

## The Communion of God's Spirit in *Jesus Christ*: Christology

Lecture Notes  
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### Some working principles:

All the puzzles of Christology, like practically all the other puzzles we've encountered so far, stem once again from the first Christians' tendencies to weave the living Jesus, the Spirit, God, and themselves into such an intimate communion that nobody could get too clear on precisely who or what went where.

For these Christians, to be embraced by the communion of God's Spirit was to be in Jesus Christ, and to have Jesus Christ in them.

They called Jesus "the Christ" (the Messiah, the anointed one) because they were convinced that Jesus' risen, indwelling and embracing presence had something to do with fulfilling Israel's messianic hopes, even though they admitted there was still more to come.

They called this present one "Jesus" because they were convinced that Jesus of Nazareth was one and the same as the one among and in them now, even though he had been executed.

They made that connection because Jesus had mysteriously, elusively, but convincingly appeared to some of his earliest followers as the risen and exalted one shortly after his death.

And they found the manner in which he appeared and remained with them to be mysterious enough that they could not simply call him "the Christ" without calling him "Lord," for somehow his presence and the presence of God were one and the same.

I believe that these earliest convictions, though difficult to pin down, are still credible today, that the confession, "Jesus Christ is Lord," is good news especially for marginalized people, and that it can be heard as good news even by Jews, Buddhists, Muslims and others who remain faithful to their own traditions.

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While I consider myself a celebrant of Nicene and Chalcedonian orthodoxy, I am not a staunch defender of either.

What I celebrate in them is where they resisted the temptation (better than their competitors) to sort things out too neatly, yet still managed to say something illuminating.

With Nicea I can readily say that in encountering the 'realistic narrative' of Jesus' ministry and destiny we encounter no less than 'true God from true God', 'of one being with' the one Jesus called 'the Father'.

With Chalcedon I can readily say that the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ is, to paraphrase, a relationship of unity without confusion and distinction without separation (i.e., a relationship of interpermeation [or *perichoresis*]).

But these councils also seem to have fallen prey to the neatly-sorting-out temptation as well, frightened as they were at the very idea that the Divine might suffer. Most of their current, self-appointed defenders have done a better job of keeping everything more relational, the ironic thing being that precisely for that reason they would all doubtless have been anathematized by the original councils, as would I.

To emphasize communion in this way is already to introduce a note of eccentricity into our very idea of God. We are, after all, speaking of a God whose very self is not a private, self-

contained commodity but an open dynamism of self-giving to us in creation and redemption: at once the Giver, the Gift and the Giving.<sup>1</sup>

A God whose very self does not exist behind but in and through the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ is thus a God whose self is centered eccentrically.

The practical upshot of this is that both we and God are truly ourselves only in true communion with true others (indeed a self *is* such a communion). And we thus know no other God than a God of 'otherness'—a God of "eccentric relationality.

In many current debates on christology we are often presented with the question whether the heart of Christian faith is theocentric or christocentric. In light of what I've been saying, I consider these false alternatives.

At the risk of sounding too cute, I've said that the heart of Christian faith is both "theo-eccentric" and "christo-eccentric."

It's theo-eccentric because the God we know in Jesus Christ is not a God whose selfhood exists apart from God's self-giving in creation and redemption. Even God's self is centered eccentrically.

It's christo-eccentric because, even though we can regard Jesus of Nazareth as a pivotal moment in God's self-giving, he does not exhaust all that happens "for us and for our salvation" in the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.

And that is once again why I prefer this entire phrase: we should encourage ourselves and one another to stop thinking of God, the Spirit, Jesus, or even ourselves apart from the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ, which involves "unity without confusion and distinction without separation" (the Chalcedonian formula, in case you've forgotten).

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That's one way to approach christology. It's not the only way or even the only "orthodox" way. George Lindbeck has detected three fundamental principles underlying the decisions of Nicea and Chalcedon and has proposed that we use these, instead of the precise wording of those creeds, to see if what we want to say today preserves enough continuity with the faith of our forbears.

He labels these principles a) the monotheistic principle, b) the principle of historical specificity, and c) the principle of christological maximalism. He defines them as follows:

- a) The Monotheistic Principle: "there is only one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus."
- b) The Principle of Historical Specificity: "the stories of Jesus refer to a genuine human being who was born, lived, and died in a particular time and place."

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<sup>1</sup>For a fruitful development of the terminology of self-giving, see Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). I did not borrow this terminology directly from Webb. I borrowed it first from a doxology by Brian Wren, set to the hymntune *Lasst uns erfreuen*: "Praise God the Giver and the Gift. / Hearts, minds and voices now uplift: / Alleluia, alleluia. / Praise, praise the Breath of glad surprise, / freeing, uplifting, opening eyes: / Three-in-oneness, Love communing, / Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia." See Wren, *Bring Many Names* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Hope Publishing Co., 1989), no. 35a. It is only fitting that a poet gets the principal credit here.

c) The Principle of Christological Maximalism: “every possible importance is to be ascribed to Jesus that is not inconsistent with the first rules.”<sup>2</sup>

I encourage you to look at the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds in terms of these rules, and at my own reflections on christology.

