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Christology as the Clarification of Creation

KENNETH CAUTHEN

THE thesis presented in this paper presupposes that the Christian message is final and ultimate for the human race. In Jesus the meaning of the whole creation and of man's existence has been clarified once and for all. However, the conceptual content in which this normative revelation is expressed is necessarily relative to the time and place of the interpreter. If the Christian message is to be meaningful, it must be connected with the present experience and idea system of the persons to whom it is addressed. The conviction which underlies the thinking expressed here is that the conceptual system in our time which is best equipped to assist faith in understanding the biblical view of God and of his relationship to the world is the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. Extensive use of this philosophy has been made in working out this paper. It should also be said that the view set forth is in agreement with Rudolf Bultmann that the underlying intention of the New Testament *kerygma* is to express a certain way of understanding human existence. It needs only to be added that human existence can be understood only in the light of man's actual situation in the world and before God. This means that theology must speak of God and his relationship to the world and to man as well as of possibilities of human existence. It is at this point that process philosophy can be of valuable service.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A Christian is a person who finds in Jesus of Nazareth the clue to the deepest meaning of life and the resources for fulfilling that meaning. For the Christian, Jesus provides both true knowledge of God and saving power. He is the norm as well as the source of authentic human existence. To say this is the same as saying that Jesus is the Christ, which in turn means that one accepts as normative the New Testament witness to Jesus. The heart of the New Testament is the *kerygma*, the proclamation that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself in a decisive revelatory and redemptive act. Hence, the New Testament itself finds in Jesus the clue to the meaning of life and the resources for fulfilling that meaning. The reasoning involved here is circular, but the whole point of this paragraph is to establish the formal unity between accepting Jesus as the norm and the source of authentic existence and accepting the New Testament witness to Jesus as the Christ.

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Christology is the articulation and conceptualization of the meaning of Jesus for human life. To be more specific, it is the attempt to give concreteness and content to the formal affirmation that Jesus is the norm and source of authentic existence, and to do this in language that is intelligible to the interpreter and to whatever audience he may address himself. By intelligible language, I mean terms, concepts, and ideas which relate the affirmation that Jesus is the Christ to the totality of the experience and ideology (general view of life) of the persons for whom the christology is designed. Now the New Testament itself is a body of data which attempts to make concrete the meaning of the ultimacy of Jesus in the language available to the early church. There is variety in that witness, and doubtless contradiction as well, with regard to the details of its factual and conceptual content. Yet every New Testament document has no other purpose than to interpret the testimony that Jesus is the Christ, and this is what gives unity to the New Testament as a whole.

The process of interpreting the ultimacy of Jesus begun in the New Testament has continued through the centuries and must continue in the future. Each new generation of Christians must think out for itself the meaning of Jesus as the Christ. This is true because every christology is relative to time, place, and interpreter. The conceptualizations with which we organize and articulate our experience change from age to age and differ from one culture to another. We cannot simply repeat New Testament passages and stop there, and no generation of Christians and no Christian preacher has done only that and no more. Interpretation is essential; that is, it is necessary to connect the New Testament affirmation of the ultimacy of Jesus with the experience and ideology of a given person or community of persons at a given time. The christologies of Chalcedon and of the great theologians of the past and present are attempts to provide just this kind of interpretation.

While in principle the christological task is the same for our generation as for the first generation of Christians, we stand in a peculiar relationship to the New Testament writings which the latter produced. The primary data for the reflection of the first Christians about Jesus came to them from their own personal experience, from reports of eye-witnesses embodied in oral traditions, or from written documents which preceded the writing of the New Testament books. The primary data for our reflections about the meaning of Jesus come from the New Testament itself. This means that the Jesus whom we accept as the Christ is Jesus as known to us in the New Testament documents. For us, then, christology is the attempt to state in the contemporary idiom the concrete meaning and significance of Jesus as the Christ in the light of the New Testament witness to him. In light of the discussion so far, it is evident that we are bound to the New Testament in a double way. In the first place, we are at one with the central New Testament claim that Jesus is the Christ, that is, the revealer of God and the redeemer of man, the norm and the source of authentic existence. In the second place, we are dependent upon the New Testament for the data we employ to give concreteness and content to the meaning and ultimacy of Jesus for our own life and experience.

