

Chapter One

Can Christians Contribute to the Postmodern World?

I. Christianity as Obstacle and Resource

Christianity has lost its dominant role in the Western world. In many countries it is no longer politically established as the official and state-supported religion, and even where such support exists it has declining significance. More important, Christianity no longer occupies the primary place in the commitment system of most citizens. Even most of those who attend church have their basic attitudes and convictions shaped by sources other than the Christian community and its traditions. In the eyes of many intellectuals and opinion-makers, the church is an anachronistic institution.

In view of this situation, beginning a book on postmodern social policy with a chapter on Christianity seems odd indeed! As explained in the Introduction, one reason for doing so is to put my cards on the table. As a Christian theologian, my own reflections on the social issues with which this book deals are formed and informed by the Christian tradition.

But there are other reasons for attending to religious communities and convictions in general and to Christianity in particular. Despite centuries of secularization, religious beliefs continue to play a large role at deep levels in shaping cultural and social life. As we encounter people formed in diverse religious traditions, we become more aware that even what we have known as secularization has roots in our particular religious tradition, that often what we have defended as simply rational appears so to us because of our religious heritage.

Even the most secular Americans acknowledge the importance of Islam and Judaism on the world scene. That the Catholic Church is a power to be reckoned with on a variety of social issues has long been apparent to those interested in social change. More recently, conservative Protestants have made their voices heard in influential ways. There is widespread concern about the rise of what is sometimes called religious "fundamentalism" all over the world, sometimes as a protest against the forces of Western secularism. Within the United States the diversity of religions is recognized as in tension with unified social and educational practices.

Those who view Western culture from without have no difficulty in seeing that even in its present, highly secularized form, it is, for good and ill, an outgrowth of Christianity. When secular Westerners treat their own values as religiously neutral, others may experience this as a new form of cultural arrogance and imperialism. In an increasingly pluralistic context, to ignore the historical fact of our shared Christian tradition inhibits effective response to social and cultural problems.

Furthermore, avowed Christian commitment is far from dead. Globally, Christianity claims the largest number of adherents of any religious tradition. Although many of these adherents are only nominally Christian, many others are serious. This is true even in the Western countries where secularization has gone the farthest.

Most secular thinking identifies Christianity as an obstacle to postmodern change (and even to modernity). Christianity is seen as informing one among the multiple religious and cultural traditions out of which a postmodern, secular, or pluralistic culture must be formed. Since Christianity has been dominant in the past, much of the deconstruction that is needed is of this particular tradition. The presence of large numbers of committed defenders of this tradition makes the needed deconstruction difficult. It may be important to understand this tradition, but it seems to many moderns and postmoderns unlikely that one can look to it for help.

The reality, however, is more complex. Some Christians understand their tradition in ways that turn it into a positive resource for moving into the postmodern world. Furthermore, these ways of understanding are not imposed on the community from without but arise from its own internal reflection.

This chapter takes up four topics. First, how is Christianity to be understood? Several possible answers are considered, including understanding Christianity as a cultural-linguistic system. Section II proposes

that we understand it, instead, as a particular sociohistorical movement with great capacity for change and development. It is Christian because Jesus is its central and pivotal figure, and in every period the movement looks back to the events centering in Jesus for inspiration.

For this reason the subsequent sections focus on this centeredness in the Jesus-event. Section III asks who Jesus was. Is it reasonable for Christians today to continue to attribute special authority to him? Section IV turns to his teaching as a guide to how we can now understand salvation, or that toward which our efforts are properly directed. The discussion focuses on the *basileia theou*, often translated as the Kingdom of God. Section V discusses "Christ" as the living power that Christians find in their lives and world as they are informed by Jesus. It explains this to be the power of creative transformation.

Section VI completes the chapter with a discussion of what this means for the Christian way of being in the world today. What constitutes faithfulness? The question is brought to bear on the currently controversial topic of physician-assisted suicide.

II. What Is Christianity?

Whether Christianity is an obstacle to moving forward into a postmodern world, or a resource for doing so, depends on how its adherents understand the significance of their faith. What does it mean to be a Christian? Most of the major answers lead to making Christianity an obstacle. But there is another way of understanding faith that makes it a resource.

We can consider a few of the answers to our question in a highly schematic way. (1) The dominant premodern answer was otherworldly. The other world was divided into realms of rewards and of punishments. Since these were everlasting, their overwhelming importance could not be denied. To be a Christian was to be recipient of the grace of Jesus Christ through the church. This grace mediated God's forgiveness for sins and the gift of a destiny of blessedness.

(2) In modernity, attention shifted to this world. Belief in life after death was long retained because of the assumption that hope for rewards and fear of punishment after death encouraged socially desired behavior in this life. By the nineteenth century, however, the appeal to rewards and punishments in another world largely disappeared among leading Christian thinkers. The focus was on the Christian formation of life here and now. To be a Christian was to be a member of

that community that participated in the highest form of religious experience and life.

