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On Interpreting the Christian Story

The 10th Annual Greenhoe Lectureship, 1976

These lectures were given at Louisville Seminary, and although Frei spoke from rough notes which have not been persevered, an audio tape was made. Frei attacks 'story theology' before returning to the subject matter of both EBN *and* IJC*, the latter in a Wittgensteinian vein. Frei described these lectures in a letter to his hosts later that year as an attempt to push the project of* IJC *'a little further'. LPTS Audio Cassette, Cass: Greenhoe, 1976. CPH 1976h.*

1. Story, Fact and Mystery: A Reflection on the New Testament

Introduction

President Nelson, Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm honored to be here. I didn't know my life was going to be laid out before you so thoroughly.[1] The only thing that President Nelson forgot to tell you is the most interesting thing about me, and that's that I'm master of a residential college at Yale[2] that has attached to it 420 undergraduates; and the reason I mention that is that I'm on sabbatical once again (which seems to be a perennial state of affairs, but this time I earned it, after being in charge of 420 undergraduates). As masters and wives do we gave a reception for our temporary successors, who happen to be a husband and wife both of whom are professors of psychiatry. One of the undergraduates came up to them at the reception and said, 'So, you're both psychiatrists; I wonder what that says about this college, that it takes two psychiatrists' and the new incumbent, not to be outdone, said he had once done something like what he was about to undertake; he had once been in charge of a four hundred bed mental hospital. I suddenly knew exactly what he was talking about.

It is therefore nice to be able to sail under a different flag tonight. I'm going to be completely academic; I hope you don't mind. And for the more liberated spirits among you I'm a little bit traditional; I hope you don't mind that: it's not that I mind liberation in anybody else, it's just that *I'm* unliberated. And so the talk is going to be traditional academic theology. I hope you'll bear with me because no matter how well I prepare I don't like to read from a manuscript; I have to work it out from the notes.

Story Theology

Theology has always been a matter of fads, and I want to talk a little bit about one fad. There's an awful lot of publication, argument and writing about something that calls itself 'story theology' and I would like to simply start off and suggest that when I am talking about the Christian story, the interpretation of the Christian story, I am not talking about that; and yet it is worthwhile to say a word or two about it. Why is story such a fashionable subject amongst some theological folk – and I think also amongst some ministers and others? It is due in large part to the new interest that all of us have, I think, in the relationship between psychology and Christianity – there isn't a minister, I'm sure, who doesn't have that interest – and the curious and renewed interest not so much in Freudian but in Jungian psychology, with its directing of our attention to the great unconscious myths of the race.

We tend to go on from there to say that man is a myth-making, a symbol-creating animal. And we have seen a lot of that in theology. I need only remind you of the enormous part that the notion of the symbol plays in Paul Tillich's theology. (There's another one that's just come out, a young theologian at Chicago, David Tracy – a remarkably fine book in theology, *Blessed Rage for Order: Prolegomena in Theology*,[3] where again the suggestion is very similar to the sort of thing that Tillich suggests to us.) You remember that Tillich's suggestion is that symbols do something for us that concepts, or that rational ideas that classify, do not do. Symbols, myths and stories evoke in us a sense of our ultimate concern. And one never knows whether it is ultimate concern or concern with the ultimate. David Tracy, unlike Tillich and yet very similar to him, says that symbols (and stories as symbolic expressions in narrative form) are the natural linguistic expressions for expressing human 'limit situations' or 'limit experience' by which he means very much the same thing that Tillich does: concerns with the ultimate; concerns and expressions which cannot, as I say, be reduced to pure conceptual form. And of course such symbols are not to be taken literally. (Remember there was an old expression that Reinhold Niebuhr used to use about the biblical narratives. He said we must use the words of the Bible *seriously* but not *literally*.) If, in other words, one wants to have it – as I suspect many of us do – both ways: if one wants not to demythologize in the sense that one robs the symbols of their significance, and yet one does not want to take them literally, then one of the ways to treat the Bible is precisely as embodying in symbolic expression the limit experience of the Hebrews and the early Christians.

Now why should this be so popular amongst some theologians and preachers interested in psychology and so on? Well, there are various reasons but let me suggest a philosophical or theological one. It perpetuates a tradition

with which we have been familiar in theology, especially in Protestant theology for 175 years ever since Schleiermacher and Kant (and now in Catholic theology, since the Catholics, I think, are trying to recapitulate 175 years of Protestant theology in one decade, for better or worse). In this tradition we have understood theology to be in some sense an expression of, or a report about, the religious character of man. And if one wants to talk about that, there are endless ways of doing it, but one way of doing it is to suggest that man is unique because he is a symbol-creating animal.

All theologians who stand in this tradition, which begins with a general anthropology, a general doctrine of man (it does not end there but it begins there) are in some sense also suggesting that religious statements and, derivatively, theological statements have a specific character. That is to say, they are *indirect*. All religious statements are unlike either scientific or metaphysical statements in that – as I think every introductory theological class is taught – they are not direct characterizations of what they talk about. That is to say, we say that 'God is…' then we add all sorts of things: we may say that 'God is love', we may say that 'God is righteous'; or if we are terribly traditional and not process theologians we may say that God is impassible (I didn't say impossible, I said impassible: that he is not subject to change or to being affected by anything external), and so on and so on. When we say these things in the tradition of Schleiermacher, in the tradition of theology that begins with anthropology, what we are doing above all is making a statement about the relationship between God and the religious man – let us simply say God and the human being. All statements about God are statements about the religious or limit situation, if you will – about the relationship between God and man, rather than about God himself.

I think it can be claimed that in this tradition the only thing that can genuinely be said as a straightforward statement about God is that he is transcendent. That is to say not that he is absolutely out of communication with us, but rather that his manner of being related to us is not the manner of an objective being 'in a super-world a world above this world', as Tillich used to like to say. It is not the fashion of a super-being in a world above this world relating himself to us. No. This above all is what one wants to suggest is *not* the case in the ultimate relation the relationship between God and man. One does not want to create God in the image of a finite object, therefore one says, Don't think of what is beyond the limit of our situation literally, don't think of it therefore as a world beyond this world; think of it as a depth dimension, an ultimate dimension to *this* world. Sometimes a shorthand formula is found for this sort of thing: 'Think of God as subject rather than object' is one of the ways of putting this. Think of God, the divine human relation, as a dimension that we discover at the limits of our own experience, rather than as a world that we find placed above the finite world in which we live.

