

EDITORIAL

A recent challenge from Mark Mattison invites us, in the spirit of friendly dialogue, “to demonstrate the relevance of our enterprise.”

As one of the editors of the JOURNAL, I accept that invitation. Mark will realize that since my family and I abandoned home and career to join the particular enterprise embodied in our form of Radical Reformation (an enterprise documented in history by the celebrated G.H. Williams of Harvard in his *Radical Reformation*, 1962), Mark’s question comes to me more or less as a request to justify what amounts virtually to a career!

Firstly, I do not share my co-editor, Kent Ross’s, exasperation about the failure of orthodox theologians to enter into dialogue with advocates of biblical unitarianism (see spring 2002 editorial). “Orthodox theologians” are anyway not the only object of this JOURNAL’s attention. Rather our object, as I understand it, is to contribute to a return to the fundamental teachings of Jesus and the Apostles. This, of course, has been the avowed object of reformers and restorationists at all times. Unless the Christian religion in its varied and various manifestations today is a satisfactory reflection of the intentions of its founder, the task of reformation must continue. It appears to us that the core teachings of “orthodoxy” are a clear departure from the original faith. Helping to set things on a course truer to the mind of Jesus is a huge task.

Mr. Mattison’s challenge is welcome indeed. But I think we need to find out what his point really is. Not, I am sure, that he does not have a clear point, but in his brief words he has not let us know precisely what that is. What, then, precisely is his objection to what we stand for? Mark himself “has moved away from biblical unitarianism,” and has become “more circumspect” about the theological task. As a former editor he became “troubled about our apparent inability to constructively propose a coherent theology.” What then is his core conviction about God and the faith?

The question I want to pose also is this: Is the New Testament a record of the teaching of Jesus or not? If it is, and if Jesus expressed his passion for the unitary monotheism of Israel as the basis of sound theology and practice (Mark 12:28ff), what is so wrong about trying to make that great insight widely known? Was not Jesus doing *theology* when he declared himself a devoted advocate of the unitary, biblical monotheism of his heritage? (John 17:3). Did Jesus have to explain how and why belief in the One and Only God of Israel would be beneficial when adopted and built into the fabric of our spiritual life and the church’s worship? What is wrong, then, with using Jesus as our model and his theology as a guide to our own?

Now if Mark thinks that unitary monotheism is *not* the teaching of Jesus, let him help us to see this. Apparently, though he has “moved away from biblical unitarianism” (What does this mean? Has he seen that it is untrue to the words of the Messiah?), he is not convinced of the “doctrine of Jesus’ metaphysical preexistence.” Preexistence of course is the main pillar of Trinitarianism. So then, Mark cannot happily associate with Trinitarian theology. He has lots of questions about its validity.

I have spent the past 25 years or so promoting what I think are the obvious teachings of Jesus which in other systems of theology have become either obscure or directly suppressed (evangelicalism being one of the toughest opponents of Jesus in regard to the nature of God). In working back to the teachings of Jesus with the help of countless excellent scholars, I have experienced a great measure of joy, as the Bible has come alive as a first-century account of the ministry of the one I believe is the promised Messiah. I have corresponded with some of the top Bible scholars and theologians of our day. In rare cases, where they had dedicated their PhD thesis to matters, say, of the interpersonal relationships in eternity of the members of the Trinity, I have found scholars of many different types to be highly sympathetic to the concerns promoted by this JOURNAL. They too know that all is not well with the status quo.

Hence my conviction that the struggle for Truth must continue. Moreover, it will be advanced if we can show that such basic teachings as the nature of God revealed in Scripture are, in respect of worldwide Christianity, in need of Radical Reformation. The object? So that others may read and enjoy the Bible in the light of its own presuppositions, not those of Greek church fathers. So that the mind of Messiah may be allowed to develop among us uncluttered by the unnecessary burden and baggage of a misdirected and often unexamined tradition of unbelief — more precisely, a false notion of who Jesus and God are.

What is so striking is that the Bampton Lectures of 1976, 1980 and 1984 were dedicated in large measure to promoting the very same critique of the traditional view of Jesus as is promoted in this JOURNAL. I am not frustrated when Professor Paula Frederiksen (author of *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus*) thanks me for pointing to a misreference in one of her books in which inadvertently she said that the Messiah was called *Adonai* in Psalm 110:1 (he is in fact *adoni*, the non-Deity superior at the right hand of the One God).

I am encouraged when an Episcopalian academic and his colleague from Harvard applaud our work as “immensely important,” they themselves having known all along that the Trinity is not an original Christian doctrine and only recently realizing that there are others who confidently share that view.

We are pleased to know that Hans Kung, Karl-Josef Kuschel, Karl Heinz Ohlig, J.A.T. Robinson, James Dunn, and Colin Brown of Fuller Seminary have, in their various ways, dedicated much of their professional life as theologians to exposing the fateful misdevelopment of Christology from the second century onwards.

I agree with Hans Kung that the muddled theology of the Trinity is one of the great hindrances to ecumenical discussion between Jews, Muslims and Christians. False theologies are responsible for the hopeless division now existing among world religions. Theology, as done by Jesus and the Apostles, provides the only remedy. People who want to know God must rally around the faith of Jesus, the model believer. In that teacher and Savior the world’s brokenness must ultimately be mended. The problem needing attention was noted by Pinchas Lapide in *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine*:

“Distinguished but undivided, bound together in otherness, one in three: that is the Godhead and the three are one” (Credo of Gregory of Nazianzus, Jan.

6, 381). This language is still heard in Roman Catholic liturgy. Thus Hans Kung has spoken of “the unbiblical very abstractly constructed speculation of the Roman Catholic treatises” and “the Hellenization of the Christian primordial message by Greek theology” and expresses “the genuine concern of many Christians and the justified frustration of Jews and Muslims in trying to find in such formulas the pure faith in One God”...Claus Westerman said “the question of relationships of the persons in the Trinity to one another and the question of the divinity and humanity in the person of Christ as a question of ontic relationships could only arise when the Old Testament had lost its significance for the early church. The Christological and Trinitarian questions structurally correspond to the mythological questions into relationships of the gods to one another in a pantheon.”¹

What is needed is a level of sophistication in putting the simple truths of Scripture to leaders responsible for teaching and preaching across the world. Judging by the approval and excitement with which some of these already embrace the Jewish Jesus and his theology, the task will continue to be exhilarating. Reports of ministries encouraged and lives changed can only add fuel to the excitement. Of course, no one should forget in this the 450th anniversary of the tragic death of Servetus, precisely over the truth of the One God for which the JOURNAL stands, that blood has been shed when men and women stand up and are not “ashamed of me and my words” (Mark 8:38).

Is not the exegeting of the teaching of Jesus in itself a valid *theological* exercise? What is this curious use of the term “theology” to mean something removed from the work of the Messiah, the truest of all prophets and theologians?

The JOURNAL is a small voice amongst many of the world’s “big guns,” whose warnings and protests call the Church back to its foundations. That is how I conceive the task of the JOURNAL. Everything is evangelism, and all depends on a faithful relaying of what Jude, who seemed little concerned about “doing theology” (though he did it very well), referred to as “the faith once and for all delivered to the saints.” This he promoted against all opposition.

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¹ Fortress Press, 1981, 40, 41.