

# Orthodoxy in Christology

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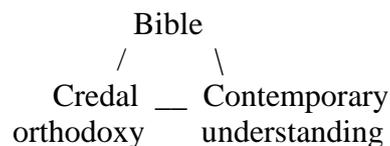
A lecture given in Oxford, 9 June 2002

## The triangle of orthodoxy

An adequate orthodoxy, I should like to suggest, is biblical, credal and contemporary. It must be faithful to Scripture, of course. By saying that it must be credal I mean that it must keep faith also with the authoritative formulations of Christian belief that belong to the shared tradition of the churches. Since this lecture is about christology, I need not discuss the place within credal orthodoxy of definitions and confessions of faith from periods later than the patristic age. Such confessions do not redefine christology but reaffirm the formulas that derive from Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon. For the purposes of this lecture, therefore, credal orthodoxy refers to the trinitarian and christological definitions of the patristic period.

The third element - that an adequate orthodoxy must be contemporary - may be more controversial. I do not mean that our contemporary context can determine what is credible for Christian faith or that a search for contemporary relevance should one-sidedly determine our faith. I do mean that an adequate orthodoxy must do more than repeat itself. It requires a constantly renewed process of faith seeking understanding in the constantly changing contexts in which the church finds itself. This is not just a requirement of mission, though it is that. It is also a necessity for a living faith that believers can believe with understanding and live with creative faithfulness. Without a truly contemporary understanding of what orthodoxy means here and now Christian faith lapses into fossilized traditionalism.

We can envisage adequate orthodoxy as a triangle. Orthodox belief, teaching and theology are responsible to the three poles of Bible, credal orthodoxy and contemporary understanding. They occupy the triangular space between the three corners of a triangle:



Orthodoxy is threatened when any of the three sides of the triangle is removed or disappears.

In christology the need for contemporary understanding was famously formulated in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's question: Who is Jesus Christ for us today? But, in asking this question, Bonhoeffer presupposed the biblical account of who Jesus was and is, as well as the consonance of credal orthodoxy with that biblical account. Knowing who Jesus Christ is for us today requires us to rediscover his identity according to the Bible and the creeds in the context of our unavoidable immersion in our own here and now. Our task is not to create a Christ out of the needs and demands of our context, but to discern the relevance for our context of the Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday today and forever.

'The question 'Who is Jesus Christ for us today?' could be unpacked in a whole series of questions like: Who is Jesus Christ in relation to the human suffering that is increasing in many parts of our contemporary world? Who is Jesus Christ in the contemporary encounter of various religious faiths? Who is Jesus Christ in relation to the various quests for human identity today, including feminism and nationalism? Who is Jesus Christ in relation to the oppressive and destructive economic structures of our world today? These are vital questions about christology in the human situation here and now, but they can only be adequately asked - let alone adequately answered - in connection with the more general questions the Christian tradition has always asked: Who is Jesus in relation to God and who is God in relation to Jesus? Who is Jesus in relation to humanity as such? The formulations of credal orthodoxy require us to recognize that what is at stake in christology is who God really is and what being human is really about. We do not know these things apart from knowing Jesus. If we presume that we do, then the sides of the triangle begin to dissolve.

### **How challenges to orthodoxy in Christology occur**

To understand what can and often does go wrong in christology in the modern period we need not only my triangle of orthodoxy, but also another set of three concepts that relate to each other along a time-line thus:

the historical Jesus - the Christ of the New Testament - the Christ of credal orthodoxy

