

SPIRIT CHRISTOLOGY

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Spirit christology has generally been avoided in Christian theology because it seems readily apparent that an explanation of the person of Jesus in terms of Spirit cannot be held in conjunction with the doctrine of the immanent Trinity. To identify Jesus in terms of Spirit reduces the threeness of the Trinity to at least two or possibly one. The Athanasian creed has been enough to scare off virtually all theologians from exploring the possibilities of Spirit christology.

In the present century, however, the situation has changed in at least two fundamental respects with the result that several theologians have developed Spirit christologies. The most important change for theologians has been an explosion of biblical and historical research that increasingly casts into doubt any reasonable continuity between the thinking of the biblical authors and that of Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy. The other major change for theologians has been their growing inability to deny the redemptive activity of God outside the Christian church.

If we look in some detail at the two new factors which are confronting traditional christologies it is possible to see some indication of why the time for Spirit christology may finally have come.

The explosion in New Testament studies is producing a growing consensus that Jesus and the apostolic writers were firmly theocentric. This apostolic theocentricity is not *merely* consonant with the two central affirmations of Nicaea, namely homousios, "of one substance," and the principle of "no subordination" of the Son to the Father. Wilhelm Thüsing, a biblical scholar, who coauthored A New Christology with Karl Rahner, claims that the New Testament authors were consistently and thoroughly monotheistic and theocentric, as was Jesus himself. He further shows that "this theocentricity of Jesus is maintained in a whole series of important New Testament writings referring to the risen and exalted Lord." (p.75). Thüsing insists that this new biblical understanding of the theocentric risen Christ is "the most important contribution that the New Testament can make to this attempt to find new approaches to an orthodox Christology" (p.75).

Many other biblical scholars could be cited who recognize the theocentricity of the New Testament and the fact that the New Testament does not call Jesus God or support the principle of "no subordination." One compelling example is J. Christiaan Beker of Princeton, ^{no 3} perhaps the foremost Pauline scholar in our times. In The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) he explains Paul's apocalyptic thought which he says has been unacknowledged partly because of the general rejection of any apocalyptic worldview and, secondly, because of the Christocentrism "that, especially since Nicaea and Chalcedon, intended to protect the sovereignty and unity of God

but actually fostered a type of Christomonism, particularly within the construal of an immanent Trinity." Beker observes that "A full immanent Trinitarian hermeneutic seems to compel an interpretation of Paul's Christology in ontological rather than functional terms and thus fuses God and Christ to the detriment of the coming final glory of God, to which, according to Paul, Christ is subordinate and for which he lived and died." (p.xiii).

Beker's allusion to the functional relationship between Jesus and God points to another widely held view among biblical scholars, namely, that the biblical meaning of Jesus's sonship is what John A. T. Robinson called a "functional conception of sonship" which was later labelled adoptionism and rejected by the church.

Still another anomaly in traditional Christology has been its citing of the protological passages in the New Testament in support of the Trinitarian pre-existence of Christ, whereas a number of New Testament scholars now say that it is a mistake to understand the protological passages as meaning any kind of pre-existence for Christ. One can hardly affirm the immanent Trinity, of course, without claiming pre-existence for Christ.

The historians of church history have not been idle, either, and some of their discoveries have monumental implications for contemporary christology. The claim is made that the traditional logic of atonement by satisfaction or substitutionary punishment is not truly based in scripture but owes its origin mainly to lawyer-theologians such as Tertullian, Anselm and Calvin who

favoured the legal metaphors of satisfaction from civil law or punitive retribution from criminal law to explain the saving work of Christ on the cross. This logic of salvation which holds that the merit of Jesus' death must balance or more than balance all the guilt of human history depends absolutely on Jesus being "very God of very God" because the death of any lesser being would not have sufficient merit to cover all sin. If this logic is not truly biblical and God is not mollified by cultic sacrifices then the main reason why Jesus was declared to be "of one substance" with God no longer applies.

Furthermore, some patristic scholars are saying that Arius, who espoused the idea of some subordination of Jesus to God and believed that salvation is an advancing covenantal process of struggle and faith, was actually more in line with ^{the biblical witness and with} the main stream of Christian thought prior to Nicaea than was Athanasius whose ideas prevailed at the Council in 325 and thereafter became the unassailable paradigm of Christian orthodoxy.

This Christocentric Trinitarian paradigm is now being assailed because of the findings of the biblical and historical scholars. The other major pressure upon it comes from the increasing occurrence of interfaith relationships. The experience of these relationships makes the legitimacy of pluralism with its diversity of faith difficult to deny.

