

A Response to Bishop Sprague

On June 25, 2002 Bishop Joseph Sprague made a speech to the Iliff School of Theology on Christology. Since theological reflection on the person and work of Jesus Christ is central to the doctrinal teaching of the church and Bishop Sprague has expressed his perspective in a public forum it is appropriate for others to respond to the ideas that Bishop Sprague has expressed, especially other bishops who have a different point of view. The following is my personal response.

In his speech Bishop Sprague demonstrated that he is a person of deep faith. Throughout his speech he offers eloquent testimony to his trust in “the one who has created and is creating....Jesus Christ our liberating Savior, and...the Holy Spirit” who is the source of “life-giving power.” Bishop Sprague also expresses his commitment to “living out of Jesus’ revelation” in his own life and the life of the church. He has demonstrated in his living that he is an intelligent person of courage who is passionately concerned about great moral issues such as making peace in a violent world.

Moreover, Bishop Sprague has confirmed his belief in the orthodox doctrine of the church that “Jesus was fully human and fully divine, very God of very God, begotten not made....” He also clarified that he affirms that “the Christ event” is “unique and normative.”

In addition to giving testimony to his trust in the triune God and affirming the orthodox doctrine of the church, Bishop Sprague also articulates his theologoumenon, his personal theological opinion of the church’s doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ. I wish to differentiate my own perspective from his and offer a critique of his opinion.

Bishop Sprague is engaged in the task of the apologetics. He is seeking to re-present the traditional doctrines of the church in a form that might be intelligible to people in contemporary culture in order to invite them to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Apologetics is an honorable task. In every generation there is a need for theologians, bishops, pastors and other teachers to interpret the historic doctrines of the ecumenical church in forms of thought and in language that is intelligible to contemporary people. Whenever this apologetic task is undertaken it should be exercised with a careful attention to the theological direction and boundaries established by the ancient church in its doctrinal formulations and creeds.

During the 19th and 20th centuries most mainline Protestants in the West who have practiced apologetics have attempted to respond to the claims of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is that philosophical movement that originated in the 18th century that is committed to a rationalistic interpretation of reality. Combined with the discovery of the scientific method, the view of the world engendered by the Enlightenment is one in which only that which can be apprehended by human reason or observed by human senses should be legitimized as “real.”

I share the opinion of many that the presuppositions of the Enlightenment are no longer normative for postmodern people. Postmodern people have awakened to the realization that there is more to reality than what is presupposed by the claims of the Enlightenment. Postmodern people are more open than modern people to the assumptions of traditional Christian affirmations of divine revelation, mystery and miracle.

Because we now live in a new cultural context in which many of the extreme claims of modernity have been by-passed, I believe that the apologetic task as it has been practiced often by mainline Protestants during the 19th and 20th centuries has exhausted its usefulness. There are two weaknesses in this old form of apologetics. For one thing, as it usually practiced it results in accommodation to the presuppositions of modernity. For another thing, I wonder how many disciples of Jesus Christ it has produced. Indeed, one might conclude that the accommodation to the Enlightenment in Protestant apologetics has contributed to the church's loss of confidence and an enervation of its mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

In my judgment Bishop Sprague is attempting to do theology in the tradition of 19th and 20th century apologetics. Therefore, I disagree with his methodology. I believe that postmodern people are more likely to be reached by the church through a thoughtful presentation of the living Christian tradition and an evangelical appeal in the context of a vital congregation. Moreover, the growth of Christian communities in non-Western nations is evidence that the future of the mission of the church will depend, as it always has in church history, upon a faithful transmission of the apostolic witness and the universal faith by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Bishop Sprague contends that Christology is a “divisive issue in the church today.” I do not think this contention is an accurate statement. It is true that in academic circles there is a continuing debate about the person of Jesus Christ that originated in the Enlightenment. Since this debate has been going on for over 200 years, this is nothing new. The fact that Martin Kähler published his book The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ in 1896 is a reminder of how old this debate is! It is also true that there is a fresh irruption of this old debate in popular form with the publication of books by scholars of the Jesus Seminar and Episcopalian Bishop John S. Spong. I do not think that the publication of books by individuals who are still in captivity to the presuppositions of the Enlightenment has shaken the confidence of the church in its confession of the person and work of Jesus Christ. To characterize our situation as one in which there is a “crisis” in Christology is overwrought.

Whenever there are persons who struggle with doubts about the teaching of the church about Jesus Christ, the teachers of the church need to exercise pastoral patience in instructing them in the history of the development of Christian doctrine so that they may understand how doctrine developed in the context of Graeco-Roman culture as an attempt to hand on the witness of the apostles in the face of distortions of that witness.

Bishop Sprague assumes that he should have considerable liberty to articulate his theologoumenon because the language of the ancient ecumenical councils and creeds is

“symbolic.” All language is symbol, and language about the trinity and the person of Jesus Christ is symbol at its highest level. However, if Bishop Sprague means that the language of the councils and creeds does not establish normative rules for understanding the trinity and the person of Jesus Christ, or that this language is merely poetic imagery with no definitive theological substance, then I think he is mistaken. A constructive example of the way this language can be made intelligible for contemporary people in a way that adheres to the theological direction and boundaries established by the ecumenical councils and creeds is the explication of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed in the document published by the World Council of Churches (and reportedly written primarily by Wolfhart Pannenberg) titled Confessing the One Faith.

