

THE CONVERGENCE OF NARRATIVE AND CHRISTOLOGY: HANS W. FREI ON THE UNIQUENESS OF JESUS CHRIST

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In recent years there have been few as articulate, and yet enigmatic, in the defense of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Hans W. Frei (1922–1988). Consider Frei's own declaration: The "Gospel story presents Jesus' identity as that of a singular, unsubstitutable person." "It is simply the unsubstitutable person about whom the story is told—his unsubstitutable deeds, words, and sufferings—that makes the real difference."¹ It is of central importance in his work *The Identity of Jesus Christ* to display how the Christological claim of the unsubstitutable uniqueness of Christ stands at the heart of Christian self-description: "We take the New Testament picture of Jesus as our norm," and one feature of that norm "is the personal and unsubstitutable center that is Jesus, his personal uniqueness."²

Yet—and here is the puzzling element in Frei's Christology—he based the assertion of the uniqueness of Jesus upon what he saw as the fictive or novel-like characteristics of the gospels. This means that "we cannot, for instance, inquire into the 'actual' life and character of Jesus inferred from the records." "With regard to the Gospels, we are actually in a fortunate position that so much of what we know about Jesus . . . is more nearly fictional than historical in narration."³

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¹ H. W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) vii, 52, 59. Frei originally published this material as a series of articles ("The Mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ," *Crossroads* 17/1 [January-March 1967] 69–96; 17/2 [April-June 1967] 69–96). Also germane is "Theological Reflections on the Accounts of Jesus' Death and Resurrection," *Christian Scholar* 49 (1966) 263–306.

² Frei, *Identity* 63–64. The purpose of *Identity* is discussed in G. Hunsinger, "Hans Frei as Theologian: The Quest for a Generous Orthodoxy," *Modern Theology* 8/2 (April 1992) 103–113. Frei's constant repetition of words such as "personal," "individual," "singular," "specific," "unsubstitutable" and "unique" regarding the identity of Jesus Christ makes the purpose of *Identity* unmistakably clear.

³ Frei, *Identity* 87, 144. Although some have categorized Frei's work in this regard as another expression of "narrative theology," it is rare that any associated with this approach would describe this as a movement except as a means to display congeniality between what is actually a great variety of neoconfessional theologians. See B. S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 541–546; M. I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur and the New Yale Theology* (Macon: Mercer University, 1990); G. Fackre, "Narrative Theology: An Overview," *Int* (1983) 340–352.

I. EVANGELICALS AND THE CHRISTOLOGY OF HANS FREI

Evangelicals can profit from embracing both the method and assertions of Frei's defense of Jesus' uniqueness. While he did not propose a typically exhaustive historical Christology, Frei provided a truly Protestant defense of the uniqueness of Christological truth-claims by means of the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Nor does Frei's work comprise a narrative Christology *per se*. He thought such enterprises were exaggerations of the nature of Biblical narrative, although he certainly articulated a Christology almost exclusively dependent on the narrative form of the gospels.⁴ It is better to represent Frei's work as a depiction of the convergence between the gospel narratives and their representation(s) of Jesus Christ, the identity of Christ being rendered at this point of intersection.

Evangelicals can certainly enjoy the rhetoric of Frei's claims to the uniqueness of Christ and his jabs at the Christology of liberalism: the remade gnostic-redeemer myths, its use of archetypal Christ-figures, the mystical use of Jesus' identity as a symbol of humanity.⁵ But what to do about the method of this critique? Carl Henry noted that "a lively debate is underway in some evangelical circles over whether narrative hermeneutics should be welcomed as an ally that is essentially orthodox."⁶ How do evangelicals respond to Frei's rationale of basing this claim to Jesus' uniqueness upon what he believed to be a more modest and perspicuous notion that the sources for asserting this uniqueness are narratives, stories, fiction-like works Christians identify as that distinct literary genre known as gospel?⁷ The clarity of Frei's description of the uniqueness of Christ is titillating to those who have diagnosed, and who disdain, the current climate of religious pluralism and the corresponding relativism regarding the question of Christ's uniqueness and the Christian claim to particularity. Frei's response to this modern religious climate was an argument that one cannot separate the question of Scripture's authority (the way[s] it should function in the Christian community) from the assertion of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. But how does his appeal to the gospels as realistic narrative impinge upon his appeal to Scripture's authority in making Christological truth-claims?

⁴ David Clark has recently presented an evangelical appreciation of narrative theology (including Hans Frei's hermeneutical method). Clark's article serves as a good introduction to "narrative" in relation to evangelical apologetics, but Frei's employment of narrative needs further clarification (D. K. Clark, "Narrative Theology and Apologetics," *JETS* 36/4 [December 1993] 499-515).

⁵ The opponent in *Identity* was traditional liberalism. Frei has little or nothing in the work directed at evangelicals. Regarding Frei's various lectures on Christology in relation to his *Identity*, Hunsinger commented: "Frei has nothing less far-reaching in view than to break with the entire modern liberal tradition in theology, while still remaining within the purview of that tradition to the extent that he does not wish merely to relapse into the pitfalls of the older orthodoxy" (Hunsinger, "Frei" 104).

⁶ C. F. H. Henry, "Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal," *Trinity Journal* 8 (1987) 7.

⁷ The uniqueness of the genre of gospel is itself debatable. For the time being it is interesting to mention that, in his exchange with Frei, Henry asserted the uniqueness of the literary genre of gospel: "Evangelicals consider the gospels not as mere historical chronicles but as a distinct genre that combines history and interpretation" (*ibid.* 5).

A contiguous question: What did Frei mean when he said Jesus was unique? Can he sustain orthodox Christological claims—about the historically unique Jesus of Nazareth—based on the argument that the fictive qualities of the gospels would not tolerate a severing of Jesus from the narrative form in which he is identified as the unique, solitary and unsubstitutable Christ of God? These questions establish the boundaries of this article.

