

A Prolegomena in Total Christ Ecclesiology *Incomplete Rough Draft-* PG

We have already stated our aim to discern an approximate ideal in spirituality and praxis that is adaptable to multiform cultural manifestations of the global church. In sympathy with the current such an ideal will want to transcend the *modems*. Our task by way of a theological prolegomena is to explore both a philosophical and theological basis for a Total Christ Ecclesiology.

Admittedly, we are being set up for quite an ambitious program, arguably too ambitious. And to be sure, the following is recommended if but to get the conversation started in whatever context it might find itself. And yet the question remains, can such a thing as a universal and holistic consensus of an approximate ideal in spirituality and practice be found, especially as to both transcend church traditions if but to assume them? And can this church also be adaptable to particular demographic vernaculars and local contexts as one multi-form church?

Our prolegomena in Total Christ spirituality begins with Christology applied to Ecclesiology under Christ's ascension ministry. Briefly Chalcedon is reviewed in so far as it is picked up with Augustine in his Total Christ ecclesiology.

Once the relation of Christology to ecclesiology is established, there are many issues that need exploration if to better understand the "distinct, never separate" Christological formula that is applied to the nature of the church—*vis-à-vis* word (covenant) becoming flesh (temple). On the "word" side, we will address the issue of perspicuity of divine revelation. On the relation of word to flesh, we will review three fields of study that might assist in our understanding of the two in relation one to another—sociology of knowledge, nature of theology, sacramentology. But first:

Christology Applied to Ecclesiology:

The 5th century controversy in Christology was focused on the meaning of Christ's incarnation in relation to his person. The questions were: To what extent was Christ human? And to what extent was Christ divine? The protagonists involved Bishop Nestorius of Constantinople and Bishop Cyril of Alexandria representing the East and West respectively. The former stressed two natures to preserve Christ's humanity. The later stressed one nature to preserve Christ's divinity. And yet both conceded the absolute necessity of preserving a *dialectical understanding of the relationship of the human and divine in Christology*.

It was all charged within the political context surrounding whether to venerate Mary as the "mother of God" (Cyril), or not (Nestorius). As history tells it, the differences in Christology were no doubt accelerated by political expediency. The debate moved between what was most likely competing semantics per vernacular "forms" to competing theological positions per theological "elements." Accordingly, historian Ben Green makes the observation how "the challenge for understanding the debate between Nestorius and Cyril is to distinguish the moderate from the extreme. Each of these theologians can be seen to represent *either* the moderate or the extreme position of his school of thought."¹

Eventually by means of a convergence in theologizing and politicizing, and after involving a whole host of subsequent personalities (The Antiochene "school" per Eutyches on the east side and the Alexandrian school per Dioscorus on the west side for instance), the council of Ephesus in 431 decided in favor of the Cyril-Alexandrian school and against what was by then a more eccentric expression of the Antiochene position than was previously held by Nestorius himself. Again as noted by Ben Green, "in deciding in Cyril's favor, Ephesus did not, however, fully adopt Cyril's Christology." Likewise, "Nestorius' overall delivery of the Antiochene Christology was much more orthodox. He was firmly convinced of the union of the divine and human natures in the single Son, Christ: "I did not say that the Son was one (person) and God the Word another; I said that God *the Word* was by nature one and the *temple* by nature another, one Son by conjunction."² Eventually, Ephesus was not able to come to a resolution concerning Christology itself, as it was more a decision concerning the praxis issue of

¹ Ben Green, *Nestorius and Cyril: 5th Century Christological Division and Recent Progress* (Reconciliation Press, 1975) p. 454.

² Green.. Quote taken from a sermon Nestorius preached in 430 as quoted by Aloys Grillmeier, S.J., *Christ in Christian Tradition*, Vol. 1: *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, 2nd revised edition, trans. John Bowden (Atlanta: John Knox

eneration. And even then, Cyril was later deposed as well by the Eastern bishops before the counsel was formerly closed in AD 433.

