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## THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST

THE author of *The Presence of Christ*<sup>1</sup> gives a really enthralling sketch of a dogmatics of revelation.

The theme of this able and intriguing presentation of a series of "Babylonish captivities of the Church" is used to describe and contrast the true nature of pure faith as it constantly occurs at different periods of the Church's life. Orthodoxy as the keynote of genuine "belief" in the only LORD and Saviour is always liable to treatment by outsiders, who invariably claim to be "insiders". *Sola fide* is the true watchword and test of genuine Christianity, and it applies to that worship of God, the centre of which is the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, whose *radii* are such true believers as dwell within the orbit of His mighty influence, whether B.C. or A.D. He is the one eternal sponsor of Deity in time, incarnate for the salvation of the elect. Whether incarnate or discarnate He is the revelation of the only true God and Lord. So that prophets and apostles on either side of the incarnation are centred in the manifestation of the one Deity. In consequence of this once-for-all divine reality, true believers are to be constantly on the alert to maintain the purity of "the Faith", as expounded in the records of true believing; believing in the Christian sense; nothing in it man-made; all things to be recognised as inspired by God alone, in Christ. The constant danger to genuine orthodoxy is that those who profess Christianity in place of professing Christ are, for all their own excellent motives, bound inevitably to evolve and subscribe to a doctrine which—we must say it—is manufactured humanly, not inspired divinely. Man, and not his Maker, begins to steer the ship. The results of such errancy are manifold, describable as bypassing the issues of real faith, in particular as replacing doctrinal verities which build up the new man in Christ, by schematic creations, man-devised, which are wishful substitutes for the verities which belong to faith alone.

Landmarks of the faith are, for example, the "rebirth" of a Peter, a Paul, a John; are the canonical Creeds of the Early

<sup>1</sup> *Christus Praesens*. A Dogmatics of Revelation in Four Parts. By Otto A. Dilschneider (Bertelmann, Gütersloh, 1948).

Church; are likewise the great landmarks in the Conciliar history of the Church. The keynote of the presentation of "revealed" truth is "I believe". Blessed he who can say humbly, Lord, I believe; help me! Remember how Christ, the Creator of the new covenant, finds and interprets it from the Scriptures of the Old Covenant. It is a very hard saying for theological manufacturers: "Before Abraham was, I am!" Christ is bound to shock us into believing faith or into outrageous rebellion—Either/Or. The indifferent He will spew out of His mouth. And what of the multitudinous agnosticisms in between? "Before Abraham was, I am!" Worship and bow the head—God help us thereto.

The hallmark of fervid, or at all events of genuine, Christianity is "Lord, I believe!—help Thou mine unbelief!" Not our doing, just our acceptance of the workings of God—no substitute is efficacious at all. I suppose Martin Luther's pilgrimage was at times a grim wrestling with shadows that posed as realities. St. Paul, God had to knock out, ere he formed some sense of his proportions in relation to those of his Maker. Thereafter the Apostle called himself the slave of the Lord Jesus Christ, the purchased possession of the King of kings and Lord of lords. That was the lesson that it took Luther so long to assimilate. That is the lesson to be learned by every soul that would enter into the light. Knowledge of salvation comes down, in Karl Barth's phrase, *senkrecht von oben*, perpendicularly from above. It is not the fruit of study or practice or imagination, wit or authentic genius—the end of these things is *not* invariably Christian faith. To be a follower of Christ one must simply—follow Christ, at Christ's charges. Christ got a Cross; what shall we have? Are we in Him? Christian life is the sheer, short cut to communion with God, by God: there is no other way to salvation. And it was St. Paul who was taught it by violence. Similarly in his own guided way the monk Martin Luther fought *his* way into the light. And what an Odyssey of pain Calvin endured in laying the foundations of the Reform! What a meticulous perspicacity his exegesis of the Bible displays! We prize his theological works, deservedly so. But his greatest work consisted in his fundamental expositions of Holy Scripture. So to expound is to have caught that which drops down perpendicularly from above. True theology is high and deep. "Brainy" theology may be wide and able; yet superficial, if

lacking the divine touch. Superficiality is due to derivation from essentially mundane sources. Almost we might say that its source is in its exponents.

