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## Is Jesus the Last Word?

Christ is the Question  
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## Is Jesus the Last Word?

Any of you who have been following these lectures from the first must by now surely have recognized that my approach to questions about Jesus' identity is in conflict with one of the more cherished and ancient convictions of the church. That is the conviction that the revelation in Jesus is both final and complete, that Jesus is both the last word and the sufficient word about God's relation to humanity and humanity's hope for authentic existence. The Letter to the Hebrews sums it up, in words that have often served as a motto for the believer: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8, NRSV). That claim may owe something to the popular Platonism of the author's day, which pitted the reality of the eternal against the shadowy realm of becoming, but it's right there in the Bible, and it's clear enough. And the statement stands directly counter to that understanding of identity that I proposed in my first lecture, which sees all human identity, including the identity of Jesus, as a continuous process of social transactions.

The motto from Hebrews also renders impossible any understanding of the Christian revelation that depends centrally on *narrative*, like the postliberal hermeneutic advocated by Hans Frei and his students, which I have adopted in part despite some reservations about it. For a story about a character who is the same yesterday and today and forever is going to be pretty boring. In fact, such a narrative arguably can have no plot. And a narrative without a plot is not just boring, it is no narrative at all. Yet the Letter to the Hebrews itself depends quite centrally on narrative. In very imaginative fashion, it embodies that interpretive process that I called attention to in my second lecture. And to revive the flagging enthusiasm of second-generation believers, it retells Jesus' story in a breathtakingly expansive way, set spatially in heaven and in earth, and temporally embracing the whole sweep of creation's history and destiny. I think, then, that we should forgive the author's overexuberance expressed in the quasi-Platonic sentiment, and pay attention rather to his method, which illustrates precisely that ongoing process of interaction between Jesus and his followers by which it becomes slowly clear who he is.

The church has always been torn between the desire to pin down its teaching about Jesus once and for all, in a system of static dogmas, and the acknowledgment that the story of God's engagement with the created world is dynamic and still open to God's perhaps surprising future. As you have seen, I come down squarely on the latter side. There are, however, some dangers in this emphasis on the open-endedness of the story. Some of us are old enough to remember certain catastrophic applications of a doctrine of "progressive revelation" that was very popular with the liberals at the turn of the twentieth century. It has been only three quarters of a century since a great many "liberal" Christians in Germany saw in Adolph Hitler the latest revelation in God's on-going plan. The few courageous Christians who stood firm against this new gospel became the "Confessing Church" because they adopted as their bulwark against this pseudoprogressivism a quite "conservative" *creed*. Not every novelty announced in the name of Christ will turn out to be in tune with the dynamics of God's love. The open-endedness of God's story and the progressivism of modern industrial society are two different things altogether.

Our question is really twofold. First, is Jesus the last word? That is, is that identity of Jesus which has emerged through the process of interaction with his followers that I described in the first lecture and that process of interpretation which I illustrated in the second and third lectures—is that God's ultimate communication with God's creatures? And second, has the last word about Jesus already been spoken? By now you will not be surprised to learn that my answer to the second part of the question is categorically No. The first half I find more difficult, for reasons I will try to indicate in this lecture.

Let's begin by asking whether we can find a more helpful way of putting the question. Again, as so often, I turn to Hans Frei. Frei has insisted that, for Christians, the story of Jesus is *unsurpassable*. There is not, nor will there be, any story that can take its place. To take any other story as providing the master narrative within which our own life narratives must take their places would mean, quite simply, not to be Christians any longer. The story of Jesus, then, is for Christians unsurpassable. But remember that Frei also said, as I reminded you in yesterday's lecture, that if there is a *right* interpretation of the Bible, it can only be *eschatological*. Frei

would surely say the same about our understanding of who Jesus was, is, and will be. Of what kind of story can we say that it is unsurpassable, if we do not know quite how it will turn out so long as the present world endures?

