

Current Issues In Christology

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Pastors Institute, 1993

By Wilbert R. Gawrisch

I. The Contemporary Christological Scene

It was the summer of 1978. Five professors of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary were conducting the first Summer Quarter in Israel involving an archaeological dig at Tel Michal on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea and a study tour of the country. In the far north of Palestine at the foot of snow-capped Mount Hermon rising more than 9000 feet above sea level, the professors and their tour group stopped at ancient Panias, now called Banias, to dangle their feet in the cold, crystal-clear waters of the Springs of Pan. The waters pour from a sheer, rocky cliff and combine to create the Banias River. Tumbling over picturesque falls, the Banias then merges with the white water of the Dan and Hazbani Rivers to form the famed Jordan River.

This beautiful area was the site of ancient Caesarea Philippi. Here Herod the Great had built a temple of fine marble for the idol Pan and dedicated it to the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus. Herod's son Philip the Tetrarch enlarged and beautified the city and changed its name to Caesarea Philippi to honor Tiberias Caesar, the stepson of Caesar Augustus, and himself.

It was to this scenic region, about 30 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, that Jesus withdrew with his disciples before he went to Judea to suffer and die. The inhabitants of this area were for the most part Gentiles. Here Jesus sought escape from the crowds that dogged his steps in his Galilean ministry. He wanted peace and quiet so he could devote himself to prayer and to intensive instruction of the Twelve to prepare them for the trauma and testing they would soon face.

Who is the Son of Man?

As they were making their way along the dusty road, Jesus began this particular lesson by asking the disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Mt 16:13). He refers to himself, as he often does, as the Son of Man. This title, taken from the Old Testament (see e.g., Da 7:13-15; Ps 8:4-8; Heb 2:5-9), describes the Messiah not only as a true man, but also as One to whom God has given all authority, glory, and sovereign power. Jesus, of course, knew what the people were saying about him. His question was not a request for information but an introduction to the confession he wanted to elicit from the disciples. "They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets'" (Mt 16:14).

Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee and Perea, had beheaded John the Baptist at the request of Salome, the daughter of Herodias. Herodias, a granddaughter of Herod the Great, was the wife of Herod's brother Philip (Mt 14:4). Herod had persuaded her to leave her husband, however, and marry him. Herodias was furious when John told Herod, "It is not lawful for you to have her." When Herod heard the reports about Jesus' miracles, he said, "This is John the Baptist; he has risen from the dead! That is why miraculous powers are at work in him" (Mt 14:2).

Those who thought Jesus might be Elijah, the 9th century preacher of repentance who did not die but was taken to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Ki 2:11), remembered but misunderstood Malachi's prophecy about the return of Elijah (Mal 4:5,6). Malachi's prophecy was fulfilled, as Jesus explained, in the coming of John the Baptist, his forerunner, who was a preacher of repentance like Elijah (Mt 11:14).

Those who thought Jesus might be Jeremiah saw a similarity in Jesus' stern call to repentance and perhaps recalled legends concerning Jeremiah recorded in the Apocrypha (2 Macc 2:4-8; 15:13-16). Still others suggested that Jesus might be one of the other prophets come back to life (Lk 9:19; Heb 11:35.).

The observation of Oskar Skarsaune, professor of church history on the Free Theological Faculty of the Church of Norway in Oslo, is apropos: "It is amazing how modern these answers sound in our New Age era, that the spirit which had previously resided in Buddha, Zarathustra [also known as Zoroaster, the founder of the ancient Persian religion before that country's conversion to Mohammedanism], and in the deepest

consciousness of every individual dwelt in Jesus.... But this is an old answer. In the days of the Early Church, those whom we call Gnostics already fully developed this idea.”

Peter's confession of Christ

Skarsaune notes that just twenty years ago a totally different answer was given to Jesus' question. Before we examine that, however, we need to come back to the little group on the road in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi. Having highlighted the false opinions of the people, Jesus now asked his disciples, “But what about you? ... Who do you say I am?” (Mt 16:15). The answer of Peter, acting as spokesman for the Twelve, is remarkable for its simplicity and clarity: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). In other words, you are the promised Messiah, the Lord's Anointed One. You are “the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote,” as Philip had told Nathaniel at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry (Jn 1:45).

There was no question in Peter's mind that Jesus was a man, a true human being. Even Jesus' enemies recognized that. So did the unbelieving people of Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, who asked, “Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us?” (Mt 13:55,56).

Speaking for all the disciples, Peter confessed, however, that Jesus was more than a mere man. All that he had heard Jesus say and had seen him do convinced him that Jesus was the Son of the living God. That was what the Lord told David about his great descendant, whose throne would be established forever, “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Sa 7:13,14; Heb 1:5). That was what God the Father declared to the Messiah in the Second Psalm, “You are my Son” (v 7; Heb 1:5; 5:5).

Peter was reiterating what he had confessed when many followers left Jesus after he told them that he was the bread of life and that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood, that is, believe in him, if they wanted to have eternal life (Jn 6:35-58). When Jesus on that occasion asked the Twelve, “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Peter as their spokesman gave the beautiful reply, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God” (Jn 6:67-69). The Holy One was another name given to the Messiah in the Old Testament that established his deity (e.g., Ps 16:10; see Ac 2:27,31).

Peter's confession was not the result of keen human insight. It was not a cold, logical deduction made after a critical analysis of the evidence. Many others had also heard Jesus preach and had witnessed his miracles but then turned away, shaking their heads in unbelief. Jesus declared that Peter was “blessed” or saved through the faith he had confessed. But that faith was a gift of God. Jesus tells Peter (translating literally), “Flesh and blood did not reveal [this] to you, but my Father in heaven” (Mt 16:17). “Flesh and blood” refers to Peter's sinful human nature. No one can come to Jesus by his own thinking or choosing, as we confess with Luther in the explanation of the Third Article. No one can come to Jesus unless the Father enables him (Jn 6:65). With one stroke Jesus with his words to Peter brands every form of decision theology as false.

The church's confession

Peter's faith was the same as the faith of Thomas, who, having personally witnessed the stigmata in the body of the risen Christ, exclaimed, “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28). Peter's faith was the faith of the apostolic church, which confessed “that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Ac 2:36; 1 Co 12:3; Php 2:11). Paul simply calls Christ “God over all” (Ro 9:5) and declares that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col 2:9). Peter's faith was the faith of the Early Church as confessed in the Old Roman Symbol, the acknowledged antecedent of the Apostles' Creed, “I believe . . . in Christ Jesus, His only Son, our Lord.”²

This confession was made more explicit in the Nicene Creed as formulated at the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) and refined at the Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.): “We believe ... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.”³

It was made still more explicit in the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.), which declared:

We all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer [*teotokos*]; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in TWO NATURES, WITHOUT CONFUSION, WITHOUT CHANGE, WITHOUT DIVISION, WITHOUT SEPARATION; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence [*hypostasis*), not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has handed down to us.⁴

With almost every phrase a dagger pointed, as it were, at the Arian, Eutychian, and Nestorian heresies, this beautiful creed was the object of Reinhold Niebuhr's biting scorn. He called an example of "the wooden literalism of orthodoxy."⁵ "Skarsaune, by way of contrast, views it "as reflecting great theological and ecclesiological wisdom."⁶

Peter's faith was confessed also in the third of the Ecumenical Creeds, the Athanasian, the source of which is shrouded in mystery but which seems to have originated in Southern Gaul or Spain around the 6th century.⁷ It discusses the relationship of the three persons in the Trinity in considerable detail:

Now this is the true Christian faith;

We worship one God in three persons and three persons in one God, without mixing the persons or dividing the divine being.

For each person — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—is distinct,

but the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, equal in glory and coeternal in majesty.

What the Father is, so is the Son, and so is the Holy Spirit.

The Father is uncreated, the Son uncreated, the Holy Spirit uncreated; the Father is infinite, the Son infinite, the Holy Spirit infinite; the Father is eternal, the Son eternal, the Holy Spirit eternal;

yet they are not three who are eternal, but there is one who is eternal,

just as they are not three who are uncreated, nor three who are infinite,

but there is one who is uncreated and one who is infinite.

In the same way the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty;

yet they are not three who are almighty, but there is one who is almighty.

So the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God; yet they are not three Gods, but one God.

So the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Spirit is Lord: yet they are not three Lords, but one Lord.

For just as Christian truth compels us to confess each person individually to be God and Lord,

so the true Christian faith forbids us to speak of three Gods or

three Lords.

The Father is neither made nor created nor begotten of anyone.

The Son is neither made nor created, but is begotten of the Father alone.

The Holy Spirit is neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeds from the Father and the Son.

So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.

And within this Trinity none comes before or after; none is greater or inferior, but all three persons are coequal and coeternal, so that in every way, as stated before, all three persons are to be worshiped as one God and one God worshiped as three persons.

Whoever wishes to be saved must have this conviction of the Trinity. ⁸

By God's grace, our confession too

It hardly needs to be said that Jesus addresses the question he directed to his disciples to every one of us, yes, to every human being: "What about you? Who do you say I am?" Among us who are participating in this Pastors Institute it is taken for granted that, by the grace of God, we make Peter's answer our own. Our church, by the grace of God, still takes its stand on the three Ecumenical Creeds, understood in the sense that was originally intended.

When we said that among us this is taken for granted, we did not by any means intend to say, however, that this is something that should be taken for granted. In our day there are vast numbers of professing Christians who regularly recite the Apostles' Creed but who divest the words of their true sense. For them the words do not mean what they say. It would be the height of folly for us to take the grace of God for granted. Our Wisconsin Synod has enjoyed the blessing of God's grace and truth for nearly a century and a half. Complacency, indifference, and ingratitude are attitudes sown by Satan with the aim of robbing us of our treasure. We need to hear and heed Paul's plea, "We urge you not to receive God's grace in vain" (2 Co 6:1) and Luther's warning that the gospel is "like a passing shower of rain which does not return where it once has been."

Some current views

Who is Jesus of Nazareth? In his day some concluded that he was an agent of Beelzebub, the prince of demons (Mt 12:24). Today prominent Protestant theologians are willing to call him "the man of universal destiny," as Michael Goulder of the University of Birmingham, England, does, placing him in a preeminent position in a small class of individuals that includes Buddha, Themistocles, Mohammed, Joan of Arc, Churchill, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King.¹⁰ But they are not willing to recognize him as God incarnate. Who is this Christ? Is he "the most wonderful man, who ever lived," but nothing more, as John Hick, also of the University of Birmingham, claims?¹¹ Is he merely a moral example on a level with Moses, Socrates, Gautama Buddha, and Mohammed? Is he merely a man whose religious consciousness is a model for human emulation? Is he, as Anglican Bishop J. A. T. Robinson, author of the 1963 best-selling bombshell, *Honest to God*, in a subsequent book, *The Human Face of God*, holds, "totally and utterly a man—and had never been anything other than a man or more than a man"?¹² Jesus has been praised as "the man for others,"¹³ or "the man for God' the one, that is, whose entire life was dominated by a passion for God."¹⁴

Resurrected heresies

Prof. Edmund Reim once published a series of articles in our Seminary's *Quartalschrift* with the title, "Ancient Heresies in Modern Garb." He shows how the false teachings of the Ebionites, a Jewish-Christian sect of the first century that denied Christ's supernatural birth, of Dynamic Monarchians or Adoptionists like Paul of Samosata, a third century metropolitan bishop of Antioch who taught that the child to which Mary gave birth was a truly human child—but only human—upon whom a divine power came, and of Arius, an early fourth century presbyter of Alexandria who claimed that Jesus was a creature, preeminent, to be sure, but only a creature, all assailed the eternal deity of Christ. Their error has been resurrected by modern Unitarians,

Jehovah's Witnesses, and the deistic lodges and Scout movement. The articles also discuss other ancient heresies like that of Pelagius which limit the implications of the fall of man and which reappear in the semi-pelagianism of the Church of Rome and in the synergism of Melanchthon and his followers in the Lutheran Church. Our concern at the present time, however, lies in the area of Christology.

More recently Anglican Bishop Stephen Neill, formerly of the University of Nairobi, has observed, "There is no heresy so dead that someone will not attempt to resuscitate it; there is no error so frequently denounced that someone will not try once more to deck it in the garments of truth."¹⁶ One could hardly agree more with Neill's reaction to the 1977 publication of the provocative book, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, by seven purportedly Christian theologians of the Church of England:

I wish I were more certain as to what exactly is being offered us in exchange for the Nicene faith. It seems to me that we are being offered a God who loved us a little, but not enough to wish to become one of us; a Jesus who did not rise from the dead, and therefore offers no answer to the great and bitter problems of humanity; and a gospel which is just one of many forms of salvation, therefore offers no answer to the great and bitter problems of humanity; and a gospel which is just one of many forms of salvation, and perhaps not that which is most suitable to modern Western man. If this is so, we may perhaps be excused if we say respectfully to our friends that it looks to us remarkably like the diet which the younger son enjoyed in the far country. However, if that is the food they appreciate, and if they find it to be nutritive, far be it from us to deny them a single husk; but it would not be honest to pretend that it bears much resemblance to what we so liberally enjoy in the Father's house. We might even be tempted to whisper in their ear that the door to the Father's house is always open and that there is a specially warm welcome for returning Pelagians."¹⁷

The quest for the historical Jesus

Who was Jesus Christ? As we have already seen, it is a critical question. It demands an answer. It will not go away. In 1835 David Friedrich Strauss at the age of 27 wrote his famous and scholarly, but highly critical and negative *Leben Jesu*. At that time there were three parties to the controversy on the problem of the life of Jesus: the supernaturalists, who accepted the New Testament narratives and miracles; the rationalists, who rejected the miracles; and the radical rationalists, who considered the Gospel narratives to be fabrications. Strauss rejected the miracles, and so for him the Gospels, which report them as history, cannot be accepted as authentic. He did not consider them to be deliberate fabrications but called them "myths." A "myth," according to Strauss, presents an event in nature or an ethical idea as a divine drama and incorporates something that continually recurs in an imaginary person. For Strauss the truth of the Gospel stories of Jesus was simply that the human race lives, suffers, dies, and goes to heaven. Although the fabricator of a myth may realize its fictitious character, it may be accepted by the multitude as being in harmony with their religious ideas. We shall have more to say about the concept of "myth" later in these lectures.

In 1840 Strauss wrote *Christliche Glaubenslehre*, in which he subjected the doctrines of Christianity to destructive criticism. In death human personality is lost, and man returns to divine unity. So Strauss became an outright pantheist. In his 1864 book, *Leben Jesu fuer das Deutsche Volk*, he attempted a positive reconstruction of Jesus' life. He tried to bridge the chasm between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history but later admitted that in his view the data for such an attempt were insufficient. Toward the end of his life he asked the question, "Are we still Christians?" His answer was No.

During the last hundred years there have been New Testament scholars who, strange as it may seem, have seriously questioned whether the man called Jesus of Nazareth ever really existed. Others say that even if such a person did exist, we have no way of knowing who he was or what he did.

Discounting the wealth of evidence to be found in the New Testament, scholars have set out with a great show of learning on a quest for the historical Jesus. They have attempted to distinguish between the historical Jesus and the so-called kerygmatic Christ. Specifics will be reserved for a later lecture in this series. Suffice it at this time to note that Paul Tillich, who called himself a Lutheran and who taught for many years at Union

Theological Seminary and at Harvard Divinity School, points out that “the attempt of historical criticism to find the empirical truth about Jesus of Nazareth was a failure. The historical Jesus, namely, the Jesus behind the symbols of his reception as the Christ, not only did not appear but receded farther and farther with every new step.” The reason he gives is that “the reports about Jesus of Nazareth are those of Jesus as the Christ, given by persons who had received him as the Christ.”¹⁸

There is an anecdote that, though fictional, aptly illustrates the view of some modern theologians concerning the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth. It goes like this: The pope was told by the cardinals that archaeologists working in Israel had dug up the remains of Jesus. There was no doubt that it was Jesus—all the Catholic archaeologists were agreed on that. “Oh,” said the pope, “what do we do now?” “There’s only one hope left,” said the cardinals. “There’s a Protestant theologian in America called Tillich. Perhaps you can get him on the phone.” So a call was put through to Tillich, and the problem was explained to him. There was a long pause at the other end of the line. Finally Tillich said, “You mean to say he really existed?”¹⁹

“All theology is Christology”

There is more than a grain of truth in the observation of Danish theologian Regin Prenter that “all theology is Christology.”²⁰ Luther notes “that all error, heresy, idolatry, offense, misuse, and evil in the church originally came from despising or losing sight of this article of faith in Jesus Christ. And if one looks at it correctly and clearly, all heresies do contend against this dear article of Jesus Christ.”²¹ Christ is indeed as Paul said, “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Co 1:23), or as Isaiah expressed it centuries earlier, “a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall” (8:14).

Christ is the heart and core of the Scriptures. Not only the New Testament but the Old Testament as well, beginning with the Protevangel in Genesis 3:15, centers in him. Jesus declared that the Scriptures testify about him (Jn 5:39). He told the Jews who were trying to kill him, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me” (Jn 5:46). On Easter evening he appeared to his frightened and troubled disciples and assured them, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Lk 24:44).

The conflict between the God-fearing antediluvian Sethites and ungodly Cainites (Heb 11:5-7; Jude 11,15), between the true spiritual seed of Abraham and his offspring according to the flesh (Gal 4:29), between God’s Old Testament people and the unbelieving, pagan world (Dt 7:1-6; Isa 48:20; 52:11; Jer 50:8; 51:6,45; 2 Co 6:17), between true prophets of God like Elijah and false prophets like the priests of Baal (1 Ki 18:16-40), between the orthodox Christian church and the false prophets and heretics who have arisen from time to time (e.g., Mt 7:15; 10:11-42; 24:24; Ac 20:29f; Ro 16:17f; 1 Jn 4:1-3) is a fulfillment of God’s prophecy in Eden of the enmity he would put between Christ and Satan, between the offspring of the woman and the offspring of the devil (Ge 3:15). In this series of lectures we shall take our cue from Luther. In 1538 Luther wrote a brief treatise, *The Three Symbols*. The title refers to the Apostles’ and Athanasian Creeds and the Te Deum, the church’s ancient great canticle of thanksgiving to God, which is said to have been considered from early times “a classic expression of the Christian faith” and which “was placed on a par with the liturgical confessions.”²² In his treatise Luther clearly recognized the devil’s strategy when he observed that he “attacks Christ in three lines of battle. One will not let him be God, another will not let him be man, and the third will not let him do what he has done. Each of the three wants to reduce Christ to nothing.”²³ In this short writing Luther brilliantly and effectively meets each assault and concludes with the Nicene Creed.

Following Luther’s outline, in our discussion of Current Issues in Christology we shall devote the second lecture to issues involving Christ’s deity, the third to issues involving Christ’s humanity, and the fourth to issues involving Christ’s work. In the final lecture we shall assess the stakes in the issues.

ENDNOTES:

1 Oskar Skarsaune, *Incarnation, Myth Or Fact?*, translated by Trygve R. Skarsten (St. Louis: Concordia, 1991), p 11.

2 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, 1950), p 102.

- 3 The translation is that in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal (CW)* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1993) p 18. A discussion of details of this confession is reserved for later in this series of lectures.
- 4 *Documents of the Christian Church*, selected and edited by Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p 73. Also cited in *Concordia Triglotta (Trig.)* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), p 1109.
- 5 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 6 1949), p 28.
- 6 *Incarnation*, p 123.
- 7 "Historical Introduction to the Symbolical Books," *Trig.*, p 13f.
- 8 *CW*, pp 132-133
- 9 *Luther's Works (LW)* (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955-), 45,352.
- 10 See *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), pp 55-58.
- 11 In *Daily Mail*, June 29, 1977, cited in George Carey, *God Incarnate, Meeting the Contemporary Challenges to a Classic Christian Doctrine* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1977), p 12.
- 12 J. A. T. Robinson, *The Human Face of God* (London: SCM, 1973), p 179.
- 13 The term is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's. See his *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), pp 209f.
- 14 See Dennis Nineham in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p 187.
- 15 *Quartalschrift, Theological Quarterly*, Vol 46, No I (January 1949), pp 11 6 27, and No 2 (April 1949 pp 95-108.
- 16 Stephen Neill in *The Truth of God Incarnate*, edited by Michael Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p 72.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p 68.
- 18 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957 1~ Vol. II, p 102.
- 19 Michael Goulder, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p 48.
- 20 Regin Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, translated by Theodor I. Jensen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), p 296.
- 21 *LW* 34,207f.
- 22 Robert R. Heitner in *LW* 34,199f. Heitner adds, "It was also known in reference to its contents as the hymn in honor of the Holy Trinity' and as the 'hymn of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine,' because of a legend that at the time of St. Augustine's baptism in 387, Ambrose intoned the hymn and sang it alternately with Augustine. Its composition is attributed by Irish traditions to Nicetas, probably with reference to the bishop of Remesiana, who died between 335 and 414. He may very well have made the definitive arrangement of the hymn."
- 23 *LW* 34, 210.

