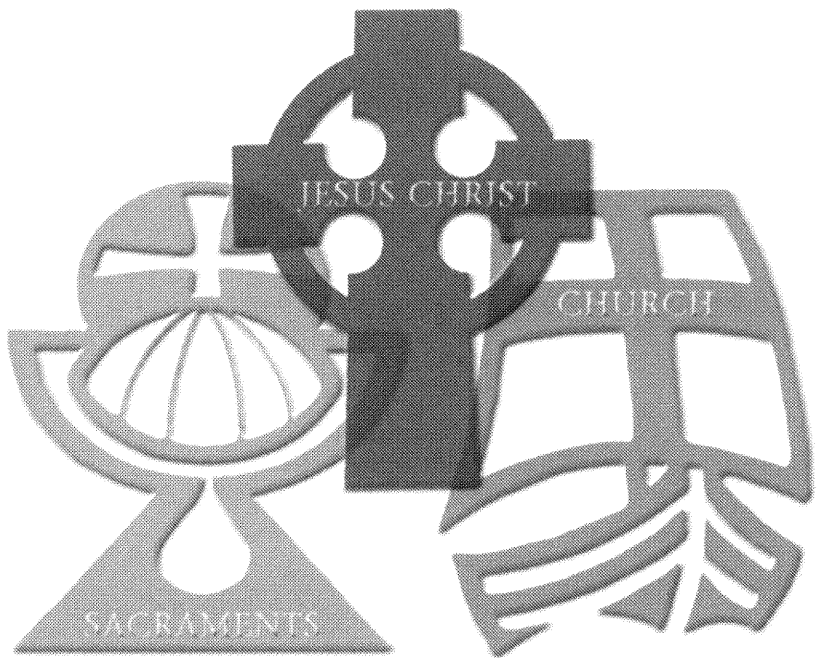


# WE CONFESS

## ANTHOLOGY

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HERMANN SASSE

TRANSLATED BY  
NORMAN NAGEL

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WE CONFESS



JESUS CHRIST

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# Translator's Preface

Student, pastor, scholar, teacher, and confessor, Hermann Sasse (1895—1976) is recognized as one of the leading voices of confessional Lutheranism in the 20th century. Born in Sonnewalde, Germany, his theological activity extended through the decay of the Weimar Republic and the rise and fall of the Nazi regime. In the midst of such disruption he became and remained a staunch confessor of the *Una Sancta*, the one holy catholic and apostolic church. His confession was grounded in that earliest of all Christian confessions, "Jesus is Lord."

"Jesus Christ Is Lord" in this volume is Sasse at his brilliant best in the service of confessing Jesus Christ, the burning heart of all his work. This leitmotif has its early setting in *Mysterium Christi: Christological Studies by British and German Theologians*, edited by Bishop G. K. A. Bell in 1930. Two of the essays in this volume are taken from Sasse's "Letters to Lutheran Pastors," ("Briefe an lutherische Pastoren"), which he began to write after World War II and continued after his emigration to Australia.

Throughout this volume we have incorporated Sasse's footnotes into the text, sometimes with parentheses, sometimes without. We have generally broken up his long paragraphs into several smaller ones. Where we have added references, etc., in various places, these are indicated with brackets.

Dr. Sasse throughout his life, both in Germany and later in Australia, was involved in the whole Christian scene. He kept astonishingly well informed and was able to illumine developments and events in scattered parts of the world with his far-reaching knowledge of the church's history and confession. For him, to be a loyal Lutheran was to be a catholic Christian, heir to all the treasures of the church. His historical perspective blended with his confessional integrity won him the respect of Lutheran, Catholic, and Reformed alike.

Hermann Sasse wrote in times of theological turmoil and political upheaval. In the midst of great adversity he brought a message that would strengthen and hold. Many and varied were the situations he addressed, and yet through them all it is the same message, the only message which finally holds, the message about Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Lord. The three volumes of the "We Confess" series, of which this is but the first, give testimony that Dr. Sasse's work lives on.

# JESUS CHRIST IS LORD The Church's Original Confession

1931

## 1. The Original Confession

*Kyrios Jesus Christos*, "Jesus Christ is Lord." This is the original confession of the church. With it the Christian faith once entered world history. To understand the sense of this confession ever more deeply is the great, yes, basically the only task of all Christian theology. To repeat this confession, to speak it in ever new forms, to translate it into the language of all times and peoples, to protect it against misunderstandings and reinterpretations, and to understand its meaning for all areas of life—that is the task of all confession building within Christendom. No later confession of the church can and wants to be anything else than a renewal of the original confession to Jesus as Christ and Lord. This is true of the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the confessional writings of the Reformation, and any confession in which the Christendom of the future may want to speak its faith. As this confession stood at the beginning of the church's history, so it will stand at its end. Then will be fulfilled that great word of the apostle: "At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10 f.).