Evangelicals writing appreciatively of Hans Frei's work have stressed his contributions to theological methodology and narrative but have not interacted with the specifics of his Christological claims.⁸ Yet the relationship between his method and Christology may be the most significant cause for apprehension among evangelicals. A perennial concern of evangelicals when confronted with an emphasis on the gospels as stories is the confusion this brings to the question of Christ's uniqueness—that the real effects, according to Henry, "are so many ways of saying that Christ is unique without affirming a genuine uniqueness."⁹ Recently Henry, David Wells and Donald Bloesch have each voiced concern that the rejection or neglect of historical concerns by narrative theologians like Frei effectively undercuts claims to the historical nature of the evangelical faith.¹⁰ This type of suspicion was also raised regarding the effect of Frei's influence in encouraging literary and rhetorical analysis of the gospels. D. A. Carson worried that appeals to similarities between the gospels and modern novels results in "a substantial loss both in accuracy of exegesis and in the book's real authority." He complained that one feature of this type of project "is the removal of the external referent in the interpretative process and . . . in the final assessment of the text's relation to external reality," resulting in "a two-tier approach to history and even to truth itself"—with one truth of the external world "and one in the 'story.'" The real worry, according to Carson, is that "what that will do to the 'scandal of particularity' inherent in the revelation of a self-incarnating God can only be imagined."¹¹ Note that in these samples of

⁸ Most notably M. Ellingsen, *The Evangelical Movement: Growth, Impact, Controversy, Dialog* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988) 364–387; *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative: Story in Theology and Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). This paper benefited greatly from Ellingsen's constructive proposals of rapprochement between Frei and modern evangelical theology.

⁹ C. F. H. Henry, *The Protestant Dilemma: An Analysis of the Current Impasse in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 173. Speaking of Karl Barth's emphasis on Christology, Henry further stated: "Rejoice one must in the insistence on a *once-for-allness*, an unapproximated *uniqueness*, for the Person who stands at the central fact of the Christian movement. . . . But [Barth's] Christology is still needlessly obscure" (p. 199). This comparison seems appropriate due to Henry's (and others') belief that to interact with Frei is to argue with Barth.

¹⁰ Henry, "Narrative" 11–15; D. F. Wells, *No Place for Truth: Or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 284–285; D. G. Bloesch, *Holy Scripture: Revelation, Inspiration and Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) 208–217. I wonder if Henry's more recent monograph surveying modern Christology was meant as a slight of Frei's work, *The Identity of Jesus Christ*—although Henry does not cite it once in his monograph (C. F. H. Henry, *The Identity of Jesus of Nazareth* [Nashville: Broadman, 1992]).

¹¹ D. A. Carson, "Recent Developments in the Doctrine of Scripture," *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 32; italics his. Carson added: "These developments have come about in part because of the influential work of Hans W. Frei" (p. 370).

evangelical concerns there is a common perception that contesting for an emphasis on the narrative quality of the gospels threatens claims to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ.¹² This is precisely the matter taken up by Frei in *Identity*.

II. THE GOSPELS AND CHRISTOLOGY

Hans Frei is an enigmatic figure to evangelicals precisely because of this perceived tension between the serious manner in which he approached the realism of the gospels and the fictive character he attributed to the same. After reading his description of Jesus' identity in relation to his obedience—a moving description of this dominant theme in the NT—one wonders how Frei can be truly serious about the divine identity of Jesus as he proceeds to describe the source of his assertion of Jesus' uniqueness as novel-like or to call it story and Jesus a storied figure.¹³

Rather than mitigating his case for the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth, Frei was assured that to assert the prominence of the story-like feature of the gospel narratives actually strengthened the case for the uniqueness of the identity of Christ: "The very distinctiveness of the Gospel story as a story of salvation rests wholly on the claim that the Savior is completely identical with the specific man Jesus of Nazareth."¹⁴ To Frei, Jesus' identity is only available to us through the description of his actions, specifically through the display of his obedience in reference to God the Father, and not "by grasping certain of his inherent personal characteristics"—not by seeking the "actual" man apart from the story as a storied figure. Frei believed that he was able to feature the uniqueness of Jesus Christ according to the gospels and also transfer a host of perplexing questions regarding independent access to Christology to the realms of irrelevant speculation. He wrote: "But do we actually know that much about Jesus? Certainly not, if we are asking about the 'actual' man apart from the story."¹⁵

Frei's approach to truth-claims regarding Jesus' uniqueness is linked with his utilization of the descriptive schemes of identity analysis: intention-

¹² In contrast to these suspicions, Mark Ellingsen offered a summary of commonalities between evangelicalism and narrative theologians that included the authority of the text, the pursuit of a fixed meaning of that text, and an advocacy of the accuracy of the text's depiction of reality versus an abstract interest in historical reality (M. Ellingsen, "Should Philosophical Theories About History Divide Christ's Body?", *Evangelism* 3 [1985] 82–108). One could also add Henry's tentative appreciation of narrative theologians: "By focusing on the text, narrative hermeneutics stresses the adequacy of human language to convey meaning, and hence its serviceability as a carrier of divine revelation" ("Narrative" 5).

¹³ Frei, *Identity* 102–115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 82, 114. As G. Outka offered, Frei's recognition of the limits of identifying Christ "underscores the importance of narrative" ("Following at a Distance: Ethics and the Identity of Jesus," *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation* [ed. G. Green; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987] 156).

¹⁵ Frei, *Identity* 102–103, 106.

action and self-manifestation.¹⁶ These were intended to facilitate the understanding of the gospels' ostensive reference to the identity of Jesus Christ and "tell us what Jesus is like and who he is."¹⁷ Put simply, Jesus "was what he did." Frei argued regarding the gospel story as a whole: "The identity of Jesus in that story is not given simply in his inner intention, in a kind of story behind the story. It is given, rather, in the enactment of his intentions."¹⁸

This use of identity analysis functions to limit the description of Jesus' identity to that depicted in the gospels' story itself as sufficient for its purpose and as having its own authority to depict that identity.

