PRIMER

in the flesh

issue 12 – *the doctrine of the incarnation*

Understanding and celebrating the person of Christ

Previous issues of *Primer* explore Scripture, Sin, Gender & Sexuality, Justification, the End Times, Sanctification, Apologetics, the Attributes of God, the Trinity, Spiritual Warfare, and Humanity.

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The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches is a Charitable Incorporated Organisation registered in England and Wales with charity number 1168037 and in Scotland with charity number SC047080.

Oak Hill College, Chase Side, London, N14 4PS - *oakhill.ac.uk*

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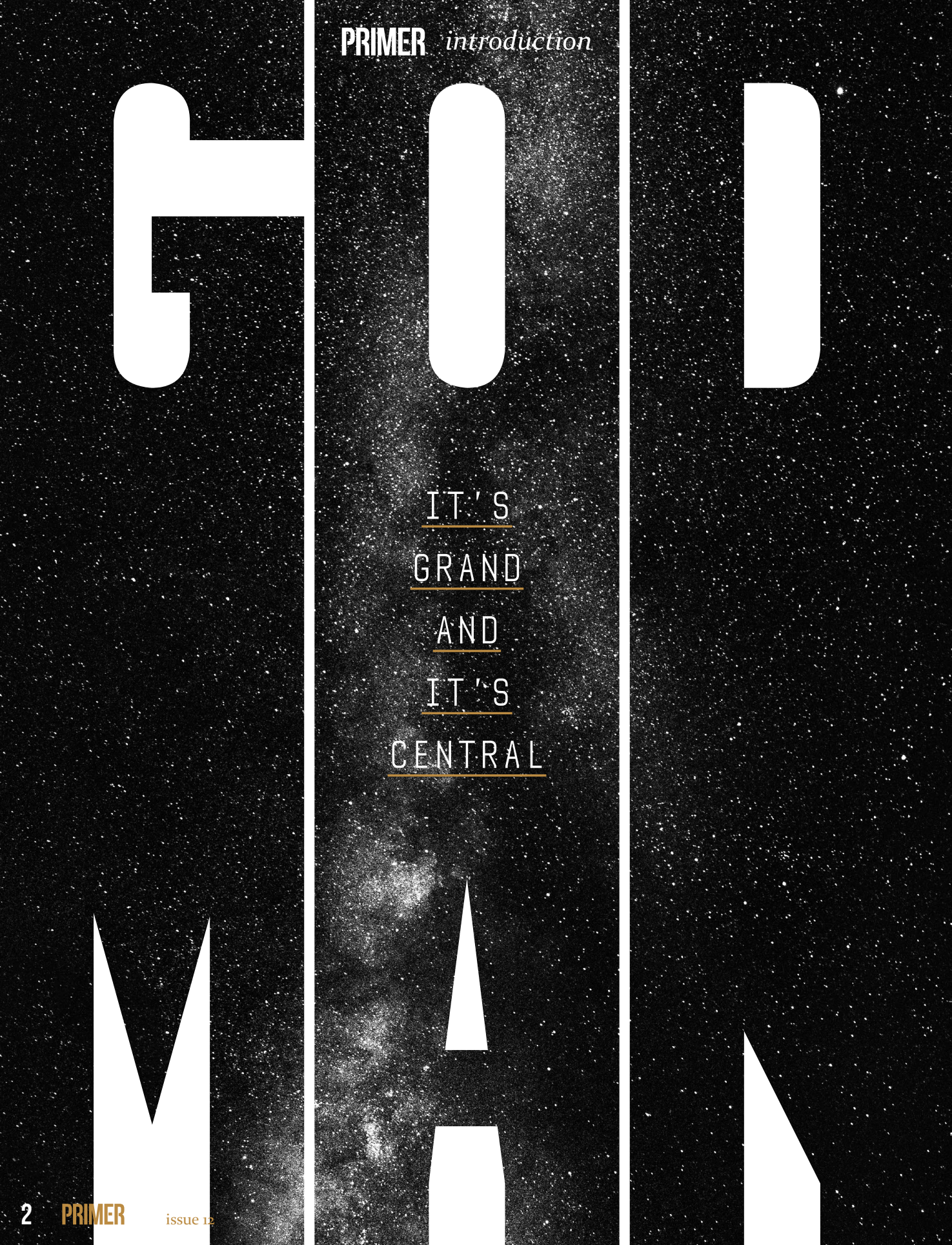
ISBN: 978-1-913896-39-3


GOD
IT'S
GRAND
AND
IT'S
CENTRAL
MAN

"THE CENTRAL MIRACLE ASSERTED BY CHRISTIANS IS…"

WHAT?