CURRENT ISSUES IN CHRISTOLOGY

II. Issues Involving Christ's Deity

The mystery of the incarnation

"The Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14). Four simple words, but what a profound truth they express! Speaking through his inspired apostle, God here reveals to us a truth that is utterly incomprehensible to our finite human minds! Here is the mystery of mysteries. The fact that it is the ultimate of mysteries does not, however, call its reality into question. There are many things even in the world of nature that we do not understand but do not hesitate to accept. What, for example, is life? We all recognize it when we see it, but we cannot explain it, much less create it. Scientists can put all the chemical components of a living cell into a test tube but they cannot bring them to life.

We are told that the Word—the Greek word is *logos*—existed in the beginning: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (v 1). "In the beginning" is reminiscent of the opening words of Genesis 1. At the beginning of creation, when time began, the Word was there. He was "with God." In verse 2, John underscores the fact: "He was with God in the beginning." The expression "with God" makes it obvious that John is speaking about two individuals, two persons. The church introduced the term

“person” to speak about these individuals when it became necessary to defend the teaching of the Bible against the errors of heretics.¹ *Person* is not a term used in the Bible.

Not only was the Word with God, however. He himself “was God!” The mystery deepens. Although the Word was with God and also was God, there are not two Gods. In this Prologue to his Gospel John consistently uses the singular when speaking about God (vv 6,12,13,18). He distinguishes between the Logos and the other person in God to whom he refers by designating the other person as the “Father” (vv 14,18). Luther in his translation gives added emphasis to the truth that the Word was God by placing the predicate noun at the beginning of the clause, as the Greek does: “*Gott war das Wort!*”

As God, the Word was active in the work of creation. In Genesis 1 we repeatedly read, “And God said, ‘Let there be...,’ and there was...” (e.g., v 3). The Psalmist writes, “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (33:6,9). Col 1:16 states, “By him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.” John puts it this way: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (v 3). “Through him” does not mean that the Word was merely an instrument God used himself in his work of creation as a carpenter uses a saw or a hammer. This is made clear by the fact that he is called and actually is God. God is not an impersonal force like gravity or electricity. He is a personal being with self-consciousness and self-determination.² The personality of the Logos is also apparent from the antecedent of “him” in verse 3. This antecedent is the masculine pronoun *houtos*, translated “he,” in verse two. John does not use the neuter, *touto*. If someone were to argue that the gender of *houtos* simply reflects the fact that *logos* is masculine, the many personal activities ascribed to him in this Prologue—creating, giving life, coming to his own, giving believers in him the right to become children of God, becoming flesh and dwelling with us, making God known, and being at the Father’s side—make any denial of his being a person absurd.

“In him was life” (v 4). It has already been mentioned that we cannot explain what life is. Louis Pasteur demonstrated long ago that life does not come into existence spontaneously. *Omne vivum ex vivo* is an established law of nature that rests on the Creator’s blessing and decree that living creatures reproduce “according to their kinds (*lemiynehu*)” (e.g., Ge 1:11,21,24). A *miyn* is a group of plants or animals that can be crossed or interbred. Despite the claims of evolutionists, God fixed definite limits making the transmutation of species impossible. Only God can bring forth living plants and animals from inanimate matter, as the creation account in Genesis tells us he did. Even man was only dust of the ground until God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (*nephesh chayyah*)” (Ge 2:7; the same term is used, incidentally, for the living water and land forms of life God created, Ge 1:20,24).

The fact that the *Logos* had life in himself and was the source of life for men (v 4), is another forceful assertion and irrefutable proof of his deity. “In him was life” tells us that the *Logos* was not only the source of physical life, but of spiritual life for man as well. That is clear from the added remark, “That life was the light of men” (v 4). This is further explained in verse 9: he is “the true light that gives light to every man.”

Then comes the astounding statement: “The Word became flesh [*ho logos sarx egeneto*]” (v 14). Note that John does not say that the *Logos* gave up his *Logos* nature and turned into flesh in the way that Satan wanted Jesus to turn stones into bread (Mt 4:3) or the way Jesus turned water into wine at Cana (Jn 2:9). After the water became wine, there was no more water in the jars, only wine. What happened when the divine, eternal *Logos* became flesh was a unique occurrence. It has no parallel in all of creation.

We call this event Christ’s incarnation. God intervened in human history and in the person of the *Logos* became one of us. The Creator became a creature! The second person of the Godhead took on a human nature. Jesus Christ is the only person who has two natures. He is not two persons. Whenever he speaks or acts, it is as a single individual, as when he says, for example, “I am he” (Jn 18:5) or “I saw you” (Jn 1:48). From the moment of his conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary and to all eternity his divine nature and his human nature are inseparably joined and are co-extensive. Wherever his human nature is, his divine nature is; and wherever his divine nature is, his human nature is. The Child lying in the manger in Bethlehem was the Lord of

heaven and earth. The angel of the Lord told the shepherds, “Today ... a savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:11). Jesus told Nicodemus, “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man” (Jn 3:13). An NIV footnote indicates that some manuscripts add, “who is in heaven.” Even if this reading is not part of the original text, the thought it expresses is scriptural. In this Prologue to his Gospel which we are considering John states that the Word “is at the Father’s side” (*ho oon eis ton kolpon tou patros*; KJV: “in the bosom of the Father”; Luther: “*in des Vaters Schosz*”). While Jesus walked here on earth, yes, while he hung on the cross and lay in the tomb, he was in heaven.

Nestorianism

This scriptural truth was denied by the fifth-century heretic Nestorius. Nestorius taught that the two natures, the divine and the human, “are united with each other like two boards glued together” so that “the two natures have no communion whatsoever with each other ... so that Christ is one person and God the Word who dwells in Christ is another.”⁴

The error of Nestorius has been revived by the Calvinists. Arguing on the basis of human reason that *omne corpus verum in loco est*, Calvin taught, “It is essential to a real body to have its particular form and dimensions and to be contained within some certain space.”⁵ Hence, the promise of Mt 28:20, “I am with you always, to the end of the age,” is not “to be applied to his body.” Consistently, Calvinists reject the scriptural doctrine of the communication of idioms or properties, namely, that in Christ on account of the union of the divine and human natures God is man and man is God “without thereby blending the natures or their properties; on the contrary, each nature retains its essence and properties.”⁶

Luther emphasized that the “two natures are one person: whatever therefore concerns one part of the person is said to happen to the whole [person]”⁷ He damned to the depths of hell “the blasphemous alloeosis of Zwingli,”⁸ who dreamed up a fictitious figure of speech whereby supposedly “when something is said about the divinity of Christ which after all belongs to his humanity, or vice versa,” a rhetorical exchange of one for the other takes place. “Beware, I say,” Luther wrote, “of this alloeosis, for it is the devil’s mask since it will finally construct a Christ after whom I would not want to be a christian....For if I believe that only a human nature suffered for me, then Christ would be a poor Savior.”⁹ The Jews did not crucify a mere man but “the Lord of glory” (1 Co 2:8). The Nestorian heresy is still the teaching of the Reformed today, who hold that since Christ’s body is in heaven, it cannot be in the Lord’s Supper.

Jesus Christ, both God and man

The orthodox church, ancient and modern, has always endorsed what Paul teaches in Colossians 2:9, “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (*en autoo katoikei pan to pleerooma tees theoteetos soomatikoos*).” Paul heaps up the terms to underscore the truth that Christ is God. The *Godhead* is in him, and not only the Godhead but the *fullness* of it; not only the fullness of it, however, but *all* the fullness of it; it did not come on him only temporarily, as the dynamic monarchians or adoptionists like Paul of Samosata taught,¹⁰ it *dwells* in him, and dwells in him *bodily*, occupying him totally. In his graphic language Luther spoke of the body of Christ as *ein durchgottert fleisch und blut* (flesh and blood permeated by God).¹¹ Hence, Jesus Christ is the God-Man. Even the Roman centurion, standing at the foot of the cross and seeing how Jesus died, had to confess, “Surely this man was the Son of God!” (Mk 15:39).

For human reason this is nonsense. It defies comprehension. John Hick, an Anglican theologian previously mentioned who edited the 1977 shocker, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, repeats Spinoza’s dictum that to talk of one who is both God and man is like talking about a square circle.¹² Calvinism argues, “How can the entire omnipresent God exist within the confines of a human body? It is as impossible as pouring the oceans into a cup.” It expresses its unbelief as an axiom: *Finitum non est capax infiniti*, the finite cannot contain the infinite. But the laws of physics and logic do not apply to that unique event when “the Word became flesh.” “Flesh” refers to the entire human nature, all that belongs to being human. It means having a human body and a human soul. It does not however, include sin. Sin does not belong to man’s essence, as Flacius taught,¹³ although it permeates and contaminates the whole essence of every human being with the exception of Christ.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews explains: “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity.... He had to be made like his brothers in every way... yet was without sin” (2:14,17; 4:15).

Because John testifies concerning the incarnate Word that he is God (v 1) and goes on to say, “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only [*monogenees*], who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14), we confess in the Nicene Creed that he is “*of one being with the Father*”¹⁴ and in the Athanasian Creed that he is “*perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*.”¹⁵ In the words of the Chalcedonian Definition he is, “*Theon aleethoos kai anthroopon aleethoos, vere Deum, et vere hominem*, truly God and truly man.”¹⁶

God’s eternally begotten Son

The meaning of the word *monogenees* is debated by lexicographers. Whether one takes it to mean “only begotten,” as the KJV and Luther¹⁷ translate it or “One and Only,” referring to his unique being, as the NIV renders it,¹⁸ the fact remains that Scripture clearly teaches that he was “eternally begotten of the Father,” as the Christian church confesses in the Nicene Creed. In this respect there is no one like him. He is the Father’s one and only Son.

The doctrine of the *aeterna generatio* of the Son is based not only on all those passages which speak of Jesus as God’s Son and of God as his Father,²⁰ but also on those passages which expressly refer to this act of generation. Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5 quote Psalm 2:7, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” The two clauses in this verse are in synonymous parallelism. They express the same fact from two points of view. In close connection with this quotation the writer to the Hebrews refers to him as God’s firstborn (*proototokos*, Heb 1:6). He also describes him as “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being (*charakteer tees hypostaseoos*)” (1:3).

But what does “generation” or “begetting” of the Son by the Father mean? Here again we are confronted with an incomprehensible mystery. All we can say is that it pleased God to use this expression in his revelation to us to describe the relationship between the first and the second persons in the Trinity.

David uses the Hebrew word *yalad*, which means “beget” or “bring forth.”²¹ In some way analagous to a human father’s begetting of a son, the Son derives his essence from the Father. At the same time there is a vast difference between the human and the divine acts. The human act is sexual and takes place at a moment in time. The divine act does not involve a mother and is eternal, not temporal. It is not, however, imperfect or incomplete. In human begetting, the father is older than his son, but in the divine begetting the Father and the Son are co-eternal.

This Son, John declares, “made his dwelling among us,” literally, “tented [*eskeenoosen*] among us” (v 14). He lived on earth with his human creatures. He was “made like his brothers in every way” (Heb 2:17). He grew tired and hungry. He experienced sorrow and pain and finally death. He can sympathize with our weaknesses because he was “tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin” (Heb 4:15). But all the while, as we have already heard John testify, his divine glory was apparent. As the *Logos*, the Word, who is at the Father’s side, he has made the Father known to all will listen (v 18).

John refers to him as the “Word” because both in the Old Testament²³ and in the New he is the one who reveals God. What a tragedy it is, however, that “he came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (v 11).

Proofs of his deity

Christian theologians have traditionally demonstrated the deity of Christ from the Scriptures by pointing to those passages in which divine names, divine attributes, divine works, and divine honor are ascribed to him. Time limits us to citing only one passage for each. A more complete listing will be found in the standard works on dogmatics. In 1 John 5:20 he is called “the true God and eternal life.”²⁴ Hebrews 13:8 declares that he has divine immutability: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.”²⁵ Of his divine works the greatest was without question his resurrection from the dead. While the Bible tells us that God raised him from the dead (e.g., Heb 13:20), it also teaches that Jesus raised himself (e.g., in 2:19; 10:17f). According to John 5:23 and other passages, the Son is to be accorded divine honor.

Jesus manifested his deity also in the way he taught. The people noticed that “he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the Law” (Mt 7:29). There was also a marked difference between Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. While the prophets emphasized their role as God’s representatives by announcing, “Thus says the Lord,” Jesus spoke on his own authority, “But I tell you...” (e.g., Mt 5:22,28,32,34,39,44). He asserted his authority over the temple (Mt 12:6), over the Sabbath (Mt 12:8), and over Satan (Mt 12:25-29). He exercised the divine prerogative of forgiving sins (Mt 9:1-8; Lk 7:48). He addressed God as “Abba, Father” (Mk 14:36), his Father in a unique sense (Jn 17:1-5), and God declared that Jesus was his Son, whom he loved (Mt 3:17; 17:5). Finally, Jesus claimed to have a knowledge of God which no one else had and a sonship which no one else possessed: “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Mt 11:27).

In view of the superabundant testimony of the Scriptures to the deity of Christ, it seems incredible that anyone should question or deny it. When John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus to ask whether he was the one who was to come (*ho erchomenos*, a designation of the Messiah based on Old Testament promises like Psalm 40:7; 96:13; 98:9),²⁶ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me” (Mt 11:4-6). Nevertheless, when Jesus asked the Pharisees, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” they answered, “The son of David,” in other words, a human descendant of David and no more. Even though Jesus reminded them that David called him “Lord,” they stubbornly refused to recognize his deity (Mt 22:41-46). Jesus was condemned to death because he testified under oath before the Sanhedrin that he was the Christ, the Son of God (Mt 26:63-66).

Ancient and modern heresies

In the first lecture of this series reference was made to the first century Ebionites who claimed that Jesus was “merely a man whom God had chosen to proclaim his will.”²⁷ Also in the first century a system of religious philosophy known as Gnosticism began to make inroads into the fledgling Christian congregations. A syncretistic potpourri of religious thoughts, Gnosticism taught that a secret, higher knowledge was the way to salvation; and salvation according to Gnosticism, was a liberation of the spirit from slavery to material things. It was libertine and licentious, throwing off all moral restraints. In his writings, especially his letter to the Colossian Christians, the Apostle Paul had to oppose an invasion of gnostic ideas.

Of interest to us in our consideration of the heresies that denied Christ’s deity, is a first-century gnostic by the name of Cerinthus who lived at Ephesus. Cerinthus taught that Jesus was a man, the son of Joseph and Mary. Christ, the divine being descended on Jesus at his baptism and left him again before he suffered and died. As Luther notes, Cerinthus’ heresy is the background of John’s First Epistle.

Reference was also made in the first lecture to the Arian controversy. Arius (d. 336) was a presbyter in the church of Alexandria. He taught that although all things were made by him, the Son was a creature (*ktisma* or *poieema*), made by God out of nothing before the creation of time and space. Arius’s claims have no basis, in Colossians 1:15 where Paul calls Christ the “firstborn over all creation (*proototokos pases ktiseos*).” Paul is not ranking Christ with God’s creatures but asserting his superiority to them. (The genitive expresses comparison.) Arius asserted that the Son was not eternal; “there was a time when he was not. “ He was not God in the strict sense of the word, but also not a mere man. Rather, he was a demi-god, divine but not co-equal with God. His courageous, clear-sighted, and eloquent opponent, Athanasius, was an archdeacon in the Alexandrian church, who was only 29 years old at the time of the Council of Nicaea (325). Athanasius recognized the threat to Christianity and the gospel in Arius’ teaching that the Savior is not God. The council affirmed the Son’s co-eternity with the Father and rejected both Arius’s term *anomoios* (dissimilar in essence), and the semi-Arian term, *homoiousios* (similar in essence), and accepted *homoousios* (same in essence) as the proper term to describe the Son’s co-essentiality with the Father. Although not found in Scripture, *homoousios* expresses scriptural truth. In 328 Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria but spent his whole life contending for the truth. Banished five times, he lived in exile at various times for a total of twenty years before he died in 373.

During the time that Arianism was officially endorsed in the empire, beginning in 356, the Germanic tribes that invaded Europe adopted Christianity and so became Arian. They did not accept the orthodox faith until the 6th century.²⁹

Arianism is perpetuated today in the fast-growing cult now known as Jehovah's Witnesses. Founded by Charles T. Russell about the year 1879, before adopting their present name they were known first as Russellites, then as the International Bible Students Association and the Watch Tower Bible Society. In his *Studies in the Scriptures*, which is regarded by his followers as more authoritative than the Bible, Russell writes, "Jesus is only a creature of God, and not the Son of God from all eternity; and now, since his death, the God-man no longer lives."³⁰ That this is a revival of Arian teaching is obvious.

It goes without saying that today's Unitarians deny the deity of Christ. They interpret Jesus' emphatic assertion of his deity in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one [*hen esmen*]," to mean merely that he and the Father were of one mind and will. They are the modern representatives of the views of the Socinians of Luther's time. In order to escape persecution the Socinians established themselves in Cracow, Poland, one of the few places where there was religious liberty in those days. Though few in numbers, like their modern counterparts they were energetic in publishing and disseminating their heresies. Consequently, Luther and the Lutheran confessors found it necessary to address and refute the Socinians' errors. With respect to the contemporary theologians like the seven Anglican authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate*, Stephen Neill notes perceptively that what they have to offer "is almost precisely the old Unitarianism."³¹

The professed aim of such contemporary theologians is to strip away ideas that make Christianity unpalatable to modern man, who lives in a secular, science-oriented society in which the supernatural, they say, has no place. They are echoing Rudolf Bultmann, the "Lutheran" theologian in Germany. In his well-known manifesto of 1941 Bultmann claimed that the picture the Bible presents of Christ "is incredible to men and women today because for them the mythical world picture is a thing of the past."³² Bultmann calls historic, orthodox Christology "not only irrational but utterly meaningless."³³

The Church of Rome is not far behind these Protestant scholars. Ever since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), which, it was said, let a breath of fresh air into the church, Catholic scholars have been free to use the historical-critical method in interpreting the Bible. An example is the recently published *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Although it has the *nihil obstat* and *imprimatur* of Catholic officials guaranteeing that it is free of doctrinal or moral error, it attacks the deity of Christ by denying his omniscience and preexistence from eternity. It asserts, for example that "no NT passage states precisely that the Son coexisted from all eternity with the Father."³⁴

What is one to say also about the so-called "Jesus Seminar," a group of nearly 200 Bible "scholars" who are reported to have concluded that Jesus never claimed to be the Son of God and that he probably said fewer than fifty percent of the sayings attributed to him in the New Testament?³⁵ Suffice it to recall that Jesus said, "By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Mt 12:37).

Of great interest, naturally, is the question, What is taught in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) concerning the deity of Christ? Because of ELCA's pluralism, it does not speak with one voice. When one looks into its unofficial textbook, *Christian Dogmatics*, however, the trumpet one hears does not give a clear sound. On the one hand, in the sixth locus on "The person of Jesus Christ" in the section headed, "The True Divinity of Jesus Christ," written by Carl E. Braaten, one reads:

The truth of the incarnation is that God took on a truly human reality, so that in Jesus Christ he stands on both sides of the boundary separating the Creator from the creation. The confession that Jesus in his person is truly God means that God's decisive and final word for the world has been communicated once for all in his Word made flesh.³⁶

On the other hand, Braaten also writes:

The history and phenomenology of religions have called our attention to the mythic character of the incarnation. The notion of the preexistent Son of God becoming a human being in the womb

of a virgin and then returning to his heavenly home is bound up with a mythological picture of the world that clashes with our modern scientific world view.³⁷

“Crown Him with many crowns”

Not only in its Creeds but also in its hymns the Christian church has confessed and praised Jesus Christ as the incarnate word of God. Apart from what appear to be quotations from early Christian hymns in 1 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Timothy 2:11, we find four hymns from the 5th century or earlier in *Christian Worship A Lutheran Hymnal*. The oldest, “Shepherd of Tender Youth” (#515), is attributed to Clement of Alexandria (c.170-c.220). The others are: “Savior of the Nations, Come” (#2), “O Trinity, Most Blessed Light” (#591), and “O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright” (#586), three by the church father Ambrose (340-397); “Of the Father’s Love Begotten” (05), by Aurelius Prudentius (348-c. 413); “Now Praise We Christ, the Holy One” (#39) and “The Star Proclaims the King Is Here” (#91), both by Coelius Sedulius (5th cent.).