We cannot have what they are about (the "subject matter") without the stories themselves. They are history-like precisely because like history-writing and the traditional novel and unlike myths and allegories they literally mean what they say. There is no gap between the representation and what is represented by it.¹⁹

This inextricable connection between the narrative and the narrated character leads to several implications for the relationship between hermeneutics and Christology. Frei believed this link between the gospels and Christology helped to explain why the various "quests" after a historical Jesus (he mentions J. M. Robinson as an example) and the hermeneutical projects of demythologization (from the likes of Bultmann) are ultimately frustrating, distort the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and function to subvert Scripture's sufficiency by "adding a kind of depth dimension to the story's surface, which is actually a speculative *inference* from what is given in the story, rather than a part of it."²⁰ Frei's central problem with such quests is that they presuppose the bifurcation of the gospel text and the identity of Jesus.

Evangelicals have acceded to the historicism that precipitates such quests as a means to vindicate the historical nature of the gospels so that the question of historicity functions to buttress Christological truth-claims,²¹ even though evangelicals ultimately beg the demands of the historical-critical

¹⁶ This subject is worthy of its own investigation, but we must limit our concerns to the relationship between these descriptive categories and Frei's truth-claims regarding the uniqueness of Christ. For additional discussion on these matters see Hunsinger, "Frei" 103–112.

¹⁷ Frei, *Identity* 84. Intention-action analysis answers the question "What is he like?" The question "Who is he?" is addressed by the category of self-manifestation and concerns the matter of persistence across various and specific actions (p. 91).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 123, 94. Frei also said, "In realistic narratives the depiction coincides with what it is all about. The story renders the subject matter, not only by its ordinary and generally accessible language, but by the interaction of character and happening. Persons and publicly accessible circumstances are indispensable to each other, even as they are irreducible to each other. In their interaction they form the story and thereby cumulatively render its subject matter. They render it—and thus the sense of the text—to the reader, no matter how he disposes himself toward the story on a personal level" (p. xvi).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* xiv.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 90.

²¹ Cf. e.g. the critical work by R. G. Gruenler, *New Approaches to Jesus and the Gospels: A Phenomenological and Exegetical Study of Synoptic Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982).

basis of such quests with appeals to inspiration and faith.²² But Frei's critique of such quests calls into question this methodological basis because they preclude regard for the character of the gospel narratives as both sufficient and authoritative.

By contrast, the status of such descriptive categories in Frei's Christology is not logically previous or foundational and is not meant to establish the uniqueness of Jesus *per se*. Those categories only give shape to (describe) the gospels' depictions of Jesus Christ.²³ Frei maintained that "the theoretical devices we use to make our readings more alert, appropriate, and intelligent ought to be designed to leave the story as unencumbered as possible."²⁴ In the case of the gospels—because of their character as realistic narratives and the historical attestation of their literal reading—it is necessary to pursue a "case-specific reading" without regard for the broader hermeneutical issues of a universally applicable literary theory that would, in effect, make Scripture a member of a larger and more dominant literary class.²⁵ Frei limited the use of his suggestion regarding narrative in his work *Identity* and, by general consent, remained faithful to this commitment.²⁶ He was both cautious and casual about employing the interpretative devices of intention-action and self-manifestation descriptions, and he displayed minimal interest in these schemes in their own right.²⁷

²² G. Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 100. Fackre advocates entering through the door opened by the new quest (J. M. Robinson *et al.*): "Outlines of Jesus' teaching, behavior, self-understanding, and fate can be discerned in and through the proclamation and editorializing which another generation of biblical studies had deemed too thick to penetrate. Interest in this approach is also related to two other convictions. One is that the Church will only receive a hearing from this secular generation on the basis of well-founded historical claims. The other is that as a religion rooted squarely in history, Christianity should be prepared to deal actively with the Jesus of history."

²³ Regarding Frei's methodological program, J. Stout argued that "the theological metalanguage he has worked out is intended to display how the stories work, thus aiding in their understanding, without in any way presuming to take their place" ("Hans Frei and Anselmian Theology" [unpublished paper] 10).

²⁴ Frei, *Identity* xv. Frei added that the appropriate method of interpretation is simply "to observe the story itself—its structure, the shape of its movement, and its crucial transitions" (p. 87). As M. Ellingsen suggested, Frei's presuppositions regarding the interpreter's role "aim to be 'formal,' not 'material' presuppositions. That is, they purport not to affect the content of the biblical text" (*The Evangelical Movement* [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988] 371).

²⁵ H. W. Frei, "The 'Literal Reading' of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?", *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition* (ed. F. McConnell; Oxford: Oxford University, 1986) 66–67. In addition, Frei's intent in pursuing the description of Christology in this manner was to display that "no matter whether one is a believing Christian or not, one can make sense of the Gospel story in its own right, and that making sense of it that way entails important consequences for a theology based on this narrative" (*Identity* xvii).

²⁶ Hunsinger, "Frei" 110–113.

²⁷ "In this undertaking, identity description is designed simply to furnish us with ways of thinking about the person of Jesus as he appears in the narrative of events in the Gospels. The usefulness of this kind of analysis, however, will depend on the extent to which it may vividly portray aspects of the Gospel narrative, without damaging the integrity and flow of that narrative by the imposition of artificial intellectual categories or structures. In other words, if these categories and concepts are stable formal instruments, they should enable us to see who Jesus is

Frei's appeal to a historically attested literal sense betrays a confessional presupposition, one that is not unrelated to evangelicalism's defense of the gospels from Reformed and Lutheran theologians.²⁸ Kevin Vanhoozer doubts whether Frei escaped the trap of imposing his own "foreign interpretative framework on the Gospels" and believes Frei's use of descriptive schemes and the appeal to "realistic narrative" are more at "home in the fiction of the nineteenth century."²⁹ There is no doubt that Frei's reliance on categories such as identity description and realistic narrative functioned as presupposition in his Christology. But the defense for such an admission is historically and confessionally based and actually represents the strength of Frei's methodology in forming a Christology.³⁰ If such categories accomplish less than broader literary and historical-critical theories in terms of speculative Christological assertions, then so be it. In this case, to say less in terms of method allows the text to say more in terms of the identity of Jesus Christ. The devotion to an historically attested literal sense of Scripture—evident in its narrative features as a story, and especially so regarding the identity of Christ—formed the basis for Frei's conviction that the particularity of the Christian religion is based on the inextricable relationship between the gospels and Jesus Christ at the point of intersection between identity and action. A Christology "involving assertion of the indispensable uniqueness of Jesus" rested not with the religious uniqueness of the sayings of Jesus, not with a utilitarian notion of Christ's comparative worth as a mythic figure, not with "the historical accessibility of the teacher" or of his sayings, but with the unsubstitutable identity of Christ as narrated in the gospels.³¹

