In my last lecture, I discussed with you Paul Tillich’s concept of God. In this lecture I want to turn and look at his concept of Christ, but before we do that, let’s bow for a word of prayer.

Father, we thank you so much for Jesus Christ, for what He has done for us and what He means to us. We thank you, as well, for what Your Word reveals about Him. Lord, as we study Paul Tillich’s understanding of Christology, we know that it is very different from what your Word says. But help us, through this study, to even get a better understanding of what Your Word does teach about Christ and then having that understanding to have an even greater appreciation for Him. So bless our study together. For it’s in Christ’s name we pray it. Amen.

I want to turn this lecture to Paul Tillich’s Christology. Volume 1 of his Systematic Theology dealt with his understanding of the nature and method of theology, then he turned to reason and revelation, and then a good portion of the first volume of The Systematics dealt with his understanding of God. The whole second volume of Tillich’s Systematic Theology deals with his understanding of Christ.

Well, Tillich, you remember, in terms of his Method of Correlation said that, first of all, in doing any theological formulation, you have to begin by analyzing the human situation, and that’s what he does himself. We saw that in regard to his understanding of God, and we see it again in terms of his understanding of Christ. And the place that Tillich begins is with a discussion of the existentialist problem of man.

Now, let me share with you what he has to say about that. Tillich begins by discussing the meaning of the term existence. And Tillich points out that etymologically the English word existence comes from the Latin word existere. That’s spelled E-X-I-S-T-E-R-E. Now that Latin word means “to stand out.” Now Tillich
then says, “We as individuals stand out of nonbeing.” We stand out of both absolute nonbeing, the *oùk ontic* nonbeing that he refers to, and we also stand out of relative nonbeing, the *me ontic* nonbeing that he talks about. Now he says it’s obvious how we stand out of absolute nonbeing or nothingness. The way that we stand out of that is that we are something whereas *oùk ontic* nonbeing is an absolute void, an absolute lack of all being. As for relative nonbeing, Tillich says that “things participate in potential being even if they are not yet actual.” When something is in this potential state, it is not yet actual, but on the other hand, it’s not a total blank, it’s not a total nothing. So that this is a state, if you will, of relative nonbeing, that is, there is potentiality of becoming something that you aren’t, but you already are at least a something. And that’s the condition of relative nonbeing.

Now on page 21 of volume 2 of *The Systematic Theology*, Tillich gives his summary of what it means to exist and he says the following: “Existing can mean standing out of absolute nonbeing, while remaining in it. It can mean finitude, the unity of being and nonbeing. And existing can mean standing out of relative nonbeing while remaining in it. It can mean actuality, the unity of actual being and the resistance against it. But whether we use the one or the other meaning of nonbeing, existence means standing out of nonbeing.”

After Tillich ends his discussion on the meaning of being, he turns next to the discussion of the rise of the existentialist problem. Now Tillich says that the split in reality between potentiality and actuality is the first step toward the rise of existentialism. The potential, he tells us, has been equated in philosophical discussion with the essential realm, that is, it deals with the essence of things there—we might even say ideal form or their ideal description. And on the other hand, the actual, that which actually exists has been equated in philosophical discussions with the existential realm, that is, it’s equated with existence. To exist, then, means to stand out of, to stand away from, if you will, one’s essence, as in a fall. And that’s how Tillich refers to it. To stand out of your essence as you would in a fall.

Now you remember that with Hagel, we had the notion that existence is the logically necessary actuality of essence. In other words, in Hagel there was no problem or conflict between essentialism or essences and existentialism or, that is, existence. But, of course, Tillich has a very different view and so do the existentialists. On page 24 of volume 2 of *The Systematics*, Tillich
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Talks about Hegel and tells us something of his evaluation of Hegel. He says, “Existence is the logically necessary actuality of essence.” This, of course, is in Hegel’s thinking. “There is no gap, no leap between them. This all-embracing character of Hegel’s system made it a turning point in the long struggle between essentialism and existentialism. He is the classical essentialist because he applied to the universe the scholastic doctrine that God is beyond essence and existence. The gap is overcome not only eternally in God but also historically in man. The world is the process of the divine self-realization. There is no gap. No ultimate incertitude, no risk, and no danger of self-loss when essence actualizes itself in existence. Hegel’s famous statement that everything that is is reasonable is not an absurd optimism about the reasonableness of man. Hegel did not believe that men are reasonable and happy, but it is the statement of Hegel’s belief that in spite of everything unreasonable, the rational or essential structure of being is providentially actualized in the process of the universe. The world is the self-realization of the divine mind. Existence is the expression of essence and not the fall away from it.”

