Symbols of Jesus is a systematic theology focusing on what makes Jesus important in Christianity. It studies six families of symbols about Jesus and shows how they are true for some people, not true for others, and not meaningful for a third group. Divine creation is analyzed in metaphysical as well as symbolic terms, and religious symbolism is shown to be wholly compatible with a late-modern scientific world-view.

Robert Cummings Neville, a leading philosophical theologian, here presents and illustrates an elaborate theory of religious symbols according to which God is directly engaged in symbolically shaped thinking and practice. Symbols are not distancing substitutes for God. Theology of symbolic engagement is defended as an alternative to doctrinal or descriptive theology.

This major work re-shapes the way we think about Jesus, and will be of value to students, academics, clergy with theological training, and others grappling with the meaning and importance of religious symbols in our age.

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SYMBOLS OF JESUS

SYMBOLS OF JESUS

A Christology of Symbolic Engagement

ROBERT CUMMINGS NEVILLE

WITH PLATES OF A PAINTING
FROM CAVES TO COSMOS
BY BETH NEVILLE

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For Elizabeth Egan Neville

Partner in marriage, family, life, love,
and the engendering of our lives' works for
vision, wisdom, and culture:
companion for this brief run in eternity

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From Caves to Cosmos, by Beth Neville, 1994, photos by Steve Nelson/FAYPHOTO copyrighted by Beth Neville

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1. The lines of dreams
2. Having arrived, we planted and the earth was fertile
3. God's rainbow's really fire, not light and water
4. Behold the past, a place we knew not when we dwelt there
5. What lines are there in the ether?
6. O what deaths are these, the supernovas?
7. In the end

Preface

The intellectual center of gravity in this Christology is the explication of a number of religious symbols by which Christian traditions have engaged God. Most of these are symbols of Jesus, although symbols of God as Father and as Holy Spirit are also treated. Symbols are concepts of a certain sort, as analyzed below, and they have many different media of representation. Because this is a book, the main medium of representation here is verbal. But religious symbols such as these also have been represented profoundly in visual arts, architecture, dance, music, and crafts of many sorts. Visual representations can at least be reproduced and discussed in this book. The covers, Salvador Dali's *Christ of St. John of the Cross* on the front and Matthias Grünewald's *Resurrection* on the back, encase the entire Christological story in a symbolic sense. Because of their integrated crucifixion/resurrection motif, they express the central Christian point that makes all the other symbols of Jesus religiously interesting. Unlike most crucifixion representations such as Delacroix's (figure 6, p. 83 below), in which the viewer looks up at the hanging Christ, Dali's (following St. John of the Cross's drawing) looks down from a God's-eye view, and the crucifix itself towers over the reaped-clean landscape (see also figure 17, Wagner's painting of the Last Judgment, p. 260 below) with its boat symbolizing Jesus' calling of disciples and the ark of salvation. Is the Crucified One ascending, descending, or hovering in majesty? His surreal cosmic position vibrates with the realistic painting of Jesus modeled by the very human Hollywood actor Russ Saunders, who could be the friend of any viewer and whose humanity is symbolically continuous with the gospel accounts of Jesus. Dali's atonement image compacts symbols as distant as the Cosmic Christ, the descending Divinity, the historical Jesus, and the personal Friend. The Grünewald Rising Christ, by contrast, transfigures all those symbols, overcomes the limitations of stone grave and wicked might, and blasts through to the aboriginal heat of creation. The Christ

breaking the gates of hell in the Chora fresco (figure 8, p. 100 below) has the same transfigured energy. All these symbols of Jesus make sense only in connection with the symbols of God the Father-Creator and the Holy Spirit. Esteban Murillo's *The Heavenly and Earthly Trinities* (figure 4, p. 28 below) makes this point on the vertical axis, while the horizontal axis (Mary–Jesus–Joseph presenting the Babe to the world) connects the human life of Jesus to the salvation of those who interpret God through him. The Christology here analyzes and amplifies the resonances of these and other symbols.

