

Week 3: Modern Christology

- A. McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology (1750–1990)*, Wipf&Stock, 2nd ed. 2005.
- C. Stephen Evans, *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith: The Incarnational Narrative as History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996)
- Claude Welch (ed.), *God and Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965)
- C. Stephen Evans (ed.), *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006)

1. Introduction: Christology from above and from below.

- Often understood as denoting emphasis on uniquely divine or human Christ.
- In reality: describes approach to a basically Chalcedonian Christology
- Traditional: unity constructed by showing how God could also become human.
- Danger of marginalising Jesus' humanity.

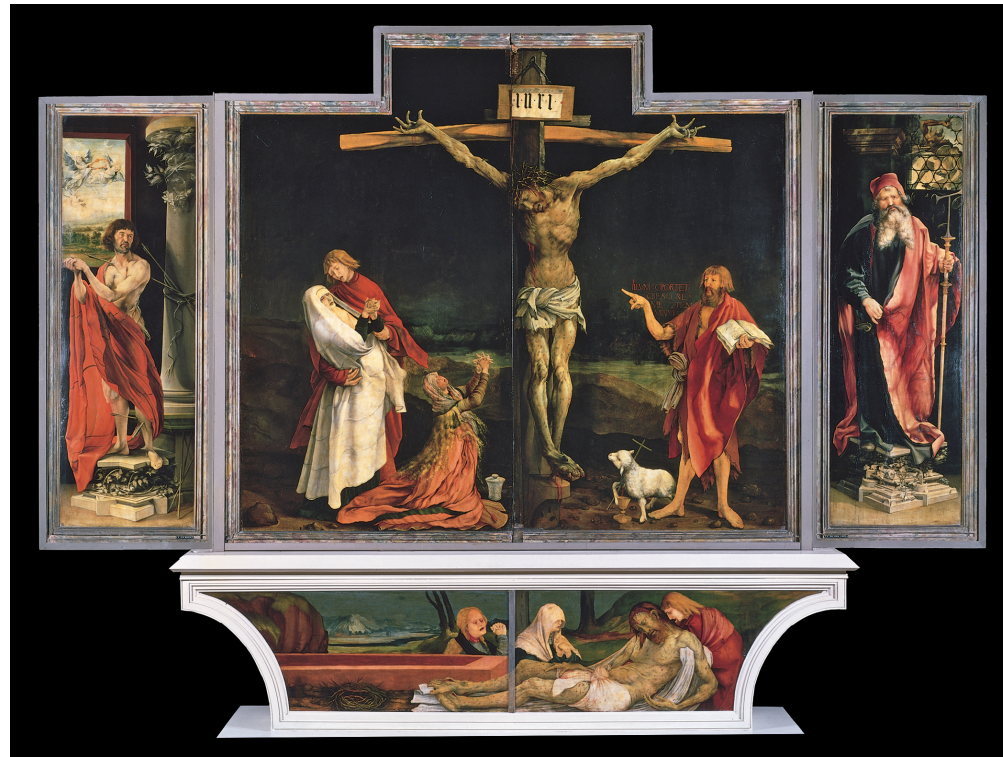
Introduction II

- Modern Christology a series of attempts to try the reverse approach.
- Trying to show how Christ's humanity rightly understood is the key to his divinity.
- Danger: losing sight of Jesus' divinity.
- Promise: rethinking not merely Christology but reshaping ideas about God and humanity as well. Why?

Introduction III

- Christology often seen as puzzle to explain how a person can be God + human.
- Two knowns, one unknown so to speak.
- Yet it is arguable that the precise understanding of God and humanity are also unknown.
- Idea of revelation can mean that in and through Christ we come to know God and ourselves.

