

REFLECTIONS ON CHRISTOLOGY

A Letter to the Council of Bishops from One of Its Members

AUGUST 25, 2003

Dear Fellow Council Members:

I choose to begin this letter on Christology by focusing at the outset on our local congregations over which we are given our most challenging charge to keep. For it is neither in the thinker's armchair nor in the scholar's seminar that the revealed drama of the Incarnation and Atonement is primarily celebrated. The native home of these ancient mysteries comes to light in the hearts and souls of believers in local congregations. Pulpit, choir, hymnal, pew, stained glass windows, the Cross, the Bible, and the Upper Room provide the divinely ordained setting for this greatest drama ever staged. Like no other doctrine, Christology has found its way into the intuitive thinking and feeling of the people through the Holy Spirit who moves them to glory in the gospel of salvation, to break forth into hymns of praise and adoration, and, with gratitude, to fashion into fact deeds of love and mercy.

I choose to begin with local congregations also because I can never forget how I have felt over the years when, on almost every Sunday, in churches small and large, I have had the privilege of preaching across our Southern states. In every church, I felt I was moving into the real spiritual world, the world of the holy, the world of the living Christ who was mysteriously present and real by the Holy Spirit. All of us have experienced this and gloried in it.

From time to time, modes of thought not rooted in the biblical revelation arise which never get off the ground—longing to be born, powerless to do so. For example, in recent years a group of scholars which named themselves “The Jesus Seminar” received some notice by finding their way into the news media. It was made up of a relatively small group of scholars who wanted to make Christianity more appealing to the modern mind. It laid aside the historic understanding of who Jesus was and what he did. A critical evaluation of its findings was given by the distinguished New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, in his book, *The Real Jesus* (Harper, San Francisco, 1996).

As far as local congregations were concerned, they went on their own ways of preaching, singing hymns, baptizing babies in the name of God the Father, God the son, and God the Holy Spirit, praying in the name of Jesus, administering the Sacrament of Holy Communion with its ineradicable christological content, and calling all to receive by grace through

faith in Jesus Christ justification, regeneration, and sanctification for the new existence in Christ that leads to service.

For further illustration, I mention three strong and fertile minds who denied the Church's historic biblical understanding of Jesus. They were notable men of the 19th century with many scholarly credentials: F.D.E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Albrecht Ritschl (1822-1889) and Ernest Renan (1823-1892). Renan wrote of Jesus as “an incomparable man” and said that his body lies in an unknown grave under Syrian stars. There were many heated discussions on their views about Jesus. Two things impress me most about the multitude of first-rate scholars of that time. First, there were no inquisitions against these good men. They lived out their lives of many years without burning at the stake like Servetus (1511-1533). Second, in their times and in the times following them, local congregations, whether Lutheran or Roman Catholic or Wesleyan, went on affirming the Trinity, preaching and hearing of salvation through Jesus Christ and offering Sacraments.

My dear colleagues in the Council of Bishops, is it not our most precious congregations around the world that we hold dear and lift up in our prayers?

What do we see and know as Bishops when we stand before our congregations? Do we not see the pulpit and Bible from which the gospel of God's great salvation in Jesus Christ is preached and heard? Do we not see women, men and children who are taught that they are made to be known and loved by God and to serve, please and glorify God forever? And do we not remember that these congregations, worldwide, are called to love their neighbors as themselves?

Do we not feel ourselves to be in the presence of people who glory in celebrating the most important seasons in the Christian calendar, Advent leading up to the day Jesus was born, Good Friday, the day Jesus died, and Easter, the day Jesus was raised from the dead? Do we not see people who, from time to time, as they celebrate Holy Communion, feel something of the wonder and glory of God's gift of pardoning grace through the broken body and shed blood of our Lord?

Do we not see those congregations of all nations and cultures and tongues worshiping not on Saturday but, transcending one of the Ten Commandments, on the first day of the week because that is the Lord's day (Rev. 1:10), the day Jesus was raised from the dead? Then as we sit in the congregations, do we not see the Cross, that sovereign emblem over all? And

do we not know that, in the minds of our congregations, there is an infinite distance between a human being dying on a cross unjustly and the Son of God suffering and dying to wash away the sins of the world? Yes, and do we not hear the congregation singing the great hymns on revealed religion?

