Part Two

THE CONTENT OF THE FAITH HANDED ON
On Taking the Creed Seriously
LUKE TIMOTHY JOHNSON

speaking of the “content of faith” demands a willingness to tread carefully between two extremes represented by each of the terms in the phrase and by different parties within the Christian family. One extreme emphasizes content as though it were objective fact. The other extreme stresses faith as though it were subjective feeling. Putting the terms in the same phrase creates a space for thinking.

We would all agree, I think, that “faith” in its fullest sense is indeed subjective in the sense that it is a personal witness. Faith in full is the response of humans to the living God involving belief, trust, obedience, and loyalty, a response that remains always flexible and creative even as the one to whom it responds is living and active in the world. In this sense, “handing on the faith” is not like transmitting an ideology or philosophy, a matter of ideas clearly communicated and precisely preserved. Rather, “handing on the faith” means the transformation of life from one generation to the next, the mysterious leaping of a divine spark from person to person through the agency of the divine person who is the fire. It is in this sense that we can speak of the true history of Christianity being the lives of the saints, for if faith is not a faithful life then it is nothing.

But we would also all agree, I think (at least within this room), that faith as response is a response to something or someone real. Christian faith is not subjective in the sense that it is simply an interesting opinion, or that it is a projection of individual desire. Quite the opposite. Faith claims that it responds to what is most real about the world, and claims furthermore that what is most real about the world is not the result of human calculation but is the gift of divine revelation. If faith is certainly subjective in the sense that it is personal and perspectival
and cannot persuade on the basis of universally agreed-upon evidence, it is also certainly intersubjective in the sense that it is public and makes genuine truth claims about reality—even though such claims cannot be supported by universally agreed-upon evidence. Christian faith is public both in the sense that it is exoteric rather than esoteric—it speaks of the world as everyone sees it if not as everyone experiences or understands it—and in the sense that it is the profession of a people, a people, moreover with a past and future as well as a present. It is in this sense that we can properly speak of “the faith” and “the content of faith,” as a way of designating the public and consistent claims about the world made by Christians in the past and in the present.\(^1\)

Our language must be sensitive both to the public profession by which Christians stake a claim to the truth about the world, and the personal commitment through which such claims are shown to be plausible or not on the basis of the sort of life they engender. If we fail to respect the public profession, then we sink into utter solipsism and sentiment. But if we fail to honor the personal commitment, then we sink even lower into a form of ideology.

**The Creed as Articulation of Faith**

I have recently proposed that Christians recover a sense of their public profession as well as their personal commitment through the frequent recital, close study, and theological reflection on the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which is, together with the Apostles’ Creed, the most familiar, accessible, and adequate articulation of classic Christian faith.\(^2\) I have suggested that the creed performs several identity-formative functions with admirable directness and brevity. It narrates the Christian myth, interprets the Scripture, constructs a coherent understanding of the world, guides Christian practices, and, because of its placement in the Mass between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Meal, prepares a faithful people for worship.

The creed is particularly pertinent as an instrument of Christian self-definition in the present cultural context, and also particularly provocative. For some contemporary Catholics persuaded that everything undefined is also unsafe, the classic creed falls far short of adequacy. It is far too parsimonious in its profession. The creed elaborates no theory of sin or atonement, provides no definition of Eucharist or priesthood, and is absolutely silent on ecclesiastical authority. For those who identify Christian with Catholic, and Catholic faith with an itch for ever-more expansive definition, the creed appears as too dangerously reticent and ecumenical a profession.

