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Jesus

Savior of the Isolated Individual, or the Body?

A Christological Issue Facing Churches of Christ

BY ALLAN J. MCNICOL

It may seem strange to raise the question of Jesus in an article written for a conservative theological fellowship such as ours. After all, Churches of Christ in America have existed for about two centuries without any great christological battles. In vain do we search for an Arius or Apollonarius who has greatly troubled the church. And, as far as we can tell, there has been no Athanasius who has come among us bringing some brilliant new insight about Jesus and his relationship to God.

Thus, indeed, sheltered by a culture in mid-America that has been hospitable to those who accept traditional affirmations about the divinity of Jesus, we have focused upon such things as issues of ecclesiology and, more recently, the chaos in cultural lifestyles. We may be oblivious, therefore, to the growing body of evidence that the power and authority of what traditionally has been understood as God's revelation in Christ and the salvation brought about through him has eroded. Here we do not refer to the acids of critical scholarship working their way to undermine credibility in the New Testament reports about Jesus. We have in mind, rather, certain inherent dangers in the widespread tendency to replace the understanding of Jesus as the awesome eternal Son of God who reigns in his heavenly kingdom, the church, *with* a Jesus who functions as a friend and companion and the One with whom individuals have a personal relationship. To put the matter provocatively, Is the Jesus whose presence the

community encounters at the Supper the same Jesus who is invoked in the highly individualistic lyrics of Christian rock or in the intimate soul talks at the youth encampment? Is involvement with the latter compatible with finding the Jesus of New Testament faith? The main themes of this essay will attempt to assay what is at stake theologically in these questions.

Procedurally, I will first give a brief synopsis of what has passed for christological reflection among us. Second, under the rubric of discussing the christology that understands Jesus as personal Friend, I will survey briefly present trends that endanger the historical consensus and threaten to sever us from a key point of New Testament theological understanding, namely, that the power of Jesus is primarily mediated, not in an isolated individualistic setting, but in a communitarian one. Finally, I will trace briefly the outlines of a biblical position on christology that is in keeping with our heritage and may serve as a springboard for further discussion on this particular topic.

Christology within Churches of Christ

As I have said, our trademark has not been lengthy debate and discourse on christology. Aside from a few off-the-wall ideas on the preexistence of Christ expounded by Barton Warren Stone, and an insistence on using biblical language as opposed to metaphysical and nonbiblical terminology when re-

ferring to the work of Jesus Christ in teaching or praise, we have done our theological reflection within the boundaries of the christological heritage of our Reformed forebears—especially Calvin. This christology is quite mainstream and self-consciously orthodox.

Central to the structure of such christology is the notion of Christ as mediator. As a result of the fall, humans are estranged from God and are unable to bring reconciliation through personal effort. They need a mediator who can reveal the mercy and love of God and reconcile them to the Father. For Calvin, Christ accomplished this mediation under the aegis of the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king.¹

As prophet, Jesus announced the new era of the Messiah (Luke 4:14–30). His words, which will never pass away, supersede the work of the Old Testament prophets. After the ascension (very important for Calvin), Christ completed his work as a prophet by sending into our hearts the Holy Spirit, who now gives us the power to receive his claim through the teaching of the *Word* in the *church*.

Christ's priesthood is closely connected to his work as prophet. Calvin followed carefully the argument of Hebrews. Through his once-and-for-all sacrifice, Christ was able to make the perfect sacrifice to deal with sin. Adopting a juridical view of the atonement, Calvin understood that Christ, in his death and descent into hell, was ascribed our sins, and his righteousness was ascribed to us. Upon his ascension, Christ continued his priestly work in heaven, where he now intercedes on behalf of the church before the heavenly Father.

Finally, for Calvin, Jesus, in his first coming, brought God's kingdom. Again as a result of the ascension, he now serves as heavenly king, ruling through the medium of believers accepting and obeying his Word. Christ's rule transcends Satan's kingdom. Ultimately, he will deliver his kingdom up to the Father to share his victory.