My positive thesis is that these symbols are true under certain circumstances. I spell out these circumstances, and urge their religious value in the circumstances of contemporary life where they are valid.

Surrounding the explication of the religious symbols are many philosophical considerations about the nature, use and validity of symbols. In other works, cited below where relevant, I have dealt with these issues in more detail. In this book I have tried to develop them enough for theologians who are more interested in the nature of this Christology than in its content to see what is new and might be interesting in this project. Part of the project is to show that the truth of religious symbols is related to context, and that it can be assessed by anyone sufficiently interested to analyze the context and the nature of the interpretations in which the symbols are involved.

Therefore two audiences are intended here. One is the Christian communities for whom I write as a Christian theologian urging the consideration of *our* symbols. The other is a wider audience of people who would never themselves employ these symbols for religious purposes but who can see how Christians might, and might do so truly. The line between these two groups is indistinct.

One theme of this book is the religious place of human beings and Christian interpretations of the human condition in the evolution of the cosmos. Christianity has no single symbol for this, and the theme is addressed in glancing discussions of other symbols, especially in chapter 3. But that theme is the exact center of the painting by Beth Neville, *From Caves to Cosmos*, which is reproduced in the plates here. The painting itself consists of seven canvases, each five feet high and seven feet long, which abut to constitute a large scroll-like work of art. The first panel, plate 1, represents the human view out from the birth-cave of prehistory and the last, plate 7, represents the entropic dissolution of the cosmos with things moving ever farther apart, losing relation, and reducing to irrelevant straight-line order. The legends under each of the plates give more

details about representations and composition as I understand them. The artist herself has made several videos explaining her own intentions and understanding of the iconography, consistent with but not the same as mine; some of her early drawings for these paintings were published in my *Eternity and Time's Flow*. The artist is my wife, and our collaboration in nearly all things for many decades makes her painting an interpretation of my text and vice versa. For this, I thank her and dedicate this book to her.

The system of citation in this book employs titles in the text and footnotes of books and articles whose full bibliographical information is given in the bibliography on pp. 262–270 below.

Acknowledgments

All biblical quotations, unless noted otherwise, are from the New Revised Standard Version, copyrighted in 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

I am grateful to Boston University for the sabbatical semester during which this book was begun at a retreat in Cambridge, England, and for my friends there at Trinity College and Wesley House. Topics in this book have been discussed with nearly all my colleagues at the Boston University School of Theology. Specific suggestions and reactions have been made to at least parts of the manuscript by my contemporary theology class, fall 2000, and by Loye Ashton, John Berthrong, Ray Bouchard (who has also helped in the preparation of the manuscript), James-Mark Lazenby, Byungmoo Lee, and Jay Schulkin (with whom I have discussed the topics here for twenty-five years). Wesley J. Wildman has been my closest interlocutor on the ideas defended here, challenging and refining their meanings, expressions, and existential significance. The anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press made many helpful corrections and I am particularly grateful to Kevin Taylor, my editor at the Press, for his encouragement from the beginning and his careful guidance throughout.

Prologue

The interesting Christian beliefs about Jesus Christ are mostly fantastic: that his blood saves, that he is the cosmic king, a divine being, the incarnation of God in history, each person's friend, and the final judge of human history, just to name a few. Most traditional Christologists have been uncomfortable with such fantasies, thinking fantasy to be untrue fiction, and have attempted to reconstruct those claims into something like literal descriptions. The result is doctrines that compromise the stark power of the fantastic symbols and still do not make much sense in terms of how we know the world works ("conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary"?) or are foolishly false (washing clothes in blood turns them white?).

Whereas most Christologies are studies of doctrines about Jesus Christ, a more fruitful way forward in our time, I believe, is through studies of the major symbols of Jesus Christ and how they function to engage people truly or falsely with God.[1] Close behind this point is my conviction that even the classic doctrines have functioned in Christian life more often like symbols than like descriptions, explanations, or rules for belief. So this Christology approaches its subject through a theory of the ways symbols work or fail to work to facilitate truthful engagement. The theory of symbols in turn is justified in part by the felicity it exhibits in the analysis of that symbolic working.

