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Jesus Christ, the Life of the World

JOHN R. W. STOTT

It is most welcome that the World Council of Churches tends to choose Christological affirmations as the titles of its periodical assemblies. Four out of six have not only referred to Christ by name, but have made a biblical declaration about him. The theme of the second assembly at Evanston (1954) was 'Christ, the Hope of the World'; of the third assembly at New Delhi (1961) 'Jesus Christ, the Light of the World'; of the fifth assembly at Nairobi (1975) 'Jesus Christ Frees and Unites'; while the forthcoming sixth assembly at Vancouver (1983) is to be entitled 'Jesus Christ, the Life of the World'.

At the same time, each title has presented delegates and observers with a hermeneutical task of some complexity. The words of each assembly's title have not always meant what, according to their plain biblical significance, one would have expected them to mean. It was, to say the least, unprincipled to give the fourth assembly at Uppsala (1968) the title 'Behold, I Make All Things New', then almost entirely to ignore the eschatological setting of that grand utterance spoken by him 'who sat upon the throne' (Rev. 21:5), and instead to apply it to the revolutionary movements of the 1960s. To be sure, one understands that each assembly has an agenda it cannot escape: it must receive an account of how the central committee has transacted the business committed to it by the previous assembly, and it must respond to what is happening in the world when it convenes. And it is unfair to expect it to relate all this to its overall theme and title. Nevertheless, we have a right to expect some conscientious theological reflection on the title in its biblical context. In Vancouver, for example, it will not be enough to express some modern understandings of 'life' and 'world', or even consider some *Images of Life* (as in the WCC's 'Invitation to Bible Study'), drawn from all over Scripture, and then declare Jesus Christ to be 'the life of the world' *in all those senses*. Instead, we have a right to expect a thorough exposition of the biblical—indeed the Johannine (since it is from John that the phraseology is borrowed)—meaning of 'Jesus Christ, the Life of the World'.

What expectations should the title 'Jesus Christ, the Life of the World' raise in our minds as the sixth assembly approaches?

Acknowledgement of Christ's authority

First, we shall expect to hear something about *Jesus Christ*. The

famous question which bothered Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'Who is Christ for today?', should bother every fresh generation of Christians, caught as we always are in the dialectic between the once-for-all divine revelation and the contemporary human predicament. We should thankfully accept the rich diversity of Christological formulation in the New Testament. We should also acknowledge the even richer diversity of attempts throughout church history to reconstruct Jesus in an image calculated to appeal to the contemporary world. The World Council of Churches can hardly assemble in Vancouver and ignore the Christological ferment of our day, as exemplified in the publication of *The Myth of God Incarnate*.¹ Fortunately, the World Council's basis, though minimal, has always confessed Jesus as 'God and Saviour'. At New Delhi, moreover, not only was a reference to the Trinity added to the basis, but for the first time Orthodox Churches were admitted to membership of the council. And we may be sure that, so long as the Orthodox remain members, the doctrine of the incarnation will not be compromised.

This is not to claim infallibility for the Chalcedonian definition. Anglicans confess that General Councils 'may err, and sometimes have erred' (Article XXI). Moreover, the vocabulary of *hypostasis* and *ousia* may not be as satisfactory in the twentieth century as it seemed in the fifth. But the ultimate question is not one of semantics; it concerns rather the church's faith and worship, or, more simply, what we may expect Christ to do in relation to us and what he expects us to do in relation to him. According to John 5:19–29, he declared that the Father had given him authority both to execute judgement and to give life, and judging and life-giving are divine prerogatives. It is also plain from the New Testament that the earliest followers of Jesus prayed to him and worshipped him. Thus Christolatry preceded Christology. And they must have grasped some of the implications of what they were doing, for worship becomes idolatry if its object is not God. It would be of real benefit to the church, if, in these days of Christological uncertainty and unbelief, the World Council of Churches were to issue a clear statement about Jesus Christ and a clear call to worship and trust him.

Definition of 'the world'

Secondly, the Vancouver Assembly's title leads us to expect to hear something about *the world*—not just the world we live in, but 'the world' as John presents it to us. Certainly John's 'cosmology' is as distinctive as his Christology, for of nearly 200 references to *kosmos* in the New Testament, more than 100 occur in the fourth gospel and in John's first letter. The word has at least three shades of meaning. Sometimes it means the planet earth, our material environment which God created. Sometimes it means people, the human population inhabiting the planet, whom God also created. Lastly and specially, it

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means this people's rebellious culture, which—being godless—God did not create.

