

# Some Brief Reflections on Inclusive Language

I first encountered the problem of “inclusive language” when I was working on my doctorate quite awhile ago. The University of Notre Dame Theology Department had a policy that all written work had to use “inclusive language.” At least one of the faculty members interpreted this to mean that one could not use male language in reference to deity, and would penalize students a full grade for doing so. I encountered a real problem when I wrote my dissertation and had to decide how to translate *homo* (the Latin word for “human being”). Latin does not normally use pronouns, but English does. In translating Latin “homo,” should I use “man” or “human being”? Which pronoun should I use when an English translation of a Latin verb referring to the action of “homo” needed a pronoun – “he”? “He or she?” “They?”

I think the problem is less acute these days. However, if we write papers or give sermons, we still have to ask the question of how properly to refer to God and to human beings. Do we call God “she”? If God is “Father” is God also “Mother”? Do we use “man” when referring to human beings? Why or why not? Following are some short reflections:

There are a number of issues that need to be addressed. First is the issue of theological language in general.

1) The motto of my blog is “*Non sermoni res, sed rei sermo subiectus est,*” which comes from Hillary of Poitiers on the Trinity. It translates approximately “The thing is not subject to the word, but the word is subject to the thing.” I first came across Hillary’s rule in Karl Barth, who appeals to it to make the point that the theology is always subject to its subject matter. That subject matter of theology is the Triune God *in se*, but as known in revelation.

We have to use some kind of language to talk about God, but that language is always subordinate to the Reality of the God who has revealed himself, not our own projections. We are not free to impose any metaphors we might wish when we speak of God in the matter of Sallie McFague's *Metaphorical Theology*. The Christian claim is that God speaks, and that the canonical Scriptures are faithful witnesses to God's Word of revelation. At the same time, any human language is inherently inadequate to speak of God. No language can capture God, and our attempts at conceptualizing continually demand correction. In the words of Charles Williams, "This is Thou, This neither is Thou."

Theological language uses the distinctions of the *via negationis*, *via affirmationis* and *via eminentiae* to speak of God.

*Via negationis* (the negative way) denies of God all limitations characteristic of creatures. Many of the traditional "divine attributes" are not positive affirmations so much as negative denials of creaturely limitations. Divine omnipotence and omnipresence mean that God is neither temporally or spatially limited; divine eternity means that God is not subject to temporal limitations; God is Spirit means that God is not embodied; Impassibility means that God does not have passions or parts; Immutability means that God is not subject to the physical or temporal alteration – God does not "get better" or "worse."

*Via affirmationis* (the positive way) affirms that, as the source of all created perfections, God must *in se* contain these perfections in an eminent manner (*Via eminentiae*) and is self-identical with them. God is not only good, but Goodness Itself. God is not only loving, but Love Itself. God is not a being, but Being Itself.

At the same time, while we can affirm positive language of God, we can form no proper concepts of God. We can apprehend

God, but not comprehend him. One of the inherent dangers of theological language is to confuse our theological conceptions with the reality to which the language refers. Theology can be incredibly flexible about the terms it uses, precisely because the terms do not encompass Divine Reality. At the same time, theology needs to be on guard that its language is not unfaithful to the reality.

Because all human language originates in created concepts, and we have no direct or immediate access to Divine reality, human language is inherently inadequate to provide proper concepts of God. Nonetheless, human language about God can provide proper judgments about God. We can affirm that certain things about God are indeed true, although such affirmations are mediated through human concepts that are inherently inadequate to express the divine reality. Because of its inadequacy to conceive divine reality, positive language is either analogical or metaphorical. Analogous language is literally true perfection language. Because God does not participate in perfection, but is himself identical with the divine perfections, such language is both universal and particular: God is not only good but goodness; God is not only just, but justice. Although expressed through creaturely concepts, the language of divine perfections applies primarily to God rather than creatures insofar as God in his self-identity is the original source of all created perfections. Creatures are created goods, because God is primarily Good and Goodness in himself, and shares that goodness with creatures.

Metaphorical language is language that is not literally true, but expresses some truth about God through comparison of some likeness with created reality: "Our God is a consuming fire."

Second is the question of specifically gendered language about God:

- 1) God has given us certain kinds of language to refer to himself in revelation, and this is the primary language we use

because God has given it to us. If we take revelation seriously, we must believe that there is analogical or metaphorical correspondence between the language applied to God in biblical revelation and God's eternal reality. The primary way that God has given to refer to himself is by the Triune names: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We believe that God is Triune in himself because he has revealed himself in the history of revelation as the Father of Jesus Christ, Jesus who is the Son of his Father, and the Holy Spirit who has been sent by Father and Son.

2) Besides the Trinitarian names, Scripture provides us with other names in speaking of God. In the OT, God is YHWH, Elohim, Adonai, El Shaddai. In English translation, these generally are translated as LORD, God, Lord, God Almighty. Besides the divine names, Scripture refers to God with numerous metaphors. The metaphors are predominantly masculine, but occasionally are feminine. A crucial distinction is that between metaphor proper, and simile. Proper metaphors tend to be masculine or neutral (God IS a Warrior, a Lion, a King); feminine metaphors tend to be similes (God is LIKE a mother, LIKE a woman in labor).

A predominant metaphor in the Old Testament is that of God as the Husband or Father of Israel and Israel as bride or daughter. In the NT, this analogy is transferred to that between Christ (as Husband) and the Church (as Bride).

At the same time, the wisdom literature of the OT regularly uses a feminine personification to describe the attribute of God's wisdom (*sophia*). Significantly, in the NT, this originally feminine language is regularly referred to Christ. HE (not she) is the Divine Wisdom.

3) Divine transcendence: One of the crucial differences between religions of transcendence (like Judaism and Christianity) and religions of immanence (Hinduism) is the metaphors they use to articulate the relation between Deity

and creation. Religions of transcendence tend to use metaphors of height (God is in "heaven") and masculine language to characterize divinity (God as Father). Religions of immanence use metaphors of embodiment (the world as God's body) and feminine imagery (mother goddess). This is not consistent across the board, however. Scripture speaks of the Spirit as brooding over the waters, and indwelling the church. Hinduism has male gods like Brahmin who do not transcend created reality.

4) Monotheism: that God is One is a crucial distinctive of Biblical faith. The masculine imagery of God (particularly in the OT) does not make the point that God is male (he is never described below the waist), but that God has no partners (there is only one God, and the God of the Bible has no consorts) and God is distinct from creation (the earth is not God's body).

5) Pronouns: That God is personal demands that we use personal pronouns in referring to God. Such personal pronouns do not mean that God is "sexed," but that God is personal (God is not an "it"). God is not sexed because God has no body. Refusal to use any pronouns (repeated and exclusive references to "God" or "God-self" or "Divinity") present the image of an impersonal God. In normal usage, the pronoun "she" really would seem to imply that God is "sexed." The preferred pronoun "he" is used, not because God is male (again, God has no sex), but because God is not an "it."

6) Some have suggested that because the Hebrew (*ruach*) in the OT is feminine in gender, we should refer to the Spirit with female pronouns ("she"). Insofar as the primary imagery of the Spirit is that of immanence, there might be some logic here. However, this seems to be confusing grammatical gender (which English does not have), with sexuality. There is no correspondence between grammatical gender and sexuality. Moreover, in the NT, the Greek *pneuma* is neuter, when Jesus refers to the Spirit, he uses the masculine pronoun (*ekeinos*),

and the masculine "Comforter" (*parakletos*).

Conclusion: If we are going to be faithful to the language of biblical revelation, we should use the primary biblical language of the Triune names (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) in referring to God. The proper pronoun would be "he." At the same time, there are numerous feminine similes applied to God in the Bible (God is not "mother," but God is "like a mother"), and these should not be avoided, but encouraged.

To reiterate, use of the Triune names in reference to Deity and the masculine pronoun follows the language of biblical revelation. It does not imply that God is male, because God is not sexed. The use of "he" in reference to God does not mean that God is male, but that God is personal.

Use of inclusive language in reference to human beings is a rather different question.

1) The primary purpose of language is to communicate. Language evolves and changes over time, and what communicates at one time does not necessarily communicate at another.

2) The church should avoid getting involved in the politically charged culture wars. We have no stake in taking sides at either preserving or demolishing "the patriarchy." The church has fundamentally different loyalties.

3) The "offending" words are the generic "man" and the masculine pronoun "he." While previous generations used these regularly in both an inclusivist sense ("human being") and an exclusive sense ("male human being"), English language use has considerably changed, and many (perhaps most) now hear the word "man" in only an exclusivist sense.

4) English has a peculiarity in that it does not distinguish between an inclusive and exclusive use of "man." Latin, for example, distinguishes between *homo* (human being), *vir* (male human being), and *femina* (female human being). Greek

distinguishes similarly between *anthropos*, *aner*, and *gune*. In Middle English, *man* was "human being," *wer* was "male human being," and *wifman* (woman) was a female human being. In modern English, *wer* has long ago fallen out of use.

5) It seems that any contemporary English document should use language in the way that it is used by the general population. While "man" seemed to be avoided for a couple of decades, it now seems to have found its way back into the general population. "Man" (with a capital M) is regularly used by the media and popular culture to refer to "humanity" or "humankind." "Man" (small "m") is also regularly used in reference to "male human beings." However, the pronoun "he" seems regularly understood to refer only to a male human being. "Men" (plural) is never understood to mean "human beings" (plural) but "male human beings" (plural). A document that deliberately reverted to the terminology of forty years ago would be understood to be deliberately provocative. People would notice not the content of the language, but the way it was used. Whether intended that way or not, the document would be read as "sexist."

6) The ESV translation of the Bible has adopted what I think is a good compromise. "Man" (capitalized) is used for Greek or Hebrew "human being." "Man" (not capitalized) is used in referring to male human beings. When no gender is present in the original Hebrew or Greek, "Man" or "man" are not used. ESV does not use "men" for plural human beings, but "humans," "people," etc.

7) My own standard practice when writing is to use "human being," "human," or "humankind," when the context calls for generic "human being," but sometimes "Man," as in Aristotle's definition of humanity as "Man is a rational animal." For pronouns I use "he or she" or "one." I do not use "they" to refer to individual human beings, although many of my students do, as did even Jane Austen almost 200 years ago. (That just seems grammatically awkward to me.) For the plural, I use

“human beings” “humans” or “people,” not “men,” unless I am referring to more than one male human being. I think my students (particularly those under 30) would hear consistent use of “man” and “men” as referring to males. The plural of “brothers” should be “brothers and sisters.” Siblings sounds too formal.

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# New Article on The Hermeneutics of Same-Sex Practice



It is only within the last generation that affluent Western Christians have suggested that same-sex sexual activity might be morally permissible. The unanimous consensus of the previous Christian tradition (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican) has been that homosexual activity is immoral, condemned by both Scripture and Church tradition. The vast majority of critical biblical scholars continue to recognize that the plain-sense reading of the biblical texts prohibits homosexual activity, and that Scripture endorses only one permissible model for sexual activity: exclusive life-long commitment within heterosexual marriage.

