



FAITH & REASON

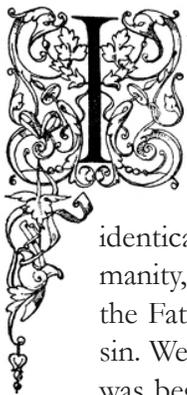
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THE CHRISTOLOGY OF PAUL TILlich: A CRITIQUE

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Christology is at the very heart of the faith. Ultimately we know the Father through the Son, and so understanding the Son is crucial. Therefore when certain questionable Christological tendencies appear in the work of a theologian as influential as Paul Tillich, a critique of those tendencies is necessary. This is precisely what is provided here by Fr. Gerald Orbanek, who goes on to suggest a positive approach to genuine development in our understanding of the God-Man, Jesus Christ.



IN THE YEAR 451, REPRESENTATIVES OF A THEOLOGICALLY TROUBLED CHURCH gathered in the city of Chalcedon to ponder the question, “Who is Jesus of Nazareth?” After heated and vigorous discussion the Church expressed its faith in the following formula:

Following the holy Fathers, we all with one accord teach the profession of faith in the one identical Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We declare that he is perfect both in his divinity and in his humanity, truly God and truly man composed of body and rational soul; that he is consubstantial with the Father in his divinity, consubstantial with us in his humanity, like us in every respect except for sin. We declare that in his divinity he was begotten of the Father before time, and in his humanity he was begotten in this last age of Mary the Virgin, the Mother of God, for us and for our salvation. We declare that the one selfsame Christ, only-begotten Son and Lord, must be acknowledged in two natures without any commingling or change or division or separation; that the distinction between the natures is in no way removed by their union but rather that the specific character of each is preserved and they are united in one person and one hypostasis. We declare that he is not split or divided into two persons, but that there is one selfsame only-begotten Son, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.¹

The immediate concern of this dogmatic formulation was Monophysitism, the heresy that so minimized the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth as effectively to deny it, but in each sentence of this conciliar teaching one can read a reference to almost all of the Christological heresies which have plagued the Church for about four centuries. Gnosticism, Arianism and Nestorianism, to name a few, are all clearly alluded to. Thus, since the formula of the Council of Chalcedon in a very real sense summed up four centuries of prayerful reflection by the Church on the mystery of the Incarnation, it has come to be taken as normative of Christological orthodoxy.

Christological orthodoxy is not, however, the mere repetition of the words of Chalcedon. Such an understanding of orthodoxy reduces the task of theology to an exercise of the memory, or at best to a task of historical investigation. But theology is something else; it is an exercise of men of faith in every age and epoch of the history of the Church who struggle for intellectual clarity within the faith.

In a significant article published more than two decades ago, Karl Rahner perhaps best epitomized the Roman Catholic attitude toward Chalcedon. He pointed out that “once theologians and the ordinary magisterium of the

Church have begun to pay attention to a reality and a truth revealed by God, the final result is always a precisely formulated statement.”² After nearly four centuries of struggling for clarity on the Word of God with the question, “Who is Jesus of Nazareth?”, a dogmatic statement of the Church was inevitable. But, as Rahner pointed out, “it follows from the nature of human knowledge of truth that any individual truth, above all one of God’s truths, is beginning and emergence, not conclusion and end.”³

It should be noted that Rahner’s view presupposes an epistemology which is based on the principle of identity. This epistemology involves two things: that truth has an absolute character and an atemporal character. Rahner made a second point concerning human understanding of the truth, however, which cannot be overlooked: that concepts are always time-bound and that no formulation of theological truth is incapable of deeper understanding, appreciation and development.

Anyone who takes seriously the ‘historicity of human truth’ (in which God’s truth has become incarnate in Revelation) must see that neither the abandonment of a formula nor its preservation in petrified form does justice to human understanding.⁴

The teaching of Chalcedon, then, is for the Roman Catholic “beginning and emergence, not conclusion and end.” It is a locus from which further theological investigation must proceed, and the norm by which all further theological conclusions must be judged.

