

Incredible Christianity: Toward a Post-Liberal Apologetic for the Historical Christ

THOMAS A. BAIMA
*University of Saint Mary of the Lake
Mundelein, IL*

MY PURPOSE with this essay is modest. I want to apply the central insight which gave birth to the ecumenical movement over one hundred years ago to the present moment in history and to argue that ecumenism is just as vital a project today as one hundred years ago. My thesis will be that the present moment represents an opportunity to engage again the original task of the ecumenical movement, articulated at its beginnings in 1910.

The original task of ecumenism was ending the scandal of Christian division. The first ecumenists were drawn together around a single insight, that the evangelizing mission was being frustrated by the division of Christians. That's right: the motive for ecumenism was evangelism. It had become impossible to convert the world because of our sad divisions. Those preaching the Gospel were not credible witnesses. The full import of this insight was captured best, in my opinion, in the Collect for the Unity of the Church in the 1976 *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP), which reads:

O God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, our only Savior, the Prince of Peace: Give us grace *seriously to lay to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy divisions*.¹

This spiritual insight is a unique gift of the Anglican Communion. There is no equivalent prayer in the *Roman Missal*, either in beauty of prose or

¹ "Collect for Christian Unity," in *Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church USA* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979).

theological depth. The *BCP* rightly names division as a spiritual danger, an occasion of peril. To be clear, this is not a personal problem, solved by our warm feelings towards each other. No, it is a global problem, for the world refuses to believe, and they refuse *because of us*. Christianity, to most people today, is incredible—in the most negative sense of that word—not believable! If I might be allowed to paraphrase the famous communication between Apollo 13 astronaut Jack Swigert and Mission Control in Houston—“Church, we’ve had a problem.”²

We have had a problem for the two thousand years of Christianity’s existence, and although the ecumenical movement for the past one hundred years (or fifty for Catholics, who were late to the effort) has worked tirelessly to overcome divisions, the movement itself is divided. It is divided over the place of traditional doctrine in the work of unity and over several contemporary controversies.

Each of the several predecessor bodies of the World Council of Churches (WCC) represents a different idea about the purpose and method of ecumenism.³ Among them, the Faith and Order movement, supported strongly from the beginnings by the Anglican Communion, has been the segment of the WCC most attractive to the Catholic Church. This is because we realize that Christian division is, fundamentally, about doctrine. The way forward to unity requires the resolution of doctrinal divisions. Indeed, this is the only way, given the nature of a revealed religion. At the same time, we cannot wait for doctrinal agreement. The agreement we have in the traditional doctrines found in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds provide a sufficient basis for an apologetic to a skeptical world for the Christian faith. Dr. John Armstrong has helpfully called this approach “missional ecumenism.”⁴

Since 1910 we have seen a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification between the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation.⁵

² Jack Swigert and James Lovell, *Apollo 13 Technical Air to Ground Voice Transcription* (Houston, TX: National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 1970), 160, available at www.hq.nasa.gov/alsj/a13/AS13_TEC.PDF. See also James Lovell, *Apollo Expedition to the Moon*, ed. Edward M. Cortright (Hampton, VA: NASA Langley Research Center, 1975); available at history.nasa.gov/SP-350/editor.html.

³ The predecessor bodies included: the World Conference on Faith and Order; the World Conference on Life and Works; the International Missionary Council; the World Alliance of Churches for Global Peace; and the nineteenth-century Sunday School Movement (see oikoumene.org/en/about-us/wcc-history).

⁴ John H. Armstrong, *Your Church Is Too Small: Why Unity in Christ’s Mission Is Vital to the Future of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014).

⁵ See Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *Joint Declaration on the*

We have also seen the dialogues with the Oriental Orthodox and the Assyrian Church of the East resolve serious doctrinal divisions between the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools.⁶ At the same time, new errors have developed which open new divisions between us. These new divisions are as deep as what separated Nestorius and Cyril or Luther and Zwingli—accompanied by the same amount of tension as in the fourth or sixteenth centuries.

Fortunately, the skills we have developed working out agreements concerning the ancient heresies could offer us a path to resolve the new errors, if we have the fortitude for the task.