Given the historic Anglican commitment to the primacy and



sufficiency of Scripture, it would seem difficult to make a case from an Anglican perspective for the approval of same-sex activity, for the blessing of same-sex relationships, or for the ordaining of practicing homosexual clergy. Those who attempt to make such a case necessarily have to address the question of biblical authority. How one attempts to reconcile the endorsing of same-sex practices with the authority of Scripture will depend, first, on whether one recognizes that Scripture prohibits same-sex activity, and, second, how one responds to Scripture's teaching.

*The above is the beginning of a new rather lengthy article I've just written entitled ["The Hermeneutics of Same-Sex Practice: A Summary and Evaluation."](#) It can be found in the Pages section to the left. I cannot imagine it will win me many friends.*

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## **Second Readings: A Sermon**

Feast Day of St. John the Baptist

Isaiah 40: 1-11

Acts 13:14b-26

Luke 1:57-80



In what follows, I am going to depart from the usual way in which responsible expository preachers are supposed to preach sermons. I am not going to focus primarily on the meaning of the biblical texts themselves. Rather, I am going to look at the slightly different question of how it is that we as Christians make sense of the texts, how it is that the church has read these particular texts, and particularly the text in Isaiah. Because, frankly, there is a bit of a problem.

Let me explain what I mean by referring to an icon called *The Hospitality of Abraham*, that shows three angels sitting around a table. (For background, see Solrunn Ness, *The Mystical Language of Icons*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), pp.36-37) It is based on the story from Genesis 18 in which three men appear to Abraham, and Abraham offers the men hospitality. There are some odd details about the story. The narrative begins by stating that The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, and throughout the narrative Abraham speaks to one of the visitors, who promises Abraham that he will have a son, and later he and Abraham have a long discussion about whether or not Sodom is going to be destroyed. Throughout the narrative, this visitor who speaks with Abraham is referred to as the LORD.

The icon has a second name. It is also called "The Old Testament Trinity," and the Eastern Church in particular has identified these three visitors with the divine Trinity. John

of Damascus says: "Abraham did not see the divine nature, for no one has ever seen God, but he saw an image of God and fell down and worshiped." (See John of Damascus, *On Holy Images*, part 3, ch. 4.) In the icon, the figure on the left is identified with the Father; the figure on the middle is identified with the pre-existent Word or *Logos*. The one on the right is identified with the Holy Spirit.

The historical background to this interpretation of the Genesis story has rather interesting, if problematic, roots. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria noted that in the narrative Abraham addresses the three men (plural) in the singular as LORD. Philo suggested that this indicates that there was some kind of triad in God, and, since the Pythagorean philosophers believed that three was the perfect number, finding this number three in an appearance of God to Abraham demonstrates that God is perfect. While Christians did not follow Philo in his Pythagorean speculation, they were more than willing to follow his interpretive method by suggesting that the passage showed that, even in the OT, God is revealed as Trinity. (See Gerald Bray, "Allegory," *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 34-36)

We know this way of interpreting the Bible as "allegorical" or "figurative" interpretation. "Figurative" interpretation is a way of reading the text in other than its literal sense to suggest that there is some other equally fundamental meaning, maybe even more fundamental than the original one. This side of the Reformation and the Enlightenment, we tend to look down on it. A first rule of modern biblical interpretation is that the text has to be interpreted in its literal historical sense. Heirs of the Reformation are sometimes willing to distinguish between typology and allegory, but generally figurative reading is bad. Clearly there is something odd going on in the Abraham story, but the original author of this

passage in Genesis was not thinking about the later doctrine of the Trinity. In the discussion of this passage in the *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, prepared by Roman Catholic scholars, one would never know when one reads their exegesis of this passage, that anyone had ever thought it had anything to do with the Trinity. Modern biblical scholars, even Roman Catholics, ones have learned that lesson. (One of the chief complaints of the Protestant Reformers at the time of the Reformation, was that Roman Catholic biblical interpretation depended on allegory.)

That leads us to this morning's Isaiah reading. If one reads modern commentaries on Isaiah, one finds that this passage marks the beginning of a major division in the book of Isaiah, marking chapters 40-66, usually referred to as Deutero-Isaiah. The setting of the book is after the exile of Israel to Babylon, and the prophet is announcing that the remnant of those Israelites who have been in captivity, are finally going to be freed, and are going to return to their ancestral homeland. That is how the scholars interpret the text. It is what is called its literal historical sense.

However, if we look at the Christian tradition of interpretation of this text, we find, as John Cleese used to say on the British television comedy Monty Python, "something completely different." Handel's Messiah begins with this reading: "Comfort, Comfort Ye my People," (Is. 40:1) and then goes on to "And Every Valley Shall Be Exalted" (Is. 40:4) followed by "And the Glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." (Is. 40:5) Handel has one Old Testament reading after another after another that all lead in a particular direction: "For unto us a child is born, unto us, a son is given." (Is. 9:6) Handel thinks the readings are about Christmas. Without warning, he suddenly shifts from Old Testament readings to passages from Luke about shepherds watching their flocks in the field by night (Luke 2:8). And then, again without warning, he goes back to the Old

Testament. And the rest of *The Messiah* is a hodge podge of shifting back and forth between Old Testament and New Testament readings. Even after the resounding "Hallelujah Chorus," reciting the Book of Revelation (Rev. 19:6), Handel bounces back to Job, "I know that my Redeemer Liveth" (Job 19:25). Can you imagine what it would be like to take a certain kind of modern biblical critic to a performance of Handel's *Messiah*?

This morning's biblical readings are the readings for the feast day of John the Baptist. And the Old Testament reading is Handel's opening passage from Isaiah. And we know why. All four gospels identify John the Baptist with this passage from Isaiah 40. Mark's gospel begins with, "As it is written in Isaiah the prophet. Behold I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness; Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." (Mark 1:2) In John's gospel, John the Baptist tells the priest and Levites who question him, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said.'" (John 1:23)

One can imagine a certain kind of biblical critic having a discussion with Mark, or perhaps even with John the Baptist himself: "No, no, no. You've got it quite wrong. Whoever wrote Deutero-Isaiah certainly was not thinking about you, John. And you don't even have the Hebrew right. It's not 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness.' It's 'A voice cries,' full stop. 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,' full stop. The voice is not in the wilderness. The way is in the wilderness. The way is the way back from Babylon, to Jerusalem which goes through the wilderness. I'm sorry," says the critic. "But in my upcoming course entitled *Gunkel and Geschichte: A Form-Critical Introduction to Deutero and Trito-Isaiah in their Historical and Cultural Setting*, John the Baptist gets a 'C'!"

And, yet . . . isn't there something of a nagging voice in the

back of our minds that gets just a bit irritated with this kind of critic? “Yes, yes, yes. Of course. No doubt everything you’re telling us about the original context in which this passage from Isaiah 40 was written is correct. And yet . . . Handel was right! And Mark and the other gospel writers were right! And John the Baptist himself was right! John is the voice crying, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord.’ And the Lord for whose way he prepares is Jesus!”

If we are going to have a Christian reading of the Bible we have to be able to say both. The reason we have to say both is that, for Christians, the Bible consists of Two Testaments. And we have to take both Testaments seriously.

If we take the Old Testament seriously as Scripture, we have to take it seriously in its literal historical sense. Christians have sometimes been guilty of using the Old Testament as a kind of spring board to get to the New Testament—and the sooner we get there, and leave all that Old Testament stuff behind, the better.

But if we are going to take Isaiah seriously as Scripture, we have to take seriously Isaiah’s actual message. And we have to take seriously that the second half of Isaiah really is about Israel’s return from captivity in Babylon after the exile. The Cyrus that Isaiah talks about in Isaiah 45:1 really is the Cyrus who conquered Babylon and allowed the exiled Israelites to return from captivity five hundred years before Jesus or John the Baptist were born.

At the same time, if we are going to take the New Testament seriously, we have to take seriously that the New Testament interprets the Old Testament as being about Jesus. And one of the ways in which the New Testament interprets the Old Testament as being about Jesus is to engage in figurative readings. It is not just icon painters and allegorical interpreters of Scripture like Origen who engage in figurative interpretation of the Old Testament. The New Testament itself

does it. And the way in which the gospels associate Isaiah 40 with John the Baptist is an example.

I confess that I myself have been the victim of graduate level theological education. It has taken me awhile to appreciate that there is something more going on in figurative interpretation than simply bad exegesis, trying to find a Christian meaning in an Old Testament text that just is not there. I confess that when I was younger I used to take a certain pride in disabusing simple Christians of their pious but mistaken readings of the Old Testament.

But rejoice! There is salvation even for theologians with Ph.D's! I have finally seen the light! C. S. Lewis, in an essay entitled "Second Readings" in his book *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1958) looks at the question of figurative reading in a helpful way. I like Lewis's term "Second Readings" better than "figurative interpretation" or "allegorical interpretation" because, rather, than suggesting that New Testament writers like Mark or Paul have misread, or deliberately distorted the Old Testament text, they have instead seen the way we cannot help but read an earlier Old Testament text as having said more than it meant originally, when we read it in the light of Jesus.

Lewis illustrates his point by referring first not to a biblical text, but to some pagan ones, including Plato's description in the *Republic*, of a perfectly righteous man who is treated with contempt when he comes among ordinary people, who bind him, scourge him, and finally kill him by impaling him on a stake. There is a similar example in the Apocryphal book of Wisdom where the unrighteous decide to oppress the righteous poor man.

*Let us lie in wait for the righteous man, because he is inconvenient to us and opposes our actions; he reproaches us for sins against the law and accuses us of sins against our*

*training. He professes to have knowledge of God and calls himself a child of the Lord. . . . Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life, for if the righteous man is God's son, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. Let us test him with insult and torture . . . Let us condemn him to a shameful death for, according to what he says, he will be protected. (Wisdom 2: 10-20).*

For a Christian, it is almost impossible to read these descriptions, and not think of Jesus, although they were written well before Jesus lived. Similarly, I would imagine there are few Christians, even those who have been trained strictly in the rules of modern critical exegesis, who can read the account of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53, and not think of Jesus.

Lewis suggests that in the real world these resemblances are not irrelevant. Hundreds of years before Jesus came along, Plato was able to imagine what would happen if someone like Jesus came along because that is how wickedness treats goodness when it is confronted by it. Look what happened to Martin Luther King, Jr. in our own time! But, how much more would it be the case that when God works through his chosen people the nation of Israel, and works through their prophets, and through them creates a literature in anticipation of his coming among us in person through the incarnation, that that there will be anticipations of God's redemption in Christ that appear in that literature? How could it be otherwise?

So it is perfectly natural for the New Testament writers to engage in these second readings of Old Testament texts. They are a key to discerning the connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament because they are based on real connections. The readings may be figurative, but they are not arbitrary. If the God of who raised Jesus from the dead is the same God who delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, and then



delivered Israel again from exile in Babylon, it is not arbitrary to see a connection between the Exodus or the return from exile in Babylon, and the deliverance from sin and death that Jesus' death and resurrection bring. If God wrote the script, he knows the plot-line!

What might be the second reading that we find in Isaiah 40? Well, first, before we find the second reading, we need to pay attention to the first reading. In just a few short points, what is that reading?

First, Israel's exile is ended. Israel has been punished for her sins, and she is delivered from her captivity.

Second, Israel's God is returning to Zion, to the same cities of Judah that had been taken into captivity.

