

# Some Problems of Modern Christology

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Christology, or the doctrine of the person of Christ, is central to Christian theology. It is an attempt to answer Christ's own question, 'Who do you say that I am?' (Mk. 8: 29). We should notice that he put two questions. The first was, 'Who do men say that I am?' (Mk. 8: 27). This is a question about the opinions of the general uncommitted mass of mankind. It is not a christological question. It was, of course, a question that had been answered and would be answered in various ways. Some said he was John the Baptist, some said he was Elijah *redivivus*, others said he was one of the prophets. To others, he was a radical who was upsetting the traditions. To Roman historians, he was a fanatic and a troubler of the *pax Romana*. And similar estimates of Jesus have been made ever since—an outstanding moral teacher, a violent revolutionary, and so on. Some have even gone so far as to pronounce him a figment of mythology.

The descriptions just mentioned are not, I have said, christological pronouncements. They are not, indeed, quite unconnected with christology and may have relevance of one kind or another to the christological problem. But this is not a problem which can arise outside of faith. Notice that Christ's second question is introduced by the adversative conjunction, 'But . . .' This points up the contrast with the first question. The second, truly christological question, is not concerned with uncommitted estimates or, at least *prima facie*, with objective facts and empirical characteristics. The second question was addressed to the disciples, and these were men who had taken at least the first step toward a commitment to Christ. The question is therefore addressed to faith. It seeks to elicit an answer in depth, so to speak, an answer that will penetrate below the surface characteristics to the ulterior or ultimate meaning of Jesus Christ. Hence, Christ can say of such an answer: 'Flesh and blood has not revealed it to you' (Mt. 16: 17).

According to the Gospel of Mark, Peter gave the answer: 'You are the Christ' (Mk. 8: 29). This is not a mere description of Jesus, it is at the same time a confession of faith for it expresses an attitude on the part of Peter. It is the attitude of one for whom Jesus of Nazareth had taken on an overwhelming significance. Yet Peter's words are only the beginning of christology, an incipient christology rather than christology proper. For the latter (like all theology) is not only a confession of faith but reflection upon faith. It is *fides quaerens intellectum*.

Peter's words can be considered as an act of interpretation. But no interpretation is ever final or complete. It leads into ever new interpretations. In the Gospel of Matthew, Peter is reported to have said:

'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Mt. 16: 16). Here the idea of the Christ or Messiah, which is used to interpret the meaning of Jesus in Mark's Gospel, is itself interpreted. There are many complexities in the process. 'Messiah' had a meaning in a Jewish context, but needed to be interpreted as soon as Christian faith moved into a wider context. Furthermore, even a first-century Jew would need to ask about the precise meaning of 'Messiah' and would study the Old Testament to find out. But meanings keep changing. Jesus (or his followers) drastically revolutionized the meaning of 'Messiah', especially by making central the element of suffering which, in the Old Testament, is at the most marginal. Peter himself had not thought of suffering when he first hailed Jesus as the Christ.

So began the long, never-ending task of christology, and it is still with us. It is an inescapable part of our Christian responsibility. For as soon as men began to make the kind of confessions that came from the lips of the first disciples, they had the responsibility to reflect deeply on the meaning and the grounds for what they were saying. One can only make such gigantic claims for Christ as that he is Messiah or the Son of God if one is prepared to think through them, otherwise it can all become mere superstition and fanaticism.

A recent essay by Don Cupitt bears the title, 'One Jesus, many Christs?'<sup>1</sup> At first, this strikes one as a strange title. In the nineteenth century, there were many pictures of Jesus produced by the historical quest, but there was a tendency to assume that there is one Christ of faith. Cupitt reverses this. But he has his point. Jesus has been seen as the Christ in many ways. There is pluralism in christology, and this need not be disruptive. Rather, it may even be needed. If the event of Jesus Christ has the greatness and inexhaustibility that Christians ascribe to it, then it will yield many interpretations in different ages and different cultures. But it cannot mean just anything. There are limits to interpretation, imposed by the reality interpreted.

Pluralism is already there in the New Testament. A variety of titles are given to Jesus—Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, Lord, the Word and so on. These do not contradict one another, yet they do not easily fit together. Their very diversity draws attention to the richness of Jesus Christ. Further, each of these titles gives rise to a specific type of christology. At different epochs, one type or another may be dominant, yet perhaps none of these types can ever be suppressed. Each introduced an exploration of meaning that is related to a particular kind of questioning, to a particular background of presuppositions. However novel or unique anything may be, it is necessary to relate it to what we already know if it is to be meaningful at all. We always bring along some pre-understanding, some frame of reference that affords the possibility both of comparison and of contrast. Yet this frame is itself flexible. It is capable of being stretched and reshaped. With Jesus Christ, something new appeared on the human scene. Yet the novelty could be related to the promises of the tradition. But even as the tradition helped to elucidate the

<sup>1</sup> In *Christ, Faith and History*, ed. S. W. Sykes and J. P. Clayton (Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 131 ff.

meaning of the new, there was a reciprocal action of the new on the tradition whereby it came to be understood in new ways.

We have noted that the first interpretative idea was 'Messiah' or 'Christ'—an idea which naturally came from the background of Judaism. It means literally 'the anointed one' and could refer to the king of Israel or to the nation itself. In the course of the history of that nation, the idea took on eschatological connotations. The Messiah came to be understood as a promised king who would deliver Israel and rule in righteousness. This expected Messiah was not an otherworldly figure, and the possibility of a suffering Messiah was only marginal. From this idea of Messiah there arises the possibility of what may be called a politico-ethical christology, a this-worldly interpretation of Christ as the Lord of man's social, moral and political life. There has been a tendency to play down this understanding of Messiahship, and it has been argued that Jesus transformed the political understanding into a spiritual one. Admittedly, that political understanding of Messiahship would, in isolation, be one-sided. But it is nevertheless a genuine part of the meaning, and it is today being revived in such movements as the political theology of Johannes Metz and in the 'black theology' of the United States, as well as in the attempts to portray Jesus as a revolutionary.

