

## ***Stories of Faith. John Shea. Chicago: Thomas More Association, 1980.***

### **Preface:**

Dual drives of Christian faith:

1. Toward God;
2. Toward Jesus.

How do we escape being “troubled” (cf. Jn 14.1) when Jesus promises his followers a fate similar to his own, and when divine reality is such a dazzling blend of infinite acceptance and infinite demand?

The emphasis in this book is on ‘navigating’ activity, how our stories help us journey the worlds we have created.

### **CHAPTER ONE: The Way of Revelation and Faith**

Life-STORIES:

- i. Middle aged man remarks about getting to know grandchildren: “It hit Marge and me that at our age that’s what it is all about.” GENERATIVITY.
- ii. College girl having heard Mother Teresa: “It came to me that. . . if you. . . never found something that you could give yourself to. . . it would be a waste.” OTHER-CENTEREDNESS.
- iii. Son to his 83 year old dying father: “Pa. For God’s sake, let go! Let go! It’s got to be better.” SURRENDER.

Five elements of the Revelation-Faith process can be discerned in these episodes”

- i. There is a relationship to the Mystery of Life.
  - ii. This Mystery communicates meanings about the nature of the relationship.
  - iii. This meaning is initially formulated and then pondered, acted on, rephrased, repondered, reacted on, etc.
  - iv. The meaning that is received is related to the conflicts, questions and needs of the people involved.
  - v. Although there is an enshrined religious vocabulary to talk about the felt perception of these experiences, it is seldom used.
1. The first moment is awareness of the oft-overlooked larger Mystery, within which we ‘come and go.’
- ‘In and through’ an event/person, the relationship to Ultimate Mystery enters the minds and hearts of the people involved.

We do not encounter the Mystery, the Whole, directly; it is always *mediated* through our interaction with concrete situations. (Schillebeeckx: Mystery as a “transcendent third.” Rahner: the Transcendental mediated through the categorical.)

Any interaction seems capable of being the vehicle of Mystery; thus, each person's life story must be told and heard from the perspective of which events brought the awareness of a relationship to Mystery.

The awareness focuses not on the objective existence of Mystery, but on the person's relationship to Mystery.

2. The felt perception is that a meaning is communicated from the Mystery rather than fabricated by the person.

Mystery is sensed as "being on the make:" it initiates, we respond.

Mystery appears as freely disclosing the quality of our relationship with it; this is the experiential base for all talk of "grace."

The communicated meanings have an imperative character; they are indicators of how life is to be lived if it is to be in sync with the Mystery which is its source and destiny.

While the communicated meanings can be resisted, they make powerful claims on the people involved.

The meaning comes in a flash of unformulated insight, but needs formulation; there is no easy way to sort out the "bare communication" from the "personal formulation."

3. Any formulation of the meaning which the person feels has been received will only be a partial appropriation of the actual flow of the relationship (since Mystery is always 'transcendent').

The meaning of our relationship eludes full expression; the process is thus open-ended and ongoing. The meaning accompanies a person through life and occasions ongoing reflection.

This reflection is not a purely intellectual activity; it involves the whole person – convictions, feelings, behaviors.

There is a priority to action: it is in living out the project hidden in the revelation-faith experience that we extend and own, deepen and purge that experience.

We find ourselves engaged in a new way in an old world.

4. Our lives prior to the revelation-faith experience (needs, drives, conflicts) are closely connected to what happens in that experience.

Such needs/drives/conflicts make us receptive; they form the questions which the experience answers.

T. Fawcett delineates three stages in the dynamics of a revelation-faith experience:

- i. The presence of an existential need.
- ii. The moment of disclosure or perception itself.
- iii. The embodiment of the experience in symbolic form.

Personal quest is met by a gift from beyond; but often the communicated meaning is recognition of the wrongheadedness of one's prior life and the possibility of change.

The communicated meaning is often not expected and it is greeted by shock and disbelief.

Cf. Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation."

Revelation-faith experiences may appear to come out of the blue, but they always have hidden roots in our life story and speak to our conflicts, needs, drives.

