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# The Christology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

by Russell W. Palmer

*Any Christian theologian must expect to have his theology tested by its account of the person of Christ. Amid varying evaluations of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology it is helpful to have this study of his Christology from the Professor of Religious Studies in the University of Nebraska at Omaha.*

**M**ENTION of the Christology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer immediately raises two questions: what is Christology? and who was Dietrich Bonhoeffer? It may be best therefore to begin with a word about these preliminary questions.

In terms of Biblical categories, Oscar Cullmann tells us, Christology is the attempt to explain the *uniqueness* of Jesus<sup>1</sup>. More specifically, in the words of John Hick, "The central task of Christology is to give meaning to the dogma that Jesus of Nazareth was both God and Man."<sup>2</sup> As different as these definitions are, they unite in suggesting that Christology is a theological attempt to interpret the uniqueness and significance of Jesus who is called Christ. Beginning from the basic Christian confession of faith, that Jesus Christ is Lord, Christology seeks to understand and give an account of the meaning of this confession.

This question—the question of the meaning of Christ—was a constant concern of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the brilliant young German theologian who was executed by the Nazis for his part in the conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Bonhoeffer is probably best known to the public for a series of letters written from prison to his friend Eberhard Bethge.<sup>3</sup> In these letters, whose posthumous publication created a theological sensation, Bonhoeffer explored new possibilities for Christian faith in a "religionless" world.

Though it may come as a surprise to those who know only the "radical" Bonhoeffer of the prison letters, it is my claim that Christology is at the heart of Bonhoeffer's theology from beginning to end, and that we do not understand him rightly unless we pay attention to the Christological centre of his thought. Indeed, even in the

1 O. Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), p. 5.

2 J. H. Hick, "The Christology of D. M. Baillie," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, xi (1958), pp. 1-12.

3 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Edited by Eberhard Bethge. Third Edition (New York: Macmillan, 1967).

prison letters, the question with which Bonhoeffer is wrestling is precisely "who Christ really is, for us today" as he puts it in the letter of 30 April 1944—the letter which inaugurates his reflections on "non-religious interpretation."

Furthermore, it is my conviction that the best way to get at Bonhoeffer's Christology is to examine his systematic statement of it in a course of lectures on the subject given at the University of Berlin in 1933.<sup>4</sup> It will be the purpose of this paper, therefore, to give an account of the shape of Bonhoeffer's Christology as set forth in these lectures (followed by some concluding reflections on the relevance of Bonhoeffer's insights for current theological discussion).

*Logos and Anti-Logos: the Limits of Understanding*

Bonhoeffer begins his lectures by calling attention to the uniqueness of Christology as an academic enterprise. Generally speaking, he points out, scholars ask either of two basic questions:

a. What is the cause of  $x$ ? b. What is the meaning of  $x$ ? The first question embraces the sphere of the natural sciences, the second that of the arts (*Geisteswissenschaften*). . . . The subject  $x$  is comprehended by the natural sciences once it has been understood in its causal connection with other subjects. The subject  $x$  is comprehended by the arts once an understanding has been reached of its significance in relation to other known subjects. In both instances it is a matter of classification (28-29).

But what if there appears a reality which refuses to submit to such classification—which resists the effort to "explain" it by finding a place for it in the intellectual scheme of things? Then the human logos, man's reason, would be confronted by an "Anti-Logos" which defies man's attempt to master it. In this way we are alerted to the fact that Christology, though as an "-ology" it is an attempt of the human logos to grasp its subject matter, finds itself in a unique position vis-à-vis all other "-ologies" because it is an attempt to grasp the divine Logos. Furthermore, since the divine Logos is not merely an idea but a person—the person of the incarnate one, reason is unable to pursue the possibility of classification but can only ask, "Who are you?" This, Bonhoeffer insists, is the only appropriate Christological question (30). But this question is not only the question of "deposed, distraught reason"; it is also the question of faith. When faith puts this question to Jesus Christ, he reveals himself.

