

Martyrdom and the Suffering of the Righteous

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The Theology of the Martyrs

Paul R. Hinlicky

A Cautionary Tale

I begin with a cautionary tale, a negative precedent for us, in the *Kein Anderes Evangelium* (*No Other Gospel*, cf. Gal. 1: 6) movement, or rather rally, that took place in Dortmund, Germany, in March of 1966. Douglas John Hall has called attention to it in his 2012 book, *Waiting for Gospel: An Appeal to the Dispirited Remnants of Protestant "Establishment."*¹ The event was organized by American evangelicals, according to Hall, and made its primary target the then predominant theologies in Germany of Rudolph Bultmann and his renegade disciple Ernst Käsemann. In response to the attack, Käsemann wrote an influential article with the rhetorical question as its head, "Was Jesus a Liberal?" Käsemann answered his own question with an emphatic, Yes!, underscoring the Pauline theme that Jesus brings freedom to love, especially those in need of love. And this freedom to love stands in judgment over all human, all-too-human religious needs for group cohesion and contrastive identity. The freedom to love is the real signature of Christian theology.

For Hall, the most salient response to the *No Other Gospel* movement was that of Karl Barth. Recalling that the time is 1966, Barth asked the organizers whether the would-be confessors also protest against the proposed rearmament of the West German army with nuclear weapons, against the new appearances there of anti-Semitism, or against the American

1. Douglas John Hall, *Waiting for Gospel: An Appeal to the Dispirited Remnants of Protestant "Establishment"* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 4.

war in Vietnam. He asked whether the would-be confessors support East-West peace negotiations based upon the borders established in 1945. Barth then concludes that if so, the confession of the *No Other Gospel* movement is a "good, precious and faithful one;" if not, however, it is a "dead, cheap, gnat-sieving, camel-swallowing statement." Under the force of these critiques, the *No Other Gospel* movement sputtered and died. It failed to make the genuine witness it intended. Not that Lutheranism in Germany was any better off for its failure.

In the clarity of hindsight, we can draw a number of lessons from this exchange, the chief of which is the need for a clear and fruitful distinction between the confession of the martyrs and the sufferings of the righteous, which is in brief a kind of Two Kingdoms distinction. I will come to that later. But short of that, we can make some more immediate observations from the foregoing cautionary tale. First, the critique made by the *No Other Gospel* movement was, on the one side, theologically shallow and hence not sufficiently self-critical, and second, the defense, on the other side, of theological liberalism by the Bultmann school, or of the direct line from the gospel to politics drawn by Karl Barth, have not stood the test of time.

To be more specific: the *No Other Gospel* movement got no further than a reaction against Bultmann's rejection of miracles as first century mythology. It did not penetrate to the true problem of the Bultmann school's Christological *docetism*, that is to say, that its Jesus only *appears* to be a real human being. Bultmann in fact reduced theology, that is, knowledge of God given in the real man Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit, to anthropology, that is, to symbolizations of human consciousness or of the existential self-understanding of believers. He did so, as we might know, by purportedly "radicalizing" the theme from Luther regarding faith as what the proclamation of Christ liberatingly means "for me." This reduction corresponded to Bultmann's reduction of the New Testament gospel of the self-defining divine act of the

resurrection of the Crucified Son to a mere change in human understanding, as in his school's motto, "Christ is risen into the kerygma."

Furthermore, Ernst Käsemann struggled to free himself from some of these leading ideas of the Bultmann school. He launched the so-called second quest for the historical Jesus by decrying the danger of docetism in Bultmann's theology, in which Jesus disappears into the kerygma of contemporary proclamation, arguing instead that the name, Jesus, has to refer to something real and thus knowable in the world, lest the name, Jesus, become an empty cipher at the disposal of contemporary hawkers of religion, howsoever "liberating." Yet on analysis the Jesus discovered by Käsemann's second quest remained a figure stamped with traditional anti-Judaism – Jesus means freedom – indeed, above all, from the "law," i.e., from Judaism. This is the inevitable result of an historical method where the criterion of authenticity requires us to reject whatever elements attributed to Jesus in the gospels that have parallels either in contemporary Judaism or post-Easter Christian faith. Such a method is more likely to produce a highly distilled essence of Jesus rather than the real, historical personage. So Käsemann's more penetrating critique from within the Bultmann circle in its own way led to the dead end of contemporary Euro-American theology where Christ mysticism or Jesuolatry compete for attention as alternatives to creedal Christianity's doctrine of Jesus Christ, in Luther's familiar words from the Small Catechism, "true God born of His Father from eternity, true man born of the Virgin Mary, my [saving] Lord."