This concept of the threefold office of Christ as the construct for accomplishing his work as mediator has been very influential in the few works of systematic christological reflection that have emerged from the Restoration movement. There is not space here for a detailed discussion, but I will set forth as examples of this understanding two crucial works

in Restoration theology that serve as bookends for past and present. First, in his magisterial work *The Christian System*, Campbell picks up the same organizing principle of the office of Christ that we have seen in Calvin. He speaks about the role of Christ in redemption:

Three things are done for us; a sin offering is presented, a lamp of life is put into our hands, and all the active powers and energies in the wide universe are placed at the command of our King whenever we need them. All these things, it is true, might be comprehended in one gift—the gift of Jesus as our mediator; our Prophet, Priest, and King.²

Campbell was one of the inaugurators of the New Reformation.³ One of its most articulate contemporary advocates is Everett Ferguson. It is worthy of note that in his recent book on the Churches of Christ, Ferguson anchors the major chapter divisions into a christological framework. This framework echoes the threefold office of Christ. What is also significant about this book is that Ferguson continues to emphasize a central focus of the Restoration heritage, namely, the strong insistence that the locus of discipleship and obedience toward Jesus is in the church, which is the contemporary analogue to the work of Christ.

It was popular a few years ago to say, "Jesus, yes; the church, no!" or, in other words, "Give me Christianity not Churchianity." . . . The person of Jesus is more attractive than those who claim to follow him are. But . . . on a more theological level, one cannot have Jesus without the church. Jesus died for the church; his whole mission was directed toward gathering a sacred community. To take Jesus means taking also his teaching and taking the people who are joined to him.⁴

Thus, although christological reflection within Churches of Christ has not been especially innovative, one major highlight has been its insistence in correlating the historical ministry of Jesus with his function as head of the church. Our Jesus has been the Jesus of Matt 16:16–18, the Jesus who founded the church and rules over it until it is delivered up to the Father. But it is precisely this kind of Jesus who has become problematic to many in our contemporary society.

Jesus as Our Personal Friend

For several decades a mindset has developed in some circles of Churches of Christ that diminishes the significance of the church (“Brand name isn’t important”) in favor of an emphasis on individualistic religious expression. Much of this development goes back to reactions against legalism that arose in the 1960s. From that point onward, there emerged a major debate among us over the issue of “faith in a person as opposed to faith in a plan.” The debate has now been chronicled and evaluated.⁵ But it has many mutations in the contemporary scene. One of them boils down to a widespread perception that the personal faith pilgrimage is something that can be viewed as conceptually different from the demands of the obedient life. The former takes place outside the institutional church and, indeed, in many cases is considered to have priority over the communal demands.

It is no accident that many of our contemporaries question the biblical view that the living reality of Christ is experienced primarily in community rather than by isolated individuals. Such a notion cuts against the grain of popular conventional wisdom because it assaults the modern sense of personal autonomy. For it is a fundamental dogma of this era that a person is not truly human unless he or she is answerable only to the uncoerced self in making choices or moral decisions. That is why so much importance is placed on asserting our right to make a choice rather than focusing on the consequences of the choice. This strategic determination to exalt personal autonomy and freedom from outside constraints over everything else underwrites for many a very attractive view of the self. The perspective is appealing because it affirms as a very commendable human activity doing what is necessary and most valuable for the moment. In this view, the self is no more than the aggregation of a certain set of needs, emotions, and feelings operative at any given time.

Given the widespread currency of such a view of the self, it is not accidental that its correlate, individualism, spreads abroad in both society and the church with almost reckless abandon. Thoughtful observers of the present cultural scene decry the decline of participation of Americans in civic activities

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of any kind. Since the 1970s there has been a steady erosion of membership in groups ranging from labor unions to the Elks. In the meantime, new cultural entities such as talk radio, which absolutize personal opinions, have become more and more popular.⁶ Just as it is almost impossible to guide a “herd” of cats, so it is very difficult to develop a sense of common welfare among a populace of chronic individualists.

Likewise, as we turn our attention to the church, we can hardly find it surprising that the dominant question of many who attend the assembly is, “What’s in it for me?” Indeed, many arrive with their own cozy relationships to Jesus already in place. “My personal beliefs and values are fine, thank you!” Therefore, there is a predisposition to praise and invoke a Jesus who is understood as the one who can give immediate validation to a particular set of personal wants and needs—a Jesus who affirms and accepts us unconditionally.