Reference was made in the first lecture to the great, ancient *Te Deum*, which is used not only as a canticle in our liturgy, but is also the basis of the versified hymn, “Holy God, We Praise Your Name” (#278). Three hymns from this early period that were in The Lutheran Hymnal did not make it into *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*.³⁸

Nevertheless, we still enjoy a rich hymnological heritage from the ancient church. In these hymns without exception the deity of Christ is acknowledged and divine worship is given to him. It would take a computer analysis to list all the post-5th century hymns we use today in which Christ our Lord is worshiped and adored as true God and true Man, the Savior of the world. We mention only “O Word of God Incarnate” (#279) and the much-loved “Beautiful Savior” (#369), in the fourth stanza of which the church sings:

Beautiful Savior, Lord of the Nations,
Son of God and Son of Man!
Glory and honor, Praise, adoration
Now and forevermore be thine!

Will we not all join St. John the Divine in his paean of praise: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and had made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power forever and ever!” (Rev 1:5f)? Will we not lift up our voices with the hosts of heaven and sing, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Rev 5:12)? What greater joy can there be here on earth for those who look forward to spending eternity singing a never-ending Alleluia to the Lamb?

ENDNOTES:

1 See *The Book of Concord, The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert [Tap.] (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 28: “The terms *hypostasis* in Greek or *persona* in Latin were used in the ancient church to repudiate Modalism, which regarded the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three modes or manifestations of the one God.”

2 See the Augsburg Confession: “The word “person” is to be understood as the Fathers employed the term in this connection, not as a part or a property of another but as that which exists of itself,” 1,4 (Tap., 28; also *Triglot Concordia, The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church* [Trig.] (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), 43).

3 There is an extensive literature on this point. A helpful recent book is *Darwin’s Enigma* by Luther D. Sunderland (Santee, CA: Master, 1988).

4 The Formula of Concord, S.D., VIII, 14, 15; Tap., 594; Trig., 1019.

5 *Institutes*, IV, 17, 29f, cited in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), 11, 246.

6 Formula of Concord, S.D., VIII, 19; Tap., 595; Trig., 1021. The Council of Chalcedon (451), previously cited, spoke of the two natures as joined in Christ “without being commingled (*asyngchutoos*), without being changed (*atreptoos*), without being taken apart [or divided] (*adiairetoos*), without being segregated (*achooristoos*),” Trig., 1108f.

7 Cited in Franz Posset, *Luther’s Catholic Christology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1988), p 161.

8 Formula of Concord, VIII, 21; Tap., 595; Trig., 1023.

10 See the Formula of Concord, quoting John the Presbyter: “Paul... taught godlessly that the Lord Christ was a mere man in whom the Word of God dwelled just as in each of the prophets. Hence he also held that the divine and human natures are separated and distinct from each other and that in Christ they have no communion at all, just as if Christ were one individual and God the Word who dwells in him another” (S.D., VIII, 16; *Tap.*, 594; *Trig.*, 1021).

11 WA 33:224; LW 23,143.

12 *The Myth*, p 178.

13 Formula of Concord, Art. I, S.D., *Tap.*, 508ff; *Trig.*, 558ff. See “The Flacian Controversy,” in “Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books,” *Trig.*, 144ff.

14 *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1993), p 18

15 *Trig.*, 34,40.

16 *Trig.*, 1108.

17 “Eingeboren.”

18 F. Büchsel in Gerhard Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), Vol. IV, 739-741, strongly contends for the meaning “only-begotten.” Citing the five passages in which monogenees is used of Jesus (Jn 1:14,18; 3:16,18; 1 Jn 4:9), Büchsel argues that it “denotes more than the uniqueness or incomparability of Jesus. In all these verses he is expressly called the Son, and he is regarded as such in 1:14. [Büchsel also contends that in Jn 1:18 11 we are to read *ho monogenees huios*.”] In Jn. *monogenees* denotes the origin of Jesus. He is *monogenees* as the only-begotten.” If Büchsel is correct, *monogenees* when used of Jesus has a heightened sense from its use with reference to the young man of Nain (Lk 7:12), the daughter of Jairus (Lk 8:42), the demoniac boy (Lk 9:38), and Isaac (He 11:17). Because of the single *nu* in monogenees, the root is probably *qinomai* rather than *gennaoo*, which means “beget” or “bring forth.” But *qinomai* according to the Arndt-Gingrich Lexicon can also mean “be born or begotten” (*ad loc.*). Romans 1:3 and Galatians 4:4 are cited as examples and 1 Corinthians 15:37 (of plants). There is a good discussion of the problem in an appendix of the *New Evangelical* translation (Cleveland: NET, 1992). With regard to the John passages it states, “In all of these passages either of the meanings of *monogenes* fits the context. One could translate either ‘only-begotten’ or ‘only-existing,’ (‘Only-existing’ means ‘one-and-only’ or ‘the only-one-there-is’ or ‘one-of-a-kind’ or ‘unique.’) Since John is the only New Testament writer to use this term to refer to Jesus, it is impossible to say conclusively which of the two meanings is the best translation in the five passages in John” (p 543).

19 So translated in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1993), p 18.

20 So John Schaller in *Biblical Christology, A Study in Lutheran Dogmatics*, revised edition (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1981), p 53.

21 Discussing the term, Luther writes, “The professors have disputed in various ways about the phrase: ‘Today I have begotten you.’ For some expound it as concerning the nativity of Christ, others concerning the resurrection and the time of the New Testament. But we should keep it as it is, *reeton*, or literally. For the Hebrew word means expressly ‘to beget.’...I therefore take this passage as a reference to the eternal generation” (LW, 12,51-52). Luther’s whole discussion is worth reading.

22 Note Quenstedt: “This generation of the Son does not take place by derivation or transfusion, nor by an action which begins or ceases, but takes place by an unceasing emanation, which is unlike anything in nature. For God the Father begets his Son from eternity and always begets him and never ceases to beget him. For if the generation of the Son would have an end, it would also have a beginning, and so would not be eternal. Nevertheless, this generation cannot be called imperfect or successive, for the act of generation in the case of the Father and the Son is considered perfect as far as the act is concerned, perpetual as far as the activity is concerned” (*Middler Dogmatics*, p 61).

23 See, for example, the many passages where the special, uncreated angel of the Lord (*male'ach yahweh*) appears to people (e.g., Ex 3:2ff). In John 8:58 Jesus calls himself "I am," identifying himself with *Yahweh*, whose name is "I am" (Ex 3:14). It was the preincarnate Christ who appeared to the Israelites on Mt. Sinai (Dt 33:2; Ps 68:17f).

24 Other passages in which he is directly and unequivocally called God are Acts 20:28; Romans 9:5; and Titus 2:13. Reference has already been made to passages in which he is called the Only begotten and the Son of God.

25 Other examples are divine omnipotence and omnipresence in Matthew 28:18,20; divine eternity in John 5:58; and divine omniscience in John 21:17. Many more passages could be cited.

26 See Hebrews 10:5-7.

27 See Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon, 1970), Vol. 1, p 126.

28 In his commentary on I John Luther says, "Cerinthus was a gross negator of Christ's divinity Because of him he [John] wrote the gospel and epistle" (*Weimar Ausgabe [WA]* 20:681, cited in Franz Posset, *Luther's Catholic Christology According to his Johannine Lectures of 1527* Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1988), p 190. See I Jn 1:1; 2:22; 4:2f; 5:1,5,20.

29 Excellent summaries of the Arian controversy are found in *The Concordia Cyclopedia*, L. Fuerbringer, Th. Engelder, P. E. Kretzmann, eds. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1927; *A History of Christian Thought*, by Otto W. Heick (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965; and Gonzales, op.cit.

30 Cited in J. L. Neve. *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (Blair, Nebraska: Lutheran Publishing House, 1944), p 471.

31 "Jesus and Myth," in *The Truth of God Incarnate*, edited by Michael Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p 66.

32 Cited in Skarsaune, *Incarnation*, p 129, from "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth* by Rudolf Bultmann et al., edited by Hans Werner Bartsch (New York and Evanston: Harper, 1961), p 3.

33 *Kerygma*, p 8.

34 *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by Raymond Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993),

35 *Christian News*, Vol. 29, No. 44 (December 2, 1991), p 1.

36 *Christian Dogmatics*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), Vol. 1, p 527.

37 Ibid.

38 They are: "O Gladsome Light, O Grace" (#101), "Sweet Flowerets of the Martyr Band" (#273), and "Lord Jesus, Think on me" (#320).

CURRENT ISSUES IN CHRISTOLOGY

III. Issues Involving Christ's Humanity

As there were those in the Early Church who denied Christ's deity, so there were also those who denied his true humanity. The latter were known as docetists. These heretics held that Jesus only seemed to be a human being. They taught that he was not a true man like us but a kind of phantom—God pretending to be a man.

"The time had fully come"

The Scriptures clearly teach that Jesus was in every sense of the word a true human being with body and soul, flesh and blood. In Galatians 4:4 the Apostle Paul states the same truth about the incarnation of God's Son which the Apostle John set forth so eloquently in the Prologue to his Gospel. Paul writes, "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons."

God, the Creator and Preserver of the heavens and the earth, holds the nations of this world as well as each individual creature in his hand. Everything that transpires in the course of events is under his sovereign control and occurs according to his predetermined schedule. The clock of time moves at God's direction. While

it normally moves forward, he can also cause it to stand still (Jos 10:12-14) or even to move backward (Isa 38:7f). This does not mean that we are at the mercy of a cruel, inexorable fate, as the Stoic philosophers taught, and that when things get too tough, *exire licet*, as they said. On the contrary, the God who is love personified (1 Jn 4:8,16) is directing and governing the entire course of human history so as to carry out his loving, gracious purpose toward his recreant creatures, the fallen sons and daughters of Adam.

Paul explained this in detail to the men of Athens on the Areopagus: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth.... he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’” (Ac 17:24-28).

Now, after hundreds and thousands of years of waiting, “the time had fully come.” The time had come for that to happen which God had promised in Eden and which he had confirmed and clarified in Old Testament times to the patriarchs and through the prophets, the time to send his Son. In God’s wise providence, Alexander the Great by his conquests had given the world a universal language, his mother tongue, Greek. Then, as its far-ranging legions planted the Roman eagle from the Mine and the Danube to the Euphrates and the Nile, Rome established and enforced a *pax Romana* throughout the Mediterranean world, facilitating communication and travel for the rapid spread of God’s good news to Satan’s restless, wretched captives, not only among the Jews but also among the Gentiles. The greater part of the Jewish people were pharisaically inclined with a zeal for the law, a burning hatred toward their heathen conquerors, and the dream, of a world-wide Jewish kingdom to be set up by the Messiah. The cultured pagan world turned from the gods of Homer still worshiped by the superstitious masses to philosophy, whose many systems ended in the refrain: There are no gods. In spite of outward peace and prosperity, the world was spiritually and morally bankrupt. By the stroke of a pen Caesar Augustus in far off Rome ordered a census that took Joseph and Mary from their home in Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, the town of their ancestor King David. It was there that Micah had foretold that the one would appear “whose origins are from of old” (5:2). Yes, on God’s calendar and clock the time had fully come.

Jesus Christ, true God and true man

According to Paul, this one whose coming is the focal point of history is “God’s Son.” In the Prologue to John’s Gospel, only in some manuscripts is the Word identified as the “Son” (1:18). Paul makes it clear, however, that he is speaking about the One John described as being “at the Father’s side” (Jn 1:18). Paul relates how God carried out his eternal plan of love for the rescue of the apostate human race by sending the One he loved (Mt 3:17; 17:5) on a self-sacrificing mission of mercy. This entailed his being “born of a woman (*genomenon ek gunaikos*.)” This is Paul’s way of saying that “the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14).

Who does not at once think of the woman’s Seed, promised in the Protevangel (Ge 3:15)? The point is that in order to save human beings God’s Son became a human being. In God’s original creation “woman came from man,” but according to God’s plan for the propagation of the human family, “man is born of woman” (1 Co 11:12). The Son became incarnate. In the words of the Nicene Creed, he “became fully human.”¹

As God’s Son, Christ was not by nature “under law”; he was the Giver of the law (Mt 12:8; Ps 68:17f). To the Philippians Paul writes that Christ Jesus, “being in very nature God [*en morphee theou hyparchoon*), did not consider equality with God [(*to einai isa theoo*, living like God] something to be grasped [*harpagmon*, booty for public display], but made himself nothing [*heauton ekenoosen*], taking the very nature of a servant [*morpheen doulou laboon*] and became obedient to death, even death on a cross” (2:6-8). Although Jesus possessed the *morphee theou*, the form and essential character of God, He did not take full and constant use of it or display it at all times. Rather, He took, on the *morphee doulou*, the appearance and lifestyle of a servant. Obedience to his heavenly Father, even to the point of dying as his Father willed (Jn 10:17f), was the outstanding characteristic of his life. Confidently he could challenge his enemies, “Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?” (Jn 8:40). Subsequently, he laid aside the *morphee doulou* but not his human nature. The purpose for which he put himself *under law* was “To redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of

sons” (Ga 4:4). Not only did he fulfill the law as the Substitute for sinners, he also suffered in their stead the curse of the law (Ga 3:13).

In the pericope from Philippians 2 just cited, Paul emphasizes not only Christ’s deity but also his true humanity: 2 “being made in human likeness,” and “being found in appearance as a man” (vv 7,8).² Romans 8:3 likewise tells us that God sent his own Son “in the likeness of sinful man.” Although he was in every respect a true man, unlike other men, he was sinless. The Epistle to the Hebrews states explicitly, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity” (2:14), but adds, “yet was without sin” (4:15).

It is important to recognize, however, that it was not Christ’s becoming man that constituted his humiliation, but the humble, lowly manner in which he became man.³ As Paul writes to the Corinthians, “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Co 8:9). In his state of exaltation and glory he is and to all eternity will be both God and man (Da 7:14; Lk 24:39; Rev 1:13,18).

The historical Jesus - the kerygmatic Christ

We have previously noted that there are theologians today who question whether a man named Jesus of Nazareth ever really lived. A professor in England by the name of G. A. Wells wrote two volumes to show that “Jesus of Nazareth never really existed but is the creation of the minds of the early Christians.”⁴ Martin Kahler of the University of Halle wrote an essay entitled, “The so-called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ,” in which he declared:

We do not possess any sources for a “Life of Jesus” which a historian can accept as reliable and adequate. I repeat: we have no sources for a biography of Jesus of Nazareth which measure up to the standards of contemporary historical science.... He could be taken for a product of the church’s fantasy around the year A.D. 100.⁵

Rudolph Bultmann, famed as a New Testament scholar, went only so far as to concede the “thatness” of the Man from Nazareth. He claimed, “We can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus,”⁶ and in his view, “The historical person of Jesus was very soon turned into a myth in primitive Christianity.”⁷

Modern theology attacks the humanity of Christ, not by claiming as the docetists of old did that Jesus was God leading a phantom existence as a man, but by denying the historicity of the biblical account of his life in the four Gospels. It assumes that the Gospels were written, not by the four Evangelists whose names are associated with them, but by later compilers or editors who set down in writing the myths and legends concerning Jesus of Nazareth which had become current in the Early church.⁸

As for the historicity of the man Jesus of Nazareth, the comment of Anglican Bishop Stephen Neill is on the mark:

He who says “Jesus” says also “history.” The early Christians recognized this, and by putting Pontius Pilate into their creeds, transformed the second-rate governor of a second-rate Roman sub-province into the second-best known man in the whole of human history.¹⁰

Adolf Koberle of the University of Tübingen agrees: “This naming of names is of crucial importance. It indicates that Jesus bled on a real cross and that the occurrence is attested by the record of world history.”¹⁰

David P. Scaer of Concordia, Fort Wayne, notes a number of secular references to “Chrestus” and his followers such as those of Pliny the Younger and Tacitus and then remarks,

... the variety of written records for Jesus is much greater than those for Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor at the time of Jesus’ birth and boyhood. This evidence for establishing the historical probability for a real Jesus is not offered by faith or for faith. It is used only to show that apart from the church’s faith, the evidence for establishing Jesus’ existence is as good as, if not better than, any of his contemporaries.¹¹

The historicity and humanity of Jesus Christ are firmly established in Scripture in part by the genealogies of Jesus. In Matthew 1, his ancestry is traced forward from Abraham, the father of God’s chosen people, to Joseph, the husband of Mary and Jesus’ legal father. Thereby Jesus’ legal claim to the title, “Son of

David,” and to David’s throne is established. In Luke 3, his lineage is recorded from Mary, his blood relative, back to Adam and God, showing his relationship to the whole human race.¹² Luke makes special mention of the fact that in the minds of his contemporaries Jesus was thought to be the son of Joseph.

Another comment by Scaer is well put:

Matthew begins his Gospel with a royal genealogy: 14 progenitors of kings, 14 kings, and 14 descendants of kings—all culminating in the most magnificent scion of the royal family, Jesus Himself. In another way “Christ” is more than just king. He is not only the king from the kingly family, Yet He is, as John says in the Book of Revelation, “the King of kings.”¹³

In Paul’s great analogy between Christ and Adam in Romans 5:12-19, his entire argument hinges on the historicity of both the first and the second Adam: “Just as through the disobedience of the one man [Adam] the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man [Christ] the many will be made righteous” (v 19). The same can be said for his parallel in 1 Corinthians 15:22, “For as in Adam all die, in Christ all will be made alive.” If what Martin Kahler claims is true, namely, that Christ is only “a product of the church’s fantasy around A.D. 100,” we are, in Paul’s words, “to be pitied more than all men” (1 Co 15:19).

Also, if the famous humanitarian Albert Schweitzer is right, we and the rest of the orthodox church are the victims of a gigantic hoax. In his 1906 study, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, he comes to this conclusion:

The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give his work its final consecration, never had any existence.¹⁴

Schweitzer brushes off the consequences of his conclusion by maintaining, “It is not Jesus as historically known but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time.”¹⁵

Bultmann thought that the idea of Christ’s incarnation was derived from Gnostic myths of redemption. He held that nothing more can be known about Jesus except that he once lived, taught, and died. He claimed that the mere *thatness*, the *Dass*, the fact that Jesus once existed, is sufficient. But, as one scholar has observed, Bultmann’s insistence on the mere *fact* of Jesus is meaningless:

As though there could be a “fact” without content! History is never made up only of the mere fact of an event, for this fact always includes the question of “who?”, “how?”, “where?”, “when?”, and “what?”.¹⁶

Another critic, appraising Bultmann’s book *Jesus*, commented, “It is one of the most characteristic features of Bultmann’s book about Jesus that it dispenses not only with all biographical questions but also with all ‘personal’ questions.... It is in a sense a Jesus-book without Jesus.”¹⁷

Bultmann’s views have been largely discredited by more recent scholars such as Ernst Fuchs, Ernst Kasemann, Wolfhard Pannenberg, and others, the so-called post-Bultmannians. They believe that to say no more about the historical Jesus than *thatness* is to run “the risk of dissolving Christianity into a Gnostic redeemer myth, and of falling into Docetism, that is, of diluting the historical reality of Jesus’ humanity into mere appearance. . . . Most of Bultmann’s disciples now insist that some knowledge of the historical Jesus is indispensable.”¹⁸ Even those who consider the quest for the historical Jesus hopeless do not consider this a serious situation, however. The historical Jesus, they say, is irrelevant. The Christ of faith, the kerygmatic Christ, that is, Christ as preached by the Early Church, is what matters, not the historical Jesus.