So Hall is right; we must dig down for a deeper reason for the failure of the *No Other Gospel* movement. This would lead us to the lack of a genuine self-critique on the part of the would-be confessors. In 1966 we are only 20 years from the Christian catastrophe that was Nazism. The complicity of the established and, after the war, re-established churches in Nazism has since then

become an important theme in historical research, as I explored in my 2013 book, *Before Auschwitz*.² In that work, I pointed out how researchers Doris Bergen and Susannah Heschel especially have pointed to the failure in truth and reckoning that followed the end of the war, when the model of the *Volkskirche* – that is, the “inclusive” church of “the people” for which the pro-Nazi German Christians had contended – was consciously *sustained* while the model of the *Bekennende Kirche* from the 1930s – that is, the Body of Christ constituted in the *solus Christus* confession, hearkening back to the Reformation – was *rejected* during post-war reconstruction.

Nazism, however, tolled the death-knell of the Christendom model of the *Volkskirche*, the idea that we are by definition the Christian people in an integral culture inclusive of the coercive mechanism of the state. The catastrophe of Nazism brought to an end the illusion that the church can be anything other than a confessing, that is witnessing, and so always possibly suffering and persecuted society in a world that in Europe, and now in North America, was becoming, like it or not, post-Christendom. Without reckoning with this unprecedented situation, and counting this cost, no one succeeds in confessing “no other gospel” in the Pauline sense of Gal. 1:6. That failure to know the signs of the times and to count the cost was the deeper reason for the failure of the *No Other Gospel* movement.

When we turn to Karl Barth’s criticism of the *No Other Gospel* movement, we experience both a traditional Lutheran-Reformed tension with him, but also a serious summons to self-examination. Suffering for the gospel and suffering for the sake of righteousness are related but distinct; companions but not identical twins. The reason for this Lutheran two-kingdoms distinction is that certainty of conscience must attend faith in Christ, who receives the sinner in mercy; correspondingly, a

2. Paul R. Hinlicky, *Before Auschwitz: What Christian Theology Must Learn from the Rise of Nazism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 16-43.

salutary uncertainty must ever attend the believer who lives by the forgiveness of sins in his or her political engagements, if really Christians have no other righteousness before God than that mercifully given in Christ. As we look back in this light on the 1966 laundry list of politically correct positions Barth wanted true Christians to take as part of their confession of Christ, we can both appreciate his summons to a consequent Christian political discipleship and also see how the great theologian too was constrained by the sin and limited vision that attends all our politics, including the politics of Christians, this side of the Parousia. Barth could not have foreseen 1989 and yet demanded as a matter of conscience that we eternalize 1945; but he should have known that he could not have foreseen 1989 and he should have known that Christians in Socialism was but the left-wing inverse image of right-wing German Christianity. Barth, however, was justified to this extent when he argued for *churchly* confession, and further, that in arguing for the political engagement of Christians as a consequence of a true, precious and faithful witness, he was taking into account the post-war end of Christendom with its axiomatic privileging of the churches.

I hope that by this analysis I have laid bare the challenges for us today. We who attend the Braaten-Benne annual theological lectures see that neo-Protestant liberalism, whether in 19th century or 20th century versions, goes tramping after other gospels than the announcement of the divine act of the resurrection of the Crucified Jesus, against which the apostle protests in Galatians 1:6. We are accordingly the dispirited remnants of Protestantism to whom Douglas John Hall addressed himself pleading for patience, wisdom and discernment in our trying times. Just so, we have our penance to do in this time of waiting. The genuine suffering of the righteous always begins in suffering the salutary judgment of the cross on us who intend to be in the household of God.

Is it not our failure that our witness has heretofore failed to persuade erring sisters and brothers? Is it not a humbling

truth that our critics see in us the inconsequence of professing with our lips what we fail to perform, or rather suffer, in our bodies? Anyone who wants to confess Jesus Christ alone as the hope of the world, as we do, must discern the times and count the cost that begins in and ever returns to repentance. Would-be confessors must understand that they undertake anew the classical theology of the martyrs as a remnant in a world largely indifferent and often hostile to the name of Jesus.