Third, what is the wilderness? I would suggest that the wilderness is not the distance that Israel has to travel between Babylon and Jerusalem. Rather, as in the earlier Exodus from slavery in Egypt, the wilderness is the place of exile and judgment (following Christopher Seitz in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), vol. vi: 335). Israel is being delivered from the wilderness to come once again into the Promised Land.

There is a contrast between God's divine sovereignty in delivering Israel and human weakness. All flesh is grass. The Babylonians, who had held Israel in captivity, who seemed so powerful, are actually grass. It is God who controls history, not the Babylonians.

Finally, it is God who brings victory, but he brings victory, not as a conqueror, like the Babylonians, but as a shepherd. God cares for Israel the way that a shepherd cares for his sheep.

How does the New Testament take up these themes from Isaiah in

a second reading?

First, it is John the Baptist who is the voice pronouncing in a new situation that Israel's exile is ended. (Luke 3:2-6).

As in Isaiah, there is a lamb. Jesus is the lamb, but he is the lamb who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). He is also the shepherd who seeks out and cares for the sheep, and lays down his life for them (Luke 15:4-7; John 10:14-18.)

Jesus is also the Lord—the *kurios*—whose road is prepared for by the voice. The Lord has indeed returned to Zion! (Luke 19:28-40; Acts 2:36; 10:36; Phil. 2:1).

Finally, all flesh is grass! John the Baptist will preach that those who respond to the message with resistance will be separated like chaff from wheat (Luke 3:17).

Zechariah's prophecy in this morning's reading from Luke (2:68-79)—which has come to be known as *The Benedictus*—has many of the same themes.

God's people are in exile, but God has visited and delivered his people. God's promises through his prophets have been fulfilled, and God has remembered his covenant with Israel. God's people have received the forgiveness of their sins. John the Baptist is the new Prophet of the Most High. He is the voice crying in the wilderness. And Jesus is the Lord whose way is prepared, who brings salvation and forgiveness of sins, and gives light to those in darkness.

This is how the New Testament writers have interpreted the Old Testament. But it is a second reading. The key issue that has to be addressed is that of continuity. How do we know that the connection that the New Testament writers draw between Isaiah's "voice" and John the Baptist, between the Lord who returns to Zion, and Jesus, who is called "Lord" by Christians is a legitimate reading? Why is it not arbitrary?

The thing about second readings is that they are second

readings. It is always possible to point to the literal meaning of the original text, and refuse to follow the interpreter who tries to point to a connection. It is always possible to claim that the so-called second reading is really nothing more than seeing pictures in clouds, pictures that exist only in our imagination.

However, I am going to suggest three connections that the New Testament writers draw in their second readings of Old Testament texts, connections with the life of Jesus that make the second readings almost inevitable, and especially connections with Isaiah.

First, there are Jesus' words and deeds. In Luke 4, Jesus begins his ministry in Nazareth by citing Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives." (Luke 4:16-19; cf. Is. 61:1-2). Throughout Jesus' ministry, his preaching and his miracles are signs that God's kingdom is present, that Israel's exile has ended. When John is imprisoned, he sends messengers to Jesus to question whether he really is "the one to come"? And Jesus replies by citing Isaiah: "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up!" (Luke 7:22-23; cf. Is. 29:18). Jesus is asking John to engage in a second reading.

Second, there are two themes in Isaiah 40-66 whose connection is never really explained. On the one hand is the theme of deliverance from exile and a new creation. On the other the story of the Suffering Servant. How do these fit together?

The consistent claim of the New Testament is that it is Jesus' resurrection from the dead that ties them together. Jesus himself and the early church saw his crucifixion as a typological fulfillment of the suffering of the Servant (Luke 24:25; Acts 8:32-36). It is a second reading. In Jesus' own words, his death is a "ransom for many" (Mark 10:45; cf. Is.

53:10).

At the same time, Jesus' resurrection is the vindication of the Servant. It is also the clue to the Servant's identity. The New Testament is clear that in raising Jesus from the dead, God proclaimed him not only as Christ, but as Lord (Rom. 1:4). The Suffering Servant is the dying and risen Lord whose way has been prepared by John.

Finally, the resurrection is the new creation by which Jesus creates a new people. The church is the people who have been brought back from exile. They are both Jews and Gentiles who come to Zion (Acts 1:8; Is. 60).

The key to the legitimacy of the second reading is the resurrection. If God really has raised Jesus from the dead, then it is almost impossible to avoid the second readings. If God has raised Jesus, then his crucifixion really makes sense as the Suffering Servant whose death is a ransom for sins. If God has raised Jesus, then Jesus' claim that his preaching and miracles were deliverance to the captives, and sight to the blind as signs of a new return from exile just makes sense. If God has raised Jesus, then Jesus is the Lord who has returned to Zion, and John is the voice who calls on Israel to prepare for the coming of her Lord!

But we cannot stop there. The question of second readings is not just a question about continuity between Jesus and Israel, but of Jesus and the church. Where does this church fit in all of this? To see Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision of deliverance from exile demands that we see things through faith in Jesus' resurrection. It is because God has raised Jesus from the dead that we can believe that God has delivered us from exile. We are the new people made up of both Jews and Gentiles. The church is the New Jerusalem, and Jesus is the Lord who has visited her.

At the same time, second reasons demand faith because the

readings are not self-evident. From external appearances, exile continues. We believe that Jesus has brought salvation, but many continue to live in bondage. Jesus is the Lord who has visited his people, but he is also the Suffering Servant, and to follow Jesus means to share in his sufferings. Our sins are forgiven, but we still sin, and we still look forward to our final deliverance. Every mountain has not yet been brought low. Every valley has not yet been raised up. All flesh is still grass, and until Jesus returns, like the author of the second half of Isaiah, we must still wait in hope for there to be no more tears and no more death.

In the meanwhile, however, we can still rejoice with Handel in singing “Comfort, Comfort, my people,” because we know that our Redeemer lives. And we have confidence that some day “All flesh shall see it together!”

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## Thomas Aquinas on the Formal Sufficiency of Scripture



Dr. Michael Liccione has responded to my post on the distinction between formal and informal sufficiency of Scripture, and specifically objects to my reading that Thomas Aquinas subscribes to a “formal sufficiency” of Scripture. By a formal sufficiency I had meant that Scripture has an inherent intelligibility that does not

derive from some source outside itself. To the contrary, I had stated that a merely material sufficiency would not have an inherent intelligibility, but would rather derive its intelligibility from an outside source. Dr. Liccione specifically quarrels with my reading of Aquinas, and insists to the contrary, that Aquinas affirmed the “material sufficiency” of Scripture

*in the sense explained by WW, in no way affirmed the formal sufficiency of Scripture in the sense explained by WW. That is partly why Aquinas, like Newman and even Vatican II after him, most certainly did see a magisterium as necessary for interpreting Scripture reliably.*

I find this a startling admission, and shows at least that I have not misunderstood the kind of argument being put forward by current disciples of John Henry Newman. Dr. Liccione’s defense for his interpretation of Aquinas is a quotation from S.T. 2.2.5.3:

*Now the formal object of faith is the First Truth, as manifested in Holy Writ and the teaching of the Church, which proceeds from the First Truth. Consequently whoever does not adhere, as to an infallible and Divine rule, to the teaching of the Church, which proceeds from the First Truth manifested in Holy Writ, has not the habit of faith, but holds that which is of faith otherwise than by faith.*

Unfortunately, the passage does not mean what Dr. Liccione claims that it means, as one can discern from its immediate context. Thomas is not concerned here with epistemological questions such as Dr. Liccione’s distinction between “opinion” and the infallible teaching of the “magisterium.” Indeed, the authority of the magisterium is not the point of discussion at all. Aquinas mentions the “teaching of the Church,” but he nowhere mentions the pope, for example. To know what he means we have to know which specific teaching of the Church he is

talking about, and why he considers it infallible.

The answer to this question is not difficult to find. Aquinas is asking a very specific question in 2.2. art. 5: "Whether a man who disbelieves one article of faith, can have lifeless faith in the other articles?" Thomas's answer is that "Neither living nor lifeless faith remains in a heretic who disbelieves one article of faith," the reason being that anyone who doubts an article of faith cannot have the virtue of faith. So, the specific question is not about the authority of the magisterium, but about a person who refuses to believe a specific article of faith. The question is not about epistemology, or even the authority of the church, but about the specific content of belief or unbelief. What particular false belief deprives one of the virtue of faith? To answer this we have to know what Thomas means by an "article of faith."

What does Thomas mean by an "article of faith"? The answer can be found in Question 1 of the very same section. Here Thomas identifies the "First Truth"—the "formal object of faith" referred to in q. 5—with Deity itself (art. 1). However, the material things to which faith assents includes not only God, but things related to God, specifically those divine operations that aid the human being on the way to salvation. Specifically, they are "Things concerning Christ's human nature, and the sacraments of the Church, or any creatures whatever, come under faith, in so far as by them we are directed to God, and in as much as we assent to them on account of the Divine Truth."

Aquinas is quite clear what he means by the expression "article of faith." When using the expression, he is referring quite specifically to the "Rule of Faith" (my expression) summarized in the creeds. He makes this clear in q. 1, art. 8, when objection 5 complains that the "articles of faith" are unsatisfactory because the Eucharist is not mentioned. Aquinas summarizes the articles as follows:

*Now with regard to the majesty of the Godhead, three things are proposed to our belief: first, the unity of the Godhead, to which the first article refers; secondly, the trinity of the Persons, to which three articles refer, corresponding to the three Persons; and thirdly, the works proper to the Godhead, the first of which refers to the order of nature, in relation to which the article about the creation is proposed to us; the second refers to the order of grace, in relation to which all matters concerning the sanctification of man are included in one article; while the third refers to the order of glory, and in relation to this another article is proposed to us concerning the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting. Thus there are seven articles referring to the Godhead.*

*In like manner, with regard to Christ's human nature, there are seven articles, the first of which refers to Christ's incarnation or conception; the second, to His virginal birth; the third, to His Passion, death and burial; the fourth, to His descent into hell; the fifth, to His resurrection; the sixth, to His ascension; the seventh, to His coming for the judgment, so that in all there are fourteen articles."*

The "articles of faith" are simply identified with the subject matter of the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. How do these truths of salvation that are summarized in the Creeds become known? How do the articles of faith become objects of faith? The answer is clear: They are "all things contained in Holy Writ."  
1.1. rep. obj. 3.

So Thomas states specifically in q. 1. Art 9 why the Church needs a summary formulation of its faith:

*The truth of faith is contained in Holy Writ, diffusely, under various modes of expression, and sometimes obscurely, so that, in order to gather the truth of faith from Holy Writ, one needs long study and practice, which are*



*unattainable by all those who require to know the truth of faith, many of whom have no time for study, being busy with other affairs. And so it was necessary to gather together a clear summary from the sayings of Holy Writ, to be proposed to the belief of all. This indeed was no addition to Holy Writ, but something taken from it.*

Note that Aquinas says (in essence) that the Scripture contains all things “sufficient” for salvation, that the “truth of faith” can be gathered from Scripture, but that one needs study and practice to know this truth. Many do not have this capacity, not because Scripture is not inherently intelligible, but because they do not have the time for study or are too busy. Moreover, the creedal formulations of faith are “no addition to Holy Writ, but something taken from it.”

