CHRISTOLOGY

BY

ERNST M. LOOMER

1962
CHRISTOLOGY

Bernard M. Loomer

The problem of this paper is to present my understanding of what I take to be the classic statement of the Christological foundation of Christian faith: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself." (I do not mean to have the problem of the paper hang simply on the particular wording of this statement. Godspeed, for example, speaks of God reconciling the world to Himself through Christ. But I am dealing with the general notion that God Himself was revealed in Jesus Christ.) My approach to this problem involves an interpretation of the Gospel record in conjunction with an orientation derived from process philosophy. The attempt to arrive at a contemporary understanding of the biblical basis of our faith with the aid of a philosophic discipline exposes me to the charge that I am arbitrarily imposing a philosophical framework on material that does not lend itself to such treatment. It could and perhaps will be said that this is not only another example of the modernizing fallacy, but that this kind of effort inevitably results in a corrupted and distorted picture of Christian faith. It may be added, perhaps, that this methodological procedure is question-begging at the outset because it assumes that process philosophy is a true picture of the world which can be used as the valid measure by which to ascertain and judge the truth-value of the Gospel records. It involves a trimming and a watering down of Christian faith to make it fit preconceived philosophical categories. Therefore this kind of effort, by definition, must be judged to be inappropriate and inadequate. (In any event, if members of this group do not make these charges, members of other groups will.)
My only reply to these presumed criticisms is simply to state that I honestly cannot see any other alternative. Or, more precisely, it seems to me that other approaches involve as great if not greater difficulties. For example, I appreciate the intent of kerygmatic theology to state the meaning of Christian faith in its own terms so that its purity, vitality, and profoundness will be preserved, unalloyed with contemporaneous philosophic, psychological, and scientific viewpoints (however good and valuable these other modes of thought may be in their own areas). It has a commendable purpose in trying to protect the eternal significance of the Christian message from the corrosive effects of shifting, transitory, and culture-bound winds of doctrine. But it is impossible to realize the goal of kerygmatic theology. And if it were possible, it would be undesirable, or even idolatrous. Any attempt to state the meaning of any major Christian doctrine involves the interpreter in some kind of a general world-view. If one says that Jesus was born of a virgin, there is implied in that statement a picture of a world in which that kind of an event is possible. I would hazard the guess that we would not accept that statement as true even if the supposed event were fully attested to in accordance with the highest standards of biblical and historical scholarship. We would not accept it as true, I suggest, because we simply do not believe that we are living in that kind of a world (or that Jesus and the writers of the Gospels were living in that kind of a world, even if they thought so).

The example is inconsequential, and we say that it is not decisive for an adequate interpretation of Christian faith. The example is trivial, but what is involved is a principle of interpretation that has implications for the weightier matters of the Gospel.
As a matter of fact, it was this type of consideration (among others to be sure) that caused many of us to undergo transformations of varying degrees of radicalness and profundity in our understanding and interpretation of Christian faith. The principle of interpretation I am proposing, however, is not that the present is the sole judge of the past (as the particular illustration used might lead one to think). Rather the burden of my contention is that a world-view underlies all interpretations of faith, whatever the intent may be. The truth of this contention becomes apparent when the interpreter is asked specific questions about the evidential meaning of his interpretation. The alternative for the kerygmatic theologian, in the face of direct questioning, is to refuse or to choose not to answer. This latter option might be similar in kind to the type of reply Barth is reputed to have made to Pauck’s inquiry as to whether Jesus literally rose from the dead: “The Bible says he did.” A repetition of the question, with an emphasis on where Barth himself stood, brought a repetition of the answer.