The Theology of the Martyrs

By the theology of the martyrs, as we shall shortly hear, we point to something as historically real as Jesus and His cross, as I have explored in detail in my book, *Divine Complexity*: namely, the line of 2nd century patristic theology that stretches from Ignatius of Antioch through Polycarp and Justin Martyr to Irenaeus³ (and in the Latin West to the remarkable lady, Perpetua, to whom I devoted a lengthy excursus in my new systematic theology, *Beloved Community*⁴). This is a line that extends to Origen who recovered it toward the end of his days in his treatise, *Exhortation to Martyrdom*; Athanasius thematized it in his early treatise *On the Incarnation of the Word*, when he inquired into the ground for the courage of the faithful martyrs in face of the decade long Great Persecution that he had witnessed in his youth.

This patristic theology of the martyrs is constituted by two theological decisions that mark forever after the parameters of theology that intends orthodoxy: first, the decision *against Gnostic dualism* for the unity of creation and redemption, in Lutheran lingo, for the unity of the Law and the gospel of the one God, as told in the canonical Genesis to Revelation canon; and, second, the decision *against docetism*, the Christological teaching associated with Gnostic dualism that denies the real

3. Hinlicky: *Divine Complexity: The Rise of Creedal Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 109-158.

4. Hinlicky, *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 87-93.

humanity of Jesus Christ the Son of God and the significance of His body for human salvation. Together, these decisions instead affirm the costly suffering in the flesh of the Son of God incarnate, crucified for our sins and raised for our justification.

These two theological decisions of the martyrs for the canon of the Bible as the Genesis to Revelation narrative of the coming of God to us, and for the baptismal creed at the center of which stands the affirmation of the Son of God who was “born of the Virgin Mary and suffered under Pontius Pilate,” moreover, can and should be linked to the original Reformation notion of the “confessing” theology of a confessing church. The epigraph from Psalm 119:46 introduced the Augsburg Confession of 1530 with the words, “I will also speak of your decrees before kings, and shall not be put to shame.” To confess – to “same say,” to say the same as what one has seen and heard – is but the Latin word for the Greek *homologizein*, a synonym for *martyria*, denoting the testimony given in the witness stand when the powers that be, or the powers that would-be, put the believer in Jesus in the dock, as in the great narrative of John 9 about the man born blind, and demand that they deny their Lord in exchange for life or fortune or liberty. Indeed, we Lutherans ought readily to recognize our familiar theology as the theology of the martyrs, if we still mean it when we sing, “Take they goods, fame, fortune, child and spouse, they yet have nothing won. The kingdom ours remaineth.” As Luther put it in the *Large Catechism*, “For where God’s Word is preached, accepted, or believed, and bears fruit, there the holy and precious cross will also not be far behind. And let no one think that we will have peace; rather, we must sacrifice all we have on earth – possessions, honor, house and farm, spouse and children, body and life. Now, this grieves our flesh and the old creature, for it means we must remain steadfast, suffer patiently whatever befalls us, and let go whatever is taken from us.”⁵

5. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 448-9.

This stance of the vulnerable witness to the uniquely saving power of Jesus Christ in the teeth of hostile powers is the first and chief work of faith, according to Luther. As such, we dare not claim to possess orthodoxy except from this stance of vulnerable witness in the hour of trial. For we betray its content, Jesus who brings the Kingdom to the helpless and undeserving, when we try to make ourselves deserving and strong, worthy of grace as it were, even, curiously enough, in resorting to a worldly defense of this precious content of the confession, the gratuitous gift of God. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels. This saving power of God is made perfect not in human strength, but in our weakness.

