

January 22, 1978

President Daniel E. Weiss
The Seminary

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing this letter in response to instructions from the Dean made during his visit with me on January 11, 1978, and reiterated in his letter of January 12, 1978, that in light of my lectures given at the World Missions Conference at Green Lake, August 1977, the following question has to be faced: "Does your interpretation of Christ as one who had a beginning, and who is to be clearly differentiated from Jahweh, fit the interpretation affirmed in our Doctrinal Basis, viz. belief in 'one God eternally existing in three persons--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'?" As suggested by the Dean in his post-script to the letter of January 12, I will focus my attention on this question, giving as honest an answer as humanly possible.

To put the question into context, two items need to be noted. First, in a letter dated June 10, 1977, Bernie Ramm alerted me to the fact that "the fire smolders even at the faculty level" concerning my Christology; consequently, I wanted to address myself to the subject of Christology openly so as to dispell any doubts about the orthodoxy of my faith. Secondly, the Bible-study lectures at Green Lake (which are an honest reflection of my faith) were not designed to be a definitive or technical theological presentation geared for specialists in the field of historical and systematic theology. They were extemporaneous lectures, sermonic in style, delivered without manuscript or even notes, designed by the speaker to be "popular," inspirational and informative of insights gleaned by the speaker from the Scriptures. They were designed to stimulate questions and discussions, and a full hour of discussion followed each lecture. Unfortunately no one taped the discussions.

I have not yet listened to the tapes of the lectures, for I am not interested in defending my words or phrasing. They were a testimony of my faith, and I know what I believe. I believe I honestly subscribed to the Seminary's doctrinal statement, and that my interpretation of the person of Christ is compatible with the statement. Allegations made against me that I am Arian or seemingly Unitarian cannot be sustained by those who honestly understand me or are appreciative of the issues I addressed.

Since the Dean's initial visit on this matter ten days ago I have reviewed the discussion on Arianism in Adolph Harnak, History of Dogma,

Volume 4, and I have surveyed Unitarian christological studies by reading Prescott Wintersteen, Christology in American Unitarianism: An Anthology of Outstanding Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Theologians. If Harnack's analysis of the doctrine of Arius is correct (as succinctly listed under eight points on pages 14-19), I can emphatically state that I share little, if anything, in common with Arius and that I am not Arian in my Christology! If Wintersteen's anthology correctly represents Unitarian thinking on the person of Christ, I can state emphatically, I am not Unitarian in my Christology!

I have always interpreted sentence three in section one of the Seminary's doctrinal statement in light of sentence one in section one of the statement; namely, the affirmation, "We believe in one God eternally existing in three Persons--Father, Son and Holy Spirit," is made in light of the affirmation, "We believe that the Bible, composed of the Old and New Testaments, is inspired of God, and is of supreme and final authority in faith and life." My affirmation of the primacy of Scripture has always made me seem a little unorthodox to those committed to the Bible and tradition. But it is my commitment to the sole authority of Scripture that precludes my conformity to creedal formulations per se. Creeds, in my opinion, must be examined in the light of Scripture, and not Scripture in light of the creeds.

When I read the phrase "eternally existing" in the Seminary's doctrinal statement, I interpret it in light of the biblical words for "eternal." The four words (two Hebrew and two Greek) used in the Bible and commonly translated "eternal" occur five hundred eighty-seven times. I am prepared to demonstrate that the King James translators were correct in translating these words by the terms "everlasting," "always," "perpetual," "for ever and ever," etc. The point is that the biblical meaning of "eternal" addresses itself to the present and future, and when the words (Greek or Hebrew) refer to the past they have the meaning of "antiquity," "old," "old time," not to any idea of the philosophical concept of pre-time existence. I give the biblical definition to the word "eternal" and deliberately avoid speculation about pre-existence beyond what the Bible declares. This biblical definition to the word "eternal" (as over against any philosophical definition) seems to be reinforced by the word "existing" in the Seminary's doctrinal statement. It is of significance to me that the present participle was chosen rather than the past participle. Whether providential or accidental, the doctrinal statement does not address itself explicitly to God's past eternality. It does not state: "one God having existed co-eternally . . .", which would be explicitly in conformity to certain creedal formulations. I recognize some of my colleagues may so interpret the statement, but it is their interpretation. The statement itself permits other interpretations, and in light of the grammar and the biblical definitions of "eternal" my interpretation is a legitimate one.


My view of the Trinity calls for the equation of God the Father with the holy name of God, Jahweh. Such common names as Joab and Abijah carry significant theological information, for the former name means, "Jahweh is Father," and the latter one means "Jahweh is (my) Father." This is not my interpretation of the names, but interpretations given in any Bible dictionary. The identification of Jahweh as "Father" goes back to the Davidic period and is not a novel idea. The classical passages in the Old Testament, cited for equating Jahweh and Father are Isaiah 63:16; 64:7; Malachi 1:6; 2:10; and Deuteronomy 32:6, 11. Other passages from Jeremiah could be added. This is no attempt to "proof-text" my position, but to note that the Old Testament people recognized Jahweh as "Father." I make that same connection, noting that in the New Testament, the holy name Jahweh is not attested but the title "Father" appears to be a surrogate for the name Jahweh.

My attempt to differentiate between Jahweh and Jesus is an attempt to emphasize the Father-Son relationship. As stated, as I recall, on the tape, the attempt was to deal with the syllogism: Jesus is God, Jahweh is God, Jesus is Jahweh. (Not mentioned on the tape and omitted from the lecture lest I come across as anti-Roman, is the syllogism: Mary is the mother of God, Mary is the mother of Jesus, therefore Mary is the mother of Jahweh.) The biblical terms "Father" and "Son" would seem to parallel the names "Jahweh" and "Jesus" and these names and titles are helpful in addressing a theology of incarnation: God the Father has in the incarnation, i. e., in God the Son, come to redeem the world. Father and Son are not interchangeable synonyms; nor are the names Jahweh and Jesus.

My attempt to demonstrate that the Wisdom-of-God motif in Proverbs and elsewhere served as a prolegomena for the doctrine of the Logos was my way to introduce into Christological discussion biblical passages which have been long neglected. Having reviewed the Arian controversy, I appreciate all the more why they were neglected. But Arius did not censor out of my Bible Proverbs 8, Colossians 1:15, or Philipians 2. My primary responsibility is to understand what these texts meant to the original audience to whom they were addressed and to let that meaning shed light on theological possibilities. For example, unless one understands the pre-Christian idea of sophia (wisdom), one cannot appreciate the radical departure in the gospel of the Logos which asserts that "the first born of creation" is in reality the Son of God, the only begotten of the Father, i. e. the Logos is divine, deity himself!

I trust this statement will indicate the basis for my assertion that I concur with the doctrinal statement, that I sign it with integrity, that I believe in the deity of Christ, and that I think I understand what Paul meant when he stated, "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation . . . for in him all the fulness of God God was pleased to dwell.

Cordially,


Thomas F. McDaniel

cc: Dr. Mering