

# DOGMATICS IN OUTLINE

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*with a new Foreword by the author*

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# IO

## JESUS CHRIST

*The heart of the object of Christian faith is the word of the act in which God from all eternity willed to become man in Jesus Christ for our good, did become man in time for our good, and will be and remain man in eternity for our good. This work of the Son of God includes in itself the work of the Father as its presupposition and the work of the Holy Spirit as its consequence.*

WITH this paragraph we pass into the heart of the Christian confession, whose text is indeed distinguished by particular explicitness and which is not only outwardly the heart of it all. Even in our introduction to these lectures, when we were speaking of faith, and in the first lecture, when we spoke of God the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, we could not avoid continually pointing to this centre. We could not possibly have given a genuine exposition of the first article without continually interpreting it by means of the second. Indeed, the second article does not just follow the first, nor does it just precede the third; but it is the fountain of light by which the other two are lit. It is also susceptible of historical proof, that the Christian Confession arose out of a shorter and indeed probably a quite short primitive form, which included only what we confess to-day in the second article. It is believed that the original Christian confession consisted of the three words, 'Jesus Christ (is) Lord', to which were only later added the first and third articles. This historical event was not arbitrary. It is also materially significant to know that historically the second article is the source of the whole. A Christian is one who makes confession of Christ. And Christian confession is confession of Jesus Christ the Lord.

Starting with this heart of the Christian Confession, all that it expresses of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit is to be regarded as an expanding statement. When Christian theologians wished to sketch a theology of God the Creator abstractly and directly, they have always gone astray, even when in tremendous reverence they tried to think and speak of this high God. And

the same thing took place, when the theologians tried to push through to a theology of the third article, to a theology of the Spirit, to a theology of experience as opposed to the theology of the high God in the first article. Then too they have gone astray. Perhaps the whole of modern theology, as characteristically found in Schleiermacher, could be, must be understood as theology prepared by certain developments in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It became a one-sided theology of the third article, which believed that it might venture with the Holy Spirit alone, without reflecting that the third article is only the explication of the second, the declaration of what Jesus Christ our Lord means for us men. Starting with Jesus Christ and with Him alone, we must see and understand what in the Christian sense is involved by the mighty relationship, to which we can only point again and again in sheer amazement, about which we cannot help being in danger of great error, when we say, *God and man*. What we mean by that can only be declared adequately, by our confessing that 'Jesus is Christ'. And as for what is involved in the relationship between creation and the reality of existence on the one hand, and on the other hand the Church, redemption, God—that can never be understood from any general truth about our existence, nor from the reality of history of religion; this we can only learn from the relation between Jesus and Christ. Here we see clearly what is meant by 'God *above* man' (Article I) and 'God *with* man' (Article III). That is why Article II, why Christology, is the touchstone of all knowledge of God in the Christian sense, the touchstone of all theology. 'Tell me how it stands with your Christology, and I shall tell you who you are.' This is the point at which ways diverge, and the point at which is fixed the relation between theology and philosophy, and the relation between knowledge of God and knowledge of men, the relation between revelation and reason, the relation between Gospel and Law, the relation between God's truth and man's truth, the relation between outer and inner, the relation between theology and politics. At this point everything becomes clear or unclear, bright or dark. For here we are standing at the centre. And however high and mysterious and difficult everything we want to know might seem to us, yet we may also say that this is just where everything becomes quite simple, quite straightforward, quite childlike. Right here in this centre, in which as a Professor of Systematic Theology I must call to you,

'Look! This is the point now! Either knowledge, or the greatest folly!'—here I am in front of you, like a teacher in Sunday school facing his kiddies, who has something to say which a mere four-year-old can really understand. 'The world was lost, but Christ was born, rejoice, O Christendom!'

This centre is the Word of the act or the act of the Word. I greatly desire to make it clear to you, that in this centre of Christian faith the whole contrast, so current among us, between word and work, between knowing and living, ceases to have any meaning. But the Word, the Logos, is actually the work, the *ergon*, as well; the *verbum* is also the *opus*. Where God and this centre of our faith are involved, those differences which seem so interesting and important to us, become not just superfluous but silly. It is the truth of the real or the reality of the true which here enters the field: God speaks, God acts, God is in the midst. The very Word with which we are here concerned is an act, this act, which as such is the Word, is Revelation.

