

THE  
PERSON  
OF  
CHRIST

DONALD MACLEOD

CONTOURS *of*  
CHRISTIAN  
THEOLOGY

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## Introduction

This book is not a detached academic statement. It is written from within the Christian community by a member of that community and for the benefit of the community. As such, it reflects my personal belief that the gospels give us access to the real Jesus. It also reflects my belief that the great creeds, far from betraying the gospels, faithfully encapsulate their central concern to portray Jesus as the incarnate Son of God.

Yet it is easy to sympathize with scepticism, contemporary or otherwise. The claims made by the early church (and in my view by Christ himself) are staggering, and indeed offensive. At many points they require radical revision of our intuitive beliefs about God. Although I have personally moved beyond doubt and even uncertainty, I have not, I hope, forgotten how non-Christians think, and at every stage of the argument I have assumed that they are looking over my shoulder and challenging what I say. Many of those with whom I disagree profoundly have enriched my life by presenting me with new questions and offering fresh agendas.

There is no mandatory approach to Christology and at several points I had to make methodological decisions which can be challenged easily.

The most obvious is that against the contemporary current I have opted for a 'Christology from above'. This does not mean that I do not take the humanness of Christ seriously. I take it very seriously indeed. Some will think I take it too seriously altogether. But if I had opted for a Christology from below, it would have been a pretence. I am not starting from below. I am starting from faith, convinced before I put pen to paper (or finger to keyboard) that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God. This, it seems to me, is also where the gospels start. By the time they were written, Christ was already 'above', and the selection, arrangement and presentation of materials were determined by that fact. *Prima facie*, such an approach seems hopelessly biased. It is not more so, however, than that which insists that we must treat Christ as 'just an ordinary man' and the gospels as ordinary literature.

A substantial part of this study is historical, surveying the questions raised and the answers proffered by Christian thought from Tertullian to Barth (if Barth will excuse me for bracketing him with the North African father) and from Praxeas to Edward Irving. In the course of these discussions, most of the possible questions (and perhaps a few impossible ones) were formulated; and most of the possible answers were proposed. There are few new questions left, and even fewer new answers.

We can never be content with parrot-like repetition of the definitions of the past. Yet it would be presumptuous to speak before we have listened to the fathers. Men like Athanasius and Augustine, Basil and Calvin, are the Newtons and Einsteins of theology. By comparison, we are pygmies. Our only hope of far-sightedness is to stand on the shoulders of the giants.

This historical approach explains some of the peculiarities of this book. For example, it treats the Jesus of history after devoting three chapters to the basic New Testament material. My reason for doing so is that discussion of the Jesus of history began relatively late in the history of Christian thought. Besides, its fundamental concern was to challenge the authenticity of gospel material bearing on the deity of Christ. In particular, it challenged (and still challenges) the conclusion I try to establish in chapter 3, namely, that such titles as *the Son of God* can be traced back to Jesus himself.

Similarly, although it may seem obvious to treat the uniqueness of Christ at the very beginning, I have chosen to treat it last, in the context of contemporary discussion. We are too close to this period to assess it



properly, but there can be little doubt that the crucial modern question is, What makes Christ different? For orthodoxy, the answer is clear enough. He is different because he is God incarnate. But what if, like Bultmann and those associated with *The Myth of God Incarnate*, we reject orthodoxy? In what sense can we still think him unique? And on what grounds can we continue to worship him?

Later in this book (page 155), I criticize Melancthon's famous observation that 'to know Christ means to know his benefits'. Yet it contains an important truth. Though I write with the pen of men and of angels and have not the life of God in my soul, it profits me nothing.