WHAT I want to say on this subject this evening will fall into two main divisions. The first will speak of the need for a reappraisal of the traditional interpretation of New Testament christology; the second will deal with evidence requiring special attention in any reappraisal of New Testament christology.

I

Aloys Grillmeier’s valuable book entitled Christ in Christian Tradition (1965) has an epilogue headed “Chalcedon—End or Beginning?” Here, this learned Roman Catholic scholar reminds us that, react as we will to the christological disputations which agitated the church from the Council of Nicaea to that of Chalcedon, the Fathers certainly “intended to preserve the Christ of the Gospels and the Apostolic Age for the faith of posterity”. Then, however, Grillmeier goes on to mention a comment by Karl Rahner that Chalcedon was not an end but a beginning, refers approvingly to Pope John’s call to the church at the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council to speak the language of the modern world, and finally himself asserts that “the demand for a complete reappraisal of the Church’s belief in Christ right up to the present day is an urgent one” (p. 494).

Some while ago, a high-ranking colleague of mine in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne assured me that theologians are always wrong! Be it so, or not, the prevalence of Grillmeier’s view among Catholic and Protestant theologians is evident from the number and nature of christological studies produced by New Testament scholars and others in recent years—an output to which the one whom we commemorate this evening with honour and gratitude made notable contributions.

1 The Manson Memorial Lecture delivered in the University of Manchester on the 30th of January 1968.
And if it is asked why a reappraisal of christological doctrine is urgent today, I would give at least four reasons.

(1) First, is it not a pressing apologetic and catechetical need? Put more precisely, do we not find the orthodox doctrine of the person of Christ a source of much perplexity to enquiring non-christians and to many a christian believer under instruction? "True God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father" and "the selfsame perfect in Godhead, the selfsame perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man"—thus runs the familiar language of what we call the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian Definition, but how successful are ministers and clergy in making it intelligible? not to mention its baffling elaboration in the Athanasian Creed! Must it not be conceded that to many intelligent lay folk it seems sheer mystification? Donald M. Baillie confessed as much years ago in his widely read book God was in Christ. He remarked, "I am convinced that a great many thoughtful people who feel themselves drawn to the Gospel in these days are completely mystified by the doctrine of the Incarnation—far more than we theologians usually realize" (p. 29).

(2) Secondly, if some of the thought about the nature of God now emerging outside and within the christian churches is accepted, a restatement of traditional christology is certainly necessitated. Quite obviously so, if we entertain the notion of a decease of the transcendental, personal God of the Bible as propounded by Thomas Altizer and other exponents of the so-called "death of God" theology; but no less definitely so, if we opt for some form of the Ground-of-our-being theology associated particularly with the names of Paul Tillich and the Bishop of Woolwich. This theology contends that, though personal, God in relation to us is not another Person. Yet Jesus certainly was another person; then if God is not to be conceived as another Person, in what sense may Jesus still be confessed as "True God from true God" and "perfect in Godhead"? The affirmation will require fresh clarification.

(3) Thirdly, for some time christological studies have been insisting strongly on the essential genuineness of the humanity of
Jesus, often indicting the main stream of christological orthodoxy with proneness to Docetism and Apollinarianism—Docetism being that ancient heresy which denied the physical reality of Christ’s human body, while Apollinarianism could not allow him a human mind. The trend is obvious in the book just mentioned, Donald Baillie’s *God was in Christ*; it assumes robust features in later writing like that of John Knox and W. N. Pittenger. “Chalcedon”, says Pittenger, “failed to prevent a modified Apollinarianism from becoming the orthodoxy of the Middle Ages”¹ and Knox declares that “at whatever cost in terms of other cherished beliefs, the reality and normality of Jesus’s manhood must be maintained”².

