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## THE JUSTIFICATION OF THEOLOGY

*With a Special Application to Contemporary Christology*

ROBERT L. REYMOND

The highly esteemed American philosopher-theologian of revered and recent memory, Dr Gordon Haddon Clark, begins his 1984 book, *In Defense of Theology*, with the following statement:

Theology, once acclaimed 'the Queen of the Sciences,' today hardly rises to the rank of a scullery maid; it is often held in contempt, regarded with suspicion, or just ignored.<sup>1</sup>

If Professor Clark is correct in his assessment, that is to say, if there is today this widespread disregard bordering on contempt for theology, one might at first blush be excused if he should feel it entirely proper to be done with theology altogether and to devote his time and energies to some intellectual pursuit holding out promise of higher esteem among men. One might even wonder wherein resides the justification for such a gathering as this, called for the express purpose of advancing the cause of theology. The issue can be pointedly framed in the form of a question: How is theology,<sup>2</sup> as an intellectual discipline deserving today of the church's highest interest and of the occupation of men's minds, to be justified?

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1. *In Defense of Theology*, Milford, Michigan, 1984, p. 3.

2. The term 'theology' is used in this paper in the somewhat restricted but still fairly broad sense for the disciplines of the classical divinity curriculum with its departments of exegetical, historical, systematic, and practical theology, or for what is practically the same thing, namely, the intelligent effort which seeks to understand the Bible, viewed as revealed truth, as a coherent whole.

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If this conference were a conference in philosophical theology, to this question I would respond with one very simple basic sentence: God has revealed truth about himself, about us, and about the relationship between himself and us in Holy Scripture; therefore, we should study Holy Scripture.

The product of such study would be theology. Or we might say this another way: if there is a God, he must be someone we should know; and if he has spoken to us in and by the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, that very fact is sufficient warrant in itself to justify our study of the Scriptures. Indeed, it mandates the study of Scripture, or what amounts to the same thing, the engagement of men in the theological enterprise. We would even urge that not to study Scripture, *if God has revealed himself therein*, is the height of folly and the clearest evidence of a certain kind of insanity!

This particular ground or justification for the study of theology is so overwhelming that all other reasons, from an apologetic perspective, would be unnecessary. And I say again, if this were a conference in philosophical theology or apologetics, that this would be the justification I would offer for doing theology. Then the remainder of this paper would be devoted to the task of stating the case for what has often been called the first principle of the Christian faith, namely, that God is 'really there' and that he has spoken to us, rationally, authoritatively, and univocally, in and by the inspired Scriptures of his prophets and apostles. This task I have already attempted to do in my book on apologetic method, entitled *The Justification of Knowledge*,<sup>3</sup> so I see no need to restate the entire case now. Suffice it to say simply at this point that, for me, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are self-arrestingly, self-authenticatingly of divine origin as to content and message, the Word of the self-attesting Christ of Scripture, carrying inherently within them their own divine *indicia*, such as

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3. Robert L. Reymond, *The Justification of Knowledge*, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1984.

the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope [goal] of the whole (which is to give all glory to God), the full discovery [disclosure] it makes of the only way of man's salvation, the many other incomparable excellencies, and the entire perfection thereof (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, I,v),

which properties, the *Confession of Faith* also reminds us, are 'arguments whereby [the Holy Scripture] doth *abundantly evidence* itself to be the Word of God' (I,v; emphasis supplied). If my concern today, may I say once again, were purely and strictly an apologetic one, it would be Augustinian/Anselmic/Calvinistic fideism, or perhaps more simply phrased, biblical presuppositionalism, expressed in the phrase '*credo ut intelligam*' ('I believe in order that I may understand'), wherein the child of God through *believing* study seeks an ever-fuller *understanding*<sup>4</sup> of the self-authenticating truth of God in Scripture, which I would urge and defend.

The nature of this conference, it seems to me, however, calls for the explication of a different kind of rationale for engaging in the theological enterprise, and this I would suggest should be done along lines more biblical than apologetic.

## **The Biblical Justification for Theology**

When we inquire into the issue before this dogmatics conference on the justification of theology, if I understand its intended import, what we are asking is simply this: Why should we engage ourselves in intellectual and scholarly reflection on the message and content of Holy Scripture? And a related question is this: Why do we do this, as Christians, the particular way that we do? To these questions, I would suggest, the New Testament offers at least the following four reasons: (1) Christ's own theological method, (2) Christ's mandate to teach

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4. *Fides quaerens intellectum.*

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in the Great Commission, (3) the apostolic model, and (4) the apostolically-approved example and activity of the New Testament church. Consider each of these briefly with me.

