

Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places

A CONVERSATION IN SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY

Eugene H. Peterson

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

Contents

Acknowledgments

Preface

Introduction

Clearing the Playing Field

Two Stories

Three Texts

Four Terms

And a Dance

I. Christ Plays in Creation

Exploring the Neighborhood of Creation

Kerygma: Jesus' Birth

Threat: Gnosticism

Grounding Text (1): Genesis 1–2

Grounding Text (2): St. John

Cultivating Fear-of-the-Lord in Creation: Sabbath and Wonder

II. Christ Plays in History

Exploring the Neighborhood of History

Kerygma: Jesus' Death

Threat: Moralism

Grounding Text (1): Exodus

Grounding Text (2): St. Mark

Cultivating Fear-of-the-Lord in History: Eucharist and Hospitality

III. Christ Plays in Community

Exploring the Neighborhood of the Community

Kerygma: Jesus' Resurrection

Threat: Sectarianism

Grounding Text (1): Deuteronomy

Grounding Text (2): Luke/Acts

Cultivating Fear-of-the-Lord in Community: Baptism and Love

Epilogue: As Kingfishers Catch Fire ...

Appendix: Some Writers on Spiritual Theology

Index of Subjects and Names

Index of Scripture References

Acknowledgments

Three congregations gave me a long schooling in spiritual theology: Towson Presbyterian in Maryland, White Plains Presbyterian in New York, and Christ Our King Presbyterian in Maryland. These are the places and people where this conversation got its start.

Numerous schools through the years welcomed me as a visiting or adjunct professor, occasions that provided stimulus and reflection that deepened and broadened my understanding and concern for spiritual theology beyond my local circumstances. Much of what developed in this book was tested and developed while I was teaching at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, and Regent College in Vancouver, Canada.

Early drafts of various parts were published in *The Christian Century*, *Christianity Today*, *Crux*, *Ex Auditu*, *Journal for Preachers*, *Reformed Review*, and *The Rutherford Journal* (Scotland). The Theissen Lectures at Canadian Mennonite College, Winnipeg, and the Selwyn Lectures at Litchfield Cathedral, England, were significant in the formation of the final draft.

Pastors Michael Crowe and Steven Trotter were particularly helpful in the final stages of the writing.

To these and so many unnamed friends and colleagues, my sense of gratitude is immense for the conversations and prayers through the years that have been formational and taken form in this book. Thank you.

Preface

Two fields of work converge in these pages, the work of pastor and the work of professor. Most of my vocational life has been conducted as a pastor in a congregation. That is where most of the “field work” took place that has been written out here as an extended conversation in spiritual theology, the *lived* quality of God's revelation among and in us. Writing about the Christian life (formulated here as “spiritual theology”) is like trying to paint a picture of a bird in flight. The very nature of a subject in which everything is always in motion and the context is constantly changing—rhythm of wings, sun-tinted feathers, drift of clouds (and much more)—precludes precision. Which is why definitions and explanations for the most part miss the very thing that we are interested in. Stories and metaphors, poetry and prayer, and leisurely conversation are more congenial to the subject, a conversation that necessarily also includes the Other.

But my work as a professor has also been formative. As a visiting or adjunct professor throughout the years that I was pastor, I often spent time with students and pastors to reflect on the intersection of the Scriptures, theology, history, and congregation in the work of getting the gospel lived in the actual conditions we face in North American culture. And then after thirty-three years of work as a pastor, I became a professor fulltime, James M. Houston Professor of Spiritual Theology at Regent College (Canada). The overlapping fields of work, pastor and professor, crossfertilized and provided the occasion and energy for writing this book. The wide variety of persons who have been with me for worship and learning and with whom I have been in conversation in these matters (farmers and pastors, homemakers and

engineers, children and the elderly, worshipers and students, parents and scholars) accounts for the mixed style in the writing, the mixture of personal and academic. I have attempted to write spiritual theology in the same terms in which it is lived, which is to say, using language that comes at one time right out of the library and at another from a conversation over coffee in a diner, that on one page is derived from questions raised in a lecture and on another from insights accumulated while kayaking on a river. My intent is to provide the widespread but often free-floating spirituality of our time with structure and coherence by working from a scriptural foundation and with a Trinitarian imagination.

All of these conversations in congregations and schools came together in a particularly fortuitous way for me in the life and work of Dr. and Mrs. James Houston of Regent College. They embodied in their own lives the meaning and significance of spiritual theology (Jim in his teaching and mentoring and Rita in her hospitality). *Christ Plays* is dedicated to them with gratitude.

Advent 2003

Introduction

The end is where we start from. “In my end is my beginning” (T. S. Eliot).¹ Endings take precedence over beginnings. We begin a journey by first deciding on a destination. We gather information and employ our imaginations in preparing ourselves for what is to come: Life is the end of life; life, life, and more life.

