

Who Is Jesus Christ for Africans Today? Prophet, Priest, Potentate

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Several years ago, an evangelical church was built on a strategic road in Nairobi with a big neon-light sign that read, "CHRIST IS THE ANSWER." As a young theological student I remember my reaction to the sign: But what is the question? In the Gospel of Mark (8:27-32), which is believed to be the earliest Gospel or story about Jesus Christ, Jesus confronted his disciples not with an answer but with a question which is still pertinent to all those everywhere who claim to be his disciples. Jesus repeated his question. The first time he wanted to know what the disciples knew others to say about who Jesus was. And he got some answers. Some say this, others that, and so on. Then Jesus went straight to the point and asked them, "And what do you say that I am?" Peter, who often assumed the role of their spokesman, responded without hesitation: "You are the Christ. You are the promised Messiah!"

Other people may say a thousand things as to who Jesus is; it will never suffice, however, for the disciples of Christ to mimic the confessions of others, no matter how valid. Ever since the coming of Western missionary Christianity to Africa, African Christians have more or less been content to embrace the answers supplied to them by the "mother" church. Quite often these answers have been defended with the arguments that they are orthodox, faithful to the faith handed down from the apostles. Such arguments have stifled every attempt by indigenous Christians to find their own questions so that they may give their own answers.

An attempt to answer the question Who is Jesus Christ? is an attempt

to develop a christology; an interpretation as to who Jesus really is in every context and situation. It is not merely to provide a catechetical answer or a pious evangelical slogan. In this paper, I contend that Africans have every right to formulate their own christology, their own response to who Jesus is to them. Such a response should reflect their consciousness as to who this Messiah really is. I also contend that Africans understand Jesus Christ in the context of their own religious consciousness. They are looking for a Christ who will play the mediating role between humanity and divinity. In African religious tradition, meditation between humanity and divinity; between the natural and the supernatural; between the world of man and the world of spirit was accomplished through three main religious specialists—the prophet, the priest and the sacred king ruler, chief-elder or the accepted potentate. In this paper, the mediating Christ will be outlined as prophet, priest, and potentate.

When Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ, he was expressing a confession that was very much in the minds and hearts of his Jewish contemporaries. The Jews were an oppressed and colonized people. They lived as strangers and were dominated by strangers in their own land. Peter, as all other Jews, knew and expected a day when the promised Messiah would come to restore not only the glorious Kingdom of their ancestor David (Micah 5:2) but also their dignity and freedom (Isaiah 61). The strength of Peter's confession was not that it was original or new; rather, it was because it expressed his genuine desire, prayers, and hopes and these were not only his but also those of the other disciples, fellow Jews and the entire humanity, particularly the oppressed peoples everywhere. With this confession, Jesus knew that "the Kingdom of God" had dawned among men, the fulfillment of God's promises to his people had been inaugurated and nothing would stop it from reaching God's people in every place and in every age. Aware of the misunderstanding such a confession would cause to those with the mistaken notions of a narrow, nativistic political Messiah, Jesus admonished his disciples to keep such a revolutionary confession to themselves, at least temporarily (Mark 8:30).

The recognition that Jesus Christ is to be understood in the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king is not uniquely African. Belief in Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King may be traced back to Eusebius of Caesarea who in the fourth century said:

And it has come down to us that some also of the same prophets have by anointing become typically Christs, so they may be referred to as the Same Christ the divine Heavenly word, who is the only High Priest of the Universe, the only King of Creation, and the only supreme Prophet among His Father's prophets.¹

By the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, the church had fully recognized the threefold office of Christ, although various sections of

Christianity emphasized a particular office sometimes at the expense of others. Sometimes the office of the prophet was combined with that of the priest, especially when emphases were on understanding Jesus as the "Revealer of God."²

It is not in the scope of this paper to dwell at length on the development of the "threefold office" doctrine throughout the history of the church. It suffices to mention that the church has taken this path throughout the centuries. However, the Western wing of the church, while acknowledging the threefold office has also tended to dwell too much on the person of Christ rather than the work of Christ. Even the Protestant theologian, Emil Brunner, in his very relevant statement on christology (*The Mediator*) emphasizes the person rather than the work of Christ. The Roman Catholic christologies lean heavily toward the person of Christ also. Nevertheless, attempts to understand Christ from what he does rather than who he is have become dominant in recent years, particularly with the emergence of theologies of liberation. In our attempt to understand Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King as key to an African christology, the work of Christ rather than his person will have priority.