5. Even in a secular setting where a specifically religious vocabulary is not at-hand, our relationship with Mystery is so inescapable and important that it inevitably finds expression. Thus, religious language is not a specific language but a specific use of any language.

Without the richness and subtlety of the inherited Christian vocabulary, the articulation of the experience is restricted; this necessitates a fresh, but impoverished beginning.

This points to the necessary task of enlivening the traditional language and once more making it serve the present and living God.

The contemporary situation largely reflects a painful dualism – real life/language on the one hand, and church life/language on the other.

The task is to fashion rope ladders between the enshrined language and contemporary experience:

- The human condition must be interpreted in such a way that it calls for religious symbolization;
- The enshrined language must be willing to forego its privileged status.
  - This vocabulary must remember its birth in the conflicts of human life.
  - When the vocabulary "thickens" (Ricoeur), it requires a "loosening" treatment which will make it available for people to use in understanding their lives.

Revelation-faith experiences do not produce "how-to" hints but fundamental perspectives and attitudes.

Clue: Statements beginning with "Life is. . ." usually reflect an experience which has a revelation-faith structure.

Certain encounters give off meanings that are applicable not only to that individual happening but to the relationship to life itself which permeates every happening.

The central Revelation: Faith Events of a religious tradition do not differ in process outlined here; their uniqueness lies in their intensity/power of illumination.

Such Events provide touchstones to which personal revelation-faith experiences are brought in the process of reflection. But it is essential to recognize that it is the personal experience which gives the character of effective revelation to the community symbol.

W. Temple: "Unless all things are revelation, nothing can be revelation. Unless the rising of the sun reveals God, the rising of the Son of Man from the dead cannot reveal God."

## **CHAPTER TWO: The Revelation of God and the Journey of Faith**

The question of God is concerned with the ineradicable nature of the relationship to Mystery itself, not with a specific communication.

The most fundamental phrasing of the God question is: "Is the Mystery of life ultimately gracious to all that is within it and, in particular, to this two-legged stand-up who is asking the question, or is it indifferent?"

Gracious or indifferent?

The alternative to belief appears radically undesirable; an ultimately indifferent reality undercuts the meanings and hopes which are the foundations of our most creative attempts at living.

It can be argued that the very ferocity of our need for an ultimate graciousness is an indication that the Mystery is truly gracious.

Though there are dangers of narcissism in this argument.

Both theism and atheism are fundamental assumptions derived from revelation-faith experiences. Both are 'religious' options, in the sense of regarding our relation to what is ultimate.

The question is not "Do you have faith?" but "What is your faith?"

It must be recognized (as many contemporary secularists do not) that all human knowing proceeds from fundamental assumptions which are not argued to but argued from; faith and reason are complementary processes operative in every person.

Theistic, atheistic, and even agnostic positions are faith assumptions garnered from experiences taken to be revelatory of the ultimate meaning of our relationship to Mystery.

Artistic expressions are the first forms of contemporary revelation-faith experiences.

Annie Dillard's work explores the capricious nature of life, alternately caressing and violating us. Her ultimate conviction that we are grounded in a reality that cares is founded in a revelation-faith experience (*Holy the Firm*).

The experience is an "anchor," a touchstone experience for ongoing belief in God even in the face of life's capriciousness.

For many, the conviction of graciousness does not arise from one experience, but rather from a number of experiences which have the cumulative effect of revelation.

This is the considered reflection that in the midst of ambiguity the gracious moments are the truth about us and the times of terror a distortion.

This is not a matter of absolute intellectual certitude, but of confidence.

There is no once-and-for-all answer; the question remains a question. The experience of a received answer is merely that now there is a perspective, an orientation within the continuing ambiguity.

To believe in graciousness is not to live without questions.

Once the relationship is perceived as gracious/loving, a need is felt to explain those characteristics of the relationship which appear as indifferent. An example of 'forcing things to fit' is found in Job's friends.

Job himself is able to believe in God's graciousness without knowing the ways of that graciousness.

Belief. . . despite everything.

We must recognize the tentative/fragile nature of our theological 'explanations' of evil.