### **Learning to Talk to Strangers**

Yesterday I quoted Father Timothy Radcliffe, O.P., who said that one of the primary jobs of people in universities is to “resist the imperialism of the single vision” by learning “to talk to strangers.” I do not think there has been a moment in my lifetime when the threat of “the imperialism of the single vision” has been more dangerous than it is today. Nor has it ever perhaps in human history been more important to learn how to talk and listen to strangers. In the last century we have mastered the technology of *killing* strangers. And we have also mastered the psychological rule that it is easier to kill them so long as we are careful to keep them strangers. Do I need to belabor the obvious? This is not working very well. Security purchased by the psychological technique of dehumanizing the stranger; security purchased by the technology of murder, whether the expensive technology of guided missiles or the cheap technology of suicide bombs, is no security at all. It brings no closure, and it brings no peace. In this situation learning to talk to strangers is no longer just a nice thing to do. It is a matter of survival.

For Christians the imperative of talking to strangers is especially strong and especially complicated. It has a history, which has been very powerful in its effects. But this history has had some quite troubling side-effects. This is a topic so vast I can barely scratch the surface this evening, but it requires our concentrated attention. Everyone can see that, in today’s world, differences between religions are one of the primary ways in which estrangement of people from one another is formed and focused—whether or not such differences are the underlying *cause* of the estrangement. So when Father Timothy says that we must learn to talk to strangers, by strangers he means especially the whole non-Christian world. The strangers to whom we must learn to talk and to listen include both that majority who hold to other religious persuasions and live within narratives quite different from our story of Jesus and that growing number of people

who are skeptical if not hostile toward all religious claims and all stories of transcendence.

From the very first followers of Jesus down to our own times, Christians have shown the most extraordinary zeal and the most astonishing ingenuity in talking to strangers of all kinds. Think of the physical energy, of the endurance of hardships, of the courage to face unfriendly climates, alien customs, perils of travel, all kinds of hostility. Think of the intellectual exertions in the endless work of translation, not only into different languages, but into different styles of philosophy, different modes of thinking, different cultures. The history of Christian missions comprises the most varied stories of adventure and fortitude, and many aspects of these stories remain marvellous to remember. And yet...the continuation of that history in our century becomes deeply problematical.

Why do we talk to strangers? The traditional answer has been, we talk to them only in order to convert them. Never mind that many missionaries discovered or knew from the start that conversion was not necessarily the point, nor the measure of success, of their efforts. The drive to engage those others has always been explicitly the drive to convert, and it is hard to refute the impression of so many of those others that by conversion we meant trying to make them as much as possible like ourselves. It is not just that in our postchristian age many of us are uncomfortable with that program to convert the world, which we find unsophisticated and not very polite. There are also deeper problems with the conversionist program.

The first problem is pragmatic: “the conversion of the world in our generation” (the motto of the Student Volunteer Movement in the early twentieth century, which we now find so incredibly naïve) is not going to happen. And one of the reasons it is not going to happen is the conviction of a great many of the world’s peoples that Christian missions have served repeatedly as either the advance guard or the camp follower of Western imperialism—sometimes overtly, more often covertly or unconsciously. And that suspicion is answered by our bad conscience as we acknowledge that indeed Christian missions have too often been complicit in colonialism in the past and, in the present, too often indistinguishable from the culture-destroying dimensions of the new globalization.

And the old and new forms of imperialism are not the only sins that have been hidden by the banner of Jesus' name. Think how many moral abominations the Bible has been called to support. The Crusades. Torture. Cruel and unusual punishments. American slavery. The oppression of women. Nationalist wars. Suppression of scientific inquiry. Antisemitism in all its guises. Racism. Bigotry of every description. Fear and loathing of every group that was different from our own. To name only the most obvious; there are plenty of others. Given all the misery that has been caused by people who otherwise seemed *good* people and who said they were Christians and indeed *were* Christians, and who were acting in the name of Jesus and with what they were sure was the clear teaching of the Bible as their warrant—given those facts, it is really rather difficult to argue that the world would be a better place if everybody were a Christian.