On the other side—and it is a far larger side—many Christians have deep anti-creedal sentiments. Some from within free-church traditions despise creeds as the instruments of theological tyranny imposed by ancient ecclesiastical authority. They claim the authority of Scripture alone. Others have erected the acute individualism and consumerism of contemporary American culture into a new Gnosticism that neglects and sometimes scorns classic expressions of Christian faith. They consider spirituality more important than religion.\(^3\)

Both Catholicism and mainline Protestantism in America have suffered the erosion of clear boundaries between the saints and the world. On every side we see the struggle between those who seek to eliminate such boundaries altogether, and those who seek to make such boundaries into barriers. The extreme positions are both abetted by an inadequate grasp of the essentials of faith as found in the creed. Those who have no sense of what is truly essential cannot be flexible at any point; they need to define everything as essential precisely because they can’t tell the essential from central from the peripheral. And on the other side, the willingness to scuttle even the heart of the Christian confession clearly reveals the unwillingness to acknowledge some truths as nonnegotiable.\(^4\)

In a crisis of Christian self-definition, the creed has the advantage of defining without confining, of challenging the world while at the same time challenging those who recite it. In an obvious way, the recitation of the creed challenges the ethos of the world. In my book, I speak of those who say the creed at Mass every Sunday: “In a world that celebrates individuality, they are actually doing something together. In an age that avoids commitment, they pledge themselves to a set of convictions and thereby to each other. In a culture that rewards novelty and creativity, they use words written by others long ago. In a society where accepted wisdom changes by the minute, they claim that some truths are so critical that they must be repeated over and over again. In a throwaway, consumerist world, they accept, preserve, and continue tradition. Reciting the creed at worship is thus a counter-cultural act.”\(^5\)

At the same time, the creed also challenges those who speak its words. Cognitive psychology has again taught us what we were first taught...
by ancient moral philosophers (including Paul) and should never have forgotten, namely, that humans act upon their genuine and deep beliefs concerning the world and their place in it. The creed constructs a vision of the world as created and saved by God, guides the reading of the Scriptures that reveal such a vision, and provides the basis for practices consistent with that vision. The challenge the creed presents is whether those who speak its words truly believe what they say and truly act in accordance with its profession.6

I do not mean to suggest that the creed is significant only because of its efficacy as an instrument of coherent ecclesiology. Just the opposite: I suggest that the creed deserves attention and study because it can shape Christian communities in accordance with the truth of revelation. It is not simply that the creed functions to shape identity. Any statement of convictions can do that. It is that the creed shapes Christian identity according to the truth of God's self-revelation. The implication of the rejection or distortion of faith's content according to the creed is not only the rejection or distortion of the entire Christian tradition, but as well the rejection or distortion of the creed's claim to speak truly about the human experience of God in the world.

The Case of Christology

The creed reminds us, moreover, that the convictions that make up "the content of faith" are more than a set of discrete opinions concerning reality. They are, rather, deeply interconnected aspects of the same story, which I have called "the Christian myth." It is not possible to reduce or reject one part of the story without a commensurate effect on every other part of the story. The denial or distortion of one truth leads to the denial and distortion of the entire set of truths, or the truth of the entire story.

Nothing so clearly shows such interconnectedness than the understanding of Jesus, or Christology. And nothing so dramatically reveals the crisis within Christianity concerning the "content of the faith" than the way in which the truth of the Gospel concerning Jesus the Lord has been challenged and eroded over a period of centuries, not through direct attack by Christianity's cultured despisers, but through a steady process of revision by theologians who seem either unaware of or not to care about the consequences of their capitulation to the premises of Christianity's cultured despisers.

I am speaking of the variety of "Christologies from below" that have, in different ways, sought to capture a more accessible and attractive Jesus for contemporary Christians, through the use of historical methods, while failing to recognize that a "Jesus within the bounds of Reason" may be accessible and attractive, but is much less than the Jesus proclaimed from the beginning as the good news by which humans are saved. The most benign form is taken by liberation theology, which seeks to base a message of social betterment on a "historical Jesus."7 The most malignant form is undoubtedly found among the liberal Christians who are represented by Bishop Spong,8 and the essayists anthologized several decades ago in The Myth of God Incarnate.9 Among such authors, the Enlightenment critique of classic Christian belief is the unquestioned starting point for the dismantling of the Christian faith in the name of modernity or relevance.