The late Paul Tillich must be acknowledged as one of the three or four most significant Protestant theologians of the twentieth century. Characteristic of his Christology is his rejection of the two-nature doctrine of Chalcedon. Said Tillich:

The development of Protestant orthodoxy, both in its classical period and in its later reformulations, showed the impossibility of an understandable solution to the christological problem in terms of the classical terminology.⁵

Because of this alleged failure, he proposed that Protestant theology, preserving the *substance* of classical Christological dogma, find new forms in which this *substance* be expressed. This he attempted to do. An evaluation of that attempt from a Roman Catholic point of view is the subject of this study.

To understand Tillich’s theology and theological method, one must first consider his attitude toward dogma. Early in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology* he explained why he shunned the words *dogma* and *dogmatics*:

The word *dogmatics* emphasizes the importance of the formulated and officially acknowledged dogma for the systematic theologian. And in this sense the term is justified, for the theologian exercises a function of the Church and for the Church.⁶

But because in the history of Christian thought, *dogma* and *dogmatics* have taken on a demonic element, it is hardly possible to reestablish their genuine meaning. According to Tillich, they have all too often come to stand in the way of the divine reality they seek to express. They are, at best, the product and never the source of theology.

For Tillich there are no revealed dogmas and no deposit of the faith. There are only “revelatory events and situations which can be described in doctrinal terms.”⁷ Even the Word of God contains no revealed doctrines; it merely interprets revelatory events.

Such a revelatory event is the Incarnation and it is this event that the formula of Chalcedon attempted to describe. The Incarnation as a revelatory event is independent of any interpretation of it. According to Tillich:

It is an event with all the characteristics of an event in time and space: namely occurring but once, unrepeatable, possible only in a special, incomparable, individual form, a subject of report and not of analysis or deduction.⁸

Although the Biblical witness to the event of the Incarnation is also an interpretation, Tillich argued, it of all interpretations may not be cast aside. As he put it, “The religious picture [in the Word of God] of the New Being in Jesus is the result of a new being: it represents the victory over existence which has taken place, and thus created the picture.”⁹ Faith and faith alone confirms the accuracy of the Biblical witness to the event of the Incarnation and of the Biblical portrait of Jesus.

Although for Tillich dogma had only a relative and limited value, it was not primarily for this reason that he rejected the Chalcedonian formulation or interpretation of the revelatory event of the Incarnation. For him

Chalcedon had to be rejected because of the inner logic of his theological system (and, it must be added, the philosophical presuppositions of his theological system). That logic rests on three points: 1) his conception of God as being-itself; 2) his understanding of existence as estrangement; and, 3) his understanding of reconciliation between God and man as the dynamic relation between God and the Christ in which man participates.

First, for Tillich God is “being-itself or the ground of being.”¹⁰ “Nothing can be said of God theologically before the statement that he is the power of being in all beings.”¹¹ As being-itself or as the ground of being, God transcends all beings and the totality of all beings in the world. He alone is from himself; to him alone belongs the quality of aseity. As that which radically transcends the world, it is impossible for him to go into the world, for that would mean that he had become a finite being, which is the only thing that cannot be said of God. And yet he not only transcends all being, he is also the ground of being, i.e. every being has its being from him. To be separated from the ground of being is to cease to exist.

In reference to the event of the Incarnation, this conception of God necessarily implies two things. First, if God is such as to be so transcendent to the world that he cannot enter it, then his presence to the world in the Incarnation must be a unique and altogether new kind of presence. And second, God in the event of the Incarnation must remain radically distinct from the man Jesus who is the Christ.

Tillich’s understanding of the Incarnation is also determined by the second major presupposition of his system, i.e. that existence means estrangement. “Existence is estrangement and not reconciliation; it is the dehumanization and not the expression of essential humanity. It is the process by which man becomes a thing and ceases to be a person.”¹² This conception is closely linked with Tillich’s conceptions of God and can be seen as the anthropological consequence of his doctrine of God. Only in God are essence and existence identical. The created world exists, but its existence is separate from its essence.