This emphasis derives in part from the success—however qualified—with which modern New Testament scholarship has brought us face to face with the historical Jesus of Nazareth, an achievement the real value of which has in my view been most unprofitably obscured by those recent theological fashions which have disclaimed interest in any other Jesus than the kerygmatic Christ of apostolic witness and have denied that our New Testament sources can yield up any other. However, be its causes what they may, does not so much outright insistence as we are hearing today on what Knox calls “the reality and normality of Jesus’s manhood” demand new apologetic efforts of those who with the Fathers and the ancient credal formularies still affirm that this historical human Jesus, a prophet from Nazareth, while truly man was also *ontologically* “True God from true God”? 

The embarrassing edge of this age-long problem is commonly thought to be turned by the plea that, despite the implications of some of their language, the Fathers never intended to identify Jesus with God outright. This is said to be evident from their use of the Logos christology and the conception of Jesus as God’s Son. So orthodox christology in confessing Jesus as truly God is not asserting that Jesus is God without qualification, or God absolutely. But will this line of argument do? May I at least frankly admit that, coming as it so often

² *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ* (1967), p. 73.
does from eminent Christian theologians, I find it quite extraordinary? For does it not at once evoke the query, What kind of God is it, then, who is only God with qualification, who is not God absolutely? On any legitimate Christian use of terms is any being who is only God with qualification, and not God absolutely, any longer truly God?

(4) I pass to a fourth reason for a re-examination of the traditional doctrine of the person of Christ.

There now exists a widespread recognition that early Christology, and especially New Testament Christology, was an outgrowth of the Christian experience of Jesus as Saviour—yes, indeed, as eschatological Saviour. That is, in, through and around him God was held to be providing man's full and final deliverance from the world, sin, death, from all demonic cosmic powers and Satan. To be sure, Jesus's advent was thought to portend the dissolution of the kingdoms of this world, the end of the present age and the inbreaking of the kingdom of God. Then in consequence of his God-appointed role in this stupendous series of eschatological events, what was his rank? How must one assess his status in the light of his redemptive function? It was from this angle that the first Christians formed their estimate of Jesus. When, therefore, they assigned him such honorific titles as Christ, Son of man, Son of God and Lord, these were ways of saying not that he was God, but that he did God's work. In other words, such designations originally expressed not so much the nature of Christ's inner being in relation to the being of God, but rather the pre-eminence of his soteriological function in God's redemption of mankind. That is, the earliest interpretation of the person of Christ found in the New Testament is predominantly not ontological but functional; and Oscar Cullmann has stoutly maintained that the functional emphasis remained the dominant one throughout the New Testament. He wrote, "When the New Testament asks 'Who is Christ?' it never means primarily 'What is his nature?' but 'What is his function?.'"¹

However, interest in Jesus's personal nature and speculation about the relation of his inner being to God's being soon arose

¹ The Christology of the New Testament (1959), pp. 3 f.
in the first Christian communities, and asserts itself in the New Testament documents, especially in passages like Philippians ii. 5-11; Colossians i. 15:20; Hebrews i and ii; and in the Fourth Gospel. Moreover, the three centuries following the New Testament period saw this concern for an ontological interpretation of the person of Christ eclipsing and overriding functional christology, until the question whether and in what sense Jesus was God became the dominant issue. Nicene and Chalcedonian christology was the credalizing climax of this process, with Jesus ultimately confessed as "of one substance with the Father", "perfect in Godhead" as in manhood, truly God and truly man.

And so arises a leading exegetical question, namely, to what extent is the ontological christology of the ancient creeds with their strong affirmation of the deity of Jesus a faithful credalization of the New Testament evidence? Is it a legitimate and inevitable development of New Testament christology, or a distortion of it? In the light of the knowledge now at the disposal of New Testament scholarship—knowledge so much greater than that possessed by the Fathers—does not this christological problem call for fresh and far more thoroughgoing elucidation?

