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## **SPIRIT CHRISTOLOGY: RETHINKING CHRISTO-CENTRIC THEOLOGY**

The theology of the Reformation was thoroughly concentrated upon the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It was correlated with an academic and educational revolution which particularly turned against speculative thought. Luther's famous Heidelberg Disputation with its strong emphasis on what is called a "low Christology" and on a "theology of the cross" deeply impressed many young reformers. Many of Luther's old friends and teachers, however, had serious questions and doubts about his rejection of the old metaphysical theology in favor of a low Christology. Similar questions come up today. "Only the suffering God can help!" said Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his letters from prison. Jürgen Moltmann published a famous book entitled "The Crucified God." But how can a suffering and crucified God be of any help in a world full of violence, injustice, agony and distress?

In the following, I should like to deal first with the liberating concentration of the Reformers on a low Christology and its theological realism. In the second part, I will focus on the public and eschatological presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. I will try to illuminate the reality of the resurrected Christ in continuity and discontinuity to his pre-Easter life, to his cross and his resurrection. Following great insights of John Calvin, we will proceed to the pouring of Christ's Spirit

inside and outside of the churches and thus consider the diaconal, prophetic, and priestly gifts of the Spirit bestowed on the witnesses to Christ.

In my second lecture, I will continue this exploration and look at Christ in the power of his Spirit. A threefold “Gestalt” of the reign of God can be identified which encourages a realistic theology and a realistic faith even in relation to what is called “high Christology.” The threefold “Gestalt” offers a rich orientation to a fragmented ecclesial body and can thus inspire the different churches and styles of piety to learn from one another in the Power of the Holy Spirit and to grow together towards a more complete witness and faith. In my view, the *Receptive Ecumenism* has been an outstanding example of this process.

## **I. The Reformation as an Anti-Speculative, Educational Revolution: Christological and Biblical-Theological Orientations**

Reformation Theology is concentrated upon God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. The four famous, programmatic sola-formulae (*solus Christus, sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide*) stood, and for us continue to stand, at the center of the Reformation message. This message states that the salvific *God of grace* does not seek to be understood through metaphysical speculations, but has rather given Himself to all humanity, and wants to be recognized by all humanity, in the person of *Jesus Christ*. For this reason, the pathway to God is to be sought and found via the

study of *scripture*. Therefore all attempts to reach God through philosophical contemplation – for instance, by defining God as an “all-determining reality,” as “ground of being,” as “primal cause” or “ultimate point of reference” – must be severely questioned. The God who takes on human form and humbles Himself, the God who is near to us in His incarnation and kenosis, wants to be grasped and understood *in faith*, not through metaphysical or moralistic endeavors.

This theological insight brings with it a critique of authority as well as an academic challenge, regularly and impressively expressed by Martin Luther. For example, in 1519 the Reformer writes to his friend Spalatin regarding a text (John 6) which deals with the community of will between Jesus and the Father. Luther states: “He who seeks to think beneficially about God should concentrate wholly upon the humanity of Christ.” He stresses, “This is the one and only path to recognizing God, a path from which the teachers of the Sentences have widely strayed.” With dramatic flair, Luther argues that the great medieval theologians, the speculative teachers of the Sentences, have used absolute speculation to bypass the humanity of Jesus Christ in an attempt to “worm their way” to or even into God.<sup>1</sup> For Luther, this is a dangerous theological endeavor which can only lead us astray.

There have been repeated attempts to criticize this Reformation approach, to denounce its Christocentrism as “*Christomonism*” and thus marginalize it academically. Yet this type of polemic fails to recognize

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<sup>1</sup> *WA, Letters I 3, 27ff.*

the Trinitarian way in which the Reformers saw the entire creative force of God and the power of the divine Spirit bound together with the exalted Christ. Whereas this concentration on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ can direct us to the presence of the living, triune God, metaphysical speculation can at best only attempt to gain a clear idea and concept of God, a more or less impressive god-thought. Furthermore, claims that such Christological concentration is finally incompatible with an academic theology also fail to appreciate the academic and educational revolution associated with the novel Reformation approach.