However much Ephesus settled the issue politically, it took Chalcedon in AD 451 to finally clarify the Christological doctrine itself as would eventually become widely accepted in the Greek, Roman and Protestant traditions. The Chalcedon creed reflected more of a “win-win” compromise between the original Nestorian and Cyril positions. To begin, as per a unified confession, Chalcedon first stipulated how “we unanimously teach to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man... the same *one in being* (*homoousios*) with the Father as to the divinity and one in being with us as to the humanity.” That is, in so far as Christ’s being is two *natures* (*ousia*), they are forever being in *union* (*homo*), the divine in perfect union with the human as then to establish Christ’s communal essence. The counsel would further clarify, “that one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son, must be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion or change, without division or separation.”³

Herein the famous “two distinct but not separate” concept is codified. That is, “the distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person (*prosôpon*) and one hypostasis.” Here again, the distinctly human and *divine* remain fixed in one *static* essence, albeit in an ongoing living communion as one person in communion, “the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the communion.” This then was the Caledonian confession of what materialized historically in the incarnation of Christ wherein it was said; “the same was begotten from the Father before the ages as to the divinity and in the latter days for us and our salvation was born as to his humanity from Mary the Virgin Mother of God.”⁴

And so there we have it: ecumenical Christology later confessed by all three of the major branches of Christendom—Eastern Catholic, Western Catholic and generally speaking Protestant. And yet, our present interest is not so much Christology, but Christology *applied!* How would this Christology as especially related to the “two distinct but not separate” in Christ’s divinity and humanity correspond to the ascension ministry of Christ today? In so far as the “distinct” is concerned, there is a “distinct-static” orientation expressed. But in so far as the “but not separate” is concerned, there is an “ongoing-vivifying” orientation that is continued. Stated differently if there is a “once and for all” aspect to Christology, is there as well an “ongoing” aspect to Christology in relation to the union of the two natures albeit in one person Jesus Christ? Our proposal then is to ask the question as related to Christ’s ascension ministry today.

Without espousing what has traditionally been described as “Nestorianism” per se, what exactly is the meaning of his earlier clarification, “ I said that God *the Word* was by nature one and the *temple* by nature another, one Son by conjunction.”⁵ Was Nestorius distinguishing a “once and for all” ideal-objectifying-*word* or “covenantal” paradigm in heaven and an ongoing material-subjectifying–communal or “temple” paradigm as mediated on earth?” Enter Augustine’s *Totus Christus* idea concerning Christology as applied to ecclesiology.

The focus of Augustine’s *Totus Christus* Christology in relation to ecclesiology was concerned to address both the “distinct” (not absolutely present) but “not separate” (not abstractly present only) aspects of Christ’s ascension ministry. For instance Augustine wrote:

The Word was made flesh, and dwelled among us; to that flesh is joined the church, and there is made the *total Christ*, head and body. ⁶

The meaning of “to that flesh is joined the church” is of particular significance to our thesis per the temple orientation especially. It would appear that Augustine’s point is that the significance of the Eucharist is something more than a simple comparison of Christ’s life to ours by way of a moral example. More than a Eucharist in the position of the Holy Spirit to excite in us the life of holiness and love, Augustine’s point was that the visibly and organically socialized church into a given cultural-linguistic “flesh” BECOMES Christ in the midst of us today. Augustine writes for instance:

Then let us rejoice and give thanks that we are made not only Christians, but Christ. Do you understand, brothers,

³ Green, p. 455

⁴ Green, p. 457

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ St. Augustine, *On the Epistle of John* 1.2.

and apprehend the grace of God upon us? Marvel, be glad, we are made Christ. For if he is the head, we are the members: the whole man is he and we... The fullness of Christ, then, is head and members. Head and members, what is that? Christ and the Church.⁷

In this manner, Augustine clearly understands Christ ascension presence to be full or “total” in the visible flesh and blood of the church on earth. To further illustrate this point in relation to Augustine’s “we are made Christ” idea, the 16th century reformers often applied Augustines *Totus Christus* to Christ’s presence acting through “one anothering” or the classic “communion of the saints” idea. One sample of this application could be Luther’s application of Christology to ecclesial communion in mercy:

That even as we have eaten and drunk the body and blood of Christ the Lord, we in turn permit ourselves to be eaten and drunk, and say the same words to our neighbor, Take, eat and drink; and this by no means in jest, but in all seriousness, meaning to offer yourself with all your life, even as Christ did with all that he had, in the sacramental words.⁸

