THE EVENT AND STORY

by John Knox

from ON THE MEANING OF CHRIST, p. 84-96.

1 Earlier in this book we considered the elements which, at the least, must be regarded as belonging to the event. These were found to be the man Jesus, his life, death and resurrection, the coming of the Spirit, the creation of the community. None of these elements, we saw, can be omitted. What we mean by "Jesus Christ" is the whole of which these are indispensable parts. But although we had no hesitancy in affirming that the event cannot be less than this whole, we attempted, it will be recalled, no maximum definition. Indeed, we recognized that no absolute maximum, or outer, limits can be set to this or, for that matter, any other event, short of the limits of history itself.

2 But although we cannot draw an absolute line except at the ends of history, we can draw it there. If the reality we are considering is an historical event, by definition anything nonhistorical or "suprahistorical" is excluded from it. This does not mean, of course, that nothing nonhistorical is real; the whole purpose of the event, according to Christian faith, was to provide an historical medium for the revelation of God, who is the ultimate reality above and beyond history as well as within it. But the statement does mean that nothing nonhistorical can be an element in the event itself.

3 Now all of the elements we have proposed as essentially constituting the event are historical elements: the man Jesus, his life, teaching, death and resurrection, the creation of the church by the Spirit are all truly historical. It may be objected by some that the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit are not, properly speaking historical since they did not occur publicly, but only within the experience of a limited group. But such a criterion of the "historical" cannot be sustained. It may well be true that nothing purely private and individual can be called historical--the historical is essentially social--but it does not follow from this that nothing is historical which is not universally witnessed or experienced, even by those who are physically situated to witness or experience it. As a matter of fact, if such a criterion were applied, Jesus himself, as his character is presented in the Gospels, could not be regarded as an historical person since nothing is more certain than that only relatively few of those who had some contact with him recognized this character. The indubitable fact is that the resurrection of Christ, no less than the life of Jesus, did occur, whether everybody witnessed it or not. The church is beyond any doubt historical, and its very existence is a testimony to this occurrence.

4 But as much as this cannot be said of certain other "occurrences" which the New Testament and the creeds have affirmed, such occurrences as

God's sending the pre-existent Christ to earth, the ascension of Christ, and his coming again to judge the quick and the dead. These are all matters of traditional Christian belief and they all stand in some relation to the revelation, but they are matters of belief, not of empirical fact, and therefore do not belong essentially to the event itself. They stand at least one place removed from what is actually given within the experience of the community. They belong not to the event, but to the "story." This distinction between history and story is an important one and deserves more attention than has usually been given to it.

I

5 The story is as familiar to the average Christian as the history. Indeed, the story includes the history and many of us never think of the history except in the context which the story provides. For most purposes it is just as well that this is true, but for purposes of clear theological definition, it is important always to have in mind where the history leaves off and the story takes up.

6 Although the story is told with some variations in the several parts of the New Testament, its general outline is clear and, in view of the general variety of New Testament religion, amazingly consistent. The story is nowhere more succinctly and effectively presented than by Paul in Phillipians 2.6-11:

> "Though he was divine by nature, he did not snatch at equality with God but emptied himself by taking the nature of a servant; born in human guise and appearing in human form, he humbly stooped in his obedience even to die, and to die upon the cross. Therefore God raised him high and conferred on him a Name above all names, so that before the Name of Jesus every knee should bend in heaven, on earth, and underneath the earth, and every tongue confess that 'Jesus Christ is Lord,' to the glory of God the Father." (Moffatt)

7 This is the story in its briefest form. As we read it, we find ourselves filling in from Paul and others: It was out of love for mankind that Christ came into the world and it was out of love of mankind that God sent him or permitted him to come. One is lead to imagine a high colloquy in Heaven between the Father and the Son as to the necessity of this sacrifice. Man, God's creature, made in His own image and for fellowship with Himself, has by his disobedience, by his misuse of God's gift of freedom, become hopelessly embroiled in tragedy and death. He is held body and soul by Sin and is unable to extricate himself. Only God can save him--and how can even God save him unless He comes to where man is and deals directly with man's "enemy?" Therefore, it is decided that Christ shall lay aside his heavenly status and powers and himself become man. Thus it happened that Jesus was born, lived a brief and strenuous life of unfailing devotion to the will of God,

preached the good tidings of the salvation he had come to bring, repulsed all the attacks of man's demonic enemies, carried his obedience so far as to die. But just as he had successfully resisted Sin, so he conquered Death. He arose from the dead and ascended to the Heaven from which he had come. There he now reigns with the Father and thence he shall come at the end of all things to judge the world and to save those who have put their trust in him and who thus through faith have been permitted to enter the community of those who share in his victory over Sin and Death.

