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I

To talk about the point of something is to talk about its meaning—about the matter with which it has to do, the way in which it deals with it, and the reason or purpose it has in doing so. But, ordinarily, one undertakes to talk about the point of something only when there is reason to believe that its point is unclear, because it either has been or threatens to be somehow obscured or even forgotten. Just this, however, is what has happened again and again and is still in danger of happening in the case of christology. Consequently, there is good reason to ask anew what christology is all about with a view to clarifying its essential point.

By "christology," I should explain, I mean simply the *logos* of *Christos,* or, in English, thought and speech about Christ—specifically, about Jesus who is (said to be) the Christ. There are two distinct levels, as it were, on which such thought and speech take place. There is, first, the more spontaneous, less reflective level that may be called the *witness* of faith. This is the level of concepts and symbols which comes to exist insofar as Christians undertake somehow to formulate and express their faith in Jesus as the Christ and their beliefs about him, as well as about the mystery of their own existence as decisively re-presented by him. Distinct from this first level, then, is the less spontaneous, more reflective level that I distinguish as the *theology* of faith, by which I mean the process or the product of critically reflecting on faith through its primary expressions in witness. In general, to be reflective means to take something that *appears* to be the case and then to ask deliberately and methodically and with a view to giving reasons for one's answer whether it really is so. But there is also work for reflection to do whenever something is *said* to be the case, as is in fact done in the more spontaneous witness of faith on which theology critically reflects. Thus theology, properly so called, is the deliberate, methodical, and reasoned attempt to determine what is meant by the Christian witness of faith and whether or not this witness expresses, as it claims to do, the ultimate truth about human existence.[1] Although, when I use "christology" in this essay, most

[1]See my essay, "What Is Theology?" *Journal of Religion* 52 (January 1972): 22–40.

of what I say will apply to both of the things that can be meant by it—both the spontaneous witness to Christ and the process or the product of critically reflecting on that witness—it is of christology in the second, properly theological, sense that I shall mainly be speaking.

So that it will be clear right from the outset what I wish to say, I shall state it here in the form of the thesis, which all that follows is intended to explain and defend. *The point of christology is a strictly* existential *point; and the great weakness of so much christology, including most of the more recent attempts at revising it, is that it either forgets or else seriously obscures this point by failing to treat the question of christology as the strictly existential question it in fact is.*

II

I assume without argument that the constitutive assertion of christology, of which its other assertions—indeed, *all* the assertions of a properly Christian theology—are the elaboration, is the assertion, "Jesus is the Christ." To be sure, this particular formulation is but one of many of the same type in which the constitutive christological assertion is expressed in the New Testament. Alternative formulations encountered there include the assertions that Jesus is the Son of David, the Son of God, the Servant of God, the Lord, the Son of Man, the Savior, the Word of God, the Image of God, the King of Israel—indeed, simply God, although striking in the New Testament, in comparison with the later creeds and dogmas of the church, is the extreme rarity of the last assertion, which is certainly made in only one place (John 20:28). Then, too, there are the many different formulations in which the significance of Jesus for Christian faith is expressed, not by ascribing such honorific titles to him, but by making plainly mythological assertions about his divine destiny and origin—for example, that he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, or that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. Yet, despite the wide variety of both types of such formulations, they are evidently all intended to make one and the same assertion, and it is this assertion with which christology has to do.

The first thing we need to consider, however, is the question presupposed by this assertion. In general, we understand an assertion only when we understand the question it is intended to answer. But what this question is in the case of the constitutive christological assertion is not as obvious as it may seem.

On the face of it, one might suppose that the question is simply, "Who is Jesus?" When Peter is represented in Matt. 16:16 as confessing, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," this is evidently in response to Jesus' question, "But who do you say that I am?" Here *Jesus* himself is clearly the subject of the assertion, because it is he about whom the

question asks to which the assertion gives an answer. But in John 1:18 we read, "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known." According to the view expressed here, Jesus is the only begotten Son of God in that he reveals God to us. In this case, *God* is the subject of the assertion, because it is God about whom the question asks to which the assertion that Jesus is his only Son is the answer.

Reflection discloses, I believe, that the question, finally, to which all the New Testament assertions about Jesus are intended to be the answer is the second question, "Who is God?" For even Jesus' question, "But who do you say that I am?" has no other intention, finally, than to provoke an answer to the implicit question of God. Jesus asks, in effect, "Who, then, is God if it is I who am the Christ, the Son of the living God?"[2]

This means, however, that we can expect to clarify the point of christology only by first clarifying the point in asking about God—this being the ultimate question that christological assertions about Jesus are intended to answer. Without pretending to an adequate clarification, I wish to suggest that the question about God is, at bottom, the existential question about the ultimate meaning of our own existence.[3] Of course, there are ways of asking about God and of answering the question in which its existential meaning is merely implicit. For the philosopher, ordinarily, God is less the answer to the existential question of the ultimate worth of his own life than the answer to the more reflective question of the ultimate coherence of reality as we experience and reason about it. "God," one may say, functions in the philosophical context to solve a problem for thought or reflection rather than a problem of one's own existence as a person. But, aside from the fact that even the philosopher is concerned with the more reflective problem, finally, because he, too, is faced with the problem of his own existence, there can be no question that "God" functions in the religious context as one way of talking about the ultimate meaning of human life.

Faced as he is with the mystery of his own existence in relation to others and to the encompassing reality of which he is a part, man is led to ask about the ultimate identity of that mystery—about what it is, finally, that determines his life. Nor is it mere curiosity, in the first instance, that motivates this question. Since, being human, he cannot merely live his life like an animal but must, as we say, lead it by his own free decisions, man must either discover or invent the norms of truth, goodness, and beauty by which his life is to be guided and directed. Moreover, his

[2]Cf. Walter Schmithals, *Jesus Christus in der Verkündigung der Kirche, Aktuelle Beiträge zum notwendigen Streit um Jesus* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1972), pp. 181–82.

