

D. M. Baillie on the Person of Christ

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The Scottish theologian, D. M. Baillie is a figure of impressive stature as pastor, church leader and professor of theology. His personal impact on his students has been estimated in these words of a former student:

From the beginning we realized that he was a giant and so great was our awe of him that we were in danger of regarding him as an Olympian who dwelt apart. We soon learned that he was the simplest and friendliest of men, the most hospitable of hosts, a born story-teller, a genius with children. As the months passed into years we discovered something else—he was a saint in whose transparent humility we saw reflected the beauty of holiness.<sup>1</sup>

When he died in October 1954, Donald Macpherson Baillie had just completed an appendix to, and the new edition of, his major work, *God Was In Christ*. This book presents us with a mature and comprehensive study of the person and work of Christ. Indeed, Rudolph Bultmann calls it “the most significant book of our time in the field of Christology.”<sup>2</sup>

There has hardly been a recent work on the person of Christ which has attracted the breadth of attention commanded by *God Was In Christ*. Baillie’s Christology has gained a sympathetic hearing even where Barth’s thundering doctrine of Christ has been dismissed. For instance, in the recent case-book trilogy, two of the cases refer their readers to *God Was In Christ* for guidance in Christology. Apparently D. M. Baillie is claimed both by “Theology in a Liberal Perspective” and by “New Reformation Theology.”

In William Hordern’s very popular *Layman’s Guide to Protestant Theology*, the concluding segment is given over to what the author recommends as an adequate and up-to-date form of orthodox Christianity. The entire treatment of the Incarnation is a singularly lucid exposition of D. M. Baillie.

Professor Walter Marshall Horton of Oberlin has made a notable attempt at writing an ecumenical theology in his book, *Christian Theology*, published in 1955. He speaks of his project in these terms:

The Ecumenical Movement has come to a common mind much more clearly on some theological topics than on others, but enough has become clear to make it possible for beginners in theology to sharpen their personal opinion on the whetstone of world opinion.

. . . *What is the Christian answer to this problem, so far as the Christian churches and schools of thought are now agreed?* If the student finds he is at odds with this ecumenical consensus, he must decide whether he is thinking superficially or provincially, or whether the whole Flock of Christ in this generation is crowding sheep-like into some broad trail that leads to destruction.<sup>3</sup>

In Horton’s chapter “Christ the Saviour” we find a lengthy exposition of D. M. Baillie’s thought introduced in this manner:

The best indicator of the amount of theological consensus now existing on the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity is the extraordinarily cordial reception that has been given to D. M. Baillie’s *God Was In Christ*. Not only among Scots and Presbyterians, but among American and Continental Protestants of many different denominations and among Anglican and other “Catholic-minded” Christians as well, the book has evoked almost universal acclaim and general assent.<sup>4</sup>

It is evident then, that D. M. Baillie's work on the person of Christ is worthy of consideration. My purpose here is to analyze and examine three central ideas of D. M. Baillie's theology of the person of Christ. It is not possible to include in the scope of this paper his presentation of the doctrine of the atonement, nor of the Trinity. The book *God Was In Christ* ranges widely through the varied perspectives of contemporary religious thought and it fairly bristles with significant gleanings from, and sharp criticisms of, major theologians. Consequently, many important and interesting insights of Professor Baillie must be passed over for our immediate purposes.

### THE FULL HUMANITY OF CHRIST

No reader of *God Was In Christ* could miss the strong and repeated emphasis of the author on the integrity and the completeness of Christ's humanity. One of the most important facts about contemporary Christology is described by Professor Baillie as the end of Docetism.<sup>5</sup> Not only the obvious, crude forms of Docetism have suffered eclipse, but also more recent and sophisticated forms that tend to omit the full humanity of Jesus Christ are being abandoned. An example of this emphasis on the real manhood of Jesus is to be found in the work of theologians like Leonard Hodgson who find in Christ's miracles, works of human faith to which God responds by mighty acts. Professor Baillie also points out that there is now widespread agreement on the human limitations of Christ's knowledge and on the human character of His moral and religious life.