### **Christ's Own Theological Method**

It is Christ himself, by his example of appealing to Scripture and by his method of interpretation, who established for his church both the prerogative and the pattern to exegete the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments in the special way that she does, and to derive from those Scriptures, by theological deduction, their special application to his person and work. This is clear from the New Testament itself. For in addition to those specific occasions when he applied the Old Testament to himself (cf., for example, Matt.22:41-45; Luke 4:14-21; John 5:46), we are informed in Luke 24:25-27 that 'beginning with Moses and all the prophets, (the glorified Christ) *explained [diermeneusen]* to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself' (emphasis supplied). Beyond all controversy, such an exhaustive engagement in Scripture exposition involved our Lord in theological activity in the most heightened sense. In his small book, *According to the Scriptures*, with great sensitivity and depth of insight, C.H. Dodd develops the point I am making here. Let us listen to this eminent biblical scholar for a few moments:

At the earliest period of Church history to which we can gain access, we find in being the rudiments of an original, coherent and flexible method of biblical exegesis which was already beginning to yield results.

... Very diverse scriptures are brought together so that they interpret one another in hitherto unsuspected ways. To have brought together, for example, the Son of Man who is the people of the saints of the Most High, the Man of God's right hand, who is also the vine of Israel, the Son of Man who after humiliation is crowned with glory and honour, and the victorious priest-king at the

right hand of God, is an achievement of interpretative imagination which results in the creation of an entirely new figure. It involves an original, and far-reaching, resolution of the tension between the individual and the collective aspects of several of these figures, which in turn makes it possible to bring into single focus the 'plot' of the Servant poems ... , of the psalms of the righteous sufferer, and of the prophecies of the fall and recovery (death and resurrection) of the people of God, and finally offers a fresh understanding of the mysterious imagery of apocalyptic eschatology.

This is a piece of genuinely creative thinking. Who was responsible for it? The early Church, we are accustomed to say, ... But creative thinking is rarely done by committees, useful as they may be for systematizing the fresh ideas of individual thinkers, and for stimulating them to further thought. It is individual minds that originate. Whose was the originating mind here?

Among Christian thinkers of the first age known to us there are three of genuinely creative power: Paul, the author to the Hebrews, and the Fourth Evangelist. We are precluded from proposing any one of them for the honour of having originated the process, since even Paul, greatly as he contributed to its development, demonstrably did not originate it ... the New Testament itself avers that it was Jesus Christ himself who first directed the minds of his followers to certain parts of the scriptures as those in which they might find illumination upon the meaning of his mission and destiny ... I can see no reasonable ground for rejecting the statements of the Gospels that (for example) he pointed to Psalm cx as a better guide to the truth about his mission and destiny than the popular beliefs about the Son of David, or that he made that connection of the 'Lord' at God's right hand with the Son of Man in Daniel which proved so

momentous for Christian thought, or that he associated with the Son of Man language which had been used of the Servant of the Lord, and employed it to hint at the meaning, and the issue, of his own approaching death. To account for the beginning of this most original and fruitful process of rethinking the Old Testament we found need to postulate a creative mind. The Gospels offer us one.<sup>5</sup>

Beyond dispute the Gospels depict Jesus of Nazareth as entering deeply into the engagement of mind with Scripture and drawing out original and fascinating theological deductions therefrom. And it is he who establishes for us the pattern and end of our own theologizing - the pattern: we must follow him in making the exposition of Scripture the basis of our theology; and the end: we must arrive finally at *him* in all of our theological labours.

### **The Mandate in the Great Commission**

Theology is a mandated task of the church; of this there can be no doubt. For after setting for us the example and establishing for us the pattern and end of all theology, the glorified Christ commissioned his church to *teach (didaskontes)* all nations (Matt.28:18-20). And theology, essential to this teaching, serves in carrying out the Great Commission as it seeks to set forth in a logical and coherent manner the truth God has revealed in Holy Scripture about himself and the world he has created.

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5. C.H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, London, 1952, pp. 108-110. One caveat is in order here, however. While we obviously appreciate Dodd's granting to Jesus alone the creative genius to bring these several Old Testament themes together to enhance understanding of His person and work, it is extremely important to insist that, in doing so, Jesus did not bring a meaning to the Old Testament that was not intrinsic to the Old Testament itself. Cf. also Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ*, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1984, p. 50.

The divine commission to the church to disciple, baptize, and teach all nations clearly places upon the church, indwelt and empowered by the Holy Spirit, certain *intellectual* demands. There is the *evangelistic* demand to address the gospel to the needs of every generation, for the commission is to disciple all the nations, with no restriction as to time and place. There is the *didactic* (or catechetical) demand 'to correlate the manifold data of revelation in our understanding and the more effectively apply this knowledge to all phases of our thinking and conduct.'<sup>6</sup> Finally, there is, as we have already noted, the apologetic (or polemic) demand ultimately to justify the existence of Christianity and to protect the message of Christianity from adulteration and distortion (cf. Tit.1:9). Theology has risen, and properly so, in the life of the church in response to these concrete demands in fulfilling the Great Commission.