Shall *we* take as our motto, Every saint a sinner? If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, just as badly as a Harnack was *deceived*, for all his theological and literary output—we take that great man as a polite example of doing the wrong thing on the best theological presuppositions available to him. A genius, a cultured genius, with a vast command of intellectual resources; a great little gentleman out of the most educated milieu—but *not* born again? The theological verdict upon this charming figure from the existential standpoint of Christian faith must be that he completely missed a God-centred theology.

Herr Dilschneider is therefore exceedingly illuminating when he describes the German Evangelical Church of to-day as no longer free but “imprisoned and embarrassed”, virtually enclosed in a cage of custom and inheritance; and his cry is to “plough a fresh furrow, because it is time to look for the LORD”. What are we in the twentieth century to have as our theme for theology? There is sheer need for a revival not merely German; we need a universal-Christian revival! God’s direct power in our lives or collapse! Epigonal theology is what we must all struggle out of, at all costs.

For German religion in 1933 the baleful figure of Hitler threw a black shadow upon everything spiritual. Nothing in the religious sphere could live and breathe, and no temptation to martyrdom was manifested, save in certain isolated cases like that of Pastor Niemöller. Until very recent days nothing was done by the Church. Organisation, or reorganisation, was *nil*. There was so little to reorganise! Inspiration direct was the only cure. The new stirrings were quite unofficial. Spirit was endeavouring to break through deadness, with the battle-cry of restoration and reformation, a sheerly spiritual call to the Church. Things are still fluid; but the Spirit is brooding creatively over the situation. What is needed is that men must avail themselves of His breathing.

Now what is the bearing of history of dogma, as a light upon the dogmatic perplexities of the twentieth century? Are they just the parcel of sciences dealt with in universities? In this year of grace that is apt to be the German outlook. But dogmatics

is no historical study *per se*. It is *vital* to Church history. History of dogma is the very study to help us orient ourselves in the present mixed situation, after a prolonged dose of a Baur, a Ritschl, a Harnack. They wrought according to their lights ; but these are not the lights to lighten this present world. We must stand comparison with the great epochs, those which Christ alone dominates. Dogmatics must reach *dogmatic* conclusions. Such a propaedeutic is one opening exercise, to equip us for grasping saving knowledge of the Truth.

The trio just mentioned stand at the head of speculative theology. F. C. Baur belongs to the school of Hegel's philosophy, a direct divergence from the dogmatic sequence and practice. His is the task of describing the evolution of dogmatics from the earliest period to date, so creating a common Christian consciousness. This process is "always in flux and never at rest", unfolding the Spirit, barely distinguishing Hegel's objective spirit from the Spirit of the New Testament. Dogmatics is now a department of the philosophy of history and the history of philosophy, being a part of the history of the human spirit, in the form of Christian dogma (Baur). Philosophy and religion are the two forms of the manifestation of the human spirit. In philosophy man is active, in religion he is receptive.

Next in interest is Albrecht Ritschl, the offspring of positivism. Kant was too critical and dismissed such metaphysic. Lotze was an empirical philosopher. The mystery of things is to be sought not beyond but in things, and there we find Ritschl breathing the air of positivism. His "theology" is completely empirical. Anything connected with the reality of the Holy Spirit (conversion, rebirth, prayer and the hearing of prayer) are events lying beyond any positively indicable reality. "God is love, Christ leads us to the Father of love and into the fellowship of the Church's faith. Therein is conceived an ethical calling." Christian history of dogma must render realisable the inner revolution of the Church and transmit to theoretical theology the tasks it has to deal with at a particular period. For which as a discipline not a little might be said.