But what about the “distinct” in Christology as then applied to ecclesiology? It seems that for Augustine, as related to the “Head” and “body” distinction, Christology applied to ecclesiology will also want to qualify Christ’s one to one corresponding presence in/with/through the church by the all important “not immediately, but *mediately*” concerning the sovereign advent of Christ by the Holy Spirit. Contrary to how some have defined it, it is not so much that Christ is both “absent” and “present” per se (though it gets to the same concern), but that Christ’s “presence” in the organized church is *predicated upon* the mystery of his sovereign election. Perhaps then the reformation distinction “visible” and invisible” is more related to “what God sees” and “what we see” respectively. But the point is the same. Christ and the church are not *ordinarily* separate, even if they remain distinct.

The all important qualification “ordinarily” is illustrated by Augustine in his comments about the meaning of “I am the bread of life” as applied to the Eucharist. In relation to the Pauline warning that “some have died” concerning a wrongful participation in the Lord’s Supper, Augustine raised the question “why then are there some that have not died who have eaten the bread improperly?” His answer:

“Why? Because they understood the visible food spiritually, hungered spiritually, tasted spiritually, that they might be filled spiritually. For even we at this day receive visible food: but the sacrament is one thing, the virtue of the sacrament another.”

He further explains:

Consequently, he that dwelleth not in Christ, and in whom Christ dwelleth not, doubtless neither eateth His flesh [spiritually] nor drinketh His blood [although he may press the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ carnally and visibly with his teeth].⁹

Accordingly, J. N.D. Kelley will conclude how “in the 4th and 5th century... the universal, if somewhat vague assumption was that the sacraments were outward and visible signs marking the presence of an invisible, but none the less genuine grace.” Kelley will go on to explain how according to Augustine’s view of baptismal efficacy, “the sacrament itself is one thing and the power of the sacrament is another... in baptism the water serves as the sacrament of the grace imported, but the grace itself is invisibly operated by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰

The Covenant-Temple Aspects of Ecclesiology Explored in The Nature of Theology

The concern then for many is that within a globalized context especially, we ought to be more aware of how fallible any given interpretation is within her own vernacular context such as to beg for a more multi-vernacular and

⁷ St. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, In. Io. XXI.8).

⁸ Martin Luther, Palm Sunday Sermon from 1524 "On Confession and the Lord's Supper."

⁹ Augustine, *Homilies in John*, Tractice 26, Sec. 11.

¹⁰ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, (1978)p. 422.

conciliar approach to biblical interpretation. Ironically perhaps, this is to not argue for less confessional creedalism, but more, albeit to be more inclusive of other cultures and contexts. In other words, a case could be made that the concern is less against creedalism itself as it is against the fact that modern creedalism tended to be culturally imperialistic! This would mean that the emerging concern is less cynical about biblical perspicuity as cultural hegemony.

At the heart then of this issue is the relation between the divine and human in Christology applied then to ecclesiology today. Or stated differently, the relation between doctrine and culture, or again the issue of human-divine socialization vis-à-vis Christ's presence as mediated through the covenant church. Again if briefly, these issues are aptly illustrated theologically, sociologically and sacramentally as follows:

The Nature of Doctrine

Many of the emerging thinkers are familiar with George Lindbeck for instance, and especially his *The Nature of Doctrine*. A brief review of Lindbeck's will further illustrates our present point. For instance, Lindbeck wants to describe three predominant types of theories about how the subjective "context" of the cultural-linguistic community of faith engages the object reality or "text" of divine revelation.

The first type says Lindbeck roughly corresponds to the conservative Protestant and Roman Catholic context in so far as it "stressed the ways in which church doctrines function as informative propositions or truth claims about objective realities." He notes, "religions are thus thought of as similar to philosophy or science as they were classically conceived."¹¹

The second type roughly corresponds to the Liberal Protestant context as related to an "experiential-expressive" approach wherein the focus is on the subjective albeit individualistically related to interpreting "doctrines as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes or existential orientations." This in turn "highlights the resemblances of religions to aesthetic enterprises."¹²