One could hardly come up with a better way of saying that Scripture is “formally sufficient.” Although not everything in Scripture is clear—it contains some things obscurely—its essential subject matter is evident to those who have the time, study, and practice to read it properly, and its essential content—its intelligible subject matter—can be found in the Creeds, which provide a “clear summary from the sayings of Holy Writ . . .” not an addition, but “something taken from it.”

Of course, as a Medieval Catholic, Aquinas certainly did believe that the “universal church cannot err”—Vincent of Lerins would agree ; he affirms in the very next article that the pope can draw up a creedal symbol, and he bases his argument for papal authority on a classic Petrine passages (Lk 22:32). But, again, this argument in no way departs from his affirmation of the formal sufficiency of Scripture. Thomas states in 2.10. rep.obj. 1:

*The truth of faith is sufficiently explicit in the teaching of Christ and the apostles. But since, according to 2 Pet.*

*3:16, some men are so evil-minded as to pervert the apostolic teaching and other doctrines and Scriptures to their own destruction, it was necessary as time went on to express the faith more explicitly against the errors which arose.*

Aquinas does not regard the pope as providing to Scripture an intelligibility it does not already have, or that of bringing out a truth that was not already evident in Scripture. To the contrary, “the truth of faith is *sufficiently explicit* (my emphasis) in the teaching of Christ and the apostles,” that is, Scripture. Rather, papal authority is needed not because Scripture is not clear on the essential matters of salvation, but because “evil-minded” people deliberately “pervert the apostolic teaching,” and so it is necessary to “express the faith more explicitly” against error. No Reformation Christian who would affirm the necessity of confessions, synods, or councils would disagree. Certainly the church needs an authority to correct those who willfully disregard the “truth of faith,” which is “sufficiently explicit” in Scripture.

Moreover, not only does Thomas affirm the inherent intelligibility (and therefore formal sufficiency) of Scripture, he explicitly addresses the question of development in 1.7, when he asks “Whether the Articles of Faith have increased in course of time.” Thomas responds:

*The articles of faith stand in the same relation to the doctrine of faith, as self-evident principles to a teaching based on natural reason. Among these principles there is a certain order, so that some are contained implicitly in others; thus all principles are reduced, as to their first principle, to this one: “The same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time,” as the Philosopher states (Metaph. iv, text. 9). In like manner all the articles are contained implicitly in certain primary matters of faith, such as God’s existence, and His providence over the salvation of man, according to Heb. 11: “He that cometh to*

*God, must believe that He is, and is a rewarder to them that seek Him." For the existence of God includes all that we believe to exist in God eternally, and in these our happiness consists; while belief in His providence includes all those things which God dispenses in time, for man's salvation, and which are the way to that happiness: and in this way, again, some of those articles which follow from these are contained in others: thus faith in the Redemption of mankind includes belief in the Incarnation of Christ, His Passion and so forth.*

Aquinas makes clear then what he means by an "increase" in the articles of faith. The Old Testament prophets had implicit faith in Christ who was to come; the apostles actually knew the "mystery of Christ." This is hardly a "development" in Newman's sense.

What finally is the point of Thomas's statement in 2.2.5.3 quoted by Dr. Liccione? The meaning is clear. A heretic who rejects one of the articles of faith, specifically stated in the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, which are "clear summaries" of the "sufficiently explicit" subject matter of revelation found in Scripture (God's creation and salvation of humanity in Christ), does not have the faith of the Church, and the Church does not err when it affirms this creedal summary of the teaching about God's salvation of humanity (the "articles of faith") which finds its origin in the clear sufficient explicit teaching of Scripture. Moreover, the magisterial authority of the church has the right and obligation to explicitly endorse and teach clearly this creedal doctrine that summarizes teaching found in Scripture when it is rejected by willful heretics.

This is an understanding that would certainly be affirmed by Anglican theologians in my own tradition like John Jewel or Richard Hooker. In fact, Jewel's "Apology of the Church of England" is a defense of the catholicity of the C of E built

around an outline that follows the Creed, which he argues is a summary of the clear teaching of Scripture, and the heart of Catholic faith. Jewel argues further that the authority of the keys means that the Church has the authority to forgive or retain sins based on the promises of Scripture:

*We say also, that the minister doth execute the authority of binding and shutting, as often as he shutteth up the gate of the kingdom of heaven against the unbelieving and stubborn persons, denouncing unto them God's vengeance, and everlasting punishment: or else, when he doth quite shut them out from the bosom of the Church by open excommunication. Out of doubt, what sentence soever the minister of God shall give in this sort, God Himself doth so well allow of it, that whatsoever here in earth by their means is loosed and bound, God Himself will loose and bind, and confirm the same in heaven. And touching the keys, wherewith they may either shut or open the kingdom of heaven, we with Chrysostom say, "They be the knowledge of the Scriptures:" with Tertullian we say, "They be the interpretation of the law:" and with Eusebius, we call them "The Word of God." The Apology of the Church of England*

Jewel's summary of the purpose of the keys is virtually identical to what Aquinas says in *ST* 2.2.5.3. The current controversy that is dividing the Anglican Communion of which I am a member has occurred because leaders of the Church have repudiated not only the plain teaching of Scripture about sexuality, but also the explicit teaching of the creeds concerning the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ for salvation. It is because the teaching office of the Church (as represented by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Consultative Council) has refused to exercise their responsibilities as holders of the power of the keys that the Communion is in danger of splitting, and that many Anglican Churches in the Global South have broken communion with the Episcopal Church USA, and have instead endorsed the new North

American Anglican Province as the faithful, orthodox and catholic representative of Anglicanism in North America.

I conclude then that Dr. Liccione has misinterpreted Aquinas here. His distinction between an interpretation of Scripture that is mere "opinion" rather than the indubitable certainty that comes from the magisterium reflects rather the concern about epistemic certainty that first appears with a vengeance in the post-Reformation Tridentine controversies, and which reappears in the epistemological anxieties that one finds in Newman's critique of "private judgment." But it is not Aquinas.

The key passage for understanding Thomas Aquinas's own views on the role of Scripture is actually found in ST 1.1-10, where Thomas discusses *sacra doctrina* in a perichoretic or symbiotic relationship with *sacra scriptura*, as well as his exegetical writings. Thomas's understanding is similar to what Heiko Oberman has called Tradition I, as opposed to the late Medieval understanding of Tradition II which is echoed by Tridentine theologians. Thomas's understanding of Scripture is certainly not the understanding of Tridentine apologists like Bellarmine and (definitely) not that of Newman.

Two of the most helpful recent discussions of Aquinas's understanding of Scripture can be found in:

Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum, eds. *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction* (T & T Clark, 2004).

Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum, eds. *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to his Biblical Commentaries* (T & T Clark, 2005).

I recommend them. Nicholas Healy suggests in the latter volume that Aquinas's understanding of the relation between revelation, Scripture and preaching has affinities to Karl Barth's notion of the threefold Word of God.

Addendum: After posting the above, I decided to add this rather lengthy but telling quote from Nicholas Healy's "Introduction" to the above *Aquinas on Scripture*, pp 18-19.

*[For Thomas,] Sacra doctrina is in some important respects identifiable with Scripture. . . . But sacra doctrina is not normative, or not in anything like the way Scripture is. The teaching of the Creeds is fundamental, not because it is a product of the Church but because the credal statements are drawn from Scripture. The teachings of the Fathers have authority, but only of a probable kind. While Thomas treats the 'holy doctors' with immense respect, he does not hesitate to correct their imperfections, 'loyally explaining' or 'reverently expounding' (exponere reverenter) their remarks so that they better conform to Scripture. He insists that 'faith rests upon the revelation made to the apostles and prophets who wrote the canonical books and not on the revelations (if any such there are) made to other doctors.' Thus Thomas does not anticipate the later Roman Catholic doctrine of two sources of revelation, Scripture and Church tradition. Though he admits an oral apostolic tradition, this has no authority with regard to doctrine, but applies only to specific practices. Scripture alone is the basis of our faith, and of itself it gives us knowledge sufficient for our salvation, to which nothing new can be or need be added (my emphasis).*

*In sum, the exegesis of Scripture can never be dispensed with. We cannot rely upon intermediary work, whether theological systems or conciliar documents or papal teachings. Such intermediaries are vital and constitute the ongoing disputatio that informs the Church's quest for more truthful preaching and witness. But for that quest to be successful, teachers and preachers must return ever anew to Scripture. . . .*

*. . . Thomas engages in conversation with everyone he can possibly think of, irrespective of their methods or even*

*their religious beliefs. A glance at his commentaries will find him referring to Aristotle and other philosophers and their commentators (including mediaeval Muslims), Church doctrines, papal definitions, ancient heresies, the exegesis of the Fathers, and contemporary proposals, together with a cloud of references to other parts of the Bible. All potential sources of truth are brought into the discussion in order that Scripture may be the more deeply probed and understood. Yet none of the non-biblical sources are permitted to govern the interpretation, which lies with the *sensus litteralis vel historicus* alone. Instead, it is they who are brought within Scripture's orbit and made to serve its divine author's communicative intention.*

By the way, I love the above picture of Thomas. Mary (representing the Church) points Thomas to the Father, who hands him the Scriptures. Thomas receives the Scriptures directly from the Father, and looks through them (as it were) to God. Mary (the Church) does not point to herself; neither does she hand Thomas the Scriptures, or interpret them to him. Nor does she stand between Thomas and the Scriptures or between the Scriptures and God. Theologically, this is correct.

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## **Wrestling With the Symbols: A Sermon on Reading Scripture**

The following is a sermon that appeared on my website, and never made it to my blog. Sometimes an example is better than an argument. Perhaps what I write below shows something of what I mean when I say that Scripture is “formally sufficient”

and has an “inherent intelligibility.” Other helpful examples can be found in my article on George Herbert in my “Pages” section in the sidebar and my sermon on “Christological Subversion.” . . . Or you could just read all of my sermons.



One of the prerogatives of the preacher is that, since he or she is the one in the pulpit, he or she can also break the rules on occasion. This morning, I’d like to break the rules a little bit. Rather than preaching on the Scriptural readings, I’m going to talk *about* them. In a few minutes, you’ll realize what I mean by that.

What I would like to do this morning is talk a little bit about the use of metaphorical and symbolic language in Scripture. Metaphor and symbol are the primary ways in which the language of the Scripture speaks of God. This happens so frequently that often we don’t even think about it. A good example is the number of images that cluster around Jesus in the NT. In the NT, Jesus is called a King, a Lamb, a Priest, a Shepherd, a Judge—the list goes on and on.

The readings in today’s lectionary provide a prime example of the prevalence of metaphor in Scripture. What we see in the passages is something that happens frequently in the Bible. A single image or cluster of images is used and developed by several authors to develop a common theme. Identifying the central themes of the metaphors in today’s readings is fairly straightforward. The predominant metaphor is that of a farmer who owns a vineyard. In all three passages, the owner of the



vineyard is clearly God. The vineyard represents the people of God, more specifically God's covenant people, the nation of Israel. Finally, the prevailing theme is that of judgment. The owner of the vineyard is—to put it mildly—disappointed with something about his vineyard.

In the Isaiah passage, the vineyard owner is disappointed because the vineyard has not produced its expected crops—instead of producing grapes from which good wine could be made, it has produced “wild grapes.”