Now let me press it just one but further. There is one more thing that one could say here. If one talks this way about the divine–human relationship, obviously one builds the notion of story into the relationship itself. The story has really two aspects to it: the story is itself the *relation* (our life-story is in some sense a coded form of the way we experience the ultimate), and the story is itself the *code*. The story is not only the *shape* of the experience the story is also the *verbal expression* of the experience. I use the word 'experience' a little hesitantly; nonetheless I think it fits.

What one finally has to say about this anthropology, this doctrine of man, in which man is basically and generally related to God, is that it finally speaks about a self that lies ineffably, for any expression, behind all expressions. For this kind of theological thought it is valid to raise that question that we used to raise when I taught in seminary twenty years ago (and we were always thinking we were terribly profound when we said it): 'Who am I? What is my true identity?' 'Well, simple! I am *me,* you know. I am also father of certain people, and I have a certain job and so on.' 'Don't give me that! Who am I *really*?' And when one raises that question one asks about that mysterious self which is related to itself, and related to the ultimate, always through symbols, and cannot get in touch with itself directly in any other way. It is a self, to use the language of the Nineteenth Century, that has to be mediated to its own deep roots through symbol and stories – to its own depth-experience.

There's a positive and a negative aspect to this. The negative aspect first. We used to think up until the Eighteenth Century that the self is a kind of spiritual substance just like physical substance; you know; there's the body, the philosophers of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century used to say, and there is the mind. And Descartes and Leibniz and Spinoza all had some problems as to how they would relate the body and the mind but they had no question that that is how see the human being, as made up as either two substances or two aspects of substance, body and mind. Then Kant came along and suggested that is the wrong way to look at the self – and Schleiermacher followed him and Hegel did too. The self is not another substance. The self, Kant said, is a *perspective* on all objective existence including its own body, including its own psychophysical organism; but it is not another aspect of this same configuration, it is a perspective on it. It is not a substance; it is a subject, it can never be an object. It is a perspective on things. It is my ineluctable perspective from which I see the whole world. It is that ineluctable perspective which is my self in this world.

But I am not part *as* subject of this same object world. So the negative task of this self that symbolizes and mediates itself to itself through symbols is to avoid again making the self a substance. And the positive aspect of it is – something that was said particularly in late nineteenth-century philosophy – that this is a way of claiming the uniqueness of the human being, and a way of

claiming that the only way that we know the human being is a way that is different from the way we know anything else. And *story* is one of the ways.

Now this is a long way round, but I think it is worth it as a negative counterpart because it is a fascinating tradition, and in some ways a great tradition. I would say that what I have just been describing to you is the tradition of liberalism in Christian theology. This is the kind of reasoning which traditional liberalism – at least one great part of it, for there are some other kinds of liberalism – functions in theology. If I may invoke the name Karl Barth here – if it's not a heresy to say it here – and ask what Barth revolted against when he revolted against liberalism, then it was the kind of thing I have described to you, the kind of anthropology and its relationship to God strained through the apprehension of an ultimate dimension in human life and consciousness and experience: that is precisely what Karl Barth rebelled against, and it would have included, had he lived long enough to see it, story theology. (He had begun to hate fads by the time his life ended; he saw several of them, including the 'death of God' theology which he compared once to the foam from two glasses of beer, one of which was entitled 'Bultmann' and one 'Tillich').

The Doctrine of the Spirit and the Doctrine of Christ

But I want now to switch. When I use the word story, and speak of the interpretation of the Christian story, I am speaking about something else, which has deep roots in the Christian tradition but also deep roots in a modern tradition in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century theology. There have been two topics, generally speaking, that have pervaded Christian theology in mainline theology in Europe, Britain and America in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (It may be changing now, but at least traditionally this has been true). One has been the doctrine of the Holy Spirit; that may sound a little surprising but in point of fact what I have just been suggesting to you can be translated into terms of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, immediately, directly and very simply. Let me suggest that when one thinks that the basic way of being human is one's self-consciousness, one's depth experience, and then asks about the nature of ones relationship to God, then the answer of course is that God is present in, with, and through, and at the limits of, precisely that experience of depth, that experience of a limit, an ultimate limit to all our endeavors, to the ultimate limit of our consciousness – *that* is where God is present. And when one says that, the best way to designate what one means by that in theological terms is that the presence of God is conceived of as the presence of Spirit in, with, and through us individually and communally. But that has been only one of the topics, and incidentally was the topic that the Nineteenth Century wrestled with. The Eighteenth Century wrestled with

another topic that came in a most disturbing relation with that topic. The Eighteenth Century wrestled with the topic of Christology; that was the other central doctrine. But the central doctrine of Christology was not given to the Eighteenth Century in the traditional form of the incarnation of the godhead in two natures in one person. That metaphysical way was gone for the Eighteenth Century; in the eighteenth-century discussion the question was constantly, 'What is meant by revelation?' and 'How do we know that it is true?' I have no desire to go into that issue, but the fiercest attack in the Eighteenth Century was on the notion of revelation, and if you attacked the notion of revelation you attacked it centrally at one point: you attacked it at the point of Jesus Christ. And we have all heard about the distinction between the religion *of* Jesus and the religion *about* Jesus. In the Eighteenth Century it was believed that the religion *of* Jesus was the religion of any moral religious hero – except more distinguished. It was the true example of what human religion ought to be, but it had been perverted by Paul into a religion in which Jesus became the God-man. And Christian theologians had to defend themselves constantly; they had to argue constantly concerning the notion of revolution (a) that it is a notion that makes sense – a supernatural revelation by which God communicates his truth in an historical series of events or an historical story, namely those told in the Bible; and (b) that it is conceivably true, or that there is evidence for its factual truth. It was in the Nineteenth Century that David Friedrich Strauss wrote the *Life of Jesus*, but the problem that led to it was the problem of historical revelation and the reliability of the Bible that was raised in the Eighteenth Century.