Whoever wants to understand the sense of this confession must first be clear as to what a church confession actually is. Nowadays

this is much forgotten, and also theologians seem to be little aware of it. Confession does not belong, as many have thought, to the essence of religion. It does not even belong to the essence of the higher religions. Mysticism, for example, knows nothing of confessions. But from the very beginning it belongs to the essence of the Christian faith, and that threefold: confession of sin, confession of faith, and acclamation of God. These are the meanings of *homologeîn* and *exhomologeisthai* in the New Testament, and of corresponding words in Greek and Latin church usage. It still echoes on in Augustine's *Confessions*.

This Christian usage of confession has moved deeply in men's souls. It has given its name to a whole class of literature. Consider the confessions of Augustine and of Rousseau, and how these have affected the writing of autobiography. If people in the modern world, in contrast to all other periods of history, understood and evaluated great poetry as "confession" in that sense in which Goethe spoke of his works as fragments of a great confession, if philosophical and political world views appear among us as "confessions," then this is an aftereffect of confessing in the sense of the Christian faith. During a thousand-year history it has helped form Western man, and it still remains a force when its content—forgiveness of sin, confession of faith, and acclamation of God—have long been forgotten.

A special kind of Christian confession is, already in the New Testament, *the church's confession of faith*. Its essence can be seen through the following marks. It is to be understood, first of all, as *the answer that is evoked by God's revelation of Himself*, faith's answer to the received Word of God. When Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered with the church's first confession of faith: "You are the Christ" (Mark 8:29). It is not by chance that in Matthew's account Jesus speaks of revelation. All true confessions of faith want to be response to revelation. In them faith bears witness, in spare, objective statements of fact, to the revelation that has occurred. Therefore parallels to Christian confessions can be found only in prophetic religions that know of a revelation that once happened (e. g., the *shahada* of Islam). The church's confessions tell objectively of facts, not of subjective experiences. For this very reason they are offensive to modern man. They speak of what was revealed in Christ, which happened at one time in history. Therefore in later time they always point to the past, to the "once" and "there" of salvation history, to that which happened "under Pontius Pilate."

Confession as response to revelation is, second, *the response of the church*. It is not the response of just a single believer, even though

each believer confesses with the creed "I believe," as at Baptism. Jesus' question was addressed to all the disciples together: "Who do you [plural] say that I am?" Peter answers in the name of them all, and his answer immediately becomes the confession of them all. It is again not by chance that in Matthew's account there follows immediately the first mention of the church. Confession and church belong together. Christ's church is always a confessing church. Not only does each Christian confess his personal faith, but the church, the whole company of believers, gives testimony of the revelation that has happened. The individual Christian joins this testimony in his personal faith. Out of such consensus of faith, worked by the Holy Spirit, is true confession born. (Cf. "Our churches teach with great unanimity" [Augsburg Confession I, 1] and similar statements in the Preface to the Book of Concord.)

The third characteristic of confession of faith is that it belongs in the liturgy, in the *divine service*, in which the church appears as the hearing, praying, and confessing congregation. Right from the beginning we see that the earliest confessional statements have their place in the divine service. As the answer of the congregation the confession is directed to God. In this respect confession is similar to prayer, although the two must not be confused.

When the church confesses, she is speaking not only to God but also to the world. This is the fourth characteristic of the church's confession. Every genuine confession has a polemical character, even if it does not contain condemnations against false doctrine. It separates *pure doctrine* from false doctrine, the Christian faith from the religions of the world, the church from all that is not church.

In this sense the New Testament formulas "Jesus is Lord" (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3) and "Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:11; cf. 2 Cor. 4:5; Col. 2:6) are genuine confessions of faith and the prototypes of all later confessions of the church. Of their origin we are ignorant. We may be grateful that we are given an account of the origin of the Messiah-confession, "You are the Christ." But the New Testament gives us nothing certain about the origin of "Jesus is Lord." The early Aramaic-speaking church already called upon Jesus in prayer as "Lord." That is proved by the old prayer formula *marana tha*, "Our Lord, come!" (1 Cor. 16:22; cf. Rev. 22:20). Despite Bultmann this can only be addressed to Jesus. After the Lord's Prayer it is the oldest piece of the Christian liturgy. We cannot say, however, whether the confession of faith "Jesus is Lord" was already used in Aramaic. We find it in Greek in the churches that were served by Paul. Here it

appears as a confession of faith at Baptism (as can be deduced from Rom. 10:9 and Col. 2:6) and is in use in the divine service (1 Cor. 12:3).

It is in the Greek *Kyrios Jesus* ("Jesus is Lord") that this confession attains its full resonance. Everything that is in the word *Kyrios* ("Lord") is here said of Jesus. *Kyrios* is "the name which is above every name" [Phil. 2:9], the holy name of God used in the Greek Bible.

(The concepts *Theos* ["God"] and *Kyrios*, ["Lord"] belong together, as we see in John 20:28, "My Lord and my God," and in 1 Cor. 8:5-6, "many gods and many lords," and then "one God" and "one Lord." We see them also together in the later title of the emperor *dominus et deus* ["lord and god"]. This meaning of *Kyrios* derives from the East, where what was said of the ruler was said of the deity and vice versa.)