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, the manuscript of these lectures has not survived, but the lectures have been reconstructed by Bonhoeffer's pupil and friend, Eberhard Bethge, on the basis of several sets of student notes and published in Bonhoeffer's *Gesammelte Schriften*, III, 166-242 (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1966). An English translation by John Bowden has appeared as *Christology* (London: Collins, 1966; American edition entitled *Christ the Center*). Page numbers in parentheses in the body of this paper will be references to the English edition, although I have sometimes altered the translation to improve its accuracy.

And in the church, the community of faith, this answer is pondered and reflected upon.

*On Asking the Right Question: How? vs. Who?*

The recognition of the question "Who are you?" as the proper question of Christology has the effect of ruling out two other questions. On the one hand, because Jesus Christ asserts himself in answer to the church's question, his self-testimony is self-authenticating. Christian thought therefore cannot seek to prove that this revelation is real. "The fact (*Dass*) of the revelation of God in Christ cannot be either established or disputed scientifically" (32-33). On the other hand, the question as to *how* this revelation is "thinkable," i.e. the demand for an explanation of how it is possible, is equally illegitimate. "This question is tantamount to going behind Christ's claim and providing independent vindication of it," which amounts to a claim that the human logos is superior to the divine Logos (33).

The exclusion of these two questions leaves Christology with what Bonhoeffer calls "the *who*-question," i.e. the question of the identity of Jesus, "the question of the being, the essence and the nature of Christ" (33).

*Point of Departure: Present Christ or Historical Jesus?*

In clear contrast to the procedure insisted on by Pannenberg,<sup>5</sup> Bonhoeffer begins his Christology with a consideration of Christ as the one who is present. To be sure, Jesus is the present Christ only as the crucified and risen one (43), and the Christ who is present is the historic Christ, the historical Jesus of Nazareth (71). Nevertheless, it is important for Bonhoeffer to begin with the person of Christ as a present reality because his presence is what makes Christology possible. The presence of Christ is his being "here and now" in the community of faith via word and sacrament, and this presence in turn presupposes the resurrection, because only the risen one can be present here and now (43-45). It is because we experience Christ's presence in word and sacrament in the context of the church, Bonhoeffer argues, that we can ask the Christological question.

In speaking of the presence of Christ in the church, however, it is necessary to be on guard against misinterpretations. Some modern theologians have understood the presence of Christ as a historical influence, affecting us only indirectly as a power working in history; others have spoken of the power of the personality of Jesus, the direct impact of his inner life upon us. The trouble with these views, says Bonhoeffer, is that they see Christ not as a person but as an impersonal power. Moreover, they disregard the resurrection and

<sup>5</sup> Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus: God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968).

view Jesus only as a historical figure of the past whose influence somehow affects us. Over against this, Bonhoeffer insists that "only the Risen One makes possible the presence of the living person" and thus provides the necessary condition for Christology (45).

What then of the so-called historical Jesus? As noted above, Bonhoeffer affirms the identity of the Christ who is present now with the historical Jesus of Nazareth. Without this identity, "we would have to say with Paul that our faith is vain and an illusion" (71). That is not to say, however, that faith is dependent on the results of the historian's research. Speaking of "the self-testimony of the Risen One," Bonhoeffer declares:

By the miracle of his presence in the church he bears witness to himself here and now as the one who was historical then. . . . The Risen One himself creates faith and so points the way to himself as the Historical One. . . . Before the self-attestation of Christ in the present, the confirmation of historical research is irrelevant (75).

### *The Present Christ: Form and Place*

Before turning to the traditional questions of the doctrine of Christ's person, Bonhoeffer sketches two of his own characteristic Christological ideas: the form of Christ and the place of Christ.

In what form is Christ present? The answer is threefold. First, Christ as word: "Christ is not only present *in* the word of the church but also *as* the word of the church, i.e. as the spoken word of preaching" (52). Second, Christ as sacrament: "The word of preaching is the form in which the Logos reaches the human logos; the sacrament is the form in which the Logos reaches man in his nature" (54). Third, Christ as community: "Just as Christ is present as the word and in the word, as the sacrament and in the sacrament, so too he is also present as community and in the community" (59).