(3) As modernity advanced, the claim that Christianity is superior to other religious traditions and communities lost its persuasiveness. That claim has been superseded by the view that all the great religious traditions are paths to the same goal. As paths they are quite different, but their success in reaching the goal is relatively equal. The goal may be understood as loving communion with neighbors, as proper response to the holy, as union with ultimate reality, or, more recently, as transformation from ego-centeredness to centeredness in the Real.¹ Since Christianity offers a successful and effective path to the ultimate goal, those who have been formed by the Christian tradition have every reason to continue to pursue that path.

From a postmodern perspective, this effort to find or impose unity on diverse communities is objectionable. However generous the intention, the effect is hegemonic. Inevitably, the goal that is affirmed as common to all expresses the values of the writer and silences the voices of those who have other priorities and commitments. This is true even if some members of the diverse traditions can recognize their ends in what is asserted to be the universal goal.

(4) The influence of postmodernism on Christian theology is most visible among those who have renounced any universal claims. They recognize Christianity as one community among others, with its own distinctive traditions and practices. To be a Christian is not to compare Christianity with others and make claims either to superiority or to equality. It is not to try to impose Christian teachings on society as a whole. It is to immerse oneself in one's own community, appropriating its values and meanings more deeply, and living from its stories and rituals.

The argument for this understanding of Christianity is familiar to many postmodernists. It begins with the rejection of the notion that language mirrors an objective and independent reality. According to this view, there is no access apart from language to a "real" world, and hence there can be no correspondence of language to that world. Instead, the world we inhabit is a linguistic one.

This means that Christian doctrines are not to be viewed as assertions about how things are in and of themselves. They are not to be believed in this sense. Instead, they constitute a system of symbols and meanings that can order understanding and life. Christianity thus understands itself as a cultural-linguistic system.²

This kind of theological postmodernism has the advantage of abandoning all Christian claims to hegemony, of leaving to others the equal right to shape their lives according to their preferred system of meanings. This is certainly a gain. Furthermore, Christians formed in this way can be counted on to serve not only one another but other neighbors as well, without imposing their own meanings and values on them. They will make a positive contribution to meeting some of the needs of society.

It is not clear, however, that Christians who accept this understanding of what faith means can contribute, as Christians, to the shaping of policy in the wider society. If they do so, it seems, they do not act as Christians but in some other capacity. Yet the inherited symbol-system encourages concern for society as a whole. And the good of society cannot be attained simply by the virtue of individual actors.

There is another way for Christians to understand themselves that grows more naturally out of their tradition and yet breaks, as fully as does the cultural-linguistic proposal, with both pre-modern and modern views. This is the understanding of Christianity as a sociohistorical movement. This interpretation goes back to the American Protestant "modernism" discussed in the Introduction, which has many affinities to postmodernism.

According to this understanding, which is mine, to be a Christian is to locate oneself in the Christian community. This community is a changing one, growing out of a long history and moving into an uncertain future. Being a sociohistorical movement does not, of course, differentiate Christianity from other major traditions. What differentiates the Christian movement is its particular origin and history. It originated in events in Israel centering on Jesus and the community that grew up around him. Crucial for the development of this community was its interpretation of the nature and mission of Jesus after his death and his appearances to his followers. For simplicity, this complex of historical occurrences can be called "the Jesus-event."

But origination in that event does not by itself define the movement as Christian. That Western secularism also has roots in that event does not imply that all Western secularists are now Christians. Even those who recognize their roots are not necessarily Christian. The Christian movement regards the originating events as normatively significant. Some Marxists, secular humanists, existentialists, and post-Christian feminists recognize that their origins lie in the Jesus-event, but no longer find it a source of norms. They do not consider themselves Christians, and their preference should be respected.

Normally, the Christian community understands the Jesus-event as located in the history of Israel and finds much of normative importance in that earlier history. Normally, it gathers for regular occasions of renewal of its memory both of that earlier history and of the Jesus-event itself. Normally, it places great weight on the written records of Israel's life and of the Jesus-event, that is, on the Bible. Much else can be said of its usual practice. But a definition should include only enough to establish boundaries within which there may still be great diversity. No matter how carefully those boundaries are drawn, furthermore, there will be many borderline instances. This does not disqualify a definition.

Beliefs are important to this sociohistorical movement. Subgroups within the community may not be able to work together if they disagree too much on the meaning of the founding events. Today it is hard to understand the intensity of feeling aroused by disagreements on Christology and Trinity in the early church because these differences are not the ones that divide us today. But at that time they were bound up with the way salvation was understood, and a great deal depended on that.

More understandable to us today are the theological quarrels that gave rise to the Reformation. But they, too, are fading in importance. Lutherans and Catholics can now agree on common formulations without overcoming their practical differences, brought about by a long history of separate development.

In the nineteenth century, denominations split over slavery, an issue we can still understand. Today the most divisive issues among Christians in the United States are abortion, women's ordination, and homosexuality. To what extent these will cause institutional divisions within the church remains to be seen, but they are already dividing the Christian movement.