### The Apostolic Model

Such activity as eventually led to the church's engagement in theology is found not only in the teaching of Jesus Christ but also in the rest of the New Testament. Paul wastes no time after his baptism in his effort to 'prove' (*sumbibazon*) to his fellow Jews that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 9:22). Later, as a seasoned missionary, he enters the synagogue in Thessalonica 'and on three Sabbath days he *reasoned* [*dielexato*, 'dialogued'] with them *from the Scriptures*, *explaining* [*dianoigon*] and *proving* [*paratithemenos*] that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead' (Acts 17:2-3; emphasis supplied). The learned Apollos 'vigorously *refuted* [*diakatelencheto*] the Jews in public debate, *proving* [*epideiknuso*] *from the Scriptures* that Jesus was the Christ' (Acts 18:28; emphasis supplied).

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6. John Murray, 'Systematic Theology', *Westminster Theological Journal* 25 (1963), p. 138.



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Nor is Paul's evangelistic 'theologizing' limited to the synagogue. While waiting for Silas and Timothy in Athens Paul 'reasoned [*dielegetol*] in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as *in the market-place* day by day with those who happened to be there' (Acts 17:17); emphasis supplied). This got him an invitation to address the Areopagus which he did in terms that could be understood by the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers gathered there (cf. his quotation from the Greek poets in 17:27), without, however, any accommodation of his message to what they were prepared to believe. In a masterful theological summary presented with evangelistic and apologetic sensitivity, Paul carefully presented the great truths of revelation concerning the Creator, man created in his image, and man's need to come to God through the Judge and Saviour he has provided, even Jesus Christ.

But Paul's 'theologizing' was not exclusively evangelistic. In addition to that three-month period at Ephesus during which he spoke boldly in the synagogue, arguing persuasively (*dialegomenos kai peithon*) about the kingdom of God (Acts 19:8), Paul had discussions (*dialegomenos*) daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus over a two-year period, not hesitating, as he was to say later (cf. Acts 20:17-35). 'to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught [*didaxai*] you publicly and from house to house,' declaring to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 20:20-21). In a word, he declares: 'I have not hesitated to proclaim the *whole will of God*' (Acts 20:27; emphasis supplied).

No doubt we see in the epistle to the Romans, Paul's major exposition of the message entrusted to him, not only the broad outline and essential content of the gospel Paul preached but also the theologizing method he employed. Notice should be taken here of the theological flow of the letter: how Paul moves logically and systematically from the plight of the human condition to God's provision of salvation in Christ, then, in turn, on to the results of justification, objections to the doctrine,

and finally to the Christian ethic that results from God's mercies towards us. It detracts in no way from Paul's 'inspiredness' (1 Thes. 2:13; 2 Pet. 3:15-16; 2 Tim. 3:16) to acknowledge, as he set forth this theological flow of thought under the Spirit's superintendence, that he reflected upon, and deduced theological conclusions from (1) earlier inspired conclusions, (2) biblical history, and (3) even his own personal position in Christ. Indeed, one finds these 'theologizing reflections and deductions' embedded in the very heart of some of the apostle's most radical assertions. For example, after stating certain propositions, at least ten times Paul asks: 'What shall we say [conclude] then?' and proceeds to 'deduce by good and necessary consequence' the conclusion he desires his reader to reach (cf. 3:5, 9; 4:1; 6:1, 15; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14, 30; 11:7). In the fourth chapter the apostle draws the theological conclusion both that circumcision is unnecessary to the blessing of justification and that Abraham is the spiritual father of the uncircumcised Gentile believer from the simple observation based on Old Testament history that 'Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited it to him for righteousness' (Gen.15:6) some fourteen years *before* he was circumcised (Gen.17:24) – striking theological deductions, to say the least, to draw in his particular religious and cultural milieu simply from the 'before and after' relationship between two historical events. Later, to prove that 'at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace' (Rom.11:5), Paul simply appeals to his own status as a Christian Jew (Rom.11:2), again a striking assertion to derive from the simple fact of his own faith in Jesus. Surely the apostolic model lends its weight to the point I am making respecting the justification of our engagement in the enterprise.

### **The Activity of the New Testament Church**

Finally, our engagement in the task and formation of theology as an intellectual discipline based upon and derived from Scripture gains additional support from the obvious activity of

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the New Testament church itself,<sup>7</sup> for our attention is again and again already called in the New Testament to a body of saving truth, as in Jude 3 ('the faith once delivered to the saints'), 1 Timothy 6:20 ('the deposit'), 2 Thessalonians 2:15 ('the traditions'), Romans 6:17 ('the pattern of doctrine'), and the 'faithful sayings' of the pastoral letters of Paul (1 Tim. 1:15; 3:1; 4:8-9; 2 Tim. 2:11-13; Tit. 3:3-8).<sup>8</sup> These descriptive terms and phrases unmistakably and incontestably indicate that in the days of the apostles the theologizing process of reflecting upon and comparing Scripture with Scripture, collating, deducing, and framing doctrinal statements into creedal formulae approaching the character of church confessions had already begun (cf. for examples of these creedal formulae Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Tim. 3:16). And all of this was done with the full knowledge and approval of the apostles, indeed, with the full and personal engagement and involvement of the apostles themselves in the theologizing process (cf., for example, in Acts 15:1-16:5 the activity of the apostles in the Jerusalem assembly, labouring not only as apostles but also as elders in the deliberative activity of preparing a conciliar theological response to the issue being considered then for the church's guidance).