Between these extremes are the various versions of "the historical Jesus" that have been on offer since the time of Reimarus and D. F. Strauss,10 down to (on the left) Funk, Crossan, and Borg — the three most famous members of the Jesus Seminar11 — and (on the right) N. T. Wright — the most famous champion of the evangelicals.12 The diversity of images of Jesus generated by what is supposedly an "objective scientific" method is, to be sure, one of the standard observations concerning these efforts, revealing them to be, on the whole, much more an exercise in apocryphal imagination than in sober historiography. Stated motivations, to be sure, range widely. Funk and Crossan are clear in their hostility toward traditional Christianity — from the start a distortion of the "real Jesus" — and their desire to dislodge the creedal Christ in favor of their "historical" reconstruction, with the express intention of reshaping a "Jesus for the New Millennium."13 Borg and Wright appear far more pious, regarding their respective reconstructions of Jesus (based entirely on the Gospel of Luke) thoroughly compatible with traditional belief.14

Whatever form taken, four aspects of such "Christologies from below" are noteworthy, no, astonishing. The first is the thoroughly uncritical acceptance of "critical history" as an adequate epistemological framework for interpreting the mystery by which millions of Christians through the ages have interpreted their lives. The second is the assumption that
"bracketing" the resurrection perspective of the Gospels in order to present Jesus "as he really was" or "bracketing" the theology of the incarnation for the sake of "real history" is any more intellectually honest than "bracketing" the fact that a woman is my mother in order to present her more historically. The third is that so many ordinary Christians, certainly including many Catholics, regard such Christologies from below as entirely positive, precisely because they render Jesus "more like me," and have real difficulty in understanding why someone should object to such theologies and histories. The fourth is that, despite the creedal confession concerning Jesus being under such constant attack over a period of some three hundred years (now the longest-lasting christological controversy in the church's history) and creating such confusion among lay and ordained Christians alike, there has been little or no concerted effort to identify what is erroneous or destructive in such efforts, little or no concerted effort to identify the truth of the Gospels for the present generation. I will say a word about each of these *thaumata* before moving forward.

1. The uncritical acceptance of critical history as an adequate way of thinking about Jesus and as an adequate framework for reading the Gospels reveals the remarkable compression of acceptable modes of knowing after the Enlightenment. After Bacon, only the potentially verifiable can seriously claim to truth about the world. For the present, natural science trumps all; for the past, historiography alone counts. Everything else is opinion, legend, myth, error. I call this compression remarkable not only because of the narrowness of its focus but because of the range of its success. How can ontology so completely have disappeared? For that matter, how could mathematical and musical and aesthetic and moral ways of knowing be regarded as irrelevant to grown-up life? But the results are all around us. Lay readers and scholars alike seem to think that "historical" equals "real." Among the historical Jesus books, only John Meier's first volume takes up the epistemological problem with this equation, and in his actual questing, not even he entirely avoids the slippage between the terms. Similarly, despite all the ways in which the phenomenology of religion and philosophy has tried to rehabilitate the term *myth* for language that expresses what surpasses the empirical, common usage (again both lay and scholarly) tends to reduce the meaning of myth to "non-historical" and therefore "non-real."

2. The "bracketing" of the resurrection and incarnation in order to "recover" a historical Jesus is more problematic than it first appears. What appears as a simple methodological decision quickly becomes a substantive exclusion or denial. When D. F. Strauss declared already in 1835 that historical method could not deal with the supernatural — since history deals only with human events in time and space — he was absolutely correct. History's scan captures only what is at least potentially verifiable. Therefore nothing "supernatural" in the Gospels can be handled historically, including Jesus' miraculous birth, exorcisms, healings, transfiguration, and resurrection. But the fact that history cannot deal with miracles slips easily into the denial that miracles occur or can occur — especially when history has been elevated into the only legitimate way of knowing. This is, to be sure, the simplest sort of fallacy, namely, equating reality with our capacity to know it. But that does not keep it from being widespread. Such "bracketing" of the divine in Jesus — for that is what it is — is problematic in two further ways.

