

On the Christology of *Jesus of Nazareth*, Volume 1

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IN THE FORWARD TO THE FIRST BOOK of his trilogy on Jesus [hereafter, JN; cited below in text by page no.],¹ Benedict XVI declares that his main thrust is to see “Jesus in light of his communion with the Father, which is the true center of his personality.”² The Pope states that God “is at the deepest level the one speaking” in Scripture (xxi). The reader of Benedict’s book can therefore conclude that, through his communion with God, Jesus can address us in Scripture so as to invite us into an “intimate friendship” with him that constitutes faith’s “point of reference . . . on which everything depends (xii; see also 257).”³ In other words, Benedict writes a book developing the Bible’s presentation of the theocentric personality of Jesus precisely “to help foster the growth of a living relationship with him” (xxiv).

Everything in faith depends on our innermost friendship with Jesus because such friendship brings us to Jesus’s personal core, where we meet God himself. Meeting God represents, for Benedict,

¹ *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* [hereafter, JN], trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007) [originally *Jesus von Nazareth*, vol. 1, *Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verklärung* (Freiburg-im-Breisgau: Herder, 2007)]. This work will be cited parenthetically simply by page numbers in the text of this article.

² JN, xiii–xiv, citing Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology*, trans. O. C. Dean (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 322.

³ Benedict assigns to the Holy Spirit the words of the Lord’s Prayer, attributed by the Gospels to Jesus (JN, 131, citing Cyprian, *De dominica oratione* 2, in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* [Vienna, AT: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1867–], 3/1:267f.).

the goal of all human history. "Among all the paths of history, the path to God is the true direction that we must seek and find" (4). Humanity can come to itself only by coming out of itself toward God.⁴ Of course, many prophets can show us the face of God (*ibid.*; see also 291–93). In order therefore to emphasize that everything depends on our friendship with Jesus, Benedict's book has to show that human beings will fully come to God only by coming to Christ. In his personal core alone dwells the God who gives us the fullness of the divine encounter for which the world strives as its ultimate goal. From the first pages of JN, Benedict commits himself to finding in Scripture the portrayal of Jesus as the uniquely universal access point to God and hence to the center of life's meaning.

Benedict thinks that seeing the Jesus of Scripture in this way is "a genuinely historical insight" of faith that is "based upon . . . historical reason" (xiii, xix). He founds his demonstration of Jesus's divine identity on the Church's own act of faith, which opens people to the transcendent creator of history. Ecclesial faith, together with Benedict's demonstration, must thus transcend historical insight, especially in historical-critical exegesis, even as historical knowledge must be kept as their basis. Benedict wishes to navigate between two shoals. On one hand, the salvifically intimate friendship with Christ would lie beyond our reach if our knowledge of him never attained a certitude greater than the merely provisional knowledge delivered by historical criticism. In that case, the Jesus we need slips from our grasp (xii). On the other hand, if we can know Jesus only through a knowledge separate from history, our friend would cease to act as God's fleshly face saving the world precisely in it. In this way, the Jesus we grasp would not be the one we need (xv).

Benedict thus grapples with the classic Enlightenment question: How do we conceive of an absolutely certain acquaintance with God that apprehends him as a human being subject to an opacity that, with time and distance, becomes so fragile? Benedict points out that Hegel's approach to the Absolute in history, which responded to this question, incited the diverse responses of thinkers like Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, as well as the warring cultural movements that they stimulated. As a consequence, the Church's unity has been sacrificed on the altar of disputes about the epistemic status of faith

⁴ Cf. JN, 90: "In a word, the true morality of Christianity is love. And love . . . is an exodus out of oneself, and yet this is precisely the way in which man comes to himself."

in the Incarnate God. Their smoke has risen in wafting swirls such as the fundamentalist–liberal split, the Catholic modernist crisis, and the bitter battles over the spirit of Vatican II. Therefore, far from restricting the relevance of his book to a “me-and-Jesus” pastoral interest in the salvation of individual souls, Benedict’s promoting of an intimate friendship with Jesus attacks head on one of the major issues in the struggle for integrity in the Church and Western culture over recent centuries. His vision of a historically conditioned, theocentric Jesus is designed to lead to a recentering of society as a whole on God.

The essay presented here explains Benedict’s Jesus by emphasizing four points of JN. First, the center of Jesus’s identity lies in his dialogue with the Father. Second, Jesus’s mission consists in leading all people to the Father. Third, Jesus’s way consists in the reigning of God over and in society. Fourth, Christ’s portrait offers a remedy for an age without God. Finally, I will assess Benedict’s understanding of Christian faith as the middle ground between ahistorical certitude and historical hypothesis. I will examine whether it is successful in equating “the Jesus of the Gospels” with “the real, ‘historical’ Jesus,” who claims to be “a plausible and convincing figure” (xxii).