There is more than a grain of truth in the observations of Herbert Butterfield concerning the rise and fall of German scholars:

It was often noted in the earlier decades of the present century how greatly it had become the habit of Protestants to hold some German scholar up their sleeves, a different one every few years but always preferably the latest one, and at appropriate moments strike the unwary Philistine on the head with this secret weapon, the German scholar having decided in a final manner whatever point might have been at issue in a controversy. From all of which the charge arose that for the Protestants the unanswerable pope was always some professor—a system more inconvenient than that of Rome, partly because the seat of authority might change overnight and

be transferred to a new teacher who had never been heard of before, and partly because if one has to have a pope it is at least better that he should be subject to certain rule and traditions, and be appointed by a properly constituted authority.¹⁹

One is compelled to agree also with the observation of Michael Green that “when every article of the creed is challenged by some who profess to believe it, and when the skepticism of professors of theology is sometimes tantamount to atheism, it is not surprising that many people are deeply puzzled. What is left of the Christian faith?”²⁰ It is undoubtedly true, as Carl F. Henry notes, that the 20th century has seen the rise and fall of classic liberalism, the rise and fall of neo-orthodoxy, and the rise and fall of existentialism.²¹

Christ’s virgin birth

Yes, from the Holy Scriptures we know that Jesus Christ was a true man, *vere homo*, as the Council of Chalcedon declared. But he was not an ordinary man. He was not only extraordinary, like Moses or John the Baptist, he was unique. This uniqueness is evident in part from his virgin birth, or, more precisely, virginal conception. In the Apostles’ Creed we confess that he was “conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.” The confession has a solid basis in Holy Scripture.

In Luke 1 we are told that “God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary” (vv 26f). As might be expected, Mary was surprised and greatly troubled. After allaying her fears, the angel delivered the astonishing message he was sent to bring: “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (vv 31-33).

God’s appointed time had come. The real Jesus or Joshua, the Old Testament form of the name which means Savior and which was not an uncommon one among the Jews, was at that very moment in the process of coming into the world. He will be called “the Son of the Most High” because that is exactly who he will be, the Son of God from all eternity. The Most High, *El elyon*, is the God who is highly exalted above all his creatures, the transcendent, supreme, and all-powerful Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. Mary’s Child will be the offspring promised to David in 2 Samuel 7:12-16, whose throne and kingdom God would establish forever. Yes, contrary to what Nestorius taught, Mary would indeed be the “mother of God [*theotokos*],” not, to be sure, the mother of her Child’s divine nature, but mother of the child who would be true God and true man in one person.²³

Mary was understandably puzzled. Her question, “How will this be since I am a virgin?” was not an expression of doubt but a request for information. Mary understood from what the angel had said that she was to become a mother at once, before she and Joseph would be married. The angel explains, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you” (v 35). The two parts of this statement are synonymous—like synonymous parallelism in Hebrew poetry. The “power of the Most High” refers therefore to the Holy Spirit. The human nature of Christ was produced, not from the divine essence of the Holy Spirit, but by his creative energy from the substance of Mary’s body.²⁴

Because of the Spirit’s overshadowing power, the angel adds, “The holy One that is being born will be called the Son of God [*to gennoomenon hagion kletheesetai, huios theou*]” (v 35). It has been noted that the present participle *gennoomenon* indicates that the conception of which the angel was speaking was taking place at that very moment. Mary’s Child “will be called the Son of God,” not, of course, because he was conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit but because he is eternally begotten of the Father.²⁵ After the angel informed Mary that in her old age her relative Elizabeth was also expecting a child and assuring her that “Nothing is impossible with God” (vv 36f), Mary expressed her willingness to serve as God’s agent: “I am the Lord’s servant.... May it be to me as you have said” (v 38).

Matthew also records Mary’s virginal conception “through the Holy Spirit” (1:18) and reports that Joseph “had in mind to divorce her quietly” (v 19). Informed by God’s angel in a dream of the real reason for Mary’s condition, Joseph took her home as his wife, “but he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son”

(v 24f). According to the angel's instructions, Joseph called the child "Jesus," because he was to save his people from their sins" (v 22).

Matthew, whose Gospel was originally intended especially for the Jews, points out that "all this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'—which means, 'God with us'" (vv 22f).

The reference is to the great Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 7:14. The situation was this: About the year 735 B.C. the king of Aram and the king of Israel made war on Judah under King Ahaz. They attacked Jerusalem but could not capture it. In desperation Ahaz was considering making a protective alliance with Assyria. But God warned Ahaz not to look to Assyria for help. He assured him that he would frustrate the plans of the two enemies he feared. Israel and Aram themselves would be crushed. As proof of this, the Lord through Isaiah offered Ahaz a sign, whatever he would ask for. But Ahaz, masking his lack of trust in God's promise with a pretense of piety, declined the offer. Then Isaiah announced that the Lord himself would give Ahaz and the whole nation, the house of David, a sign "The virgin [that is, the one the prophecy speaks about; we would say 'a virgin']²⁶ will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."

The name Immanuel points, on the one hand, to his saving work, his coming into our world to be with us in order to redeem us. On the other hand, it points to mystery and wonder of his person. As one born of a woman, the Child would be a true human being. At the same time, however, he would be true God. That is the thrust of his being called Immanuel, God with us. God would become man. The virgin's Child would be God and man in one person. He would be a wonder (*pele*, Isa 9:6) not only because of his being born of a virgin, but also because of his divine-human character.

What is Tillich's verdict on this stupendous revelation? "The assertion that 'God has become man' is not a paradoxical but a nonsensical statement."²⁷ Luther acknowledged that while "in theology it is true that the Word was made flesh, in philosophy the statement is simply impossible and absurd." In fact, "The declaration, 'God is man,' is not less but even more contradictory than if you would say, 'man is an ass'"²⁸

In fact, God gives two signs that he will protect and save his people, "the one is hidden, the other open," as Luther puts it.²⁹ Expanding on the second, that the land of the two kings Ahaz dreaded would be laid waste (v 16), Isaiah in chapter 8 says that he and his children "are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty" that "the wealth of Damascus and the plunder of Samaria will be carried off by the king of Assyria" (vv 3,4,18). The first sign was "designed to confirm the faith of the believing remnant of Judah—and the faith of God's spiritual Israel, the Church, in all future ages.... This is a promise of something extraordinary, yes, miraculous. A virgin would give birth to a child."³⁰ Luther remarks, "This sign was given for the sake of the remnant, that the kingdom of Judah should not be destroyed until Christ would come. It is, however, a hidden sign ... for the ungodly."³¹ Prof. August Pieper explains: "For Ahaz and the like-minded house of David and Judah, who were irrevocably hardened, there is in the entire sign of the virgin's Son no longer a single trace of grace. For them it is, rather, a sign of their final rejection."³²

In his famous study, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, J. Gresham Machen, one of the conservative, Presbyterian founders of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, paraphrases the prophecy in this way: "I see a wonderful child.... Whose birth shall bring salvation to his people; and before such a period of time shall elapse as would lie between the conception of the child in his mother's womb and his coming to years of discretion, the land of Israel and of Syria shall be forsaken."³³ Machen interprets the passage as a typical prophecy but recognizes that the objections to interpreting it as a direct prophecy "largely fall away when one reads the language of the prophet as the language of prophetic vision ought really to be read."³⁴ Some of those who hold the typical interpretation take the *almah* to be either the prophet's wife, or the wife of Ahaz, or any young woman. Needless to say, such interpretations do not do justice to the prophecy that speaks of a *virgin* giving birth to a child. Such a birth occurred only once in the course of human history. That was when Mary, the virgin chosen by God to carry out his eternal plan of salvation, gave birth to the Child called Jesus.³⁵

The prophecy continues, “He will eat curds and honey (the food of people suffering from dearth and poverty] when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right. But before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right [that is, reaches the age of discretion], the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste” (vv 15,16). But the unbelief of Ahaz and the majority of the people of Judah will bring down on them God’s fierce wrath and the severest form of judgment: “The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah—he will bring the king of Assyria” (v 17).

Much debate has swirled around the word *almah*. The Septuagint translates it with *he parthenos*, and Matthew takes this over in 1:23. The fact is that *almah* means a young woman of marriageable age who is a virgin. The word *bethulah* may also refer to a virgin, but a *bethulah* may also be an older woman. Edward J. Young, citing Vischer, refers to Luther’s offer to give a hundred *Gulden* to anyone who could show that *almah* ever referred to a married woman. “In characteristic fashion Luther added that the Lord alone knew where he would get them. Says Vischer: So far no one has collected the hundred *gulden*.”³⁶

Matthew also quotes the words Isaiah adds to his prophecy: “They will call him ‘Immanuel, ‘—which means, God with us” (Mt 1: 23). The child miraculously born of a virgin will therefore be God himself. Isaiah who, incidentally, in his awe-inspiring vision in chapter 6 of the Lord “seated on a throne, high and exalted,” saw Jesus (Jn 12:41), enlarges on his description of the child in the well-known Christmas pericope, “He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever” (9:6f). Then in chapter 11 he describes him as “the Branch” and the Root of Jesse” (vv 1,10).

An article of faith

As might be expected, the Virgin Birth of Christ has been the object of unbelieving scorn and ridicule front New Testament times to the present. The citizens of Nazareth argued, “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?” (Mt 13:55.). In the second century in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho* he refers to Jews who accepted Jesus as the Christ but maintained that he was “a man born from men.”³⁷ Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the acknowledged father of modern theology, in his book *The Christian Faith* declared, “The assumption of a Virgin birth, is superfluous.”³⁸ Bultmann considers the “legend” of Christ’s Virgin birth “inconsistent with the assertion of his pre-existence.”³⁹ Paul Tillich in his *Systematic Theology* says, “The actual story is a myth, the symbolic value of which must be seriously questioned.”⁴⁰ Gerhard Gloege, professor of systematic theology at Bonn, in *A New Look at the Apostles, Creed* published in 1969 by Augsburg calls the Virgin Birth “a pious legend.”⁴¹ Nels Ferre’ in *The Christian Understanding of God* mentions a suggestion that Jesus was an illegitimate child fathered by a German mercenary stationed near Nazareth and asks, “Who can deny that such a conjecture *could* be true?”⁴² In his *Christian Dogmatics* Carl E. Braaten notes that Emil Brunner in his book, *The Mediator* calls the Virgin Birth of Christ “a biological curiosity,” and that for Wolfhardt Pannenberg “it bears all the marks of a legend.” But Braaten himself considers it to be a symbol and not “a freakish intervention in the course of nature.” He argues, “Did not God create fatherhood and look upon it as ‘very good’? Why then should human fatherhood be eliminated in the work of salvation?”⁴³

Modern skeptics continue to recite the words of the Apostles’ Creed, “born of the Virgin Mary,” but they make it clear that they do not believe that Mary was a virgin. For them, the scriptural doctrine of the Virgin Birth involves a biological impossibility. I am certain, however, that Luther speaks for us all when he insists that Mary “became a mother in a miraculous manner without violation of her virginity.”⁴⁴ While steadfastly confessing the *fact* of the incarnation, the orthodox church has never attempted to explain the *how* of this supernatural mystery. It is an article of faith.

In his First Epistle, John emphasizes the true humanity of the Word of life, which was from the beginning: “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched” (1:1). Commenting on these words, Luther writes, “Christ according to his humanity was not a phantom, but we truly saw his body parts, the person, every familiar activity which is common to man.”⁴⁵

Later he again stressed this point: Christ did not flit like a phantom, but lives as a real human being among others.⁴⁶

In putting on human flesh, the Logos assumed weaknesses that are common to man such as hunger, thirst, weariness, pain, and sorrow. Chemnitz points out that he “did not assume our personal infirmities, such as leprosy, blindness, consumption, fevers, and the like, but only the natural infirmities that befall the entire sinful human nature. For he came to redeem human nature without respect of persons.”⁴⁷ Assuming particular infirmities which are not common to all human beings such as diseases would in their entirety have resulted in his early death.

Christ was like us in all respects. As a child, he developed physically and mentally. He “grew in wisdom and stature” (Lk 2:52). Like us, he was subject to temptation. This involved a painful struggle for him, although he could not sin since he was God (Heb 2:18; 4:15; 2 Co 5:21). Over against those who taught that Christ’s human nature was different from ours, as when Apollinaris, for example, claimed that the *Logos* took the place of the human spirit in Christ, Gregory of Nazianzus made his famous remark “*Quod non assumpsit, non redemit* [what he did not assume, he did not redeem].”⁴⁸ The heresy of Apollinaris, who became the bishop of Laodicea in Syria in 361, was condemned by Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D.

Christ’s human nature possesses divine idioms

Because the man Jesus was at the same time the divine *Logos*, he possessed divine attributes. Scripture teaches the communication of idioms, including the *genus maiestaticum*, which means that the human nature of Jesus received from the divine nature divine idioms or characteristics such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, and honor, which Jesus from time to time manifested during his life on earth.

Scripture, for example, ascribes life-giving, saving power to Christ’s human nature when John reports that Jesus said, “My flesh is real [spiritual] food and my blood is real [spiritual] drink (Jn 6:55). *Flesh* and *blood* are abstract terms, as the fathers say, that is, they refer to the human nature by itself, apart from the divine nature. To cite another example, 1 Jn 1:7 tells us, “The blood of Jesus, his son, purifies us from all sin.” Here the divine idiom of taking away sin is ascribed to Christ’s blood, a reference to his human nature as such. On the other hand, Scripture does not teach a *genus tapeinotikon*, as if the divine *Logos* took on human frailties and weaknesses. Being God, the *Logos* is immutable. At the same time it is true, however, that being united with the human nature in the person of Christ, the *Logos* participated in all that the person experienced, including suffering and dying.

As we individually reflect on the profound mystery of the union of the divine and human natures in the person of Christ when “God sent his Son, born of a woman,” we will surely be moved to join Mary in her *Magnificat*: “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.... He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever” (Lk 1:46f, 54f). In his exposition of these words, Luther refers to the promise God made under oath to Abraham, “In your Seed shall all families or nations of the earth be blessed,” and writes:

In these words Abraham and all his descendants were preserved and saved, and in them we, too, must all be saved; for here Christ is contained and promised as the Savior of the whole world.... This Seed could not be born in the common course of nature, of a man and woman, for such a birth ... results in nothing but accursed seed.... Here, then, we have a contradiction — the natural flesh and blood of Abraham, and yet not born in the course of nature, of man and wife.... God is able to keep what he has promised. He raises up seed for Abraham, the natural son of one of his daughters, a pure virgin, Mary, through the Holy Spirit, and without her knowing a man.... And indeed, the whole Bible depends on this oath of God, for in the Bible everything has to do with Christ. Furthermore, we see that all the fathers in the Old Testament, together with all the holy prophets, had the same faith and Gospel as we have.... The sole difference is, they believed in the coming and promised Seed; we believe in the Seed that has come and has been given.⁴⁹

This was also the subject of Zechariah’s *Benedictus*:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said, through his holy prophets of long ago, salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our father and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days (Lk, 1:68-75).

So the Christian church jubilantly sings:

Savior of the Nations, come,
Virgin's Son, make here your home.
Marvel now, O heav'n and earth,
That the Lord chose such a birth.

Not by human flesh and blood,
By the Spirit of our God
Was the Word of God made flesh,
Woman's offspring, pure and fresh.

Praise to God the Father sing,
Praise to God the Son, our King.
Praise to God the Spirit be
Ever and eternally.⁵⁰

ENDNOTES:

1 So translated in *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, p 31. Incidentally, it may be noted that the phrases, “was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, and became fully human, (*sarkootherta ek pneumatos agiou kai Marias tees parthenou kai enanthroopeesanta* (Kelly, op. cit., p 297)]” underscore Christ's true humanity, the fact that he is *perfectus homo* just as he is *perfectus Deus* in the words of the Athanasian Creed, and *anthroopon alethoos* as Chalcedon expressed it. Not Christ's maleness was the issue in the church's rejection of Docetism, but his full humanity. Kelly notes that the formula, “We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ was born from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,” recurs with monotonous frequency “as a safeguard against denials of the real humanity” (p 337).

2 As the *Concordia Self-Study Bible, New International Version [CSSB]* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986) points out, “The poetic, even lyric, character of these verses is apparent. Many view them as an early Christian hymn ... taken over and perhaps modified by Paul” (ad loc.).

3 In view of the fact that Christ's incarnation is not as such identical with his exinanition—otherwise his exaltation would involve excarnation—*cave*, *CSSB*: “...submitting to the humiliation of becoming man” (ad loc.). It was no disgrace for the *Logos* to take on a human nature. It was, rather, a demonstration of supreme power. Pastors need to guard against this error especially in preaching on the incarnation during the Advent and Christmas seasons.

4 Stephen Neill in *The Truth of God Incarnate*, p 71.

5 Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, translated by Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), p 48.

6 Rudolph Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner's, 1934), p 8.

7 Rudolph Bultmann A. *Primitive Christianity in its Contemporary Setting* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), p 200.

8 See this writer's article, “The Twentieth Century Crucifixion of Christ,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 68, No 3 (July 1971), p 173.

9 Op. cit., p 71.

- 10 Adolf Köberele, "Jesus Christ, The Center of History," in *Jesus of Nazareth Saviour and Lord*, edited by Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), p 65.
- 11 David P. Scaer, *What Do You Think of Jesus?* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1973), p 14
- 12 In this explanation of the difference between the genealogies of Matthew and Luke we are following William F. Arndt, *Bible Commentary, The Gospel According to Luke* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), pp 122-125. This is the conclusion also of F. W. Wenzel, *The Wenzel Commentary* (Bemidji, Minnesota: Arrow, 1986), pp 32-36.
- 13 Op. cit., p 64.
- 14 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p 398.
- 15 Ibid., p 401.
- 16 Heinz Zahrnt, *The Historical Jesus* (New York: Harper, 1963), p 93, cited in Carl F. Henry, op. cit.,
- 17 F. Lohmeyer, cited in Carl F. Henry, op. cit., p 40, from W. G. Kümmel, *Das neue Testament, Geschichte der Erforschung seiner Probleme*, translated in Heinz Zahrnt, op. cit., p 89.
- 18 Carl F. Henry, op. cit., p 7.
- 19 Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (New York: Scribner, 1949), p 9, cited in Carl F. Henry, op. cit., p 8.
- 20 "Jesus and Historical Scepticism," in *The Truth of God Incarnate*, Michael Greeg, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977, p 107.
- 21 Op. cit., p 8.
- 22 *Trig.*, 1108.
- 23 Nestorius, who became the patriarch of Constantinople in 428, was, according to Luther, "a proud and unlearned man." Luther charitably credits him with adhering faithfully to Christ but describes him as one who "in his ignorance does not know what and how he is speaking, like one who does not quite know how to speak of such things, but still wants to speak as an expert" (*LW* 41,97-99).
- 24 The dogmaticians speak of the preposition *de* in *de Maria* as a "*de*" *materiale*, and of the *de* in *de Spiritu Sancto* as a "*de*" *Potentiale*.
- 25 Note Norval Geldenhuys: "It should be noted that he does not say that through his conception by the Holy Ghost Jesus will *become* the Son of God. No; as a result of this supernatural conception he will, in His humanity, reveal Himself as a Divine Being; and for this reason, too, He will be acknowledged as such and will be called son of God" (*Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, New International Commentary*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952, ad Lk 1:35).
- 26 Edward J. Young: "The definite article is used with the word *almah* in a generic sense, and serves to designate some particular unknown person" (*The Book of Isaiah*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965, Vol. 1, p 287).
- 27 Systematic Theology, 11,94.
- 28 *LW* 38, 239.
- 29 *LW* 16,84.
- 30 Werner H. Franzmann, *Bible History Commentary, Old Testament* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1980), p 499.
- 31 *LW* 16,85.
- 32 August Pieper, "*Die gropsze Weissagung vom Jungfrauensohn in ihrem historischen Rahmen*" (*Theologische Quartalschrift*, Vol. 1, No 4 [October 1904], pp 219-240). One hopes that a translation of this outstanding exegesis of this great prophecy will be made so as to make it available to English readers.
- 33 J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1932), p 292.

- 34 Ibid. Regrettably, the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* also interprets this wonderful prophecy typically: “Mt 1: 23 understood the woman mentioned here to be a type (a foreshadowing) of the Virgin Mary” (ad loc.).
- 35 See also Edward J. Young, *Studies in Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p 198. The mention of the woman in Genesis 3:15 and of “her who is in labor” in Micah 5:3 also refer to the virgin in this prophecy.
- 36 Young, *The Book of Isaiah*, p 287.
- 37 Machen, op. cit., p 15.
- 38 Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart, editors (New York and Evanston: Harper & plow, 1963), Vol. II, p 405.
- 39 *Kerygma and Myth*, pp 9,11.
- 40 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University, of Chicago Press, 1957) Vol. II, p 160.
- 41 Gerhard Gloege, *A New Look at the Apostles’ Creed* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969) p 30.
- 42 Nels Ferre’, *The Christian Understanding of God* (London: SCM, 1951), p 191.
- 43 Op. cit., I, 546f.
- 44 LW 21,302. In addition to the work of Machen mentioned above, William F. Arndt offers a helpful defense of the Virgin Birth in his commentary on Luke previously mentioned, pp 53-57.
- 45 WA 20:602, cited in Posset, *Luther’s Catholic Christology*, p 171.
- 46 WA 46:634, Posset, p 172.
- 47 Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, translated by J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971), p 63. See also John Schaller, *Biblical Christology*, p 55
- 48 See Norman Anderson, *The Mystery of the Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), p 43. Also, Justo L. Gonzales, op. cit., 1.360.
- 49 LW 37,229.
- 50 CW 2:1,2,5.