Also from the Jewish tradition came the title, Son of Man. There are parallels to this idea in other Near Eastern religions: such ideas as those of a primal man or a heavenly man or a second Adam. These ideas are associated with an eschatological or even apocalyptic emphasis. History is a cosmic drama. The Son of Man will be God's viceroy who will judge the earth and institute the new age. There came to be overlaps with the idea of Messiah, but essentially the Son of Man is a different symbol. In contrast to the original notion of the Messiah, the Son of Man is otherworldly, cosmic, supernatural. Yet as the very title suggests, he is somehow continuous with man—man radically remade, a second Adam. So although the Son of Man is judge, he is not anti-humanistic. On the contrary, he inaugurates a new age of man. Could we call the christology which arises out of this second model eschatological-humanistic, looking as it does for the emergence of a new humanity?

Christ is also Lord, and one of the earliest confessions or creeds of the Church was simply that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2: 11). With this title, we make contact with a broader background, for the idea of the Lord was common to Jewish and Hellenistic religion, though differently understood in each. The Lord was the common Jewish title for the one God, whose name was too holy to be pronounced. In Hellenistic religion, the word Lord also connoted deity, though there were many Lords. The application of the title Lord to Jesus certainly elevated him on to the divine level, though it hardly said *tout court* that he is God. The arguments over the precise provenance of the title have been inconclusive. But the important point about the use of a title like Lord (and also Saviour) is that it lays stress on the confessional aspect. It brings out the stance of the believer: To call anyone Lord is to acknowledge his ultimacy—he is always

**Lord** for the one who confesses his lordship. We could say that the word **Lord** is a rank word or an evaluating word, rather than a descriptive word. Hence we can also say that this particular model lies at the root of the existential type of christology.

Another title is **Son of God**. Again there has been much argument over its origin. Attempts have been made to explicate it in terms of sonship in the Old Testament, in Jesus' own filial relation to the Father, and in Hellenistic ideas about sons of the gods. Perhaps it is to guard against the danger of thinking of the **Son of God** as a kind of demigod, polytheistically understood, that the Gospel of John speaks of Jesus as the 'only begotten Son'. Yet however one may answer these historical questions, the point theologically about a **Son of God** is that somehow he unites in himself the divine and the human. The central paradox about Jesus, as the Church has understood him, is that he is true God and true man, and the expression 'Son of God' has become a standard way of expressing this paradox. Let us call the christology that arises from this model the mythico-metaphysical type. And for the early Church this became the dominant way of understanding the christological problem. The question was posed as the metaphysical question about the possibility of a God-man. Here are the roots of the classical christology, which eventually develops into talk of the one person and the two natures. Today there is something of a revolt against that type of christology, and unquestionably its dominance in the past has overshadowed other legitimate ways of considering the problem. But, language aside, can we finally escape the metaphysical question?

The title **Word** or **Logos** is somewhat different from those so far considered. It seems obviously more reflective, even if it was not in its original application to Jesus philosophical—and here again, of course, there are historical disputes. It seems unquestionable that some Greek influence was at work. But let us begin with the simple point that a **Word** expresses: it brings forth that which has been hidden, it mediates that which has so far lain unexpressed in someone's mind. In the Old Testament, it is by his **Word** that God acts and brings himself to expression. In Greek philosophy, **Logos** had a varied history, and came to mean the principle of reason in the world. Like wisdom in the Old Testament, the **Logos** had been there from the beginning as the inner meaning of all things, the expression of the being of God. To call Jesus the **Word** was to identify him with the meaning of Being and so to institute what may be called an ontological christology. This type of christology, with its appeal to a universal meaning, has always had special significance for the relation of Christianity to other faiths as can be seen from the thought of Justin the Martyr in the early days of Christianity down to Panikkar in present-day India.

The whole range of ideas just surveyed, all current in the world at the time of the birth of Christianity, could be likened to a nebula. The floating clouds were ready to crystallize, to assume definite shape and structure. They did in fact crystallize around Jesus of Nazareth, though we have seen that they were themselves transformed in their application to him. But 'crystallization' perhaps suggests something

too definite and final. Rather, there was set in motion a plurality of christologies, with the possibility of many variations, interactions, combinations, transformations to meet the needs of new ages and new cultures. This is the truth of the one Jesus, many Christs. Yet the creative originating event must remain in some sense normative for the christologies derived from it, and in fact these bear, in spite of their divergences, a family resemblance.

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The classical christology developed over several centuries in the period after the New Testament. Christological doctrine was, to a considerable extent, formulated in response to heresies. One might define a heresy as an individualistic, one-sided statement of a doctrine. A heresy contains truth, but truth that has been distorted. One might also say that heresies were needed, in order to show what ways forward were possible, and what would turn out to be dead-ends. Yet heresies are not just experimental thinking. One can only properly speak of heresy when there has been a hardening of the error and a breach of the Christian community.

If at the centre of christology there is the paradox of true God and true man, this is a paradox so hard to maintain that heresy becomes almost inevitable. There were two main possibilities of error, and both of them emerged rather swiftly. The Ebionites stressed the true man: for them, Christ was merely a man, even if an exemplary one. The various Gnostic and docetic sects stressed the true God: for them, Christ was a purely divine being who only seemed like a man, and certainly did not become truly incarnate or die.

These two errors have kept recurring in the Church ever since. Perhaps — as J.A.T. Robinson has argued — a built-in docetism has been the major threat to the integrity of the Church's thinking about Christ. But the opposite tendency which would deny the true deity of Christ has also been around, for instance, in unitarianism and recently in the theology of van Buren.

I shall briefly recall some of the climactic moments in the rise of classical christology. I mention first Nicea and the rejection of Arianism. The Arians highly honoured Christ and used very exalted language about him, but nevertheless they claimed that finally he was a creature. Athanasius saw that the issue at stake was really that of idolatry. However exalted Christ might be, he could have no ultimate claim on men unless he were God. This is the point of the famous word *homoousios*. Christ is one in being with the Father. It was in this way that Nicea tried to settle the question of the relation of Christ to the Father. I pass straight on to Chalcedon. Its language of the one person (*hypostasis*) uniting in himself the two natures (*physeis*) without either separation or confusion was intended to pilot christological doctrine between the errors on either side—the alleged Nestorian error of separating the natures, and the Apollinarian error of confounding them in some kind of demigod. Chalcedon aimed to preserve the paradox of one who is truly and fully God, yet truly and fully man.