Jesus’s Identity Found in His Dialogical Unity with God

My first point shows how Benedict maintains again and again that Jesus’s identity centers on his dialogue with the Father. He begins to do so in the introduction of JN by depicting Jesus as the eschatological Moses. As a prophet, Jesus, like Moses, is “granted . . . a real, immediate vision of the face of God.” This vision puts him in an “immediate relation with God, which enables him to communicate God’s will and word firsthand and unadulterated.”⁵ We can understand this relation as an “immediate contact with the Father,” as a “‘face-to-face’ dialogue” that implies “the most intimate unity with the Father.” In this unity, “all that we are told [in the New Testament] about his words, deeds, sufferings, and glory is anchored” (6–7). Benedict’s chapter on Jesus’s baptism tells us that this immediate vision and intimate dialogue constitute Jesus in a unity with God that gives him “equality with God” (20; also 298), together with a “communion of will with the Father,” which involves a total yes to God’s will (23; also 341). John’s Gospel shows us that this yes to God constitutes his entire subordination to the Father, as well

⁵ JN, 5. See also *ibid.*, 235–36, 244–45, and 264–68 (which all concern Jesus’s depiction in the Fourth Gospel), 304 (Peter’s confession in Caesarea Philippi), and 308 (the Transfiguration).

as his equality with him (343). Indeed, Matthew 11:25–27 and Luke 10:21–22 tell us that Jesus knows the Father in a unique way, such that he can rightly say that only he knows the Father. This “perfect communion in knowledge” implies equality with the Father and “communion in being” with him (340).

Benedict’s treatment of Jesus’s temptation to throw himself down from a great height in order to test God shows that Jesus’s dialogue with the Father includes the “dimension of love, of interior listening” (37). Jesus’s choice of the Twelve emerges out of his prayerful communion in dialogue with God on the mountain (170). Commenting on the blessedness of the pure in heart who see God, the Pope notes that “it belongs to [Jesus’s] nature that he sees God, that he stands face-to-face with him, in permanent interior discourse.” Benedict calls this “a relation of Sonship.”⁶ It reveals itself in the Transfiguration as “a profound interpenetration of his being with God” (310). Jesus’s yes to God’s will reaches its climax in his Passion, where we see most clearly that obedience defines who Jesus is (149–50). Therefore, his “special oneness with God . . . is displayed in the Cross and Resurrection” (338; also 349).

This dialogical relation to God belongs to Jesus “in the strict sense”: it embraces the *homoousion* of Nicaea interpreted by Benedict as Christ’s “total belonging to God” (138; also 140) and as “a communion of being with God himself” that makes Jesus and his Father “truly one and the same God in the Holy Spirit” (320; also 354–55). In Jesus, “the mystery of the one God is personally present” (348). In a comment on John 1:18, the Pope tells us, “Only the one who is God sees God—Jesus” (265). His disciples realized, to their astonishment at certain key moments before his resurrection, that Jesus is God himself. Although they were unable to use such a straightforward formulation, they expressed this realization with titles like Prophet, Messiah, Son of God, Chosen One, and finally Lord, the placeholder for the divine name (299–305).

Benedict returns often to a reading of Jesus as the new Moses, especially when he interprets the depiction of Jesus at the beginning of Matthew’s account of the Sermon on the Mount. Here Jesus’s teaching “presupposes his entering into communion with the Father, the inward ascents of his life, which are then prolonged in his descents

⁶ JN, 95. See also *ibid.* 120, 126, and in greater detail, the whole tenth chapter (319–55), which discusses in particular the titles “Son of Man” and “Son.”

into communion of life and suffering with men.”⁷ The loving obedience that Jesus gives to the Father, who so intimately speaks with him and sends him, leads Jesus to a solidarity with suffering humanity whose apex is the Cross. Jesus’s communion with the Father makes the Cross the new form of God’s theophany, more terrible than Sinai, since it requires one who would receive the divine manifestation to suffer with Christ.⁸ Because his Cross and resurrection reveal the Father’s love to be like the father in the parable of the two sons in Luke 15, Jesus can justify his own welcome of sinners by evoking that parabolic father’s behavior (206–09). His dialogical “oneness with the Father’s will is the foundation of his life” (149), and an “unceasing dialogue with the Father . . . is his life” (266; also 268). Benedict ends by asserting that this dialogue simply is God (344). Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount, building on the Decalogue, consists in “God . . . uttering words in history that come to us from outside and complete the interior knowledge” of his will “that has become all too hidden” in our consciences because of sin. In this teaching, Jesus develops “a revelation of the essence of God himself . . . and hence . . . an exegesis of the truth of our being” (148). In observing his miracles, the people with Jesus find themselves “immediately exposed to the presence of God.”⁹ His unique oneness with God constitutes the mystery of who Jesus is, and this mystery constitutes the Father’s sending of Christ, “since Jesus’s whole being is mission.”¹⁰

Jesus’s Mission to Lead All to God

We arrive, then, at the second point of this essay: Jesus is sent by the Father to lead all people to the Father. Here we see that the theocentric personality of Jesus has a uniquely universal saving role. Jesus uses parables because “he has to lead us to the mystery of God.”¹¹ Thanks to the uniquely immediate unity between Jesus and the God who sends him, “the disciple who walks with Jesus is . . . caught up with him into

⁷ JN, 65–68, quote at 68. See also *ibid.*, 303–04 and 308–09 (the meaning of this event’s taking place on a mountain).

⁸ JN, 67–68. See also *ibid.*, 136, 144, 349. Especially in his death and resurrection, Jesus becomes “God’s great sign” of himself in response to those who ask for a sign of the truth of Jesus’s message (*ibid.*, 217).

⁹ JN, 352 (Jesus’s walking on the water).

¹⁰ JN, 172. See also *ibid.*, 348–49: “Jesus is wholly ‘relational.’ . . . his whole being is nothing other than relation to the Father.”