Obviously, being a part of the Christian movement does not determine how one thinks on all issues. This is partly because Christian identity does not exclude the influence of other social forces. Much thinking in the church becomes subservient to these other forces. Many passionately affirm as essential to faith beliefs and attitudes whose sources are quite external to the tradition. But disagreements also occur because equally faithful people disagree as to the meaning of the Jesus-event for our time and as to the most faithful responses for the church to make to new challenges.

The theological task is both to clarify disagreements and to take a stand in relation to them. To be theological, the stand must intend to be Christian. The more fully this intention is clarified, the better the

theologian fulfills the task. But theologies that excel in this way still disagree, and there are profound changes over time.

This understanding of Christianity has some of the advantages of the cultural-linguistic form of postmodernism. It leaves entirely open the self-definition of other religious communities, imposing nothing on them. It makes no attempt to reduce their otherness to sameness, or to prejudice them in any way as inferior, equal, or superior to Christianity. In short, it is not hegemonic.

This way of understanding Christianity recognizes that beliefs are culturally shaped and have their role and meaning within the community. They are not ultimate statements about absolute truth. Believers are not to be required to accept them if they do not commend themselves by their own persuasiveness and illuminating power.

But the sociohistorical school is not committed, as is the cultural-linguistic school, to a way of thinking that prevents speaking of God, the world, and the human past as having a reality independent of our thought and language. In responding intellectually to changing situations, the church attempts to reformulate its teachings as well as possible. Good teachings are not only those that conform to past teachings or shape the lives of members well. They are also those teachings that conform as fully as possible to the best knowledge of the time. That knowledge has some, always fragmentary and imperfect, correspondence to the way the world is. The church should strive to formulate its teaching more accurately.

For example, the scholarship of the past two hundred years has given us a much more accurate account of how the Bible was formed and who Jesus really was. Of course, there are still legitimate debates about these matters. Among those who take the historical evidence seriously, however, the parameters of the debates have changed. Some of the assumptions underlying past doctrines are now exposed as highly implausible. The church should reformulate its teaching in light of this increased knowledge of history so that it will correspond more closely to what probably took place.

Similarly, there have been enormous advances in our knowledge of the natural world. We are quite sure now that the world is far more than six thousand years old. Our teaching about creation has changed to take this into account. This is as it should be. As the Big Bang becomes more and more the likely story about the origins of our cosmos, our teachings should reflect this new understanding. In this way they are more likely to correspond to what actually occurred.

Even though church teaching obviously has changed over the centuries, many Christians are disturbed by this relativization of doctrine. Some Christians attempt to establish one set of doctrines as eternally fixed regardless of changing culture, historical study, and natural science. These doctrines, they declare, are of the essence of Christianity. Others recognize that no linguistic formulations can have this absoluteness, and they appeal to prethematic convictions, orientations, or styles of life. This move greatly eases the problem.

Nevertheless, the effort to establish some unchanging pattern that must characterize all Christians moves in a direction different from that of the sociohistorical school. It may well be that there are some teachings and practices that have characterized all serious Christians for two millennia. But it is a mistake to identify them as the unchanging essence of Christianity. In this new century we may discover problems with what has characterized all of us until now. If our fresh reflection about the meaning of our history for our new situation leads us to abandon those teachings or characteristics, we will not be less Christian for that. On the contrary, to refuse to change for the sake of a supposed unchanging essence would be a lapse of faithfulness.

III. Jesus

The central teaching of the Christian movement is about Jesus and "Christ." The question is how we are to understand the originating events of our movement and what they call on us to do today. Jesus is at the center of those events.

For two centuries reflection about Jesus has been in part an investigation of history. What really happened back then? Modern historiography can help to answer that question.

The question for Christians, however, goes beyond the capacities of modern historians because modern historiography cannot deal with God's agency. While learning as much as possible from historians, theologians ask: How was God involved in the Jesus-event? The importance of that question shows that Christology cannot be separated from the doctrine of God.

The complexity of the church's task is already clear. We cannot answer our question without the help of historians, but the assumptions that modern historians have written into their craft prevent them from even asking the question that has been most important to the Christian

movement. One solution is for the movement today to accept the assumptions built into modern historiography that God does not act in the world. It would then be possible simply to adopt the consensus of historians, when there is a consensus, and move on from there.

Another solution has been to minimize the role of historians by grounding our affirmations as to what happened on the testimony of the earliest witnesses. We may regard that testimony itself as the decisive initiation of our movement.

The Whiteheadian form of postmodernism offers another option. Christians can bring their understanding of God's presence in the world into relation with what we learn from historians who omit this. We can thereby come to fresh judgments as to how God was present in Jesus and in the early church. This enables us to take seriously the efforts of the church fathers to understand God's incarnation in Jesus even while realizing that some of the issues they raised and the conceptual categories available to them were different from ours.

Whitehead makes this possible by providing a postmodern philosophical grounding for the widespread Christian belief that God is present and active everywhere. In a quite technical sense, God is immanent in all things. If so, God was immanent in Jesus and in the community that surrounded him and subsequently developed into the church.

