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Theological Observer

CARL BRAATEN'S SIXTH LOCUS: THE PERSON OF JESUS CHRIST

Christian Dogmatics (Fortress Press, 1984), edited by Gettysburg professor Robert Jenson and Chicago professor Carl Braaten, is an attempt to offer an ecumenical dogmatics for the Lutheran Church within the framework of theological movements prevalent at the end of the twentieth century. As the title indicates, the intended audience is wider than Lutheran students of theology, but it is unlikely that it will overreach its Lutheran boundaries. Braaten, an ELCA minister and professor at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, has made a name for himself as a theologian, even with those who can accept neither his procedures nor conclusions. As editor of *Christian Dogmatics*, he has assumed the task of preparing the section on the person of Christ, which is the center and focus of Christian faith and theology.

The starting point for Christology is what the church understands by considering Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ of God (I, 473). In a sense Braaten has adopted a "confessional" Christology. Though it is much narrower than the traditional Lutheran confessional heritage in the Book of Concord, especially as expressed in the second article of the Nicene Creed, Braaten begins his dogmatic discussion with what he finds the church to believe—Jesus is the Christ of God. How he understands "Christ of God" is, of course, another matter.

The first issue is how Braaten establishes his Christology and the second is how he defines it. The early church, as understood from the New Testament, had a high Christology. It understood that Jesus was divine in some sense. To come to this conclusion Braaten begins with the Easter proclamation of the early church (I, 478). At first glance, it may appear that this is only a restatement of Bultmann's position which distinguished between the nonaccessible Jesus of history and the kerygmatic Christ available in the Easter proclamation. Braaten wants to find the roots of Christology in the historical Jesus of Nazareth, whose preaching of the kingdom brought God's power into the world. This kingdom is to be understood not in the moralistic sense set forth by nineteenth-century theologians but in the eschatological terms set forth by Schweitzer and Bultmann. The church assigned to Jesus such titles as Messiah, Son of Man, and Son of God, but Christology does not depend on whether Jesus understood Himself in these terms. "The root of christology in the ministry of Jesus is not located in a particular title of honor he claimed for himself"

(I, 490). The Easter appearances are the border between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. What Jesus was and what the church thought about Jesus are interwoven in the gospel narratives. Braaten concedes the identification of Jesus with God was not the dogmatic result of a later Hellenized Christianity, but one made by the most primitive Palestinian community. Here the break with Bultmann is more apparent than real, since docetism with its devaluing of Christ's humanity is an ill gain from this identification of Jesus with God (I, 499-500). More serious is Braaten's redefinition of the human and divine in Christ as our "giving expression to the knowledge of faith that God has entered history as the power of final salvation of humanity and the cosmos" (I, 514).

In pursuing dogmatics, Braaten wants to take into consideration the nineteenth and twentieth century exegetical understandings of Jesus without having to choose between the several options and at the same time without surrendering the classical Christology, or at least its terms, even if he has to redefine them. This was the mark of neo-orthodoxy. Braaten's confidence in such diverse and contradictory exegetical methods and conclusions, developed by an almost premeditated evolutionistic development and blended into monolithic conclusions, is either brilliant or just naive. To add the classical expression to his Christology, Braaten reviews the dogmatic concerns which lead up to the early church councils, the Lutheran Confessions, and the discussions raised by the Erlangen theologians in the nineteenth century. In his breadth of knowledge and historical procedure, Braaten is not unlike Francis Pieper, whose title, *Christian Dogmatics*, Braaten and Jenson borrowed without giving appropriate credit. Braaten wants to work within Lutheran boundaries. Whether he succeeds is another matter.

Since Braaten is versed in the classical Christology and wants to preserve its terminology, he is led into a discussion of the sinlessness of Christ. This dogmatic concern for Christ's sinlessness is quite amazing, since for Braaten Jesus' own self-understanding did not go beyond His proclamation of God's kingdom for which "he never offered a definition or straightforward description" (I, 486). Is it really possible to deduce Christ's sinlessness from a definitionless proclamation of God's kingdom? Christ's sinlessness is problematic for Braaten, since it detracts from His complete identification with fallen humanity. For contemporary New Testament studies this is hardly an issue; but Braaten supports it not from the classical position of the incarnation and the impossibility of God sinning, but rather as "a retroactive type of judgment based on the role of Christ in the mission of God's approaching kingdom" (I, 522). The approach here is reminiscent of Pannenberg who makes eschatology, i.e., what God will do in Jesus, rather than incarnation, i.e., what God has done in Jesus, the standard for Christology. As close as Braaten comes to proposing a high Christology, especially in his use of terms, he faults early church theologians for