The end of all Christian belief and obedience, witness and teaching, marriage and family, leisure and work life, preaching and pastoral work is the *living* of everything we know about God: life, life, and more life. If we don’t know where we are going, any road will get us there. But if we have a destination—in this case a life lived to the glory of God—there is a well-marked way, the Jesus-revealed Way. Spiritual theology is the attention that we give to the details of living life on this way. It is a protest against theology depersonalized into information about God; it is a protest against theology functionalized into a program of strategic planning for God.

A sonnet by the poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins provides an arresting and accurate statement on the end of human life well lived:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is—
Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.²

We sense that life is more than what we are in touch with at this moment, but not different from it, not unrelated to it. We get glimpses of wholeness and vitality that exceed

¹ T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952), p. 129.

² In *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 90.

what we can muster out of our own resources. We get hints of congruence between who and what we are and the world around us—rocks and trees, meadows and mountains, birds and fish, dogs and cats, kingfishers and dragonflies—obscure and fleeting but convincing confirmations that we are all in this together, that we are kin to all that is and has been and will be. We have this feeling in our bones that we are involved in an enterprise that is more than the sum of the parts that we can account for by looking around us and making an inventory of the details of our bodies, our families, our thoughts and feelings, the weather and the news, our job and leisure activities; we have this feeling that we will never quite make it out, never be able to explain or diagram it, that we will always be living a mystery—but a good mystery.

Everyone alive at this moment, most emphatically including you, the person reading this page, and me, the person writing it, with no other qualification than having our eyes open and our lungs taking in air, can give personal witness to this More, this Congruence, this Kinship, this Mystery, that

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:

Deals out that being indoors each one dwells ...

Our simplest word for all of this is Life.

The final lines of Hopkins's poem supply the image I have chosen for providing a metaphorical arena for working out the details of all that is involved in Christian living:

For Christ plays in ten thousand places,

Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his

To the Father through the features of men's faces.

Hopkins's diction conveys the vigor and spark and spontaneity that is inherent in all of life. The focused conviction expressed here is that it is Christ, the God-revealing Christ, who is behind and in all of this living. The message is that all this life, this kingfisher-and dragonfly-aflame life, this tumbled stone and harp string and bell-sounding life, gets played out in us, in our limbs and eyes, in our feet and speech, in the faces of the men and women we see all day long, every day, in the mirror and on the sidewalk, in classroom and kitchen, in workplaces and on playgrounds, in sanctuaries and committees. The central verb, "play," catches the exuberance and freedom that mark life when it is lived beyond necessity, beyond mere survival. "Play" also suggests words and sounds and actions that are "played" for another, intentional and meaningful renderings of beauty or truth or goodness. Hopkins incorporates this sense of play with God as the ultimate "other" ("... to the Father")—which is to say that all life is, or can be, worship.

Hopkins's sonnet is as good a presentation of what we are after in understanding life, the "end" of life, as we are likely to find: The vigor and spontaneity, the God-revealing Christ getting us and everything around us in on it, the playful freedom and exuberance, the total rendering of our lives as play, as worship before God. Some of us, to prevent misunderstanding or reduction, sometimes supply a defining adjective to this life and call it the *Christian* life. It is

the task of the Christian community to give witness and guidance in the living of life in a culture that is relentless in reducing, constricting, and enervating this life.

And so I have chosen Hopkins's sonnet to set the tone and identify the nature of what I have set about doing in writing this book. I hope to fairly and clearly represent what the Christian church has for two thousand years now been living out in and for the world. What I am after is not unlike what Hopkins did when he made his poem. A poem is a complex matter of sounds and rhythms, meanings nuanced and plain, the ordinary and the unexpected juxtaposed, all put together in such a way as to involve us as participants in life, more life, real life. That is my intent—not primarily to explain anything or hand out information, but to enlist your play (my friends and neighbors, my family and congregation, my readers and students) in the play of Christ. I don't have anything new to say; Christians already know all the basics simply by being alive and baptized. We are already in on it, for Christ does, in fact, play "in ten thousand places." But I do hope to get you in on a little more of it, we who are the limbs and eyes and faces in and through whom Christ plays.

Christ Plays is a conversation in spiritual theology—"conversation" because conversation implies back-and-forthness, several voices engaged in considering, exploring, discussing, and enjoying not only the subject matter but also one another's company. Spiritual theology is a pair of words that hold together what is so often "sawn asunder." It represents the attention that the church community gives to keeping what we think about God (theology) in organic connection with the way we live with God (spirituality).

