

Prof. Joseph A. Sittler (Divinity School, The University of Chicago) delivered an address to the Third Assembly, World Council of Churches, New Delhi, India, on November 21, 1961.

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CALLED TO UNITY

by

JOSEPH A. SITTLER

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation ; for in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church ; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1, 15-20).

There are two reasons for placing these five verses from the Colossian letter at the beginning of what I wish to say about the unity of Christ's church. 1) These verses say clearly *that* we are called to unity, and 2) they suggest *how* the gift of that unity may be waiting for our obedience.

That we are called to unity, that the One who calls us is God, that this relentless calling persists over and through all discouragements, false starts, and sometimes apparently fruitless efforts is what engendered the ecumenical movement among the churches, and steadily sustains them in it.

These verses sing out their triumphant and alluring music between two huge and steady poles — "Christ," and "all things." Even the Ephesian letter, rich and large as it is in its vision of the church, moves not within so massive an orbit as this astounding statement of the purpose of God. For it is here declared that the sweep of God's restorative action in Christ is no smaller than the six-times repeated *Ta panta*. Redemption is the name for this will, this action, and this concrete Man who is God with us and God for us — and all things are permeable to his cosmic redemption because all things subsist in him. He comes to all things, not as a stranger, for he is the first-born of all creation, and in him all things were created. He is not only the matrix and *prius* of all things ; he is the intention, the fullness, and the integrity of all things : for all things were created through him and for him. Nor are all things

a tumbled multitude of facts in an unrelated mass, for in him all things hold together.

Why does St. Paul, in this letter, as in the letter to the Ephesians, expand his vocabulary so radically far beyond his usual terms? Why do the terms guilt, sin, the law, and the entire Judaic catalogue of demonic powers here suddenly become transposed into another vocabulary, general in its character, cosmic in its scope, so vastly referential as to fill with Christic energy and substance the farthest outreach of metaphysical speculation?

The apostle does that out of the same practical pastoral ardour as caused him, when he wrote to his Philippian community, to enclose a deceptive petty problem of human recalcitrance within the overwhelming therapy of grace. Just as selfishness and conceit in Philippi are drowned in the sea of the divine charity "found in human form ... humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross," — so here. The Colossian error was to assume that there were "thrones, dominions, principalities and authorities" which have a life and power apart from Christ, that the real world was a dualism, one part of which (and that part ensconcing the power of evil) was not subject to the Lordship of the Creator in his Christ.

Against that error which, had it persisted, would have trapped Christ within terms of purely moral and spiritual power and hope, Paul sets off a kind of chain-reaction from the central atom, and the staccato ring of *ta panta* is the sounding of its reverberations into the farthest reaches of human fact, event, and thought. All is claimed for God, and all is Christic. The fugual voices of the separate claims — of him, in him, through him, for him — are gathered up in the quiet coda — "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell."

We must not fail to see the nature and the size of the issue that Paul confronts and encloses in this vast Christology. In propositional form it is simply this: a doctrine of redemption is meaningful only when it swings within the larger orbit of a doctrine of creation. For God's creation of earth cannot be redeemed in any intelligible sense of the word apart from a doctrine of the cosmos which is his home, his definite place, the theatre of his selfhood under God, in corporation with his neighbour, and in caring-relationship with nature, his sister. "Unless one is prepared to accept a dualism which condemns the whole physical order as being not of God and interprets redemption simply as release from the physical order, then one is forced to raise the question of cosmic

redemption, not in contrast with but as an implicate of personal redemption. Physical nature cannot be treated as an indifferent factor — as the mere stage and setting of the drama of personal redemption. It must either be condemned as in itself evil, or else it must be brought within the scope of God's redemptive act" (Galloway, Allan D.: *The Cosmic Christ*, Harper and Brothers Publishers, N. Y. 1951, p. 205). Unless the reference and the power of the redemptive act includes the whole of man's experience and environment, straight out to its farthest horizon, then the redemption is incomplete. There is and will always remain something of evil to be overcome. And more. The actual man in his existence will be tempted to reduce the redemption of man to what purgation, transformation, forgiveness and blessedness is available by an "angelic" escape from the cosmos of natural and historical fact — and in that option accept some sort of dualism which is as offensive to biblical theology as it is beloved of all Gnosticism, then as now.