I mention fortitude as an ecumenical virtue because the new errors at the root of the contemporary divisions are of a different sort from those previously confronted by ecumenical theologians. The new divisions come from the doctrines related to the human person, from theological anthropology and moral theology, not typically ecumenical subjects. And the new divisions exert great attractive power. You might say they are “sexier,” which is literally true. And it is important to understand the sources of the new divisions.

Sources of the New Divisions

Some years ago (2004), Dr. Martin Marty, professor emeritus of church history at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, shocked and alarmed the assembly of the National Workshop on Christian Unity (NWCU) in Omaha. Marty said something to the effect that:

Our problem right now is the Church is in crisis. By “crisis” I mean like the Arian crisis—a church-dividing problem that has grown beyond the capacity of a local or regional council to solve. At the root of the crisis is an error that has spread to encompass the whole inhabited world, and therefore, can be resolved only by an ecumenical council.⁷

Doctrine of Justification (http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html).

⁶ John Paul II and Mar Dinkha IV, *Common Christological Declaration between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East* (<http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/it/dialoghi/sezione-orientale/chiesa-assira-dell-orientale/dichiarazioni-comuni/1994-dichiarazione-cristologica-comune-tra-giovan-paolo-ii-e-k/testo-in-inglese.html>).

⁷ Martin Marty, “Special Presentation,” unpublished keynote delivered at the National Workshop on Christian Unity, Omaha, NE, May 10–13, 2004. The

When pressed by the audience about the nature of the crisis, Marty said that he actually believed we are suffering from two at the same time. First, there is a crisis of authority and, secondly, a crisis over human sexuality. He went on to say that the Church has not awakened to their import. Most people seem to think these crises were caused by something the Church did or did not do. Marty asserted, to the surprise of the NWCUC, that the “causes come from outside the Church. Nothing we did caused them. Nothing we might have done would have stopped them.” He knocked everyone out of their seats with his next statement: “The crises were caused by advances in technology.”⁸

Professor Marty went on to explain that the crisis of authority was caused by the democratization of knowledge (which eliminates a role for the expert), and that of human sexuality by the development of contraception—which for the first time in human history gave control over fertility.⁹ I would note that both conspire to create an anthropology based on the idea of the autonomous self.

Both crises are present in all of today’s churches and ecclesial communities and in society at large, even if they present themselves in different ways. Twenty-first-century ecumenism will need to engage both crises, for they are sources of the church-dividing errors of our time. Professor Marty was also clear about his limits as a church historian. He reminded us that he can tell us what happened, but not what will happen next. He noted that church historians know that it takes about 250 years for the church to move through a crisis. Since we do not really know when these crises began, it is hard to say where we are in the timeline.

As I have reflected on Martin Marty’s claim, I am more of the opinion that the two crises are fellow travelers across the same timeline. Both represent a trajectory in the history of ideas, from when the real was understood as having its basis outside of human consciousness to the nineteenth century, where our ideas about what is real took a subjective turn. This turn severed the moorings of Western civilization. The evangelists of this subjective turn are not Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, but Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Each in his own way located truth and meaning in ideas they held to be more foundational than the Bible. It did not help that, in reaction to this philosophical trajectory in the history of ideas, theologians, both liberal and conservative, made the same move.

quotations are from my notes at the event and should be treated as paraphrases. For information about the NWCUC, see nwcu.org/2004-nwcu-highlights/.

⁸ Marty, “Special Presentation.”

⁹ Marty, “Special Presentation.”

According to Hans Frei, both the Enlightenment thinkers and the Christian theologians replaced the authority of the biblical narrative with “their own (supposedly universal) reality.”¹⁰ Episcopal church historian Gary Dorrien observed that:

Before the Enlightenment . . . most Christians read the Bible primarily as a kind of realistic narrative that told the overarching story of the world. . . . Jews and Christians made sense of their lives by viewing themselves as related to and participating within the story told in scripture.¹¹

Instead, Dorrien tells us, liberal theologians “reinterpreted the text according to culture-affirming eternal truths,” and conservative theologians “looked for real meaning in the Bible’s factual references.”¹² Along the way, the historical materialists read the biblical narrative as “applied cultural phobia.”¹³ Notice, please, that all sides are fighting the authority question, not engaging the apologetic.

