circles, the notion of "implicit faith" somewhat parallels this. "According to this notion, whereas salvation comes only through the work of Jesus Christ, one may be saved without knowing the identity of Jesus or the details of his redemptive work. How could such salvation come about? Persons, through the general revelation Paul writes about in Romans 1-2, come to realize that they are sinful and in need of divine grace and, as a result, throw themselves upon God's mercy. Although a number of evangelical theologians allow for this possibility, they differ greatly in their estimates of the number of persons who might actually be saved through general revelation. Finally, some evangelicals have also revived the idea of a postmortem opportunity to accept the gospel, for those who have never heard it explicitly during this lifetime, but this has not been widely accepted."

Evangelicalism is thus able today to preach with confidence about the nature and person of Christ and to offer a positive hope of salvation in a world

containing so much fear and despair. With its ongoing conviction of the importance of doctrine, evangelicalism both contributes to, and benefits, from the current resurgence of theology.

#### NOTES

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3. E.g., Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).
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5. E.g., I. Howard Marshall, *Z Believe in the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976); R. T. France, *The Evidence for Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986); *idem*, "The Authenticity of the Sayings of Jesus," in *History, Criticism and Faith*, ed. Cohn Brown (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), pp. 101-43; Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1987).
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16. "The Reply of Professor Cullmann to Roman Catholic Critics," *SJT* (1962): 40.
17. *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson Press, 1970), pp. 134-35; France, "The Worship of Jesus," p. 34.
18. E.g., Hugh Montefiore, "Towards a Christology for Today," in *Soundings: Essays Concerning Christian Understanding*, ed. A. R. Vidler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 158.
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*Jesus Christ is Lord! This central christological assertion, repeated by Christians for centuries, seems straightforward enough. Yet, when subjected to poststructuralist analysis, it reveals the labyrinth of countless issues this analysis uncovers.*

# Christology and Postmodernism

*Not Everyone Who Says to Me, "Lord, Lord"*

Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite  
*Professor of Theology*  
*Chicago Theological Seminary*

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits. Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the realm of heaven . . .<sup>1</sup>

THE PERSON AND WORK of Jesus Christ are distinctively Christian. This is the language that most defines Christian discourse. But which Christ? Modern Christian theology has produced so many Christs that we cannot count on the fact that those who say, "Lord, Lord" are doing Christian theology.

Alan Davies, in his provocative book *Infected Christianity: A Study of Modern Racism*, outlines several modern Christs. These are the Christs of the twentieth century, used to legitimate particular racial hierarchies. Examples are the Germanic Christ, the Latin Christ of France, the Anglo-Saxon Christ of social Darwinism, the Afrikaner Christ, and the Black Christ.

The theology of the Germanic Christ revived Luther's orders of creation,

identifying them with the German *Volk* (“people”) and, ultimately, with the Nazi regime. Christian theology has always struggled to hold on to the notion that salvation is universal, losing this struggle sometimes, as in predestinarian doctrines. Salvation, whether for all or for some, has always been regarded as the work of Christ. In the German Christian version, however, the *Volk* is identified as God’s creation and the means of salvation. The Germans, in a sense, became Christ.

The Latin Christ of France, a product of the royalist French aristocrats, was believed to be nothing less than a Latin god—the “sovereign Jupiter who was crucified for us on earth.” His atoning death, argued Charles Maurras, one of the founders of the royalist political movement in France, was accomplished on behalf of the French race *alone*.<sup>2</sup>

So, too, was the Christ of social Darwinism held to be “the greatest member of the great [Anglo-Saxon] race, [and] was blond and Nordic like the Olympian gods. . . crucified between two ‘brunet’ thieves.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus is “the white man par excellence.”<sup>4</sup> In the same vein, the Afrikaner Christ is a deified Aryan.