Before discussing the profound and controversial symbols of Christology, however, it would be well for me to say as plainly as possible what I think Christianity is about and where Christology fits in with its symbols. The reason for this prologue is to forestall the criticism that the Christianity exhibited in these symbols is not what the reader recognizes, for the symbols are too intense, too extreme, and too much each

[1] See the magisterial analysis and summary of recent doctrines and symbols in *Jesus: Symbol of God*, by Roger Haight, SJ, which also advances a nuanced view of symbolic engagement. My only criticism of Haight's book is that it pre-empts the title that should name my book here.

a biased perspective on the whole, too fantastic, in other words. An abstract doctrinal system would not have such a problem. This overview is meant to be no more than superficial, because to get more profound would require the difficult symbols. Though superficial, it provides an important orientation.

Christianity first and foremost is about being kind. Love is the more customary word than kindness, but love is too complicated in its symbols, too loaded with history, to be a plain introduction to Christianity. In the end, of course, being kind opens into the profound ontological love that for Christians characterizes both God as love (1 John 4:8, 16) and the epitome of humanity and piety (Mark 12:29–31 and parallels). Nevertheless, being kind, though the bottom-line theme, is an ideal that often has been ignored within Christianity or seriously distorted, sometimes systematically as in the history of European Christianity with the Jews. The unkindness of Christians to Jews, and every other circumstance of unkindness, is a devastating reproach to Christian practice. But being kind is still the bottom-line theme.

Sometimes it is hard to tell in what kindness consists. Whether a social welfare system is ultimately kind if it creates a long-term dependent class of people is a debatable point at this stage, and how to amend it to make it more kind is also debatable. But some obvious and up-front meanings of kindness should be affirmed before stumbling on hard cases. These include being generous, sympathetic, willing to help those in immediate need, and ready to play roles for people on occasions of suffering, trouble, joy, and celebration that might more naturally be played by family or close friends who are absent (see for instance Paul's list in Rom. 12:9–21; or his song to love in 1 Cor. 13).

To be kind is also to be courteous, an extremely important and difficult virtue in a society as multifarious as ours. Courtesy means holding in balance two things. One is an articulate acknowledgment of who people are in all their differences, especially deferring to their differences from oneself. The other is an articulate and clearly communicated assumption that those others are equal to oneself in their importance for the community and in the cosmic assessment of things. Courtesy is especially difficult because its balance requires shared rituals of acknowledging and deferring to difference and also communicating acceptance and respect. Too often the necessary rituals themselves are lacking and to be kind to certain sorts of people is simply impossible. This is especially true in situations of sharp imbalances of power. The more powerful lack rituals for withdrawing their influence so as to open

space in which, without their seeming to be abandoned, the less powerful can define and assert themselves. The less powerful lack rituals for asserting themselves in self-definition over against the more powerful without seeming to attack in order to take over. These failures in ritual are serious inhibitions to Christians attempting to be kind.

Kindness, especially as it depends on cultural rituals of courtesy, but also in many other contexts, is an ideal for a community. Communities should be kind to their members and their neighbors; they should enable their members to be kind to one another and to the communal institutions that make kindness possible and effective.

Christians believe that communities of kindness are the human ideal because of the nature of God. Being obliged to kindness in community and personal life is part of how Christians interpret being "created in the image of God." God is the ultimate foundation of kindness. Not that the created world is always a kind place to be, assuming for the moment the Christian claim that God creates the world. Rather, the "principles" expressed in creation are those that, in the human sphere, define kindness. Being kind, with all the personal and communal variations on that ideal, is being God-like (1 John 4:7–21).