At Nicea and Chalcedon the Church made momentous choices. She chose rightly, and there could be no question of reviving the old heresies deliberately. As John Robinson remarks, 'Arianism as a considered theological option is not a serious contemporary temptation'.<sup>2</sup> We cannot go back on the history of the Church, and the classic christology remains and claims our allegiance. But it should be remembered that Chalcedon was not the end, but rather a beginning. It ruled out some possibilities, but it left plenty of tasks for future generations.

Actually the classical christology now seems very foreign to twentieth-century minds. It is not only its language that is strange, but its whole way of putting the question. We do not reject it—I do not think we *can* reject it, but we must find new ways of grappling with the christological problem. The analogy of driving out of a city may be helpful. As we go along the road, we see the city differently when we look back. Its whole shape may change. Buildings which dominated the skyline when we were only a mile or two away, or which may have seemed to constitute the very core of the city, may seem much less impressive from five miles further on. While new features, of which we had been unaware before, may now seem quite important. In similar fashion, the whole shape of christology may change—not just its language or its thought-forms.

Let me mention some characteristics of the classical theology which now seem foreign to us and which give it a shape not appropriate to our own vantage point.

1. It was a christology from above down—its essence was the *descendit*—he came down from heaven. It is not so much the mythology of coming down that is the trouble. More fundamentally, the trouble is that the classic christology begins from God as its starting point. So the question assumes the form: How does God become man? This way of formulating the question is in itself an encouragement to the docetic tendency, for it permanently relegates Christ's humanity to second place.

2. A further difficulty of the classical christology is that it conducts the discussion in metaphysical terms. Of the models mentioned in an earlier part of this essay, one has come to be dominant—the one which I called the mythico-metaphysical model. The problem becomes the metaphysical one of conceiving the relation of divine being to human being and of their union in Christ.

3. In the classical christology, history and mythology are confused—or, better expressed, they have not yet been sorted out. Christ was 'conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven . . .' Are these events all of the same order? Did they happen or could they happen in any manner of which an historian could take cognizance? The ancients were relatively untroubled by such questions, but we are troubled by them and we cannot rest with the uncritical mythological mentality of the classical christology.

<sup>2</sup> *The Human Face of God* (S.C.M. Press, 1973), p. 197.

4. There was only a fragmentary and inchoate attempt to grapple with the problem of how Jesus Christ relates to the race of mankind in such a way that his incarnation and atoning work have consequences for all. This is the problem of Christ's solidarity with all men, or his capacity as representative man. Furthermore, the attempts to meet this problem were once again couched in exceedingly obscure metaphysical terms, notably such difficult ideas as *anhypostasia* and *enhypostasia*. The whole problem needs to be thought out in new ways.

The defects of the classical theology set the agenda for a contemporary christology. (a) In a secular age, the *descendit* is not possible as a way of explanation. The order and shape of christology must be turned round. Contemporary christology must take the humanity of Christ with an utterly new seriousness, and make that its starting-point. This is in fact happening in the work of such diverse theologians as Pannenberg, Knox, Robinson, Rahner, Meyendorff. To be sure, there is a danger of swinging too far in this direction, as we noted in the case of van Buren. Also, one must not repeat the mistakes of adoptionism. (b) Metaphysical language may not finally be avoidable, but it must be muted in an age which has rebelled against metaphysics. But it is not simply that metaphysics is unpopular. What is worse is that a too speculative approach misses the real meaning of Christ. Luther made a famous distinction between sophistical knowledge and saving knowledge, and although this insight was lost in Protestant orthodoxy, it has been powerfully regained in recent decades. Models other than the mythico-metaphysical are being revived. (c) Perhaps the most vexing problem of all for a contemporary christology is the historical one. It is a problem that has been mounting up since the 18th century, and I shall have more to say about it later. But what is left of history in the Gospels? What do we really know about Jesus Christ when the myth and legend has been recognized for what it is? (d) The problem of the corporate nature of Jesus Christ arises for us with a new urgency. This is in consequence of the fact that our own age has become impressed as never before with the interdependence of the whole human race. Can we find in the contemporary experience models that will illuminate this problem in a way that such notions as *anhypostasia* could not do? (e) One must add another problem which, I think, arises out of the others. Wherein do the uniqueness and specialness of Jesus Christ consist? The classic christology was able to answer this by saying that the Logos was incarnate in Jesus. But if we have turned the order of christology around, we cannot avail ourselves of that traditional answer. We have to start with the human Jesus and ask ourselves what was so special about him that men eventually came to confess him as the Logos incarnate. Would we say that it was supreme love? or pro-existence for others? or true freedom? or creativity? or obedience? or possibly the fact that he rose from the dead (whatever we may mean by that)? But can we not find parallels to at least some of these matters in the founders of other religions? Is there any one of them that is distinctive? Or must we take all of them together? What is so special about Jesus Christ?

## The Historical Problem

I said that we would need to devote more attention to the historical question, and it is to this that I now turn. What do we know about Jesus? For more than two hundred years it would seem that a steady erosion of the gospel history has been taking place. How much of that history remains? And, if a contemporary christology carries the demand that we take the humanity of Christ with new seriousness, what can we in fact still know about Jesus as a man?

The historical question cannot be dismissed as unimportant. It is not enough simply to cherish an ideal of Christhood. Such an ideal would be significant, but Christianity has always affirmed more than the ideal. It claims to be an historical religion, and the point of this claim is that the ideal has in fact been actualized under historical conditions. There is not merely a Logos (other ancient religions affirmed as much) but the Logos has become flesh and has dwelt among men. It is this historical assertion that brings a new hope and confidence. The Logos is not just a distant ideal (which could be very discouraging) but has entered the texture of history in embodied actuality. This assertion is integral to Christianity. But if it brings a new hope and confidence, at the same time it makes Christianity more vulnerable than religions which deal only in timeless ideals.

The serious criticism of the Bible arose along with the Enlightenment or Age of Reason. The rationalism of the 17th and 18th centuries brought two consequences. One was deism—the view that all the essential truths of religion are discoverable by reason, and that no specific revelation is needed. Christianity is simply a story version of truths that are as old as creation. The other consequence was historical criticism. This introduced a new way of thinking. The sacred was secularized, the absolute relativized, the eternal historicized. In particular, the Bible was subjected to the same kind of historical investigation as had been applied to other writings.