Davies includes a description of the Black Christ as articulated by Bishop Henry Turner, Albert Cleage, and James Cone. In citing from Turner and W.E.B. DuBois, Davies points out that “neither Turner nor DuBois, of course, intended to substitute a black racism for a white racism and reinterpret the Christian faith accordingly: they simply intended a vivid protest against the age old colour dualism of the church in which whiteness was associated with the divine logos and blackness with the powers of evil.”

How are we to understand the difference between the Black Christ of Cone, Turner, or Cleage and the white Christ of the Germans or the Afrikaners? In the case of Cone, one difference, especially in his later work, is that “black” is used explicitly as a metaphor to identify in a particular way the salvific work of God with the “least of these.” In 1989 Cone stated,

**I am more convinced today than I was during the 1960’s that the God of the Christian Gospel can be known only in the communities of the oppressed who are struggling for justice in a world that has no place for them. I still believe that “God is Black” in the sense that God’s identity is found in the faces of those who are exploited and humiliated because of their color. But I also believe that “God is mother,” “rice,” “red,” and a host of other things that give life to those whom society condemns to death.”**

**But there are those who are not so careful when they advocate a Black theology. The racially explicit language of Black African Nationalism has also been explicitly anti-Semitic. I agree with Rosemary Radford Ruether when she states that the black theologians constantly walk a “razor’s edge between a racist message and a message that is validly prophetic.”**

**Race is not the only site for christological confrontation in contemporary**



theology. Gender exclusion is also a way in which the meaning of the person and work of Jesus Christ has been construed in the twentieth century. The Vatican has declared: "Christ is the bridegroom of the Church, whom he won for himself with his blood, and the salvation brought by him is the new covenant; by using this language, revelation shows why the incarnation took place according to the male gender and makes it impossible to ignore this historical reality."<sup>\*</sup> The Catholic Church has used this argument about Jesus' incarnation as a male human being to exclude women from the priesthood. Feminist christologies have countered this argument in ways that range from use of a historical-critical method that centers on Jesus' extraordinarily egalitarian treatment of women to an appeal to "Christa," which is a representation of Jesus as a crucified female." Rita Nakashima Brock has developed a christology around "Christa/Community," an explicit recentering of Christianity around the incarnational reality of the Christian community.<sup>10</sup>

How are we to adjudicate among the competing truth claims of the literally hundreds of Christs produced in the twentieth century? Why say that the Nazi Christ is an abomination, the Black Christ liberating, and the maleness of Jesus paradigmatic or the ultimate symbol of a patriarchal church?

### **The Poststructuralist Critique**

Poststructuralist critique can be a helpful tool for understanding the competing truth claims of these modern christologies, even if only to understand how the same religion with the same God can produce so many conflicting versions of its central tenet. What is poststructuralism? Characteristically, the word itself does not have one fixed meaning (welcome to the late twentieth century!) but is used to collect the theoretical positions developed from several philosophers and linguists, primarily Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault.<sup>11</sup>

Although several tenets of critique are shared by poststructuralists, the primary one is the significance of language. Poststructuralists hold that the key to understanding social organization, social meanings, power, and individual consciousness is language. This philosophical approach is often called "postmodernist" because it is a direct challenge to the central assumption of the modern period, namely, that the human being is a rational and coherent subject. What the modern period has taken to be an innate human reason and subjectivity is instead a product of social forces, primarily language. Our sense of who we are, both individually and collectively, is constructed by the way reality is named to us.

This is such a profound shift in the way we regard ourselves and our world that it takes much getting used to. A nontheological example might be in order. Think of the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson and the way in which the news

media constructed radically different people from the different actors in this tragedy. Whereas one publication emphasized O. J. Simpson's "dark rages," another focused on his "heroism" as a football player. Alternately, Nicole Brown Simpson was made out to be either a "battered wife" or "party girl." The American readership is sharply divided along racial lines in its interpretation of this rhetoric. African Americans, according to the polls, are almost twice as likely to think O. J. Simpson innocent of the charges against him as white Americans. African Americans tend to look for racial bias in white news media far more than do white Americans.