CURRENT ISSUES IN CHRISTOLOGY

IV. Issues Involving Christ’s Work

‘The Apostle Paul clearly and concisely spelled out Christ’s work, in Galatians 4:4 “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born, under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.” God’s Son, became incarnate, the Word became flesh, in order to redeem us. The word *redeem*, which Paul uses (*exagoradzo*) means to ransom, to pay a price to purchase someone’s freedom.” By nature all human beings are “under law,” under the condemnation and curse of God’s holy law. They not only fail to live up to its requirements but are completely incapable of doing that, in fact, they are altogether unwilling to do that. The law demands that people live a life of love, having and demonstrating a perfect, flawless love for God and all their fellow human beings (Lk 10:27f; Ro 13:8-10). By nature their attitude toward their Creator, who has graciously given them “life and breath and everything else” (Ac 17:25), is, however, unmitigated hostility and open defiance” (Ro 8:7). Standing before the bar of divine justice, they are, therefore, justly pronounced guilty (Ro 3:10-12,23). As rebels against God, whose justice and holiness are infinite, their guilt and the price of satisfaction are infinite. Their sentence is death, never-ending punishment in the torments of hell (Ro 5:12,18f; Mt 25:41). From this sentence, humanly speaking, there is no escape.

To understand Christ’s role, the work that Paul sums up in the word *redeem*, we need to look at God’s good and gracious plan of salvation and how in love he carried it out. We call it *Heilsgeschichte*, the history of salvation.

God’s eternal plan

In the beginning, after he had finished all his preparatory work, God proceeded to make man, the crown of his creation. This was the culmination of his six days of creative activity. Everything prior was directed to carrying out God’s plan, fashioned in timeless eternity, to create a creature with whom he could enjoy the most intimate companionship and fellowship. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him” (Ge 1: 27)

Being in God image (*tselem*) meant that man was like God, not in his physical appearance—God, is pure spirit (Jn 4:24)—but in his attitudes, in the thinking, emotions, and willing of his soul. Although other creatures of God have life (Ge 1:20-26), none of them has a soul (Ps 32:9, Ecc 12:7; Mt 10:28). Man was a reflection of God in that he was “like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:23) and had an intellect that was, to be sure, not the equal of God’s omniscience and wisdom in its scope, but was in, full harmony, with God in its principles and standards of judgment (Col 3:10).

When his creative work was finished, God surveyed it all and pronounced it “very good” [*tobh meodh*] (Ge1:31). Then, on the seventh day God “rested [*wayyishboth*] from all his work. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating he had done” (Ge 2:3) “Rested” does not mean that God became inactive. While he had completed and ceased from his work of creating, he actively preserved and sustained his creation by his powerful word (Heb 1:3; Jn 5:17; Col 1:17). In Exodus 31:17 Moses amplifies the thought of God’s resting by adding that he “was refreshed” [*wayyinnaphesh*¹]. This should not be misunderstood as if God was tired out from his work (Isa 40:28), but rather that “he found great joy, delight, and satisfaction in everything he had made, especially also in man whom he had made in his own image for fellowship with himself.”²

Of special significance is God’s blessing of the seventh day. Carl Manthey Zorn, one of the eminent exegetes of the former Synodical Conference, explains: God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it *for man*; on this seventh day man should see, with joy and gladness, with thanks and praise to God, that every thing was created very good for him, and that he, too, was created very good.

This seventh day was the *sabbath of creation*. What does this mean? It means that man was to come into the *rest of God*. And what does that mean? It means that just as God rested *after* His work of creation.... So man was to enjoy a blissful rest *in* God’s work of creation from the seventh day and evermore, every day, eternity. If you will read attentively the fourth chapter of Hebrews you will learn this. Surely, the seventh day is a day blessed and sanctified of God! It was the day of the dedication of the earth and of the heaven above it.³

Zorn also cautions against the false interpretation given to God’s blessing of the seventh day by the Seventh Day Adventists:

To say that the seventh day of *every week* has been blessed and sanctified is to wrest and distort the Scriptures. Not a word is here said of the seventh day of *every week*. The day spoken of is the day following the sixth day of creation. True, the Lord did point to the fact that he rested on the seventh day and that he blessed and sanctified this sabbath of creation, when he instituted the Old Testament sabbath, and gave this fact as a reason for his sabbath law. But the Lord did not say that *at that time already* he had instituted the Old Testament sabbath. When God pointed to the sabbath of creation as the reason for instituting the old Testament sabbath, he desired to call man’s attention 1) to the rest which they had lost because of sin, and 2) to the blessed promise that Christ would restore this rest. Of *this* the sabbath of the Old Testament was a shadow (Col 2:17; Heb 4:9-11). This doctrine you will find clearly set forth in the Augsburg Confession, Art. XXVIII.⁴

God placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil into the Garden of Eden to be, as Luther says, “Adam’s church, altar, and pulpit. Here he was to yield to God the obedience he owed, give recognition to the word and will of God, give thanks to God, and call upon God for aid against temptation.” He was to “maintain this practice, as it were, of worshipping God by not eating anything from it.”⁵

God’s plan shattered

But then the greatest tragedy in human history occurred. Tempted and deceived by the devil (I Ti 2:14), a fallen angel, “the father of lies” (Jn 8:44), Eve took some of the fruit and ate it. “She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (Ge 3:6). Those are facts. The record is straightforward and simple. But modern theology discredits it as pure mythology.

Maurice Wiles asserts, “The fall myth has frequently been treated as form of theodicy, or myth of the origin of evil in a world of God’s good creation. Understood in that way it seems to me clearly to be false. For even understood as myth—i.e. With no claim implied about the historical existence of Adam and Eve or even more generally about monogenism—it would have to be the case that the evil we experience were wholly the result of wrong human choices.” He accepts it as true in the sense “that men fall below the highest that they see and that they could achieve. Any reference to the devil, according to Wiles, “is a strong indication that we are in the region of fairy-tale.”⁷ Karl Barth ridicules the facticity of the Genesis account of the Fall “. . . a speaking serpent—well, I cannot imagine that any more than anybody else.”⁸ Norman C. Habel, in an essay written in the 1960s and recommended by the Conference of Presidents of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod for pastoral conferences and discussion groups, maintains that Genesis 2 and 3 “should not be read as a simple surface chronicle of historical incidents. Ralph D. Gehrke calls it “a didactic story.”¹⁰ Emil Brunner is grateful that historical science “has eliminated the historical element from the creation and Fall”¹¹ and rejoices that this means “that the convincing power of this imposing doctrine [of original sin], which dominated the thought of Europe for fifteen hundred years ... has completely disappeared.”¹²

Adam’s disobedience brought sin and death into the world. Rudolf Bultmann scoffs, “To attribute human mortality to the fall of Adam is sheer nonsense, for guilt implies personal responsibility, and the idea of original sin as an inherited infection is sub-ethical, irrational, and absurd.”¹³ In spite of what Bultmann says, it is an assured fact that “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned”(Ro 5:12). Sin separated God’s highest creature from his Creator (Isa 59:21). The crown of God’s creation, who was to act as God’s representative and exercise a benevolent rule over the earth and its other inhabitants, whom even the angels were created to serve (Heb 1:14), lost the image of God. Instead of being holy, he was now a rebellious sinner (Ps 51:5; Ro 8:7; Eph 2:1-3). As a result, he was no longer fit for fellowship with God. Instead of enjoying God’s rest, he found no peace (Isa 57:21). His life became an endless round of toil and trouble, pain and sorrow (Ge 3:16-19).

God’s plan to save his plan

God’s great plan appeared to be in shambles. Nevertheless, God did not abandon his plan that man should be his close companion and friend. Even before he began his work of creation and made man, his love found a way to rescue man from his sorry plight. “For he chose us in him [Christ] before the creation of the world, to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the one he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Eph 1:4-10).

What a comprehensive and reassuring picture Paul gives us of Christ’s work! His role was to undo the damage done by the devil. Scripture frequently speaks of Christ’s work in terms of obedience: “For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Ro 5:19.); “Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (Php 2:8).

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews explains that in spite of the Fall, God’s “promise of entering his rest still stands” (4:1) and “we who have believed [in Christ] enter that rest” (v 3). “There remains, then, a Sabbath rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his” (vv 9,10). Jesus’ work, then, was to be a Rest-bringer, the true Noah (Ge 5:29), the antitype of Solomon, “a man of peace and rest” (1 Ch 22:9), in short, the Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6). In that capacity he extends his gracious invitation to anxious and fearful, restless and troubled sinners, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:28,29). So when our brief pilgrimage through

the Valley of Baca, this vale of tears (Ps 84:6), is over, we will join the believers in heaven, of whom we are told, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on (*ap’ arti*, that is, at once, from the moment of their death].” Yes,” says the Spirit, “they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them” (Rev 14:13).

Christ’s work: Redemption

Did you notice in Paul’s eloquent summary of God’s plan of salvation the significant word *redemption*: “in whom we have redemption through his blood” (Eph 1:7)? A ransom had to be paid to rescue sinners from eternal death. That ransom was not “silver or gold” but “the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,” who was chosen for this task “before the creation of the world” (1 Pe 1:18-20). This ransom was not, of course, paid to the devil, as some have imagined. It was God whose command Adam and Eve disobeyed. Tempted by the devil to be “like God” (Ge 3:5), they were guilty of the crime of *lese majesty*, of violating God’s infinite dignity and honor. Their sin was in effect an attempt to dethrone God and set themselves up as gods—a sin man persists in to this day. Like Pharaoh, he asks, “Who is the LORD, that I Should obey him?” (Ex 5:2). With W. E. Henley he insists, “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul” (*Invictus*). Some years ago some radical disciples of Tillich created a storm by announcing, “God is dead! “¹⁴ The corollary was, “Long live man! “

It was God, therefore, whose wrath had to be appeased and whose justice had to be satisfied. When man was helpless to do this himself, God stepped into the breach. He promised to send a Redeemer. That Redeemer was none other than God himself, the second person of the Godhead.

Frightened, guilt-ridden Adam and Eve listened in amazement as God said to the serpent, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head [*yeshuphecha ro’sh*, literally, crush you as far as your head is concerned], and you will strike his heel [*teshuphennu ‘ageebh*, literally, you will crush him as far as his heel is concerned; the same verb, *shuph*, is used in a striking paranomasia that translators have struggled to reproduce]” (Ge 3:15). Satan’s head would be crushed, his power broken, his captives freed. But at what a price! It would cost the woman’s offspring his life, as when a poisonous viper bites the heel of the person trampling it to death.

In Noah’s divinely inspired prophecy the coming Savior’s lineage was linked to his son Shem (Ge 9:26,27). Then later God designated Abraham (Ge 12:2,3), Judah (Ge 49:10), and David (2 Sa 7:12-16) as progenitors of the one through whom all peoples on earth would be blessed.

It was Job, however, who was the epitome of perseverance in suffering (Jas 5:11), whose vision of the coming Redeemer and his work has been the inspiration of untold numbers of God’s people. Whose heart has not thrilled to the stirring strains of Handel’s resurrection aria in “The Messiah” or Samuel Medley’s triumphant Easter hymn, “I know that my Redeemer lives”? Despite his adversity, with heroic faith Job clings to his Redeemer, his *go’el*. The picture is that of a kinsman-redeemer who, according to the Levirate law (Lev 25:25-55), buys back the property of a deceased relative, as Boaz did Naomi’s, and to carry on the family line marries the man’s widow, as Boaz married Ruth (Ru 4). Job is confident that his Redeemer lives. The implication is that he has paid the price for Job’s redemption by giving up his life. But he will rise from the dead; and when Job rises from his grave on the last day, he will see his *go’el* with his own eyes.¹⁶ —So much for those who claim that the Old Testament knows nothing about the doctrine of the resurrection! — But Job was not the first to speak of God as his *go’el*. In blessing Joseph and his sons, Jacob called upon God to bless them, “the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, the Angel (*mal’ach*) who has delivered me (*haggo’el othi*) from all harm” (Ge 48:15,16).

Christ’s work as Redeemer is described in rich detail in the Old Testament in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. In Psalm 22 David serves as the Messiah’s mouthpiece (2 Sa 23:2). In bewilderment the pain-wracked sufferer asks why God has forsaken him (v 1). He recognizes that God is laying him in the dust of death by a strange, cruel execution that involves the piercing of his hands and feet (vv 15,16). Nevertheless, as he dies, he knows that the LORD has heard his prayer (v 22, *aniythani*, “you have answered me.” Note that this is mistranslated as an imperative in the *NIV*; the footnote, “you have heard,” is correct.) and “listened to his cry for help” (v 24). He will be exalted and will declare God’s name to his brothers in the great assembly of the church. He sees that

“all the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD” (v 27). “Future generations will be told about the Lord” and “will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet to be born—for he has done it” (vv 30,31). Yes, he has accomplished the work of their redemption, a prophetic anticipation of the Crucified’s triumphant cry, “It is finished!” (Jn 19:30). Careful readers of the Psalm will note references to all three aspects of Christ’s work, as we are accustomed to speak of them, his offices as priest, prophet, and king. Luther calls this Psalm a Messianic prophecy of Christ’s suffering and resurrection and gospel with a clear portrayal of his agony on the cross, the like of which one does not find in other prophets.¹⁷

In his Pentecost sermon the Apostle Peter pointed out that in the 16th Psalm, in which the Messiah is again speaking through the mouth of David, David “spoke of the resurrection of Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave nor did his body see decay” (Ac 2:31).

The Prophet Isaiah, who lived several centuries after King David, also gave a detailed picture of sufferings of the Lord’s Servant (*‘ebhed YHWH*), “a man of sorrows” (53:3), but emphasized especially the reason for them: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.... The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.... He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was stricken.... it was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause to suffer.... by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities.... He poured out his life unto death.... For he bore the sin of many” (53:4-12). Although Isaiah does not use the words Redeemer or redemption in this chapter, it is obvious that he is speaking about the price the Messiah, the Lord’s Servant, paid to redeem us. The term *go’el* was not a strange one to him. He used it repeatedly (e.g., 41:14; 43:14; 44:24), and the verb *ga’al* as well. What precious comfort not only for the believers in Israel but for all the spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham of all times lies in the Lord’s assurance, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine” (43:1).

Through his Old Testament prophets God foretold that Christ’s work would involve serving not only as a priest, offering sacrifice and intercession, (e.g., Ps 110:4), but also as a prophet (e.g., Dt 18:15,18) and king (e.g., Ps 2:6). In view of what Jesus told the Emmaus disciples concerning the Old Testament prophets (Lk 24:25f), it is, as has been said, “no anachronism to say that the Old Testament is Christian.”¹⁸ We must also agree with the observation that “the Christian Church stand or falls with the recognition of the unity of the two Testaments.”¹⁹

Returning to the New Testament, we find Zechariah contemplating the imminent fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation at the circumcision of his son John: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people” (Lk 1:68). Aged Anna, having seen the Baby Jesus in the temple, “spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (Lk 2:38). Jesus spoke of his work in terms of redemption when he said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom [*lutron*] for many” (Mt 20:28). “Many” points to the vast number whom he ransomed or redeemed. In fact, it was the world, the entire rebel human race without exception. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

Christ bought those also who deny him (2 Pe 2:11). His blood, which has infinite value since it is the blood of the Son of God, “takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). God’s Great plan of salvation embraced all people, for God “wants all men to be saved, and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Ti 2:4). He does not want “anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Pe 3:9).

Redemption is universal, just as sin is universal. There is no sinner—not even Judas—whose sin is so heinous that it was not paid for by the blood of the Lamb of God. It is significant that in Jesus’ genealogy three of the women who are listed were adulteresses: Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba, who is described as having been Uriah’s wife (Mt 1:3,5,6). (The other women are Ruth and Mary.) The New Testament does not use the word “atonement” to describe Christ’s work. On the basis of the many Old Testament passages, however, that

describe the work of the high priest as making an atonement for the sins of the people (Lev 16), the concept of atonement is scriptural. The Old Testament high priests were types of Christ (Heb 7-10). Shame then on sinners who have been redeemed with the blood of God's own Son, when they ridicule God's plan of salvation as Bultmann does: "What a primitive mythology it is, that a Divine Being should become incarnate, and atone for the sins of men through his own blood!"²⁰

The scandal of the cross

Jesus' death was not pretty. Crucifixion, a method of execution devised by the Phoenicians and taken over by the Romans, was excruciatingly painful and was reserved for slaves and the worst of criminals. That the one put to death on a disgraceful and degrading cross, a tree of shame, should be the Son of God and Savior of the world is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (2 Co 1:23). A stumbling block, *skandalon*, is, literally, the trigger on a trap, then something revolting, something that arouses opposition, and finally an obstacle to faith. Foolishness, *mooria*, in this context is not nonsensical stupidity but moral foolishness, something considered immoral, as the contrast shows. At Thessalonica Paul and his companions were said to "have caused trouble all over the world" [KJV: "turned the world upside down"] by preaching that God forgives sins freely for Christ's sake (Ac 17:6). Telling people such news seemed to destroy every incentive for moral living. To those whom God has called, however, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Co 1:24).

According to reports during the excavation of the Palatine Palace in Rome a rough drawing was discovered of a man worshiping a figure on a cross. The figure has the head of a donkey. The graffiti mocks the worshiper: "Alexamenos worships God!"²¹

Celsus, a pagan philosopher of second century, heaped scorn on Christians for worshiping a crucified Savior.²² Modern theologians, though calling themselves Christians, are not far behind. Why God chose the cross as the way to redeem the world remains a mystery. It belongs to the mysteries God has not revealed to us. He is *Deus absconditus*, who as Luther says, "does many things that he does not disclose to us in his word."²³

"He has risen!"

How do we know that Christ actually did redeem the world? How do we know that God accepted the payment he made as "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn 2:2)? His astonishing—although predicted—resurrection on the third day is the incontrovertible proof of that. Paul testifies, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Ro 4:25). On at least three occasions according to the Gospels Jesus had told his disciples that he would "be crucified and on the third day be raised again" (Lk 24:6,7).²⁴ According to present-day critics, these passion predictions "are clearly *vaticinia ex eventu* (prophecies after the event)."²⁵ And as for Jesus' resurrection, "the resurrection never happened—if by that you mean the raising by God of Jesus to a new quality of life which took up and transformed that body which was laid in the tomb on the first Good Friday. And in any case.... it did not matter. The early Christians were not antiquarians pointing to an empty tomb, but enthusiasts full of an Easter faith. The faith was what mattered.... After all, if faith is to be faith, it cannot be propped up by history.... Dead men don't rise."²⁶

Compare that with the historian Luke's "carefully investigated"²⁷ report, "After his suffering, he showed himself to these men [the apostles he had chosen, v 2] and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive" (Ac 1:3). The Apostle Paul supplies more details: "...that Christ died, for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born" (1 Co 15:3-8).

These historical facts, attested by a great number of trustworthy eyewitnesses, are the cornerstone of Christianity. Paul underscores the centrality and paramount significance of Christ's resurrection in the Christian gospel: "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Co 15:14,17).

