

# *Christology*

# *Revisited*

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# THE ABSOLUTE PARADOX

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*In the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul (or one of his disciples) writes of his vocation to 'preach the unsearchable riches of Christ' (EPHESIANS 3. 8) If Christology is the study of the person of Christ, the attempt to answer the question, 'Who is Jesus Christ?', and if the riches of Christ are 'unsearchable', then the task of Christology is one of extreme difficulty, perhaps an impossible one, certainly one that will never be completed.*

The question [we] must try to answer was the concrete one raised by Dietrich Bonhoeffer as he lay in prison just about a year before he was hanged by the Nazis. In a letter to a friend, he wrote that the great question agitating his mind was, *'Who is Jesus Christ for us today?'*

Though for different reasons, the existential question *'Who is Jesus Christ for us today?'* is as real and oppressive for us as it was for Bonhoeffer. For a great many people today, Jesus is little more than a distant figure of the past, and they cannot believe that he has anything important to say to the contemporary world.

The very form of Bonhoeffer's question — *'Who is Jesus Christ for us today?'*— implies that in different times and in different situations different ways of thinking of Jesus Christ and different ways of expressing the thought may be required. This may well be true, and it is a point of which preachers and theologians have always taken account. ... In the very earliest period, the gospel was preached in the context of Jewish messianic expectations, and Jesus was proclaimed as the Christ, the One anointed by God to be the Saviour of his people Israel.

The clearest formulations, the most sanctified formulae, the classic condensations of the centuries-long work of the Church in prayer, reflection and struggle concerning God's mysteries: all these derive their life from the fact that they are not end but *beginning*, not goal but *means*, truths which open the way to the ever greater Truth.'

We cannot simply dismiss the one and retain the other, yet we may not be clear about how they can be reconciled. An obvious example is provided by the apparently conflicting claims that Christ is human, and Christ is divine (this was called by Kierkegaard the 'absolute paradox'). From this basic opposition, others flow in quick succession. In method, does one begin 'from below', as it is popularly expressed, that is, from the human Jesus; or 'from above', from the eternal Word? Does one stress the temporal career of the historical Jesus, or does one look beyond to the metaphysical Christ? Where do we get our knowledge of Jesus Christ – from the testimony of the past or from present experience? And if we can only say, 'from both', *we still have to decide what weight to give to one or the other.*

Jesus ... did have culturally conditioned beliefs about causality, disease, the agency of angels and demons and so on, but these did not and do not obscure his central convictions, which he expressed in both word and deed – convictions

1. concerning the sin that disfigures human life,
2. concerning the righteousness necessary for the health of society,
3. concerning above all the love in which human life is brought to its highest pitch

of fulfillment.

I do not think that, if we remain Christian, we can ever escape the fundamental paradox, that Jesus Christ is both human and divine. There are no devices that would eliminate it, short of the destruction of Christianity itself. It will not do, for instance, to say that Jesus Christ is indeed human, but not divine. Many people have believed that, and many still do. Some of them would go further, and say he was a very great man, a very good man, even the most sublime human being that has ever lived. But they stop short at the idea that he was the Word of God incarnate, as the Christian church has claimed. But if that claim is denied, then Christianity collapses. Jesus Christ might remain as an inspiring moral teacher, to be set alongside Socrates and Confucius, but he could not be a Saviour or Redeemer, he could not be preached as the Lord who demands the ultimate allegiance of the believer, and it would be nonsensical to baptize people into his name or to celebrate the Eucharist. *Jesus Christ is indeed fully and truly a human being, but Christians from the earliest days have believed that there was something 'more' to him, though this 'something more' is very hard to define.*

We cannot get away from the paradox of the one Person who is both human and divine. We have rather to stretch our minds as far as they will go to show that this is indeed a paradox and by no means nonsense or mere contradiction. ... The task of Christology is to find the right *balance*.

## THE HUMANITY OF JESUS CHRIST

‘We have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin’ (HEBREWS 4. 15).