Martin Werner, of course, has offered a solution of it in words both forthright and provocative. The dogma of Christ's deity, he has said, turned Jesus into another Hellenistic redeemer-god, and thus was a myth propagated behind which the historical Jesus completely disappeared.\(^1\) Professor H. E. W. Turner has pronounced Werner's book "brilliant, learned and perverse"\(^2\) (a very possible combination of qualities in any erudite scholar!). Yet be that as it may, the fact has to be faced that New Testament research over, say, the last thirty or forty years has been leading an increasing number of reputable New Testament scholars to the conclusion that Jesus himself may not have claimed any of the christological titles which the Gospels ascribe to him, not even the functional designation "Christ", and certainly never believed himself to be God. For example, with the words of Mark x. 19 in mind, H. W. Montefiore has of late remarked that

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Jesus seems to have denied explicitly that he was God\(^1\); and R. H. Fuller’s exhaustive analysis of the growth of New Testament christology brings him to a view of the self-understanding of Jesus resembling Bultmann’s. Fuller thinks that Jesus understood himself as an eschatological prophet, not in the sense that he defined himself thus precisely, but that this was “the working concept” of his identity which guided him throughout his mission.\(^2\)

Now if this is the position to which careful analysis of the Gospel evidence brings us, what becomes of the claim that the christological clauses of the ancient credal formularies are a right explication of the New Testament witness? Can you hold together, as many New Testament scholars seem still to do, the two positions that on the one hand critical study of the Gospels discloses a Jesus with no consciousness of being God and making no claim to be God and on the other hand the belief that Nicene christology, declaring him “True God of true God” is a right credalization of the New Testament evidence? I would at least suggest that this problem is becoming sufficiently acute today to be in itself a reason for that “re-appraisal of the Church’s belief in Christ right up to the present day” which, in the quotation made at the outset of this lecture, A. Grillmeier speaks of as urgent.

II

Shall we now move on to our second main division, which will be a review of the evidence requiring special attention in any reappraisal of New Testament christology. In other words, if in consequence of the advance of New Testament scholarship this is a day for christological stocktaking and one which poses the question whether the traditional formulations of the doctrine of the person of Christ are in fact scriptural, what aspects of New Testament teaching about Christ’s person require careful reconsideration?


May I say something about three? They are all familiar to New Testament scholars; they are not overlooked in christological apologetics; but are they apt to be underrated?

(1) First, there is the rarity of New Testament references to Jesus as "God" ("theos"). Some nine or ten passages occur in which Jesus is, or might be, alluded to as "God" ("theos"). Usually cited are John i. 1, 18; xx. 28; Romans ix. 5; 2 Thessalonians i. 12; 1 Timothy iii. 16; Titus ii. 13; Hebrews i. 8f.; 2 Peter i. 1 and 1 John v. 20. Two or three of these, however, are highly dubious, and, of the remainder, varying degrees of textual or exegetical uncertainty attach to all save one, which is Thomas's adoring acclaim of the risen Jesus in John xx. 28 as "My Lord and my God!" Distinguishing this passage from the others, Vincent Taylor—a moderately conservative scholar on christological problems—speaks of it as "the one clear ascription of Deity to Christ" in the New Testament.

But let me give another view. Karl Rahner, the eminent Roman Catholic theologian, considers that there are reliable applications of "theos" to Christ in six texts (Romans ix. 5 f.; John i. 1, 18, xx. 28; 1 John v. 20; and Titus ii. 13). Rahner, however, immediately goes on to say that in none of these instances is "theos" used in such a manner as to identify Jesus with him who elsewhere in the New Testament figures as "ho Theos", that is, the Supreme God.

Now obviously the very few New Testament passages—possibly only one—which without question call Jesus "God" outright do not exhaust the linguistic evidence. Notwithstanding, and in comparison with the frequency with which this form of christological confession is still required in the Christian churches, is not its rarity in the New Testament most surprising? Would it, in fact, be unfair to press the point with the following query? If the New Testament writers believed it vital that the faithful should confess Jesus as "God", is the almost complete absence of just this form of confession in the New Testament explicable?