An even more profound insight from poststructuralism, beyond these different interpretive slants, is that Simpson himself was produced by what was said of him as a football player and commercial personality. Consider, for example, when his wife reported him for battering: The police responded to him not as having committed assault but as an essentially trustworthy figure, and consistently did not require more than token compliance with the law. Simpson's receiving therapy over the telephone is also a case in point. Whereas Simpson, or any public figure, is writ larger than life, his case is, in the poststructuralist view, only different in degree and not in kind from the way anyone's consciousness of oneself and the world is constructed: by how that world is named to one. Thus, the poststructuralist assertion is that who we are as humans is not innate or given but produced in history.

In addition to the view that human subjectivity is constructed by language, poststructuralists believe that language itself is not fixed but "built," as words acquire meanings in specific historical locations. These locations are always the site of competing meanings and, hence, of struggle. The struggle over what language means in specific historical circumstances is a critical insight of poststructuralists. To return to the example above, when the adjective "dark" is used to describe Simpson's battering of his wife, and when it is juxtaposed to "rage," the use of the word "dark" to mean "evil" is a product of nearly three centuries of racial prejudice; the enslavement or economic impoverishment of African Americans depends on the powerful, but unconscious, belief that somehow this group of people does not deserve equality because of their moral failings. When, therefore, this adjective is employed, or when *Newsweek* "darkens" Simpson's skin as in its famous cover picture of him, all this social and political struggle over the moral meaning of race is carried along. Meanings get produced and reproduced through the ordinary power relations of everyday life.

## **My Own Struggles with Race and Gender**

I began to see the usefulness of the theories of poststructuralism in my own struggles to come to terms with the criticism African-American women were leveling at white feminist theology. These African-American women have been

explicit that white women have produced a feminist theological discourse that ratifies not the experience of women in general but the experience of only one race and class of women, namely, that of white, middle-class women.

This is not unlike the critique that feminist theologians have been leveling against patriarchal theology for quite some time. Simply put, feminism is the claim that women are human beings and that whatever is predicated of the human should include reference to their experience. The critique of patriarchy then, is that what has been named human experience is, in fact, only the experience of male human beings projected onto all.

Therefore, the major methodological starting point of feminism has been to reclaim women's experience and to see where it differs from what has been incorrectly named the human norm.<sup>12</sup> In this, feminism, especially in theology, has had much in common with Protestant liberalism, as the liberals, too, claim that the experience of the God-relationship (Schleiermacher) is foundational to the task of modern theology.

Still, it is precisely this appeal to experience that has been rejected by black women as the most racist aspect of white feminist theology. Black women have asked, 'Whose experience is meant when white feminists refer to 'women's experience'?' These black women contend that white women have made a mistake parallel to that committed by white men: the assumption of common experience and hence the false universalization of what is in fact only the experience of a particular group.<sup>13</sup> This is where the poststructuralist critique is so helpful. Poststructuralists contend that it is necessary to reject the notion that "any human perspective has a privileged access to ontological reality."<sup>14</sup>

I, like the patriarchal theologian, have assumed that I can move smoothly and directly from my naming of any "experience" I may have of reality to the truth of human existence. While we may all acknowledge today that we live in different social locations, have different races, genders, and so on, we also assume that behind this plurality of existences there lies a discoverable truth, "the way things really are." But we cannot make this claim. In fact, according to the postmodernist we do not even experience reality directly but only through the linguistic constructions of reality. The liberal roots of white feminism became clear to me: In naming "my experience" as an antidote to the exclusion of women's experience from theological discourse, I had carried along in this "naming" all the linguistic constructions not only of gender but also of race, class, sexual preference, ethnicity, and the thousand other particularities infrequently brought to consciousness in the way "my" experience had been constructed in me.

## **Foucault and Theology**

The philosopher Michel Foucault has been by far the most influential of the

poststructuralists in the reconstruction of feminist discourse in regard to race and class. Sharon Welch and Mary McClintock Fulkerson<sup>15</sup> are two feminist theologians who have used poststructuralism to deepen and broaden feminist theology on race and class.