George Lindbeck made this point with his much discussed parable, whether the crusader who yelps, "Jesus is Lord," as he whacks off the head of the infidel with his sword speaks the truth.⁶ The statement, "Jesus is Lord," he suggested, is in fact performatively betrayed, thus falsified before the world, when spoken in this triumphalist manner. For Jesus is the Lord who came not to be served but to serve and to lay down his life a ransom for many, so that the greatest of those who follow Him is least of all and servant of all. This reversal of prevailing values is what the name Jesus denotes as a real, thus particular human being in the world, not then something infinitely malleable in the hands or on the lips of devotees. To utter the true statement, "Jesus is Lord," truthfully, the utterer must be 1) moved to do so by none less than the same Spirit who led Messiah Jesus to the cross ("for no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit,") and 2), as thus conformed in principle and in power by the Spirit's baptism into Jesus Christ, dying to sin and rising to the newness of *His* life. To abstract the statement, "Jesus is Lord," from the Spirit's work in the church by the Word and Sacraments to conform would-be confessors to His way of suffering witness and to make it instead into a worldly statement of knowledge

6. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a PostLiberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).

accessible apart from this excruciating conversion of our hearts and minds and bodies is in fact to betray it. The new willingness to suffer for this particular truth, by the resource of the Spirit, is the *sine qua non* of its truthful confession. God offers no other gospel and honors no other defense of it.

To this I would add further only that we must be clear, or at least as clear as ongoing theological self-examination allows and enables, that our confession is about Jesus, not our own crusades seeking a righteousness of our own, so easily disguised in the religion business looking for a market niche under contemporary conditions. How easy it is to slide into the confusion of our own righteousness – real, as it can be, yet relative, as it must be – with the righteousness of Christ! "I oppose the destruction of unborn human life and the commoditization of its body parts." "I stand up for full access to health care for oppressed and stigmatized women." "I oppose altering the traditional definition of marriage." "I stand with the bullied sexual minorities." "I stand with Israel against hostile neighbors." "I am in solidarity with dispossessed Palestinians." Can we not see how *both*, though in painful conflict with each other, are relative yet true righteousness in the world, according to the Law? Can we not see the radicalness of Paul's gospel insight that *all* have sinned and fallen short, that there is none, no not one, who is righteous before God, even if not especially in their very real, yet always partial, one-sided and inevitably also self-serving righteousness, according to the Law? Must we not recall and take to heart Luther's commentary on the petition, Forgive us as we forgive: "Those who boast of their goodness and despise others should examine themselves and put this petition uppermost in their mind. They will find that they are no more righteous than anyone else, that in the presence of God all people must fall on their knees and be glad that we can come to forgiveness."⁷ If we dare descend into this profoundest moment of despair of self at the failure before God of *every* possible righteousness of our own, just here enters the

7. *Book of Concord*, 452.

alien, truly alien righteousness of Christ, the righteousness of this one Man's mercy for those merciless just because they are at the sole mercy of their own righteousness. Jesus is the one, true Lord in that He came not to be served but to serve by giving his life a ransom for many, the righteous for the unrighteous, especially those unrighteous, that is, before God, in their own self-proclaimed righteousnesses!

Let us then be quite clear that the intention of Christian orthodoxy is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but this crucified and risen Lord Jesus as our only righteousness, signaling a genuinely new creation, over against all of our own righteousnesses, even at their very best. A genuine confessing movement today must be scrupulously clear that it is about this Jesus as Someone real in the world, whose reality in particular cannot and may not be coopted by any of our partisan righteousnesses, but rather manifests, through the gospel and its gathering, the church as the assembly of believers. This is what we contend for as the life of the church when we reject attractive but false gospels that turn the church from faith and witness into political partisanship with ritual.

In that light, let us return to the two basic theological decisions of the theology of the martyrs and their relation to Lutheran confessional theology. These are the decisions for the canon unifying the Old and New Testaments as Holy Scripture, and for unity of the person, Jesus Christ, true man born of the Virgin Mary, true God born of the Father from eternity, our saving Lord. Corresponding to this dogmatic theology of the martyrs, there are two kinds of Lutheran doctrine that we have to affirm accompanied by two kinds of typical Lutheran errors that we have self-critically to assess and reject.

First, because we find Christ at the center of the Bible, we find the unity of the Testaments in His death for our sins under the indictment of the prophets and His resurrection for our justification according to the promises made to the fathers.

