

Fall 2014

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Anna Mercedes

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, amercedes@csbsju.edu

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Recommended Citation

Mercedes, Anna. 2014. Christ as Charism, Christ Given Away. *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 53(3): 233-239

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Christ as Chrism, Christ Given Away

By Anna Mercedes

Abstract: This article develops the concept of Christ not as static body but as chrism for bodies. Christ as chrism travels in the matrix of relationality, on a vector toward the benefit of others. Conceptualizing christ as chrism potentially avoids both exclusionary and colonizing tendencies in Christian polity, and frames a Christian ethics that, while vulnerable and risky, marks the sanctity of the one giving Christ away.

Key Terms: Christ, Messiah, kenosis, feminism, sin

What is Christ Today?

Elsewhere I have begun to conceptualize Christ, not as a particular static body, but as *chrism*.¹ Describing Christ this way emphasizes the fluidity of Christ, and the possibility that Christ is known in transfer and connection. More than simply or randomly transferable, chrism is a thing applied or given, a way of sharing Christian identity or of blessing. As chrism Christ is inherently relational: between the bearer of the chrism and the receiver of it, and bending toward the other. Christ is perpetually given away.

The root word for “Christ” and “chrism” is the same, and thinking of Christ in this way does not need to imply some fundamentally ontological shift for Christology. But I would suggest, as I will explore below, that it does have political implications for the “where” and “who” of Christ today. Christ as chrism travels in the matrix of relationality, on a vector toward the benefit of others. Conceptualizing Christ as chrism potentially avoids both exclusionary and colonizing tendencies in Christian polity, and frames a Christian ethics that, while vulnerable and risky, marks the sanctity of the one giving Christ away.

“Christ” comes from the Greek *christos*, and the Hebrew legacy behind first century Jewish (and thus, New Testament) use of the word is in the word *messiah*. Both designate a person anointed or designated, by God and the community of God’s people, as a unique and important figure. In the Hebrew Bible, *messiah* often applies to an anointed king for the Israelite people, and yet the Hebrew Bible is not possessive in its use of the messianic title. Contrary to much later Christian understanding, a messiah need not be a once and for all figure or a one-and-only. The Israelite community was in need of messianic presence at different times in its history. Thus the Hebrew Bible applies the term to different figures for different reasons; for example the term is applied to Cyrus—a foreign king, not even a Jew—because of the role this Persian king plays in returning the people of God to their home after exile.² So many Christians are still erroneously taught that in Jesus God opens the covenant to all people, as though the Jewish covenant was a deeply exclusive one, when we can find evidence far to the contrary not only in contemporary Jewish tradition but in the Hebrew Bible that Christians carry to church with them. In the example of Cyrus, the term “messiah” is given away to a person outside the covenant.

In Greek use of the term, “messiah” becomes “christ,” meaning “anointed one.” The term appears frequently in English for a “christening”—and of course in the word “Christian.” So to

describe Christ as *chris* is only to emphasize the anointing process over the anointed product. The process always requires community, for anointing is a thing done by one to another, a thing bestowed and given away (or in cases where a person anoints oneself, a thing done precisely to signify the connection of the larger community in which one is held as God's person). And the process is ongoing, never freezing static on one body as the once-and-for-all body of Christ. Who, then, is this anointed body in the world today?

Who is Christ Today?

Determinations about the "who" of Christ's body can all too easily function problematically. To declare another person or another group the body of Christ—while on the surface a generous gesture— can also, when relational strength is lacking, imply a sort of paternalizing judgment, and a kind of glorification of another's suffering. Conversely, to declare oneself participant in, or one's group synonymous with, the body of Christ, while in some important circumstances a proclamation of dignity and strength,³ can for some groups mean a kind of self-serving egotism, not far from what Luther may have considered a "theology of glory."⁴ In contrast to both of these problems, if one's own body, marked "Christian," is inherently a self-giving or generous body—as one might hope the body of Christ to be—then this demarcation does not need to be an oppressive exclusion, but simply a marker of specificity. And if bodies marked are realized as Christ through connection and relationship, then the body of Christ is realized between persons rather than theoretically assigned.