I am going to argue, on the contrary, that it was a mistake to imagine that what God really wanted us to do was to make everyone else in the world like ourselves. I believe that, powerful as the conversionist drive has been in the history of Christendom, even acknowledging that the conversionist drive has accomplished much that is lasting and good, that is not the only way of reading the Bible or the Christian interpretive tradition. Nor is it the best way for our time. I have been arguing throughout these lectures that the identity of Jesus is still open, that that transactive process by which identity is made is still going on. We are still learning who Jesus is. And we are still learning about the story of Creator and creation, the *λόγος* of God. We cannot write the last chapter of that Logos, because we see but dimly in mirrors, because we know only in part and we prophesy only in part. We do believe that, when the story is complete, it will include as one of its decisive turning points what Paul named the *λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ*, the story and trope and logic of the cross, but just how that fits into the whole story remains to be learned. And we will learn that only as we learn to listen and talk to strangers, to the other sheep of God who are not of this fold of ours, not of this Christian fold, not of this Western fold, not of this theistic fold.

I am not talking about a return to the naïve humanism of Lessing—though considering the blood shed by bigotry in the years since Lessing, his humanism does not look so bad. All the

ways up the mountain are not equal and they do not all lead automatically to the same reality. The peculiarities of the different traditions are not mere concealing husks that must be stripped from the truth that is the same for all. Reality is not something out there apart from the knowing. God is not the least common denominator of all our faiths nor the sum of the best in all our myths nor the essence that lies beneath all appearances and beyond all becoming. What is essential for the conversation among the religious traditions and between the religious and the irreligious traditions, the conversation we so desperately need to promote if we are to survive this century, is a resolutely honest acknowledgement of differences coupled with the determination to hear each other out and to press forward together, without masking our differences and without relinquishing what we each believe to be unsurpassable in our own traditions. The crucial question for Christians in our time—the crucial question for strong believers in every ongoing interpretive community—is how we can be faithful to those dimensions of our own lifeworld that our history has led us to deem irreplaceable, while at the same time opening our minds and our imaginations to the things we may need to discover—the things God may be trying to teach us, if you will—in those other traditions and lifeworlds that are now our unavoidable neighbors in this small planet. As usual, I turn back to the apostle Paul for help.

### **The Surpassability of Jesus' Reign**

We would certainly expect Paul, of all people, to agree with Hans Frei that the story of Jesus is “unsurpassable.” Because Paul believed that “the form of this world is passing away,” and “the time has been cut short,” and that in his own lifetime Jesus would come back in glory, it would surely be fair to think that he would take Jesus to be the last word. It is surprising, accordingly, to find him interrupting his proofs for the belief in the resurrection of the dead, in 1 Corinthians 15, with the following account of Christ’s *παρουσία*, his royal advent:

Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when God has abolished every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until “[God] puts every enemy under his feet.” As the last enemy, death is abolished, for “[God]

subordinated *all things* under his feet.” Now when [scripture] says, “all things” are subordinated, obviously that excludes the One who is subordinating “all things” to him. And when God subordinates all things to him, then the Son himself will be subordinated to the One who subordinated all things to him, in order for God to be all in all.

That paragraph certainly makes it sound as if, for Paul, at least one part of the Jesus story, the story of his eventual triumph over all powers and his reign in glory, was not only surpassable, it would be surpassed in God’s time. It is surprising how little you will read about these verses in most commentaries. Or perhaps it is not surprising, given the fact that “Subordinationism” became a heresy in the ancient christological controversies, and so did Origen’s notion of the return of all things to the beginning. Whatever the reason, the ancient commentaries talk of these verses only to explain that Paul did *not* mean either of those heretical notions, and most modern commentators say almost nothing about them, except to suggest that Paul was absentmindedly following some apocalyptic timetable or other that we don’t have to pay any attention to.