One further problem is its historiographical naiveté. Everything we know about Jesus (apart from those few outsider sources that confirm the basic facts about his life and death) comes from those who believe in him as the resurrected and exalted Lord, not merely the one who came back to life but who became "life-giving spirit" (1 Cor 15:45). Not only the shape but also the very selection of Jesus' words and deeds derive from that conviction. Even if we could scrape away all redaction and get back to bedrock, we should still be within the framework of tradition. We have nothing that comes directly from Jesus. Everything comes from those who heard and saw him, and whose view of what they heard and saw was fundamentally altered by the reality of his continuing presence in their midst.

Questers for the historical Jesus show themselves most historically naïve in their willful "bracketing" of all evidence about Jesus in our earliest Christian sources, not only the letters of Paul but also such early compositions as 1 Peter and Hebrews: all of them attest to the importance of the humanity of Jesus, but all of them speak even more powerfully of the reality of Jesus' exaltation to the presence and power of God.

The other problem with such bracketing is in fact the most severe. If Jesus is the incarnate word of God, then his story is, from beginning to end, mythic, for no other language can contain the activity of God.
within the frame of human existence. The language of myth is, to be sure, connected to a historical figure. But to claim to render Jesus “historically” by eliminating the language that seeks to convey his divinity is an exercise not in historical fastidiousness, but a form of theological denial. Similarly, if Jesus is the raised and exalted Lord who not only lives but continues to be life-giving spirit even now, then his share in God’s life is what is most true about him. “Bracketing” the truth that Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father as Lord and will come to judge the living and the dead is to “bracket” the existential and ontological truth about Jesus. It is because historical critics operate with such a methodological bracketing that they consistently miss the literary richness and religious profundity of the Gospel stories, and appear, in the end, to be verifying what does not matter while leaving everything that does matter unexamined, and worse, unengaged.

3. Astonishing also is that Christology from below has been so universally applauded by ordinary Christians. Most Christians are little disturbed by the various and sometimes contradictory versions of “historical” Jesus on offer at Barnes & Noble, and consider anything “historical” an improvement on “dogma.” Indeed, as the success of books by Elaine Pagels20 and Dan Brown21 make obvious, virtually any account of Christian origins is to be preferred to that handed on by the Christian tradition. How do we account for this remarkable phenomenon? The causes are undoubtedly multiple, but they must include the failure of preaching and teaching within the church to powerfully communicate the true significance of the resurrection life and the transformation of human identity by Christ, the corresponding success of scholars to position themselves as mediators of truth more trustworthy and uncorrupted than priests or ministers, and, finally, the breakdown of a creedal consciousness among most Christians, who no longer have a sense of the connectedness of the truths of faith, or their inner logic, so that a purely human Jesus “just like us” seems to them like an unexpected addition rather than a fatal subtraction.

4. That this long-standing christological tendency has generated so little official response from the church is also astonishing.22 The failure adequately to address the erosion of the heart of the Gospel stands in stark contrast to the church’s willingness to engage issues of morality great and small, especially those having to do with sexuality. Bishops can gather to issue statements on war, on the economy, and on sexual scandal. But the collapse of classical Christology seems scarcely to be noticed, least of all by the many ministers who week by week continue to erode the integrity of the good news by preaching as though the resurrection were an event of the past concerning Jesus that is celebrated each year at Easter rather than the most pressing and present circumstance of all human existence — and the premise of all preaching.23 That ecclesial groups in America are gathering in solemn assembly to debate the homosexual body but would find ludicrous the proposal that they gather to debate the resurrection body says all that needs to be said about the state of creedal faith today.

**Corollaries of Christological Collapse**

We might add as a fifth astonishing thing that the corollaries of such christological collapse do not seem to concern anyone overmuch either, even though they represent a thorough revision of traditional (creedal) faith. Recitation and study of the creed might at the least alert Christians to the fact that they continue to affirm as truths things that cannot be true if what they now think about Jesus is true.