One of the most disturbing instances of exclusion based on the body of Christ comes with the collision of Christology and ecclesiology. When one church or denomination understands itself to be the body of Christ, what does that mean for other Christians? Some churches therefore are careful to describe themselves as *part* of the body of Christ, or participants in it, rather than *the* locus of Christ in the world. But of course not all churches and denominations take that care. When a church is confident about itself as the one true body of Christ, it can exhibit a self-righteousness about its identity and its confession. Rather than risking its own polity for the sake of others, or giving the assertiveness of its identity away in attentiveness to others, the self-righteous church seeks to make Christian life about the proclamation and protection of its own rightness. It is a Christ-body that is precisely not given away. You may be welcome to join it, but it will not convert toward you.

Additionally, very well intentioned theologies also can use the "body of Christ" terminology for others as a label rather than a mark of connection. Perhaps speaking of an impoverished group in a two-thirds world context, a one-thirds world theology might say: "They—the poor, the dispossessed— are the body of Christ! Look how they bear the cross!" On one hand this theology is not hoarding Christian identity, and is drawing attention to the conditions of others. But at the same time, the labeling is possible without any relationship. It also takes one group's Christian terminology and applies it to another—whether Christian or not.⁵ If no relationship exists, then it remains possible that the newly labeled "body of Christ" contests its own label. Perhaps this "Christ" doesn't want its hardship polished with a Christ-like label. Perhaps this "Christ" has a message of repentance to speak to the labelling party about that party's own complicity in its hardship, rather than offering those labelers inspiring examples of a supposedly more simple or humble life.⁶

A Forced Baptism

At its worst, then, the labeling of others as “the body of Christ” can feel like a reiteration of a colonizing forced baptism. But at its best, supposing a real connection does exist between groups—one perhaps that is even self-conscious about power inequities in the relationship—the sharing and giving away of Christian identity can draw both groups into deeper relationship or transformation. In motion, the connected people flow toward a different set of identities, perhaps mutual, that then could take flesh as another momentary embodiment of Christ in the world. In this sense we do not “meet Christ in another” as though Christ already existed there ready to be discovered, nor do we “show Christ to others” as though we already firmly embody Christ, but rather we encounter and embody Christ in the connection between us: in the transfer, in the process of being drawn more deeply into new creation together. Christ is not oil in a jar waiting to be distributed or oil in distant flask waiting to be found, rather Christ as chrism flows in motion and for a purpose: oil that consecrates, oil that gives holiness away. Oil in an intimate meeting between us. Oil that is chrism freshly applied and wet on the skin, oil that will be dry on this body tomorrow. Oil always shifting to different skin, but oil precisely marking *skin*: carnal bodies. Oil demarcating incarnation.

Chrism moves skin to skin, bridging and making more viscous the interstice between us: Christ in, with, and under our bodily connection, Christ between. Would Christ be said to be you or me in the anointing between us? Chrism is on us both, and dripping into our world.

Where is Christ Today?

In his 1969 *Black Theology and Black Power*, James Cone powerfully concludes by asking, “Where is your identity? Where is your being? Does it like with oppressed blacks or with the white oppressors?”⁷ For Cone in this text, Christ is located in the “black ghetto” of 1960s America, and Christ is not simply visiting there but rather is fully “synonymous with black oppression.”⁸ Thus, “For white people, God’s reconciliation in Jesus Christ means that God has made black people a beautiful people; and if they are going to be in relationship with God, they must enter by means of their black brothers, who are a manifestation of God’s presence on earth.”⁹ Cone’s is not an exclusivist labeling of Christ’s presence, but rather a call toward just relationship, toward a reconciliation that takes seriously the real lived power imbalance between those seeking to follow Christ. Cone finds the beauty of God’s presence glistening on and in black skin, and this incarnation beckons all who would be reconciled to God, for “Being black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are.”¹⁰ Cone speaks from within this experience of dispossession and marks a path for others seeking Christ.