Turning in another direction, do we not see and remember those men and women who, trembling before some hideous memory, have grasped the hand of Jesus, Crucified and Risen, 'who breaks the power of canceled sin and sets the prisoner free'? And do we not hear others, defeated under the ruffian grip of the Tempter's power, pray as Wesley did, "I the chief of sinners am, but Jesus died for me?"

We see also our young people across the world who are often bewildered yet longing, longing, longing to hear the Saviour's call so they can respond saying, "Here am I, Lord, send me."

How could we miss those who, stricken by grief and circumstance, have fallen into deep depression? They too have joined the congregations in worship. Do we not hear their prayer that somehow Jesus might come their way so they can touch the hem of his garment and feel his healing power?

Finally, do we not behold that composite body of women and men, believers, who through the living Christ daily have responded to the merest touch of sympathy and chosen to follow Jesus in his pilgrimage of servanthood? Do we not hear them pouring out their souls in intercessory prayer?

What I have seen in congregations could be amplified a thousand times by each of you in the Council of Bishops. Does it not all find its center in the biblical theme of the Incarnation and Atonement? And back of this is it not the divine Love who created us to be known and loved by God and to serve, please and glorify God forever through deeds of love and mercy?

SUGGESTED BIBLICALLY-BASED CHRISTOLOGY

Now, my dear colleagues in the Council of Bishops, against this background let me suggest for our reflection a view of Christology which might undergird what our congregations know and feel in the depths of their souls. At the outset, we should make it clear that our Christology does not come from Europe or England or the United States; it comes from the Bible. Therefore, it does not have national or cultural or linguistic boundaries. It is universal because the profoundest hungers and soundings of human souls across the world are the same. We weep for the same reasons, laugh over the same juxtapositions, hunger alike for the same salvation through faith in Christ, and long for the same Grace that changes us to be what God created us to be. And we share in the same hope for the life everlasting.

It seems clear to me that our Christology needs to be comprehended in relation to three grand biblical themes, namely, (1) on the self-revealed God, (2) on Nature (the created phys-

ical universe) and (3) on the human soul. Consider these in that order. (1) On the self-revealed God. I'll never forget how I felt when I first read Borden Parker Bowne's *Personalism*. More particularly, I remember my first reading of a chapter in that book entitled, "The Failure of Impersonalism." I felt the way Keats must have felt after reading Chapman's *Homer*.

Then felt I like a watcher of the stars
When a new planet swims into his ken.

I had already ruled out of my thinking the view of such philosophical naturalists as John Dewey that nature is ultimate.¹ And as I studied under Alfred North Whitehead at Harvard, by an arrangement with Boston University, I could not follow him in his idea as the Ultimate Biological Organism. (It will be recalled that Whitehead's *Process and Reality* is foundational for process theologians today.) After reading Bowne, and most especially after reflecting on the biblical revelation, I could never put either Cosmic Process of Whitehead's Organism above Mind or infinite Conscious Loving Being as the Ultimate Reality.

Many thinkers have spoken of God as Being or Being-in-Itself or as the One of the Transcendent or as the Liberating Factor in Cosmic Process. But for me all these modes of thought fall dead because, according to the Bible, an unconscious deity does not know us or care for us; and before such a deity we cannot enter realistically into prayer and worship or into ultimately meaningful service to others. The I-Thou relationship is foundational in the Bible. Moreover, when we believe in God as the Infinite Conscious Being who cares for each human being as unutterably precious, it is clear that the one true God revealed in the Bible, being infinite, cannot be ineluctably bound to the physical universe which God created.

