

Christology at the Tenth I.A.M.S. Missiology Conference

Colleagues,

TWO PRELIMINARIES

NUMBER ONE: The text for ThTh 94 is some thoughts I posted to fellow-participants at that missiology conference Robin and I attended in January. Our group is the International Association for Mission Studies [IAMS]. We meet every 4 years. This year we gathered in South Africa—220 of us from 50-plus countries—at the Hammanskraal campus of the University of Pretoria. Most of you on our Crossings listserve weren't there, I know, but you may still be interested in my reflections. If not, tune in next week.

NUMBER TWO: Bob Schultz of Seattle, Washington, USA alerts us to a bargain. It's Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Unabridged) on CD-ROM. All for 50% off—US\$150 instead of \$300. But the catch is that you've got to order it now before April Fools Day arrives to get such a good deal. Here's the message:

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Peace & Joy!
Ed

CHRISTOLOGICAL DIFFICULTIES AT IAMS 10

Some Thoughts about IAMS 10

January 21-28, 2000 in Pretoria, South Africa

Part I. Looking for Christology at IAMS 10

It seems to me that we had trouble reflecting on Christology at IAMS #10 – January 21-28 in Pretoria, South Africa. Our trouble was not that we got into arguments about the person and work of Christ. I don't recall that sort of thing happening at all. Our trouble with Christology at IAMS 10 was that it never got much attention at all—no forthright head-on discussions—at least not in our plenary sessions.

That is doubly strange when you consider that the theme banner facing us from behind the podium each day of our assembly was REFLECTING JESUS CHRIST: CRUCIFIED AND LIVING IN A BROKEN WORLD. Today's broken world [hereafter TBW] got almost all of our attention; Jesus Christ Crucified and Living [hereafter JCCL] hardly any at all. JCCL received nowhere near the specific

analytic and programmatic attention that TBW did. Is that significant? I think so.

Klaus Schaefer had told us in his preparatory essay, published in MISSION STUDIES [32. XVI-2. p. 179f] that the planning committee intended the term “reflecting” to be a pun with double meaning. First of all “to engage in thinking, discussing, debating, theological reasoning.” Let’s call that “reflecting-T” (for thinking). “But [reflecting] also hints at the image of a mirror in which something is reflected.” Call that “reflecting-M” (for mirror). If you don’t engage in reflecting-T about Christ crucified and living, how can you do reflecting-M to TBW? Only when the image in the mirror is itself clear can it be reflected to some other person or place.

That saddens me for more than one reason. Least important is this one: A number of us at IAMS 9 in Buenos Aires (and even before at IAMS 8) had observed that differing versions/visions of the person and work of Christ regularly surfaced at IAMS gatherings. Often they appeared to be crucial (no surprise) to our debates. So why not address Christology head-on at the next gathering of the association? What better time than at the nexus of the second and third millennia? So having learned of the theme for IAMS 10, I bought my air-ticket and was smiling as I checked in at the Hamanskraal campus. But the smile faded.

This is not to say that I was somber or morose for those 8 days. Not at all. For all 200-plus of us attending from some 50 nations, I’m sure, these were days of joy and gladness. The face-to-face exchanges with dear people, the seminar sessions and Bible studies, the exposure experiences, the mealtime conversations and Kaffee-klatsches, the laughter, even the steady stream of announcements from both Willem and Klaus—all that made IAMS 10 a blessing.

But I don't "count it ALL joy." For I was anticipating that Christology, the JCCL, would get equal time with TBW at our gathering. But it did not, and that signals the second sadness. It's not sadness because MY wishes went unfulfilled, as though I'm now pouting because I didn't get my way. I think the whole conference suffered because of this real absence. IAMS 10 didn't get as close to the goal as we could have, because of this Christological neglect. Stated bluntly: Our reflecting-M in today's broken world could have been better, much better, if our reflecting-T on JCCL had gotten equal billing. How so?

First I wish to take a look at Klaus's preliminary paper, and then listen again to the papers presented to us in the plenary sessions. My question is simply this: what did we indeed hear about JCCL?

KLAUS SCHAEFER

Klaus's paper [MISSION STUDIES 32] picked up on the term "reflecting" in 2 Cor. 3, telling us that this term in Paul's own mission theology "has influenced the formulation of the conference theme and illuminates the intentions of the conference planners." (182) So the planners wanted us to attend to "the interrelatedness of Christological and missiological reflection . . . in 2 Cor 2:14 – 7:4" when we came to Pretoria. Klaus gets even more specific: "...this style of reflection, moving from the Christological vision to the perception of missionary praxis, and from missionary praxis to the vision of Christ, makes 2 Corinthians a stimulating document for our conference."

Too bad we didn't follow the conference planners' lead to spend time, plenary time, on "such intertwined Christological and missiological reflection" offered here. Did we ever take a serious look at 2 Cor. at all?

Klaus traces what's offered in these Christology-cum-missiology chapters of 2 Corinthians. I see him highlighting three items.

