

Christology and the Historical Jesus

KLYNE R. SNODGRASS
NORTH PARK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Gerald O'Collins. *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, 333 pp.; \$14.95.

The work of Gerald O'Collins on Jesus and the resurrection has resulted in several publications over the past two decades. The present work functions somewhat as a summary discussion and covers a wide range of issues. This is not a technical work, but rather one that would be particularly suitable as a text in a seminary level course in Christology. The author avoids extensive footnotes, but, on the other hand, provides helpful introductory notes to the most important books on the various subjects he treats.

Unlike many other works that seek to offer a comprehensive study of Christology, the author provides a relatively balanced treatment of his three areas. After an introductory chapter, five chapters focus on the Old and New Testament texts and themes (including an assessment of Jesus' self-understanding), three on christological discussions in Church history, and five on issues of systematic theology. This last section is viewed as the heart of the book (p. 153). The author emphasizes three central ideas for understanding Christology: the resurrection, love, and presence. Despite the assertion that the resurrection is the interpretive key for Christology (pp. 15-16), the resurrection does not receive much attention after the treatment of the biblical material. (No doubt, this is partly due to the shift caused by the nature of the christological controversies in the Church.) The author provides a wide-ranging analysis that touches on topics from the Virgin Birth to redemption and has as a primary purpose the substantiation of belief (p. 16).

Not many scholars would attempt to provide an overview of biblical, historical, and systematic issues pertaining to Christology. By necessity the author is selective in the subjects he treats, but the result is an unusual, interesting discussion of Christology. As much as anything, this treatment reveals the enormous difference between biblical and traditional systematic theology. One has only to read the author's analysis of the Old and New Testaments and his survey

of historical and systematic theology to be struck by the shifts in method and tone. Discussion of the two natures of Christ seems strange next to an investigation of the meaning of "Son of Man."

Generally the conclusions reached are in line with traditional Church teaching. Against Bultmann and other "minimalists," and despite occasional retrojection by the Synoptic Evangelists of later material into the life of Jesus, O'Collins accepts that the Synoptic Gospels are reasonably reliable (p. 51). He thinks Jesus was conscious of performing a messianic mission, used all three categories of the "Son of Man" sayings of himself, and viewed his death as in some way salvific. He critiques those who, like Gordon Kaufman and Rosemary Reuther, do not think language about the resurrection was referring to an event that happened to Jesus. On the contrary, O'Collins thinks the four verbs in 1 Cor 15:3-4 ("died," "was buried," "has been raised," and "appeared") all convey factual information about what happened to Jesus (p. 84). Further, he argues Jesus implicitly claimed an essential, ontological relationship of sonship towards God (p. 126). Against James Dunn, with whom he is in frequent dialogue, O'Collins sees the pre-existence of Christ as the teaching of the early Church and Paul, not merely the teaching of John. Both pre-existence and the Virgin Birth are accepted as necessary parts of theology.

At points the argument is not as clear as one would like. This is most obvious in the chapter entitled "Universal Redeemer." Whereas the preceding chapter focused on Christ's saving work and especially on the character of love, this one seeks to underscore the universal scope achieved. While affirming that outside Christ there is no salvation (p. 300), the author seems to suggest that no one is outside Christ. Further, he argues that recognition in Christ of the full revelation of God does not deny "to other faith any true knowledge of God and mediation of salvation" (p. 305). Whether this results in universalism or how it relates to Christ's role as judge is not clear, but universalism would seem to be the obvious conclusion.

As might be expected in such a book, numerous points will cause debate. Some debate emerges over texts dealt with all too quickly, such as the argument that Rom 9:5 does not ascribe the title *theos* to Christ (p. 144) or the statement that Jesus never unambiguously pointed to his deeds as signs of the Spirit's power. (What of Matt 12:28?) Why does the author demote John to a different level than the Synoptics, yet use John when it is convenient? Why does he argue "Son of Man" is not a title on Jesus' lips but only says what Jesus did (p. 63), when elsewhere he argues that it was Jesus' characteristic self-reference (p. 66) and that one cannot separate being and doing (pp. 19-20)?

Possibly and understandably the most troublesome areas emerge in consideration of the relation of the human and divine in Jesus.

Having rejected much—but not all—of the Johannine material on pre-existence, O'Collins concludes that Jesus was aware of his divine sonship, but had no memory of pre-existence. Pre-existence is understood of an order of being, rather than in temporal terms, and eternity does not relate to before and after (pp. 237-38). Is it legitimate to say Jesus' divine consciousness pre-existed, but not his human consciousness (p. 243)? What does O'Collins mean in saying "Christ was/is not a human person" (p. 244), when he clearly argues for the full humanity of Jesus? Is it correct to think Jesus had two sets of cognitive powers, a divine and a human (pp. 244-46)? O'Collins argues convincingly that Jesus had a faith analogous to our own, but seems to become tangled in working out the relation of Jesus' faith and knowledge. He argues: "Jesus knew God, his own divine identity, and redemptive mission. He did not and could not believe that God existed and that he himself was the Son of God and Saviour of the world" (p. 263; italics his). Further, he argues that Jesus could not sin, but did not know he could not sin (p. 271). One can appreciate the difficulty of the questions with which O'Collins is struggling, but I do not find that the solutions convince or resonate with the New Testament way of viewing things.

A further topic requiring comment is the author's legitimate, but ineffective attempt to raise feminine issues. At several points he seeks to include the feminine, but most of the comments are too brief and unclear. He discusses the feminine character of wisdom (pp. 37-41), a certain "feminine" aspect of Jesus (pp. 142-43), Jesus' specific maleness (p. 231), and the "feminine face" of presence (pp. 313-22), but never addresses the question "Can a male Savior save women?" and in the end his treatment of the feminine is unsatisfying. It seems to me that any healthy view of humanity cannot accept that masculinity is differentiating, moving outward, set on change, breaking idols, and restlessly earning its identity through struggle, while femininity is receptive, nurturing, interior, self-assured, self-possessed, and not needing constant contest to earn and maintain one's identity (p. 319). Just these assumptions have created tremendous obstacles for the Church and for people in general. Presence is no more feminine than masculine, and Jesus' reception of children or his insistence on losing life in order to find it do not betray feminine traits. They betray caring, human traits.

This is a helpful book for students and general readers, which will stimulate thought and debate. Even where the arguments may not convince, the author raises important questions that must be treated. Subject and Scripture indices would have increased the usefulness of the book.