

[1959. Review of *Christ and the Christian*, by Nels F.S. Ferré. *Christian Today* 5 Jan.]

CHRISTOLOGY BASED ON AGAPE

Christ and the Christian, by Nels F.S. Ferre (Harper, 1958, 253 pp., \$3.75) is reviewed by Gordon H. Clark, Professor of Philosophy, Butler University, Indiana.

Taking the concept of Agape as the basic principle of theology, Dr. Ferre in this book proceeds to construct the implied Christology. Doubtless a review should indicate some of the Christological results and comment on the adequacy of the method.

In several places Dr. Ferre speaks with approbation of the creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon. "Nicea settled the question of the full deity of Jesus" (p. 42). "Chalcedon, furthermore, settled the question of the unity of Jesus' personality" (p. 45). "The Sixth Ecumenical Council settled the question of the permanence of the two natures within one personality" (p. 46). He even says, "Mary can rightly be called the Mother of God" (p. 194). But this language is misleading for other paragraphs make it quite clear that he is not using these words in their traditional significance. The phrase 'Jesus is God,' he brands as a "crass statement" (p. 38), although he admits that "there seems to be a stand in the New Testament that pulls toward this position." He emphatically denies that the person or ego whom we name Jesus is the second Person of the Trinity. Again, "we do not speak of finality in Jesus, for growth is eternal (p. 77), and "out of two natures comes one genuine personality, neither simply God nor simply man . . ." (p. 78). "Any theology which insists that God was fully present [in Jesus] from birth may in upholding one truth, the primacy of God's coming throughout the whole event of Incarnation, deny the other, the need for real growth in grace and wisdom" (p. 101). "If the Virgin Birth in any way endows Jesus with a predetermined sinlessness or, even more, with some initial presence of God which sets him off essentially from normal human beings, then the Son of God never took on our human nature" (p. 104). "The ego [of Jesus] was therefore neither human nor divine . . ." (p. 108). "Jesus in the most natural and indirect instances seems to have been humbly conscious of sin before God" (p. 111). "When, however, did this hypostatic union take place? We cannot tell . . . although it seems likely that it occurred before his baptism" (pp. 114-115). This, I take it, means that the Incarnation was an event that took place, not at Jesus' birth, but at a time just preceding his public ministry. At any rate, the term Incarnation in this

book does not bear its usual Christian meaning. The exact significance of the crucial terms is, however, not too clear. Although one can quickly see what Dr. Ferre opposes, namely, historic Christianity, the exposition of his own views is rather perplexing. He and his wife “have read aloud every word of the book in the attempt to make it as easy reading as possible” (p. 15), and in this attempt they were successful; but the fluency and poetry of the language have resulted in ambiguity of expression and obscurity of thought.

Minor examples of figurative language and the numerous cases of undefined terminology are too trivial to consider. Major obscurity is found in the theological method of constructing a Christology on the basis of Agape. The rejection of other methods is clear enough, even though the reasons given are not always convincing.

That the question of objective fact (pp. 30-31) rules out both personal experience and the experience of the Church may be granted; but the rejection of history, i.e., the rejection of the Bible (the only historical source), on the ground that this is too simple a solution of the problem of method, is not so well argued. The mere fact that we today read the Bible with minds educated by centuries of theological discussion, while warning against sources of possible blindness and misinterpretation, is not a sufficient reason for substituting some other court of ultimate appeal. A second reason for not starting with the Bible is that it does not present a single system of thought. It contains, as Dr. Ferre avers, many types of Christology, and therefore, we must have some other principle by which to choose from among them. This reason for rejecting the Bible as the starting point would be a good reason, if it were true. But attempts to charge the Bible with inconsistency have always seemed to this reviewer to be cases of misconstruction. Dr. Ferre several times uses the question, “Why callest thou me good? To show that Jesus did not claim deity. Yet, surely, this is to insist on an interpretation, a naïve interpretation, that is by no means necessary.

However, if the Bible is to be rejected, it still does not follow that Agape is to be chosen as the guiding principle of theology. Dr. Ferre's subjective preference for Agape need not be shared by others. Beyond the question of subjectivity, however, lies the question of conceptual adequacy, which question in fact becomes two questions: Is Agape clearly defined? and, Do Dr. Ferre's conclusions in Christology follow from this concept?

Suppose Agape is precisely defined as “indiscriminate kindness to all” (p. 57). If this explicitly statement really is the precise definition, then Dr. Ferre will find difficulty in deducing

his Christology. If, on the other hand, the details of his Christology are deducible from Agape, its definition has been omitted. A reviewer, however, must work with what is actually stated.

Dr. Ferre supports this explicit definition of Agape with the verse concerning God's sending sun and rain on the just and unjust alike. Yet why this theme should be designated as the central motif of the Gospels when (1) we cannot depend on any fanciful *ipsissima verba* (p. 57), and (2) Jesus himself was inconsistent (p. 60), and (3) the disciples did not understand him (p. 60), and (4) Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees, which Dr. Ferre does not believe to be an "authentic report in detail," remains "a problem within the major conclusive context of Jesus' living and teaching Agape" (p. 83), and when (5) "we cannot know the historic Jesus" (p. 58),— why, under these circumstances, should Agape be specially connected with Jesus or with Christianity?

Now, aside from such a doubtful connection with the Bible (a connection logically useless if Agape is the basic principle), should we conclude Agape to be indiscriminate kindness to all, we may say that God sends sun and rain upon all nations alike, but we cannot show that the gospel of grace, the creed of Chalcedon, or, say the insights of Dr. Ferre himself, have been vouchsafed to all people indiscriminately. Even with the rejection of the doctrine of hell—and it is the Jesus of the Gospels who talks more about hell than Paul or any other New Testament personage — and the assertion of universal salvation (pp. 246-247), it still remains evident that some people suffer more calamity than others. This Agape therefore not only is unbiblical, but fails to square with human experience, and indeed precludes any intelligible view of the problem of evil.

Finally, the definition of Agape does not in good logic require the Christology that the author derives from it. Extensive documentation would be tedious, but over and over again there are a series of unsupported assertions in no necessary way attached to Agape. Why, for example, does Agape, so defined, require the Incarnation to occur nearly 30 years after Jesus' birth? Why does Agape, so defined, require time and change to be attributes of God (pp. 237-238)? And why does Agape, so defined, require "the persons of the Trinity [to be] operational capacities in God"? (p. 205). Or, for that matter, why does Agape imply that "we can never become God"? (p. 205). These are serious questions which the reviewer thinks Dr. Ferre has not answered.

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