*Kyrioi* ("lords") is what the cultic deities of the Oriental-Hellenistic mystery religions were called. *Kyrios* is what the Roman emperor was called in the emperor cult. In the language of the Hellenistic Orient *kyrios* is applied to a deity in its revelation, the revealed god. When the early church confesses its faith that Jesus Christ is *kyrios*, it is confessing its faith in His true deity. It thereby says no less of Him than does the Nicene Creed: "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God."

With the confession that Jesus is *kyrios* the Christian faith is marked off from all surrounding religions. The confession that Jesus is the Christ just may have been possible among the Jews. At least the early church in Palestine thought so, though not the rulers of the Jews (John 9:22). But the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord brought the irreparable separation of synagogue and church. What was seen on the one hand as deification of a creature and blasphemy against the one and only God was seen on the other as no infringement at all of the fact that there is but one God. Paul puts the latter beyond doubt in 1 Cor. 8:6. To religious Hellenism the statement that a historical man of the recent past is *kyrios*, and only He, appeared to be utter foolishness and absurdity. To the Roman imperium the confession of Jesus as Lord, *Kyrios Jesus*, was a repudiation of *Kyrios Kaisar* ("Caesar is lord"), and so high treason.

Such are the depths and dimensions of the original confession of the church that Jesus is Lord. With it the early church gave its answer to the revelation which had happened in the historical human being Jesus of Nazareth. Thereby it marked itself off from all the religions of the world. In order to probe this confession further, and the faith in Jesus Christ as true God that is bound up in it, we shall

explore two of the things which are foundational for this confession: the *resurrection* and the *ascension* of Jesus Christ. It is understood that we are thereby dealing with only a small segment in the area of Christology.

## 2. The Risen One

“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom. 10:9). This word of Paul inseparably links the confession that Jesus is Lord with faith in His resurrection. There can therefore be no proper understanding of this confession that Jesus is Lord without the proper understanding of His resurrection. Let us then try to answer the question: What does the New Testament mean by the message of Jesus’ resurrection?

From the very beginning the message of Jesus’ resurrection or, otherwise put, that “God raised Him from the dead,” is at the heart of the apostolic proclamation. But, as the New Testament shows, during the time of the apostles there was no attempt to picture the event of the resurrection; the first such attempt appears in the apocryphal Gospel of Peter. Beside the proclamation of the resurrection the New Testament has only reports of facts that should encourage faith in the resurrection that has happened. Such facts are the empty grave and the appearances of the Risen One.

The oldest account of Easter that we have is a formulary that summarizes the proclamation about Christ which Paul cites in 1 Cor. 15:1 ff. as a tradition which he has received and has handed on. The death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus are stated. There is no mention of the grave having been found empty. For bolstering faith in the accomplished resurrection only the fact is cited that the Risen One was seen by a number of witnesses. From this we may conclude that the Easter faith had its foundation in the appearances of the Lord and that the empty grave at the most played a secondary role in the earliest apostolic proclamation.

The account of the empty grave is first found in Mark. In the original text of this gospel there is no report of an appearance of the Risen One, but an appearance is pointed to which will take place for the disciples in Galilee. Peter is named especially, and in Paul he is the one listed first. Only later were a number of appearances attached to the end of Mark. The other evangelists took over what Mark tells of the empty grave, and combined this with reports of the

appearances of the Risen One in Galilee (Matthew, Luke, and John), and in Jerusalem (Luke and John). The pressures operative in retelling, in persuading, and in defending the Easter message may already be at work here.

It is no accident that Mark's account of the empty grave became the actual Easter Gospel of the early church. It is the form of the Easter message that comes home most readily to everyday people. For such people in the early Palestinian church the empty grave was a way of portraying the resurrection that made the fact of Easter more comprehensible. As they had to defend the objective truth of their Easter faith over against their Jewish compatriots, they were not slow in using the empty grave as a proof that the resurrection had happened. As the generation that still remembered the compelling force of the Easter experiences grew old and died, the empty grave all the more had to become the foundation for the resurrection message throughout the church.

The appearances of the risen Jesus were known from the first, and they always had a place in that proclamation, as we see from our gospels. But the gospels show an unmistakable tendency to connect these appearances more and more with Jesus' grave. This can also be seen in their tendency to localize in Jerusalem the decisive events of the Easter days. We may call this the Jerusalem tradition. What it traces is indeed very early and reliable, and yet it is clear from the gospels that there is another tradition which tells of decisive appearances of the Risen One—at least the basic Easter experience of Peter—far from Jesus' grave, in Galilee. The gospels tell us what happened in Galilee, and yet what happened in and around Jerusalem has greater prominence. This may be due to the gathering of the believers in Jerusalem. Thus we hear no more of the appearance to Peter, although it was an appearance of the highest importance for the Easter faith of the early church.