Well, that was Hegel’s view, but, of course, when we come to the existentialism of the 19th and the 20th century, we find that in those thinkers, there is a tremendous protest against Hegel’s essentialism.

Now, the common point in all existentialist attacks against Hegel and his essentialism is that man’s existential situation is a state of estrangement from his essential nature. In other words, rather than saying that everything that man could potentially be he has actualized, the existentialist said, No, there’s a gap between potentiality and actuality. Now Hegel, of course, thought that the estrangement between possibility and actuality, between essence and existence, had been overcome. All of the existentialists, on the other hand, say that he’s wrong.

On page 25 of volume 2 of The Systematics, Tillich makes this point rather nicely. And let me read from that portion of his discussion. “Existence is estrangement and not reconciliation. It is dehumanization and not the expression of essential humanity. It is the process in which man becomes a thing and ceases to be a person. History is not the divine self-manifestation, but a series of unreconciled conflicts, threatening man with self-destruction. The existence of the individual is filled with anxiety and threatened by meaninglessness. With this description of man’s
predicament, all existentialists agree and are therefore opposed to Hegel’s essentialism. They feel that it is an attempt to hide the truth about man’s actual state.”

Well, this state of estrangement from essential being, or if you will from our essential nature, causes, as Tillich said, as we just read, meaninglessness—it causes despair—and other problems like that. And it is the problem of man’s existence which must be overcome. Well, then Tillich turns to discuss Christian theology and existentialism. You’ll remember the Method of Correlation says, first of all, you analyze the human situation and then you turn to Christian theology or whatever religion you’re dealing with, you turn to the symbols of that religion to see how that religion addresses the problem that you have set forth. So, now’s where we begin to see what Tillich would say that Christianity has to say to the existential problem.

Well, Tillich says that Christianity claims that Jesus is the Christ. Now the term *the Christ* points in contrast, Tillich says, to man’s existential situation. The reason that that’s so, Tillich says, is that the Christ is the One who is to bring the new eon—the universal regeneration. The new reality. *Well, you say, so far this sounds fairly abstract. Can we get a little bit clearer about this?* Well, we need to get some idea of what this new reality would be. And Tillich explains a little bit more at this point. We’ll see, as we proceed, that he gives more and more of an idea of what he means by this new reality or this new being. Tillich says that new reality presupposes an old reality and this old reality is a state of estrangement of man and his world from God. In other words, it is being in existence, but being separated from one’s essence or one’s highest, if you might, fullest potentiality. Now it is the task, says Tillich, of the Messiah, the Christ, to conquer this estrangement and to establish a new reality which conquers the estrangement of the old reality. So you begin to get an idea of the respects in which the new reality is new. There’s going to, somehow or other, be a bridging of the gap between existence and essence in the person Jesus Christ.

Well, Tillich then says, and this is a direct quote from page 27 in volume 2 of *The Systematics*. I quote him, he says, “Existentialism has analyzed the old eon.” And the word eon he spells E-O-N. “Existentialism has analyzed the old eon, namely the predicament of man and his world in the state of estrangement. In doing so, existentialism is a natural ally of Christianity. Immanuel Kant once said that mathematics is the good luck of human reason. In the same way, one could say that existentialism is the good luck
of Christian theology."

Well, you may have never thought of existentialism in that light, but in the confines, in the context of Tillich’s Christology, you understand what he means. Existentialism points out the great need of man and, in so doing, it prepares the way for what Christianity will say about Christ and how Christ is the solution to the need of man.

Well, on pages 29 through 44 of volume 2 of *The Systematics*, Tillich then gives us his analysis of the fall of man, and he sees the fall as the symbol for man’s move from essence to existence. As you can imagine, this will give a very, very different interpretation of what Genesis 3 is all about. Well, then on pages 44 through 78, Tillich analyzes man’s state of existential estrangement and he tells us all of what that involves. Then beginning on page 78, we have an analysis of what Tillich refers to as the *quest for the new being*. And, you see, it’s that new being which is going to solve the problem of man’s estrangement from the ground of his being.