[3]Just what this suggestion does and does not mean I have tried to explain in some detail in *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), especially pp. 1–70, 164–87. A somewhat similar (but in its execution divergent) suggestion is worked out by Rolf Schäfer in *Jesus und der Gottesglaube,* 2d ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1972).

question as to these norms, if pursued seriously and radically, brings him hard up against the question of their ultimate ground and end and of the meaning of his own existence so far as he submits to their guidance and direction. After all, not only must he himself die and pass away, but the same is true of all his fellows. And what is he to do when, having submitted to these norms, he fails to live up to them and hence must bear the further burden of guilt?

One way, although not the only way, of answering this question is to speak of God, meaning by "God" the ultimate reality in which the norms of existence have their ground and end and which justifies any life lived in accordance with them by maintaining its significance even in face of individual and racial death and despite the burden of guilt. Naturally, there are many concepts and symbols in which God can be thought and spoken about in this general sense as the ultimate meaning of human existence. In fact, it is just these many forms of expression that are reflected in the various formulations in which we encounter the constitutive christological assertion in the New Testament. Behind all the talk of Jesus as the Christ, for example, there is a whole understanding of human existence—of man, the world, and God—which is quite different, say, from that expressed by talk of Jesus as the Lord. In the one case, we have the witness or theology of Jewish messianism, in the other, the witness or theology typical of the Hellenistic mystery religions. Still, as different as are the ways in which human beings can talk and, in fact, have talked about God, the question ultimately underlying all of these ways, as well as all of the other nontheistic understandings of reality, is precisely the existential question of the ultimate meaning or worth of human life. In this sense, God-talk is existential talk—talk about the mystery of our own existence and all existence within the ultimate reality whence we come and whither we go and which therefore determines, finally, whether or in what way the course of our life has any abiding meaning.

This being so, there can hardly be any doubt about the meaning of the constitutive christological assertion. Because the question to which this assertion finally answers is precisely man's question about God, the point of the assertion is to give an answer to the universal human question of the ultimate meaning of our life. "Jesus is the Christ," or any of the alternative equivalent assertions, does indeed assert something about Jesus—namely, that what is re-presented to us in him is the answer to our question about God as the question of our own existence. But this assertion, or any of its equivalents, also asserts something about Christ, or the Lord, or the Son of God, etc.—namely, that the God about whom we ask in thinking and speaking in any of these concepts and symbols is none other than the God who is decisively re-presented to us precisely in Jesus. Thus the predicate of the constitutive christological assertion not

only interprets the subject but is also interpreted by it. Or, as we can just as well say, Jesus himself is the predicate by which the subject that we are ourselves is definitively interpreted. For the ultimate meaning of the constitutive assertion of christology is strictly existential: it re-presents the word that is addressed to us and to all men in Jesus as the decisive word about our own human existence, as the word that answers all our deepest questions about God because it tells us explicitly and finally who we ourselves are given and demanded to be.

III

But now there is an obvious objection to this claim that the Christian witness of faith to Jesus as the Christ is strictly existential. Granted that the religious question of God is precisely the question of the ultimate meaning of our own existence and that the constitutive assertion of christology is intended as an answer to this question, the fact remains that this assertion also asserts something about Jesus. Moreover, whatever the reason for them may be, the actual assertions about Jesus that we find in the New Testament include empirical-historical as well as existential-historical assertions.[4] Assertions are made or implied there to the effect that Jesus lived, had a certain understanding of himself and his vocation, preached or taught certain things, related himself to his contemporaries in certain ways, ran afoul of religious and political authorities, was tried, condemned, and finally crucified. In addition to assertions to this effect, whose truth, in general, the contemporary historian would hardly question, there are a number of other assertions in the Gospels usually characterized today as legendary because their empirical-historical truth is, to say the least, problematic—such as, for example, many of the assertions about Jesus' birth and childhood, or about his temptations and the events immediately preceding and following his death. But, even if one discounts all such allegedly legendary assertions, regarding them as in their own way open to existentialist interpretation, there can hardly be any question that, alongside of all the obviously mythological talk about Jesus, which can, indeed, be interpreted existentially, there is also talk that either expresses or implies properly empirical-historical assertions. To this extent, the claim that the

[4]This distinction, of course, is essentially the same as that made in recent German theology by distinguishing between *historisch* and *geschichtlich* assertions. Generally speaking, one may say that empirical-historical assertions function to make claims about the historical past, whose warrants, if any, must be empirically given or inferred, while existential-historical assertions are used to make or imply claims about our present existence as itself historical and, therefore, must be warranted, if at all, by an existentialist analysis of human existence. I have further discussed the logical difference between "empirical" and "existential" assertions in my essay, "Falsification and Belief," *Religious Studies* 10 (March 1974): 21–43.

meaning of the constitutive christological assertion is strictly existential does not seem to square with the facts as we find them in the New Testament.

The first thing to be said in reply to this objection is that the evidence to which it appeals cannot be ignored or explained away. The talk about Jesus that we find in the New Testament clearly does include empirical-historical assertions, and, since the New Testament contains the original as well as the finally normative witness of Christian faith, there is no reason to deny that such assertions are, in some sense, the talk of faith itself. But, having said this, I would stress the cardinal importance of its most obvious implication—namely, that talk about Jesus in the New Testament is precisely the talk of Christian faith, in the sense that the controlling purpose of such talk, even if not its only purpose (that being the very thing under discussion), is to answer the question of God as man's existential question. In other words, the relevant question is not *whether* there are empirical-historical assertions about Jesus made or implied in the New Testament but only *why* such assertions are in fact to be found there. Are they there because Christian faith is concerned to raise and answer an empirical-historical question as somehow essential to raising and answering its controlling question? Or are they there for some other reason or reasons?