John lays his emphasis on three particular and complementary truths about this fallen society. First, the world is controlled by the devil, whom John calls this world's 'ruler' (*archōn*, John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), and Paul calls its 'god' (2 Cor. 4:4). In fact, 'the whole world is under the control of the evil one' (1 John 5:19, NIV), in spite of the fact that he has been condemned and Christ has overcome him (John 16:11, 33; cf. 1 John 2:13, 14). Because people are still in his grip, they are both spiritually blind—unable either to perceive the Father or the Son or to receive the Spirit (John 1:10; 14:17; 17:25)—and spiritually dead until Christ summons them to rise (5:24, 25).

Secondly, the world is hostile to Christ. In this respect the world contradicts what it claims to be. For the word *kosmos* speaks of order, beauty and harmony, whereas according to John it is a society of disorder, ugliness and discord. It hates and persecutes Christ, and is therefore hostile to his Father and his followers also (15:18–25; 7:7; 16:33). So, the world John portrays is far from being neutral towards Christ; it nurses an active and malicious antagonism towards him.

Thirdly, John's 'world', despite its subservience to Satan and hostility to Christ, is loved by God. 'God so loved the world...'. It is a much misunderstood statement. As B. B. Warfield wrote, the reference to 'the world' as the object of God's love is 'not to suggest that the world is so big that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it all, but that the world is so bad that it takes a great kind of love to love it at all.'² His love for humans in revolt against him was so great that he 'sent' or 'gave' his Son for its salvation (3:16, 17; 10:47; 11:27), even as God's lamb to take away its sin (1:29). He therefore has the titles 'the Saviour of the world' (4:42; cf. 1 John 4:14) and 'the light of the world' (John 8:12, 26; 9:5). He also 'gives life to the world' (6:33).

Is this the world whose life Jesus Christ will be declared to be, at Vancouver? Delegates will hear much of the sufferings of the world (and rightly), and of the oppression, poverty and hunger of its people, but will they also hear of its sin, its hostility to Christ, its bondage to Satan, and of the love of God in sending his Son to save it? I have seen little in the preparatory literature to suggest that the assembly will faithfully interpret its title within this Johannine understanding of 'the world'.

Loyalty to Christ's teaching

In the next place, the Vancouver Assembly's title leads us to expect a careful explanation of *the life* which Jesus Christ offers to the world. It is well known that 'life', better 'eternal life', is another of John's characteristic terms. It occurs about fifty times in his gospel and first letter, and largely replaces the concept of 'the kingdom of God' in the synoptic gospels. What does John tell us about it? First, that it is a

special kind of life: 'eternal' in the sense of belonging to the age to come; 'abundant' in comparison with the biological life common to humankind (10:10); beginning now, because believers have already 'crossed over from death to life' (5:24, *NIV*); and consisting essentially of a personal relationship with the Father and the Son (17:3). Secondly, this life is peculiarly Christ's gift. He not only has life in himself (5:26), but as the good shepherd he laid down his life to secure life for his sheep (10:10, 11, 18). He gave his flesh 'for the life of the world' (6:51). In consequence, he declared that 'I am the resurrection and the life' (14:6; 11:25), and is able to bestow it on others (10:28).

Thirdly, he gives life only to those who 'come' to him to receive it (5:40), who 'believe' in him (6:48) or—to borrow his own dramatic imagery—who 'eat his flesh and drink his blood' (6:54). It is important to recall this condition, for it is sometimes eclipsed by the way people quote his affirmations (e.g., 'I am the bread of life', 'I am the light of the world') as if they were complete in themselves. But nearly every such general affirmation is immediately followed by a personal and particular application. For example, 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never hunger...' (6:35). 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness...' (8:12). 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live...' (11:25). 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (14:6).

This individual response to himself, for which Jesus asked, is a significant characteristic of the great Johannine discourses. It is all the more emphatic in John 6, because it stands out in contrast to the corporate experience of Israel. 'Your fathers ate manna in the wilderness, and they died', Jesus said; on the other hand, 'if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever' (vv. 49, 51). This is not to deny that Jesus anticipated the growth of the new community to replace the old, for it is everywhere implicit. His followers are the sheep of his flock, branches in the vine, and his friends who are to love one another. Indeed, in his letters, John makes it clear that 'life' and 'love' belong to each other, so that one of the major evidences that we have 'passed out of death into life' is that 'we love the brethren' (1 John 3:14). My purpose in emphasizing the necessity of an individual response to Jesus, which he made the condition of receiving the life he offered, is that it highlights the latent ambiguity in the title 'Jesus Christ, the Life of the World'.