The two tendencies, deism and historical criticism, coincided in the person of Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768). His writings were published only after his death, but they reveal him to have been one of the most radical critics of traditional Christianity, and much that is still being written was already better expressed by Reimarus more than two hundred years ago. The essence of his teaching was this. There were really two gospels. The first has been covered up by the evangelists, but enough traces remain to show us what it was. That first gospel was purely political. When Jesus preached the kingdom, it was understood as the deliverance of Israel and the founding of a worldly kingdom with a traditional Messiah, and (argues Reimarus) Jesus knew that his teaching would be understood in this way, so he must have intended it. He propagated his views and gathered disciples, of whom some were zealots. When the time seemed ripe, he went up to Jerusalem and was well received, with, apparently, a large following among the people. The story of the cleansing of the Temple is taken by Reimarus to indicate an attempt by Jesus and his followers to seize power by force. But the attempt failed. Jesus had overestimated the extent of his support, his followers melted

away, and he found himself arrested. The cry of dereliction from the cross is evidence of his failure and disillusionment. So the first gospel came to nothing. But the disciples invented a second gospel, which has in fact become the gospel of the Christian Church. This new gospel was based on two fictions: that Jesus had risen from the dead, and that he would shortly come again in power. The deception worked, and Christianity flourished. The disciples became the powerful leaders of the new movement.

This first drastic critique of the gospel history certainly revealed the vulnerability of Christianity on the historical side. It prompted Lessing's famous question whether the salvation of mankind could rest on anything so fallible as a particular contingent historical happening and—very much in accord with the rationalist spirit of the time—led to the supposition that the eternal truths of Christianity, especially its moral teaching, are quite independent of any historical manifestations. In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant argued that although the example of Jesus is useful, the rational man does not really need it, for the ideal of the good life is already present in his reason.

I shall pass over the complex story of the nineteenth century quest for the historical Jesus and the criticism of that quest to more recent work. The form criticism developed by Weiss, Dibelius and Bultmann has been very influential. According to them, the Gospels were put together from units with little regard for chronology or the interconnection of events. Thus they are not biographies of Jesus. They tell us about the teaching of the early Church rather than about Jesus himself. Concerning Jesus, Bultmann tells us that we can know very little of his personal history.

Of course, there is not a complete skepticism. Among reputable scholars nowadays it is almost universally admitted that Jesus actually existed, in contrast to some nineteenth century writers who claimed that the figure of Jesus was entirely a product of mythology. Bultmann remarks: 'Form critics do not dispute the view that the Church had its origin in the works of Jesus and has preserved many of his sayings in its literary creations'.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, many New Testament scholars are less skeptical than Bultmann. Yet, even if one does not go along with the more extreme views, we have to acknowledge that many question marks have been set against the traditional story, and we have to ask what this means for christology. Two obvious questions are: Was Jesus ever conscious of being Messiah? And, how did he understand his own death? Suppose, for instance, one believes (as Bultmann does) that Jesus thought of himself only as a messianic prophet, and that it was only after his death and resurrection that his disciples hailed him as Messiah, what is the importance of this for theology? I should say myself that the importance is not great, but it does force us to recognize more clearly the humanity of Christ, whereas the traditional view supposed that all along he was conscious of being Messiah and foresaw everything in advance—a belief

<sup>3</sup> *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (Harper and Row, 1963), p. 40.

which can hardly fail to lead to docetism. The question about how he understood his death is more serious. But again, if we accept the full humanity of Christ, it may well be that he went up to Jerusalem hoping that his enemies would be won over. Yet he knew that Jerusalem slew its prophets. Death must have been a possibility with which he reckoned, though he may have hoped right up until the betrayal in the garden that there might be another outcome. The erosion of the gospel history by no means destroys the foundations of christology. On the contrary, it makes us take far more seriously the true humanity of Christ. So far is it from making that humanity inaccessible that it rather drives out the last vestiges of docetism.

Of course, one has got to assume that there is some basic correspondence between the historical reality and the Christ of faith presented in the Gospels. And one can have a reasonable confidence that there is indeed such a correspondence. If the credibility gap had been too wide, then it is certain that Christianity would never have got off the ground in the first place.

### **Development of Modern Christology**

I have indicated the differences that would characterize a modern christology as compared with the classical christology, and have gone into a little more detail on the specific difference that arises out of the historical criticism of the past two hundred years or so. But in order to understand the modern problematic more fully, it is necessary to say more about the developments that have brought us to the present situation. Thus I now propose to trace—and it can be only in the barest outline—the development of christology from the end of the eighteenth century down to the present. That development has taken the form of a highly complex dialectic. As each stage in it has arisen, it has provoked an opposing movement, and this in turn may split up into new oppositions. Yet there has been over the whole period something of a consensus in moving toward the positions which we characterized above as typical of the modern period.

We begin with Schleiermacher (1768-1834), the father of modern Protestant theology. He stands in opposition both to traditional propositional orthodoxy and to the deistic rationalism of the Enlightenment. He claims a place for feeling in religion, and for this reason is often considered as the theological exponent of Romanticism.

But what is most important from the christological point of view is that he does take the humanity of Christ seriously. Christ is seen by Schleiermacher as 'the completion of the creation of man'. His solidarity with the human race is not in doubt, but he has brought the human condition to a new level of fulfilment. Thus christology in Schleiermacher is held in the closest relation to anthropology.

Man himself is a being who stands before the possibilities of either blessedness or sin. He achieves blessedness when his God-consciousness is clear and vivid. This God-consciousness is the affirmative side of man's awareness of his dependent status. Sin, on the other hand, is equated with the febleness of near extinction of the God-consciousness. Christ is like all men in his basic constitution, but

he differs from all men in the constancy and vividness of his God-consciousness. This can be described as the very presence of God in him. But although this may sound like a very humanistic christology, Schleiermacher seems also to posit a special intervention of God whereby Christ was from the beginning destined for his messianic role and preserved from sin.

Schleiermacher's sense of the continuity of Christ's being with that of mankind as a whole enables him to see both sin and salvation in corporate terms. Original sin is that corporate disorder which affects each and to which each contributes. Redemption is also corporate; it takes place through the union of the Christian community with Christ. An unusual feature in German Protestant theology is Schleiermacher's willingness to speak of this union in mystical terms.