Harnack was the leading representative of "positivistic historicism in theological science", drawing the inevitable inferences from his own premises. Little in the spiritual sense can really acquire solid proof—dogma is really dead. But what a charming teacher and no sponsor himself of any deadness ! He

must rank as a pure Hellenist, and his discipline (*History of Dogma*) a part of secular history. Sacred history is for him but a tributary of the great stream of the secular, yclept the *science* of religion ; and it debouches into the sea of secularity, apart from Christ.

Our author now takes us over a short strip of Lutheran history, in the new reciprocity with the Lutheran Church in Sweden, where the way was opening up for a revival which affected revivalists like Dilschneider. It was really a side show for Lutheranism in Germany, though Sweden was helpful. Aulén and Nygren are the Swedish leaders ; but for a reviewer this chapter of events may be omitted, especially as he believes that under God the German Lutherans are able to stage their own revival. In this connection we must not forget the interlude of National Socialism in Germany. We need not expatiate on the "damnation" of these twelve years. Things were now too serious for half-measures. Germany was now re-seeking her soul and expecting to find it in God again.

How then are we to revive the distinction between theology and Church History in the Old Testament ? The central confession is "Hear, O Israel ; the LORD our God is a single LORD" (Deut. vi. 4). Here we may ask in passing whether this passage is monotheistic. *Is* the one God monotheistic for the Jews *at the outset* ? Was it not a development in history, under God of course ? ! In the patriarchal period it is different : the history of Israel begins there. There *were* other Gods : but Yahweh was supreme over all other gods *for the Israelite*. Which of course does not mean that Israel was polytheistic—anything but ! The idols of the other tribes were rivals of the God Yahweh, *but could not stand against Him*. Yahweh *is* supreme. The patriarchs fittingly prelude the monotheism of the prophets, culminating in Isaiah xl ff. and in the growth of faith in the one God and Lord of creation and history. Abraham is a scion of polytheism, but answers the call of the one God, everywhere, anywhere ; upheld by grace to the end ; surely elect. And so with the patriarchs—waves of doubt, but the issue somehow faced. And, Exod. iii. 6 : "I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." There may not yet be monotheism in Israel ; but "thou shalt have no other gods beside Me". For there *are* other gods. The upshot *is* the one God of the great prophets. At last it is realised that

He is God and there is *none* beside. What contempt for idols and blocks of wood ! *Could* the major prophets express themselves ?! God is the world's Creator, the Lord of history, the judge of the nation. *He* completes this history and this earth. These great prophets express the declaration of Deuteronomy : "Hear, O Israel ! The LORD our God is one LORD" (Deut. vi. 4-5). This is the theology of Isaiah and Jeremiah. Not that there was never temptation and despair ; Jeremiah could curse his own life, because he could no longer bear the burden of faith (Jer. xx. 14). But the LORD prevailed ! And so for Israel "the LORD our God is one LORD". This was no speculative development on the nature of God. Israelites *could* speculate (wisdom literature). But that is not the soil of confession. That soil is the faith of the fathers. God is the God of the fathers.

In the New Testament we begin to realise that confession is neither a speculative nor a dogmatic thesis for the inner chamber. It springs from the living space of the Church. Confession is forced out existentially from within the community. But when we cross the threshold of the New Testament, which leads to the Christian era, Christ's figure stands centrally in all faith-forming utterances. The main utterance is that Jesus of Nazareth is Christ and Lord. The roots of this confession lie in the Messianic idea, and types of it are to be found in the Septuagint. But essentially such new elements enter into the New Testament that only now do we reach the proper significance and content of it. The point now is to secure man in his relationship to God by the Kyrios Christus confession. For here we have the hidden mystery in the souls of the men whom God has touched. How do we thus come to make this confession ? What do we really know of Christ's contemporaries ? Certainly they were completely outshone by the figure of Christ and so withdrawn from our glances. Can we gather more than legends of saints ? We must study the lives of the first Apostles, in order to see how they came to confess Christ. Peter is one of the best sources. It was he that announced that " God hath made this Jesus to be Lord and Christ " (Acts ii. 36). Peter was Christ's friend. He is a good example of the kind of evidence there is. We have the confession : " Thou art the Christ", answered by Christ's " Thou art Peter, and on this rock will I build my Church ". Peter was no paragon—on the contrary ! In Matt. xvi. 23 he objects to the prospect of Christ's passion. Think of the walking