Moreover, it is precisely existence in the created, existent world of humanity which contradicts or limits the essence of humanity, or what man should be. The Biblical symbol of the Fall is the Scriptural expression of this universal human situation. Because of this contradiction between essence and existence in Tillich’s system, one simply cannot use the term *nature*, insofar as it refers to essences, in speaking of the world of existent

human beings. At best the word is ambiguous; at worst it is meaningless, since it implies a contradiction. The implication of Tillich’s understanding of existence as estrangement for his teaching on the Incarnation is this: the Incarnation cannot be understood *essentialistically* or in terms of a hypostatic union of two natures.

Tillich’s third major point was that reconciliation between God and man occurs in the dynamic relation between God and the Christ in which man participates. For Tillich, the “New Being” is most perfectly realized in Jesus as the Christ. Here is the one man who lived under the conditions of existential estrangement, but who never fell from his essential being, never sinned, never claimed ultimacy, never lost contact with the ground of his being, God. He was man alive as man was intended to live, ever transparent of the divine, even though, as all other men, he lived under the conditions of existence and therefore estrangement. This understanding of Jesus as the Christ removes the Incarnation from the realm of supernaturalism, i.e. from conceiving Jesus as the Christ as identical with God. Rather Jesus as the Christ is seen as essential man because of his communion with God.

To sum up, then, the whole fabric of Tillich’s theological system forces him to posit the following conclusions in his understanding of the Incarnation. First, for God to be God, he must manifest himself to the world in a totally new way. Second, in the Incarnation God must somehow remain distinct from the man Jesus. Third, the Incarnation must not be understood ontologically, but existentially. And fourth, the Incarnation must not be conceived in a supernaturalistic fashion, but rather relationally. Thus, for Tillich the classical dogmatic formulations of the mystery of the Incarnation must be abandoned. His justification for that abandonment is as follows:

The dogmatic work of the early Church centers in the creation of Christological dogma. . . . The baptismal confession that Jesus is the Christ is the text of which the Christological dogma is the commentary.¹³

Although, as has been previously noted, Tillich gave dogma only a relative value, he did see some necessity in the Christological formulations of the early Church. They arose out of an attempt to preserve the substance of the Christian message against those within and outside of the Church who would have distorted it. These dogmatic formulations were quite successful in thwarting a distortion of the Christian message, but in Tillich’s mind, the

conceptual tools used in the formulations were very inadequate.

The dangers involved in every Christological statement are immediate consequences of the assertion that Jesus is the Christ, and are two-fold. As Tillich put it: “The attempt to interpret this assertion conceptually can lead to an actual denial of the Christ-character of Jesus as the Christ; or it can lead to an actual denial of the Jesus-character of Jesus as the Christ.”¹⁴ Tillich did acknowledge that because Jesus as the Christ is ultimately a divine mystery, no conceptualization will be totally adequate. However, any conceptualization must as best it can preserve both the Jesus-character and the Christ-character of this divine mystery.

The classical formulations show an awareness of the problem, for which the solution is attempted by the use of the term *nature*. As Tillich noted:

Any diminution of the human nature would deprive the Christ of his total participation in the conditions of existence. And any diminution of the divine nature would deprive the Christ of his total victory over existential estrangement. In both cases he could not have created the New Being. His being would have been less than the New Being.¹⁵

Thus the dogmatic task of the early Church was to conceive of the unity of a totally human and a totally divine nature. According to Tillich, the first and the fourth councils, Nicaea and Chalcedon, ultimately failed in this regard. And the failure was due to the inadequacy of the term *nature*. “When applied to man it is ambiguous; when applied to God, it is wrong.”¹⁶

The Council of Nicaea with its use of the term *homoousios* asserted that God himself and not a half-god is present in the man Jesus of Nazareth. Tillich argued that in so doing it preserved the Christ-character of Jesus as the Christ but risked the loss of the Jesus-character, or in traditional terms, his full human nature. The Council of Chalcedon, with its use of the terms, *mia hypostasis* and *duo physes* (one person, two natures) preserved the Jesus-character over strong monophysite tendencies. All this happened in spite of the use of very inadequate conceptual tools, the most inadequate of all being that of *nature*.