I think I'd be tempted to say the resurrection, and there's a pretty strong case to be made. After all, that is the great turn, when the descent of the Son becomes ascent. Having come down as far as the tomb, now he begins the climb towards that throne above every throne.

But that's not how C. S. Lewis finished his sentence.

> "The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. They say that God became Man. Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this…
>
> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (Glasgow: Collins, 1960), 112.

"God became Man." The words don't strike us as remarkable perhaps, but linger on the thought for the moment and you start to see why C. S. Lewis calls it "the central miracle" and "the Grand Miracle." It is God's great entrance onto the stage. *He* has entered the building. Every other miraculous birth in Scripture was a warm-up act for this. Every reversal of fortune and victory in the face of overwhelming odds in Israel's long history was a trailer for this. Every promise that God will dwell with his people, and once more walk with humanity in the cool of the garden turns on this. The Word made flesh.

In the beginning God made man. And now in the incarnation we see God made man. In that marvellous moment everything becomes possible; inevitable even. Every miracle Jesus performed follows from this central miracle, just as surely as summer follows spring. The empty tomb is already contained in Mary's womb.

And so it's about time we turn our attention to the Grand Miracle in *Primer*. When theologians reflect on the incarnation they often make a distinction between the *person* and *work* of Christ. They cannot be separated of course, but it can be helpful to distinguish the questions of

who and what Jesus Christ is, from debates about the work he came to complete.

In this issue we will focus on the first – the person of Jesus Christ. It makes sense to start there, and it is probably true that as evangelicals we have devoted more time to describing what Jesus accomplished than to contemplating who he is. That's not surprising, given the need to defend the substitutionary work of Christ in the last century or so. But that can mean that we have lost touch with some of the church's best resources for understanding the person of Christ. As we'll see, those resources can provide the deepest defence against misunderstandings of Jesus' work, and they can fuel our worship of the Word who became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us.

We begin in the four gospels, where Greg Lanier explores the varied ways in which they testify to Jesus's divine and human natures and teach us to hold them together. Next we go a little deeper into the interpretation of those texts with Chris Stead, asking how the early church understood and protected "the central miracle" in its creeds and confessions. Here we'll get an introduction to many of the key theological terms, major debates, and heresies to which we should be alert.

From confessions, we turn to Maximus the Confessor. Garry Williams's article draws on this early church hero to connect the incarnation to our salvation, demonstrating how Jesus Christ had a divine and a human will, and why that matters for our salvation.

If there's some steep climbing to be done in the first half this issue, the second half is designed to help us all enjoy the view. In our regular "Something Old" piece, Suzanne McDonald introduces us to John Owen on the "beatific vision" – the idea that our eternal reward and joy will be to behold the incarnate Son of God. Next, Nathan Weston helps us see how the incarnation in Hebrews 2 addresses our fear and shame in the face of a hostile culture, and puts strength in our steps. And then finally we'll reflect a little on "incarnational ministry." Every issue of *Primer* wants to model the move from theology to ministry, but it's not as simple as saying "Jesus was incarnate and so we should be too." Our final article will therefore ask how the unique incarnation of the Son relates to our ministry and witness.

