

Reformation  
& Revival



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**T**hrough 20 centuries the Christian church has consistently realized that what it confesses regarding the person of Jesus of Nazareth is of paramount importance. Christianity stands and falls by what it believes and confesses regarding this person! For this reason every generation since the first has been called upon to answer the question: “Who do you say that I am?”

While Christology has always been of central importance for Christianity the subject has never been easy. Consider, for example, the great convocation known as the Council at Chalcedon (451 A.D.). Here heresies and challenges were taken up openly. Affirmations that have served the church well for 15 centuries were put forward. Yet Chalcedon did not elaborate on a number of questions related to Christology, especially positive reflections on New Testament teaching regarding the uniqueness of Jesus. It prescribed sound doctrine, as far as it went, but it addressed problems and issues without taking up specific applications.

This is illustrated in the affirmation of the Council concerning two natures in one person. The Council informs us what this statement does *not* mean but did not address many positive issues. Millard J. Erickson, a Baptist theologian, aptly comments: “It may not be an exaggeration to say that there have been more of these epochal developments in the past one hundred years than in all of the preceding centuries.”<sup>1</sup>

The uniqueness of Jesus has often been assumed, but generally unconsidered by evangelicals in our era. We often begin with the false premise that no one else ever claimed to be the Messiah. From there we assume that most of the teachings of the early church were unique to Christianity and the apostolic witness. Surely no one else believed in incarnate deities who were dying and rising saviors in whom lay all truth. Yet ancient documents reveal such

beliefs were quite prevalent.

What then makes Jesus of Nazareth unique from all other claimants to be “the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6a)? How does the New Testament set forth this *unique* One? And how shall we set forth His person in our pluralistic age where global awareness itself calls into question the universality and normativeness of Jesus?

### The Problem Stated

If the classical Chalcedonian Christology (i.e., Jesus is the God-man, two natures in one person) is a true understanding of the person of Jesus, then the church has correctly believed that Jesus is *unique* among men. The doctrine of the incarnation says much about Christ, as well as about God. But it says a great deal about man as well. Did God really become man, and live among us? (Cf. John 1:14.) And was this a one-time incarnational appearance as the Scriptures testify?

It has been argued that the consequence of a *unique incarnation* is the basis of a *unique salvation* for all mankind, for all time, and in all places. Erickson concludes, “There is just one true religious understanding and way of life, and there is a qualitative difference between biblical Christianity and all other faiths.”<sup>2</sup>

Erickson addresses our concern in his magnificent book, *The Word Became Flesh*, concluding:

Contact with persons of other cultures has particularly accelerated in the late twentieth century. One effect of these new relationships has been to call into question the uniqueness of the Christian religion vis-a-vis the beliefs, practices, and leaders of other religions. This in turn challenges the idea that the incarnation as a once-for-all occurrence is normative for all persons and all times. The result has been the growth of a universalist Christology.<sup>3</sup>

A significant number of twentieth-century theologians

have challenged exclusivism, or the *uniqueness of Jesus*. The problem itself is not new. It parallels problems raised by historical universalism over the centuries. (By universalism I mean the teaching that all will be saved, whether or not they believe in Jesus as the Christ.) Erickson is again helpful when he writes:

In recent years, however, with the phenomenon of globalization, or the growing contact of Christianity and of Western culture in general with other cultures and other religions, the problem has become more pronounced. The shrinking world has resulted, for some Christians and theologians, in a shrunken Christ.<sup>4</sup>

The problem plainly surfaces in recent treatments. One example is that of Paul Knitter, a Roman Catholic theologian who has plainly stated a pluralist vision of Christ and the gospel in his book, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985). Knitter, a former missionary, believes that all religious traditions are talking about the same reality. Can one be “saved” by “some other name,” he asks throughout. His answer is “yes,” and his book is an attempt to square his affirmation with Christian theology. We might say that Knitter’s Christ is *unique*, but not finally, or exclusively, *unique!*

Raimundo Panikkar, an Asian Indian who is a Roman Catholic priest, and Stanley Samartha, also an Indian and a presbyter of the Church of South India, defend these same kinds of ideas as well.

Perhaps the best known proponent of a Christ who is not truly unique is the British philosopher John Hick. He has contributed such books as: *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982); *God and the Universe of Faiths: Essays in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973); *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985); and the bombshell which dropped

with considerable effect, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), where Hick brought together, as editor, several essayists supporting essentially the same thesis.