But we ought to be careful. Our wants and needs, although ostensibly emerging uncoerced from an autonomous self, more than likely issue from a self shaped not so much by the biblical story as by shopping malls and advertising. In such a world, faith comes in winning the lottery. Hope is found, not in the resurrection, but in a new-car showroom.⁷ And, of course, love is found in sexual gratification. Here we are close to a self-help Jesus who functions as a Santa Claus to distorted personal desires shaped by the culture.

In the end, if we are not very careful, we are in danger of reversing priorities so that we expect the Christian life to revolve around the gratification of our personal needs. At one time, reflecting our Reformed heritage, we understood that the chief purpose of life was to glorify God. Now the reverse may be the case. Some act as though the role of Christ is

to underwrite the needs of humanity.⁸ But this model of discipleship can be claimed only at the expense of a massive loss of Jesus' authority. This is the danger to the church posed by the acute individualism abroad in our culture today.

Contemporary believers, for the most part, have no conscious intention to throw away the nuanced christological formulations that the church, over the centuries, has worked out with respect to Jesus; it is just that such formulations have little utility in the context I have described. And, I have argued, such a shift in perceptions of Jesus, driven by this new view of the self, is not benign. A key element of Christian faith is threatened with elimination. The emphasis on Jesus, the friend who supplies my personal needs, obscures the crucial communal relationship the Father shares with the Son—a relationship that is intended to have as its analogue the relationships between believers in Christ who share fellowship with one another in the church. Setting the ship of state on a steady course away from this chronic individualism will require the recovery of an understanding of the self in keeping with the biblical story. It must be conjoined with a christology that incorporates a view of God as One who draws us into the divine life within the locus of the church.

A Biblical Framework for Christology Today

As we have observed, much of contemporary christology within the circles of the Churches of Christ (and the evangelical community) is driven by a minimalist view of the self: an understanding of the human as one who has certain needs and feelings that constantly must be gratified. In these circles a heavenly Jesus, often experienced in some quasi-charismatic individualistic sense ("Yes, Jesus. Thank you!"), is seen as the ultimate answer to those needs.

The biblical tradition, of course, is concerned also with what constitutes our "specialness" as human beings. The author of Ps 8:4 asks plaintively,

What is the human that you (God) should
remember him?

What is mortal human that you should care for
him?

And although the biblical tradition is not ver-

bose in its response to the question, it makes it abundantly clear that we are more than an ephemeral collection of needs. We learn in Gen 1:26–28 that, subject to God, the human has lordship over creation. But that is not the entire story. God has not only given an imprint of his image in the form of our lordship over creation, but in Christ he has started a new creative process among humankind that will come to completion when his followers grow into his likeness. Then, and only then, will the glorious unity that exists between the Father and the Son be real-

So, when are we truly human? Only when we grow into the likeness of Christ.

ized also in our lives as God's children (John 17:20–26).

So, when are we truly human? Only when we grow into the likeness of Christ. Paradoxically, this likeness is shown in the humble life of servitude—showing committed love that will not quit (Phil 2:5–11). It is through a community in pursuit of this model that God will ultimately bring the whole created order under his sovereignty. This is a far cry from a religion that underscores "doing your own thing."

Interestingly enough, in Heb 2:6–8 the words of Ps 8:4 are echoed again in a startlingly new way. The writer to the Hebrews, reading the psalm in Greek, sees a temporal reference in the statement about the human's having been constituted a lesser being. With the Greek word *bracuv* 'a little while', the writer applies the psalm to Christ, who, in the "little while" of his incarnation, was tested in all aspects of human experience but, through exaltation upon his death, experienced honor and glory as the fruits of a committed life. As the New Testament witness concludes, Christ has initiated believers into a new mode of existence whereby they forfeit the old way of Adam and imitate the divine likeness as modeled by Jesus, thus attaining the reality the creator intended for them (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10–13; Rom 8:29; 1 John 3:2). As Wesley well said:

Come, Desire of nations, come,
 Fix in us thy humble home;
 Adam's likeness now efface,
 Stamp thine Image in its place;
 Second Adam from above,
 Reinstate us in thy Love.