III. SOLA SCRIPTURA AND CHRISTOLOGY

The notion of *sola Scriptura*, the appeal to Scripture's perspicuity, the sufficiency of Biblical language in Christian self-description and its binding normativity were linked in Frei's belief that the divine authority of Scrip-

without determining better than the text itself the meaning and importance of what the Gospels have to say about him" (Frei, *Identity* 46).

²⁸ Frei wrote: "I believe that the tradition of the *sensus literalis* is the closest one can come to a consensus reading of the Bible as the sacred text in the Christian church" ("Literal Reading" 37).

²⁹ K. J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (New York: Cambridge University, 1990) 176–177. J. Breech addressed concerns similar to Vanhoozer's in his *Jesus and Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989). Cf. also the critical work of Wallace, *Second Naiveté*.

³⁰ The issue of Frei's defense of realistic narrative is found in H. W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974); cf. also "Literal Reading." His arguments in these works directly address Vanhoozer's criticisms. The origin of Frei's reliance on fictional novels comes from his own confessions and will be addressed below when discussing the influence of Auerbach.

³¹ Frei, *Identity* 142–143.

ture essentially means “for me simply that we do not need more.”³² The sufficiency of the Biblical language to depict the unique identity of Jesus Christ entails the (negative) restraint on supplanting Scripture’s authority—its “privileged status [as a] source of intelligibility and truth”—by appeals to another conceptual system, be it predominantly philosophical or linguistic or theological.³³ As Frei stated: “The identity of the Christian savior is revealed completely by the story of Jesus in the Gospels and by none other.”³⁴ Especially in Christology, the text is sufficient—has its own meaning (is its own world and frame of reference)—as the only means to affirm the uniqueness of Jesus as Redeemer.

As a restatement of *sola Scriptura*, Frei’s invocation of the Protestant notions of clarity and sufficiency served to ground Christological claims by restricting adventures beyond or behind the narration. Frei also wished to avoid reducing Jesus’ identity to isolated instances of word or deed. Christology is not the result of an inductive composite of Jesus’ sayings or actions. The benefit of narrative is related to this issue of sufficiency precisely because narration holds character and circumstances together as the text then forces Christological truth-claims to accord with its narrative shape.³⁵ The dialectic relationship of character and incident is arguably at the heart of Frei’s narrative construal of Jesus’ identity. We encounter the gospels as readers: subject to the constraints of learning who Jesus is by means of his depiction in the narrative, anticipating his resurrection by means of the gospel’s retrospective introduction to his birth, his public ministry, his betrayal and crucifixion. We who acknowledge the divinity and resurrection of Jesus Christ are forced to wade through his life to get to his resurrection only to find that we should have expected it all along. (Of course this is the narrative of discipleship also, and not simply the recording of what Jesus said and did.) Plainly put, translating Christological truth-claims into theoretical descriptions, under the rules of general hermeneutical theories that merely disguise anthropological schemes, tends to reduce the justifiability of asserting Jesus’ unique identity. In this case “identity” is an ontic assertion but not necessarily an ontological assertion. Precisely because the gospel’s narration of Jesus Christ does not lend itself to ideal description, that it is language bound as well as narrative bound, we are drawn back to the sufficiency of the text.

Rather than emphasizing the convergence of narrative and Christology, evangelicals tend to concentrate upon the relationship between the somewhat independent categories of Christology and Bibliology. Evangelical Christologies periodically struggle with the relationship between the use of

³² H. W. Frei, “Response to ‘Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,’” *Trinity Journal* 8 (1987) 23. The complete statement by Frei reads: “The truth to which we refer we cannot state apart from the biblical language which we employ to do so. And belief in the divine authority of Scripture is for me simply that we do not need more. The narrative description there is adequate.”

³³ Stout, “Frei” 6.

³⁴ Frei, *Identity* 88.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 90.

Scripture as authoritative and Christological claims.³⁶ For example: Are affirmations of a “high” Bibliology logically necessary and prerequisite for a “high” Christology? There is a lack of consensus on this issue.³⁷ Frei’s work may provide an example for those interested in the relationship of doctrines to the formal criterion of *sola Scriptura*. His appeal to the literal sense of the gospels takes the form of a confession that remains open to scrutiny as the relationship of Scripture and tradition remains more fluid than fixed. Also, the literal sense is intentionally unassuming and therefore makes us suspicious of a general hermeneutical theory that is “logically prior to the actuality of interpretation.”³⁸

In this regard Frei chose a hermeneutic that put the questions of reference and truth with regard to extratextual matters posterior to the recognition of Scripture’s authority to depict the identity of Jesus Christ. As we will see later, he did not forbid these questions but affirmed that they must be asked as a result, rather than a prerequisite, of affirming the uniqueness of Christ. In this way Frei affirmed the necessary relationship between an appeal to *sola Scriptura* as a formal principle and the assertion of the uniqueness of Christ.

IV. CHRISTOLOGY AND SCRIPTURE’S AUTHORITY

Frei’s approach to Christology raises a question regarding the relation between the uniqueness of Jesus and the authority of Scripture—namely, how is Christological uniqueness linked with Scriptural authority? For Frei the question is not whether Scripture is authoritative but the way in which Scripture’s authority will function in theology as the self-description of the Christian community and sustain the uniqueness of Christ as redeemer in the Christian faith.³⁹ It has been argued that Frei was less concerned with the question of on what basis Scripture “is” authoritative. Instead he concerned himself with the result of reading Scripture “as” authoritative.⁴⁰

³⁶ Evangelicals are not characteristically generous regarding dispensing with the logical priority of inspiration, infallibility or inerrancy for making Christological truth-claims. See N. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976) 329–330; J. F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago: Moody, 1969) 20–21.