The mathematician, scientist and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead perceptively observed the parallels between the academic theological approach taken by the Reformation and the genesis of the modern natural sciences. He saw that the Reformation's return to the scriptural and historical sources presented an early form of and a parallel to the modern natural sciences' revolutionary turn to efficient causes and to experimentation. Whitehead concluded, "The Reformation and the scientific movement were two aspects of the historical revolt which was the dominant intellectual movement of the later Renaissance." The Reformation's appeal was to go back to the sources, to the origins of Christianity, to the revelation of God here on earth. Among others, Francis Bacon, one of the founders of the modern natural sciences, famously stressed the need to examine efficient causes and to promote experimentation as a means for proving scientific claims. Whitehead

here saw two clear expressions of a great and influential, anti-speculative intellectual movement which would mold the modern spirit.<sup>2</sup> The Christological and biblical-theological orientation of the Reformation led to a theological realism which was both emancipatory and critical of speculation.

Both an anti-speculative Christology – that is, a Christology that begins with the humanity of Christ – and the theological insights that such a Christology delivers demand a biblical-theological orientation. An anti-speculative theology compels theological teachers to attain historical and philological qualifications. It enables common sense to understand the Word and to think through the matters of faith even without philosophical or metaphysical training. The Reformers were not just aiming at the renewal of all academic and church theology, but at a massive reorientation of the educational system and culture. The Reformation became an educational revolution.

Together with Spalatin, Karlstadt and Melanchthon, Luther planned a series of university reforms in Wittenberg – reforms that would drive back scholastic philosophy and theology. The aim of these university reforms was for theology to return to the biblical texts and the history of revelation. When faced with the objection: “Why do we need Bible translations when the people cannot read?”, the Reformers responded by demanding the expansion of the school system, and the intellectual

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<sup>2</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (1926), (New York: Free Press, 1967), 8.

and spiritual education of children while they were still at home. They responded with catechisms and pamphlets, and enthusiastically engaged in visitation. Those who read Luther's diary<sup>3</sup> see just how tirelessly he worked and travelled for the cause of a biblically-oriented, and even broadly comprehensive, education.

There has been a tendency to use Luther's own programmatic sayings in a way that reduces his underlying Christological and biblical orientation to a *mere* "theology of the cross." I mentioned in the beginning Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous words following Luther: "Only the suffering God can help".<sup>4</sup> During the second half of the twentieth century, German "theologians of the cross" such as Jürgen Moltmann<sup>5</sup> and Eberhard Jüngel<sup>6</sup> took up this message and expanded upon it. In this context, the nagging question – just how the impotent and suffering, indeed "crucified God" can help – has rarely been answered but rather suppressed through appeal to slogans such as "*sub contrario*," "*paradox*" or "*the mysticism of the cross*." In this way, we find a "speculative theology from above" often simply exchanged for a hardly less problematic "speculative theology from below."

Yet to what degree does the nearness of God in the incarnation and in kenosis truly fascinate us? I certainly have no intention of calling into

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Andrea van Dülmen, *Luther-Chronik. Daten zu Leben und Werk* (dtv: München, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 361.

<sup>5</sup>Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute Between Theism and Atheism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1983; Reprint T&T Clark 2014).

question the sustained power of the person and life of Jesus to attract and fascinate us. On the contrary, if the media of the Western world had ever had the task to select not a “man of the year,” but a “man of the millennium”, then the uncontended choice would have twice fallen upon Jesus of Nazareth. Yet the impressive, sustained *iconic presence* of Jesus Christ in classical art and in the church’s most important festive days lies precisely in the images of the manger and cross. But how do we experience the nearness of God in the form of a baby in a manger and in the figure of a dying and crucified man on the cross? Does this revelation really have an impact on the practice of our faith and lives? This question needs to be asked in the face of the power still exerted today by an abstract theism devoid of Christ’s presence.