JESUS THE PROPHET

During the New Testament period, it was the Messianic consciousness which was dominant among the people to whom Jesus came. They were looking for the coming of a Messiah. However, the Gospels present an unmistakable Prophetic consciousness represented by the disciples' answer to Jesus' question, "What do men say that I am?" Without any hesitation the disciples were quick to answer, "some say that you are John the Baptist; others say that you are Elijah, while others say that you are one of the prophets" (Mark 8:28). The disciples of Jesus saw in him a prophet in the line of Moses, Elijah, Amos, and the other pre-exilic prophets (Matthew 1:14, Luke 7:16, 39, 24:19, John 9:17). Even Jesus gave the impression that he viewed himself as the prophet (Matthew 13:57, Luke 4:24, John 4:44).

One of the basic qualifications of a prophet was that he was sent from God. The Gospels clearly indicate that Jesus was sent from God. As Moses was sent from God in the Old Testament, so was Jesus in the New Testament.³ The Gospel of Matthew (5:17-48) compares and contrasts Jesus with Moses, pointing out that Moses received the Torah but Jesus gave the New Torah. Jesus is not only compared to Moses but also to other prophets of the Old Testament. Many of the parables, pronouncements, denunciations, and "signs" Jesus made conformed well to the prophetic tradition of his day. This does not mean that Jesus was no more than a prophet; it does mean that he was also no less than a prophet. Jesus the man and Jesus the prophet cannot be separated. Jesus understood himself and was also understood by others to be not just a prophet but also the prophet from God.

This prophetic office of Jesus could be one important aspect in the development of an African christology.

JESUS THE PRIEST

The Gospel story does not portray Jesus as a Messiah and a prophet only but also as a priest. One cannot understand the work of a priest without the ideas of suffering and sacrifice. In the Gospels, Jesus is not only presented as the "suffering servant" of Isaiah 53:11ff. but also as the sacrificial victim offered through his death on the cross (Mark 15:37, Matthew 27:46). Jesus, as the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann says, died a "God-forsaken death for a God-forsaken people."⁴ The use of sacrificial language in Paul's writings and the presentation of Christ as the High Priest in Hebrews conform to one of the most basic aspects of the early church's understanding of Jesus. Paul states this priestly ministry of Jesus in the famous statement, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (1 Cor. 5:19). As a priest, Jesus stands in between human beings and God to provide the essential link between man and God. The priestly office of Jesus Christ which is the central theme of Hebrews, chapters 1-7, and the first epistle of Peter show the relationship his priestly office has with his office as king (Hebrews 2: 8f.) and as the leader of his people (2:10-13) and as High Priest (2:14-18). Jesus, however, offers a better priesthood (Hebrews 8-10) because he leads his people into the City of God (Hebrews 11-13).

In the New Testament, Jesus appears in the presence of God as a priest on behalf of believers. He is not, however, presented only as the priest at the altar but also as the sacrificial victim on the altar. This is the dual role in the priestly work of Christ.

JESUS THE POTENTATE

In 1 Timothy 6:15, Jesus is referred to as "the blessed and only Potentate, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords" (AV). The word *Potentate* is translated in the other versions as *Sovereign* (RSV) and *Ruler* (TEV). Jesus is presented in the potentate in many expressions in the New Testament. He is the eschatological "Son of David" (Mark 10:46-52, Matthew 20:29-34) who is destined to come and establish the glorious reign of David over God's people Israel (Psalm 2:7). He is the eschatological "Son of Man" of Daniel 7:13f. signifying the authority of historical Jesus with the authority not only over Sabbath but also the authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10, 28). Mark combines Psalm 110:1 and Daniel 7:13 to answer the chief priest Caiaphas (Mark 14:62) where Jesus is reported to have answered the Chief Priest's question: "Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed God?" (14:16) with the statement: "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated

on the right hand of the Almighty and coming with clouds of heaven" (14:62).

The risen Christ becomes the "King of Kings and the Lord of Lords" (Rev. 19:16) and is the culmination in the development of a theology which identifies Jesus with the rule of God in the world. Jesus is the Kyrios, the reigning Lord (Acts 2:36) upon whom apostolic Christianity based its proclamation. God has entrusted to Jesus his eternal rule on earth (Acts 11:20, 14:30).

In Jesus of Nazareth, God speaks to his people as Prophet, relates to them as Priest, and establishes his rule not only in the world to come but in this present world also. A christology which revolves around the three offices of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and Potentate is not only soundly biblical but will be the most comprehensible to African Christians.