In the parable told by Jesus in Matthew's gospel, the approach is slightly different. In this variation on the theme, it is not the vineyard that disappoints the owner, but the tenants—who refuse to turn over to the vineyard owner his share of the grapes. When the vineyard owner sends his servants, and finally his Son, to collect what is due to him, they are beaten and the Son is killed.

Finally, the Psalm looks at things from a rather different perspective. In the Psalm, the point of view is that of the tenant, or perhaps the vineyard itself, who asks the vineyard owner why he has neglected his vineyard and allowed it to be trampled and destroyed by strangers and wild beasts.

The key question for the reader of these passages is: what are we to make of this metaphor of the vineyard owner and the vineyard? To answer this question, we have to ask how we deal with metaphor in the Scriptures in general.

The first point to which we must attend is that metaphorical language is not literal. This should be so obvious as not to need pointing out. There is probably no one among us who would be so oblivious as to interpret today's passages literally—to presume that the Bible was teaching us that God is a literal vineyard owner who plants grapes and harvests them. Why would God need to plant grapes? God is the Creator of all the grapes in the world. If God planted grapes, would he eat them or make

wine with them? Would he drink his own wine, or would he sell it on the open market? Would it be fair competition if you could buy wine in the local liquor store that had the "God" label on it?

Oddly, many otherwise intelligent people seem to forget this point when it comes to interpreting Scripture. Literalism is a problem both for those in the church who call themselves progressives and those who call themselves conservatives. Every once in awhile a prominent bishop suddenly notices that this metaphorical language does not make much sense if taken literally. Four decades ago, Bishop John A.T. Robinson came to the realization that God does not really live in the sky, and decided that "our image of God must go." We could not talk about "our Father in heaven" anymore. These days, the retired Bishop John Spong of the diocese of Newark has written best-selling book after book in which he often seems to confuse the metaphorical and symbolic language of Scripture with the language of mythology, and assumes that the key to understanding the Scripture is to discard the "myth" and keep whatever we find left that is palatable. Interestingly, the palatable parts just happen to correspond to the good Bishop's political causes.

At the opposite extreme from Bishop Spong are groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Seventh Day Adventists, and fundamentalist Protestants who take the strange and sometimes bizarre symbolism found in Scripture texts like the Book of Revelation and try to find in this symbolism a one to one correspondence with events in the modern world. The popular *Left Behind* novels are the latest example. Where Spong literalizes what is intended to be symbolic and mythologizes what is intended to be literal, the Fundamentalists find literal meanings in symbolic passages that are just not there. Although some in the last election might have found it disappointing, the Book of Revelation does not teach that John Kerry [or now Barak Obama] was the anti-Christ. In this

respect, Handel's Messiah is a better interpretation of the book of Revelation than the one's found in any Fundamentalist commentary on the end of the world.

If metaphorical language is so easily subject to misinterpretation, why is it so prominent in the Scriptures? Why should Scripture not speak in clear, unmistakable literal language, something like the instructions for programming a VCR or a computer software manual? (Well, perhaps that wasn't quite the best illustration!) An ancient Christian writer who was known by the name of Dionysius the Areopagite long ago asked himself the same question. Why does Scripture sometimes use such inappropriate and even irreverent images to describe God? God is described in the Bible as a rock, a lion, a thief in the night, even a chicken! Dionysius suggested that such outrageous images are used because they help us avoid the dangers of confusing our own limited conceptions of God with the reality itself. When sophisticated theologians speak of God as being all-powerful, or all-perfect, or Necessary Being, they sometimes give the impression that they know what they're talking about. But of course we have no conception of what it means to be all-powerful or totally perfect, or self-existing Being. These notions are totally outside our experience as finite creatures. But we do know what a farmer is, or a rock, or a lion, and hopefully we're not apt to confuse them with the literal reality. We know that God does not plant grapes, or stub your toe, or have a bushy mane. Because the images cannot be taken literally, they point beyond themselves to the God who is hidden in mystery.

Another characteristic of metaphor is that it is open-ended and evocative. A metaphor can be used in different ways in different contexts. No one use of the metaphor is necessarily the single correct one. Different uses and different metaphors have to balance each other. We see that in today's readings. A central concern of the readings is God's judgment of the covenant people of Israel. An overly literal and one-sided

reading of the parable in Mt's gospel could lead to the conclusion that God has finally given up on the people of Israel. The vineyard has now been turned over to the Church. Israel is no longer God's people. But the reading in the Psalm will not allow us to take that approach. In the Psalm, the tenants (or the actual vineyard) dare to ask the vineyard owner if he hasn't been too hasty, and beg for a second chance. The tenants ask: "Why have you broken down [the] wall [of your vineyard], so that all who pass by pluck off its grapes? . . . Turn now, O God of hosts, look down from heaven; behold and tend this vine; preserve what your right hand has planted."

The apostle Paul uses imagery similar to that of today's passages in Romans 11 in a manner that also calls into question simple attempts to define God's judgment. Paul says that we Gentile Christians are like a wild branch that has been grafted into the cultivated olive tree of Israel. If we fail to be faithful to that which we have been called, God can remove our wild branch from the original tree. In another development of the same theme, John's gospel applies the vineyard imagery to the Church rather than to Israel. Jesus says to his followers on the night before his crucifixion: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you abide in me, you will bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:4) But Jesus goes on to say: "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers." (John 15:5) If we who are the Church do not abide in Christ, then, like Israel, we also will face judgment. God's judgment is not then a rejection of the nation of Israel as such, but a warning to the people of God, whether those of the old covenant or the new.

Similarly, the open-endedness of metaphor in Scripture means that we should not jump too quickly to the conclusion that we know necessarily what a given metaphor means. The metaphor of the owner of the vineyard is a good example. A careless

reading of the metaphor seems to present us with a rather harsh, even unmerciful image of God. If a vineyard doesn't produce what you want, then you dig it up and start over. But, of course, God's people aren't branches and dirt, simply to be discarded if they do not produce. As the Psalmist pleads: "Restore us, O God of hosts; show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved." At the beginning of the Isaiah passage we read this morning, we discover that the planter of the vineyard is not only a farmer, but also a lover, a lover who grieves over his vineyard. He pleads: "What more was there to do for my vineyard than I have not done in it? When I looked for it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?" At the end of the reading, we find that God truly cares for his vineyard: "[T]he people of Judah are his pleasant planting." But when God expected justice from his people, he found bloodshed; when he looked for justice, he heard the cry of oppression. So the casual reading just won't do. God is not simply a capricious vineyard owner. His judgment is always rooted in his care for his people and our just dealings with one another.

In unveiling the metaphors of Scripture, we often find that a willingness to be teased, to wrestle with an image, and to sit lightly with a given interpretation is more helpful than simply to dismiss the images we don't like, and to keep the ones we do. A sanctified imagination is sometimes more helpful in understanding Scripture than a Ph.D. in ancient languages or a bishop's mitre. The Scriptures like to play with our imagination. If a given metaphor is somewhat limited, the writers do not hesitate to build on it, to pile metaphor on metaphor. Sometimes the metaphors seem impenetrable, sometimes they just don't seem to make sense. In other cases, they speak to us immediately. Whether they speak directly to our hearts, or we "just don't get it," we should remind ourselves that we need to be patient with the metaphors, to realize that sometimes their very strangeness and outrageousness is needed to get our attention, to awake us from our insulated cocoons

and to learn not only how to understand in new ways the unknowable God to whom they point, but to relearn the meaning of old symbols that we think we understand, but may not have understood at all.

At the end of the day, the metaphors are pointers. They are not the thing in itself. God is a lover, and a lover who sometimes plays hard to get. God has spoken to us in metaphors, not because they are adequate, but because we have no way to speak of him that is quite adequate. The metaphors shatter our illusions, but the Shepherd, the Rock, the Vineyard Owner, to whom they point, is the real thing itself, and not a metaphor.

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## A Reply to the Questioning Christian

D.C. Toedt (aka [The Questioning Christian](#)) is one of the regular contrarians who hangs out at TitusOneNine, Kendall Harmon's blog. D.C is a lawyer who regularly raises doubts about the historical reliability of the New Testament—especially when it comes to either miracles or the historic doctrines of the church. In a recent discussion over at [TitusOneNine](#), D.C. raised the following objection:

*If we're to believe Acts, it's abundantly clear that the apostles regarded Jesus as a mortal. They thought he was a special mortal, to be sure: in their minds, his resurrection proved that he had been designated by God to return Real Soon Now as Israel's liberator. [Evidently they were wrong about that.] But there's nothing in their reported early preaching that even hints they thought Jesus was God Incarnate. The*

*standard orthodox response is that it took the church awhile to come to that conclusion. OK, fine: then the conclusion is far from self-evident – and it's not at all unreasonable for others to conclude otherwise.)*

I responded rather hastily, "Sorry, D. C., you're wrong." This resulted in a few interchanges at the end of which D.C. left this challenge:

*Many of you think the apostles always believed a high christology, but Acts clearly suggests otherwise – which raises interesting questions that William Witt and others seem afraid to confront.*

Not one to back down from a challenge, I promised D.C. to get back to him, but when I finally finished my response, I realized it was way too long to post as a blog comment, so I'm putting it as a post on my own blog in hopes that some find it valuable.

One of the causes for frustration in the current discussions between the orthodox and revisionists in the mainline churches these days (especially on the blogs) is that so often the debates are between an uncritical orthodoxy and an uncritical revisionism. Many of the orthodox seem under the impression that critical biblical scholarship is essentially unchristian, and always leads (or will inevitably lead) to heresy. Many revisionists endorse a kind of popularist uninformed version of biblical scholarship that amounts to little more than a philosophical prejudice that "miracles don't happen" combined with a search for "gotcha" difficulties. In my opinion, both of these approaches represent a kind of naïve epistemological fundamentalism that has its roots in the Enlightenment, specifically in the Cartesian methodology of doubt and a "foundationalist" or "methodist" rationalism. (Perhaps more on this later some other time.) A single difficulty is thought to uproot the entire faith, so "conservatives" launch an all out

attack against any recognition of genuine diversity or plurality or development in the Scriptures as attacks on Christian faith, while the revisionists regard such diversity, development, or pluralism, as definitive arguments against orthodoxy.

Both sides seem oblivious to the history of what I would call "critical orthodoxy." There has been for at least a hundred fifty years a careful and thoughtful application of historical and literary method to studying the Bible that has led not to doubt, but confirmation of orthodox faith. I think of the work of scholars like B.F. Westcott, Walther Eichrodt, Sir Edwin Hoskyns, Joachim Jeremias, Oscar Cullmann, C.F.D. Moule, and, more recently, Brevard Childs, N.T. Wright, Richard Hays, and Ben Witherington. While not a biblical scholar myself, but a systematic theologian, I have learned much from those who are. I offer the following as a reflection of "critical orthodoxy." It must be kept in mind that all readings of the development of New Testament christology are interpretations. We have only the canonical documents, and any reading of what lies behind the documents is largely speculation. We can look at what Paul writes in his letters. We can look at what Luke writes in his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles. From this we can extrapolate something like Paul's christology or Luke's christology. We cannot say with certainty what the christology was that preceded either Paul or Luke—although some scholarly speculations are more certain than others. We can be fairly confident, for example, that Paul is quoting an earlier christological hymn in Philippians 2, so the christology there is earlier than Paul. What scholars do is provide plausible reconstructions based on the evidence. There are at least four variations in such recent attempts at reconstruction of the development of the church's christology in current NT scholarship.

