

Facing Polemics Head On: Learning Christology “From the Side”

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Introduction

When it comes to doing theology today — and Christology in particular — we find that “what is true is seldom new, what is new is seldom true.”¹ But, there was a time when this witticism did not apply, when Christology was not fully articulated, not thought through. In fact, the early church had to face constant and potent theological challenges from within and without. And these challenges were faced head on.

Today we have the privilege of being able to fall back on the great ecumenical creeds of the fourth and fifth century and their miscellanea. Likewise, we have the advantage of having clearly defined, highly sophisticated critical editions of the New Testament at our fingertips. The Christian communities of the second century, for example, still had to wrangle over the nature and extent of the canon — a struggle which we hardly have to face today.² In that sense we have clear advantages, we have creed and canon, deposits of truth that come with extensive commentaries ancient and new. We do not have to reinvent the wheel, and we *must not* if we want to stay within the trajectory of orthodox Christianity.

¹ Based on a German proverb: “*Das Wahre ist selten neu, das Neue selten wahr,*” which perhaps is based on a couplet by Johan Heinrich Voss: “Dein redseliges Buch lehrt mancherlei Neues und Wahres, wäre das Wahre nur neu, und das Neue nur Wahr!” (Vossischer Musenalmanach 1792). See Wolfgang Jacobmeyer, *Das Deutsche Schulgeschichtsbuch 1700–1945: Die erste Epoche seiner Gattungsgeschichte im Spiegel der Vorworte, Band 1* (Geschichtskultur und Historisches Lernen 8; Berlin: Lit, 2011), 609, n. 259.

² Nowadays, the discovery of “lost” or “secret” versions of the gospels cannot become a significant challenge to the canon of Scripture; they and any future discoveries can safely be dismissed precisely because there was no Christian faith community who retained and “traditioned” them as *Scripture*. This point has been explored by Roland Deines, “The Term and Concept of Scripture,” in *What Is Bible?* (eds. Armin Lange and Karin Finsterbusch; Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 235–81 (see 274–75), and idem, “Revelatory Experiences as the Beginning of Scripture: Paul’s Letters and the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible,” in *From Author to Copyist: Essays on the Composition, Redaction, and Transmission of the Hebrew Bible in the Honor of Zippi Talshir* (ed. Cana Werman; Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 303–36 (see 317–19, 322–23).

However, the danger for those who want to do Christology today is to *not* squarely face the challenges because of having such a repository of answers. “Christology for a New Generation” of course cannot be so innovative in its fresh articulation that it forgets the hard learned lessons from the past.³ But, the disadvantage that comes with having creed and canon is often a lack of awareness of the weight of the objections; to never have really heard the voices coming “from the side.”⁴ Especially when it comes to Christology it was the voices coming from the outside, from the periphery, often from the majority, that created an existential need for theological reflection and response. And quite often these outside voices were also inside voices.⁵

In this paper I hope to show briefly why it is needful for any new generation to listen carefully to challenges coming “from the side,” challenges that have been persistent and are potent, to learn that theology benefits from this exercise, and to perhaps discover that these challenges (and responses) are not so new after all. This is how the church has done theology, and this pattern we should follow. In that respect, it is like a mother’s caution to “listen before you speak.”

³ The conference theme was “Jesus Christ — For Us Today: Christology for a New Generation,” Paradosis Conference, 15 August 2016, Melbourne School of Theology. The call for papers included the following text: “Christians have been discussing the person of Jesus Christ for more than 2000 years. Yet over the centuries the discussion has lost nothing of its relevance and appeal. While we honour those who have gone before us, we are convinced that every generation ought to articulate afresh its faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ.”