If the resurrection is denied or reduced to a form of resuscitation, then humanity has not entered (through Jesus) into a share in God’s life, humanity has not been gifted with the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus cannot come again as the judge of the living and the dead. Jesus remains simply a dead Jewish teacher of the past. Everything else is fantasy, everything Christians do “in the name of Jesus,” including worship. It is literally nonsensical to pray to God “through Jesus Christ our Lord,” if Jesus is not “Lord.” And to the precise degree that Jesus does not have a present in the presence of God, believers have no future in the presence of God. Thus, “looking forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come,” as the creed concludes, is at best a form of poetry, and at worst a sad example of self-deception.

Likewise, if Jesus is not the divine Word of God made flesh, if God does not, in Jesus, enter fully into human existence, then the claim that “Jesus reveals the human face of God” is again true only in the way that it is true of any human being. And if God has not entered into human existence, then neither has God shared fully in human suffering and death, nor has God transfigured human suffering and death. Nothing fundamental has changed in the human condition.
Without incarnation and resurrection, contemporary Christians are in effect the heirs of the radical Arians of the fourth century, and, whether knowingly or not, Unitarian rather than Trinitarian. Jesus has not revealed God but only a way of being human. The spirit of Jesus is not the one that leads us into God’s own life but is at most a form of enthusiasm.

Without incarnation and resurrection, with a purely “historical” Jesus as the basis of Christian commitment — who knows why? — the understanding of sin and salvation necessarily adjust as well, as we have seen them adjust. Sin is no longer a matter of the rebellion of the human will against God but a matter of unjust social systems harming people. Salvation is, correspondingly, not the transformation of human existence, a process of sanctification leading in the end to a share in God’s glory, but a process of political change, seeking just social structures in place of alienating ones.24

If the shape of human hope is confined to the rearrangement of human institutions, it is small wonder, in turn, if Christianity appears to some observers as a fairly incoherent club for moral betterment, and to still others — among them many calling themselves Christian — as a moral force that could be more effective if it stripped away the last inhibiting vestiges of myth. We have arrived back in the land of Bishop Spong and Robert Funk. Jesus liberated from the tentacles of the creed leads to a Christianity liberated from any coherence and from any reason to continue in its present (diminished) form.

The Corollaries of Taking the Creed Seriously

One consequence of reading the creed and studying the creed is the discovery of how little contemporary Christians actually understand what the creed says and, once they understand it, how little they actually believe in what it says. Taking the creed seriously would, I think, first create a crisis in a Christian consciousness that has steadily been eroded under the influence of modernity. Being forced to engage the gap between what Christians have always professed and contemporary Christians actually think should generate a healthy cognitive dissonance. The scandal of Christian faith will prove to be a scandal first of all to Christians. The cognitive dissonance cannot be resolved in a positive fashion, moreover, unless those who have induced the crisis through taking the creed seriously also have the ability to lead others to a more robust appreciation of classic Christian confession, and the way of life that follows from that confession.

It is here, I think, that the real challenge is posed to those of us who are participating in this conference on “handing on the faith.” If we want to be prophets, teachers, pastors, within a church that takes the creed seriously, if we want to be theologians within such a church, then much will be demanded of us, both personally and intellectually.

Personally, we must find some way of witnessing to the faith that combines deep piety, social passion, and intellectual openness. Deep and authentic piety is necessary, because words about the transformation of life that are not backed by a life in the process of being transformed are empty. An active and committed passion for social justice is required, because the logic of the creed demands practices that are at least as radical as those bruited by liberals. Intellectual openness is mandatory, because adherence to tradition by those who are not even aware of modernity’s charm as well as challenge is otherwise mere stubbornness.

When orthodoxy is represented only by the humorless and the bland, by those patently interested in power and privilege, by those who show no real engagement with thought and little real engagement with the lives of the suffering, then orthodoxy is naturally (and perhaps justly) regarded as the protected turf of the safe and comfortable. It is therefore, I think, an essential dimension of the contemporary witness to orthodox faith that it combines largeness of vision, sharpness of mind, and a joyous embrace of legitimate diversity. Above all, theologians must reveal in their lives as well as their words that the power of the resurrection is present and the miracle of transforming grace is real. Otherwise, the content of faith articulated by the creed will indeed appear removed from life, and an imposition from the fossilized past on the problematic present.