on the lake (Matt. xiv. 22-3) : " O thou of little faith ! " and the outstretched hand. Again Peter : " What reward shall we have ? " (Matt. xix. 27) ; " I shall *never* deny Thee ! " (Matt. xxvi. 33-5) : and follows the triple denial, alas ! Christians *must* confess Christ. Think of John xx. 4, the race to the tomb. Peter is the type of all our human witness ; who of us can criticise ? " But this carpenter's Son, Jesus of Nazareth, as *the Christ*, i.e. the Lord and Saviour of this world, has overcome sin and death."

If Christ is Kyrios, He is living now ! " Confession with the mouth and belief in thy heart", that He rose again from the dead, is salvation (Rom. x. 9). And so it says in Acts ii. 36. Discipleship of the Lord risen is intensified. Anxiety, fear and doubt, the shattering death, were turned into living testimony ; think of the resurrection stories in St. John. Easter bred certainty ; Whitsun meant foundation.

And what of the " cosmic " Christ of Colossians ? How hard it must have been for a Christian not to slip up ! What a debt we owe to St. Paul ! The Colossians must beware of philosophy, robbing them of Christ (ii. 8). And Christ *is* the cause and agent of creation (i. 16 ff.) ; for He is all in all. In the New Testament is exhibited a striking unity of faith and doctrine throughout. Our friends Harnack, Seeberg and Lietzmann never deal with the origin of the Trinitarian Confession. They regarded it as a sort of ultimate sediment of doctrine, accepted technically. They don't realise the urgency of dealing with heresy.

Note the difference between the triadic formulae of the New Testament and the Trinitarian formulae of the Creeds. The former are only " on the way " to the latter. The Trinitarian formula is the final outcome of Christian reflection and insight. There is a sub-apostolic period between the triadic formula and the Trinitarian dogma. The result of living study and faith, of every temptation and " Gnosis ", was a slow growth into a complete realisation of the essential Trinitarian deposit. We can only refer to our author for the historical ups and downs of the process of final credal fixation—a most interesting study.

Most interesting and rewarding are the disputes about the nature and the Person of Jesus Christ. The Apologists and Origen first, then the Nicene and Chalcedonian Symbols : first



Scholasticism, then Trent. Dogmas are more than "propositions of doctrine, conceptually expressed, which between them must test the unity and fix the content of the Christian religion . . . from the standpoint of fixing the proof of its truth" (Harnack). Dogmas are conceptual means "by which in early times men tried to make the Gospel understandable". Theology for Harnack is "a speculation on the part of the Early Church . . . to bring divine life to humanity". From Origen onwards theology was really *speculation*.

But we turn to history and the unfolding of the problem of Christology, the mystery of the nature of Christ and of His divine humanity: see 1 John iv. 2, where men *either* confess *or* don't confess that Jesus is the Messiah in the flesh; Christ *versus* Antichrist. There is likewise the heresy of Docetism, for which the body is not a real body; contrast this with the treatment of the dead Christ on the Cross (John xix. 33 ff.). The danger was that Christ should not be regarded as a real man of flesh; hence read the detailed Passion narratives. This stage is succeeded by the great Christological debates, Arius *versus* Athanasius, crystallised in the Nicene (325) and Constantinopolitan (381) Creeds. The issue is settled by the Chalcedonian Symbol (451). Cutting across these is the split in the schools of Alexandria and Antioch, Western and Eastern theology, Rome *versus* Byzantium. At root it was all a question of precedence. Arianism was the real heresy: but Origen and the East were typical of the Hellenic rather than of the Latin Spirit. And Origen is fitly succeeded by Lucian (317) and broke the trail for Arianism. Arianism is essentially Hellenic in spirit. In the Apostles' Creed the stress is on the divine Sonship of Jesus: "born of the Virgin Mary", with a polemical stress. The Nicene formula emphasises the divinity without excluding the humanity, these excluding the Greek spirit. Similar is the Chalcedonian emphasis on "true God *and* true man", both true, distinct and numerical. Mature Christian faith, in other words, deliberately rules out the idealism of the Hellenic spirit, Chalcedon being the most anti-Hellenist. "Of Chalcedon we must say, what Paul says to us in 1 Cor. i. 22 about the divine Wisdom: 'Where are the clever ones, where are the scribes, where are the worldly wise? Hath not God turned the wisdom of this world into foolishness?' To call *this* the Hellenistic spirit is to stand early Church History of Doctrine