#### Factors Leading Toward Denial of Christ's Uniqueness

Each of these authors, and others who follow the same approach, offers a number of challenges to historic, orthodox, Chalcedonian Christology. Following Erickson's approach I will offer a brief look at several factors which have led Hick, and others, to this conclusion. These include:

*The Diversity of Religions.* Christians are clearly the minority in the world. Having assumed that they have the gospel for all men everywhere, how can Christians who hold to the uniqueness of Jesus explain the rejection of Him by most peoples?

*The Connection Between Ethnicity and Religion.* What religion one holds is clearly the result of where he is born and the practices of his own people. What happens, argues Hick, to the conception of a loving God, if most people are born into an environment where they are already committed to a particular religious belief system as a result of birth?

*The Lack of Missionary Success.* It is argued that missionary success is generally "downwards," i.e., in lands where relatively primitive religions hold sway, such as among tribal peoples, rather than in places, where more sophisticated religions hold influence. Most converts, it is argued, come from animism and polytheism. Knitter writes, "When confronted by living religions, especially if they are undergirded by some kind of intellectual system, Christian missionaries have had practically no success of conversions."<sup>5</sup>

*Religious Life in Non-Christian Religions.* This observation is expressed in the words of one universalist who writes of his gratitude for the people of a country where he was a

missionary. Says Eugene Hillman, "The Masai people taught me the meaning of religious pluralism and demonstrated in their lives that God's grace is not less operative among non-Christians than it is among Christians."<sup>6</sup>

Historically two kinds of response have been generally offered to the kinds of arguments presented by Hick and others. The first position concerning the uniqueness question has been expressed in what is called *exclusivism*. This was expressed in Roman Catholic theology as *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("Outside the church, no salvation"). In this present time it would be hard to find a serious Catholic theologian who would defend this position. The Protestant response, though different in its beginning point, ended similarly by saying, in effect, "Outside of Christianity, no salvation." What this meant, for traditional theological formulation, was that the vast majority of the people on this planet were perishing without the knowledge of the *unique One!*

For men like John Hick to respond to exclusivism requires not just an entirely new understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus but an entirely new understanding of His work in salvation as well. He posits that salvation has nothing to do with the removal of guilt incurred through Adamic failure and personal responsibility. Forgiveness which is grounded in Christ's sacrificial death would, Hick concedes, necessitate salvation in Christ alone. But we must escape this kind of exclusivism. We must not be "blinded by the dark dogmatic spectacles through which [the Christian] can see no good in religious devotion outside his own group."<sup>7</sup>

The second response offered to views like those of Hick has been that of *inclusivism*. This has been a popular choice for certain liberal theologians and is becoming more fashionable in what were once considered "safe" evangelical settings. In this view the uniqueness of Christ is maintained

(?) but *all* persons are (somehow) included in His salvific work. Even those who have not consciously placed their trust in Him receive the benefits of His sacrifice. In some theologies salvation is not divine forgiveness through Christ's atoning work, but moral transformation of human life which can come through various religious contexts, since Christ is over all. It is in this idea that we hear of the "unknown Christ of Hinduism." (Here we have echoes of Karl Rahner's concept of the *anonymous* Christian and Hans Kung's thesis of salvation in "the ordinary way" and "the extraordinary way," by which he means through the church!) Modern evangelicalism has produced its own versions of inclusivism as well. According to this idea, everyone will be given an opportunity to come to conscious acceptance of the *unique* One. Whoever has not done so will be given opportunity in the next life! Clark Pinnock, reflecting a variation of this idea, believes that on the basis of 1 Peter 3:19-20 and 4:6 everyone will have at least a first chance to believe, and if this does not come in this lifetime it will occur at death.<sup>8</sup>

Hick rejects both of these historic responses to the uniqueness of Jesus and salvation by accepting a third one, namely the increasingly popular notion of pluralism. Erickson comments:

Rather than holding that one religion is supreme and that all persons must somehow be participants in this one religion, as does inclusivism, pluralism maintains that there is one reality, and that all religions lay hold upon it. The various doctrines and practices of the world's faiths are simply the same truth refracted in different ways.<sup>9</sup>

As noted earlier Hick sees a commonality of experience in differing religious traditions. He notes the similarities of piety and even says if such were read to Christians without names and "doctrinal" content we would think them very

much like our own experience as Christians who believe in the unique Jesus.