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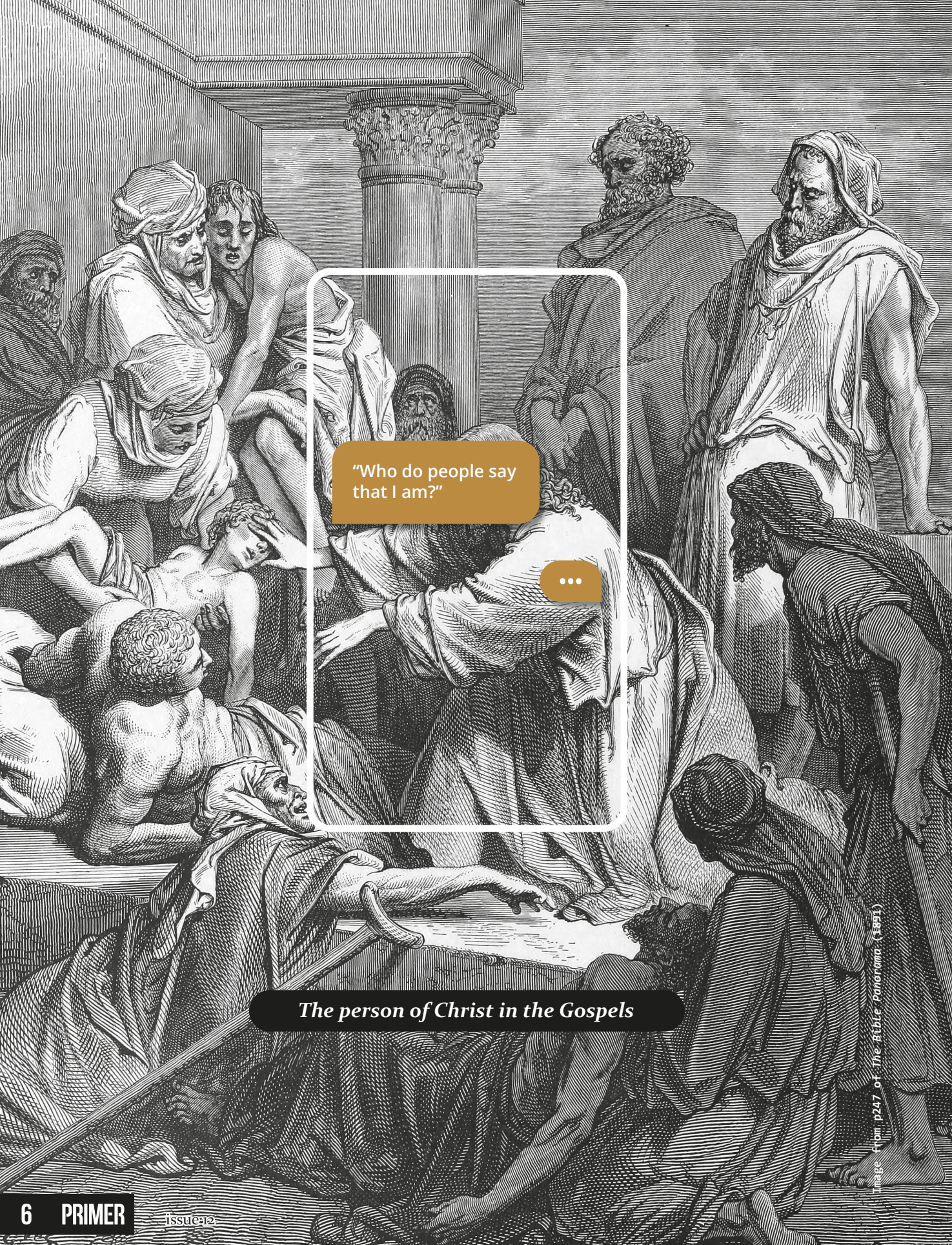
"The Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as this truth of the Incarnation."

J.I.Packer, *Knowing God*



The person of Christ in the Gospels

Image: from p247 of *The Bible Panorama* (1891)

From the moment Jesus begins walking the dusty roads of Galilee and Judea, teaching the kingdom and healing many (Matt 4:23), the question on people's minds is this:

who exactly is this man?

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Various bystanders and crowds puzzle over him. Is he "one of the prophets" from old (Matt 16:14)? Is he Elijah returned in the flesh (Mark 6:15)? Is he *the* prophet (John 7:40)? Is he the "Christ" or "Messiah" (John 7:41)? Herod is intrigued about this new person he keeps hearing about (Luke 9:9). Pilate pushes Jesus to identify himself (John 18:33) and asks, "Where do you come from?" (John 19:9). And Jesus himself puts the question on the table when he asks who the crowds claim him to be – and then pointedly asks his apostles, "Who do you say I am?" (Luke 9:20).

Who is Jesus? The answer to this question defines entire religions. It may very well be *the* question. Indeed, answering the question about the *person* of Jesus – that he is fully God and fully man, in all that both natures entail – sits at the heart of Christian orthodoxy. But do the Gospels bear out these orthodox claims? Or did these ideas come later?