The kerygmatic viewpoint is akin if not identical with the approach of those who want to prevent a modernizing and corrupting of Christian faith by having the Bible speak for itself in its own terms and categories. The aim of historical scholarship should be to let the past speak for itself in its own terms. Otherwise the past loses its integrity and significance by becoming only a tool of the present. But, in addition to the fact that our historical research and interpretation root in contemporary concerns and issues, the historical ideal of letting the past speak for itself does not settle the problem of the contemporary meaning of Christian faith. The cultural, intellectual and other limitations present within the thought-forms and modes of apprehension of past
generations cannot be made binding upon the present, especially within the area of faith and its expressions. The past can no more be normative for the present than the present can be the sole judge of the past. The denial of either end of this proposition is idolatry. Consequently biblical faith must be reinterpreted to make it meaningful for the present and yet not to make it conform to the present.

A third alternative approach, saying that the biblical interpretation of life is mythological in form and content, and is to be understood seriously and imaginatively but not literally, is at best inconclusive. If this viewpoint means that mythological statements or myths in general embody modes of awareness which differ in quality and sometimes even in importance from others forms of perception, the point may be granted. If it means that myths may contain insights and depths of meaning which are not as adequately articulated and conveyed by other modes of expression, no quarrel need necessarily ensue. But these considerations do not put mythological interpretations beyond the pale of criticism. Myths are criticized not only by other myths but also by other forms of apprehension and expression. Since myths embody meanings of some kind or other, these meanings can be structured and analyzed. One does not have to contend that the structures exhaust the full content of the meanings inherent in the myths in order to sustain the more general point involved. But no mode of apprehension or expression is completely free from the restrictions of the particular culture in which it had its birth and came to maturity. I am not now advocating the priority and superiority of clear and distinct ideas. But the alternative to this positivistic ideal is not anti-intellectual obscurantism which seeks to defend the faith by insisting that there are mythological truths too deep for analysis and in the face of which we can utter
only monosyllabic cries of ecstasy or anguish.

No one need assert that abstract intellectual discernment is the only type of acceptable understanding, adequate for all purposes. No one need assert that abstract propositional knowledge is the only fully accredited way of depicting truth in all of its aspects. No one need assert that an intellectual kind of intuition is the only valid way of grasping a gestalt of meaning. There is the concrete intuition of immediate encounters and acquaintance. There is the discernment embodied in the various forms of art. There is the wisdom apprehended and expressed in action and historical movements. But it does not follow that only abstract modes of apprehension and expression contain structure. We have tended to identify intellectuality with one kind of awareness and knowledge, whereas all types of knowledge involve intellectual sensitivity to some degree. Just as all processes contain forms to give them definiteness, so do all meanings embody structure. The essence of a meaning is a relationship of some kind. Therefore the concrete intuition of immediate acquaintance is not a penetration into a structureless and opaque surd. The structure as such is not synonymous with the totality of the particular reality intuited or perceived, to be sure. And there are obviously meanings that defy translation into abstract propositional formulation. But whatever we can appreciate or grasp as meaningful we can symbolize in some manner, even if we can communicate only to ourselves. There may be silences too deep for words, but not for feelings. And feelings are as structured as the self of which they are parts. The transcendence of God over men does not indicate the absence of form in God. It rather points to a difference in structure and meaning. Yet we can know God only if there is structure within the divine life.
Philosophy is simply the attempt to describe the most general structure of the world in which we live. I adopt the general orientation of process thought because, at least up till now I think it is more adequate than other comparable systems. I use it to validate ideas in other areas of life, and I use more special disciplines to test it. I believe in a dialectical relationship not only between faith and reason, philosophy and theology, but also in principle between the authority of the present and the authority of the past (however unsuccessfully I manage to maintain the tension involved in the dialectics). I hold that the Bible deals with authoritative events, yet it itself is not normative. Stated more obliquely, I regard the Bible as an authoritative source for materials pointing beyond themselves to authoritative and decisive happenings. I accept it as data but not as unconditioned historiography. This for me is simply an implication of the Protestant principle of justification by faith which, derived as it was from the Bible is reflexively applied to the Bible itself.