8 This summary, susceptible of modification and amplification at many points, is intended only as a reminder of what is as familiar to us as the songs our mothers taught us.

9 Now it is clear that while this story embodies historical elements--the life and death of Jesus, his resurrection, and the continuing life of the community of faith--it also contains elements which are not historical. The pre-existence of Christ, his decision to come into this world as a man, his struggle with demonic powers and his triumph over them, his ascension to heaven, where he reigns at God's right hand awaiting the time of his return--these are parts, not of the event, but of the story. This does not mean that they are not true, but, rather, that if true, they are true in a different way from that in which the account of the earthly life and the affirmation of the resurrection are true. These latter are true in the sense that the earthly life and the resurrection actually took place; but one can hardly use the term "take place" in connection with "occurrences" which transcend time and place altogether. These belong, indeed, not to the sphere of temporal occurrences at all, but to the sphere of ultimate and eternal reality. The story is not an account of the event, but a representation of the meaning of the event. The story is true if that representation is true and adequate; it is false only if the meaning of the event is misrepresented or obscured.

10 It will be recalled perhaps that in our examination of the Gospels we saw the importance of recognizing two facts about them: first, that they bring us the career of Jesus only as transfigured; and, secondly, that they are more, rather than less, true on that account. Now I should like to urge the importance of two somewhat analogous facts about the story: first, that it is a story, and secondly, that the story is true.

II

11 Neglect of the fact that the story is a story betrays us not only into a sterile and irrelevant literalism, but also into an unnecessarily rigid and divisive dogmatism. The criterion of truth for a story is a different criterion from that which applies to history. In the case of an alleged historical incident, the appropriate question is, "Did it happen?" That question may also be asked of the story, but it is not in that case the essential question. One's acceptance of the story as true does not depend upon one's giving an affirmative answer to <u>that</u> question. <u>Hamlet</u> is true or false without the slightest reference to the question whether there was a Prince of Denmark by that name. Or, to take a much better illustration for our purposes, one may accept as true the story of man's

creation and fall, as found in Genesis 1-3, without supposing for a moment that those chapters give us an accurate account of an actual happening. Indeed, it might plausibly be argued that the essential and universal meaning of this ancient story can be grasped most profoundly only when the story is set free from any connection with an actual occurrence in time and space. I have no interest in making such an argument, but I would insist that those who believe the story happened and those who believe it did not--or at any rate, do not believe that it did--should both recognize that their beliefs at this particular point are largely irrelevant. A story is a story. You do not believe it by believing it happened, and you do not deny it by denying that it happened. The important question about the story of man's creation and fall is whether we believe what it is trying to say about God and man and human history. To believe, or deny a story is to believe, or deny its meaning.

12 Now the Christian story is a story, and it is of first importance that we recognize it as such.

13 But equally important is the recognition that this story is true--and true not merely in the sense in which all true stories are true, but also in a very special sense. Stories generally are true in so far as the characters of the play are life-like, their motivations understandable, their actions consistent and credible. In other words, to be true the play must be true to life as life is universally experienced and observed. The more deeply it probes into the play of interests and motives, the more precisely it analyzes the subtler aspects of human relationships, the more profoundly true it is. Still, such a story is true only because it might be true.

14 But the biblical stories of man's creation, fall and redemption would, as regards their really important significance, be false if only such truth could be affirmed of them. These biblical stories, while not being accounts of actual incidents, nevertheless have a connection with actuality which stories of the ordinary kind do not need to have. Thus the creation story is true only if God is <u>in fact</u> the Creator of the heavens and the earth and of man in His image, and the story of the fall is true only if man is <u>in fact</u> alienated from God and thus <u>actually</u> falling short of the glory of his own true nature and destiny. In other words, these biblical stories, which are not self-conscious literary creations but genuine emergents from the experience of a religious community--these stories are attempts to express an understanding of the relation in which God <u>actually</u> stands to human life, and they are true in any really important sense only if that understanding is correct.