Canon John Poulton's book, *The Feast of Life*, is subtitled *A Theological Reflection on the Theme 'Jesus Christ, the Life of the World'*.³ It arose out of a meeting in Switzerland in December 1981 of twenty-five theologians, who had been brought together from all over the world to reflect on the theme of the Vancouver Assembly. By eliminating all footnotes, he has declined to attribute anything to anybody, and has skilfully woven the participants' varied thoughts into

a single tapestry. One does not know, therefore, when he is expressing his own views or when he is reflecting the views of others. We need to take it seriously, however, because although it is a personal statement, it comes out of an official meeting. There is much in this meditation, as one would expect from John Poulton's sensitive mind and gifted pen, that is thought-provoking. Its horizons are broad and its insights deep. What is disquieting, however, is its overall interpretation of the assembly's theme, which suggests that Jesus Christ gives life to the whole world. Already on pages eight and nine we are told that the theme 'does not proclaim an exclusive Christ to the world, but states what Christians can offer in the human search for God's presence and purposes for the world.' Indeed, in the recently 'growing encounter and mutual discovery between Christians and peoples of other faiths', neither side is asked to 'give up' its position; instead, we discern 'the first shoots of a springtime from God'.

In the next chapters, entitled 'Eating and Drinking', 'Living Death' and 'Dying Life', John Poulton reflects on the death and resurrection of Jesus and on the sufferings and triumphs of the contemporary world, draws a parallel between them, and then declares the whole of human life to be a eucharistic celebration. For 'in breaking the bread and pouring out the wine, Jesus is identified with all our deaths. Through them he reveals himself as the life of the world.'⁴ The eucharist should not be 'hedged around' by theologians, nor the Lord's table 'fenced' by disciplinary requirements, which make it a 'closed-shop exercise for recognized members only'. To do this is to rob it of its very character as 'a celebration emerging from agony'. 'Might we not say... that wherever there is the conjunction of suffering and joy, of death and life, *there is eucharist?*'⁵

The basis for this attempted reconstruction is the fact that 'the pattern of self-sacrifice and new beginnings is not one that only members of the Christian church experience and live by. Outside their circle, others too seem to reflect it, sometimes quite remarkably'⁶ Indeed, the criss-crossing of pain and joy, suffering and security, betrayal and love is discernible in every-day life everywhere. There is, therefore, no need for evangelism in the traditional sense. Instead, the new evangelism 'involves the Holy Spirit bringing into focus in Jesus Christ a shape already glimpsed in human experience', so that 'somewhere, somehow, people recognize the shape of their own experiences as matching Jesus Christ's. He is their life', and their response to him is to choose life as against death.⁷

Towards the end of his book, John Poulton lists seven contemporary responses to religious pluralism: 1) that 'a central core of moral and philosophical ideas' underlies all religions; 2) that the best in each must be pieced together into 'a sort of spiritual jig-saw puzzle'; 3) that Jesus Christ must be accorded 'the highest honour' among the world's great 'creative spirits'; 4) that in 'all religions and all moral commitment' the

hidden presence of Christ the Saviour may be discerned; 5) that the consequences of God's saving work through Christ are universal, 'though consciously *known* only to those who name the Name'; 6) that since only those who call on Jesus as their personal Saviour can be saved, we must plan strategically for the evangelization of the 'unreached billions'; and 7) that the adherents of different faiths and ideologies, though these are mutually contradictory, should co-exist amicably, without any constraint to seek or reach accord.⁸ In listing this sample of seven 'possible positions' as belonging to the agenda behind the Vancouver discussion, John Poulton does not commit himself. It is clear that he rejects option six (for he expresses it in stark, unsympathetic terms), and it seems probable that he accepts one of the first five, or a combination of some of them. He calls them 'interim theologies'. Particularly acceptable to him is the idea that God's presence may be discerned in other religions 'by the renewal and fulfilment of truly human existence. It is the pattern of "new being"', and it is being lived out by the adherents of different religions 'within their own faiths'. Thus 'in the End the great traditional communities of faith will not have disappeared. None will have "won" over the others. Jews will still be Jews, Muslims still Muslims, and those of the great eastern faiths still Buddhists or Hindus or Taoists. Africa will still witness to its traditional life-view, China to its inheritance. Peoples will come from the east and the west, the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God (Luke 13:29), without having first become "Christians" like us.'⁹

Anticipating the negative response which such a statement will provoke, John Poulton goes on to write: 'We are not talking in old, tired, theological jargon about "universalism".'¹⁰ Well, his jargon may concern 'new being', but his position is still the old universalism. The alternative is not to 'domesticate Jesus Christ to the private use of the churches'; it is rather to seek to be loyal to his own teaching, namely that people must come to him and believe in him if they are to receive his life, and so to proclaim to the world 'the full message of this new life' (Acts 5:20, NIV).

Proclamation of the Saviour

For if the Vancouver Assembly's title leads us to expect to hear something biblical about Jesus Christ, about the world, and about life, it also leads us to expect to hear something about mission. The title is evidently intended as an affirmation. But an affirmation requires a verb. So what verb shall we supply? It is the absence of a main verb which creates the ambiguity. Are we intended to understand Vancouver to declare that 'Jesus Christ *is* the life of the world' (in the sense that the world already has new life, and has received it from Christ)? Or will Vancouver proclaim that 'Jesus Christ *came, died and was raised in order that he might become* the life of the world' (which then lays on the

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churches the obligation to make known to all peoples the good news of his death, resurrection and offer)? The former seems to be what John Poulton is suggesting; the latter is, however, more faithful to the New Testament. The fact is that the Vancouver title, as it stands, is not a biblical affirmation. Jesus did claim to be 'the light of the world' (John 8:12; 9:5); he is nowhere recorded as having claimed to be 'the life of the world'. He affirmed both 'I am...the life' (14:6) and 'I am the resurrection and the life' (11:25). When, however, he desired to make a connection between his life and the world, he referred to two necessities. The first was his death (6:51): 'The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh' (RSV), or 'This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world' (NIV). Life for the world would mean death for him. Life through death is central to the gospel: our life through his death. The second necessity was personal faith. True, he could say of himself that 'the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world' (6:33, NIV). For his purpose was not only to give his life *for* the world, but thereby to give life *to* the world. But how would the world receive the life he died to give? Only by personal faith in him as the crucified Saviour, vividly expressed by the imagery of eating his flesh and drinking his blood. According to verse 54, 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life'. According to verse 47, 'he who believes has everlasting life.' Yet these are not two ways (whether alternative or supplementary) of receiving life, the one believing, the other eating and drinking—they are one and the same. *Crede, et manducasti*, wrote Augustine: 'Believe, and you have already eaten'.

If, then, the title of the Vancouver Assembly is interpreted in the light of the gospel of John, from which its vocabulary has been borrowed, at least three fundamental truths are being, and will be, affirmed by it. First, 'the world', meaning fallen human society, while it remains hostile to Christ is 'dead'—in Paul's terminology 'dead in trespasses and sins' (Eph. 2:1). For 'He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life' (1 John 5: 12). Secondly, only Jesus Christ can raise the dead. For he died to bring us life, and he is himself the resurrection and the life. It is his voice alone which can summon the dead from their spiritual graves (John 5:25). Thirdly, it is those whom his authoritative voice calls forth who come to him, believe in him and receive life in his name (3:16; 20:31). Only thus does Jesus Christ become 'the life of the world'.

But some refuse to come to him (5:38, 40) and therefore remain in death. Dr Robert McAfee Brown had the courage, in his introductory address at Nairobi, to remind us that Jesus Christ also divides, and that we can hardly confess him as the Liberator and the Unifier unless we are ready at the same time to recognize him as the Divider.¹¹ Will the Vancouver Assembly have the same courage? John Poulton is not satisfied even with the unity of the redeemed people of God. Beyond

this 'religious "ecumenism"', he writes, 'lies this fuller and even more urgent "ecumenism" in which the universal acknowledgement of God's way (his "kingdom") is encouraged.'¹² But the sixth assembly should repudiate this indiscriminating universalism, this unprincipled 'Reunion All Round' which Ronald Knox lampooned so brilliantly.¹³ Instead it should summon the churches to proclaim Jesus Christ as the heaven-sent Saviour, who gives life freely to those who trust in him.

Honour to the Logos

There is still one verse in the gospel of John, which I have not yet mentioned, and which speaks of 'life' through Jesus Christ in a wider sense, namely in the context of creation rather than redemption. This verse comes in the prologue. Having declared that the personal Logos was in the beginning with God, was God and was the agent through whom everything was made, John goes on to write: 'In him was life, and the life was the light of men' (v.4). It seems clear that John is referring to the pre-incarnate Logos, who 'was coming into the world' continuously (v.9) and 'was in the world' permanently (v.10) before he actually 'came to his own home' (v.11) by becoming flesh and dwelling among us (v.14). And during this period before the incarnation, all created life and light owed their origin to him, as indeed since the incarnation they still do. John is using the terms 'life' and 'light' in a more general way than he does later in the gospel, when they stand for the fulness of God's redemption and revelation in Christ. Since he does not elaborate, we shall be wise to be cautious. But, providing we remember that John is describing the work of the creative Logos, it is surely right to attribute to him all beauty, truth and goodness—in fact everything which contributes to our humanness as reflecting the image of God.

We have no quarrel with the World Council of Churches, therefore, that its agenda is much more comprehensive than redemption and evangelism. It has published eight discussion papers entitled *Issues*, which arise out of its life and work, and prepare for its sixth assembly. These are concerned with witness, unity, participation, the healing community, peace and survival, justice and human dignity, goals and methods of education, and communication media. Nor would there be any objection if the assembly sees these issues as relating to the 'life' which the Logos of God gives to all mankind, and wishes to give more completely. Indeed, it would be natural for the assembly to do so. So much in the contemporary world that is unacceptable to the Christian conscience is death-dealing rather than life-sustaining. To improve the quality of people's lives is a fundamentally Christian concern, whether by conserving the natural environment, or by defending human rights, or by liberating people from the crippling bondage of poverty, hunger and disease, or by securing equal educational opportunities so that all children may develop their full human potential. The Logos, the

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Life-giver, is surely even more concerned than we are about the increasing manufacture of weapons of mass destruction which threaten human survival, and, at the opposite end of the size-scale, about the grave hazards of genetic engineering. Whether we are thinking of bombs or genes, the stance of Christians must be pro-life, in honour of the Life-giver.

I hope and pray that delegates to the sixth assembly will bring a Christian, biblically informed mind to bear on these great human issues, and speak out fearlessly about them. We evangelicals are only beginning to recover our social conscience, which, after its conspicuous successes in the nineteenth century, we seem to have mislaid in the early decades of this century, largely in over-reaction to the 'social gospel' of liberal theology. But now, thank God, there are encouraging signs that the so-called 'Great Reversal' is itself being reversed. As we join in Christian debate of the major questions of social ethics, however, we need to distinguish things that differ. It was because at Uppsala in 1968 the eschatological renewal was being confused with contemporary revolutionary movements, and because at Bangkok in 1973 salvation and liberation, Jesus and Mao, were being confused with one another, that the Lausanne Covenant needed to distinguish as well as associate these things: 'Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ.'¹⁴ Further progress was made in this area at the 'Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Responsibility', jointly sponsored by the Lausanne Movement and the World Evangelical Fellowship, which took place at Grand Rapids in June 1982.¹⁵

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Our hope and prayer must be that, at the 1983 Vancouver Assembly, although 'life' of all kinds and in all forms will rightly be attributed to Jesus Christ for his glory, yet a clear distinction will also be made between his work as the Logos, who gives life and light to all human-kind, and his work as the Saviour, who once gave his life 'for the life of the world' (John 6:51) and now 'gives life to the world' (6:33), whenever people come to him to receive it.

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NOTES

- 1 J. Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (SCM Press, London 1977).
- 2 'God's Immeasurable Love', in S. G. Craig, ed., *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Philadelphia 1952), p.516.
- 3 J. Poulton, *The Feast of Life* (WCC, Geneva 1982).
- 4 *ibid.*, p.32.
- 5 *ibid.*, p.52.
- 6 *ibid.*, p.66.
- 7 *ibid.*, loc. cit.
- 8 *ibid.*, pp.69–70.
- 9 *ibid.*, p.71.
- 10 *ibid.*, loc. cit.
- 11 R. McAfee Brown, 'Who is This Jesus Christ Who Frees and Unites?', *Ecumenical Review* 28, 1976, pp.6–21.
- 12 Poulton, *op. cit.*, p.72.
- 13 R. A. Knox, *Essays in Satire* (Sheed and Ward, London 1928).
- 14 J. D. Douglas, ed., *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (World Wide, Minneapolis 1975), *The Lausanne Covenant*, para. 5.
- 15 *Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment* (Paternoster Press, Exeter 1982).