He writes of a conception of God as our higher power that is common to all. He says various religions are engaged in a similar quest, like people marching in the same direction in different valleys without being aware of others' existence. Each group moves along with its own songs, ideas, language and stories.<sup>10</sup>

Hick uses a familiar parable to illustrate this. Several blind men run their hands over different parts of the same elephant. The one who felt the elephant's leg said the elephant was a tree. The one who felt the elephant's trunk thought it was a snake, while the one who felt the tail said it was surely a rope. Each was describing what he perceived. So each religion describes what it perceives of God. Concludes Hick:

Every conception of the divine which has come out of a great revelatory religious experience and has been tested through a long tradition of worship, and has sustained human faith over centuries of time and in millions of lives, is likely to represent a genuine encounter with the divine reality.<sup>11</sup>

Such radical pluralism goes well beyond the universalism of previous Christian thought. In Erickson's view it "puts God, not Christ, at the center. There then are many ways to the center."<sup>12</sup> When this is done all of theological reflection is distorted. It is much like leaning the ladder against the wrong wall. You may climb the wall, but find out that you were wrong before taking the first step. Such pluralism poses a significant threat to both doctrine and practice in the church. Evangelicals may feel quite safe, but this has infected them in several ways that alter how they *do theology* and how they *preach the gospel*.

#### The Effect of This Theology Upon Us

As long as we stress "our experience" of Christ over the

truth of His objective uniqueness we run the continual risk of falling into traps set for us by pluralistic Christologies. Stressing moral transformation, as evangelicalism has and does, often leads to *moralistic* preaching. Moralistic preaching often grows best in environments that are *not* strongly anchored in good Christology.

Paul Knitter wishes to stress what he calls the *relational uniqueness* of Jesus. This is “uniqueness defined by its ability to relate to—that is, to include and be included by—other unique religions.”<sup>13</sup> He argues that one’s hermeneutic must interpret the text by really hearing the texture of the text, i.e., not just what it meant to original readers but what it now means in a shifting global environment of the late twentieth century. Theologian William Hordern refers to this kind of interpreter as a “transformer,” not just a “translator.” A translator wishes to get the original meaning across to his modern hearer while a transformer seeks to adjust his message in view of the contemporary cultural challenges. Knitter believes the early Christian community transformed the theocentric message of Jesus into a Christocentric message.

Evangelicals will surely reject these conclusions, if the term evangelical still has any meaning left at all, but can they avoid other traps inherent in this? Have we not, for some time, preached our experience of the *unique* Christ over the *unique* Christ who really is? And have we not done this, to a considerable extent, in preaching theology without the *unique* Christ at the center of *all* our preaching and teaching? We do this when we preach sermons on commandments without Christ as the Lawgiver and Lawkeeper. We do this when we teach people to pray without Christ as the Mediator. We do it as well when we urge our brethren to trust God without the God-man as the sole object of their faith.

I am concerned as well with evangelical methodology which is not Christocentric. I have in mind our continual

desire to avoid the criticism of “cultured despisers” (the term of liberals in the last century). When “church growth” says continually that we need to set our agenda based on what the outsider feels and perceives he needs, then are we not abandoning a definitive incarnational Christology in practice? Modern North American church leaders are more concerned for the counsel of George Barna, a marketing strategist, than for that of James I. Packer or Millard J. Erickson.

I find the profound insights of the late Karl Barth immensely helpful at this point. It was he who said Christology is *the* touchstone of all theology. He wrote in his small overview of theology, *Dogmatics in Outline*, “Tell me how it stands with your Christology, and I shall tell you who you are.”<sup>14</sup>

#### The Uniqueness of Jesus Demonstrated

It is my intention, in conclusion, to briefly demonstrate several of the factors which plainly demonstrate the complete uniqueness of the person of Jesus of Nazareth. If He is indeed the Unique One, then with the Apostle Peter we can confess with simplicity and profundity: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that You are the Holy One of God” (John 6:68).

Contrary to modern pluralistic Christologies which ultimately undermine the uniqueness of Jesus I believe we have some high Christology in the Synoptics as well as in John. With Thomas’ profound exaltation in John 20:28 my confession of Jesus is: “My Lord, and my God!” But on what basis do I confess this? And is it intellectual suicide to make such a confession in our age?