What explanation is there for the persistent and powerful dominance of abstract theism in the theologies and churches of the west? To be sure, such theism, with its constantly propagated image of God as “all-determining reality,” fails miserably when confronted with the problem of theodicy – nevertheless it still dominates the tepid and skeptical religiosity of these churches to this day. In addition, an equally powerful subjectivist faith, which tries to discover God in one’s own innermost self-consciousness<sup>7</sup>, also excludes the revelation of God in Christ. “Me and my internal Other” – in such attempts to be “near to God” Christ and the bible can only ever be disturbances.

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<sup>7</sup> See here Michael Welker, “Subjectivist ‘Faith’ as a Religious Trap,” in: W. Schweiker and Ch. Mathewes (eds.), *Having: On Property and Possession in Religious and Social Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 122-137.

## II. The Public and Eschatological Presence of Jesus Christ in the Power of the Holy Spirit<sup>8</sup>

Multiple Christological corrections are needed to lead us out of these dead ends. First, we must recognize that the presence of the resurrected and exalted Christ cannot be understood without considering the humanity of Jesus. Theology and piety cannot disengage themselves from a passionate interest in the life and work of the historical Jesus. Here we also need to appreciate additional challenges: that Jesus encounters us differently in different contexts – in his preaching in Galilee, in his table fellowship, in his healings and exorcisms, yet also in his conflicts with the global power of Rome or in his conflicts with the administrators of the Temple and the Torah.

However, this *first multicontextuality* of his real historical life and work only encounters us in the *second multicontextuality* of the biblical and extra-biblical witnesses. We see the way in which these witnesses variously order, integrate and evaluate the various aspects of Christ's work – leaving us with an abundance of historical and exegetical questions and problems. The biblical witnesses also stand within a *third multicontextuality*: a vast space of broader Old Testament remembrances, ex-

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<sup>8</sup> The following takes up several insights from M. Welker, *God the Revealed: Christology*, translated by Douglas Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).



pectations and hopes. Finally, our questions (and those of our predecessors) about the historical Jesus are shaped by the *fourth multicontextuality*, formed by our respective intellectual interests, ethical concerns, understandings of the world, by the spirit of our times, and by our visions of academic and social progress.

Yet we must not allow the difficulties of this *fourfold multicontextuality* to frighten us away from the search for the historical Jesus, for the life of this human being, if we do not want to drift off into abstract, and finally docetic Christologies – be they lowly or grandiose. If we are honest with ourselves, we will see that without a constantly renewed search for the historical Jesus in all of his corporeality and admittedly difficult approachability, we can never do justice to the challenges and demands of Reformation theology. An intensive and differentiated interest in the life of Jesus will also protect us from a reductionist theology of the cross which is focused only upon a suffering and impotent God.

In light of the life of Jesus and the representations of his death on the cross, we must open ourselves to the revelation of that monstrous power of the world which, in the cross, confronts and attacks God and God's presence. Jesus is condemned in the name of the ruling global political system and in the name of established religion. He is executed in the name of two legal systems, Jewish and Roman. Even public opinion was against him: "Crucify him!" they all shouted" (Mk 15:13f par). Jew and Gentile, Jew and Roman, native and foreigner were all in

agreement. All powers joined here together to work against God's revelation. Even Jesus' own disciples betrayed him, abandoned him and fled.<sup>9</sup>

Jew and Gentile, occupier and occupied, friend and foe worked here together against the revelation of God. In light of the unveiling of this monstrous power of the world, which aligns itself against God and God's revelation, we must first open ourselves up to this estrangement between God and the world. The world under the power of sin – here finally we see the “*sola gratia*” in all its depth and awe. Nothing less than a second, new creation out of chaos can overcome this break between God and the world, between God and humanity. In this light we can now speak appropriately about the subtlety of God's compassion, of His suffering, even of the suffering of the creative God and of the suffering of the Spirit, which was driven out, sacrificed and withdrawn during that night on Golgotha.