Where is Christ present? The place of Christ, says Bonhoeffer, is in the centre of things. "The one who is present in word, sacrament, and community is in the centre of human existence, history and nature. It is part of the structure of his person that he stands in the centre" (62). There follow three sections: Christ as the centre of human existence, Christ as the centre of history, and Christ as the centre (or mediator) between God and nature. Readers of the *Ethics* and the prison letters will recognize here themes that shape Bonhoeffer's later thinking.

### *The Main Christological Heresies*

When Bonhoeffer turns his attention to what he calls "critical" or "negative" Christology, he discusses a series of developments in the history of Christian thought which were judged by the church

at large as deviations from the authentic doctrine of the person of Christ. These distortions or "heresies" tend to be defective in one of four main ways (this is my classification, not Bonhoeffer's):

1. *Affirm deity in such a way as to deny humanity.* If we stress too onesidedly the divine nature of Christ, portraying him primarily as God, then the genuineness of his manhood is called in question. This tendency to deny that Christ is really human like us is known as Docetism (Greek *dokein*, "seem"): Christ only seemed to be human, but he is really divine.

2. *Affirm humanity in such a way as to deny deity.* On the other hand, if we give exclusive emphasis to the manhood of Christ, so that Jesus is seen as a man who was "adopted" by God, then it becomes questionable whether we can speak of an incarnation of God in him. Such a view makes it easy to see how Jesus is human, but cannot show how he is divine. Ebionitism or Adoptionism are designations for this approach.

3. *Affirm distinction of natures, denying that he is one person.* If we seek to preserve both Christ's deity and his humanity by stressing the coexistence of two complete natures in him, then it becomes difficult to preserve the unity of his person. This view has become known as Nestorianism.

4. *Affirm unity of person, denying distinction between natures.* If we stress the oneness of his being as a single person, then the distinctiveness of his two natures tends to blur, resulting in a fusion of divine and human into a third something. This tendency is found in Monophysitism.

Bonhoeffer's review of these heretical alternatives is fairly standard—i.e. there are no real surprises or innovations in this section of his lectures—with one striking exception, and that is his characterization of modern liberal theology as Docetic.

Docetism, as Bonhoeffer interprets it, rests on the Greek antithesis of idea and appearance. Beginning with an idea of God, Christ is then understood as the appearance or manifestation of this idea. This means that Docetism is indifferent to the concrete reality of the man Jesus: "he is the chance phenomenon; it is the idea, and its display, which must be grasped. Whether it was Jesus in whom the idea was displayed, and who Jesus was, does not matter at all" (82).

It may seem odd to charge modern religious liberalism with Docetism, in view of its emphasis on the historical Jesus. But beneath this emphasis Bonhoeffer detects an interest in Jesus only as a means

to an end, in which "a particular religious idea is first held and then applied to the historical Jesus." Liberal theology

understands Jesus as the support for or the embodiment of particular ideas, values and doctrines. As a result, the manhood of Jesus Christ is in the last resort not taken seriously, although it is this very theology which speaks so often of the man. . . . It confuses the real man with an ideal man and makes him a symbol (83-84).

### *The Contribution of Negative Christology*

The lesson of the Christological controversies in the ancient church is clear:

The concept of the incarnation must be defined negatively in such a way as to expose any attempt which interprets either the full manhood or the full Godhead of Jesus at the cost of qualifying either one or the other. In christology, the humanity of God and the divinity of the man are to be held together at the risk of destroying the rationality of the exposition (88).

In other words, any proposed "solution" which cuts the Gordian knot is *ipso facto* suspect. It is better to leave certain questions unanswered than to destroy the mystery in a misguided attempt to explain it.

The inconceivable cannot be changed into something conceivable; it is rather a matter of rejecting any attempts at such a transformation. Critical christology aims at delimiting the sphere within which this element of inconceivability must be allowed to remain (77).

The fact that the Council of Chalcedon does this in its declaration that Christ is two natures in one person is both its greatness and its limitation. In spite of liberal theology's criticism of the Chalcedonian definition, Bonhoeffer is basically positive about it. Not only does it repudiate the false theological content of the heretical Christologies, but it also entails the rejection of inappropriate thought forms.