1 In the article "Does the New Testament Call Jesus God?", Expository Times, lxxiii, No. 4 (January 1962), p. 118.

A second consideration when re-examining New Testament christology must certainly be the background of the divinizing christological language of the New Testament—that is, the background of all that New Testament christological language which in one way and another speaks of Jesus as though he were a divine being and which sometimes seems to be saying that he was God. And how rich, how far-reaching, yes, how worshipful much of this language is! To these first Christians, Jesus bore God's image, was in the form of God, the effulgence of God's glory, the stamp of God's very being. He had been raised far above all angels, was the firstborn of all creation, the alpha and omega, a heavenly high priest, the man from heaven, the wisdom of God, God's Logos (or Word) which was with God at the beginning and his agent in creation. And when it came to personal titles, his were the highest they could bestow: they proclaimed him as the Christ, the Son of man, the Son of God, Lord and on occasion even as God!

One cannot but be moved with wonder at this glorification, but this should not suppress the question, What does such language really mean?

May I here interject a somewhat irreverent story? I was once conducting a Sunday service in a Baptist Church. Sitting in the minister's vestry with the deacons in their appointed places on the right hand and on the left, I was waiting to enter the church. The order of service had been given me, but not the title of the anthem. The door opened a little, the organist put his face around it, looked only at me and simply said, "Come, Holy Ghost!" When I replied that it was not yet the hour for worship the gravity of the deacons collapsed!

Thus by means of a digression into levity we happen upon a reminder of a serious linguistic point: wrenched from their right context, words can convey wrong meanings—words which in their right setting gave the title of the anthem became grotesque when apparently transferred to me! Related to the exposition of the christology of the New Testament, what then does this caveat imply? The point, of course, is that if what the New Testament says about the person of Jesus is to be understood aright, it must be read not in accord with our linguistic English
usage in the 1960s, but in the setting of the categories of thought and the linguistic idiom of its day, that is, in the context of the thought and speech of that first century Jewish and Hellenistic environment to which the New Testament documents belong.

Obviously, a few brief words cannot adequately show the interpretative consequences of doing this, when the relevant field of study is so far-ranging. The main considerations, however, are well enough known and appear in the commentaries, textbooks and works of reference, together with mention of the original sources of information.

Some of the specially important facts are these. The Greek world drew no sharp line of division between the human and the divine, and readily divinized human beings—outstanding people such as distinguished philosophers, soldiers or kings might be called "son of God", "lord" and even "God". For instance, the Seleucid king Antiochus IV whose policy provoked the Maccabaean revolt, had himself styled "theos" (God) on his coinage, and the Roman emperor Domitian, a contemporary of some of the New Testament writers, affected the honour of being "Lord and God". So far accepted was this fashion that an able and cautious New Testament scholar, Professor C. F. D. Moule of Cambridge, has expressed the opinion that even christians might, in certain senses, have been willing to recognize the deity of the emperor. ¹ That the New Testament writers were not unaffected by these modes of thought and speech appears in the striking words of 2 Peter i. 4, where the readers are told that even they—ordinary christians—would "become partakers of the (or 'a') divine nature"; and that the consequences of christian salvation would indeed be deification (in whatever sense) is said here and there by the christian Fathers. Athanasius's statement is often quoted; speaking of Jesus, he remarked: "He was humanized, that we might be deified." ²

Then, too, notwithstanding its fervently sustained insistence upon monotheism, upon the belief that the only true God was the transcendent God of the Jewish Scriptures, Judaism, the cradle of christianity, sometimes went surprisingly far in applying

divinizing terms to angels, to the personalized concepts of Wisdom and the Logos and even to men. Angels could carry the designations "son of God", "lord" and even "god"—the Qumran documents have brought further evidence of this. Jewish writing about Wisdom, the Logos and the Torah (the Law of Moses) contains close parallels to the New Testament description of Jesus as God's image, the effulgence of God's glory, his firstborn, God's agent in the creation of the world and so on. Philo could speak of the Logos as a "second God".

In honorific references to men, Hellenistic Judaism was beginning to speak of outstanding Old Testament characters as divine ("theioi"); a righteous man could be a "son of God"; and a passage can be cited in which Philo alludes to Moses as "theos" (god).¹

But, to be sure, already in the Old Testament, Israel's king as God's anointed finds mention as "son of God", and one or two passages occur in which the noun "god" is actually used of men. Psalm xlv. 6 f. provides a significant example, because here the greater and lesser senses of the substantive "God" appear side by side, namely, "God" in the usual sense of the supreme God of Israel and "god" denoting the person of Israel's king. Furthermore, this same passage appears in Hebrews i. 8 f. as a testimonium related to Christ, where it is "god" in its lesser connotation in the original which, following the usual translation of the passage, is apparently related to Jesus Christ.