This view of the human is not some vague Platonic idea of an estranged immortal self that mysteriously discovers its home, but it is a concrete image that shows how one may grow morally into wholeness by sharing in the life of God, mediated through communal life in the church.

Christologically, this brings us back to the centrality of the office of Christ as a mediator. As one who is both truly God and human, Christ is the only one who is in a position to act as our mediator. But it is a central New Testament idea that we benefit from this mediation only insofar as we as individuals are united in one communal body to him who is its head. Such a union does not obliterate, but perfects, our human identity.⁹ For that human identity can come to full realization only as it is carried out by the undertaking of common tasks in fellowship together within the body.

Thus, without question, we understand again that there is no such thing as a religion for the isolated individual—in the biblical tradition. The new eschatological reality that emerged out of Jesus' ministry through its spirit and activity in the church brought salvation and the hope of blessedness in the life beyond.¹⁰ Again, let me underscore that all this took place within the context of a communal life in the body of Christ. Or, to put it another way, it is through our routine activities in the life of the body, which pass almost unnoticed, that we are constantly renewed by the power of the heavenly Christ. This power does not draw us into solipsism or narcissism, where Jesus confirms our culturally influenced needs, but into involvement with a wide range of people within the faith community. In true restorationist fashion, we are saying no more than what we have always said: "There is no salvation outside of the church." Any christology worth accepting will have to take that reality into consideration.

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Notes

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion I*, ed. John T. McNeill, The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 495–503. These pages are the most salient sections of Calvin's christology. This is the place where Calvin sets forth his famous and very influential argument for the threefold office of Christ.

² Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System: In Reference to the Union of Christians and a Restoration of Primitive Christianity As Plead in the Current Reformation* (Bethany, Va.: A. Campbell, 1839), 53.

³ I am not the first to have noticed Campbell's dependence on Calvin's idea of the threefold office of Christ. This has also been noted by William Baur, "Christology in Disciples Tradition: An Assessment and a Proposal," in *Classic Themes of Disciples Theology*, ed. Kenneth Lawrence (Forth Worth: TCU Press, 1986), 9–27. He makes the additional interesting observation that Campbell stood strong against predestinarian theology by insisting that Christ's redemptive work is unlimited in its aim, but limited in effect to those who receive it by faith.

⁴ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), xix–xx. In the opening chapter, Ferguson highlights the rule of the Messiah (King); in the fourth chapter, he highlights the role of Christ as High Priest; and in the final chapter, he underscores the role of Christ as Teacher (Prophet). He supplements this threefold office with other images of Christ as Lord, Savior, and Bishop.

⁵ John Mark Hicks, "K. C. Moser and Churches of Christ: A Historical Perspective," *Restoration Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1995): 139–57; "K. C. Moser and Churches of Christ: A Theological Perspective," *Restoration Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (1995): 193–211.

⁶ As noted by Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); also note the timely comment by Wolfhart Pannenberg, "How to Think About Secularism," *First Things* 64 (June/July 1996): 27–32. Pannenberg sees the end result of this emphasis on personal autonomy not only as a severance of the self from a common concern for the welfare of others but also as a rejection of any heteronomous source of authority—including God. This must ultimately lead to a crisis in meaning and societal breakdown. Pannenberg opines succinctly about the future of Western stability: "It depends in part on how long most people will be willing to pay the price of meaninglessness in exchange for the license to do what they want."

⁷ Ellen Charry, "Raising Children in a Pagan Culture," *Christian Century* 111 (16 Feb 1996): 166.

⁸ Paul H. Jones, "How We Worship: Corporate Worship as a Matrix for Christian Identity Formation," *Worship* 69 (1995): 346–60.

⁹ Roch A. Kereszty, *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology* (New York: Alba, 1991), 168.

¹⁰ Anton Fridrichsen, *Exegetical Writings*, WUNT 76 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Siebeck, 1994), 276.