Given this starting point, the problem in formulating a Christology is quite opposite to that which confronted the church fathers. For them, thinking of creatures and God as externally related substances, the problem was how to affirm that, nevertheless, in this one unique case, God was internal to a human being. Since for them supernaturalism was no problem, they could do so easily by thinking of some portion of the human Jesus as replaced by the divine. But they resisted this option, because the assertion of the full humanness of Jesus was important to them. Accordingly, they developed the idea that one being could be commingled with another without loss of distinctness. In doing so they moved toward a doctrine of internal relations. They employed this doctrine also in understanding how the members of the Trinity mutually constituted one another. Whitehead believed that in their reflections on the Trinity and the incarnation, the Alexandrian and Antiochene theologians made a fundamental metaphysical advance over Plato by developing a doctrine of internal relations.³

Christians can now begin where the church fathers ended. Not only was God present in Jesus without reducing his humanity in any way,

but also God is present in all of us. Hence the literal affirmation of incarnation is unproblematic. But the doctrine of incarnation was not simply about God's presence in the world. It was also about the unique authority and nature of Jesus. It is this that now challenges us.

That Jesus played a unique role in the Christian movement is not in question. What *is* in question is what kind of authority we should give him today. The founder of a movement may not be regarded as particularly insightful or wise. One can acknowledge the contribution without returning to her or him for guidance in future situations. Yet to this day the church continues to look to Jesus and to those most closely involved in the Jesus-event as authoritative. Is that warranted? Or is it simply a habit that was developed when people supposed that one in whom God was incarnate would be all-wise and inerrant?

These questions are fundamental for present practice. The church is a community that not only originated in the Jesus-event but also seeks to be informed by the memory of that event. When it ceases to find the event normative, it will cease to keep the memory alive through scripture reading, sacrament, and sermon. The Christian movement will end.

Although the question of the authority of the event is not identical with that of how God was present in Jesus, the relation has always been close. If there was nothing unusual about the way God was present in Jesus, then are there other grounds for attributing special authority to him? If so, what are they? If there was something unusual about the relationship, then this should be affirmed and clarified so that both the nature of the authority that follows from it for believers and its limitations can be understood.

Given the fact that God is present in all people and that Christians have looked to Jesus with particular admiration, the simplest answer would be that Jesus conformed more fully to God's aim than have most others. Few Christians doubt that this is the case. The truth of this judgment warrants attributing authority to Jesus as an example of goodness and spiritual greatness. Further, an unusually good person is also more likely to have accurate insights than others are. Hence, it is appropriate to attend to his teaching. Nevertheless, this judgment would not justify singling Jesus out to the extent that the church continues to do in its liturgical life.

A second point that is not particularly controversial is that the mission Jesus performed is unique. Just how we identify that mission is controversial, but some elements are historically undisputed. Whether intentionally or not, Jesus initiated the movement within which Christians

now find themselves. That movement was far more open to Gentiles than was the dominant Judaism of the day. Because it has in fact been remarkably successful among Gentiles, the movement has had world-historical importance.

Does this give us reason to accord any particular authority to Jesus' words and deeds? Apparently not. Since Jesus himself did not envision the sort of events that followed, it is hard to see why, on the grounds of his unique work, we should pay particular attention to his teaching. That teaching was not directed at us. And further, as practical advice, most of it is questionable.

Nevertheless, Jesus' contemporaries were impressed by the implicit claim to authority of Jesus' teaching, and it still carries its own weight today. Even when people know that they will not act directly on what he taught, many feel grasped by it as having a truth that they can neither incorporate nor neglect. Is there any explanation of the unusual nature of Jesus' teaching and actions?

The Whiteheadian form of postmodernism suggests a possibility that is worth exploring. It does so by deconstructing the modern self and putting in its place a self that can be constructed in a variety of ways. It does this through its doctrine of "prehension."

A prehension is the way one actual entity includes another. The Introduction briefly explained that actual entities as conceived by Whitehead are not little substances but events that are "occasions of experience." Each such event is constituted by the way other events flow into it. This inflowing is the causal efficacy of past occasions for the one that is now becoming. From the side of the occasion that is becoming, the act of including a past event is a prehension.

The most important prehensions in ordinary occasions are of the immediate environment. This environment always includes God. In the case of a human experience, it also includes not only the neuronal experiences in the brain, but one's own immediate past experience. The deconstruction of the continuous self prepares for reconstructing the self out of a succession of human experiences.

In ordinary adult human experience, at least in the modern West, the single most determinative prehension with regard to one's self-determination is that of one's own personal past. It is the prominence of this prehension that has given rise to notions of a substantial self. Whiteheadian postmodernists affirm that this connection is what establishes one's sense of personal identity through time.

As one examines one's own experience, one can distinguish this

continuation of the personal past into the present from the roles of other elements that participate in constituting the experience. One easily thinks of “I” and “they.” Although the decision that culminates the self-forming occasion of experience grows out of all of these, if it is not primarily determined by the prehension of the personal past, one is likely to feel some loss of autonomy and control.

