

AFFIRMATIONS OF A DISSENTER

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Chapter Four

Fully Human Jesus

Next to biblical authority, Christology, or words about the nature and person of Jesus the Christ, is the second most divisive issue in today's church generally, and within United Methodism specifically.

Rather than probe this core belief of the Christian movement by discussing the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Christ, the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, as many scholars have done in quite helpful ways, I shall seek to confess as candidly and vulnerably as I can, who Jesus the Risen Christ is for me.

What follows will offend some. Offense is neither my intent nor purpose. Rather, my hope is to encourage confused believers and those who want to embrace Jesus, but find little meaning in the stilted christological language of the ancient creeds.

Previously, such efforts have brought written complaints of heresy from a few neoliteralists, persons who fail to understand the symbolic nature of religious language. Neoliteralists do not accept the progressive presupposition that words describing matters of ultimate truth are by necessity primarily metaphorical.

I can affirm the orthodox language of the ancient creeds regarding Jesus because I understand, at least in part, the symbolic nature of such religious, theological language. I affirm that Jesus was fully human and fully divine, very God of very God, begotten not made in that he was differ-

ent, not in substance from other humans, but qualitatively different in his relationship of ultimate trust and absolute obedience to the Holy One he called Abba. I do affirm my faith through the symbolic language, the theological-poetic utterances of the ancient creeds. But it is incumbent upon me as believer and evangelist to unpack this ancient, obtuse language about Jesus in order to make a semblance of finite sense out of infinite mystery on behalf of those who find the ancient creedal language confusing or implausible.

This is not an elitist or academic exercise. There are many thoughtful seekers looking to the church for help with a gnawing spiritual hunger in their hearts. We must open windows to help such people to see the essence of the One whose life, death, and resurrection are the substance of the faith once delivered to the apostles. Anything less is either cowardice or laziness. Thus, for woe or woe, here is who Jesus the Christ is for me.

To state it unequivocally: Jesus was *in toto* fully human. His life was no masquerade. He was the child of human parents, complete with belly button and genetic code. Otherwise, he could not be Liberator, let alone Savior. The Gospel writers provide little in the way of detailed biographical data about Jesus. This is understandable since they were writing theology (Christology in particular) and not history. Their mission was to solidify the church and evangelize others. They wrote accounts that would invite people to listen, believe, and follow, not biographies of Jesus. The four Gospel accounts vary in the person they present, although the three Synoptic (meaning similar stories) Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—present a composite picture of an itinerant preacher, teacher, and healer who proclaimed and incarnated the reality that in and through him a new age had dawned. This age is the kingdom or reign of God, long awaited by Israel's faithful.

Jesus' primary message was of the present and future reality of this kingdom/reign of God. In it the prophetic hopes and dreams of Israel were being realized as the poor received good news; the blind saw; the lame walked; captives were released from every form of bondage; and believers became new people, transformed disciples like Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene, Simon Peter, the woman of Samaria, and a host of others.

It is irrefutable, as one searches the Gospel accounts, that Jesus was convinced that the new age of the kingdom/reign had dawned and that his mission was to proclaim it, incarnate it, and invite others into it. For this vision, anchored by his trust in and radical obedience to God, Jesus was crucified, died and was raised.

To assist him in his mission Jesus called a core group of followers, including the inner circle of twelve who were symbolic of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jesus and his followers lived as a covenant community symbolizing the new Israel, a continuation and fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah. While the Twelve were at the heart of this new community, many others, including innumerable women, were experiencing the excitement pointing to a new age. But Mark's account of the gospel, in particular, and the other Synoptics, in general, do not hide the reality that the community, especially the Twelve, did not know who Jesus was or what he initiated until after his death and the emerging church's experience of his resurrected presence in their midst. The disciples simply did not get it when Jesus physically was present. Rather, it was only as they "saw" in faith the Risen One that they came to understand, trust, and follow in his steps.

I have chosen not to deal here with John's account of the gospel since it is a later document, which is more attentive to the needs of a developing church late in the first or early in the second century, than to the person and actual min-

istry of Jesus. Compare John's great "I am" sayings with the parables of the Synoptics. Jesus simply did not preach, teach, or describe himself as John suggests. Rather, John, working in the midst of theological controversies arising in the early church as oppression mounted and dissension developed, took the stories of Jesus, including the witness of the Synoptics, and crafted his particular evangelistic offering for his community in his time and place.