³⁷ For example, Benjamin B. Warfield entertained the notion that plenary inspiration was logically dispensable in regard to the veracity of essential Christian doctrines; cf. *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (ed. S. G. Craig; Phillipsburgh: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948) 210–212. Cf. also the discussion of these matters by D. H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975) 21–24.

³⁸ H. W. Frei, “Theology and the Interpretation of Narrative: Some Hermeneutical Considerations” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, New York, December 20, 1982) 30.

³⁹ It is unfair to assume that because Frei maintained what others have called a functionalist view of Scripture’s authority he would deny the possibility of the propositional authority of Scripture. On the general discussion of a functionalist position see Kelsey, *Uses* 39–50.

⁴⁰ See the discussion in T. W. Tilley, “Incommensurability, Intratextuality, and Fideism,” *Modern Theology* 5/2 (January 1989) 87–111.

And of concern to evangelicals is the question, according to Henry, whether this orientation approaches the evangelical emphasis on the authority of the text.⁴¹ Henry said no. Frei's response would not have been this direct.

It is true that Frei concentrated on the functional qualities of Scripture with regard to the question of its authority for making truth-claims regarding the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. While he insisted that the subject matter (Christ) and the text are interrelated, he gave prominence to Scripture's subject matter as the means to depict the identity of Jesus. Rather than regard this intent as a weakness, we should see it as Frei's strength in making Christological truth-claims.⁴² When restricted to the examination of justifiability, Frei also restricted his concern to how Scripture functioned as authoritative for the purpose of Christological truth-claims.

The rationale for this approach to Scripture's authority, and the basis for Frei's assertions regarding Christological uniqueness and the gospels specifically, was supported by a link between his notion of Scriptural authority (for the purpose of Christology) and the affirmation of Scripture's sufficiency:

The nature of the narrative therefore imposes a limit on theological comment. It is not likely that we shall be able to get beyond the descriptive accounts presented to us in the Gospels concerning the resurrection and the relation of God's and Jesus' actions. And if we do go beyond them in explanatory endeavors, we are clearly on our own and in speculative territory, just as we have suggested that we are in speculative realms when we look beyond the narrative for the writers' and Jesus' own inner intentions. In that instance, our speculation would be historical; in the present, metaphysical. But it is never easy and usually not desirable to transform a literary description, such as a narrative sequence, into an *explanatory* scheme using abstract concepts and categories. What is perfectly fitting in a narrative may be banal or absurd in an explanatory scheme drawn from our general experience of occurrences in the world.⁴³

Putting aside for the moment the question of Frei's historical agnosticism, notice how he linked the themes of Scripture's authority to depict the identity of Jesus and Scripture's sufficiency to do so (both positively in making truth-claims regarding Christ and negatively in denying the ability and also the need to look beyond or behind the gospels). He did not abandon Scripture's normativity or sufficiency as he pursued a more modest means to simultaneously (and in corresponding measure) pursue a more specific affirmation of the unique and unsubstitutable identity of Jesus Christ.

What happens to Christology when, as Frei recommended, we recognize the gospels as narrative, story or fiction-like depictions of Christ's identity? Frei's response was to first describe why moderns neglect the means of an appeal to narrative qualities of the gospels. Negatively stated, the unique-

⁴¹ Henry, "Narrative" 8.

⁴² G. Green, "The Bible As . . .": Fictional Narrative and Scriptural Truth," *Scriptural Authority* 79-96; J. J. Buckley, "The Hermeneutical Deadlock Between Revelationalists, Textualists, and Functionalists," *Modern Theology* 6/4 (July 1990) 325-339.

⁴³ Frei, *Identity* 125.

ness of Jesus Christ was misconstrued when the authoritative source for Christology—the gospels' narrative quality—was distorted. Frei's diagnosis of the errors of modern theology in this regard are clearly set out in his work.⁴⁴ The distortion of the obvious—that the stories literally meant what they said—meant the distortion of the uniqueness of Christ.⁴⁵ Because the rendering of the uniqueness of the identity of Christ was not simply a byproduct of the gospels but their express design, the sacrifice of story or narrative impinges on the authority of Scripture as well as the question of the unique identity of Jesus.⁴⁶

Positively stated, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ is an obvious assertion of the gospels. The uniqueness of the storied Jesus of gospel narratives was linked with the nature of the gospels themselves. It was their intention to argue that no other access to Christ was available save that of the narrated Jesus of Nazareth. Frei maintained that the uniqueness of the gospel story itself was its assertion of the unsubstitutable and individual identity of Christ within the account of salvation: "The story as story . . . should be taken in its own right and . . . if it is read for its own sake, it suggests that Jesus' identity is self-focused and unsubstitutably his own." He explicitly debunked assertions of a universal or mythical Christ figure, on the one hand, and efforts to depict Christ as a specific individual figure in modern novels, on the other hand, "because the place of the Christ figure is already and exclusively preempted by Jesus Christ himself, and there can be no concrete duplication of him."⁴⁷ There is no type or figure or class of Christ. He is unlike every depiction of a salvation figure precisely because of the unique presentation of his identity in the gospels. For example, writing against the imposition of gnostic salvation myths and modern Christ figures on the story of salvation, Frei stated:

The Gospel story's specific identity of the Savior is bound to be wholly different from that of any other equally specific savior, and they cannot be grouped into one class. . . . The Gospel story is different from both because its "type" is wholly derived from the specific and unsubstitutable identity of Jesus Christ. The very distinctiveness of the Gospel story as a story of salvation rests wholly on the claim that the Savior is completely identical with the specific man Jesus of Nazareth.