Hence, when we today, under the guidance of the Spirit of God and in faith, come to Holy Scripture and with all the best intellectual tools make an effort to explicate it, trace its workings in the world, systematize its teachings, formulate its teachings into creeds, and propagate its message, thus hard won, to the world, we are standing squarely in the theologizing process present in and witnessed and mandated by the New Testament itself!

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7. Cf. J. N. D. Kelly, 'Creedal Elements in the New Testament', *Early Christian Creeds*, London, 1950.

8. Cf. George W. Knight, III, *The Faithful Sayings in the Pastoral Letters*, Kampen, 1968.

Surely herein resides the biblical justification for the theological enterprise in our own time and our personal engagement in it. Indeed, so clear is the scriptural mandate for theology that one is not speaking to excess were he to suggest that our concern should not be one primarily of whether we should *engage* ourselves in theology or not - the Lord of the church and his apostles leave us no other option here (cf. Matt. 28:20; 2 Tim. 2:2; Tit. 1:9; 2:1); we have to be engaged in it if we are going to be faithful to him. Rather, what should be of greater concern to us is whether, in our engagement, we are *listening* as intently and submissively as we should to his voice speaking to his church in Holy Scripture. In short, our primary concern should be: Is our theology correct? Or perhaps better: Is it orthodox?

### **A Case In Point: Two Modern Christologies**

An illustration that, for me, highlights this greater concern is what is being written today in the area of Christology. Such writing justifies in a powerful way the place for continuing engagement in orthodox theology. Just as the central issue of church theology in the Book of Acts was christological (cf. 9:22; 17:2-3; 18:28), so also today Christ's own questions, 'What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?' (Matt. 22:42), continue to occupy centre stage in current theological debate. While the conciliar decision of Chalcedon in A.D. 451 espousing a two-natured Christ has generally satisfied Christian orthodoxy, it has fallen upon hard times in the church in our day (cf. for example, an extreme example of this in *The Myth of God Incarnate*). The church dogma that this one Lord Jesus Christ is very God and very man and is both of these in the full unabridged sense of these terms and is both of these at the same time has been increasingly rejected, not only, it is alleged, on biblical grounds but also as a contradiction, an impossibility, indeed, a rank absurdity. As a result, it is widely affirmed today that Christology in a way heretofore unparalleled in the church is simply 'up for grabs.' It is 'a whole new ball game.'

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The Johannine phrase, *ho logos sarx egeneto*, is at the centre of the modern debate and in its own way, as a point of departure, crystallizes the major issue of the current debate: Is Christology to be a Christology 'from below,' that is, is it to take its starting point in a human Jesus (*sarx*) or is it to be a Christology 'from above,' that is, is it to begin with the Son of God (*ho logos*) come to us from heaven? And in either case, what precisely is the import of John's choice of verbs: the *egeneto*? Faced with such questions, is it not clear that never has the need been greater for careful, biblically-governed, hermeneutically-meticulous theologizing as the church addresses the perennial question: *Who is Jesus of Nazareth?*

Any response to this question would be well-advised to recall at the outset that the ultimate aim of the early Fathers throughout the decades of controversy over this matter (A.D. 325-451) was simply to describe and to defend the verbal picture which the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament draw of Jesus of Nazareth. Certainly there were the party strife and the personal rancour between some individuals which made complete objectivity in the debate extremely difficult at times. But a faithful reading of the Nicene and post-Nicene Fathers must lead one to the conclusion that neither was it the concern just to 'have it one's own way' on the part of those engaged in the debate nor was it the desire to contrive a doctrinal formula so intellectually preposterous that it would be a stumbling block to all but the most gullible of men that led them to speak as they did of Jesus Christ as a two-natured single person. Rather, what ultimately underlay their entire effort, we may affirm without fear of correction, was simply the faithful (that is, 'full of faith') resolve to set forth as accurately as words available to them could do what the New Testament said about Jesus. If their creedal terms were sometimes the terms of earlier and current philosophy, those terms nonetheless served the church well then and still do in most quarters of the Christian community in communicating who the Bible declares Jesus to be. If the 'four great Chalcedonian adverbs' (*asunkutos* [without confusion],

*atreptos* [without change or transmutation], *adiaretos* [without division], *achoristos* [without separation or contrast]) describe not so much how the two natures – the human and the divine – *are* to be related to each other in the unity of the one person of Christ as how they *are not* to be related, again it can and should be said that these adverbs served to protect both what the Fathers believed the Scriptures clearly taught about Jesus and, at the same time, the *mystery* of his person as well. My own deep longing is that the church today might be as faithful and perceptive in assessing the picture of Jesus in the Gospels for our time as these spiritual forebears were for theirs.