We might say that traditionally the church read this sequence from right to left. This means that the credal statements determined its reading of Scripture and that Scripture determined its understanding of the earthly history of Jesus. In this sense the epistemological direction of the church's faith ran in the opposite direction from the chronological direction of historical sequence. There is truth in this but it is also a hugely simplified account. A good deal of left-to-right thinking also went on within the context of a right-to-left framework. However, the characteristically modern problems in christology arose when left-to-right readings of the sequence were given epistemological priority and normative status. Epistemology was to follow the same path as history. Such an approach can be but is not necessarily compatible with orthodox christological belief. Many scholars in the modern period have offered left-to-right readings that confirm the christological statements of credal orthodoxy as an appropriate development and valid interpretation of the history of Jesus. But many others have influentially insisted that left-to-right reading, when it is pursued in a properly critical historical way, conflicts with traditional right-to-left readings. In this way historical study of Jesus and the New Testament has very often been represented and perceived as challenging credal orthodoxy in christology. After two centuries of such challenges, they are still routinely represented as disturbing, shocking and liberating, as though it has only just been discovered that the church's traditional faith rests on foundations of sand and can no longer withstand the blast of objective historical study.

The issue is usually presented as that of the relationship of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. Our sequence of three concepts shows that it is more complex. There is the question whether the historical Jesus, that is, a Jesus reconstructed by critical historians, not a Jesus portrayed in the New Testament writings but a Jesus rediscovered behind them, is compatible with the New Testament writers' portrayal

and interpretation of Jesus. There is also the question whether the New Testament texts, read not through the lens of patristic orthodoxy but in their own historical context through historical-critical exegesis, are compatible with the christological doctrines of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Moreover, in historical-critical study of the New Testament what orthodoxy perceived as the uniform apostolic witness to Christ has disintegrated into a bewildering array of developments and varieties of christology within the New Testament. The historical-epistemological path from Jesus to Chalcedon comes to seem fractured by not one, but many unbridgeable chasms. For the sake of clarity of argument, however, we can risk the over-simplification of focusing on two: that between the Jesus of history and the Christ of the New Testament, and that between the Christ of the New Testament and the Christ of credal orthodoxy.

The problematic we have outlined is typically modern - rather than post-modern - in its interest in history and its confidence in the objectivity of purely historical investigation and methods. Its long dominance in theological education gives it an incalculable continuing influence and the remarkable renaissance of the quest of the historical Jesus in contemporary America is a warning against underestimating its continuing popular appeal. But an emerging post-modern approach to the issues may be just discernible enough for us to characterize it. Unlike the modern approach, the post-modern will be very sceptical of historical objectivity and will understand the quest of the historical Jesus as the imaginative construction of the sort of Christ-figures that are useful to us. The post-modern approach also considers uniformity oppressive and celebrates diversity and difference. Its difficulty with credal orthodoxy will not therefore be with the latter's historical adequacy, but with its claim to exclusive truth. Refusing to privilege any interpretation of Jesus over others, the post-modern approach will stress the great diversity of very early christologies, in the extra-canonical texts as well as the canonical ones, and advocate an unlimited variety of contemporary christologies, determined unashamedly by contemporary interests, and formed in a dialogue with early christologies that allows the texts no privileges over their readers.

Such a post-modern approach is probably the form that coming challenges to christological orthodoxy will take in the context of western culture and its world-wide influence. But for all its divergence from the typically modern historical approach, it seems to me to presuppose the deconstruction of orthodoxy already achieved by the sceptical use of historical-critical method. We still need to grapple with the latter. In the next two sections of this lecture, therefore, I shall suggest how an orthodox approach to christology is possible at the two main points where the modern historical critique threatens to sever radically the history of Jesus from the christological faith of credal orthodoxy.

### **The Christ of the apostolic witness**

What is actually going on when historical study claims to uncover a gulf between who Jesus really was and what the church made of him? The quest of the historical Jesus, for all that it stakes so much on the objectivity of historical investigation, has never been a purely historical enterprise. It is hard to imagine how anyone could engage in this particular historical enterprise with no regard for its more than purely historical significance. Rather, in the quest of the historical Jesus, history has been, in its own way, a means of answering the question: Who is Jesus Christ for us today?