Like Welch, I have found that I agree with Foucault's approach to critique: that it is really only possible to recognize the partiality of another system of thought when one has abandoned it and found another way of constructing thought and action.<sup>16</sup> One develops the critical posture by describing both the fractures that appear in the dominant discourses and the alternative practices and discourses already present and operative in the struggle with the dominant discourses. When one describes an alternative system of thought and action, one enters into the struggle to define reality.

Foucault has been especially helpful to theologians because he studies both institutions—such as the law, the political system, the church, the family, and the media—and the way in which social structures and processes are organized through these systems. Each system produces a distinctive way of organizing concepts through language. Foucault calls any given system a “discursive field.” Discourses, let us say, theology, that have power in one field (e.g., the church) will not have the same power nor the same content in other fields (e.g., politics or law). The more dominant the discourse, the larger is its field. We could argue today that the field of law is coming to dominate theological discourse in the sense that the church is sued more frequently for clergy malpractice; the net result is that the theological field has shrunk even further than was already the case in a secularized society.

We are not able to become conscious of this shift because, although we call ourselves theologians, we seldom pay attention to the fact that half of the term “theo-logian” is *logos*, or “word.” The theologian is one whose primary work is the construction of language and yet, for most of Christian history, we have used words without a consciousness of how language functions in the construction of reality. We have assumed that we can get from the word to the “thing in itself” without even pausing to consider how this could be the case. Words are not the things they denote. They are the product of historical forces and, as Foucault argues, function in matrices or fields where meaning is made or not made.

Another of Foucault's contributions, especially for theology, is the understanding of power and how power is diffused throughout society. Foucault defines “power” as

the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process **which**, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the **contrary**, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take

effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies.”

We are not familiar with power conceived as a series of intricate relations that form a chain winding through the state, the law, and different social institutions. Power dispersed through institutions tends to be invisible; this is where its real power lies. Power as the uniformed army, the king on his throne, or the president in his office are only representations of the diffusions of power and, without these invisible apparatuses, the representations would cease to exist.

The state cannot directly control the lives of all those living in it. “Big Brother,” the all-seeing invasion of human life by technology in the Orwellian scenario, is really the operation of multiple apparatuses. One of the key sites for the organization of power diffused throughout society, according to Foucault, is the body. Foucault wants to understand how bodies have been named and given meaning and value, and how “the manner in which what is most material and most vital in them has been invested.”<sup>18</sup>

The church as institution vested the body with meaning and value for centuries, primarily, as Foucault argues in his *History of Sexuality*, through the mechanism of confession. By having people confess to the “experience” or even the imagining of bodily pleasure in connection with their sexuality, the experience of sexuality itself, as something forbidden, took shape. This power to name, and hence to create, sexuality has largely passed from religion to science. Biology, medicine, and psychiatry now define the body, and it is to these authorities that we must “confess” the processes of the body and have them named for us.

Nevertheless, power eludes the total control of any one institution or system, nor is there a totalizing discourse on one side and an opposing discourse on the other. Rather “discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can run different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another, opposing strategy.”<sup>19</sup>

The body as a key site for the construction of power relations in society finally brings us back to the subject of christology. In christology, we make the extraordinary claim that God had a body. In the flesh, God came and lived in history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This anathema to the Greeks is still at the center of the power struggles of Christianity today, as it has been for the centuries of Christian history.

### **Classical Christological Problems as Discursive Struggles**

Jesus Christ is Lord (I Cor. 12:3). This central christological assertion, repeated by Christians for centuries, seems straightforward enough. Yet, submit-

ted to poststructuralist analysis, it reveals all the countless labyrinthine issues that come from this critical perspective.