The Literal and the Figural Senses

In the process, the Christian story became interpreted in a variety of ways. And on that I would like to spend a few moments. I have to advertise my own wares here: This is what I have written about, so I know something about it. (An expert is a man from out of town who has written about whatever it is that no-one else either writes or reads about.) The Christian story, the story of the Bible, received an enormous shift of interpretation in the Eighteenth Century. Before that there had been, especially in the Reformation (and especially in the man who ought to be – whether he is or not –your patron saint, John Calvin) there had been a strong emphasis on the literal sense. And by 'literal sense' Calvin and Luther also meant something very interesting. The literal sense of the story meant for Luther and Calvin something that I might title as *literary*-literal not *grammatical*-literal. It does not mean that every word was the precise name for whatever thing it named, and that every word was fit, every word was the right word, and that every word was true and not misplaced, breathed directly into the writer by direct inspiration. It didn't necessarily

mean that at all. What it *did* mean was that it was *literary*-literal, that is to say that it was the right description, not a symbol not an allegory – that it meant exactly what it said; that the biblical narratives described and depicted precisely what they meant to describe and depict. That is much forgotten these days but it is enormously important. For to the Reformers and to the Protestant Orthodox folk who followed them, until the end of the Seventeenth Century, this meant that the literal sense and the historical sense meant exactly the same thing. If the meaning of what is written is exactly what it says, and if it is not either allegorical or symbolic or anything else but what it says, and if it is a story, then it is a true story, an historical story. That was, in a certain sense, the heart – or at least belongs to the very heart – of Protestant and I think indeed traditional Christian pre-critical interpretation.

So much was this the case that the other sense that the Reformers and others gave to scripture, namely the *figural* sense, was regarded as being of the same kind as the literal sense. Remember what the figural sense is: there are certain things, or certain occurrences, or concepts, or whatever, in the Old Testament (say the law, or Noah's ark) which are what they are; they mean in their own right – and yet even though they mean in their own right they are also figures that will be fulfilled in what they prefigure. So you see the literal sense actually went hand in hand with the figural sense – that's the point, and that meant that you could read the Old Testament in such a way that you saw Christ prefigured in it and yet could at the same time also affirm that you believed in the literal sense and not in anything else. For figuration the figural sense had more to do with the literal sense than it had to do with allegory. When the reformers said that they found Christ in the Old Testament as both Luther and Calvin said, this was in no sense an *allegory* for them, it was a *figural* interpretation of the Old Testament.

You find something of this still in modernity; you find it done very imaginatively in volume II/2 of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* in a whole long section (he has nothing but long sections) entitled 'the old testament witness to Jesus Christ': a highly imaginative figural interpretation of passages from Leviticus. And it is not at all old-fashioned; you will find it startlingly modern, startlingly like what a good literary critic might do.

The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative

Now, when things changed drastically in the Eighteenth Century, story began to mean something else. The narratives and that which they are about began to separate. The literal sense was understood to be an argument for something else. Let me try to explain this, because it's a little difficult. The governing British philosophy, which I think is as good a philosophy as any to claim as being the philosophical backdrop of biblical criticism, was empiricism. The

originator, more or less, of British empiricism was John Locke. John Locke suggested that we have two kinds of ideas; he called them ideas of *reflection* and ideas of *sensation*. Forget about the ideas of reflection; it is only the idea of sensation that counts. The idea of sensation means that any idea we have we receive through our senses. There's the famous metaphor that the mind is an empty blackboard on which the senses inscribe with chalk whatever they want, but there's also the claim that each idea, since it comes from the senses, comes from the outside in such a manner that there is something 'out there' which is responsible for all our ideas. He called this thing out there 'substance'. And the idea in some way represents the substance as given to us through the senses.

What happens to the unity of literal and historical sense that we had from the reformers? They split apart now. The literal sense now is that sense which refers us to something 'out there' which is literally represented by the story. The story, say the Gospel story, has not only a meaning now; the Gospel story has a subject matter. The story refers to something outside itself, and that subject matter outside itself now is not only the meaning, but that subject matter if it is history can also be verified in various ways, or it can be disconfirmed by evidence. And from this notion historical criticism springs. I think logically it becomes more complex, but this is I believe how it begins.

If you now want to hold scripture still to be true in the Eighteenth Century, what do you say with regard to the story, the story of Jesus in particular; since the centre of Christian belief is that Jesus is the divine revelation in history as attested by the Bible? You have certain options. Some people said that the subject-matter of the Bible, what the words refer to, is really a series of natural events that were erroneously reported. If you don't believe in miracles (and remember in the Eighteenth Century you were haunted by the question of miracle) and yet you want to give the Bible the benefit of the doubt, you say, 'Well, what they say there when it is written that Jesus walked on water is in fact that the disciples saw him moving in the morning mist by the side of the lake, as in good eighteenth-century fashion he was getting his lecture ready for that day, walking up and down, and the distance seemed foreshortened, and being either superstitious or something they translated that into his walking on the water. In other words, *something* took place, but it was *natural*. A historical fact was there, but it was not the fact that was reported in the story. These people are called naturalists.

Then there were of course supernaturalists, the folk who became something like our fundamentalists – and it is interesting to note that in the Eighteenth Century these folk were *modern*, because they bought the new philosophy, they bought the notion that evidence was relevant to estimating the truth; they said 'No, it is perfectly evident that the Gospel writers are intelligent, sincere, and not deceiving folk, and therefore what they wrote is bound to be a correct and

not a distorted report.' Like the naturalists they believed that the subject matter or referent of the stories is historical happening, historical occurrence, space-time occurrence, but it is the space-time occurrence literally reported. But you see that in both cases the story's meaning is now found outside the story itself, in that to which it refers, that which lies outside it.

This was followed by certain folk in the late Eighteenth Century who discovered the theory of myth. They suggested that the true meaning of the Biblical stories, especially the miraculous stories, is neither the natural event nor the supernatural event but rather the folk-consciousness of the people who told these things perfectly honestly. If you want to get at that meaning, you will have to demythologize it. Demythologization was invented in the late Eighteenth Century and not in the middle of the Twentieth Century. Again, the meaning of the story lies outside the story.

