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CHRISTOLOGY

A Guide for the Perplexed

Alan Spence

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**CHRISTOLOGY: A GUIDE
FOR THE PERPLEXED**

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For
Winifred Marie

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers, reprinted by William B. Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985ff.)</i>
<i>CD</i>	<i>Church Dogmatics (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1932–69)</i>
<i>Contra Arius</i>	<i>Four Discourses Against the Arians</i>
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>
<i>Eph.</i>	<i>Epistle to the Ephesians</i>
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, reprinted by William B. Eerdmans (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1975ff.)</i>
<i>Smyrn.</i>	<i>Epistle to the Smyrnaeans</i>
<i>Trall.</i>	<i>Epistle to the Trallians Works The Works of John Owen ed. by William H. Goold, reprinted by the banner of Truth Trust (London, 1965–8)</i>

PREFACE

To say that Jesus Christ is determinative for Christian faith appears to be doing no more than stating the obvious. The extent, however, to which the Church's conception of Jesus has shaped its understanding of God, humanity and the world, has not always been fully appreciated. All the Church's major doctrines including those of the Trinity, salvation, sanctification, creation, final judgement and the coming Kingdom of God have been influenced, if not governed, by the interpretation that Christians give to his person. This means that a comprehensive discussion of who this man really is would have to include pretty much everything that Christians distinctively hold to be true. And that is rather more material than can be included in most theological libraries let alone a book of this length.

It has, however, been the practice of the Church in its christological reflection to focus on one particular aspect of Jesus, that is, on the relation of the divine and human in him. And the concentration of its attention on this specific area has proved to be remarkably fruitful. This is because the way in which theologians interpret this relation inevitably influences almost everything else that they say about him. It provides, as it were, the DNA or basic building block for all their theological constructions. This means that as we seek to come to terms with various christological theories and ideas in the course of this book we will always have an eye to what is being stated or implied of the relation of the divine and human in the person of Jesus.

The method we have used in our study can be compared to that of a hostess who is required to introduce a late arrival to a group of distinguished guests at a dinner party. An important conversation has been going on among them for some time. In order that the newcomer can be brought up to speed and participate in the ongoing

PREFACE

discussion, the hostess briefly summarizes what each of the participants has said so far and so supplies an outline of the conversation's development. For our consideration of Jesus' person we have invited 20 or so influential theologians, ancient and modern, to the party. Their input into the christological discussion of the Church has either been significant in itself or is representative of an influential historical development. We have tended, particularly in the later chapters, to choose for examination one or two of their major writings. The intention is that readers, as recent arrivals to the table, might have the freedom, if they so wish, to go back and examine these ideas directly without having to rely on the interpretive summary of this particular host. They can, as it were, interrogate the invited guests for themselves at their own leisure and in this way become active participants in the ongoing discussion.

The subject matter of the book has been divided evenly into two principal sections: classical christology and modern christology. These are not strictly consecutive movements. Although modern christology originated with the emergence of Socinian ideas in the early years of the Protestant Reformation, classical christology has continued to serve as a parallel interpretative scheme not only within the Orthodox and Catholic churches but also in some of the more orthodox Protestant traditions. To continue with the analogy of the dinner party, it is as though a number of the guests had at some time in the evening drifted into the living room to carry on their conversation independently of the original party, sometimes breaking up into even smaller sub-groups in response to new ideas. Why they left the dining hall and what fresh insights they brought to the discussion are of course matters of great interest. So is the question of whether or not there is any possibility that the conversations might one day be reunited or at least what the conditions might be for such a convergence to take place. A consideration of this last question is the subject matter of the concluding chapter.

I am indebted to three of my friends Lincoln Harvey, Oliver Crisp and Susanah Ticciati, all teachers of christology in British theological institutions, for reading the draft of the book and making numerous helpful suggestions as to how it may be improved both in its presentation and in its theology. My thanks also go to Georgina Brindley and Thomas Kraft of T&T Clark for inviting me to contribute to the 'Guides for the Perplexed' series.

CLASSICAL CHRISTOLOGY

CHAPTER ONE

THE PARADOX

QUESTIONS ABOUT JESUS

From their earliest days Christians have offered their worship and allegiance, not just to the one God who made the heavens and the earth, but to a Galilean preacher, who was executed while still a young man during the reign of Emperor Tiberius Caesar. Most Jews and Muslims regard such devotion to an historical person as both absurd and impious, if not blasphemous. Christians seem generally far less conscious of just how odd or paradoxical their religion looks from the outside. They exalt Jesus in their prayers, their hymns and their creeds with little awareness of how strange such action might appear.

