The vital question

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This article is reprinted from a longer contribution in 'The Churchman'. We wish to thank that journal for their permission to reprint.

Christology is in dispute today, and the differences under discussion are crucial. The question is whether the man Christ Jesus was and remains God in person or not: whether God incarnate is, as one recent book maintains, an item of factual truth (see *The Truth of God Incarnate*, ed. Michael Green, Hodder and Stoughton: 1977) or, as another book has urged, a notion with the status of a non-factual myth (see *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. John Hick, SCM: 1977). We may excuse ourselves from trying to state in positive terms just what a myth is, for those who use this category of explanation do not seem to be fully agreed among themselves on that; suffice it for our purposes to say that myth is in one way or another an imaginative declaration of personal significance or communal vision which does not correspond to, or rest on, public, objective, cosmic, space-time fact. So the issue is whether, as a matter of public, objective, space-time fact, Jesus Christ was a divine person—the Word made flesh without ceasing to be God's Son, which is what John affirms explicitly in the famous fourteenth verse of the first chapter of his gospel—or whether, despite what John and other New Testament writers, notably Paul and the writer to the Hebrews, thought and taught, Jesus was not God become man and ought to be accounted for in other terms.

This is as far-reaching an issue as can well be imagined. On it hangs your view both of God and of salvation. Take the matter of God first. We need to realize that, as the doctrine of the Trinity is not an idle fancy or speculation about God in the abstract but a specific claim about our Lord Jesus Christ, so the doctrine of the Incarnation is not an idle fancy or speculation about Jesus in isolation but a specific claim about God. For what the doctrine of the Trinity says is that the relationship of Jesus the Son to the Father and the Spirit, which the gospels depict and the epistles affirm, is a revelation of that endless fellowship of mutual love and honour which is the final, definitive description of God's eternal reality. And what the doctrine of the Incarnation says is that the Triune God loves sinners, and therefore in unity with God the Father and God the Spirit God the Son has come to us where we are and identified wholly with the human condition in order to save us. All the works of the Trinity external to the Godhead are undivided, says the old tag (*omnia opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*): so it needs to be understood that, as indeed the gospel records make very plain, the Son became human at the command of the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the joy of loving union with both; and that when in His cry of dereliction on the cross Jesus testified to godforsakenness at conscious level, at a deeper level the togetherness of the Godhead remained intact. That Jesus knew this, even if for those three dark hours He could not feel it, is surely clear from His first and last words on the cross: 'Father, forgive them', and 'Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit' (Luke 23: 34, 46).

Denial that the Incarnation is fact, however, undercuts the whole of this. On the one hand, it takes away at a stroke all grounds for supposing the Trinity to be fact (as clear-headed myth-men like Professor Maurice Wiles cheerfully admit). On the other hand, it constitutes a denial that, when mankind was perishing in sin, and had forfeited God's favour and provoked His wrath, the Father loved the world enough to give His only Son to become poor so that we might be made rich, and to bear unimaginable agony in enduring the sinner's death so that we might know righteousness and life. There is no escaping this point: what non-incarnational Christologies say is that, contrary to what Christians always thought and what their liturgies and hymns have hitherto expressed, God did not come in person to save the world after all; for whoever Jesus was, and whatever He did, He was not God. Putting this point biblically, Paul's great statement that the Father 'did not spare his own Son' (the verb speaks of the cost to the Father) 'but gave him up for us all' (that verb speaks of the cost to the Son), is being denied; and the effect

of this denial is to rob us of all warrant for embracing Paul's glorious inference—'will he (the Father) not also give us all things with him?' (Rom. 8:32). In other words: deny the Incarnation, and Jesus' death, just because it is not now the death of God's Son and not therefore the most costly gift God could bestow, loses its significance as the guarantee of every other gift that God can devise. This is a heavy loss which, one feels, should make advocates of the new Christology pause and reconsider.