To come to grips with this question, it may be helpful to consider what at least seems to be an analogous case. It has long been recognized that, for all of its apparent differences from empirical or merely factual inquiries, metaphysics nevertheless has a certain relation to matters of fact. Moreover, even on modern views, for which the metaphysical question is sharply differentiated logically from any merely factual question, this relation to fact is both recognized and insisted upon, the reason for the insistence being that, although metaphysics does not ask with properly factual inquiries, "What are the facts?" it does ask as its typical question, "What is it to be a fact?" Thus, even on this kind of a view of what metaphysics is all about, it is understandable that metaphysical writings and discussions not uncommonly contain a considerable amount of purely factual and even empirical talk. Although the metaphysician's concern is ontological rather than ontic, and thus is with factuality rather than with fact, the very nature of his concern explains why he, too, is likely to make certain factual claims—or, better, why he assumes such claims as are made by others who are responsible, as he is not, for making them.

But now, supposing that metaphysics in this general sense is a possible kind of inquiry, we are led to recognize the following state of affairs. Something taken to be a fact may be taken as such with reference either to the factual question, "What are the facts?" or to the metaphysical question, "What is it to be a fact?" If in a given case, then, the taking

should subsequently prove to have been a *mis*-taking, any answer given to the factual question must, so far as dependent on the mistake, itself be rejected as mistaken or corrected accordingly. And yet, significantly, this need not be done in the case of an answer to the metaphysical question. Even though what is taken as fact should prove to have been mistaken, the metaphysical answer itself, not being a factual answer, may still be correct.

A concrete example may serve to show how this can be so. Suppose that, from reflection on what is presently taken to be empirical fact —namely, that not all events are states of at least potentially enduring individuals (this being asserted by certain physicists today of elementary particles)—a metaphysician concludes to a metaphysics of "event pluralism." According to a leading exponent of such a metaphysics, it is the view, very generally, that "the most analytically complete way of speaking is event-speaking, not thing- or substance-speaking."[5] But, then, further suppose that it is subsequently determined that what certain physicists today and the metaphysician with them take to be empirical fact is actually not the fact at all. In that case, clearly, one of the empirical claims currently asserted by these physicists to be true would have proved to be false. But would the same have been proved of the conclusion of the metaphysician? Just as clearly not; for, whatever the empirical truth of the matter (and conceivably, at least, there might be or have been worlds in which *not* all events are states of potentially enduring individuals), it could still be metaphysically true that events, rather than things or substances, are the only "complete fact," or what it is to be a fact in the most concrete sense of the word.

The pertinence of this case, I believe, is that something like the same kind of relation may be said to obtain between assertions that are empirical-historical and existential-historical as has been indicated as obtaining between those that are factual and metaphysical. Although the existential talk about Jesus in the New Testament does indeed take certain things to be empirically the case, it by no means follows that it so essentially includes these things that it itself would be false if such empirical assertions as it makes or implies themselves proved to be so. The reason for this is the way it takes the fact of Jesus—not with reference to the empirical-historical question, "What actually happened?" but, rather, with reference to the existential-historical question, "What is the significance of what happened (or is taken to have happened) for human existence?"[6] Rather as the metaphysician takes certain things about the

[5]Charles Hartshorne, *Creative Synthesis and Philosophic Method* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Publishing Co., 1970), p. 175. It is to Hartshorne's statements elsewhere in this same book (p. 20) that I also owe the suggestion of the present example.

[6]Cf. Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus von Nazareth* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1956), p. 15 (English translation by Irene and Fraser McLuskey with James M. Robinson, *Jesus of*

world to be factually true solely in order to learn what they may teach him about the very being of fact, so the Christian witness of faith takes certain things about Jesus to be empirically true solely in order to proclaim through them the very meaning of human existence. But, in the second case, even as in the first, there is a logical-type difference between what is *taken* as true and what is *asserted* as true. What the Christian witness asserts is not that Jesus said or did certain things which, as a matter of empirical-historical fact, he may or may not have said or done. Rather, simply assuming that he said and did these things, it asserts that the possibility of understanding oneself that is thereby re-presented is man's authentic possibility of self-understanding, whose re-presentation as an actual event is of decisive significance for his existence.[7]

Consequently, if empirical-historical research should prove that Jesus did not in fact say or do what he is taken to have said or done, this need not in the least affect the truth of what the Christian witness of faith asserts, as distinct from what it assumes. For, whatever the empirical truth of the matter, it could still be existentially true that man's only authentic possibility is the possibility that this witness takes Jesus to represent by his words, deeds, and tragic death.

Nazareth [New York: Harper & Row, 1960], p. 17): "In narrating the history that once was, [the Gospels] proclaim who [Jesus] is, not who he was. What the passion narratives show holds good of the Gospels as a whole: the past of Jesus' history will always be questioned and understood in terms of its meaning for the present and for the future of God." Cf. also Willi Marxsen, *Das Neue Testament als Buch der Kirche* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1968), pp. 74, 78–79 (English translation by James E. Mignard, *The New Testament as the Church's Book* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972], pp. 72, 77): "The earliest community is not concerned with 'reporting' events from the life of Jesus. It does not want to report directly what was but, rather, intends to assert what was has to say 'today,' in the present of the post-Easter community. . . . Its selection of what is to be handed on is already conditioned by its 'setting in life': it intends to proclaim, not to present the past. Not even the oldest layer of tradition is historical report, but, rather, is witness of faith, apostolic witness to Jesus." Of course, the distinction rightly insisted on by Bornkamm and Marxsen is not novel with them. It is, in effect, the same distinction already insisted on by Luther in distinguishing with respect to the work of Christ between the *res* or *factum,* on the one hand, and the *usus rei* or *usus facti,* on the other. Indeed, my distinction here between empirical- and existential-historical assertions is evidently implied by Luther's crucial distinction between *fides historica* and *fides apprehensiva* (see the discussion by Friedrich Gogarten, *Luthers Theologie* [Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1967], pp. 75 ff.).