Well in Tillich’s next section, then, he directly turns to talk about the quest for the new being. Tillich says that the existentialist problem is in fact the human predicament. And as a result of that, all men of all cultures have sought the new being. This isn’t something that is peculiarly Western. It isn’t something that is peculiarly Christian. This is something that is a problem that all people in all cultures have faced and as a result of that, they’ve all been looking for the new being, even if they don’t understand that that’s what they’re after.

Now, Tillich says that the new being can be sought above history. You can look for this new being in some supra historical realm or you can understand this new being as the aim or the goal or the purpose of history. And Tillich then says, as a matter of fact, there have been two different traditions of looking for the new being. The Far Eastern religions, on the one hand, represent one of those traditions. They represent the tradition of looking for the new being above history. These religions would say that the misery of mankind within history is not something that can be changed, but mankind can, in fact, transcend the whole sphere of existence. The new being, then, in this interpretation, is the negation of all beings (plural) and the affirmation of the ground of being alone. In other words, these type of religions attempt to flee this worldly to that which is the transcendent one, who is going to be the answer to this estrangement. Well, that’s the Eastern tradition as
Tillich understands it—the Far Eastern tradition.

On the other hand, he says there is the Western tradition, Western religion. And these religions have had as their approach the view that the existentialist problem, which would be solved by the new being, is to appear within history, not above it or beyond it, but within history. Now, matter then is viewed, according to these religions, as estranged from its essence or ground of being, but in the Western religions they don’t view matter as itself being evil. Now, in these religions or according to these religions, the new being is simply, then, the expectation of a transformed reality. A transformed history, if you will. This transformation occurs in and through a historical process which itself is unique, it’s unrepeatable, and it’s irreversible, but the key here is that it does happen within history. Now Tillich thinks that Christianity, of all these Western religions, is especially important in terms of the quest for the new being. And I’d like to read to you from page 88 of volume 2 of *The Systematics* as to why he thinks Christianity is so important for the quest for the new being.

Tillich says, “But it can be stated that in Christianity the decisive event occurs in the center of history and that it is precisely the event that gives history a setter. That Christianity is also aware of the not yet, which is the main emphasis in Judaism. And that Christianity knows the revelatory possibilities in every moment of history. All this is included in the title of the ‘Christ,’ the name which Christianity applied to the bearer of the ‘New Being’ in its final manifestation.” Now the term “Christ” he has in quotes, the term *New Being*, both of those terms he has capitalized.

Well, so, you can see that Tillich really believes that Christianity is extremely important because it contains in it what all the other religions were searching for. They were searching for this *New Being* and in Christianity, and specifically in Christ, we find the bearer of the *New Being*.

Well, Tillich then moves on to talk about the reality of Christ. And the first thing that he does in this section is to talk about the symbol of Christ, and here he wants to explain what the term *Christ* actually means. Tillich says that the term *Messiah* or *the Anointed One* is a term that is used to represent the king. He is the One who conquers the enemies and He establishes peace and justice. Well, Tillich says that was the original notion in the term, but gradually the political meaning of the idea of a Messiah was transcended and the figure of the king became more symbolic.
But the notion of a Messiah always remains related to history, according to Tillich. Well, the Messiah, Tillich says, doesn’t save in a path leading people out of historical existence; instead it’s the function, the purpose, the aim of the Messiah to transform historical existence. The individual, then, enters into a new reality which embraces society and nature when he identifies himself with the Messiah. So you can see that this is very definitely a notion that is not above history; it is a resolution to the existentialist problem, which is within history.

Now Tillich then says that in Messianic thought, the new being does not demand the sacrifice of finite being. Instead it fulfills all finite being by conquering it’s estrangement from the infinite, from the essential, from the potential. Well, then Tillich turns—still he’s talking here about the reality of Christ—but he turns to talk about paradox in Christian theology. We might have expected that somewhere along the way, Tillich would get to that and indeed he does.