Even on those rare occasions when the answer has been: he can be of no meaning or relevance for us today, the point has been to establish at least this negative point about his significance. Much of the time the quest has been driven by the desire for a religiously relevant Jesus other than the Christ of credal orthodoxy. The point has been to liberate us from credal orthodoxy but also to substitute for the Christ of credal orthodoxy a supposedly real Jesus who is a significant figure for us in some other way. The current north American quest of the historical Jesus is one way in which the question 'Who is Jesus Christ for us today?' is currently being answered in a culture deeply affected by western modernity and for which Jesus remains at least a powerful cultural symbol. What is notable is that in its key manifestations the significance the figure of the historical Jesus has for us is distinctly non-theological. It speaks of God only by way of Jesus' religious experience or as an expression of Jesus' social radicalism.

While the quest of the historical Jesus does seek his significance for us, its attempt to do so by getting behind all theological interpretations of Jesus, including those of the first Christians, and reconstructing Jesus by purely historical methods, is bound to be reductionist. It assumes the real Jesus to be no more than what is still accessible to empirical scrutiny. It assumes all theological interpretations of Jesus to be more or less arbitrary add-ons. It is precluded methodologically from saying that God sent Jesus or that God raised Jesus from the dead or that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. It cannot but collude with the secular worldview that takes it for granted that Jesus, like the rest of history, can be adequately discussed without reference to the reality of God. Of course, most historical reconstructions of Jesus have something worth saying about Jesus and some are very illuminating. From the perspective of theological orthodoxy, this is to be expected. Jesus was a real historical figure in real history, and so careful and sensitive historical scholarship can illuminate his historical reality. But it cannot give him a significance for us that is of more than secular character.

In my view, the way forward is to recover the sense that the historical reports of Jesus we have in the New Testament are in the form of apostolic testimony. What they give us, directly or indirectly, is testimony from people who were present and involved in the events, and who report, not merely what anyone might have seen, but also their God-given perception of the inherent significance of the events. The category of testimony as such is not alien to the work of the historian, much of which must rely on the reports of participants in the events, and historians in antiquity preferred the testimony of committed participants to that of uninvolved observers. The former, being 'interested' in both senses of the word, can take the historian and his readers inside what was going on in a way the mere bystander cannot. The historian may have to judge between discrepant and competing accounts of witnesses, as the jury in a trial must do, but usually the result is to accept or to reject the testimony of one or more witnesses, not, as it were, to start from scratch, as though the historian could dispense with the witnesses and construct a quite different account of his own.

The New Testament's notion of the testimony of the apostles is akin to this historiographical notion, because it makes genuinely historical claims, but it goes further in its claim to witness to the presence and action of God in history. What the

philosopher Paul Ricoeur, in his helpful treatment of the hermeneutics of testimony,<sup>1</sup> calls the exterior and interior poles of testimony - that is, the testimony of the senses to the empirically observable and the commitment of the witness to the meaning disclosed - are not neatly separable, though some distinctions can be made. There are various ways in which the historian may usefully comment on the testimony, and in principle he or she could refute it by demonstrating an essential empirical claim to be false. What the historian cannot do is extract some empirical observations from the testimony and out of them construct an alternative testimony that could claim our faith. The apostolic witness remains the only form in which we can have access to God's presence and action in the history of Jesus.

### **New Testament christology as a christology of divine identity**

The trinitarian definitions of the faith at Nicaea and Constantinople and the christological definition at Chalcedon are not, of course, in any sense substitutes for the apostolic witness to Christ in the New Testament. They were formulated essentially as guides to reading the Gospel story of Jesus. However, the challenge of modern biblical scholarship to credal orthodoxy at this point has been to question whether they are appropriate guides. New Testament scholarship has laboured long and hard not to impose the anachronistic categories of fourth and fifth century orthodoxy on the christological statements of the New Testament, but to understand the latter within the ideological context of their own time, which has in recent decades increasingly been recognized as that of early Judaism. This is the principal way in which a historical - left-to-right - reading has challenged the traditional - right-to-left - reading of the relationship between the New Testament and the credal definitions of the patristic church.