Although Christianity has come to express this ideal as a kind of universal obligation, applicable to people across the board, it came to the ideal in very particular circumstances as a reforming insight within Second Temple Judaism. Jesus was a practicing Jew, observant of the Temple obligations, who assumed for himself a reforming and prophetic role within and for Judaism.[2] He taught kindness in his preaching, his healing, and in the formation of his community of followers, always stressing its continuity with historical Israel and contemporaneous Judaism, even when he loosened some of the commandments of Torah in the name of kindness. Continuity was important even when he criticized hypocrites for unkindness that they hid behind observance of the commandments (e.g. Mark 7:9–13). It's not that Jesus advocated kindness

[2] The theme of Jesus as a Jew, the ways by which he continued Jewish practices, or distanced himself and his movement from them, moved ancient principles to the center of his religious vision and displaced others to the margins, has been the subject of much recent scholarship. For a selection, see for instance Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ* and *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*; Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, volumes I and II; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* and *The Historical Figure of Jesus*; Theissen, *The Shadow of the Galilean* and *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*; and Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* and *The Changing Faces of Jesus*. Of these, perhaps Paula Fredriksen's *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* makes the strongest case for direct continuity of contemporaneous Judaism in Jesus' person and community, and Meier's *A Marginal Jew* stresses the opposite. Gerd Theissen's *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*, pp. 21–40, presents a clear, perhaps overly clear, catalogue of ways in which Jesus continued and modified a Jewish heritage.

whereas "the Jews" advocated legalism, as some Protestant commentators have liked to say.[3] Rather, whatever else he changed in emphasis and direction, he carried over the focus on kindness and love in his summary of the Law (e.g. Mark 12:28–34 and parallels) and in specific instructions to his community about what is essential (John 14–17, especially 15:12–17).

To some degree Jesus may have seen his call to kindness as the initiation of a new world order. Surely his disciples saw it this way within a very short time after his death. Jesus seems in all instances to have been confident that his call to kindness, and his prophetic critique of unkindness, stemmed from God and was a continuation of the revelation of God that had been laid down in the history of Israel. This conviction of divine sanction and the power of his ministry made Jesus an extraordinary charismatic figure (Matt. 7:29).

The shock that his crucifixion caused among his followers led to an extraordinary re-conception of the relation of their movement and community to continuities with Israel. As expressed in the documents of the New Testament, Jesus himself was a sort of divine figure and the community he initiated, bound by the ideals of kindness, was a rewriting of the Old Covenant that foreshadows the coming of the completely achieved kingdom of God. Although often justified by alleged prefigurements in the Old Testament and expressed in symbols mainly deriving from there, the new Christian community looked not only to the authority of the past but to the calling and fulfillment of the future. How many of these new ideas were taught or at least hinted at by Jesus, we cannot know for sure. Nearly all the New Testament writings reflect directly or indirectly a tension between living out a given commandment or program derived from the past – the religion of Israel and the teachings of Jesus – and the development of surprising new forms, often discontinuous with the old, that seem to be called for in order to be true to the divinely sanctioned new community ideal of kindness, so charismatically taught by Jesus.[4] Clearly the most important new development was the conviction that Jesus had been raised from the dead, had reconvened some disciples, commissioned them to spread the community in

[3] See Sanders' *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chapter 14, for a careful discussion of Jesus and the law. His general conclusion is that Jesus affirmed the law as a good Jew and that his disagreements with Pharisees and others over its interpretation, applications, and allowable exceptions were within the limits of acceptable first-century Jewish debate.

[4] The centrality of this point and its implications for current Christianity are brought out beautifully in Rowan Williams' *On Christian Theology*, especially in chapter 2 but discussed from various angles throughout.

anticipation of his apocalyptic return, and would himself come again at any moment. The crucifixion therefore was not the defeat it looked like at first, dispersing the community who had failed to give Jesus even elementary support. Rather, for the early Christians it was the transition to the new order of divinely sanctioned community. Caravaggio (figure 11, p. 165 below) captures this sense by depicting even Jesus as a new man, ruddy, sleek, and youthful, not a man recently crucified, dead, and buried. Many images were used to express the relation between Jesus and the Church or new community, for instance that the Church was his body (Eph. 1:22–23) and he was its animating mind (1 Cor. 2:16), or that he was the bridegroom and she was his bride (Rev. 21:2; Gal. 4:26–29). But one of the crucial meanings of Jesus' resurrection is that he remains a somewhat external judge by which the Christian community and its members individually will be judged. Therefore the Church cannot look too authoritatively even to the past of Jesus but rather must look forward to its own time of judgment.