Near the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is tempted by Satan (MARK 1. 12); he is tempted again after Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi (MARK 8. 33) and perhaps finally in Gethsemane (MARK 14. 35-36). This fact of temptation, which we encountered already in the verse quoted from the Letter to the Hebrews, is of vital importance to the genuine humanity of Jesus. He has known from the inside, as it were, the moral pressures to which human life is subject. ... Again, we note that Jesus prayed to the Father (MARK 1. 35), and the natural reading of the passages concerned suggest *that like other human beings* he was praying for God’s help to face the difficulties of life. ... Again, when someone calls him ‘Good teacher’, Jesus replies, ‘Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone’ (MARK 10. 17-18). Mark’s blunt reporting is changed by Matthew, who gives Jesus’ reply as ‘Why do you ask me about what is good?’ (19. 17) and thereby deflects any suggestion that there could be a question of Jesus’ goodness. Further evidences of Jesus’ humanity are the attribution to him of the common human emotions, and in this Mark is followed by the other evangelists.

The first item to be considered here is the virgin birth or virginal conception of Jesus Christ. There is no mention of this in the earliest writings of the New Testament. The earliest writings of all are those of Paul, some

of whose letters may have been written less than twenty years after the crucifixion: Paul has very little to say about the birth of Jesus Christ. The most important passage is this: ‘When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law’ (GALATIANS. 4.4). That verse seems to set Jesus fully and firmly within the human race. Like every other human being, he was ‘born of a woman’, and also like every other human being, he was born into a definite culture, ‘born under the law’, the most important feature of the Jewish people.

A further period of fifteen or twenty years elapsed before the church had the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, at least, in their present form. So if, as both of these Gospels claim, Jesus was born in the reign of Herod the Great who died in 4 BCE, there must have been a period of eighty or more years between the birth of Jesus and the first surviving accounts of the birth. It is not unreasonable to think that any adults who had been living at the time of the birth and who knew anything about it must have been long since dead. It is also not unreasonable to suppose that Matthew and Luke, writing in retrospect and knowing all the subsequent history of Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection, and seeing around them the steady progress of the church, believed, rightly, as history has shown, that *in some way that birth had been no ordinary birth but a turning-point in history*. At that period in history, it was believed that the births of outstanding persons would be marked by some publicly observable phenomena. Matthew’s Gospel tells of a special star appearing at the time of Jesus’ birth and astronomers have tried to discover whether there was some unusual celestial object to be

seen about that time, perhaps a comet or an unusually brilliant conjunction of heavenly bodies. Luke, on the other hand, tells of an appearance of angels to the shepherds.

When we get away from the biological level of thinking and try to understand the tradition in a purely theological way, we see that Matthew and Luke were grappling with the profound question of the origin of Jesus Christ. They were saying that the life that had been implanted in Mary had come from God. Jesus Christ is not simply the product of natural evolution nor even of human procreation – there is something ‘more’ in Jesus, something that Matthew recognizes when he connects the birth of the child with an Old Testament prophecy, ‘Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel’ (ISAIAH 7. 14). This also connects with the title ‘Son of God’ as given to Jesus in the early church. The idea that the being of the child was derived from the father while the mother’s role was receptive demanded that if Jesus is indeed ‘God with us’, then theologically God is his Father – a theological truth which, as we shall see shortly, eclipses any biological considerations.

We Westerners have very literalistic, unimaginative, matter-of-fact mentalities. We find it hard to appreciate that truth can be conveyed in parables and allegories and even in myths and legends. Consider that story about Christ walking on the waters (MATTHEW 14. 22ff.) Taken literally, it would be a rather pointless story. But as an allegory, it has much to say. If people ask me, ‘Did Jesus really walk on the sea?’, I reply, ‘I’ve been walking myself on the water for quite a few decades. I’ve often

been sinking, but like Peter I've found that faith keeps one afloat.' 'Walking on water' is a perfect description of the human condition, and the story of Christ walking on the water is not a story of his supernatural power but rather an illustration of how in his humanity he shared all the insecurity and vulnerability of our earthly life. As for the feeding of the multitude if we look at the version of this story in John's Gospel (JOHN 6. 1-14, 25-59), we see that it is followed later in the chapter by Eucharistic teaching about the bread that comes down from heaven. This suggests that these stories feeding large numbers of people with only a few pieces of bread and fish are allegories of the Eucharist, where minimal entities (in a physical sense) of food and drink convey the very life of Christ himself, his body and his blood.