The third type will more or less want to bring the two together "as both religiously significant and valid" and said to be related to a more ecumenically minded Roman Catholic for instance. It then concerns this third type or "the cultural-linguistic" orientation to biblical interpretation that Lindbeck makes his most significant contribution, albeit often misunderstood if not also debated. In the "cultural-linguistic" orientation, "the emphasis is placed on those respects in which religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures. The function of church doctrines that becomes most prominent in this perspective is their use, not as expressive symbols or as truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action-- that is, as a *rule of faith* or a communal "confession of faith."¹³

Admittedly, this statement could be misunderstood to mean a necessary relativism as bound to "linguistic symbol" in relation to "rule of faith." And yet, by his subsequent qualification he is, I think, vindicated from this misunderstanding. For Lindbeck is careful to distinguish between what he describes as an "intratextual" vs. "extratextual" conception of the cultural-linguistic relation between faith and spirituality. By *extratextual*, he means an approach that "locates religious meaning outside the text either in the objective realities to which it refers or in the experiences it symbolizes." That is, there are no absolute religious ideas that are not inherently relative to a communal narrative. The real subject of theology is not an absolute reality that is knowable by means of divine revelation *and* illumination as united to cultural-linguistic forms. Rather the real subject of theology is the communal narrative itself given to language. And to be clear, again contrary to what some have portrayed Lindbeck and many emergent thinkers as saying, Lindbeck wants nothing of this. Rather, he will want to affirm an *intratextual* understanding of the cultural-linguistic relation in which religious meaning is both objectively textual and propositional, even if the text itself is necessarily contextualized within a communal narrative in terms of how we encounter it.

So for instance, in an attempt to clarify what intratextuality is NOT, he states:

If intratextuality implies relativism and fideism, the cost for most religious traditions is much too high. If there are not

¹¹ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), p. 16.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. p. 17-18.

universal or foundational structures and standards of judgment by which one can decide between different religious and nonreligious options, the choice of any one of them becomes, it would seem, purely irrational a matter, or arbitrary whim, or blind faith; and while this conclusion may fit much of the modern mood, it is antithetical to what most religion, whether interpreted in liberal, preliberal or postliberal fashion, have affirmed.

And so it seems for Lindbeck, his reaction to modern rationalist foundationalism is NOT for “no-foundations” as it were. Rather his reaction is to expand the foundations as to include a communal means of accessing divine revelation. IT is a “both-and,” rationalist-communal type of relation between faith and spirituality even as they are necessarily co-dependent upon the other in terms of the human experience.

Antifoundationalism, however is not to be equated with irrationalism. The issue is not whether there are universal norms of reasonableness, but whether these can be formulated in some neutral, framework-independent language... [it] need not imply relativism or fideism, the question remains of how to exhibit the intelligibility and possible truth of the religious message to those who no longer understand the traditional words. How, as modern Christians often put it, does one preach the gospel in a dechristinized world?”¹⁴

In summary, regardless of whether we are getting Lindbeck right on this by way of a theological prolegomena, our point is that objective ideas if e known in human experience must necessarily get socialized. The process of socialization necessarily represents a dialectical relationship between the objective/declared “ideals” and the subjective/mediated socialization relative to cultural-linguistic forms. As for the nature of the dialectical relationship, it is NOT related as to in anyway compromise or change the objective ideal, but it IS related to our understanding of the ideal. The two taken together calls then for are for both confidence in objectivity coupled with humility as related to the “cultural-linguistic orientation to faith formation that needs to be taken into account. The more then our “rule of faith” is both mono-textual with respect to divine revelation and multi-contextual with respect to divine illumination, the greater our success in discerning objective truth from scripture.

By way then of a third illustration, the nature of the reunion of covenantal and temple is perhaps nowhere better illustrated than in socialization itself, as per the communal model in hermeneutics, that perfectly anticipates as well our prolegomena of Christology.

The Covenant-Temple Aspects of Ecclesiology Explored in Socialization

According to Peter Berger, Luckmann and others, “socialization” is the sum product of both social ideation (covenantal/propositional side of spirituality) and social materialization (temple/communal side of spirituality). The two forces are said to *never be separate*, albeit if to retain their own *distinct but separate* properties again in dialectical relationship together. Applied to religion, Peter Berger says it this way:

It is possible to show in concrete instances how religious ideas, even very abstruse ones, led to empirically available changes in social structure.