THE QUEST FOR A RELEVANT AFRICAN CHRISTOLOGY

In spite of the fact that Jesus Christ is taken very seriously and followed by a large segment of the African population, very little effort has been made by Africans to define and establish who Jesus Christ is to them. However, as John S. Mbiti observes, some special interest is growing among many African scholars to develop an African christology.⁵ And this is quite in order because without a very clear concept of who Jesus is to African Christians, the church in Africa may be standing on quicksand.

WHO DO AFRICANS SAY THAT JESUS CHRIST IS?

If Peter understood Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of his contemporary Jewish thought, the African response to the above question must reflect African consciousness. The efforts by forces of colonialism to exterminate and suppress the African religious consciousness have not succeeded, and today African people are asserting their own experience of God and their own reflection of how that God relates to them. In African religious tradition, God relates to people in concrete, experiential, and practical terms rather than in a mystical and spiritualistic manner. As Mbiti observes:

Traditional religions and philosophy are concerned with man in past and present time. God comes into the picture as an explanation of man's contact with time. There is no messianic hope or apocalyptic vision with God stopping in at some future moment to bring about a radical reversal of man's normal life. God is not pictured in an ethical/spiritual relationship with man. Man's acts of worship and turning to God are pragmatic and utilitarian rather than spiritual or mystical.⁶

The nature of the quest for African christology is to translate Jesus Christ to the tongue, style, genius, character, and cultures of African peo-

ple. If African peoples, as Mbiti observes, are more conscious of a relationship with God based on living contacts, in concrete situations and experiences, it is easy to appreciate the importance of the religious authorities who in some very real way symbolize God's presence among the people. In African religion, faith is not expressed through credal formulations or theological statements but in day-to-day encounter with the challenges of life. Every encounter is understood in its temporal or material sense as well as its religious or supernatural sense. The African, as Mbiti has observed, "lives in a religious universe so that natural phenomena and objects are intimately associated with God."⁷ The religious specialists, whom Mbiti calls medicine men, rainmakers, kings, and priests (he combines priests and prophets), mediate between the world of man and the spiritual or sacred reality even if in many cases this is only in a symbolic manner. Mbiti says:

"Specialists" are in effect the repositories in knowledge, practice and symbolically, of the religious life of their communities. They are the ones who make history of African traditional societies both sacred and religious. "Specialists" are the symbolic points of contact between the historical and spiritual worlds. In them are the continuity and essence of African religious thought and life.⁸

A religion without a creed, definite structure, or definite organizational forms finds its expression and impact on its visible symbols such as its rituals and religious personages. The prophet, priest, and king in African religious tradition is at the very centre of the religious life of the African people. No ritual observance would make any sense without them.

THE PROPHET IN AFRICAN RELIGIOUS TRADITION

The prophet in Africa is known by several names. He (or she) is the diviner, seer, revealer of secrets, possessor of the spirit, or just the man of God.⁹ Prophets are special persons in that they are the leaders of their communities in matters both political and religious. Sometimes the role of diviner or seer is considered more religious than that of the prophet who functions as an intermediary within the community. But as Benjamin Ray observes, the difference is insignificant:

African prophets go directly to the people and inspire religious and political movements. Diviners and prophets alike are the mediators of the divine, but prophets speak forth the divine word directly without reading it off a symbolic medium. For this reason, prophets are often sources of creative religious change. . . . Under certain circumstances, diviners and priests may develop prophetic powers and become leaders of religious and social change.¹⁰

As we saw earlier, the social, political, economic, and religious life of African people was seen as one and the same. The role of the prophet was not restricted to the religious aspects of the community but also involved its social and political dimensions. The prophet was therefore the socio-political as well as the spiritual leader of his people. While in most cases the priest was a male, the prophet in African religion could be a man or a woman. In fact, female prophets are numerous in African society. In African religion, prophets as "possessors of the spirit" surprised everybody at times when they were manifested in persons of lower rank in the community. At such times the community did not see the person but the "power" which he or she possessed.

During crises, particularly in times of war, the prophets were the spokespersons of the people, advising the community on the proper steps to be taken in order to overcome the crises. The prophets also expressed the aspirations and ideals of their communities. In times of epidemics or political upheaval, African communities looked up to them for guidance.