on its head" (Aulén). The Incarnation is the strongest defence against any idealism.

As for the Confession of the Reform, "the sum of Romans", says Luther, "is to spoil, pervert and abolish all wisdom and righteousness of the flesh, therefore in its place to implant and insert and magnify sin, however so little it may actually be present, or however so much its importance". The complementary addition is Calvin's word, "that no man attains to true knowledge of self, unless he has first seen the face of God". In both cases the call is for "the self-knowledge which man exercises in the sight of God, His commands and His will". Cf. Paul: "Wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. vii. 24). Man cannot go one step Godwards or transfer to a condition in which he would be worthy of His grace. All men "are bent and stunted in sin"; at best the primal sin is that man cannot deliver Himself from his own ego. This ego of ours is the barrier we cannot pass, by which we are bound and to which we are fettered. Every "I" is an egotist and so even a good will is perverted. How could such an one produce a disposition towards grace? There is no *attritio*, far less the real *contritio*. Luther's conclusion upon the will of man was that apart from God's grace the answer to the question of man's will-power is—*nil!* And self-knowledge can but lead to despair. For such desperate ones the Reformed Gospel message is designed. Straits of conscience, temptations cause disappearance of the comfort and salvation in Jesus Christ: the more stringent is the case for Luther. Not only can he not resist temptation himself: *God* was actually tempting him, and not just the devil. "It is a special instance, if God so deals with the man who is in faith, withdraws from him all that he has, even Christ too Himself." In such extreme pangs of faith (such as befell even Christ in His temptations), it was the first commandment that rallied him: "thou shalt have no other gods before Me!" The angry God confronts him and pronounces judgment on the sinner, Law reveals man's sin and utter rejection. But God's pronouncement is not final judgment. The door is not closed. In spite of His judgment God does not abandon ultimate communion with men. He disciplines them. "Luther grasps anew God's gracious hand outstretched to him in Jesus Christ."

The entry of Reformed knowledge is achieved *via* the tempted

conscience. God is a consuming fire. Sin and you will be consumed. How nature must resile from such Majesty ! He is more frightful and horrible than the devil and plagues and martyrs us and cares not for us (Luther). He is gracious to whom He is gracious ; immeasurable by human standards, Luther's God is the God of prophecy in the Old Testament, who hates Esau and loves Jacob, who is gracious to whom He is gracious, filling men with forebodings and fears, working alike in godly and in godless. In His presence theology collapses, men's glory crashes, on all man's self-consciousness.

Confessionalism revived for our good, both Lutheran and Reformed. The two together, one might say, rebelled against Romanism as such, and became the Churches of the Reform.

Here we must distinguish between a Confessional attitude and an orthodox. Confessionalism, for example, stamps the great Old Testament prophet race. It is balanced by the established Deuteronomic fixity. The priestly tradition means orthodoxy, and the Rabbinate the permanent element. The prophetic side is a matter of direct inspiration. Doctrine may be a burden, may be *not* of the Spirit. Living truths of faith are liable to be dogmatised, and life yields to tradition.