The exclusiveness of traditional high Christology is increasingly unpalatable for theologians and countless Christians ^{who} ~~to~~ feel a strong compulsion to respect friends and neighbours ~~who~~ ^{that} happen to be of Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or some other

faith. Attempts to include such others by speaking of them as anonymous or latent Christians are less than satisfactory, especially if one tries to convince the neighbours of the case.

A regrettable result of the consternation caused by these two monumental changes has been a widespread uncertainty among many clergy and lay people about what to say about Jesus. One minister reported recently that she tends to avoid saying anything about Jesus in her sermons and liturgies because the traditional affirmations are unacceptable and there are no alternatives yet clearly in view. "Jesus is a gray area" was her conclusion on the subject. There is evidently a great urgency to discover or recover an authentic biblical paradigm of explicitly Christian faith and to develop appropriate christological models in accordance with that paradigm.

It is quite clear that a new paradigm of Christian faith must be relational and ethical rather than ontological and cultic. Whereas the Nicaean/Chalcedonian paradigm was based on the ontological fusing of Jesus, Father and Spirit in one God in order to deify Jesus for cultic soteriological reasons, a new paradigm has to be based on the biblical view of the functional sonship of the man Jesus to God as well as on the biblical view of atonement by Tsuvah which is moral or ethical rather than cultic, as were the traditional substitutionary views of atonement. More about atonement later.

Spirit christology is one possible model for such a paradigm. In fact, it seems to me to be the most promising and appropriate model in sight. It is not possible here to list all

the reasons why this is so but some of the main reasons can be quickly cited.

First of all there is the fact that the Bible supports the specific model of Spirit christology in a variety of ways. It provides a rich source of meaning for Spirit that can illuminate as well as appropriately limit the understanding of the relationship between Jesus and God in terms of Spirit. The Biblical witness to God's Spirit can control the extent of speculation that might be introduced into explanations of Jesus' faith, i.e. his relationship with God.

A number of scholars including Pannenberg, Reginald Fuller and Schillebeeckx agree that the relationship of Jesus with God in the Spirit is the earliest and most influential understanding of Jesus in the New Testament writings. Philip Rosato (The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth, 1981) makes the point clear. He writes:

Except for the prologue of John's Gospel and the beginning of his first Letter, the prevailing New Testament paradigm of Jesus' being is the Spirit bearer; Jesus is the Christ, one anointed fully with the Holy Spirit; for this reason he is Messiah and Lord...With time, however, this paradigm gave way to that of the incarnate Word. (p.173).

Another advantage of Spirit christology is that it employs the language of Spirit which the Bible uses for describing God, humans, salvation and church. In other words, Spirit christology can usefully integrate an understanding of biblical anthropology soteriology, ecclesiology and creation theology with christology.

The fact that Spirit is clearly metaphorical rather than mainly conceptual is another advantage over Logos. The point is that metaphors are inherently aniconic which is appropriate in referring to God. They are explicitly inadequate as well as adequate in some respects and therefore cannot pretend to perfection or absoluteness. Concepts tend to claim correspondence and may more easily be idolatrous in referring to the holy God. The methodological "poverty" of metaphorical christology is appropriate for Christian theology which is theologia crucis.

The Spirit metaphor also may be less susceptible to becoming a basis for hierarchical ecclesiology as Logos christology was and is. With a Spirit christology, the speakers of words do not have any obvious primacy over those who manifest any of many gifts and fruits of the Spirit. Along this line of thought, Spirit is wholistic and inclusive of emotional, affective and volitional as well as rational aspects of humanness and God. Spirit christology unlike Logos christology does not tend to define human beings as only homo sapiens, or to see revelation as primarily propositional, or to conceive of salvation as dependent essentially on orthodoxy rather than orthopraxis and therefore to be predominantly redemption-oriented to the virtual exclusion of creation-orientation. If orthodoxy is the main efficient condition of salvation there may be relatively little attention paid to the unbelieving subhuman parts of creation or unbelieving humans, for that matter. Not least valuable is the capacity of the language of Spirit to cross many cultural and religious

boundaries thereby opening a dialogue about the singularity of Jesus in which people of other religious and philosophical traditions may participate and possibly contribute.

Finally, Spirit is a relational Reality and also the Agent, it can be said, of morality. A Spirit model of christology does exemplify the biblical paradigm of faith which is relational and moral. At least an interpersonal Spirit christology is relational and moral. Walter Kasper and Philip Rosato have advocated what might be called intrapersonal Spirit christologies in which Spirit is conceived to be the essential identity of Jesus exactly analogous to the way in which Logos christology conceives of Logos to be the essential identity of Jesus' person. These intrapersonal models are not relational unless one stretches the term to include God relating to Godself.

I believe that an interpersonal ~~Spirit~~ christology is necessary because of the functional understanding of sonship in the New Testament. It is necessary also because of the soteriological need to see Jesus as fully and essentially human ^{human, being with faith} which, despite the claims for Jesus' humanity made at Chalcedon, the anhypostatic Logos christology never achieved.

