

TILLICH'S CHRISTOLOGY: ORTHODOXY OR HERESY?

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An orthodox Christian, be he Catholic or Protestant, can only judge Tillich's Christology in the light of the definitive statement of the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. The purpose of this paper is to show that the Council of Chalcedon and Tillich's reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Incarnation are completely incompatible.

Nestorius, a Syrian bishop, denounced and deposed as a heretic by the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D., taught that the divine nature and human nature co-existed as two distinct natures in Jesus and were not unified in one person, Jesus Christ.¹ There were, therefore, in this view, two persons as well as two natures in Jesus Christ. The growing threat to orthodoxy presented by this teaching prompted the need for a response from the Church that would authoritatively clarify and define the God-man relationship in the person of Jesus Christ. It was for this purpose that the Church fathers, in 451 A.D., convened in Chalcedon, an ancient city in Asia Minor.

The doctrine of Chalcedon is that in Jesus as the Christ, the human nature and the divine nature co-existed, and the human nature, soul and body, was actuated by the divine Person, the Word of God. Thus, there was a real unity between the two natures of Christ while, at the same time, they remained distinct, the one being merely human and undergoing all the tragedies of existence, sin excepted, the other being purely God. That Tillich's view is incompatible with this should appear evident from his comments in the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*.

Prior to the unorthodox teachings of Nestorius, the Church found it necessary in the fourth century to deal with the equally unorthodox teaching of an Alexandrian priest by the name of Arius. Arius taught that the Logos, Christ, was a creature of God, "alien and dissimilar in all things from the Father; a perfect creature and immensely above all created beings, but a creature nevertheless."² In 325 A.D., at a Council convened in Nicaea, an ancient city in Bithynia, this doctrine of Arianism was declared heretical. Thus in clarifying and defining the orthodoxy of the Incarnation, Chalcedon also reaffirmed the declaration of Nicaea, thereby condemning both Arianism and Nestorianism as heretical. The fifth and sixth centuries witnessed a challenging of the doctrine of Chalcedon. This challenge came chiefly from the Coptics, an Egyptian sect of Christian believers, who held that Christ's nature was one single nature or a single composite nature that was partly

divine and partly human. The upholders of this doctrine were called Monophysites. Monophysitism was later condemned as heretical.

Tillich seems convinced that the definition of Chalcedon was needed as a protection against heretical distortions that would portray Christ as a half-God. The Divinity of Christ had to be fully affirmed. He seems equally convinced that it was also needed to counteract Monophysite tendencies, which would allow Christ to be fully man. These are the two dangers, he maintained, that a Christology must avoid, and the two elements that it must protect. In Tillich's words, an attempt to express the mystery of Christ conceptually "can lead to an actual denial of the Christ-character of Jesus as the Christ; or it can lead to an actual denial of the Jesus-character of Jesus as the Christ. Christology must always find its way on the ridge between these two chasms".³ The Christ-character of Christ refers to his divine dimensions; the Jesus-character to his human finitude. The council of Nicaea had begun solving the dilemma by identifying the Christ-character of Jesus with the eternal Logos. The doctrine of Chalcedon continued in the same vein; it described Jesus as having two natures, the human nature and the nature of the eternal Logos, expressed in the formula: two natures, human and divine, in the one divine Persona of the Logos.

Paul Tillich says this definition was necessary and "saved the Church,"⁴ and he says further that this doctrine has "substantial truth and historical significance."⁵ Nevertheless, Tillich insists that the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulations ended in what he calls an "inescapable definitive failure."⁶ The Doctrine of Chalcedon has, Tillich says, "substantial truth" because in it "both the Christ-character and the Jesus-character of the event of Jesus as the Christ were preserved."⁷ Yet, he says, it failed to formulate a definitive doctrine, a doctrine that would permanently protect the Church from error, because it used "very inadequate conceptual tools."⁸ What Tillich objects to in the Chalcedonian doctrine is the concept of nature. He says: "the basic inadequacy lies in the term nature."⁹ To be more specific, he says, "the term 'human nature' is ambiguous and the term 'divine nature' is wholly inadequate".¹⁰