Theologically we are left with all three fundamentals of Christian Confession—the Trinity, the Incarnation and Justification. And however historically variants on doctrine arise, there has never been any tampering with credal documents. If a new Confession has been found necessary, it *has* been a new one ; and new ones often refer to earlier ones.

An important point is the union of dogmatics and ethics to constitute Systematic Theology. Items of faith-knowledge involve systematisation. There is nothing arbitrary in their collocation, which is ultimately and ideally one system. Stresses and emphases depend upon the situation *pro tem*. The Trinity, the Incarnation and Justification by faith alone are the three corners of the dogmatic edifice. That edifice might be illustrated in dogmatic history, with all its temporary necessities of emphasis. St. Paul is normally the standard guide. Moreover, having him, we have the added joys of the Biblical corpus. But all the different details regarding different periods and different emphases must be soberly considered. It usually depends on the prevailing heresy. As for the Reform the centre is justification of the sinner by faith alone. Much may also be usefully done in the exposition

of sacramental doctrine. But best I love the answer to the question as to the basis of Christian ethics : it is thankfulness for the receipt of forgiveness of sins. And *all* should learn to love the Heidelberg Catechism. But most of all to thank God in Christ. However emphatic we may be in our main stresses on doctrine, we must remind ourselves that there *is* a system—that would have to be made clear, lest anything good in revelation be let slip—so the *Systematiker* ! And he is right. Dogma must subscribe to system, if the whole is to be correctly represented *as* a whole.

To come to the twentieth century, Dilschneider rightly laments the still pervading influence of Harnack's dead hand. And there are many other dead hands ! But let us believe that this period is ended and that life may return to us evangelically. But we have to realise that the Protestant revelation is not the end of the matter. Things have happened theologically since A.D. 1500. We are now in the twentieth century, 450 years later than Luther and his contemporaries of the Reform. Hitherto spirituality Godwards held the arena in civilised thought. But to-day that is not so. Christian totalitarianism collapsed in the interval, although one thinks and hopes that it is returning. A medieval map inevitably shewed Christianity in the centre of the field ; or better, the Christian faith. Picture an Emperor's coronation ; a picture or representation of the King of kings, whose Cross the emperor wore at his crowning. Christ was everything. Similarly with regard to learning. Kepler's investigation of the planetary paths proved to him God's guidance of the stars in their courses. We cannot think of Copernicus apart from considerations of Christian faith. Every grade of creation rises in its courses, until the complete building reaches heaven ! The Universe is one, the grand sign of a uniform Providence, as in Paracelsus. If God makes us sick, He can make us whole again.

But in the last 450 years the spiritual totality of the Middle Ages has disappeared. On 17th January 1546, in his last sermon, Luther declared that " the devil will kindle the light of reason and remove you from faith . . . I see that unless God give us faithful servants, the devil will rend our Church with divisions, and he will not let up till he has achieved this ". Luther anticipates the upshot. That is his legacy to us ; and we have got it !

We have certainly to go back to Luther and Calvin, if we are to walk in the way of true religion. Science, in its first great

European prototypes after Luther, still praised God for His marvels. But man got stricken with the idea that *his* discoveries were more worthy and central than God. And so we arrive at the egotism of human knowledge. By searching we can find out many things, and the absence of God among the trove soon ceases to arouse comment. The gradual inference is that there is no God after all. The latter-day centuries are increasingly godless—deliberately so, and proudly and self-consciously so. Was it all due to the Church's persecution of scientific discovery?

Man has devastatingly become his own god. The twentieth-century prophet—ours!—is Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlands*. But now he is answered in the name of God by Karl Barth. Our thin blood under his preaching and teaching begins to course again in our veins. To be a Christian is once more the chance of spiritual exaltation, and a good hope of ultimate exaltation in the "heavenlies". Stick to Barth and use him to vet your private theological idiosyncrasies. For Barth is not a Barthian! Let us praise God for Barmen and its formulations, for the boldness of Christ's true slaves. We *must* get back to revelation and *its* theology. Without that any brand is dangerous, and the bottle should be marked "Poison".

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