What, now, of the link between the Incarnation and salvation? Here the basic point is that if we are going to deny that Jesus was God incarnate, we cannot ascribe to Him any mediatorial ministry involving anything which it takes God to do. How much, then, do we stand to lose of the Saviour's ministry as we have hitherto understood it? The answer of the New Testament from its own standpoint, and equally of the protagonists of 'humanitarian' Christologies from theirs, seems to be: practically all of it. For both objective reconciliation through Christ, and personal renewal in Christ as its consequence, will have to go.

Take reconciliation first. Paul tells us, if I read him right, that God's reconciling work in Christ took the form of a substitutionary sacrifice in which 'for our sake he (the Father) made him (the Son) to be sin who knew no sin' (2 Cor. 5: 19, 21): that is to say, our sins were imputed to Christ as the personally innocent and sinless sacrificial victim, according to the typical Old Testament pattern, and He died under God's curse in our place. 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become'—the natural rendering would be, '*by becoming*'—'a curse for us' (Gal. 3: 13). The curse is, of course, the sentence of spiritual death, the appropriate judicial retribution. But if Jesus Christ had not been God incarnate, He would have been simply a man in Adam; and in that case, however Spirit-filled and godly He was, He would not have been personally sinless, for no child of Adam is. How then could He have been our substitutionary sacrifice?

Again, if the substitutionary sacrifice goes, the free gift of justification that is based upon it goes also. When, in the verse (2 Cor. 5: 21) which we started to quote above, Paul said that for our sake the Father made the Son 'to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God', he linked reconciliation and justification together as two aspects of what Luther called the 'wonderful exchange' whereby our penal liability has passed to Christ and been dealt with on the cross; while His righteousness, that is His acceptance by the Father, which was maintained by His perfect obedience, is now extended to us for the taking. If we do not see our justification as based on 'the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood' (Rom. 3: 24f), it is not justification according to Paul that we are talking about: we have lost his frame of reference. A non-incarnational Christology, however, seems to make this inevitable.

Again, the New Testament sees our subjective renewal—that is, according to Paul, our co-resurrection with Christ—as taking place 'in Christ', through life-giving union and communion with the risen Lord. But those who insist that Jesus was no more than a godly man are naturally sceptical as to whether His resurrection, if indeed it happened, could in reality be the vitalizing archetype of ours. It is really impossible on a non-incarnational basis to make anything of that present rising with Christ which baptism proclaims, or of waiting for 'a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself' (Phil. 3: 20f). So on this basis renewal in Christ, as the New Testament presents it, must also be given up, as must that fellowship with the living Lord, in the power of the Spirit whom He sends, which is the distinctive and essential feature of New Testament devotion; and now very little of New Testament salvation remains, as you can see.

Both pro- and anti-incarnationists (not all the latter, but most) affirm the uniqueness of Christ. They do it, however, in contrasting ways, and it is instructive to compare the two kinds of accounts.

(1) All mainstream Christian traditions since the patristic period (the evangelical included) have followed the lead of the New Testament writers, whose presentations of Jesus—though seemingly independent, apart from the Synoptic evangelists, and at verbal and conceptual level quite distinct—harmoniously converge upon the 'two-nature' Christology, and the account of mediation built on it, which is set out in the fourth gospel and the letters to the Colossians and Hebrews. On this view, Jesus' uniqueness, that is His one-and-only, once-for-all quality, appears at two points: first in His divine-human person, and second in His mediatorial work as, in Barth's phrase, God for man and man for God. Take the two separately.