interpreting John's mythological terminology of the Word becoming flesh in ontological terms. Such "ontologizing the incarnation" was well intentioned and perhaps the only possibility within the mind-set of the early church fathers which was defined by Greek philosophy, but still a regrettable intrusion of alien elements into Christology" (I, 530). This is, of course, recognizable as first von Harnack's position and then Bultmann's. This does not mean that Braaten finds it impossible to call Jesus God. Such a confession does not involve the entering of the pre-existent Logos into the world by incarnation, but in Jesus "the power of God's absolute future—*basileia*—was shown to be effectually present in his person and humanity" (I, 538). We are left with a functional Christology, borrowed from Moltmann and Pannenberg. Jesus' unity with the Father is no longer understood in Trinitarian terms, but in terms of the theology of history as the representation of "a perfect realization of the humanity of humankind" (I, 539). Jesus is God in name only and not ontologically. Regardless of Braaten's dogmatic inadequacy in his understanding the incarnation as "a perfect realization of the humanity of humankind," his language and categories are hardly recognizable as biblical. His judgment against the early church fathers in understanding mythological language in philosophical terms might be adjusted to fit Braaten, who has surrendered biblical terms and categories for philosophical ones. This becomes clearer when Braaten presents his understanding of the articles of faith in the Apostles Creed.

The virgin birth is seen as a sign of Christ's humanity which does not require the denial of human paternity (I, 546-7). Sadly missing from this all too brief discussion on an article so basic to faith that it was included from the very beginning in the precursors of the Apostles Creed is any exegetical presentation. This lack of biblical discussion is characteristic of Braaten's dogmatic writing throughout. To be sure, His birth from Mary is Christ's link with fallen humanity, as Braaten contends, but His *virgin* birth is understood both by Matthew and Luke as the sign of His being God and on that account it is by both evangelists intimately tied with the incarnation, a point missed by Braaten. In his failure to connect virgin birth and incarnation, Braaten is consistent as he defines the preexistence of Jesus as His never being "an individual person apart from the incarnation of the Son of God" (I, 545). This definition of preexistence contradicts what the word means. Preexistence is prior to incarnation, but not dependent on it for its meaning. Braaten's rhetorical question, "Is God the Father in competition with the role of our human father?" (I, 547), leads to no other conclusion than that he does not accept the virgin birth as the evangelists and the early church fathers understood it. For them it was a real event.

In his interpretation of the descent into hell he sees a double meaning: a symbol of Christ's suffering, the view offered by Calvin, and a symbol of final salvation to those "who have never been confronted with the preaching of his salvation in his name" (I, 549). This is nothing other than universalism, a position directly borrowed from Pannenberg. The resurrection accounts for the transition of Jesus from the *announcer* of the kingdom to the *announcement* of the kingdom (I, 524); this is pretty much standard exegetical opinion. In spite of its popularity, Braaten's assumption of it into his theology should not remain unchallenged. Without denigrating the importance of the resurrection in the thinking of the disciples about Jesus (so that He became the announcement of their preaching), Jesus before the resurrection was *both* the announcer and announcement of the kingdom. Unless this is said, the early church and not Jesus becomes *the* determinative factor in the Christian religion. To use more traditional terms, it must be said that Jesus is at the same time the revealer and revelation of God. For Braaten the resurrection is an historical event because it happened at a certain place and time. His resurrection appearances were interpreted by the witnesses as an eschatological event and became foundational for Christianity (I, 551). Granted that Braaten's position, which is borrowed from Moltmann and Pannenberg, does emphasize an oft forgotten understanding that the resurrection of Jesus belongs to both our history and the eschaton, it does not adequately define the historical dimension. Placing it within time and space does not adequately answer the question of *what* really happened in the resurrection. We can come no closer to the resurrection than the first witnesses' interpretation of the appearances of Jesus. These suspicions of Braaten's doubts about the resurrection are confirmed when Braaten sees no "sound historical arguments" for distinguishing the ascension from the resurrection (I, 552-3), a position similar to Bultmann's.

Braaten's Christology is a map of his own theological pilgrimage as a child of his times. He wants to preserve the Lutheran heritage of his youth, but his Christology reflects neo-orthodoxy, Bultmann's hermeneutic, and the dogmatic approaches of Moltmann and Pannenberg, in all of which he became well versed. Braaten wants to preserve the traditional language, but like neo-orthodoxy he redefines the terms before he incorporates them in his theology. Not as radical as Bultmann, who is virtually agnostic about the historical Jesus, Braaten sees the classical Christology as coming from the early Christians and not from Christ himself. With Pannenberg and Moltmann, he sees eschatology as the clue to understanding the person and work of Jesus. The student trained in classical Christology is capable of interpreting Braaten's approach. Others are left with philosophical speculations put forth in Christian language. Such verbal confusion is always damaging to the faith once delivered to the church by the apostles.

David P. Scaer

TAKING UP ZWINGLI ON THE CONSECRATION

Having recently authored a volume on Martin Chemnitz's views of the Sacrament of the Altar (*The Lord's Supper in the Theology of Martin Chemnitz*), it has hardly escaped my notice that it has raised discussion of several issues, and not among the least is the doctrine of the consecration. Since it is my view that both Martins (Luther and Chemnitz) agree on their understanding of Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:24-25 and that their understanding has been incorporated into the Book of Concord, I submit a brief summary of my findings of both Martins on this aspect of the Lord's Supper.