The depiction of Jesus in the gospels makes an exclusive claim to the salvation story because "the Gospel story claims the Savior Jesus' identity to be solely and unsubstitutably his own and not a universal myth."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Frei, *Eclipse* vii–viii. Cf. the evangelical critique of these matters by B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (ed. S. G. Craig; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 265–319.

⁴⁵ Some take issue with Frei's bold assertions regarding ostensive reference, literal meaning, and the "self-sufficiency and autonomy" of the text in such appeals; see L. M. Poland, *Literary Criticism and Biblical Hermeneutics: A Critique of Formalistic Approaches* (Chico: Scholars, 1985) 120–128.

⁴⁶ Frei, *Eclipse*.

⁴⁷ Frei, *Identity* 102–103, 81–82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 82–83.

This assertion of the uniqueness of Christ is not merely a byproduct of Frei's use of literary depictions as a means of reading the gospels, contrary to Henry's suspicion that narrativists like Frei are unable to "rise above dramatic literary depiction" and thereby make factual truth-claims.⁴⁹ A concern raised against Frei is that because of his dependence on the literary character of the Bible there is a danger that "as the literary theory goes, so goes the christological assertion."⁵⁰ But, as noted above, Frei was intentionally modest in his appeal to the relationship between the narrative as literature and a corresponding theory of interpretation (i.e. the tail must not wag the dog). Speaking of the Christian tradition Frei argued:

In that tradition, the ascriptive literalism of the story, the *history-likeness* if you will, of the singular agent enacting the unity of human finitude and divine infinity, Jesus of Nazareth, is taken to be itself the ground guarantee, and conveyance of the truth of the depicted enactment, its *historicity* if you will.⁵¹

His assertions regarding the literary character of the gospels are based on an historically attested claim—an appeal to an historically orthodox reading of the gospels—rather than an appeal to the authority of a genre.

What about the concern that Frei's Christology is only a function of a literary convention regarding narrative? Frei confessed to learning a negative lesson about how to read the gospels from an acknowledgment of the "novel-like structure of parts of the Gospel story."⁵² He also noted that his reliance upon the significance of realistic narrative as a species of literature disposed him to regard the gospels as making "tyrannical" claims. This was a lesson he learned from Erich Auerbach.⁵³ It was based on the conviction that there is an inseparable link between the authority claimed by Scripture itself and an appropriate reading of the same. Auerbach noted that the world portrayed in Biblical narrative—the narrated or storied Biblical world—was characterized by the claim to exclusive authority and claimed to be the "only real world," not merely a byproduct of its literary character: "The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is only the real world, is destined for autocracy. All other scenes, issues, and ordinances have no

⁴⁹ Henry, "Narrative" 10–14.

⁵⁰ J. Sykes, "Narrative Accounts of Biblical Authority: The Need for a Doctrine of Revelation," *Modern Theology* 5/4 (July 1989) 328.

⁵¹ Frei, "Literal Reading" 66–67. Frei continued: "The linguistic, textual world is in this case not only the *necessary* basis for our orientation within the real world, according to the Christian claims about this narrative, and this narrative alone; it is also *sufficient* for the purpose."

⁵² Frei, *Identity* 74–84. Frei also noted that "even if the modern endeavors to present 'Christ figures' are bound to be theological—if not literary—failures, they may be *significant* failures for the Christian in several respects. . . . [e.g.] The novel is the special vehicle for setting forth unsubstitutable identity in the interplay of character and action. The latter part of the Gospel story does just that."

⁵³ Frei, *Eclipse* 3, 15; E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1953) 12–23.

right to appear independently of it.”⁵⁴ This is really a conflict of worlds with attending truth-claims about what constitutes the “real” world (Biblical and narrated versus modern and enlightened, but not premodern versus modern or scientific). Frei’s agreement with Auerbach is expressed in the conviction that the Biblical world forces itself on the reader so that truth-claims are made by means of the narrated world of the story.⁵⁵ Thus to claim that Jesus is a storied figure in this fashion, with corresponding truth-claims made regarding his uniqueness and unsubstitutability, is to say more, not less, about the identity of Jesus.

Frei’s conclusion was that when a realistic reading of the gospels was combined with the notion of their sufficiency the meaning of a text is found solely in the text itself.⁵⁶ Yet the uniqueness of Jesus of Nazareth is related precisely to what the gospels assert about his identity according to Frei: “In short, there can be no Christ figure because Jesus is the Christ.” “To speak of Christ involves an enormous claim—a claim so large that it is made *exclusively* of whomever it is made.”⁵⁷ It is not merely that Jesus was historically singular or a narrated figure that makes him unique but that as such the depiction of Jesus as Redeemer makes particularist and exclusive claims on behalf of Jesus Christ—that is, Jesus is unique because the gospels materially assert his uniqueness.

A careful reading of *Identity* will yield an instructive lesson in the hermeneutical task of stating a Christology that is faithful to Scripture’s authority to do so. But it is not so much a sampling of Frei’s positive (dogmatic) truth-claims about the person and work of Jesus that concern this paper—whether he remained historically orthodox, Chalcedonian, and defended a high Christology.⁵⁸ We can assume that no one would deny Frei the privilege of making truth-claims about the uniqueness of Christ. Of interest is Frei’s effort to confine his attention to the gospels as sufficient to depict the uniqueness of Jesus in their ostensive reference and thereby avoid speculative methodological ventures (which he insisted are not justified on the basis of Scripture’s authority, no matter how possible or needful they

⁵⁴ Auerbach continued: “Far from seeking, like Homer, merely to make us forget our own reality for a few hours, it seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history” (*Mimesis* 14–15).

⁵⁵ Ellingsen noted regarding Frei’s use of Auerbach: “On these narrative grounds, the question of the historical reality of the biblical narratives need not occur to believers” (*Evangelical Movement* 381).

⁵⁶ G. W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 81.