What did the formula of Chalcedon say? It stated the *a priori* impossibility and impermissibility of taking the divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ side by side or together as a relationship of objectifiable entities (*dinglicher Gegebenheiten*). Simple negations remain. No positive pattern of thought is left to explain what happens in the God-man Jesus Christ. Thus the mystery is left as a mystery and must be understood as such (91).

The remarkable thing about the Chalcedonian definition is "the way in which it cancels itself out (*aufheben*)."

In other words, it shows the limitations of the concepts it employs simply by using them. It speaks of 'natures', but it expresses the facts in a way which demonstrates the concept of 'natures' to be an inappropriate one. It works with concepts which it declares to be heretical formulas unless they are used paradoxically and in contradiction. It brings the concept of substance which underlies the relationship of the natures to a climax and does away with it. From now on it will no longer be permissible to say any thing about the *substance* of Jesus Christ. Speculation about 'natures' is at an end; the notion of substance is superseded (91-92).

The great danger in Christological thought is the tendency to seek an answer to the question "How?" But Christology can have nothing

to do with the "how" question; it must give its exclusive attention to the "who" question. It is true that Chalcedon itself sought to answer the "how" question, "but in its answer it was already clear that the question 'How?' had been superseded" (101).

In the Chalcedonian Definition an unequivocally positive, direct statement about Jesus Christ is superseded and split into two expressions which stand over against each other in contradiction. . . . Objectifying thought succeeds in negating itself because it comes up against its own limitations. It comes to its end where its contradictory opposite must necessarily be recognized at the same time as itself (106).

Hence, "after Chalcedon, the question can no longer be 'How can the natures be thought of as different and the person as one?' but strictly, 'Who is this man of whom it is testified that he is God?'" (102).

In Bonhoeffer's view, the subsequent history of Christological thought vindicates the wisdom of the Chalcedonian definition with its insistence that we cannot answer the question of how the union of God and man is achieved in the incarnation. Whenever theologians have strayed beyond these boundaries, they have failed because they have sought to "objectify (*dinglich zu reden*) the divinity and the manhood in Christ and to distinguish them from each other as entities (*Dinge*)" (91). But such thinking leads only to an impasse. The basic methodological error in all such attempts is the habit of beginning with a concept of deity and a concept of humanity and then worrying about how to combine them. Instead, Bonhoeffer insists that Christology begin with the concrete person of the God-man himself. It was the failure of Protestant orthodoxy to do this that led to the fruitless debates between Lutheran and Reformed theologians. Bonhoeffer grants that orthodox Lutheranism, for example, wanted to preserve the integrity of both natures in Christ, but criticizes the way the divine and the human were pictured: "Before their integral unity in the one person . . . they were first conceived of in isolation from one another. So the procedure which the Chalcedonian Definition had prohibited was still being followed" (93). The same weakness is present in nineteenth-century kenotic theologians:

A comparison with the Chalcedonian Definition reveals that once again an attempt had been made to soften and balance contradictory and exclusive contrasts. It had been thought that one could define the divine and human natures *in abstracto* so that they fitted together. But this was only to fall victim to a simplification of the problem; the recognition of the real Jesus Christ had been made the recognition of a God-man construction. The prohibition against applying objectifying (*dingliche*) categories to the solution of the question of the God-man relationship had been violated (101).

### *The Structure of Positive Christology*

Within the limits set by critical or negative Christology, what is the scope of positive Christology? Bonhoeffer here develops two



themes: Christ as the one who became man, and Christ as the humiliated and exalted one.

1. *Incarnation.* No theologian has affirmed the reality of the incarnation more strongly than Bonhoeffer—although, he says, “strictly speaking, we should really talk not about the Incarnation but about the Incarnate One,” because thinking about the act or process of incarnation involves us in the “how” question (109). In lines that remind the reader of the emphasis of the prison letters, Bonhoeffer declares:

If Jesus Christ is to be described as God, then we may not speak of this divine essence, of his omnipotence and his omniscience, but we must speak of this weak man among sinners, of his cradle and his cross. When we consider the Godhead of Jesus, then above all we must speak of his weakness. In Christology one looks at the whole historical man Jesus and says of him, ‘He is God.’ One does not first look at a human nature and then beyond it to a divine nature; one meets the one man Jesus Christ, who is fully God (108).