¹¹ JN, 192. The parable of the two brothers and their father in Luke 15:11–32 “is ultimately an appeal to say Yes once more to the God who calls us” (*ibid.*, 203).

communion with God.” Passively being “caught up” is at the same time an active “stepping beyond the limits of human nature,” a move that God created us capable of doing, even as he expects it (8; also 140–41, 149–50). Accordingly, in his commentary on the bread of life discourse in John 6, Benedict affirms that, “when we encounter Jesus, we feed on the living God himself” (268). Because Jesus “is forever receiving himself from and giving himself back to the Father,” those who come into dialogue with him who laid down his life for them, “enter into this communion of his with the Father” through a “transcendent dialogue” (283). Because only the Son knows the Father, “all real knowledge of the Father is a participation in the Son’s filial knowledge of him, a revelation that [the Son] grants.”¹²

Our walking with Jesus toward the Father commits us, from the moment of baptism, to sharing in his Cross and resurrection, as the Beatitudes make clear (71–74, 310–11). In the Paschal mystery anticipated in his baptism, Jesus’s dialogical equality with God involves him in saying a yes to God’s will. This enables him “to take upon himself all the sin of the world” and to suffer that sin completely, such that he frees creation from the power of evil (17, 20). By following Christ, we then step into his “communion of will with the Father” (23) brought to its summit in Jesus’s death and resurrection. Our Eucharistic “food must become an opening out of our existence, a passing through the Cross, and an anticipation of the new life in God and with God” (270). Christ “wants to draw all of us into his humanity and so into his Sonship, into his total belonging to God” (138).

It makes sense, then, that “the actual core of Jesus’s word and works” is the gift of the coming of God’s Reign and the human response of conversion and faith that this gift demands (47). Benedict understands the Reign of God presented in the Gospels as “God’s actual sovereignty [*Regentschaft*] over the world, which is becoming an event in history . . . in a way that goes beyond anything seen before” (55, 56).¹³ He describes this sovereignty in terms that recall his portrait of the act of faith. It transcends each part of history, extending throughout history and beyond it. The “inner dynamism” of this sovereignty “carries history beyond itself,” while it belongs “absolutely to the present.” Its “life-shaping power” gives those who,

¹² JN, 341 (commenting on Matt 11:25–27, Luke 10:21–22, and John 1:18).

¹³ See also 176. For the German word cited, see *Jesus von Nazareth*, vol. 1, *Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verklärung*, 85.

submitting to it, adopt its perspective and anticipated “share in the world to come” that brings the joy of the Beatitudes’ blessedness to those in affliction (57, 72). Following Christ brings our will into communion with the Father’s sovereign will of the Kingdom that “is to be found in Jesus himself” (60; see also 146). In fact, Jesus simply is the fulfillment of God’s ongoing activity of being Lord (199).

Thus, Jesus’s parables of the Kingdom of God are basically about it “as coming and as having come in his person.” Although the waste of seed strewn on the hard ground rejects him, yet a seed sprouts that becomes universally fruitful, ironically, in the total rejection and failure of the Cross (188–91, quote at 188). Because Jesus’s dialogue with the Father makes “divine life . . . present in him in original and inexhaustible fullness,” Jesus gives nothing else to people except the abundant life of the Reign of God, which is “the world having attained its rightful form, the unity of God and the world.”¹⁴ Jesus’s “whole being consists in communicating” the gift of God’s life received from the Father and given to us. His elevation on the Cross shows this paradigmatically (354).

The presence in Jesus of the sovereignty of God that pervades and transcends all history makes Jesus a person of universal import. The whole world can meet in him its only Creator, Savior, and God, who is bringing it to eschatological fullness “through the love that reaches ‘to the end’” of the Cross (61, citing; 61). When this love reaches that far in the dying Christ’s prayer for his enemies, he “shows us the essence of the Father” uniquely (136). Therefore, for Benedict, when Jesus promises, at the end of the Beatitudes, a great reward to those who suffer for his sake, he establishes “fidelity to his person” as “the criterion of righteousness and salvation,” as “the reference point, . . . goal and center” of righteous living. This means that Jesus conveys openly “the message that he himself is the center of history” (90; see also 91–92, 105, 137–38).

Similarly, when the Matthean Jesus contrasts the Mosaic Torah—“it was said to them of old”—with his own Torah—“but I say to you”—he puts himself in “a mysterious identification” of equality with the One who gave the law on Sinai, the God of the universe (102–03). Indeed, Benedict follows Jacob Neusner’s interpretation of Jesus’s teaching about the Sabbath, his claim to be Lord of the Sabbath, and his *Jubelruf* (Matthew 11:25–39). These combine to show that he

¹⁴ Benedict takes the first quotation in this sentence from C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to John*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1978), 2:88.

simply is the Sabbath that constitutes “the central expression of life in Covenant with God,” Israel’s way of being like God (106). Accordingly, both Neusner and Benedict stress the implication that Jesus is God. Benedict adds, however, that “Jesus understands himself as the Torah—as the word of God in person.”¹⁵ The Sanhedrin convicts Jesus precisely because of this claim: that he was “on an equal footing with the living God himself.” This claim forms “what was new, characteristic, and unique about his message” (303–04).