While I think Bishop Sprague assumes that he is being faithful to the symbols of the church in explicating his theologoumenon, I am of the opinion that he is not as careful about attending to the directions and boundaries of beliefs established by the councils and creeds as he should be, particularly in his reflections on the divinity of Jesus Christ. It may be that he assumes certain liberties because of his rather vague interpretation of the symbolic nature of the language of the councils and creeds.

It appears that Bishop Sprague is attempting to construct a Christology “from below.” That is, he is attempting to begin his explication of Jesus’ identity with an understanding of Jesus’ mission as it is described by the Synoptic Gospels on the assumption that it was only after the resurrection of Jesus that his disciples realized who he is. This is not only a legitimate approach, but also it is the way in which the apostles came to faith in Jesus as the Christ and the Sovereign of the world. The deficiency in Bishop Sprague’s construction of a Christology “from below” is that he wants to bracket the Gospel of John (and presumably some of the teaching of Paul) from consideration. He justifies this bracketing of John because he assumes that John is a “later document which is more attentive to the needs of a developing church late in the first or early in the second century than to the person and actual ministry of Jesus.” Actually, the situation is much more complex than Bishop Sprague contends since it is the opinion of some scholars that there are historical memories in John that are more compelling than the memories contained in the Synoptics. Nevertheless, it should be conceded that John’s Gospel represents meditation upon the person of Jesus Christ. This kind of meditation is necessary since it is the work of the Holy Spirit to guide the apostolic church in a deeper and truer understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. Because the Gospel of John is a part of the canon and the primitive Christian witness it can not be summarily bracketed from the interpretation of Jesus Christ. The claims of John and Paul must also be treated in the development of any Christology that is faithful to the doctrinal formulas of the church, including a Christology “from below.” The removal of John from the construction of Christology represents a kind of biblicism of the Synoptic Gospels that neglects the illumination of the Holy Spirit in the mind of the apostolic church as it develops its mature apprehension of the identity of Jesus Christ.

The orthodox teaching of the ecumenical church is that Jesus Christ is one person in whom there are two natures, human and divine. Bishop Sprague affirms this formula, but he seeks to find new forms of expressing it. He is on sure ground when he affirms that

Jesus “was in total fully human.” To assume otherwise is to deny the mystery of the incarnation. In particular, kenotic Christologies are those that take this affirmation of historic doctrine most seriously. Bishop Sprague seems to be operating with a theology of kenosis that emphasizes that Jesus Christ, “though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:6-7).

Where Bishop Sprague is on less sure footing is when he attempts to explain the meaning of the divinity of Jesus. He is valiant in his attempt to find new ways to express ancient truths. Yet one wonders why he thinks his new ways are more relevant than the language of the councils and creeds of the church. He states that “in Jesus and him alone God’s essence found confluence with a human being...” By introducing the word “essence” he is making ontological claims about Jesus; isn’t “essence” the same kind of language that is supposed to be so antiquated?

Bishop Sprague’s affirmation that “in Jesus and him alone God’s essence found confluence with a human being” is his way of confessing the doctrine of the church that “Jesus was the long expected Messiah, the Christ of God whose revelation was unique and normative.” This seems to represent his understanding of the incarnation. His intention is laudable, but his execution of his intention is difficult to assess in the context of the history of the development of doctrine. Does this statement mean that Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God made flesh, or does it mean that Jesus Christ is the highest expression of human response to divine grace? If it is the latter, then isn’t this just a way of saying that Jesus is the human being who ascended to God rather than God who descended to human being? By not clarifying his statement in the context of the Christological doctrine that developed in the ancient church, it is hard to say.

In my opinion the crucial comment that Bishop Sprague makes about the divinity of Jesus is when he states, “Jesus was not born the Christ, rather by the confluence of grace with faith he became the Christ, God’s beloved in whom God was well-pleased.” Without careful explication this statement appears to be an expression of old-fashioned adoptionism, the theory that Jesus Christ was not born the Son of God but that he became the Son of God. However I am not prepared to jump to that conclusion. He has already affirmed that Jesus was “fully human and fully divine, very God of very God, begotten not made...” If he is now saying that Christ as the only-begotten eternal Son of God “was not born the Christ,” then he has contradicted himself and failed to heed the theological direction of the creed. If when he says “Christ” he means only the incarnate Son of God who came to self-understanding through a normal process of development by grace, then he is consistent and faithful to the theological direction of the creed.

I must admit that I find Bishop Sprague’s comments on the divinity of Jesus to be rather incoherent as he stated them in his speech. He is not as clear to me as is the consensus of the tradition that affirms that Jesus Christ is the Son of God by nature whereas we are the children of God by grace even though as the incarnate Son of God who submitted to be obedient to God the Father he experienced the normal process of human growth by grace.