Christ as chrism flows in this kind of relational track. Reconciliation with God happens simultaneously alongside a sometimes excruciating creation of new relationship: Christ in 1960s black church communities christening one another as blessed in the face of defamation, Christ in the coalition of blacks and whites together desiring a more full revelation of God’s presence on earth in God’s body, God’s beloved community. In Cone’s late 60s text, oppressed American blacks, and all who through God’s power in reconciliation are made black, are the chosen ones of

God.11 A messianic people, anointed ones: a Christ also actively anointing others with blackness, with reconciliation to the body of Christ.

Christ glistens in the coalitions formed in desire for Christ and desire for the flourishing of God's peoples and God's earth. These propelling desires mark Christ's trail. Chrism glistens in encounters as persons seek Christ, and in seeking find—even if momentarily, even if as manna dissipating on the morrow. Chrism glistens as people give up their own self-possession, caught up in desire for others' thriving, and having given up their grasp on self, find it anew, as the body of Christ—finding themselves, as particular beloved bodies, glistening with a holy chrism. Wet with holiness, delighted and dignified, persons are left with a self-assurance so strong that it is eccentric, propelling these bodies forward again, toward and for others: the body of Christ always and forever given for you.

Christ as our chrism glistens in many places at once, new creation every day and every minute: carnal, specific, yet too alive to hold still.

Sola Christus

If the “where” and “who” of Christ are plural, and if Christians want to claim a “uniqueness of Christ,” this will need to be a uniqueness based neither on particular skin nor on specific time and place. While chrism always marks particular skin in particular times and places, and indeed sanctifies those historical particularities, those bodies and contexts cannot claim a uniqueness as *the* Christ without closing down the ongoing vivacity of Christ's movement in the world, of the power chrism's momentum and transfer.

Martin Luther asserted as his “first and chief article”¹² in his Smalcald Articles that “Jesus Christ, our God and Lord” is alone the one who removes sin, justifies, and redeems.¹³ In time “Christ alone” becomes one of the central tenets for much of Protestant Christianity. Luther's emphasis in *sola Christus* is on what Christ *does*. The emphasis is less on the person of the historical Jesus and more on the verbal quality of Christ: what Christ does. Christ is unique in justifying and redeeming. As I have been exploring Christology here, Christ as chrism is singular in the particularity of Christ's vector, not in a singularity of location. This is a vector embodied in each muscle of Jesus of Nazareth, a vector vivid in the Torah, a vector propelling the spoken and living Word, and funneling through baptismal waters and covenantal meals. It is a vector *for* and *toward*, and as trustworthy as the *hesed* of God.

The uniqueness of Christ is in Christ's doing, a doing realized in and through bodies. The process of Christ, rather than the skin that has been incorporated into Christ, is singularly unique; the ontology of Christ is itself life process rather than any static being. Christ has a verbal essence, a living, tombstone-rolling ontology: immutable in purpose only, passible through and through. Christian particularity in a diverse world, following and conveying chrism, lies in vocation, in the bearing of the Christ vector in the world. Christian particularity is unique, but hardly exclusivist, because it exists for the sake of others. It serves.

Christians can claim as their uniqueness the christic vector, informed by the scriptures and rehearsed in liturgy. There are, needfully and wonderfully, many other life paths that also are

oriented toward service, some religious and some not. There is an especially tremendous resonance between some Jewish ways of being in the world and some ways of being Christian. The christic vector need never be unrelated to other paths, for by its essence it seeks the benefit of others, the companionship of others along the way, and the self-transformation wrought by relationship with others.

This is not a vector that, in following it, earns us heaven; it is not a vector we follow to merit redemption. *Sola Christus*: Christ alone redeems. It is the energy of Christ in the world that sustains this vector, draws us into it, propels us on the path. We are in Christ on this vector, wet with chrism: a holy body. To be christened such is to be already in currents of heaven, in the *basileia tou theou*, being and bearing salvation, redeemed and redeeming, participating in the embodiment of Christ in our world. Thus, while christic process does not earn us salvation, it is itself salvation, and to be in its courses is life for us and a unique infusion of life for the world, while also a foretaste of things to come: an undying spring, water from the rock.