Meanwhile, given the understanding of Jesus as raised, ascended, and destined to come again as judge (see Memling's *Last Judgment*, figure 15, p. 226 below), the early Christians refocused the notion of the inspiring divine spirit as the Holy Spirit sent from God, especially in Jesus' absence, to help them understand Jesus and also to know what to do in their communities' new circumstances (1 Cor. 2:9–16, John 14:18–26). The Holy Spirit both interprets the witnesses to Jesus and guides the Church for the future. But the Holy Spirit is not organically bound within the Church and does not run things automatically. Rather it comes and goes ecstatically, and there is always a problem to discern the genuine leadings of the Spirit; the tests hover around the virtues of kindness (Gal. 5:16–26).

Thus within the New Testament documents lie the roots of what later would become the doctrine of the Trinity. The God of Israel, the Father, is the creator whose ideals for human life, by which the creation of the human sphere can be completed, is revealed by Jesus as a divine being, the Son of God (among other symbolic titles) who is the initiating and judging Lord of the Church. The Church is divinely attended during historical time by the Holy Spirit until the return of Jesus as judge (most of these notions are compacted together in Paul's salutation in Romans 1:1–6). These ideas and symbols competed with many others in the New Testament writings and they are not expressed there in coherent ways as would be sought in the later Councils attempting to define the doctrine of the Trinity. But they were sufficiently manifest that John's Gospel, the

latest in composition, could represent Jesus as teaching mainly about himself and his authority as spokesman for the Father (for instance John 8:12–59), emphasizing the characters of love or kindness in the community of "friends" he had created (e.g. John 15:7–17), and promising both the guidance of the Holy Spirit and also the ultimate union of the community with him and the Father in the Holy Spirit (John 14–17, particularly 14:15–17, 26, and 15:26–27). John's Gospel ends (chapter 21) with Jesus cooking the disciples breakfast, charging the Church's leader, Peter, to remember and fulfill his love of Jesus by being kind to others (whom Jesus had claimed as his sheep), and to get on with it.

In getting on with it, the Church quickly discovered how uncomfortable it is to live in between a past that gives meaning and direction to its life and a near future that calls for the Church to be something new in order to be true to its risen (and therefore not fully past) Lord. That novelty might require rejecting some elements of the past, or at least displacing them from the center of attention. Instead of being able to think that Jesus had established the form of the Church and that all that then was required was faithfulness to his vision, the early Christian leaders had to invent new forms of life and community in order to be faithful to the revelation that was still coming out (through the Holy Spirit).

The first great issue came from the fact that Gentiles responded very positively to the ideal of the kind Church community with firm loyalty to Jesus as the Lord. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians was addressed to a church community well established by the early fifties and the people addressed were Gentiles (1 Thess. 1:9). Whereas Jesus could orient his ministry to "the lost sheep of Israel" (Matt. 10:5–6, 23; 15:24), and expressed some astonishment that non-Jews had significant faith (Matt. 15:21–28), the Christians within a very few years included many Gentiles.[5] The first Gentile Christians might originally have been earlier converts to Judaism, but soon that was not the route to Gentile Christianity.