The skepticism of contemporary theologians is nothing new. The Sadducees of Jesus' day said, "There is no resurrection" (Lk 20:27). When the leading men of Athens heard Paul mention the resurrection, "some of them sneered" (Ac 17:32). The denial of the resurrection rests on the presupposition that miracles don't happen. Alan Richardson comments, "The notion that the resurrection of Christ was a purely 'spiritual' affair, while his corpse remained in the tomb, is a very modern one, which rests upon theories of the impossibility of miracles drawn from nineteenth century physics."²⁸

Bultmann pontificates, "An historical fact which involves a resurrection from the dead is utterly inconceivable!" He speaks about "the incredibility of a mythical event like the resuscitation of a dead person."²⁹ For him, "Jesus rose into the kerygma."³⁰ "In the word of preaching and there alone we meet the risen Lord."³¹ He calls the resurrection "the eschatological event *par excellence*" and asserts, "The resurrection itself is not an event of past history. All that historical criticism can establish is the fact that the first disciples came to believe in the resurrection."³²

That Jesus did actually rise from the dead as he said he would, was recognized even by his enemies. With "a large sum of money" they bribed the Roman soldiers who guarded the tomb to spread a false report that Jesus' disciples came during the night and stole his body while they were asleep (Mt 28:12,13). Michael Green castigates the unreasonable, prejudicial methodology of modern skeptics, "It is perfectly evident to all and sundry that dead men do not rise. Christians were never so naive as to suppose they did." But that does not mean that there can be no exceptions. "The scientist will be open to the possibility that Jesus might possibly have risen from the dead, provided only that the evidence is strong enough to warrant it. He will not exclude it without examination. Such a procedure would be quite unscientific. Yet it is the procedure adopted by some modern theologians in the name of science! In any case, who are we to define the impossibility of God becoming one of us, or of rising from the dead?"³³ That was the question Paul put to King Agrippa, "Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?" (Ac 26:8). Gabriel told Mary, "Nothing is impossible with God" (Lk 1:37). The historicity of Jesus' resurrection is assured by the fact that "it was not done in a corner," as Paul reminded Festus, the Roman governor in Caesarea (Ac 26:26). The empty tomb was inspected by eyewitnesses who were anything but gullible.

Universal justification or reconciliation

Reference was made above to Paul's statement in Romans 4:25 that Christ "was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." When Paul says that Christ "was delivered over to death for our sins," he is not limiting the benefits of his death to the elect, as Calvinists claim. "He died for all" (2 Co 5:15), as the followers of Jacob Arminius properly taught, a doctrine that led to the break between the two groups at the Synod of Dort (1619). Because of the Arminian position, the hymns of many of their gifted poets are a significant part of our hymnological heritage. Isaac Watts, for example, the so-called "Father of English hymnody," is represented with 21 hymns in *Christian Worship*. Charles Wesley, known as "The Prince of Hymn-writers," has a total of 10 hymns in the new hymnal. Of the 623 hymns in the book nearly five percent are the work of these two Arminian hymnists.

Just as the redemption won by Jesus was for all people, so the forgiveness of sins he obtained by his redemptive work was for all. Universal redemption is the basis for universal justification. It is important to distinguish between redemption, Christ's work by which he ransomed us and atoned for our sins, and justification, God's verdict of acquittal as a result of the atonement Christ made for us.

It is worth our while to look more closely at Ro 4:25. Paul had quoted Genesis 15:6, that Abraham's faith "was credited to him for righteousness," and noted that these words "were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (vv 23,24). Then he continues "*hos paretothee dia ta paraptoomata heemoon kai eegerthee dia teen dikaiosin heemoon.*" The two *dia* phrases are obviously parallel, and *dia* with the accusative is casual, "on account of our trespasses" and "on account of our justification." Two are grammatically possible. The first is retrospective: Jesus was delivered over to death because we sinned and our sins were laid on him; he was raised from the dead because we were justified by God. His resurrection is the seal that proves that God accepted

Jesus' payment for our sins. The prospective interpretation looks to the future: Jesus was delivered up in order to atone for our sins and was raised in order that we might be justified.³⁴ In our judgment, the retrospective interpretation is preferable because Christ's death and his atonement for our sins was completed past acts. Justification, *dikaioosis*, refers to God's act of declaring our sins forgiven. He has pronounced the verdict of "not guilty" on all human beings because Jesus Christ, his son, paid the full penalty for their sins.

Universal justification is an accomplished fact just as Christ's resurrection is an accomplished fact. Our German forefathers called it "*ein fertiges Gut*," a fully prepared blessing. It is an objective reality, irrespective of whether one believes it or not. For that reasons our dogmaticians call it "objective justification." Luther writes:

Even he who does not believe that he is free and his sins forgiven shall also learn, in due time, how assuredly his sins were forgiven, even though he does not believe it. St. Paul says in Ro 3:3, "Their faithlessness does not nullify the faithfulness of God."³⁵ ...He who does not accept what the Keys give receives, of course, nothing. But this is not the keys' fault. Many do not believe the gospel, but this does not mean that the gospel is not true and effective. A king gives you a castle. If you do not accept it, then it is not the king's fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it.

In his Christian Dogmatics Dr. F. Pieper points out that Walther emphasized that "the resurrection of Christ from the dead is the *actual absolution pronounced upon all sinners*." He notes that the justification spoken of in Romans 4:25 is not subjective justification:

To refer the words: "Who was raised again for our justification," to the so-called subjective justification, which takes place by faith, not only weakens the force of the words, but also violates the context. Calov, following Gerhard, rightly points out the relation of Christ's resurrection to our justification as follows: "Christ's resurrection took place as an actual absolution from sin (*respectu actualis a peccato absolutionis*). As God punished our sins in Christ, upon whom he laid them and to whom he imputed them, as our Bondsman, so he also, by the very act of raising him from the dead, absolved him from our sins imputed to him, and so he absolved also us in him."³⁷

It was mentioned previously in this series of lectures but it bears repeating that Scripture speaks in two ways about Christ's resurrection. On the one hand, it tells us that the Father raised him from the dead (Ac 2:24; 3:15; 4:10; etc.). On the other hand, we are told that Christ raised himself (e.g., Jn 2:19). The empty tomb testifies loudly to the truth of his words, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again" (Jn 10:17,18).

The price of our redemption was paid by God himself

It is important to note that it was the *person* Christ who died on the cross, not only the human nature. While it is true that the deity cannot suffer and die, nevertheless, as Luther says, "since the divinity and humanity are one person in Christ, the Scriptures ascribe to the divinity, because of the personal union, all that happens to the humanity, and vice versa.... For the Son of God is truly crucified for us, i.e. this person who is God. For that is what he is—this person, I say, is crucified according to his humanity."³⁸ "According to his humanity" is what is known as a diacritical particle. Since the deity cannot suffer or die, Scripture tells us that "Christ suffered *in his body* [*sarki*, KJV: 'flesh']" (1 Pe 4:1) and that he was "was put to death *in the body* [*sarki*, flesh]" (1 Pe 3:10). Because the person died, it is scriptural to say, however, that God died on the cross. Dogmatically speaking, "God" is a concrete term that refers to the God-Man, Jesus Christ. So the church with the full warrant of Scripture sings:

*O grosze Not, Gott selbst ist tot!*³⁹

Peter told the Jews that they killed "the author of life [*archeegon tees zooees*]", (Ac 3:15) and accused them of crucifying "the Lord of glory [*ton kurion tees doxees*]" (1 Co 2:8). Both of these are also concrete terms, specifically concretes of the divine nature.

All this is summed up in the Formula of Concord in a quotation from Luther's book *Of the Councils and Churches*:

“If it is not true that God died for us, but only a man died, we are lost. But if God's death and God dead lie in the opposite scale, then his side goes down and we go upward like a light and empty pan.... But he could never have sat in the pan unless he had become a man like us, so that it could be said: God is dead, God's passion, God's blood, God's death. According to his nature God cannot die, but since God and man are united in one person, it is correct to talk about God's death when that man dies who is one thing or one person with God.”⁴⁰

These truths have been designated as the *genus apostelematicum* of the communication of idioms, meaning, that all of Christ's official acts (*apotelesms*) in his redemptive work were performed by the person who is the God-Man, each nature contributing what is characteristic of it. Thus in Christ's death the human nature contributed the possibility of dying, the divine nature gave infinite value to his death.

This technical terminology has come down to us in the church from the ancient Greek fathers who had to defend the truth against the heretics in the Christological controversies of the 4th and 5th centuries. In his battle against the Zwinglians and Calvinists Luther, too, made use of these tools. What the Formula of Concord says about the technical, logical terms *subsantia* and *accidens* applies also, however, to this Christological terminology: “The assemblies of the uninstructed ought rightly to be spared these terms in sermons, since they are not in the common man's vocabulary.” Scholars may, however, use these terms among themselves or in the company of persons to whom these words are not unfamiliar “under the necessity of explaining the doctrine against heretics.”⁴¹

The Reformed cling to their errors to this day. They still hold to the claim of the Heidelberg Catechism concerning Christ that “with respect to his human nature, He is no more on earth; but with respect to his, Godhead, majesty, grace, and Spirit, he is at no time absent from us.”⁴² That this is Nestorianism, an unscriptural separation of Christ's two natures, is obvious. That Reformed theology retains the gospel at all is only because, without realizing it, by a happy inconsistency it abandons its human logic and asserts, we may never isolate a given deed or property of Christ from his divine or from his human nature. At stake here is the unity of the person... we must be concerned to maintain that all the deeds of Christ were performed by his *one* person and that in the suffering of Christ the human nature was indissolubly united with the divine.”⁴³ Charles Hodge, who is still recognized as an authority on Reformed doctrine, likewise writes that “such expressions as *Dei mors, Dei sanguis, Dei passio* have the sanction of Scriptural as well as of Church usage. It follows from this that the satisfaction of Christ has all the value which belongs to the obedience and sufferings of the eternal Son of God and his righteousness, as well active as passive, is infinitely meritorious.”⁴⁴

There are some theologians who are willing to recognize universal redemption as a scriptural doctrine, but reject the concept of universal or objective justification. Romans 4:25 is not the only passage in Scripture that teaches objective justification, however. In chapter 5 of this Epistle, Paul writes, “Since we have now been justified [forgiven] by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” Here Paul equates being justified with being reconciled.

In 2 Corinthians 5:18,19 the same apostle explains reconciliation in terms of justification: “All this [the fact that believers in Christ are a new creation, v 17] is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.” “Reconciliation” (*katallagee*) and the verb “reconcile” (*katallassoo*) denote a complete change, in this case a change in the sinner's standing before God. Paul defines “reconciliation” as “not counting men's sins against them (*mee logidzomenos autois ta paraptoomata autoon*). It is important to note that the non-imputation of sins applies to “the world.” The sole reason some are damned is, therefore, their unbelief, their refusal to accept the forgiveness God has granted to them for Christ's sake, or to put it another way, their refusal to accept the gift of Christ's righteousness which God has conveyed to them by his judicial pronouncement.

God's eternal plan—a fait accompli

Despite our disagreement on various points with the Calvinist G. C. Berkouwer, we can certainly heartily endorse what he writes at the conclusion of his book *The Person of Christ*:

The living faith of the church shall not yield as long as it hears the ancient confession of Christian faith: “*vere Deus, vere homo*,” as the echo of what prophets and apostles long ago testified, and as a summary of its faith—the faith which is irrevocably intertwined with the testimony of Scripture: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday and today, yea, and forever” Heb 13:8). To know him and to know his work is to know the life-giving word: “These things have I spoken unto you, that in *me* ye may have peace” (Jn 16:33).⁴⁵

In a famous, classic statement Melancthon declares in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

What is the knowledge of Christ except to know Christ's blessings, the promises, which by the Gospel he has spread throughout the world? And to know these blessings is rightly and truly to believe in Christ, to believe that God will certainly accomplish what he has promised for Christ's sake.⁴⁶

Peace! Rest! Those are the benefits of Christ's work. Even now, in this life, “since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ro 5:1). But with every passing day in the wisdom and providence of God, his eternal plan, which has its fulfillment in Christ, moves toward its ultimate goal, “a Sabbath-rest for the people of God” (Heb 4:9). What an incredibly splendid prospect God's Word sets before us to inspire us to persevere in faith—perfect peace and rest in eternal fellowship with God!

ENDNOTES:

1 Koehler-Baumgartner Lexicon: “take breath, refresh oneself.”

2 Carl J. Lawrenz, *Commentary on Genesis 1-4*, unpublished manuscript, p 67.

3 C. M. Zorn, *The Whole Christian Doctrine in Genesis 1-5*, translation by W. F. Doctor (Zwickau: Johannes Herrmann, 1924), pp 34f.

4 Ibid., p 35f.

5 LW 1,94f.

6 In Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, pp 159,160. 7

7 Ibid., p 154.

8 Karl Barth, *Grundfragen*, p 30.

9 Norman C. Habel, *The Form and Meaning of the Fall Narrative* (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Print Shop, 1965), p 25.

10 Ralph D. Gerhke, “Genesis Three in the Light of Key Hermeneutical Considerations,” (*Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. 36, No. 8 (September 1965), p 545.

11 Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt, A Christian Anthology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), pp 144.

12 Ibid., p 120.

13 Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, p 7.

14 See Thomas J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

15 *Christian Worship*, 152.

16 For excellent discussions of this message see Rudolph E. Honsey, “Exegetical Paper on Job 19:23-27” (*Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol 67, No 3 [July 1970], pp 153-206), and Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), pp 211-218.

17 *Luther's Saemmtliche Schriften*, St. Louis, IV, 147.

18 G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p 117.

19 Wilhelm Vischer, as cited in Berkouwer, op. cit., p 124.

20 Bultmann, *Kerygma*, p 7.

21 See George Carey, *God Incarnate*, p 10.

- 22) Origen against Celsus, 6,47.
 20 Bultmann, *Kerygma*, p 7.
 21 See George Carey, *God Incarnate*, p 10.
 22) Origen against Celsus, 6,47.
 23 LW 33, 140.
 24 The other references are Mt 16:21; 20:17-19; Mk 8:31; 9:31; 10:33; Lk 9:27; 18:31
 25 Reginald Fuller and PHEME PERKINS, *Who Is This Christ? Gospel Christology and Contemporary Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p 109.
 26 A summary of contemporary views by Michael Green, *The Truth of God Incarnate*, p 11.
 27 Lk 1:3.
 28 Cited in Green, *The Truth of God Incarnate*, p 112.
 29 Rudolf Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, p 39.
 30 Reginald Fuller and PHEME PERKINS, *Who Is this Christ?*, p 35.
 31 Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth*, p 42.
 32 Ibid., pp 40,42.
 33 Green, *The Truth of God Incarnate*, pp 113,114.
 34 See John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) I, 154-156.
 35 There is an obvious mistranslation here in LW. The German text reads, “Um unsers Unglaubens willen wird Gott nicht fehlen” (St. L., XIX, 946).
 36 LW 40, 366f.
 37 Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), 11,321.
 38 LW 37,210f. The last two sentences are quoted in the Formula of Concord, S. D., 3S VIII, 42 (*Tap.*, 399; *Trig.*, 1029).
 39 Stanza 2 by Johann Rist of the hymn, “Oh Darkest Woe” (CW 137). The English translation, Oh, sorrow dread! God’s Son is dead,” does not reproduce the original exactly. It might be translated: “Oh, sorrow dread! Our God is dead!” Was it perhaps a fear that this language, which is completely scriptural, might not be understood that led to the softening of text in the hymnal translation?
 40 Formula of Concord, S.D., VIII, 44, (*Tap.*, 599; *Trig.*, 1029-1031).
 41 Formula of Concord, S.D., I, 54 (*Tap.*, 517f; *Trig* 877).
 42 Cited in Berkouwer, op. cit., P 285.
 43 Berkouwer, op. cit., p 293.
 44 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), Vol. II, p 483.
 45 Berkouwer, op. cit., p 364.
 46 AP. IV, 101 (*Tap.*, 121; *Trig.*, 151).

CURRENT ISSUES IN CHRISTOLOGY

V. The Stakes in the Issues

The “battle hymn of the Reformation,” Luther’s A Mighty Fortress, is Christocentric throughout. This Christocentricity is especially apparent in the second stanza:

With might of ours can naught be done,
 Soon were our loss effected.
 But for us fights the Valiant One,
 Whom God Himself elected.
 Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is.
 Of Sabaoth Lord.
 And there’s none other God;

He holds the field forever.

In this stanza Luther clearly identifies Jesus Christ as the Lord of hosts, “of Sabaoth Lord.” Chosen by God to do battle with “the old evil Foe,” he is the Lord, if and there’s none other God.” His adversary’s cunning and power are great; “on earth is not his equal.” Nevertheless, Christ’s victory is a magnificent triumph. “He holds the field forever.” And he is our Champion. The world may be full of devils, “all eager to devour us.” But we need have no fear; “they shall not overpower us.” God’s Word, our Gibraltar, a strong and sturdy support, stands firm. Despite the efforts of its enemies, it cannot be destroyed or suppressed (Jer 36; Ac 4:18-20; 5:27-29). With his good gifts and Holy Spirit, our God is at our side. He snatches victory from the jaws of defeat and turns our losses into gain. So his gracious rule in our hearts in this present life and our glorious reign with him in eternity are assured. “The kingdom ours remaineth.”

It is generally agreed that Luther wrote this hymn either in the fall of 1527, when there was a persecution of Lutherans in southern Germany and the Bavarian Lutheran pastor, Leonard Kaiser (Käser), was burned alive, or 1529, at the time of the Diet at Speyer, when the famous protest was made, “In matters concerning the honor of God and the salvation of our souls, every man must stand alone before God and give account of himself.”¹ The year 1527 was also the time when Luther began his lectures on the First Epistle of John, which deals with the battle between Christ and the Antichrist. In the introduction to his lectures, Luther lists the same enemies he mentions in the hymn—the devil and hell, rebels and the world the flesh and sin and death—and encourages Christians to stand firm and take a tight hold on the Word. He writes:

Since I see that the devil is assailing us on all sides and that we do not have peace anywhere, we should bear in mind that God wants to keep us in his church, in which he has given us his Word. And we should understand that this Word of his is more powerful than all devils. For it is God’s practice to join the cross and persecution to his Word.... This is an outstanding epistle. It can buoy up afflicted hearts. Furthermore, it has John’s style and manner of expression, so beautifully and gently does it picture Christ to us. It came to be written because at that time heretics and sluggish Christians had rushed in, which invariably happens when the Word has been revived. Then the devil harries us constantly and seeks in every way to cast us down. In John’s time there were the Corinthians, who denied the divinity of Christ, and there were the sluggish Christians, who thought that they had heard Christ’s Word enough and that it was not necessary to forsake the world and to do good to their neighbors. Here the apostle attacks both evils and urges us to guard the word and to love one another.... The devil never rests. Thus exhortation and the use of God’s Word are needed everywhere. It is a living and powerful word. But we snore and are lazy. It is the Word of life. But we are in death every day.²

Biblical theology is Christocentric

In the first of these lectures the Danish theologian Regin Prenter was quoted as saying that “all theology is Christology.”³ The thought was not original with Prenter. It goes back to Luther. In a table talk of 1532, referring to Romans 1:2, he asserted, “Christ is the subject of theology.”⁴ Again, in 1535 in the Preface to his lectures on Galatians he wrote, “In my heart there rules this one doctrine, namely, faith in Christ. From it, through it, and to it all my theological thought flows and returns, day and night.”⁵ Luther attributed his Christocentric teaching to his superior in the Augustinian order, vicar-general Johann Staupitz (d. 1524). In a 1533 table talk he expressed his appreciation for what he learned from Staupitz, “My good Staupitz said, ‘One must keep one’s eyes fixed on that man who is called Christ.’ Staupitz is the one who started the teaching [of the gospel in our time].”⁶

Even ELCA’s Carl E. Braaten admits, “Christology ... is always central in a system of dogmatics that claims to be Christian.” We can also concur when he maintains,

The centrality of Christ is not limited to a particular part of theology, for example, the doctrine of the church or the sacraments. Christ is central both in the order of creation and in the realm of redemption. He is central in a Christian theological interpretation of nature, history, and

existence. Even our knowledge of God is finally determined by the way in which God is revealed in the person of Jesus.⁸

These observations agree with what the Bible teaches. John, the apostle whom Jesus loved (Jn 13:23) and who, together with Peter and James belonged to the inner circle of disciples, writes, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” (Jn 1:18). Jesus himself insists, “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man” (Jn 3:13). And again he says, “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father” (Jn 6:46). Jesus is God’s final revelation to the world. The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews tells us, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son” (1:1,2).

Both the Old Testament and the New center in Christ. Referring to the Old Testament Scriptures, Jesus declares, they “testify about me” (Jn 5:39). Moses, he says, “wrote about me” (Jn 5:46). In the evening of the day of his resurrection he told his startled, frightened disciples, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Lk 24:44).

Jesus was the central focus, the heart and core, of the apostles’ preaching. Boldly Peter confronted the Jewish Sanhedrin, including the high priests Annas and his son-in-law Caiaphas, with their crime. They had crucified Jesus. But God had raised him from the dead. What the inspired Psalmist centuries ago foretold had come to pass: the stone which they, the official builders of God’s church, rejected became the capstone (Ps 118:22). Then Peter added, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Ac 4:12).

That was the keynote of Paul’s preaching, too. He resolved to know nothing “except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Co 2:2). In the building of God’s spiritual temple, the holy Christian church, Paul asserted that “no man can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Co 3:11). When terrified sinners like the Philippian prison warden asked how to be saved, Paul and Silas answered, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (Ac 16:31). Make no mistake about it, the Bible is Christocentric.