1) The first is something like what D.C. suggests above. The earliest Christians endorsed something like an adoptionist



christology. Jesus was a man who received a new status because of the resurrection. It was only later (perhaps as late as John's gospel) that an incarnational christology came into being. (There may have been various stages in this development, with some scholars suggesting that Christians pushed the moment of adoption from the resurrection back to the baptism by John the Baptist, then to the conception by Mary, then finally to pre-existence.) This is largely the argument that James Dunn made in his *Christology in the Making* (Eerdmans, 2nd. edition, 2003). Such an interpretation might be called "evolutionary." That is, one kind of christology ("adoptionist") evolved into another kind ("incarnational") over time. Raymond Brown also argued a position something like this in his *Introduction to New Testament Christology* (Paulist, 1994) as did Wolfhart Pannenberg in *Jesus – God and Man* (Westminster, 2nd ed, 1983). (The problem with this position is that it conflicts with the evidence that the earliest christology in the New Testament—Paul's—is a high christology.) Interestingly, Dunn seems to have backed down from this earlier position, and moved in a more conservative direction in his later *Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Eerdmans, 2006).

2) The second view would be called developmental. This is the position argued for by C. F. D. Moule in his *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge U Press, 1979). The crucial question for understanding the origin of christology has to be the relation between Jesus' own self-consciousness, the significance of the resurrection, and the continuity of the relation between the two in the post-resurrection church's own understanding of Jesus' identity. Moule argues that the evolutionary understanding is mistaken—presupposing without argument or evidence that the high christology of the NT is in fundamental discontinuity with the actual self-understanding of Jesus. Rather, claimed Moule, a developmental view is demanded by the evidence. That is, the church's christology is in direct continuity with the self-understanding that the

earthly Jesus already had before the resurrection, and is a more explicit spelling out of what was at least implicitly there all along.

Moule points to four titles applied to Jesus in the gospels that he believes go back to Jesus himself: Son of Man, Son of God, Messiah, Lord. He finds particularly significant the parallel between the LXX use of *kyrios* to translate the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, and the very early consistent application of *kyrios* to Jesus—particularly the consistent transfer to Christ of OT passages that originally refer to God, e.g., Phil. 2:10, Rom. 14:11, Heb. 1:10, etc. 1 Cor. 8:6 and Col. 1: 16 ff postulate a cosmic Lordship of Christ, identifying him with the Divine Wisdom of the OT, and also as the Creator. There is a clear connection between this cosmic Lordship and the resurrection of Christ in such passages as Rom. 14:9.

Moule then points to Paul as exhibit A in his argument that the church's christology was a high christology from the beginning, a consistent development of the earlier christology held by Jesus himself. Moule focuses particularly on Paul's notion of corporate personality as exhibited in his "in Christ" language. For Paul, the risen Christ is more than an individual, but has a universal all-embracing presence. He is described in language that parallels the kind of language that Scripture applies to God.

3) A third approach emphasizes the complex variety of christologies found in the New Testament. Jesus is talked about in different ways at different times in different contexts, often by the same author. So there are Son of Man christologies (the synoptic gospels), exaltation christologies that focus on the resurrection, Adam-Christ christologies (Rom. 5, Phil. 2), cosmic Creator christologies that focus on the pre-existent Christ's role in creation (Colossians 1-2), Suffering Servant christologies, incarnational christologies (John 1), Scripture fulfillment christologies, *kyrios* christologies that focus on Jesus as Lord, Messianic

christologies, wisdom christologies, second coming christologies. An older example of such an approach would be Oscar Cullmann's *The Christology of the New Testament* (Westminster, rev. ed, 1980). The sheer variety and overlap (both in the same and between different authors) makes it difficult to trace development.

4) A fourth approach would be the canonical approach. This approach focuses on the final text of Scripture as the church has received it, and generally refuses to speculate about the pre-canonical history of the text. It is the final form that is Scriptural and authoritative, not the attempted reconstructions of historical-critics, which are highly subjective, and often mutually contradictory. We have the writings of Paul, the gospels, the catholic epistles, and Revelation. We do not have any immediate access to either the historical Jesus, or the development of Christian theology in the early church apart from the canonical texts. The late Brevard Childs of Yale and Richard Hays of Duke basically follow this approach.

How do these four approaches relate to the problem of the speeches in Acts that D.C. refers to in his question?

It needs to be kept in mind that the earliest writings of the New Testament are neither the gospels nor the Book of Acts, but the writings of Paul, and Paul's writings contain the highest christology anywhere in the New Testament. Uncritical readings of the New Testament (both conservative and revisionist) often do not appreciate the full implications of the fact that Paul's writings are the earliest New Testament documents we have, and that Paul's christology and soteriology precedes the synoptic gospels. The synoptics presume this early christology and soteriology throughout (as is evident in the very first verse of Mark's gospel—the earliest). Was there a development from a very early christology that could be read as adoptionist? Perhaps. (I'll address this later.) Scholars believe that Rom 1:4 cites an early Christian "creed" in which

Jesus is “declared to be the Son of God” by his resurrection. But, if so, such a christology would have had to have been very early indeed, because it had already been superseded by a completely incarnational christology by the time that Paul was writing his letters, a matter of a mere two decades. Paul himself saw no tension between this creedal statement that points to Jesus’ resurrection and his own completely incarnational Christology. In Philippians 2, Paul speaks of Christ pre-existing in the “form of God”; in his resurrection, Jesus receives the “name above every name—at his name “every knee will bow” and “every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (*kyrios*). The latter is a direct quotation from Isaiah 45:23. Paul is clearly applying to Christ a passage that in its original context applies to Yahweh—the God of the Old Testament.

D.C. claims on his [blog](#) that “Jesus is Lord didn’t mean Jesus is God.” He is correct that *kyrios* is a word that can be translated “master,” and is sometimes applied in the New Testament (particularly in forms of address) to ordinary human beings. That is an interesting but irrelevant observation. Context determines whether *kyrios* is being used simply as a form of address, or is rather an applying to Jesus of the divine name, i.e., the Septuagint translation of YHWH. During his earthly ministry, Jesus is often addressed as “Lord” in the gospels in a way that is parallel to what D.C. suggests. However, the majority of New Testament scholars (I am tempted to write “all,” since I am unaware of any who suggest otherwise) agree that after the resurrection the term is applied to Jesus in a manner equivalent to YHWH.

Thus biblical scholars often distinguish between a relative and an absolute use of *kyrios* as applied to Christ. It is the latter only that is relevant to this discussion. The citation of Isaiah 45:23 in Philippians 2 is a clear example of this. In another classic example that shows that the NT writers understood this distinction between a relative and an absolute

use of *kyrios*, Paul in 1 Cor. 8:5-6 distinguishes between “many gods” and “many lords,” yet insists that for Christians, “there is one God the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

As Paul draws a direct parallel between the roles of God the Father and the Son in creation in the above passage, so, in Colossians 1, he develops a cosmic christology in which the pre-existent Christ exists not only (as in Philippians) in the “image [or form] of God,” but is also the agent through whom God (the Father) creates the world. Paul tells us in Col. 2:9, “In [him] the fullness (*pleroma*) of deity dwells bodily.”

So there is no question that the highest christology is found in the the earliest writings of the New Testament (Paul’s epistles) and it is a christology that applies to Christ the name and attributes of the God of the Old Testament.

How then do the speeches in Acts relate to all of this?

First, the book of Acts is written later than Paul’s epistles, and it is a witness primarily of Luke’s christology—a later christology than Paul’s. Acts is the only historical account we have of Paul’s activity—apart from the Pauline letters. Luke clearly regards Paul’s ministry as authoritative and definitive. The narrative of Acts is about the spread of Christianity from an originally Jewish community to a Gentile community—and this culminates with Paul in captivity in Rome. The “we” sections in Acts indicate that the writer was either with Paul, or incorporated material of one of Paul’s companions into his narrative. So the author of Acts (whom we call Luke) sees no conflict between his own theological views and those of Paul. And, as mentioned above, Paul’s christology is one of the highest in the New Testament.

Second, it is important to remember that Acts is the second volume of a two-volume work. Though separated in the canon,

Luke-Acts was, from the point of view of its author, a single narrative. Assuming that the authors of New Testament writings were at least as intelligent as their contemporary readers, we have to assume that Luke saw no inconsistencies between the christology of his gospel, and what he wrote in Acts.

Third, since the rise of redaction criticism, NT scholarship has recognized that the gospel writers are not merely cut-and-paste compilers, but authors in their own right. Through the arrangement of their material, and their own editorial interpolations, they have not only incorporated the theological bent of their sources, but have also contributed their own emphases. For example, Mark's gospel recognizes from the first verse that Jesus is the Son of God, yet throughout, Mark's emphasis is that Jesus' Sonship is hidden within his role as the Suffering Servant. What it means to follow Jesus is to take up one's cross, just as Jesus did. Luke's particular emphases include a geographical structuring—his gospel tells the story of a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, while Acts tells the story of the journey of the gospel from Jerusalem, to Samaria, to the "ends of the earth." In both Luke and Acts, Luke speaks of God's activity in terms of the presence of the Holy Spirit, an emphasis not found in the same way in the other gospels or in Paul. Luke also thinks more specifically in terms of a salvation-history. The time of the Acts of the apostles is the intermediate time between the time of Jesus as the center of God's activity in history, and the present time of the church. The christology in Luke-Acts is primary evidence for Luke's christology, and only secondarily evidence for the christology of the earliest church.

Fourth, the speeches in Acts have presented a special kind of problem for NT interpreters, who have to ask (and try to answer) the following kinds of questions:

- 1) To what extent are the speeches primarily historical reconstructions of actual sermons preached by Peter and others, based on Luke's sources? To what extent are they

summaries of much longer materials, and, how has Luke's own theological perspective affected their arrangement and emphasis? (Each sermon in Luke's gospel can be read in only a minute or so; so they can hardly be word for word accounts of the sermons as actually preached.)

2) To what extent has Luke been influenced by the style of speeches contained in the histories of the ancient pagan writers who were his contemporaries, e.g., Thucydides, who composed summary speeches to put in the mouths of historical figures at important events, i.e., what they "might have said." (For a contemporary parallel, think of the kinds of dialogue that appears in modern docudramas, films based on actual historical events that must provide spoken dialogue for reconstructed scenes, films as diverse as war and political dramas (*Tora, Tora, Tora*; *Midway*; *Thirteen Days*), heroic adventures (*Braveheart*), biting political commentary (*W.*, *All the President's Men*), even reconstructions of the gospel or lives of saints, (*Jesus of Nazareth*, Mel Gibson's *The Passion*, Franco Zeffereilli's *Brother Son*, *Sister Moon*). Such docudramas may vary in their historical faithfulness, but the creation of imagined dialogue does not in itself falsify the presentation of the story. In fact, a too faithful presentation of dialogue would make for a tedious recounting. Unlike *All the President's Men*, a film that faithfully reproduced every word of Richard Nixon's tapes would be a box office disaster.