2. *Humiliation and Exaltation.* In describing Christ as the humiliated and exalted one, Bonhoeffer does not intend to consider divine and human natures, but “the way in which the one who has been made man exists (*die Existenzweise des Mensch-Gewordenen*).”

Thus ‘humiliation’ does not mean a state where the Incarnate One is more man and less God, in other words a stage in the limitation of God. Neither does exaltation mean a state where he is more God and less man. In humiliation and exaltation, Jesus remains fully man and fully God. The statement ‘This is God’ must be made of the Humiliated One in just the same way as it is made of the Exalted One (110).

In the light of the reality of his humiliation, “the harshest and most scandalous expressions about this humiliated God-man must be ventured and tolerated” (112). To be sure, “the Humiliated One is present to us only as the Risen and Exalted One,” so that “as believers, we always have the incognito as an already penetrated incognito. . . .” But the opposite is also true: “We have the Exalted One only as the Crucified . . . the Risen One only as the Humiliated One” (116). There is no overcoming of this paradox prior to the return of the Lord in glory.

### *The Problem of Continuity*

At this point it becomes necessary to consider the problem of the relation between the earlier and later stages of Bonhoeffer’s thought. To what extent does Bonhoeffer’s early attempt at a systematic statement in his Christology lectures of 1933 retain any validity for the theology of the later Bonhoeffer? We have only to read the great Christological passages in the *Ethics* to see that Bonhoeffer’s basic Christological position did not undergo any fundamental change. The emphasis on incarnation on the one hand and humiliation/exaltation on the other is replaced in the *Ethics* by the threefold pattern of incarnation, cross, and resurrection. But the way he draws lines

from the incarnate one, the crucified one, and the risen one to the corresponding aspects of the Christian life shows that there is no sharp break in Bonhoeffer's Christological thought. In the *Ethics* he can say:

In Jesus Christ the reality of God entered into the reality of this world. The place where the answer is given, both to the question concerning the reality of God and to the question concerning the reality of the world, is designated solely and alone by the name Jesus Christ. . . . Henceforward one can speak neither of God nor of the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. . . . In Christ we are offered the possibility of partaking in the reality of God and in the reality of the world, but not in the one without the other (*Ethics*, 194,195).

Even the prison letters show no diminution in Bonhoeffer's lifelong preoccupation with the Christological question. Even the most radical statements about the suffering of Christ in these letters simply echo the affirmation of the humiliation of Christ in the 1933 Christology lectures. In spite of varying emphases, Bonhoeffer's thought shows a remarkable Christological continuity.

### *Evaluation*

When all is said and done, what are we to make of Bonhoeffer's Christology? The lectures themselves, had he ever published them, would certainly have required further development and clarification. Nevertheless, in spite of some annoyingly vague rhetoric, his basic criticisms are still cogent—especially his critique of the way in which traditional Christology “postulates and constructs the God-man from the prior knowledge of two isolated substances instead of taking as its presupposition the prior fact of the God-man” (105). Bonhoeffer's emphasis that the Christ who is interpreted in Christology is the Christ of the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection, is a welcome antidote both to the humanistic reductionism of liberal theology and to the abstract theorizing of orthodoxy as to how a divine principle and a human principle can be united. I appreciate this insistence on the necessity of beginning our Christological thinking with the concrete person of Jesus Christ. Further, it seems to me that Bonhoeffer's interpretation of the role of critical or negative Christology is fundamentally correct and needs to be stressed again in current theological discussion. Finally, the Christian community needs to hear and take to heart Bonhoeffer's admonition that “the more exclusively we acknowledge and confess Christ as our Lord, the more fully the wide range of his dominion will be disclosed to us” (*Ethics*, 58).

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