⁴ I take the idea of Christology “from the side,” rather than from “above” or “below” from Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Calling Jesus Names: The Social Value of Labels in Matthew* (Sonoma, Cal.: Polebridge, 1988). This term was also appropriated by Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica, eds., *Who Do My Opponents Say That I Am? An Investigation of the Accusations Against the Historical Jesus* (LNTS 358; London: T&T Clark, 2008). Malina and Neyrey contend that “within Christian groups before Constantine, the chief expressive social dimension for non-Roman and Roman non-elite Christians was not vertical, but horizontal — ‘from the side.’ This is the human perspective and social arrangement marked by the relational inside and outside, center and periphery... [O]ur task will be to describe Christology as it was articulated from the outside and from the inside, that is, how Jesus was evaluated by his enemies and his followers. This is Christology ‘from the side’” (op. cit., x). I question if the Christology on the horizontal plane, specifically “on the inside,” would have been articulated by the insiders much differently from the so-called Christology “from above/below,” especially when we attest an early high Christology. Nevertheless, I find the idea of Christology “from the side” a helpful one.

⁵ Walter Bauer has shown that the demarcation between what is “in” (orthodoxy) and what is “out” (heterodoxy) was far from clear in the early centuries of the church; see Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1972).

The Constant Challenge of Christ⁶

From the very beginning of the Christian story, the message about Christ has been scandalous (cf. 1 Cor 1:23). From within and without the faith community objections to the proclamation that *this* Jesus is the Son of God incarnate — even “God with us” (Matt 1:23) — have been persistent and articulate.⁷ Historically, Christians have listened to these challenges coming “from the side” and it is precisely this which lies behind the articulation of theology and the great creeds.

Because the belief in the full divinity of Jesus has been challenged at all times, it is therefore false to think that it was merely the naiveté of earlier “pre-critical” generations that allowed such a high view of Jesus to prevail unchallenged. It was challenged, constantly, over centuries, by formidable thinkers from within and without the Christian community. For that reason alone it is worthwhile investigating those challenges.

Nevertheless, the authors of the New Testament, the church apologists, and theologians before and during the Middle Ages maintained the paradox of Christology as a *necessary element in the description of the “real” Jesus*, when it would have been much easier to abandon the embarrassments of the incarnation and humiliation of Christ. Contemporary taboos, some of which persist to this day, and strongly held metaphysical beliefs should have stifled, if not stopped, a Christology that embraced and proclaimed the full humanity and full deity of Jesus Christ.

And, as any student of early church history comes to know, this struggle over the understanding of Christ and of God was not just a struggle with external voices. The so called Arian controversy, for example, was a controversy precisely because Arian Christology was not only a popular, but also a plausible way of explaining

⁶ The points I am making in this paragraph are taken from the introduction of my dissertation, *Matthaeus Adversus Christianos: The Use of the Gospel of Matthew in Jewish Polemics Against the Divinity of Jesus* (WUNT II/350; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1–6.

⁷ Although it is not the incarnation *per se* that is the *scandalon*, rather as Bonhoeffer writes: “The offence caused by Jesus Christ is not his incarnation — that indeed is revelation — but his humiliation. The humanity of Christ and his humiliation should be carefully distinguished,” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christology* (trans. John Bowden; London: Collins, 1966), 46–47.

Christ.⁸ At a time when christological orthodoxy was not fully articulated, the Arian model was actually viable, and perhaps even preferable, because it avoided certain metaphysical embarrassments. Of course, one of the reason why that did not happen is because the church did carefully consider these voices “from the side.” In the case of the Arian controversy, Athanasius pointed out that this christological explanation redefined and undermined the established understanding of salvation.⁹

Another prime example of listening to the side would be Irenaeus’ detailed, mind-numbing examination of various gnostic beliefs, teasing out possible inherent contradictions or clashes with established doctrine in his *Against Heresies*. In fact, the existence of the entire *Adversus haereses* and *Adversus judaeos* genre with its many examples demonstrates that the early church intently listened — and had to listen — to alternate truth claims, though it must be said some protagonists heard better than others.¹⁰

And so it is the constant challenge of Christ, the voices that object and question, which really become the midwives of theology. In other words, it is the vitality and potency of another truth claim that brings about the creation of responses and theological reflection.