Beyond the demands of such personal witness, theologians seeking to cultivate a creedal Christianity face severe intellectual challenges. If the creed is to be intelligible and credible (and attractive) to contemporary believers, far more than a historical explanation of its terms will be required. A historical explanation of why Nicene theologians considered it necessary to assert belief in “one” God, or affirm that God is creator “of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible” does not, by itself, make those words either true or pertinent today. In fact, the basic
intellectual challenge facing teachers in the church today is recovering
a sense of critical thought that is not constrained by the epistemologi-
ical contraction of the Enlightenment, and this means refusing to accept
that history is always and everywhere the censor of acceptable discourse
about God and the world.

Three aspects of this epistemological challenge are fairly obvious.
First, theologians must once more embrace, eagerly, gladly, and without
apology, the language of myth as appropriate for the story of salvation
rather than that of history. This is clearly a delicate and difficult step,
for we must also declare that the story of which we speak has historical
dimensions, and the study of history is pertinent to the responsible read-
ing of Scripture. History as such is not rejected as a way of knowing. But
history cannot adequately contain the truth of which faith speaks. When
Paul declares that “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself”
(2 Cor 5:19), not a single word in that sentence is even potentially veri-
ifiable as historical. Yet it speaks the truth about Jesus more profoundly
than any historical statement could. When history is the only means
of knowing, the truth of faith is necessarily reduced. Resurrection must
be reduced to resuscitation, for only resuscitation fits within the frame-
work of empirically verifiable fact, whereas exaltation to the right hand of God
does not. But if Jesus’ resurrection is merely a resuscitation, it is not good
news, it is not a new creation.

Second, theologians need to recover ontology. In fact, it may be possi-
able to speak of myth as a form of narrative ontology. The story told
by the creed is not that of merely human events in time and space, but the
story of God’s entry into human existence and God’s transformation
of human existence. If all our language can address is the factual and the
empirical, then we cannot speak the content of the faith. Without being
able to speak of being and of existence, we cannot speak of the real-
ity of which the creed speaks. It is certainly the case that philosophical
language entered the creed as a way of responding to the philosophical
idiom introduced by Arius. But it is not true to say that philosophical lan-
guage (either that of the Arians or the Nicene theologians) was alien to
the language of the New Testament. The story told by the New Testa-
ment is not that of historical fact alone but of divine presence and activity
through Jesus. The language of myth (“God was in Christ reconciling
the world to Himself”) is itself ontologically dense, and requires for its
explication a language capable of dealing with more than the empirical.

Once more, the contemporary discussion of the resurrection reveals
the consequences of a loss of philosophical sensibility. Those who can
speak only in a historical idiom are helpless in the face of the New Tes-
tament’s assertions. Typically, they end up either eliminating the somatic
dimension of the resurrection, reducing it to a vague “spiritual” sur-
vival (through teaching, memory, imitation), some sort of psychological
adjustment occurring in the minds of Jesus’ followers, or, in the attempt
to assert its “realness,” reduce it precisely to its somatic dimension, end-
up with a resuscitation of Jesus’ empirical body. But resuscitation
only defers rather than overcomes mortality. Yet Paul speaks of the
resurrection as a mystery in which “this perishable body must put on
imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality” (1 Cor
15:53).

Similarly, Paul speaks of the resurrection in terms of a soma pneu-
matikon (1 Cor 15:44). But if we have no phenomenology of the body,
and no phenomenology of spirit, how can we possibly address Paul’s lan-
guage? If, in order to fit within the framework of modernity, we think
of the body in terms of physical extension and think of spirit in terms
of the mind in the machine (or, today, in terms of brain chemistry), we
cannot begin to engage Paul’s statements. Only if we have some way
of thinking about spirit as a capacity to transcend individual somatic
boundaries and enter into the bodies of others can we begin to approach
the mystery of which Paul speaks.25 If we insist that revelation must fit
within the bounds of reason, as reason is defined by modernity, then we
cannot but reduce revelation.