[7]In this connection, one may also recall the point effectively made by John Knox, that the Jesus about whom the church makes its assertion of faith is the Jesus whom it remembers. See, e.g., "The Church *Is* Christ's Body," *Religion in Life* 27 (Winter 1957–58): 57: "One way of describing the church is to say that it is the community which remembers Jesus; but one can equally truly define Jesus (in the only really significant sense of that name) as the one who is remembered. It is only as he is remembered that he has significance for either Christian theology or Christian devotion. . . . The human career of Jesus, in so far as it is an element in the revealing event, is a memory of the church." The same point is also made, with less concern about the veridicality of the church's memory and greater attention to the requisite conceptual distinctions, by Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1966), pp. 246–91.

But, surely, it may be argued, there must be at least one empirical-historical truth that the Christian witness essentially asserts—namely, that Jesus actually lived and died at a certain point in human history. This seems sufficiently evident from what has just been said about the different ways in which the *fact* of Jesus—what he said, did, and suffered—may be taken. Presumably, one cannot talk about taking the fact of Jesus existentially unless there is some fact to take in this way.

To this further objection, I would reply, first, that the Christian witness of faith does indeed take the actual historical existence of Jesus for granted. Tacitly presupposed by whatever it takes him to have said or done is that he did, in fact, exist as a historical figure, whose existence could be confirmed by empirical-historical research. Moreover, lest there be any uncertainty on the point, I would stress that there is every reason to suppose that this presupposition is warranted, given the results of sustained empirical-historical inquiry. As Rudolf Bultmann long since pointed out, "the doubt whether Jesus really existed is unfounded and not worth refutation. That he stands as the founder behind the historical movement whose first accessible stage is represented by the earliest Palestinian community is perfectly clear."[8]

Yet I would reply, second, by reiterating the point made previously that there is an important logical difference between *taking* as true and *asserting* as true and contend that, so far as the Christian witness of faith is concerned, even the empirical-historical existence of Jesus (or perhaps one should say, especially his empirical-historical existence) belongs to the former category rather than to the latter. So far from being asserted, this is, above all, something that the witness of faith documented by the New Testament takes for granted. Nor is the anti-Docetic polemic of some of the later New Testament writings any reason for questioning this—as will become clear presently, when we consider what is really at stake in Christian faith's assertion of the humanity as well as the divinity of Jesus the Christ.

Then, third, it is characteristic of the event of Christ that the New Testament witness asserts, as distinct from the event it assumes, that this event is identical with the event of its assertion, to which event Christian faith as such is always the response. As Bultmann puts it, "Christ crucified and risen encounters us in the word of proclamation and nowhere else."[9] The reason for this, as Bultmann explains, is that "the word of the Christian proclamation and the history it communicates coincide, are one. The history of Christ is not a history already past but

[8]Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1951), p. 15 (English translation by Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero, *Jesus and the Word,* 2d ed. [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958], p. 13).

[9]H. W. Bartsch, ed., *Kerygma und Mythos,* 2d ed. (Hamburg: Herbert Reich Evangelischer Verlag, 1951), 1:46 (English translation by R. H. Fuller in *Kerygma and Myth,* ed. H. W. Bartsch, rev. ed. [New York: Harper & Row, 1961], p. 41).

one that takes place in the word being proclaimed. The remembrance of Jesus does not happen in such a way that he is remembered as Moses was, by remembering what he brought, what the people experienced through him and to which they are to be faithful. Rather, it is he himself who in the present word encounters the hearer, for whom the history itself only now begins."[10] Thus, "as the eschatological event, Jesus Christ is not objectively demonstrable, so that one could believe in him on that basis. Rather, he is this event, or, more exactly, he becomes it, in the encounter in which the word that proclaims him meets with faith, indeed, even when it does not meet with faith, for he who does not believe is already judged (John 3:18)."[11] In short, "it is not the historical Jesus but rather, Jesus Christ as the one who is preached, who is the Lord."[12] Consequently, strange as it may seem, the New Testament's assertions about Jesus the Christ do not essentially include even the empirical-historical assertion that Jesus actually existed. While they certainly take Jesus' existence for granted, they themselves are entirely existential, although this emphatically includes, rather than excludes, that the fact of the assertions, the event of their being asserted, is itself of their very essence.

This brings us to a final point that must be made in replying to the original objection. Among recent attempts at a restatement of traditional christology, one of the more interesting is that made by the Dutch Roman Catholic theologian, Ansfried Hulsbosch. According to Hulsbosch, the basic datum on which christology is required to reflect may be summarized in the formula,"Jesus Christ is *known* as man, but *confessed* as Son of God."[13] From the standpoint of the present argument, it is clear that this formula is by no means entirely inappropriate. So far as the New Testament generally is concerned, the fact that Jesus the Christ is a man is not confessed but known—or, as it has been put here, is not asserted as true but taken as true. Nevertheless, as we know from the Johannine Epistles, as well as, naturally, from the later development of the christological dogmas, the humanity of Jesus the Christ, no less than his divinity, has been confessed or asserted as essential to the Christian witness. But, if recognizing this raises a question about the appropriateness of Hulbosch's formula, it would seem to raise an even more serious question about the position argued for here; for, clearly, Hulsbosch has

[10]Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen,* 2d ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1954), 1: 292–93 (English translation by Louise Pettibone Smith, *Faith and Understanding* [New York: Harper & Row, 1969], 1: 311).

[11]Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1952), 2:258 (English translation by James C. G. Greig, *Essays, Philosophical and Theological* [London: SCM Press, 1955], p. 286).

[12]Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen,* 1:208 (Eng. trans., 1:241).

[13]Robert North, ed., *In Search of the Human Jesus* (New York: Corpus Instrumentorum, 1971), p. 15.

no intention of regarding the knowledge of Jesus the Christ as man as anything other than essential to the Christian confession, just as he assumes, in general, that what we naturally know constitutes an essential part of what Christians confess.