In this older tradition the empty grave cannot have played a role. This is confirmed by the Pauline accounts. They represent a stage of the Christian proclamation when the message of Easter did not deal with the empty grave, nor with the physics of the Lord's body, but with the overwhelming experiences that were described as seeing the resurrected Christ.

With the fact of these experiences every investigation of the resurrection must begin. According to the New Testament they are the source of the Resurrection faith. When the critical historian has done all his sorting of the accounts, there remains this fact that

cannot be shaken: Among the first Christians these were experiences that were described as a seeing of the risen Christ. These occurred at various places (Galilee, in and near Jerusalem, near Damascus), within a defined time but at various specific times (from the Easter appearance to Peter until the appearance to Paul), and to various persons and groups of persons (the Eleven, the Emmaus disciples, the Five Hundred). The people who had these experiences became convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead.

What are we to make of these experiences? Not much is gained if they are called "visions" and then classified within that psychological category, although the New Testament itself might give an indication in this direction (in Acts 26:19 Paul's Damascus experience is called an *optasia*, "vision"). With this we may have said something about their form but not their content.

We may make more progress with the help of Rudolf Otto's fine study in which he compares what happened to the disciples at Easter with what happened to the prophets, particularly with the call visions of prophetic religion. They certainly do have something in common. But even the experiences of prophetic religion are not explained by considering them visions from the psychological point of view. For what is essential in them is exactly that in which they differ from everything else that is called "vision" in the history of religions. We shall not get far in attempting to understand the experience of the prophets unless we recognize at the outset that there are true prophets and false prophets, authentic prophets and inauthentic prophets. The tools of psychology are no help at all for making this distinction. The psychologist of religion cannot tell why the experiences of Jeremiah are true prophecy while those of the "lying prophets" are not.

Nor is this distinction something that has been inserted later on from a dogmatic point of view. Demarcation against false prophecy belongs to the nature of all prophecy, as it sets itself off over against the spirituality of the ecstatic religions. The prophets are afraid they themselves may fall into error. Hence Amos' refusal of the title *nabi* ("prophet"). Therefore the prophets of Israel struggle against "the lying prophets," as also does Zarathustra. Therefore Mohammed early in his career feared that he might be a *kahin*.

How is the line to be drawn between true and false prophecy, between an actual call and an imagined one, between authentic revelation and the manifestations of a pneumatic enthusiasm, between the pure and the impure proclamation of the received "word"?

That is the theological problem of prophecy, to which already a pertinent review of the history of religions leads us. Even a genuine prophet can cease to be an instrument and messenger of God. The history of religions tells of a host of visionary and similar experiences. That among these there should be a special category of genuine prophetic experiences in which human beings are called to an office, to be proclaimers of God's Word—that is the riddle of prophecy.

If we test the nature of the Easter experiences by comparing them with the category of prophecy, we immediately see the contrast. What the prophets experienced is something that happened ever and again through the centuries. The Easter experience was confined to a single generation. What happens to a prophet happens to an individual. This may be the case with Easter, but it can also be the experience of a group (the two from Emmaus, the Eleven, the Five Hundred).

On the other hand, both types of experience have this in common, that they involve a call and mission. An office is conferred, in the one case that of a prophet, in the other that of an apostle. Not everyone who had the Easter experience became an apostle; this experience can also make a group of people into a church. No one, however, could be an apostle, according to the strict sense of the word, who was not "a witness to His resurrection" (Acts 1:22), although the New Testament does have a broader use of the term than this strictly theological usage of an apostle as a bearer of revelation. The more general usage includes itinerant preachers. According to 1 Cor. 15:7 Jesus appeared "to all the apostles." The apostolate and the Easter experience are inseparable, no less close than prophecy and the prophetic experience.

For understanding the Easter experience it is important to see it as an apostolic experience. The office of apostle, confined to a single generation of history, is something quite new when contrasted with prophecy. It is very significant that after the coming of Christ prophecy, while it does not disappear, becomes something quite different. In Christendom the office of prophet is an office within the church, certainly subordinate to the apostolate. "Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" is said of the church in Eph. 2:20. The apostles come first.

The exclusion of prophecy as an independent factor of equal rank with the apostles and their witness did not take place without a struggle. But Montanism showed how necessary this exclusion was, this struggle between "Spirit and office," as it is usually called. For

Montanus laid claim to what was promised of the Paraclete in John, as did later also Mani and Mohammed.

The recognition that the revelation in Christ is not something inconclusive or relative stands and falls with the primacy of the apostolate over prophecy. Wherever prophecy asserts its independence and power, it is a threat to the finality of the revelation that happened once in history, of which the apostolic office bears witness. Christ's church is an apostolic, not a prophetic church. This does not mean, as some today suppose, a quenching of the Spirit, a constriction of religion within an ossified institution. Rather it expresses the conviction that revelation has taken place, that the word of God is no longer only given and assigned to a human being here and there, but that the Word has become flesh.