Negatively, Schleiermacher offered a brilliant critique of the classical theology of the two natures united in the one person. If indeed one is to understand 'nature' as a universal property characterizing an indefinite number of individuals, then there is indeed something logically inconsistent in thinking of a single individual combining in himself two opposed natures.

To Schleiermacher's christology is opposed that of Hegel (1770-1832). As a rational philosopher, Hegel could not go along with Schleiermacher's exaltation of feeling (even though feeling, as Schleiermacher understood it, is much more than subjective emotion). Yet Hegel, as soon as he had moved beyond the position of his early theological writings, opposed also the dry rationalism of Kant and the eighteenth century. In Hegelian terms, Hegel's own christology can be understood as a synthesis which takes up the opposition between Kant and Schleiermacher. But this is possible only in the context of a vast speculative philosophy of spirit—the philosophy of which we have a statement in Hegel's great work, *The Phenomenology of Mind*.

Reality is seen in terms of a great dialectical movement. Everything has an opposite and tends to pass into it. In the course of this movement, a new reality emerges and sets up a new dialectic. Absolute Spirit moves out from itself into the realm of finite beings. Only so can its own inner potentialities come to expression. In the world of the temporal and the finite, the Absolute knows itself. But this is no dualism, for a new movement is set up in the finite back to the Absolute. From the theological point of view, what is of interest here is the underlying pattern of the Trinity. The Father comes forth into the world and its history in the Son, and the world in turn is led back to the Father by the Spirit. Hegel thus makes the eternal prior to the temporal, but he does not, as is often said, devalue history, for it is only in the movement of history that the treasures of Absolute Spirit can be actualized. If that Spirit remained pure Being, then it would be indistinguishable from nothing. Hegel makes the important point that there can only be sacrifice (atonement) on the part of the Son because there is already sacrifice in the Absolute. Thus the eternal significance of Christ is clearly recognized in Hegel and the Hegelian theologians, many of whom found the *Logos* model the most

satisfactory approach to Christology. But in spite of what I have just said about the importance, even the necessity, of history to the Hegelian scheme, most Hegelians did in fact play down the value of the historical and the particular. In the end, what really matters is the Idea—and one finally wonders whether any advance has been made beyond Kant.

Among all the followers of Hegel, the one most significant for christology was David Friedrich Strauss (1808-74), and his influence continues to be felt. We may think of Strauss's work as a subsidiary dialectical phase within the broader movement of Hegelianism. Strauss took up with new seriousness the problem of history, and his massive *Life of Jesus* is a minute and detailed examination of the whole gospel tradition. Every saying and every incident is probed and scrutinized. Strauss introduces a new word into theological discussion—the word 'myth'. Hitherto this word had been applied only to non-Christian religions, but now it is used of the New Testament itself. A myth, in the sense in which Strauss uses the term, is 'a narrative relating directly or indirectly to Jesus, which may be considered not as the expression of a fact but as the product of an idea of his earliest followers'. Strauss has in fact set up a new form of dialectic. Myth is seen as the synthesis of the opposition between supernatural and natural explanation. For instance, there is a story in the Gospels of Jesus walking on the waters. The supernatural interpretation claims that he did so by divine power, and Strauss holds that such an interpretation is not credible in a scientific age; the natural explanation (found in some modern commentators) is that he was walking on a ledge of rock hidden just below the surface of the water, but such an explanation is also to be rejected as simply a far fetched invention. The story is myth, a narrative which may have little or no factual basis and which is intended primarily to convey a religious or dogmatic truth about Christ. Strauss found a powerful motivation for the myth-making propensity in the study of the Old Testament by the early Christians. Their minds had become so dominated by the compelling figure of Jesus that wherever they looked in the Old Testament, it seemed to them that they found predictions of the Messiah and applied them to Jesus. Their reasoning went thus: such and such is predicted of the Messiah in the Old Testament; Jesus was the Messiah, so such and such must have happened to Jesus. Sometimes genuine recollections of Jesus could be fitted into this scheme, sometimes incidents were simply invented for they 'must have happened'.

At the end of his *Life of Jesus*, Strauss considers what is the result for faith. The history, it would appear, has been discredited and indeed shattered in a manner that was unparalleled before the time of Strauss. But now the Hegelian character of Strauss's thought come out more clearly. Although the history has been shattered, the dogma remains and is indeed set free from the accidents of a contingent history. That dogma is simply the unity of God and man.

Thus Hegelianism leads once more to the swallowing up of history in timeless truth, of the particular and concrete in the universal and abstract. It is in the face of this whole Hegelian tendency that we must see the next phase in the dialectic of modern christology, namely,

the powerful protest of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55). One can hardly talk about Kierkegaard's christology, for one of his main points is that a systematic doctrine that would make Jesus Christ an intelligible phenomenon is just impossible, and if christology aims at that, it is a mistaken enterprise. What we find in Kierkegaard is not a systematic christology but a number of fragmented christological insights. The concrete Jesus Christ, man and God, is a paradox not to be contained in any formula.

In some regards, Kierkegaard stands opposed to the whole drift of nineteenth century christology. For Kierkegaard insists that you cannot begin with the human Jesus, but only with the fact that this man was God. If you begin with a man, then you may pronounce him great, very great, the greatest that ever lived . . . but you will never come to Godhood, for this, in Kierkegaard's view, is at an infinite distance from manhood. Yet at the same time Kierkegaard is far from denying the true manhood of Jesus Christ. This is precisely the paradox. God humbles himself to become truly and fully man, and this particular, suffering, rejected man, Jesus of Nazareth. This is the offence or stumbling block of Christianity. Nor is there any infallible sign to show that this man is the incarnate God. On the contrary, God comes incognito. If we had all the historical information in the world about Jesus, if indeed we had lived as his contemporaries and had the opportunity to note all the details of his life, this would be of no help to us. There is no way of proving that Jesus Christ is God, for the very idea that God should be incarnate in a particular man is at variance with reason.

Somewhat related to Kierkegaard's position and playing a mediating role in the discussions of the nineteenth century were the so-called 'kenotic' christologies. The best-known representative of this view was Thomasius (1802-75), though long after his time kenotic-christologies were still being taught in England. I have compared the kenotic christologies to Kierkegaard because they too begin from the side of God and yet take great care to insist on the true humanity of Jesus Christ. They try to maintain the classic shape of christology while avoiding the docetic tendency which is so liable to arise when christology operates 'from above down'.