A text more honored in the breach than in practice puts the affirmative this way:

Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, through whom everything was made and through whose life, death, and resurrection God fashions a new creation. The proclamation of God's message to us as both Law and Gospel is the Word of God, revealing judgment and mercy through word and deed, beginning with the Word in creation, continuing in the history of Israel, and centering in all its fullness in the person and work of Jesus Christ. The canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the written Word of God. Inspired by God's Spirit speaking through their authors, they record and announce God's revelation centering in Jesus Christ. Through them God's Spirit speaks to us to create and sustain Christian faith and fellowship for service in the world. This church accepts the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as the inspired Word of God and the authoritative source and norm of its proclamation, faith, and life.⁸

As excellent a statement of the Lutheran doctrine of the Word of God as this is, however, it does *not* bring out what Luther himself advised us always to do to attain clarity as theologians, namely, to discern the antithesis. Who are the opponents? What is being rejected in these affirmations, namely, that the Word of God is the second person of the Holy Trinity made flesh for us and our salvation in Jesus Christ, as known in the canonical Scriptures when they are opened in the Spirit to proclaim God's judgment and mercy as Law and Gospel for the sake of our new creation?

What is in fact being rejected is Marcion *redivivus*, that is, the idea of the second century heretic, against whom Polycarp and Justin Martyr contended, that the New Testament leaves the

8. ELCA Constitution, Article 2.

Old behind as no better than an antiquated religion or, at worse, as the false religion of an angry and jealous God. This position had been tacit in 19th century liberal theories of progressive religious evolution beginning with Schleiermacher; it was openly endorsed and advocated by Adolph von Harnack at the end of the 19th century in his influential book on Marcion. All this modern anti-Judaism of renewed Marcionism was fodder for the German Christian movement's effort to eradicate all traces of the legalistic and ritualistic religion of the bloodthirsty Jehovah from Christian prayer and hymnody and even from Scripture – just as is recurring in the sanitized liturgy and revisionist hymnody of Fortress Press's *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*. And in all this, we have self-critically to acknowledge, the name of Luther has been claimed in support.

This history of modern Marcionism thus raises for us the vexing problem of Luther's own anti-Judaism. Suffice it say that Luther, who made his living as a Professor of Old Testament, confronted already in John Agricola's antinomianism unwelcome implications of several of his own earlier unnuanced or hyperbolic statements against the Law, much as Paul corrected in Romans certain overstatements he had made in Galatians. With his turn against antinomian interpretation of the doctrine of justification, the later Luther corrected himself theologically. Faith justifies, in other words, not because it progresses from external works to inward piety, from ritualism to conscientious ethical idealism, from a wrathful picture of God to a nice one, from exclusive tribalism to inclusive cosmopolitanism, from Judaism and Catholicism on to liberal Protestantism; but faith justifies only because of the One to whom faith joins us, Jesus Christ. And faith in Jesus Christ can count for us sinners because it was He who fulfilled the holy Law of God by loving God above all in loving those unworthy of love – even to death, death on a cross. This is none other than the *Jew* Jesus who died *accursed* on the cross as Isaiah's *suffering servant of the Lord* in profoundest fulfillment of the holy *Law of God*.

Part and parcel, then, of the theology of the martyrs is to affirm the unity of the testaments as centered in the crucified and risen Christ; in the one God, then, who creates in order to redeem and redeems precisely his own lost and perishing creatures, who in preaching Law and Gospel kills in order to make alive. We nail down that point about the canonical unity of the testaments in theological anthropology by specifying *the body* as the site of redemption, this *earth* of our common body as the material of the new creation. Gnostics wanted to liberate the spirit from the body and fly away to a purer world above and beyond. They denied any need for faithful confession on the lips in face of the death threats of the persecutors, because what is done in the body was for them a matter of indifference. The body is not the site of redemption but rather the prison from which release of the spirit within was expected.

But what else is Christian martyrdom than the affirmation that what we do in the body has ultimate significance? What else but the defiant faith that the body, whom the enemy may kill, nevertheless belongs to God our creator and redeemer who will vindicate its sacrifice by glorifying it? We could be especially instructed on these points by a study of Irenaeus of Lyon, who wrote against the Gnostics when their alluring but false message of religious escapism threatened his people who had just endured a bloody persecution in which his predecessor as bishop had been martyred. Such continuity with Judaism's affirmation of the body, in any case, can and must be affirmed, especially by Lutherans today, in receiving the Old Testament as authoritative witness of God's Law *and* God's gospel, in affirming this world as God's creation, in affirming the human body as the site of judgment and redemption, ethically making what we do in the body a matter of ultimate significance, since, as Paul says, what we believe in the heart we confess with our lips, and so are saved.

