

The confession that constitutes one a Christian explicitly as such is “You [Jesus] are the Christ,” or, in more purely formal terms, “You [Jesus] are of decisive significance for my existence and all human existence.”

But a *confession* is one thing, an *assertion*, something else. And this is so even though the constitutive Christian confession necessarily implies certain constitutive Christian assertions, but for the validity of which the Christian confession itself could not be valid. Specifically, the Christian confession necessarily implies two Christian assertions: (1) the properly christological assertion that Jesus is the Christ, or is of decisive significance for human existence; and (2) the properly theological assertion that the meaning for human existence of the strictly ultimate reality properly called “God” is the pure, unbounded (i.e., unconditional) love that Jesus decisively re-presents.

Of course, these two constitutive Christian assertions—properly christological and properly theological—are existential assertions. (Actually, it might be better to say that, while the constitutive Christian confession is “existential,” the two constitutive Christian assertions are “existentialist” —in the same sense in which Bultmann can identify a certain kind of interpretation as “existentialist,” and thus speak of “existentialist interpretation [of scripture, proclamation, etc.],” as distinct from the sense of “existentialist” when he speaks of “existentialist analysis [of human existence]” as “a philosophical analysis of existence.”) Therefore, they necessarily imply certain properly metaphysical and ethical assertions, but for the validity of which the two constitutive Christian assertions themselves could not be valid. Whether these assertions *are* valid, however, or, more exactly, whether they are credible as well as appropriate, is the proper business of systematic theology, in its third, “philosophical,” phase, to determine.

If this account is essentially right, it is clear that I was not as totally misguided as I have come to think I was in earlier formulations in which I asserted or implied that Christian witness is constituted explicitly as such by only one assertion, i.e., the properly christological assertion. The truth in all such

formulations is that there is, in fact, only one constitutive Christian *confession*, while the truth in the other quite different formulations to which I have been led more recently is that there is nevertheless not one but two constitutive Christian *assertions*: the properly theological assertion that the meaning for us of the strictly ultimate reality properly called “God” is the unconditional love decisively re-presented through Jesus; and the properly christological assertion that the historical person Jesus is of decisive significance for human existence because he decisively re-presents this strictly ultimate reality in its meaning for us.

The question, obviously, is whether the threefold distinction between (1) existential; (2) existentialist; and (3) metaphysical and ethical can be upheld—or, better, whether this terminology provides the most appropriate way in which to uphold it. One thing seems clear: I am, in any event, bound to distinguish, in some terms or other, between (1) self-understanding; (2) understanding of existence; and (3) metaphysics and ethics. For just as any self-understanding necessarily implies a certain understanding of existence, so any understanding of existence necessarily implies a certain metaphysics and ethics. The most important thing, accordingly, is to uphold *this* distinction in whatever terms may prove to be most appropriate for doing so.

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