

# The Mystery of Christ

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## Preface

This book provides an account of Christian theology that is systematic yet remains true to the way in which theology was first learnt. This is not as simple as it might seem, but it is a task worth undertaking. As we turn again to the early witnesses, we will be challenged to rethink our approach to theology, its vocabulary, and the manner in which we read Scripture. Yet we will also find a vision that might seem radical, even extraordinarily daring, but which far surpasses our limited modern scope in both breadth and vitality.

Most modern expositions of theology exemplify Kierkegaard's observation that we understand backwards, yet fail to take adequate account of this fact. That is, they begin with the results of the theological debates of the early centuries – especially Trinitarian theology and Christology – but separate these theological formulae from the way in which they were in fact learnt and from the exegetical practice, the manner of using Scripture, in and through which they were articulated. Starting with detached theological formulae, a doctrine of the being of God, as Trinity, is posited, and then Scripture is read in a distinctively modern manner, as a history of the interaction between God and the world: the creation, the life of Adam and Eve in Paradise, the Fall, the long history of salvation, in which God (usually in the person of the “pre-incarnate Logos”) appeared to Abraham and spoke with Moses and through the Prophets, culminating in the work of salvation when the Son became incarnate, and after the Passion returned to the Father, sending the Spirit to guide the Church through the remaining time of human history until the Second Coming.

Such an approach to theology has become, in modern times, all but ubiquitous. But the fact that we only understand retrospectively should caution us to consider more carefully how such theological statements are made and what kind of assertions they are. For example, in the above approach, the term “Incarnation” is used to refer to

the becoming human of the second person of the Trinity by being born from the Virgin Mary. But it is a stubborn fact, or at least is presented this way in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, that the one born of Mary was not known by the disciples to be the Son of God until after the Passion, his crucifixion and resurrection (the apparent exception, Peter's confession in Mt 16, in fact proves the point, and the Gospel of John takes this reflection further, as we will see). Thus to speak of the “Incarnation,” to say that the one born of the Virgin is the Son of God, is an *interpretation* made only in the light of the Passion. It is a *confession* about the crucified and exalted Lord, whose birth is then described in terms drawn from the account of his death (the correspondence between the tomb and the womb that delighted early Christians and is celebrated in liturgical texts and iconography); it is not a neutral statement that could be verified by an uninvolved bystander as part of an objective history, an account of things “as they actually happened,” in the manner of nineteenth-century history. Although popular imagination is still enthralled by the idea of “what really happened,” it is generally recognized today that there is no such thing as uninterpreted history. Failing to appreciate the confessional nature of theological assertions gives much modern theology a character that can only be described as an odd mixture of metaphysics and mythology.

The interpretative character of theological statements forces us to take seriously the exegetical practices of the apostles and the early Christians following in their footsteps, in and through which doctrinal formulae were articulated. The disciples did not simply come to understand Christ in the light of the Passion. Rather, only when turned again (or were turned by the risen Christ) to the Scriptures (meaning what we now call the “Old Testament”), did they begin to see there all sorts of references to Christ, and specifically to the necessity that he should suffer before entering his glory (cf. Lk 24.27), which they then used in their proclamation of Christ. In other words, the Scriptures were not used merely as a narrative of the past, but rather as a thesaurus, a treasury of imagery, for entering into the mystery of Christ, the starting point for which is the historical event of the Passion. In this it is not so much Scripture that is being

exegeted, but rather Christ who is being interpreted by recourse to the Scriptures. Not that they denied that God had been at work in the past, but their account of this “salvation history” is one which is told from the perspective of their encounter with the risen Lord, seeing him as providentially arranging the whole economy, the “plan of salvation,” such that it culminates in him.

It is sometimes said that for antiquity truth is what *is*, for enlightened modernity it is what *was*, and for post-modernity it is *that which will have been*. The historicizing approach of modernity places the truth of Jesus Christ firmly in the past – how he was born and what he did and said – and subjects his truth to our criteria of historicity, which are ultimately no more than a matter of what we find plausible (as is evidenced by the “Jesus Seminar”). For antiquity, on the other hand, the truth of Christ is eternal, or better, timeless: the crucified and risen Lord is the one of whom Scripture has always spoken. Yet, as the disciples come to recognize him, as the subject of Scripture and in the breaking of bread, he disappears from their sight (Lk 24.31). The Christ of Christian faith, revealed concretely in and through the apostolic proclamation of the crucified and risen Lord in accordance with Scripture, is an eschatological figure, the Coming One. Hence the importance of the other half of Kierkegaard’s observation, that while we understand retrospectively, we nevertheless live into the future. As we leave behind modernity’s fascination with the past, it is possible that we are once again in a position to recognize the eschatological Lord.

This, moreover, allows us to see a greater depth of meaning in the term “Incarnation.” As it is only in the light of the Passion that we can even speak of “Incarnation,” the sense of this term is pregnant with a greater fertility: by the proclamation of his gospel, the apostle Paul is in travail giving birth to Christ in those who receive his gospel (cf. Gal 4.19), that is, who accept the interpretation he offers in accordance with Scripture, and are thereby born again to be the body of Christ. This is still in process, as our life is “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3.3). Yet the indeterminacy celebrated by post-modernism, locating the “event” always in the future, is given concrete content in Christian theology, by anchoring its account in the crucial moment of the

Passion. The timeless subject of Christian theology is the crucified and risen Lord, the one who “was from the beginning, [who] appeared new yet is found to be old, and is ever young, being born in the hearts of the saints” (*The Epistle to Diognetus* 11).

The historical approach of modernity has resulted in the discipline of theology becoming increasingly fragmented. Students of Scripture, historical theology and systematic theology have each pursued their own disciplines, in ways that make them increasingly unable to dialogue with each other, so that it is difficult to see them as belonging to the same pursuit: the study of Scripture has, until recently, been dominated by the presuppositions of a historical-critical method, looking for the original text, its context and redaction, and its interpretation (in terms of what it *meant* rather than *means*); the study of the Fathers has focused on the development of doctrine that is already supposedly known, treating patristic exegesis as if it were a distinct subject, and is increasingly turning to any subject other than theology, becoming the study of Late Antiquity rather than Patristics; and systematic theology, working with the results of earlier studies in historical theology, overlooking the exegetical dimension of patristic theology and looking askance at modern scriptural scholarship, has become burdened by the momentum of its own discourse to become increasingly self-reflexive, concerned with its own methodology. The reappropriation of a pre-modern perspective in a cautious post-modern fashion, such as that offered in this book, might point a way out of the quandary in which theology has found itself in recent centuries, and forward to a space in which we can appreciate again the integrity and unity of the discipline of theology, and see anew its vision.

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