The Christic vision of the Eastern Fathers

In our understanding of the vast Christic vision that informs the passage from Colossians it is Irenaeus, and not the western and vastly more influential Augustine, who must be our mentor. The problem forced upon us by the events of the present decade is not soluble by the covert dualism of nature and grace. At a certain period in Christian thought and practical life, this dualism worked itself out in the dualism of church and world, of spiritual and temporal. But the time when Christian theology and Christian life could operate with such a view of things is long past. The view was never appropriate to the organic character of biblical speech; in the present state of man's knowledge in all areas it has become unintelligible.

But before that cleavage occurred, and strong with the vitalities of a Christology as splendid as our case is desperate, a unitary Christology prevailed in the church: Colossians and Ephesians are echoes of it. I recollect it here, and in connection with the theme Christ the Light of the World, because it is now excruciatingly clear that Christ cannot be a light that lighteth every man coming into the world, if he is not also the light that falls upon the world into which every man comes. He enlightens this darkling world because the world was made through him. He can be the light of men because men subsist in him. He can be interpretive power because he is the power of the word in creation.

“Christ the light of the world” has not had a career in the Christianity of the west comparable to the rich career of this doctrine of eastern Christendom. Nor has this image been expanded to address with lordly power the multiple energies of other images of light as these live and shape spiritual life in the religions of millions of men in whose midst we now meet. God is light. Men have in nature the bent light of God. Therefore Christ the Lord, who in our confession is named “Light of Light,” must not be reduced to Light against light.

The Church takes a large risk when she pulls into the centre of her reflections the New Testament image of Christ as the Light of the world. For the holy meaning of light cannot be restricted to Christ, and cannot be separated from him. Creation is a work of God, who is light. And the light of the Creator-God falls upon and inheres within his creation. The world of nature can be the place of this light that “came” by Jesus Christ because, despite the world’s hostility to that light, it was never without the light of God. Nature and grace are categories necessary to do justice to Christ the Saviour of the world. But if they are absolute and contradictory categories they distort and reduce the doctrine of creation.

As we seek for a vision of Christ ample enough to draw us toward unity in his Church we would do well to turn back the pages of western theological reflection and attend to a Father in the Church whose understanding of Christ the light was not able to settle for statements less majestic than the apostrophe to him in the first chapter of Colossians. From a recent and careful summary of the thought of Irenaeus, I quote the following paragraph :

“In Irenaeus . . . there are not two orders of goodness, but only one. All goodness, whether it belongs to this world or to the final consummation, is a manifestation of the grace of God. It is the same grace of God which sustains nature even in its fallen state and which confers salvation in Jesus Christ. The residual goodness in nature can even be regarded as an anticipation or foretaste of that salvation. The same . . . appears also in Irenaeus’ attitude toward the sacraments as compared with that of the church of the Middle Ages. For Irenaeus the union of spiritual and material benefit in the Eucharist symbolizes the ultimate unity of nature and grace implied in Christian salvation. But for Aquinas the fact that the sacraments are administered in a material element is merely God’s gracious concession to man’s regrettably sensuous nature” (P. II. QI, A.8).

For Irenaeus, the Incarnation and saving work of Jesus Christ meant that the promise of grace was held out to the whole of nature, and that henceforth nothing could be called common or unclean. For the church of the Middle Ages, on the other hand, nature was essentially common, and, if not positively unclean, at least seriously deficient in that shining whiteness of the saints in the empyrean heaven, and essentially incapable of sharing in such glory" (Galloway, Allan D.: *The Cosmic Christ*, Harper and Brothers Publishers, N. Y., 1951, p. 128 ff.)