How did such a situation ever arise? Jews and Muslims have enormous respect for their own major prophetic figures but have always been careful not to allow such esteem to develop into any suggestion that the prophet himself was worthy of divine honour. The line between what is appropriate and inappropriate reverence for such persons has been deeply drawn in their communal religious consciousness. Those who would stray across it are always in serious danger of being charged with blasphemy.¹

Why then are Christians so unconcerned about ascribing to Jesus such exalted status? It certainly isn't a practice that they came to gradually. On the contrary, there is clear indication that after his death the first generation of believers, including a number of those who had known him personally, began to honour Jesus in their hymns, blessings, salutations and prayers with a status that other monotheists have generally found to be wholly improper for one born of a woman. It is interesting to reflect on how this curious state of

affairs might have come about. It is a question that has in recent times prompted much scholarly research.

A number of studies focused on the titles that the early church used when referring to Jesus and sought to trace through them a pattern of increasing religious devotion to him, particularly in the predominantly Gentile churches, which were less inhibited by Jewish monotheistic tradition.² More recently, scholars have shown that a high level of divine reverence was paid to Jesus by the Jewish-Christian community almost from the start and that this is indicated in some of the earliest Christian literature. In his book *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?* Larry Hurtado argues persuasively that

[o]ur earliest Christian writings, from approximately 50-60 C.E., already presuppose cultic devotion to Jesus as a familiar and defining feature of Christian circles wherever they were found (see 1Cor. 1.2).³

One of the most elegant of these early ascriptions of high honour to Jesus is to be found in a letter that one of his Jewish contemporaries wrote to a newly established community of Christians:

[H]ave the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had:

who, being in the very nature of God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to
his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in the appearance as a human being,
He humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and earth and under the earth,
and that every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.⁴

What is particularly interesting is that most commentators believe that the poetic style of this piece of writing indicates that Paul,

THE PARADOX

the author of the letter, most probably borrowed it from an earlier hymn. It is apparent that Christians offered Jesus an extraordinary level of honour from around the time the first churches came into being.

What is surprising is that while non-Christian Jews were deeply disturbed by the growing reverence paid by Christians to Jesus, such a development appears to have raised no internal controversy within the Church. There is no indication that Christians were offended by the high praise offered to him by some of their more enthusiastic fellow-believers. No righteous concern seems to have been shown that traditional Jewish monotheism was under threat from some over-exuberant Christian devotional practice. No voice was heard in the Church warning that the development of such Christian piety could undermine the authoritative words of the 'Shema':

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. (Deut. 4.4)

Why was this? How was Christian esteem for Jesus able to move apparently unchallenged over the critical line of demarcation between creature and creator? In short, how was such a remarkable degree of consensus reached so soon within the Church on a matter which outsiders generally regarded as blasphemous? The early church did of course give serious theological thought to how it might speak about Jesus, at some transcendent level, to account for his elevated place in its faith and spirituality. This is apparent, for instance, in the claims made for the Galilean carpenter's son in the prologue of John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made, without him nothing was made that was made. In him was life and that life was the light of men. . . . The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn 1.1,2,3,14)

But such theological reflection and insight, articulated in Christian literature towards the end of the first century, was an outcome of early Christian devotional practice rather than the actual cause of it. What was it then that brought about this tide of devotion to Jesus which so quickly overwhelmed the longstanding Jewish religious

strictures forbidding the ascription of divine glory to any mortal man or woman?

The New Testament narratives bear witness to a dramatic sequence of events leading to the formation of the Church which can be summarized loosely in this way. The prophetic ministry of John the Baptist and the preaching and healing ministry of Jesus fuelled the expectation of many in Judea and Galilee that the appearance of the coming Kingdom of God was imminent. The announcement of Jesus' resurrection after he had been unjustly executed by the Romans, along with the public outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the early disciples, was a clear signal to the faithful that the promised divine Kingdom, already apparent in the signs, wonders and miracles of Jesus' ministry, was finally breaking into the present age. It was in this context that many responded positively to the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel. They were baptized for the remission of sins and through their reception of the Spirit came to know the salvation of God. The pronouncement that Jesus had been elevated to a position of authority at the right hand of God was confirmed by their own dramatic experience of the Spirit, a token for them of his present enthronement in heaven. In the context of such an interpretation of these events, it is not difficult to understand why the devotion of those early disciples should so quickly have crossed, or at least completely reinterpreted, the boundaries of monotheistic strictures.