II

The Fact of Revelation

As I indicated in my Green Lake paper of two years ago, my own central and abiding problem is that of the concrete nature of God, as I now term it. More generally put, it is and has been the problem of the objective reality of God himself disclosed to man. I will not recount to you the various chronological steps involved in what I hope is a growing maturity of insight, except to indicate there has been and probably still is a deep-seated prejudice for objectivism within me (or a "compulsion" if Reverend Hiltner will find his obsessiveness relieved with such a designation). The general thesis and implications of the doctrine of objective relativism, and the biological, psychological, and sociological conditioning of all knowledge and experience (or the point of view involved in
the perspective character of knowledge, experience, the self, and reality in general constituted an orientation that I had to confront. It was probably first of all a threat for me. There is one part of me that is an urge to a direct knowing hold of whatever I am concerned about I can recall my sense of irritation at the New Testament saying which runs to the effect that no one has seen God (which I took to mean God, and not his agent, or his ambassador, or his works, or his promises, etc.). This is one aspect of my concern with structure, which is related to a rationalistic streak within me. This is also one of the reasons I was attracted to Wissan, Whitehead, the radical empiricists (and even the positivists), and the whole objectivistic orientation in epistemology and value theory.

You can say if you like that I have wanted to make God an object alongside of or within other objects, as Tillich for one has so clearly indicated, and go on to say with him that I wasn't really looking for God because God just isn't that kind of a reality or being. You can say that this attitude is a denial of faith, that there is something dangerous and profane about this compulsion, that I sacrifice the Gospel for the Law, that this is a negation of the Protestant principle. And in some measure, perhaps to a large degree, I would accept this criticism as true. In fact, it is a criticism I make of myself; and this is one of the reasons I accept the Protestant principle so fully. Yet I am still uneasy about the ambiguous inferential quality of transcendent symbols; the absolute that communicates but never commune; the God who is concretely expressive but never is present; the God one encounters but never meets; and "the philosophy of as if."

In any case this paper will give you my understanding of the complex of events referred to by the term "Jesus Christ." In spite of the fact the the Gospels are documents of faith, I am concerned to try to state what happened and what it means, in so far as I can understand it and piece it
together, and in so far as it makes sense to me and possibly to others.

By the term "revelation" I mean the disclosure of the presence of an objective reality. More specifically I mean that God made himself known in the event Jesus Christ. By the event "Jesus Christ" I mean (following John Knox, in part) the personality, life and teachings of the historical Jesus, the response of loyalty he awakened, his death, the resurrection happening, the coming of the spirit, the faith with which the spirit was received, and the creation of the new community. All this is to be understood as being rooted in the Hebrew faith and culture. But the center of this is the personal figure of Jesus. The problem is, then, where and what is God in all this? My major difficulty with most theological interpretations I have encountered may simply be a matter of words, and yet I do not think so. Those views which attempt to do justice to Jesus' humanity seem to be inadequate in making clear how God himself was present. Those who try to take care of the latter point seem to make Jesus something other than really human.

It seems that, apart from the difficulties inherent in the conception itself, there is not too much support in the New Testament for the idea that Jesus was God in human form (and thus was not really human in any significant sense). The writer of the Gospel of John does have Jesus saying that he and the Father are one. But this notion is not completely consistent with many other parts of that Gospel where a clear distinction between the two is indicated. The main thrust of this and all the other Gospels is that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one, the son of God, the Christ. He is sent by God but he is not God.

Another widespread interpretation (current among some liberals and also others who theologize in terms of the inferential symbols which point but don't quite get you there) holds that Jesus was wholly and completely a
human figure who exemplified in his spirit, attitudes, and behavior the will or the mind or the purpose of God. By his teachings, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus illustrated the love God has for man and the love man should have for God and his fellows. Jesus revealed that love was the essence of God. Thus in this interpretation God himself was not concretely revealed in Jesus; only the abstract character or structure of God was symbolized. My point would hold unless one takes the view that the full reality of God consists in an abstract character or principle such as love. But in this case God is not a living reality, an actual resource in dealing with the problems of life. Furthermore, this interpretation could apply to several conceptions of God, including the platonic, deistic, idealistic and humanistic types. And it doesn't explain how Jesus got that way.