What are the social or lived outcomes of this Christology . . .

Christ as chrism, Christ given away, flows for and toward, not diffusely, but for particular beloveds, toward particular skin. The flow is wide but not anonymous. The flow is driven by the intimate, passionate desire of God for God's people. It is as particular as people in love are particular about each other, not generalized like some distant charity or patronizing largesse. The flow is kenotic—a kenetic *kenosis*—moving toward and for others.

Kenosis comes from the Greek word in Philippians

2:7 that transliterates into keno and is a verb for “empty.” Here Christ is said to have “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” And while *kenosis* is the current of Christ's verbal essence as I have been exploring it here, *kenosis* also has been a topic of great consternation for theologians, not least because, for many oppressed groups, self-giving is mandated by their oppressors and thus problematic when construed as the shape of Christian life. *Kenosis* has the potential to carry us into some very dangerous territory.

. . . in the lives of women or oppressed persons?

Feminist theologians, aware of social and theological teachings that would construct the female self as naturally caretaking and self-giving, have debated whether self-giving should remain a component of contemporary Christology. Joining this debate, I have proposed that a kenotic Christology also can be a deeply feminist one.¹⁴ Though christic *kenosis* is about the emptying of self, it also generates a new moment of subjectivity, a new creation and a recurring and transforming resurrection. The momentum of this *kenosis* is the pulse of the Christic self. Christic *kenosis* empowers, renewing the people of God, acting as a guarantor on their subjectivity. Though many forces and people oppress us, held in Christ's trajectory we glimmer with a holy dignity. In this way Christ as chrism marks the sanctity of the one giving Christ away.

Kenosis is especially risky for those in abusive and oppressive contexts. This may not, however, render it any less vital for some survivors. I have described elsewhere accounts of abuse

survivors who articulated their survival and their ongoing strength in terms of their dedication to others.¹⁵ Some survivors reclaim their sense of self not through what would be an understandable self-protection, but rather through a tenacious self-dedication: to their families, to other survivors, to causes for justice.

Rather than protecting oppressed persons from theologies of self-giving, for example by developing a separate theology for them, theologians can instead recognize that many survivors of and dismantlers of oppression already are stunning wielders of self-giving power. Thus theology—even and especially feminist theology—can embrace *kenosis* rather than repudiating it. Oppression is the problem, not *kenosis*.

Though propaganda full of themes of self-giving has been a popular tool in the hands of oppressors, including Christian ones, the christic kenotic vector itself has a notable history of survival under and in the face of oppression. Christ as chrism for God's beloved offers not only the momentous power of the self made new, but also a social power that resists and sometimes erodes oppressive structures. Christ resists abuse and builds more just relationships—a claim hardly new to readers of the Gospels.

And this kenotic power, as I have explored from the beginning of this article, is also the life pulse of Christ's own ongoing embodiment in our world. Christ given away does not mean Christ dead. Christ given away is not Christ weakened or Christ watered-down. The empty tomb is already a cue; the Eucharist is another. Christ given away is mark of Christ's enduring existence; Christ given away is Christ alive as God's messianic presence always has been for God's people and the world.

. . . *in a world of sin?*

Christ's kenotic power for us—a power renewing the self, resisting oppression, giving Christ, and birthing Christ anew—carries those caught in its flow vigorously beyond any desire for self-justification or defense of righteousness (resonating again with an affirmation of *sola Christus*). It is love for another, and desire for justification of and justice for that other, that carries chrism and propels Christian life. And yet a terrific amount of energy is expended by Christians in defending their beliefs, their confession, and their church. This locks old holy chrism away as though to worship it, but Christ as chrism is alive and moving on.

