

Extra Christum Nulla Salus?

Mike Thompson

In canonizing the Christian story as divinely inspired and historically grounded in the texts of the New Testament, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, the Church succeeded in canonizing itself and affirming the Christian story. The Nicene Creed has roots in the Early Church long before its official approval at Constantinople in 381 and has been declared by the Church in its confessions as a summary of the κήρυγμα handed down by the apostles. Article VIII of the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England (1571) affirms the Nicene and the Apostles' Creeds as 'proved by most certain warrants of holy Scripture'. The Augsburg Confession (1530), the Formula of Concord (1576) and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-6) all re-express the central motifs of the creeds as being the teaching of the New Testament and the apostles. And more recently, the World Council of Churches has deferred to Nicea in calling itself a 'fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit'.¹ Most of the member churches of Churches Together in England acknowledge the two ecumenical creeds, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, and many use them in their liturgical worship. The creeds, together with the Bible, unify what constitutes the 'one Catholick and Apostolick Church'. Ordinands for ministry in the Church of England, for example, are asked to affirm their loyalty to an 'inheritance of faith' described as being 'uniquely revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds, which faith the Church is called upon to proclaim afresh in each generation'.²

It is not within the scope of this article to explore the theological doubts about the harmonization of creed and New Testament. Richard Hanson's admirable survey³ shows the extent of the debate and raises the question: 'How much of faithfulness to Scripture did the fathers of the fourth century sacrifice?'⁴ Similarly, I am unconcerned about the arguments concerning the historicity of the events to which the New Testament writers and the Nicene Creed subscribe, or indeed the Gagerian psychological explanations. For Hick and others, Jesus as God the Son

1 'Ecumenical Foundations: A Look at the WCC Basis' *One World* 107 July 1985 p 11

2 'Preface to the Declaration of Assent' *The Canons of the Church of England C15* (London: Church House Publishing 1993) p 96

3 R P C Hanson *Studies in Christian Antiquity* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1985)

4 Hanson p 249

incarnate is metaphorical or mythological language even though such language had come to be understood by the Christian mind not as symbols but as realistic propositions. Given that this background debate continues, the theological imperative is to recognize the faith dimension and the idea of the 'revelatory principle' at work within Christians throughout history, and to notice the unifying and schismatic responses by communities taking a realist view of the gospel propositions as expressed within the New Testament and the creeds. The New Testament is the Church's resource for the narrative of Jesus the man now exalted, his life, death and resurrection; it is the canonization of Christian faith and practice and the 'story' of the Church. Christian theology is inseparable from particular narratives. As Geerhardus Vos, among others, has argued, if Christianity were a philosophical system aimed at the spiritual enlightenment of humankind, or a code of ethics to be used as human suasion, then it would make little difference whether its founder were born of a virgin, walked on the water, healed the sick or rose from the dead.⁵

The Church has consistently acknowledged the authority of God's revelation in Christ and through the Scriptures. In *Called to be One*, the member churches of Churches Together in England 'agree that the only absolute authority is God, and that truth is mediated to us through the revelation of God in Jesus Christ recorded for us in the Scriptures, and through the present guidance of the Holy Spirit'.⁶ Whatever shortcomings the Nicene Creed and the New Testament may have, they are, theologically speaking, the core of the Church's inheritance and qualify the word 'Christian'. If this sounds presumptuous to the modern theologian, then one has only to look at historical theology and the exegetical tradition of ancient Christian orthodoxy to see that both 'Church' and 'Christian' have been defined by the core beliefs enshrined in the Creed and by the regular confession of the Creed throughout the Church's history.

Today, it is the Nicene Creed which forms the basis for participation in the Ecumenical Movement (given that there is no final agreement on the *filioque* clause). This point is substantiated by Richard Hanson, well known for his theological contribution to the Movement. Hanson is unequivocal in claiming that the Creed has formed the 'minds and life' of all contemporary denominations who accept it whether or not it forms part of their worship. He continues:

It forms an important bond between Orthodox, Roman Catholics and many non-episcopal bodies. It is the doctrinal basis upon which the

5 This summary of Vos *et al* is taken from Timothy George 'What we mean when we say it's true' *Christianity Today* 23 October 1995 p 19