THE TASK OF CHRISTOLOGY

Once Jesus was perceived by the believing community in this light and elevated to a position of divine status in its worship, the Church found itself facing, even as it continues to face today, a whole host of complex and baffling questions about his person. Responding to them has been the task of christology. Christology can be described as the faltering attempt of the Church to provide a coherent conceptual and theological explanation of Jesus' person, in harmony with the scriptural testimony, which is able to account for his role in its worship and faith.

Christology is, according to this description, a distinct discipline from one which seeks to show why Jesus is indeed worthy of the status that the Church ascribes to him. Its primary concern is not to persuade the agnostic that he is the promised Messiah or to

THE PARADOX

marshal evidence in support of his divinity for those who are yet to be convinced. It has to do, rather, with making sense of what is already there, that is, the faith and practice of the believing community. Christology is consequently a theological discipline that is undertaken by *the Church*. This does not preclude those without or within that community of faith from challenging the coherence or the appropriateness of its christological structures. But it remains a reflection on *the Church's* understanding of Jesus, the belief of Christians that the son of Mary is now Lord and Saviour of the world.

Further, christology is concerned with matters of coherence. It must offer a coherent account of how a human life can be identified with the being of God and expounded as the single narrative or history of one person. However, even framing the task in this way can be problematic. It assumes we already have a firm and adequate grasp of what is meant by the being of God, or the defining characteristics of human life or the concept of person, before we even begin our reflection on who Jesus is. But the Church has found that its study of Jesus' reality soon transforms the way it understands the nature of God, or what it means to be truly human, or even what is implied by the notion of person. Nevertheless, the concept of coherence reminds us that christology has to do, at least in part, with holding together a disparate set of realities.

Christology seeks to understand and explain Jesus' person in the context of God's determination to redeem fallen humanity through him. Consequently, it is not possible to detach the discussion of Jesus' being from the grand drama which includes the story of the world's creation by God, its alienation from him and its reconciliation to him through Christ. For, considered on its own, Christ's exalted status is an abstraction. It is made concrete only when understood in relation to the God of Israel and his redemptive action in our history.

To describe christology as the 'faltering' theological exercise of the Church is to recognize, on the one hand, the unfathomable depths of the mystery of its subject matter and, on the other, the difficulty that theologians have always had in providing adequate answers to questions raised about Jesus' person. Most christological formulations in the Church's dogmatic history have been driven by the attempt to solve or eliminate weaknesses apparent in earlier models. Consequently, christology has always had about it the air of a work in

progress. As each age brings its own questions, or more often, somewhat different slants on ancient questions, so the Church has to be ever ready, if it is to be true to its calling, to address them afresh.

Finally, that the Church struggles in its christological task does not mean the project is not significant. Karl Rahner, the twentieth-century Catholic theologian, is surely right when he described christology, or more precisely the doctrine of the incarnation, in this way:

It is the very centre of the reality from which we Christians live, of the reality which we believe. For the mystery of the divine Trinity is open to us only here; only here is the mystery of our participation in the divine nature accorded us; and the mystery of the Church is only the extension of the mystery of Christ. Since our faith is contained in this conjunction of mysteries, we should mediate on this centre of theology and of Christian life, and often speak less of a thousand other things. For this mystery is inexhaustible and in comparison with it most of the other things of which we speak are unimportant.⁵

It is difficult to conceive of any significant area of Christian faith or thought that is not dependent on what is held to be true about the person of Christ. Here is the foundation for all the Church's theology and practice, the rationale for its worship and the window for its vision or knowledge of God.

AVOIDING THE ISSUE

There might be some readers who are a little frustrated with the way the task of christology has been introduced in the discussion above. It has been framed as a paradox concerning Jesus' person that is in need of theological explanation. A number of people, however, have a deep and abiding suspicion that the simplicity of Christian faith, outlined in the teaching of Jesus, has from the start suffered serious distortion at the hands of the theologians of the Church. When Jesus' person becomes the subject of metaphysical enquiry and is interpreted in terms of supra-mundane realities or defined with precise technical formulae, their concern is that a particular religious world view or systematizing methodology has somehow been allowed to enter in and distort the simplicity of the Christian message. They would prefer