In the constitution of His person, Jesus is 'God plus': the second person of the Godhead who through being born of Mary became the subject of all the physical and psychological awarenesses that make up distinctively human experience. This does not, of course, mean that He experienced

everything that actually happens to each one of us (He did not, for instance, experience marriage or old age); not does it mean that it was into fallen human experience, of which disordered desire is a constant element, that He entered. All we can say is that His human experience was of such a comprehensive kind as to enable Him to understand and feel with us in all situations, as Hebrews 2: 18 and 4: 15 tell us He does. A question arises about His knowledge while on earth: though sometimes He knew facts at a distance, and seems always to have been utterly and immediately clear on spiritual issues, there were times when He showed ignorance, and it has been suggested that rather than put this down to play-acting (as the Fathers sometimes did) we should posit some pre-incarnate self-emptying of divine powers—in this case, of the capacity to know whatever He willed to know, the capacity which we call omniscience. This *kenosis*-theory is not, however, easy to make fit the facts (because Jesus knew, not only so little, but also so much); not is it easy to make sense of in its own terms (because it sound like a di- or tri-theistic fairy story rather than Trinitarian theology). It seems better to explain Jesus' ignorances in terms not of an induced ability to know but rather of dependence on His Father's will and unwillingness to call to mind facts which He knew that His Father did not direct Him to have in His mind at that time. The paradigm for this view is Jesus' own statement that 'the Son can do nothing of his own accord' (John 5: 19).

I wish I could go on here to speak at length of Jesus' mediatorial ministry as our prophet, priest and king; of the solitariness, permanence and power of that ministry; and of His solidarity with both His Father and us, a solidarity which He indicated in deceptively simple terms by saying, according to John's gospel, that He and His Father are 'in' each other, and that His people live 'in' Him and He 'in' them (Jn. 14: 11, 15: 4, 17: 23, etc.). But time does not allow that.

(2) The non-incarnational account of Jesus' uniqueness places it entirely in His *impact*: that is, in the instrumentality of His example to bring about effective identification with, and experience of, the 'Jesus way' of life—whether this is analysed at the level of feeling (Schleiermacher) or of ethics (Ritschl, Harnack, Albert Schweitzer), or of openness to God and self-understanding (Bultmann, Bornkamm and their successors), or however. Jesus on this view is 'man-plus': plus, that is, a unique sense of God and unique, God-given, insight. But His significance for us is wholly as a revelation of godliness rather than of God. Teacher and brother-man and example to us He may be, but Son of God and Saviour He is not: and one cannot think it surprising that myth-men like Dennis Nineham and Don Cupitt are prepared to wonder aloud whether, even as teacher and example, Jesus has very much real importance for us today.

Whence does such thinking—such painful thinking, to many of us—derive? From three obvious sources. Source one is hermeneutical arbitrariness (interpretive individualism, if you like) whereby, with Bultmann, scholars treat apostolic witness to Christ as myth despite the apostles' own constant insistence that they are declaring historical fact and revealed truth. Source two is historical scepticism whereby, following Deism ancient and modern, scholars assume that God never does anything genuinely new, despite sustained biblical proclamation to the contrary; so that they discount miracles, and particularly what C. S. Lewis calls 'the grand miracle', namely the Incarnation, as necessarily non-factual. Source three is philosophical dogmatism whereby they affirm *a priori* that God the Creator cannot take to Himself the nature of created man, despite New Testament declarations that He has actually done so. One can understand non-incarnationists wishing to affirm this hazardous *a priori* (for hazardous it is: how could anyone possibly prove it? How can one show it to be even plausible?). Certainly, any denial that God came in person to save will sound less shocking and impoverishing when based on a confident assurance that incarnation could not have happened anyway, in the nature of things. But surely setting limits to God in this way is really the acme of crass and even suicidal irreverence. Ecclesiastes pronounced woe on the land whose king is a child (Eccles. 10: 16), a child presumably in matters of statecraft and government. It is hard to refrain from pronouncing similar woe on the church whose theologians and teachers, however technically accomplished and sophsticated in speech, are children in understanding; and that is the point we seem to have reached. I am sorry to have to speak like this, but lest my words should be thought intemperate and unwarrantable I would like to refer you to E. L. Mascall's recent magisterial essay *Theology and the Gospel of Christ*, which makes this precise point by sustained argument and with devastating conclusiveness.

What shall we say to these developments? I have three things to say concerning them as I close.