Pointedly in the same direction D. M. Baillie does have one interesting word of approval for the kenosis view, although his book is better known for its criticism of kenotic Christology:

It gets away entirely from the docetism which has so often infected Christology and which explained away the humanity of Jesus by applying to the story of His life a kind of supra-human psychology. It is able to go the whole way in using human categories about Jesus: He lived a man's life, His mind worked as a man's mind, His knowledge was limited to human knowledge, His equipment to human equipment.<sup>6</sup>

The Christology of Baillie is emphatic and explicit on the full and real humanity of our Lord, a truth that orthodox Christianity has always maintained. I challenge some of the ways in which Baillie follows out this theme, however. I would by no means charge with Docetism a theology which says more and wrestles more with the affirmation of Christ's deity than of His humanity. It is not so much the humanity as it is the deity of Christ which has been undermined in our day. On exegetical grounds, moreover, I question whether it can be said that Christ's knowledge was strictly limited to human knowledge and that his miracles are purely the result of human faith. This theme is certainly worthy of more extended attention, but having noted this much we move to the second aspect of Baillie's doctrine of the Person of Christ.

### THE RELATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF GOD TO THE INCARNATION

While he is admirably clear and direct concerning the humanity of our Lord, the same cannot be said for Professor Baillie's exposition of the deity of Christ. Indeed, neither the word "deity" nor its equivalents are used of Jesus Christ except in reference to the historic Christological heresies.

Since Dr. Baillie neither explicitly affirms nor denies the deity of Jesus Christ

a suspicion is awakened. It is of importance, then, to pursue the issue further lest we fall into the trap of reacting only to theological catch-words.

D. M. Baillie wishes to affirm a doctrine of the Person of Christ that adheres to the central concerns of the historic orthodox creeds. He also takes New Testament teaching as normative in this connection. Hence the title of his book is taken from the Pauline expression as found in II Corinthians 5:19. Throughout the book personal pronouns referring to Jesus Christ are capitalized. Professor Baillie prefers to state the relation of Christ to God in the form: Jesus Christ was the man in whom God was incarnate, or in greater detail:

A true Christology will tell us not simply that God is *like* Christ, but that God was *in* Christ. Thus it will tell us not only about the *nature* of God, but about his *activity*, about what He has done, coming the whole way for our salvation in Jesus Christ, and there is no other way in which the Christian truth about God can be expressed.

. . . We never find there (i.e. in the New Testament) anything that could be called a Jesus-cult, or a Christology interested simply in the question of who or what Jesus was apart from the action of God the Father. Whatever Jesus was or did, in His life, in His teaching, in His cross and passion, in His resurrection and ascension and exaltation, it is really God that did it in Jesus; that is how the New Testament speaks.<sup>7</sup>

It is now possible to see that Professor Baillie insists on what we may call "dynamic" forms of expression of the Person of Christ. More broadly in contemporary theology an important distinction is made between "static" as over against "dynamic" statements of this. Phrases like "the deity of Christ" or "of the same substance with the Father" are examples of "static" expression, while the following would typify the "dynamic" mode of affirmation: "God acts in Jesus Christ," "God is revealed in Christ," "the Christ event," etc. Significant theologians of our day make a point of restricting their Christological affirmations to the dynamic mode. Thus, the usual expressions of the deity of Christ would all be called "static" and would be avoided as tending toward "pagan speculation" or "imported Greek metaphysics." Incidentally, I have not been able to understand why the phrase "humanity of Christ" does not seem to be challenged on the same grounds.

D. M. Baillie makes distinctive use of the "dynamic" mode of expression, but does not argue the point as others do. The Christology of John Knox is interesting on this matter. He blames most of the turmoil, confusion and divisiveness among Christians in their stand on the person of Christ on the fact that static and "metaphysical" categories were insisted on rather than the use of the "event" category.

If Christ himself has been and is still the principle of our unity, the attempt to define the meaning of Christ has just as surely been the major occasion of controversy and division. I believe that this attempt has had this kind of effect because the church has tried to define abstractly in terms of the metaphysical essence of a person's nature what at first was received concretely as the divine meaning of an historical event; or, to say the same thing somewhat differently, we have tried to interpret the revelation in Christ as a static thing residing in a person when it was really a dynamic thing taking place as an event.<sup>8</sup>

The Christological question, which was originally a question about the eschatological and soteriological significance of an event, has become a question about the metaphysical nature of a person. This process reaches its culmination in the fourth and fifth centuries, when the attention of theologians was

focused almost entirely upon the question of the nature of the Person. Was he co-eternal with the Father and of the same substance? . . . Did Christ have two natures? Such questions threatened for awhile to divide the church. For the great majority of Christians they were answered satisfactorily at Nicea and Chalcedon . . .