Because Jesus is identically the unique Word-Creator of all and the unique Shepherd laying down his life to save all, all people can find their unity in him: his mission, which he shares with his disciples after his resurrection, is universal (284). Therefore, “all individual beings are deeply interwoven and . . . all are encompassed in turn by the being of the One, the Incarnate Son,” which his Cross makes clear. There he bears “the burdens of us all” (159–60). By handing all things over to the Son in a dialogical relationship within the Trinity, the Father makes the Son the Son, donating this Son to the whole world in the Incarnation, a gift that the love of the Cross perfects (343–44).

The universality of the Jesus who leads all to the Father makes Jesus the gatherer of a group of followers called to extend everywhere. The Father sends him with a mission to “preach the Kingdom of God and thereby [to] gather people into God’s new family” (173). In giving to the children of Israel their new Torah, the Messiah’s Torah, Paul’s “law of Christ,” Jesus “opens them up, in order to bring to birth a great new family of God drawn from Israel and the Gentiles” (101). This Torah includes Jesus’s invitation to partake in his own prayer dialogue with God through the Our Father, which “embraces the whole compass of man’s being in all ages” (133).¹⁶ In commenting on Peter’s confession, especially in Mark 8 and Luke 9, Benedict notes that, upon witnessing Jesus’s unique dialogical relationship with God, some of his hearers come to know Christ with deep faith and to receive his call to discipleship. Through it, they gain new insight into God and begin to form the new universal family of the Church (290–94).

¹⁵ JN, 110, citing Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000), 87–88. See also JN, 155–57, 266–68, 315–17 (Transfiguration), and 325 (the Son of Man as Lord of the Sabbath).

¹⁶ Benedict does not say precisely why this prayer embraces the whole history of humanity. He implies that it does so because it originates in Jesus’s prayer with the Father that reaches to depths beyond words.

Jesus's Way: God's Reigning over and in Human Society

Benedict misses no opportunity to point out scriptural allusions to the universal importance of Jesus's person and work.¹⁷ Since Christ has universal impact as divine revealer and Savior leading all people into the dialogue with God who is his substance, we can expect the way of Jesus to connect God to every form of human society. Benedict thus presents Jesus's way as the reigning of God over and in all social life.

He first manifests this way in his account of Jesus's temptations. For the Pope, this episode represents Jesus's recapitulation of all of human history through a "descent into the perils besetting mankind," an "entry into the drama of human existence" (26). Every temptation in our perilous human drama points us, according to Benedict, toward the act of "pushing God aside because we perceive him as secondary, if not actually superfluous and annoying, in comparison with the apparently far more urgent matters that fill our lives." Every temptation goads us toward "constructing a world by our own lights, without reference to God, . . . refusing to acknowledge the reality of anything beyond the political and the material, while setting God aside as an illusion" (28). Jesus rejects this temptation in part because, "when God is regarded as a secondary matter that can be set aside . . . on account of more important things . . . those supposedly more important things . . . come to nothing" (33). Thus, Jesus understands that the issue in the whole human drama comes down to "the primacy of God" as "the reality without which nothing can be good." Things "can turn out good" only if people have good hearts that come ultimately only from God. Therefore, society will finally feed its poor only on the day when it arrives at obedience to God, which represents the first and foremost principle for a vital humanity. Jesus decides to live and teach this message in his Deuteronomic answer to the first temptation: people do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God (33–34).

Jesus inculcates this same message by teaching us to ask God for our daily bread so that we might oppose "the temptation that comes to us through our pride to give ourselves life purely through our own power." This temptation makes us cold, violent, mediocre, unfree, alienated from our own humanity, and destructive of the earth (151). But when we pray to God for our daily bread, we commit ourselves to accepting our responsibility for each other through sharing what

¹⁷ See, for example: JN, 10, 18, 22, 26, 66, 69, 81, 179–80, 198, 201, 238, 240, 247, 284, 289, 326–27, 332, 338.

we have with the poor (151–52, 156). Therefore, what the human person “needs most is the Word, love, God himself. Whoever gives him that . . . releases the energies man needs to shape the earth intelligently and to find for himself and for others the goods that we can have only in common with others” (279).

To embrace this truth of God’s primacy in all things, even in social life, people must appreciate the distinction between God’s Reign and all the kingdoms of the world, which Satan displayed before Jesus. They must also realize that the “perfect world” such governments, social systems, and ideologies often promise is illusory: “the total condition of mankind’s salvation” is God’s Reign not theirs. Jesus’s refusal of this illusion shows us his conviction that God’s power at work in “the humble, self-sacrificing glory” of Christ’s love constitutes “the true and lasting power” able to bring humanity to its full potential (44). In responding to this temptation, Jesus teaches that pursuing power and wealth in order to secure “a future that offers all things to all men” constitutes belief in a lie. Power and prosperity are not God, whom we must choose as “man’s true Good” (45). Thus, for Benedict, even Mark’s expression “the Gospel of God” implies that “it is not the emperors who can save the world, but God.”¹⁸

Benedict thinks that the third Beatitude, the blessing of the meek, refers to Jesus’s own meekness before God and his fellow human beings. It is reflected in his fulfillment of Zechariah’s prophecy of a king of Jerusalem riding on an ass (9–10). In this role, Jesus functions as the universal king bringing true peace to the world through God’s power. He renounces political and military violence, and he accepts suffering (80–81). Therefore, Jesus’s rebuke of Peter after his confession in Caesarea Philippi teaches us that the Lord’s way “is not the way of earthly power and glory, but the way of the Cross” (299). By interpreting his death in Mark 10:45 in terms of second Isaiah’s “suffering servant,” Jesus shows us that “service is the true form of rule and . . . gives us an insight into God’s way of being Lord” (332). Consequently, Christian faith is “fundamentally apolitical” and “does not demand political power but acknowledges legitimate authorities (cf. Rom 13:1–7).” However, Christianity “inevitably collides” with the claim to divine worship on the part of Roman “imperial political

¹⁸ “The term [*evangelion*] figures in the vocabulary of the Roman emperors, who understood themselves as lords, saviors, and redeemers of the world. . . . The idea was that what comes from the emperor is a saving message, that it is not just a piece of news, but a change of the world for the better” (JN, 46–47).

power.” Benedict generalizes this collision by noting that Christian faith “will always come into conflict with totalitarian political regimes and will be driven into the situation of martyrdom” (339).