The earliest Christians, as the Pauline letters would attest, were a persecuted minority in the large and powerful Roman Empire. When they said that Jesus Christ is the *kyrios*, the “Lord,” they were also saying that Caesar is *not* lord. The “re-construction” of power introduced by the Christian use of this word was that the hegemonic, militaristic, and expansionist Roman understanding of power was being replaced by the construction of human community by other norms, the norms of I Corinthians 13 or Luke 6:20–26 (or Matt. 5:1–11).

The assumption of the language of political subversion for the paradigmatic assertion of Christian faith about who Jesus of Nazareth was, and is, was a deliberate strategy for a powerless and persecuted minority to engage in a language of protest. Therefore this language becomes a way to construct Christian identity in the first three centuries as founded on understandings of relationships, of the state, of self-sacrifice, and of peace. Thus, the language becomes a site of resistance where the discursive field encompasses the sharing of goods in common (Acts 2:44–47); the practice of charity (Acts 11:29–30); and the breaking with traditional exclusions of women, members of other religions or races, economic conditions, or even bondage (Gal. 3:28).

When the context of power and authority changes for the Christian community, however, the discursive field of the language “Jesus Christ is Lord” also changes. After the peace of Constantine, Christianity became an official religion of the empire and gradually took into itself the Roman hegemonic, militaristic and expansionist understandings of power. The church became empire as the Holy Roman Empire. The christological titles of “Lord” or “King” were retained but invested with different meaning, since to become a Christian—from the time of Constantine—was not to become a persecuted minority but to acquire privilege in society. Therefore the language about *kyrios* ceased to be a language of protest and resistance and became a way of constructing the imperial identity of the church and its dominance over any other site of power in the Christian West. The language of Lordship reified the power of emperors and produced the divine right of kings. As power became organized through the stratification of society through gender, race, and class, the term “lordship” increasingly functioned to divinize these stratifications and to organize power relations in a hierarchical fashion. This stratification in the churches became so complete that the first definition of hierarchy in English-language dictionaries is ecclesiastical.

The doctrine of the Incarnation and its formation is another example of how the imperial structure of the Roman Empire impacted the formulation of christological doctrine. The Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) promulgated the doctrine of the Incarnation, that is, that Jesus of Nazareth was God *in caro*, or “incarnate.” The Greek *oikonomia*, which was actually used by the Council in the original document, was the word translated by the Latin expression, and from

the Latin comes the name of the doctrine of the incarnation. The Greek term *oikonomia* contains within it *oikos* (“household”) and *nomos* (“management”). We get our modern English word “economy” from it. In the section “The Sociopolitical Location of Christological Doctrine” in her new book on christology, Elisabeth Schiessler Fiorenza brilliantly analyzes this point: “What *is* translated as the ‘mystery of the incarnation’ would better be rendered as the ‘mystery of the Lord’s (household) management/order/law/economy.’”<sup>20</sup> The “flesh” into which Jesus enters is not, according to this Greek word, revealed as human flesh, but specially the flesh of those who rule: emperors, masters, lords.

When the Afrikaners or the Nazis construct a Jesus of racial hegemony, therefore, their discourse must be analyzed in terms of its relationship to the way in which power in the twentieth century is organized along racial or ethnic lines. How did the construction of the racial superiority of the Aryan race depend *on* the compliance of the church institutions? German theology had already constructed a groundwork of racial superiority, and it extended from Schleiermacher’s ordering of the human God-consciousness according to race, with Germans being the most spiritually talented and Africans the least,<sup>21</sup> to Karl Barth’s acknowledgement that in his orders of creation, Luther had provided the preconditions of Nazism. The use of racially specific imagery by those in positions of power confirms and legitimates their hegemonic, militaristic, and expansionist understandings of themselves and their right to rule, exactly like the Roman imperial model.