A further step can be taken by noting that any given christology consists of an intuition of the essence of the New Testament message concerning Jesus. By "intuition" I mean a comprehensive grasp of meaning in which the data of the New Testament witness to Jesus fall into place in an ordered whole around an organizing center. An intuition of this sort arises out of a complex encounter between the New Testament material and the total experience and ideology of the interpreter. This is to say, in the first place, that no interpretation of the New Testament message is simply a matter of reading off what is

objectively there but rather involves a grasp of the pattern of the whole from a given perspective. One need only refer to the bewildering variety of views concerning the historical Jesus which have come out of the old and the new quest, along with the rejection of such a quest in between, to show that every attempt to state the meaning of Jesus for faith is conditioned not only by the general climate of opinion (theological and secular) in which a given New Testament scholar works but also by the peculiar slant of his own mind.

It should be noted, in the second place, that the encounter of the interpreter with the New Testament involves a dialectical process in which attention is focused first upon one's total experience and ideology in the light of the New Testament data and then, in a converse movement, upon the New Testament data in the light of one's total experience and ideology. There are stages of reflection along the way toward an understanding of the meaning of Jesus as the Christ. The intuition comes in a moment of illumination or a series of such moments in which the data fall into place and the meaning of Jesus for life shines in its own light with convincing power. A Christian thinker may go through a number of periods of reflection in which new intuitions succeed former ones now seen to be inadequate or false, and there may be periods in between in which confusion and darkness of various degrees may prevail. Doubtless, few Christians ever attain such a comprehensive or perfect vision that no problems or dark spots remain. Nevertheless, intuitions of the meaning of Jesus as the Christ do occur, and thereby christologies are born.

What has been said about christology applies also to the understanding of the Christian message as a whole. Every part of the Christian message implies and is implied by every other part, so that the understanding one has of Jesus fits into a larger structure which includes the doctrines of God, man, sin, salvation, and so on. This means that a christology emerges as a part of a more comprehensive intuition embracing every aspect of the Christian message in an organic whole.

In order that the first part of the present analysis may be completed, reference needs to be made briefly to the church, to the Holy Spirit, and to the trinitarian pattern of Christian thinking. Nothing said so far should be interpreted to mean that the individual Christian in seeking to understand the meaning of Jesus may confront the New Testament merely in his solitariness of that he may simply leap across the centuries that separate him from the original witness to Jesus. On the contrary, the Christian belongs to a community of believers which extends backward in unbroken historical continuity to the time and place at which Jesus was first confessed as the Christ. The Christian always reasons with, and with the help of, his contemporary companions in the faith. Moreover, he reads the Gospels and Epistles surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who have preceded him, and he enters in their labors. His reflections about Jesus are carried on in conversation with Augustine and Luther as well as with his contemporaries and with Paul and John. The concepts and categories which illuminate the relevance of Jesus for him are largely provided by this historical community out of its agelong struggle to understand the meaning of its confession in Jesus as the Christ. In short, the individual Christian lives and thinks within the church, which is the bearer of the original revelation and the locus of its continuity through the ages.

The Christian community in its reasoning is led inescapably toward the employment of a trinitarian pattern in the attempt to give an account of the ultimate Object of its concern. When the Christian confesses that Jesus is for him the norm and the source of authentic existence, he does so because he finds in Jesus a normative disclosure of the Supreme Power