. . . If Christians are ever to be united creedally it will be upon the basis of these ancient creeds. But that can happen only if these creeds are recognized to be symbols of God's revealing and saving *action* (italics in Knox), not metaphysically accurate descriptions of the nature of his agent.<sup>9</sup>

It is not so much the phraseology of the first five centuries which has been of concern to orthodox theologians, but there is something quite basic at stake here that John Knox and the use of Christ-event terminology simply do not get at.<sup>10</sup> Whether Christ be deity or God is an issue older than Nicea and even earlier than the ancient Christological heresies. This issue is crucial for New Testament faith. Jesus was charged with blasphemy for claiming to be deity. He received the worship of his disciples directed toward Himself. The question of Christ's deity is central and simply cannot be evaded. "Christ-event" terminology is Biblical. The New Testament certainly does speak of God's revealing purpose and saving action in the ministry of Jesus Christ, but the Person of the Agent may not be side-stepped.

To return to our inquiry into the Christology of D. M. Baillie, having observed his preference for "dynamic" expressions and his careful detour around any affirmation of Christ's deity, we are able to ask why this stand is taken. In the case of theologians like Rudolph Bultmann and Paul Tillich, who insist on "Christ-event" or dynamic rather than what they call "static" or "metaphysical" forms of expression, anti-supernaturalism is at the root of their intent. Professor Baillie cannot be written off as anti-supernaturalist. There are two reasons for Baillie's hesitation about affirming the full deity of Christ. In the first place he fears that such affirmations will entail some minimizing of the full humanity of Jesus Christ and end in a semi-Docetism.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, he is troubled about the meaning of the affirmation: "Jesus is God," since it implies a meaning of "God" that is not dependent on the revelation in Jesus Christ.<sup>12</sup> He gives much thought to developing the insight of Archbishop Temple: "The wise question is not 'Is Christ Divine?' but 'What is God like?'"<sup>13</sup> Baillie says repeatedly, "The whole Christological question is a question about God."<sup>14</sup> He expresses considerable concern that most discussions of the relation of Christ and God never arrive at any proper basis for understanding "God." Is it the idol of the cave or of the market place which will be at the root of the understanding of God or will it be the uniquely Christian conception? What is the Christian conception of God? Fundamentally, argues Baillie, it does not mean the Maker of all things nor does it mean the Source and Guardian of the moral law, but it does mean something expressed only in the Incarnation. Here we are in need of Baillie's own pointed phrasing:

It means the One who at the same time makes absolute demands upon us and offers freely to give us all that He demands, . . . This is the Creator-God who made us to be free personalities, and we know that we are most free and personal when He is most in possession of us. This is the God of the moral order who call us every moment to exercise our full and responsible choice; but He also comes to dwell in us in such a way that we are raised above the moral order into the liberty of the sons of God. That is what Christians mean by "God."<sup>15</sup>

Certainly this is a devout and profound expression. While I admit with Pro-

fessor Baillie that my fullest understanding of the doctrine of God is found in the revelation in Jesus Christ, the Living Word, the Revealer of the Father, it is my contention that Baillie's argument is very likely to arrive at a purely immanent God. His line of reasoning ends in a logical trap. If the meaning of God be restricted to "what was manifest in the Christ-event," what will emerge for many contemporary theologians is that the only possible affirmation about God is that of a loving or gracious purpose, and even that meaning will depend ultimately on a theistic view of the work of Christ.

It is only because Baillie's doctrine of God is not really so restricted that he is not quite caught in the consequences of his argument. We may see these consequences, however, in a number of contemporary theologians. Note these conclusions of John Knox, for instance:

Christ is "of one substance with the Father;" but the utmost, and inmost, it is given us to know of God's "substance" is that he is love—as such he is revealed in Christ—and love is not a metaphysical essence but personal moral will and action.<sup>16</sup>

In the Christology of the important Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulen, the outcome is very similar to that of John Knox.

The Christian confession of faith in Christ is essentially a confession of faith in the incarnation of divine love, of God, in the man Jesus Christ . . . This expression affirms . . . that the 'essence' of God, or in other words the divine and loving will, 'dwells in Christ.'<sup>17</sup>

The distinguished American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, if I read him correctly, finds himself in this same position.<sup>18</sup> In an enlightening comment on D. M. Baillie's Christology the liberal Anglican theologian Norman Pittenger generally expresses appreciation and agreement, but he also sees the need of correction at this particular point in order to have "ontological grounding." These rhetorical questions present Professor Pittenger's point:

For what after all, is the basic nature of man? Is not his God-movement, his drive to respond in moral and spiritual ways to the pressure of God upon him? Is not his very moral and spiritual nature in itself an ontological reality? And is not God, in the depths of his being, not only loving in an *adjectival* sense but actual Love in a *substantival* sense? Ought we not to say that for Christian thought *being* and *love* together constitute the supreme Reality's very life?<sup>19</sup>