#### The Teaching of Jesus Was Truly Unique

Jesus went about preaching and teaching “the kingdom of God.” What His hearers heard and understood seems to have been in a state of flux. People in His time expected a

kingdom but not the one He came to bring. Jesus increasingly taught that the kingdom was coming with power. Men are able to recognize it because the demons are driven out (Luke 11:20). And it was not to be brought about by man, but by the power of God (Luke 12:32). Leon Morris writes:

The New Testament shows God breaking into this world of time and sense so that we see nothing less than the power of God Himself at work in the kingdom which is set up in the work accomplished by Jesus.<sup>15</sup>

The kingdom is God's, but it is also plainly said to be Jesus' kingdom as well (cf. Matt. 13:41; 16:28; 20:21; 25:34-40). Men not related properly to Him are outside this Kingdom (Matt. 7:23; Mark 8:38). T.W. Manson notes, "In the mind of Jesus, to become a genuine disciple of His and to enter into the kingdom of God amounted to much the same thing."<sup>16</sup>

We tend to take all of this for granted, but in Jesus' day things were different. Writes Leon Morris, "When a truly original teacher did arise he had to resort to great ingenuity to fasten his teaching on to some illustrious predecessor to gain a hearing." Morris correctly sums up my reflections in this area by writing:

It is often said today that His teaching was not very original, and that almost all of it can be paralleled from the teachings of the Rabbis. This is true, but only within limits. If you search the immense field of Rabbinic literature you will find somewhere or other parallels sometimes more, sometimes less, exact to much of the teaching of Jesus. But it is an immense field, and the remark attributed to Julicher, "It is a pity they said so much else," is very much to the point. Well might Bousset say, "The Rabbis stammered, but Jesus spoke." There is none of the Rabbis who has anything like the range or the comprehension of the spirit of Jesus. . . . The Rabbis spoke *from* authority, Jesus spoke *with* authority. Those who heard Him "were astonished at His teaching, for He

taught them as one that had authority, and not as the scribes." W. Manson reminds us that the word rendered "authority" in the Hellenistic world "implied supernatural power," and he cites the saying of Justin Martyr, "His word was power from God." "Thus says the Lord" is typical of the Old Testament, but Jesus' characteristic expression is "Truly, truly, I say to you." The difference is significant. Jesus appealed to no other authority as He spoke to men of the deep things of God.<sup>18</sup>

### The Personality of Jesus Was Unique

Jesus was a gigantic figure! Nothing commonplace, or trite about His words and surely nothing bland and tepid about His person. The Jesus "meek and mild" of stereotypical conclusions is not seen in the Gospels. Meek He most certainly is, but not weak!

He inspired complete devotion among His followers, not simply personal interest. Further He attracted men and women of all types and personalities. The high and the lowly, the brilliant and the uneducated, all sought Him out. The observation of E.A. Knox is well worth considering:

. . . there has been no other instance, nor will there be another, of one whose personality, without effort, without self-assertion, without the barest suspicion of megalomania, it would seem almost without direct claim, left upon His immediate entourage the solemn conviction that they had been walking with God.<sup>19</sup>

### The Miracles of Jesus Show Him to Be Truly Unique

If there is any reliable record to be found in the Gospels, then undoubtedly Jesus did things which we must put in the realm of the miraculous by any definition of the term. Many in our day are embarrassed by so many miracles, feeling that they somehow discredit Christianity in our scientific age. In earlier eras of church history apologists referenced arguments for Jesus' uniqueness to such events. Explana-

tions offered several decades ago suggested that the miracles were more or less an amazing human activity carried out through incredible faith. Therefore Leonard Hodgson says, "Think of the powers exercised by Christ as being powers open to manhood where manhood is found in its perfection."<sup>20</sup>

Jesus did refuse to work "wonders" as a display of divine power in itself. Morris correctly says, "He does not appear on the pages of the Gospels as a wonder-worker." Surely Manson had it right, however, when he wrote, "[They] are a demonstration from God that what prophets and righteous men had desired to see is at hand and already in process."<sup>21</sup>

Yes, surely we must not make too much of the miracles, at least in the wrong way. But we must not make too little of them either. Morris helpfully says, "The miracles point us to God" (i.e., they are "signs"). And further, "The people who saw them reacted as in the presence of God. They were amazed at the authority they revealed."<sup>22</sup>

It is hard to resist the conclusion that the One who performed such great acts was *unique*, because He was the God-man! He even performed such acts and claimed with them the "power to forgive sins" (Mark 2:10ff.).