Now there were several other such. The point is in each instance that the representation and that which it represents have a gap between them. What I want to suggest is that the striking thing about many of these stories – and I suggest that you re-read your Gospel of Luke as perhaps the paradigmatic instance of what I'm talking about – is that the story itself has, if I may put it this way, a startlingly *realistic* quality; that is to say, whether miraculous or non-miraculous events are being reported, they are being reported as though the author is saying, 'I mean what I say, whether or not something happened.'

That is to say that, in a certain sense at least as literature the case may be made for taking these stories neither symbolically, nor as having a natural or supernatural referent beyond themselves, nor as myth, but precisely as saying what they mean. Now, that sense of the biblical story says something very, very different from the sense of man as story-bearer or symbol or myth-bearer which I started with; it is in fact the exact reverse. It says that, quite apart from what a historical critic might do, at the level of interpretation the story ought to be taken for what it says and not as a symbolization of a New Testament religious limit or depth experience. And what I am suggesting you see is that it is precisely this, namely, the sense of the story as it is, which became lost in the kind of theology that began to think of theology as based on a general anthropology; the sense of the story is lost; the sense of the realistic story is lost even in that extension of liberal theology which is called story theology.

Reading Realistic Narrative

What would an alternative interpretation, however, be like? 'Does this mean,' one wants to say, 'that the story makes sense only as literature? Does it make sense only literally? Do I have to believe it literally?' Let me remind you that these are questions that one wrestles with perennially; they are not simply done away with. The sense of a story in a realistic story is precisely this, that it

makes sense always cumulatively; it is like any realistic historical narrative, in that it does not have a subject matter that you can state apart from the narrative itself, just like you cannot state what a history is about apart from the historical narrative itself.

If we say, for example, that Jesus is the Christ, or if we say simply Jesus Christ, what we mean by that is exactly the story of the enactment of his life and death and resurrection. He is not Jesus Christ apart from that story of his. It is precisely in that story that he is the Christ. And this already begins to suggest something of where the difference is located between consciousness or liberal theology and what I am trying to shape. The self in the consciousness theology is precisely that: a consciousness perspective on the world. In a realistic story the self is a specific agent. There is no *general* anthropology here; the self is a *specific* agent who is what he does, not the consciousness lying behind. He is what he does and what is done to him, so that (if I may put it in theological terms) Jesus Christ the person is nothing other than the enactment of his person in his work. Who is Jesus Christ in the story? Not a messianic consciousness: no, he is the obedient Christ who died and rose again. He is what he does and what is done to him.

But now if you go on from there and say, 'What about the historical facts here?' – what facts? Do we know what the facts are outside of the description? Remember what facts were for the empiricists: facts for the empiricist were always those separate occurrences, quite apart from the description, quite apart from the story itself – those separate historical, empirical occurrences which could be confirmed or disconfirmed by independent evidence. What are the facts that are being referred to here? *They* are facts that we *cannot* have apart from the story. That is precisely one of the most important things about a realistic interpretation of the Gospels.

I'll put it in the words of a modern English philosopher who said, 'We have reality only under a description.' We have this reality only as it is rendered under the description, only as it is rendered by this narrative. It is as though the Bible, especially the Gospel story (if I may put it is this boldly, and following a theological friend of mine) were a non-fictional realistic novel.[4] It is as though it were a genuine narrative, the reality of which is not rendered by anything other than the description itself – the reality of which is indeed rightly called I think, for Christians, true fact, but rightly called true fact in a way which, although it may bear a family resemblance to that set of empirical facts we call history, is not identical with it.

The true fact of the Christian story, the centre of the Christian story, is that passage in which Jesus is most truly who he is, crucified and resurrected. The resurrection is not an ordinary historical fact in an empirical sense. Is it therefore only a symbol? I believe that is not the Christian vision, nor the Christian witness. The resurrection is a fact the truth of which Christians

affirm even though they have to say that the nature of it is not such that we are in a position to verify it, because even though we affirm it we do not think of it under the category of an ordinary empirical datum; it is a fact which is rendered effective to us through the story and we cannot have it without the story in which it is given to us. So that if I may end by quoting the distinguished British theologian Austin Farrer, it is as though the story of Scripture were like Christ himself; the Scripture is for the Christian in a mysterious way God's self-enacted parable.[5]

It as though we, ordinary human beings, were living in a world in which the true reality is one that we only grasp in this life as if it were for us a figure. Yes – but it is *we* who are the figures and it is that reality embodied by the resurrection that is the true reality of which we were only figures. It as though our sense of reality were to be turned about; it is what is depicted – the world, the one world, God's and man's, depicted in the Bible – which is real, and it is ordinary world history which is a parable, a figure of that reality. And that is the mystery it seems to me of our life into which the story and the facts fit together.

2. Interpretation and Devotion: God's Presence for us in Jesus Christ

The Essence of Christianity

One way to title what I'm about to say is simply 'Confession of a failure'; another would be to say 'Notes on leaving things the way they are.' And you will find in a little while that I mean the latter at least very seriously, and something of the former too. What I'm going to talk about is a problem that was set for me at least in two ways: both by my academic studies in the history of modern theology, and personally. Let me pick up the trend, the theme of what I want to say, from last night. I am unlike many theologians who are still, whether they like to say so or not (usually they like to say so) deeply troubled by the issue, 'Given the Gospel, embodied in the Bible written in an idiom so long ago – miracles, myth, and so on, and apparently a claim to exclusive salvation only in that name of Jesus Christ – how does one make *that* very austere and long-ago kind of message meaningful today? And by 'meaningful' they usually mean how does one allow it to be a *possibility*, how does one so bring out its content that it speaks to the deepest needs of – to quote an absolutely unheard of phrase – this secular age? In a certain sense, like most people I share that and yet there always seemed to me something callow and shallow about it that bothered me.