Tillich says that the Christian claim that the new being has appeared in Jesus as the Christ, that claim is paradoxical. In fact, he says it constitutes the only all-embracing paradox of Christianity. Now, Tillich says in order to understand this, we need to be clear about what he means by paradox and in order to understand what he means by paradox, we have to distinguish it from some other ideas with which we might confuse it. Well, what are those ideas? Well, Tillich says that paradox is different from the reflective rational. Now here Tillich is referring to the realm of technical reason. Here we’re talking about the kind of thinking that follows the laws of formal logic. Tillich says the paradoxical does not destroy the formal function of logic and the formal rules of logic or thinking that follows it, but it is different from the reflective, the rational kind of thinking.

In addition, paradox is different than the dialectical. Now dialectical thinking is rational, Tillich says; it is not paradoxical. By dialectical, Tillich means the tension between polarities in a concept and the movement between those polarities. The idea here follows very definitely the notion of dialectic that we saw in Hegel and that we’ve seen at work in a number of contemporary theologians and philosophers. So that which is paradoxical is not dialectical. Tillich then says paradox has to be distinguished from the irrational. Tillich says the theological paradox is not irrational; it’s not something that’s contrary or against reason. Paradox, he says as well, is not the absurd. Now the absurd, in the way that
Tillich defines it, has the idea of the grotesque and the ridiculous. Now Tillich says the paradox of the Christian message is surely not absurd in that sense. It’s not grotesque, it’s not ridiculous.

Well then, finally, paradox is to be differentiated from nonsense. Nonsensical propositions, Tillich says, are propositions which have no meaning semantically. If you look at them, you can’t figure out at all what the utterer or the writer was trying to say. You don’t even begin to have a clue. But Tillich says the paradox is not nonsense, it’s not nonsensical in the sense of nonsense.

Well, then how are we to understand the idea of paradox? Tillich says that paradox is to be understood in the literal sense of the word **paradox**. And paradox comes from Greek words, *para* and *doxa*. Tillich says that is paradoxical which contradicts or is different from the *doxa*. The *doxa* is the opinion which is based on the whole of ordinary experience.

Now on page 92 of volume 2 of *The Systematics*, Tillich explains how it is that Christian paradox fits in with this notion of paradox. And let me read this to you. I think it will help you to understand what he has in mind. Tillich says, “After this limited discussion of the concept of the paradoxical, we must state in affirmative terms that the concept should be understood in the literal sense of the word. That is paradoxical which contradicts the *doxa*.”

D-O-X-A. “The opinion which is based on the whole of ordinary human experience, including the empirical and the rational. The Christian paradox contradicts the opinion derived from man’s existential predicament and all expectations imaginable on the basis of this predicament. The ‘offense’”—offense is in quotes—“given by the paradoxical character of the Christian message is not against the laws of understandable speech, but against man’s ordinary interpretation of his predicament with respect to himself, his world, and the ultimate underlying both of them. It is an offense against man’s unshaken reliance upon himself, his self-saving attempts, and his resignation to despair. Against each of these three attitudes, the manifestation of the new being in Christ is judgment and promise. The appearance of the new being under the conditions of existence, yet judging and conquering them, is the paradox of the Christian message.” And I might just interject here that it’s a paradox because under the conditions of existence, there’s never been anyone else who’s been able to judge or conquer the conditions of existence, that is, the conditions that show that we’re estranged from our essence, from our potentiality, but the new being does judge and conquer
that estrangement. And in so doing, it is different than anything that we are accustomed to.

Well, picking up with what Tillich says, Tillich then says, “This is the only paradox and the source of all paradoxical statements in Christianity. The paradoxical statement that the situation of the Christian is simul peccator, simul justus, at the same time unjust and just, namely justified, that paradoxical statement that tells us of the Christian situation,” Tillich says, “is not a paradox beside the Christological paradox that Jesus is the Christ. Historically and systematically everything else in Christianity is a corroboration of the simple assertion that Jesus is the Christ. This is neither irrational nor absurd and it is neither reflectively nor dialectally rational. But it is paradoxical, that is against man’s self-understanding and expectation. The paradox is a new reality and not a logical riddle.”