There is something else operative in each moment—the prehension of God, drawing one into responsible freedom. Normally one feels this, like the other influences, as coming from without. One may be grateful for it as a gift; or one may be resistant, because it calls for taking risks one does not want to take. One may feel guilt because one experiences a rightful demand that one refuses. But in all these instances there is a clear difference between oneself as the continuation into the present of the personal past and the divine presence experienced as grace or judgment.

As long as this difference exists, part of one’s experience in each moment will be the feeling of tension between what one has become and what one might have become. One will be in some measure guilty and defensive. One’s perception of the world will be colored by this tension and the resultant defensiveness. In traditional theological language, one will be concerned to justify oneself. One will view others as supporters or threats, not simply as what they are in themselves. In short, one will be self-centered.

But there are other possibilities. The prehension of the personal past may lose any significant role in the present. Buddhist meditation moves in that direction but without highlighting God’s presence in the occasion. Some forms of Western mysticism, in contrast, may lead to so setting the personal self aside that the organizing principle of the occasion is the prehension of God. Mystics who have attained that experience should be recognized as having a certain authority.

Jesus does not seem to have been that kind of mystic. He impresses us as having had a strong self. According to the gospel accounts, the tension between his personal self and the call of God was occasionally intense. This tension is depicted especially in the story of the temptations in the wilderness and the struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane. Although the evidence for their historicity is very indirect, the inclusion of these stories shows that the first Christians did not suppose that Jesus’ relation to God precluded such struggle.

On the other hand, what comes through in many of Jesus’ sayings is a lack of tension, an absence of defensiveness. Jesus seems to speak out

of immediate perception of the situation, a perception that is not distorted by self-concern. Is such perception intelligible?

If Jesus' prehension of his personal past and his prehension of God were sometimes so related as to function as a unity in determining what each of his occasions of experience became, then the apparent absence of tension, doubt, and defensiveness would follow. Jesus would speak with authority, knowing that what he perceived was what was there to be perceived—that, in a sense, he saw as God saw. There would be then, at times, the union of the divine and the human persons that the church fathers struggled to articulate.

To accent the distinctiveness of the way in which God was present in Jesus, we could restrict the term "incarnation" to this type of immanence, using the term "immanence" elsewhere. Alternately, we could speak of incarnation everywhere and describe the different forms that it takes.

The teachings resulting from such a structure of existence have the authority of direct insight but do not provide practical guidance for the behavior of those who are still caught in the midst of tension and defensiveness and social expectations. They provide norms by which we can judge the direction that our lives, our church, and our society are taking. We can work for circumstances in which actual behavior could more easily conform to these norms. Because these insights stand in tension with all human achievements they are an inexhaustible source of challenge.⁴ This is their peculiar authority for Christians.

IV. Salvation

A religious community offers its members some vision of the goal of life, some ideal toward which to strive, or some end for which to hope. Buddhism points toward enlightenment as the supreme end. It is the Buddhas, the enlightened ones, whom it reveres and who speak to it with authority. Christianity names its goal salvation, and identifies Jesus as the Savior. When the Christian movement is clear both about the salvation for which it hopes and its role in relation to that salvation, it is vital and vigorous. When that is not the case, its energies are difficult to mobilize.

Unfortunately, the understanding of salvation in the old-line Protestant churches has become vague and diverse. There are still some who take the term to apply to what happens to individuals after they die or

to vindication at the last judgment. But there are many who focus on salvation in this life instead. Of these, some identify salvation in psychological terms, others, in existential terms. Still others have stopped using the term altogether.

In such a situation, identifying Jesus as Savior has little meaning. From what does he save us and to what? For some Christians, the answer is that he saves us from sin and guilt. This answer has strong traditional support especially among Protestants. For many Christians, however, it now has little power. They are not sure whether they are "sinners." The clear-cut legalistic statements of an earlier generation are largely gone from the old-line churches. In any case, it is not clear how Jesus saves us from sin. The doctrines of atonement that were long central to Christian teaching have lost persuasive power. If one is having a problem with guilt feelings, one is more likely to get help from a therapist than from one's church.

For some, Jesus has saved us by showing how deeply God loves us. This frees us from fear and assures us that, when we seek forgiveness, God is ready and willing to extend it. We do not have to appease an angry God. This is plausible and meaningful for many, but the threat of punishment from an angry God seems quite remote to most. Perhaps this kind of salvation, effected by Jesus, has been all too successful in wide sections of contemporary Christendom. One has to remind oneself that people once feared God's wrath in order to appreciate one's current lack of fear. If this exhausts the meaning of salvation, salvation seems somewhat peripheral to more burning concerns.

One reason for the difficulty of defining salvation is that the word has many uses in the Bible. Often salvation has quite practical historical meanings. A city is saved from a siege. A child is saved from disease. A people are saved from bondage in Egypt. We continue to use the term in these ways today, but most Christians distinguish this use from the theological one.