6 The Theology and Unity Group of Churches Together in England *Called to be One* (Didcot: CTE 1996) p 28

Ecumenical Movement has lived; it is not simply the Bible which forms a bond between the participants in the Ecumenical Movement. There are thousands of Christians who devoutly respect the Bible but who execrate the Ecumenical Movement. It is the Nicene Creed and the dogmatic tradition represented by it that forms the true bond of unity in the Ecumenical Movement.⁷

It is this dogmatic tradition that enables the theologian to claim that there is a definable Christian faith which, according to the apostle Jude, 'was once for all entrusted to the saints' and is the ground for contending truth against heresy (Jude 3). Truth in Christian terminology is not simply an objective list of propositions calling for cognitive assent but is rather truth relative to the Christian's relationship to God in Christ. In the words of William Willimon: 'All truth, all truthful living is relative to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.'⁸ I appreciate that for some sociologists notions of truth and the faith claims of the Creed and the New Testament fall outside admissible evidence but others may proceed *as if* they were evidence. This study is an illustration of the narrative which may be discovered if one does proceed with these axioms.

What I am seeking to establish is that the Nicene Creed and the New Testament taken together can reasonably provide both a meta-narrative and a meta-discourse to the qualifier 'Christian' when applied to the Church, theology or ethics. Churches are governed by the qualifier 'Christian'. Their faith is Christian faith. Their faith is a faith in God as he has revealed himself in Christ and, juxtapositionally, faith in Christ as the revealer of God. The Nicene Creed explicitly states that 'in one Lord Jesus Christ' was 'Very God of very God' who 'was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, And was made man'. The words were written to describe a space-time crucifixion and a space-time resurrection. Together with the rich variety of Christological, Binitarian and Trinitarian models in the New Testament, it becomes clear that Christian tradition has carried the notion that Christ was *the* revealer of God rather than the more modernistic notions that Christ was *a* revealer of God. It is here that we begin to observe the cleavage in soteriology. More conservative (and most Roman Catholic parishes) hold to the traditional beliefs about Christ, whilst more inclusivist churches maintain a variety of views about Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ and the *Logos* traditions of the Early Church. Credal affirmations about Christ are not required to be realistically interpreted but are rather symbolic motifs to inspire personal reflection, religious emotion and worship of God. Evangelical churches warn against a more 'philosophical trend' in theology which moves away from this 'revelatory

7 R P C Hanson *Studies in Christian Antiquity* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark 1985) p 280

8 William H Willimon 'Jesus' Peculiar Truth' *Christianity Today* 4 March 1996 p 22

principle'. John Wenham, for example, espouses the narrow path of Christian thinking:

Christians can imagine that they can safely think their own independent thoughts whereas in fact they will think correctly only if they think God's thoughts after him. If they forsake submission to holy Scripture, they are back in the empirical swamp... The tale of modern theology is one long story of the successive capitulation of theology to each new fashionable philosophy.⁹

Wenham is here responding to Christians who regard the realist notion of Jesus as God the Son incarnate as metaphorical or mythological language and present non-realist explanations of the resurrection-event. Viewing Christ in less deific and supreme terms permits a soteriology unleashed from its pre-critical past with its classical Christology and then reworked into an inclusivist or pluralistic framework.

The divide amongst Christians becomes sharper still when a Christology is defined in terms which avoid saying that God can only adequately be known and responded to through Jesus and thus avoid the implication that other faiths lie outside the sphere of salvation. This idea is perceived as being 'excessively parochial' by pluralists, presenting God as a tribal deity of the Christian West and as being inconsistent with the loving God and Father of humankind.¹⁰ The division is also found amongst Roman Catholics despite their largely conservative and traditional views on salvation.

The three soteriological worldviews as generally categorized are: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. *Exclusivism* describes salvation as occurring when there is an explicit confession of repentance and faith in Christ and his redemptive work in his life, death and resurrection. This position emphasizes the fallenness of men and women in sin and that their only means of salvation is through responding to the revelation of Christ through the preaching of the gospel or through a direct supernatural experience. This does not mean *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* but rather *extra Christum nulla salus*. The confusion between the two notions was clarified in Vatican II which recognized that God's salvific work operated beyond the visible frontiers of the Church: *extra ecclesiam* but not *extra Christum*.

Inclusivism as a soteriology includes non-Christians in Christ's salvific work even though they are unaware of him or even unbelieving. The only similarity to pluralism is that this approach affirms the salvific presence of

⁹ John Wenham *The Enigma of Evil* (Guildford: Eagle 1994) pp 202-3

¹⁰ See, for example, John Hick 'Jesus in the World Religions' *The Myth of God Incarnate* John Hick ed (London: SCM 1977) p 167.