John Chrysostom, however, as Margaret Mitchell pointed out several years ago, did take the passage seriously, and took it to be obviously part of Paul’s rhetorical strategy in this whole letter, to combat the factionalism and status-conscious ambition that were tearing the Corinthian house churches apart. When all of the enemies lie at his feet, says Chrysostom, the Son, far from rebelling against the One who begot him, is at pains to demonstrate his *concord*, his *ὁμόνοια*. Chrysostom is right. Paul describes the ultimate submission of Christ’s kingship to God as the supreme example of the sacrifice of one’s own power and advantage for the sake of general concord. That is the same rhetorical use that Paul makes of his own story, especially in chapter 9, but in various ways throughout this letter. So once again we have that analogical working out of Jesus’ story and the apostle’s story in Paul’s appeal for the moral formation of the communities he has founded. They ought to be imitators of him as they are of Christ, by letting the paradoxical power of God revealed in the Logos of the Cross shape their form of life, rather than the competition for power and honor that pervades the world around them. And, by the way, Paul arrives at this remarkable scenario of Jesus’ humble condescension by that kind of creative

reinterpretation (and even rewriting) of biblical texts that we talked about in the second lecture, and of which, in the third lecture, we found Paul to be a past master. Here Paul sets up a tension between the biblical text—in this instance the “twin” texts of Psalm 109:1 and 8:7 in the Septuagint—, the story of Jesus that Paul had received as tradition and reshaped out of his own experience, and the present calamitous situation of the house churches. It is through that interactive tension that Paul perceives the way in which the grand narrative must culminate.

### **Paul’s Eschatological Hermeneutic**

O. K., we are not Paul, and in our present situation we had better be very careful about the limits of the *imitatio Pauli*. Nevertheless, we still have a lot to learn from the kind of interpretive strategy to which he was driven by the unique situation in which he found himself after, as he said, “God who had singled [him] out from [his] mother’s womb chose to reveal God’s son in [him] (Gal 1:15f.). That revelation, you will remember, turned his life upside down—no, his language, as you will remember from our reading of the Letter to the Galatians last week, is even more extreme: that new thing that God had done *killed* Paul’s old life. “For through the Law I died to the Law, that I might live to God.” Crucified with the absurdity of the crucified Messiah, Paul had died to that Law which had been, he tells the Galatians, his whole life up until then. Died to that whole structure of obedience which, he was certain, God had personally decreed as the covenanted form of life which constituted God’s people. When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he saw these new converts as ready to “enslave” themselves to “weak and impoverished elements” of the old world. Therefore, he deliberately emphasized the contrast between the old and the new, between the world of striving to make oneself acceptable to God by means of one’s keeping the rules of Torah and the freedom belonging to the new creation which the faithfulness of the Son of God had made. A reader of that Letter could easily suppose that Paul was setting Christ against Torah, faith against law, even “Judaism” against “Christianity.” In one aside, Paul emphatically denies that “the Torah is against the promises,” but that seems a rather weak disclaimer in view of the vehemence of his main argument.

There was a hidden problem in this radically new appropriation of the scriptures and traditions of Israel. The central question was this: does God change his mind? Does he at one moment tell us that, in order to be his people, all our males must be circumcised, and we all must keep every rule that can be deduced from the Torah, and anyone who is crucified is a curse of God—and then at another moment does this same God tell us that his own Son the Messiah was crucified and that even gentiles who are drawn to this crucified Messiah will be welcomed as God’s people without being circumcised?