In my judgment, we would benefit from taking Jesus' authority seriously on this topic. He provides a way of moving past the diversity without excluding many of its elements. At the heart of his teaching was the proclamation of the *basileia theou*, the "realm of God."

Jesus' parables give little concrete idea as to what happens in the *basileia*. They speak instead of its supreme value and of how it comes. But the parallel line in the Lord's Prayer speaks volumes. The *basileia* is where God's will is done on earth. Jesus called people to prepare for this changed order.

It is fortunate for us that we have no record of Jesus spelling out the political, social, and economic arrangements of the *basileia*. We are left free to read into it our own understanding of God's aims in the world. Of course, if we are Christians, what we read in will be deeply influenced by the Jesus-event.

Jesus' expectation was of a transformed earth where God's purposes are realized. Those who thought it would come soon were disappointed. But understanding salvation in terms of the healing of the planet with all its human inhabitants remains a worthy definition. It directs our attention to the suffering of the present day and indicates the importance of working for the transformation of society and the renewal of the Earth.

As a sociohistorical movement, Christianity can clarify its socio-historic goal by aiming at the *basileia*. Indeed, in the early part of this century, when this way of understanding Christianity was most widespread, the goal was identified as the coming of the Kingdom of God. But this formulation of Christian hope came under severe critique. During the era of the "social gospel," to which I have been referring, many people saw the activities in which they were then involved as ushering in the Kingdom quite unambiguously. Some spoke of "building" it.

The expectation that it was already coming and would soon be present in a fuller way was proven hopelessly wrong by two world wars. History showed that this understanding of salvation had relied far too much on human effort and had greatly underestimated the corruption of human actions by sin. It had also conceived the Kingdom of God in modernist terms.

But the reaction went much too far. Instead of continuously correcting the interpretation of the *basileia*, placing stress on the divine initiative and emphasizing the deep ambiguities that beset all action in history, leading theologians directed the church away from Jesus' message altogether. When the idea of the *basileia* was retained it was given an apocalyptic meaning that disconnected what was expected of God from any human efforts. Some defined salvation in a radically individualistic, existentialist way. Popular piety in the United States adopted psychological categories.

Partly as a result of these moves the church has become ineffective in the public world at a time when that world desperately needs salvation. A bold recovery of Jesus' proclamation of the realm of God, which fills it with concrete and realistic accounts of the solutions that

Christians can propose for the existential, moral, psychological, social, political, economic, and ecological problems of our day, could galvanize and unify the energies of the church and enable it to serve the world.

V. Christ

Section III dealt with Jesus and his specific authority for the church, Section IV, with the realm of God that he proclaimed. We have proposed that in Jesus the church discerns an unusual relation to God, one that undergirds or explains the authority many find in him. As a result we call Jesus the Christ.

But the term "Christ" has not been limited to Jesus. We find Christ in the church and in other believers as well. We even encounter Christ outside the boundaries of the church. When we say "Jesus," we attend to a past historical figure, but when we say "Christ," we are often speaking of the ongoing working of God in the world.

We do not, however, speak of Christ in complete disconnection with Jesus. It is in and through Jesus that we discern Christ's presence elsewhere. And that presence elsewhere is enhanced by Jesus' special efficacy in the church.

What marks the presence of Christ, that is, of God's efficacious presence in the world as known in and through Jesus? In Jesus himself the presence was marked by a unity of his personal past and God's indwelling. Because of this he is for Christians uniquely "the Christ." In us, formation "in Christ" rarely takes that form.

Among believers, much more commonly, Christian formation takes the form of repentance. Repentance is the English translation for the Greek word *metanoia*, a word frequently on the lips of Jesus in the gospels. Unfortunately, the English word has lost much of the meaning of the Greek. It tends to name only regret and, perhaps, desisting from some sin. *Metanoia*, in contrast, refers to a change of direction more than to regret for the past. Jesus' call for *metanoia* is not for a return to the past but for an orientation toward the future, toward that new way of ordering matters that he calls the *basileia*.

It is thus the encounter with a new possibility that calls forth *metanoia* in Jesus' message. In the first generation of believers, it was the encounter with the message of Jesus' resurrection and the new possibility that God has brought about through that. Throughout the history of the

movement, encountering the message of Jesus has often evoked *metanoia*. But it also occurs through the words of the preacher who is calling for *metanoia* in new circumstances. The Christian life is entered through *metanoia* and continues as one of repeated *metanoia*.

Metanoia is understood to be the work of God. It comes about because God addresses the soul and calls for change. God also empowers the soul to change accordingly. To the extent that God is heard and a positive response is evoked, there is *metanoia*.