God may have many realms of energizing of which we know nothing. But through the Bible we can identify two realms of divine revelation and activity. These are the realm of Nature and the realm of Grace. These two realms of divine energizing are interrelated in many ways by God's ordination. At the same time, in important respects the realm of Grace is unique. For one thing, the realm of Grace is uncreated and eternal because it exists in the Heart of God, that is, in the Holy Trinity. In contrast to this, Nature is created and ever dependent on God. In relation to Nature, the realm of Grace is "supernatural"; but I do not feel comfortable in using that word here. Therefore, I choose to use the word "ontological" in reference to all of God's revelation and activity pertaining to our salvation and nurture in Christ Jesus. "Ontological" has to do with what is rooted and grounded in the Ultimate Conscious Being of God.

(2) When we come to the creation of Nature there are wonders on which to reflect. To create is to cause to be what was not. How God created Nature we do not know; that God created it and all the creatures in it, we do know. We know also that it had to be created by God's *transcendent action* since Nature did not exist. Of course, we should not suppose that there was any diminution of God's transcendent energizing

after creating the universe. For God's transcendent energizing is infinite.

Among the many wonders of Nature are two realities which suggest that what we call matter has some kind of mysterious kinship with Mind, namely, the Beauty of Nature and the Intelligibility of Nature. Flowers of numberless kinds, trees, mountains, valleys, streams, rivers and oceans with their surrounding scenes – all these we experience as beautiful. Our aesthetic experiences, originating as they do from external sources, colors, sounds, shapes, and movements, seem to have a kind of kinship with our souls so they can share their beauty with us. The physical universe might have been thought of after Plato as a receptacle of the beautiful because God is beautiful and the lover of beautiful things. This thought of beauty in Nature might include the theme that even much later manifestations of beauty were present proleptically in creation.

For example, on September 8, 2002, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra came to Emory University to help celebrate the opening of the Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts. They played the harmonious rhythms of Mendelssohn and the dramatic beauty of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Seldom have I seen and heard such a perfect cooperation of skilled persons in the production of beauty. That orchestra did not exist at creation billions of years ago; but it was proleptically incorporated into Nature for later actualization in history.

A second wonder about Nature to be noticed here is its intelligibility. Einstein had a profound awareness of this when he said, "The eternal mystery of the world is its comprehensibility" ("Franklin Institute Journal" 221 (1936) p. 351). Einstein, not being a philosopher, made no effort to account for this paradox. As far as I know, no one devoted more reflection on this as a philosopher than Borden Parker Bowne. He suggested that we can explain this mystery by holding that there is Mind at both ends of the line: The Mind of God at one end creating Nature to be intelligible and creating the minds of human beings capable of knowing it at the other end. *How* God did all this we do not know. *That* God did it seems to be the best way of accounting for it. It is reflections along these lines that led the Irishman, Bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753), to say that the universe is pervaded and regulated by Mind.

Neither the thought of Nature as beautiful nor the thought of Nature as intelligible is trivial. The author of Psalm 19 (KJV) expressed it profoundly and poetically:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
and the firmament showeth his handiwork.
Day unto day uttereth speech,
and night unto night showeth knowledge.

But neither the beauty nor the intelligibility of Nature provides for our salvation.

It might have been that Paul was reading from Plato when he turned that Greek philosopher's thought around and wrote

to the Corinthians of Christ as both "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1:24). When we move into the New Testament we find a christological understanding of the creation of Nature. For both Paul and John were governed by the vision of God's great salvation in Jesus Christ. So we read with breathtaking inspiration:

All things were made by him [the Word];
And without him was not any thing made that
was made (John 1:3, KJV; see also John 1:10
Colossians 1:16-17; Ephesians 1:10)

Therefore, back of what seem to be the cold relentless cosmic processes of Nature there was from the beginning the love and care and Grace of Jesus Christ waiting to be actualized in our history. Another way of putting this is that, by implication, from the beginning—nay, from before the beginning—in the pretemporal resolve of God, the Trinity acted proleptically to weave into creation the Incarnation and Atonement through Nature and Grace for our salvation. As Paul put it 'When the fulness of time had come, God sent forth his Son' (Gal. 4:4, KJV).