15 This distinction is even more clear when we consider the story of Christ. This story is not only connected with actuality in the general sense which can be asserted of the earlier biblical stories, that is, God is <u>in fact</u> our Redeemer from Sin and Death--but it is also related in the most intimate and necessary fashion with a specific historical occurrence. The actual life, death and resurrection of a man form the great center of the story. The meaning which the story as a whole sets forth is the meaning which was actually discovered in the event itself.

16 There is, therefore, a certain inevitability about this story, as was hinted earlier in a reference to the creeds. It cannot be replaced or, in its essential structure, modified. The meaning it expresses cannot be expressed otherwise. Metaphor can always be substituted for metaphor and parable for parable; and although one parable or metaphor may be judged more apt or effective than another, none can be thought of as indispensable. But the story of Christ is absolutely unique and irreplaceable; and this is true not only because it includes the account of an actual historical event as a part of itself but also because it is itself, in all of its essential parts, the creation of the event. The story came into being as a phase of the community's life and is as truly an element in the event as the community itself.

17 The story came into being because the meaning of the whole event, as it was realized and fulfilled within the experience of the community, was too great for merely historical terms to express it. For the event was known to be nothing less than the revealing, reconciling, redeeming, act of God. God had drawn near in Christ. This was not mere metaphor; this had happened. But simply to affirm this is virtually to tell the Christian story; for when that story is stripped to its essential elements, is it not seeking to say just that, and indeed only that? Thus although the event took place on earth, the story, which embodies the meaning of the event, begins in heaven and ends there. Can any one, even now, to whom the event has occurred think of it as beginning or ending anywhere else? Can the heights and depths of the meaning of the event be expressed in any other way? To witness the event is to believe the story.

18 But the point must be made again that although the Christian will inevitably believe the story (and often we do not know how deeply we do believe it), it is important for him always to realize that it is a story he is believing. Otherwise, he is likely to become rigid and harsh in his orthodoxy, and his conception of Christ may become an instrument for dividing the body of Christ.