True faith must have moments of anxiety/uncertainty. Otherwise, we have settled into a domesticated idea of God rather than allowing ourselves to be swept into the untamed reality of divine transcendence.

The relationship to God does not submit to control but only to adventure.

Graciousness asserts that we are never alone and that no power which seeks to destroy us has a final claim.

#### THE JOURNEY OF FAITH:

The Journey of Faith begins with the conviction of an all powerful and faithful presence (cf. Ps 139).

Graciousness is experienced as the *power* to undergo and overcome.

Jesus' metaphor for the relationship to Mystery is generating and forgiving fatherly love, which manifests itself as the power of transformation.

The resurrection is a symbol of overcoming. It affirms that the relationship between Jesus and God was stronger than the relationship between Jesus and death.

The fact that the Mystery is faithful to us (covenant) and relates to us as all-powerful love (resurrection) gives us the hope of everlasting life.

This hope for life after death gives a perspective on life before death.

The story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal tells us something of the relationship between power and presence.

God's direct intervention in burning the bull: the spontaneous reaction to miracle is applause, not personal conversion and renewal.

The angel with the hearth cake: *The touch of God is the power to go on.*

In every situation of life the nurture and love of God is present: To look at a broken man on a cross and say "Son of God" is to say there is no situation where the divine power to undergo and overcome is not present.

God's sustaining/inspiring presence means that we undertake the journey with *courage*, risking the unknown.

- *Humility* is also necessary: delighting in limited *existence*, not regretting *limited* experience.
- *Humor* reestablishes our awareness of the transcendence of God which we have the tendency every hour of every day to forget.

The journey of faith is walking through life with courage, humility, and humor in the company of God.

“Yahweh:” “I will be with you as who I am will I be with you.”

To journey with God is to walk with him as who he is and not as who we want him to be.

Religious passion is the raw drive to think, feel, and act out of whatever is the ultimate truth:

- Indifferently, if Mystery is indifferent;
- Graciously, if Mystery is gracious.

Jesus places his own efforts at love within a larger Love; thus, enemies should be loved because “My Father makes the rain to fall on the wicked and the good. . .”

In *Zorba*, N. Kazantzakis refers to a Rodin sculpture, “The Hand of God.” It shows a half-close hand, in the palm of which an ecstatic man and woman are embracing.

Kazantzakis’ character remarks: “The hand of God is everywhere.” And Shea adds that religious passion wants to “obey the bronze hand,” i.e., to be in communion with Ultimate Truth.

God’s presence is a seductive lure, encouraging us to hand our life over to God and to receive it back.

We usually resist handing over our extremes (our best and our worst): we cling to our best achievements to ‘make us somebody,’ and we hold on to our meanness because handing it over would necessitate recognizing it as ours.

But divine reality will settle for nothing less than a handing over of the total self; but God also hands everything back.

This is the advent of the new person: we now possess ourselves in and through God’s possession of us.

The returned self bears the mark of the sender; though we are not the source of love, we are love’s sacraments.

Jesus is the image of this new self in action, for he carries the cause of God – which explains his freedom vis-à-vis his environment (law, custom, etc.).

And God’s cause is us!

God’s presence provokes our activity on behalf of his cause – humanity.

Jesus’ presence provokes our activity on behalf of his cause – humanity.

Jesus' parables of 'the unjust judge' and 'the hungry friend at midnight' portray God as a knocking and nagging presence pulling us along the path of his justice and love.

The journey of faith's history involves the expected and the unexpected. Our entrance into the thick of things with agenda of graciousness meets the resistance of the world and ourselves; but we also encounter possibilities we did not envision and allies we did not suspect.

There is need for an ongoing "empirical fit" (I. Ramsey).

This will involve conflict, for to live out of an ultimate graciousness in a world that is not gracious is to experience that world as struggle; faith names the fight.

Jon Sobrino charts Jesus' journey of faith, contending that his initial faith undergoes a radical change in the course of his ministry.

Jesus begins with absolute confidence in the Father, believing that the Kingdom is soon to arrive; but his message/behavior meets with massive resistance. Thus, "the Galilean crisis."