The split between Grace and Nature in Western thought

The doctrinal cleavage, particularly fateful in western Christendom, has been an element in the inability of the church to relate the powers of grace to the vitalities and processes of nature. At the very time, and in that very part of the world where men's minds were being deepeningly determined by their understanding and widened control of the powers of nature they were so identifying the realm of history and the moral as the sole realm of grace as to shrink to no effect the biblical Christology of nature. In the midst of vast changes in man's relation to nature the sovereignty and scope of grace was, indeed, attested and liberated by the Reformers. But post-Reformation consolidations of their teaching permitted their Christic recovery of all of nature as a realm of grace to slip back into a minor theme.

In the Enlightenment the process was completed. Rationalism, on the one hand, restricted redemption by grace to the moral soul, and Pietism, on the other hand, turned down the blaze of the Colossian vision so radically that its *ta panta* was effective only as a moral or mystical incandescence. Enlightenment man could move in on the realm of nature and virtually take it over because grace had either ignored or repudiated it. A bit of God died with each new natural conquest; the realm of grace retreated as more of the structure and process of nature was claimed by now autonomous man. The rood-screen in the Church, apart from its original meaning, has become a symbol of man's devout but frightened thought permitting to fall asunder what God joined together.

It is not necessary or proper on this occasion to specify more fully the factors that have caused that unhappy divorcement. It is sufficient only to affirm that it has occurred, and to listen to the voices that lament its effects and to some that, longing for a lost wholeness, celebrate the

glimmerings of its recovery. A representative voice of the lament is Matthew Arnold :

The sea of faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shores
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd ;
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar
 Retreating to the breath
 Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.

And a seldom heard voice that celebrates the world as a God-haunted house is Gerald Manley Hopkins :

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
 It will flame out, like shining from shocked foil ;
 It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
 Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod ?
 Generations have trod, have trod, have trod ;
 And all is seared with trade ; bleared, smeared with toil ;
 And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell : the soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
 And for all this, nature is never spent ;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things ;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
 Because the Holy ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah ! bright wings.

Claiming nature for Christ

Is it again possible to fashion a theology catholic enough to affirm redemption's force enfolding nature, as we have affirmed redemption's force enfolding history ? That we should make that effort is, in my understanding, the commanding task of this moment in our common history and by common history I refer to that which is common to all of the blessed obediences of the household of faith : Antioch and Aldersgate, Constantinople and Canterbury, Geneva and Augsburg, Westminster and Plymouth.

For the problem which first drove the Church, as our text reminds us, to utter a Christology of such amplitude is a problem that has persisted and presses upon us today with absolute urgency. We are being driven to claim the world of nature for God's Christ just as in the time

of Augustus, the Church was driven to claim the world of history as the city of God, for his Lordship and purpose. For fifteen centuries the Church has declared the power of grace to conquer egocentricity, to expose idolatry, to inform the drama of history with holy meaning. But in our time we have beheld the vision and promises of the Enlightenment come to strange and awesome maturity. The cleavage between grace and nature is complete. Man's identity has been shrunken to the dimensions of privatude within social determinism. The doctrine of creation has been made a devout datum of past time. The mathematization of meaning in technology and its reduction to operational terms in philosophy has left no mental space wherein to declare that nature, as well as history, is the theatre of grace and the scope of redemption.

When millions of the world's people, inside the church and outside of it, know that damnation now threatens nature as absolutely as it has always threatened men and societies in history, it is not likely that witness to a light that does not enfold and illumine the world-as-nature will be even comprehensible. For the root-pathos of our time is the struggle by the peoples of the world in many and various ways to find some principle, order, or power which shall be strong enough to contain the raging "... thrones, dominions, principalities" which restrict and ravage human life.

If, to this longing of all men everywhere we are to propose "Him of whom, and through whom, and in whom are all things," then that proposal must be made in redemptive terms that are forged in the furnace of man's crucial engagement with nature as both potential to blessedness and potential to hell.

