

## *Further Reflections on Christology*

The constitutive christological assertion functions to answer not one question but two: not only the question, "Who is Jesus?" but also the question, "Who is the Christ?" and so "Who is God?" Indeed, its function to answer the second question is religiously and theologically crucial. Even so, its function to answer the first question is important, and "christology" in the usual narrow sense of the word is to be understood as the more or less reflective elaboration of its answer.

The question, "Who is the Christ?" and so "Who is God?" is one particular form in which one may ask the existential question of how to understand both the mystery encompassing existence and my authentic possibility in virtue of that mystery as necessarily implying one another. If my authentic possibility is thus and so, the mystery encompassing existence must be thus and so—and vice versa. Insofar as it makes any proper sense to distinguish between talking about the being of God in itself and the meaning of God for us, that sense is the same as is expressed by distinguishing between the mystery encompassing existence and my authentic possibility in virtue of that mystery.

The assertion, "Jesus is the Christ," is made by faith and to faith and therefore is made on the basis of human experience, and so on the basis of what a human being *could* somehow experience. But no human being could experience either the resurrection or the miraculous conception of Jesus or his being the incarnation of the preexistent Son of God. Nor could any human being experience Jesus' being completely obedient to God, unreservedly open to God, and so on. Therefore, neither the more mythological nor the more legendary ways of understanding Jesus can be understood as directly expressing the experience of faith. They must be understood, rather, as indirect expressions of the experience of Jesus as decisive for human existence—as the explicit primal ontic source of Christian existence as authentic human existence. To acknowledge Jesus as the explicit primal ontic source of one's own existence is to have the faith and experience of which both traditional forms of talking about his person—the more

mythological (be it adoptionist or incarnationist) and the more legendary—are only more or less inadequate expressions.

In the nature of the case, however, the legendary ways of talking about the decisive significance of Jesus are dependent on the mythological ways and are inadequate apart from them. The most that the legendary ways can express is that Jesus was a man in principle like other men, even if in fact indefinitely unlike them insofar as he was perfectly obedient, unreservedly open, and so on. The point of the mythological ways, by contrast, is to say that Jesus was God or, at least, that Jesus was God present and at work disclosing Godself to human beings and accomplishing their salvation. Therefore, insofar as Christian faith in Jesus is faith in him as God's own word of judgment and grace, it is more appropriately expressed by the mythological than by the legendary ways of talking about the specialness of his person.

This implies, among other things, that it is as inadequate to see Jesus simply as a human being decisively *re-presenting* the possibility of faith as to see him simply as a human being perfectly *actualizing* that possibility—the former being as much as the latter more a "legendary" than a properly "mythological" way of expressing his decisive significance. To be sure, Jesus does decisively re-present the possibility of faith in and through all that he says and does, whether or not he does (or even could) perfectly actualize the possibility of faith. Accordingly, Jesus may be said to be the fulfillment of the *law*, in that he makes clear the universal gift and demand of God's love. But insofar as Jesus is the substance of the *gospel*, he is so because the agent doing the re-presenting—to be sure, in and through his human life—is none other than God. What all mythological, as distinct from legendary, talk is an attempt to express is *God re-presenting God's own gift and demand through Jesus*.

Of course, it is the insistence that it is God who is doing the re-presenting that eventually comes to expression in the notion that the person of Jesus is divine. But what becomes an insolvable metaphysical puzzle when taken to refer to the being of Jesus in himself—in terms that either qualify his humanity or else destroy the unity of his person—raises no such difficulty when it is understood as a way of expressing Jesus' decisive significance for human existence. To say of something that God has done it—so far as that is

intended to be in any way <sup>a</sup>~~of~~ *differentiating* statement—can only mean that it is and by right ought to be significant for my self-understanding before God; that in it God confronts me with God's own gift and demand.

Whether as Jesus-kerygma or as Christ-kerygma, the witness of the New Testament is a witness to Jesus as of just such decisive significance for human existence, as, in effect, the explicit gift and demand of God.

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