When we pronounce the name of Jesus Christ, we are not speaking of an idea. The name Jesus Christ is not the transparent shell, through which we glimpse something higher—no room for Platonism here! What is involved is this actual name and this title; this person is involved. Not any chance person, not a 'chance reality in history' in Lessing's sense. The 'chance fact of history' is just the eternal truth of reason! Nor does this name Jesus Christ indicate a result of human history. It was invariably a human discovery, when the effort was made to show that the whole of human history was bound to have its culminating point in Jesus Christ. Not for one moment was it possible to say that of the history of Israel, not to mention world-history. Of course in retrospect we may and must say that here history is fulfilled. But fulfilled in a truth which, looked at from the standpoint of all historical results, is completely novel and offensive! To the Greeks foolishness, to the Jews a stumbling-block. So in the name of Jesus Christ we have not to do with the result of a postulate of man, with the product of a human need, with the figure of a redeemer and saviour to be explained and derived from man's guilt. Even the fact that he is a sinner cannot be known from man himself. It is rather the result of knowing Jesus Christ; in His light we see the light and in this light our own darkness. Everything that deserves to be called knowledge in the Christian sense lives from the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Also from the standpoint of the first article it is something quite new when we say, 'I believe in Jesus Christ'. God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the eternal God in His loftiness and hiddenness, in His inconceivability, which transcends the inconceivability of the heavenly reality, is confessed in the first article. And now here in the second article the apparently contradictory, at all events the quite new thing is confessed, which for the first time makes clear and illustrates the loftiness and inconceivability of God in the first article, and at the same time confronts us with a tremendous riddle, that God has form. A name sounds forth, a man stands before us in God's place. Here the Almighty appears not almighty at all. We were told of God's eternity and omnipresence. Now we are told of a here and now, of a happening on a small scale in the midst of human history, of a story at the beginning of our era, at a definite place on our earth. In the first article we were told about God the Father; and now from the unity of the Godhead God Himself comes forth in the form of the Son. Now God is this Other in God and proceeding from God. The Creator who is distinguished from all that is, and the creature as the essence of all being which is different from the being of God, are described in the first article. And now the second article says that the Creator Himself became a creature. He, the eternal God, became—not creation in its totality, but—one creature.

'He who from eternity willed to become man for our good, has become man in time for our good, will be and remain man in eternity for our good'—that is, Jesus Christ. The English novelist, Dorothy L. Sayers, who has recently turned to theology with remarkable interest, has described in a pamphlet how unheard-of, how strange, how 'interesting' the narrative is of the fact that God became man. Imagine for a moment this story being one day put in the papers! It really is a sensational story, more sensational than anything else. And that is the centre of Christianity, this infinitely surprising thing, that never existed before and cannot be repeated.

At all times there have been combinations of these two concepts, God and man. The idea of incarnation is not alien to mythology. But the thing that distinguishes the Christian message from this idea is that all myths are basically just the exposition of an idea, of a general truth. A myth circles round the relation between day and night, winter and spring, death and life; it always

implies a timeless reality. The message of Jesus Christ has nothing to do with this myth; it is formally distinguished from it by its possessing the unique historical conception that it is said of an historical human being that it happened in His existence that God was made man, that consequently His existence was identical with the existence of God. The Christian message is a historical message. And only by seeing eternity and time together, God and man, only then do we grasp what is expressed by the name Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the reality of the covenant between God and man. It is only when we look at Jesus Christ that we succeed, in the sense of the first article, in speaking about God in the highest; because it is here that we get to know man in the covenant with this God, in His concrete form as this man. And when in the third article of the Confession we may speak and hear of God in man, of God who acts with us and in us, it might be in itself an ideology, a description of human enthusiasm, an over-wrought idea of the meaning of man's inner life with its transports and its experiences, a projection of what takes place in us men into the height of an imaginary deity, which we call Holy Spirit. But if we look at the covenant which God has really concluded with us men, then we know that it is not so. God on high is really near to us men in the depths. God is present. We may make bold to speak of a reality of the Holy Spirit in view of this covenant between God and man, in which God became man, in this one who stands for all others.