Prophesy in its African sense has been a primary aspect of African Christianity in independency. Most founders of the African Independent churches were seen as prophetic leaders. Leaders such as Simon Kimbangu from the very beginning presented himself as a messenger or prophet (*ngunza*) of God and healed in the name of Jesus.¹¹ Simon Kimbangu of Zaire is the best example of the most popular form of Christian independency which revolted against the brand of Christianity represented by the missionary-founded churches from the West. Benjamin Ray observes:

These prophet-led sects represent a radical indigenization of Christianity in Africa. Often called "Zionist," "Prayer," "Spiritual," "Prophet," these churches have created a thorough synthesis of Christian and African ritual forms. They emphasize revelation from the Holy Spirit, through prophets and a practical, this-worldly notion of salvation in which healing is prominent. They stress communal solidarity in terms of the Old Testament ideal of prophet-led community based in a Holy City.¹²

In general, the independent churches have done quite well in making the Christian faith relevant in the daily life of African people. They have also demonstrated the potency of the African religious heritage by addressing the issues affecting African societies, be they political or religious. Many of the independent prophet-leaders have led religious rebellions and combined religious and political revolt. Whether it is the Kinjikitile of the Maji Maji revolt against the Germans in Tanganyika, the Mau Mau movement in Kenya, or the recent "Holy Spirit Movement" led by self-declared prophetess Alice Lakwena in Uganda, the essential elements remain the same—the quest for spiritual/physical liberation from external domination. For the followers of these independent churches, the prophet is their spiritual and

political leader and liberator. While the prophet may resist identifications or designations as the Messiah, his followers do not see much of a difference, and such a prophet often gets the kind of reverence and status accorded to Jesus.

Prophesy in African Independent churches is also associated with dreams, visions, and trances as means of interpreting the existential events of life. The prophecy of Joel quoted in the book of Acts 2:16-18 is extremely pertinent:

This is what I will do in the last days, says God,

I will pour out my spirit on everyone,

your sons and your daughters will proclaim my message;

and your young men will see visions,

and your old men will have dreams.

Yes, even my servants, both men and women,

I will pour out my spirit in those days,

and they will proclaim my message . . .

Prophesies like this are the basic leitmotif in independent Christianity and are extremely potent in the life of the believing community symbolized in those who are believed to be the prophets or the "possessors of the Spirit." As Peter proclaimed to the people of Jerusalem, "Jesus of Nazareth was a man whose divine authority was clearly proven to you by all the miracles and wonders which God performed through Him" (Acts 2:22). This Jesus is still doing wonders through his own servants. In other words, Jesus is real in what he continues to do even at the present time. He pours his spirit, heals the sick, and leads his people from their spiritual and physical bondage. This is evidenced through the special people through whom he works in the life and faith of the community of faith. In this aspect, Christianity and African religion blend well.

THE PRIEST IN AFRICAN RELIGION

One of the important points to underline is that the prophet in African religion would also be the priest. But at times, the priestly role will be separated from that of the prophet. As Benjamin Ray observes, "it is sometimes mistaking to distinguish sharply between 'priest' and 'prophet,' the distinctive mark of a priest is his ritual and symbolic authority."¹³

The priest in African religion is seen as the medium through which the life-giving power of God comes to man. The priest contains within himself the "life force" which he mediates to his people. In the community the priest presided over religious rituals, led the people in worship, and solemnized the Rites of Passage ceremonies. The priests are masters of traditional wisdom, rituals, and ceremonial practices. More than anything else, they are the living symbols of religious life of the African community. Peo-

ple go to them with the hope of allaying their fears and sufferings. They lead in the communal sacrifice where God's intervention to meet the needs of the community is sought. It is through the priest that divine power is employed for the purpose of changing the human condition for the better. As Ray observes, "ritual sacrifices thus had a basic threefold structure: consecration, invocation-immolation, communion-purification."¹⁴ The priest officiates these rituals in order to establish the bond between the people and the divinity and between the people themselves. The sacrificial animal provides the link between the people and divinity through the symbolic actions and words of the priest.

THE KING IN AFRICAN RELIGION

He may be called the King, Ruler, Chief Elder, Leader, or any other term which marks the person who symbolizes the identity of an African people and their unity. This position may be acquired through hereditary means or through special recognition. In the former case, the power of the position is passed on through a rigid ancestral lineage, and in the latter case quite often through ritual action. The king or ruler plays a priestly role on behalf of his people on the basis of the fact that he stands as the intermediary between them and the divinity. "African Kings perform priestly functions, for they are often the focal points of their Kingdoms."¹⁵ Among the Swazi, the king is both the ritual and political head of his people, and the annual Ncwala ceremony signified the religious and political dimensions of the Swazi society.¹⁶ Until recently, the Kabaka of Buganda was the symbol of Buganda's national and religious heritage. Even his deposition from Uganda has not diminished his symbolic significance.

