



## Consummatum Est

Certain words and phrases come to mind easily, and we take them for granted as part of the theological tradition of the church. Certainly “the work of Christ” is one such phrase. We speak of “the work of Christ” as a standard topic of Christian theology.

But it is not always easy to find the origins of our standard terminology, and the present case is a good illustration. The apostle Paul speaks of “the work of Christ” on one occasion (Phil 2:30), and there it signifies the sacrificial witness of the Christian in this world.

Along with Paul we can continue to speak of “the work of Christ” as the work which Christians do in the world today. The church is Christ’s body to do—or to “work” out—his mission through word and deed in the world. Normally, however, when we speak of “the work of Christ” we have something else in mind. That is the “work” which Christ has done, once for all, through his death and resurrection to deliver humankind from the powers of sin and death. Here the biblical basis can be found in certain utterances of Jesus in the Gospel of John. At 4:34 Jesus says, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish (*teleiōsō*) his work (*ergon*).” At 17:4 he prays to the Father, “I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished (*teleiōsas*) the work (*ergon*) which thou gavest me to do.” And at the close of the crucifixion narrative, when the decisive work of Christ has been accomplished, the Johannine Jesus utters, “It is finished (*tetelestai*; Vulgate, *consummatum est*)” (19:30).

The gospel of the completed work of Christ reverberates throughout the New Testament in one form of expression or another. The Letter to the Hebrews insists explicitly on the “once for all” (*ephapax*) character of that work (7:27; 9:12; 10:10). The apostle Paul is no less decisive, however, when he writes that in his crucifixion Christ became “a curse for us” (Gal 3:13); “one has died for all; therefore all have died” (2 Cor 5:14); God made Christ “to be sin...so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21); Christ “died to sin, once for all” (Rom 6:10); in the crucified Christ, God “condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom 8:3); God “gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32); and “while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom 5:6).

It has often been difficult to speak of the relationship between the “objective,” completed work of Christ and the believer. One way to sketch it out would be as follows. The work of Christ is a completed work. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself once and for all (cf. 2 Cor 5:19). Faith is the response which accepts the gospel of God’s recon-

ciling work, and by which the eschatological gifts of justification and salvation, are made present to the believer. No work is required on the part of anyone.

And yet the gospel is muted whenever faith itself is spoken of in such a way that it is

nothing but a “higher,” more “spiritual,” more “proper,” more “God pleasing,” or supposedly more work-able form of work which one can and must do as a precondition or prerequisite for justification. Justification is by grace through faith, to be sure. But our language can play tricks on us and the gospel. Whenever the clear indicative (“justification is by grace through faith”) is amended into a condition (“if you are going to be justified and saved, first you have to believe”), the result is to require a work which is, in fact, more difficult than mortifying the flesh and/or sacrificial giving. How do I know whether I believe enough? It seems that Anders Nygren expressed the matter very well long ago in connection with his study of Romans when he wrote that “faith is not something that [ a person] offers as a condition of...justification,” for to say that is to express a “legalistic outlook” which assigns “co-operative roles between God and [humankind].” Rather, “it is truer to say that one’s faith is evidence that the gospel *has* exercised its power,...for it is the power of the gospel that makes it possible for one to believe” (*Commentary on Romans*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949 [69-71]). The work of Christ is all sufficient. Faith does not “help” that work to do its work. Rather, faith is an openness and trust on the part of the believer—and is itself a gift of the Spirit “working” through the gospel—which allows God’s new creation to happen here and now. Whoever is in Christ is a new creation (2 Cor 5:17). The new creation is the work of God from start to finish. How else can one speak of a new *creation*, except that it is the work of God?

The New Testament uses a variety of images to interpret the death of Christ, and various theories of the atonement have been worked out since. Most images and theories, for all their differences, seek to emphasize the “objective” character of the work of Christ in one way or another. One cannot conceive of a “gospel” otherwise. Either something happened in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth which is finished and decisive for humankind, or there is no “good news” at all. Some of the images and theories are reviewed in articles in this issue of the journal.

This issue proceeds with an essay by *F. Dean Lueking*, who takes up the question how one can speak faithfully in the world today about Christ’s reconciling work beyond glibness, jargon, and moralizing and move on toward soundness and the integration of theology and preaching. He draws upon illustrations from pastoral experience and other encounters. *I. Howard Marshall* offers a comprehensive essay on the death of Jesus in the New Testament. He reports on recent discoveries concerning crucifixion and how these relate to Gospel accounts, asks how the crucifixion narratives interpret the event itself, explores the imagery of the New Testament, and finally treats the question of how the death of Jesus is to be considered a saving event. *Gerhard Forde* starts his essay with a question posed by Abelard, takes it with utmost seriousness, goes beyond abstract theories of the atonement, explores the “brute facts” surrounding the death of Jesus, and then concludes that the wrath of God is “satisfied”

when believers, no longer under wrath, are created. *Jonathan Strandjord* delineates the meaning of a “theology of the cross,” discerns what that has to do with exegesis and preaching; and then goes on to show how it can be used as a criterion for the evaluation of preaching.

Two essays explore more explicitly the meaning of Christ in a global context. *George Rupp* shows how both the incarnational and apocalyptic motifs in Christian faith are important in

several ways. The Christian is called to appreciate ordinary life (incarnationalism) but also to avoid domestication of the divine and satisfaction with provincialism and self-righteousness (which apocalyptic seeks to prevent). Both Christian and other faiths are challenged to affirm this world and yet maintain the tension between “the ultimate that is emerging and the actual as it is.” Collaboration with various religious traditions on global and social issues is possible through a Christology which attends to a “marriage of the apocalyptic and incarnational motifs.” *Yoshiro Ishida* explores the ways and means by which Christ is or can be confessed in various contexts, particularly the third world, basing his essay on studies conducted by the Department of Studies of the Lutheran World Federation. His essay takes up the meaning of the act of confessing Christ, how specific contexts challenge the form in which confession is to be made, what Christological images seem to “work” in these contexts, and what the ecumenical implications are for a common confession of Christ in and for today’s world. Particularly interesting too is his discussion of how the *filioque* clause is faring in ecumenical circles, concluding with some reflections on what the dropping of the clause might imply.

The Resources section contains two additional articles. *Margaret Krych* discusses the implications of Piaget’s age-stage theory of cognitive development for teaching about Christ in parish education, suggests appropriate concepts at the various levels, and rounds off the discussion by entering into the problems of curricular development (and marketing!) and teacher training. *H. Frederick Reisz* surveys certain images of Christ in contemporary poetry. He limits himself to poets of the last two decades, often offering quotations from their works. Reviews of recent, significant books conclude this issue of the journal.

In some ways, then, we get back to where we started. The phrase “the work of Christ” has to do with the saving work of Christ through the cross and resurrection (Marshall, Forde), which is proclaimed in the gospel (Lueking, Strandjord). But in another sense “the work of Christ” is the work carried on yet today by Christians in their collaboration with others for human betterment (Rupp), confession and witness in global contexts (Ishida), teaching in the parish (Krych), and the imaginative use of the arts (Reisz).

A.J.H.