In my own perverse moments when I first read about the death of God theology that the real meaning of the Gospel is that God has died and we are

now released to live a full spontaneous life, my reaction was something like this: 'Well if that's what it takes, if that's the price you pay to make it relevant today, well then I'll go somewhere else.' (I never took it in its literal form terribly seriously, though it seems to me that the death of God theology did bespeak a certain problem. The problem might have been this – I simply propose it to you for consideration – that some ministers, theological students and theologians found it difficult to pray, and because they found it very difficult to pray they said God was dead.) But what I said to myself at the time was, 'Well, alright, if Christianity is going to go out (let us assume for a moment that it depends on what *we* do and not on the grace of God!) it's had a magnificent history and I'd rather see it go out with an orthodox bang than a liberal whimper.'

Now, I say that's perverse; I think one shouldn't divide the world into orthodoxies and liberalisms and things of that sort. But what I am saying is that for *me* the great problem was always this: how does one express, grasp, and speak – let's just simply say articulate – how does one articulate the sense of Christianity? What is its *essence*? A question that has disturbed and puzzled theologians certainly since the question was raised formally in the late Nineteenth Century by people like Harnack and Troeltsch, but before then too and since then too. And if the Bible has anything to do with that, how does one properly get the sense of the Bible? And I should hurriedly say obviously I do not think of the Bible as a simple straightforward unity; the Bible is our canon but that does not mean that the books are of one kind and they all say one thing. But one might find for oneself a certain centre in the Bible and says 'Here is where I find the Gospel more clearly expressed than in any other part; this shall be the centre for me of the canon'; and one might say that and then go on and say, 'I want to articulate that in such a fashion that it makes sense.' For *me*, that was the very first question: How can I grasp a part of the Bible so that I can be sure that I have its sense?

And then for me the question of its translation – to use that very common metaphor that theologians used strictly as a metaphor in the neo-orthodox period, especially in the 1950s, the question of how I can so translate it that it becomes meaningful, so that it speaks powerfully to a secular age – that for me is a secondary problem. The problem is for me to have some assurance that its sense is really what it says there; that I really understand what it says there. I'll let its meaningfulness take care of itself. That was the problem for me; that was the task for me.

And that is why I invested my time, my study, my pondering, my meditation, as deeply as I could in finding that part of the Bible in which it seemed to me I found a total coincidence – a total *identity* if you will – between what was *said* and what the words, the statements, the sayings were *about*. Many find the centre in St Paul; some find in Hebrews; Luther found it,

startlingly enough, as much in the Old Testament as anywhere (my colleague Jerry Pelikan likes to say that if Luther had been a modern seminary professor he would have been professor of the Old Testament); others find it in the Gospel of John; but to me it is in the Synoptic Gospels. There it seemed to me (wherever others found it differently) we have the identity of the account with what the account is about. And if I may recapitulate what I said last night very simply, it seems to me that in that case *Christology* is the centre of the New Testament. Lets put it this way: in a non-technical way a high Christology – a Christology very much focused on Jesus Christ as not simply the unique revealer but also the atonement through whose death and resurrection we and the whole world have life – that seemed, to me at least, what was being said there, and that was where I found it most of all.

Here as far as I could see we have in the form of a realistic story the rendering of our salvation – in the form of a realistic story which of course claims to be true. In that in the form of a story that claims to be true we have the rendering of our salvation; but if it is not true *that is still what it means*, and for me the problem of the meaning on the one hand and the truth on the other hand were quite distinct. Even if I could not believe in its truth I wanted at least to be able to say I know the meaning of that which I cannot believe. I *do* believe it, but in the end I would still say, regardless, 'This is its meaning.' I did not want, in order to be able to believe it, to reshape its meaning in such a way that it would render a truth that is acceptable to me. That seemed to me to be playing dirty pool.

And I did not for a moment think that in order to do this, in order to maintain what I hope would be some integrity in scriptural reading, that I had to turn fundamentalist; it did not seem to me for a moment that that was the case.

Christ's Identity and Presence

Now, it was then for me terribly important to raise the question, Who is Jesus Christ?, and to see that identity, the identity of Jesus Christ, rendered through the story of his life. If I may put it now in a somewhat more theological fashion and use the words of a friend of mine who told me what I had done. (You know how that is, we all have some very clear-headed friends and they often seem to us like that famous saying, of a man who said 'I have written a play, I'm having it translated into French because it loses so much in the original'.) He suggested that what I had written about was Jesus Christ *as the self-enacted agency of God*; the self-rendering, self-enacted agency of God; *that* is the identity of Jesus Christ that I had wanted to talk about.

Now, having said that, I then wanted to enter in again into the problem that modern theologians and many modern Christians talk about: 'How is he

present for us?' – and that's what gave rise to my title. I put it to myself in a very simple, perhaps rather naïve way, which ultimately derives from the ontological argument, of Anselm of Canterbury. I want to tell you how that came about, but let me simply state it: If Jesus is really who the Bible says he is; if that is his identity; then he *cannot not be present*. If he is who the Bible says he is then, having died once, he lives; he is in some manner present, here to us – to be sure in a very unique and unrepeatable manner, and yet he is.

And that, it seems to me, is one of the two things that the history of modern theology has all been about. Remember I said yesterday that there were two problems, two doctrines if you will, with which modern theology has always dealt? One was Christology – the endeavor to see if a unique revelation in history was a notion that made sense. But the other one was that, really, of the presence of God in Christ to our present age, or any given present age; *the presence of God in Christ now*. This I said was the essence of liberalism, and in a certain sense it is not only the essence of liberalism, in a certain sense it is also the essence of pietism – the endeavor to have him here, to be here with him now, to know him, to be living, and to convert my dead heart. It is a very modern preoccupation (and I think pietists in this sense are as modern as the liberals.)

Now when you occupy yourself with that then you raise some very disturbing questions. Because it may very well be (let me put it as simply as I can) that then one goes to church on Sunday constantly expecting not only something but *the* thing, if you will, to happen. One expects to have, in Wesley's terms, one's heart strangely warmed. That may be one way of suggesting what it is about, what one expects.