The next theological mistake to be corrected deals with the fatal confusion of the resurrection with plain joyful global triumph of the “mighty acts of God”, or the confusion of resurrection with mere physical resuscitation. The resurrection witnesses, however, are quiet and modest. They reflect a multitude of doubts. They oscillate between concrete lucidity and ephemeral vision, between experienced theophany and doubt. The breaking of bread, the greeting of peace, the expounding of

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Michael Welker, *What Happens in Holy Communion?*, translated by John Hoffmeyer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and London: SPCK, 2000; second printing 2004).

scripture, the call to baptize and the sending of disciples into the world – these appearances testify to a profound confirmation of the power of God. The Resurrected One is not the resuscitated pre-Easter Jesus. He reveals Himself to His followers in the power of the Spirit and in the edification of the life of the church in continuity and discontinuity with his Pre-Easter life.<sup>10</sup>

However, those who would try to understand the Spirit only in an intellectual way (as many in western cultures do) will fail to find any access to the presence of the risen Christ in the Spirit. Paul gives us an incredibly valuable clue when he says (with particular clarity in 1 Cor 5) that he himself, in the spirit, not only remembers and anticipates being with his beloved community. The power of remembrance and imagination, this power of the spirit to overcome distances in space and time, is something we can all understand very well. And yet Paul also says that despite his absence he can still be present, personally in the spirit, whenever the community thinks and acts not only in lively communication among itself in remembrance of him but aims at working in accordance with his will while and in imagining his authentic presence. It is precisely in this sense that the resurrected Christ reveals Himself in the power of the Spirit. His entire person and entire life become present.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Ted Peters, Robert Russell and Michael Welker (eds.), *Resurrection: Theological and Scientific Assessments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Hans-Joachim Eckstein and Michael Welker (eds.), *Die Wirklichkeit der Auferstehung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 4th ed. 2015).

More precisely: in the passing of peace, in the breaking of bread, in the teaching of scripture. He becomes present for the growth and edification of His community.

If, in this light, we ask about the presence of the exalted Christ, then we must recognize that He cannot be present without the Holy Spirit, and that He in-corporates His witnesses into His post-Easter life through that same Spirit. In Book 2, Chapter 15 of his renowned *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (*Institutio Christianae Religionis*), Calvin expressly emphasizes that Christ, the Messiah, was not anointed with oil but with the Holy Spirit so that “those who belong to him” might be given a share of His power. What he is stressing here is the so-called “baptism of the Spirit,” an aspect which would later take up center stage in the piety of the global Pentecostal movement and charismatic renewal of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the Christ upon whom the Spirit rests also pours that Spirit out upon His disciples.<sup>12</sup> Calvin argues, “he was not enriched privately for himself, but that he might refresh the parched and hungry with his abundance. For as the Father is said to have given the Spirit to the Son without measure (John 3:34), so the reason is expressed, that

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Frank Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit: A Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> James Dunn, “Towards the Spirit of Christ: The Emergence of the Distinctive Features of Christian Pneumatology”, in: M. Welker (ed.), *The Work of the Spirit: Pneumatology and Pentecostalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

we might all receive of his fullness and grace for grace (John 1:16).”<sup>13</sup> In addition, amid this orientation toward the resurrected and exalted Christ, Calvin offers a further differentiation that allows us to keep a helpful hold on the connection back to the pre-Easter life of Jesus. He writes: “To know the purpose for which Christ was sent by the Father, and what he conferred upon us, we must look above all at his threefold office: prophetic, kingly and priestly.”<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth and other significant theologians have taken up and expounded this doctrine of the “three offices” or “threefold office of Christ” (*munus triplex Christi*). Thanks to Johann Gerhard, it was also adopted into Lutheran theology. It has spread into Roman-Catholic dogmatics and into the teaching of all ecumenical churches. This doctrine allows us to grasp the powerful public work of Jesus Christ in all its richness, and it opened up connections to the Old Testament traditions, continuities with the work of anointed kings, priests and prophets repeatedly alluded to in the New Testament witnesses to Christ. In the following chapter I intend to unfold this working of Christ and his Spirit. How does the outpouring of the Spirit manifest in the life of the Christian churches? What promise and what challenges does it offer to the transformation from a fragmented ecclesial body to a polyphonic practical witness to the well-being of all members of the body of Christ and to the glorification of the living God?

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<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. by John T. McNeill, translated and indexed by Ford L. Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), Vol I., chp. II, 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Institutes*, *ibid.*