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Who Can This Be?¹

A Review Article

E. F. KLUG

ACCORDING TO the preface, this little booklet is “offered in the hope of fostering the growing trust and respect among various Lutheran groups and of deepening our understanding of the Christ, both as to his person and work” (p. 7). Edited under the capable hands of the executive secretary of the Division of Theological Studies of LCUSA, Prof. Arnold E. Carlson, the chapters represent a collation that grew “out of discussions and readings” by ten lecturers on selected themes, all dealing with Christology: the Chalcedonian statement, with a probing into the adequacy of its formulations; a close look at the nature of man in present-day categories and the possible relevance these have for a better understanding of our Lord Himself, particularly His human nature; an effort at relating these two, traditional formulation and contemporary thought-form, meaningfully with each other. Selected clergymen and laymen from the four member bodies of LCUSA met at area conferences for reflection and discussion on these subjects.

The study document gives solid evidence of love for the Gospel. Evidently participants shared a stimulating experience and were reassured to find fellow Lutherans concurring. What is unclear to this reviewer is the somewhat detached, academic posture assumed within the document—and so also apparently in the discussions first of all—that the efforts were not intended to result in position statements but rather “allow men to take a variety of positions and hopefully contribute to an openness of faith and thought that will strengthen the churches” (p. 7). Perhaps the right to use this approach ought not be challenged, but frankly, the church has never been strengthened by the kind of openness of mind which suggests that the meaning of God’s revelation is unclear, or may open up to a variety of positions (particularly when the article on Christ is at stake), or that it depends upon discoveries in the life sciences before it can take concrete form, if ever. It is un-Luther-like to imply that assertions concerning an article of faith like that of Christ and His work cannot be made in any dogmatic sort of way for our day. God, as our Confessions remind us, asks only for attentive listeners, not speculating rovers, with reference to what He has to say in the revelation bequeathed us in Holy Writ!

Since the document is presented for study and discussion, and therefore also criticism, it would appear to be in order to list certain *Bedenken*, or second thoughts, from a Biblical, as well as Lutheran

1. WHO CAN THIS BE? . . . Studies in Christology. Prepared by the Division of Theological Studies, Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., 315 Park Ave., New York, New York, 10010. Available without charge. Paperback. 36 pages.

point of view, concerning some of the methodology and theology proposed within the document.

1. It is highly doubtful that present-day studies into the nature of man as suggested by the document, will shed any light upon our understanding of the personal union of natures in Christ. Surely the finest insights of psychology and related fields—all of them the most *insecure* of the sciences!—cannot finally be determinative for our understanding of the human nature of Christ our Lord. This is a very hazardous approach, to say the least, whatever esteem we may have for these sciences otherwise in the understanding and care of man himself.
2. On the subject of Christ's humanity and whether the church has failed to understand it in its full dimension and significance, the following quotation from the document is very disturbing, because of the implications it has: "Although we have attested both to the divine and human in Jesus, have not our actual proclamation and teaching often yielded to the docetic tendency? We have not found it difficult to pull out all stops in confessing Jesus as true God. More hesitatingly have we spoken of Jesus as a full participant in the human race." (p. 15) This is a fear completely without foundation or evidence, at least for Lutheran theology. (Docetism denied that Christ's body was real and taught instead that it only appeared so, or that, at most, it was a celestial body). *Much more real*, as a threat to Christian theology for our time is the view of Christ which raises again the specter of dynamic Monarchianism, according to which the Logos came to work in and through this man Jesus in a most vital sort of way, meanwhile denying His true deity. Bengt Hägglund, in his recently published *History of Theology* (Concordia Publishing House, 1968), correctly points out that the dynamism of Paul of Samosata has perennially surged to the fore: "This rationalistic interpretation of the Christian faith in God was the first clearly formulated example of a point of view which has appeared in many different forms. In more recent times it has appeared in Socinianism and other Unitarian schools, *as well as in neology and in certain branches of liberal theology.*" (Emphasis added.)
3. This leads to another criticism of the document's handling of Jesus according to the human nature. At various points it speaks of the humanity of Jesus in such a way as to suggest a self-sustaining essence or person of man, for example, in a statement like "in the man Jesus, God confronts us" (p. 16), or "who shared our humanity, perhaps even our limitations" (p. 10). These statements could, it is

true, be understood correctly, but the context in the document is so intent on humanizing the person of Christ that it appears to speak in terms of an autohypostatic nature for the man Jesus, as a distinct human person according to that nature. Scripture says that it was the Person of the son of God who became man and took the human nature, the Logos became flesh. There was only the Person of the Son of God who had both a divine and a human nature. Lutheran theology has heretofore always recognized the danger of autohypostasis as regards Christ's human nature, but the document seems to ignore it, in fact to play along with it. The whole value and power of the vicarious atonement impinges upon the fact that it was the person of the holy, eternal Son of God in the nature of our sinful flesh.