⁵⁷ Frei, *Identity* 65. Also, Clark noted that postmodern narrative theology characteristically asserts the uniqueness of Christian truth-claims as a function of its rejection of foundationalism and acceptance of the particularity of religious self-description (“Narrative” 502). For our purposes, therefore, Christological particularity is not merely a byproduct of the gospels as literature but is based on the centrality of the gospels in Christian self-description.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of Frei’s efforts to maintain an orthodox Christology—a high Christology—and a narrative rendering of the gospels see Hunsinger, “Frei” 103–128; J. Webster, “Response to George Hunsinger,” *Modern Theology* 8/2 (April 1992) 129–132; Outka, “Following” 144–160.

may seem to a given age). According to Frei, it is the function of the text to depict the identity of Jesus Christ—thus the authority of the text for Christological truth-claims.

V. FAITH AND HISTORY AND CHRISTOLOGY

Underlying evangelical concerns with Frei's Christology is undoubtedly the question of the relationship of history and Christology.⁵⁹ Henry was disappointed that in the arguments concerning Jesus' uniqueness Frei did not offer a "direct argument merely for the historical factuality of the resurrection . . . vis-a-vis modern historical criticism."⁶⁰ And Henry was correct. Frei offered no such argument of historical rationality.⁶¹ Frei did clearly affirm that the primacy of Scripture's depiction made the question of Jesus' not being raised an impossibility: "What the [gospel] accounts are saying, in effect, is that the being and identity of Jesus in the resurrection are such that his nonresurrection becomes inconceivable."⁶² But this assertion is restricted to a function of the text as the narrative identification of Christ, and Christological truth-claims are restricted to this narrative depiction rather than subjected to (an extratextual) historical measure.⁶³

Frei argued that the question of historicity cannot be addressed except by an affirmation of the fictional shape of the gospels' narration of Christ, and

⁵⁹ As background to this question, take a standard argument from evangelicals recently voiced by Alister McGrath: "Either something is history, and open to historical investigation, or it does not exist: there is no alternative" (*The Making of Modern German Christology* [Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1986] 3).

⁶⁰ Henry, "Narrative" 7. Henry adds: ". . . despite the fact that the NT itself affirms that the historical disconfirmation of the resurrection would undermine the Christian faith." Henry of course assumes that terms like "history," "historical" and "factuality" are self-evident and viable means to undermine or confirm the Christian faith.

⁶¹ It is certainly dissatisfying to be told that one is asking the wrong question, but this is precisely what Frei does in his response to Henry's disappointment. Specifically regarding the resurrection, Frei affirmed that it is inconceivable according to the narratives "that it should not have taken place" (*Identity* 145). "Of course I believe in the 'historical reality' of Christ's death and resurrection, if those are the categories which we employ. But they weren't always the categories employed by the church. There was a time when the church didn't talk about 'the Jesus of history' and 'the Christ of faith.' There was a time when we didn't talk, as many people have talked for nearly two hundred years now, about Jesus Christ being 'a particular historical event.' And it may well be that even scholars won't be using those particular terms so casually and in so self-evident a fashion for much longer" ("Response" 23–34).

⁶² Frei, *Identity* 145. Frei continued: "To know *who* he is in connection with what took place is to know *that* he is. This is the climax of the story and its claim. . . . [Thus] however impossible it may be to grasp the nature of the resurrection, it remains inconceivable that it should not have taken place."

⁶³ Thus the crux of the debate concerns the interrelationship of faith, history and Christology. The main concern for evangelicals has been the fundamental issue of the nature of history and historical understanding. Clark suggests that the Henry-versus-Frei debate centered on the larger question of modernity (Henry, who links an Archimedean principle of history to evangelical orthodoxy) versus postmodernity (Frei, who opts for pragmatic justification of rationality; "Narrative" 508–509).

then in a manner palliated by that narration.⁶⁴ Frei did not say that the gospels were fictional in nature but rather that they were “more nearly fictional than historical in narration,” his examples of this being the narration of the various scenes of the climax of the passion-resurrection sequence, specifically the narration of the scene in Gethsemane.⁶⁵ His evaluation regarding the relationship of fiction and history in the gospels was based on the conviction that the “narration is at once intensely serious and historical in intent and fictional in form, the common strand between them being the identification of [Jesus] in his circumstances.” As Frei observed regarding the specific instance of the gospels’ depiction of the resurrection, it is as if the gospel writers “grateful discipleship and factual acknowledgement seem to have been—mysteriously—one and the same act.”⁶⁶ Frei believed that this admission—the acceptance of this description—was basic to appropriating the resurrection of Jesus via faith, but he stopped short of offering any explanation for this phenomenon.⁶⁷

To argue that the gospels cannot resemble or function as fictional-like because such an admission would mean that they are therefore not true is to confuse form (historical or otherwise) with truth and to force the notions of fiction and fact into a duality that is reductionistic.⁶⁸ To Frei, the appeal

⁶⁴ Also, contrary to Henry’s suspicions that the argument of factuality in 1 Corinthians 15 goes unanswered by Frei, we note that Frei did address this line of argument. After stating his conviction that “faith is not based on factual evidence or inherent historical likelihood” he added: “On the other hand, because [the Gospels’ depiction of Jesus’ resurrection] is more nearly factlike than not, reliable historical evidence *against* the resurrection would be decisive. In other words, if the resurrection is true, it is unique, but if false, it is like any other purported fact that has been proved false: there is nothing unique about it in that case” (*Identity* 151).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* 144–145. Frei added: “Throughout the climax of the narrative, and most particularly at the crucial climax of the resurrection, fictional description, providing direct knowledge of his identity in, with, and through the circumstances, merges with factual claim, whether justified or not.”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 145, 147.

⁶⁷ The reluctance exemplified in Frei is one of the most endearing features of his Christological claims. It is realistic, appropriately modest about the epistemological prostitution one is forced to engage in in order to converse in Christology with the past two hundred years of speculations and distortions of the nature of Scripture’s authority, the uniqueness of Christ, and the nature of history itself. See Hunsinger, “Frei” 104–113; P. Nelson, *Narrative and Morality: A Theological Inquiry* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1987) 72–79; Stroup, *Promise* 139–144.