The apostolate was given once in a single generation. The office of an apostle goes along with the office of a prophet, and yet it is something quite different. The apostolic office, which founded the church, has the primacy over the prophetic office, which served to prepare for the church. The apostolic experience must therefore be something quite different from the prophetic experience, something unique, something for which there is no parallel in history. What happened for the apostles was the completion of the revelation that occurred in Christ, the experience of a happening, of a fact by which it is substantiated that Jesus Christ is Lord. This fact is stated with "The Lord is risen."

If this is so, then we must set aside the common misunderstanding of Easter which asserts that the disciples had only visions of Christ which prompted them to an assurance that their Master was living on, which prompted them to draw the conclusion that He was risen. Visions of Christ, regardless of how they are to be evaluated, have not been confined to those days. How are the Easter experiences different from other "visions and revelations of the Lord" (2 Cor. 12:1), of which also Paul knows?

The disciples could have arrived at the assurance that Jesus was somehow living on without those Easter days when something happened that changed their whole lives. When a loved and honored master is taken from his circle, it seems almost natural to feel that he somehow lives on after death. We have only to recall the significance of the death of Socrates for what people in the European tradition have thought about immortality. No, what happened with the disciples must surely have had a different content. Not "Jesus lives" but "Jesus is risen" is the real Easter message of the New Testament.

Something happened, God did something, something never heard of, something unique. This unheard-of event, this fact that can only be designated with the word "resurrection," is not some conclusion drawn from the Easter experience, something deduced, not even the assurance that Jesus lives on. However true that may be, it is not the essential point. The essential content and heart of Easter is that "Jesus is risen."

But what is meant by "resurrection"? What does it convey in the New Testament? What did Jesus mean when He spoke of the resurrection of the dead (and perhaps also of the resurrection of the Son of Man)? We will find the answer by considering where it was that the New Testament message of the resurrection was opposed and why. We know of this happening in Athens and in Corinth when Paul's mission brought him there. Why did they mock the resurrection in Athens? Why did some in the church at Corinth deny the resurrection of the dead? For one thing, any thought that the body might live again was repugnant to the Greek doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Such a notion was too utterly unphilosophical, too utterly not of the soul but of matter and the body. In 1 Cor. 15 Paul goes to no end of effort to defend the doctrine of the resurrection against such Greek objections. He shows its high spirituality, over against the misunderstanding that it is a materialistic idea. We modern people, for whose view of the world the idea of resurrection is also strange, may therefore be grateful that Paul was here forced to develop more fully what was for him a self-evident concept.

It would, however, be a mistake to suppose that what repelled the Greeks was only the question of matter and the body. Recall the scene in Athens that is so vividly pictured for us in Acts 17:31-32. Why did the interruption come when Paul said that God had raised Jesus from the dead? Was the thought of rising again really so intolerable to the Greeks? Why was the dying and rising again of Attis and Osiris not regarded as intolerable in the Greek world? Why did the Greeks of Paul's day accept without trouble the myths and cults of dying and rising deities and combine them with their belief in immortality, just as the older Greeks had done with the Dionysius religion?

No, it was not the idea of resurrection that was intolerable, but the message of a resurrection that was no myth. What repelled them was to hear of a resurrection that had happened at a particular time, an event that was above history and yet reached into history. We must be clear about what it means that when Christ was proclaimed this was a historical message. Although some mythological terms may

have been drawn into use, what was spoken of was the historical fact of a particular man who lived at a particular time in a particular place and whose death was a verifiable historical fact. That this man should be *the* revelation, this was intolerable to the Greeks, just as it is for moderns. When and where did the death of Osiris take place? The question has no sense. A myth tells of things that did not happen in history. A myth tells, to use the modern phrases, of necessary truths of reason, not of chance facts of history. We must never forget that ancient heathen religion had no thought of historical revelation. The death and resurrection of Jesus as a myth, as a parable of an eternal truth, this the Greeks could have accepted quite cheerfully—but not as a one-time historical event.

This leads us to a further point. The historical message of faith in Christ is at the same time an eschatological message dealing with the end of history. The resurrection of Jesus is bound up with the resurrection of the dead. Paul tells of this unmistakably in 1 Cor. 15 and alludes to it when he preaches on the Areopagus (Acts 17:31). At this point a chasm opens between the two views of the world, between the religious worlds of the Christians and of the Greeks. And at this point we learn to understand the nature of the resurrection.

The doctrine of the resurrection is not yet there when people expect that those who have died may return from the grave or their bodies come alive again. There is plenty of this in many primitive religions. Resurrection of the dead in its real sense is known only where it is seen as the culminating event of history. This is the case in the prophetic religions: Outside of Christianity we find it among the Parsees, in Judaism, and in Islam. Characteristic of this apocalyptic hope of resurrection is that it is not only for the individual but for all people. Resurrection is a cosmic event. It comes at the end of the world and means the beginning of a new creation. Death is thereby judged differently than among the Greeks. It is viewed not only as the end of an individual human life but also as a power that dominates the world. According to the doctrine of the resurrection, death is not simply the passing of the soul from one form of existence to another, as in India and among the Greeks (although it is that too), but death is the abhorrent disintegration of a human being. This way of looking at things does not make dying easy, but hard. The aim of the philosophical doctrine of immortality is to make dying easy, but the doctrine of the resurrection takes death with complete seriousness. The natural man's dread of death is not chased away by the consolations of philosophy.