(3) This brings us to the unutterable preciousness of the soul in God's sight. As we know so well, all of our people are created by God. Therefore, God wanted them to be. God created them to be known by God; otherwise, they would be strangers to God—which is impossible. All were created to be loved by God and to respond by loving God and serving God forever. All—women, men, and Children of every race—were created in the image of God. Therefore all have intrinsic dignity. We human beings alone are made to be bearers of God's salvation in Christ.

At the same time, all of us know well the many passages in the Bible which report graphically the reality that all are sinners in need of God's redeeming Grace (e.g. Gen. 3:22; Psalm 14:23; Isa. 53:6; Jer. 17:9; Matthew 12:34; Gal. 3:22). If the sustained biblical teaching on the needs arising out of sin are not enough for an unbelieving world, let us turn to history which tells all. This has been summarized painfully by the German philosopher, Hegel, when he wrote of history as "the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been victimized." (George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, London: Bell and Doby 1872, p. 22).

Here is where the Atonement comes in. God alone knew enough to do what had to be done to wash away the vast soundings and depths of sin of the human world. In infinite love and wisdom, God chose to provide the answer to sin through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ for our salvation.² No wonder people rejoice when they hear those beautiful words: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom.5:8).

As we keep our congregations in mind, perhaps we can do no better than to summarize the divine drama of God's acts in our history by referring to the great days of the Christian calendar. The earliest Christians were so profoundly, gratefully

and joyfully aware of the reality of the resurrection of Jesus that they started a revolution in their calendar: they changed their day of worship from the seventh day—which for centuries had been the holy day of Judaism via the Ten Commandments—to the first day of the week. This was their Lord’s Day because on it Jesus was raised from the dead. So this day became fixed very early as they worshipped each week.

Then, by a kind of ontological necessity, the other holy seasons and days were added: Advent, leading to Christmas Day, when Jesus was born, and Lent, leading up both to Good Friday, the Day Jesus died on the Cross, and Easter, the Day when Jesus was raised from the dead. The time when all this redemptive action of God through Jesus Christ was first known, felt, and comprehended, was the Day of Pentecost. Up to then, the apostles and other Christians did not take in the mystery—the ontological reality—of what God had done for the salvation of all who believe. On that Day, the earliest Christians were so illuminated and empowered by the Holy Spirit that they could not help knowing and feeling the reality of what God had done *for* them and *in* them through the coming of Jesus, the death of Jesus, and the resurrection of Jesus.

It is very interesting to me that John Wesley, in his sermon, “Salvation by Faith,” made a comprehensive statement on the work of Christ by including it in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. He says,

Christian faith is then not only an assent to the whole gospel of Christ, but also a full reliance on the blood of Christ, a trust in the merits of his life, death, and resurrection; a recompency upon him as our atonement and our life, as *given for us*, and *living in us*. It is a sure confidence which a man hath in God, that through the merits of Christ *his* sins are forgiven and *he* reconciled to the favor of God; and in consequence hereof a closing with him and cleaving to him as our ‘wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption’ or, in one word, our salvation. (*The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Albert Outler, Vol. 1, p. 121)

The italics used in the personal pronouns remind us of Wesley’s constant effort to focus on the intimately personal relationship between us and Christ.

At this point, I need to call attention to the other side of the Incarnation and Atonement, namely, on how these ontological realities relate to the depths and hungers of human souls. How can we unwind the tangled web of the souls of people? Only God can know the depths of the mystery of iniquity in those who charge others with a sin they themselves have committed and would go on to stone an accused woman to death.

Only God can grasp the mystery of iniquity in human souls caught up in the awful depths and convolutions of racial prejudice. Only the Savior can lead them to be born from above to see all people as they really are: daughters and sons of God.

Only God can expose the prodigious iniquities of war. Only the Grace of God can raise up leaders who have the courage, good will and wisdom to build that world-civilization under law which has its beginnings in The United Nations.

Only God can know the depths and soundings of those who cry out: “Wretched soul that I am, who can rescue me from this body of death?”