⁶⁸ See the discussion by Green, “The Bible as” 81–93. To reject the ultimate ability of the modern quests after an historical Jesus to supply the sufficient ground for faith or account for the authoritative rendering of the uniqueness of Christ does not mean that Frei rejects that there is some inherent relationship between Jesus and historical circumstances. Frei does allow that the coincidence of story and history can be addressed, but then only in the final sequence—in the passion-resurrection sequence—but not in “his sayings taken simply as sayings” as is the case for quests after an historical Jesus (*Identity* 142). To Frei, the appeal to history and faith must remain within the domain of the narrative depiction of Jesus’ identity as the unique Savior. This disinterest in Jesus’ sayings only refers to the depiction of Jesus’ identity, not to the authority of the sayings *per se*. The notion that in the narration of Jesus’ identity it is only the sequence of passion-resurrection that is closely tied to historical claims is tenable. Frei’s emphasis upon Jesus’ self-manifestation (Who is he?) as a postresurrection affirmation is also tenable from the narrativist’s perspective.

to history and faith must remain within the domain of the narrative depiction of Jesus' identity as the unique Savior. Even though Frei admitted that the historical dimension of the gospels' depiction of Jesus' resurrection "allows and even forces us to ask the question, 'Did this actually take place?'" he remained reluctant to abandon the priority of the narrated person: "The force or urgency of the *question* does not make a positive *answer* to it any more credible."⁶⁹ Frei was reluctant to give priority to historical factual claims as the means to establish Jesus' identity. Instead he argued that "one cannot deny that in the accounts themselves the fact question was bound to be answered the way they did answer it."⁷⁰ The question of factuality should not be divorced from the manner in which the resurrection is narrated. Or, as Frei stated: "The truth to which we refer we cannot state apart from the biblical language which we employ to do so."⁷¹

VI. CONCLUSION

There are several reasons why, as this paper has argued, evangelicals should appreciate the constructive venture into Christology offered by Hans Frei. Foremost is the commitment to the inextricable relationship between the realistic depiction of Jesus Christ in the gospels and Christological truth-claims regarding his uniqueness. This emphasis might prove fruitful in an evangelical response to the perplexity of modern and postmodern debates regarding the nature of history and faith and the corresponding contention regarding Christological truth-claims. To examine Frei's Christological claims is to examine the continued application of Protestant confessional themes and as such is to engage in a dialog with the tensions of tradition and Scripture within Protestantism itself.⁷²

The goal of *Identity* was to set out the manner in which the assertion of the unsubstitutable identity of Jesus Christ, as a truth-claim central to the particularity of Christianity, could be established, primarily (and sometimes exclusively) in its narrative presentation. Beyond this task Frei was

⁶⁹ Frei, *Identity* 140–141. Frei continued: "It is not likely that successive generations of critics will agree on what is probable fact in the Gospel accounts. The criteria for historical reliability in regard to the Gospel story will—in the absence of external corroborations—always rest on shifting grounds. Speculations about Jesus' cultural milieu and its relation to him, the influence of the earliest church's setting on the Gospels, the shape and religious functions of the earliest oral traditions handed down by the first community of believers, the likely shape of the first written documents, and the interests or prejudices of the final editors—all these factors will keep on influencing and changing what is regarded as historical or historically likely about Jesus, to say nothing about the changing cultural influences playing on the generations of scholars doing the speculating."

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 146. There is more to Frei's position than his doubts regarding the fruitfulness of such quests. His doubts do not necessarily betray a fideistic apologetic or an appeal to intratextuality, contrary to the suspicions of G. Comstock, "Truth or Meaning: Ricoeur versus Frei on Biblical Narrative," *JR* 66 (1986) 117–140. Also, Clark suggests that "narrative purists," like Frei, are cousins to evangelical presuppositionalists and fideists ("Narrative" 506–508).

⁷¹ Frei, "Response" 23.

⁷² See Mark A. Noll's comments on this neoconfessional movement (*A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992] 524).

cautious, even reticent, about the function of and what role the narratives should play in Christology. This reluctance was based on a desire to avoid subverting the authority of Scripture by appeals to the gospels that were inconsistent with the realistic shape of the texts. In turn this realism indicated what an appropriate reading of the text could yield. Frei advocated a more restricted dependence upon the exclusivity of the gospels to portray Jesus Christ.

Although there is concern that Frei's hermeneutical modesty and corresponding lack of a conceptual apparatus or appeal to an extratextual philosophy lean toward agnosticism regarding truth-claims, Frei's work in *Identity* actually displays a sensitivity to the question of the text's meaning and the ultimate truthfulness of the same. Frei maintained that the question "What does it mean?" must be prior to the question "It is true?"⁷³ There is an evangelistic force to such questions, as a maintenance of the sufficiency of the Biblical language and depiction of the identity of Christ makes exclusive claims on the reader without sacrificing the priority of Scripture as authoritative. But this by no means prohibits asking the question of truth or, specifically, making truth-claims about the uniqueness of Christ. Christological truth-claims regarding the unique identity of Jesus are central to Christian particularity, according to Frei, but they must be pursued in a manner consistent with the authority and sufficiency of Scripture to identify the person and work of Christ. Evangelicals can be appreciative of Frei's approach to Christological truth-claims, especially in his commitment to do so in a manner that recognizes and applies Scripture's authority and sufficiency to depict the unique and unsubstitutable identity of Christ.

⁷³ Frei wrote: "The right order for thinking about the unity of Christ's identity and presence is to begin with his identity. . . . We might begin to use our reflections about Jesus for purposes that we should actually eschew, e.g., showing non-believers how faith in Christ or the idea of his presence might be 'possible,' 'meaningful,' or 'real.' The claim that it is more important to ask *who* Jesus is than *how* he is present is not intended to downgrade the importance of the latter question. On the contrary, if its enormous significance is to be grasped, it must be relegated to second place in the order of development. For it receives an implicit answer through what we say about who Jesus is" (*Identity* 6-7).