



# Continuity with Christ

Jaroslav Pelikan

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**T**HE ENTIRE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, with all its institutions and doctrines, is involved today in a deep crisis of continuity. Ideas and practices cherished for many centuries are being challenged or discarded, but more far-reaching and more paralyzing than any such individual challenge is the numbing sense that the very continuance of the Christian faith may itself be in jeopardy. As a historian of Christian doctrine, I am, of course, concerned professionally as well as personally with the nature of continuity in the church, and hence with the crisis of continuity today.

The story of the confrontation between our Lord and Peter at Caesarea Philippi in the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew sets forth several answers to the crisis of continuity, answers that have also figured prominently in the search for continuity throughout Christian history. There is, first of all, the continuity of doctrine in the confessional tradition: "Now when Jesus came in the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do men say that the Son of man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'"

In one form or another this confession has been declared to the church and to the world by Christian believers in every generation. Each of the terms in it has been the subject of careful philological analysis and philosophical explanation, each of them has found its way into some part of the creedal formulas of the church. Whatever else it may mean to be a Christian, it ought to mean some reaffirmation of this confession. For Luther, therefore, this was the central point of this story. Peter speaks here for the entire orthodox Christian community, identifying the Jesus of life, death, and resurrection as the Chosen One of God and as the Son of God. It is some distance, but not an unbridgeable distance, from Caesarea Philippi to the Councils of Nicaea and of Chalcedon; and in the repeated affirmation of the confession

## THE CRESSET

of Peter, together with that of the 318 fathers of Nicaea, much of orthodox Christianity has found the guarantee of what Eusebius, the first church historian, called “the successions of the holy apostles.”

Yet Eusebius’s very use of that phrase calls to mind another guarantee of continuity set forth in this text, and the one that is the most celebrated: “And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell [and powers of death] shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’ Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.”

Inscribed in unforgettably glorious letters around the dome of St. Peter’s, chanted by obsequious bishops, and expounded in endless detail by papal theologians, the words of Christ to Peter form the charter for a theology of continuity that finds it in the succession of the church’s institutional structures from the apostles to the present. Whether this succession be thought of episcopally or papally or even congregationally, it does mean that we are to look to the institutions of the church for the assurance that there will always be a Christianity and that the Christianity we now have is indeed one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. The Papacy is, after all, the oldest monarchy whose persistence can be documented historically; the church is the oldest continuing cultural force in the Western world; and the gates of hell, from Nero to Stalin, have failed to destroy its continuity. It is a source of reassurance just to know that it is still there.

Or is it? The dome of St. Peter’s, big as it is, does not seem to have had room for the whole story of Caesarea Philippi. After the confession of Peter and the promise of Christ comes the portentous paragraph: “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid, Lord!’ This shall never happen to you. But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me; for you are not on the side of God, but of men.’”

“On *this* rock I will build *my* church”? Some church! Some rock! The

## THE CRESSET

orthodox creed just affirmed has suddenly become a sign of apostasy and of discontinuity. For Peter says that Christ is *Kyrios* and says “God forbid” to the message of the cross. Not everyone who calls him “Lord, Lord” will enter into the kingdom. The affirmation of who he is, which is the central content of the creed, becomes a hindrance unless it includes the affirmation of what he came to do: “go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Thus it has been that for entire ages of the history of the church her confession, orthodox enough in its formulas, has been a “hindrance” to Christ and to continuity with him, being not on the side of God but of men, so that the bold confessor of Christ becomes Antichrist.

But the continuity that is rooted in the structures of the-church is no greater a source of reassurance. Leaving out all the historical debates since the promulgation of papal infallibility in 1870, the history of the institutional church of every denomination is anything but an unbroken succession of faithfulness to Christ and to his gospel. It is a tragic series of moral and religious defeats, of capitulation to the world without and to the tempter within. More often than any of us would like to acknowledge, the rock on which Christ has been obliged to build his church has been the Peter of “God forbid, Lord!” rather than the Peter of “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” If this is to be the church’s continuity with Christ, we had better fasten our safety belts.

But the story does not end there. Peter’s confession of the doctrine of the person of Christ is followed by Peter’s heresy on the doctrine of the work of Christ, but both of these are followed in turn by the charter of continuity with Christ: “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?’”

This summons to self-denial and invitation to discipleship are the abiding element amid what the Book of Common Prayer calls “the changes and chances of this present life.” Even those church fathers and modern theologians whose speculations constituted a threat to the confession of the orthodox faith managed somehow to hear the summons and to

## THE CRESSET

heed the invitation. Origen, the greatest genius of the ancient church, might have had difficulty being recognized as orthodox even by the standards of American Protestantism, but his life and spirituality were consecrated to taking up the cross and following his Lord. Adolf von Harnack, the greatest theological scholar of his time, could not even be ordained; but his persistent question was, “How do I manage to become his disciple?” And that same Harnack saw, in his famous lectures on *What Is Christianity?*, that the constant force in Christian history, across theological conflicts and denominational rivalries, has been the call of Christ to discipleship. It still is.

Yet the greatest danger is to sentimentalize the call to discipleship or to equate its content either with the Boy Scout law or with some particular scheme for social reform. At this moment, here and now, it is not only proper but necessary for Christians, in their discipleship, to develop patterns of personal morality and strategies for social justice; even American Lutheranism has finally discovered this. But the continuity of the faith does not lie there. Finally, when discipleship has been probed to its depths, we must ask not only Harnack’s question, “How do I manage to become his disciple?” but his other question as well: “Is the Divine that has appeared on earth and reunited men with God identical with that Divine which rules heaven and earth, or is it a demigod?” And when we have answered that question in faithfulness to our vocation as disciples, the answer will surely come close to Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi—and, I would, add to the confession of the 318 fathers at Nicaea.

Nor is it enough to let such a confession fly off into the air and then to wait a generation or two so that faith may “happen” again. Faith may indeed be a “happening,” although I have difficulty imagining the German theologians, who say it is, participating in present-day “happenings.” But it can happen only because between the happenings and between the times there is a community that remembers and celebrates and expects, an ecclesiastical structure, if you please, that cannot live up to its foundation but cannot forget its Founder—and cannot let anyone else forget him either. The point of discipleship is not the disciple but the Master; the content of confession is not theology but Christ; the life of the church is not her institutions but her dying and risen Lord. In him is her life—and ours. In him is the continuity of discipleship, of doctrine, and of structure.

## THE CRESSET

And so, as T.S. Eliot reminds us,  
There shall always be the church and the world,  
And the heart of man  
Shivering and fluttering between them, choosing and chosen,  
Valiant, ignoble, dark and full of light,  
Swinging between hell gate and heaven gate.  
And the gates of hell shall not prevail.