I fear, however, that it is not just a modern dissatisfaction with their usage of Greek philosophical terminology or the belief that the early Fathers simply failed to read the Bible as accurately as they might have that lies behind the totally new and different reconstructions of Jesus presently being produced by doctors in the church. Rather, it is a new and foreign manner of reading the New Testament, brought in by the 'assured results' of 'Enlightenment criticism' - a new hermeneutic reflecting canons of interpretation neither derived from Scripture nor sensitive to grammatical/historical rules of reading an ancient text - that is leading men to draw totally new portraits of Christ; but along with these new portraits of Christ, a Christ also emerges whose purpose is no longer to reverse the effects of a space/time fall from an original state of integrity and to bring men in to the supernatural kingdom of God and eternal life, but rather to shock the modern somehow into an existentially-conceived 'authentic existence,' or into any number of other religious-psychological responses to him.

Now I believe that it is quite in order to ask, over against the creators of these 'new Christs': Is the mind-set of modern man really such that he is incapable of believing in the Chalcedonian Christ and the so-called 'mythological kerygma' (Bultmann) of the New Testament? Is it so that modern science compels the necessity of 'demythologizing' the church's proclamation and to reinterpret it existentially? I believe not. In fact, what I find

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truly amazing is just how many truly impossible things (more than seven, I assure you) modern man is able to believe every day - such as the view that asserts that this present universe is the result of an impersonal beginning out of nothing, plus time plus chance, or that man is the result solely of forces latent within nature itself, or that man is essentially good and morally perfectible through education and social manipulation, or that justice and morals need not be grounded in ethical absolutes.

It is also still in order to ask: Who has better read and more carefully handled the biblical material - the ancient or the new Christologist - with reference to both the person and the purpose of Jesus Christ?

### Bultmann's Existential Jesus

Consider Bultmann, the exegete, for a moment as a case in point. When, in his commentary on John he comes to John 1:14, he writes: 'The Logos became flesh! It is the *language of mythology* that is here employed,<sup>9</sup> specifically 'the mythological language of Gnosticism.'<sup>10</sup> For Bultmann, all emphasis in this statement falls on *sarx* and its meaning, so that 'the Revealer is nothing but a man.'<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the Revealer's *doxa* 'is not to be seen ... *through* the *sarx* ... ; it is to be seen in the *sarx* and nowhere else.'<sup>12</sup>

When one takes exception to this and observes, however, that this statement cannot mean that the Word became flesh and thus ceased to be the Word (who earlier was said to be in the beginning with God and who was God [1:1]), both because the Word is still the subject of the phrase that follows, 'and dwelt among us,' and because John's sequel to this latter phrase is 'and we beheld his glory *as* [the *hos* here denotes not only

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9. Rudolph Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, Oxford, 1971, p. 61.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, p. 62; cf. too his statement: 'It is in his sheer humanity that he is the Revealer', p. 63.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 62f., 69.

comparison but also identification] of the unique Son of the Father, 'whom John then further describes as 'the unique one, God himself, [cf. F. F. Bruce], who is in the bosom of the Father' (1:18), one has just reason to wonder at the exegesis behind Bultmann's response that John's assertions are reflecting the perspective of *faith* which has understood that the revelation of *God* is located precisely in the *humanity* of Jesus,<sup>13</sup> and that they are not statements about the divine *being* of Jesus but rather the mythological shaping of the *meaning* of Jesus for faith!

Can the exegete who is not a follower of the highly personal, individualistic, existential school of Bultmann be blamed if he politely demurs at this perspective? For here there remains not even a kenotic Christ who once was God and who divested himself of his deity but only an existential Christ who in *being* never was or is God but who is only the Revealer of God to *faith*, but of course this faith here is devoid of any historical facticity.

The questions must be squarely faced: Is Bultmann's interpretation preferable to that of Chalcedon? Is it in any sense exegetically sustainable? Is not the language of John 1:14 the language of an *eyewitness* (cf. the following 'we beheld' and the commentary on this phrase in 1 John 1:1-3)? And does not the Evangelist declare that others (cf. the 'we') as well as he 'beheld his glory,' which glory he identifies as (*hos*) the glory of his divine being as 'unique Son of the Father'? And just how observable Jesus' divine glory is is evident on every page, in every sign-miracle he performed, a glory which neither bystander could overlook nor enemy deny (cf. 2:11; 3:2; 9:16; 11:45-48; 12:10-12, 37-41; cf. Acts 2:22: 'as you yourselves know'; cf., too, Acts 4:16: '... and we cannot deny it').<sup>14</sup>

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13. *Ibid.*, pp. 62f., 69.