In these racist christologies, there is a profound and uncrossable line drawn between the material and the spiritual, between the private and public, aspects of life. Redemption does not alter the structures of creation but confirms them. This separation between the material and the spiritual depends on the way in which Christian theology has understood the body and sexuality. Not only in Christian asceticism but throughout Christian doctrine, the body has been considered problematic. While Augustine may have repudiated the Manicheans, his distrust of his own bodily responses as representing the bondage of the will set the terms for much of the Christian understanding of the body as the location of temptation. Bodily pleasure itself became suspect and was defined as concupiscence, the way in which sin itself gets transmitted.

The female body becomes the representation par excellence of carnality and the drag of the flesh on the spirit. The Vatican Declaration notes that it is “this language” of bridegroom, a male specific language, that constructs the understanding of salvation as blood sacrifice. The female body cannot represent the efficacy of the atoning sacrifice of Christ, especially, of course, as enacted in the Eucharist because the Incarnation took place “according to the male gender.” Gender is elevated to an ontological category; there are really two humanities, one male and one female, and they are actually different. For gender dominance to be secured, it is necessary to construct two separate and opposing human

identities, one male and one female. The female body as the symbol of carnality and its attendant liabilities of emotion, pain, sensuality, and even death is opposed to the spirit and rationality, the male as stoic, exercising self-control, and transcending bodily decay after death. This is the ultimate ideology of control, control over what humans most fear: the decay of the flesh in death.

The separate ontological identities of man and woman also occupy different places in a hierarchical order of human value. When we connect this to the language of the Chalcedonian formula that Jesus was the mystery of God's order or management, then we can see that the political context of the formulation of christological doctrine after the "Peace of Constantine," which is really the "Pax Romana," has shaped christology to confirm the order of rulers over ruled, men over women, and slaves over free. These are indeed the Greco-Roman rules of the "household" that come to substitute for the egalitarian and power-sharing understandings of resistance in the minority Christianity of the **first** three centuries.

## **Reconstruction**

If traditional Christian doctrine was formulated at a time of imperial rule that invested its doctrinal language with militarism, hierarchy, and the reification of gender and race dominance, how do we reconstruct Christian doctrine to recover the critique of power and the communitarian vision of the first three centuries? The context of the first three centuries was one of resistance to oppression. The use of the political language of "lord" or "king" then produced a practice of subversion of dominant modes of authority. Hence, what we have to do to begin to reconstruct christology, is to put our feet somewhere else; we have to move our lives and our commitments away from authoritarianism to the road to Emmaeus.

I have often been struck by the methodological soundness of Sojourner Truth's self-chosen name. Sojourner Truth was a woman of African descent, born into the American system of slavery. She saw almost all of her thirteen children sold away from her. As an abolitionist and Christian preacher, she moved hundreds, if not thousands, of people out of slavery. What we learn from Sojourner Truth is that we need to travel to a foreign country and to live there for a while before we return, that is, to sojourn. If we get up and change our social location, we have a much better chance of finding the truth.

This seems to me to be the underlying message of Jesus' words in Matthew, with which I started this article. One cannot know the truth of a theological tree until one sees the fruits. One cannot know how faithful a doctrine is until one has sojourned with it and lived out its tenets. What happened because of the Nazi Christ? The Anglo-Saxon Christ? The Afrikaner Christ? Did those who lived from these doctrines come closer to the Sermon on the Mount, or did they go



and live in another country, away from the Mount and its lessons on how to live a decent life with others?

And what of the Black Christ? What has happened because African-American theology has rejected the white Christ of Euro-Atlantic Christianity? I have seen many of the African-American students I teach come to the black theological perspective with a huge burden of low self-esteem, having internalized the white Christ. They often resist black theology precisely because it calls them to name this pain and to work to change it. But black theology calls to them out of an affirmation of the value of their humanity, and when that call is attended to, their recognition of their own value in the eyes of God as an African American has a profoundly healing effect.

I think, however, that the black nationalism that is an amalgam of biblicism and Islam, while it, too, can foster self-esteem, does so at the price of racial superiority and racial division. This perspective does not heal but causes those who subscribe to it to become rigidly ideological.