Listening to the Voices from the Side

So, Christians have listened to challenges coming “from the side.” In fact, it is this that had decisive and positive impact on the articulation of Christology, so much so that without knowing the challenges it becomes difficult to fully understand the creeds.

⁸ For the rationale behind Arian thinking see, e.g., Richard P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 99–122.

⁹ According to Athanasius’ famous dictum, “for he became man, so that we might become god” (Αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐνηθρώπησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς θεωποιηθῶμεν), *Inc.* 54.3 (PG 25:192B), salvation was understood as *theosis*. Athanasius’ Christology won the day *because it aligned with the established understanding of soteriology* (see, e.g., Jn 14:20; Rom 8:17; 2 Pet 1:4; Clement, *Protr.* 1; Justin, *Dial.* 124; Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.38.4), which consequently mandated a union of the divine and the human in Christ. Christ had to be fully divine in order to offer participation in the divine nature. The christological paradox was embraced because it corresponded with the church’s tradition and experience of salvation. For a shorter introduction see Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (eds.), *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology* (Vol. 1; Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2006), esp. the essay by Jeffrey Finch, “Athanasius on the Deifying Work of the Redeemer,” 104–121.

¹⁰ Irenaeus seems to have listened carefully as a comparison with Nag Hammadi texts shows; for a short discussion see Matthew C. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption* (VCSup 91; Leiden: Brill, 2008), 11–15.

When one carefully listens to the polemics, the objections, and even allows these to stir up doubts, only then will one come to understand the questions and the existential pressure behind them that drove the articulation of theology. The creeds and christological statements, the controversies, they are really the responses to these questions. But, if we do not allow ourselves to feel the weight of these questions, then the creeds and theology remain stale and irrelevant to our current contexts. It is unfortunate that the authorities often have attempted to purge these voices and writings in the aftermath, so that we often have to piece together what the actual objections were.¹¹

And, I would argue that teaching theology from the creeds without *first* challenging students with the questions *and* allowing them to struggle with those questions, is one of the things that makes theological study often feel irrelevant. Knowing and understanding the question is often more important than knowing the answer.

Now, listening does not mean hearing the argument and then to immediately return with a response or answer. This is a temptation and it often leads to a parody of the original objection. Listening means to take the objection seriously and to allow the alternative truth claim, the alternate explanation that is offered to inform one's own thinking. At the very least, it gives insight in the objectors' way of thinking. This requires a certain openness to new ideas, courage, and patience. It is this willingness to listen and explore that brings about a fuller articulation and understanding of orthodoxy. In other words, we do not have to fear or shun the voices "from the side," we ought to welcome them.

Let me give several examples to illustrate why it is worthwhile and illuminating to listen to the voices "from the side." One of the first

¹¹ Prime examples would be Celsus' *Logos Alethes*, Porphyry's *Adversus Christianos*, or the various writings of Arian bishops, including Arius' *Thalia*. Some of the arguments have been reconstructed, see, e.g., Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, 2003); John G. Cook, *The Interpretation of the New Testament in Greco-Roman Paganism* (STAC 3; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000; repr. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002); Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians* (trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Robert M. Berchman, *Porphyry Against the Christians* (Ancient Mediterranean and Medieval Texts and Contexts 1; Leiden: Brill 2005). For Jewish objections see Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (2nd ed.; Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2007), or my *Matthaeus Adversus Christianos*.

of these voices was Marcion.¹² Now, Marcion was actually an insider and the heterodox ideas he voiced (or amplified) are surprisingly resilient, as we will see. Of course we only can call them heterodox because he in effect helped the church to find her orthodoxy. Because of that his voice is somewhat muffled and largely lives on only in the writings of those who responded to him, in this case Tertullian:

Marcion — Gentile Christian heterodox leader (c. 85–160 AD)