Or some believe that the presence of God is not a specific conscious experience. The general expectation in modern theology, as I suggested last night, as it endeavors to look on modern Christian religion in this secular age, has been to think that man is consciousness, basically at the deepest level, and that there are limit situations, and limit experiences in those situations, in which we also have to use limit language (which is what I suggested symbolism, stories, and myths are usually thought to be). That is the only way in which we can express the impingement of a God who does not impinge through the statement simply of doctrine – for to have faith is not simply to repeat a creed, we have always been told; to have faith is to have a living faith that makes an impact now, and in some sense it is thought that God makes that impact now through certain limit situations, situations in which we may not be aware of anything but we trust he is there in the darkness, perhaps. We trust he is there when we are driven to the ultimate of our reflections on ourselves and our situations, say in the presence of death. In such situations, when we say 'I trust', *that* perhaps is what it is like to have the presence of God.

The presence of God here and now has in some sense to be the same presence that was articulated in the enacted identity of Jesus Christ. That seems to me have been, if anything, the single statement of the modern problem in theology. It has been stated in any number of ways, and some solutions to the problem have been stated in any number of ways.

For example: Kierkegaard spoke about this as 'being contemporaneous with Christ', the disciple at second hand who is contemporaneous with Christ, through – and he proudly confessed it – through a paradox: this is something we cannot conceptualize. This is something we cannot think. To enact the presence of God here is a paradox, something paradoxical in virtue of the absurd, as he said; it is to understand faith as a risk; it is to risk a life *as though* this were true; as though that offence that was committed way back there of a man calling himself God and being put to death helplessly – as though that were the presence of God now; that is absurd, that is paradoxical, and faith is the decision to say, 'Yes!' to that in one's life and not simply to profess it externally as a creed about something called reality; it is a *subjective* and *existential* truth. That's one way of expressing the issue, that deeply religious and theological issue, and a suggestion for how one can meet it.

We can also follow Paul Tillich, who said that there is a given or miraculous side to revelation – but he went on to say there is no revelation that is not *received*, and he called the receiving side of revelation 'ec-stasy' (and usually when theologians want to be profound they put a hyphen between two symbols; there is whole hyphenated theology that grew up after the first and second world war): standing literally outside oneself; being driven to the limits of ones being, apprehension and life and then being driven beyond them; that is what receiving revelation is like. So what we have here is first of all the objective side or the miraculous side of revelation which Tillich compressed into one phrase: 'the biblical picture of Jesus as the Christ', and that is if you will the content of revelation; but in addition to biblical language expressing revelation there is also a certain power in biblical language, power in the picture – and its power is that it *occasions* what it *expresses*. It occasions the very power that is inherent in the picture itself. So the meaning of that biblical picture, that story from the past, is at least in part that it has an ec-stasy-lending power for us today. That is perhaps one way of bringing the two together.

Now notice in both cases – in Kierkegaard and in Tillich – what I have suggested here is that there is a way of explaining a solution to a problem. First you state the problem and then you suggest a possible answer to it. Or if you will it is the supplying of a certain technical or theological conceptual frame for a religious answer, supplying a technical theological language which will be explanatory of what goes on in the meeting of this problem. Here's where everything seemed wrong to me. It seems to me that the Christian does not see a technical problem here; he sees a religious problem here, not a

technical problem. But more than that, it seems to me that if there is a problem here then the notion of meeting it with a conceptual explanation is a frighteningly misleading one; it seems almost as if the Bible itself dealt in concepts; it seems almost as if the Bible dealt in specific technical concepts – and I had been taught by a certain Austro-English philosopher, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, that language doesn't often work in technical concepts; language can be conceptual but it doesn't often work in technical concepts.

But I still had my own problem and that was that it seemed to me that having affirmed that I understood what a biblical articulation of the identity of Jesus Christ was, I still, if I were a Christian believer, had the problem of talking about him as present, and admitted – I *had* to admit to myself, I think – that this is not an easy thing to do. It is especially difficult to do if one tries then to *explain* by translating the notion of presence into some explanatory concepts. That is precisely what I think cannot be done, and what I think need not be done. There is, it seems to me, a very ordinary way of talking about the presence of Christ.

Ordinary Christian Language

And now let me hark back to what I said at the beginning – namely, that I was going to title this lecture, 'Notes on leaving things the way they are'. One of the tasks, in fact *the* task of Christian theology is simply to talk about the way Christian language is used by Christians, and to ask if it is being used faithfully. The theologian simply examines contemporary use of Christian language to see if it is faithful to what he senses to be the traditional use or the biblical use – usually some combination of the two: the use the Church has made of its source, namely the Bible; that is what theology is about.

Notice that I do not say that it is the task of the theologian to *translate* the language of the Bible, to *translate* Christian language, into a language that will be relevant to our situation. I think the whole metaphor of translation there is misleading; it is an erroneous way of looking at it – though I don't have time right now to look into that. And furthermore it seems to me that at the centre, at what I took to be the heart of the Bible, it *means what it says* – so there is no need to translate it; no need to reconceptualize it. There may be a need to *redescribe* it, but that's a very different thing.

So it seems to me that when one talks about God's presence one is not trying to explain, one is trying a much more modest task; one is trying to step back and describe the use not of a technical language, but of an ordinary language, and a very specific ordinary language: the specific language of ordinary Christian usage. And that is what the word 'devotion' in the title is about. I use 'devotion' simply to circumscribe, to have a term for, *Christian language in use*. Christian language in meditation, in public worship, private

prayer, in the obedience of the moral life: Christian language in the public and private use of faith.

Now this is a totality-language – that is to say, it is a coherent language; it is held together by the usage of a community – to be sure a riven community, but a community nonetheless; and it is held together by the community's empowering agent who is one; but still it is a multifarious language. Faith itself is not a single thing to be defined. This is, I think, one of the half-hidden tensions between Lutherans and Calvinists very often: that Lutherans tend to think that there is perhaps a root form or root articulation or root expression in the life of faith; I think not, and I think I tend to be Calvinist there. If I understand Calvinism at all, Calvinism tends to think of faith – one finds it in the first book of the Institutes – as first of all a peculiar form of knowledge – but it is other things too. It is obedience, an obedience through the forgiveness of ones sins, an obedience to the law, for there is a third use of the law, and there is sanctification, and there is a kind of moral life. (Let me also say that I think this has profound social consequences, obviously – there is an obedience not only in the individual life, there is an obedience of society; we will be held to account for the things we have not done rightly. The church will be held to account; America is held to account; Russia is held to account; we are all held to account before the one God who is not the God of a single nation or group, not even of a single ethnic power, not even the God of a single sex.) Faith, then, is a knowledge; faith is an obedience; and faith is also a trust; it is a leap; it is a belief; but a belief in the very strongest sense, a belief in the existential sense of total commitment. But faith is not only total commitment; it is not only knowledge; it is not only obedience; and it is not the case that one of these is the root form and the others are derivative. Well – I think not.

The language of the church is, I am saying, a highly various language but it is a language in use. No ordinary language, no language, that is to say, that is not a technical language but an ordinary language embodied in life, is simple or straightforward. It is always a language which we *learn*. But how do we learn it? How do we learn the concepts that are embodied in that language? We learn them by using them, by speaking them. One of the marvelous and – to my mind – startling and liberating little sentences that Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote was when he said, 'Don't ask for meaning, ask for use.' There are technical languages, you see, in which the concepts – say the concept 'atom' – always means the same thing: it has a fixed, stipulated meaning; and when you deal with a language like that you can ask for the fixed, stipulated concept as a general term which runs by its definition and is always connected to other concepts by its definition. But ordinary language does not work that way; that does not mean that ordinary language doesn't have its own rules, but it is very difficult, in fact sometimes impossible to state the rules apart from the use; it is the ruled use that gives us the rules, and the rules may be highly various

depending on the use to which the concept is put in the context in which it is being used.

It is foolish to take a biblical concept (like 'God' or 'reconciliation' – any of the concepts of the Bible) and think that they function as though they were technical concepts – and yet many, many modern biblical commentators and many biblical theologians have done this. No-body has ever admitted that, but they have been treated that way as though the concept has a kind of unitary meaning – 'the biblical concept of revelation' (a word that's hardly ever found in the Bible), 'the biblical concept of peace', 'the biblical concept of God', 'the biblical concept of reconciliation'. Sometimes it is admitted that these words, these concepts may have a history – as the Bible is a book that has a very long history of its own – and yet even then it is as though the concepts have a history of their own apart from the social, religious, worshipping community context in which they are used, so that there is a certain accretion: 'In the pre-Hellenistic period here is what it meant'; 'Hellenism influenced it in such and such a way and it came over into the New Testament like that'. It is as though there were an *intellectual* history which was insulated and self-enclosed and gave us our concepts pure, and technical; and this is precisely what it seems to me is not the case.

I suggest even that the notion of 'presence' may be something that is actually a technical theological term, a technical concept rather than an ordinary usage.

Metaphor, meaning and understanding

We learn a language through the use of a language, and I want simply to keep for a few moments repeating that in a variety of ways. In regard to parables there is a great debate on whether parables are not really metaphors. Well, if they are, if it is metaphorical language, then what *is* a metaphor? Have you ever noticed that we all know what a metaphor is but as soon as you ask us to define it it someone runs out on us? We knew this was true about the notion of time; Augustine told us so: I know perfectly well what time is, but as soon as somebody asks me to define it, I'm in trouble. We know perfectly well in the ordinary usage which unites us, in our ordinary language, how to use a metaphor – even some strange metaphors. 'Violence is a metaphor for American life', some people who just cannot get tired of violence on the screen tell me; well alright maybe it is; I'm not quite sure I understand what the word metaphor means here, but maybe it is: there's a kind of an emblem here. Or – I'm still thinking of recent usage – 'Kent State was an obscenity'; I'd never heard before the late sixties or early seventies a public event called an obscenity; it was as though the word 'obscenity' took on a metaphorical meaning. Don't ask me to define it however; it struck me, whether I agreed

with it or not – and I happen to agree with it, if I understand it – that I knew, I understood what the metaphor 'Kent State was an obscenity' meant. But if you ask me to define a metaphor I'm not sure that I can do it for you. Again, the principle, if there is a principle here, is very simple; it is simply that we know the rules of ordinary, as distinguished from technical language, simply through use of the language.

Let me press on. There was a raging debate among literary critics in the early '50s about the meaning of 'meaning', with two distinguished critics making an inquiry into the topic. But once again – do we really use language like that? When we see an ordinary statement, is it really true that there are the words, and then in addition to the words there is the meaning of the words? Is the meaning something that is separable from the words themselves; is the meaning a container that the words, or the concepts, always carry round with them wherever they go? It seems to me that this is not the case. When I use the term 'meaning' I use a puzzle, what Wittgenstein called a verbal cramp, about some kind of an objective situation: the meaning is out there in the words.

Now let me use the subjective correlate to that: the word 'understanding'. What does it mean to understand? This is what hermeneutical inquirers, people who have been interested in theory of interpretation, have been asking themselves; what does it mean to understand? Well, perhaps, in ordinary language, it doesn't mean one single thing. Suppose you are having explained how a certain person misbehaved in public, was very offensive to his hostess one evening at dinner before startled company, and then a psychologist tells you that there were certain things about this man's home background that meant that there were some occasions that he half-remembers which triggered a certain kind of behavior. 'Ah, I see.' You say. Then you go on to say, 'Now wait a minute, there's still a question in my mind.' Let's take both of those. The expression 'Ah I see' is a kind of momentary analogy, simile, perhaps a metaphor for something that happens: a kind of mental event. 'Aha!' In fact, irreverently one may call it an 'Aha!' event: there was a whole series of those that some theologians (like Gerhard Ebeling and Fuchs) spoke of as something very profound, they spoke of them as 'speech events'; I hard a hard time understanding the technical language involved, and in plain metaphorical language what it always seemed to me that they were talking about was an Aha! event, an 'Ah I see!' – which we all experience. To make *something* of it is at once very important and rather platitudinous; to make an enormous amount of it is something that always puzzles me. That's *one way* of understanding: there are ways of understanding which are analogous to or like a mental event, like a sudden seeing.