Benedict’s reflections on the inheritance of the land by the meek lead him to conclude that true peace comes from God and is built on human obedience and openness to God, which lead to the right ordering of the earth in true freedom (82–84). In following Jesus, the king of peace, by establishing peace for the world, people come to reconciliation with each other. In turn, this requires reconciliation with God (85). Summing up his treatment of the first two words of the Lord’s Prayer, Benedict therefore affirms, “The fatherhood that is ‘in heaven’ points us toward the greater ‘we’ that transcends all boundaries, breaks down all walls, and creates peace” (142).

He explains the beatitudes of those who mourn and those who suffer persecution in terms of God’s opposition to social injustice. Sorrow at the injustice within us and at the suffering of those unjustly treated makes us more strongly resist social injustice and more deeply suffer in love for those unjustly treated. It puts us on the side of Jesus, who is the unjustly condemned one, and on the side of the God, who is love (86–87). Such resistance obeys God’s righteousness because of the demands of faith. Persecution confronts us in every age, because humanity is always trying to free itself from God’s will (89). Yet God forms the center of all social life: we can know ourselves “only . . . in light of God”; and we can know other people only when we see “the mystery of God in them” (282–83).

The final pages of Benedict’s chapter on the Sermon on the Mount bring together the first three points I have made thus far (112–22). The Pope observes that, when Jesus describes his family as those who do his Father’s will (Mark 3:34–35), “Jesus’s ‘I’ incarnates the Son’s communion of will with the Father. It is an ‘I’ that hears and obeys” (117). Jesus’s very self is this intimate dialogue with God, which constitutes “his divine authority—his Sonship in communion with the Father” (120). This authority provides the foundation for Jesus’s revising of the Torah so that he can lead all people who follow him to the Father. “Communion with [Jesus],” says Benedict, “is filial communion with the Father.” Jesus’s followers become a new family based solely on living in union with the will of God, and they thus manifest “the heart of the obedience [to God] intended by the Torah.” This family becomes “the vehicle” of Jesus’s universalization of faith in the God of Israel. Its membership no longer depends on

blood descent, but on Jesus's way of obedience to the God of all (117; see also 140–42). By demoting the relations of birth, which ground Israel's juridical and social order, Jesus desacralizes all juridical, social, and political arrangements. He thus rules out theocracy by making a theocentric society founded only on obedience to God. We should search for his will on the basis of the commandments of the Torah, “a decisive point of reference” and “a signpost” (116–19, quote at 119; see also 120–22).¹⁹

Benedict's theocentric Christology differs greatly from the theocentrism that he pushes aside in chapter 3, “The Gospel of the Kingdom of God” (53–55). This false theocentrism ejects the Church and Christ from the center of Christianity because it asserts that the Church and Christ divide people from each other (such as church members from those outside it, and believers in Christ from those who do not acknowledge him). Benedict believes that replacing Church or Christ in the central position with God (as one who does not divide people) proves unstable because not all religions are theistic. God divides theists from non-theists. Thus, false theocentrism leads to a regnocentrism focused on the ethical project of establishing a kingdom of justice and peace without a necessary link to God. For Benedict, regnocentrism proves itself “utopian dreaming” open to being coopted by “partisan doctrine.” It makes God irrelevant to the human project, turns religions into permissible customs without real significance, and subordinates faith to political goals in a post-Christian outlook resembling the temptation to political power that the devil presented to Christ.

By contrast, Benedict's Christology, which keeps God in the center of history, allows Christ to dwell concretely in time and space. Moreover, it makes the Church a vital manifestation of the universal efficacy of Christ's salvation. Christ unites all people, leading them to God by eschewing any sacralization of political power. It thus strives to attract people to the unitive function of the God of Jesus Christ working in the Church. In sum, Benedict's theocentric Christology offers an antidote to other programs that seek to overcome religious

¹⁹ See also JN, 134 (the Our Father), 145–46, 166. See also his World Day of Peace message January 1, 2006, which identifies “fidelity to the transcendent order” as an essential element of peace, accessed April 25, 2017, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/peace/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20051213_xxxix-world-day-peace_en.html#_ftnref3, consulted 6 February 2016.

divisions at the cost of encouraging a godless approach to religion and society.

A Theocentric Jesus for a Culture without God

We thus arrive at the fourth point of this essay: Benedict's theocentric portrait of Christ addresses a culture attempting to live without God. This culture leaves people thinking that life does not completely make sense, and it leads them to treat each other inhumanely. The Pope believes that "the spirit of the modern rebellion against God and God's law" animates this culture, which seeks to leave behind "everything we once depended on" because of a "will to a freedom without limits" (204). For him, "the logic of the modern age, of our age" declares God to be dead and makes of people the divine proprietors, the measuring standards of themselves and the world, such that they can do what they please (257).