Well, then on page 94, I think there’s also a very important section where Tillich talks about Christ’s nature, and I think this also tells you something of the paradox to which Tillich is speaking. Tillich says, “It is essential man who represents not only man to man, but God to man, for essential man, by his very nature, represents God.” Tillich here is talking about Christ as essential man. “He represents the original image of God embodied in man, but he does so under the conditions of estrangement between God and man. The paradox of the Christian message is not that essential humanity includes the union of God and man; this belongs to the dialectics of the infinite and the finite. The paradox of the Christian message is that in one personal life, essential manhood has appeared under the conditions of existence without being conquered by them. One could also speak of essential God-manhood in order to indicate the divine presence in essential manhood, but this is redundant and the clarity of thought is served best in speaking simply of essential manhood.”

Well, that suggests something to us of the nature of the Christian paradox and also it tells us how Tillich understands the person of Jesus Christ. And in the next paragraph following the one I just read to you, Tillich then goes on to explain the meaning of the incarnation, and we’re going to see that what he says about that fits precisely with the portion from page 94 that I just read to you. Let me then share with you what Tillich says about the incarnation.
Tillich says that the subject of the incarnation is often said to be God and then it’s claimed that God has become man. By the subject of the incarnation, he means the person who became incarnate. And Tillich says that oftentimes people think that the person who became incarnate is God and then we say, *Well, God has become man.* Now, Tillich says that to say this is not paradox, but in fact, it’s nonsense. We don’t have a clue as to what this means. Now, I think you can understand how this is essentially the case for Tillich when you think of what he means by God, the ground of being or being-itself. Now how in the world could that possibly become a human being? You can see why Tillich says, “That to think of the incarnation in those terms is to think of something that’s not a paradox, but is nonsense.”

Well, then how should we think about all of this? Well, Tillich says that the word *God* in this phrase, “God has become man,” points to ultimate reality and, of course, as I just suggested to you, the one thing that God cannot do is cease to be God and, of course, if we say “God became a man,” and we think that God, ultimate reality, is turning Himself into a man, then we’re really saying something that’s nonsense. Well the better way to talk about the incarnation, says Tillich, is to say that the *Logos* (and *Logos* here is capitalized, L-O-G-O-S), the *Logos* became flesh. Now what in the world does that mean? Well, Tillich is more than happy to elucidate this for us. He says the term *Logos* is the principle of defined self-manifestation in God as well as in the universe. So *Logos* is not God. It’s not identical with being-itself, but it is the principle of divine self-manifestation.

Tillich then says, well, what about the word *flesh*. Well, the word *flesh* in the phrase, “The *Logos* became flesh,” doesn’t mean a material substance, but it stands instead for historical existence. The term *became* in the phrase, “The *Logos* became flesh,” points to the paradox of God participating in that which did not receive Him and in that which is estranged from Him. So, “*Logos* became flesh,” means that the principle of divine self-manifestation was here under the conditions of historical existence. Well, you say, that’s not terribly illuminating. Are we being told here that a person became a human being? No, we’re not being told that. Are we being told that a principle or a force? Well, it sounds more like that, but it’s not entirely clear as to just what Tillich means is going on in Jesus Christ.

Well, Tillich says, though, that this idea, that “The *Logos* became flesh,” is not a myth of transmutation, as he believes that Orthodox
theologians take it. In other words, that somehow or other that which is divine is transferred, it’s changed into that which is human. Clearly he does not understand the Orthodox theological position at that point, but he’s saying that his understanding of the incarnation is not a myth of transmutation, but he says it is the assertion that God is manifest in a personal life process as a saving participant in the human predicament.

Now, I don’t know whether you find that to be terribly illuminating. I think it tells us certain things because Tillich has told us what this doesn’t mean, but it’s not abundantly clear as to exactly how this sets forth for us the nature of Jesus Christ. As you continue to move through what Tillich says about Christ, you get more and more the impression that Tillich sees Jesus Christ as a human being who happened to have this special kind of being, this new being, in which the estrangement between existence and essence is overcome. And that new being is the divine Logos, it’s the divine part of Jesus, but it’s not really totally conjoined, at least you don’t get that impression as you read Tillich. It’s not totally conjoined with the humanity in Jesus, so you do, as you read through Tillich, at least as I read him, I am led to get the impression that he views Christ more as a human being who tended to carry around that which was the divine, but you don’t have a genuine union of God and man in Christ. Well, you see whether you think that as I continue with Tillich’s explanation of Christ and as you do your reading of Tillich and see what he says about Christ.

