

Christology and Missions?

Ralph Winter

Suppose a Western Union messenger appeared at your door—during a Bible study, let's say. Would your group be content just to sit there and study the man with the telegram in his hand, and not read the telegram? What if, hour after hour, the color of his hair, the clothing he wore, or even the kind of paper on which the telegram was written was the focus of attention—but not the message?

We immediately think of scholars and classrooms when the word "Christology" is mentioned. Or we think of centuries of discussion by earnest men—in school situations, or perhaps even political situations, where the precise definition of who Christ is/was must be carefully determined. All that is important.

However, what follows is what resulted when, at a North American conference of Bible scholars and theologians, a mission scholar was invited to respond to a paper by Dr. Roger Nicole of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The paper was an "application" of Christological truth, entitled "The Work of the Savior." While very appreciative of the scholarship and devotion of all those scholars who are involved in the tradition of theological inquiry, the response here is a courteous attempt to explore just a bit further the practical significance of the "work of the Savior."

One thought, not mentioned until later in the conference, is the fairly obvious fact that the doctrine of the uniqueness of Christ must clearly have a corresponding doctrine of the obligation to share Christ with all of the world's otherwise unreached peoples; we cannot insist on His uniqueness without insisting on mission outreach.



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I come to this topic with three sensitivities held consciously in mind.

First, since this is a conference on the Bible, I feel I must try to deal as much as possible directly with the Bible rather than with a theological corpus through which to view the Bible.

Second, if that were not hard enough, I would like consciously to hold at arm's length, for reexamination if necessary, the particular point of view which we all bring along with our heritage from the roots of the Reformation and the Pietist/Evangelical tradition.

Third, I carry into this discussion my own focus of thought. I must warn you that the bulk of my thinking and writing has been in the realm of mission history, theology and strategy, and I am sure that those who invited me to participate were aware of that fact. Wanting not to disappoint such expectations, I have, in fact, concerned myself about where, if not under this topic of "The Savior and His Work," might there appear legitimately in this conference something about the work of our Savior on earth in its larger, global and eschatological dimension, which we usually call *missions*.

For example, it would surely be possible to consider the missionary expansion of the Kingdom of God under the topic of "The Living God." Or, we ought to be able to approach missions under the topic of "The Church and Her Mission." But it is equally logical that we should see, or take seriously, the entire world through the prism of the topic of "The Savior and His Work."

Roger Nicole has already done us all a great favor as he has so effectively and marvelously, in the short space allotted him, gathered together a veritable floral bouquet of Scriptures which highlight many of the uniquenesses of our Lord. As for scope, he includes the entire human race in his very first sentence! He goes on to underscore the fact that the exclusivity of salvation in Jesus Christ, when offered to the whole world as Scripture has it, does not at all restrict salvation to a minority of the human race: salvation in Christ is precisely aimed at the whole world and always has been from the beginning of redemptive history.

On the other hand, we do well to remember that as evangelicals, reaching back into our Pietist and Reformation roots, we have conventionally focused our attention in the realm of Christology upon the person and work of Christ as this pertains to *our own* salvation. Even the major creeds of Christendom do this, whether we look at the Nicene Creed or the Westminster Confession. How strange that some would take these creeds very uncritically while subjecting the Bible itself to unending criticism!

Were not the ancient creeds fashioned in semi-political circumstances? Do they not characteristically focus more on the person of Christ than on His work, and if on His work, do they not reduce that work primarily to the atonement and its implications for *us*, rather than seeing in the work of Christ his relentless concern for the *largest possible audience* for that atonement?

One of the dangers to a high view of the Bible, and a danger recognized in the period of the Reformation itself, was the tendency to allow the creedal treatments of Holy Scripture a status very close to that of the Bible itself. Although the Westminster Confession was hammered out in the aftermath of the Reformation, it was not until the 1890's that evangelicals in the Northern Presbyterian church undertook to add a chapter entitled, "Of the Love of God and Missions." This simple fact means it took almost three centuries for the Pietist/Evangelical tradition (with all of its serious Biblical exposition) to gain sufficient confidence for even one of its bodies to dare to alter the sacred creedal text.

By comparison, how refreshing it is to note on the frontline of the missionary expansion of the Kingdom the frequent reminder of how much more significant and reliable are the documents of the Bible themselves than the creeds of Christendom, as respectful as we ought to be of that institutional and quasi-political tradition. Granted, new cultural biases arise on the mission field; not only are old ones lost in the process as the Bible in each new people group becomes freshly again the primary source of orientation. But perhaps God has intended that only in the symphony of many voices and perspectives, drawn from the authentic impact of the Word of God across the globe, would we be best able to

reflect back upon our own cultural traditions with any objectivity, and to understand the Bible with greater certainty.