3) To what extent are the speeches compositions that reflect Luke's own theology? That is, are they material for the christology of the earliest church or for the christology of Luke? Or, rather, is it even a legitimate question to attempt to reconstruct the historical events behind the canonical texts, since it is the final canonical text that is authoritative for the church, and all such reconstructions are hypothetical and subjective?

Not surprisingly, critical scholars (whether orthodox or revisionist) have embraced positions that have tended to

emphasize some variation of positions 1-3) or a combination thereof.

1) C. H. Dodd wrote the most important and influential book embracing the position that the speeches in Acts provide important historical evidence for the christology of the earliest church in his book *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (Harper, 1962). Dodd argued in his book that the speeches in Acts are summaries of the earliest missionary preaching (*kerygma*) of the church. This *kerygma* was intended primarily for outsiders and needed to be distinguished clearly from the teaching (*didache*) of the church, which consisted primarily of doctrinal and moral teaching, and was intended for insiders. The *kerygma* consisted of a summary of certain historical events (the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, his exaltation to God's right hand, and his coming again in judgment); claims about the fulfillment of prophecy within an eschatological framework (the prophecies are fulfilled, and the New Age has begun with the coming of Christ); claims about Jesus' identity (he is the Son of David, the risen Lord, the Messiah, the Son of God); a basic ecclesiology (the presence of the Spirit in the church is the sign of God's presence); a call for repentance.

Dodd argued that the content of the *kerygma* can be reconstructed from materials in the Pauline and other epistles (Petrine and Johannine epistles, Hebrews), the speeches in Acts, and the synoptic gospels, which are basically expanded narratives of the original *kerygma*.

At the same time that the speeches in Acts accurately summarize the content of the earliest apostolic preaching, it cannot be emphasized too strongly that the *kerygma* does not represent the entire gospel. It is a minimal summary addressed to outsiders. The *kerygma* does not contain such essential theological teaching as the doctrines of grace or justification, the full teaching of the church about the incarnation, a developed ecclesiology, the sacramental



theology of the church.

2) C.F.D. Moule (already mentioned) wrote one of the most important (and frequently cited) essays about Luke's use of his sources in "The Christology of Acts," in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martin (Fortress, 1966). Moule begins by acknowledging a point made frequently in modern NT studies, and one I acknowledged above, that the gospels are theological documents reflecting the faith of their writers and communities. One possible conclusion from this acknowledgment would be that the gospel writers were not interested in providing a faithful historical account of the pre-resurrection Jesus as he really was, but were rather presenting Jesus as the risen Lord of the later Christian church. IOW, they are nothing more than propaganda pieces.

Moule notes a significant difference in the christology of Luke's gospel and Acts. Both acknowledge Jesus as Lord (*kyrios*). However, in the gospel, the human characters in the narrative neither refer to Jesus as *kyrios*, except in the vocative (*kyrie*)—nothing more than a respectful form of address. (The single exceptions are angels and the narrator himself, who are "in the know.") After the resurrection, and throughout Acts, this changes completely. From Luke 24:34 on, the disciples freely apply the term *kyrios* to Jesus in a way that they did not do before the resurrection. Moreover, they clearly understand this in an absolute sense. Jesus is not merely one Lord among many, but "Lord of all" (*panton kyrios*) (Acts 10:36). There is now a regular exchange between *kyrios* used of God, and *kyrios* used of Jesus. There is also the phenomenon of the frequent variations on the expression "call on the name of the Lord" (*epikaleisthai to onoma*), which, in its first citation in Acts 2:21 is a quotation from Joel 2:32 referring to Yahweh, but which, through the rest of Acts (7:59, 9:13-14,21; 22:16) clearly equates the name of Jesus as the Lord who is being called on.

The key point is that Luke acknowledges a clear distinction

between the recognition given to Christ during his earthly ministry, and the full recognition that Jesus is *kyrios* after the resurrection. (Moule traces similar differences in the way that characters in Luke-Acts apply titles like "prophet," "Son of Man," "Savior, and "Son" to Jesus, before and after the resurrection.) The resurrection plays a crucial role, not in Jesus' identity—both the angels and the gospel narrator acknowledge Jesus' true identity from the very beginning (Luke 1:32), but in his vindication. The risen Lord is identical with the earthly Jesus, but before the resurrection, his identity is hidden. Moule addresses specifically the question of two different Christologies, an "adoptionist" christology (Acts 10:38) representing a primitive Palestinian christology, and a later well developed Hellenistic christology ("He is Lord of all," 10:36). Given the significance of the resurrection, there simply is no reason to presume any incompatibility here. In the resurrection, this Jesus of Nazareth, who was "anointed with the Holy Spirit," and "who went about doing good" is recognized for who he was all along—"the Lord of all" (*panton kyrios*).

This also indicates that Luke is a careful historian. He does not credit the pre-resurrection disciples with a post-resurrection Christology—though he (as narrator) is willing to do so.

3) Joseph Fitzmyer has a discussion of "Lucan christology" in his commentary on *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)* (Anchor Doubleday, 1979). For Luke, there are four phases in Christ's existence: virginal conception until baptism, baptism until ascension, ascension until *parousia*, the *parousia* itself. (Fitzmyer notes correctly that Luke says nothing about Jesus' pre-existence or incarnation). Fitzmyer discusses Luke's use of *kyrios* in an absolute sense, noting (as did Moule) that he "retrojects" this title back into the time of Jesus' ministry, including the first phases of his earthly existence. Fitzmyer notes: "In using *kyrios* of both Yahweh and Jesus in his

writings Luke continues the sense of the title already being used in the early Christian community, which in some sense regarded Jesus as on a level with Yahweh." Fitzmyer says of the title "Son of God," that in Luke, it "attributes a unique relationship with Yahweh, the God of Israel. . . . Luke does not intend that Jesus should be recognized as God's son merely in the adoptive sense in which a king on God's throne would be called his son . . . ." He says further, "Luke might even be suggesting that Jesus is God."

Fitzmyer states that "we shall never know" how the process of the revelation of Jesus divine sonship took place in the ministry of Jesus, and in the gospel tradition. What we can do is trace "various stages" or "phases of awareness" as the NT writers gradually recognized the implications of that revelation.

4) In his *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1998), Ben Witherington suggests that in the speeches in Acts, Luke follows the custom of Thucydides and others of rendering speeches in their own words and style. While we cannot assume that Luke created the speeches, he did make his source material his own, in such a way that recovering his sources is "difficult if not impossible." If Luke followed the pattern of Thucydides, we can assume that he provided accurate and adequate summaries, especially if he was able to consult with those who heard the speeches first-hand.

The similarity between the speeches in Acts may suggest the use of a basic *kerygma* or *testimonia* by various early Christian preachers. (Witherington here refers to Dodd's *The Apostolic Preaching*.)

Witherington notes that *kyrios* is the most frequently used christological title in Luke-Acts. The quotation from Ps. 110:1 in Acts 2:34 shows that Luke equally applied *kyrios* to both God and Jesus. Expressions like "Day of the Lord," "angel of the Lord," etc., refer to God. Expressions like "Word of

the Lord" refer to Jesus.

The key to understanding Luke's use of *kyrios* is the "narrative framework" in which he views christological matters. What Luke says about Jesus depends on which stage in Jesus' career he has reached at that moment in the narrative. (Witherington cites Moule's article to indicate the significance of the resurrection for indicating whether Jesus is called *kyrios* by the narrator or by others.)

Witherington insists that it is a misreading to interpret Luke's language in Acts 2:36 as adoptionist. Luke uses his language in a way that "suits his narrative." "It was not that Jesus became someone different from who he was before, but that he entered a new stage in his career." After the ascension, Jesus assumed a new role. He did not fully assume the roles of Lord and Messiah until after the resurrection. According to Witherington, "The Lord Jesus is able to do what he does because he is who he is." The roles he assumes at various points in the narrative are the appropriate ones for him to assume at that time: "Luke's primary concern is with presenting a narrative christology that tells the story of Jesus from his birth until his present exaltation to heaven and his reign from there as Lord of all."

5) H. Douglas Buckwalter writes of Jesus as "The Divine Saviour" in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Eerdmans, 1998). Buckwalter draws attention to the sheer diversity of christological images in Acts. Jesus is portrayed as God's instrument in salvation-history, as Saviour, as Lord, as Messiah, etc. Buckwalter believes that two common elements unite the various christological images: first, Luke describes Jesus' divine status; second, Luke points to the way the earthly and heavenly Jesus are instructional for discipleship.

Buckwalter describes the way in which Luke draws parallels between the exalted Jesus and the OT depiction of God. The exalted Jesus pours out his Spirit on the church, and provides

it guidance. As the Spirit's presence describes Yahweh's immanence in the OT, so, in Acts, the Spirit's presence is equated with the immanence of the risen Jesus. As Yahweh gave visions and provided guidance to Israel in the OT, so the exalted Jesus appears in visions in Acts and provides guidance to the church. As the OT associates salvation with the name of the Lord (Joel 2:32), so Luke in Acts associates the name of the Lord with the exalted Jesus. Buckwalter notes: "With Luke's description of the work of the exalted Jesus in Acts, one cannot easily dismiss the impression that he intended his readers to view Jesus' heavenly ministry as similar to Yahweh's."

Buckwalter concludes his essay by arguing that Jesus models in Luke-Acts a new understanding of Lordship. The Lord is one who "waits on tables," not one who seeks personal glory. Buckwalter concludes: "it is arguable that Luke considered Jesus as Yahweh's co-equal and co-regent." Yahweh is distinguished from everything else by the way he providentially brings about salvation according to his will. The exalted Jesus "appears on equal footing with God" by doing the same thing. However, Jesus is not only a deity who is all-knowing, and all-powerful, but the kind of deity who serves rather than is served. Jesus acts as does the Father, and does what the Father does.

6) Brevard Childs presents a highly original discussion of the purpose of the sermons in Acts in both his *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Fortress, 1984) and *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: An Introduction* (Fortress, 1992). Childs criticizes current Acts scholarship for trying to find the decisive factor for interpretation in "some force *behind* the biblical text." To the contrary, "The book of Acts sees itself in direct continuity with the Gospel of Luke." The key to interpretation is to understand this continuity, which is related by a "conscious pattern of promise and fulfillment." The decisive new factors in Acts

are, first, the presence of the Spirit, and, second, the "word of God" as the vehicle for the witness of the Spirit (Acts 4:4,29,31; 6:4,7; 8:14; 10:44; 11:1). The "word" which is preached is "in the name" of Jesus (4:30, 10:43, 16:18). For Luke, the "name of Jesus" is the way in which he is present to the church after the resurrection. The "preached word" unleashes the power of the risen Christ. The Spirit is the bridge between the earthly Jesus of Luke's gospel, and the ascended Lord of Acts.

The preached sermons in Acts show "how the preached word functions as the means of actualizing the present significance of the gospel." There is a consistent pattern: a) the sermon summarizes the life of Jesus culminating in his death; b) these events occurred according to God's plan, not by chance; c) God raised Jesus from the dead and vindicated him; d) Christ is alive and reigning with God; d) the sermon closes with a call to repentance.