This short and fragmentary survey of linguistic background material must end. Possibly, however, enough has been said to indicate that the New Testament writers spoke of Jesus in an environment in which terminology which we should reckon appropriate only when referring to a truly divine being could be used of angels and indeed of human beings. In that first-century world, you could maintain that certain humans were in origin associated with the heavenly sphere; you could attribute to them a measure of ontological affinity with God's nature; you could honour them with such titles as "son of God", "Lord"—yes, even "god"; and you could do all this without

¹ Cf. F. Hahn, Christologische Hoheitstitel (1963), pp. 294 f.
any intention of investing those so honoured with the same
divine status as that of the highest God.
I have already stated that this background, linguistic evidence
has by no means been overlooked: it is too well known. Yet in
expositions of the meaning of the christological language of the
New Testament along traditional lines, has it so far been accorded
its due weight?
(3) The third and last of the three considerations treated in
this lecture as deserving of close attention in any reappraisal of
New Testament christology is what may surely be described as
the sustained subordinationism of New Testament christology.
That is to say, is it not a fact that right through the New Testa­
ment the reader again and again encounters material which,
implicitly or explicitly, represents Jesus as of lesser rank than
God? And is it not of special significance that this position is
maintained, even where the New Testament is speaking of the
person and functions of the celestial Christ active in heaven
after his resurrection and exaltation?
Whatever happened at that first christian Easter, the earliest
Christians were convinced that God had raised Jesus from death,
and had translated him to the highest heaven, where God him­
self was believed to dwell. Further, in and from his heavenly
dwelling-place the erstwhile terrestrial Jesus, now a celestial
being, was continuing his redemptive function and would go on
doing so until its consummation. In consequence, the resurrec­
tion event was a decisive turning point in the growth of New
Testament christology. Recent research has stressed this.
Barnabas Lindars, for example, wrote of his recent book, New
Testament Apologetic, published in 1961: "... this study shows
that the resurrection of Jesus is the primary factor in the forma­
tion of Christian dogma. The Messianic titles are applied to him
as a consequence of this fact, and defended by appeal to it" (p. 29).
This judgement is sound, and implies that a careful considera­
tion of the New Testament accounts of the post-resurrection life
and activity of the celestial Christ is essential, if a true elucidation
of New Testament christology is to be achieved. May we, then,
look into a few significant points?
Noteworthy first of all is the fact that, in his post-resurrection heavenly life, Jesus is portrayed as retaining a personal individuality every bit as distinct and separate from the person of God as was his in his life on earth as the terrestrial Jesus. Alongside God and compared with God, he appears, indeed, as yet another heavenly being in God's heavenly court, just as the angels were—though as God's Son, he stands in a different category, and ranks far above them. Small wonder, then, that angel christology was a prominent strand of early christological thought, as Martin Werner has emphasized and other scholars have recognized. 1 Werner further argued that in calling Jesus "Lord" ("Kyrios"), Paul and the early church meant that Jesus "was a high heavenly being of an angelic kind", the designation "Lord" being a particular instance of the designation and invocation of angels as "lords" ("kyrioi") in late Judaism. 2

But whatever is to be said for or against the validity of angel christology, the distinctness and separateness of Christ's heavenly person in his celestial life and activity from the person of God in heaven is plain enough. We are told that he sits at God's right hand; Stephen at his martyrdom is said to have seen him standing there (Acts vii. 56); and ultimately, of course, men on earth are to see him again as a person quite distinct from God when, with his holy angels, he returns triumphantly from heaven at his parousia, that is, at his second advent.

Indeed, so completely and consistently is his individual separateness from God maintained that if the New Testament writers did consider him fully God, and if for the sake of the argument the New Testament references to the Holy Spirit are left on one side, would not the resultant conception of God be a form of ditheism? I do not see how this conclusion can be avoided.

