

“RESPONSE PAPER: CHRIST-TALK IN A GOD-LESS SOCIETY”

Antonie Holleman, Netherlands District Church of the Nazarene

How to speak meaningfully of God and the Christian life in a secular and post-Christian society?

I wrote my response to the papers of Eugenio and Leclerc with this question in mind. My context is the Netherlands, a secular and multicultural society where the Church has been marginalized.

How to speak of God when many associate Christianity with repressive religious systems? How to speak of holy living when many blame Christians for their flawed ethics?

Christ-centred Theology Requires Obedience

Over the years, I have become convinced of the need of a fresh expression of our faith from a renewed emphasis on biblical theology, similar to the contribution of Karl Barth in the first part of the 20th century. More than anything else, a renewed understanding of the witness of Scripture is needed. Therefore I appreciate in both papers the concentration on the life of Jesus as narrated in the Gospels. In order to re-Jesus the church we need to re-Jesus our theology by a renewed concentration on Scripture.

The wisdom of the decision of the council of Chalcedon in 451 AD is that it established boundaries to prevent one-sided interpretations, without explaining the mystery or resolving the tension. Christ is fully divine and fully human, without any confusion, change, division or separation. This means that we need to speak of Christ in a twofold way; He is fully divine, the image of the unseen (Col. 1:15), and fully human as a second Adam (1 Cor. 15:45). He therefore provides us authoritative knowledge of God and of what it means to be human in the image of God. Leclerc touches on both and Eugenio is primarily focused on the second with his view of Christ as the obedient Son and the dependent Human.

I welcome the approach of Leclerc of describing the character of God from the human portrait of Jesus, as well as the call for a life of shared incarnational humility, filled with the

Spirit of God to resist the temptation to exert power inappropriately. In addition, I appreciate her insight that Jesus also died for those who were sinned against, and the call for solidarity with those who suffer. The model she provides will help the Church in speaking of God in a post-Christian setting and being a witness in a world full of suppression. The dominant experience of a growing number of people is that of being sinned against. Bringing the Gospel as good news to these people requires a different emphasis or different order in the way we present the Gospel, as well as a different tone.

Eugenio presents a trinitarian description of the identity of Jesus Christ in which he combines a kenotic with a pneumatic Christology. Jesus is the obedient Son of the Father who emptied himself by adding to himself our human frailties, and becoming the dependent Human on the Holy Spirit. His aim is to correct the tendency towards an adoptionistic Christology bereft of pneumatological features. I am not immersed enough in the current trinitarian theological models to comment on his trinitarian model, but I do want to ponder the implications of his model. Is his picture of Jesus helping the Church in presenting Christ to the world and encouraging the people in the Church to becoming more like Jesus? In spite of a rather abstract and technical approach, his model can help pastors in the way they present Jesus to the people. It will help them in describing Jesus as the example for a life of holiness and in helping people setting the right priorities.

The key word for me that ties both papers together is obedience. Obedience is an expression of humility and acknowledges that individuals play a part in God's design for His creation that supersedes their individualistic lives. Jesus Christ calls us to a life of obedience to the Father and dependency on the Spirit, in order to live a life of servanthood reflecting the humility of God. In highly individualistic societies that stress human autonomy and self-

realization, this Christian message is becoming counter-cultural, and unfortunately in many of the churches as well.

Knowing Christ

How should we proceed? The question Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” was in response to the talk of the people about Jesus. The crowd had heard Jesus talk, observed his interaction with the people and his various miracles and tried to come up with an interpretation concerning who Jesus is. Their starting point was the man of Nazareth, son of Mary, but as they became more familiar with this person their descriptions of Jesus moved beyond the historical and human dimensions. Ultimately it was Peter who made the confession: “You are the Christ” (Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20), and expanded in Matthew 13:16 with the words: “The son of the living God.” The movement in knowing Christ in the Gospels is from the human to the divine.

In his words on the kenosis of Christ, Paul acknowledges this order. He states that Christ was “being found in appearance as a man” (Phil. 2:8, NASB). He appeared as fully human, and his divine nature was only recognized as the relationship of the people with him matured. This is the way the Gospels tell the story of Christ. Apart from the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, Jesus all of a sudden appeared on the shores of the Jordan River as a full human being and started his ministry. As the people observed what Jesus was saying and doing, they began to acknowledge that Jesus was not just an ordinary human, opening the door to their speculations about his identity.

The order of knowing Jesus starts with the human presentation of the incarnate God. And as a consequence of the incarnation, it is the combined impression of all the human senses, rather than the theological words and models that trigger the inquiries of who this Jesus is. Also, when John the Baptist was in doubt and sent his disciples to Jesus asking if he indeed is the one who was promised, Jesus replied: “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive

sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt. 11:4-5, NASB).

If the order of knowing Christ is from the human to the divine nature, how should it guide us in presenting Jesus Christ to the world? Instead of starting with words we need to begin with incarnated theology, showing our faith by our works as recommended in James 2:18. As the body of Christ, we need to present the tangible and incarnated Christ to the world, so that the people begin to ask: “Who are these people who call themselves Christians?” In a post-Christian society the Church can only regain the trust of the people by its deeds. No more empty words! This task of winning back our credibility by showing our faith in our deeds of compassion to the unchurched people outside, and by showing how the church internally deals with differences of opinion, provides the “why” of holiness. In order for us to do what we believe, we need the inner transformation of the Holy Spirit to become Christlike in deeds.

In my opinion, Leclerc and Eugenio have provided us the tools for the appropriate witness of Christ in secular and post-Christian societies. Believing that God can be ultimately known in the life of a human being, we not only need to uncover the human portrait of Jesus for our image of God, but also live that same life of servanthood and humility in a power-based world. By describing Jesus as the obedient Son of the Father and the dependent Human, Jesus Christ becomes a model for us to follow in a life of holiness. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God’s character, and of the essence of being human.