4. If the foregoing is a valid criticism, then side by side should come the reminder that a wrongful and un-Scriptural kind of *kenosis* may also be involved. The interpretation of Phil. 2, 6, "he counted not equality with God a thing to be grasped," understood as Jesus having "embraced his humanity and accepted his creatureliness, emptying himself of any aspiration to be as God," (p. 23), seems to bear this out. As does also this statement:

"So the gospels clearly give us a picture of one who, like the rest of us, was groping through each new situation to find some clear indication of what the Father's will might be. Nowhere is this more evident than in the account of the Gethsemane agony If these words are interpreted in their obvious meaning, Jesus at that moment had no divine preview of the necessity of the cross Likely he was even unaware of the resurrection that lay beyond the criminal's death" (p. 25).

No one is going to solve or penetrate the great mystery of the personal union, nor that of the humiliation, especially in connection with the *genus majesticum*. But let us not bend over backwards in our efforts at humanizing Christ to such an extent that we run head-on into Scripture's own testimony that He who was in the flesh understood the necessity of the cross and told His followers about it (John 3,14; 8,28; 12,32, etc.) and that He spoke plainly about the certainty of His resurrection after voluntarily laying down His own life (Matt. 12,40; 26,61; 27,63, etc.)!

As we consider the matter, therefore, is not the threat to Lutheran theology at this point a brand of Nestorianism, even Arianism, rather than Docetism? In this connection, how shall we understand the document's definition of omnipresence, when it describes this wonderful attribute of our

exalted Lord in terms of *our* entering into "a believing relationship" with Him? The threat of kenoticism seems to be real in view of statements like these, let alone a possible denial of the *genus majestaticum*.

5. The document also shows a definite predilection for Aulen's *Christus Victor* emphasis, of Christ who was triumphant over Satan and evil, at the expense or neglect of the vicarious satisfaction. In a document on Christ and His work there is precious little focus on the crucified and risen Savior, who was the perfect Propitiation, the Mercy-seat, as Paul calls Him, who made full atonement for all men's sins, through whose redemption there is a perfect righteousness, or justification, for all who are under the Law! It is this good news, or Gospel, which is to be preached for faith's acceptance.
6. In this connection, on pages 29 and 30, where Christ is being described as Reconciler, there is noticeable avoidance of speaking of the righteous wrath of God against sin and sinners. The ghost of Ritschl seems to be right off in the wings ready to come on stage with his Love-focus as the only proper way of describing God's nature. We dare never forget that the denial of the righteous wrath of God against sin involves the denial as well of His holy nature! It is only in the context of God's holiness and just wrath that His wondrous love appears within Scripture and is to be understood. Whatever difficulty human reason has with seeing both love and hatred in God at the same time should find its resolution, to the extent it can be resolved, in connection with man's own sinful condition, for it was man who deserved fully the wrathful vengeance of God. Those who minimize God's wrath and hostility against sin and sinners, inevitably end with a reduction of human depravity and sin. Wilhelm Dantine in *Justification of the Ungodly*, a book to be released in translation this fall by Concordia Publishing House, speaks directly to this point: "The Son dies on the cross, abandoned by the Father, defenselessly delivered up to the merciless judgment over the sin of the world, so that this same world might be saved. In this way and only in this way does God love, He who is both the Holy One and the Loving One in impenetrable unity. God loves in no other way. Or more precisely, the Gospel knows nothing of another, abstract, nonsacrificial love."
7. Certain phrases in the document show an undue commitment to liberal theology's thought-forms. Witness, for example, this one which has Tillich written all over it: "God is capable of and willing to fill every human life with that content that was manifested in the person of Jesus of Naza-

reth" (p. 23). Where is Luther's Christ-for-us in this? Sounds more like the New Being of Tillich and the old, old Christ-in-us theology of Schleiermacher and all the other subjectivists!

This will suffice to demonstrate that the document hardly fills the bill of *strengthening* the church in our day with clear, meaningful treatment of the important article on Christology. Considerable spadework remains to be done and if we may offer a suggestion, it had better be a much more Biblical study in the tradition of our Lutheran Confessions which speak so eloquently and unambiguously on the person and work of our precious Savior, uncluttered with neology's "insights." We ought after all remember that the same Savior who rebuked the winds and waves also rebuked those who had been in the boat with Him, with a stern "Where is your faith?" Their reaction, according to Luke, included the question, "What manner of man is this? for he commandeth even the winds and water, and they obey him" (Lk. 8,25). But Jesus did not leave His disciples in a quandary as to what manner of man He was. As time went on they were made sure of who He was and what He had come to do. Now we have the Word these apostles were given by inspiration of the Holy Ghost. We dare not leave men in a quandary with a perpetual "Who Can This Be?" but must lead them by the Gospel, Scripture's Word concerning His death and resurrection for our salvation, to faith like that of Thomas, who, when he had seen the resurrected Savior, exulted: "My Lord and my God."