

Christology for Evangelism

1. By theology for evangelism in the comprehensive sense in which this course seems to be concerned with it, I can understand nothing other than quite simply "theology"--which is to say, critical reflection on the claim of the Christian witness of faith to be decisive for human existence, and hence the deliberate, methodical, and reasoned attempt to answer the questions as to the meaning and truth of that witness. This assumes that "evangelism" is most properly used to refer to the mission of the visible church as such to bear witness to Jesus the Christ in all that it thinks or says or does through its individual members, whether gathered or dispersed. (I should not wish simply to deny that "evangelism" may also be used more narrowly to refer to a particular form of the church's mission as distinct from its mission as such. But I take it that this can hardly be the sense of the term presupposed by this course.) Given this assumption, then any theology that could be properly called a theology at all would be a "theology for evangelism"; for the only way in which any theology as theology can be of service to the integral mission of the visible church is by asking and answering the questions of the meaning and truth of the witness that is constitutive of that mission.--Of course, this is in no way to deny the distinctions between the three main disciplines of historical, systematic, and practical theology, each of which may quite appropriately be understood to have a somewhat different bearing on evangelism as the church's integral mission to bear witness to Jesus the Christ--historical theology having to do with the basis of that mission, systematic theology, with its content, and practical theology, with its aim. But, assuming the sense of "evangelism" that I take to be appropriate to our deliberations here, one need have no hesitation in saying that "theology for evangelism" can mean nothing other than

24 October 1977

simply "theology," with or without regard for the differentiation of theology into its three main disciplines as historical, systematic, and practical theology.

2. But now if the only theology for evangelism is simply theology, it is nevertheless true that theology is for the sake of evangelism in one or both of two somewhat different senses of the words. Theology, I have said, is critical reflection on the meaning and truth of the Christian witness that is constitutive of the church's integral mission as the visible church. But now such theological reflection is obviously necessary not only in order to bear the Christian witness in a given time and place but also in order to understand that witness sufficiently to be able to make the decision of faith for which it calls. Thus, whether theology is undertaken for one or both of these reasons, it is by its very nature as theology for evangelism--if not for the sake of bearing the church's witness, then certainly for the sake of understanding it. Thus, if the only theology for evangelism there can be is simply theology, it is just as true that any theology that is really theology can only be a theology for evangelism--critical reflection for the sake of understanding the church's witness to Jesus Christ if not also for the sake of bearing that witness in the world.

3. With this much by way of clarifying my understanding of what this course in general is all about, I can proceed at once to say that a christology for evangelism, such as I understand I am expected to speak about, can be nothing other than simply a christology, even though if it really is a christology, it will of necessity be a christology for evangelism, in one if not both of the ^{two}~~true~~ senses just explained. But this leaves the question, then, of just what christology is all about, or, as I have formulated it for my own seminar this

semester, it leaves the question of the point of christology. Of all that might be said by way of pursuing and answering that question, I must confine myself here to one basic statement. Assuming that the task of christology as such is to reflect critically on the meaning and truth of the constitutive christological assertion that Jesus is the Christ, one can say that an essential step toward understanding the point of christology is to understand what the question is to which this assertion is the answer. Because every assertion simply as such functions as the answer to some question, the first step toward understanding any assertion is to understand the question that, as an answer, it necessarily presupposes. But now just what that question is in the case of the constitutive assertion of christology is not as obvious as it may at first glance appear to be. In any event, it is this question about the question of christology to which I wish briefly to speak in what follows; and I do so in the confidence that there's nothing I could say that would be more directly relevant to christology, and hence to a christology for evangelism. Unless one understands the question to which the church's witness to Jesus the Christ is addressed, evangelism is out of the question; for one can neither properly bear that witness nor properly understand the decision with which it confronts us.

4. To what question, then, is the constitutive christological assertion that Jesus is the Christ an answer? Without any doubt, it is an answer to the question, "Who is Jesus?," and one may plausibly claim that the task of christology in the narrow sense of the doctrine of Christ is to set forth an adequate answer to just this question. But, if I am right, the more fundamental question to which the christological assertion is the answer is, rather, the existential question, "Who am I?," i.e., Who am I as a person in the world related

to others and encompassed, finally, by the mystery whence we all come and whither we all go? I maintain that it is only because, or insofar as one is asking this existential question, whatever the terms in which one may be asking it, that one is in a position to understand the christological assertion and the decision for which it calls. Accordingly, my answer to the question about the question of christology is that it is the existential question, finally, to which the christological assertion is an answer and that the point of christology is an existential point. Thus, on my view, the assertion that Jesus is the Christ is at one and the same time an assertion about my own possibility of understanding my existence as a person in the world, related to others, and encompassed round about by ultimate mystery. At the risk of considerable oversimplification, I should say that when I or you or anyone else is confronted by the christological assertion, I am thereby explicitly confronted with the possibility of existing in the world in radical freedom, in freedom from all things, as well as in freedom for all things--the ground of such freedom lying in the fact that the mystery encompassing my existence and existence generally is the pure unbounded love of God. The implication of this statement, of course, is that what the christological assertion means by the Jesus whom it affirms to be the Christ is the explicit re-presentation of the boundless acceptance of God as the gift and demand of my own radical freedom.

5. Now there is nothing original about this basic christological position. Not only has it been vigorously represented by Rudolf Bultmann in our own century, but it has clear antecedents in the christological reflections of Ritschl and Schleiermacher in the last century and may appeal both to Melanchthon's famous dictum that "to know Christ is to know his benefits," and

to Luther's own insistence that Christ is properly preached only "when that Christian freedom which he bestows is rightly taught." (As a matter of fact, I'd be willing to break a lance or two in defense of the proposition that it is just such a christology that one finds in Mr. Wesley's sermons, with the one notable difference that Wesley never leaves any question that the freedom of faith is always precisely as such the obedience of faith.) But, while the claim that it is the existential question, finally, to which the christological assertion answers is not new, what may very well be new is the claim that I should want to make that this is the only question to which the christological assertion finally intends to be an answer, or, in other words, that the point of christology is a strictly existential point.

1. Evangelism is not anything alongside the church, but the church itself being the church.

2. Being the church is not a new privilege so much as it is a new responsibility: evangelism.

3. Evangelism is not so much getting them in here as getting us out there.

4. We go out with the liberating message of Christ: freedom *from* all things—ourselves and all others—and freedom *for* them.

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