Jesus abandons Galilee and heads for Jerusalem, having reappraised his faith; He still believes in the Kingdom but not in its imminent arrival; and the power of the Kingdom is no longer embodied in miracles but in suffering love; sin is not so much to be denounced as to be shouldered.

There is continuity and discontinuity; the catalyst of change is the actual conflicts caused by the effort to embody his initial faith in the loving God and his Kingdom.

To have God as companion on the journey means we must also take him as path: belief in an ultimate graciousness means proximate trouble!

### **CHAPTER THREE: The Event of Church and the Stories of Faith**

An individual takes clues from the shared values of the groups to which they belong; this is true of the values of generativity, other-centeredness, and surrender encountered in the stories which opened this book.

A culture/tradition is actively at work in our experience; community and tradition are the permeating context of every experience and every interpretation.

The comprehensive environment of local Catholicism present earlier in this century is breaking down; in such a break-down situation, personal experiences/stories should be heard before the traditional experiences/stories are consulted.

Gordon Allport distinguished between *extrinsic* religion (beliefs/values/behaviors received from the larger community but without roots in the individual's personality) and *intrinsic* religion (personal appropriation of the community's convictions).

A tension between extrinsicism and intrinsicism exists in each of us.

A tradition is obtained "by great labor" (T.S. Eliot).

The tradition and the individual must be united by a third experience – participation in a common human predicament.

There must be an ear that can hear before Scripture can become Word of God.

Church begins with people sharing their revelations of God and their journeys of faith; tradition is the record of other people's revelations of God and their journeys of faith. Thus, we are a group who is exploring our religious identity by dialoging with the Christian tradition – this is the event of Church.

Tradition involves many things (Bible, saints, liturgy, Church history, councils, theologians, art, reformers, customs, folklore); but the Bible (and within it the New Testament especially and more especially the Gospels) has a central place.

The contemporary church shuttles back and forth from the records of past living to the problems of present living.

Group dynamics in such reflection bring richer possibilities for insight.

Within the church community there are members who focus on understanding the convictions/feelings/behaviors of the tradition; they stress the continuity between us and our ancestors.

Other members focus on the effort to solve the ongoing problems and celebrate the ongoing hopes; they tend to stress discontinuity between past and present.

The conversation between experience and tradition has two directions:

1. A concern of contemporary living searches the tradition for perspectives/values which resonate with it.

The present concern acts as a selective 'filter.'

2. The tradition contextualizes present insights/values with other insights/values, and offers critique of present elements which are contrary to the Christian vision.

It widens the scope of concern and so makes possible a new approach to it.

There is confidence in the Church that the faith formulations of the past can have revelatory power in the present.

Though born in a specific historical context, these formulations point to an everlasting relationship to Mystery.

"Repetitive revelation" (John Macquarrie).

The formulation can evoke the experience that gave it birth, and thus function symbolically.



What arises from the conversation is Christian meaning, a way of inhabiting the present that is faithful to both the Christian vision and the exigencies of the situation.

This meaning remains always a human construction, without pretensions to absolute divine approbation.

Essentially this is a storytelling process, and there are many reasons for the centrality of 'story.'

Telling a story invites the hearer to participate.

Stories are more accessible than abstract/conceptual language.

All experience is inescapably temporal; thus, narratives is the most appropriate linguistic form to express experience. (Cf. S. Crites.)

The very act of storytelling is an implicit affirmation of ultimate meaning, even if the content of the story is atheistic. (Cf. S. Keen.)

The Scriptures are heavily story-laden; these stories remain memorable today because they are similar enough to our own lives for us to see ourselves, yet different enough from our lives for us to see new possibilities.

SEVEN ELEMENTS (of the conversation between experience and tradition):

1. Stories of *coming to faith* (in which the initiative of God is stressed).

These relate powerful contact with Mystery which produces a radical shift in our thinking, feeling, and acting. (Cf., e.g., St. Francis, Annie Dillard, and William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.)

Experiences which fund the religious personality give rise to stories of coming to faith; retelling the story rekindles some of the inexhaustible power of the experience.