Beginning then with that nativity you [Marcion] so strongly object to, orate, attack now, the nastiness of genital elements in the womb, the filthy curdling of moisture and blood, and of the flesh to be for nine months nourished on that same mire. Draw a picture of the womb getting daily more unmanageable, heavy, self-concerned, safe not even in sleep, uncertain in the whims of dislikes and appetites... You shudder, of course, at the child passed out along with the afterbirth, and of course bedaubed with it.¹³

According to Tertullian, Marcion rejected the full incarnation of Christ because of the associated taboos of a mammalian birth; to think of Christ born of a woman. Perish the thought! This may perhaps also be the reason for the omission of the nativity accounts in Marcion's bible version.¹⁴ If so, a good case can be made that it is Marcion's high view of god that acts as his motivation, for it is unbecoming to associate this good and pure god and savior with the facts of human life and any all too anthropomorphic depictions.¹⁵ It

¹² For a recent attempt of recovering the "historical Marcion" see Judith M. Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹³ Tertullian, *De Carne Christi* 4. Translated by Ernest Evans, *Tertullian's Treatise on the Incarnation* (London: SPCK, 1956), 13. It is not clear if this is in fact Marcion's polemic or something that Tertullian puts in his mouth; regardless, it is a potent challenge.

¹⁴ Marcion of Sinope/Pontus is commonly known as having created for himself and his church a more suitable bible with some significant omissions (akin to Thomas Jefferson), although it must be said that much of what is known about him comes from his opponents' writings. It is, therefore, not entirely clear if and what Marcion precisely cut out from his gospel edition, in particular since it is presumably related to an early version of the gospel of Luke, see Lieu, *Marcion*, 367–73, and Dieter Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel* (NTTS 49; Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1–45.

¹⁵ I would tentatively suggest that it is this aspect of Marcion's theology that is detrimental to his asceticism, his views of human sexuality, the incarnation, and of the god of the Hebrew Bible as a lesser god. Lieu reminds us that "Marcion could not have made the impact he undoubtedly did if his questions and his answers had not resonated among his hearers; neither would he have made that impact if he had had nothing more to offer than did many others" (op. cit., p. 11). Tertullian quotes Marcion as saying: "'But,' you [Marcion] say, 'the reason why I deny that God was really and truly changed into man, in the sense of being both

would seem Marcion had listened to the voices “from the side,” and *agreeing with them*, his solution was to cut out the humiliating aspects of the incarnation.¹⁶ His intention would have been honorable and reasonable, for he sought to remove Christ from the kind of taboo polemics we hear repeated by pagan philosophers, such as Celsus and Porphyry:

Celsus — Platonist philosopher (c. 180 AD)

And if he [= God] did wish to send down a spirit from himself, why did he have to breathe it into the womb of a woman? He already knew how to make men. He could have formed a body for this one also without having to thrust his own spirit into such foul pollution.¹⁷

Porphyry — Neo-Platonist philosopher (c. 234–305 AD)

But if anyone among the Greeks were so frivolous that he would assume that the gods live in these statues, his idea would be a much purer one than those who believe that the deity came down into the womb of the Virgin Mary and became an embryo. And then when he was born he was placed in swaddling clothes. For this is a place full of blood and gall and things even more disgusting than these.¹⁸

It is easy to underestimate the potency of this kind of argument, to perhaps just think of it as an antiquated kind of sexism or a cheap polemic. No doubt, the taboo aspect of the idea of god being born and its graphic nature made it a readily understood challenge. This argument could be heard in the streets and alleys. This is how you pummel your Christian neighbour.¹⁹ But the real challenge of this

born and corporated in flesh [sic; *et carne corporaretur*], is that he who is without end must of necessity also be unchangeable: for to be changed into something else is an ending of what originally was: therefore change is inapplicable to one to whom ending is inapplicable,” Tertullian, *De Carne Christi* 3 (Evans, 11). Marcion’s metaphysics, in particular the emphasis of the transcendence of god, would seem to inform his theological commitments. The fact that Marcionism was so vehemently opposed by the early church demonstrates that this must have resonated with a significant number of Christians.

¹⁶ Other heterodox forms of Christian belief, e.g., (so-called) Docetism, Arianism, and Apollinarianism all seek to avoid associating the divine with any notion of passability, though their solutions of course differ significantly. Nevertheless, this goes to show how strong these voices from the side really were, and how these voices were not just in the periphery but were much at the centre of theological articulation.

¹⁷ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.73. Translated by Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 386.

¹⁸ Translated by Robert M. Berchman, *Porphyry Against the Christians* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), §208, 217; cf. Macarius Magnes, *Apokritikos* 4.22.

¹⁹ A comparable example is the so called *Alexamenos graffito*, a second century anti-Christian drawing of a crucifixion scene with a donkey headed Christ inscribed with the line “Alexamenos worships God.” For a detailed discussion see Oliver L. Yarbrough, “The

idea lies in the largely shared, common concept of God. Greeks and Jews essentially had an equally high view of the transcendence of God and held to a strict divine/human, creator/creation dichotomy.²⁰ And this is, of course, one of the reasons it took centuries to articulate and agree on the mystery of the nature of Christ. But, this is also why these voices, these arguments, do not go away. We hear it echo through the centuries:

Anonymous Jewish writer — Near East (c. 6–9th century AD)

It is most astonishing, how is it that you, who claim to be judicious and reasonable, are not ashamed: ashamed of yourself and embarrassed by me; [ashamed] that you worship a god who dwelt in the womb, in the filth of menstrual blood, in the confinement and imprisonment and darkness for nine months; he lay in a donkey's manger and he was nursed at the breast of a harlot.²¹

Joseph Qimhi — Medieval rabbi, France/Spain (c. 1105?–1170? AD)

The great and mighty God Whom no eye has seen, Who has neither form nor image, Who said 'For man may not see Me and live (Exod. 33:20) — how shall I believe that this great inaccessible *Deus absconditus* needlessly entered the womb of a woman, the filthy, foul bowels of a female, compelling the living God to be born of a woman, a child without knowledge or understanding, senseless, unable to distinguish between his right hand and his left, defecating and urinating, sucking his mother's breasts from hunger and thirst, crying when he is thirsty so that his mother will have compassion on him. Indeed, if she had not suckled him, he would have died of hunger like other people. If not, why should she have suckled him? He should have lived miraculously! Why should she have suckled him for nothing, that he should engage in all foul and miserable human

Shadow of an Ass: On Reading the Alexamenos Graffito," in *Text, Image, and Christians in the Graeco-Roman World: A Festschrift in Honor of David Lee Balch* (eds. Aliou Cissé Niang and Carolyn Osiek; PTMS 176; Eugene, Or.: Pickwick, 2012), 239–54.

²⁰ How strict this dichotomy was during the Second Temple period is a matter of very recent debate, see e.g., Daniel Boyarin's or Crispin Fletcher-Louis' work. But it is fair to say that with the rise and influence of Christianity this dichotomy became more pronounced, so that eventually only Christians could hold to a duality or mixture of natures, whereas Jews and Muslims denied the mere possibility. But even within Christian thinking, there always was the temptation to over-emphasize one aspect, whether it be the divinity of Christ (Docetism, Sabellianism, Apollinarianism, etc.) or his humanity (Ebionism, Arianism, etc.).