In addition to this logical difficulty there is an obvious and pointed omission in Baillie's whole setting of the question. When the first Christians trusted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour they were already in a setting that permitted no ambiguity on the meaning of God. The earliest believers were devout Jews with definite ideas on the doctrine of God, firmly rooted in the Old Testament revelation. It is no accident that not only the advent of Christ, but his ministry, his immediate followers, his crucifixion, death, resurrection, ascension and the beginning of the Christian Church at Pentecost were all on the soil of Palestine in the midst of the Jewish people. Moreover, Jesus Christ made a point of relating his person and ministry to the Scriptures (Old Testament) and the promise of the prophets of Israel. As the parable of the vineyard and the wicked husbandman (Luke 20:1-19) so aptly puts it, Jesus presented Himself to Israel as being in the line of the prophets but also transcending them. Our Lord made much of His continuity with

Old Covenant revelation while also establishing the New Covenant in His own person.

When the first Christian missionaries began to penetrate the pagan world, their message remained one of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as deity. Sermons to pagans stressed the revelation of God (Acts 17:23-29) as background for the preaching of Christ.

Unless I am quite mistaken, then, Professor Baillie's attempt to avert confusion on the meaning of God does not end in success, and it also loses sight of the first century setting of the issue.

## THE INCARNATION AS THE PARADOX OF GRACE

At the very center of D. M. Baillie's constructive statement of the meaning of the Incarnation is his paradox of grace, which has been called the most original contribution to Christology in recent years.<sup>20</sup> The most profound of all Christian paradoxes is the central paradox, the paradox of grace. Professor Baillie cites I Corinthians 15:10 as the clearest expression of the paradox of grace: "By the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me." How does this idea capture the secret of the Incarnation?

It is what we might call the paradox of Grace. Its essence lies in the conviction which a Christian man possesses, that every good thing in him, every good thing he does, is somehow not wrought by himself but by God. This is a highly paradoxical conviction, for in ascribing all to God it does not abrogate human personality nor disclaim personal responsibility, never is human action more truly and fully personal, never does the agent feel more perfectly free, than in those moments of which he can say as a Christian that whatever good was in them was not his but God's.<sup>21</sup>

What I wish to suggest is that this paradox of grace points the way more clearly and makes a better approach than anything else in our experience to the mystery of the Incarnation itself; that this paradox in its fragmentary form in our own Christian lives is a reflection of the perfect union of God and man in the Incarnation on which our whole Christian life depends, and may therefore be our best clue to the understanding of it. In the New Testament we see the man in whom God was incarnate surpassing all other men in refusing to claim anything for Himself independently and ascribing all the goodness to God. We see Him also desiring to take up other men into His own close union with God, that they might be as He was. And if these men entering in some measure through him into that union, experience the paradox of grace for themselves in fragmentary ways, and are constrained to say, 'It was not I but God,' may not this be a clue to the understanding of that perfect life in which the paradox is complete and absolute, that life of Jesus which, being the perfection of humanity, is also, and even in a deeper and prior sense, the very life of God Himself? If the paradox is a reality in our poor imperfect lives at all, so far as there is any good in them, does not the same or a similar paradox, taken at the perfect and absolute pitch, appear as the mystery of the Incarnation?<sup>22</sup>

For Baillie, then, the perfect degree of Jesus' self-renunciation, giving glory rather to the Father, His refusal to be called "good" on the grounds that only God

is good — this is the paradoxical center of the Incarnation itself. This is the act of God, the life of God, the event in which God becomes incarnate.

Before proceeding to the substance of this proposal, I would point out that there is no need to say that the Incarnation is a paradox, although I readily grant that there can be no ordinary explanation of how the Eternal Son could assume humanity in the womb of the Virgin Mary. I see miracle here and great mystery, but nothing self-contradictory.