Jewish Christians could understand the Christian movement as a purification, rectification, but clear continuation of the revelation of God to Israel. For them the Old Covenant was clearly in hand when they adopted membership in the New Covenant and the earliest community continued to worship in the Temple (Acts 3, 4:1–31). But the non-Jewish Gentile Christians did not have the Jewish past to purify, rectify, or extend in continuity. Quite the contrary, they had their own various

[5] See Wayne A. Meeks' *The First Urban Christians*.

pagan and secular pasts to purify, rectify, and transform in becoming Christians. They could adopt a Jewish past in a kind of secondary sense, as the source of the symbols in terms of which they understood their faith, expressed in the Septuagint (the earlier Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible used by Hellenized Jews). They could use those symbols to understand Jesus as the Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God, and some of the sacrificial imagery for Jesus, and also the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, their own past, with which they had to come to terms, was not Israel but something else entirely. Therefore very quickly they transformed their readings of those Jewish symbols from the strict history of Israel into new meanings that could apply to themselves. That Jesus could be represented as a divine being with cosmic dimensions for whom all people and nations are in the same family was congenial to Hellenistic paganism. But that representation must have been very hard for the anti-idolatry traditions of Israel that conceived God's revelations to be much intertwined with its national, tribal, identity. Jesus himself selected the Twelve as apostles so that they might judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:29–30; Acts 1:21–26). Yet by Paul's time being an apostle had little to do with the twelve tribes; it was the office of carrying the community of Christ to new territory. The great Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:1–35; Gal. 2) decided that Gentile Christians did not have to become Jews or (in the case of the men) be circumcised. This meant that the Gentiles were recognized as full members of the community. It also meant that they could not worship in the Temple closer in than the "Gentile Court," a moot point after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Peter made the point about the acceptance of Gentile Christians, not in terms of circumcision, but in terms of the dietary laws, proclaiming all things clean. He did so (Acts 10) with the authorizing citation of a new vision of Jesus as Lord and a confirming visitation of the Holy Spirit.

The second great issue for the young Church emerged more slowly than the almost sudden presence of many Gentiles. Apparently Jesus had been most particular about God's Kingdom coming very soon, in which he would be a kind of viceroy of God and the Twelve would rule the Tribes.[6] His arrest and crucifixion abruptly interrupted this expectation, but with the resurrection appearances and the Pentecost

[6] This eschatological emphasis was the general consensus of the first "quest for the historical Jesus," as summarized for instance in Schweitzer's *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. See also Vermes' *The Changing Faces of Jesus*, chapter 6. For a careful recent summary of the evidence see Sanders' *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chapters 11–12; he elaborates the symbol of Jesus as viceroy in the kingdom.

experience (Acts 2) his followers reconvened as the Church to perfect the community of love in preparation for his return on clouds of glory. They expected it within their own lifetime (1 Thess. 4:9–5:11) and, when some of the original members began to die, had to work out a new timeline (2 Pet. 3:3–13). Yet an indefinite eschatological postponement loses the immediacy of Jesus' conviction about the reign of God, and so a "realized eschatology" was developed, most notably in Ephesians, Colossians, and John's Gospel, according to which a present victory in Christ and unity with God in heaven was conceived to be concurrent with ongoing history. Realized eschatologies have become increasingly important as time has passed and the historical interpretation of Jesus' claim that the kingdom of God is "at hand" or "near" has proved empirically false. Even if Jesus understood it historically, later ages could not do so without giving up the immediacy of "soon." The Church gradually softened the notion that it was a temporary holding action until Jesus' second coming and understood itself to be an eschatologically judged way of life.

The condition of living in tension between an authorizing past and an open future calling for new forms of Christian life and truth is one of the clearest issues in the New Testament. We should read the New Testament not as a blueprint, for it has no consistent clear pattern of belief or practice, but rather for its tensions, for the very clash of symbol systems and the struggles to determine what new Way is faithful to the risen and future Lord, expressive of the guidance of the true Spirit.[7] The workings of the Spirit are better to be discerned in the dissonances of symbols rather than their consonances. We should see how that large text of texts embodies the extraordinary creation of the Christian Way.[8]

[7] See Williams' *On Christian Theology*, pp. 44–59, 93–147.