2. A central moment in all stories of coming to faith is the acknowledgment of God and the consequent ongoing use of *God-language*.

Two contrasting imaginations contextualize the use of God-language: supernaturalistic and sacramental.

□ *Supernaturalistic*: "God" is a descriptive word which points to a Supreme Being.

God, though invisible, is imagined as 'another being.'

This leads to a literalistic expectation of divine activity: God's direct intervention is expected in the face of evil which can lead to disillusionment.

God tends to be largely absent ("the man upstairs") and the focus is on very special times and places as the only sources of revelation.

□ *Sacramental*: "God" is a vocative word that people call out when they come into contact with the Greater Than They Are.

In and through reactions to encountered persons/events we acknowledge a greater Mystery within which we live but which is more than we are.

E.g., a twenty-three year old girl who, after surgery, sees for the first time and repeatedly exclaimed, "Oh God, how beautiful."

In the interaction between herself and the colorful objects of the room she is triggered into an awareness of the greater Mystery within which she lives.

From such exclamation, we move to use "God" as a noun to express the felt perception that the Greater Mystery initiated the encounter.

To speak of "God" is always then to speak of our relationship to God; i.e., God-language is always self-involving.

"God is love" means that our relationship to God is loving.

This imagination always keeps the reality and presence of God joined to the reality and presence of the finite world: God-self-others are permanently bound together.

The foundation of this imagination is the conviction of a universal divine presence. Faith is responding in mind, heart, and action to the inescapable Mystery.

3. *Images*, with cognitive and affective power, are a first form of attempting to convey the experience of God.

The multiplicity of images reflects the fact that God cannot be 'captured' in one or all images, but nonetheless can be contacted through them: an imageless God available through images.

Images are often taken from the medium of disclosure.

E.g., God as mother, father, lover, heavenly.

The elusive Divine Presence is named with feelings, attitudes, and values through which it entered one's awareness.

Images can also be chosen because they accurately convey the felt perception of the relationship.

E.g., Elijah in the cave discounting the images of a mighty wind, earthquake, and fire – and arriving at a small, whispering sound.

Diverse images can be used to convey the same meaning.

A baffling originality results when images drawn from the inherited writings merge with images of contemporary experience.

This is both (a) the personal appropriation of the traditional faith and (b) the enlivening of the traditional faith by personal experience.

Examples given from Edith Sitwell, Annie Dillard, and Br. Antoninus.

This is true in religious conversation as in more literary attempts to express experience.

The tradition gives us a language for the depth of our present experience; present experience revitalizes the language of the tradition.

'God-talk' is frequently analyzed into at least three functions:

- i. Names the intention of the Mystery toward all that dwell within it;
- ii. Performative: expresses the commitment of the speaker to the values contained in the language;
- iii. Evocative of the presence of Mystery.

Generally speaking, inherited images function well at (i) naming the Mystery and (ii) expressing our commitment, but are largely unable to (iii) evoke the presence of Mystery.

They have become so much a part of our ordinary speech that they cannot shock us out of our everyday perceptions; they are permanent metaphors for our convictions and values but not live metaphors for our experience.

E.g., "Abba" had innovative power in Jesus' time that "Father" does not have in ours because it has become established/traditional.

Also, note the contrast between Ps 148 and Anne Sexton's "Welcome Morning."

By themselves the traditional images are prone to conviction without inspiration; by themselves contemporary images are prone to enthusiasm without direction.

Images play upon the experiences of people and call forth many responses; they are characterized by an explosive richness and power.

But the evocative power of imagery has little control over what it evokes; thus our traditional images of God as father, king, and creator can overcommunicate and give rise to meanings which distort the relationship:

- Father = male supremacy;
- King = God rules and we are absent from the governing;
- Creator = Deist clock-winder.

Because of this capacity for distortion, images are never enough.

#### 4. Stories of exploring faith.

Such stories first delimit the possibilities of the image.

'The prodigal son' gives direction to the father-image, and restricts the image's open-ended potential.

Note, e.g., that in the story the father's behavior contradicts the unwritten laws of patriarchy.