## A CRITIQUE OF ADOPTIONISM

We shall engage in a critique of Adoptionism, the type of Christological theory which, it is usually believed, so emphasizes the humanity of Christ that it rules out any special ontological or metaphysical relation between him and the Father.

When one speaks of Adoptionism, one is, of course, using a *metaphor*. In traditional Christian language, Jesus Christ is often said to be ‘begotten’ of God the Father. This is obviously figurative language, but the point of it is that Jesus Christ does somehow share in the being or substance of God, and this relation is not an external one or a temporary one, but belongs to the inmost being of Jesus, and is comparable to the relation between a child and his or her natural father. When one speaks of ‘adoption’, the relation between father and child is not one of ‘being’ or ‘substance’, though it may be as much a relation of love as would be the case in a ‘blood’ relationship or even more so. It is clear that difficult questions arise. How important is it to insist on a special ontological relation of Jesus Christ to the Father? **How different must his relationship be from yours and mine to safeguard his position as Redeemer and Lord, yet without separating him from the human condition and making him something other than a member of the human race?**

I accept that the main strand in Paul’s Christology could be described as adoptionist, though he too recognizes that a simple Adoptionism is inadequate and, like the Peter of Acts, adds further thoughts about the provenance of Christ. The opening verses of the letter to the Romans have a strong adoptionist

flavour, for they speak of ‘the gospel concerning [God’s] Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead’ (ROMANS 1. 3-4). A natural reading of these verses would suggest that Jesus was a fully human being descended from David (there is no mention of a virginal conception) who after the resurrection is designated Son of God. What is meant here by ‘designated’ (the RSV translation of *horisthentos*)? Does it simply mean that the resurrection ‘declared’ or ‘made public’ an already existing state of affairs? Perhaps we could accept this if we pay attention to other letters of Paul. But if we took it to mean that the resurrection brought into being Jesus’ status as Son of God, this would be a much more adoptionist reading.

Paul has a much fuller Christology than what we can find in the beginning of Romans. It is based on a comparison and contrast of the figures of Adam and Jesus. We find it in the fifth chapter of Romans and, in a different form, in I Corinthians. It is a Christology ‘from below’, that is to say, based on the humanity of Christ, but it is not adoptionist and shows that a Christology which begins from the human Christ need not be adoptionist. Two human beings (*anthropoz*) are set over against one another. Through one of them (Adam) sin and death have entered the world, and have spread through all members of the human race. Through the other (Jesus Christ) has come righteousness, and this too has spread out to many through justifying grace. Just as sin brings death, so righteousness brings life. In fact, we could say that a new humanity appears with Christ, a humanity orientated on

righteousness and life. Adam is a mythological figure, Jesus an historical one, but they are both human. The fact that one is mythical, the other historical, is not important for Paul. He considers them both as human beings. Adam represents the 'average man' in the sense that his experience is the experience of all the other human beings who have followed him on this planet.

If it was God's intention that the human being should bear his image and likeness in the created realm, then we would have to say that Adam is a failed human being, and the 'average man or woman' is no more than an approximation to a human being. Jesus Christ is the representative human being in a different sense: not an example of the average specimen, but the 'true man', *the realization of the divine purpose for man*. Because he is the true man, he also brings to realization the image and likeness of God on the finite level. In Paul's words, 'He is the image of the invisible God' (COLOSSIANS 1.15). Paul lays too much stress on the concept of grace for us to suppose that, to adapt the words of John Knox, there 'happens' to be a human being who fulfils the potentiality of his humanity, but it is doubtful whether Paul invokes a doctrine of pre-existence to break out of a humanistic interpretation of christhood.