The meteoric ascendancy of interest in spirituality in recent decades is largely fueled by a profound dissatisfaction with approaches to life that are either aridly rationalistic, consisting of definitions, explanations, diagrams, and instructions (whether by psychologists, pastors, theologians, or strategic planners), or impersonally functional, consisting of slogans, goals, incentives, and programs (whether by advertisers, coaches, motivational consultants, church leaders, or evangelists). There comes a time for most of us when we discover a deep desire within us to live from the heart what we already know in our heads and do with our hands. But "to whom shall we go?" Our educational institutions have only marginal interest in dealing with our desire—they give us books to read and exams to pass but pay little attention to us otherwise. In our workplaces we quickly find that we are valued primarily, if not exclusively, in terms of our usefulness and profitability—they reward us when we do our jobs well and dismiss us when we don't. Meanwhile our religious institutions, in previous and other cultures the obvious places to go in matters of God and the soul, prove disappointing to more and more people who find themselves zealously cultivated as consumers in a God-product marketplace or treated as exasperatingly slow students preparing for final exams on the "furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell."³

Because of this spiritual poverty all around, this lack of interest in dealing with what matters most to us—a lack encountered in our schools, our jobs and vocations, and our places of worship alike—"spirituality," to use the generic term for it, has escaped institutional

³ A phrase from Reinhold Niebuhr in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 294.

structures and is now more or less free-floating. Spirituality is “in the air.” The good thing in all this is that the deepest and most characteristic aspects of life are now common concerns; hunger and thirst for what is lasting and eternal is widely acknowledged and openly expressed; refusal to be reduced to our job descriptions and test results is pervasive and determined. The difficulty, though, is that everyone is more or less invited to make up a spirituality that suits herself or himself. Out of the grab bag of celebrity anecdotes, media gurus, fragments of ecstasy, and personal fantasies, far too many of us, with the best intentions in the world, because we have been left to do it “on our own,” assemble spiritual identities and ways of life that are conspicuously prone to addictions, broken relationships, isolation, and violence.

There is no question but that there is widespread interest in living beyond the roles and functions handed to us by the culture. But much of it ends up as a spirituality that is shaped by terms handed out by the same culture. Because of this, it seems preferable to use the term “spiritual theology” to refer to the specifically Christian attempt to address the lived experience revealed in our Holy Scriptures and the rich understandings and practices of our ancestors as we work this experience out in our contemporary world of diffused and unfocused “hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

The two terms, “spiritual” and “theology,” keep good company with one another. “Theology” is the attention that we give to God, the effort we give to knowing God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures and in Jesus Christ. “Spiritual” is the insistence that everything that God reveals of himself and his works is capable of being lived by ordinary men and women in their homes and workplaces. “Spiritual” keeps “theology” from degenerating into merely thinking and talking and writing about God at a distance. “Theology” keeps “spiritual” from becoming merely thinking and talking and writing about the feelings and thoughts one has about God. The two words need each other, for we know how easy it is for us to let our study of God (theology) get separated from the way we live; we also know how easy it is to let our desires to live whole and satisfying lives (spiritual lives) get disconnected from who God actually is and the ways he works among us.

Spiritual theology is the attention we give to lived theology—prayed and lived, for if it is not prayed sooner or later it will not be lived from the inside out and in continuity with the Lord of life. Spiritual theology is the attention that we give to living what we know and believe about God. It is the thoughtful and obedient cultivation of life as worship on our knees before God the Father, of life as sacrifice on our feet following God the Son, and of life as love embracing and being embraced by the community of God the Spirit.

Spiritual theology is not one more area of theology that takes its place on the shelf alongside the academic disciplines of systematic, biblical, practical, and historical theology; rather, it represents the conviction that *all* theology, no exceptions, has to do with the living God who creates us as living creatures to live to his glory. It is the development of awareness and discernments that are as alert and responsive in the workplace as in the sanctuary, as active while changing diapers in a nursery as while meditating in a grove of aspens, as necessary when reading a newspaper editorial as when exegeting a sentence written in Hebrew.

Some may want to simplify things by keeping the spiritual and throwing out the theology. Others will be content to continue with the theology as usual and forget the spiritual.

But the fact is that we live only because God lives and that we live well only in continuity with the way God makes, saves, and blesses us. Spirituality begins in theology (the revelation and understanding of God) and is guided by it. And theology is never truly itself apart from being expressed in the bodies of the men and women to whom God gives life and whom God then intends to live a full salvation life (spirituality).

“Trinity” is the theological formulation that most adequately provides a structure for keeping conversations on the Christian life coherent, focused, and personal. Early on the Christian community realized that everything about us—our worshiping and learning, conversing and listening, teaching and preaching, obeying and deciding, working and playing, eating and sleeping—takes place in the “country” of the Trinity, that is, in the presence and among the operations of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. If God’s presence and work are not understood to define who we are and what we are doing, nothing we come up with will be understood and lived properly.

