

# THE WORD INCARNATE:

*A Study of the Doctrine of the Person  
of Christ*

*By*

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## CONCLUSION

It may be appropriate to summarize, in these last pages, the argument which we have sought to follow in this book.

The person of Jesus Christ, apprehended in Christian faith through his 'work'—that which he has done for men in the deepest places of their experience and in their understanding of the world in which their lives are set—is the heart and centre of Christianity. A religion which does not have him thus at its heart and centre cannot be called Christian; a theology which does not find its focus in him has no claim to the Christian name. Yet Christianity is above all a God-centred faith, never content until it has found the supreme Reality who has made men for himself.

Authentic Christian faith finds no contradiction here. Jesus Christ does not stand in the way, as an obstacle to that human reaching for God. On the contrary, it is the very wonder and joy of the Christian life that God is found to reach towards men in Jesus Christ. It is in and through our relationship with him that God is most surely known and his grace and love most certainly apprehended. Christians dare to proclaim that in him the supreme Reality makes his most direct approach to the lives of men. *God in Christ*: here is the formula which alone can satisfy the swift insight of faith and express the deepest deliverance of Christian experience.

On the other hand, the approach of God to the lives of men, known with such intensity in fellowship with Jesus Christ, is not made in terms that are foreign to the common humanity which we all share. It is precisely *in* that humanity, not as alien to it, that God comes to us. Hence it is also of the essence of Christian faith to insist, as the stories of the earthly life of Jesus themselves make plain, that he is true, genuine, and full man—and this in no abstract and 'impersonal' sense, but in the richest and most concrete personal humanity.

Here, then, is the double emphasis of historical Christianity: it is nothing other than God himself whom we meet in our Lord, yet it is in nothing other than a true Man that we meet him. The whole history of Christian theology, in so far as it concerns itself with the person of Christ, is the attempt first to make this double assertion as clearly and plainly as possible, and then to find ways

in which the double assertion can be justified and maintained. It is this which makes the apparently arid technical language of the 'credal period' so significant, for under all the talk about *ousia* and *hypostasis* and *phusis* is hidden this constant Christian insistence on what we have styled the double emphasis. We may not be happy about certain of the turns which the discussion took; we may feel obliged to reject certain of the ways in which the position was stated; and in this book some of this discontent has found expression. But the basic affirmation remains: truly God meets us here; truly the meeting is in One of our own kind.

Furthermore, in making that basic affirmation the Christian faith does not think of itself as setting up any dichotomy in the life of its Lord. Godhead and manhood are not antithetical in him; they do not clash one with the other. On the contrary they find one in the other a fulfilment elsewhere lacking. God is such that he seeks for and in the person of Christ possesses an adequate organ for his most intimate self-expression; man is such that in being the organ for God's self-expression his nature is brought to its intended completion. This is genuinely personal union. So there is a deep, enduring, and enriching unity: God and man one Christ.

How then can we best describe Jesus Christ? If the argument and discussion of this book is at all cogent, he is that One in whom God actualized in a living human personality the potential God-man relationship which is the divinely intended truth about every man. In him that which is thus a possibility—and thereby the ground of our human existence; that which in each of us is to some slight extent partially realized and effectual—and thereby the secret of our growth in true manhood; *that* is made real and factual. And how was this accomplished? It was brought to pass by the coincidence in him of the divine Self-Expression (and thus the Word or *Logos* of God, humanwise) and free human response in self-surrender and faith and dedicated love (and thus the limit of human action in its supreme form). Therefore he is the fulfilment of man's capacity for God; but first he is the fulfilment of God's purpose in man. He is *the Man*, and by fellowship with him through life *en Christo* men are restored and brought to their own fulfilment by the gracious loving action of God in him, and through him in his brethren.

The faith that in Christ God and man are thus at one springs from the apprehension of the 'work of Christ.' For us men, who are sinners—self-alienated from God—it is inevitable that this work will find a peculiarly direct expression in our 'reconciliation'

with God through Christ. Hence the 'forgiveness of sins,' soteriological action in its narrowest sense, is necessarily a main element in our relationship with our Lord and in our interpretation of the significance of his person. But it is not the *only* aspect of his work. For the Scotist view speaks with profound insight in claiming that even if man had not sinned God would have crowned his movement of self-expression towards his world by just such an action as the Christian faith sees Jesus Christ to be. God and his world are *for* each other; God and man, supremely, are *for* each other. Thus the Incarnation of God in Christ is the focal point of the divine action *vis-à-vis* humanity; it is also the actualization of that which by his very nature and in the purpose behind his creation is nothing other than the potential truth about man. So Christ is both power and light.

It is this which is involved in our suggestion that the difference between our Lord and all other instances of divine operation in manhood is of immeasurable degree, not of absolute kind. Otherwise, the intimate relationship which binds us to him and him to us might be lost. And all the devices employed in so much traditional christological thought to retain that intimate relationship while at the same time establishing this chasm of absolute difference in kind, seem to fail in that they really never make our Lord other than a catastrophic and irrational intrusion into a world from which in any genuinely significant sense God otherwise is taken to be 'absent.' It has been our judgement, right or wrong, that the whole trinitarian theology is *implicitly* on our side of this controversy.

The mention of trinitarian theology at once leads us on to another and highly important point in the Christian faith. It is no accident that the Fourth Gospel, in clear phrase, and St Paul in his own special idiom, speak of the Word of God as an eternal and pre-existing reality. The great passages in Colossians, in which Christ is the creative principle in whom all things cohere, and the Johannine declaration that the Word who is 'with God' and as 'divine' as God, is the agent 'by whom all things were made,' are both of them saying that whatever is divine in the Lord Jesus Christ is truly divine, yet not all there is that is divine: *totus Deus, non totum Dei*. When to this is added the simultaneously apprehended work of the Spirit who conforms us to Christ, the path is prepared for a portrayal of the supreme divine Reality as more than unitary monad—that Reality must be such that, as in a mystery, the Church is led to speak of 'one substance, three persons.' The English words 'substance' and 'person' are of course so inadequate and imperfect that they almost certainly mislead us;

we should do better if we were to follow St Thomas Aquinas and refer to the three 'relationships' in Godhead, or the Greek Fathers and signify three eternal subsisting modes of being and acting in the divine Being, or St Augustine and admit that we say 'three persons' in one Mind simply because we dare not keep silent about so great a mystery, a mystery which has in part been revealed to us in our little human area of experience.

Finally, this Christian faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is known and assimilated within the community of believers. If it is taught outside the Church, apart from the life by faith in grace, unrelated to the persisting worship and devotion which are the heart of Christianity, this faith can hardly become vivid, real, and compelling. Certainly something of Jesus may be known elsewhere; certainly the eternal Word is everywhere active and revealed; but it is in the *Una Sancta*, where men are bound together in their Lord's life and identified with the continuing and abiding experience of the Christian centuries, that the specifically Christian faith comes alive to them, reproduces itself in them, and nourishes them in the communion which is in Christ. Hence the indispensability, for full entrance into the Christian faith, of the 'churchly appurtenance' of which the Baron von Hügel spoke; hence the various 'means of grace'; hence the missionary imperative, that all men everywhere be given the opportunity to enter the household of faith and in it find life which is life indeed. Hence also the ecumenical task of our own day, that the words of prayer which the Fourth Evangelist attributes to our Lord may be fulfilled: 'that they all may be one, that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.'