There can be no doubt that in a legitimate observance of the Lord's Supper Luther confessed that the consecration achieved the Real Presence. When Zwingli objected to Luther's doctrine of the consecration, Luther gave a clear answer as to what he believed, taught, and confessed, and also the biblical basis for it. Zwingli declared that "although in the Supper Christ gave His body when He said, 'This is My body,' it does not follow that if I repeat the same words, Christ's body would immediately be present; for Christ nowhere commanded that His body should come into being out of my word" (LW 37, 181). Thus challenged, Luther answered, "Let us take him up on the first point."

Luther refers to Christ's command to do what He did in the first Supper: "But when He said, 'Do this,' by His own command and bidding He directed us to speak these words in His person and name: 'This is My body' " (LW 37, 187). Luther is so certain of this that he asserts that, "if there were an imperative that I should speak to the water these declarative words, 'this is wine,' you would see indeed whether wine would not appear" (LW 37, 183).

Significantly, part of Luther's answer to Zwingli on this occasion has been incorporated into the Formula of Concord as part of the Lutheran Church's confession (SD VII, 78): "When (*wenn, quando*) we follow His institution and command in the Supper and say, 'This is My body,' then (*so, tunc*) it is His body, not because of our speaking or our own declarative word, but because of His command in which He has told us so to speak and to do and has attached His own command and deed to our speaking" (LW 37, 184).

The other Martin (Chemnitz) confessed in his *Fundamenta* (chiefly directed against the Philippists) that he had no desire to bring in anything new but was "simply trying to retain the old fundamental and simple teaching and to repeat it out of Luther's writings" (*The Lord's Supper*, Concordia Publishing House, 1979, p. 21). And he virtually did repeat Luther's doctrine of the consecration. For example, he confesses for the

benefit of the Philippists: "Thus the other fathers hold that before the consecration there is only one substance there, namely, the bread and the wine. But *when* the Word and institution of Christ comes to these elements, *then* not only one substance is present as before, but at the same time also the very body of Christ" (LS, 156; emphasis added).

In the *Examination* (Concordia Publishing House, 1978) Chemnitz presents this doctrine in greater detail (II, 224-231). Any fair examination of this section will reveal that the central point of Chemnitz here is that "our bread and cup become sacramental by a certain consecration; it does not grow that way" (II, 225). He finds the basis for the recitation of the Words of Institution as the consecration which effects the Real Presence in the command of Christ Himself: "In short, Christ has commanded us to do in the action of the Sacrament what He Himself did. He did not, however, perform a mute action but spoke. And what He said is reported to us in Scripture, as much as the Holy Spirit judged to be necessary for us" (II, 226). Later he precludes the possibility of misunderstanding him as though the consecrated bread and wine were going to be the body and the blood of Christ upon their oral reception: "The meaning is not that the blessed bread which is divided, which is offered, and which the Apostles received from the hand of Christ was not the body of Christ but becomes the body of Christ when the eating of it is begun" (II, 248).

Chemnitz's Scriptural basis for clinging to this point so tenaciously is also Matthew 26:28. He writes "on the use of the particle 'for.' 'Drink,' He says, not because it is a common cup, nor because you are thirsty, nor because it is a typical or symbolic drink; for He had now put an end to all these. But 'Drink, *because* this is My blood' " (LS 99; emphasis added). It is quite striking to observe that the eagle-eyed NIV translators (chiefly of Calvinistic persuasion) omitted the *gar* in their translation, while back in 1611 the KJV men saw it with Chemnitz, as did in the modern day both the NKJV and the NASB translators.

As a final note, a Lutheran theologian of Germany, Pastor Frank-Georg Gozdek has recently made a valuable contribution to the understanding of Martin Chemnitz's doctrine of the Lord's Supper, a volume commemorating the fourth centenary of the death of Chemnitz: *Der Zweite Martin der Lutherischen Kirche: Festschrift zum 400. Todestag von Martin Chemnitz* (ed. W.A. Junke, Braunschweig, 1986). Pastor Gozdek made a most intensive study of Chemnitz's first book on the Lord's Supper, *Repetitio sanae doctrinae de vera praesentia corporis et sanguinis Domini in coena* (1561). This book is a sort of first edition of the *Fundamenta* (1570), which has been translated by J.A.O. Preus under the title of *The Lord's Supper*. Pastor Gozdek put the results of his scholarly research into the essay, "Der Beitrag des Martin Chemnitz zur lutherischen Abendmahlslehre" (pp. 9-47). He discusses the consecration in section 5 under the rubric "Das Ereignis der Realpräsenz." Pastor Gozdek's essay is worthy of serious study.