The earlier Synoptic Gospels were written in similar fashion. Each was crafted theologically, with a distinct literary style for a certain audience, as each author employed oral and written sources both common to all three and unique at least to Matthew and Luke. Each Gospel account presents a contextually relevant, theologically informed, evangelistic witness for a particular group or congregation of believers. Nevertheless, despite each evangelist's unique offering, the composite picture of Jesus that emerges from the Synoptics is that of a parabolic teacher, a charismatic preacher, an insightful prophet who was anchored in the covenant of God with Israel, and a healer of possessed souls and broken bodies whose words and deeds were in total congruence with one another.

The complete manifestation of Jesus was claimed by the church after his death and resurrection as the fulfillment of Israel's hopes and dreams and the dawning of the new age. Jesus was affirmed as the expected Messiah, the Christ of God. I believe that Jesus the Messiah, the Christ of God, was fully human. The myth of the Virgin Birth (a theological myth is not a false presentation but a valid and quite persuasive literary device employed to point to ultimate truth that can only be insinuated symbolically and never depicted exhaustively) is found neither in Mark, the earliest Gospel account, nor in John, the latest. This powerful myth was not intended as historical fact, but was employed by Matthew and Luke in different ways to point poetically to

the truth about Jesus as experienced in the emerging church. The church believed that Jesus was the long-expected Messiah, the Christ of God, whose revelation was unique and normative. Said differently, in Jesus God's Essence found confluence with a human being and the kingdom/reign was incarnated and ushered into being. The theological myth of the Virgin Birth points to this wondrous mystery and ultimate truth. To treat this myth as a historical fact is to do an injustice to its intended purpose and to run the risk of idolatry, namely, treating a means as an end itself. Thus, if the Virgin Birth did not occur in a physical historical sense, if Jesus were born of human parents, as I affirm he was, and if Jesus did not possess trans-human supernatural powers, as I do not believe he did, what sense can we make of the miraculous stories about him in the Gospel accounts? It is my intent to be candid and vulnerable in responding to these fundamental queries.

God is not a Supreme Being "out there" in the great beyond. Rather, the word *God* is the sound image we humans employ to point to the very Essence of it all that is both in our midst and yet beyond the boundaries of time and existence. Symbolically, if we employ the spatial metaphor developed by Paul Tillich, God is not a Being "out there" or "up there," but the foundation or Ground of all Being. Not limited by time or space, history, or creation, God has been, is, and ever shall be. God is the Essence of it all and is constantly (preveniently, as John Wesley said) at work creating, loving, doing justice, calling humans and all creation into relationship by forgiving, reconciling, empowering, and transforming so that all human beings and the whole created order might be saved. God, as Ground of Being, never quits being God and does not cease from revealing the Essence of it all.

Given this all too brief confession of who and what God is and is not, it follows that Jesus the Christ, in his full

humanity did so trust and follow this loving Essence he called "Abba," that he committed himself unequivocally to doing God's will in words and deeds, body, mind, and soul. Jesus in his humanity could have done otherwise. He could have said no to God, but the confluence of God's grace with the human response of faith, as trust and obedience, found perfection in Jesus and the Christ was made manifest. Jesus was not born the Christ. Rather, by the confluence of grace with faith he became the Christ, God's beloved in whom God was well pleased. It was in Jesus' total at-oneness with God, made possible by God's initiatory actions and Jesus' unequivocally faithful response, that Jesus revealed the heart, the very Essence, of God. When the Gospel writers wrote they sought to portray not merely Jesus of Nazareth but the Christ of God who was alive in their midst.

When the faith community remembered Jesus, they celebrated his resurrected presence in their midst through the breaking of bread, prayer, preaching, teaching, the gift of water, and other means of grace. The church came to confess Jesus not only as the human son of Mary and Joseph, but also as the unique Son of God, the political heir of David, the apocalyptic Son of Man, and the fulfillment of all the hopeful prophecies from Israel's exile and diaspora. From such understandings, Jesus was portrayed as Bethlehem born, the Virgin's child, the long-expected Messiah born to set his people free and, therefore increasingly, as time passed, as the only Son uniquely endowed with those transhuman qualities assumed to be of God. More and more was said about Jesus as the Son of God after his death on the cross as the confused and frightened disciples, who had not gotten it, experienced the Risen Christ in their midst. Profoundly, they got it at last, so they sought appropriate means to tell the story of his unique presence that had transformed their lives and brought the church into being.