In his argument against the new apostles in Galatia, Paul emphasizes the radicality of his claim and, understandably, not that terrible underlying problem. But by the time he wrote the longest of his letters, the one to the congregations that were not his own in Rome, this problem had become the center of his concern. This was not merely a problem of Paul’s conscience. It was not just an unresolved issue of his own biography. It is not just a question for those interpreters who wonder why Paul is not consistent. It is rather a question about God. It is not Paul’s consistency that is at question, but God’s. If God’s action in Christ was as radical as Paul claims, then (as Paul Meyer puts it), “what ... becomes of God’s faithfulness, that very reliability on which human trust, beginning with Abraham’s, can alone depend?” The question is, can you trust a God who is unpredictable? I have written about that question at some length; there is time tonight only to summarize. The answer Paul gives in the Letter to the Romans is that we can trust God precisely *because* God is unpredictable. We can trust God because God’s intention for the creation is too vast for us to comprehend, wonderful beyond our petty notions of consistency. We can trust God because God’s love welcomes those whom our fears would exclude, embraces those whom our predictions would assume to be God’s enemies and ours. And Paul answers the question by not answering it. Instead he constructs a story that is itself full of surprises. In this story the gentiles are astonished because the God of Israel has brought good news to them. The unrighteous are astonished to find God declaring them righteous. The righteous are astonished that God would welcome the unrighteous. The enemies of God are astonished by God’s amnesty. The people of God are astonished to find themselves unmasked as themselves God’s enemies

insofar as they resist this unpredictable and unseemly expansion of God's love. The Jews are astonished by the absurd story of the crucified Messiah, and they are scandalized by the notion that this bunch of goys are now God's people. The gentiles are astonished that Paul still thinks the Jews are God's people and that the call and election of Israel are irrevocable—or, as we might as well translate, unsurpassable.

Paul's rhetorical method in this letter matches the astonishing story he is telling, for the reader is surprised at every turn by the twists and paradoxes that Paul introduces and emphasizes. Not least are the surprises that Paul contrives by his outrageous way of interpreting scripture. It is not just that he turns the plain sense of familiar verses upside down. He does it in such a way that anyone who knows the Bible at all will see what he is doing. As Richard Hays so lucidly explained, Paul sets his novel interpretation over against the plain sense of the text in such a way that they become like two strings plucked together to produce a strange, almost comic assonance, so that by the very contradictions a new tone is set ringing and a new song is sung. It is a letter whose rhetoric gives the reader a lot of work to do. It places us as readers into that same perplexing situation in which the Jews and gentiles of the congregations at Rome and Paul's congregations in the provinces find themselves. It is an anomalous situation in which there is no easy resolution, such as those the successors of Paul so often chose: In with the New, out with the Old. Once the Jews were God's people, now the Christians are. Christians are living out *Heilsgeschichte*, the history of God's salvation; Jews are living out *Unheilsgeschichte*, the history of God's curse. We are all too familiar with those solutions, which are not only expressed in other early Christian writings, but have overtly or tacitly controlled the relationship between Jews and Christians throughout most of Christian history. Paul does not allow any of them. He does not offer a resolution; only God can do that, and not until the End. Then it will be revealed that "God has locked up all people in disobedience, in order to have mercy on all" (Rom 11:32). The climax of Paul's argument is not a solution but a doxology:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!

How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord?  
 Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?  
 For from him and through him and to him are all things.  
 To him be the glory forever. Amen. (11:33-36, NRSV)

Paul is not being evasive. He is rather expressing by the very form of his rhetoric that paradoxicality of the story of God that always points beyond the fragile and distorting mirrors in which we see its truth enigmatically reflected. And this is not, as we say, just rhetoric. It is rhetoric that is designed to do what all Paul’s letters try to do: to form a community who will embody the shape of that partially and enigmatically perceived story in the form of their life together. So the climax of the story about the Jews and the gentiles as God’s peculiar people, which occupies chapters 9–11 of Romans but has been introduced at the very beginning, is set into Paul’s practical admonitions about the way in which people of quite different everyday ways of living out their faith, some strong and some weak, ought to deal with one another—and this issue has also been in Paul’s view from the beginning of the Letter. He was new to Rome, but he certainly knew a lot about the kind of conflict that he here imagines could happen there, because he had seen it first hand in Corinth. Here, more carefully and with greater literary precision than in the letter to Corinth, he lays out the concerns of each side—and what each side is doing to its opponents. And he sums up, as you may remember, with these words: “Therefore welcome one another, just as the Christ has welcomed you, into the glory of God” (15:7).