In response, Benedict's portrait of Christ puts God at the center of Christology, and that Christology puts God at the center of society. The Pope indicates the context for his distinctive Christology in his commentary on Jesus's giving to the Twelve the authority to expel demons. He links the power of the Twelve to exorcize with their message of monotheism. He notes that when we belong in faith to the only God who alone is Lord, all else, including the powers of evil, loses its allure. Only then can people see the world as created and saved by a divinely rational goodness that constitutes the sole power over and in it. Without this faith in the one Creator, "the indeterminate powers of chance" leave us with insoluble "obscurities . . . that set limits to the world's rationality" (174). When this gift of faith is shared in ecclesial communion, Christians can stand up to the principalities and powers of Ephesians 6. Benedict interprets these as "an anonymous atmosphere . . . that wants to make the faith seem ludicrous and absurd" because it poisons "the spiritual climate all over the world that threatens the dignity of man, indeed his very existence."²⁰

On his penultimate page, Benedict tells us that God is "what it is that [man] truly needs and truly wants." Here he makes clear the central role played in the whole book by his theocentric Christology: "What ultimately lies behind all the Johannine images . . . [is that] Jesus gives us 'life' because he gives us God. He can give God because he himself is one with God, because he is the Son. He himself is the

²⁰ JN, 175, citing Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser: Ein Kommentar*, 2nd ed. (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1958), 291.

gift—he is ‘life.’ . . . This is exactly what we see in the Cross, which is his true exaltation” (354). What the world needs, then, is a sure hold on God in Christ as the transcendent, life-giving center of individual and social life.

A Traditional Jesus between Ahistorical Certitude and Historical Hypothesis

To defend his theocentric Christology, Benedict must stake out ground for the Christian faith’s affirmation of Jesus’s relationship with God between ahistorical certitude and historical hypothesis. Addressing his success in this endeavor constitutes my final point. I turn now to examining how well the Pope arrives at “a historically plausible and convincing figure” in his attempt to equate “the Jesus of the Gospels” with “the real, ‘historical’ Jesus in the strict sense of the word” (xxii). Many exegetes commented on this issue soon after JN came out, and my competence permits me to add nothing substantial to their critiques. Nonetheless, leaving aside Benedict’s penchant for going out of his way to throw an elbow into exegetes’ ribs²¹ and the apparent errors of some of his claims in the interpretation of one or another passage,²² I will point out a few of his exegetical moves that could make some professional biblical scholars eager to criticize JN. Doing so will

²¹ See, e.g., JN, 35. For a response to Benedict’s critique that historical-critical research works independently of a faith commitment, see Pierre Gibert, “Critique, méthodologie et histoire dans l’approche de Jésus. Sur: Joseph RATZINGER / BENOÎT XVI, Jésus de Nazareth. 1. Du baptême dans le Jourdain à la Transfiguration,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 96 (2008): 219–40.

²² There is an exaggeration at JN, 15: “there is absolutely no reason to suppose that Mark is exaggerating when he reports that ‘there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem’ (Mark 1:5).” Another example is an inconsistency: at JN, 24, he states that the biblical texts “give us no window into Jesus’s inner life—Jesus stands above our psychologizing” (German: “ins Innere Jesu . . . hineinshauen” [*Jesus von Nazareth*, vol. 1, *Von der Taufe im Jordan bis zur Verklärung*, 50], citing Romano Guardini, *Das Wesen des Christentums—Die menschliche Wirklichkeit des Herrn. Beiträge zu einer Psychologie Jesu* [Mainz: Matthias Grünewald, 1991]); but Jesus’s inner life is crucial for JN’s own argument, as we have seen, and the whole book aims to get to the true center of Christ’s personality (JN, xiv). Yet another inconsistency occurs at JN, 184, where he claims that historical-critical exegesis can give us no “definitive information” on the meaning of the parables, but at 183, literary comparisons of such exegesis allow Benedict to claim that the Aramaic shining through the Greek text of a parable gives us “a very immediate sense . . . of closeness to Jesus as he lived and taught,” and at 187, he asserts that Jeremiah is right that “each parable has its own context and thus its own specific message.”

help me to highlight the value of Benedict's project from the point of view of a dogmatic or systematic theologian.

Professional exegetes have demurred about what they consider a minimizing of differences in Benedict's arguments. In his book, the pre-Paschal/post-Paschal difference about what Jesus and others knew about him seems small compared to what most historical-critical exegetes would want to assert.²³ Benedict claims that, before Easter, both Jesus and some of his followers knew he was God (303, 324). Similarly, he asserts that Paul's discourse in Acts 13 "is a typical example of early missionary preaching to the Jews" (337). By contrast, Luke Timothy Johnson avers that "no longer is it presumed that such speeches report . . . a sample of primitive preaching. The conventional wisdom now is that the speeches of Acts are entirely the work of Luke the author."²⁴

Besides this comparative minimizing of differences between distinct historical moments, many scripture scholars have balked at the Pope's emphasis on the agreement among all New Testament books concerning Jesus.²⁵ He claims, for example, that the Synoptic *Jubelruf* of Jesus, his praise of the Father for his revelation of things to the simple (Matt 11:25–27; Luke 10:20–21), contains all of the Johannine theology of the Son (343). Sometimes to the same effect, Benedict will concentrate a grand theological synthesis on a single point expressed in the Gospels, as he does in his commentary on the title Son of Man (333–34). Finally, a number of his interpretations come with less argument than one might normally expect or require.²⁶ While we might wish to attribute this feature to his writing for a popular audience or his need to keep an ambitious book to a

²³ See, for example: Richard B. Hays, "Benedict and the Biblical Jesus," *First Things*, no. 175 (August–September 2007): 49–53, at 51–52; Luke Timothy Johnson, review in *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 318–20, at 319; Denis Campbell, review in *Homiletic* 32 (2007): 35–37, at 36–37.