In all this we may observe a difference in the way the body is valued. For the Greeks the soul is imprisoned, entombed, by the body. For the people of the New Testament the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, a creation of God, and therefore His possession. The whole Biblical concept must have seemed childish and primitive to the Greeks, as it does to moderns. But that does not yet settle the matter. May not the primitive view of death, of dying, and of the body be the right one? This view is charged with being materialistic. But we may ask whether the materialistic view is not the one which considers the body as merely matter. Paul answers the charge quite clearly. Insofar as the body is merely matter it cannot inherit the kingdom of God. But it is not merely matter, not merely *sarx* (flesh), but something more. It is not higher or lower than the *psyche* (soul). Body and soul can belong to God or the devil. The life of the soul is in bondage to sin just as much as is the life of the body. The antithesis of godly and ungodly is not identical with the antithesis of soul and body. Above both soul and body is the Holy Spirit (*pneuma hagion*), the Spirit of God, who is to be carefully distinguished from the natural spirit (*pneuma*) of man, the "ground of the soul," as it has been called.

The resurrection is the calling of the whole man, soul and body, out of death into life in the Spirit, just as he once was called to existence in the flesh in this transitory world. The resurrection is a new creation. (The Jewish and Persian apologists therefore liked to indicate the possibility of the resurrection by pointing to the miracle of creation.) As the creation of man cannot be separated from the creation of the world, or his existence from the existence of the world, so also the new creation of man is inconceivable without the new creation of the world, a world of which we are told: "Death shall be no more" (Rev. 21:4). This world, a new heaven and a new earth, corresponds to the human beings on whom the curse of having to die no longer remains.

These were more or less the thoughts which the people of the New Testament connected with the concept of the resurrection. From here we return to the question of Jesus' resurrection. It can be understood only when viewed in connection with the resurrection of the dead. Time and again Paul speaks of these as inseparable. As the Risen One, Jesus Christ is "the firstborn among many brethren" [Rom. 8:29]. "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised" [1 Cor. 15:13]. If He did not rise, then the dead also do not rise. If this connection is so close, then it becomes clear what the resurrec-

tion of Christ means: It is *the turning of old world to new world, the end of the former age and the beginning of the new, the dawn of the new world of eternity and of the Spirit*. The resurrection of Christ can be understood only as the event which fulfills history, as future that has become present. *It begins God's new creation. It ushers in the universal resurrection of the dead*. Here we glimpse the power of those Easter experiences by which the disciples became convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead. What they experienced was the fulfillment of all prophetic and apocalyptic expectations. What are the experiences of the prophets compared with these experiences? Did a prophet ever experience what the apostles and the first church then experienced?

If the resurrection of Jesus is to be understood this way, then we see why it is not pictured in the New Testament, why it cannot be described. It is incomprehensible and inexpressible, like the creation of the world and the incarnation of the Son. "The great deeds of God" no man can see. Only in their effects do they in some way reach into our world, into our reality. Only God through His Spirit can make us human beings sure of them. Since this is so, we are unable to describe the resurrection in more detail. The impossibility of giving it expression on the one hand and the need to bear witness of it on the other create the tension we find in the different accounts of the New Testament. We cannot get a consistent picture of what is said of our Lord's risen body by Paul and in the Gospels. Our knowledge cannot encompass the empty grave or the risen body of Jesus. We cannot relive what the disciples lived through at Easter.

Even if we knew all this, we still would know nothing about the resurrection itself. The heart of Easter is not in those "miracles." This is a grievous misunderstanding, although a very old and understandable one. *The miracle of Easter is not the fact of the empty grave or our Lord's body as seen by Thomas but, lying behind all that, the act of the living God, who raised Jesus from the dead*. In those "Easter facts" the final event of history somehow reaches into history. How far? About this there are, and probably always will be, differences of opinion. Not these "facts" but the event lying behind them, the act of God, is what the first church referred to when it went out into the world with the message: "The Lord is risen!"

### **3. The Exalted One**

Only on the basis of the resurrection message can the confession be understood that Jesus is Lord. Yet it is profoundly significant that

the New Testament separates the exaltation of Christ from His resurrection. As the Risen One, Christ would only have been the firstfruits of the dead (1 Cor. 15:20, 23), “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). His resurrection would then be only the beginning of the resurrection of all the dead. There would basically be no difference between His resurrection and ours. While His being Lord would be unthinkable without the resurrection, yet it does not have its sole foundation there. Hence the New Testament makes the logical distinction between the resurrection and the exaltation. It is only a logical distinction insofar as both are actually inseparably connected. The ascension account in Acts 1 is not to be understood as minimizing this fact. The Risen One is the Exalted One. In raising Him from the dead God also exalted Him and “made Him both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:24, 32 f., 36; 5:31).