Paul’s eschatological hermeneutic does not just consist in retelling the old, old story, nor even in transforming the old, old story by the new, new story, though both are true. At the center of Paul’s concern is his labor to give birth, as he rather dramatically puts it in the Letter to Galatians, to a community that will be conformed to that story, whose form of life will be analogous to that paradoxical story of life in death, of power in weakness, of joy in suffering, of judgment and waiting, of striving and receiving, a community in which “Christ will be formed” (Gal 4:19). In Paul’s version of this story, the event of the crucified Messiah radically transforms the story of Israel—but it does not supplant it. The calling and election of Israel are still

irrevocable, the history of God and Israel unsurpassable. So, also, the story of Jesus, the Logos of the Cross, is unsurpassable, even though, at the end, as Son he will hand over the kingdom to God.

### **The Story of Jesus in the Postmodern World**

When we talk, as we must, to the strangers who have become our necessary neighbors in this newly small planet, what shall we say about Jesus? To our Muslim neighbors, and our Buddhist neighbors, to our atheist neighbors, and our pragmatist neighbors, what shall we say? We will not say, “It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you’re sincere,” because it does matter deeply, and they know that and we know that. We will not say, “Let’s just not talk about religion, because religion is a private matter,” because religion that means anything at all is not private but quite social and public, and it forms communities—for good and for ill. We will not say, “Let’s just talk about the things we agree on, and ignore the differences,” because the differences are not only important, they are the very points of tension where we have most to learn from one another.

And when I talk with my Muslim neighbor, and he tells me of the story of Issa as the Qur’an tells it, the Issa who is a great but not the last prophet, the Issa who could not have suffered as the Gospels say, it is not the case that the only way we can go on being neighbors who learn from each other is if I accept that story or he accepts the Gospel story. It is certainly not the case that we have to decide not to talk about those conflicting stories. But we can talk to each other about what the consequences are when communities try to shape themselves in accord with those differing stories, and the other stories of our frequently conflicting traditions. And we will look for intersections and we will look for ways in which each of us can learn from those things which one of us cannot give up, because that part of the story is unsurpassable, and the other cannot accept, because that would mean giving up something central to a way of life that had been precious for a long time. And something like that extended and open-ended conversation will have to take place with each of those other strange and sometimes prickly neighbors.

For if Paul is right, then surely we have not seen the last surprise in God's plan to bring the unruly human denizens of creation into some kind of habits of justice and peace and love. If Paul is right, the God of the Bible will astonish the people who claim to be his over and over again, but God will not betray those who put their confidence in God's story. The ultimate story, which we will learn only when we know as we are known, will still include, in a way that is now unfathomable to us, that paradoxical *λόγος τοῦ σταυροῦ*, that story and trope and logic of the cross and resurrection of Jesus, but it will include much else as well, far beyond our imagining.

So how ought we to imagine the End of Days—the last chapter of the Jesus story, the ultimate shape of Jesus' identity? Shall we imagine Jesus standing in armor, his foot on the neck of the conquered infidel? Shall we imagine the Jesus of Michaelangelo's Sistine ceiling, averting his gaze from the anguished hordes of the pagans and heretics and sinners who are being dragged off to hell? Or shall we imagine a Christ who smiles at the surprise of those sons of Abraham who come from East and West to join him in the kingdom that now is to be handed over to the one inscrutable God, who cannot imagine that they are really here? Can you picture the Son of the Human who, at the last judgment when he sits on his throne, surprises the sheep on his right as much as the goats on the left: "Lord, when did we see you ...?"

When we sing "Jesus shall reign where'er the sun / does its successive journeys run," let us remember Justin Martyr's peculiar reading of Psalm 95 LXX, "The Lord reigned from the tree" (1 Apol. 41:4). That is, the victory of the Son of God is not that of the triumphalist church's dreams, but the victory that reveals the heart of the loving, inscrutable, ironic God. The story that centers on that paradoxical reign and culminates when the last enemy, Death, is vanquished and the Son hands the whole thing over, let us remember that that story is called "Good News." It is not a rule book. It is not a set of doctrines. It is above all not a ransom note. It is a love letter.