Interestingly, Peter, the symbol-person for the whole faith community, could not walk very far on the Sea in Jesus' actual physical presence. But he became so Spirit-filled, so Christ-Essence permeated, on and after the Day of Pentecost, that he became the titular head of the emerging church (leadership he first shared with James and later with Paul). It was Peter who led the church onto and across the sea, that is, into the world of discipleship. It was from their experience of the risen and ever-present Christ Spirit, God's powerful breath of life, that the apostles and disciples came to see through their own trust and obedience that Jesus was not dead and buried but alive forevermore, calling them to pick up his mantle, even to take up the Cross and follow him.

Having said this much, I must say more. I believe in the resurrection of Jesus, but I cannot affirm that his resurrection involved the resuscitation of his physical body. The inconsistent reports in the New Testament of his several and initially unrecognized resurrection appearances add support to this point of view.

A personal experience may help to illustrate. While the innocent, fragile body of our infant son, Mark, was not resuscitated when he died unfairly and far too young from spinal meningitis, I believe, nevertheless, that he and the Risen Christ abide together. The Essence of God, the eternal Spirit of life that flowed completely in and through Jesus and abides from everlasting to everlasting, holds Mark, and all the little children of all ages. This is the same resurrected Jesus power or Christ Essence that infused the disciples and apostles, called the church into being, makes the wounded whole, forgives sin, reconciles and renews, guides history toward justice, drives creation's evolution, and is the foundation of the new age that both is and is to come.

I affirm resurrection, the resurrection of Jesus. God's

Essence cannot be killed, buried, or kept from being active in creation and history. God is from everlasting to everlasting. But, resurrection, including that of Jesus, does not occur through bodily resuscitation. God does not work this way. The issue is not the absence of God's power but God's own "self"-limiting role of revelation in history. God works within the boundaries God has established. And while I do not pretend to know the limits of these boundaries and realize that we all see but through a glass darkly, I am certain that the miracle of resurrection, preeminently that of Jesus, is not tied to bodily resuscitation. The linking of resurrection with bodily resuscitation is to make a literal religious proposition of a metaphorical, symbolic expression of truth itself. This is the kind of idolatry from which I dissent.

I affirm that by God's graceful actions, in confluence with the response of radical obedience and ultimate trust by Jesus, God was uniquely and normatively revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. And we who do so believe are mandated to follow in the way of Jesus. We are to grow toward perfection by the confluence of divine grace with human faith, as modeled uniquely in the person of Jesus. We are called to be like Jesus in his at-one-ment with God, just as God is gracefully active in us personally and among us as the church. God is calling us to that personal and collective perfection which signals to the world the presence of God's kingdom/reign on earth as it is in heaven.

Having so affirmed Jesus as God's unique and normative revelation, I must dissent from Christocentric exclusivism, which holds that Jesus is the only way to God's gift of salvation. Such an arrogant claim stands over and against the inclusive Jesus of the Synoptics and limits God in ways that humans cannot. God is God, and all human knowledge of that One is limited at best. The Jesus revelation is primary

for Christians, and, while I affirm the Christ event as normative, I cannot honestly limit God's ability to be God through revelatory offerings of the Spirit as found in other religions. After all, God's life-giving Spirit found expression in Israel, and the Jews continue to be people of the Covenant. They too are pilgrims on the way. So, too is this the case with God's grace for the faithful followers of Islam. Frankly, I am much more concerned with living out of Jesus' revelation in my life and that of the church than with castigating other religions as being inferior and outside God's eternal plan for salvation. Evangelism is living the good news of Jesus and proclaiming in words and deeds that in Jesus we Christians see and know God. Our personal and communal lives will give credence, or lack thereof, to our witness and call others to—or repel them from—the Jesus way, which I believe is normative, but not the only way to salvation. The other ways may be more circuitous, bumpy, but I trust God to call the family home by whatever means. In the end this mysterious will of God prevails!