To my mind, the dominant New Testament picture of Jesus is that of a fully human figure, who was not God, but who was able to do great acts because he was sent by God to announce and to help initiate the coming of the kingdom of God on earth. He was enabled to do these mighty deeds and utter his tremendous sayings with authority because he was empowered by God. He was empowered because the Holy Spirit, God's spirit, was present in him. The Holy Spirit was an enabling power, a causally efficacious power, an efficient cause, if you will. A power that was also the wisdom of God. Why Jesus was chosen for this role is a mystery, evidencing the freedom of God to choose his own servants in his own way and in his own time. But there is some warrant for the assertion that Jesus did not always have this power, that it descended on-him as it were at a certain time and place.

Beginning with Mark and continuing with Matthew, Luke, and John in that order the Gospel writers increasingly attribute Jesus' unusual personality and ability to a power not his own, to the presence within him of a Holy Spirit. The writer of John, more than the other writers, portrays Jesus
as quite conscious of the fact that he was able to do what he did, not because of himself but because of the Holy Spirit within him. In terms of the logic of this basic explanation Jesus would inevitably think of himself as the messiah.

Throughout the Bible the Holy Spirit or the spirit of God seemed to be present intermittently and to function somewhat sporadically. It was not present in all people. It apparently visited some prophets and other lesser known individuals. But even with these favored few it did not operate uninterrupted. One couldn't absolutely count on it with any certainty. Jesus told his disciples, as we read, to wait until the Holy Spirit came to them. If this picture is understood in a literal and exclusive fashion, some theological and philosophical problems are encountered which become difficult if not impossible to handle. I mean such problems as the omnipresence of God, the sustaining love of God, etc. But apart from this type of consideration there is theological insight involved in this conception of the Holy Spirit which I will deal with shortly.

In the New Testament there is an obvious distinction between God as father and the Holy Spirit. God is in heaven, that is he transcends the world; and the Holy Spirit is in Jesus (and later on, the disciples and others). The logic it seems to me is clear. If we say that God revealed himself in Jesus Christ, then God himself was the Holy Spirit, the actual presence of God literally, since it was the Holy Spirit and its working that was revealed in Jesus Christ. God therefore is a power and a wisdom, a dynamic reality resident within Jesus and in the total complex of events that made up the revelatory situation. (Note to Mr. Hiltner: the "substantive" connotation of this language is difficult to overcome at this point.) The Holy Spirit was "in" Jesus, but it should not be confused with Jesus. Theoretically there is a distinction of kind or quality or essence between Jesus and the Holy Spirit,
which from my point of view is the basis for the traditional two-nature
two-nature theory of the person of Christ. But it was the Holy Spirit that was present
and felt or observed. If there is a radical difference between the Holy
Spirit and God as transcendent, then God as transcendent was not experienced
or revealed. I am putting it this sharply to point out that if God as trans-
scendence is God himself, and if God himself was revealed in Jesus Christ, then
God as transcendent becomes a dimension of the Holy Spirit as imminent. I
state the issue this way because I think it is the logic of the actual bib-
lical picture and because it makes better sense to me philosophically. My
intent is not to water down in any way the important insights embodied in the
document of the transcension of God. On the contrary I am concerned to make
the idea of God's transcendence more functional. For part of my point is
that it was precisely the transcension of God, the "hiddenness" of God, that
was revealed.

Thus in order to protect the transcension of God (when revelation
is a disclosure of God himself), and also to protect the initiative of God,
as well as to be true to the Biblical account, I find myself, strangely enough,
coming out with a version of the two-nature theory. The traditional account
is untenable from many points of view today, theologically, psychologically,
and philosophically. Yet it was perhaps right in its aim. I would put the
matter in terms of structure and process instead of the categories of sub-
stance and essence. The older view stated that there were two complete natures
in one. I would say that within the one person of Jesus there was a process
of divine power that was in him but not of him. Or, as I have tried to state
it elsewhere, there was within him an integrity not of his own making. It
is difficult to avoid words with traditional substantive meanings (which, in-
cidentally, is a tribute to the tremendous power of substance philosophy in
not only shaping our language but also in structuring our very minds).
And I am not sure that I can make my meaning much clearer, even to myself, in speaking of this integrity not of our own making, yet within us as a distinguishable and discernible process. I would differ from the older two-nature theory in that this Holy Spirit, this God as present, this process within us, is to be found not only within us as though we were independently existing selves, but between and amongst us—or between and among Jesus and his disciples.