Human nature, as Tillich understands it, refers to three elements in man. Firstly, it refers to man's essence. Secondly, it refers to man's estranged existence. Thirdly, it refers to what he calls "the ambiguous unity of the two".¹¹ As regards the Christ, Tillich says the first and third elements apply. Jesus, in other words, was "man", and he was "involved in the tragic ambiguities of life"¹² of which the Cross is a symbol. As for the second element, namely, 'man's estranged existence', one must qualify Christ's participation in estrangement. The qualification that Christ's participation in estrangement must be given, says Tillich, is due to the fact that Christ "has man's existential nature as a real possibility, but in such a way that temptation, which is the possibility, is taken into the unity with God".¹³ Continuing, he says the word "nature" calls for qualification when used to refer to

Christ. Hence, Tillich concludes: "Under these circumstances it is imperative to dismiss altogether the term 'human nature' in relation to the Christ and replace it by a description of the dynamics of life."¹⁴ This is a very strange and puzzling conclusion that does not seem to follow. First of all, to say that the term 'human nature' must be qualified when used with reference to the Christ is by no means a reason to dismiss it completely, but only to qualify it. Secondly, a "description of the dynamics of life" while speaking of the human nature of Christ involves no irreconcilable contradiction, and therefore, poses no real problem. In other words, to describe the dynamics of life in Jesus Christ by no means requires a rejection of the Chalcedonian description.

Tillich goes on to claim that as far as the term 'divine nature' is concerned, "it cannot be applied to the Christ in any meaningful way; for the Christ (who is Jesus of Nazareth) is not beyond essence and existence."¹⁵ But since the divine nature is, by definition, beyond essence and existence, then, Tillich says, Christ "could not be a personal life living in a limited period of time, having been born and having to die, being finite, tempted, and tragically involved in existence."¹⁶ Because of this metaphysical impossibility, Tillich finds the concept of divine nature, as applied to Christ, totally unacceptable as well as erroneous. He has failed to see, however, that his reasoning here does no violence to the doctrine of Chalcedon, a doctrine which makes it impossible to confuse the human and

divine in Christ. According to Chalcedon, what, in Christ, "is not beyond essence and existence": is the human element, the divine element remaining, by definition, beyond essence and existence. Tillich clearly disregards the Chalcedonian distinction, and it is on the strength of that disregard for it that he denies the adequacy of the Chalcedonian doctrine. The result is that Tillich's reason for rejecting Chalcedon turns out to be absurd. Had Tillich paid closer attention to the meaning of the Chalcedonian Christology, he could hardly have failed to see that his very starting-point is groundless, and he could not have denied Chalcedon on so shallow a basis.

However, Tillich does not stop here: his attack on the doctrine of Chalcedon continues. Not only is the concept of two natures meaningless, but the union of the two natures, he says, "lie beside each other like blocks and unity cannot be understood at all."¹⁷ It is understandable that Tillich would come to this conclusion because of the fact that his treatment of Chalcedon pays little or no attention to the concept of *hypostasis* or *persona*. The two natures are joined in what is called a "hypostatical union" by a later theology, and it is rather strange that Tillich does not discuss this. However, the Council of Chalcedon did make a clear statement on how the two natures are united, namely, "in one person and one subsistence, not partitioned or divided in two persons, but in the one and self-same Son and only-born of God, the Logos, the Lord Jesus Christ". The two natures are not

therefore "blocks", as Tillich refers to them: they are animated by one and the same center of divine life, the Word of God. Apparently because he has failed to understand this unconfused union in the person of Jesus Christ, Tillich recommends, by way of a solution to his problem, the elimination of the concept of 'two natures'. In that way he says we can lay the groundwork for the establishment of relational concepts which make understandable the dynamic picture of Jesus as the Christ."¹⁸ This is really an astonishing statement in the light of the fact that, as it always has been traditionally understood and explained, the "person" of the Word, in which the two natures of Christ subsist, is itself a relational concept. The Word is a substantial relation to the Father. Christ is consubstantial, of one substance, with the Father. His relationship with man is established through the human nature which, as God, he assumed. Jesus is both God and man. Thus the Chalcedonian doctrine does provide a basis for a relational understanding of Jesus as the Christ; yet, it is this very same doctrine Tillich wants to eliminate in order to establish a relational Christology. Once again Tillich's criticism of Chalcedon has veered around and destroyed itself.