In African society, leadership was never purely political or mere civil authority. It always carried with it a religious aspect in which the leader of the people exerted ritual and religious authority as well. Through these leaders, Aylward Shorter observes:

traditional religion received its visible expression. Authority in traditional Africa was basically political-religious and professional priest-hoods and other cultic offices or forms of religious dedication represented partial approaches or specializations within the religious system taken as a whole. At the universal or territorial level it was the hierarchy of family heads, clan-leaders and chiefs who presided over religious rituals, led the people in worship and took initiative in creating and manipulating religious institutions such as oracles or rites of initiation.¹⁷

The sacred element in African society guaranteed not only the identity and a sense of belonging to each person in the community but also his sense of security and just protection. Traditional rulers were not tyrants to

their people, for their leadership was a sacred trust with codes of conduct religiously sanctioned and for which individual rulers could betray or change according to their own whims. Leadership also threatened with deposition from the inside; the danger always outside, from foreign invaders. Such an invasion, however, was to the community, and the loss was to all, not to the king alone. The de-
the king was the defence of the community as a whole.

Mbiti has observed that in independent churches, individuals religious fame "emerge and become the focus for corporate or co-expression of faith among members of the particular group."¹⁸ Africa tend to link leadership with the sort of sacredness it was identified the traditional religion. The leader was the visible expression of the life of his people. While the office of the leader was not always a monarchial, others chieftainships, while yet other clan elders and leaders—the office or the recognition bestowed in ship was never without religious connotations.

JESUS AS PROPHET, PRIEST AND POTENTATE IN AFRICAN CHRISTOLOGY

Ever since the first consultation of African Theologies held at Ibadan in 1965, African Christians have been struggling hard to establish and define a truly African Christology. During that consultation, the quest for a Christology was inaugurated with these words: "We recognize the special quality of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and yet it is because of this revelation that we can discern what is truly of God in our pre-Christian heritage. This knowledge of God is not discontinuous with our pre-Christian knowledge of Him."¹⁹

As the disciples of Jesus Christ, the African Christians will define their view of Jesus Christ from their own religious consciousness. If Jesus is to be something to Africans, he will certainly be the answer to their aspirations and expectations. The majority of the African people are black, and their religious consciousness has been conspicuously associated with an oppressed, exploited and humiliated segment of the human race. How can African Christians define Jesus? One thing that is very evident in African Christianity is that African Christians have understood Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and King. Any observer of African Christians, particularly of the independent church groups, will get the notice that certain persons symbolize their faith in Jesus Christ whom they regard as central in the evolution of a genuinely African Christianity. It is these persons and not ideas or doctrinal tenets who captivate the masses of African people and bring them to faith. Prophet William Wade Harris, who shook the western African zone with his prophetic message, is perhaps one of the perfect examples of early African Christianity:

[He was] . . . an imposing figure . . . out of the Old Testament. His long white robe, his white turban and white beard identified him as a prophetic figure; the black bands crossed over his chest and the tall cross of cane which he carried in his hand suggested that he was a Christian. He was followed through the streets of Axim (Ghana 1914) by a crowd of people, some of whom fell into convulsions before him, some of whom trembled with the emotions his presence unleashed . . .²⁰

African peoples have always known and taken very seriously the role of their spiritual leaders. The community in Africa has always approached the divinity through its religious personages. These personages are necessary in bridging the gap between ordinary persons and the divine world. This does not mean Africans did not pray to God directly. Indeed, they often did so, particularly with informal prayers and invocations.²¹

The Christian doctrine of incarnation provides an excellent base for the development of an African christology. In Jesus God is not a mysterious hidden reality but one who comes down to the people through his servant Jesus. Kofi Appia-Kubi very well describes the way an African christology has evolved:

the concept[s] of Christology of such traditional African Christians are practical, dynamic, living and basically based on real-life experience, and a comprehensive African notion of religion and of God taking off faithfully from the Gospel message and African culture and notion of man. . . . Their concepts of Christology revolve around genealogy, rites of passage—birth, baptism, eucharist, and death; kinship and community aspects; such titles as Mediators, Redeemer, Saviour, Liberator and Healer are pregnant with meaning for these indigenous African Christians.²²