So what does one say of feminist christologies, the depictions of Jesus as female, or as the embodiment of community? I must confess that when I first saw the statue "Christa" in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, it offended me greatly. On a nearby bulletin board was an anonymous poem entitled "By His Wounds You Have Been Healed, I Peter 2:24." This is the poem:

**O God,**

through the image of a woman\*

crucified on the cross

I understand at last

For over half of my life

I have **been** ashamed

of the scars I bear.

These scars tell an ugly story,

a common story,

about a girl who is the victim

when a man acts out his fantasies

In the warmth, peace and sunlight of your presence

I was able to uncurl the tightly clenched fists

For the first time

I felt your suffering presence with me

in that event.

I have known you as a vulnerable baby,

as a brother, and as a father.

Now I **know you as a woman.**

**You were there with me**

as the violated girl  
caught in helpless suffering.

The chains of shame and fear  
no longer bind my heart and body.  
A slow fire of compassion and forgiveness  
is kindled.  
My tears fall now  
for man as well as woman.

You were not ashamed of your wounds.  
You showed them to Thomas  
as marks of your ordeal and death.  
I will no longer hide these wounds of mine.  
I will bear them gracefully.  
They tell a resurrection story.

**\*In a Toronto church, the figure of a woman, arms outstretched as if crucified,  
was hung below the cross in the chancel.**

In *caro*, “incarnate,” could come to mean that Jesus of Nazareth was enfleshed in everybody, not just the **bodies** of those who order the household. In a class that I team-taught with Rosemary Radford Ruether, a woman told of her experience of being raped at a deserted garbage dump when she went to drop off some trash. “I lay there,” she recalled, “wondering if he would come back and kill me.” Bleeding and injured, and wondering if she were about to die, she lay on the trash. She envisaged Jesus before her as a crucified woman, saying to her from the cross, “You don’t have to be ashamed, I know what you are suffering.” After hearing this student’s story, I came across the poem above. I copied it and hung it on the door of my office. Few weeks go by without a woman student, and occasionally a male student, of all races and from all walks of life, coming by to tell me how the poem has helped them to admit to their own suffering from abuse, and how the poem holds out the promise of healing from that abuse.

What does it mean to say Jesus saves? I think it means that healing occurs, that wounds that continued to bleed despite all medical help suddenly stop oozing. I think it means that Jesus’ own vision, which he called the *basileia*, is realized and the blind see, the lame walk, and the Jubilee year finally comes. This is the soteriological content of the passage from Matthew. Jesus becomes the Christ to us as the fruits ripen and are good.

Christianity is about a passionate commitment that this revelation makes a difference for human history. We pursue this passion in a way that acknowledges how difficult it is to change despair into hope, to change evil into good, to transform injustice into justice.

There have been many Christs so far in the twentieth century and, as we wind down to the end of the millennium, I think we will see many more. Some

will offend at first glance, and some may seduce with their princely garments and smooth theological language of “lord, lord.” How are we to tell which are faithful and which are faithless? What we need to ask is, does this Christ heal? Does this Christ help? And if it does not, then God help us all.

## NOTES

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6. James Cone, “God is Black,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 83.
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8. *Vatican Declaration, Commentary*, 1966, p. 20.
9. This term refers to the name of a sculpture in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Edwina Sandys was the sculptor.
10. Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1988), p. 52.
11. The following is a select bibliography of their works: Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Lacan, *Écrits* (London: Tavistock, 1977); Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971); Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. I (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
12. See, for early examples, the work of Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation, A Feminine View,” in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979) or of Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women’s Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980).
13. Sheila Greeve Davaney, “The Limits of the Appeal to Experience,” Unpublished paper, 1986, pp. 2-3.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
15. Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990); Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).
16. Welch, *Feminist Ethic*, p. 4, citing Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).
17. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. I: *An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 92.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

19. *Ibid*, p. 102.

20. Elisabeth Schiessler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet* (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 20.

21. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1928), pp. 31-62.