Jesus' stories of God's kingship talk about human well-being and transformation; no uninvolved kingly deity is intended here.

Gn 1 and 2 tell of God empowering the man and woman to tend the garden and care for one another.

But the story also expands the image by triggering other stories.

There results a gradual unfolding, not only of our relationship to God, but also of what people look like when they are participating to a high degree in that relationship.

Stories also suggest insights and elicit action.

Unlike straight moral exhortation, the story is able to meet us where we are without clubbing us into where we should be.

But stories are prey to reductionistic and misleading distillations of meaning.

There is need for further clarification, for going beyond the story to the insights it contains and the values it proposes.

5. The move to *insights* and *values* is necessary if we are to arrive at an action which is in accord with the story, which is an interpretation of the image, which carries the felt perception of the relationship to the God whom we have met.

But the story must never be abandoned because it is ever capable of generating new insights/values in new situations.

It is not the story which formulates the insights and proposes the values, it is the people who hear and read the story. Thus, the story is able to work its way into new minds and new hearts with new results.

Thus, we seek *some* of the insights/values to be derived from stories:

- The 'prodigal son' insists that the past does not have to determine the future, and the way to a better future after betrayal is forgiveness.
  - The story of 'the king who gave a great supper' tells of an invitation eventually going out to all, thus emphasizing the universality of God's approach.
  - The Genesis creation stories spark many insights and guide us to values of respect for nature over brute manipulation of it, of joy in being finite over despair about not being infinite, or responsibility for each other over looking out for number one.
6. *Implications:* The insights/values make us attentive to the areas of life which the reality of God attends to, enabling us to perceive the redemptive patterns of human existence.

They also provide stable attitudes toward the fluctuating situations of life, thus providing a basic orientation within life.

Such insights/values push toward concrete embodiment, unraveling into strategies (this being a painful and piecemeal process, not a matter of straight deduction).

On the level of strategy, there are three temptations:

- i. To not have strategies, making religion a purely inner experience;
- ii. Equating the experience of God with one strategy;
- iii. To engage in inappropriate strategies.

7. *Stories of enacted faith* are life histories, recounting what happens to people when they struggle with God, themselves, and the world.

Structure: "With these convictions and values this is what I did; this is what happened; this is how I responded."

God is 'embodied' in these stories; they thus provide the possibility of a new meeting with the familiar yet ever strange God.

From this new meeting comes a different acknowledgment, a different image, different stories of exploration, different insights/values, different implications, and different struggles which give rise to new stories of enacted faith: and the journey of faith goes on.

#### **CHAPTER FOUR: The Forerunner of Faith**

The story of Jesus carries the struggles and hopes of all our stories. Paradoxically, the concrete particularity of his story universalizes it.

The total event of Jesus is 'what it looks like' to live within and act out of our relationship with God; this is what it means to say that Jesus is human and divine – in him we contact neither God alone nor man alone but God-Man.

#### **ORIENTATIONS TO JESUS:**

- The Way of *Admiration* involves filtering the Gospels through a highly developed theology of the Incarnation as the center of a universal divine plan.

This involves the classic mythic pattern of the hero who journeys forth, undergoes perils but overcomes them, and returns home with the spoils (cf. Phil 2).

Our response to the Son of God who has accomplished our salvation is to give him praise/thanks; we marvel at the story of Jesus.

The way of admiration is continually awe-struck by God becoming man.

The key moments of the Jesus story, in this approach, are pre-existence, birth, death, and resurrection (with the emotional center being on Incarnation/Christmas [Irenaeus] and Crucifixion/Good Friday [Anselm]).

Focus is on the *objective* fact of the redemption, its once-and-for-all quality.

This often leads to a certain *distancing*: the Jesus story is related as a series of magnificent facts to be acknowledged rather than realities to be encountered.

The ministry of Jesus tends to be largely overlooked, except for possible consideration of the miracles.

This is a genuine Christian spirituality, but by lessening our awareness of Jesus' humanity and the affirmation/critique offered by his words and deeds, it can subtly keep at arm's length the gracious and demanding Jesus of Nazareth.