To say that controversy over human sexuality is tearing at the fabric of the churches is an understatement. Part of the frustration lies in the crisis of authority, for there is no clear agreement on the basis for resolving the matter. All churches and ecclesial communities face these issues. The manner of presentation may be different, but the root issues are the same. It will not be my goal in this essay to offer a solution to the problem of authority or the problem of human sexuality. What I will offer is a path forward which might inform both an apologetic suitable for the present moment and, through it, the basis for approaching a solution.

A Post-Liberal Apologetic for the Historical Christ

If we are going to find a path toward the resolution of the crisis of authority (and through it the crisis of human sexuality) it will need to address epistemology and ecclesiology.

My former colleague at Mundelein, Robert Barron, said all this quite well when he asked a rhetorical question:

¹⁰ Gary Dorrien, “A Third Way in Theology?: The Origins of Post Liberalism,” *The Christian Century*, July 4, 2001, christiancentury.org/article/third-way-theology.

¹¹ Dorrien, “Third Way.”

¹² Dorrien, “Third Way.”

¹³ R. C. Butterfield, *Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert: An English Professor’s Journey into the Christian Faith* (Pittsburgh, PA: Crown and Covenant, 2012).

Do Christians become aware of the centrality of Jesus after a long and epistemologically neutral inquiry, or does that awareness condition all modes of their intellection from the beginning? The questions fix us on the horns of a dilemma. To answer them affirmatively seems to place Christians in an irresponsibly fideistic and sectarian position, compromising their capacity to enter into conversation with those outside their community of discourse [this is the apologetic piece] but to answer them negatively seems to force Christians to abandon their claim that Christ has primacy in all things, including, presumably, what and how we know.¹⁴

The post-liberal move is to locate authority in the person and event of Jesus, accessible to us through the greatest meta-narrative ever told, and within a community which reads that narrative contextualized by their doxology. This method allows us to offer an apologetic for the historical Christ.

Apologetic for the Historical Christ

The Reverend Doctor Stephen Holmgren, an Episcopal priest and former professor of moral theology at Nashotah House Theological Seminary, observed that the central problem for philosophical ethics is “whether or not human subjectivity apprehends the foundations for morality in our experience of reality, in the structure of the objective world.”¹⁵ Holmgren’s argument indirectly links the crisis of human sexuality to the crisis of authority in what I see as a helpful advance. He describes the problem in ethics as a “separation of fact and value.”¹⁶ Ideas that belong together are torn apart. The famous separation of Jesus of Nazareth from the “Christ of faith” results in, to use Holmgren’s words, [separation] of spirituality from ethics and salvation history from natural history.¹⁷

From a doctrinal standpoint, every Christian heresy is rooted in a Trinitarian/Christological error. Holmgren prescribes a recovery of the creedal affirmations about Jesus as the path toward a recovery of the natural-law tradition which, he argues, has the capacity to break the separation of

¹⁴ Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007), 133.

¹⁵ Stephen C. Holmgren, “Jesus Christ and the Moral Life,” in *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon, and Creed in a Critical Age*, ed. Ephraim Radner and George Sumner (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1998), 36–50, at 39.

¹⁶ Holmgren, “Jesus Christ and the Moral Life,” 39.

¹⁷ Holmgren, “Jesus Christ and the Moral Life,” 42.

science and theology and restore a both—and approach to their relationship. I have long seen our natural-law tradition as a unique contribution which Catholic Christianity could offer as guidance to an intellectually struggling world.¹⁸

Holmgren argues that a starting point for such a recovery of natural-law thought is found in the article of the Nicene Creed which names Jesus Christ as “maker of heaven and earth.”¹⁹ Holmgren holds that such an emphasis can offer us an “embodied faith in a disembodied world.”²⁰ Both the special revelation transmitted in the Scriptures and the general revelation observable in nature through an open use of reason offer us a renewed teleology for our philosophical ethics and moral theology.²¹ Consequently, “acts and choices, in their basic pattern or structure, are also shaped by [Jesus] and therefore given moral value by him.”²²

The historical Jesus—the incarnate Logos born of Mary—when approached with epistemic priority, provides both the scriptural warrant and a confidence in reason’s capacity to know things as they are, and as they should be. The priority of Christ prevents what Holmgren has called the “convergence of separations” which have impoverished philosophical ethics.²³

Participatory Knowledge

The apologetic, however, requires something more. As Barron notes, people do not come to Jesus through an epistemologically neutral inquiry. They come to Jesus through disciples, whose lives transparently show the shaping and ordering effect of unity in Christ. This is where ecclesiology enters the picture. It is the Christ, whose Incarnation is prolonged by his body, the Church, who worships the triune God. I am going to dwell on this point. While Barron is right that people do not come to Jesus through rational epistemology, I would agree with David Fagerberg that they can and do come to know the Lord through a liturgical epistemology. If we take the theme of Irenaeus that the Church is the prolongation of the Incarnation, we can shift the believing subject from

¹⁸ See Thomas A. Baima, “The Logic of Why: What the Declaration on Religious Freedom Contributes to the Idea of Religion in the Public Square,” *Chicago Studies* 50, no. 1 (2011): 49–89.

¹⁹ Holmgren, “Jesus Christ and the Moral Life,” 36.

²⁰ Holmgren, “Jesus Christ and the Moral Life,” 43.

²¹ Holmgren, “Jesus Christ and the Moral Life,” 43.

²² Holmgren, “Jesus Christ and the Moral Life,” 43.

²³ Holmgren, “Jesus Christ and the Moral Life,” 42.

the individual to the mystical body.²⁴

Douglas Martis and Christopher Carstens titled their book on the Third Typical Edition of the Roman Missal *Mystical Body, Mystical Voice*. In doing so, they are asserting that the *theologia prima* voiced in the sacred rite is corporate speech. More than that, since the head is never separated from the members, the *theologia prima* is Christ's prayer to the Father in the Holy Spirit. In a previous essay, I argued on the basis of Eastern Christian thought, that there is a distinctive liturgical epistemology which could guide the West through the travail of the modern and contemporary periods and back to a future characterized by a synthesis similar to what we had in the Middle Ages.²⁵ In summary, such knowledge comes through participation in the *theologia prima*. It yields the *lex orandi lex credenda suplicandi* (the law of prayer [that] establishes the law of faith). Those who worship in this way (*lex orandi*) have their minds (corporate not individual alone) shaped by that worship, and a *lex credendi* is formed in them, which really means the *sensus fidelium*, the beliefs held in the "mind of the Church." Such praying and believing, in turn, results in living disciples, which is the *lex vivendi*. Doctrine is born from doxology. Hence, doctrine is inseparable from ecumenism.

Such discipleship—Church living—has the potential to reverse the convergence of separations, the "separation of fact and value," but only if it witnesses to the person of Christ, "through whom all things were made." The historical Christ is revealed through the beauty of the shaping and ordering effect of unity, when one faith and one baptism removes hatred and prejudice, and whatever else may hinder us from godly union and concord. And godly union and concord are based on God's word, come to us through the special revelation of Jesus and the general revelation available to all. This means that "whoever wills to do the will of God shall know concerning the doctrine" (John 7:17). Living within the biblical

²⁴ Irenaeus does not use the phrase as we have it today, but the phrase summarizes his Christocentric ecclesiology, which he articulates in *Adversus haereses*. The best theological description I found is by Kevin Mongrain: "Alexandrian *corpus triforme* Christology taught that the Body of Christ is a multidimensional phenomenon that includes Scripture, Eucharist and Church. . . . [Balthasar's] overarching goal is to preserve Irenaeus's emphasis on the organic 'unfolding' of the one Body of Christ in a 'multiplicity' of incarnational forms throughout history" (*The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* [New York: Crossroad, 2002], 37).

²⁵ Thomas A. Baima, "Liturgical Epistemology: Knowing the Truth through Participation," unpublished manuscript, University of Saint Mary of the Lake, April 8, 2015 (usml.edu/wp-content/uploads/Liturgical-Epistemology.pdf).

narrative restores doctrine to its place in the ecumenical movement, not as an obstacle to be overcome or a proof text to be repeated, but as a path to knowledge of Christ, through participation with the source of our unity. All of this adds up to credible Christianity. N.V