M. Grünewald, Isenheim Alterpiece, 1512–16



Isenheim Altarpiece

- John points to the crucified. The text refers to John 3, 30: 'He must increase but I must decrease'.
- At the same time, the gesture (together with the pictured lamb) invokes John 1, 29: 'Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.'
- What does the finger point to? The mangled, tortured body of an executed man. What is significant about him? Do we see here 'the human being', cf. John 19, 5: Behold the man (Latin: *ecce homo*). Do we see God? What could that mean?

Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518)

- He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.
- The manifest and visible things of God are placed in opposition to the invisible, namely, his human nature, weakness, foolishness. [...] Because men misused the knowledge of God through works, God wished again to be recognized in suffering, and to condemn »wisdom concerning invisible things« by means of »wisdom concerning visible things«, so that those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering. [...] Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty, unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross. Thus God destroys the wisdom of the wise, as Isa. 45:15 says, »Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.«

Introduction VII

- Neither Grünewald's painting nor Luther's text are technically 'Christology' but they indicate a direction of travel.
- Contemplating the human Jesus *in his most human, i.e. weak moment* is the key to an understanding of his divine-human person.
- This approach is sometimes called 'kenotic' Cf. Philippians 2, 7: '[Christ] emptied himself [Greek: ekenōsen heautō], taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.'

2. Kenotic Christology

- A kenotic Christology is one that explains the absence of visibly divine attributes in the Incarnate by an intentional decision on the part of God to withhold them for the duration of the Incarnation.
- It is a technical attempt to reconcile the logical contradictions in Christological predication:
- Christ should be both omnipotent and weak, both eternal and temporal etc.
- Kenotic Christology seeks to resolve this contradiction by bracketing aspects of Christ's divinity.

Kenotic Christology II

- It was popular among conservative theologians in the 19th century.
- Names include Gottfried Thomasius in Germany and Charles Gore in Britain.
- Attempt to combine concern for Jesus' true humanity including his historical reality with the doctrinal language of the tradition.
- Strength: seems to be able to say how Jesus could be God despite apparent absence of divine features from his person.

Kenotic Christology III

- Weaknesses (among others):
- Can't say how we *do* see God in Jesus.
- Can't say how Jesus reveals God.
- Relies on previous knowledge of God.
- Ultimately kenotic Christology fails.
- It is a halfway house: attempts to retain the top-down logic of traditional Christology 'from above' while patching it up with a nod towards a truly human Jesus.
- More promising are approaches that tie together Christology and knowledge of God.

3. Schleiermacher's Christology

- Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 374–475.
- F.D.E. Schleiermacher: Christ is human being with perfect God-consciousness.
- At first sight, it seems little more than adoptionism: Christ as human 'inspired' by God.
- Schleiermacher thinks that God is only known from his effects in the world.
- Specifically from his effects in human consciousness.
- The celebrated 'feeling of absolute dependence'.

Schleiermacher's Christology II

- This 'feeling' or 'consciousness' is not merely cognitive but a determination of our entire existence.
- Knowing God = knowing him as the cause of our actions.
- If Christ therefore has 'perfect' God-consciousness, this means his entire existence is an expression of God's actions.
- God and human are one in the sense that the humanity is entirely determined by God.

Schleiermacher's Christology IV

- And yet, at the same time there is nothing 'supernatural' about this union.
- Jesus is perfectly human but as such divine.
- Importantly, we don't know God apart from Christ.
- The 'feeling of absolute dependence' is no 'proof' for God's existence.
- We don't have 'natural' knowledge of God.
- Schleiermacher accepts Kant's critique of traditional metaphysics.

Schleiermacher's Christology V

- Results:
- (1) Jesus is both human and divine.
- (2) Jesus reveals to us who God is.
- (3) Jesus reveals to us what true humanity is.
- What is wrong with this approach?
- Karl Barth spent his entire life trying to figure that out.

Schleiermacher's Christology VI

- One criticism is that in Schleiermacher there is no Incarnation because he is so agnostic about God.
- The 'storyline' from above, the 'myth of God incarnate' has disappeared.
- God's role in the Incarnation can only be gleaned from its effects.
- What can it mean that 'The Word became flesh'?

