



The Finality of Christ: Twenty Years Later

Two decades have passed since the publication of Lesslie Newbigin's *Finality of Christ* (Richmond: John Knox, 1969). Bishop Newbigin introduced his book with a list of five things which, in his view, made it difficult to use the word "finality" in respect to Jesus Christ: (1) the relatively recent appreciation of the vastness of time and space; (2) the insistence of scientific methodology that every conclusion is tentative; (3) the contextual relativism that comes with thinking in historical terms; (4) the parallels noted by comparative religion studies between Christianity and the beliefs and practices of the other great religions; and (5) the "acute bad conscience" of Western people.

Things have hardly gotten easier in the intervening years. Perhaps only Newbigin's second point has been somewhat tempered. Scientific method itself has not been called into question, but there is a renewed interest in ways of seeing and knowing which diminish the hegemony of the "scientific" explanation of all things.

Otherwise, the micro and macro expansion of the universe continues; relativism has degenerated into individualistic autarchy (especially in religious matters); decisions at every level are increasingly made on pragmatic rather than principled grounds; and comparative studies must now come to terms not only with the "great religions," but also with the new emergence of native religions and the many-splendored manifestations of the New Age.

Twenty years ago, pluralism was largely a topic of liberal conversation; now it is an everyday experience of Western cultural life. And not only Western—certainly pluralism and pragmatism have been active participants in the decline of confidence in the "finality" of communism as well.

In this context *Word & World* reexamines the issue of the finality of Christ. How do disciples of the Word, who are also committed to conversation with the world, speak today about finality?

Despite the difficulties, Newbigin was able to claim finality for Jesus Christ, to assert "that commitment to him is the way in which [people] can become truly aligned to the ultimate end for which all things were made" (115). All of our writers would, I think, agree. But getting there in 1989 is a more difficult task.

In a personal perspective, *James H. Burtness* argues for a tolerance that includes gentleness, openness, and civility, but against a tolerance which requires an abandonment of particular claims and judgments on matters of substance.

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suffering and to proclaim a Kingdom of God which counters every dominion of oppression and bondage.

In a daring inquiry, *Paul Varo Martinson* wonders whether it can make sense to speak of the “crucified and risen Buddha.” Can our understanding of Christ be enlarged by the title Buddha? Can the Buddhist appropriate the terms “crucified” and “risen”? Where is revelation to be found? What about salvation?

Despite its grim pictures of judgment, the Apocalypse’s vision of the heavenly city is wonderfully open, according to the careful exegetical presentation by *Walter Pilgrim*. Universalism in the book of Revelation is not absolute, not without distinction, and not apart from the blood of the Lamb, says Pilgrim, but the book does invite us to ponder the surprising mystery of the abundant grace of God.

Carl E. Braaten guides the reader through the history of the church’s encounter with the world to show both the necessity and the risk of adopting different images and new language to speak of the one gospel of Jesus Christ. All such language, he asserts, must be normed by the witness of the New Testament and the ecumenical creeds to avoid the very real pitfall of proclaiming a “different gospel.”

Lee E. Snook, of the Luther Northwestern faculty, writes on our topic “from out of Africa” where he has been serving as a visiting professor. From that context he attempts to maintain Christ’s finality while at the same time taking account of the reality of religious pluralism. His introduction to African theological literature is very helpful, especially given the increasing significance of the African perspective in Christian theological construction.

The Resources section begins with our Face to Face feature. *Robert J. Marshall* argues that, by seeing themselves as “evangelical catholics,” Lutherans properly recapture their full tradition, while *Walter Sundberg*’s historical analysis leads him to conclude that the term is the label of only one faction within Lutheranism. Next, for those whose interest in the theological questions surrounding the theme of this issue has been stimulated, *Jerry K. Robbins* provides a systematic review of bibliographic resources for further study.

Outside the theme, *David M. Howard* presents a survey of recent approaches to the study of the editorial process in the formation of the book of Psalms. This new field of endeavor is especially helpful for understanding how these human prayers came to be received as the Word of God. Thus, Howard’s work will be particularly productive for the preacher. Finally, in his Texts in Context article, *Mark Throntveit* provides interpreters with the gift of away of seeing prophetic texts. No exegete can furnish a particular preacher with all the specifics needed for a given sermon on a given day; but by offering a framework within which the texts can be understood, the exegete can stimulate the preacher’s own creative contextualizing of the text—so that she can address “the finality of Christ” in her own situation.

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