At this point I must summarize briefly an argument I have presented elsewhere at some length.<sup>2</sup> In my view much work on New Testament christology has employed categories of thought that are certainly no less appropriate than those of the patristic definitions. In particular, much damage has been done by the standard distinction between functional christology and ontic christology. The former means that Jesus performs divine functions (such as saving and judging) but only as an agent of God, while ontic christology goes further in claiming that Jesus shares the being of God or is divine by nature. A widespread assumption has been that in the Jewish monotheistic context in which the earliest christology developed only functional christology is conceivable. Ontic christology is possible only to the extent that early Christianity moved outside a dominantly Jewish framework of thought, and the more scholars have come to think that most, if not all of the New Testament writings belong within a Jewish framework of thought, the more ontic christology has been pushed to the margins of the New Testament. There has been a strong tendency to read New Testament christological texts in as 'low' a way as possible on the grounds that their original Jewish context requires this. Obviously, the gap between the Christ of the New Testament and the Christ of later patristic orthodoxy grows deeper and wider.

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<sup>1</sup>P. Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (ed. L. S. Mudge; London: SPCK, 1981) 119-154.

<sup>2</sup>R. Bauckham, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament*. (Didsbury Lectures, 1996; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998/ Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

While I entirely agree that Jewish monotheism was the context of thought within which early christology originated and developed, I think that the relationship of early christology and Jewish monotheism has been profoundly misunderstood. It is vital to work with categories that are appropriate to the texts we are considering, and it seems to me that the category most helpful for characterizing both Jewish monotheism and New Testament christology is that of divine identity. Jewish theology was much more concerned with 'who God is' (divine identity) than with 'what divinity is' (divine nature). Jewish monotheism defined the unique identity of God - what it is that constitutes God the only God - in a number of ways, of which the most prominent are that the God of Israel is the only creator of all things and the only sovereign ruler of all things. These were ways of distinguishing the one God absolutely from all other reality. The exclusive worship of only this one God was the appropriate way of recognizing his unique identity. When we read the New Testament with these ways of characterizing the unique identity of the God of Israel in view, it becomes very clear that the New Testament writings use precisely these uniquely divine characteristics to include Jesus within the unique identity of the God of Israel. When Jesus is pictured as seated at God's right hand on the cosmic throne in heaven from which God exercises his sovereign rule over all things, Jesus is being included in the unique divine identity. It is not that Jesus is exercising a divine function which God may delegate to someone other than God. Sovereignty over all things is a uniquely divine relationship to the world and belongs to who God is. Similarly, and even more unambiguously, when the New Testament portrays the pre-existent Christ participating in God's work of Creation, there could be no clearer way, in Jewish theological terms, of claiming that Jesus belongs - eternally - to the unique identity of the one God, the God of Israel, the Creator and Ruler of all things. This is why early Christians worshipped Jesus without supposing that they were abandoning Jewish monotheism. In terms of the definition of Jewish monotheism, the worship of Jesus as included in the unique divine identity made sense, whereas the worship of Jesus as someone other than God, to whom God merely delegated divine functions, would have been idolatry and effectively polytheism. Early Christianity remained monotheistic precisely because it attributed divinity in the fullest (and only true) sense to Jesus, not because it made Jesus some kind of lesser divinity distinguished from God.

From this perspective all christology in the New Testament is equally 'high' since at least Jesus' status as exalted to the divine throne of the universe - the symbol of God's uniqueness - is everywhere presupposed and in this basic sense the New Testament writings share a common christology. Against the background of twentieth-century study of New Testament christology, I find rather astonishing to be able to say that, from Pentecost onwards, there was never a stage at which Christians did not consider Jesus to share in the unique divine identity, but I think this is true. In the New Testament there is christological development in the sense of drawing out the implications of this, but there is no development from 'low' to 'high' christology. New Testament christology is already the highest possible christology - but developed and expounded in Jewish theological terms. What made the difference for the Fathers was, first, a context in Hellenistic philosophy which highlighted divine nature rather than divine identity, and, secondly, the temptation to understand monotheism in a non-Jewish way, such that the uniqueness of the one God (the Father) could be maintained by attributing *subordinate* divinity to Christ. These problems required the Fathers to work through the issues of trinitarian and christological doctrine in order to

reach definitions that adequately re-stated the claims of New Testament christology in a different intellectual context. These definitions are Hellenistic insofar as they give prominence to notions of divine and human nature (what it is to be divine, what it is to be human), but they also correspond to the New Testament's Jewish thinking about God insofar as the idea of divine nature is subordinated to a trinitarian understanding of God and a hypostatic (personal) understanding of incarnation. The Trinity is the Christian statement of God's identity (who God is) and the statement that the eternal divine Son made human nature his own in incarnation effectively includes the man Jesus within the identity of the one and only God.