which governs the universe. To say that Jesus is the Christ is to say that one confronts the demand and the gift of Ultimate Reality in and through him. Thus, Christians are led to speak of Jesus as the Son of God or as the Logos or in some equivalent way in order to connect him with the One to whom he undeviatingly points. Moreover, it is a part of the Christian confession that the final and Ultimate Reality to whom Jesus directs us is the living God with whom all men have to do here and now in their search for meaning and fulfillment. Jesus can be the norm and the source of authentic existence for us only because the truth and saving power which we know in him are made available to us by the presence and power of God in the world today. This making available to us of the benefits of Jesus as the Christ here and now is what Christians refer to when they speak of the Holy Spirit. What has been called above an intuition of the meaning of Jesus for faith is the human side of what is on the divine side the witness of the Spirit of God with the human spirit. In short, the Christian confession of Jesus as the Christ (the Son) cannot be interpreted in its entirety without reference to the Ultimate Reality which is the creative source of all things (the Father) and to the immanent presence and power of that Reality in the world (the Spirit). This threefoldness in the Christian experience of God which becomes evident when the presuppositions and implications of the affirmation that Jesus is the Christ are explored is the root of the doctrine of the Trinity. There are many intuitions among Christians as to how this doctrine ought to be expressed, but some form of expression seems to be essential.

With these methodological considerations in mind it is possible to move toward a constructive statement. I shall attempt to state what it means for me to confess that Jesus is the Christ, the norm and the source of authentic human existence, the revealer of God and the redeemer of men. It will become apparent that the methodology which has been stated and the content which follows belong together and, in fact, presuppose each other.

CONSTRUCTIVE STATEMENT

Christology has been defined as the interpretation of the meaning of the ultimacy of Jesus in the language of the age and based on the data given in the New Testament. The first step in carrying out this task is to examine the New Testament witness itself. Recent biblical scholarship has impressed upon us that the heart of the New Testament witness is the proclamation that God has acted decisively in Jesus as the Christ to inaugurate the New Age. Rudolf Bultmann offers the following summary of this message: "In the fullness of time God sent forth his Son, a pre-existent divine being, who appears on earth as a man. He dies the death of a sinner on the cross and makes atonement for the sins of man. His resurrection marks the beginning of the cosmic catastrophe. Death, the consequence of Adam's sin, is abolished, and the demonic forces are deprived of their power. The risen Christ is exalted to the right hand of God in heaven and made 'Lord' and 'King'. He will come again on the clouds of heaven to complete the work of redemption, and the resurrection and judgement of men will follow. . . . All of this is to happen very soon."¹ While this is basically the Pauline version of the *kerygma*, the other New Testament statements proclaim in somewhat different language the same good news that eschatological

¹ Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. H.W. Barth, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961, p. 2.

existence has become a possibility for man by virtue of the redemptive work of God in Christ. A new era in the relationship between God and man has begun, and men are called to abandon the old age with its bondage to sin and death and to receive the free gift of salvation from God. Life in the New Age, which begins now, is to be completed when Christ returns to consummate his work in a complete triumph over evil.

What can this message of salvation mean for the contemporary situation? How can the essential content of the New Testament *kerygma* be stated in such a way as to make contact with the experience of men in the world today and to illuminate the meaning of their existence? Every translation of the New Testament message into the language of another idea-system runs the risk of either distorting the message or of failing to make contact with the situation or of falling into both errors at the same time. Yet the attempt must be made.

The thesis to be explored here is that christology is the clarification of creation. This involves as a foundation principle the view that the fundamental message of the Bible has to do with God and his relationship to the world he has created. While the central focus is upon God's saving work on man's behalf, the Bible also teaches that the entire universe is included within the divine plan of redemption. The Bible opens (logically and factually) with the affirmation that in the beginning God made the heavens and the earth, and it closes (logically and factually) with the affirmation that in the end the whole cosmos will be brought to a glorious fulfillment. This destiny toward which all things move is seen as the consummation of the creation and as the realization of the eternal purpose of God. This means that the message of the Bible is theocentric and that its christology has to be understood as a clarification of the relationship among God, man, and the world. Hence, the significance of the *kerygma*, which proclaims the redemptive work of God in Christ, lies in its opening up once and for all and in a universally normative fashion the manner of God's dealing with the whole created order in carrying out his saving purpose.