For heuristic reasons, too, Jesus must be regarded in our time as fully human, interacting with God, rather than being essentially God. As Schillebeeckx has said, "there are no ghosts or gods in disguise wandering around in human history, only people." Jesus can be commended more effectively to most people in our time as a fully human person which he most certainly was. It is beneath his dignity, I believe, to be put in the same class

as the Emperor of Japan and other human beings who are called God by their devout followers usually for discernible political reasons. Such a claim, though understandable in the time of its historical origin, now works to the detriment of proclaiming the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Even if the majority of people prefer magic and mystery, as the Grand Inquisitor maintained, to present Jesus as one of the mysterious Trinity is to risk losing what John Dominic Crossan calls the "comic eschatology" and the irony and iconoclasm that were central to Jesus' teaching in parables. In short, to lose the central focus on Jesus' humanness is to risk missing the revelation of God that is received by recovering the human story of Jesus' faith.

With this rationale for considering Spirit christology we can then look at the specific characteristics of one model of interpersonal Spirit christology.

Christological method, I believe, is a matter of historical recollection of Jesus combined with systematic reflection. The reflection develops a model or models of interpretation which combine, among other things, some preunderstandings of God and the world with consideration of the performative function of the model, i.e., the results of the extension of the model's logic in ecclesiology and ethics.

The interpersonal Spirit christology that I have developed uses for its preunderstanding a biblical and contemporary theology of Spirit which includes a Spirit anthropology and a cosmology in which systems theory is related to the biblical view of principalities and powers. In the biblical and contemporary

theology of Spirit I have focussed on seven basic terms: energy, information, imagination, discernment, attitude-virtues, vocation and ethos. After these terms are analyzed and shown to have a basis in scripture they are then used as focal points for organizing the biblical recollection of Jesus. Discernment, for example, is analyzed in terms of law, wisdom, prophecy, apocalyptic and gospel. Attitude-virtues are what St. Paul called the fruit of the Spirit. They are explained in the way Donald Evans has analyzed them in Struggle and Fulfilment. Each of the seven terms of Spirit renders some valuable understanding of Jesus' life and death and resurrection. Ethos, for example, is a valuable concept for understanding the experience of the risen Jesus in the apostolic church.

The recollection of Jesus could never be adequate, of course, without focussing on his teaching about the Reigning of God over the principalities and powers. The latter are understood in the light of the biblical scholarship of Walter Wink, Hendrick Berkhof, G. B. Caird and others. Principalities and powers are the biblical language that refers to what we in our understanding of reality would call systems. In the creation God has ordered things in physical, chemical, biological, psychological, sociological, economic and other systems. God's Spirit provides the energy and information for all the systems but the systems have the potential for, and chronic tendency towards, autonomy that leads to conflict and death as systems claim more control and power than God intended for them. An example is the way in which the economic systems conflict with

the biological and ecological systems to cause suffering and death. Evil in this view is understood as whatever is "against the Spirit" (Gal 5:17) Jesus announced the good news of the possibility of return to the Reigning of God which overcomes the sin and death endemic in the creation with its principalities and powers. The Reigning of God is understood to be synonymous with what John calls eternal life and the Pauline epistles call life in the Spirit.

Central to Jesus' teaching was the understanding of atonement by Tsuva (return) which along with the understanding of royal metaphor came to be the key for the early church to understand his death. The resurrection confirmed the atonement, while the royal metaphor required the followers of Jesus to die and rise with him, sacramentally in baptism and eucharist as well as in praxis as they love their neighbours and their enemies.

Since soteriology has always been the most decisive factor in the formation of christologies something more needs to be said about the soteriology in this Spirit christology.

The understanding of atonement by Tsuva is essential because it was and still is the ^{Hebrew} Hebrew view of atonement that was shared by Jesus and the apostles. All the prophets called on people to return (Tsuva) to God who would then have compassion on them. (Eg. Deut 30:2-3; Isa 55:7; Jer 3:12; Hos 14:1-4; Joel 2:13; Mal 3:7). Jesus, according to Mark 1:15 came into the region of Galilee preaching the gospel of God saying "The time has arrived; the kingdom of God is upon you. Repent and believe the gospel." The word for "repent" was either the Hebrew word

Tsuvah or its Aramaic equivalent. The story of the Prodigal Son was Jesus' classic illustration of atonement by Tsuvah.

Jesus' death as atonement is understood correctly, I believe, in terms of Tsuvah and the royal metaphor. In his death Jesus was living out the righteousness and peace of the Reigning of God. He was loving his enemies rather than fighting them to the death. His death represents ^{an intentional} the ultimate commitment to life in the Spirit which is the Reign of God. It is the epitome of what Tsuvah means, namely, at-one-ness with God which is accepted by God in compassion, as all the prophets promised.