'God became man for thy good, O man. 'Tis God's own Child that binds Himself to thine own blood.' This Christmas truth I have tried to describe in its three elements. We must start with the historical reality, that time, our time, has an historical centre, from which it is to be understood, from which, for all its contradictions, for all its heights and depths, it stands in a relationship to God. In the midst of time it happened that God became man for our good. While underlining the uniqueness of this event, we have to reflect that this was not an accident, not one historical event among others. But it is the event which God willed from eternity. Here the second article reaches back to the realm of the first; here creation and redemption are united. From this standpoint we must say that creation itself, God's existence itself, prior to the whole world from eternity, is unthinkable apart from His will as it has been fulfilled and revealed in time. The eternal will of God has this form. From

eternity there is no other God than the God whose will was revealed in this act and in this Word. Do not regard that as a speculation. The Christ message is, let me repeat, not one truth among others; it is *the* truth. In thinking of God, we have from the beginning to think of the name of Jesus Christ. 'And who in eternity for our good will be and remain man'—the truth of the covenant, the unity of God and man, by being an historical truth which became real at that time and place, is no transitory truth. Jesus Christ is the king whose kingdom hath no end. 'Just as thou wert before all time, abidest Thou in eternity.' So we confront God. God really encompasses us in Jesus Christ 'on every side'. Here there is no escape. But there is also no drop into nothingness. In pronouncing the name of Jesus Christ we are on a way. 'I am the way, the truth and the life.' That is the way through time, the centre of which He is; and this way has an origin which lies not in darkness. This way does not proceed out of darkness; its origin corresponds with this way. And it leads to a goal, which once more is not dark; the very future bears His name, Jesus Christ. It is He who was and is and is to come, as it says at the end of the second article, 'from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead'. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. So also the middle, so also the way. We are upheld on all sides and indeed uplifted, when we pronounce this name, Jesus Christ, in the sense of the Confession.

And all this 'for our good'. This may not be suppressed. In this covenant, this revelation, we are really not concerned with a miracle and a mystery, perhaps interesting and remarkable, confronting our existence—that of course is also involved; but we should not have understood the matter, if we wanted to make it the object of a mere intellectual spectacle. Mere gnosis would be—even if we would adduce the whole New Testament in proof and speak of Christ with ever so lofty words—a sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal. Melancthon was right when he said (*Loci* of 1521), what in later theology was so frequently misquoted: *Hoc est Christum cognoscere—beneficia Christi cognoscere*. The misuse of this, particularly in the school of Ritschl, consisted in a refusal to recognise the high mystery of the Incarnation, and the desire instead to speak of Christ merely as a Being from whom certain benefits accrue to man, which have a definite 'value' for him. We cannot speak *in abstracto* of the *beneficia Christi*. We must know His *beneficia* in action in order to know Him.



The benefit consists altogether in this reality of revelation, that God was made man for the good of me, a man. In that way we are helped. The kingdom of heaven does exist already; from God's side action has been already taken for our good. To pronounce the name of Jesus Christ means to acknowledge that we are cared for, that we are not lost. Jesus Christ is man's salvation in all circumstances and in face of all that darkens his life, including the evil that proceeds from himself. There is nothing which is not already made good in this happening, that God became man for our good. Anything that is left can be no more than the discovery of this fact. We do not exist in any kind of gloomy uncertainty; we exist through the God who was gracious to us before we existed at all. It may be true that we exist in contradiction to this God, that we live in remoteness from Him, indeed in hostility to Him. It is still truer that God has prepared reconciliation for us, before we entered the struggle against Him. And true though it may be that in connexion with our alienation from God man can only be regarded as a lost being, it is still much truer that God has so acted for our good, does and will so act, that there exists salvation for every lost condition. It is this faith that we are called to believe through the Christian Church and in the Holy Spirit. Indeed the fact is that everything that we have to bewail and everything that can be brought against us as a necessary and justifiable complaint, that all sighing and all misery and all despair—and there truly is cause for it all—is distinguished from all more or less chance trouble by the fact that complaint and accusation, which again and again break out from the depths of creation, actually acquire strength from our recognition that we men are the object of the divine compassion. Only from the depths of all that God has done for us can it be made clear that we find ourselves in misery. Who then is aware of man's real wretchedness, save he who is aware of God's mercy?

This work of the Son of God includes the work of the Father as its presupposition and the work of the Holy Spirit as its consequence. The first article is to a certain extent the source, the third article the goal of our path. But the second article is the Way upon which we find ourselves in faith. From that vantage we may review the entire fullness of the acts of God.