To avoid the accent on regret for the past and to emphasize that it is divine working, this *metanoia* can also be called "creative transformation." God's effective presence known in Jesus is Christ, and Christ transforms. Most of the time, this transformation is very slight and hardly noticed either by the person involved or by others. But there are also dramatic instances.⁵

Whitehead shows us philosophically what is happening in creative transformation. In each moment, the prehension of God introduces a range of possibilities that go beyond, and are thus in some tension with, the mere outcome of the causal forces of the past. These new possibilities enable the occasion to bring unity out of the multiplicity of forces operative within it. God lures toward the realization of the best way of doing this. The rudiments of creative transformation are present in every occasion, at least wherever there is life.

But there are times when the many that are becoming one include elements that are in marked tension with what has constituted the personal self up until then. Newly encountered ideas may be incompatible with the old at the level at which they are presented. Either they must be silenced, or one must give up what has been valuable in the past. Otherwise there will be an unsatisfactory mixture of the two. There is, however, an alternative. One may move forward to a new level at which the two apparently exclusive alternatives are brought into a larger unity.

For this advance to take place, novel possibilities must play a large role. God's presence in the occasion must be peculiarly efficacious. When the novel possibility is actualized, the older value is retained, but in a larger whole that includes the other as well. One's personal identity, with its rootedness in tradition, is not diminished, but one's identity and tradition are expanded and transformed. This is growth, but growth of a specific kind. It is a full-fledged instance of creative transformation. Here Christ is peculiarly manifest.

Christ works most immediately and directly in individuals. By

working through many individuals, however, creative transformation can occur also in historical movements, including the Christian one. We discern Christ in the early church's assimilation of the best of the classical world, its later incorporation of scientific thinking and modern historical scholarship, its new appreciation of sexuality as it learned from the sexual revolution, the profound transformation of the Catholic church that occurred in the Second Vatican Council, and the transformation of American society through the leadership of the black church in the civil rights movement. We discern Christ also in political events such as the nearly bloodless transformation of the Union of South Africa into a democracy inclusive of all its people.

Christ's work is enhanced by the encounter with new ideas that prove convincing to Christians. The church did not accept all pagan thinking, only that which commended itself to Christian sensibilities. Its openness to science was not a concession to secular knowledge but an expression of its understanding of God as creator. Its repentance for its millennia-long teaching against sexuality was grounded in a recovery of biblical understanding. The Second Vatican Council was rooted in decades of study of tradition and the way it developed.

VI. The Nature of Faithfulness

Christians vary greatly in their judgments of what relation to the past constitutes faithfulness. One extreme view is that the Bible contains all truth and wisdom, that it presents one coherent position, and that our task is simply to believe what it teaches and to obey its injunctions. At the opposite extreme are Christians who quote Augustine to the effect that we should love God and do as we please, drawing the conclusion that acting as love calls us to do exhausts the meaning of faithfulness for us.

The major response to this situation within the contemporary American Protestant old-line churches is to call for "renewal." Renewal can take many forms. Those who reject repetition of outdated teaching and legalistic morality, but want to be faithful to the larger tradition, argue that we must recover important elements of our tradition that we have lost, but they differ as to which elements should be reemphasized.

This call is usually set against the background of a church that tends to conform to the world around it, a church whose inner divisions simply

mirror those of the surrounding society. In Germany this kind of church was described as “culture Protestantism.” Easily co-opted by Nazism, it stands as a warning to all future churches not to surrender their distinctive identity by uncritical acceptance of the surrounding culture. When belonging to the Protestant church is simply one of the things the culture prescribes, and when the church is not expected to challenge the culture or make significant demands on its members that put them in tension with the culture, then we have culture Protestantism. There is a great deal of culture Protestantism in our American churches today.

In its most general form, the argument is not that the church should replicate any particular earlier form. It is that it should truly be the church, having its own integrity in contrast to whatever social norms emerge in the society. Its thinking and practice should grow out of its own sources and traditions, not simply reflect the cultural environment. Instead of doing market research to determine what people want and then adapting itself to fill those needs, a renewed church would make its own judgments as to what people need. To this point there is broad agreement among serious Christians.

There are, however, two major ways, other than simple repristination, in which the church can move to realize this end.

One is *renewal* as such, emphasizing the deepening of the distinctive character of Christianity in some separation from the culture. The other is *transformation*, including renewal, but only as a step toward the development of new forms.

The most interesting form of renewal is that discussed in Section II as cultural-linguistic theology. The type of transformation that I call creative transformation has been described in Section V. These have been presented as two forms of postmodern thinking about the nature of the church. This section will explore them somewhat further with special reference to their implications for policy.

The cultural-linguistic school issues a richly informed call for renewal. Instead of adopting the language of the wider community, a renewed church would recover its own symbols and live deeply into them. These symbols would not have to be translated into some other language, because people would come to find that they provide their own meaning, that they interpret the world in their own way. Where the distinctive teaching of the church calls for action or protest beyond its borders, Christians will act. But their chief responsibility is for the faithfulness of the church in its own life, not for the solution of the

world's problems. Until they know who they are and how this is rightly expressed in action, they do well to work on their own renewal.