14. It is directly germane to our point here to observe in connection with Christ's first sign miracle (John 2:1-11) that John does not say that the disciples' faith was the pathway to the beholding of Jesus' glory, but to the contrary, that his miracle manifested his glory, and his disciples believed on him *as a consequence*.



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Later, when doubting Thomas eventually comes to faith in Jesus and cries out, 'My Lord and my God' (20:28), he does so not because an existential flash bringing new pistic appreciation of the meaning of the human Jesus for human existence overpowered him, but because his demand to see the print of the nails with his own eyes was graciously met (cf. John 20:25, 27, 29), and because the only possible implication of Christ's resurrection appearance for the nature of his *being* (cf. Rom.1:4) made its inescapable impact upon him: 'He is my Lord and my God!'

Bultmann's Christology, only one of many examples of a Christology 'from below,' represents one extreme to which faulty theologizing can lead the church - the extreme of portraying the Christ as to his being as a mere man and only a man. But this conclusion not only the Fourth Gospel but also the New Testament as a whole finds intolerable. A careful consideration of each context will show that Jesus has the Greek word for 'God' (*theos*) ascribed to him at least eight times in the New Testament (John 1:1,18; 20:28; 1 John 5:20; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pet. 1:1; cf. also Col. 2:9). Hundreds of times he is called *kurios*, 'Lord,' the Greek word employed by the LXX to translate the Hebrew Tetragrammaton (cf., for example, Matt. 7:21; 25:37,44; Rom. 10:9-13; 1 Cor. 2:8; 12:3; 2 Cor. 4:5; Phil. 2:11; 2 Thes. 1:7-10). Old Testament statements spoken by or describing Yahweh, the Old Testament God of the covenant, are applied to Christ in the New (cf., for example, Ps. 102:25-27 and Heb. 1:10-12; Isa. 6:1-10 and John 12:40-41; Isa. 8:12-13 and 1 Pet. 3:14-15; Isa.,45:22 and Matt .11:28; Joel 2:32 and Rom. 10:13). Divine attributes and actions are ascribed to him (Mark 2:5, 8; Matt.18:20; John 8:58; Matt. 24:30). Then there is Jesus' own self-consciousness of his divine nature (cf. John 3:13; 6:38,46,62; 8:23,42; 17:6,24; and the famous so-called 'embryonic Fourth Gospel' in Matt.11:25-28 and Luke 10:21-22). Finally, the weight of testimony which flows from his miracles and his resurrection (Rom. 1:4) must be faced without evasion. It carries one beyond the bounds of credulity to be asked to

believe that the several New Testament writers, living and writing under such varying circumstances, places, and times, were nonetheless all seduced by the same mythology of Gnosticism. All the more is this conclusion highly doubtful in light of the fact that the very presence of a pre-Christian Gnosticism has been seriously challenged by much recent scholarship.<sup>15</sup>

### Käsemann's Docetic Christ

Now, very interestingly, it is by one of Bultmann's students, Ernst Käsemann, that we find argued the other extreme in current Christology.<sup>16</sup> In his *The Testimony of Jesus*, Käsemann also deals at some length with the meaning of John 1:14. He argues that the Evangelist intends by *sarx* here 'not the means to veil the glory of God in the man Jesus, but just the opposite, to reveal that glory before every eye. The flesh is the medium of the glory.'<sup>17</sup>

According to Käsemann, John's Jesus, far from being a man, is rather the portrayal of a god walking across the face of the earth. Commenting on 'the Word became flesh,' Käsemann queries: 'Is not this statement totally over-shadowed by the confession, "We behold his glory," so that it receives its meaning from

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15. Cf. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism: A Survey of the Proposed Evidence*, Grand Rapids, 1983, particularly Chapter 12; cf. also C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (1953); the *Dodd Festschrift, The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology*, especially the articles by W.F. Albright and R.P. Casey; and R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII*, p. LVI.

16. I am indebted to Herman N. Ridderbos for calling my attention to this contrast between teacher and student. Cf. 'The Word Became Flesh,' *Through Christ's Word* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1985), pp. 3-22, especially p. 5.