But then we go on to say, 'There's still a question in my mind', and when I use that phrase 'question in my mind', am I saying that there is a mental,

internal equivalent to the kind of statement I could make when I say, 'The cat is in the room'? Is a question in my mind something mentally equivalent to a cat being in a physical place? We know it isn't so. There are times when understanding is not best compared to a mental event (especially since we are not only internal but also external beings, which is a very important thing to remember). It is not the case that we do something internally in a mental space first and then it reverberates physically. It is bad to think in those dualistic terms; it is dangerous; one submits oneself there unquestioningly to a very problematic metaphysic. But at the ordinary level it isn't the way understanding always functions. At the ordinary level, understanding sometimes functions the way we do when we do an arithmetic or a geometrical progression; somehow, however, 'to understand' there means being able to follow the rules, having a capacity to follow the rules; or, as Wittgenstein said, understanding in some situations is the ability to go on, rather than being a mental event or an Aha! event.

In ordinary language, understanding is not always the profound internal thing that it is sometimes taken to be by certain philosophers and some theologians too. I could go on, but alas I am getting very close to the end of the time. What I want to suggest is, then, that there is an ordinary language that we use in infinitely many contexts, and the common words by which we try to grasp what that ordinary language is vary from ordinary language to ordinary language. There is not a single simple paradigm for meaning; there is not a single simple paradigm for understanding – but there *is* simply a way of being able to say, 'We have learned the use of a given language.' It functions alright when we have learned how to use it. There is nothing wrong with the language. It doesn't have to be improved, it doesn't have to be 'translated'; it doesn't have to be put into new concepts; it functions just right. And what I am suggesting is that when we use the words, 'the presence of God', 'the presence of Christ', simply as ordinary believers, we are using not a technical language that has to be translated. We are using ordinary Christian language. How does one learn that language in its multifarious uses? I have suggested that one way of speaking about that language is to use the term 'faith'; and to say that 'faith' itself has several uses. How does one use that language? By living the life of the Christian community. And by doing those things that Christians, whether in the run-of-the-day life, or in a crisis, whether personal, or social, or even gigantically cultural, have always done: to use that language – the language of prayer, the language of creeds, the language of confession, the language of obedience, the language of trust and total commitment, and so on and so on – in the, I hope, not worn out channels that the church continuously and recreatively provides for us.

If one does this then I think one has got rid of a verbal cramp; one has got rid of a verbal cramp about the word 'presence'; one has got rid of a cramp that

makes one think that one has got to have an extraordinarily profound concept, or if you will an extraordinarily profound experience in order to be able to say, God is present. No. God is present to the world, through the church, outside the church, in the ordinary events, the ordinary reflections, the ordinary meditations, and even in the extraordinary meditations, say the meditations of the mystic as much as in the meditation of a totally non-mystical person like Pascal or Kierkegaard. God is present in these public and private events. If he is who he is, then there is really nothing to worry about. If his identity is that which he has given in the Scripture then one may speak about the Holy Spirit without recourse to an extraordinary experience or an extraordinary vocabulary.

One more thing. One of the problems that has agitated theologians in our day and time has been that when they've tried to define the essence of Christianity, they've come, ever since 1700, across two things, and we find an echo even where there are heresy trials in our own day and time. There are always two kinds of definition of Christianity. One will say you've got to believe certain things, and if you don't believe those then, no matter what your life is like, you're not a Christian: to believe is to confess certain things. Now, always, one goes on to say, 'I don't mean confessing them simply as a dead letter, as an objective truth – No, it's always confession in a living way' – but one's got to confess certain truths, and specifically that Jesus Christ is Lord and that God is enacted in him. Then there have been people who have said the reverse. Some have said it liberally; they've said that 'So-and-so may profess all the Christian belief in the world; he may be thoroughly orthodox, but what I saw him doing to his brother shows me that he is not a Christian.' That's the liberal way of putting it. Or there can be a more pietistic way of putting the same thing: 'So and so believes indeed that Jesus Christ is the Son of God but have you ever heard or seen him really testify in his life that he's been saved by the blood of the lamb? No. It just remains a profession of dead belief for him.' So you can state in a liberal or in a pietistic way that it is the living disposition that makes the Christian; or one can state that it is that which one believes in with ones living disposition that makes the Christian. And it has always been the case that it has been virtually impossible to pull these two things together. People have always started in their quarrels from one or the other. And theologians have always tried – and this again is one way of putting what theologians have tried to do in the modern times – they have tried to give us an explanation of how these things fit together. I am suggesting there is no need for an explanation. I am suggesting there *is* no explanation. I am suggesting that *there is no problem*. I am suggesting that this is precisely the function of Christian language; this is its character, its ordinary use, and, if you will, at the same time its uniqueness: it is both these things. They cohere; in the use of Christian language; in the use of Christian concepts, they are

given as being there together. To try to go to a level underneath them, you see, is precisely what I am saying is wrong, and is precisely where the technical theologians have been wrong. And we need to be released from that verbal and conceptual cramp.

The Christian language – this is one of the functions of the theologian, and this is why I think Barth was a great theologian – the Christian language is alright; it works alright, and the theologians task is to reflect on how it is actually being used, and whether people are faithful in using it in certain ways, not whether it can be explained or whether one can argue towards how it is possible. And now translate the example I just gave, of living disposition on the one hand and profession of belief on the other hand, into the terms that I used earlier: the living disposal of oneself – that's the presence of God; the belief – well, the form that belief takes is for me, and for many others, the identification, real identification, true identification of Jesus Christ. What I am saying is that I don't need to think about *how* he can be present; his identity and his presence are given together in the ordinary usage of Christian practice and Christian language.

So that is why, in talking about God's presence in Jesus Christ, all I could do was give you some unsystematic notes about 'leaving things alone'.

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1 [Frei had been introduced by way of a dry and detailed career summary.]

2 [Ezra Stiles College.]

3 New York: Seabury, 1975.

4 David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

5 Austin Farrer, 'Revelation', in Basil Mitchell (ed.), *Faith and Logic* (London: George, Allen & Unwin, 1957), p.98.