The second theological decision taken in the second century by the theology of the martyrs is, in theological jargon, named *anti-docetism*. *Dokeo* is the Greek verb meaning to seem or to

appear and in this usage it signifies the Christological error identified especially in the First Letter of John that Jesus only appeared to be flesh, that Jesus only seemed to be human. The apostolic father, Ignatius of Antioch, wearing the shackles of a condemned man on route to Rome to be thrown to the lions, refuted this error with the indignant protest: "If Jesus only seemed to be human, and only appeared to die on the cross, then I only seem to be shackled, I will only appear to be eaten by wild beasts!" If I am really to follow Jesus, in other words, in my own body to follow Him, then, Jesus must have really come for me who is flesh, come in the flesh, flesh to flesh to unite us in one body through the cross.

More profoundly yet, however, it is for Ignatius and his followers through the course of the second century a deeper matter of learning to fear not them who can kill the body, but not the soul; learning, then, the freedom in the world that comes from fearing God alone, which for Luther makes the Christian a free lord, subject to none. This freedom which Jesus brings, as a consequence, provokes on the earth a crisis of legitimation, as the political scientists put it, a crisis of authority. The genuine political meaning of Christianity, in that case, consists precisely *not* in baptizing secular partisanships. It consists instead in the violation of just such worldly boundaries by the new and free society of believers in Christ transgressing hitherto entrenched worldly identities.

What to the eyes of the world is nothing but an impaled man on a stake, humiliated and abandoned – this One, "Christ crucified," is nonetheless proclaimed and received as the very Son of God there for us. Caesar on his throne, also claiming the title Son of God, cannot then be such. Jesus brings a limit to Caesar's claim at the very edge of Caesar's power – the power to crucify. He may not be worshipped or adored. He must be obeyed according to God's institution, but not according to his own caprice or ambition, but rather conscientiously (Romans 13: 5). It is not merely, then, a change in one's existential self-un-

derstanding that comes with anti-Docetism in Christology; it is really a change in allegiance, an exchange of lordships over the human body, let the chips fall as they may.

Here we may make the Lutheran connection by returning to the actual problem in Bultmann's theology, which has been so profoundly influential in post-War Lutheranism that some of its most questionable claims are simply taken as axiomatic. The actual problem in Bultmann's theology, as previously mentioned, is that it is sophisticated docetism. For him, famously, the historical Jesus is only the presupposition of the kerygma that He is risen. We only have to affirm *das Dass*, the "that," or the fact, of His coming, since we have to presuppose a corpse in order to have a resurrection. Not only, as already mentioned, does this deprive the real, historical Jesus of his Judaism; further, it deprives His particular way within Judaism on this earth of any saving significance whatsoever for Christian faith and life. All that really matters is the present, contemporaneous, liberating proclamation so far as that somehow or other sets auditors free. Context swallows up text. Christology is then swallowed up in soteriology, and soteriology becomes a variable function of perceived contemporary needs. Not, then, the holy controversy of the Lord with His people according to Moses and the prophets, John the Baptist, and also Jesus of Nazareth; not the expectation from the same Lord of a new covenant to work a redemptive new creation by the One anointed with the divine Spirit to reign in fulfillment to the promises made to David and Abraham before him; but rather, whatever gets you through the night is alright, alright...

Anti-docetism, however, like the rejection of antinomianism for the sake of the unity of the testaments, is in fact the position taken by Reformation Lutheranism. Bultmann one-sidedly, or "radically" as he put it, emphasized present proclamation "pro me" as the happening of the Word of God: all Christ then, but little or no Jesus. Consequently, as we have just pointed out, the hope of Israel, generated by the prophetic preaching of the Law

in controversy with God's own people, ceases to define the problem to which Christology is the answer. Luther's anti-docetism was articulated especially in the *Disputation concerning the Humanity and Divinity of Christ* in which Luther contended against docetist and Nestorian tendencies to separate Jesus as a past historical figure from the Christ, the divine Son, who meets the present as a contemporary. But for Luther, the divine Son of God meets us *as Jesus*, indeed meets us *bodily* as Jesus, or does *not* meet us *at all*: "This is *my body* given for you." In receiving Him this bodily way, we remember Him as He intends to be remembered, namely, as the One who came not to be served but to serve and lay down his life as a ransom for many. It is not, then, in the gibberish of would-be liberating proclamation and the religion business's sordid salvation mongering, but in the new covenant meal, with the community that is gathered by it, that the anti-docetic gospel is proclaimed "for us" until Christ comes again in glory for the Pauline "redemption of our bodies."