#### The Sinlessness of Jesus Was Obviously Unique

In John 8:46 our Lord asks a question of His enemies, a bold and daring approach all must agree. "Which of you convicts Me of sin?" None takes up His challenge. He is accused of blasphemy because of His claim to be equal with His Father (Yahweh), but no accusations of personal moral or spiritual failure are brought against Him.

Before one concludes that the early church simply painted Jesus through "rose-tinted glasses" he should be reminded that the church openly showed itself "warts and all" in telling its own story and that of all its human leaders. And

these men lived with Him for the better part of three years, seeing Him under all kinds of stress and unimaginable pressure.

Moreover, adds Leon Morris, "... the Jesus of the Gospels does not conform to first-century specifications for a hero, either Jewish or Gentile."<sup>23</sup> Finding faults in great men and women of the past is not hard to do, even when we read the accounts of their best friends. But this man was different. He was truly unique!

#### Conclusion

Chalcedon is not the last word on the uniqueness of Jesus. It is in need of fuller positive elaboration in our day. But it is still the proper place for us to begin our Christology lest we deny the essential elements of the New Testament affirmations regarding this unique person. With the Council we can say, by faith, without intellectual suicide, *vere Deus* and *vere homo*; yet in One Person!

The late Karl Barth plainly saw the critical nature of our question when he wrote, "If dogmatics cannot regard itself and cause itself to be regarded as fundamentally Christology, it has assuredly succumbed to some alien sway and is already on the verge of losing its character as church dogmatics." My own concern, in the face of the pluralistic challenges we have briefly surveyed, is that we will give up the centrality of the *unique* One who is the Lord from heaven! And this challenge comes not simply from the theological left that we have seen in this article, but more subtly from the evangelical right and its peace with the modern world in cultural efforts to recast the uniqueness of Jesus into more acceptable forms. When we remove the mystery of who He was from the realm of faith affirmations grounded in the revelation of His person in the New Testament, we move in a direction that will strip the church of its power with God and with man. Karl Barth warned of this

when he said, “. . . the Council did not intend to solve the mystery of revelation, but rather it perceived and respected this mystery.”<sup>24</sup> Do we?

#### End Notes

- 1 Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker), 1991, p. 11.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 275-76.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 276.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 Paul F. Knitter, *No Other Name?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 1985, p. 4.
- 6 Eugene Hillman, cited in Erickson, p. 280.
- 7 John Hick, *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 1982, p. 31.
- 8 Erickson, *op. cit.*, p. 284.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 285.
- 10 Hick, *Names*, pp.40-41 and 90-91.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- 12 Erickson, *op. cit.*, p. 291.
- 13 The whole of my coverage of these pluralistic Christologies is taken from the survey given in Chapter 11 of Millard J. Erickson's *The Word Became Flesh*. The reader is urged to consult this book, and the chapter in particular, for a fuller treatment.
- 14 Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (London: SCM), 1949, p. 66.
- 15 Leon Morris, *The Lord From Heaven* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 1974, p. 12.
- 16 T.W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge, England) 1943, p. 206, cited in Morris.
- 17 Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 13.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

24 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume I:2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), 1966, p. 123.

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No man ever thought too much of Christ.

*J. C. Ryle*

We have much more to receive, but God has no more to give than He has given in Jesus Christ.

*John R. W. Stott*

If Jesus Christ is not true God, how could He *help* us? If He is not true man, how could He *help* us?

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

If Christ is only man, then I am an idolator. If He is very God, then the man who denies it is a blasphemer. There can be no union between those who hold His deity and those who deny it.

*G. Campbell Morgan*

The impression of Jesus which the Gospels give . . . is not so much one of deity reduced as of divine capacities restrained.

*James I. Packer*

The historical difficulty of giving for the life, sayings and influence of Jesus any explanation that is not harder than the Christian explanation, is very great. The discrepancy between the depth and sanity and (let me add) *shrewdness* of His moral teaching and the rampant megalomania which must lie behind His theological teaching unless He is indeed God, has never been satisfactorily got over. Hence the non-Christian hypotheses succeed one another with the restless fertility of bewilderment.

*C. S. Lewis*

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