Well, Tillich next turns to discuss Jesus as the Christ. And remember that this is still part of his discussion of the reality of Christ. He’s talked in that section of his theology about the symbol of Christ. He then, we saw, talked about the paradox in Christian theology. Then we talked about the meaning of the incarnation, all of this to elaborate what Tillich has to say about the reality of Christ. Now Tillich comes to discuss Jesus as the Christ. And this is still part of his overall discussion of the reality of Christ.

Well, what does he have to say about Jesus as the Christ? Tillich, first of all, turns to the name Jesus Christ. Tillich says that Christianity is what it is through the affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth who has been called the Christ is actually the Christ. Now, notice what he is not saying. He is not saying that Christianity is what it is because Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, but he is saying that Christianity is what it is because people have said that Jesus of Nazareth, who’s called the Christ, is really the Christ. In other words, Christianity is what it is because people have understood
Jesus in a certain way. It’s not what it is because Jesus really is the way people have understood Him, but it is what it is because people have understood Him a certain way.

Well, what is that certain way that they’ve understood Him? They have understood Him to be the Christ, namely, the One who brings the new state of being, the One who is the bearer of the new being. Well, Tillich then says that Christianity was not born with the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. As a matter of fact, the Christian religion was born on the occasion when Jesus was first identified as the Christ. And for Tillich, the key event is the confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi when he says to Jesus, “Thou art the Christ.” Do you remember Jesus was asking His disciples, “Well now who do they say I am? Who do people think I am?” And one or another of an answer was given, “They think you’re a prophet.” “They think you are from God.” “They think you are some special religious leader.” Jesus says, “But who do you say I am?” And Peter says, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Tillich says at that point where someone actually said that they understood Jesus of Nazareth to be the Christ, the bearer of the new being, that’s the point where Christianity was born.

Well, the event then, according to Tillich, on which Christianity is based really has two sides to it. The one side is the fact, the historical fact, which is called Jesus of Nazareth, that human being who lived almost 2,000 years ago. But then the second side of this event is the reception of this fact by those who received Him as the Christ, the reception of Jesus as the Christ, the new being, the conqueror, if you will, of existential estrangement. That acceptance of Him, that reception of Him in that way is crucial, says Tillich, for Jesus to be the Christ. If Jesus of Nazareth had not been received as the Christ, then He might have been remembered, Tillich says, as a historically and religiously important person, but no one would have thought of Him as the new being, the Christ. He would have been preliminary to it, even if He had claimed to be the Christ. So the event upon which Christianity is founded is a historical fact. There was a person, but then, secondarily, and really even more importantly as we’re going to see, the fact that this historical being, this historical person, was understood to be the bearer of the new being. He was received that way.

Well, Tillich then says, let’s talk about the name *Jesus Christ* itself. And I think with this I will end our discussion for today. “Jesus Christ,” says Tillich, “is not an individual name consisting of a first name, ‘Jesus,’ and second name, ‘Christ.’ Instead Jesus Christ
is the combination of an individual name, ‘Jesus’ with the title, ‘The Christ.’” Well, let’s look at each part of that name. “Jesus,” he says, well that’s the name of a certain man who lived in Nazareth between the year 1 and 30 AD approximately. “The Christ,” well Tillich says that’s a title that expresses in the mythological tradition a special figure with a special function. Well, once you realize the meaning of these two different parts of Jesus Christ’s name, then Tillich says the most accurate way to understand the name Jesus Christ is to understand it as meaning Jesus who is called the Christ—or if you will, Jesus who is the Christ, or again, Jesus as the Christ or simply, Jesus, the Christ. Well this, Tillich says, is the paradox of the Christian message. The paradox that must constantly be reemphasized, namely, that the human being, the man Jesus is called the Christ. Well, you might say, what does this mean about the historical Jesus? Well, in our next lecture, we’re going to pick that up and see what Tillich has to say about the historical aspect of Jesus as the Christ.