The bishop also offers his views on the virgin birth, the cross and the resurrection of Jesus.

He rejects the virgin birth, or more accurately, the virginal conception of Jesus, as a historical fact. He prefers to think of it as a way to express “poetically the truth about Jesus as experienced in the emerging church.” This is a commonplace point of view among Protestants who are captive to the presuppositions of the Enlightenment. One may interpret the virginal conception of Jesus as a metaphor as Bishop Sprague does and still be a faithful Christian; the warrant for such liberty is obtained by acknowledging that the virginal conception was not a part of the preaching of the apostles as the speeches in Acts and the epistles of Paul make clear.

Yet the church in the postmodern era should not summarily dismiss this element of the creed as unimportant. Different elements of the creed serve different purposes over time. For Anselm, the virginal conception of Jesus provided the key to properly understand the relationship among biological generation, the phenomenon of original sin and the guilt of the individual will. For us in a postmodern culture, the virginal conception of Jesus provides an opportunity to challenge, indeed to mount an affront, to the naturalistic reductionism of the Enlightenment.

There are exegetical and theological considerations that should cause us to take the virginal conception seriously as an integral part of Christian faith. Higher critical research, such as that in Raymond Brown’s The Birth of the Messiah, demonstrates that there were at least two independent traditions of a narrative of the virginal conception at the most primitive, Semitic level of formation of the gospels. Two of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, affirmed it. Barth was astute in his theological judgment that the virginal conception of Jesus is the “sign” of the “mystery” of the incarnation of the Word of God and that separating the “sign” from the “mystery” imperils the “mystery” of the incarnation.

It is sometimes assumed that “modern people can’t believe this.” That may be more descriptive of modern people than postmodern people. Nevertheless, it is important to expose the fallacy that difficulty in believing in the virginal conception of Jesus is unique to modern people. A cursory reading of the writing of ancient Christians would demonstrate that this idea was just as astonishing to educated people in Graeco-Roman culture as it is today. Yet the response of an earlier generation of Christians was to be bold in the face of unbelief and to reconstruct for people a different view of reality based upon the revelation of God. An example of the Christians’ response would be Origen’s answer to the philosopher Celsus around A.D. 200 (Against Celsus, Book I, chapters XXV__-XXX_X). I propose that an intelligent explanation of the virginal conception of Jesus as a free creative act of God as part of the drama of the incarnation is as plausible in this or any age as is any rejection of it.

In his comments on the cross Bishop Sprague denounces a substitutionary atonement theory that views Jesus’ death on the cross as a satisfaction paid to an angry deity. He is correct to repudiate such a theory. It should be added that the image of substitution is

embedded in the apostolic witness that Jesus died “for” us or “instead of” us, and there are theories of substitutionary atonement that do not understand Jesus’ death as “a satisfaction paid to any angry deity.” He also is repulsed by reference to a blood sacrifice. I can appreciate his objection to a concept of a blood sacrifice to appease God, but I do not think that the notion of sacrifice can be removed from the church’s teaching about the mystery of the cross because its meaning is embedded in Jesus’ own words of institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Where the bishop strikes the right note is when he emphasizes Jesus’ obedience, but even here his emphasis upon Jesus’ obedience seems isolated apart from a trinitarian context. In all of its theories the church has tried to teach that the cross represents the self-giving of God the Father in the self-giving obedience of God the Son in the Son’s radical identification with all of sinful humanity.

Bishop Sprague also rejects that Jesus’ resurrection “involved the resuscitation of his physical body.” Here is a subject that deserves more subtle explication. He is correct to say that resurrection is not resuscitation. Jesus’ resurrection was not a resuscitation of his body, but it was a transformation of his whole self as a total existence including his body. The meaning of the resurrection is that it was an eschatological event occurring in history, and it involved the transformation of his whole self as a sign of God’s purpose to transform all of nature and history. If Jesus’ body was not involved, then the so-called resurrection meant only that Jesus survived death, not that he overcame it. Belief in survival after death was commonplace in the ancient world; it was not new, and it could not inaugurate a movement. It is important today to confess the resurrection as a sign of God’s purpose to transform nature and history because this victory gives us hope as we seek to care for God’s creation and to witness to a coming kingdom of justice and peace.

Finally, he also dissents from “Christocentric exclusives which hold that Jesus is the only way to God’s gift of salvation.” William J. Abraham in The Logic of Grace (“The Wider Ecumenism”, Pg. 209-233) offers an alternative to Bishop Sprague’s views by demonstrating how a high Christology preserves both an exclusivist claim to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the Savior of the world while preserving the generosity of God’s grace of salvation to people outside the church. Abraham affirms with some of the Fathers and Mothers of the ancient church that no one can be saved except through the Son of God, but “the eternal Son of God is not swallowed up ontologically in the life of Jesus; the eternal Son of God who is fully manifest in Jesus of Nazareth is actively at work in all creation and history.”

I offer these observations as my own reflections on Bishop Joseph Sprague’s speech to the Iliff School of Theology in the conviction that he intended others to take his thought seriously and to engage him in dialogue. I unite with him in a joint commitment to pursue the truth.

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