For example, the Nicene Creed (around AD 325) states that Christians believe in "One Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God. … He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary."

This issue is key, because the Gospels are typically the first place people turn to explore Christianity. They are where we most closely meet Jesus face-to-face. And they are often a battleground over whether Jesus is *just* a man or something more.

In what follows I will outline the Christology of the Gospels. This is no small task (89 chapters, ~3,800 verses), and there are several ways it could be done. But I want to respect how the Gospels are narratives, putting us in the shoes of those who grapple with the identity of Jesus first-hand. Though the epistles begin to systematise things a bit more, the Gospels present the humanity and divinity of Jesus interwoven and progressively unveiled as he walks the earth. One moment he

For example, Rom 1:1–3; 1 Cor 8:6; Phil 2:5–11; Col 1:15–20; 1 Tim 3:16; Hebrews 1–2.

is called "teacher" – the next he is calming the storm. It is not yet arranged tidily with clear labels. Perhaps that is the point.

I will explore how the person of Jesus unfolds in the Gospels through five perspectives or witnesses. Each witness adds a layer of paint to the cumulative portrait of Jesus, with – to stretch the metaphor – distinct pigments of humanity and divinity. In the concluding section I will step back to summarise the resulting picture.

Taking a cue from the "witness" theme in John 1:15; 5:31–37, 39; 8:14, 18; 15:26; 21:24.

Witness of the people

The various individuals/groups who interact with Jesus in the Gospels are, in a way, intriguing reflections of ourselves. What would it have been like to encounter him in the flesh, without the benefit of centuries of church history? To be "foolish… and… slow to believe" (Luke 24:25) one moment and have "our hearts burn within us" (24:32) the next?

Though the crowds can be fickle, the religious elite unbelieving, and the disciples hard-hearted – they nevertheless bear witness to important aspects of the person of Jesus, both human and divine.

Humanity

We can begin with the obvious but important evidence that people interact with Jesus as a *real man* in the Gospels. They lose him in the crowds (Luke 2:43-44), touch him (Matt 9:20), eat with him (Matt 9:11; 26:26), lodge with him (John 1:39), complain when he is sleeping (Matt 8:24-25), feel his hands wash their feet (John 13:5), and more. These tender details express what it means that the Son took on flesh.

These *sensory* experiences of Jesus are accented in 1 John 1:1: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."

What about more direct indications of his personal significance? Frequently Jesus is called "**rabbi**" or "**teacher**" by his close associates (Peter, Mark 11:21; Judas, Matt 26:49; Mary, John 20:16) but also people he has healed (Mark 10:51), Jewish inquirers (Nicodemus, John 3:2), and opponents (Matt 12:38; 22:23–24). Right out of the gate the people recognise his excellent teaching ability (Mark 1:22).

But his reputation quickly ramps up as people witness him exceeding what any normal rabbi can do, leading to speculation that Jesus is not just a teacher but a **prophet** of some significance: "A great prophet has appeared among us" (Luke 7:16), or "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world." (John 6:14). This is a high claim – it even affords Jesus short-term protection from adversaries (Matt 21:46) – but does not in itself surpass the status of John the Baptist, who is also esteemed as a great prophet (Matt 11:9; 14:5; Mark 11:32).

However, John the Baptist himself claims that Jesus is "more powerful than I" (Mark 1:7). How so? He designates Jesus "the **Lamb of God**" (John 1:29, 36) – leaving it to the reader to sort out what this means as the Gospel progresses. But he also likely has in mind Jesus's identity as Messiah/king, which John emphatically denies for himself (John 1:20; 3:28).

We see tell-tale signs when various people refer to Jesus as "**Son of David**," bringing to mind the dynastic promise made by God to Israel's great king (Matt 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30; 21:15). Davidic sonship leads to the supposition that he is perhaps the coming **king** of the Jews. The magi are the first to insinuate this (Matt 2:2), followed by Nathanael (John 1:49). The crowds connect the dots when Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey and burst into praise for their coming king (Luke 19:38; John 12:13). Even Pilate presses home the point, albeit ironically, by repeatedly calling Jesus "King of the Jews" and having him crucified under that title (Mark 15:2–26).