4. G.W.F. Hegel's Christology

- What kind of an alternative remains?
- G.W.F. Hegel proposed a philosophical Christology based on a notion of God as developing.
- In reality, Hegel's view of God is already constructed from a Christological viewpoint.
- The duality of the Christological predicates (infinite - finite; eternal - temporal, etc.) are ascribed to God.
- In order to be 'all in all' (1 Cor. 15, 28), God *has* to be both transcendent and immanent.

Hegel's Christology II

- The logical contradiction is solved through a historical narrative.
- God is 'in the beginning' merely God, then takes on finitude, finally reconciles himself with himself.
- In the historical Incarnation, this story reaches its crisis-point.
- In this sense, Christ's death is both the extreme of the world's alienation from God *and* the turning point towards their eventual reunification (literally *at-one-ment*).

Hegel's Christology III

- Isn't this simply a return to the Christology from above?
- Hegel in fact integrates the Incarnational narrative (John 1, Phil. 2, Nicene Creed) better than other modern Christologies.
- The one, albeit major, change is that he reconstructs it as a story that is necessary for God-self.
- How do we know?
- Ultimately, the answer to that is again historical:
- We know the story because we are part of it.

Hegel's Christology IV

- In a sense, we have seen its end - the historical Incarnation, the birth and growth of the Church, the Reformation etc.
- Hegel's reconstruction starts from experience, not from doctrinal formulae.
- But how important is the historical uniqueness and personality of Jesus?
- David Friedrich Strauss argued that Hegelian Christology ultimately leads to the identification of Christ's humanity with universal humanity.
- The story about the single individual Jesus is only a symbol (he says, a 'myth') about humanity's divination.

D. F. Strauss, *Life of Jesus*

- This is indeed not the mode in which Idea realizes itself; it is not wont to lavish all its fullness on one exemplar, and be niggardly towards all others—to express itself perfectly in that one individual, and imperfectly in all the rest: it rather loves to distribute its riches among a multiplicity of exemplars which reciprocally complete each other—in the alternate appearance and suppression of a series of individuals. And is this no true realization of the idea? Is not the idea of the unity of the divine and human natures a real one in a far higher sense, when I regard the whole race of mankind as its realization, than when I single out one man as such a realization? Is not an incarnation of God from eternity, a truer one than an incarnation limited to a particular point of time? (trans. Evans, 895)

5. Christology of the Paradox

- Let's finally return to Grunewald and Luther
- It is arguable that there is something in their intuition that has not been brought out by any of the Christologies discussed so far.
- The challenge of discovering God in the suffering Jesus is not answered by kenoticists suggesting that he God 'parked' his divine attributes for a while.
- It is also different from Schleiermacher's view of Jesus as a kind of religious hero or ideal.
- Hegel, while emphasising the tension between infinite and finite in the Incarnate doesn't seem too concerned with the specifics of the gospel story.

Christology of the Paradox II

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer tries to do justice to the paradoxical dimension of Christology.
- He is influenced by Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth.
- For him Christology always meant ‘Who is Jesus Christ for us today?’
- In his own time this meant to ask, “How Christ [can] become the Lord of the religionless as well?”
- Bonhoeffer does not think that Christ’s was, so to speak, ‘less’ divine than we might expect.

Christology of the Paradox III

- Rather, he is more divine and therefore offers resources and guidance in a time when traditional religion has lost its lustre.
- “In that case Christ is no longer an object of religion, but something quite different, really the Lord of the world.”
- On the one hand, the end of traditional religion poses a major challenge to theology.
- Yet it also offers an opportunity, Bonhoeffer believed.
- The opportunity lies in the recognition that we need to re-think God as radically *in* the world yet subversive to its normal expectations.
- This approach Christology became hugely influential in contextual theologies since the 1960s.