The Jesus who deals with Africans and their existential situation in a real and dynamic way will be extremely comprehensible to the African people. Africans are not interested in suffering through their problems now while waiting for the bliss of heaven. This is the type of Christianity evangelistic missionary Christianity to a large extent communicated to the African people. Africans want a leader who shows them the way to liberation now—liberation from disease, oppression, hunger, fear, and death. This type of Jesus is the one presented in the Gospels. Africans identify very much with him. He is the prophet who exhorts them to a better and more hopeful living. He is a priest who mediates between them and the external powers of the living God. He is the King who leads his people to victory over the overwhelming threats of life. In the one Jesus, the threefold office is seen in its unity. Jesus is Prophet, Priest, and Potentate, all rolled into

one. This is the way the New Testament sees him. Africans would like to see him so.

There are some dangers in contemporary African Christianity regarding the threefold symbols of Christianity. While ordinary African Christians genuinely want to maintain a deep respect for their religious symbols (prophets, priests, and bishops), this respect has often been exploited by the African Christian leaders where excesses leading almost to hero worship and personality cults have emerged. Some priests and bishops have deftly exploited this African cultural heritage of reverence to their spiritual leaders for their own personal glory and enrichment. Even in political circles, leaders tend toward personality cult which they know will easily develop in the context of the African cultural respect for their leaders. This tendency may explain why in African church and state, people in authority do not easily relinquish power. Authority in Africa is held as a sacred rather than as a public trust. The tendency is to take authority as sacred and permanent (till death terminates it). Taken by fallen human beings, the African reverence for authority can become a source of great abuses and sufferings.

Nevertheless, Jesus as Prophet, Priest, and Potentate does provide for the African people the most perfect model for them. Jesus is not the man after self-glory and personal enrichment. Jesus is the "man for others" who gave his life for the most wretched people of the earth. He is referred to in Acts 3:15 as the *Archegos*, the one who leads his people into life. Jesus means life, and never death. The Western models of Christian leadership—whether bishops, priests, or moderators in church leadership—have been grossly tainted by their authoritarianism, pomposity, and lack of a servant spirit, none of which were demonstrated by Jesus. Many Africans fail to see the real Jesus because of such unworthy models of Christianity. Jesus must be Prophet, Priest, and King because, as Paul writes in Philippians 2:5-11, he first humbled himself and accepted the role of servant. Have Africans lost him in the jungle of the two thousand years of Christian history? Where can they find him? How can they know him? Who is he to them? He is still the Jesus of Nazareth, very close to the African people as Prophet, Priest, and Potentate. When seen in the Gospels, he is easily known—by the scars on his hands and body from being crucified. His true servants will bear these scars too—the cross before the crown (Gal. 6:17). Africans know how to look for these scars. Jesus supplied them in plenty. Many African women and men have exemplified the true Christ to the extent that many African Christians are able to say: "Jesus we know, and we know His disciple Paul; but you, who are you?" (Acts 19:15). Sons of Sceva beware!

NOTES

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Christ as Seen by an African: A Christological Quest

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The early church believed that one encountered the image of God the proclamation and ministry of Jesus. In the somewhat radical derivation characteristic of his ministry, Jesus declared the will of God the creator. For Jesus, sacrificial death on the cross was the ultimate proof that he fulfilled his work and ministry in obedience to God's will. The reference to the resurrection was, in fact, the basis for the faith of the primitive church. The Messiahship of Jesus acquired great importance in the early church and became identified with his sacrificial act on the cross. Within the rapidly growing church, among the Gentiles, the term *Messiah* did not have the same central importance, and the equivalent term *Christos* became the preferred name: Jesus *Christ*.¹

The New Testament expanded this high christology even further in describing the preexistence of Christ and his participation in God's creation. It describes this preexistent Christ as the One who empties himself and takes the form of a servant (Phil. 2); hence, he is identified as the suffering servant. In the Gospel of John he is described as the Word, a formulation which is usually used in reference to Jewish Scripture. This Word which was with God and which was God became flesh, incarnate in Jesus Christ. The essence of the Christian faith in Christ was that Christ had come from God and had been with God in Christ who in Christ reconciled the world to himself and that it was God himself who in Christ reconciled the world to himself. The christological confession had its origin in the Easter proclamation of the crucified Christ, born after Easter Sunday, in the community of the crucified Christ, born after Easter Sunday, in the community of the crucified Christ. The entire christological confession for this new faith in Christ. The kernel of the