It is possible to approach the interpretation of christology as the clarification of creation from another angle: to begin with the human quest for meaning and fulfillment which arises out of the encounter of man with the world. Man awakens to his existence in, and as an organic part of, a vast cosmic process. The fundamental problem of man in this context has to do with his own place in the total scheme of things. To be more specific, the basic question which man raises involves the meaning of his own existence as a gift and a problem coming from the same mysterious womb of creativity from which the world itself has come. Hence, the meaning of human existence is part of the larger question of the meaning of being in general, since it is difficult to see how man as an infinitesimal part of the cosmos can be considered independently of the totality in which he emerges. The natural, historical, and cosmic environments which constitute the context of human life appear to our best contemporary knowledge to be components of one process, one structure of activities, one organic whole. The world is inexhaustibly complex and staggering in its immensity. Moreover, it is differentiated into many levels and kinds of activities ranging from the sub-atomic processes within a single grain of sand to the vast spatio-temporal events which characterize the galaxies in their movement away from each other. Nevertheless, all of this diversity and complexity are part of a *universe* within which our experience as human beings takes place. This vast cosmic process is what Christians know as the creation.

Man appears on the scene as a free, rational self and begins to ask the question of the meaning of his life within the given, concrete context in which he finds himself as an organic

part of the cosmos which produced him. An answer to this question is essential to man, since the very meaning of his selfhood is constituted by the necessity under which he lives as a free being to choose the manner of his life and, in particular, the way he is to relate himself to the ultimate realities. By his very nature, then, man is a religious animal who seeks to understand and to fulfill his life. Human beings do not seem able to live apart from some kind of confidence in the basic meaningfulness of the world and without some kind of reliance on an ultimate center of being and value which undergirds this meaning. The Christian affirmation that Jesus is the Christ comes as an answer to this universal quest for authentic existence. This is another way of saying that the *kerygma* is a clarification of the meaning of creation with particular reference to man. To put it differently, the function of christology is to clear up the relationship between God and man within the context of the created order in which the human adventure takes place. The next step is to give specific content to this thesis and to relate it to the New Testament witness.

The crucial problem for christology is to specify how Jesus can be of ultimate significance for men now and everywhere, that is, how he can be the source and the norm of authentic existence for all men in all times and places. The solution to this problem is the affirmation that in this particular life, death, and resurrection we find the clue to the universal situation of man in the world before God. This is the meaning of the claim in the Gospel of John that the Logos was made flesh. The Logos is the reason of God or the pattern and meaning of the divine purpose and activity. John identifies this Logos with the person of the pre-existing Christ. The important point here is that the Logos who was the agent of creation is present in the manhood of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, the pattern and meaning of the divine purpose and activity everywhere expressed in the cosmos are decisively disclosed in a particular person and event. The crucial significance of this fact for humanity is that in Jesus is to be found the normative disclosure of the true meaning of man's own existence here and now in his present encounter with the Ultimate Reality which undergirds his being

An examination of the New Testament provides the concrete content of this normative disclosure. There can scarcely be any doubt that the central theme of the New Testament witness concerns the saving activity of God motivated by his perfect love for every creature he has made. Above all else, the quality and intention of the divine love is what is manifest in Jesus. It must be emphasized that his career is of one piece, so that the love of God which is the ground of all being and the source of all creaturely fulfillment can be discerned in his words and deeds as well as in the kerygmatic interpretation of his incarnation, death, and resurrection. His teachings about the providential care of God for sparrows and lilies, his parable of the prodigal son, his association with sinners, publicans and outcasts all testify to the same divine love of which Paul speaks in Romans 5. This means that those thinkers who try to bypass the *kerygma* in order to seek out the earthly Jesus and those who neglect the earthly Jesus in the interest of the *kerygma* are alike guilty of putting asunder what the New Testament has joined together. In fact, the kerygmatic interpretation of Jesus which speaks of his pre-existence, of his descent from the heavenly realm to be incarnate in human flesh, and of the cosmic meaning of his death and resurrection is simply a witness, in the categories of that day and age, to the ultimacy and universality of the meaning of the character, teachings, and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth.