- In the way of Imitation, the ministry of Jesus takes precedence: 'doing what Jesus did' is contrasted with thanking him.

This approach looks at the fundamental perspectives, attitudes, and actions of Jesus as models of faith response.

Two levels of imitation are possible:

- i. Urges assimilation of the central concerns/values which animated Jesus' life;
- ii. Looks to the actual behavior of Jesus.

The weakness of this 'way' is especially evident at level (2): Jesus' strategies were geared to his social, religious, and political environment.

Mimicry neglects the creative possibilities that our own ingenuity could devise in our time and place.

If Sobrino is correct, Jesus' faith developed under the pressure of the actual conflicts he was engaged in.

Though we must surely share in the perspectives of Jesus, our own life histories will purge and reconfigure them.

Further, the "inner mind" of Jesus is not available to us; we have but features—general attitudes/perspectives.

We must also focus on our own "inner mind," to be attentive to the movement of God catalyzing us to possibilities for action in our present situation.

The way of *explanation* pursues the question of Jesus' identity.

One approach is the bestowing of titles; each title brings to light an aspect of Jesus' person, but his concrete life also reconfigures each title.

This 'way' also attempts to construct the inner components of Jesus' selfhood.

The first five Christian centuries saw continual development and conflict of Christological constructions.

Chalcedon (451) provided the classic formulation: Jesus Christ is one person in two natures.

The central role of this dogma is to safeguard the experience of Jesus in and through Jesus the truly human is touched and the truly divine is touched, yet a truly unified person is met.

Explanation of the person of Jesus is an attempt to account for the experience of Jesus; it is a second-order process of reflection engaged in by people after they have encountered Jesus and through him have experienced the salvation of God.

The bedrock of all Christological explanation is an experience which gives rise to the conviction that in the presence of Jesus we are the people of God.

The relational has primacy; unless Jesus has touched/transformed personal lives, speculation about him is gratuitous.

The central motif of Jesus' preaching was the Kingdom of God: the movement of people in God and the movement of God in people.

When Jesus was with people, the God who was previously dormant was awake and active. When Jesus moved out of their lives, God quieted down. When Jesus returned, God stirred.

This experience led to the question of Jesus' relationship to God.

There is always a self-referent in 'Jesus-talk;' if I do not experience God through Jesus, christology becomes merely inherited habit for me.

The real question is: Is Jesus' presence the entry into the movement of God which is ultimately gracious and salvific?

Cf. Jesus' response to John's disciples – Jesus points to the destructive giving way to the creative.

The historical Jesus mediated the power of the sacred.

The question is, does Jesus mediate the sacred today?

Note the Johannine account of Andrew and Peter. Andrew experiences life through Jesus and runs to tell Peter. Peter does not take it on Andrew's word but went to *meet* Jesus. The only response to someone else's experience of God through Jesus is to see if that experience is available to us through Jesus. This is our stance vis-à-vis the tradition.

A supernaturalistic imagination tends to emphasize encounter with the 'risen Lord,' a free-floating divine presence disassociated from the historical Jesus.

This led to emphasis on a cultic presence of the risen Lord, contact with whom was less complex-demanding than face-offs with Jesus of Nazareth.

"Christ" must be bonded to "Jesus" – the Risen Lord always carries the memory of the historical Jesus.

Whenever artists place Jesus in highest heaven, he always has holes in his hands.

We must explore the possibility that in retelling and rehearing the stories of Jesus, we will enter our relationship to Mystery in a new and transformed way. We might touch God afresh.

This way of contacting Jesus is built on a trinitarian understanding of God, which is based on the fact that Jesus leaves twice:

- i. He departs into the realm of death from which he emerges triumphant.
- ii. He departs for his permanent home with God.

The inescapable message of the Ascension narrative is that Jesus is no longer available in the way he once was. In his absence, his stories are retold and his meal reenacted.

At first, the church expected Jesus' imminent return; but as his return delayed, emphasis on the sending of the Spirit grew. This was caused by the fact that the experience which Jesus was able to trigger did not go into the far reaches of God with him. What happened when the earthly Jesus was with people continued to happen when the earthly Jesus was not with them.