The statement that the earliest christology, such as we find it in early sermons in Acts or in the epistles of Paul, was adoptionist can be made only if it is heavily qualified. It must have been felt from the first to be inadequate, and, as Knox agrees, it did not last for long. It was modified either by the assertion that the career of Jesus had been foreordained by God, or by

the further idea that in some way Jesus Christ had pre-existed. It is quite likely, however, that a full-blown belief in pre-existence came only with the latest of the New Testament writings, in particular the Gospel of John.

[An appealing image] occurs in several of the Fathers, from Origen to John of Damascus. It offers the picture of a mass of iron being placed in a fire and constantly receiving the heat of the fire, so that it is fully permeated and transmits the light and heat it is receiving from the source. The iron does not cease to be iron, it has not been mixed with another metal, for fire is a different kind of being, yet the iron has become something more. So Christ has a complete human nature, but is 'something more' through his steady immersion in God.

# HOW DO WE KNOW JESUS CHRIST?

I think that first of all, we have to ask what we mean by ‘knowing’.

Not all knowledge is alike, and we have to be clear what kind of knowing we are talking about. The fact that there are contrasting ways of knowing has been recognized by many philosophers of different persuasions. Bertrand Russell wrote an essay with the title, ‘**Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description**’, in which he discusses from a strictly epistemological viewpoint the kind of knowledge that we have of, for example, sense-data, colours and sounds, a direct knowledge which differs from the knowledge that we have of, let us say, the Battle of the Somme, a knowledge derived from history-books and other reports.

Attempts have been made also to distinguish between **knowledge by participation**, where there is some kind of unity between the knower and what is known, and the knowledge in which the knower stands outside or over against what is known. I think that in modern times it is, in each of the cases I have mentioned, the second kind of knowledge that has come to be more highly prized — indeed, some would claim that only objective knowledge, the knowledge that such and such is the case, deserves to be called ‘knowledge’. But that is an absurd narrowing of what we mean by knowing.

What, then? Am I suggesting that there can be not only knowledge *about* Jesus, but a *direct* knowledge, a knowledge by acquaintance?

The first point to be made is that we should not distinguish too sharply between the knowledge that we have from the testimony of the past and the knowledge that we have in present experience. Although the knowledge that comes to us from the New Testament is **mediated knowledge**, passed on to us by the evangelists, and presumably passed on to them, probably in oral form, by still earlier Christian disciples, we can experience through the language even today something of the power of that person whom we call Jesus Christ. We hear his words, for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount, and many Christians have heard them – and perhaps all Christians should have heard them – as if they were hearing the voice of Jesus himself. That is why some men and women who eventually became leaders and saints in the church have testified that in listening to a Gospel reading or a sermon, Christ’s words *spoke directly to them* and this led them to change their whole manner of life and to undertake some difficult Christian work. *If this is true of the reading and preaching of the New Testament, it is even more true of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.* Christians speak of a ‘real presence’ of Christ in this sacrament, and his words, ‘Do this for the recalling of me!’ (LUKE 22. 19; I CORINTHIANS 11. 24)

If we read the Gospels primarily in a critical way, we are not likely to be encountered by Christ in them. It is, of course, perfectly proper and even highly desirable for the trained New Testament scholar to scrutinize the Gospels with a view to establishing so far as is possible the original. ... But the alternative is not to be uncritical or fundamentalist. Rather, *it is to be open* to the spiritual message which is the main

concern of a Gospel as distinct from a biography. The amazing thing is that sometimes we do catch the authentic voice of Jesus or recognize his special characteristics in some incident.

The fundamental point is ... that in the speaking to another person, there is *reciprocity* or conversation, and this is impossible with things.