However, it cannot be doubted that the New Testament focuses on the death of Jesus as the event in which the divine love is most clearly discerned. In the cross, the love

of God is seen to be suffering love which bears the sins of men, overcomes the evil powers, and reconciles man to God and man to man. The resurrection, which stands in correlation with the cross, is viewed as the triumph and exaltation of the crucified Jesus by which faith in him as the Christ is called forth and vindicated. It is clear that any adequate contemporary interpretation of christology must preserve the underlying intention behind the New Testament witness to the cross and the resurrection.

The New Testament witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus as the climax of his life is the testimony that the Sovereign Power which undergirds the whole cosmos is suffering and triumphant love. The cross is the disclosure that God is in the world with us and for us as the companion who knows and loves and cares for every creature. He who is the gracious creator of life is also the gracious redeemer of life who does not destroy men when they rebel against him and sin against their neighbors. Rather he bears their guilt in his own suffering heart and offers them free pardon. Moreover, he is the companion who suffers with men and with every creature in their moments of pain and feels every sorrow the world knows. This abiding love is the undergirding reality of the whole cosmos which struggles in all times and places for the fulfillment of every being. The resurrection means that this love does not only suffer; it is also triumphant against whatever seeks to defeat it. This triumph is not complete in human history and doubtless is nowhere complete in the cosmos, but there are real victories. God preserves the good that is accomplished and strives toward that consummation when all evil shall be put down and love shall reign supreme.

The divine love which suffers and triumphs in the whole cosmos and in man's history defines the meaning of creation. God creates because to be is good; i. e., God's gift of being to others besides himself is an expression of the love which defines his own character. Thus, the biblical revelation which centers upon Jesus is the clarification of the nature of the ultimate power which gives all creatures their being and which struggles with them and for them in suffering and triumph to the end of their complete redemption. Here, then, is the answer to man's search for meaning and fulfillment. His being is a gift of God, and the fulfillment of his being is the aim of the undergirding reality which bears him and the whole universe forward in creative advance through suffering and triumph. Authentic existence for man is found in a response of gratitude and trust to God and in reproducing in his own relations with his human companions the quality and intention of the divine love which creates and sustains him. Man finds his true fulfillment in this life of grateful and adoring love toward God and self-giving love toward his neighbor. The end of life is an organic community of selves in which each finds his own authentic existence by sharing in and contributing to the good of the whole. Each suffers with every defeat and each triumphs in every victory that occurs in the human pilgrimage. The call to Christian faith is a call to die to the old existence with its fear of and rebellion against God and its anxious seeking for a private or selfish good. It is also a call to rise to a new life of trust in and loyalty to God, and of sacrificial self-giving to the common human good. This new life is the authentic existence for which man was created.

To acknowledge Jesus as the Christ, then, is to make the daring and audacious affirmation that in that one human life is given a disclosure of the divine love which undergirds the whole cosmos and which is at work in human history for the redemption of men. Jesus is the norm of authentic existence in that all other claims concerning the meaning of creation and of human life are to be measured by the revelation mediated through him. He is the

source of human fulfillment in that he opens up the way of salvation by directing men to the divine love which gives life and which strives in suffering and triumph for its fullest possible realization in the midst of all that would frustrate and destroy it. Salvation is a possibility for men here and now because the love of God to which the *kerygma* points is an operative reality here and now in every event of nature, history, and personal experience. Faith is the human decision by which the self responds in utter trust to God, a decision made possible by the objective confrontation with the reality of the divine love in a moment of illumination. This awakening of man by which he comes to understand and is enabled to respond to God is what is meant by the work of the Holy Spirit. Christian preaching has no other purpose than to proclaim the good news manifest in Jesus and to confront men with the necessity of deciding whether or not they will order their lives in accordance with divine love.

Granted whatever modifications or corrections which the thesis worked out here requires, it is difficult to see how christology can throw any light on the quest for authentic life unless it can help to clarify the meaning of man's existence in the context of the Ultimate Reality which undergirds not only his being but the being of the whole creation.