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### **A Further Thought Experiment on the Person & Work of Christ**

God has always lived and suffered as one with us, and will always do so. This is an essential part of God’s redemptive work.

God has so *identified* God’s very own *self* with Jesus of Nazareth that God now lives and suffers, not only as one *with* us, but as one *of* us. This also is an essential part of God’s redemptive work.

It is furthermore pivotal in that it introduces a new and crucial dimension into the way God lives and suffers as one with us. There is, at least in some sense (but maybe not in every sense), a “before” and “after” in the history of God’s life with us.

### **Does this make other things God has done for us less pivotal by comparison?**

In some cases, yes, but we can't say in every case. As the doctrine of the Trinity reminds us, creation and redemption pivot around a center whose unity is multiple in ways we can't pin down. If this doctrine makes any sense (a big “if”), then it makes sense to say that God’s redemptive work can pivot just as crucially around more than one event (though of course these other events would all be in some sense “one” just as the Trinity is “one”).

The expectation of eschatological fulfillment also prevents us from saying that what God did here is final in every sense (though it is of course final in many important senses—redemption has taken a new turn that can’t be undone).

That means, especially, that we don’t have to be supersessionists about what God did in Israel and still does in Judaism.

And we can be open to what God may be doing in other traditions that have no historical connection to ours—which includes taking them seriously even when they refuse to speak in terms of “God” or “redemption” or other terms we find inescapable.

However open we are, though, we don’t have to hesitate to say that something of ultimate importance has happened here that has not happened anywhere else, and we believe others need to appreciate this just as much as we may need to appreciate their distinctive stories.

That’s not imperialistic.

For that reason, pluralist though I am, I can still pray the following collect in good conscience:

“Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace: So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your name. Amen.”

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<sup>2</sup> George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), p. 94.

### **Could God have done this elsewhere? Could there be other “incarnations”?**

No, at least not precisely this (though I'm not sure what “precisely” means here where language begins to get so elusive). The event that *makes* God one *of* us (in the sense we are talking about) can only happen once.

It's very much like losing one's virginity. God lost God's virginity in Jesus, and if it makes any sense for us to say that it happened there, it makes no sense for us even to ask if *precisely* the same thing could have happened elsewhere.

### **Did God have to do it this way?**

Keep in mind that phrases like “have to” start looking peculiar when applied to God.

Still let's say that God didn't have to do this in order to live and suffer redemptively as one *with* us.

But if God insists that our full redemption include God's living and suffering with us as one *of* us, then God did have to do this very thing at some point in history.

When we then ask why God might have insisted on this, we can try out some answers (e.g., it affirms our individual selfhood, etc.), but much of this is guesswork. What we begin with, and fall back on, however, is the church's conviction that God has declared this to be essential to our salvation in the fullest sense of the word.

### **What then is salvific about the cross of Jesus Christ?**

Jesus' crucifixion is salvific simply because it is the crucifixion of the one with whom God has identified God's very own self. Jesus' resurrection and exaltation are no less salvific.

### **Is this an objective or subjective account of God's redemption?**

Both. We are speaking about a turning point in the way God lives and suffers as one with us.

This is a turning point in the way we understand God's redemption (the subjective aspect).

But if we also accept that God's very selfhood is radically constituted by certain historical events, then this is also a turning point in God's own identity. If that is not objective (though maybe subjective for God) then I don't know what is.

### **What does it mean for God to identify God's own self with a human individual?**

It means something much stronger than what we do when we identify ourselves with another person. What we do mostly in our imagination God does in reality. We might thus hazard to say that God is one whose selfhood is radically constituted by certain events in the history of this world, e.g., the history of Israel, Jesus Christ, the Church, etc.

If we knew precisely how we come to have our own selfhood, we could say much more about what this means. But how we get our own selfhood is resistant to analysis.

For example, if the child born to my parents on 10-30-53, with all my physical characteristics, had been given up for adoption, would that child still be me?

In one sense he clearly would, yet in another sense he clearly would not. How are those two senses related? Is one more basic than the other?

There are many theories about this among philosophers, but little agreement. So at this point it seems best to call attention to our own perplexity in speaking of our own selfhood, in hopes of illuminating our perplexity about God's identity.

We do in fact seem to be saying something somewhat analogous about God. If the source of all that is had not shared a common history with Israel, Jesus Christ, the Church, etc., would this still be the same God? In one sense, maybe so, but in another sense maybe not.

This in part (and only in part) is what it means to say that God's very selfhood is radically constituted by such events.

We might say that we can have a bare inkling of *what* God is, in the most abstract sense of the term: God is "that than which no greater can be conceived," the source, ground and goal of all that is, etc.

But that does not begin to tell us *who* God is: to learn that you have to know God's story, and there's not a more crucial chapter in that story than the communion of God's Spirit in Jesus Christ.