“Trinity” has suffered the indignity among many of being treated as a desiccated verbal artifact poked and probed by arthritic octogenarians of the sort skewered by Robert Browning as “dead from the waist down.”⁴ In reality, it is our most exuberant intellectual venture in thinking about God.⁵ Trinity is a conceptual attempt to provide coherence to God as God is revealed variously as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in our Scriptures: God is emphatically *personal*; God is only and exclusively God in *relationship*. Trinity is not an attempt to explain or define God by means of abstractions (although there is some of that, too), but a witness that God reveals himself as personal and in personal relations. The down-to-earth consequence of this is that God is rescued from the speculations of the metaphysicians and brought boldly into a community of men, women, and children who are called to enter into this communal life of love, an emphatically *personal* life where they experience themselves in personal terms of love and forgiveness, of hope and desire. Under the image of the Trinity we discover that we do not know God by defining him but by being loved by him and loving in return. The consequences of this are personally revelatory: another does not know me, nor do I know another, by defining or explaining, by categorizing or by psychologizing, but only relationally, by accepting and loving, by giving and receiving. The personal and interpersonal provide the primary images (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) for both knowing God and being known by God. This is living, not thinking about living; living with, not performing for.

And so these conversations in spiritual theology are set in this Trinity-mapped country in which we know and believe in and serve God: the Father and creation, the Son and history, and the Spirit and community.

There is far more to Trinity than getting a theological dogma straight; the country of the Trinity comprehends creation (the world in which we live), history (all that happens to and around us), and community (the ways we personally participate in daily living in the company of

⁴ Robert Browning, “A Grammarian’s Funeral,” in *The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning* (New York: Modern Library, 1934), p. 169.

⁵ William Barrett, “The Faith to Will,” *The American Scholar* (Autumn 1978): 526.

all the others in the neighborhood). Trinity isn't something imposed on us, it is a witness to the co-inherence of God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and the co-inherence of our lives in the image of God (where we are, what is happening, and who we are as we speak and act and engage in personal relations with one another).

Trinity maps the country in which we know and receive and obey God. It is not the country itself, but a map of the country. And a most useful map it is, for God is vast and various, working visibly and invisibly. Left to ourselves we often get lost in blind alleys, get tangled up in thickets, and don't have a clue to where we are. The map locates us: it provides the vocabulary and identifies the experience by which we can explore God when there are no signs pointing to him, when there are no neatly lettered labels defining the odd shape or feeling that is in front of our eyes.

There is this also to be said about a map. Even though a map is an artifact, something made, it is not arbitrarily imposed on the land. It comes out of careful observation and accurate recording of what is actually there. It is required that maps be honest. And there is also this: maps are humble—they don't pretend to substitute for the country itself. Studying the map doesn't provide experience of the country. The purpose of the map is to show us the way into the country and prevent us from getting lost in our travels.

With the Holy Trinity providing structure and context, the conversations will proceed under the metaphor "Christ plays in ten thousand places" by first clearing the playing field and then exploring the three intersecting dimensions of creation, history, and community in which we live out our lives:

Clearing the Playing Field. We live in a time in which there is an enormous interest in what is popularly called "spirituality." The Christian church has no monopoly on giving out guidance on how to live life. The playing field of spirituality is fairly cluttered with debris from improvised attempts and makeshift rules in playing out this life. I will attempt to clear the playing field of this clutter and establish a common ground for conversation by getting some basic stories, metaphors, and terms in place that will prepare us to understand the Christian life in biblical and personal terms.

Christ Plays in Creation. We live in an extraordinarily complex cosmos. We live out our lives in the presence of and in relation to millions of other life-forms. There's a lot going on. We don't want to miss any of it. In an age that increasingly functionalizes everything and everyone, and in times when the sense of the sacred, the holy, whether in things or people, steadily erodes, we will explore the ways in which the Christian receives, celebrates, and honors all creation as a holy gift that has its origins and comes to its full expression in the birth of Christ.

Christ Plays in History. But life is not only the gift of creation. We are also plunged into history in which sin and death play a major part: suffering and pain, disappointment and loss, catastrophe and evil. In an age of burgeoning knowledge and dazzling technological proficiency it is easy to assume that a little more knowledge and technology will turn the tide and we will all soon be getting better. But we haven't. And we won't. Historians have provided thorough and irrefutable documentation that the century just lived through (the twentieth) has been the

most murderous on record.⁶ We need help. We will explore the ways in which Christians enter into a history that gets its definitive meaning from Christ's death and the life of salvation that derives from it.

Christ Plays in Community. The Christian life is lived with others and for others. Nothing can be done alone or solely for oneself. In an age of heightened individualism, it is easy to assume that the Christian life is primarily what I am responsible for on my own. But neither self-help nor selfishness has any standing in spiritual theology. We will explore the ways in which we are placed in the community formed by Christ's Holy Spirit and become full participants in all that the risen Christ is and does, living resurrection lives.

⁶ See George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 323.