God in non-Christian religions. In contradistinction to pluralism, the inclusivist paradigm maintains that Christ is the definitive and authoritative revelation of God and salvation is always the work of Christ. The demarcation with exclusivism is clear. Salvation is understood by the exclusivist as depending upon an *explicit* faith and confession of Christ as the Son of God and Saviour. The confessional side involves a 'repentance of sin' and an admission that 'Jesus is Lord'. The inclusivist requires no such profession of faith.

Building an inclusivist soteriology can be a tortuous process, if, like Karl Rahner, one provides the possibility within the scheme for people to reject the dimmest notions of God. Rahner is widely regarded as inclusivist¹¹ and has developed the inclusivist paradigm using the potent idea of the 'anonymous Christian'. He speaks of a 'positive supernatural salvific act in the actual economy of salvation' even though such motives do not result 'tangibly from the positive revelation of God's word'.¹² Inclusivism relies upon the belief that in 'his own reflective self-understanding' and in 'the transcendence of his being' someone may take on a relationship with 'the silent mystery Creator-God'. Such salvation is demonstrated in altruism: 'devotion to his material duties and the demands made upon him by the persons under his care'.¹³ In short, individuals may participate in salvation without conscious explicit faith expressed as a 'decision' but in the simple act of true love, hope and charity they may be responding to God's grace even if they do not explicitly know Christ propositionally or experientially. In responding positively to God's grace, such a person is understood to have accepted the God who is historically and definitively revealed in Christ. God's salvation cannot be divorced from Christ; hence 'anonymous Christian' rather than 'anonymous theist'. The one qualification in Rahner's scheme is that in these ways a person is 'giving the glory to God'; if he positively resists that with an intrinsic 'there is no God', then he is not a believer. This does not appear to fit the traditional meaning of *extra Christum nulla salus* and yet Rahner's insistence on salvation being inseparable from Christ makes his theology 'fit'. It is not the *explicit* Christological soteriology of exclusivism, but rather an *implicit* soteriology with links to the work of Christ relying on notions of the 'universal salvific will of God' and 'divinizing grace'.

The Roman Catholic model of mission demonstrates an understanding of both exclusivist and inclusivist positions in its recent history. Vatican II states that:

11 Gavin D'Costa refers to him as 'the major inclusivist theologian' in 'Creating Confusion: A Response to Markham' *New Blackfriars* vol 74 no 867 January/February 1993 p 44.

12 Karl Rahner *Theological Investigations* vol VI (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1969) pp 239-44

13 Rahner pp 390-91

All this holds true not only for Christians, but for all men of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way. For, since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.¹⁴

But in the Council documents a more exclusivist position also comes through:

...those cannot be saved, who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded through Jesus Christ, by God, as something necessary, still refuse to enter it, or to remain in it.

Ten years later, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (1974), Paul VI wrote that:

... there is no new humanity if there are not first of all new persons renewed by Baptism and by lives lived according to the Gospel. The purpose of evangelization is therefore precisely this interior change, and if it had to be expressed in one sentence, the best way of stating it would be to say that the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the Message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieux which are theirs.¹⁵

Pluralism, as understood by John Hick, describes the great world faiths as being different and yet independently authenticating contexts of salvation/liberation. The similarity between inclusivism and pluralism is that they understand the saving presence of a deity occurring throughout the world for all humankind. The dissimilarity is that inclusivists relate this saving presence of God to Christ¹⁶ whereas pluralists will not and may not believe in any form of salvation or deity at all. Frequently, pluralism is linked to the doctrine of the Universal Fatherhood of God which usually represents man as being a child of God by nature. Exclusivism differs from both inclusivism and pluralism in its espousal of Christians as both aware of and believing in the Person of Christ whether or not the Church has been evangelistically present. Exclusivism and inclusivism maintain the historic linkage between the saving work of Christ and the nature of his

14 *Pastoral Constitution on the Church* para 22

15 Paul VI *Evangelii nuntiandi* quoted in Cardinal Suenens *Open the Frontiers* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1980) pp 121-2

16 I am indebted for this clarification to Gavin D'Costa 'Creating Confusion: A Response to Markham' *New Blackfriars* vol 74 no 867 January/February 1993.

Person. For non-pluralists, the pluralist position is theologically incompatible with the Church-type despite its obvious existence in certain ecclesiastical circles. Such incompatibility was demonstrated in the dismissal of Anthony Freeman as a parish priest in 1994 by the Bishop of Chichester for his rediscovered 'faith' that he did not believe in God. Like Tillich, Freeman reinterprets Christian vocabulary to mean something other than traditional understandings. So 'authentic Christian grace' is being free to believe whatever one likes about God – including his existence. Liberation is therefore to be found in self-discovery and the Christian stories, as drama, may or may not be utilized.¹⁷ Freeman's dismissal as Priest-in-Charge of St Mark's Staplefield demonstrates that, despite the wide range of theological perspectives within the Church of England, there may be a boundary between what is perceived to be a Christian position and what is not.

The theologian's concern is with the integrated layers of the New Testament 'as they are integrated with a bearing on the saving acts of God in Jesus Christ, for this is how he derives the all-important intuitive insights which guide his theological inquiry...'.¹⁸ Pluralism thus lies beyond the Church's domain and better fits Glock and Stark's description of cults as being:

...religious movements which draw their inspiration from other than the primary religion of the culture, and ... are not schismatic movements in the same sense as sects whose concern is with preserving a purer form of the traditional faith.¹⁹

Theologically, it is possible to create a category called 'Church cult' for churches in which Christian belief, liturgy and ritual have been enlarged and reinterpreted to fit a pluralist agenda. One such example of this category may be the parish church of St James Piccadilly which has become 'home' to a variety of cultic pantheistic groups. Donald Reeves, the incumbent, believes Christianity is evolving and is enriched by interfaith truths.

Each religion has something unique and distinctive about it. Each truth is complemented by another ... the doctrine of the Trinity needs the Islamic insistence on the oneness of God; the impersonal emptiness of Buddhism needs the Jewish/Christian experience of the God who calls.²⁰

17 Anthony Freeman *God in Us: A Case for Christian Humanism* (London: SCM 1993) pp 12, 31-9

18 Thomas Torrance *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press 1976) pp 10-11

19 Charles Y Glock and Rodney Stark *Religion and Society in Tension* (Chicago: Rand McNally 1965) p 245

20 Donald Reeves *For God's Sake* (London: Collins 1988) p 71

This is pluralism. He speaks of the 'adventurous churches' who reassess their own perceptions and experience in their assimilation of alternative insights, experience and practice. Such churches do not fit the inclusivist-exclusivist church-type scenario and properly belong within the pluralist groups sociologically categorized as 'cult'. Sociologists, who use the cult-sect-denomination thesis to illustrate the trend towards institutionalization amongst diverse non-Christian groups, bring etymological confusion to the meaning of churches, sects and denominations, viz that they represent Christianity and not other religions. Theologically, 'church' is Christian. A church which has a place for Jesus and some elements of Christian tradition (albeit reinterpreted) is little different from a non-Christian religious group, which will, like Hare Krishna, also have an honoured place for Jesus and the Christian tradition amongst its own deities. For those Christians and theologians who take a high view of the Scriptures, such Christian pluralism would be a denial of the true worship of God.

Thomas Torrance has observed that theological statements become anthropological ones when 'historic Christianity is reduced to pietistic individualism in which each man fills the symbol of "Christ" with his own "self-understanding"'. This results in Torrance's secularized man of 'religionless Christianity' whose 'God' is his 'self-understanding' and his relations with his fellow human beings.²¹ If the Church is to be distinguished from a secularized community with a symbolic 'Christ', then it must look to its foundation. The Church is founded on the confession of a Person. Its offer of salvation and liberation from ultimate futility is inseparable from Jesus of Nazareth, the Man now exalted. The faith of mainstream historic Christianity is expressed in the Nicene Creed as a faith in 'one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God ... Being of one substance with the Father' and 'incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary'. The Christian Church calls itself 'the Church of Christ' and thus makes Christ its starting point in its own self-understanding. A Christological soteriology opposes the notions of autonomy and self-discovered contexts of liberation. It argues that salvation cannot be grounded in foundationalist philosophies or religious experiences. In the field of Christian ethics and theology, Stanley Hauerwas has poignantly focused ethical and theological issues within the context of the Church. So, for Hauerwas, Christology and soteriology are simply constituents of the story of the Church and make no sense without the Church:

For Christian beliefs about God, Jesus, sin, the nature of human existence, and salvation are intelligible only if they are seen against the background of the Church – that is, a body of people who stand apart from the 'world' because of the peculiar task of worshipping a

21 Thomas F Torrance *God and Rationality* (Oxford: OUP 1977) pp 50-51

God whom the world knows not.²²

The ethical point for Hauerwas is that the Church should be shaping the preferences of its communicants according to its 'story' rather than by trying to be attractive to those whose preferences have already been shaped by the world. This is a world-defying position and consistent with the Church's foundation. Christian ethics and theology cannot be foundationally conceived since they are an expression of a distinct community: the Church. Timothy George says that: 'The role of the community is crucial both in understanding how the Bible came to be recognized as canon and in appropriating its message today.'²³ If George and Hauerwas are right, then they are offering a clear path away from a Christianity which requires little faith. The little faith option is there and may be illustrated in the words of George's fellow Roman Catholic, Timothy O'Connell:

...the fundamental ethical command imposed on the Christian is precisely to be what he or she is. 'Be human.' That is what God asks of us, no more, no less... Christian ethics is human ethics.²⁴

If a soteriology is constructed on 'being human' then it is no salvation, a semantic contradiction. From what is one saved? By whom is one saved? And to what is one saved? Furthermore, such a soteriology does not appear to require a Saviour. If there is no Saviour, how can there be a Church of the Saviour witnessing to his 'story' and offering the possibility for humankind to participate in his 'story'? In the words of Jürgen Moltmann: 'There is only a Church if and as long as Jesus of Nazareth is believed and acknowledged as the Christ of God.' Ecclesiology is senseless if Christ is a mythical figure of faith and Jesus of Nazareth a dead person. With whom does it correspond and from whom does it derive its ethical imperatives? It may be a Church in name or in symbol, but if Christ is no more significant than Guatama to it, then is it not guilty of 'rejecting its substance, and setting up a shadow or image in the room of it' to quote the Puritan, John Owen?²⁵ Don Cupitt's *New Christian Ethics* is an example of such a 'shadow'. He says 'the old objective personal God must go' because his rules prevent us from inventing our own values and morality, an ethic of 'creative action'.²⁶ There is no personal objective God revealed in Christ, only symbols and metaphors of faith. God becomes God according to differing faith responses. He speaks of forgetting our 'pre-Enlightenment

22 Stanley Hauerwas *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Winston Press 1985) p 42

23 Timothy George 'What we mean when we say it's true' *Christianity Today* 23 October 1995 p 19

24 Quoted in Stanley Hauerwas *The Peaceable Kingdom* (London: SCM 1983) p 56

25 John Owen *The Chamber of Imagery Works VII* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth 1961) p 549

26 Don Cupitt *New Christian Ethics* (London:SCM 1988)

Christianity' and inventing a new one:

Our ethics will be an ethics of the flesh, an ethics of human feeling, an ethics of libido and of being true to the life-energy in us. We will dress it up as being incarnational and as Christian humanism, and this will give it the necessary appearance of continuity. But it is merely 'the appearance', for the truth is that we can today be Christians only at the price of saying that there wasn't any Christianity to speak of before the later eighteenth century, and certainly none of any interest or relevance to us.²⁷

In describing his experience of sitting with modern theologians, David Martin recalls secular theologians joyfully proclaiming the death of God and the death of the Church in the name of 'modern man'. 'The only two modern men present', he says, 'watch the whole exercise with sad and wondering eyes. Hence at some part in the proceedings I have been moved to enquire "Who is modern man that the theologians should be so mindful of him?"'²⁸ In the end, Cupitt's redefinition of 'Christian' becomes devoid of any realistic or supernaturalist content: pre-eighteenth century Christianity is jettisoned. For Hick and other pluralists, faith is home-made and temporary, like soft clay moulded and remoulded by changing philosophies, culture and language. The result is that there is no person of Christ evident: the term 'Christian' therefore says nothing about a person's relationship to God in Christ. Without Christ in 'Christian', we are being disingenuous, and without him there is no Church.