Desiring Christ, desiring the thriving of other people, carries us beyond territory that has been known as holy or right or even “Christian.” Thus another lived outcome of Christ as chrism alive in the world lies in the Christian relationship to sin. Christians may step with Christ into a realm of sin, for the love of the world. Our selves be damned: we love this world and its people. They are beautiful and beloved and we go to them.

Marcella Althaus-Reid similarly describes a Christ who comes out of the boundaries of holiness. She describes Jesus as “Un-Just” Messiah: “He did not occupy the *espacio justo* (space of justice, but also restrictive, scarce space) all the time. He exceeded his space, and became an *Unjust* Messiah, larger than life, sometimes outside the defined boundaries of justice, and definitively not in accordance with accepted standards of what is to be human and/or divine.”¹⁶

Thus in the trope of the Un-Just Messiah “lies the permanent conflict between the intuition of a larger Christ and a larger justice, and the tight fitted Just Christ of social and sexual restrictions of centuries of hetero-sexual ideology in Christianity.”¹⁷ Accordingly Mark Jordan explains of Althaus-Reid that she “. . . mocks the sonorous pomposities of religion—not because they are negligible, but because they can conceal violence while pretending to deplore it.”¹⁸ The Unjust Christ ironically reveals the violence legitimized by much Christian theology through the centuries.

Perhaps we have a hint of this Unjust Messiah in the letters of Paul.¹⁹ In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul writes that God “made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” While this bold statement has sometimes been interpreted as Christ becoming a “sin offering,” Richard Bell argues persuasively, through comparison with other Pauline texts, that the intention here is flatly *sin*, implying then that Christ becomes sinner: again, the Un-just Messiah.²⁰

If Christ became sin, perhaps those marked with chrism, emboldened by such an infusion of righteousness, follow suit. Christian historian Virginia Burrus writes of the use of shame by Christian figures: “When a mark of shame, whether physical or verbal, is shamelessly embraced, the stigma is transformed in the process . . . The defiant appropriation of the stigma thus both contests shaming—*shames shame*—and renders it unexpectedly productive, for the stigma opens the site of a yet-to-be defined identity.²¹ In her study, *Saving Shame*, Burrus shows how ancient Christians appropriated and claimed shame in realizing their Christian subjectivity. Might the shame of sin also function as a productive mechanism for contemporary Christian identity? Might sin, in transgressing rightness, point the finger back at the constructed nature of rightness and the ways in which that rightness maims and erodes the flourishing of some of God’s beloved?²²

A Never-Ending Stream

If, along the way, chasing chrism in sinful territory, Christians sin in the love of Christ, it is Christ who justifies and forgives. We are so captivated by the beloved as to give no thought any longer to our own holiness: a self-emptying of our claims to righteousness. The Christian is perfectly free, and yet servant of all, to paraphrase Luther’s claim in his *Freedom of a Christian*.²³ We are in Christ, for this world we love, free and eccentric, precisely as anointed ones alive on a serving pulse. We serve in a world marred by oppressive structures, by sin physically manifested on wounded earth and wounded bodies. The chrism we bear is not bound by those structures, even when they are structures of the church. And it may be that in bodies marked with chrism but labeled as sinners that Christ will make all things new.

Christ has a history with sin and its conversion. Christ has a history with self-giving and its power. Christ has a history with a multiplicity of incarnation, broken and given away: Sunday after Sunday. Christ has a history with making the unholy holy and with dignifying the shamed and suffering.

Chrism, like a never-ending stream, drips, shifts, pools, rushes on. Redeems, dismantles, empowers, blesses. We glimmer with its vestige, bear it with our bodies, share it, long for it,

worship it: beside ourselves in awe and in love with the earth and the people Christ goes to serve.