This leads to a further point about the idea of the Holy Spirit. I go along with Kylau and both in his insistence on the continuity of the Old and New Testaments and in his statements concerning their differences. I agree with his view "that the New Testament event of faith differs from the Old in the sense that it is a human life." But from my point of view this does not mean that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ established the ontological status or basis of the Holy Spirit or God. The particular historical revelation we are concerned with does not imply that God himself was revealed or become incarnate for the first time. Ontologically speaking God never had to "become" incarnate (in the general sense). He always was. The aim of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ was redemptive in import. Perhaps no will disagree with this point, but I make it at this juncture not only for philosophic reasons but also in order to clarify what follows. The intermittent character of the appearance of the Holy Spirit has the merit of indicating the initiating and free historical acts of God with regard to man's salvation. It cannot be interpreted in such a way that God is regarded as a historical reality who is sometimes present and sometimes absent. It is clear that the power of God was present in Jesus in a unique degree. This is why he was the Christ. Yet the whole picture becomes incomprehensible if we hold that what was present and operative in Jesus was totally absent from men in general, say the disciples for example. The sporadic nature of the
appearances of the Holy Spirit testifies to the history of God's "break-through" in the life of a people such that his will could become more dominant. This is the history of revelation wherein the hidden presence of God is disclosed so as to be perceptible, as it were. These out-of-the-blue occurrences of the Holy Spirit disclose not so much the presence as the power of God in human life.

It is the concrete presence of God himself in us which is the foundation of our true selves from which we cannot escape. It is this same concrete presence or power within us that makes the judgement of God a causal force or factor which is the thorn in our spirits, an irritation that we must deal with in one way or another—either to seek forgiveness or self-destruction. God could be literally disregarded unless as a power he is present within the very structure of our being. Judas Iscariot and Paul are the two classic illustrations of this point.

Our knowledge of Jesus' relation with his disciples is very scanty. The Gospel writers picture them as being aware of the unusual power resident within Jesus and manifested also in his relations with them. It is also clear from the records that the disciples didn't know what it was all about. Yet, in spite of their apparent misconceptions, some transformations must have been taking place within the lives of the disciples as they lived with him. We certainly cannot be specific, and yet in part the resurrection occurrences depend on the relationship established in the somewhat daily association of Jesus and his followers. They were caught up in something that was greater than they knew.

Yet Jesus was crucified. This means that God himself, as concretely present within the life of Jesus and within the association of Jesus and his disciples (as Holy Spirit), was crucified. The crucifixion of any man is the crucifixion of God. This statement is simply involved in the whole meaning
of the revelatory presence of God in human life. Jesus, as human, died as an act of obedience. It was an act of faith. Its purpose was to advance the coming of the kingdom of God. Its aim was to release the power of God, the Holy Spirit, already present in men. Yet before this power could be released in human life, or (as the Gospel writers put it) before the Holy Spirit could come to men and particularly the disciples, men had to be broken in spirit. God could not become sovereign until the obstacles of man's refusal were removed. God could not save men until the opaqueness of their blindness and willfulness had been shattered and dissolved. Only then could the presence of the Holy Spirit become transparent. Because of the freedom of men and its misuse, the cross was an ontological necessity within the life of God in his relationship to men. Thus in the death of Jesus the hope, the security, and the meaning of life clung to by the disciples and friends of Jesus were broken, completely and irrevocably.