The inspiration of kenotic christology comes from the Christ-hymn embedded in Philippians, chapter 2. Christ did not count it glory to be equal with the Father, but laid aside his glory, emptying himself of his majesty to take the form of a servant. Thomasius tried to elaborate on this idea by speculating that the self-emptying consisted in Christ's laying aside those external attributes of deity which concern God's relation to the world—omnipotence, omniscience, and such like. But if there was to be a real incarnation, there could be no laying aside of the immanent attributes belonging to the inner life of God—holiness, truth, love and so on. Indeed, precisely these attributes found expression in the life of Christ, so that one can acknowledge that God was truly present in him. But the human limitations of Christ are also allowed for on this theory, for instance, the limitation of his knowledge.

But both Kierkegaard and kenoticism are opposed (and perhaps usefully so) to the mainstream of nineteenth century christology. That mainstream is continued in the work of Ritschl (1822-89) and his followers. There is a touch of positivism in their attitudes, especially in their rejection of metaphysics. The essence of Ritschl's own teaching lies in his view that christological statements are not objectively descriptive assertions but judgments of value. To claim that Christ is God is not to advance a theory about his metaphysical status but to confess that for the Christian community, Christ has the value of God. The rejection of metaphysics meant that God could not be known by natural theology or philosophical speculation. Thus Ritschlianism tended to be very definitely a theology of revelation. So far as this theology can claim a philosophical grounding, this is to be found in Kant who, as he had said himself, abolished knowledge in order to make way for faith. He abolished metaphysics, but exalted the practical reason, the faculty of value-judgment.

Perhaps the clearest and most compelling statement of the Ritschlian position came from Herrmann (1846-1922). He was a man of great influence who numbered among his students both Barth and Bultmann. According to Herrmann, the truth of Christianity rests upon two foundations, neither of them speculative or metaphysical. One is the historical testimony to Jesus Christ. Though not a literalist, Herrmann believed that the New Testament witness to the historical Jesus is sufficiently reliable and detailed to enable us to receive an 'impression' of the inner life of Jesus not essentially different from the impression which he made on the original band of disciples. The other foundation is the testimony of our own consciences, of the practical ethical reason. For this judges that the quality of life brought to expression in Jesus Christ is the highest possible. Christology on this view is resolved into history and ethics, without metaphysics. In other words, we find in Herrmann a position very close to that elaborated by van Buren some seventy years later.

The final working out of the Ritschlian position comes with Harnack (1850-1931). The rise of dogma, as Harnack sees it, though it may have been necessary, was essentially a departure from the essence of Christianity. That essence was Jesus' proclamation of an ethical kingdom, but the Church turned this into a proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God. Harnack's aim was to get back to the original gospel of the kingdom, though this in effect meant that Jesus was to be regarded as the Christ only in the sense that he was a spiritual pioneer who made known God's will for men. This was the furthest development of nineteenth century liberal Protestantism.

But the edifice was already crumbling. Weiss (1863-1914) had demonstrated that the Ritschlian idea of the kingdom as an enlightened moral and social community was a modern construction, having little or nothing to do with the strongly eschatological teaching of Jesus. The same writer was one of the first exponents of form criticism, which called in question the Ritschlian appeal to the historical Jesus. Martin Kähler (1835-1912) was another scholar who dealt a heavy blow to the Ritschlian claims. He argued that the Jesus of historical

research is just as abstract and artificial a figure as the metaphysical Christ of Chalcedonian christology. The New Testament is neither history nor dogma, but kerygma. The Roman Catholic scholar Alfred Loisy (1857-1940) added his quota of criticism. Christianity, he maintained, is a living, growing phenomenon, and to look for its primitive form is rather like substituting an acorn for an oak tree, or like trying to peel an onion in the hope of finding a core.

However, it was the course of events themselves that dealt the death blow. The inadequacies of liberal theology became apparent as the West blundered into the wars and upheavals of the twentieth century. The optimistic, humanistic theology that had been developed from Schleiermacher onward was seen to have misjudged the human predicament and to have failed to penetrate to the depths. Karl Barth accused the nineteenth century theologians of having turned God into the patron saint of their own cultural institutions. Bonhoeffer may have had Ritschl's 'value-judgment' in mind when he ironically said that Jesus had been made the Christ by popular acclaim.

It seemed as if the protest of Kierkegaard, largely ignored in the nineteenth century, was now coming into its own. Barth in particular followed up the insights of Kierkegaard, and in his early writings presented Jesus Christ not as the natural culmination of human aspirations but as the living Word of God who judges all aspirations. But no more than Kierkegaard did Barth wish to let go of the genuine humanity of Jesus Christ. His later writing can speak even of the humanity of God and he sensitively portrays 'God going into the far country',<sup>4</sup> arguing that the humility and self-emptying which characterize the incarnation are as much part of the essence of God as is his majesty and otherness.

The Barthian protest was needed. But Barth himself conceded that, in its earlier phase, it had been exaggerated, and many theologians believe that even in his later writings Barth did not go far enough toward recognizing the virtues that had belonged to nineteenth century theology as well as the vices which he had so severely castigated. By mid-century the influence of Barth was already on the wane. Something like a continuation of the old liberalism seemed to be coming back, but a chastened liberalism that had learned from Barth's critique.

It is well represented by the existential christology of Bultmann. The decisive question, according to Bultmann is whether Christ helps me because he is God's son, or whether he is the Son of God because he helps me.<sup>5</sup> That is to say, christology is subsequent to soteriology; or, to put it differently, a christological pronouncement is not primarily a description of Jesus Christ but a confession of his meaning for the disciple. In some ways, this is a return to the 'value-judgment' theory. But in line with modern scholarship, Bultmann also recognizes the eschatological character of the New Testament message, so that he refuses to follow the Ritschlians in turning the Gospel into an ethico-political exhortation. Nevertheless, Bultmann's position is weakened by his failure to give any ontological account of the

<sup>4</sup> *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1.

<sup>5</sup> *Essays* (SCM Press, 1955), p. 280.

Christ for whom he claims an ultimate (eschatological) role. Could we say of Bultmann too that Jesus is made Christ by popular acclaim?