The doctrine developed like this: The God of Jesus was here, so Jesus must be here. But Jesus is definitely not here as he once was. Rather his Spirit is present among us. And since the Spirit belongs to Jesus and the Father, it is capable of initiating an experience of God as Father through Jesus as Son.

The now present Spirit of God becomes a way of encountering the absent Jesus.

We live *in* the Spirit and go *through* the Son to the Father.

We dwell in the Spirit actively at work soliciting our freedom and transforming our lives; but this Spirit directs our minds and hearts to the events of which Jesus is the center; Jesus carries our minds and hearts to the ultimate reaches of transcendent Mystery we live within and calls it Father (generating love).

The journey of faith is begun when we move out of our conviction of ultimate graciousness into the fray of everyday living; but here we experience uncertainty and conflict. But the Jesus-story is one of faith in the concrete – so contact with Jesus gives direction to action as well as 'the spark to go on.' To experience Jesus is to experience yourself in the Spirit and on the way to the Father.

The evangelists creatively retell the Jesus-story so that certain emphases in the life and message of Jesus address the present situation of the community.

They structure the remembered elements of Jesus' earthly story so that his continued presence in the Spirit can be discerned. The story of the Giver of the Spirit clarifies the Spirit's urgings and maps the journey to the Father.

There is growing confidence that a historically responsible consensus regarding the historical life and message of Jesus can be reached (Norman Perrin):



- His ministry was somehow linked with that of John the Baptist;
- He proclaimed the Kingdom of God and challenged hearers to respond;
- His reputation as an exorcist reinforced the authority of this proclamation;
- He was concerned to bring together into a unified group those who responded to his proclamation of the Kingdom, without reference to social differences;
- Celebrating a common meal was a central feature of this group's life;
- Jesus challenged the Jewish tendency to reject certain of its own members;
- He aroused deep opposition, was tried on blasphemy, and crucified;
- Jesus had chosen from among his disciples a small group who had exhibited something of his power and authority.

The "Christ of faith" is a portrait of Jesus heavily influenced by the resurrection experience of the early Church. In the portrait of the Christ of faith the role of those who contact Jesus is in the foreground – what happened to them in their interaction with Jesus is the main concern of the stories they tell.

Many metaphors/stories convey Christ's saving power for the life of the early Church.

There is definite continuity between the portrait of the historical Jesus and the portrait of the Christ of faith.

"The resurrection clarifies what is already immanent in the words and deeds of Jesus" (Dermot Lane).

But it is to the portrait of the historical Jesus that people take their lives for affirmation and challenge.

Faith in Jesus is a process of relating our own lives to his life story.

We go through Jesus into the Spirit and onto the Father.

We allow the Jesus story to focus areas of importance in life and to give a perspective on those areas; for this, the historical Jesus must be our starting point.

When we do experience salvation through Jesus, we engage in the same process as the first followers of Jesus – images and stories will follow.

The images, stories, and theologies of the New Testament (the "Christ of faith") will remain our touchstone and guide in this process.

We thus perpetuate the tradition: owning it from the inside and developing it.

Such stories and images are the inevitable overflow of God's presence: they are the wild and brilliant things people do and say when the love of God has been unleashed in their lives.

It is through the portrait of the historical Jesus, his concerns and conflicts, that the stirrings of the Spirit in our history and humanity will be named and called forth.

It is through this experience that we will both appropriate the portrait of the Christ of faith in the gospels and supplement that portrait with our own experiences of what we have found through Jesus of Nazareth.

Faith in Jesus means retelling the Jesus-stories so that the life of the teller is interwoven with the tale: the Jesus=story and my-story interact. This interaction gives way to insights, implications, and finally to stories of enacted faith.

Of central importance is that the fundamental conflicts, concerns and attitudes of Jesus are passed on.

The Jesus-story focuses questions and conflicts for us in a particular way; we hand our lives over to the story and receive it back. It thus provides perspectives from the concerns/attitudes of Jesus on our very particular lives.