A “Copernican revolution in theology”?

Contemporary theologians no longer regard the scriptural mandate to view all doctrines in the light of Christ as binding. Braaten observes:

In dramatic fashion, John Hick has called for a “Copernican revolution in theology.”⁹ This revolution would place *God* at the center of the universe of all religions, thus dislodging Christ from the central position he had held in the old “Ptolemaic” scheme of things.¹⁰

The old theological approach of seeing all things *sub specie Christi* and viewing Christ as the source of our knowledge of God and the standard by which all teachings are judged could flourish in the past “when Christianity regarded itself as the one and only saving religion in the world. But now Christendom is dying, and along with it the narrow parochialism which it bred. Christocentricity allegedly becomes anachronistic in an age characterized by ecumenical openness, theological pluralism, and interreligious dialogue.”¹¹

That the description given of the age in which we are living is an apt characterization can hardly be denied. Neither should we be surprised at the inner decay occurring in the visible Christian church. God has permitted the “powerful delusion” of the Antichrist, the Roman papacy, to deceive many “because they refused to love the truth” (2 Th 2:10,11). Jesus himself warned that the love of most would grow cold (Mt 24:12). He asked, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Lk 18:8). It is a question that ought to prompt us to search our own hearts.

But is a “Copernican revolution in theology” the proper response? The avowed aim of contemporary theologians is to make Christianity more acceptable to modern man. To accomplish that, they proceed to strip away ideas that people today find unpalatable or unreasonable. There is no room for anything supernatural in their theology. In Christology they want to get rid of philosophical terms used in the Creeds like “substance”

and “hypostatis.” As Michael Green notes however, “They are not reinterpreting traditional Christology but abandoning it.”¹²

A few years ago a film was produced for British TV called “Who Was Jesus?” The producer was a Cambridge theologian, Rev. Don Cupitt. It was reportedly a lovely story with splendid photography. But what did it have to say about Jesus? Was he really the Son of God? Was he really born of a virgin? Did he really do miracles? Did he really rise from the dead? The answer to all these questions was a sophisticated No.¹³

This is the natural result of the attitude among many contemporary scholars of outright scepticism toward the Bible. They no longer regard it as a book that has a dual authorship, men speaking “from God, as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pe 1:21). The claim is made that there is no divine element in the Bible and therefore “both in form and content the Bible entirely shares the laws which govern secular literature.”¹⁴ James Barr calls the formation of the Bible a “*human work*.” “It is *man’s* statement of his beliefs, the events he has experienced, the stories he has been told, and so on.”¹⁵ The Bible is therefore not the Word of God, but the word of man—and quite unreliable at that.

For scholars like Barr the Christian religion is only one among many and has no more intrinsic value or claim to authority than any other. There is a great deal of truth in the old German saying, “*Die Gelehrten, die Verkehrten*,” which translates roughly as, “Much learning, much erring.”¹⁶ In the ancient world there was a considerable latitude about religious beliefs and practices. People were not persecuted for their beliefs as long as they adopted a “live and let live” philosophy. But Christians did not conform to the multi-religious philosophy of the mighty Roman empire.

Christianity’s inclusivity

Christianity was, on the one hand, sweepingly inclusive, and, on the other hand, rigidly exclusive. Let us consider its inclusivity first of all. At Athens the Apostle Paul was very explicit in proclaiming the inclusivity of the gospel he preached, explaining that in time past God overlooked the ignorance of those who thought that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone. Then he continued, “But now he commands *all people everywhere* to repent” (Ac 17:30). The basis for this universal call to repentance is summed up in the best-known passage in the Bible: “God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). Jesus goes on to explain that “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save *the world* through him” (in 3:17). Jesus commissioned his disciples to “go into all the world and preach the good news to *all creation*” (Mk 16:15) and told them they would be his witnesses “*to the ends of the earth*” (Ac 1:8). He charged them to “go and make disciples of *all nations*” (Mt 28:19). John the Baptizer pointed his hearers to Jesus as the Lamb of God, “who takes away the sin of the *world*” (Jn 1:29). We are assured that Christ “died for all” (1 Co 15:5) and that “God was reconciling *the world* to himself in Christ” (2 Co 5:19). In his First Epistle John calls Jesus Christ “the atoning sacrifice [*hilasmos, expiation*] for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of *the whole world*” (2:2). Again and again we are reminded that “God our Savior...wants *all men* to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4). He does not want “anyone to perish, but *everyone* to come to repentance” (2 Pe 3:9).

It could hardly be made clearer that salvation through Christ is for all, for every human being of all times. Yes, without question the gospel is universally inclusive. This is also stressed in the Formula of Concord: “We must by all means cling rigidly and firmly to the fact that as the proclamation of repentance extends over all men (Luke 24:47), so also does the promise of the Gospel.”¹⁷ To establish this fact the Formula lists no less than a dozen passages, including some which we have not mentioned above.

It was pointed out earlier in these lectures that from the beginning God’s rescue plan included all his fallen human creatures. He promised Abraham that “all peoples on earth” would be blessed through him (Ge 12:3). The Psalmist rejoices because “the LORD has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations” (98:2). He issues a universal invitation: “Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples” (96:1-3). Through the Prophet Isaiah, the evangelist of the Old Testament, God tells his Servant-Savior, “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of

Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (49:6). It should be noted, by the way, that the *NIV* translation of the last clause unfortunately does not reflect the full force of the original. The Hebrew reads: *lihyoth yeshu’athiy ‘adh gtseh ha’arets*, “to be my salvation to the end of the earth,” a promise previously given repeatedly in the book (e.g., 2:2ff; 9:1ff; 11:10; 25:6ff; 42:1ff). Here the comments of Prof. August Pieper deserve to be noted:

This is that mighty prophecy, already contained in Noah’s blessing, in the promise to Abraham, and which was confirmed to David and Solomon, repeated and expanded by nearly every prophet, but especially by Isaiah, that the gentiles should be received into the kingdom of God. This prophecy is the basis of the mission command of the risen Savior (Mt. 28; Mk 16) who gave his Gospel to us of the gentile world. This is the promise in which Paul found support for his mission and on which he based his majestic hymn, the Epistle to the Ephesians. Those who could not claim citizenship in Israel, who were aliens to the testaments of promise, who were without Christ, without God, and without hope, have now been brought near through the blood of Christ. Since peace has been proclaimed to them, they are no longer guests and strangers but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. To appreciate the magnitude of this grace, one must understand Romans 1:18ff.¹⁸

God demonstrated his loving concern for the Gentiles as well as the Jews in Old Testament times in a variety of ways. First of all, it is significant that Canaan, the land God gave Abraham and his descendants, was at the crossroads of the ancient world. All commerce that moved by camel caravan between the great world powers in Mesopotamia and the land of the Pharaohs had to pass through Israel. Israel’s religion and its God, Yahweh, were, therefore, well known in the civilized world. The Queen of Sheba, present-day Yemen, who visited Solomon (2 Ch 9:1-12), and the treasurer of Queen Candace of Ethiopia (Nubia, present Sudan, in Africa) (Ac 8:27) are witness to that. The “mixed multitude” that left Egypt with the Israelites in the Exodus (Ex 12:38), Hiram, of and the lumberjacks and skilled workers he supplied for David and Solomon for the construction of David’s palace and the Lord’s temple (2 Sa 5:11; 1 Ki 5:1-18; 1 Ch 22:4); the descendants of the Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, whom the Israelites had not destroyed and whom Solomon conscripted for his labor force (2 Ch 8:7,8)—all were Gentiles exposed to the gospel, and we may be certain that it did not fail to produce fruit (Is 55:11). The names of Melchizedek, king of Salem (Ge 14:18); Reuel (Jethro), Moses’ father-in-law, who was a priest of Midian (Ex 2:16-18; 3:1), and his son Hobab the Kenite (Nu 10:29); the widow of Zarephath near Phoenician Sidon who provided for Elijah (1 Ki 17:7-24; Lk 4:26); Naaman, the commander-in-chief of the army of Aram (2 Ki 5); and other non-Israelites are indelibly recorded in Scripture as incorporated into God’s family. Two Gentiles, Rahab, a Canaanite, and Ruth, a Moabitess, were grafted into the Savior’s family tree (Mt 1:5). God sent the Prophet Jonah to Assyrian Nineveh, and Jesus says the people of Nineveh repented at the preaching of Jonah (Mt 12:41). It should be noted in this connection that the Ninevites were not required to submit to circumcision and the other ceremonial laws of Moses for salvation. Luther emphasizes that “the law of Moses ... was given only to the people of Israel... while the Gentiles were excluded. To be sure, the Gentiles have certain laws in common with the Jews,” namely, the moral law, but “this is written by nature into their hearts.”¹⁹

The covenant God made with the children of Israel on Mt. Sinai was a temporary one. It did not set aside the covenant he had previously made with Abraham (Ge 17) and thus do away with the promise (Gal 3:17), but “was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come” (Gal 3:19). The intent was that when the people of Israel realized their inability to keep the law, they would take refuge in the promise of a Savior given to Abraham. Through Jeremiah God promised to “make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” It would not be like the covenant he made with them when he led them out of Egypt, which they broke, but it would be in essence like the one made with Abraham: “I will be their God, and they will be my people (see Ge 17:71)... For I will forgive their wickedness and will

remember their sins no more” (Jer 31:31-34). This new covenant, of which Jesus is the mediator, is, as the Epistle to the Hebrews informs us, “superior to the old one [made at Sinai], and it is founded on better promises” (8:6).

God brought a severe but well-deserved judgment on the rebellious and recalcitrant tribe of Judah in 586 B.C. by permitting the cruel despot Nebuchadnezzar and his merciless Babylonian troops to plunder and raze Jerusalem, sack and torch the beautiful temple Solomon had built, and forcibly deport the remainder of the upper class of the population that had escaped the previous deportations in 605 and 597 (Da 6:1-6; 2 Ki 24:12-16). Only the poorest peasants were left in the Promised Land. This judgment on Judah was at the same time a blessing in disguise for the pagan Babylonians. It gave them an opportunity to learn about the LORD, the one true God, from their Jewish captives, whom they urged, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” (Ps 137:3). God permitted Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, to rise to high positions in the power structure of Babylon so that their confession of the true God reached people in the far corners of the kingdom and beyond. Esther, a Jewess, who became queen of Persia, was a faithful witness to her faith. The Gentile Wise Men from the East, who came, possibly from Babylon, to worship the Christ Child, may have learned about him from their Jewish neighbors.²⁰ All these were harbingers of the fulfillment of the Lord’s prophecy through Hosea, “In the place where it was said to them, ‘You are not my people,’ they will be called ‘sons of the living God’” (1:10; Ro 9:26; see also Hos 2:23 and Ro 9:25; 1 Pe 2:10).

While Jesus restricted his public ministry to the Jews and said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (Mt 15:24), he did not refuse help to Gentiles like the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28), the Samaritan leper (Lk 17:11-19; the Samaritans were a mixed race resulting from the intermarriage of Jews and Gentiles, 2 Ki 17:24; 25:12; Jer 39:10), and the Roman centurion whose servant was seriously ill. In fact, he praised the centurion and said, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith” (Mt 8:5-13). What a stinging rebuke this was for the Jews, who were God’s chosen people! Both Jews and Gentiles had a part in crucifying Jesus (Mt 20:18,19). The firstfruits Christ harvested at his death were the penitent thief, a Jew—according to tradition his name was Dysmas²¹—and the Roman centurion in charge of the crucifixion, a Gentile, who praised God and exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!” (Mt 27:54; Lk 23:47).

It may seem strange that of all the nations on earth God chose the family of Abraham to become the bearers of the promise. There is a ditty that goes, “How odd of God to choose the Jews.” odd perhaps, yes. But the fact is that the Jews, even today, are a gifted people, as their preeminence in many areas of culture and commerce demonstrates. That is not the reason, however, why God chose them. He himself explains, “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you” (Dt 7:7,8). In other words, he loved them simply because he loved them. The one and only reason God chose them was his undeserved love. God himself reminded them, “Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River [Euphrates] and worshiped other gods” (Jos 24:2). Some have erroneously thought that Abraham, too, was an idolater before God called him. But this is nowhere said in the Bible. The picture it gives of him is that throughout his life he was a model of faith and piety. He was the father of believers (Ro 4:11,12; Gal 3:7) and was called “God’s friend” (Is 41:8; Jas 2:23), a distinction given to no other human being.

Faith in Christ wipes out all ethnic, racial, social, and gender distinctions, as Paul points out to the Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28; see also Col 3:11). The communion of saints, the entire assembly of Old and New Testament believers, those in heaven and those on earth, is the city of God with no second-class citizens.

In view of the estimated five billion people in this world who still do not know Jesus as their Savior, what a task lies before us who are his twentieth-century disciples! There can be little doubt that this world is winding down and the end of all things is at hand. Paul’s admonition to the Roman Christians of his day is even more in place for us who are living so much closer to the end: “The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here” (13:11,12). We have Jesus’ word for it, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the

whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Mt 24:14). This sign of the end like the others, was, of course, fulfilled in kind, although not to present degree, long ago. Even in Paul’s day he could write to the Colossians, “This... gospel...has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (1:23) and is bearing fruit “all over the world” (1:6). Many commentators, including the *Concordia Self-Study bible*, call this hyperbole. It is hardly that, however, in view of Jesus’ repeated instructions to his disciples to be his witnesses “to the ends of the earth” (Ac 1:8; Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15) and the unintended effect that persecution had in spreading the gospel. (Ac 8:4). The congregation in Rome, for example, appears to have been started, not by any apostle, but by lay Christians, Jews and converts to Judaism who were in Jerusalem at Pentecost and carried the gospel with them when they returned home (Ac 2:10). Not to be overlooked is the impact of correspondence, not only on the part of leaders of the church like Paul’s letter to the Romans, but also by rank and file believers. He may not be able to explain how it happened, but it is a fact that already in the days of the apostles the gospel had penetrated to all nations and was planted far and wide under heaven.²²

In their Epistles, therefore, the apostles admonish those to whom they are writing to be alert and watchful because “the end of all things is near” (1 Pe 4:7; see also Ro 13:12; 1 Jn 2:18). This much is certain, however, the end will not come until the last one of God’s elect has come to faith. That may already have happened, of course, and so the world’s midnight hour may strike and Christ appear in the heavens before this lecture is over. How important it is then that we heed the admonition to watch, to be on our guard, to be alert! It is important also that we be about our Father’s business and work as long as it is day. “Night is coming when no one can work” (Jn 9:4) In these last days the Lord has placed before us an open door in areas of the world like Russia and other East European countries that were for years closed to our missionaries. A church that is not mission-minded is either dead or dying. To smug, self-satisfied Christians Jesus says, as he once said to the church in Laodicea, “Because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth” (Rev 3:16). We need to examine ourselves therefore and seriously face the question: Have we perhaps lost our first love for the gospel?

The exclusivity of the gospel

Mention was made above of Peter’s statement before the Sanhedrin, “Salvation is found in no one else [than Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Ac 4:12). That statement is absolute. It is exclusive. There is no other way to heaven except through Jesus. Jesus, too, emphasized that he is the only way to salvation and eternal life. His words are well known: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). On another occasion, using picture language, he told the Jews, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood [i.e., believe in him, vv 29,35,40,47], you have no life in you” (in 6:53). Again he said, “If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins” (in 8:24). The language is blunt but factual. Anything less would be loveless. Equally direct are his words in the last chapter of Mark, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (16:16). There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it—there is only one road to heaven: faith in Jesus Christ.

That fact is equally clear in the Old Testament. The LORD, the God of Israel asserts, “There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me” (Isa 45:21). Graciously he extends an invitation to all: “Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (Isa 45:22). His claim is absolute: “I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols” (Isa 42:8). He will brook no opposition and tolerate no rival.

This truth is expressed also by his declaration, “I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God [’*el ganna*]” (Ex 20:5). His name is “Jealous” (Ex 34:14). His jealousy is not sinful envy but a holy, loving concern, a burning zeal, that no one lose out on salvation as a result of putting his trust in a god that is no God. That is why he exhorts, “Do not worship any other god” (Ex 34:14; 20:3-6). What a delusion and hoax idolatry is: “The idols of the nations are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, nor is there breath in their mouths. Those who make them will be [helpless] like them, and so will all who trust in them” (Ps 135:15-18; see also 115:4-8; Is 44:9-20;

46:6,7). The idolater prays to his idol and says, “Save me; you are my god” (Isa 44:17). But “it does not answer; it cannot save him from his troubles” (Isa 46:7).

The word *qinn'ah* in some contexts is properly translated “zeal.” It describes the LORD’s burning ardor, wholehearted devotion, and unswerving determination to carry out his gracious plan for the salvation of sinners. It indicates that he says what he means and means what he says. He is completely in earnest when he announces his intention to send his Son to sit on David’s throne and establish his kingdom of righteousness: “The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this” (Isa 9:7). His unchanging purpose is also expressed in his distinctive name, *YHWH*. When Moses wanted to know what he should answer when the Israelites asked who had sent him, God said, “I AM WHO I AM [*'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh*].... Say to the Israelites: ‘I AM [*'ehyeh*] has sent me to you” (Ex 3:14). Prof. Lawrenz explains that the tetragrammaton, which was most likely pronounced *Yahweh* and which was built on *hawah*, the archaic form of the verb “to be “ “expresses the formal truth of God’s absolute independence and self-sufficiency.”²³ Specifically, this meant that “in pure grace ... through Abraham’s seed he had promised to carry out his plan of salvation for all mankind.... Nobody has inherited his salvation. Nothing obligates God to offer and effect it. God’s saving activity proceeds solely and purely from his own loving heart. *YHWH*, the LORD, is the name by which he reveals himself as the God of pure love and grace. As the LORD he says: ‘I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and will have compassion on whom I will have compassion (Ex 33:19).’”²⁴ But “I am who I am” expresses also a second formal truth concerning God, namely, his absolute constancy. “God always remains true to himself in all that he is, says, and does.... He is faithful in his saving grace.... Combining the two formal truths expressed in the tetragrammaton, we can say: *The divine name YHWH, the LORD, reveals God as the God of free and faithful love; after the entrance of human sin as the God of free and faithful saving grace* [original emphasis].”²⁵

In Exodus 34:6,7 God preaches a sermon to Moses in which he explains the significance of his name, *YHWH*. He sheltered Moses in a fissure of rock and then proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.” Commenting on these words, Prof. August Pieper explains that, on the one hand, God’s “grace has no limits in any direction, is infinite like God Himself.... He is a God who forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin. This is his real glory.” On the other hand, however, “the Lord permits no guilty person to be guiltless.... If He did, he would have to abdicate as God.... God’s wrath is ultimately every sinner’s death.” That leads to the question: “How then do God’s grace and wrath harmonize with one another? Not at all before our reason.... [But] for us Christians all the mysteries of God’s essence and will are solved—not in our understanding but in faith.... The Man in whom this contradiction in God and in all his ways finds its solution is called Jesus Christ, the Jehovah-God: *God manifest in the flesh*, I Tim. 3:16.”²⁶

On the basis of both the Old Testament and the New it is clear: No person can reject Jesus Christ, the only Savior there is, and hope to escape the fierce wrath of that God who “is a consuming fire” (He 12:29). The Unitarianism of those who advocate a “Copernican revolution in theology” stands condemned by what Jesus told the Jews, “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him” (Jn 5:23).

The pluralism of contemporary theology

What is modern theology’s answer to the inclusivity and exclusivity of the gospel? Here is what PHEME PERKINS, an American Roman Catholic, has to say:

Christianity emerged as a combination of universalism and exclusivism. The messianic salvation made possible through Jesus was to be addressed to all humanity, not just to the Jews. On the other hand, Jesus was acknowledged as the final revelation of God. There could be no other....

Twentieth-century Christians, faced with the religious pluralism of the globe in each day’s news, are often uneasy with this exclusive universalism. The application of the Old Testament condemnation of idolatry to the great religious traditions of humanity no longer seems

viable. The old “lost in darkness and corruption” language about non-Christian religions seems to be a dangerous misrepresentation that could leave us unable to deal socially and politically, not to mention religiously, with most of the world.