As serious as this question may seem, however, I am convinced it may be readily answered. For, if, as I have argued, the actual event of the assertions of faith is in no sense accidental to them but belongs to their very essence, there surely is no difficulty in understanding why the humanity of Jesus the Christ, as distinct from the empirical-historical existence of Jesus, should be one of Christian faith's most essential assertions, even if it became an *explicit* assertion only under historical conditions in which it was openly or tacitly denied. Faith's assertion of Christ's humanity is evidently implied by its own character as an actual event, in response to the always prior event of the assertion of faith, which is just what the New Testament means by Jesus the Christ. On the New Testament's view, the ground and object of Christian faith is precisely and only Jesus the Christ as actual historical event. But it is just as true, as we have seen, that what the New Testament means by Jesus the Christ is identical with the actual historical event of the witness of faith, the event whereby Christian faith becomes a possibility for man's self-understanding in that it is actually asserted as his authentic possibility—whether this be done in terms of a merely implicit christology, as was presumably the case in the witness of Jesus himself as it encountered the apostolic community, or whether it be done in terms of a more or less explicit christology, as is evidently the case in the witness of the Christian church as it has encountered men ever since. Accordingly, to actualize the possibility of faith in response to its actual assertion is one and the same with asserting the divine *and* human character of that always prior event of assertion, even if in the one respect as in the other the assertion in question is merely implicit rather than explicit. Thus, what I properly mean when I assert that Jesus is "divine" is that the possibility here and now re-presented to me in the Christian witness of faith is God's own gift and demand to my existence. On the other hand, what I properly mean when I assert that Jesus is "human" is that I am here and now actually confronted with this possibility, that it is actually re-presented to me as a historical event and hence is not merely an idea or a general truth.

This is to say, obviously, that the assertion of the humanity of Jesus the Christ, no less than the assertion of his divinity, is in the strictest sense an assertion of faith; and this means that, although it is certainly a historical assertion, it is in no sense empirical-historical but is strictly existential. Thus it is no mere addition to, but, like all assertions of faith, only the decisive re-presentation of, that primal word which, for Christian faith, is the ultimate truth of human existence: that we are here and now

totally accepted and totally claimed, being thereby freed both from and for ourselves and others within the encompassing mystery of God's love.

IV

True as this may be, however, the chief danger to which christology is exposed is that its strictly existential point will become obscured or even forgotten. What, to begin with, is talk about who we are in the light of the word that Jesus re-presents comes to be understood as primarily, or even exclusively, talk about who Jesus is—or, worse, about who he was. Assertions that were originally intended to express the event of Jesus in its meaning for us are treated as though they were simply assertions about the person of Jesus in his being in himself. And so what comes to matter in christology is simply Jesus, his qualities, his mode of being, his relation to God, etc., rather than the significance he has for us because he decisively answers our question about God as the ultimate meaning of our existence. Not surprisingly, then, the very christological assertion that should express the unity of the church becomes the chief source of divisions within it.

Consider, for example, the differences between the diverse understandings of the title "Son of God" already documented by the New Testament itself.[14] In its Jewish meaning, "Son of God" expressed the idea of an individual or group adopted or appointed by God for a particular purpose. Thus not only the anointed king but also the people of Israel and, on occasion, even the Messiah could be called the Son of God, insofar as they stood in the special official relationship of having been appointed or adopted by God to carry out a certain function. This is the understanding of Son of God which Paul evidently has in mind in saying in Rom. 1:4 (very likely by means of an already traditional formulation) that Jesus was "designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead." Or, again, this is the understanding of Son of God involved in the Markan account of Jesus' baptism, where Jesus (and only Jesus) is represented as hearing a voice from heaven saying as he came up out of the water, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee am I well pleased" (Mark 1:11; cf. Matt. 3:17). But, in a non-Jewish Hellenistic context, "Son of God" was not an official, or functional, title but served to express a physical relationship to the Godhead. A Son of God had a divine "nature" (φύσις) received either through direct procreation between a god and a human mother or by means of the divine Spirit without a human father. It is this idea, presumably, which lies behind the birth narratives in the Gospels of

[14]Cf. Marxsen, pp. 111–14 (Eng. trans., pp. 116–19).

Matthew and Luke, narratives whose origin can be traced no further back than to Hellenistic Christian tradition.

For anyone with strict Jewish upbringing, this Hellenistic idea would have been wholly unacceptable, because in his eyes it would bring God down to a merely creaturely level, as well as set up a second divine being alongside of God. For a person of Hellenistic background, on the other hand, a figure merely adopted or appointed by God would have been barely distinguishable from an ordinary mortal, and so a good deal less than the Christian witness of faith asserts Jesus to be. And so the ground was prepared for the age-old conflict between a merely adoptionist christology, on the one hand, and the kind of christology, on the other hand, according to which Jesus was a divine being by his very nature—either because of his miraculous conception and birth or, following yet another way of thinking, because he preexisted as a divine being even before his appearance as a man. Divisive as this conflict has proved to be down through the centuries, right up to the present, it could not even have arisen had the strictly existential point of all christological assertions not been obscured or forgotten. For, from a Jewish-Christian standpoint, to assert that Jesus is the adopted Son of God meant essentially the same thing that Christians with a Hellenistic background would have meant by asserting that he is physically God's Son—namely, that the word which Jesus re-presents is God's primal word to all mankind, or, conversely, that the answer to man's question about God, understood as the existential question of the ultimate meaning of his existence, is precisely Jesus' word. Because, however, this strictly existential point of both adoptionist and divine-nature christologies has again and again been obscured or forgotten, the church has been divided by controversies over interpretations—or, even, interpretations of interpretations—whose original intention has been only the more completely obscured by those very controversies.

Of course, something like a settlement of the main controversies has generally been recognized to have been achieved by the great church councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Whereas Nicaea secured the assertion, against Arianism, that Jesus the Christ is "true God," Chalcedon secured the assertion, against Apollinarianism, that he is "true man." And this formula, "true God–true man," or, in Chalcedonian terms, "one person in two natures, human and divine," has since been recognized by the great central tradition of Christian witness and theology to express the two essential things that must be asserted about Jesus the Christ if the Christian witness of faith is to find appropriate symbolic expression. But, for a long time now, there has been considerable agreement among historical theologians that classical christology has been shaped decisively by a so-called neo-Chalcedonianism, in which the

balance of this formula has been lost by a one-sided stress on the divinity of Jesus the Christ which has obscured his humanity. Therefore, most current efforts at revision in christology are bent on recovering and reasserting the true humanity of Jesus.