First, I fear that we must interpret the situation in which university theologians go into print with the effect—however unintended—of denying the Lord who bought them, as a tragedy of judgement

on us all for long-standing Laodiceanism and unconcern about revealed truth. On the personal level, we echo Stephen Neill's charitable comment that irrational factors touch the minds of the best and most well-meaning of men, causing us all sometimes to take up with theories and ideas which are objectively crazy and disastrous. Living in glass houses as we all do, we had better be careful with our stones. We note that a number of those who now challenge the Incarnation came out of university Christian Unions, where hurtful forms of obscurantism, insensitiveness and group pressure have sometimes been known to operate; and we lay our hands on our mouths. But behind all that lies the fact, for fact it surely is, that we are living through an era which spiritually is like that of Jeremiah: a time in which consciences are calloused, sin—the 'gay' life-style, for instance—can pass as virtue, shame for shortcomings is scarcely felt, and minds, even the ablest, over and over again are unable to distinguish things that differ. That this frightening time is one of judgement, bringing loss of strength, expense of spirit and waste of good throughout the church's life, seems too plain to be denied. Statistically, financially, spiritually, theologically, the Protestant churches in our country appear to be dying on their feet. Please do not tell me that the charismatic movement and the increased and increasing numbers of evangelical clergy and laity, as compared with twenty years ago, have changed all that: for they have not. These things are merely new ripples on the surface of a pond whose waters continue to drain away. Whether they will ever amount to more than that we do not yet know. At present, our complacent way of talking to each other about the future comes through as a spiritual death rattle, just as at another point on the spiritual and theological front non-incarnational Christology also does. Realism compels us to recognize that judgement, theological, moral and spiritual, has overtaken English Protestantism; and to see the humanitarian scaling down of Jesus Christ to someone who is no longer the divine Saviour whom we need, as a symptom no less than a cause of what is going on.

Second, I urge that in these bleak conditions we must consider carefully who our true allies are in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

Third, I urge that, as those who define evangelical identity in terms of a New Testament-based faith in Jesus Christ as God incarnate, our prophet, priest and king, our wisdom and our righteousness, our Lord, our life, our way and our end, we should watch like hawks against any fragmenting of the seamless robe of scriptural testimony to Jesus' person and place. One of the theological failings of our age is our habit of isolating individual doctrines for treatment and reconstruction without weighing the full consequences of that reconstruction for the rest of the body of divinity. But Christian theology, both in Scripture and in our own minds, is an organism, a unity of interrelated parts, a circle in which everything links up with everything else; and if we are clear-headed we shall keep in view the long-range implications of each position when evaluating it. We have already seen how humanitarian Christology demolishes the received doctrines both of the Trinity and of salvation, and the same is true of the doctrine of the church as the new humanity in the Lord. The worship of Jesus Christ alongside the Father, to which the New Testament leads us, the Christian's saving relationship with Him and the church's corporate solidarity with Him in His risen life, all assume that He died as an effective sacrifice for our sins, rose again as proof that His atoning work was done, reigns here and now and will one day return to judge the living and the dead. None of this can be convincingly affirmed if His divine-human glory as God incarnate be denied. It really is not true that the less you set yourself to defend of New Testament Christology, the easier it will prove to defend it. On the contrary, if you take away any of its component bricks, and particularly the reality of the Incarnation, which is the keystone of the arch, the whole structure falls down. Clarity of thought requires us to acknowledge that only when the whole New Testament story concerning Christ is told in all its parts will credibility attach to any of it. If the Incarnation is denied, the whole New Testament account of Jesus the Christ should certainly be categorized as mythological fantasy (we may agree with the humanitarians on that). But then there is no reason why it should any longer claim our interest; the proper place for it then would be the dustbin. We need to realize the interlocking and inter-dependent character of the truths concerning Jesus, to see that divided they fall, and to make it a matter of deliberate care to tell the whole story—man's creation and fall; Christ's incarnation, atonement, resurrection, reign, and future return—when bearing testimony to the Son of God in this clashing, confused and disordered age.