[8] Although many scholars attempt to reconcile the historical development of Christian ideas and symbols in the first generation, most recognize the importance of decisive break-points, for instance whether a text was written before or after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE made Temple sacrifice impossible. One of the most consistent authors to read back from the end, for instance from the Gospel of John, toward the beginning to focus in on Jesus, sorting what must be later additions to earlier points, is Paula Fredriksen in *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*. It is to Fredriksen that I owe the chief hermeneutic principle of this study, namely, to assume that Jesus was solidly Jewish and to understand Christianity as a succession of additions and subtractions made to accommodate first the presence of Gentiles and delay in parousia, and then many other conditions to which Jesus' Jewishness did not speak. Scholars contest Fredriksen's point, noting that the tension between the present and the future permeates both Christian and Jewish writings of the period. The linear development from immediate expectation to realized eschatology might be overly simple. Nevertheless the earliest New Testament book, 1 Thessalonians, said "hold on and wait just a little longer," whereas the later ones such as Ephesians, Colossians, and John's gospel express realized eschatologies, and 2 Peter tried to explain the postponement. The result of this hermeneutic orientation is to see Christianity slowly coming into its own, and continuing to do so today. Chapter 5 explores this in detail in discussing the historical Jesus, still alive and not finished.

Our own situation is no different. Christians today are in tension about authentic Christianity between the authorizing past and a present and near future no longer served by the past's forms. To use the New Testament symbols, Christians urgently need the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to look realistically at our situation and search out appropriate forms, perhaps new, in terms of which to embody the divinely ordained community of kindness. We cannot name the crucified, risen, and future Lord merely by the biblical or magisterial record.[9] Christian fundamentalisms, institutional authorities, and theological orthodoxies are heavy millstones to drag along in a Church life responsive to the Spirit. Vapid liberalisms of quick adaptation of Christianity to late-modern society are equally destructive, especially in light of that society's very unkind culture. Yet the obligations of the Church today are addressed to the various existential situations of our time, and we struggle for revelation as to how to engage those situations.

The history of Christian life has seen the rise and fall of many symbols, and the movement of some to the center, displacing others, and then back to the margins. It has also seen the growing recognition of different kinds of signs and symbols, for instance the distinction between myth and history. Gerd Theissen says of myths that they usually "tell of actions of various gods in a primal time or an end time which is remote from the present world in which people live."[10] Myth is "a narrative the action of which is in a decisive time for the world, in which numinous subjects (gods, angels and demons) transform (or will transform) a fragile state of reality into a stable state."[11] In the religion of Israel, he notes, the mythical and the historical were blended, and in early Christianity this mixture was intensified with God, Satan, and Jesus all depicted as heavenly actors in a narrative that included historical time.[12] This mixture itself is a serious tension, which means that we should not take the mythic elements to refer and mean the way historical ones do (the temptation of fundamentalism), nor should we take the historical elements to refer and mean the way mythic ones do (the temptation of the liberal quest for the historical Jesus). An added complication is that the first-century cosmology, the rather widespread Hellenistic understanding of the structure of the cosmos, is greatly different from ours and looks more like the space (and time) of myth; yet the forms of its reference and meaning are not like those of myth, but rather like early

[9] Williams treats this important theme under the rubric of sacraments (among other ways); see his *On Christian Theology*, pp. 197–221.
[10] *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*, p. 3.
[11] Ibid., p. 325.
[12] Ibid., p. 3.

science. Although we can distinguish these various kinds of thinking, we cannot separate them in the thought of the early Christian community without doing violence to its actual life. Nor can we do that for the thought of any of the subsequent Christian communities, down to the present day.

Which symbols express the revelation for the Church best in our time and situation? We have our own conceptions of "truth" in history, myth, and science, and they bear upon the kinds of thinking that can embody revelation for us in our time. This book considers some of the most vivid of the historical symbols of Jesus and asks what they might mean today. Insofar as it is part of Christian theology (it is that and more), it is Pneumatology, inquiry into the Holy Spirit.