Typical of such efforts in this respect, as in a number of others, is the recent book of John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God.*[15] Robinson's paramount concern is the reassertion of Jesus' real manhood—to the point even of insisting that we today must "test for reality" by putting questions to ourselves concerning Jesus' humanity which the Gospels, admittedly, neither answer nor ask.[16] Thus, according to Robinson, "the ultimate question for Christology" is, "How can Christ *be* God for us—without ceasing truly to be man?"[17] In order to answer this question, Robinson goes so far as to reverse (rather as the Dutch Roman Catholic theologian, Piet Schoonenberg, also does) the characteristic claim of post-Chalcedonian christology that the human nature of Jesus the Christ is anhypostatic, or impersonal, his person being divine.[18] According to Robinson, it is rather the *divine* nature which is anhypostatic, because the person of Jesus is human, his divine nature being personal only in its unity with his human nature. As he puts it, "the formula we presuppose is not of one super-human person with two natures, divine and human, but of one human person of whom we must use two languages, man-language and God-language. Jesus is wholly and completely a man, but a man who 'speaks true' not simply of humanity but of God. . . . He is a man who in all that he says and does as man is the personal representative of God: he stands in God's place, he *is* God to us and for us."[19]

I must leave to some other occasion consideration of whether one one-sided position is appropriately corrected by developing another, equally one-sided, only in the opposite direction. I also simply record my judgment that nothing is more striking about the New Testament witnesses to Jesus the Christ than the extent to which they emphatically place Jesus on the *divine,* rather than the human, side of the God-man relationship, to that extent justifying the alleged one-sidedness of post-Chalcedonian christology. The only point I wish to make here is that

[15]John A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London: SCM Press, 1973).

[16]Ibid., pp. 56 ff. "A good question to ask ourselves," Robinson proposes, is one suggested at a 1966 Canadian Council of Churches Conference on Family Life: " 'When the woman wiped Jesus' feet with her hair, she performed a highly sexual action. Did Jesus at that moment experience an erection?' " (p. 64). No doubt many readers will think Robinson's proposal bold, while others will find it offensive. But how many are prepared to dismiss it as simply beside the point? The answer, I submit, would provide a good index to the present state of christological discussion.

[17]Ibid., p. 180.

[18]See Piet Schoonenberg, *The Christ: A Study of the God-Man Relationship in the Whole of the Creation and in Jesus Christ,* trans. Della Couling (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971).

[19]Robinson, pp. 113–14.

Robinson's entire discussion, however legitimate many of his motives, is as oblivious of the strictly existential point of christology as the classical christology it seeks to revise. Here, too, just as in most traditional christology, the christological question is tacitly taken to be a question about the person of Jesus in his being in himself in abstraction from the question about the event of Jesus in its meaning for us.

This criticism, however, should not be misunderstood. Although the distinction I have made between Jesus' meaning for us and his being in himself is just that rightly insisted on by Bultmann, I would not leave the impression that I entirely accept Bultmann's formulation of the issue. The difficulty with his formulation appears most clearly when he asks rhetorically, "Do [the titles ascribed to Jesus] speak of his φύσις or do they speak of Christ *pro me?* To what extent is a christological assertion about him at one and the same time an assertion about me? Does he help me because he is the Son of God, or is he the Son of God because he helps me . . . ?"[20] That this last question is by no means an unusual question for Bultmann to ask is clear from other similar formulations throughout his writings—as when he states, for instance, in his famous programmatic essay, that "the cross is not the salvation-event because it is the cross of Christ. It is the cross of Christ because it is the salvation-event."[21] My judgment, however, is that, even if Bultmann's motives in saying this sort of thing are sound, because thoroughly justified by the New Testament, he nevertheless misstates the alternatives he is concerned to point up. Clearly, the only reason Christ can help me, provided he really does so, is that he is, in truth, the Son of God, who alone has the power to give me that kind of help. Similarly, if the cross really is the salvation-event, in that it has the power to save me from death and from the burden of guilt, there can be no sufficient reason for this other than it really is the cross of Christ. I conclude, therefore, that if we are to avoid, as we must, even the appearance of a pseudo-existentialist subjectivism, which collapses the important logical distinction between truth and belief, we cannot put the issue in quite the way Bultmann puts it. As a matter of fact, I would go so far as to say that there need be nothing wrong in asking and speaking about the "nature" of Christ. Provided that, in speaking in this way, we keep firmly in mind that we are thereby answering the existential question of our own self-understanding, we not only *can* speak of Christ's "nature," but we also *must* speak of it; for we cannot but speak of the divine-human event in which the self-understanding of Christian faith has its ground and object, and, given the terms of the situation as here described, it is to this event that the word "nature" would refer.

[20]Bultmann *Glauben und Verstehen,* 2:252 (Eng. trans., p. 280).

[21]Bartsch, p. 46 (Eng. trans., p. 41). Cf. the parallel formulations in Marxsen, pp. 95, 104 (Eng. trans., pp. 96, 108).

Unlike Bultmann and many of my other contemporaries, therefore, I am not greatly troubled by what Paul Tillich speaks of as the "wrong conceptual tools" of the christological dogma.[22] I do not question, naturally, that such concepts as "nature," "person," "substance," etc., have become relatively less useful in theology, seeing that other, more adequate terms are now available to us for christological formulation. But, as I have been at pains to make clear by the whole of the preceding argument, the far more serious difficulty with traditional christology, as well as with the usual efforts to revise it, is not its conceptual tools but, rather, the use to which it puts them—or, to interpret the metaphor, the wrong question it asks and tries to answer by means of its conceptuality. Instead of asking, rightly, about the meaning of Christ for us, for our own self-understanding as human beings, it asks about the person of Christ in himself, in abstraction from our existence.