The meaning of the exaltation was very early and clearly expressed with the words of Ps. 110:1: “The Lord says to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’” These words appear already at Mark 12:35 ff., and the other two synoptic gospels also have them in a controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees (Matt. 22:41 ff.; Luke 20:41 ff.). Even those who regard these words as inauthentic must yet agree that they go back to the earliest days of the Christian community, reflecting as they do the early sundering of church and synagogue. The words are also quoted in Acts (2:34 f.), in Paul (1 Cor. 15:25), and in Hebrews (1:13). The weight they carried is evidenced by their inclusion in the creed: He “sits at the right hand of God, the Father Almighty.” The picture of sitting at the right hand of God, combined with the concept of the Son of Man according to Daniel, is already found in Jesus’ answer to the high priest’s question as to whether He was the Messiah: “I am; and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62).

From all this we see that even the earliest faith in Jesus as the Messiah is linked with the thought of His exaltation. The Crucified One has ascended to heaven. As Son of Man and Judge of the world He shares in God’s almighty power. Here it becomes clear how closely the idea of Messiah is related to that of Lord (*Kyrios*). If the crucified Jesus was seen to be the coming Messiah/Son of Man, then one had to think of Him as ascended to heaven. And as soon as this exaltation was thought of according to Psalm 110, the title “Lord” was given to Jesus. We do not know whether this psalm prompted the description of Jesus as Lord, but it surely facilitated it. What then is meant by the

exaltation is clear. It means that Christ since His resurrection shares in the eternity, omnipresence, and omnipotence of God.

### a. The Eternity of Christ

As the Exalted One, Jesus Christ shares in the eternity of God. This is expressed most clearly in the New Testament when certain formal religious phrases used to describe God's eternity are transferred to Him: He is the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the one "who is and who was and who is to come"; "the same yesterday and today and forever." These formulas (cf. Rev. 1:4, 8; Heb. 13:8) have their home in the religious language of the Hellenistic Orient. Some are very old. "I am the First and the Last" goes back to Is. 41:4.

To get at what is meant by eternity we need briefly to consider the Biblical usage. The Biblical idea of eternity was developed in contrast to that of ancient Oriental astrology. In the latter view eternity is equal to the infinite sum of all aeons. The eternity that is ascribed to the gods of the Hellenistic East is abstracted from observation of the movement of the stars with their immeasurable periods of time. The world is eternal. If there is talk of a beginning and an end, it is never an absolute beginning and an absolute end. As the heavenly bodies at great intervals always return to where they were before, so existence repeats itself over great periods of time. From this comes the crowning notion of this view of the world, the idea of eternal return. Eternity here is the infinite sum of all aeons; eternity is unending time. Although traces of this may be found in some terms found in Biblical usage, notably in Ecclesiastes, what the Bible as a whole says about eternity is something quite different. Biblical religion makes a clear distinction between the world's time and God's eternity.

This way of putting it is found also in Persian religion and may have come from there. See the Persian distinction between *Zarvan akarana* and *Zarvan daregho-chvadata*. Oriental speculation may lie behind Plato's distinction between timeless, divine eternity and earthly time (*Timaeus*, 37, D). Aristotle again gives up the Platonic doctrine of eternity and identifies eternity with the unending time of the world.

The Bible's view of eternity excludes the open or hidden pantheism inherent in the astrological view of time and eternity sketched

above. Since God and the world are not identical, God's eternity is something other than the world's time. *The world's time, its aeon, is not infinite. It is bounded by its creation and its end.* There is an absolute beginning and an absolute end. God's eternity reaches beyond the world's time: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting Thou art God" (Ps. 90:2). Cf. Ps. 102:25 ff.: "Of old Thou didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Thy hands. They will perish, but Thou dost endure . . . Thou art the same, and Thy years have no end." It is very significant that in Heb. 1:10 ff. these words are referred to Christ.

God is the First and the Last. One sees how the ideas of creation and of the end are connected with the strict monotheism which is opposed to all open and hidden pantheism. All these thoughts, which belong to the great prophetic religions, appear at the same time in history. (They are fully developed in the second part of Isaiah.) According to this conception the distinction between the world's time and God's eternity, between aeon in the sense of the world's time and aeon in the light of eternity, is not merely a quantitative one. They are not related to one another like finiteness and infinity. Rather, the distinction is qualitative. The distinctions between *sarx* (flesh) and *pneuma* (spirit), between death and life, between that which passes away and that which does not, between world and God are inherent in the distinction between time and eternity. They are incommensurable. As Emil Brunner says, "Eternity is just as little the continuation of time as it is that which precedes time. Eternity and time are incommensurable. Our temporality is a curved fragment of eternity" (*The Mediator*, p. 572). Eternity is not unending time but the opposite of time; it abolishes time. Thus the Slavonic Book of Enoch can say: "When the creation, which the Lord created, shall end, and every man shall go to the Lord's great judgment, then the seasons shall perish, and thence forward there will be no more years, nor months, nor days, and there will be no more hours thence forward, nor will they be reckoned, but there shall begin one endless age" (2 Enoch 65:6-8. Charles, *Pseudepigrapha*, p. 467).

