

What is the significance of the event of Jesus Christ?

In this event, God's universal offer of love is actually received through a human word of gift and demand having the same universal scope as the offer itself. Thus it is not that *in* Jesus Christ God's love was first poured out, but rather that *through* Jesus Christ God's love is decisively given to all human beings together with the demand for obedient faith, and that this gift and demand continue to be the very principle of the church's ongoing existence. This presupposes, of course, that the entire reality of Jesus' history—at any rate, as it is presented to us in the gospels—is simply a transparent means of re-presenting the gift and demand of God's love and the possibility of faith correlative therewith. Likewise, the entire reality of the church—insofar as it is “more” rather than “less” visible—is the continuation of this re-presentation.

This view is at once related to, and yet different from, the view of John Knox. It fully agrees with Knox that “the purpose of God in Christ was the bringing into existence of this community [*sc.* of the church]” (*On the Meaning of Christ*: 106), and that “the only difference between the world as it was just after the event and the world as it had been just before is that the church was now in existence” (*The Early Church and the Coming Great Church*: 45). But it cannot agree with Knox that the church or community which is the end of God's work in Christ is “a redeemed humanity,” albeit one in which the “new creation” exists only “brokenly and partially” (*The Humanity and Divinity of Christ*: 114). Why not? Because on such an understanding of the church, the difference between church and world collapses. Unless one is prepared to abandon the conviction that no human being—even the most alienated and estranged—is utterly separated from God, and so realizes authentic faith in God at least “brokenly and partially,” i.e., inauthentically, one is forced to say that “a broken and partial” realization of the “new creation” is present everywhere in the world. But, then, a church defined as Knox defines it has no distinctiveness vis-à-vis the world.

What, then, is the church's distinctiveness? Its distinctiveness, I submit, is its conformation to the distinctiveness of its Lord—who is Lord, not because he

*actualized* the possibility of the “new creation,” or was instrumental somehow in God’s bringing into being a redeemed humanity, but because he *re-presented* this possibility and was instrumental in bringing into being a community whose very being is the continuation of such a re-presentation. In other words, the church is distinctive as *the community of witness*.

Presupposed here is the suspicion that Knox, rather like W. C. Smith, operates with a twofold distinction that is too crude to do justice to the problems with which he is concerned. Knox customarily contrasts the *actual life* of the new community with the *witness and theology* in which that life is explicated and explained—in this closely paralleling Smith’s distinction between “personal faith” and “cumulative tradition” (cf., e.g., his distinction between “the shared life” and “the common faith” in *The Early Church*, where this distinction obviously rests on that between “experience” and “reflection,” or “the effort to understand [experience]” [63]. See also 44, n. 1, where the limited meaning of “faith” so used is made explicit.). But this overlooks a third term: the *possibility* of new life, which as such is neither the actuality of new life nor the explication and explanation of such actuality. Actual events not only actualize possibilities, but also present—or re-present—possibilities (*qua* possibilities) for actualization. Needless to say, an event may *both* actualize a possibility and actually present—or re-present—the same possibility for subsequent actualization. But its actual presentation—or re-presentation—of a possibility (*qua* possibility) is not dependent upon, in the sense of requiring, presupposing, or implying its actualization of that same possibility. The significance of Jesus is not that he *actualized* a certain possibility, but that he actually *re-presented* a possibility, which he ever continues to re-present through the church’s witness. Thus, whatever his actual life, and however adequate or inadequate his witness and theology (relative, at least, to our present possibilities for achieving adequacy), the crucial question is this possibility that he re-presents, so construed as to include the actual event of its re-presentation. *This*—and not his “personal faith,” nor the “personal faith” of the church—is what is really explicated and explained in witness and theology.

As for the meaning of Jesus' resurrection, Paul's words in Romans 1:4, ἐξ ἀναστασεως νεκρων, seem to indicate that Jesus was raised from among the dead (plural). When we affirm his resurrection, therefore, we affirm not only (1) that he is not simply nothing, but—with all creation—is alive forever in and for God; but also (2) that he is the authoritative word of God and, as such, the "first fruits," the one sitting at "God's *right* hand."

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