Simply because he is a person, Jesus Christ has to be known in ways that go beyond the historical data. In fact, there is a word for the special kind of relationship that the Christian has with Christ, the relationship in which he knows Christ, and that word is 'faith'. Faith is drained of its vitality if it is interpreted merely as belief. Certainly, faith will always contain belief, such as the belief, mentioned earlier, that Jesus did really exist as a person in human history, and that the reports of his career in the New Testament are broadly reliable. But faith contains much more than belief, and is a more complicated relationship, with many strands to it. Faith has a different object from belief. We believe propositions, but we have faith in persons. Perhaps the best word to describe such faith is 'commitment', and this is an existential attitude of the whole man or woman. It was through faith in Christ that the first disciples began to perceive the 'more' in him and their understanding of him gradually deepened. There is reciprocity in the relation, as in all interpersonal relations.

When we speak of a person, though indeed we probably have in mind some particular named individual, that individual is only a person in so far as he or she stands in relation to other indi-

viduals. The autonomous isolated 'I' is something less than a person. To use a phrase which can be found in Buber but was actually in use at least from the time of Feuerbach, 'There is no *I* without a *thou*'. A community is made up of persons, but equally these persons are formed by the community.

The idea that a person is constituted through his or her relations to other persons has been applied to Jesus Christ by a number of theologians in different traditions. Among Roman Catholic theologians, Jean Galot has laid great stress on the relational character of Christ's person. Rudolf Bultmann may have been the originator of the expression 'Christ-event' to indicate that at the origin of Christianity there is not simply an individual, Jesus of Nazareth, but a social reality, Jesus together with those related to him in the community of faith. All this has been spelled out more fully by the American New Testament scholar, John Knox. He tells us that the 'Christ-event' includes 'the personality, life and teaching of Jesus, the response of loyalty he awakened, his death, his resurrection, the receiving of the Spirit, the faith with which the Spirit was received, the coming into being of the Church'. This is obviously a very complex reality, a whole system of relations. But it is simply an expansion of the claim that we met in Michael Ramsey – 'The fact of Christ includes the fact of the Church'.

# THE METAPHYSICAL CHRIST

‘Jesus Christ is the goal of everything, and the centre to which everything tends. He who knows him knows the reason of all things.’ – Blaise Pascal

If we say ‘God was in Christ’, then we are claiming that there was or is something transcendent in Jesus Christ, something that goes beyond a historical human life, something that is eternal. At the beginning of this book, I quoted Bonhoeffer’s question, ‘*Who is Jesus Christ for us today?*’, but in and through Jesus Christ men and women have had glimpses of a reality that is indeed the ‘centre of everything’ and is not just ‘for us today’ but is for everyone at all times.

The Letter to the Hebrews contains a sentence just as breathtaking as Pascal’s: ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever’ (HEBREWS 13- 8). It would be wrong to say that there is merely an eternal component in Jesus Christ, for that would seem to be splitting him in two, and in any case the eternal component would, so to speak, swallow up the temporal component, as indeed it was allowed to do in some idealist philosophies, with the result that Jesus Christ becomes simply an ideal or an archetype, deprived of his human and historical actuality and therefore of his significance for the human condition.

Bonhoeffer expands the notion of Christ as centre under three headings:

Christ is

1. the centre of human existence,
2. the centre of history and
3. the mediator between God and nature.

1. As the **centre of human existence**, Christ may be considered as the fulfillment of God's project in the creation of the human race. He is at once the norm against which humanity is to be judged, and the firstfruits of a new humanity. 'Christ as the centre of human existence means that he is man's judgment and his justification.' Here Bonhoeffer comes close to cutting himself free from all the ancient wrangles over justification that have embroiled Lutherans, and likewise the inappropriate legal imagery that was employed by theologians. If we are sometimes inclined to wonder whether the creation of the human race was a mistake, considering all the sin and evil that human beings have produced, Bonhoeffer seems to be saying, 'No! the experiment of humanity is justified by the representative man, the true man, Jesus Christ'.
2. As the **centre of history**, Christ is again being designated in a way that is not demonstrable. So it is no argument against the claim to say that one cannot fix a date for the centre of history or even know whether it makes sense to look for a centre of history. The centrality of Christ for history is not quantitative but qualitative. Bonhoeffer thought of history as the way that lies between promise and fulfillment. The very act of creation concealed within itself the promise of fulfillment, and Christ's coming was the decisive moment in the fulfilling of the promise. Nowadays Christians, in their desire not to offend members of other religions or of no religion by dating events BC (Before Christ) or AD (In the year of the Lord), sometimes use the