According to Tillich, in the formula of Chalcedon the two natures “lie beside each other like blocks whose unity cannot be understood at all.”¹⁷ The term *human nature* is ambiguous when applied to Jesus as the Christ: “Human nature can mean man’s essential or cre-

ated nature; it can mean man’s existential or estranged nature; and it can mean man’s nature in the ambiguous unity of the two others.”¹⁸ Tillich wondered which does apply to Jesus as the Christ.

The use of the term *divine nature* might be correct, according to Tillich, in a world view in which nature is an all-embracing concept, equally applicable to men, to gods, and to all that makes up the totality of the universe. But when God is seen to transcend everything created, qualitatively and infinitely, the term *divine nature* can mean only that which makes God into God.¹⁹ And since God is beyond essence and existence, since he has no essence apart from his existence, it could be said that his nature is that he transcends every essence. How then, asked Tillich, can the term *divine nature* be applied to Jesus as the Christ—who is not beyond essence and existence—in any meaningful way?

Tillich suggested that instead of speaking of a personal unity of a divine and a human nature, it is better to say that “in Jesus as the Christ, the eternal unity of God and man has become historical reality.” He replaced the inadequate concept of *divine nature* by the concepts of *eternal God-man-unity* or *eternal God-manhood*.²⁰ In Jesus as the Christ there is a community between God and the center of a personal life which determines all utterances of this life and resists the attempts within existential estrangement to disrupt it. What Tillich did was to abandon any ontological understanding of the Incarnation in favor of a dynamic or relational or existential understanding.

At the same time he avoided, he said, a pagan or mythological understanding of the Incarnation whereby a god passes from one form of existence to another. “The Incarnation of the Logos is not a metamorphosis, but his total manifestation in a personal life.”²¹ Tillich was insistent that it was the doctrine of the two natures which threw Christology into an impossible impasse.

The necessity of explaining the humanity of Christ in terms of Kenosis, as Christ emptying himself of the infinite divine power which he possesses potentially, or as Christ hiding this power which he possesses actually is a Christology of absurdities and shows that the very starting point was wrong.²²

Tillich’s rejection of the Chalcedonian formula on the grounds of the alleged inadequacy of the term *nature* might be convincing to some, but others might query whether he himself adequately understood the words of

the Council. Certainly the words, “like us in every respect except for sin”; remove any ambiguity from the term *human nature* when applied to Jesus as the Christ, a fact which Tillich seemed to have overlooked. Moreover, one might well ask if his use of the terms *eternal God-man-unity* and *eternal God-manhood* really shed more light on the mystery of the Incarnation than to speak of a personal unity of a divine and a human nature. To the Roman Catholic it seems that ultimately Tillich must have rejected the classical Christological dogmas simply because they do not express at all his own theological interpretation of the revelatory event of the Incarnation.

CRITIQUE

Karl Rahner may have had Tillich in mind when he wrote:

there have been attempts to reformulate a Christology in modern Protestantism which, owing to hostility to the metaphysics in the ‘Greek’ theology of the Fathers and Scholasticism and the use of philosophically inadequate instruments, have led to heresy, because they reduce the mystery of Christ to the level of our own religious experience and our own relationship with God.²³

But Rahner does not rule out the successful reformulation of a Christology with newer philosophical tools *a priori*; for him there is no proof that such attempts are false or impossible from the very beginning.

What would that task of reformulating a Christology without reference to an older philosophical system imply? Rahner makes the following suggestion:

Suppose someone says: ‘Jesus is the man whose life is one of unique self-surrender to God.’ He may very well have stated the truth about the very depths of what Christ really is, provided that he has understood (a) that this self-abandonment presupposes a communication of God to the man; (b) that an absolute self-surrender implies an absolute communication of God to the man, one which makes what is produced by it into the reality of the producer himself; and (c) that such an existential statement does not signify something ‘mental’, a fiction, but is in the most radical way a statement about being.²⁴

It could conceivably be argued that Tillich’s understanding of the mystery of the Christ preserved the first and the last conditions for an orthodox understanding of Jesus as the Christ. What is clear immediately, however, is that Tillich’s teaching on the Incarnation failed to satisfy Rahner’s second condition, i.e. “that an absolute self-surrender implies an absolute communication of God to the man, one which makes what is produced by it into the reality of the producer himself.” Tillich’s system demands the radical transcendence of God; it demands that God remain distinct from the man Jesus; it demands that the Incarnation be conceived in non-ontological terms; and it denies any supernaturalism in the reality of the Incarnation.