### **Jesus Christ for us today**

We have seen that the side of the triangle that joins the Bible to credal orthodoxy can withstand the formidable attempts to breach it that some modern biblical scholarship has made. But the kind of thinking in which we have rather briefly engaged here is much more than a defensive tactic. Thinking through afresh the relationship between the Bible and credal orthodoxy enables us the better to understand both. Moreover, it is out of such thinking that the lines linking the Bible and credal orthodoxy to the third corner of the triangle of orthodoxy develop. Who is Jesus Christ for us today? The simplest answer might be that he is God for us - both that he truly is *God* for us and also that he is God *for us* today. Here and now as much as there and then, it is in Jesus that we find the God who is not indifferent to us or against us, nor even the God who regards us benevolently from afar, but the God who is with us and for us in a radical identification with the human situation that transforms it.

I said that the Chalcedonian definition was intended as a guide for reading the Gospel story adequately. It is important to retain that stress on the Gospel *story*. One of the dangers of making too much of the concept of nature, human and divine, rather than the concept of identity, is that it encourages a rather static view of incarnation, as though what mattered were that God became human, rather than that God became *this* man, Jesus of Nazareth, whose story belongs to who he is. When we think of human identity - when we want to say *who* someone is - we rarely get far without narrative. Personal identity very significantly entails narrative identity. Jesus' human identity includes the (still unfinished) Gospel story. To say that Jesus belongs to the identity of God is therefore to include Jesus' human story, the Gospel story, in God's own narrative identity. This is what happens, for example, in the great christological passage in Philippians 2, which summarizes the story of Jesus, includes Jesus in the identity of God, and thereby also identifies God with Jesus' human story. *Who God is* now includes not only his sovereign rule over all things from the heavenly throne, but also the self-humiliation of Jesus to the point of death on a cross.

From one point of view, Jesus' human story in his earthly life is a narrative of loving self-identification with others. Jesus' narrative identity consists, partly, in his identification with other people. That not just any human being, but this man belongs to God's own divine identity, means that Jesus' loving self-identification with others is the way in which God's love enters, in an unparalleled way, into the human situation and reaches people in all the varieties and extremities of the human situation. Here, in Jesus, God does not deal with the human situation at arm's length, nor by some purely spiritual presence in it, but enters the human situation by way of concrete life, praxis and death of the man Jesus. In Jesus God has identified with us and made our situation his own. He has made his own the suffering, the failure, the

guilt, the condemnation, the despair, the forsakenness, and the death that are the worst that being human can come to, as well as living the positive potential of being human, and as well as redeeming and transforming the human situation.

All this is what Christians mean by saying that God loves us. That God loves us can mean a great many things. What Christians mean can be said only by telling the story of Jesus - and by telling it as the story of *who God is for us* in *what God does for us*. Moreover, the story of Jesus is not just an illustration of God's love, as though we could learn from the Gospel story what God's love is like, and then forget the Gospel story, having learned its lesson. The story of Jesus is the unique enactment of God's love in history for all of us. It is the way God's love in its fullness actually reaches us and claims us, while in receiving God's love in Jesus we ourselves become part of the continuing story of Jesus in its ongoing movement towards his parousia.

Who is Jesus Christ for us today? We can only discover this by telling and re-telling the story of Jesus in the context of our own loving engagement with God's world. The God who is relevant to international debt and to the Aids pandemic, to the ecological crisis and to western society's deep forgetfulness of God, is the God who is radically with us and for us in Jesus.