It is Jesus Christ and not the Self who gives Christians their identity, their *κοινωνία*, their new life, their hope and their grounding for morality and practice. More precisely, this grounding is the permanent and unique relationship which a Christian has to God in Jesus Christ. It does not matter that there is a diverse and often contrasting number of perspectives and expressions of faith in the person of Christ. What is important for grounding is the faith that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' and that this Christ was Jesus of Nazareth. It is this faith which identified and characterized the first Christians and distinguished them from other faiths and philosophies. Despite two thousand years of Christian history and the historically conditioned expressions of the Church's faith, hope and worship, this most basic thought-form of faith is still the common ground of Christians today. The way this is expressed will always be mediated through the imperfections of language, society and culture but faith in the relationship to Christ as divine Lord is central to worship and daily life. In short, the Church's Christo-centrism should be

27 Don Cupitt *New Christian Ethics* (London:SCM 1988) p 41

28 David Martin *The Religious and the Secular: Studies in Secularization* (Schoken Books 1969) p 70

real and not symbolic: a symbolic Christ leads to a symbolic Church.

Christology is inseparable from soteriology. Salvation is mediated through Christ 'Who for us men, and for our salvation came down from heaven' (Nicene Creed). As Wayne Meeks has shown, this was the faith of the Early Church and has been the central doctrine carried by the Church throughout its history. Meeks notices that the usage of the metaphor 'the body of Christ' or its equivalent is extraordinary in that it is used with a concrete allusion to the human body of Jesus, crucified and raised from the dead.²⁹ This significance is undergirded by the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The image is developed in Colossians and Ephesians with Christ as the 'head' and Christians as 'members' of the 'body' (Col 1:18; 2:19; cf 2:10; Eph 1:22; 4:15; cf 5:23).

The Church in history has struggled in its conception of the *unio mystica* and its essential hiddenness but has nevertheless held to the doctrine of the Church's union with Christ. In the New Testament, Christ is the Church's Saviour (Eph 5:23); it is his subject (5:24) and is to grow up into him (4:15); the Church must hold to its head (Col 2:19) and the individual churches were 'in Christ' (Gal 1:22). The *κοινωνία* of the Church is a *κοινωνία* arising among those in whose midst he dwells and is present. As a sign or sacrament of his presence, the members of the Church share the Lord's Supper together. These are all elements referred to in the words 'communion of saints' and affirmed in the Church's history both Roman and Protestant. For example, in answer to the question 'What dost thou believe about the holy, catholic, Christian Church?', the answer of the Heidelberg Catechism is:

That out of the whole human race the Son of God gathers, protects and upholds a community of the elect destined for eternal life, through his Spirit and Word, in the unity of faith, from the beginning of the world unto its end; and that I am a living member of the same and will eternally remain so.

The faith of the Early Church was a faith conceived in terms of discipleship, that they were to continue the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth in proclaiming the Kingdom of God, calling for repentance, baptism and making disciples. Jesus the Man now exalted continued to live among them in the mystery or sacrament of union by the Holy Spirit. Hans Küng speaks of the great mandate of the Church being the cause of Jesus Christ and to 'show' him to the individual and society:

By proclaiming the message of Jesus as the model, the Lord, the

²⁹ Wayne Meeks *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University 1983) p 90

Church takes up Jesus' message of the rule of God in a concentrated form. With the slogan 'Jesus the Lord' it proclaims – or should proclaim – the same radical requirements which Jesus proclaimed with the slogan 'kingdom of God' and fulfilled in an exemplary way to the very end.³⁰

This idea of the Church has been maintained throughout its history and, in its doctrine of the *unio mystica*, Christology, soteriology and ecclesiology come together and the Church discovers its mission. An ecclesiology constructed apart from a Christological soteriology is incapable of describing the Church of Jesus Christ. It may construct an alternative 'Church' but a biblical and credal ecclesiology will reject the representation or demonstrate its inherent flaws.

In the theological scenario I am describing it is *explicit* (not *implicit*) that *extra Christum nulla salus*. It is this faith, focused and confessed in Jesus the man, 'God of God' and now exalted 'on the right hand of the Father' which distinguishes Christianity from other faiths and thus distinguishes the Church from other religious and humanist institutions. Ecclesiology informs religious enquiry into churches and sects insofar as it provides a meta-discourse for theologian and sociologist. The notion of exclusivism should not be regarded simply as a narrow soteriology for a sect which claims exclusive truth. Ecclesiology does not regard 'world-affirming' or 'world-rejecting' as viable descriptions: God's Church neither affirms nor rejects the world. Rather, ecclesiology tells us the story of a people who relate to God in Christ – his life, death and resurrection.

MIKE THOMPSON is a management consultant who holds a doctorate in theology.

30 Hans Küng *On Being a Christian* (London: Collins 1974) pp 503-4