17. Ridderbos, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

it?'<sup>18</sup> Thinking it to be so, Käsemann contends that the Fourth Gospel uses the earthly life of Jesus 'merely as a backdrop for the Son of God proceeding through the world ...'<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, he urges: '... the glory of Jesus determines [the Evangelist's] whole presentation so thoroughly from the very outset that the incorporation and position of the passion narrative of necessity becomes problematical,'<sup>20</sup> so problematical, in fact, Käsemann believes, that 'one is tempted to regard it as being a mere postscript [*nachklappt*] which had to be included because John could not ignore this tradition nor yet could he fit it organically into his work.'<sup>21</sup> So great is John's emphasis on the divine glory of Jesus that, according to Käsemann, the Fourth Gospel has slipped into a 'naïve docetism':

John [formulated who Jesus was and is] in his own manner. In so doing he exposed himself to dangers ... One can hardly fail to recognize the danger of his Christology of glory, namely, the danger of docetism. It is present in a still naïve, unreflected form ...<sup>22</sup>

In sum, John 'was able to give an answer [to the question of the centre of the Christian message] only in the form of a naïve docetism,'<sup>23</sup> Jesus' humanity really playing no role as it stands 'entirely in the shadow' of Jesus' glory as 'something quite non-essential.'<sup>24</sup> 'In what sense', Käsemann asks, 'is he flesh, who walks on the water and through closed doors, who cannot be captured by his enemies, who at the well of Samaria

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18. *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John In the Light of Chapter 1*, Philadelphia, 1968, pp. 9-10.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 77; cf. his statement: 'The assertion, quite generally accepted today, that the Fourth Gospel is anti-docetic is completely unproven' (p. 26, n. 41).

23. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

24. Ridderbos, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

is tired and desires a drink, yet has no need of drink and has food different from that which his disciples seek? ... How does all this agree with the understanding of a realistic incarnation?'<sup>25</sup> he seriously doubts whether 'the "true man" of later incarnational theology becomes believable' in John's Christology.<sup>26</sup>

What is one to say about Käsemann's opposite extreme to that of Bultmann? One can only applaud the emphasis here on the 'very God' character of Jesus, but surely Ridderbos is right when, commenting on John 1:14, he writes:

*Egeneto*, 'became,' is not there for nothing. It is surely a matter of a new mode of existence. Also, not accidental is the presence of *sarx*, 'flesh,' which ... indicates man in his weakness, vulnerability, and transiency. Therefore, it has been said, not incorrectly, that this statement ... certainly approximates the opposite of what one would expect if it were spoken of a docetic ... world of thought.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, nowhere is Jesus' humanity more apparent in a natural and unforced way than in John's Gospel. Our Lord can grow weary from a journey, sit down at a well for a moment of respite, and ask for water. He calls himself (8:40) and is called by others a man (*anthropos*) many times (4:29; 5:12; 7:46; 9:11; 16, 24; 10:33; 11:47; 18:17,29; 19:5). People know his father and mother (6:42; 7:27; 1:45). He can spit on the

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25. Käsemann, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

27. Ridderbos, *op.cit.*, p.10. The reference in the last sentence is to the opinions of R. Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium*, p. 244, and R.E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 24. But one could add almost indefinitely to this list the names of scholars who view John as self-consciously opposing docetism by his statement in 1:14, for example, Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* Grand Rapids, 1971, p. 102, and F.F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* Grand Rapids, 1983, pp. 39-40.

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ground and make mud with his saliva (9:6). He can weep over the sorrow Lazarus' death brings to Mary and Martha (11:35). He can be troubled (*he psuche mou tetaraktai*) as he contemplates his impending death on the cross (12:27). Here is clearly a *man*, for whom death was no friend, who could instinctively recoil against it as a powerful enemy to be feared and resisted. He can have a crown of thorns pressed down on his head (19:2) and be struck in the face (19:3). At his crucifixion (N.B.!) a special point<sup>28</sup> is made of the spear thrust in his side (cf. *soma*, 19:38, 40), from which wound blood and water flowed forth (19:34). And after his resurrection on at least two occasions he shows his disciples his hands and feet, and even eats breakfast with them by the Sea of Galilee. Here is no docetic Christ! Clearly, in John's Christology we have to do with *sarx*, 'flesh,' a man in weakness and vulnerability, a 'true man.' In Käsemann's interpretation of John's Jesus, while we certainly have to do with a Christology 'from above,' the Christ therein is so 'wholly other' that his humanity is only a 'costume' and no part of a genuine incarnation.

Where precisely does the biblical material in John lead us, however (and here I turn to my own theologizing)? Does not a fair reading of John's testimony in its entirety yield up a Jesus who is true man, and yet at the same time One who is more (not other) than true man? And in what direction are we instructed to look for the meaning of this 'more than' save the 'more than' of the Son of God who is just the One who was with God the Father in the beginning and who himself was and is God (John 1:1-3), who 'for us men and for our salvation,' without ceasing to be what he is, took into union with himself what he was not and became a man, and as the God-man entered the world through the virgin's womb?

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28. Cf. John 19:35: 'The man who saw it has given testimony, and his teaching is true.'