²¹ Daniel J. Lasker, and Sarah Stroumsa (eds.), *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest: Introduction: Annotated Translations and Commentary* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, 1996), vol. 1, 68 (§82). The latter refers to Salome (not Mary), who according to the apocryphal sources, *The Proto-Evangelium of James*, *The History of Joseph the Carpenter*, and *The Infancy Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, was Jesus' wet-nurse and Mary's midwife.

practices? Thus I do not profess this belief which you profess, for my reason does not allow me to diminish the greatness of God, be He exalted, for He has not lessened His glory, be He exalted, nor has He reduced His splendor, be He extolled. If I do not profess this faith which you profess, I am not blameworthy. I say to you further that if this belief is true, the Creator would not hold me guilty for not believing in His deficiency and the reduction of His grandeur and splendor... I do not in this respect believe in the diminution of His glory and greatness... I may liken this for you to a human king who changed his garments, shaved his hair, and put on filthy garb and dirty clothes, so that he impaired his noble figure. He then walked alone on the highways without dignity or majesty. The people came and told someone: 'This is the king.' If he does not believe [it], the king cannot hold it against him. How much more evident is this with respect to the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. Who would dare to profess this belief which diminishes His greatness, whereby He cannot save His world except by humiliating Himself, debasing His majesty, and befouling His splendor.²²

International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations (1985)

Reason refuses to accept a man who was born of a woman, suffered from human wants, ignorance and limitations, and gradually grew in stature, power and wisdom like all other human beings, as God. To put human limitations upon God and to believe in His incarnation in a human body is to deny the perfection of God.²³

Of course the church has responded to these voices. The hypostatic union, in a way, is an answer; and others have been given.²⁴ But the

²² Joseph Kimḥi, *The Book of the Covenant* (trans. by Frank Talmage; Mediaeval Sources in Translation 12; Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1972), 36–37.

²³ Ulfat Asiz-us-Samad, *Islam and Christianity* (Safat, Kuwait: Sahaba Islamic Press, 1985), 38.

²⁴ E.g., Odo of Tournai (c. 1060–1113) responded to a very similar argument. A Jewish dialogue partner, Leo, tells Odo: "In one thing especially we laugh at you and think that you are crazy. You say that God was conceived within his mother's womb, surrounded by vile fluid, and suffered enclosure within this foul prison for nine months when finally, in the tenth month, he emerged from her private parts (who is not embarrassed by such a scene!). This you attribute to God what is most unbecoming, which we would not do without great embarrassment," Irvin M. Resnick, *On Original Sin and a Disputation with the Jew, Leo, Concerning the Advent of Christ, the Son of God: Theological Treatises, Odo of Tournai* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 95. Odo's answer follows: "God fills all things and is everywhere whole. Although he fills us and is whole even in us who are sinners, he is untouched by the uncleanness of our sins, but remains uncontaminated and pure. He sees all things and nothing hurts him. He sees darkness yet remains untouched by the darkness, since 'light shines in darkness' (Jn. 1:5) and 'night, just like day will be illuminated' (Ps. 138:12 Vulg.). The Most Pure sees sin, and the Most Just sees our injustices, since he justly orders every evil he sees. The light of justice is not extinguished by making sins visible, just as the

point I wish to stress here is that Christology for a new generation does well to intently listen to these kind of voices “from the side,” for it is there that Christology begins, it is there where it is articulated, learnt, and tested.²⁵

Learning Christology from the Side

Having listened to some of the voices from the side, how do we learn then? As already said, by listening intently, and patiently, by seeking to understand what these voices say, the church was alerted to real issues, as well as misunderstandings.²⁶ We likewise, if we listen, should be alerted to real issues and misunderstandings — including our own, as we should hopefully become more aware of our own subjectivisms, biases, and place in history. This is where Christology for a new generation ought to begin. By doing so, we, like the church before us, have to come to explore, reject, or endorse various alternate ideas about Christ and God; the end product being such doctrines as the Trinity or the hypostatic union. Today we hold these as the bedrock of Christian orthodoxy, and we can think about trinitarian “this or that,” something unthinkable in the second century. We learned these things because we listened, and because of it we were enriched, and our understanding grew.