And yet again:

It is possible to show how empirically available structural changes had effects on the level of religious consciousness and ideation.

Therefore,

¹⁴*Nature of Religion*, quotes taken from P. 16, 17-18, 132, and 130 respectively.

Only a dialectical understanding of these relationships avoids the distortions of the one-sidedly "idealist" and "materialist" interpretations.¹⁵

Socialization theory wants to explain how BOTH ideal–proposition and material-social are mutually inter-dependent. It reminds us that there is no possibility of human experience and knowledge without BOTH ideal and material realities coming together if not also distinguished. Perhaps by way of its practical relevance to emerging spirituality, two examples of this working out are illustrative of both very different orientations:

On the one hand, it is naïve to suggest even the possibility of union with God apart from socialization, even as socialization itself requires both an ideal and material reality as to both preserve the identities of both parties (God and human) albeit in a way that maintains a union of the two parties or “co-union.” Apart from covenant-ideation, there is nothing to preserve the distinct identities of the two parties. But apart from temple-organization, there is no communion in participation with respect to the two parties. That is, those who would argue against the “organized” church, socialization theory would render even the notion as, well, absurdly naïve. There is no human experience of anything “real” apart from their vernacular experience as then expressed through social organization.

The question then can't be “to organize” or “not to organize.” Rather the question is whether we “organize” with optimism as to the possibility of uniting with a distinct and personal God albeit experienced within a distinct and personal cultural-linguistic experience. We need therefore the regulative aspects of the covenant to insure that the distinct identity of one God not get lost in the transaction, just as we need the distinct identity of the one culture among many cultures lest the distinct identity of one cultural-linguistic person not get lost in the transaction. Stated plainly—how will we know that our union is not with a false god or idol, or that our divine-human marriage is not with a false lover unless we have a covenantal “ideal” as to measure our participation together? But then again, how would we ever really participate in our love with God if not in the flesh-blood vernacular of our given cultural “forms?”

A second orientation would include those who in reaction to postmodernity would then negate the human side of the transaction in so far as the cultural-linguistic realities of socialization. We should note here that this ideal spirituality consisting of both the ideal-divine and cultural-human is something that classical Christianity did take seriously. Whereas we will want to focus more on this later under the heading of Ecclesial Aesthetics, the distinction between “regulated” and “directed” in terms of the way scripture is related to an understanding of faith and practice is predicated on the dialectical relation between “elements” of faith and “forms” of faith in praxis. There is at once the assumption of perspicuity and humility respecting contextualization. For instance, within the more than 350 year tradition of Westminster that I am most familiar with given my own pastoral context:

Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.¹⁶

This is to affirm as well the Calcedon “distinct and not separate” principle in Christology as then applied to ecclesiology. Again, if the one is ideal-Word, the other is material or “vernacular” Word. If the one is propositional-message focused, the other is effectual-organic focused, if the one is declarative focused, the other is *mediatorial* focused, and if the one is static-revelation focused, the other is fluid-illumination focused. Stated differently, one could argue that a “by divine law” *only* orientation without the “by divine participation” orientation is strangely deistic, even if espoused by those most adamantly opposed to deism within the evangelical ranks. And yet, divine participation, albeit individualistic or communalistic, without divine law leads to nihilistic fragmentation.

¹⁵ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, p. 128. Berger explains, “Such a dialectical understanding will insist upon the rootage of all consciousness, religious or other, in the world of everyday praxis, but it will be very careful not to conceive of this rootage in terms of mechanistic causality. A quite different matter is the potency of religion to ‘act back’ upon its infrastructure in specific historical situations. On this it is possible to say that such potency varies greatly in different situations. Thus religion might appear as a formative force in one situation and as a dependent formation in the situation following historically.”

¹⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith, 1:6

And again in canonical language, "covenant" is never humanly experienced outside of the "temple" in socialization. From the vantage point of divine revelation and human experience, the essential *elements* of spirituality are by divine law instituted in "covenant." But the social expression or "forms" that these elements assume represents a union of the ideal and cultural-linguistic material via temple socialization. This of course corresponds to the mystery of Christology in so far as the two orientations are related to preserving the "distinct" otherness of Christ by divine law while preserving the "not separate" communion of Christ by divine participation.