With Davidic lineage and rumours of kingship on the table, it is natural that people would suspect Jesus to be the **Messiah** ("Anointed One" or "Christ," Greek *christos* / Hebrew *mashiach*), the eschatological deliverer of Israel. The Gospels juxtapose the doubts and sarcasm of the religious/political leaders about whether Jesus is the "Christ" (Matt 26:63, 68; 27:22; Mark 14:61; Luke 23:2) with several clear affirmations by Simeon (at his birth, Luke 2:26), Andrew (early on, John 1:40–41), Peter (at a major turning point, Mark 8:29), and Martha (outside her brother's fresh tomb, John 11:27).

Eschatological = to do with the age to come. There is not a uniform idea of "Messiah" in Judaism in Jesus's day but rather disparate expectations. For a survey of the relevant Jewish texts, see Gregory R. Lanier, *Corpus Christologicum: Texts and Translations for the Study of Jewish Messianism and Early Christology* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2021).

For a helpful study of the historicity of these messianic claims, see Michael F. Bird, *Are You the One Who is to Come? The Historical Jesus and the Messianic Question* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

In summary, various people identify Jesus from a human perspective as teacher, prophet, and Messiah/king.

Divinity

Though they may not have yet fully grasped all the implications, certain people also witness to the divinity of Jesus in assorted ways.

John the Baptist cryptically acknowledges that Jesus ranks above him because he was "before me" (John 1:15, 30), using *prōtos* in a temporal sense to suggest that Jesus **existed before** the older relative and forerunner. John the Baptist's parents also make intriguing allusions to the deity of Jesus. Elizabeth claims that Mary is "the mother of my **Lord**" (Luke 1:43) – applying the Greek word *kyrios* (traditionally translating Adonai and YHWH in the Greek OT) to the unborn baby Jesus! Her husband Zechariah adds to this theme by using two **metaphors** – "horn of

This scene sets off a pattern particular to Luke's Gospel where the narrator refers to Jesus as "Lord" (e.g., 7:13, 19; 10:39; etc.); see C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006).

salvation" and "dawn from on high" (Luke 1:69, 78, CSB) – that are applied to God himself in various ways in the OT.

See further in Gregory R. Lanier, *Old Testament Conceptual Metaphors and the Christology of Luke's Gospel* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), chapters 2–3.

The religious leaders make accusations against Jesus that indirectly convey his **equality with God**. After Jesus forgives the paralytic, the scribes charge him with blasphemy, saying, "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7). Other Jews seek furiously to kill him because he is not only violating Sabbath but "making himself equal with God" (John 5:18). And others seek to stone him for blasphemy "because you, a mere man, claim to be God" (John 10:33). Each situation is dripping with irony. They think they are discrediting Jesus and certainly do not *believe* he is divine. But their reactions, to the attuned reader, show they are unwittingly onto something.

Perhaps the clearest indication that some begin to regard Jesus as *more than a Messiah* during his earthly life is the pattern of **worshipping him**. Within Judaism and Christianity, one does not worship mere men (like Moses) or even angels (Rev 22:8-9). Thus, worshipping Jesus would be a big deal.

See Larry Hurtado, *Honoring the Son: Jesus in Early Devotional Practice* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2018).

Granted, religious worship is not *always* in view when the Greek word for "bowing down" (*proskyneō*) is used with Jesus; it can simply indicate respect (e.g., Matt 8:2; 9:18; cf. Matt 18:26). However, some situations appear to involve real worship. We can start at the end and work backwards: upon his ascension the disciples "worship" Jesus (Luke 24:52); the disciples "worship" when first meeting him after the resurrection (Matt 28:9, 17); the men on the boat "worship" and call him "**Son of God**" (Matt 14:33); the formerly blind man believes and "worships" him (John 9:38); and the magi "worship" the new-born Jesus (Matt 2:11). The clear trajectory is one of (perhaps rudimentary) devotion to one whom they are beginning to see as more than human.

See Ray Lozano, *The Proskynesis of Jesus in the New Testament: A Study on the Significance of Jesus as an Object of προσκυνέω in the New Testament Writings* (London: T&T Clark, 2020).

The most vivid witness to the deity of Jesus among the people comes on the lips of Thomas. Though initially incredulous about the resurrection (John 20:24-25), he is convinced when he touches the hands and side of Jesus (20:27). He professes, "**My Lord and my God**!" (20:28). Not only is this the clearest confession of Jesus as God on the lips of an ordinary person in the Gospels, but it is intertwined with Jesus's humanity: two natures, one person, touched by Thomas, worthy of worship.