²⁴ Luke Timothy Johnson, *Septuagintal Midrash in the Speeches of Acts: The Père Marquette Lecture in Theology 2002* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2002), 5–11, at 5.

²⁵ See, for example, Hays, "Biblical Jesus," 52.

²⁶ See, for example, JN, 215 (in Luke 16:19–31, Jesus "unequivocally" affirms "the idea of the intermediate state" between death and resurrection), 226 (the identity of the author of the Fourth Gospel), 229 (the Fourth Gospel claims to have rendered correctly the "substance" and "decisive content" of Jesus's discourses), 321–35 (interpretations of the Son of Man sayings), and 336 (Psalm 2 discards the myth of divine begetting of kings in favor of the notion of divine election of the Israelite king).

manageable length, it can easily look like a weakness in a work that clearly intends to construct a persuasive argument.

Why, then, does Benedict cut across the grain of historical-critical standards in these ways? The reason is this: He does not think we need settle with trying to bring to fruitful unity two sterile alternatives—either an ahistorical religious connection to God, whom we can never really appreciate as incarnate, or a merely hypothetical historical-critical acquaintance with Jesus, whom we can never really appreciate as God, or even as a friend.

According to Benedict, in order for people to perceive God—which is precisely the goal toward which he draws his reader—all the energies of their existence have to work together. Pure affections can guide a purified intellect and will, even as our spirit must discipline our body (92–93). A person living integrally can engage in the love that, paradoxically, amounts to “an exodus out of oneself” and yet constitutes the means of coming to oneself (99; see also 343). Wherever people believe in the love of Christ, they become sources for others of the life that Christ gives them (247–48) and they become those through whom others can hear Jesus’s voice (276–77). This love empowers a self-giving until it hurts, or even brings us to death, and it includes a “patient steadfastness,” no matter what the vicissitudes may be, that allows for God’s gift of our “deep, pure Yes of faith” to remain (261–62, 268–69).

As a result, people can come to a relationship with Jesus characterized by both a mutual inner acceptance of each other’s freedom and a loving mutual gift of self. Such a relationship gives people an analogous share in Jesus’s relationship with his Father. These relationships with Jesus and the Father enable people to support each other in mutual knowledge, acceptance, and love, and through these, we can lead each other to God (280–83). At the same time, mutual support among Christians requires them to know God in Christ. Indeed, “it is only by becoming part of the ‘we’ of God’s children that we can reach up to him beyond the limits of this world” (129).²⁷

These important claims asserted in JN constitute elements of a

²⁷ See also JN, 130: “Our praying . . . can and should be a wholly personal prayer. But we also constantly need to make use of those prayers that express in words the encounter with God experienced both by the Church as a whole and by individual members of the Church. For without these aids to prayer our own praying and our image of God . . . end up reflecting ourselves more than the living God.”

theology of tradition. Indeed, for Benedict, neither historical-criticism nor ahistorical knowledge of the absolute can deliver us friendship with Christ. What can do so is precisely the Christian tradition with Jesus at its center. It brings us into his dialogue with the Father by coming to address us through those who, throughout history, have been caught up in the love of Christ. It is these people, living and dead, who address us in life's various circumstances and contexts, especially in the liturgy, which Benedict highlights on JN's first page (ix). Indeed, helping Christians to mediate Christ to each other and to those outside the fold represents one of the purposes of baptism, ordination, and all the sacraments (283).

Because this abiding tradition brings us to intimate friendship with Christ, Benedict depends on it as he reads the Gospels. They become a manifestation, even an institution, of this tradition of mutual love and acceptance between God and people centered in Jesus centered in God. Benedict finds in the Gospels, therefore, the Christ of Christian tradition, the Son of the *homoousios*, the Word of God, whose resurrection manifests his divinity so luminously that it renders comparatively unimportant the difference between the pre- and post-Paschal Christ, between the early Christian missionary speeches and Luke's later authorial constructions in Acts, and between the Synoptic and the Johannine portraits of Jesus. The cogent completeness of exegetical arguments thus loses some interest for Benedict. Instead, he favors a presentation of their conclusions that will attract people to enter more fully into the ecclesial tradition of mutual love among the sheep and between them and the Shepherd, a tradition that brings us to live in what alone can fulfill human persons and societies: the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his treatment of the Sermon on the Mount, Pope Benedict makes one of his rare explicit gestures toward an understanding of the links between the biblical text and the tradition of mutual knowledge and love. In his discussion of the poverty of spirit taught in the Beatitudes, he notes that the meaning of a biblical passage "becomes most intelligible in those human beings who have been totally transfixed by it and have lived it out." Thus, biblical interpretation is not merely a historian's enterprise, because "Scripture is full of potential for the future, a potential that can only be opened up when someone 'lives through' and 'suffers through' the sacred text" (78). Benedict then discusses Francis of Assisi after having discussed the ascetics of Church history more generally. In the rest of the book,

he infrequently mentions such witnesses. If Benedict implies here that tradition is the best interpreter of Scripture, he does not stop to discuss how to relate such interpretation to a healthy grounding in historical-critical method and its brand of reasoning. Had he engaged more deeply in this discussion, he might have forestalled some of the exegetes' critiques. Would he then, however, have risked turning his book into a fundamental theology, rather than writing the traditional Gospel portrait he set out to do?