But, beyond this weakness, Robinson's efforts are also typical of most other recent revisionary christologies in making empirical-historical claims about Jesus that are both unwarranted and unwarrantable by the New Testament. According to such christologies, of which Robinson's is but a variation, Jesus is understood to be God for us, finally, because, unlike us, he perfectly actualized the possibility of authentic faith and love.[23] To be sure, Robinson recognizes, as others making the same sort of claims usually do not, that "we have not the evidence to demonstrate

[22]Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 2:142. According to Tillich, "the doctrine of the two natures in the Christ raises the right question but uses the wrong conceptual tools." My contention, on the contrary, is that it is precisely the *question* raised by this traditional doctrine that is wrong, if one judges it, as he should, by the question addressed by the apostolic witness.

[23]See also, e.g., Norman Pittenger, "The Incarnation in Process Theology," *Review and Expositor* 71 (Winter 1974): 53 ff.: "At every point in the existence of Jesus the divine activity is operative, not in contradiction of the humanity nor in rejection of any part of it but in and through it all—in teaching, preaching, healing, comforting, acting, dying, rising again. The divine activity is continually at work; and the human responsivity is continually present through the entire existence of the Man Jesus. He is indeed the personalized instrument for the Self-Expressive Activity of God, 'The Word,' just because he is also at every point utterly responsive to that which God purposes and is doing in and through him as a man. . . . The union of the two [i.e., the selves of Jesus and God] in the deep communion of love makes possible just such two-ness in one-ness. In Jesus, then, we have a human self that was utterly open to, agency for, and responsively acting with, the divine self: that is *how* 'God is "in" Christ.' . . . in him the initiating divine Love met full and obedient human response in a human loving." As much as I share Pittenger's convictions about the theological fruitfulness of a "process" conceptuality, I fail to see any warrant in the New Testament for such claims as he here makes or implies about the "utter responsiveness" of Jesus to God's activity as the reason for his divinity. No doubt process concepts can be effectively employed in christological reflection and formulation. But even a "process christology" must recognize the strictly existential character of the christological question and eschew claims about the person of Jesus that neither are nor can be warranted by the scriptural witness. What a process conceptuality may well be used to explicate, so far as it is appropriate for doing so, is not a past event that occurred between Jesus and God but the ever-present event that occurs between the world and God through Jesus the Christ as attested by the Christian witness.

that Jesus was always loving, or even that he was braver in the face of death than Socrates or the Maccabean martyrs."[24] Yet, so far from permitting this recognition to challenge his whole way of asking the christological question, Robinson makes a dubious appeal to faith to support his claim that Jesus re-presents the possibility of faith and love for us only because he himself uniquely actualized that possibility. In the words of Heinz Zahrnt, which Robinson cites approvingly, "Jesus Christ is the Son because he alone allows God really to be his Father."[25] Or, as Robinson also puts it in John Cobb's terms, " 'the structure of [Jesus'] existence,' . . . though *totally* human, is *uniquely* constituted by God's vocation to him to be what none of us is called to be."[26]

But such claims, in my opinion, are totally without warrant in the New Testament, where there is not a single passage that speaks of Jesus' own personal faith and love as a man in such a way as to point to their perfection as the reason for his being the Christ or the Son of God. As hard as it may be for us to realize it, this whole way of thinking of Jesus, which has been typical of liberal Protestantism ever since Schleiermacher, is utterly alien to the New Testament and can be read out of it only by first being read into it. As far as the New Testament witnesses are concerned, Jesus is the Christ not because he *actualized* the possibility of faith and, unlike us, actualized it perfectly, but because he *re-presents* the possibility of faith and, for us, re-presents it decisively.

This also explains, naturally, why the sort of claims that Robinson and so many others make are unwarrantable as well as unwarranted by the New Testament witnesses. Since these witnesses neither speak nor think of Jesus as the Christ because he is the man of perfect faith and love, they make no empirical-historical assertions that he was this kind of a man. Any inference to that effect must be merely that—an inference —and careful examination of the evidence from which it is made will invariably show that it is and must be without warrant. There are, to be sure, assertions made about Jesus' sinlessness (Heb. 4:15, 7:26 ff.), about his exemplary endurance of suffering (1 Peter 2:21 ff.), and about his obedience in face of temptations both at the beginning and at the end of his ministry (Matt. 4:1–11 par.; Mark 14:32–42). But all such assertions are plainly legendary in that they are interpretations of Jesus' significance from the standpoint of faith in him as the Christ of God. Like the accounts of his miraculous birth and of other events immediately before and after his death, they have an existential, not an empirical-historical sense. Moreover, one simply cannot appeal to faith, as Robinson does, to eke out what the empirical-historical evidence itself cannot warrant. For the claims of faith and of empirical history are not

[24]Robinson, p. 210.
[25]Ibid., p. 191.
[26]Ibid., p. 211.

logically related in that way, and to suppose otherwise is seriously to misunderstand one or the other—or, possibly, both. What kind of a man Jesus was, in the sense of whether or not he perfectly actualized the possibility of faith, is an empirical-historical question, for answering which empirical-historical evidence alone is relevant—although, as I have indicated, the evidence we have in the New Testament does not permit us to give an answer to it, one way or the other.[27] But, so far as faith is concerned, all this is indifferent anyway. For the ground of faith and its object is not the Jesus who perfectly actualized the possibility of authentic faith and love but the Jesus who decisively re-presents that possibility to us because, through the Christian witness of faith, he re-presents the primal word of God's grace, to which our own faith and love are always only the response.