Questions about the person of Jesus swirl among the people, but already we see the seed of an awareness of his divinity.

Witness of angels & demons

Let us turn to the supernatural beings who feature in the Gospels: angels bear witness to Jesus's birth (Luke 2:9), resurrection (Matt 28:2), and ascension (Acts 1:10-11) – and demons regularly battle with him (Mark 1:32-34). As heavenly beings with insight into spiritual realities, they add much to the portrait of Jesus.

Humanity

Angels and demons beat humans to the punch in recognising Jesus's significance. Upon his birth the angels reveal Jesus as **saviour**, declaring "he will save his people from their sins" (Matt 1:21) and titling him "Saviour" (Luke 2:11a). The angels also state before he is even a day old that Jesus is **Messiah** and **king**: Gabriel informs Mary that her son will receive the "throne of his father David" (Luke 1:32-33), and the angelic host calls him "Christ" (Luke 2:11b). Even demons recognise that Jesus is the "Christ" (Luke 4:41).

We also glimpse the raw humanity of Jesus when the "angels attended him" during his wilderness temptation (Mark 1:13). The angels herald his kingly power – and aid him in a time of human need.

Divinity

In tandem with this awareness of Jesus's status as human deliverer, the angels and demons clearly recognise Jesus to be supernatural.

The angels are indispensable in comforting Joseph (Matt 1:20) and Mary (Luke 1:35a) that the surprising and seemingly scandalous **conception** of Jesus is actually through direct divine intervention. It is on this basis that they call Jesus "holy," "Son of the Most High," and "**Son of God**" (Luke 1:32, 35b). Moreover, the angels declare at his birth that Jesus is not only "Saviour" and "Christ" but, indeed, "**Lord**" (*kyrios*; Luke 2:11c) – the divine ruler over all.

Demons and Satan himself also call Jesus "**Son of God**" (Matt 4:3, 6; Mark 3:11; Luke 4:3, 9, 41). The former do so when they express fear that he has "come" – presumably from heaven, where they once were – to bring eternal torment upon them (Matt 8:29). The latter does so when he tempts Jesus to abuse his power/stature. Both contexts, then, lend "Son of God" a certain ring: they know him to be *Son* in a special way unmatched by ordinary men.

"Son of God" in the ancient Jewish and Roman worlds was somewhat flexible and could simply denote a king – we even see this equation ("Christ"="Son of God") in the Gospels (e.g., Matt 26:63). However, in Christian theology it also refers to more than this, namely, that Jesus fully partakes of the divine essence as Son. Arguably the angels use "Son" in *this* sense in the birth narratives, clarifying how he is born of Mary but son *of God* instead of a human father.

In short, angelic and demonic figures play an important supporting role in unveiling Jesus to be not only Saviour and Messiah – but also the supernaturally-conceived Son of God.

Witness of Father & Spirit

The creeds of the church are not limited to the person of Jesus but expand upon it in a Trinitarian way, through his relations to Father and Holy Spirit. Thus, it is important to trace how the first and third persons of the Godhead bear witness to Jesus in the Gospels.

For more on the Trinity in Christian theology, see *Primer 09: All Being Equal.*

Humanity

At Jesus's baptism the Holy Spirit **descends upon** him visibly like a dove (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22). This sign-act, in light of Isa 42:1 and 61:1, is the public anointing of Jesus to set him apart for messianic office. He is "full of the Holy Spirit" (Luke 4:1), who **leads him** into the wilderness and brings him out in power (Matt 4:1; Luke 4:14). Thereby, Jesus has an empowering intimacy *in his humanity* with the Spirit, with whom he shares eternal relation *in his divinity*.

Divinity

Yet the Holy Spirit's role extends beyond equipping and sustaining Jesus. Luke's birth narrative gives discreet insight into the nature of the incarnation: "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will **overshadow** you" (Luke 1:35). This verb "overshadow" (*episkiazō*) may evoke how the "glory" of the LORD "overshadowed" the tent of meeting (also *episkiazō* in Greek), signifying the presence of the divine (Exod 40:35). Whereas the Spirit "fills" others (Luke 1:15, 41, 67), he is the supernatural cause of Christ's earthly origination – stretching the category of "humanity" towards that of "divinity."