Of course, the fact that certain voices and objections remain with us to this day unchanged, as we just noticed, is because they touch upon a central mystery and paradox. Christology is and will ever remain inherently mysterious because here the finite and infinite meet. To quote Augustine, “if you understand it, it is not God” (*si enim comprehendis non est deus*).²⁷ In other words, we should expect it to be complicated if we affirm that God is incarnational and Christ somehow is divine.

It should then not be a surprise that listening to these voices from the side has a direct impact on the two major ways of doing

light of this world shines upon the sordid fleshly body but is not soiled by it. Why then are you offended if God is conceived in a virgin, when he preserves his purity everywhere?” (op. cit.).

²⁵ It is equally important to realize that the inner Christian debates are not just motivated by philosophical considerations and politics (which they were), but especially by polemics. There were powerful outside voices that shaped the conversation.

²⁶ This is perhaps analogous to the primacy of thoughtful observation (*Sehakt*) in Adolf Schlatter’s theology, see Michael Bräutigam, *Union with Christ: Adolf Schlatter’s Relational Christology* (Eugene, Or.: Pickwick, 2015), 107–110.

²⁷ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo* 117.3.5.

theology. One is the negative (the *via negativa*, the apophatic) and one is the positive (the cataphatic).

When we think of the negative, by listening the church learned to articulate what Christology was not; e.g., the hypostatic union was defined by the negative adverbs *inconfuse*, *immutabiliter*, *indivise*, and *inseparabiliter*.²⁸ In that sense, theological articulation is often reactionary and apophatic, and that is inherent to the subject matter. It is okay to be reactionary and negative. In other words, after having listened thoughtfully, when it comes to articulating Christology, there is nothing wrong about rejecting certain voices. These voices, in fact, become the parameters that narrow down the area in which we can do Christology. By listening carefully, we can learn what we do not believe, and why.

Positively, we can see that the questions and voices from the side maneuver us to articulate and endorse theological insights. For example, rather than relegating the incarnation to a footnote of history, it was embraced and became central to the understanding of the work and nature of God. Or in the words of Gregory of Nazianzus: “What is not assumed has not been healed, but that which has been united to his Godhead is also saved.”²⁹ In other words, we can be grateful to Arianism that it helped us fully embrace the grandeur of the incarnation, that it helped us to see even more clearly that salvation means to be truly united to Christ. This then is one of the big benefits of listening to the voices “from the side.” Like midwives (though perhaps unwillingly), they lead us through the process of better articulating the great acts of God — “birthing theology” as it were.³⁰ There are of course also minor benefits to listening to these voices, e.g., medieval Jewish polemicists anticipated the quest for the historical Jesus by some

²⁸ Or rather, *ἀσυγχύτως*, *ἀτρέπτως*, *ἀδιαίρετως*, and *ἀχωρίστως*, negative qualifiers which are a concession to the inability to coherently describe the “‘how’ of the divine and the human existence coexisted in the same person,” Vladimir Lossky, “Christological Dogma,” in *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (trans. Ian and Ithita Kesarcodi-Watson; Crestwood, N.Y.: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 95–118, here 99.

²⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ep.* 101, 32 (SC 208, 50).

³⁰ This notion, namely, that the church progressively articulated already held theological beliefs, rather than “invented” them, and that this process is triggered by certain events (or voices) is explored in much greater depth by Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). By means of this process dispositions become positions.

500 years.³¹ In other words, there is much to gain and learn from listening to the voices “from the side.”

The moral of the story, then, is to listen carefully, to face the voices “from the side.” That is how theology was done in the past, and that is how theological thinking has advanced. Whoever wants to do Christology for a new generation first should have to listen to the voices of that generation. If they are the same voices than those of the past, then the insights of the early church can be brought to the table; if they are new, then the exciting quest of articulating fresh theological insights can begin. In either case, theology should be done only after listening.

³¹ Unfortunately, because Christians did not listen to their Jewish counterparts, this was a missed opportunity. See Ochs, *Matthaeus Adversus Christianos*, 266–67.