A renewed church would make no effort to dominate society. It would support the full freedom and equality of other groups and organizations, religious and nonreligious. It would not seek to proselytize or convert or to gain advantages for itself through government action. On the other hand, it would have little interest in cooperating with other groups or in engaging in dialogue with them. Its focus would be on its interior revitalization and faithfulness.

Understanding the church as a cultural-linguistic system can allow changes on the surface, but such a system has an unchanging deep structure. Whatever changes occur must conform to that structure. Accordingly, although Christians will not attempt to impose their views on the larger culture, traditional patterns of moral behavior are likely to be supported in the inner life of the church.

A renewed church would not concern itself with whether its actions were liberal or conservative according to the politics of the outside world. It would act as its traditions and teachings require. On issues of race its position would be unequivocally for full equality and participation of all in the life of the church. The Bible and the tradition provide no justification for racism.

But with regard to the issues now dividing the church, renewal is likely to be traditional. An example is physician-assisted suicide. Suicide is not an issue on which the Bible speaks directly, but the tradition has opposed it strongly. One can discern here part of what renewalists see as the deep structure of Christianity. It is committed to the affirmation of each individual's life. It is firmly against any practice that, for temporary gain or advantage, cheapens life. It calls for the community to surround any who are suffering with its love and support and to encourage them to face the ordeal with courage. To do otherwise would be to abandon the fullness of Christian life and to compromise with the wider culture.

The alternative to renewal is transformation. It cannot occur apart from deepening the church's rootedness in the tradition. Without that, efforts to transform would be likely to lead to a culture Protestantism that is clearly faithless to Christ. The ideal of transformation follows from the understanding of the church as a sociohistorical movement. Such a movement maintains identical elements over long periods, but it is also always changing. For transformationists there is no essence or deep structure to block such change. One cannot specify in advance what changes will occur and what will remain the same.

Change is of many types. Some of it is bad. The loss of distinctive moorings and the assimilation to the culture that renewalists rightly bemoan are examples of destructive changes. Against them Christians should stand fast. But there are other changes that are called for by the gospel itself. As noted previously, *metanoia* is a key biblical name for the needed change.

Metanoia means taking a new direction. It is evoked by the contrast between what is and what might be—what may become. It is, thus, oriented to a new future, what Jesus named the realm of God. To engage in *metanoia* by orienting ourselves to that new future is in some measure already to participate in it.

Section V proposed that this *metanoia* be called “creative transformation” and that Christians identify this transformation with what God does in them. The paradigm instances are those in which Christians encounter challenging differences and need to incorporate new insights without weakening their commitment to their own truth and wisdom. Creative transformation occurs through God’s gift of a novelty that enables people to encompass the newly encountered wisdom by moving to a larger vision. Where creative transformation occurs, there is Christ.

Viewing the church and Christ in this way leads to judgments about norms for the Christian movement that differ from those of the renewalists. There is agreement that Christians need to recover our rootage, but how we do so depends on a more comprehensive picture of both our origins and our goals. Part of the goal proposed here is to recover sufficient vitality as a Christian movement that we can encounter the vast wisdom generated outside the Christian tradition and be enriched by it.

The Christian movement that results from serious learning from others will be quite different from the more isolated and exclusivist one of which we are heirs, but it will not have lost its continuity. What has been truly learned in its own history will not be forgotten. It will not be less Christocentric than it has been, but it will find in Christ not so much a reason to defend past ideas and practices as the power and motivation to open ourselves to new challenges. As we grow in this way, our faith in Christ will deepen. We will no longer divide our allegiance between Christ and other sources of wisdom.

This transformationist understanding of faithfulness leads to different results with respect to currently troubling issues. Physician-assisted suicide was used previously as the test case for renewal. It will serve here as well.

When the church, as a sociohistorical movement stemming from the Jesus-event, encounters new ways of thinking in the culture around it, it must decide whether it is called to change. If the new ways of thinking do not strike it as having merit, as in the case of new movements of white supremacy, the church responds with principled opposition. But if the new ways of thinking contain ideas with which it has not previously dealt, ideas that on the surface have merit, then it is called to study with an open mind.

Physician-assisted suicide has this latter character. It responds to a problem, now common, that was rare in the past, that of people continuing to live when they prefer to die. Whereas death was once almost always an "enemy," coming before it was wanted, today it is often a longed-for friend. Whereas when death came too soon, physicians rightly prolonged life as long as possible, now that it often comes too late, physicians should help patients who responsibly seek their assistance to die.

To take this position is to deny that human life as such is of absolute worth. It is to say that helping people to fulfill their purposes is sometimes of greater importance than keeping them alive. Love and respect for others is expressed better by taking their wishes seriously than by imposing on them one's own sense of the worth of prolonging their lives. For the transformationist, love of the neighbor calls us to take her or his desires as a claim upon us, setting aside rules or supposed absolutes that prevent us from doing so.

For a transformationist, the fact that there is no explicit support for suicide in the tradition does not count against it in a changed situation. Reaffirming old views, just because they have been strongly established for a long time, is not faithfulness to Christ.