The same author speaks about “a transcultural Christ... who is one among many human religious founders.”²⁸ She maintains that “other religious traditions also reveal God” and that there is a need to “seek a position beyond the ‘christomonism’ of an inbred theology.”²⁹

Michael Green observes that one of the assumptions that underlies a good deal of modern reductionism about Jesus is “that there are many ways to God, and we must not offend against propriety, let alone reason, by supposing that Jesus has any finality, or that he represents the only way to God. Are there not many roads up the mountain to God?”³⁰

This is by no means a new idea. Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 220) taught that “there are many ways to salvation.” This has been the teaching of Rome through the years. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) issued a “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions.” It referred to Hinduism, Buddhism, Mohammedanism, and Judaism and states, “The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions,” and notes that they “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.”³² Contemporary Catholic theologians like Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx do not want the non-Christian to be regarded “as standing outside the pale of salvation simply because he is not a Christian.”³³ They describe non-Christians as if “anonymous Christians” who do not really know what they actually are. Zwingli, too, believed that Socrates and other heathen were saved although they knew nothing about Christ. When Luther read Zwingli’s Exposition of the Christian Faith after Zwingli was killed in the battle of Kappel in 1531, Luther wrote, “I had to despair (as I still must) of the salvation of his soul, if he died with such a disposition.”³⁵

There is a story about an atheist physician. When he died, a Catholic priest comforted the many patients he had unselfishly helped during a plague: “There is one thing most of us forget. Christ taught it. The church teaches it. That is: No one in good faith can be lost. No one. Buddhists, Mohammedans, Taoists, the blackest cannibal who ever devoured a missionary—if they are sincere according to their own lights, they will be saved. That is the splendid mercy of God. So why shouldn’t he confront a decent atheist at the Judgment Seat and say, “I’m here, you see, in spite of what you thought. Enter into the kingdom you honestly denied.”

We cannot but agree with Green that “syncretism is not a viable option for Christians. The scandal of particularity lies at the heart of the religion of Jesus.... Christianity was born in a world every bit as unified and every bit as pluralistic in matters of faith as our own. The Roman pantheon was most hospitable: additional deities were accorded a ready welcome, so long as you didn’t try to be exclusive, or to unseat the favorite gods of others. The early Christians declined the offer. For them Jesus was not one among many but the embodiment of the Only. He was not a divine sort of man but God become man.”³⁶

The early Christians were willing to die for their faith. The young girl Blandina, who was roasted alive for her faith at the end of the second century is but one example.³⁷ Untold numbers of them literally took up their cross and followed Jesus. Inspired by the Lord’s promises, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev 2:10), they are commemorated for their confessional courage in the dramatic hymn, “Rise Again, Ye Lion-Hearted”:

Mid, the lions’ roaring
Songs of praise outpouring,
Joyously they take their stand
On th’ arena’s bloody sand.³⁸

Physical-persecution of Christians did not end when Christianity became a *religio licita* in the Roman Empire with the Edict of Toleration in 311, but it has continued down through the years. One need think only of the Inquisition and the ruthless attempts of communism to destroy the church. Luther, it will be remembered, wrote his first poem to commemorate the martyrdom of two young Augustinian monks, Heinrich Voes and Johann Esch, who were burned at the stake in Brussels on June 30, 1523, because of their Lutheran faith.⁴⁰ Recalling that John Huss, the great Bohemian Reformer, was burned at the stake in 1415 on orders of the Council of

Constance, Luther recognized the danger of appearing before the Diet at Worms in 1521 but declared, "Though there should be as many devils in Worms as tiles on the housetops, I will nonetheless enter there."⁴¹ At the Diet Luther took his well-known, bold stand, saying, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason...I cannot and I will not retract anything Here I stand. May God help me."⁴² After a rump session of the Diet declared Luther *Vogelfrei*, an outlaw whom no one was to harbor and who was excluded from all protection of the law, Elector Frederick the Wise arranged for Luther to be taken to the Wartburg for his own protection. In 1527 Luther wrote, "We are living "in the midst of wolves."⁴⁴ Recently a scholar published a biography of Luther with the title, *Luther, Man between God and the Devil*. In it he views Luther's battle with the pope and emperor as essentially a struggle with the devil.⁴⁵

Without question, the devil is behind the attacks on the gospel, and on biblical Christology in particular, in our day as well. What else but devilish inspiration could induce a Lutheran theologian like J. Schoneberg Setzer to deny the exclusivity of the gospel and the eternal damnation of those who reject Christ and to write: "A heavenly Father who would fry his enemies to all eternity would seem infinitely worse than the monster Adolf Hitler.... Could ... Jesus really have agreed ... that God overpunished his enemies after death with an everlasting grudge that roasted them in an eternal oven? No!"⁴⁶

One of the reasons why the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses appeal to so many people is undoubtedly their denial of eternal punishment in hell. J. F. Rutherford, a former leader whose writings are considered authoritative, wrote, "A Creator that would put in operation a system of endless torment would be a fiend and not a reasonable God."⁴⁷ According to Charles Russell, the founder of the cult, Jesus has not redeemed people but has simply "ransomed" them. He explains this as meaning that Jesus has secured for them a second chance to save themselves. "The ransom for all given by the man Jesus Christ does not give or guarantee everlasting life or blessing to any man."⁴⁸ Or consider the statement of Robert Brinsmead in a Verdict essay, "The penal-satisfaction theory of atonement too closely portrays God as a celestial Shylock who must have his pound of flesh before he can forgive."⁴⁹

Some theologians speak in somewhat similar, though not as crass, terms. Prof. Joh. P. Meyer notes, "There are some who assume that *katallassein* [in 2 Co 5] points to a change in God, that during the process he changed from an irate into a placated God, that some sort of appeasement took place. But no, not the least change took place in the heart of God. It was his love that was active during the entire process of *katallassein*. The change was effected in our status before God." What then was the purpose of Christ's atonement? Prof. Meyer explains, "Before Christ's intervention took place, God regarded [the sinner] as a guilt-laden, condemned culprit. After Christ's intervention and through Christ's intervention he regards him as a guilt-free saint. The *nature* of the sinner has not been changed. *God* did not undergo a change, did not experience a change of heart. The *status* of the sinner was changed."⁵¹

That God loved the sinful world, even before Christ made atonement for its sins is clear from such passages as John 3:16, Romans 5:8-11 and Ephesians 1:4-10. In fact, it was God's love for fallen mankind, a love he had from eternity, that moved him to send his Son to reconcile the world unto himself. Passages like Psalm 85:3 speak from his point of view: "You set aside all your wrath and turned from your fierce anger. It is sometimes said that God hates sin but loves the sinner. In fact, however, Scripture speaks of God as hating not only sin but the sinner also (Ps 5:5; 11:5). To ignore this fact is to tone down the force of the law.

Hebrews 2:17 tells us that Jesus' work as a high priest was "to make atonement [*eis to hilaskesthai*] for the sins of the people. Büchsel in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* explains that *hilaskesthai* means "to expiate the sins of his people, to rob them of their validity and significance before God. We are not to think here either of making God gracious or of an ethical conquest of sin in man"⁵³ The noun *hilasmos* used in 1 Jn 2:2 and 4:10 and translated "atoning sacrifice" in the NIV, as Büchsel points out, "does not imply the propitiation of God. It refers to the purpose that God himself has fulfilled by sending the Son. Hence it rests on the fact that God is gracious, i.e., on his love (cf. 4:10). The meaning, then, is the setting aside of sin as guilt against God."⁵⁴

Pity the poor, supposedly Christian Theologians who have nothing more to offer despairing sinners than the chaff that “Jesus may well have been the son of Joseph and Mary, but he still brings God into our midst as nobody else does.”⁵⁵ The Christianity of these false prophets is, as Michael Green puts it, “already virtually indistinguishable from, humanism and Hinduism, and will soon become the undifferentiated world religion [people] are looking for, which will embrace all the myths of all the people in the—hopefully real—heavenly home of the one God and Father of us all.” Such counterfeit Christianity will not comfort souls troubled by a sense of sin any more than the pagan religion of those Hindus who, according to a common Indian saying, lament, “I came to Allahabad; I washed, but my sins came away with me.”⁵⁷

A final word

What a different song you and I and every true believer in Jesus Christ can sing together with the saints in heaven: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve God and the Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever!” (Rev 1:6). Some manuscripts read *lousanti*, “washed,” as the *KJV* and Luther translate, instead of *lusanti*, “freed.” Regardless of the reading, the point is clear: “The blood of Jesus.... purifies us from all sin” (1 Jn 2:7; see also Ac 22:16; 1 Co 6:11; Heb 10:22; Rev 7:14). How can we be certain of that? The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is our assurance. That, to be sure, is an article of faith. It cannot be demonstrated scientifically or physically to scoffing skeptics. To the unbelieving Jews who demanded that Jesus give them a sign that he was the promised Messiah, he said, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Mt 12:39,40). That sign is proof enough for hearts of faith.

The world’s time for repentance is quickly drawing to a close. For each individual, of course, the time is now” (2 Co 6:2). Luther says, “Each of us has his own Last Day when he dies. The last chapter of the Book of Revelation emphasizes, “The time is near” (22:10). He who is in Old Testament language *Yahweh*, in New Testament terms “the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End,” declares, “Behold, I am coming soon!” (Rev 22:12,13). Seated on his throne in the final Judgment, the victorious, risen Lamb, to whom, the Father has entrusted all judgment (Jn 5:22), will say in the words of the apocalyptic angel, “Let him who does wrong continue to do wrong; let him who is vile continue to be vile” (Rev 22:11). It has been well said, “Many an impenitent sinner has already in this life experienced the disappointment and dissatisfaction and the horrible ennui that life devoted to the service of sin often brings before it ends. To have nothing but that bitterness to look forward to in all eternity is already in itself a punishment too horrible to contemplate.”⁵⁹ But for the believers the words will be eternally true, “Let him who does right continue to do right; and let him who is holy continue to be holy” (Rev 22:11).

What are the stakes in the Christological issues raised by contemporary theologians? They are in a word: life or death. As Moses said farewell to Israel, he declared, This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life” (Dt 13:19,20). It was the same choice Joshua put before the people: “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve... But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Jos 24:15). In every age for every individual the choice is the same. Elijah put it this way: “If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him (1 Ki 18:21). The unbeliever cannot, of course, by his own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ or come to him, as we confess in the explanation of the Third Article. But the call to repentance and faith itself filled with divine, creative, life-giving power (Ro 1:16 10:17). “For through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel.”⁶⁰

If we desire that blessing not only for ourselves but also for our children, then we will need to hear and heed the admonition of Asaph in Psalm 78 to “tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done.... He decreed statutes... which he commanded our forefathers to teach

their children, so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands” (vv 4-7).

If that gospel is to be passed on to future generations in its full truth and purity, it is vitally important that pastors continue to be trained to read the Scriptures in the original languages of Greek and Hebrew. The warning of Luther is well known: “Let us be sure of this: we will not long preserve the gospel without the languages. The languages are the sheath in which this sword of the Spirit (Eph. 6:17) is contained; they are the casket in which this jewel is enshrined- they are the vessel in which this wine is held; they are the larder in which this food is stored.” In sharp, striking contrast to the arrogant, skeptical attitude toward the Scriptures on the part of many pseudo-Christian theologians was Luther’s humble, Samuel-like credence, “If they were not such frivolous despisers of the Scriptures [he was referring to the Sacramentarians], one clear saying from the Scriptures would move them as profoundly as if the whole world were full of Scripture—which it actually is. For as I see it, every single passage makes the world too narrow. They flutter past, however, and think, ‘This is only man’s word.’ Small wonder that no Scripture constrains them!”⁶²

In their desperate search for peace and security many people are embracing “what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Ti 6:20). They are turning to a motley collection of blind leaders of the blind like the Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and the currently popular peddlers of Hinduistic mysticism such as Yoga and the New Age Philosophy (Transcendental Meditation. This should not surprise us. Peter warns that false prophets will introduce destructive heresies, and “many will follow their shameful ways” (2 Pe 2:1,2). But all the while the Word is near them, that is, “the word of faith we are proclaiming” (Ro 10:8). What is needed today is not a “Copernican revolution in theology” but earnest attention to the Lord’s words through Jeremiah: “Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls” (6:16).

What a bright and happy future awaits us and all of Christ’s people! As we like Abraham become “*lebenssatt*” (Luther; *NIV* “full of years”), we look forward with eager anticipation to our eternal home. With a deep, confident faith and as “more than conquerors through him who loved us” (Ro 8:37) we join Johann Meyfahrt in his beautiful, heavenward-soaring hymn:

Jerusalem, thou city fair and high,
Would God I were in thee!
My longing heart to thee would gladly fly;
It will not stay with me.
Far over vale and mountain,
Far over field and plain,
It hastes to seek its fountain
And leave this world of pain.

Unnumbered choirs before the shining throne
Their joyful anthems raise
Till heaven’s halls are echoing with the tone
Of that great hymn of praise
And all its host rejoices,
And all its blessed throng
Unite their myriad voices
In one eternal song.⁶³

“Eia, wär’n wir da! Eia, wär’n wir da!”⁶⁴

ENDNOTES:

- 1 See Percy Dearmer, *Songs of Praise Discussed* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p 232. Also, Franz Posset, *Luther's Catholic Christology* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1988), p 115.
- 2 LW 30,219.
- 3 Page 8 of the lecture. 4 "*Christus est subiectum theologiae*," WA TR 2:242 (No. 1868).
- 4 LW 27,145.
- 6 LW 54,97.
- 7 *Christian Dogmatics*, 1,469.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).
- 10 Braaten, op. cit., p 470.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Green, *The Truth of God Incarnate*, p 109.
- 13 Green, op. cit., p 13.

- 14 James Barr in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, May 1958, cited in Green, op. cit., p.108.
- 15 James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World*, p 120, cited in Green, op. cit., p 108.
- 16 Porcius Festus, the Roman procurator of Judea, was, of course, way off base when he, after hearing Paul mention the resurrection of Jesus, exclaimed, "You are out of your mind, Paul.... Your great learning is driving you insane" (Ac 26:24).
- 17 F. C., XI, 28 (*Tap.*, 620f; *Trig.*, 1071ff).
- 18 August Pieper, *Isaiah II*, translate by Erwin Kowalke (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1979), p 360.
- 19 Luther, "How Christians Should Regard Moses," LW 35,164.
- 20 In medieval legend they were three kings whose bodies were brought by the Empress Helena to Constantinople, then moved to Milan, and finally taken to Cologne, where they are splendidly entombed in the famous cathedral. Their names were Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar (*Webster's New International Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, "Three Kings of Cologne").
- 21 Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1924), 11,598. Tradition gives the impenitent malefactor the name Gestas.
- 22 Quenstedt observes that during three distinct periods the gospel call was actually heard throughout the world: in Eden (Ge 3:15), at the time of Noah (Ge 9:8,9), and in the days of the apostles (Ro 10:18; Col 1:6,23). See Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1912), III, 243. William Hendriksen in his *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), p 51, remarks: "The rapid progress of the gospel in the early days has ever been the amazement of the historian. Justin Martyr, about the middle of the second century, wrote 'There is no Greek or barbarian, or of any other race, by whatever appellations or manners they may be distinguished, however ignorant of arts or agriculture, whether they dwell in tents or wander about in covered wagons, among whom prayers and thanksgiving are not offered in the name of the crucified Jesus to Father and creator of all things.'" Hendriksen also cites an estimate that by the close of the Apostolic Period the total number of Christian disciples had reached half a million (ibid.) The population of the entire Roman Empire at the beginning of the Christian era has been estimated at about 55 million (*Encyclopaedia Americana*, 1964, Vol.22 p 368).
- 23 Car J. Lawrenz, *Commentary on Genesis 1 - 4*, p 77.
- 24 Ibid., p 77f.
- 25 Ibid., p 78.
- 26 August Pieper, "The Glory of the Lord," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (April 1955) through Vol. 55, No. 1 (January 1957), translated by John Schaadt and Carl J. Lawrenz. The quotations from the January 1957 issue, pp 32-36. This outstanding article merits the most careful study.
- 27 Reginald H. Fuller and PHEME PERKINS, *Who Is This Christ?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p 149.
- 28 Ibid., p 152.

29 Ibid., p 156.

30 Michael Green, 22.op. cit., p 115.

31 Quoted in Adolf Hoenecke, *Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik*, II, 8.

32 *The Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, ed. (New York: Guild Press, America Press, Association Press, 1966), pp 660ff.

33 Karl Rahner, *The Church after the Council* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966), p 56

34 Ibid., p 57. Edward Schillebeeckx, "The Church and Mankind," in *Concilium, Theology in the Age of Renewal* (New York, Glenrock, NJ: Paulist Press), I, p 88.

35 LW 38,289-291.

36 Green, op. cit., pp 115f.

37 George Carey, *God Incarnate*, p 44.

38 "Löwen, lasst euch wiederfinden," author unknown, translation by Martin Franzmann, *The Lutheran Hymnal*, 470:3.

39 The inquisition was established as a regular tribunal, called the Holy Office, by Gregory IX, who was pope from 1227-1241. Inquisitors for the suppression of heresy existed since 1203, when Innocent III occupied the papal throne. The Spanish Inquisition operated state control with extreme severity from 1480 through the 16th century. It was abolished in 1834. The Congregation of the Holy office still exists. It concerns itself with heretical writings.

40 A paraphrase of this ballad appears in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, #259, "Flung to the Heedless Winds." A translation of the ballad itself is found in *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1942), p 190.

41 WA, TR, V, 5342a. Also WA, *Briefe*, 11,454-457.

42 LW 32,112f.

43 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), VII, 319.

44 WA 20:599. Cited in Posset, Luther's Catholic Christology, p 153.

45 Heiko Obermann, *Luther, Man between God and the Devil*, translated by Eileen Walliser-Schwarzbart (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989).

46 J. Schoneberg Setzer, *What's Left to Believe?* (Nashville, New York: Abingdon, 1968), p 137.

47 Joseph F. Rutherford, *Harp of God*, p 62f, quoted in F. E. Mayer, *The religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1954), p 465.

48 Charles T. Russell, *Studies in the Scriptures*, Vol. 1, p 150, quoted in *Popular Symbolics*, by Th. Engelder, W. Arndt, Th. Graebner, F. E. Mayer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1934), p 415.

49 *Verdict*, Essay 8, 1983, p 9.

50 Joh. P. Meyer, *Ministers of Christ*, p 112.

51 Ibid., p 107.

52 Compare Johann Grammann's "My Soul, Now Bless Thy Maker," stanza 2: "Nor treats us as we merit, But lays his anger by," *The Lutheran Hymnal*, #34). *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal* says of this hymn, which is based on Psalm 103, "It is without question one of our most majestic and most fervent hymns of praise, one that should be in the repertory of every Lutheran congregation." Unfortunately, stanza 2, which speaks so beautiful about the forgiveness of sins, was omitted in *Christian Worship*, #257.

53 *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, III, 316. Büshel also comments, "The most striking thing about the development of the terms, however, is that the words were originally used to denote man's action in relation to God ceased to used in this way in the NT and are used instead of God's action in relation to man." (p 317).

54 Ibid., III, 317. So also Adolf Hoenecke, op. cit., III, 194.

55 Green, *The Truth of God Incarnate*, p 11.

56 Ibid., p 139.

57 Carey, *God Incarnate*, p 60. According to *The Volume Library*, “The Ganges is the sacred river of the Hindus, who believe that it rises from the feet of Brahma and that the waters have miraculous power to cleanse from sin; moreover, they believe that the souls of those who die and are cremated on its banks will be transported, immediately to paradise. The chief bathing resort is Allahabad. To Benares [another important holy city on the Ganges] every devout Hindu attempts to make his last pilgrimage. The name *Ganges* is the Greek, form of the Sanskrit word *ganga*, which means stream” (New York: Educators Association, 1939), p 437.

58 WA 14,71, cited in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, translated by Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), p 416. See LW 30,196.

59 Siegbert W. Becker, *Revelation, The Distant Triumph Song* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1985), p 364.

60 *Augsburg Confession*, Art.V, 2 (*Tap.*, p 3; *Trig.*, p 45).

61 LW 45, 360.

62 LW 37, 40.

63 CW #212:1,4. According to *The Handbook to the Lutheran Hymnal*, this was Dr. Francis Pieper’s favorite hymn and was sung at his funeral. It has been called a precious gem in our treasury of song” and has been sung at the funeral of many another Christian. Regrettably, in *Christian Worship* its eight wonderful stanzas have been cut back to four. The melody, “which breathes the spirit of joyous triumph over death and the grave,” is deservedly described as “one of the best gems of our Evangelical hymnodical treasures.”

64 From the medieval macaronic Christmas hymn, “*In dulci júbilo*,” CW #34,4.