What the New Testament says of Christ's eternity is to be understood in the light of this Biblical concept. Because Jesus Christ as the exalted Lord shares in God's eternity, therefore past, present, and future, the measures and boundaries of earthly time, no longer exist for Him. What is said of the eternal God is true also of Him: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever Thou hadst formed the

earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting Thou art God" [Ps. 90:2].

Theologians have often marveled at how early the thought of Christ's preexistence, that He existed "before all worlds," was expressed. It has been regarded as a philosophical speculation that is actually alien to the Christology of the New Testament. But the preexistence of Christ of which the New Testament speaks has in fact nothing to do with philosophy. It would be better not to use the term "preexistence," which derives from philosophy, and to substitute something like "eternal or supratemporal existence." From the standpoint of our thinking and our earthly, time-bound existence, the eternal is that which was before time as well as that which will be after time. This, however, is only an illustration and not a definition of the eternal. For what we think and say we have only temporal terms which have altogether been derived from our earthly, time-bound existence. Consider only the tenses of verbs, without which we cannot speak a sentence.

Also the language of the Bible has no other resources than these, and so must speak of the eternal in terms derived from time. So it speaks of the eternal as of that which was "from the beginning," "at the first," and "before the world was." God and Christ, wisdom (Prov. 8:22 f.), and God's love (Ps. 25:6) are "at the beginning of His work," "before the beginning of the earth," and "from of old." "Before the foundation of the world" the Father loved the Son (John 17:24). "Before the foundation of the world" God chose us (Eph. 1:4). The "before" in these statements contains more than merely the temporal distinction between before and after. It expresses the distinction between God's eternity and the world's time that is inexpressible by means of human language.

The eternity of Christ, His being beyond the limits of time, is the presupposition for the way the New Testament sees Christ already in "pre-Christian" history, a way of looking at things that is hard for us historically oriented modern people to grasp. Here we are not thinking so much of how the history of Israel, indeed the whole Old Testament, is allegorically related to Christ. (By the way, these allegories as we find them in Paul and Hebrews are not creative imagination at play, but rather a way of disclosing the very heart of this history.) Rather, we are thinking of the fact that what is said of the Lord (*Kyrios*) in the Old Testament is simply referred to Jesus Christ. As words of the Lord they are set beside the sayings of the historical Jesus and beside the words of the Exalted One as they are heard in the

Spirit by the seer of Revelation and by Paul. Similarly such events as the death and resurrection of Jesus are "eternalized" in a peculiar way. It is not that Jesus was the Crucified One, then became the Risen One, and now is the Exalted One. Rather, as the Exalted One is the Risen One, so He is also the Crucified One. His death is not something that belongs only to history, although it is certainly a historical event. As the Crucified One He is present among us.

We have finally resolved the apparent contradiction that we are waiting for the coming of the Lord and also know of His presence. It is simply not adequate to explain this as an addition of Hellenistic mystery religion to Palestinian eschatology. The apparent contradiction between the Coming One and the Present One has been implied from the beginning by confessing Him as Lord. The *Maranatha*, the prayer to the coming Christ, shows this, for this prayer presupposes that He to whom it is directed is already present, though unseen, in the midst of His congregation. Also here the distinction between before and after is lifted, and present and future have become one. The exalted Christ, He who shares in the eternity of God, stands above the world's time. His eternal being goes beyond the limits and measurements of earthly time.

The extraordinary difficulty these ideas create for us modern people lies in the great question: "How can we think both of the eternal being of the exalted Lord and of the temporal appearance of Jesus Christ?" The theological effort to think this through confronts a double danger. Either the eternal Christ is lost for the sake of the historical Jesus, or the reverse. Everything depends on the recognition that in Jesus Christ time and eternity become one, that eternity enters time, that God's revelation takes place in the world, that God became man. This is the miracle of God's revelation in Christ: The finite is capable of receiving the infinite, time is capable of receiving eternity, this age is capable of receiving the age to come (*finitum capax infiniti, tempus capax aeternitatis, saeculum hoc capax futuri saeculi*).

If this assumption is not admitted, then the revelation of which the Bible tells has not happened. For this revelation is bound up with things that happened in time: with the historical figures of the prophets, with the historical fate of the people of Israel and of the ancient world in general, with the Jesus of history who suffered "under Pontius Pilate" and died "outside the gate" of Jerusalem (Heb. 13:12), with the history of the apostles. The revelation has a temporal side that no speculation may set aside.