As to the proposal itself I am by no means the first to point out that, in spite of Professor Baillie's careful and earnest attempts to the contrary, this paradox of grace Christology results in making the distinction between Jesus Christ and Christian men (or in fact all ordinarily good men) one of relative degree. If Baillie is right, Jesus more perfectly than others ascribed his goodness not to Himself but to God. It is my estimation that J. H. Hick's article on Baillie's Christology is essentially correct in pointing out that the paradox of grace concept of the Person of Christ amounts to adoptionism.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, it must be noted that the Biblical expressions closest to Baillie's idea speak of redeemed men as such, rather than to the Person of the Redeemer. St. Paul speaks for all the redeemed when he says, "Not I but the grace of God." In a parallel passage, however, the Apostle says, "Not I but Christ." Baillie's interpretation of Christ must double back on itself to take such passages into account. It would be well to recall the very sharp New Testament insistence that men, even the most eminent of the Apostles, are men and not God. Whenever attempts were made to reverence the apostles, they protested in the strongest terms, "Stand on your own feet, for we are men of like passions with yourselves" (Acts 10:26, 14:15). Jesus Christ on the other hand, did not turn aside human worship, but encouraged it. This state of affairs cannot be made to fit Professor Baillie's understanding of the Incarnation in terms of the paradox of grace.

We have considered, then, three emphasis of the Christology of D. M. Baillie. On the full humanity of Jesus Christ I find no difficulty, with the exceptions noted, but as to the relation of the doctrine of God to the Incarnation and the positive Christology described as the paradox of grace I find both confusion and serious error. To put it quite simply, D. M. Baillie makes no adequate affirmation of the deity of Christ. There is no Incarnation unless He who was born in Bethlehem's manger, lived and taught in Galilee, died on a Roman Cross outside Jerusalem and rose again from the dead — is also the Eternal Son of God. The reasons advanced by Professor Baillie for preferring a different understanding cannot bear scrutiny, nor can his positive proposal itself. While this Christology intends to establish itself on the New Testament, it ultimately sets aside the unambiguous teaching of the New Testament on its most central theme.

Surely no doctrine is more crucial for Biblical Christianity than that of the Person of Christ. "What do you think of Christ?" is still the first question for Christian faith. In the New Testament we are presented with some very stringent warnings on this score. One of them reads:

"He who abides not in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who comes and fails to bring this doctrine is not to be received."

These are strong words. An unstable or muddy doctrine of Christ is spiritually disastrous and a spurious broadmindedness here involves betrayal of our Lord.

Speaking positively, I find *God Was In Christ* an exciting and important contemporary study in Christology. Professor Baillie carries on a must lucid and

knowledgeable dialogue with the Christological thought of Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Karl Heim, Rudolph Bultmann, the Kenosis Christology, etc. More than anything else it is the maturity, grace and skill of this interchange with the theological masters of our age that gives this book its greatness. His criticisms are sharply stated and the level of discussion is kept high. I am impressed, moreover, that the themes of D. M. Baillie's Christology are never discussed in isolation from their devotional significance, and yet these are never "tacked on" or "dragged in" as "devotional lessons" or "morals." It is done with a sense of fitness and sensitivity that must be acknowledged to be admirable. In these respects all theological discourse could profit greatly from the example of D. M. Baillie.

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Rev. Murdo Evan Macdonald in *The Scotsman*. Cited by John Baillie in "Donald: A Brother's Impression," Donald M. Baillie *The Theology of the Sacraments* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), pp. 27-28.
2. Cited in John Baillie, "Donald: A Brother's Impression," *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.
3. Walter Marshall Horton, *Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp. IX-X ff.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
5. Donald M. Baillie, *God Was In Christ*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp. ff.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-67. The italicized are in italics in the text of the book.
8. John Knox, *Jesus Lord and Christ*, (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 225.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 233-235.
10. It is worthwhile to note that no less a figure than James Barr has made the same observation about the necessity for more than the "dynamic" forms of expression. He says, "Orthodox Christianity possessed an insight which has been lost from sight in much modern Biblical study, the insight namely that the interpretation of Christ must state what He was not only what He did; it must not only be soteriological but also ontological."  
"Christ in Gospel and Creed." *Scottish Journal of Theology*, (VIII, 1955), p. 235.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 122.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 62, 63-71, 118-121.
13. Cited in Donald Baillie, *God Was In Christ*, p. 66.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 71, 119-120. He even argues that the main heresy in Arianism was not so much a defective view of Jesus Christ as a defective view of God, as ungracious, unconcerned and not in personal relationship to His erring creatures. p. 70.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
16. Knox, *op. cit.*, p. 235.
17. Gustaf Aulen, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), p. 211.
18. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), Vol. II, pp. 70-73.
19. W. Norman Pittenger, *The Word Incarnate* (Degswell Place England: James Nisbet and Company, Ltd., 1959), p. 197.
20. J. H. Hick, "The Christology of D. M. Baillie." *Scottish Journal of Theology*, (II, 1958), p. 5.
21. Donald Baillie, *God Was In Christ*, p. 114.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 117-118.
23. Hick, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-11.