It is not the Nicene Creed but the Bible which astounds us with the picture of Jesus ignoring the disciples' concern for food and claiming, "My food is to do the will of the Father and to finish His work." Is it not a bit strange that the great mass of theological writing in history, while rightly taking special interest in the work of Christ on the Cross, gives so very little space to the work of Christ which we as his disciples were intended to pick up and carry forward? How easy it is, how human, to dote upon the blessings of Christ for ourselves and pass over lightly the clear call, the heavenly vision, to lose ourselves for His sake and the Gospel's by bending every ounce of our energy to give this great gift away to others at the very ends of the earth!

We are tempted to under-emphasize the fact of the unfinished work of Christ.

Yes, the work of Christ on the Cross was unique. But so was his behavior among men. We can search the Gospel accounts in vain to discern any very great mutual understanding between Jesus and His disciples. Indeed, like we, they were interested in His Person and His Work, as it might pertain to their own agendas. But they stumbled along quite in the dark as to the unique and unfathomably different ministry which unfolded in their presence.

We quite rightly covet the truth of the *Finished* Work of Christ, but humanly we are tempted to underemphasize the fact of the *Unfinished* Work of Christ. When in the verse I have just quoted Jesus says his food is to do the will of His Father and finish His work, are we to assume he was only referring to the Cross? Is that all He means to us? Are all these other little stories about Jesus meant merely to be the basis of sermons about the little things in our lives?

Surely we do well to teach our children to say that Jesus died on the Cross to save us from our sins. We must not forget that Jesus also lived among us relentlessly seeking out in love the poor, the dispirited, the handicapped, the sick, the blind, the women, the Greeks, and, yes, even the Samaritans. Why? Because He died on the Cross to save a lot of other peoples besides our people. Even our missionaries who go to the ends of the earth deliberately to befriend the benighted are all too often willing to spell out a traditional Christology,

only one of many examples, allows Japanese believers to take no special interest in the one million despised and unmentionable Eta people among them, or the million socially disenfranchised Koreans concentrated in Osaka. Are we more concerned about the maze of minorities in our cities?

George Eldon Ladd, whose chapel talk on the Great Commission was one of the high points of my time at Fuller Seminary, could at the very end of his teaching career come out with a huge tome on New Testament theology without a single line specifically referring to the crucial, urgent, day-to-day implications of the love of our Savior for the non-Jews and other non-entities of his day, that is to say, the global cross-cultural mission which may actually be the central theme of the New Testament.

I hope Dr. Nicole will not mind if I impute to him much of my own perspective. I believe that in germ this is what he is saying when he speaks of our Lord pictured in different parts of the world in Chinese, Zulu, Navajo and Arab clothing, and when he says that the Incarnation must lead us "all the way" to the place where we are sent as He was sent, to lead all peoples from "where they are to the loving arms of the Savior."

An inerrant Bible does no one any good if it is not accompanied by thoughtful, authentic understanding on our part. We deny our belief in the Bible if our actions do not bear out our words. The amazing, consecrated leadership in this room, giving thirty minutes a day to the concern, could terminate permanently in just five years time, if we wanted to, the scandalous situation in which there are, for example, 723 known languages in which there are no Scriptures. What is the value to the unreached peoples of the world of an untranslated, inerrant Bible?

Does it really matter in God's eyes what words evangelicals parade in public about an inerrant Bible? Does it matter how many times the Bible is translated into English, occasioning each time millions of dollars of new expenditures for ourselves rather than for these groups which have no Scripture at all? Surely it is possible to deny the inerrancy of the Bible by our behavior. As Paul Rees used to say, "It is easier to act our way into right thinking than think our way into right acting." That is hard for us Calvinists to take!

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In conclusion, let me leave with you three concepts which I believe bear significantly upon the way we deal with the topic of the Savior and His Work.

THE CONCEPT OF NON-DISCLOSURE

We must, I believe, face the fact that the Bible is not merely God's primary instrument of *revelation*. The Bible itself clearly expositis the intended non-disclosure of God. Again and again it makes clear that it is not yet possible for us to digest all that God is and is about, but that what is revealed is for our admonition in the present world, and for those who are actively walking in the light they have.

For example, we must not draw too much from the fact that Jesus did not teach His disciples a course in mission strategy. The Gospel accounts reveal for them a level of understanding that would have meant total misunderstanding, had they been exposed. Even late in the early ministry of our Lord, as described in the final chapter of Luke, we see two of His followers still struggling with the obvious discrepancy between His perspective and their own understanding of the Savior and His Work. For Jesus to have explained, or tried to explain, to these self-concerned disciples, then or now, just what was the full meaning of the Abrahamic Covenant would have been like running into an accident ward of a hospital with a tennis racket, where the patients are all bundled up in splints and in traction and doped out with anaesthetics, and shouting, "Tennis anyone?"