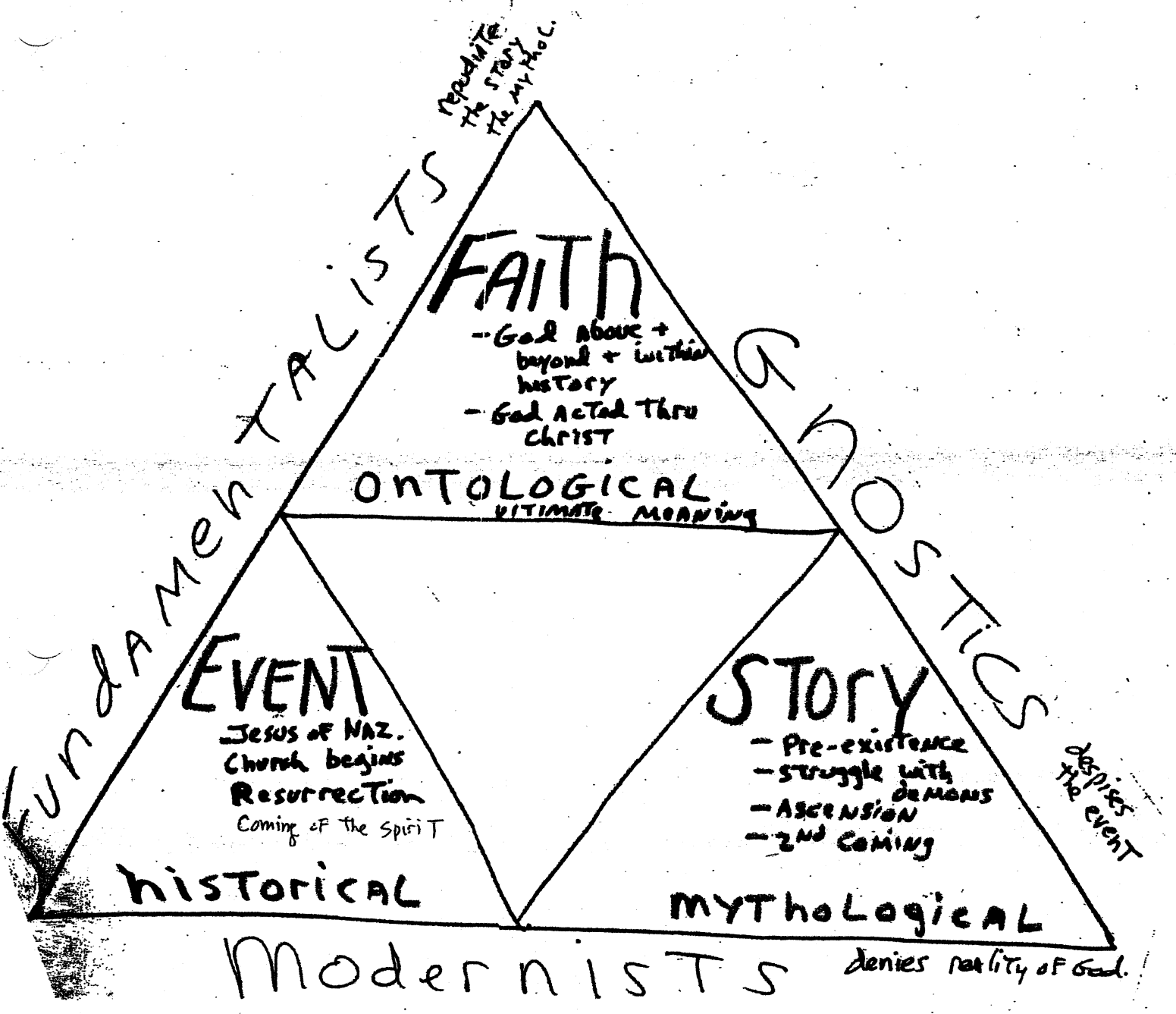
III

19 Perhaps our thinking in this perplexing area may be somewhat clarified if a distinction is made between what may be called the historical, the ontological and the mythological. The Christian confession involves all three elements, and we properly understand the meaning of the term "mythological" in this connection only if the truth and importance of the other terms are recognized. By the "historical" element in Christian faith is meant, of course, the event we have been considering through these chapters, and it must not be forgotten that the resurrection of Christ, the coming of the Spirit, and the creation of the community (different ways, perhaps, of referring to the same reality) are as much a part of it as are the personality and life of Jesus of Nazareth. By "ontological" I mean the God, who stands above and beyond history as well as within it, who has acted in and through the event, making Himself known as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. By "mythological" I refer to the supra-historical elements in the story which came into being within the Christian community as the only possible way to express this transcendent and redemptive meaning of the event.

20 Not one of these leements can be omitted or neglected without the destruction or distortion of the essential meaning of the Christian confession. Gnosticism in all its forms, ancient and modern, affirms the ontological and the mythological, but disparages or despises the historical: The Christian "gospel" becomes a mere story with its universal meaning. Fundamentalism in all its forms, traditionalist and sectarian, affirms the ontological and the historical, but repudiates the category of the mythological, thus manifesting either insensitiveness to the vastness of the mystery of God's being and purpose, or else ignorance of the true nature and the necessary limits of history. It is left for certain types of modernism to recognize elements historical and mythological in the Christian tradition, but to deny the reality of the God of Christian faith, thus robbing both history and the story of ultimate meaning.

21 But if this last position destroys meaning, the other two seriously distort it. All three are false to Christian experience, in which history, faith and story are fused inseparable. As members of the historical community we have witnessed the event, Jesus Christ the Lord, and in faith we have received its meaning as the saving act of God, but when we try to express, or even to grasp that meaning, neither philosophical nor historical terms will serve our purpose, and our thinking and speech, whether we recognize it or not, become inevitably mythological.

22 But the myth, or story, in its own appropriate way, is as true as the history with which it is so intimately connected, and as the faith which it was created to express.


repudiate the story the mythic.
FAITH
- God ABOVE + beyond + within history
- God ACTed Thru CHRIST
ONTOLOGICAL
ULTIMATE MEANING
Fundamentalists
Gnostics
EVENT
Jesus of Naz.
Church begins
Resurrection
Coming of the Spirit
STORY
- Pre-existence
- struggle with demons
- ASCENSION
- 2nd Coming
despises the event
historical
mythological
Modernists
denies reality of God.