Third, theologians must be willing to read Scripture in ways other than
historically. I spoke earlier in this paper of the creed as a guide to the
reading of Scripture, and if the creed itself is to become intelligible and
credible to Christians, then theologians must again learn to read as the
Nicene theologians read.26 Even at its very best, the historical approach
to the Bible is necessarily reductive, simply in order to be properly his-
torical. The historical approach necessarily reads the writings of the Old
and New Testaments as human writings that stay in the past. The his-
torian can perhaps declare on the reliability of the compositions with
reference to events of the past that are in principle verifiable, although
even this occasion is rarer than we might wish. But the historian as his-
torian is simply not in the position to declare on the truthfulness of the
compositions when they speak of the identity and character of Jesus, or
of his resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of the Father, or of his future coming as judge, or of the manner of life that is “worthy of God.” Indeed, methodological consistency demands of the historian the bracketing or screening of such language: that may be what Paul said and thought, but as to its truth, as a historian, I cannot judge.

What happens when the historical approach to Scripture is considered to be the only legitimate approach? Inevitably, the conversation between Scripture and theology is adversely affected. At best, biblical scholars have little to offer theologians and pastors, since their approach works only to describe what the compositions might have meant in the past and not what truth they may have for the present. At worst, theology is made captive to the historical approach to Scripture, because of the exclusive claims to competency asserted by scholars who are historians but not theologians, and thereby theologians either accept the reductionistic (historical) version of the resurrection, for example, as what Scripture actually teaches, or accept one of several versions of a “theology of the New Testament” that is itself simply another version of reduction through history.

Learning to read Scripture not simply as a record of the past, but as compositions that speak prophecy to the present — speak the truth about the presence and power of God at work to transform the world in the communities reading these texts — will not be easy. It will demand of us the humility to learn from readers of the past. It will require of us the learning of skills and of sensibilities that are not professionally rewarded. It will require of us the willingness to exegete the complexities of contemporary human experience as well as the complexities of ancient language. It will ask of us that we become theologians rather than historians.

Taking the creed seriously will not, I think, make things easier. In many ways, it will make things more difficult. But it may also make things in the church more truthful. And it may be a way in which we can once more put together a commitment to orthodox doctrine and a generous humanity, a love for the content of the church’s faith as well as a passionate witness to the life that faith enables.

Chapter 5

The Metaphysics of Co-Inherence

A Meditation on the Essence of the Christian Message

ROBERT BARRON

A round the year 750, scribes, artists, and illustrators of the monastery of Iona, situated on an island just off the western coast of Scotland, produced a book of the Gospels. We know that, for a time, it rested at the shrine of St. Brigit in Kildare, where a visitor referred to it as “the High Relic of the Western World.” A twelfth-century pilgrim to Ireland gave us a vivid description of its pages: “If you take the trouble to look very closely...you will notice such intricacies, so delicate, so subtle...so involved and bound together...that you will not hesitate to declare that all those things must have been the work not of men but of angels.”¹ This remarkable sacred object is now known, from the last place that it rested, as the Book of Kells.

One of the most famous of its pages is the “Chi-Rho” page, the opening of the Gospel of Matthew. Sinuous lines cross one another, twisting, turning, overlapping, intertwining, forming tightly woven patterns. Often within an already densely textured design, a smaller and even more intricate pattern can be picked out. Animals abound (including two mice who tug at a consecrated host!), and they find their place alongside of human figures, who in turn are implicated in the structure of the letters. The playful, colorful, and interlacing style of the Book of Kells has been called typically Irish, and this may be so, but at a much more basic level it is Catholic and Christian.

Charles Williams, who was, along with J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, a member of the Oxford writers’ group the Inklings, claimed that the master idea of Christianity is co-inherence, by which he meant the