conventions BCE (Before Common Era) and CE (Common Era). However, this way of talking only *serves to emphasize the universal or cosmic significance of Jesus Christ*.

3. Bonhoeffer's third point is that Jesus Christ is the **mediator between God and nature**. The published version of the lectures contains only the barest summary of this point, and it is not entirely clear. There seem to have been two ideas in his mind. One was the idea of a cosmic fall, the belief that not only the human race but the whole creation is fallen and infected by sin. This belief has appeared from time to time in the history of theology, and perhaps today it has become more credible as we become aware of the extent to which human exploitation of nature has polluted not only the planet but even the surrounding space. The other idea in Bonhoeffer's mind tends to balance the first one and gives a more affirmative picture. From Jesus Christ there has been derived a sacramental theology, by which material things from the old creation are brought into the new creation and given a new significance as means of grace.

It can be conceded that some christocentric theologians may have introduced their understanding of Christ in too abrupt and isolated a manner, without regard to the relations of Jesus Christ to Israel, to the church, even to the general body of mankind, relations which we saw to be essential to the personal being of Jesus Christ, when we discussed the idea of a 'Christ-event'. Jesus Christ *is never just an individual* – he is **Jesus the Jew** in relation to Israel, **Jesus the Lord** in relation to

the church, **Jesus the authentic human person** in relation to the human race. Even in relation to God, in Christian thought **he is the Second Person of the Trinity**, and if we tear him from that context, we run the risk of what has been called a ‘unitarianism of the Second Person’ or even ‘Jesusolatry’. The theologians we have been considering did not deny these various relationships, but in their anxiety to exalt Christ, they may (with the exception of Teilhard) have obscured the personal context and made him an anomaly, a ‘rock in the sky’ as was sometimes said by some of Barth’s critics about his christomonistic tendencies.

## Christology Revisited

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*Brothers and sisters* in Christ,  
God calls us to faithful service  
by the proclamation of the word,  
and sustains us with the  
sacrament of the body and blood  
of Christ.

[*Hear now God's word, and*]  
receive this holy food from the  
Lord's table.

Most merciful God,  
**we confess that we have sinned  
against you  
in thought, word, and deed,  
by what we have done,  
and by what we have left  
undone.**

**We have not loved you with our  
whole heart;  
we have not loved our neighbours  
as ourselves.**

**We are truly sorry and we  
humbly repent.**

**For the sake of your Son Jesus  
Christ,  
have mercy on us and forgive us,  
that we may delight in your will,  
and walk in your ways,  
to the glory of your name. Amen.**

*The priest shall say...*

Almighty God have mercy upon  
you,  
pardon and deliver you from all  
your sins,  
confirm and strengthen you in all  
goodness,

and keep you in eternal life;  
through Jesus Christ our  
Lord.

**Amen.**

*Before Communion...*

As our Saviour taught us, let us  
pray,

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.**

**Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin  
against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial,  
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,  
and the glory are yours,  
now and for ever. Amen.**

The gifts of God for the People of  
God.

**Thanks be to God.**

*After Communion...*

Glory to God,  
**whose power, working in us,  
can do infinitely more  
than we can ask or imagine.  
Glory to God from generation to  
generation,  
in the Church and in Christ  
Jesus,  
for ever and ever. Amen.**

*Dismissal...*

Let us bless the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**