The matter might be put another way : the address of Christian thought is most weak precisely where man's ache is most strong. We have had, and have, a christology of the moral soul, a christology of history, and, if not a christology of the ontic, affirmations so huge as to fill the space marked out by ontological questions. But we do not have, at least not in such effective force as to have engaged the thought of the common life, a daring, penetrating, life-affirming christology of nature. The theological magnificence of cosmic christology lies, for the most part, still tightly folded in the Church's innermost heart and memory. Its power is nascent among us all in our several styles of teaching, preaching, worship; its waiting potency is available for release in kerygmatic theology, in moral theology, in liturgical theology, in sacramental theology. And the fact that our separate traditions incline us to one

or another of these as central does not diminish either the fact, or our responsibility. For it is true of us all that the imperial vision of Christ as coherent in *ta panta* has not broken open the powers of grace to diagnose, judge, and heal the ways of men as they blasphemously strut about this hurt and threatened world as if they owned it. Our vocabulary of praise has become personal, pastoral, too purely spiritual, static. We have not affirmed as inherent in Christ — God's proper man for man's proper selfhood and society — the world political, the world economical, the world aesthetic, and all other commanded orderings of actuality which flow from the ancient summons to tend this garden of the Lord. When atoms are disposable to the ultimate hurt then the very atoms must be reclaimed for God and his will.

The setting for the study of Church unity

If, now we put together the threat to nature and a christology whose scope is as endless as that threat is absolute, do we, perhaps, gain a fresh and urgent vision of the call of God to the unity of the Church, and some help toward its definition and obedience? Nothing that is here affirmed questions or slights the ways we have gone, or suggests that their continuation is not necessary and good. Incessant biblical study, penetrating theological analysis, the expansion of the scope and the deepening of our various traditions, and mutual acknowledgement in thanksgiving of the blessings God has bestowed upon us all in our several ways and works — all of this must go on.

Just as Faith and Order acknowledged at Lund that cooperative ecclesiological studies are a prolegomenon to unity but no guarantee of our willingness to receive it or even to continue to long for it — so we must here acknowledge the profound studies of Christ and the Church, while they show us clearly where our life and our centre is, do not automatically furnish forth a common faith, or draw us toward a faithful ordering of the life of the church in history.

The alembic in which the dynamics of unity stir with life, fuse, give new forms to Godly vitalities, and have the power to generate new obediences amidst old recalcitrancies — is history. That is why there is such a discipline as history of doctrine. For this study discloses that doctrinal statement and development is confession-thinking to the glory of God amidst historical denials or pretensions which would usurp the glory. It has always been within the clutch of a definite historical

threat, or necessity, or a sheer intolerable malaise that the church has found her teaching voice. Doctrines are not born out of doctrines in an unchanging vacuum. Doctrines are evoked, clarified, refined, given force and precision within the challenge of exact circumstances. The facts of history are the excitors of insight ; the nature of the moment's need engenders the doctrine to serve and bless it.

This dynamism that characterizes the church's stance and movement throughout her history, this momentum and promise inherent in the church by the spirit, furnishes us with hope as we try to construct a fresh doctrinal counterpoint between the *ta panta* of the claims of Christ and the facts of nature's pathetic openness to glorious use as to brutal rapacity.

But how does doctrine, addressing the necessities of history with its own interpretive unfolding of the life of God in the life of the mind of the church, bear upon the calling of God to the unity of the Church ? Just as the gracious gifts of God constitute and endow the Church and sustain her toward fulfilment in history, so right doctrine drives toward unity in two ways : it constantly clarifies in intellectual terms what it is that sustains the church, and it calls the church to celebrate in deed what it points to as alone adequate to the world's need. This is but to say that the *telos* of doctrine is action, the fulfilment of right teaching is not right teaching but decision and deed. Clarity without the love of the brother who is luminously before us precisely as the brother is the clarity of damnation. "He that loveth his brother abideth in the light." The Church must think ; but she cannot think herself into unity. The Church must seek order appropriate to her nature ; but she cannot order herself into unity. But the unity of the Church may be given her when she thinks and when she worships, and when she reflects upon order — all in order to ethicality.