Part and parcel, then, of the anti-docetic theology of the martyrs in Luther's recension of it is the emphasis on the *unity of Christ's person*, corresponding to the aforementioned unity of the testaments. We do not speak of two sons, one of Mary and one of God, howsoever tightly coupled in a unity of will. We speak with Luther of *one* Son, Jesus who created the world (as Luther provocatively put it in the aforementioned disputation). In other words, the human being Jesus Christ is personally indiscernible from the eternal Son, and what is in truth indiscernible is in fact one and the same reality, in this case, one and the same *person*. The eternal Son personifies himself in the man Jesus; Jesus is the Eternal Son in and as the latter's *own* human coming. We neither think with the docetists that the human being is a puppet employed temporarily by an invisible spirit who then departs, nor do we think with the Nestorians that two individual persons, the son of Mary and the Son of God, closely collaborate in Christ. Lutherans who remember their own tradition in Christology think that the single figure of the man on the mission whom we encounter in the gospels simply

is the Son sent from heaven by His Father in the power of the Spirit, born of a woman, born under the Law to redeem those under the Law.

As this unity of the person is a divine work, to be sure, we cannot comprehend how it is so, nor should we even want or try to do so. A truly divine work surpasses creaturely understanding, supremely so in the unique case of the Incarnation. It is given for us to adore, not to comprehend. In Christology we preserve this mystery of the unity of person, for the sake of the good news it bears, and accordingly delivers, to us who are body, as Cyril of Alexandria affirmed in a culmination of the patristic theology of the martyrs. He asked, "In what way does the flesh of Christ make alive? Answer: according to its union with the living Word, which has made the good things of its own nature common with its own human body."

I am actually quoting Cyril here from the *Book of Concord*, more precisely from the Catalogue of Testimonies appended to the *Book of Concord*. It is a continuing tragedy that this Catalogue of Testimonies from the church fathers, recording the patristic antecedents of Lutheran confessional theology, is so little known and even more poorly understood. Such thick connections of Lutheran theology to the patristic theology of the martyrs, then, as to anti-docetism with its corollary, the unity of Christ's persons, have been largely forgotten. Instead, we have either Bultmann's kind of sophisticated docetism decaying into Christ-mysticism or more popularly today, a retreat from Bultmann back to Schleiermacher in quest of a Jesuology; this truly is a hopeless hunt, with each and every quester for the so-called historical Jesus claiming to discover, but in fact inventing, her own Jesus as someone from the past who could allegedly inspire us today.

Just as in theological anthropology we nail down the connection between Lutheran theology and the patristic theology of the martyrs by siting redemption in the body, so also in Christology we hit the target when we recover what Luther meant by the *bodily* presence of Christ. Notice that I do not say, as is

usual, the "real presence," but rather the *bodily* presence in order to follow John 6, and Cyril, in teaching that it is the *body* of Christ that gives life by virtue of its union with the eternal Son. Scholars like Edwin Hoskyns and Udo Schnelle have pointed to the schism referenced in John 6,⁹ how some of the believers from Capernaum who had followed Jesus took offense at the claim that His flesh is food indeed. They found this a hard saying and departed. These scholars see here a veiled reference to the heresy of docetism discussed in the First Epistle of John: the docetists, denying that Jesus had come in the flesh, likewise denied that his flesh could be life-giving food, and so broke away from the community that was formed by the Eucharistic feast.

This is an early, if not the very first doctrinal crisis within the household of God, a judgment and division, as John teaches, of the apparent church. Here, and ever after is where the confession of the unity of Christ's person is made or denied. Perhaps with this John 6 schism in mind, a generation later Ignatius of Antioch wrote:

Mark those who hold strange doctrine concerning the grace of Jesus Christ which came to us, how that they are contrary to the mind of God. They have no care for love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the afflicted, none for the prisoner, nor the hungry or thirsty. They abstain from the eucharist and prayer, because they do not allow that the eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which flesh suffered for our sins, and which the Father in his goodness raised up.¹⁰

9. See Hinlicky, *Divine Complexity*, 87-108. Udo Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John: An Investigation of the Place of the Fourth Gospel in the Johannine School*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); Sir Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* ed. Francis Noel Davey (London, 1947).