Perhaps this formula "traditional Gospel portrait" best summarizes the Pope's approach. For him, the Christ of Christian tradition forms the *skopos*, the central intended message and meaning, that should guide our interpretation of any and all biblical texts (xix).²⁸ It is not that we need to know Jesus through tradition before we come to the Bible to find him. Rather, we need the Bible in order to know Jesus because treasuring Scripture constitutes a central, God-given form of the tradition. By it, Christians, in their mutual knowledge and self-sacrificing love, let Christ bring them into mutual knowledge and love with him so he can share with them his knowing and loving filial dialogue with God his Father. JN's traditional Gospel portrait of Jesus constitutes, therefore, a "historically plausible and convincing figure," precisely because it offers authentic divine and human friendship to a society bereft of God but not yet comprehending its own hunger for God. The concrete judgment that such a friendship answers this hunger ties a tradition-grounded reading of the Gospels to historical reason more fundamentally, for Benedict, than does historical-critical exegesis.

A tradition-grounded reading represents an exercise of historical reason because its object, friendship with people, occurs in history. Even our friendship with God is historical. First, although God is not bound by history, the people with whom he has a friendship are thus bound. Furthermore, the God who befriends us becomes incarnate in history. Moreover, the authenticity of the divine and human friendship expressed in a traditional Gospel portrait of Jesus represents an exercise of historical reason, since coming to certitude about the bond of any friendship arises from a historical process. It requires time spent in observation, reasoning, and the making of choices. Even if it implies a certitude not always susceptible of explicit

²⁸ For this ancient ecclesiastical sense of *skopos*, see T. F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 235–39, 278–80, 376–77.

justification, its ground in historical reason goes beyond tentativity: a friend can sacrifice, even to death, for a friend. No one lays down his or her life for a friend on the basis of a mere hypothesis.

Thus, a traditional Gospel portrait of Jesus achieves its plausibility on the basis of an exercise of historical reason that avoids evanescing into the ahistorical, even as it breaks through the hypothetical into certainty. The exercise of reason that achieves these goals finds its completion in a friendship received and returned among people and between them and God. The ability to share the divine with each other in history accounts for the many nations arising from Abraham and Sarah, even as it explains Mary Magdalene's resurrection finding of him whom her heart loved. It stands to reason, therefore, that Benedict's addressing Christians in an age that organizes its social life without God makes tradition-grounded faith the source of the historical plausibility of JN's theocentric Jesus. On this faith rests the Pope's claim to have depicted "the real, 'historical' Jesus in the strict sense of the word" (xxii).

Benedict does not mention the fragility that characterizes the knowledge of the Gospel Jesus to which Christian tradition gives us access. This fragility forms part of the certitude that characterizes the knowledge. Fragility obtains in the certitude proper to friendship, even and especially the inner friendship with Jesus, the ultimate goal of Benedict's book. Trust founds the certitude that someone is our friend, not argued demonstration from solid evidence or certain first principles. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that the certitude of our friendship with God lies on the same foundation. In both the Scriptures and the history of God's people since biblical times, we see how fragile that foundation can become as the trust that God's people put in him waivers time and again.

Our tradition-grounded knowledge of the Gospel Jesus is fragile in other ways. Tradition can forget to pass on some of what it receives.²⁹ Another aspect of fragility comes from tradition's dependence on the sacred scriptures themselves. They confront us with difficulties that require resorting to historical investigation for their resolution. This resolution often attains only the merely probable, although some results can reach virtual certitude.³⁰ How the certitude

²⁹ On this fragile certitude, see Joseph G. Mueller, "Forgetting as a Principle of Continuity in Tradition," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 751–81.

³⁰ See for example, Gibert, "Critique." The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, discusses the need to use

of our traditional friendship with Christ can abide when it is affected by fragilities like these is an important question that we should not expect a traditional Gospel portrait of Jesus to resolve exhaustively.

Nonetheless, it is fair to observe that Benedict did not undertake the argument that my final section offers here. I built it from elements, some explicit and some implicit, scattered throughout JN. It represents one response to what Richard Hays requested the Pope to do in a subsequent volume of his trilogy: “to set forth more clearly how the practice of history writing should be done in the new world revealed by incarnation, cross, and resurrection.”³¹ Benedict’s groundbreaking theocentric Christology would have gained in force had he himself answered Hays.³² N·V

historical methods to understand what God wants to tell us in Scripture (§12) and then refers, by implication, to the human weakness (*infirmitas humana*) of the language (*sermo*) in Scripture that God uses to express himself (§ 13).

³¹ Hays, “Biblical Jesus,” 53.

³² The closest he comes to doing so is when, in the third volume, he describes how Matthew and Luke wrote history in their narratives of Jesus’s birth and early life (Joseph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI, *Jesus von Nazareth: Prolog; die Kindheitsgeschichten* [Freiburg-im-Breisgau: Herder, 2012], 27–30).