The present stage in the dialectic then would seem to demand that, while accepting the steady drive toward a humanistic and existential christology, we try to find an appropriate anchor for it in reality. It is in this sense that I speak of an 'existential-ontological' christology, and would maintain that at the present time the working out of such a christology has become a matter of vital concern.

### Existential-Ontological Christology

Here we can present only some outlines and guidelines towards the construction of an existential-ontological christology;<sup>8</sup> and even these outlines would need to be differently developed in different cultural surroundings, for instance, one way in Europe and another way in India. At the same time, we should not think of the interpretation of Christ to different cultures as leading to quite different christologies. Rather, we should see each cultural approach as a unique contribution toward the global theological and christological enterprise.

Let me now mention a number of christological topics and indicate the direction which a contemporary christology might pursue in relation to each of them.

1. *The Humanity of Christ.* We have recognized the overwhelming importance of this, and that a contemporary christology must begin from the side of the humanity of Christ. But this means in turn that we must have some doctrine of man. The whole christological problem has been much illuminated by the development in recent times of more dynamic theories of man than prevailed in the past. Across the whole spectrum of human studies and theories today, there runs the idea that man is a being who is still in process of emerging, so that the full shape of humanity has not yet appeared. Biological studies, and particularly the theory of evolution, provided an empirical basis for this belief that man is, so to speak, a being on his way rather than a finished product. Existentialist philosophy took up the point by claiming that man is the 'ex-sistent', the one who never has a completed essence but continually moves out into new understandings and new realizations of himself. The notion that man is in process of self-transcendence has been taken up also by Marxism and Thomism. The humanity of Jesus Christ has to be understood in relation to the unfolding of humanity in general. We agree with Schleiermacher in seeing Christhood as the completion of that still imperfect manhood that we see in the human race at large. But we would add that even Christhood is a dynamic idea, the full reach and depth of which is still to be explored—and this, we take it, is the sense in which it is asserted that although Christ has already come in the flesh, he will come again 'with glory'.

As soon as we understand human nature in the dynamic way explained above—and it is worth recalling that the Greek word for nature, *physis*, had an originally dynamic sense of 'emerging'—then

<sup>8</sup> Further discussion in my *Principles of Christian Theology*, ch. XII.

we see that the formidable objection of Kierkegaard against beginning christology from the human side no longer holds. The objection was that one could move from man to God only through an illegitimate *metabasis eis allo genos*. That would be true if human nature and divine nature were two fixed essences, infinitely far apart. But if the very nature of man is to exist, to transcend toward God, then that there should be a critical point at which human nature meets divine nature and participates in it is a genuine possibility. This, the Church claims, did occur in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Schleiermacher's critique of the two-nature doctrine also rested on the assumption that 'nature' means a universal essence. But if we now understand nature in a dynamic sense, then we have not only taken an important step toward a contemporary humanistic type of christology but have incidentally rescued Chalcedonian christology from the apparently shattering criticism of Schleiermacher.

2. *The Deity of Christ.* The exploration of Christ's humanity in depth leads to the assertion of his deity. I have indicated that we begin from the human side, but this does not mean that we end there. We are following the same route as the first disciples, who began by joining themselves to a man, a rabbi from Nazareth. But there came a time when he was transfigured before them, when they saw him in a new depth and a new glory, and confessed his deity: 'We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father' (Jn. 1:14). The New Testament christology follows a similar pattern. It begins with a kind of adoptionism. This is illustrated by the early preaching of Peter on the day of Pentecost, when he declares: 'Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified' (Acts 2:36). But it goes on to the incarnational theologies of Paul and John, in which the pre-existent Son or Word comes forth from the Father and becomes man. These two stories are not contradictory but complementary—indeed, each is needed to complete the other. There could only be the ascent of man to Godhood if already God had descended into his creation in order to give it this possibility.

But how can we think of this? Clearly it calls for a dynamic idea of God, just as we needed a dynamic idea of human nature. An existential-ontological exposition of christology begins from dynamic, emerging human nature, but it completes itself by taking into account the dynamic Being of God. This dynamism finds expression in the classic doctrine of the Trinity, or better, the Triunity of God. Although this is specifically a Christian doctrine, there are parallels to it in many religions, e.g., in the Hindu notion of the Trimurti, or in the threefold structure of the sacred syllable Aum. The point is that a living God must be conceived as an unimaginably rich and complex diversity-in-unity. This we symbolize by the three-in-one. Expressed ontologically, the Father is Primordial Being (cf. Brahma), the mysterious source from which everything flows, but about which in itself we can say nothing. But the Father does not remain shut up in his hiddenness. He comes forth into intelligibility as the Word, just as a human word brings forth the thoughts that have

hitherto been hidden in someone's mind. This Logos, Word or Son, the second 'Person' of the Trinity, I call Expressive Being. And this already carries with it the ideas of creation and incarnation, for God, going forth to express himself, shares the gift of being with his creatures. From the beginning he puts himself into his creation, and from the beginning there is the possibility of a definite incarnation. In the account of the diversity of the Godhead, we do not stop at two, lest we lapse into a dualism and the original unity is destroyed. When we come to the third 'Person' of the Trinity, we affirm that although the diversity becomes more complex, the unity is strengthened. The third Person, the Holy Spirit, is Unitive Being. Proceeding from the Father and the Son, the Spirit is immanent in the creation and forms the image of God in the creation, so that the more it is Spirit-filled, the more the creation mirrors God and is brought into unity with God.

It is in the context of this idea of God that we interpret Jesus Christ in respect of his deity. The Logos through the successive levels of evolution more and more manifests the fullness of Being in the beings, the nature of God in the creatures. Highest in the hierarchy of beings are persons, and among them Jesus Christ for whom Christians claim that he has brought humanity and personal being to a new level. In respect of his humanity, we have thought of him as rising above or transcending; in respect of his deity, we can think of him as descending as the Expressive Being or Logos which finds its perfect expression and therefore its identity in a personal life of love, service, obedience.