The cross of Jesus, symbolizing and yet weighted down with the sins of those who rejected Jesus and the Holy Spirit, became the cross of God himself. Jesus endured the pain of the cross and the suffering of being hated, despised, and rejected. This was endurable only because of his faith in the presence and power of God within him. Thus God is pictured as a suffering God.

God suffered the hatred and rejection of men. Yet God had to suffer if God was to redeem. This is but another implication of the notion that God revealed himself, that God is present in history. It is another aspect of the divine-human mutuality inherent in the divine-human relation. We must identify ourselves with those whom we would forgive. We must take their feelings into ourselves. We cannot forgive others from a distance, in aloof unsociableness, or in absentia. Therefore God had to suffer if he was to forgive and redeem men. He could forgive only if he took the sins of men unto himself. The suffering of God is not a sufficient cause of God's ability to forgive, but it
is a necessary condition. The other elements that are needed are the brokenness of man in the face of the judgment of God, and the power of God to release himself in redemptive activity in human life. But the suffering of God is needed unless God himself is to deny the basic community between man and between man and God. The community between man and God would be broken if God did not suffer, because there would be no motivation within God for community or the sense of togetherness.

Jesus is crucified. The Holy Spirit existing within Jesus and between Jesus and his disciples is crucified. Jesus suffers. God suffers. The disciples are broken in spirit. Yet there is a resurrection. But this, if you will, is the resurrection of God and not of Jesus, although I am not sure we should use the term "resurrection" at all. The historical Jesus died and apparently was buried. He as an individual, either as human or as transfigured, is no more, as far as we know. We do not now encounter a transfigured living Jesus, even if we add the word "Christ." We, like the disciples and early Christians, encounter the living God, the Holy Spirit, who was revealed in and through Jesus the Christ. The earthly Jesus died and is remembered in the community that he and the Holy Spirit established. But the term "resurrection" is ambiguous unless you read literally that the person of Jesus the Christ was raised from the dead and became transfigured and glorified. But this position I do not hold. I realize that this is the generally pervasive New Testament account. But, I do not accept this on the basis of the same principle in terms of which I do not accept the virgin birth myth.

In a somewhat literal sense, there was no resurrection. The Holy Spirit concretely present in the human Jesus was crucified along with Jesus. That particular and numerically identical instance of the Holy Spirit was not resurrected, unless one is to hold that the Holy Spirit is a non-material presence of some kind which is more or less mechanically detachable from the con-
crete human person in whom it is embedded. But in this case the two natures are never "one," or intertwined aspects of one person. On the other hand, if you hold that the human Jesus and the Holy Spirit were really "one" person (as I do), and if you further hold that that particular instance of the Holy Spirit was raised from the dead (on the grounds that it is blasphemous to think of God or any part of him as dead), then it would logically follow that you should believe that the human Jesus was resurrected, either in his bodily or transfigured form. This would follow because of the integrity involved in one person. In this case you can speak literally of a resurrected Christ or Jesus Christ. Or you come to the same conclusion from the other end. If you hold that the Holy Spirit and Jesus are "one" person, and if you also hold that Jesus was raised from the dead, then it would follow that the particular instance of the Holy Spirit in Jesus was also raised from the dead.

In other words, I am inclined to conclude that the conception of resurrection necessarily involves the resurrection of the human Jesus, either in his bodily or transfigured form. Any other position involves us in double-talk. I have spelled this out in this way because I am usually confused by most discussions on the resurrection.

From my point of view, the term "resurrection" must be used figuratively. The term has reference to the idea that the Holy Spirit, the power of God, became not present but manifest and released in the lives of the disciples and early Christians. This was the same Holy Spirit that was present in Jesus, not the numerically identical exemplification that was in Jesus, but another instance of the same power. Because of their association with Jesus, his teachings, his acts and his death, and because of the power of God within Jesus and within themselves, and because of their brokenness and God's suffering, they were freed by the Holy Spirit to receive God's grace, his forgiveness, and his redemptive activity. They, the disciples, are reputed to have seen the risen Jesus because it was through him and in him that they encountered the Holy Spirit. Therefore, for them, the coming of the Holy Spirit was an experience with the risen Christ.
God in his suffering, his mercy, and his power is triumphant over despair, brokenness, and sin (that is, spiritual death). The death of his son, his chosen one, enabled him to redeem his people and to establish a new community, the church. Thus our faith has been bought for us, and we have only to accept it as our own. And out of this faith the eschatological hope is born.