By ethicality is meant that actualization in the decisions of the common life of those commands, calls, gifts of God which are affirmed and celebrated in theology and in worship. Clarity, obedience, unity — that is the interior sequence of the light. The Church knows the light in deepening ethicality under the incandescence and guidance and judgment of that light. This it must do as a witness to the unity it now has and as the condition of the fuller unity it seeks.

It is the thesis of this address that our moment in history is heavy with the imperative that faith proposes for the madly malleable and grandly possible potencies of nature, that holiest, vastest, confession :

that by him, for him, and through him all things subsist in God, and therefore are to be used in joy and sanity for his human family.

The Church is both thrust and lured toward unity. The thrust is from behind and within: it is grounded in God's will and promise. The lure is God's same will and power operating upon the Church from the needs of history within which she lives her life. The thrust of the will and the promise is a steady force in the Church's memory: the lure is clamant in the convulsions that twist our times in the Church's present. The way forward is from Christology expanded to its cosmic dimensions, made passionate by the pathos of this threatened earth, and made ethical by the love and the wrath of God. For as it was said in the beginning that God beheld all things and declared them good, so it was uttered by an angel in the apocalypse of St. John, "... ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, saying, hurt not the earth neither the sea, nor the trees..." The care of the earth, the realm of nature as a theatre of grace, the ordering of the thick, material procedures that make available to or deprive men of bread and peace — these are christological obediences before they are practical necessities.

We live in a *kairos* where Christ and chaos intersect, a moment in which the fullest Christology is marvellously congruent with man's power-founded anxiety and need. Contemporary man expresses his hurt in terms of his broken or uncertain relationship to society and nature. We cannot, indeed, extrude from these the substance of his God-relationship. But it might be possible so to say to him that he entertain the possibility of its truth, that the problems that appear in this earthy and societal relationship are not soluble in terms of it. For created life is a triad of God, and man, and nature. If we meet him where he hurts he may be given new ears and eyes for that triadic Word from which the Church lives in confessed acknowledgement, and under which all men live by creation.

The grace and truth which came by Jesus Christ, and which were celebrated in the Colossian hymn because "... it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell..." is alone a source and power and interpretive principle for a meaning adequate to the longings and needs of this cloven and embittered world. There are perceptive men in the world who glimpse this, even outside the Christian confession, and in the dark language of nature's pathos as it groans and travails in pain they set it forth. From many voices I chose one. His utterance

is called, Advice to a Prophet. The poet speaks of man's nature as it is formed in nature's net; of how the deer, and the sky, and the sun, and the patient, mute life of the animals accompany and enrich us as we live out our days. And then, reflecting upon the possible event by which all of these should be stunned, silenced, or obliterated he cries of himself and his human fellows —

What should we be without
The dolphin's arc, the dove's return

These things in which we have seen ourselves and spoken
Ask us, prophet, how shall we call
Our natures forth when that live tongue is all
Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken

In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean
Horse of our courage, in which beheld
The singing locust of the soul unshelled,
And all we mean or wish to mean.

Ask us, whether with the wordless rose
Our hearts shall fail us, come demanding
Whether there shall be, lofty or longstanding
When the bronze annals of the oak tree close.

The Church has found a melancholy number of ways to express her variety. She has found fewer ways to express her unity. But if we are indeed called to unity, and if we can obey that call in terms of a contemporary christology expanded to the dimensions of the New Testament vision, we shall perhaps, obey into fuller unity. For in such obedience we have the promise of the Divine blessing. This radio-active earth, so fecund and so fragile, is his creation, our sister, and the material place where we meet the brother in Christ's light. Ever since Hiroshima the very term *light* has ghastly meanings. But ever since creation it has had meanings glorious; and ever since Bethlehem meanings concrete and beckoning.