1. He notes Paul merging the (seemingly opposite) terms, glory and cross, into his claim for the "glory of the theology of the cross." In my words I hear Klaus showing that in the cross of Christ the "glow" central to God's own glow-ry was "reconciling the world unto himself." This cruciform glory generates reconciliation between us and God, says Paul, and that in turn generates our own "ministry of reconciliation [call it mission] our "beseeching you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." It's not just that Christ and mission are linked; it's Christ's cross and mission that are the correlates here. Wouldn't this theological assertion have given us a boost at IAMS 10? I think so.
2. Klaus also shows us Paul correlating the crucified and living Christ not first of all with the "broken world." Perhaps to our surprise, Paul draws no parallel between Christ's suffering and its mirror image in TBW. Instead Paul correlates JCCL with his own broken life as a missionary. Klaus cites the classic words (2 Cor 4:8-11): "Afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifest in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh." It's not that the missionary is the one who holds the mirror and seeks to get JCCL's reflection projected over to the broken world. Rather the missionary in person is the mirror "so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh." The biography of the missionary mimes the

missionary's message: Christ crucified and living gets mirrored in the missionary's own personal Good Fridays and Easters.

3. Granted, I have extended these two points above a bit beyond where Klaus takes them in his very brief 7-page essay. But I do not think I've taken them beyond his (or St. Paul's) intent. It is now, after offering us these two anchor points, that Klaus links this Christology to TBW. Both the original JCCL in the person of Jesus AND its mirror image in the apostle now get linked to TBW. By being third in the sequence of the reflecting-T process, reflecting-M comes with God's promise that "everything" in TBW is a candidate for becoming "a new creation." That is St. Paul's claim. The truth is in the details—how the sequence holds together and why it works.

We would have benefitted by devoting some of our time at Hammanskraal doing "Mission Studies" on these topics. Here are some thoughts about such benefits:

A. From #1

The primal locus of the reconciliation that comes with JCCL is not reconciliation between peoples, but between people and God. Thus the prime focus for the human brokenness which JCCL alleviates is humanity's God-problem. It's not the problem people have believing in God at all—sometimes called today's problem—but the problem they have because on their own they are NOT reconciled with God. There's enmity between the two parties. The enmity is bilateral. The enmity is lethal. That's what Paul claims. Granted that claim was disputed in his day, in the two millennia that have passed since then, and in our day as well. But suppose that Paul is right, that this genuinely IS the God-problem manifest in today's broken world as well. Then that problem has to be addressed when

IAMS gathers every 4 years for missiological deliberation. Did any of that happen at IAMS 10? Not much. It was the world's intramural brokenness that got most of our attention, and therefore also intramural reconciliation got prime time—often articulated in today's p.c. terms “peace and justice.” However, when people's peace-and-justice with God is neglected (or even worse, taken for granted) in order to attend to peace-and-justice with one another, the latter, Paul would say, is a lost cause.

B. From #2

IAMS 10 would have gained from our hearing one another do what Paul does in showing how “my very missionary-biography mimes my mission-message.” We did have speakers—I'm thinking of folks reporting from the TRC—who did that. But we all would have gained if the Christ-connection of these biographies was not left to our imaginations, but made explicit for us, so that we too could improve our own miming of the message in our life and work. When the missionary's own life mirrors the message, Paul claimed, reflection-M happens. Wouldn't it have been profitable, maybe even fun, to do reflection-T on that thesis? And maybe even have a laboratory for doing some practice in mirroring?

C. Might we not also have profited by doing some reflection-T on the sequence of our process: not jumping to TBW before we had done our Christological homework? One of the dangers of starting right away with TBW—often with the untested assumption that “we all know about JCCL and now we've got to get to the really tough item, TBW”—is how we appropriate TBW. We do not approach TBW on its own terms. Post-modernity has shown us that “appropriating anything on its own terms” is not really possible. We do all our appropriating through a variety of ad hoc lenses already at hand. We are always envisioning our world(s) through

some (or several) set(s) of lenses. Christian theologians, like everyone else, need regular lens-check-ups as they do their work. What better place for missiologists to do just that than at IAMS 10! In our particular case we would have done well to check out the lenses we'd brought along with us to Hammanskraal, doing so—as the planning committee proposed—by checking our own lenses with the JCCL-lenses proposed in 2 Corinthians. We might even have been daring and tried to construct a consensus model of what those lenses look like in 2 Cor. Then, but not until then, we move on to use them to bring TBW into focus. Granted, such focusing is only instrumental to help us see TBW the way God sees it and then in our work of reflecting-M in that world. But without focusing, both the seeing and the reflecting-M are blurred. Having done our homework on the lenses we would have had more fruitful results, I think, on our TBW agenda. Wouldn't that have incited even more Hallelujahs at Hammanskraal? I think so.

Part II – Christology in the Plenary Papers (to be continued)

[This posting of Part I goes to all participants listed on the IAMS 10 roster for whom an e-mail address is given. If you wish to receive Part II also, tell me that via e-mail and I'll post it to you when it's finished. Cheers! Ed]