III

THE MEANING OF REVELATION

Finally, I would like to discuss quite briefly a few aspects of the problem of the meaning of revelation.

First, if we ask what was accomplished by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, we come back ultimately to the idea of a new community. Revelation is an historical disclosure of a divine reality, and not an esoteric revealing of propositional knowledge. I am quite ready to accept the idea that all the ethical and religious insights of the New Testament are contained in the Old. I would agree that the God pictured in the New Testament is fundamentally the same as the one pictured in the profoundest parts of the Old Testament. I gladly go along with the notion of the fundamental continuity between the two testaments. On the other hand I see no reason to question the idea that the union of the suffering servant and the messiah figures represents an advance of the New beyond the Old. There is rather a new relationship possible between God and man. Because of the complex of events that we call the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, God is more accessible to us or we to him. The redemptive power of God was re-established or re-procured. He was able to break through the power of sin by means of a new community. A deeper faith and a greater hope were and are now possible. The chains of the law, although not the law itself, were broken. There is still sin, despair, lack of faith, idolatry, injustice and meaninglessness. Yet these aspects of experience need not be and are not final. They can be overcome, and they have been overcome in
many generations, because they were overcome in one particular complex of events. They were not eradicated or abolished. They are as prevalent as ever. But the resources of God for dealing with them have been made more accessible or nearer. Thus in principle the strength of evil is weakened and in fact is so in countless instances.

Secondly, I find Richard Niebuhr's conclusion about the meaning of revelation very suggestive. It runs to the effect that revelation involves a permanent revolution of faith itself. I would understand this to be another formulation or at least an implication of the Protestant principle of justification by faith. This notion means several things to me.

It means (a) that the cross is not an ethical norm but a norm of faith. The idea of the cross as an ethical norm leads to Reinhold Niebuhr's position, where theological ultimacy is attributed to the statement, "be ye perfect as your heavenly father is perfect." Apart from the point that the word "perfect" should perhaps read "merciful" and apart from the pacifism inherent in Niebuhr's position, this outlook really makes love into another law which must be (although it can't be) fulfilled. The norm means that we are in principle bound to sacrifice ourselves literally because perfect love stipulates that we cannot engage in the claims and counter-claims of historical existence. The logic of this position is that God does not so engage himself. But in one real sense, the whole idea of revelation implies that God does so struggle in the interests of a divine-human mutuality.

It means (b) that the transcendent goodness of God is revealed in such a way that there is always a distance between God and man which requires our transformation in terms of judgment and grace. It means that God is thus free, that he is not bound to our expectations or even our faith. He is always unexpected. Thus, in spite of the fact that Nisbet's claim that the messiah who came was the one expected in the Old Testament, nevertheless, he was unexpected by the people Jesus encountered. Thus God is always first rejected.
It means (c) that our interpretation of the nature of God's character and the content of his will for us must be put in very general terms (witness the generality of Jesus' teachings). We do not really know what love, mercy, justice, judgment and forgiveness mean in the full sense of the word. Thus, God cannot be tied to specific conditions. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ is final in the sense that the hidden or transcending goodness of God was revealed as indicating God's love for us; but the full content and power of the love were revealed as still transcendent.

It means (d) that faith is to be found and lived in the dialectical relation between what we are and what we may become by God's grace, between the love disclosed and the love yet to be revealed, between being unacceptable and being accepted. Thus, the idea that one gives up his sin only when he has found a greater security needs qualification. The security of faith lies in the insecurity of tension.

Bernard M. Lesser
April 17, 1968
Orientation Committee

Federated Theological Faculty
University of Chicago