A Roman Catholic must say of Jesus, “He is the Lord; He is the Christ; He is God.” In Tillich’s system this last affirmation cannot be made. For Tillich this is idolatry. In his system we are never told that Jesus as the Christ is God. We are merely told that in the encounter with Jesus as the Christ, God is revealed to man definitively. “The Incarnation of the Logos is . . . his total manifestation in a personal life.”²⁵

It was the late Gustave Weigel who only one year after Tillich’s first extensive treatment of the Incarnation labeled his Christology as Nestorian.²⁶ To be tagged with a label so theologically infamous as the term *Nestorian*, fraught as it is with the connotations of intra-Church controversy and ecclesiastical persecution would likely disturb most theologians. It did not disturb Paul Tillich, who wrote at the time, “This is the best analysis of my thought that I have ever seen.”²⁷ Again, after the publication of his fully developed Christology in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology* in 1957, Tillich was accused by Catholics as being Nestorian in his doctrine. In reply he wrote:

My task in answering these accusations cannot be an attempt to deny them. From the point of view of accepted dogma they may be correct. But, theologically, ideas rejected by the ancient theologians and their successors may contain a truth which must be expressed in contemporary categories and concepts.²⁸

Nestorianism is understood as the doctrine that in Jesus Christ there is no real *Hypostatic Union* (one person uniting two complete yet distinct natures, divine and human) but rather only a close moral union between the man Jesus and God. The similarity between what Nestorius is alleged to have taught and what Paul Tillich surely taught

is striking, and to turn a phrase of Tillich against him, both end up with a picture of Jesus as the Christ which is a “monster with two heads,”²⁹ something which Tillich felt both he and the early Church safely avoided.

In his entire Christology Tillich tried to explain the great paradox of the Incarnation: “how he who transcends the universe appears in it and under its conditions.”³⁰ For him this appearance is not in the single person of the Logos who unites in himself a divine and a human nature which nevertheless remain distinct, un-

changed and undivided, but rather is to be found in the fulness of the manhood of Jesus as the Christ, and in this fulness, the totality of a community between God and a personal life. For Tillich, Jesus is not God; Tillich cannot use this terminology. The life of Jesus is the life through which God shines and where God is to be found, where *eternal God-manhood appears*, but Jesus is not God. For in the way Tillich understands God—and Jesus—to say so is tantamount to blasphemy.

NOTES

¹John F. Clarkson, *The Church Teaches*, St. Louis: B. Herder, 1955, p. 172.

²Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol. I, Baltimore: The Helicon Press, 1961, p. 149.

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 150.

⁵Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II, Chicago: The U. of Chicago Press, 1957, pp. 145-146.

⁶*Ibid.*, Vol. I (1951), p. 32.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁸Tillich, *A Reinterpretation of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* in *Church Quarterly Rev.*, CXLVII, 133.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹⁰Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I, p. 236.

¹¹*Ibid.*, III, p. 294.

¹²*Ibid.*, II, p. 25.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Ibid.*, 148.

²¹*Ibid.*, 149.

²²Tillich, as in note 8, p. 138.

²³Rahner, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Systematic Theology*, II, p. 149.

²⁶Gustave Weigel, *Contemporaneous Protestantism and Paul Tillich* in *Theological Studies*, XI:4, p. 194.

²⁷Tillich to Weigel in Weigel, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-02.

²⁸Tillich, *An Afterward: Appreciation and Reply* in *Paul Tillich in Catholic Thought* (eds. O'Meara, T. and Weisser, C.), Dubuque: The Priory Press, 1964.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 310.

³⁰*Systematic Theology*, II, p. 149.