What, however, is said of his life and functions as the celestial Christ neither means nor implies that in divine status he stands on a par with God himself and is fully God. On the contrary, in the New Testament picture of his heavenly person and ministry

2 Werner, op. cit. p. 124.
we behold a figure both separate from and subordinate to God. We learn that he confesses or denies men before God (Matt. x. 23 f.; Luke xii. 8); he intercedes with God on our behalf and as heavenly paraclete pleads our cause with the Father (Rom. viii. 34; Heb. vii. 25; ix. 24; 1 John ii. 1); he is the mediator between men and God (1 Tim. ii. 5); and in Hebrews there is the familiar description of his heavenly ministrations as a high priest who is faithful to God, who has learned obedience to the God who appointed him, who offers prayers and supplications to God and can in fact address the Father God as his God (i. 9; x. 7).

And how will it be at the end, when, with his outstanding work as celestial Christ accomplished, he re-appears in his parousia glory? St. Paul is quite explicit about it. The apostle writes that after that victorious event, and when Christ has put all remaining enemies beneath his feet, then will he hand over complete dominion to God—to quote from the relevant passage in the New English Bible translation: "... when all things are thus subject to him, then the Son himself will also be made subordinate to God... and thus God will be all in all" (1 Cor. xv. 28).

In many another place, and apart from allusions to the celestial work of Christ, this New Testament stress on Jesus's subordination to God recurs. How strong it is, for example, in the Fourth Gospel—the very document which contains the two most certain references to Jesus as God in the whole New Testament! Yet in this gospel not only is it Jesus as the Son rather than as God who is in the foreground, but he is also a Son who explicitly declares "the Father is greater than I" (xiv. 28), or "I can of myself do nothing... I seek not mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (v. 30)—even the will of Jesus, it noted, is one will and the will of God another! The Fourth Gospel contains more in a similar vein, so when it comes to the exposition of the prologue's statement that Jesus as the Logos was "theos" ("God") or Thomas's exclamation in chapter twenty, "My Lord and my God!", J. M. Creed was entirely right in the statement, "Even the Prologue of St. John, which comes nearest to the Nicene doctrine, must be read in the
light of the pronounced subordinationism of the Gospel as a whole".¹

The situation is similar when one turns to the exposition of the christology of St. Paul. Whatever is made of the details of important christological passages like Philippians ii. 5-11 or Colossians i. 15-20, they have ultimately to be understood in the light of Paul's overall christological position. This position is clearly expressed in the passage used just now which speaks of Christ eventually handing over sovereignty to God that God may be all in all (1 Cor. xv. 28). It comes out again with unequivocal clarity in the words of 1 Corinthians xi. 3—" the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God."

This discussion must now draw to a close, but with what kind of conclusion?

My reading of the facts must inevitably be limited and liable to error. Rightly or wrongly, however, I can but think that the main weight of the evidence is on the side of those who conclude, as does H. W. Montefiore, that "a christology which is expressed in terms of functional and personal relationship rather than in ontological categories means a return to the biblical perspective".² That is, in expounding and proclaiming the significance of Jesus Christ, the New Testament writers were moved primarily not by intellectual curiosity about the nature of Christ's person and his relation to the divine being of God, though this interest is sometimes apparent. They were gripped mostly by the extent to which Jesus was in God's service, executed God's redemptive work and on God's authority. If, therefore, on occasion they went so far as to refer to Jesus as "God", this was meant as an expression of his soteriological significance—his God-given place in the unfolding of God's plan of eschatological salvation. In so speaking, they were not assigning Jesus equality of status with God, and certainly did not intend to say that ontologically he was truly God. They meant that he was God functionally. In terms drawn from 1 Corinthians viii. 6, just as they knew of

¹ *The Divinity of Jesus Christ* (Fontana edn.), pp. 122 f.
² *Soundings*, p. 159.
lords many, but of only one true Lord, namely, Jesus Christ, so, too, were they aware of gods many, yet of only one who was truly God, and he the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. To him above all was the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever.