

Reflections on Lutheran orthodox christology after the class discussion

Three reflections dominate my mind as I reflect on the class discussion:

1. Lutheran orthodox christology is (1) embedded in that part of dogmatics concerned with the "principles," or "sources," of salvation; and (2) entitled as a chapter--the central of the three chapters comprising this part of dogmatics--"the fraternal redemption of Christ [= the Son]." To this not inconsiderable extent, justice is done to the "functional," "soteriological," emphasis both of the New Testament and of the Reformers, and, indirectly, to the existential character of the christological question; and to the same extent, Pöhlmann's criticism (cf. 39) needs to be qualified before it is acceptable.

2. Lutheran orthodox christology nonetheless provides a textbook example of what happens when one allows the consequences of others' faith to become (part of) the ground of one's own. I could put this by saying that it beautifully illustrates the outcome of treating second sentences as first sentences, and neglecting to justify them by reference to the first sentences from which they're derived, not to mention the experience and faith of which even the first sentences were themselves but a formulation and expression. But to put it this way fails to take account of another essential part of the problem--namely, that sentences originally functioning as formulations and expressions of faith--understood as an answer to the existential question--come to be used as though they performed the very different function of stating the conditions but for which faith would not be a justified response. In other words, existential confessions come to be understood as objectifying descriptions or explanations, or, as I should prefer to say in other, non-Bultmannian terms, statements expressing the meaning of Jesus for us are understood as statements about the being of Jesus in himself. Thus, even though Lutheran orthodox christology is,

indeed, embedded in a larger context concerned with the "principles," or "sources," of salvation; and even though it itself is conceived under the title, "of the fraternal redemption of Christ," it is nonetheless "objectifying" (in Bultmann's terms)--in its discussion of salvation as well as of the person of Christ--rather than "existential," or "existentialist." To this not inconsiderable extent, justice is not done to the "functional," "soteriological" emphasis both of the New Testament and of the Reformers, and, indirectly, to the existential character of the question christology answers; and to the same extent, Pöhlmann's criticism can and should be accepted as to the point and valid.

3. Withal, there is a valid and important lesson to be learned from Lutheran orthodox christology. It is the same lesson that is to be learned from orthodoxy generally--namely, that, while christological formulations, like theological formulations generally, do indeed express the de facto authority that Jesus has for those who make or imply them, this is not the only or the most important thing that they function to do, since they also assert the de jure authority that Jesus has and must have if his de facto authority for those who believe in him is itself to be justified. In other words, existential-historical claims about the meaning of Jesus for us, like existential claims about the meaning of ultimate reality for us, although indeed categorially different from all empirical (including empirical-historical) and pseudo-empirical (legendary and mythical) claims, nevertheless do have both metaphysical and moral implications, but for the truth of which they themselves could not possibly be true and, therefore, could not possibly successfully perform their function to assert Jesus' de jure authority as well as to express his de facto authority for all who believe in him and confess him. This is the valid point in the apology that the Lutheran orthodox theologians offer for their extended treatment of the

doctrine of the person of Christ when they say that "only because divine and human natures were united in one person in Christ could he accomplish the work of redemption," and that "the doctrine had to be developed at such length to make this evident" (Schmid: 13). Of course, this is in no way to question that there is also a valid and important point in the revisionary position of theologians like Bultmann and Marxsen. For while existential-historical claims about the meaning of Jesus for us, like existential claims about the meaning of ultimate reality for us, do indeed have both metaphysical implications about the structure of ultimate reality in itself and moral implications for how we are to act and what we are to do in relation to others--in this agreeing with orthodoxy--these implications, whether metaphysical or moral, are categorially different from both empirical (including empirical-historical) and pseudo-empirical (legendary and mythical) claims and must be interpreted accordingly. The greatness of Bultmann at this point, in comparison with Marxsen, is that he saw clearly that the issue is not whether ontology (or something else instead), but only what ontology--"an ontology of objectifying thinking" or "a new ontological conceptuality" (NTMOBW: 130, n. 58).

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