The passages in the New Testament that refer to Jesus' death as an expiation or ransom "for us", "for the sins of the world" need to be understood in light of the royal metaphor. The royal metaphor refers to the representative actions of a king or a high priest who acts on behalf of the people but certainly not as a substitute for them. The people of Japan, for example, were apologizing with the Emperor of Japan after the war when he made his apology. He was not a substitute for them. Similarly, the Hebrew high priest was no substitute for the people when he offered the sacrifices of atonement. The logic of the royal metaphor is entirely different from the logic of substitutionary satisfaction or punishment which prevailed in the traditional soteriology of the church. The logic of substitution required the affirmation of Jesus as full deity whose death had sufficient merit to cover the guilt of the whole world. This logic is not a true reflection of the biblical understanding of atonement by sacrifice. The biblical view of the atonement sacrifices was a

moral view rather than cultic. At least the moral view of atonement certainly prevailed in Judaism which after the destruction of the Temple continued to celebrate Yom Kippur. On that day Jews even today read the story of Jonah which is a classic story of atonement by Tsuvah.

The logic of royal metaphor when applied to Jesus' death as the supreme act of Tsuvah requires the followers of Jesus to die with him sacramentally in baptism and eucharist and practically in their moral relationships. Salvation is not a juridical transaction accomplished by Jesus under the influence of irresistible grace. Salvation is a covenantal struggle of returning to the Reign of God in all aspects of life, personal and social, in solidarity of Spirit with Jesus who pioneered and perfected the way of salvation. His way of the cross was an active, subversive, non-violent, prophetic strategy for loving God and one's enemies. *It is the way to seek the Kingdom.*

The resurrection confirmed that Jesus' way of the cross and way of atonement were indeed the way of life in the Spirit and the way of the Kingdom. Jesus was seen as no longer dead but a live option, a living Lord to be followed and remembered and hoped for - the promise of God for Shalom on the earth. Jesus in this view is a catalytic agent of processive salvation rather than causative agent of a universal "transactional" salvation. The royal work of Christ as the second Adam, the representative of all humanity, has universal relevance, we believe, but this must be affirmed proleptically and provisionally as we wait and watch and work for the realization of the Reigning of God in our

covenanted community. Since the Reigning of God extends far beyond our community alone and since our covenant is only one of the covenants derivative of the universal covenant of God with Noah we can only proclaim in trust and hope that the Reigning of God everywhere will eventually be seen as expressive of the glory of God that we have seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

So help us God, we cannot conceive of any return to God which is not consistent with the way of Jesus, although it need not be explicitly discipleship of Jesus. We have been called to our vocation by Jesus and we must "test the spirits" by reference to him until someone convinces us that there is a more legitimate revelation of God elsewhere. It was, in fact, the vocation of Jesus as pioneer and perfecter of the way of salvation, the way of the Kingdom, that constitutes his singularity as Messiah, the ultimate or eschatological prophet, the one by whom the spirits are to be tested.

The logic of atonement by Tsuva and by the royal metaphor do not require a claim for the full deity of Jesus. On the contrary the logic of royal metaphor requires the claim for the full humanity of Jesus. "He had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God." (Heb 2:17)

Interpersonal Spirit christology consequently affirms the full humanness of Jesus as one in every respect a human being who was "full of the Holy Spirit." (Lk 4:1) The presence of God as Spirit in human beings does not make them divine but truly human. This is the meaning of the image of God understood in ~~dynamic~~

dynamic terms as reflection of the Spirit of God, rather than in static terms as substantial or ontological similarity to God.

It follows that Jesus' godliness was different from ours only in degree, not in kind. His godliness, like ours, was a function of ^{with a of} God's presence as Spirit in him. He was not ontologically some kind of unimaginable God-man who in the final analysis has to be seen as God the incarnate Logos which somehow manages a temporary stint in human form. An appropriately biblical soteriology does not require such a claim and there is no other reason to make it.

If Jesus' full humanness is affirmed, consistent with the theocentricity of Jesus himself and the apostles it is necessary to hold to the view of exclusive monotheism that is characteristic of the Bible. It is not possible to opt for an ontological or immanent view of the Trinity although the triadic language of the so-called economic trinity may still be used because it recalls different important aspects of our understanding of God's saving work.

Finally, may I say that interpersonal Spirit christology does not entail any claim to be the sole authentic model of christology. It may insist that a relational paradigm of understanding humanity, salvation, Jesus and God are necessary for consonance with the scriptures but it can recognize that many models of christology might be developed to express the relational paradigm. This was clearly the case within the New Testament itself.

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