V

What, then, is the way forward for christology, if it is not the way pointed by most of the current essays in revision? The way forward, I submit, is simply to recognize once again the strictly existential point of all christological assertions and then to make that point in a contemporary conceptuality that is at once appropriate to the Christian witness and understandable to human existence. In other words, the task of christology today is to elaborate the claim that *Jesus is the truth of human existence made fully explicit,* meaning by this claim that the possibility of faith working through love that Jesus re-presents to us through the Christian witness of faith is precisely our own authentic possibility of response to God's grace.[28]

Of course, like any other christological assertion, this claim asserts something about Jesus. But at one and the same time it asserts something about human existence—specifically, that the final reality with which each of us has to do in coming to terms with the mystery of his own life is the God to whom Jesus decisively bears witness, the God whose gift and demand to every human being is the possibility of faith working through love. The word implicitly addressed to us and to all

[27]There is also the question whether, even in principle, empirical-historical evidence warrants the attribution of perfect faith and love in the strict theological sense of the words. For, according to Paul, even "if I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned," the possibility remains that I "have not love" (1 Cor. 13:3). For further discussion of this whole issue, see Van A. Harvey and Schubert M. Ogden, "Wie neu ist die 'Neue Frage nach dem historischen Jesus'?" *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 59 (June 1962): 46–87 (English translation by Carl E. Braaten and Roy A. Harrisville in *The Historical Jesus and the Kerygmatic Christ: Essays on the New Quest of the Historical Jesus* [Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1964], pp. 197–242).

[28]See my essay, "On Revelation," in *Our Common History as Christians: Essays in Honor of Albert C. Outler,* ed. John Deschner, Leroy T. Howe, and Klaus Penzel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 261–92.

men in every moment of our existence, regardless of whether it is explicitly spoken to us or explicitly heard by us, is the primal word that our lives are accepted unconditionally into God's life, so that we are free to accept this acceptance, which is what is properly meant by the word "faith," and thereby also free to accept both ourselves and others in God, which is the essential meaning of the word "love." It is this same word, then, that is explicitly addressed to us in Jesus the Christ and explicitly heard by faith in him as he ever continues to encounter us in the present witness of the Christian church.

Naturally, this word and the faith and love that it both gives and demands necessarily imply certain beliefs not only about Christ but also about ourselves and the world and the encompassing reality whence all things come and whither they all go. And if we are to live out our faith and love by ourselves becoming witnesses to Jesus the Christ, we need to make these beliefs explicit in our own concepts and symbols—just as I am doing here by speaking of Jesus as the explicit truth of human existence. But faith *in* Jesus the Christ, and thus in the mystery of our own existence as accepted unconditionally, is not simply the same as belief *about* Jesus the Christ, and thus about ourselves and the world and the encompassing reality that he re-presents to us as the pure unbounded love of God. One can very well believe all the right things about Christ, and about God, the world, and oneself, while still not having faith in Christ, and hence in the final acceptance of one's own existence and all existence in God's boundless love—just as, conversely, one can very well accept one's unconditional acceptance, and so implicitly believe in God and Christ, without believing all the right things about God and Christ—indeed, even while explicitly denying those very beliefs.[29] Moreover, even the most orthodox beliefs have to be critically interpreted and reexpressed in the concepts and symbols of today if they are to have any clear and convincing claim on us or on those to whom, so far as we are Christians, we are called to bear witness.

This is true, for example, of the belief expressed in the Apostles' Creed in the words, "conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary." As is well known, this belief is expressly attested in the New Testament only in the birth narratives peculiar to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. If we consult Luke's version, which is very likely the older, we can see at once that the original intention of the belief was to explain the designation of Jesus as Son of God. Thus the angel is made to say to Mary in Luke 1:35, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God." In other words, given

[29]Cf. Karl Rahner, "Grundlinien einer systematischen Christologie," in Karl Rahner and Wilhelm Thüsing, *Christologie—systematisch und exegetisch* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1972), especially pp. 70–71.

Christian belief in Jesus as God's Son in the specifically Hellenistic sense of that title, the question naturally arose, "But, since the Son of God is the physical offspring of God, how did this come about?" The story of Jesus' miraculous conception as Luke tells it is by way of answering this question.[30]

But, as I indicated earlier, this was by no means the only belief through which Christian faith in Jesus as the explicit truth of human existence found expression in the New Testament. In fact, the same process of reflection that led to the emergence of the virgin-birth story led, although by a different route, to the belief about Christ's preexistence, about his having always already existed as a divine being prior to his appearance on earth. Taken strictly, this belief and the belief about Jesus' virgin birth are mutually contradictory; for, if the one who encounters us in Jesus always already preexisted as God's Son, he neither did nor could have become God's Son at the time of his conception and birth. Thus the belief about Jesus' virgin birth in its original New Testament meaning was but one way, and that a way destined to be superseded, of affirming what the belief about Christ's preexistence was also intended to affirm.

But this is to say, clearly, that the belief about Jesus' virgin birth asserts nothing different from what every other belief expressed in the second article of the Creed is also by way of asserting—namely, that Jesus is God's decisive revelation to mankind, and hence has his ultimate source or origin not merely in this world but in God himself.

To understand this, however, is to understand why those who would make belief about Jesus' virgin birth a crucial test of Christian faith simply do not know what they are doing. For, like resurrections and ascensions and comings again, as well as preexistences, virgin births are a dime a dozen in the history of religions—especially in the religious environment in which the early Christian witness took shape. Like all the other beliefs about Jesus expressed in the Creed, whether by designating him with honorific titles ("God's only Son, our Lord"), or by telling the story of his divine origin and destiny ("conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, . . . the third day he rose from the dead, he ascended into heaven," etc.), what is important is not that someone was miraculously conceived and born of a virgin but that this claim is made about *Jesus.* Accordingly, to believe this claim in the only sense in which it was originally intended and still properly is intended is to believe in the one of whose decisive significance for our existence it is no more than an expression. And to believe in this one is not primarily to believe something *about* him, whether this ancient belief or the contemporary belief that he is the truth of human existence made fully explicit; it is quite

[30]Cf. Marxsen, pp. 113–14 (Eng. trans., pp. 118–19.)

simply to believe *in* him, in the word that he himself both speaks and is as God's own word of unconditional acceptance which sets us free.

This is the faith which is more or less adequately expressed by all the beliefs about Jesus that have been handed on to us by Christian witness and theology. And the point of christology, so far as it has any point, is reflectively to understand, and so in its own way to assert, this same existential faith.