Consistently, the sermons connect to the previously written gospel of Luke by portraying Christ as "belonging both to the past and the present." As in Luke, Jesus' life is portrayed as a series of historical events, in which he "went about doing good," (Acts 10:38), was crucified and killed (Acts 2:22), was raised and appointed Lord and Christ (2:36). On this basis, he is recognized as "judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42). Luke portrays this salvation as being in continuity with the mighty acts of God in the Old Testament. The proofs from prophecy that appear in the sermons are consistent with the same way Jesus is portrayed in Luke's gospel.

Although Childs does not state this explicitly (because he was not addressing this question), the crucial point for christology would be that the christology of the sermons in Acts is a short summary of the christology of Luke's gospel, and must be read as entirely consistent with it.

The above is not at all an exhaustive summary of contemporary

critical scholarship on the book of Acts and Luke's christology, but I think it is sufficiently representative to address D.C.'s questions.

So, first:

*Many of you think the apostles always believed a high christology, but Acts clearly suggests otherwise*

In light of the summary of Acts scholarship above, I think it fairly evident that Acts does not "clearly suggest otherwise."

If the sermons in Acts represent accurate summaries of the apostolic preaching (*kerygma*) of the church (as Dodd and those who follow him argue), then they represent at most some of the key themes in the public proclamation of the church. These are precisely the themes we would expect the apostles to emphasize in a Jerusalem setting right after the crucifixion of Jesus: 1) A narrative summary of Jesus' ministry; 2) the crucifixion of Jesus by the Jewish religious leaders and the Romans—the chief scandal to both a Jewish and Gentile audience; 3) the vindication of Jesus' mission by his resurrection—the Jewish leaders and the Romans were wrong; 4) Jesus' exaltation as Lord (*kyrios*) and Messiah—God has declared Jesus in the right after all; 5) the presence of the Kingdom and Jesus' coming again in judgment—the eschatological setting in which this all makes sense; 5) the fulfillment of prophecy—Jesus' mission and message were not in contradiction to God's promises to Israel, but were rather its fulfillment; 6) a call to repentance.

Dodd argues persuasively (and in detail) that these same six points are found in early material (through creedal summaries and quotations) not only in the sermons in Acts, but throughout the epistles and other NT writings, and that they provide the narrative structure around which the gospels are written.

At the same time, the *kerygma* does not provide a complete and

comprehensive account of the early church's theology. It is *kerygma*, not *didache*. The six points do not provide a detailed discussion of christology, soteriology, pneumatology, grace, sacraments, or ecclesiology. Nor do they provide a detailed discussion of Christian moral teaching. However, this doctrinal and moral teaching *didache* is found elsewhere in the NT, and it is evident in the earliest writings.

The apostolic preaching in Acts says little about christology, but insofar as the preaching in Acts touches on christology at all, it indicates a high christology. Jesus is *kyrios* and Messiah, and the coming judge. Parallel material elsewhere (e.g., in Paul) and also in Luke-Acts indicates that *kyrios* and other titles (like Son of God) are understood in an absolute sense. *kyrios* means that the risen Jesus exercises the same functions as, and has the same dignity as the God of the Old Testament.

If, however, we acknowledge (as all contemporary critical NT scholars do) that Luke-Acts is not only a historical record, but an intentional theological construction—Luke is not simply do cut-and-paste with his sources; he is a genuine author—then the sermons in Acts have to be understood as Luke's own summaries of the christology of not only Acts, but also his gospel. One cannot understand the christology of the sermons apart from the entire narrative structure of Luke-Acts, and Luke makes it clear that Jesus is Lord and Son of God from the beginning. The disciples and others do not recognize him as such, however, until the resurrection. Jesus does not become Lord and Son of God at the resurrection; what was hidden during his ministry now becomes publicly manifest.

D.C. asks some other questions:

*I presume you will grant that Acts has Peter and other apostles preaching from a low christology during the post-Pentecostal period.*



*If so, it necessarily implies one of three things:*

*1. that during the post-Pentecostal period, the apostles secretly held to a high christology, but preached a low one – which seems a dicey speculation at best, given their seeming willingness to brave death; or*

*2. that, during that period, those apostles who actually knew Jesus in life not only preached a low christology, but also believed it, arriving only later if ever at a higher one (except that we have little or no reliable evidence that those particular apostles ever did so, save arguably the Fourth Gospel); or*

*3. that Acts, regardless when it was written, mistakenly or incompletely describes the apostles' preaching during that period – which raises the question: what else is incorrect in Acts / Luke, and by implication, the Markan- and other accounts on which Luke drew in writing his summary.*

First, I do not presume that Luke in Acts has Peter and the other apostles preach a low christology. The apostolic preaching in Acts is at most a short summary of the central outline of what the early Christians preached—addressed to outsiders. It is not at all detailed discussion of everything the earliest church believed about Christ.

To borrow an illustration from a more contemporary setting—I have recently been reading a book written by Stephen Neill, the prominent Anglican historian, bishop and missionary, entitled *Out of Bondage: Christ and the Indian Villager* (Edinburgh House, 1930). It was written while Neill was a young man, and describes his missionary experiences in India. In a chapter describing mission strategy among Hindus, Neill states that the missionaries learned that the heart of their preaching had to be their story of Jesus as described in the gospels. Rural village Hindus were particularly struck by stories of Jesus' exorcisms because spirit possession and

exorcism are “real” experiences and common practices in Hindu village life. (Village Hindus have a very real fear of spirits, especially the ghosts of those who die violently—this is confirmed even in more recent accounts of Hinduism). What the missionary found unhelpful was preaching the high theology of the incarnation, and the doctrines of grace, etc., because until the Hindus knew the story of Jesus, they had no context into which to put these doctrines. It was only after potential converts seriously became attracted to the person of Jesus in the gospel stories that they could then have a context for understanding more abstract Christian doctrine. I would suggest a similar context for the earliest Christian proclamation. Jesus’ life, death and resurrection would have to be the central content of any preaching to initial converts. A fully explicated christology would come later.

So, (1) during the post-Pentecost period, did the apostles “secretly” hold to a high christology, while preaching a low one?

The earliest direct source we have for the christology of the earliest church is Paul’s writings, which contain a high christology. We have no way of knowing how completely the short summaries of the apostolic preaching in Acts represent the complete christology of the early church. We also cannot know (because we do not have access to Luke’s sources) how much the sermons in Acts represent Luke’s summary of his own christology. (We can compare Luke to Mark and Matthew because we have those texts.) For all we know, the earliest christology may have been a christology that centered on the resurrection, and the apostles only later began to think about the implications of Jesus’ resurrection for his ontological identity. Then again, their christology may have been a full blown incarnational christology from the beginning. We just don’t know, and we have no way of knowing—and it does not really matter. At any rate, a high christology is evident in the earliest Christians writings we have, and any speculation

as to how it developed is simply speculation.

(2) Is it the case that the apostles knew that Jesus himself preached a low christology, and themselves believed a low christology, arriving only later at a high christology?

Again, we have no way of knowing how early christology developed. What we do know is that all of the canonical New Testament documents embrace a high christology, and these are the only sources we have for what the apostles believed. To delay a high christology until John's gospel is a misreading of the evidence.

(3) Does Acts mistakenly or incompletely describe the apostles' preaching?

Certainly Acts "incompletely" describes the apostles' preaching. The actual sermons would have had to have been much longer than Luke reports. However, there is no reason to believe that Luke was "mistaken." He is not attempting to describe the entire substance of Christian theology in his short summaries of the apostles' sermons. The entire narrative structure of Luke-Acts provides us the content of Luke's own understanding of the gospel. His accounts of the apostles' preaching are at most short summaries of that gospel.

Moreover, even if one were to argue that Luke's summaries of the preaching of the apostle's preaching were largely his own compositions—parallel to other ancient writers like Thucydides—this would say nothing about the historical accuracy of the basic narrative of either Acts or Luke's gospel, or, certainly, his sources. Comparison with Mark and Matthew indicate that Luke is actually very conservative in using his source material. As indicated above, his additions are primarily editorial, e.g., he more strongly emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit; his gospel and Acts follow a geographical outline. Moreover, his historical narrative in Acts can be compared to parallel discussions in Paul's letters

(e.g., the Jerusalem Conference). His knowledge of pre-70 AD Roman jurisprudence and government has been confirmed by Roman classicists, e.g., A. N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (Baker, 1963). There is no reason to believe that Acts does not provide a reliable historical account.

I conclude by citing what I had already written on TitusOneNine:

A more plausible interpretation takes into account the difference between epistemology and ontology. In the order in which we come to know things (*ordo cognoscendi*), knowledge comes first. However, at the level of ontological reality (*ordo essendi*), being is first. So, when a palaeontologist discovers a new species of dinosaur, the discovery takes place at a certain point in time, for example, some morning in October 2008. However, the species did not begin to exist at that time. It had already existed millions of years previously, and had long been extinct. At the level of the order of knowledge (*ordo cognoscendi*), the resurrection of Jesus was the point at which Jesus' divine status was first known. Thus, in the passage Paul cites in Rom. 1:4, Jesus was "declared to be Son of God by his resurrection," i.e., came to be known as such at that time. However, at the level of ontology (*ordo essendi*), if Jesus was known to be Son of God at his resurrection, then he had to have been ontologically the Son of God all along. And the Synoptics (including Luke) presume that throughout. So even though Luke in Acts 2 and elsewhere has Peter declaring the significance of Jesus' resurrection to his hearers to confirm to them Jesus' identity as the one in whom the promises of Scripture had been fulfilled, Luke had already made it clear that Jesus had been God's Son (and *kyrios*) all along by virtue of his conception by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). Luke's gospel presumes throughout that Jesus was the Son of God (and *kyrios*) during his entire ministry. He did not become Son of God (or Lord) at

his resurrection. Moreover, Luke's gospel depends on Mark, so Luke had to have been aware of Mark's own high christology.

A helpful illustration of this point was made as long ago as 1926 by Edwin C. Hoskyns in "The Christ of the Synoptic Gospels," *Essays Catholic and Critical* (SPCK, 1926). Hoskyns suggests that the crucial critical question is that of the relation between the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, and the Christ of St. Paul, St. John, and the later Christian church. Hoskyns compares the synoptic gospels with Paul and concludes that the synoptics presuppose a high christology throughout. The gospels consistently presume that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, but his christological identity is hidden in the suffering of the cross: "They do not involve the transformation of a human prophet into a supernatural Messiah, since the Marcan source itself implies a supernatural christology." The contrast is not, Hoskyns claimed, between the "Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, but between the Christ humiliated and the Christ returning in glory." The two-fold use of the title "Son of Man" illustrates this; before the resurrection, the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (Mark 9: 58); after the resurrection, the Son of Man sits at the right hand of God, and returns in glory (Mark 14: 62). It is the resurrection that ties the two together, and makes for continuity.

Luke is making the same point in Acts, and in his account the apostles' sermons are summaries of this. It is not that Jesus was an ordinary human being, who received a celestial promotion after the resurrection; rather, from the beginning Jesus was the Lord (*kyrios*), the Son of God—and Luke lets his reader know this from the beginning of his gospel. However, Jesus' Lordship and Deity were hidden in humility until the resurrection—he is the Lord who waits at tables. It is only after his resurrection, that Jesus is exalted to the right hand and his identity as "Lord of all" (*panton kyrios*) is finally recognized and proclaimed by his followers.