It is really no surprise that, having rejected the divine nature of Christ, which is now replaced by what he calls an "eternal God-man-unity or eternal Godmanhood"²⁰, he develops a slanted Trinitarian theology. The Christ is not God. He may be called divine because what he manifests is the eternal ground of being, which is what Tillich says God is. The event of Jesus as the Christ remains unique. This is due to what it reveals, namely, that there is "an eternal unity of God and man within the divine life."²¹ For most human beings, this unity is a potentiality; it is, in our life, "actualized through finite freedom"²², and therefore ambiguously. On the contrary, in Jesus, the unity of God and man was actualized "against existential disruption"²³ in a triumph over ambiguity. The Christ submitted to, and conquered, the tragedy of existence. In that way, Christ manifested the New Being for which mankind had been longing. Therefore, in terms of doctrine, what we can say of this unity of God and man in Christ is limited. As Tillich himself puts it: "Abstract definitions of the nature of this unity are as impossible as psychological investigation into its character. One can only say that it is in a community between God and the center of a personal life which determines all utterances of this life and resists the attempts within existential estrangement to disrupt it."²⁴ Another way of putting it is that one can describe Jesus as the Christ, but one cannot explain him. Perceiving the revelatory power of Christ belongs to faith, not to philosophy or rational theology. To the question: What is the Christ? one can answer—He is the New Being, eternal Godmanhood manifested in existence. To the question: Who is Christ? there is no answer.

Paul Tillich has been accused of Nestorianism, Arianism, Monophysitism and Docetism²⁵ (see footnote for the latter). Father Gustave Weigel finds clear traces of Nestorianism in Tillich's view of Christ: "Tillichian theology is Nestorian; nor

would this label incommode Dr. Tillich, who sees much that is good in the doctrines of Nestorian theologians."²⁶ Nestorianism, as we saw, sees Christ as not only two natures, but also two persons. In Jesus there is a human person and the person of the divine Logos, not--as in the Chalcedonian doctrine--two natures in the one divine person. Tillich, in response, declared Father Weigel's article to be "the best analysis of my thought I ever have seen".²⁷ Tillich, however, does not call himself a Nestorian. Nevertheless, he wrote Father Weigel: "You are further right that I am more in sympathy with the Antiochean rather than the Alexandrian Christology, although I have often been accused of Docetism."²⁸ Antiochean Christology, without being necessarily Nestorian, tends to emphasize the human element in Christ. Alexandrian theology, without being necessarily Monophysite, tends to stress the divine. By aligning himself with the Antiochean, Tillich wants specifically to oppose the notion of a pre-existing divine Being becoming man. He says if the statement in St. John's gospel, "the Word was made flesh, is pressed, we are in the midst of a theology of Metamorphosis."²⁹ For Tillich it would mean that the Divine has become human, which is a contradiction. But Tillich's fears are really groundless, for the doctrine of Chalcedon does not permit of such a conception: the Logos does not *become* human, he only *assumes* a human nature.

It seems clear, then, that Paul Tillich has failed to account for the biblical portrayal of Jesus and for the traditional Christological doctrine as the Church has, from the earliest times, understood and believed it. He has paid no more than lip-service to his claim that "Protestant theology must accept the 'Catholic' tradition insofar as it is based on the substance of two great decisions of the early Church, Nicaea and Chalcedon."³⁰

Although he himself tried "to find new forms in which the Christological substance of the past can be expressed"³¹, the Christological substance, in his treatment of it, disappears. The divinity of Christ he rejects because, he thinks, it would call for a Christological metamorphosis. The humanity of Christ he declares unknowable. As we saw earlier, he made the demand that "Christology must always find its way on the ridge between these two chasms", namely, a portrayal of Christ as something less than God, and a portrayal of Jesus as something other than fully man. He says then that on the ridge between these two chasms, Christology must always find its way. I submit that whereas the Council of Chalcedon does chart a course on the ridge between these two chasms, the Christology of Paul Tillich falls into both chasms, one after the other.