And what about Käsemann's suggestion that the Fourth Gospel's *theologia gloriae* so overpowers everything in its path that there is really no room in it for a *theologia crucis*, that John brings it in simply because he cannot ignore the tradition? I respectfully submit that such a perspective emanates from his own theological system rather than from exegesis and objective analysis. The *theologia crucis* fits as comfortably in John's Gospel as it does in the Synoptics or elsewhere. It is introduced at the outset in the Forerunner's 'Behold the Lamb' (1:26,29) and continues throughout as an integral aspect of John's Christology, for example, in the several references to the 'hour' that was to come upon Jesus (2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1), in Jesus' Good Shepherd discourse where he reveals that he would lay down his life for the sheep (10:11,15), and in his teaching of the grain of seed which must die (12:24).

It must be clearly seen that the implication in Käsemann's intimation that the dogma of a *divine* Saviour does violence to a theology of the *cross* would mortally wound Christianity as the redemptive religion of God at its very heart, for both Christ's deity and Christ's cross are essential to our salvation. But the implication of Käsemann's point is just to the opposite effect: that one can have a theology of glory or a theology of the cross, but one cannot have both simultaneously. But, I ask, do not these two stand as friends side by side throughout the New Testament? Paul, for example, whose theology is specifically a theology of the cross can, even as John, see precisely *in the cross* Christ's glory and triumph over the kingdom of darkness (Col. 2:15). The writer of Hebrews can affirm that it is precisely *by his death* that Jesus destroyed the devil and liberated those enslaved by the fear of death (2:14-15). Clearly, Käsemann's construction cannot be permitted to stand unchallenged for it plays one scriptural theme off over against a second equally scriptural theme which in no way is intrinsically contradictory to it.

Is there a sense, then, in the light of all of this, in which we may legitimately speak of both kinds of Christologies - 'from

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above' and 'from below' - in the Gospels? I believe there is, but in the sense clarified by the great Princeton theologian, Benjamin B. Warfield, now over seventy-five years ago:

John's Gospel does not differ from the other Gospels as the Gospel of the divine Christ in contradistinction to the Gospels of the human Christ. All the Gospels are Gospels of the divine Christ ... But John's Gospel differs from the other Gospels in taking from the divine Christ its starting point. The others begin on the plane of human life. John begins in the inter-relations of the divine persons in eternity.

[The Synoptic Gospels] all begin with the man Jesus, whom they set forth as the Messiah in whom God has visited his people; or rather, as himself, God come to his people, according to his promise. The movement in them is from below upward ... The movement in John, on the contrary, is from above downward. He takes his start from the Divine Word, and descends from him to the human Jesus in whom he was incarnated. This Jesus, say the others, is God. This God, says John, became Jesus.<sup>29</sup>

By these last paragraphs I have illustrated what I think the theological task is and how it is to be fulfilled. Our task as theologians is simply to listen to and to seek to understand and to explicate what we hear in the Holy Scriptures in their entirety for the health and benefit of the church and in order to enhance the faithful propagation of the true gospel. With a humble spirit and the best use of grammatical/historical tools of exegesis we should draw out of Scripture, always being sensitive to all of its well-balanced nuances, the truth of God revealed therein. If we are to emulate our Lord, his apostles, and the New Testament church, that and that alone is our task. As we do so, we are to

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29. Benjamin B. Warfield, 'John's First Word,' *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, edited by John E. Meeter; Nutley, New Jersey, 1970, vol. I, pp. 148-149.

wage a tireless war against any and every effort of the many hostile existentialist and humanist philosophies which abound about us to influence the results of our labours.

Have we solved all of the problems inherent in the church dogma of a two-natured Christ by this method? In my opinion we have not. Further inquiry is needed for example, into the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son,<sup>30</sup> into the doctrine of the *anhypostasia*, and how, for example, the *same* person simultaneously can be ignorant of some things (Mark 13:32; Luke 2:52) and yet know all things (Matt.9:4; John 1:47; 2:25; 11:11, 14). But the fact that problems remain for him as he carries out the task incumbent upon him gives the theologian no warrant to play one Scripture truth off against another (for example, Christ's deity over against his humanity, or a theology of glory over against a theology of the cross) and to reject one clear emphasis in Scripture out of deference for another of equal prominence which he may happen to prefer. And it is right here - in his willingness to submit his mind to all of Scripture - *pasa graphe* (2 Tim.3:16) - that the theologian as a student of the Word most emulates the example of his Lord (cf. Matt.4:4, 7, 10; 5:17-18; Luke 24:27 [notice the reference to 'all the Scriptures']; John 10:35). And it is in such submission to Scripture that the theologian best reflects that disciple character to which he has by grace been called as he goes about his task.

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30. It is encouraging to see in the writings of such men as John Calvin, Charles Hodge, Benjamin Warfield, John Murray, J. Oliver Buswell, and Donald Macleod the Nicene Creed's implicit subordination of the Son to the Father, in modes of subsistence as well as in operation, being called into question and corrected.