Consider the almost ineradicable depths of pride of those three stout souls, Saul of Tarsus, Martin Luther and John Wesley which kept them out of the kingdom too long: Saul by out-Phariseeing the Pharisees, Luther, by out-monking Augustinian monks, and Wesley, by out-doing everybody in keeping the regulations of the Bible, of the Anglican Church, and by cooking up his own rules for nearly every moment. Blinded as they were by the pride of works-righteousness, they were going and not arriving, seeking and not finding, knocking and not entering into vital religion.

Are there not other elements which go into the mystery of inquiry? For example, there seem to be evils so close to us that they are almost too close to see. Only God knows the vast dimensions of the easy-going slumbering contentment with sin and mediocrity which cry for rescue by Grace. Wesley goes into this in his sermon, “Awake! Thou Sleeper.” He says, “By one who sleeps we are...to understand (and would to God we might all understand it) a sinner satisfied in his sins, contented to remain in his fallen state, to live and die without the image of God...” Being asleep, people are by a kind of natural condition unaware of the ontological possibility for them through God’s Grace. More than that, Wesley calls this a state of spiritual death. The sleeper abides in a state of death in trespasses and sins.

All of us could list other examples of this slumbering forgetfulness. But only God knows them in their deepest and most tragic dimensions. We remember also the light within of which George Fox preached and the prevenient grace that John Wesley taught. But it seems that the gravitational pull away from God and righteousness covers these up to leave us too often in darkness. Therefore, only God knows the Savior who is needed to probe the depths of our souls, to shake the foundations of our existence, to awaken us from death and give us the two ontological gifts we most urgently need: Justification (pardon) and the New Birth. God knew our needs and, in infinite love and wisdom, supplied them through Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen. Only God could give us the Savior who, out of the imperial glory of his biography of love, never pushes or shoves his way, but seeks knocks, calls, persuades; for he does not come to condemn us, but to save us. Justification is one thing, the New Birth, another. The struggling stream of duty needs to be amplified by the Niagara of God’s Grace in Christ.

The ontological reality of the redeeming and empowering Grace of God in Christ has been demonstrated by women, men and children in congregations from the beginning of our history during the days of the Apostles. Therefore, by the Holy Spirit we are thrown back upon the original integrity of the earliest Christian confession of faith: “Jesus is Lord” (1 Cor.12:3).

Is it not self-evident that we can neither establish nor destroy in the armchair what has been verified in the laboratories of believing, preaching, praying, singing and serving Christian congregations for two thousand years?

I close this with a prayer from Milton's *Paradise Lost*:

What in me is dark, illumine;
What is low, raise and support.

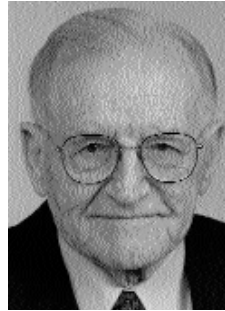
Sincerely,
your brother in Christ

Mack B. Stokes

¹ It may be worthwhile to recall the Borden Parker Bowne was the only Methodist thinker to have started an intellectual movement within our church. This was carried forward by Albert C. Knudson, Edgar S. Brightman, Georgia Harkness, Peter Bertocci and others. Bowne himself was ordained by Bishop Matthew Simpson and was a member of the New York Annual Conference. Many of our strongest Preachers who were educated at Boston University School of Theology were in this line. Bishop Francis J. McConnell, elected in 1912, wrote a scholarly biography of Bowne which came out not long after that philoso-

pher died in 1910. The Bishop showed remarkable philosophical insight in that excellent study. It will be of interest to note that the only way Bishop McConnell described himself under his name on the title page was, "one of the Bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church." Among other Bishops in this line whom I knew personally were: Gerald Ensley, Ralph Ward, Jr., and Dwight Loder. Among my contemporaries whom I have come to know very well are James K. Mathews, Jack M. Tuell and C. Dale White.

² See my book, *Theology for Preaching*, Chapter 10 on the Incarnation and Chapter 11 on the Atonement. In Chapter 11 also there is a discussion of the major historic theories of the Atonement.



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