I affirm Jesus, the fully human one, as the Son of God, whose relationship of faithful trust and radical obedience with God gave to the church (and through the church to the world) the preeminent manifestation of at-one-ment with God. Atonement is the English contraction for at-one-ment. Obviously, such an understanding of atonement leaves no room for me to affirm the substitutionary atonement theory that portrays Jesus' blood on the cross as satisfying an angry deity through one majestic sacrificial human death, much as sacrifices of unblemished sheep and goats in ancient Israel were understood to appease God and atone for the sins of all.

Sacrifice, even of one's life, on behalf of others is an eloquent witness to God's grace. Jesus died for others, doubtlessly. Nevertheless, I find the substitutionary atone-

ment theory, which is but one of several Christian theories of atonement, to be at odds with other images of God reflected by the witness of Jesus and experienced by this writer. In fact, I am convinced that quite often such unexamined thought repels many intelligent, sensitive, searching people and drives some of them from understanding, accepting, and following the God revealed in Jesus, who is the One for whom their aching hearts yearn. How much more blood sacrifice is needed in a world saturated with blood and furnished for a different understanding of salvation? While sacrifice as an act of discipleship is essential for all of us as it was for Jesus, the concept of blood sacrifice to appease God is superstition at best and an idolatrous allegiance to a non-Jesus methodology of God-human relationship at worst. Historically and presently, the church has other models of atonement theory to offer a hurting world. The time has come for progressives courageously to claim the atonement of Jesus as that which is reflective of everything he did and all he was, namely, the One who was in such at-one-ness with God that he could suffer and die for others.

To understand Jesus' at-one-ment with God as the confluence of God's grace with Jesus' radical obedience and complete trust that thus manifests the kingdom/reign of God which is to be offered in inclusive hospitality by the church to the world, presupposes an evangelistic mission that proclaims that, in Jesus, God has been made manifest among us making eternal life, life with meaning and purpose, available now. I believe that the gift of eternal life, as relationship of at-one-ment with God, continues after death and that we Christians are to live and witness here and now in such ways that God's gift of eternal life is available for all who, being welcomed and coached, accepted and guided, and not judged and cast away by the church, will dare in faith stimulated by grace to say yes to Jesus'

way. This way of living is a lifelong process of total reorientation of will and being away from self toward God and for all humankind in a life of internal piety and external unquenchable fire for mission, justice, and evangelism. Undoubtedly, we progressives have been lax in our evangelistic zeal for fear of being misunderstood as proselytizers, or because our trust and obedience have been found wanting. In either case to affirm Jesus as the Christ means that believers commit to living radically obedient and ultimately trusting lives in response to God's grace as we follow Jesus the Christ, who consummated his *at-one-ment* on the Cross. This I affirm. I do dissent from neoliberalist Christology and the failure of progressives to name the name of Jesus. Therefore, I urge neoliberalists to shun idolatry, and progressives to awaken to the evangelistic task and opportunity God in Christ is presenting all of us, for the living of these days.

Conclusion

Jesus was fully human and fully divine. His humanity was given in his conception and birth through the natural processes of procreation. His divinity was derived, given as gift, from his relationship of trust and obedience with God.

The way of Jesus is informative for his disciples. The whole church is called to follow him by responding in trust and obedience to the divine initiative that yearns for relationship with humans and longs to make us aware of our identity as children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus, and of all humankind.

Chapter Five

Hope Is the Thing

Standing for possible election to the episcopacy at the North Central Jurisdiction Conference in July 1996 and during the early years of my episcopal ministry, I was asked one question more frequently than any other, *What is the most important issue facing the United Methodist Church today?*

My response then, and now: *The near absence of hope, especially among clergy, that creates fear on the right and cynicism on the left. Both of these realities are symptomatic of a deep theological malaise, even that of practical atheism.*

Too many on the right fearfully cling to past certitudes found in a literal reading of creeds and scripture, as if the Spirit were not dynamically alive in our midst opening new understandings and demanding new interpretations. Too many on the left simply react to new challenges by behaving as if God were not at work calling all of us to expanded vistas of faithfulness.

Given my response about hope that has been validated during my tenure as a bishop through innumerable one-on-one conversations, in small group gatherings with clergy, and by hundreds of congregational visits, I am convinced that the essential role of a bishop in these days is to model active hope. This hope must flow from a deep and abiding sense of the reality of God's active presence in the life of the world, church, and the bishop himself or herself. I am convinced that a bishop must model hopeful ministry