Endnotes

1. See the final chapter of my *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).
2. See Isaiah 45:1–8. See also Psalm 2:2 and Psalm 132:10.
3. James Cone's Christology in his *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) is a key example of this dignified use, and will be discussed below.
4. For Luther, the theologian of glory gets things switched around and see the good in the bad. These "theologians"—not true theologians at all for Luther—have their vision skewed because they have neglected a focus on "suffering and the cross" (see the *Heidelberg Disputation*). In my application of this idea above, I am suggesting that a celebration of oneself or one's church as body of Christ, without a scrutinizing look at where suffering lies in one's community, is short-sighted.
5. While her subject is not Christian theology, I am guided here by the postcolonial feminist work of Chandra Talpade Mohanty. See her *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) and my discussion of her work in "Making a Difference with Difference," *Anglo Saxonica* III.6 (2013).
6. In contrast, a strong example of constructive Christian ethics amid global power imbalance comes from Cynthia Moe-Lobeda in *Resisting Structural Evil* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013). Moe-Lobeda firmly calls first-world Christians to accountability for their own complicity in the suffering of others.
7. James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, twentieth anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2007), 152.
8. *Ibid.*, 120.
9. *Ibid.*, 150.
10. *Ibid.*, 151.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Book of Concord*, 325, Smalcald Articles III.14.1.
13. *Book of Concord*, 301. Smalcald Articles II.1.1–4. Luther's claim is actually more elaborate than this, because it is not done entirely in his own words but is rather an extended weaving of Hebrew Bible and New Testament which Luther crafts into a summary of his assertions for *sola Christus*, *sola fide*, and to some extent here *sola scriptura*. William Russell reads an assertion of *sola scriptura* in Luther's heavy use of scripture while discussing Christ alone and faith alone (*Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, ed. Hans Hillebrand, 1996, entry for the Smalcald Articles).
14. See my *Power For*. The reader will also find there reference to key theological texts relevant to debates on *kenosis*.
15. Mercedes, *Power For*, chapter 5.
16. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 156, emphasis original. Althaus-Reid goes on to emphasize that Jesus only *sometimes* embodied this sort of "unjust" excess; she notes, for example, Jesus' stories of conformance to the day's justice standards for women (again, only sometimes, for there are exceptions to that, too). One could also add stories of his conformance to ethnic codes of justice, especially regarding his concern or lack thereof for non-Jews.

17. Ibid. Althaus-Reid writes that “In Systematic Theology, Jesus’ divinity was all in his genes, but in Indecent Theology we consider that it was formed around relationships with people and cultural, religious and sexual belongings” (*Indecent Theology*, 68). Her emphasis on the matrix of relationality speaks to the contrast between a natural or a nurtured identity, and the contrast between a body of Christ as a thing born once and for all, or a thing continually reconstructed and resurrected, like all bodies, where to quote Judith Butler, “the body is not understood as a static and accomplished fact, but as an aging process, a mode of becoming that, in becoming otherwise, exceeds the norm, reworks the norm, and makes us see how realities to which we thought we were confined are not written in stone.” See Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 29.

18. Mark D. Jordan, “Notes on Camp Theology” in *Dancing Theology in Fetish Boots* (Norwich: SCM, 2010), 186. Accordingly, Althaus-Reid writes that “The point is that what cannot be made indecent in theology is not worthy being called theology because it will mean that ‘God’, ‘Jesus’ and ‘Mary’ only may have meaning in a determined heterosexual economic system” (*Indecent Theology*, 69).

19. Consider especially 2 Corinthians 2 5:14–21 and Galatians 3:13.

20. Richard H. Bell, “Sacrifice and Christology in Paul,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 53:1 (April 2002). The interpretation of Christ as a “sin offering” does indeed makes sense for the earlier verses of chapter 5, and Bell argues accordingly (Bell, 14). Importantly, as Bell also argues, this offering for Paul seems to have been made in the incarnation as much as in the crucifixion (Bell, 12).

21. Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 150–151.

22. Accordingly, in considering Christianity’s tropes around specifically sexual sins, Jordan suggest that “Rather than fighting furiously with each other over the further codification of sexual sins or rights, we might want to see sin in the exercises of codifying power.” See Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 137.

23. See “The Freedom of a Christian” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writing, 2nd Edition*, Timothy F. Lull, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).