10. Ignatius, To the Smyrnaeans, 6, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, Revised Greek Texts with Introductions and English Translations, ed. J.B. Lightfoot & J.R. Harner (Baker Book House, 1984).

The unity of Christ's person, like the unity of the testaments in Christ, sites the body as the place where the saving profession is made or forfeited. That location of faith in the body is the patristic theology of the martyrs to which the Lutheran confessing movement of the 16th century appealed as to its own precedent.

A Future after Christendom

Let me summarize and draw to a conclusion. We do not take the contemporary crisis of Christianity in Europe and North America seriously enough if all we see is an incomprehensible defection from the faith once delivered to the saints and, correspondingly, only desire a return to normalcy. The crisis has far deeper roots in the unholy pact with political sovereignty that characterized Christendom in the West from the time of Charlemagne. Bonhoeffer spelled the predicament out in his reflection at the end of the *Ethics*, "Inheritance and Decay." After the catastrophe of Nazism, "[t]he *corpus christianum* is resolved into its true constituents, the *corpus Christi*, and the world. In His Church Christ rules not by the sword but solely with His Word. Unity of faith exists only in obedience to the true word of Jesus Christ. But the sword is the property of the secular government, which in its own way, in the proper discharge of its office, also serves the same Jesus Christ."¹¹ In this succinct statement, Bonhoeffer at once repudiates yearning "for the lost western Empire, the *corpus christianum*, in which Emperor and Pope were together the defenders of the unity of the Christian west,"¹² and at the same lays claim to the proper interpretation of the Reformation's teaching of the Two Kingdoms. What is that?

Bonhoeffer himself, strictly speaking, perished for the sake of righteousness rather than as a martyr of Christ. To be sure, he was a confessor of the faith prior to joining the military

11. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, trans. N. H. Smith (NY: MacMillan, 1978), 94-5.

12. *Ibid.*

conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. Thus he was inspired to suffer for righteousness' sake out of his Christian conviction. But in joining the conspiracy within the *Wehrmacht*, he took up the sword against the sword and in the end perished by the sword. We should hardly denigrate this just and courageous political engagement because it belonged to the left hand kingdom. We do not need to follow the new Anabaptists like Stanley Hauerwas,¹³ even as we learn from them. Rather, we should understand that Bonhoeffer came to his political engagement because of his previous and passionate contention in the right hand kingdom for the confessing Church; and indeed, Bonhoeffer was driven to desperate political action on account of the confessing church's failure, out of its not radical enough desire to sustain Christendom privileges even under a National Socialist regime, thus disinclined to stand in public solidarity with the persecuted.

We are not yet in such a dire crisis as Bonhoeffer was under Nazism. Our present task is to retrieve the theology of the martyrs on the unity of the Testaments centered in the unity of Christ's person as the content to which we bear an appropriately vulnerable and self-disciplined ecclesial witness. If we fail in this, I fear, we will have learned nothing from the past. But we may yet succeed, if we, like Bonhoeffer, see these convictions, even though somewhat hidden under different vocabularies or even theological conceptualities, all across the contemporary Christian spectrum and seek accordingly an ecumenical realignment along these Christological lines,¹⁴ just as the early Bonhoeffer had endeavored by joining the nascent ecumenical movement. The new confessing that emerges from that will, by the grace of God, have the power in the world to re-order worldly power,¹⁵ to make it, in Bonhoeffer's language, penultimate rather than

13. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

14. See further, *Beloved Community*, 439-445.

15. Robert W. Bertram, *A Time for Confessing*, ed. Michael Hoy, Lutheran Quarterly Books (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).

ultimate in its claims and duties, just as it may, by the grace of God, restore the lost certainty of faith to the dispirited remnants of Protestantism.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the reasons why the *No Other Gospel* movement in Germany in the 1960s failed, and what North American Lutherans today can learn from this failure.
2. The essay identifies two "theological decisions" that underlie orthodox accounts of martyrdom. What are these decisions, and how do they impact our understanding of martyrdom?
3. Discuss the heresy of Docetism, which the author mentions in several places in the essay. What is at stake in this theological problem concerning the nature of Jesus Christ, especially for a theology of martyrdom?
4. The essay concludes with a brief reflection on the political significance of an orthodox theology of martyrdom. Discuss some concrete political positions and commitments that might result from this understanding of martyrdom.