That is, to believe in the inerrancy of the Bible does not allow us to raid its treasures if we are not ready for its mandate. Jesus told the parables both to reveal and to conceal. The concept of non-disclosure is a crucial parameter in our handling of the Bible.

THE CONCEPT OF THE KAIROS

When we speak of the Savior and His Work, we need to ask not only what did He do, and why did He come, but also why did He come when He came. We must try to see who He was and what He did in the light of God's timing in history.

When the Christ appeared, it had been 2000 years since the call of Abraham and God's crystal-clear enunciation of His

concern to be a blessing to Abraham and his children by faith, and through them to be a blessing to all of the other peoples of the earth.

Throughout the Bible we see God's constant concern for the other peoples of the world: when he pushes Abraham down into the very presence of the Pharaoh of Egypt; when he places Joseph there, and Moses there; when he throws his people again and again into contact with many other nations, sitting in the very spot where He placed them, precisely on the land bridge connecting the continent of Africa and that of Eurasia; when He sends Jonah out to the nation of Ninevah; when He sends all the northern tribes out into a diaspora among the nations; when he sends the Judeans off to the Ends of the Earth (as they referred to Babylon), and, indeed, as He dispersed them throughout the Roman Empire. (We do not wonder at the fact that one of mission history's largest conquests was the Christianization of the Batak tribal peoples of Sumatra, and that, what do you know, they are now dispersed, for better or worse, throughout all of Indonesia like almost no other people.)

When Jesus appeared, what time was it? How was this nation doing with its Commission to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth? Had this nation been hiding its light in the ground? Had this nation revolted, not just against Rome but against the Landowner who finally sent his own Son to check up on things? Were Galileans delighted that God had brought so many foreigners into their midst, and that now this region was called "Galilee of the Gentiles"? (Are evangelicals in American cities today delighted that God has brought the mission field to our doorsteps? Are we taking this as seriously as we ought?)

In this sense Jesus did not come to *give* the Great Commission but to *take it away*. We must understand the Savior and His Work in the sense of God's timing. God is looking at our nation, perhaps, with the same timing in mind. Do we have infiltrated Galilees in our land today? Are we, by and large, quite unconcerned about giving our blessings away? Leighton Ford recently said that 85% of the books in our Christian bookstores focus on self-fulfillment. Is God watching His clock today?

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THE CONCEPT OF LITERALISM

It is an objectionable literalism which takes the Gospel accounts as they are, filled with examples of the self-seeking of the disciples, of the inability of the disciples to fathom the radical meaning of the call of Christ, and then accepts this kind of mediocrity and self-concern as normative or even adequate behavior for His disciples today. That is, in our inerrant Bibles we must admit that the real meaning of Christ's call does not show up in the bulk of the text, and that it is an undesirable literalism which fails to distinguish between what happened in the Bible and what the Bible is trying to tell us ought to have happened. That is, inerrant description of errant behavior calls for more than a superficial use of the text.

We see this in regard to the real meaning of the Abrahamic Covenant, which clearly and distinctly asked the Chosen People to reach out with blessing to all the peoples of the earth. (It does not help when our modern translations, for the most part, fail to translate the Hebrew imperative in Genesis 12:2.) Despite this mandate, repeated very clearly five times in Genesis, we then read on to find that the bulk of the text of the Old and New Testaments does not portray an obedient people. It is an undesirable literalism which accepts the failures and foibles thus described so accurately as though they were to be considered normative, and assumes, as so often has been the case, that there was no intention on God's part for the missionary dimension of the Abrahamic Covenant to be taken seriously until 2000 years later.

Talk about distortion of the Bible! I believe that no greater single misunderstanding of Scripture exists widely among us today than the reductionism which sees the global mandate of the early chapters of Genesis as a hibernating mandate which was supposed to be held in suspense until Jesus appeared, or until Jesus died, or until Jesus was resurrected, or until Paul was commissioned, or until William Carey bestirred England, or until the preaching of the heavenly angel of Rev 14:6,7, or, or

Sadly, the Mandate of all Scripture, implied and explained again and again, derives precisely from the scope of the Work of Christ. It is, thus, an unwarranted literalism which accepts

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the common as the normal, whether in modern or Old Testament behavior. If we do not believe the Chosen People were chosen to be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth, and that this Mandate was in force the moment it was given, then we must believe and accept that all God was after for 2000 years was good behavior, people keeping out of trouble, and that the Mandate was not yet in force. We too often live within this kind of literalism. The Mandate always applies to someone else, somewhere else, some other time. The sobering fact is that God does not have much use for that kind of a nation, no matter how highly they regard their Scriptures. How do we know this? The Bible tells us so.

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