3. *Pre-existence.* If we think of Christ as the Logos, then of course he has in a sense existed from the beginning. The early Christian writers held that manifestations of God in the Old Testament, e.g., at the burning bush, were in fact appearances of the Logos. But was the human Jesus also in some sense pre-existent? We would be undermining his humanity if we thought of his pre-existence in any way that would make artificial his birth and fleshly existence in Palestine. Thus I do not see any need to go along with Origen's speculation that the soul of Jesus had existed from the beginning, in a manner conceived along the lines of Platonist philosophy. On the other hand, it is important not to separate the Logos from the human Jesus, otherwise there are all the dangers of docetism. It seems to me that the solution of the problem might be somewhat as follows. On the side of his divinity, Christ had always existed as the Logos; on the side of his humanity, he had also existed as the entelechy of the creation, that is to say, as the hidden goal toward which creation was already moving as subatomic particles aggregated into atoms, atoms into molecules, the latter into the heavy molecules needed for the emergence of life, and continuing through the emergence of living cells, the evolution of multicellular organisms, the appearance of rational, personal beings, the cultural history of mankind, the formation of a people of God, the birth of Jesus Christ . . . To put it in another way, the creation was programmed for Christhood. This is *Heilsgeschichte* on a cosmic scale.

4. *The Sinlessness of Christ.* It is important first of all to note that this seemingly negative term is in fact a double negative and therefore a most powerfully affirmative expression. For sin is itself a negative idea—it means basically separation from God. Therefore, to be sinless has the positive signification of being one with God. Christ's sinlessness is the same as his being one with the Father. When we think then of the sinlessness of Christ (which is several times strongly affirmed in the New Testament) we are to understand this in terms of his overcoming every obstacle that separates from God.

We may well believe that Christ did in fact refrain from acts of rebellion against God, for the Gospels testify to his obedience and integrity from the temptations that beset him at the beginning of his career up to the time when he accepted the cup of suffering in the garden. But if we take seriously the humanity of Christ and his solidarity with the whole human race, must we not suppose that inevitably he was involved in the corporate sinfulness of mankind? For instance, can one pay taxes or avail oneself of the protection of the state without thereby participating at least to a minimal extent in the state and so sin of the state? Can one eat a meal without thereby to at least some small degree condoning the economic and social conditions that prevail at any given time and so participating in the sin and iniquity that characterize them? Incarnation means involvement in the human race, not separation from it. I think we can accept that Christ did enter fully into fallen humanity (as Luther put it, 'he joined himself to the company of the accursed') and yet his personal righteousness or sinlessness overcame the corporate sinfulness of the race, so that one can say that this was the turning point in the history of mankind.

It is important also that we think of the sinlessness of Christ in progressive terms. If it means perfect union with the Father, then this was not, as it were, something ready-made, but a union built-up, strengthened and finally consummated throughout the life and career of Christ. The German theologian Dorner suggested that the full moment of union (and so of sinlessness and so also of incarnation) came only at the death of Christ, understood as the culmination of all that had gone before. Thus, his abasement was also his exaltation. Paradoxically, his being lifted up on the cross was his being lifted up into glory.

5. *The Corporateness of Christ.* I have already touched on this theme in the mention of Christ's standing in solidarity with the corporate sinfulness of the race. But this notion of corporateness calls for further thought. It is surely in no sense irreverent to say that Jesus Christ, considered only as a private individual, is unimportant. He might excite our admiration, but he could hardly do more than that. His importance lies in the fact that he is the first-fruits of a new humanity, that the destiny fulfilled by him is revealing of God's purpose for the whole human race.

In traditional theology, the relation of Christ to humanity in general was often conceived in a manner too external. The whole influential

tradition of 'Christ in our place' which saw him 'standing in' for mankind as a substitute or even as a representative was too impersonal. In recent times we have been learning to conceive the interrelatedness of human persons more adequately. A person is not an individual existence with clearly defined edges, an 'ego' surrounded by 'others'. The others enter into him and he into them. Buber's philosophy has been important in stressing that there is no I without a Thou, and that the interpersonal 'between', the field of relations, is just as important as the distinct centres of consciousness within the field. The full extent to which we depend upon and react upon each other is, I believe, still far from being properly understood. There is still mystery here. One need not adopt Hegel's metaphysics of the inclusive self or Jung's speculation of a collective unconscious, yet one is compelled to acknowledge that both of these theories are seeking to express a profound truth about human life.

If it is asked then what Jesus Christ has to do with human life today, these new insights into the corporateness of existence help to supply an answer. Jesus Christ was on the one hand related to the people of Israel, on the other to that new people which constitutes the Church. Through them he reaches out through space and time, and the Christian hope is that the whole human race is being incorporated into Christ so that humanity is being transfigured into Christhood. Some theologians, notably Teilhard de Chardin, have even claimed that there is going forward a 'Christification' of the whole creation, so that the whole cosmos will come to embody and express the Spirit of Christ.

6. *The Uniqueness of Christ.* Christians have claimed a uniqueness for Christ as the 'only-begotten Son' of the Father. Is this an arrogant claim, which should be abandoned out of respect to the adherents of other religions, in which also there is a genuine knowledge of God?

Let us begin by noting that Christians can and should gladly acknowledge the truth in non-Christian religions. The Logos has been in the world from the beginning, the Logos has manifested himself in many ways as well as in Jesus of Nazareth. Although some Christians have been exclusive in their claims, there has been also a tradition of openness from such early writers as Justin the Martyr onward.

Let us gladly acknowledge too that many things that impress us in Jesus Christ can be paralleled elsewhere. His teaching has its echoes in the precepts of all the world's great religious leaders. Everything else to which one can point in his life—his freedom, his creativity, his obedience or integrity, his self-sacrificing love even—can, at one point or another, be compared with the moral and spiritual achievements of others.

What then is so special about Jesus Christ? I do not think there is any one *quality* to which one can point and say that precisely there lies his uniqueness. But perhaps if we take all the qualities mentioned in the last paragraph together, as a constellation, so to speak, we have something like uniqueness, a man so truly man in the several dimensions of his life that he gives us a new conception of what humanity is or can be at its best and deepest.

There is something further to be said on this question of uniqueness. Does it lie in Christ's resurrection? Let us agree that resurrection is a very difficult idea. Yet all scholars agree that the Christian Church would never have come into existence if the first disciples had not become utterly convinced that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead and gone on to a new mode of existence. Now, resurrection too is a possibility for all men. From prehistoric times, men have hoped beyond death. If Jesus Christ is indeed the emergence of a new humanity, then is it not reasonable to suppose that the possibility of resurrection has been fulfilled in this man? He is unique in having broken through the death-barrier, but he has done this not for himself but so that all mankind may share in his resurrection and new life.