Furthermore, during Jesus's baptism and transfiguration the Father speaks from heaven, declaring him to be "my Son, whom I love" (i.e. Matt 3:17; 17:5). While others in Israel's past are called "son(s)" of God (e.g. Israel in Exod 4:23; Solomon in 2 Sam 7:14), no one but Jesus is declared "Son" by God's own voice from heaven – investing "Son" in these scenes with divine significance.

Though God the Son – to whom we now turn – has the most prominent role in the Gospels, God the Father and God the Spirit witness to his identity in key ways.

For more on the Trinitarian relations in the Gospels (John in particular), see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (Nottingham: IVP Academic, 2008).

Witness of the Son himself

In the fourth Gospel Jesus boldly declares, "Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid, for I know where I came from and where I am going" (John 8:14). While the data surveyed so far are important to the overall portrait of the person of Jesus, the proof of the pudding for many is what *Jesus* says and does. Does he present himself as divine? As Messiah? As simply a good moral teacher?

Humanity

From the outset, Jesus's ministry of teaching and healing signals that he is the eschatological **prophet**. His discourses mirror the role of Israel's prophets and, especially in the Olivet Discourse are heavily indebted to the symbols/prophecies of prophets like Isaiah, Daniel, and others. His parables likewise echo those of Israel's prophets. Some of his miracles (e.g. raising the widow's son in Luke 7:11-17) and even his "taking up" to heaven (Luke 9:51) echo scenes involving Elijah and Elisha (mentioned by name in Luke 4:25-26). He applies Isaiah's words about a Spirit-anointed prophetic figure to himself in Nazareth (Luke 4:17–21, citing Isa 61:1–2). And he identifies himself directly as a prophet, saying, "I must press on… for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!" (Luke 13:33).

This is a term for the passages in the Gospels where, from the Mount of Olives, Jesus predicts a future tribulation (see Matt 24-25, Mark 13, and Luke 21).

Predecessors to Jesus's teaching in parables can be found at 2 Sam 12:1-8; 14:4-7; 1 Kgs 20:38-43; 2 Kgs 14:8-10; Isa 5:1-7; Ezek 17:2-10; 19:1-9; 19:10-14; 20:45-49; 24:2-5.

Furthermore, Jesus reveals himself to be **priest** and **sacrifice**. He declares that he "give[s] his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). His monumental words during the Last Supper – "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20; cf. John 6:54-56) – establish him as priestly mediator through his own sacrificial death, echoing Exod 24:8 and Jer 31:31. Finally, prior to his ascension Jesus adopts the Aaronic priestly pose, lifting up his hands to bless his disciples (Num 6:22-24).

This theme is unpacked in Hebrews 4-10.

Finally, while Jesus does not go around Palestine broadcasting, "I am the Messiah," he nevertheless identifies as the **messianic king**. Early on he is rather subtle about it, stopping others from spreading the rumour (e.g. Mark 8:30; Luke 9:21) or only alluding to it indirectly (Mark 12:35). Approaching Jerusalem, he indirectly signals it through his messianically-charged deeds, especially mounting an unridden colt (Matt 21:1-10) and cleansing the temple (Mark 11:15-18). But once he is able to accomplish

For a summary of the so-called "Messianic Secret" in the gospels, see 'Why Did Jesus Command Others to Be Silent About Him?' on *thegospelcoalition.org*.

what *he* means by "Messiah" – namely, that he would suffer and die – he acknowledges it plainly. The high priest asks, "Are you the Christ?" and Jesus replies, "I am" (Mark 14:61-62). Pilate asks, "Are you the King of the Jews?" and Jesus replies, "You have said so" (Mark 15:2). And upon his resurrection, Jesus twice points to himself as the "Christ" foretold in Scripture (Luke 24:26, 46). The angels state it at his birth; the people suspect it during his life; and Jesus adopts the title when he accomplishes the mission.

Jesus's reply is an indirect way of affirming Pilate's statement.

In sum, Jesus testifies to his fulfilment of the human offices of prophet, priest, and king.

On Jesus's threefold office see Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 1.3.8-17; John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.15; Heidelberg Catechism Q.31; Westminster Larger Catechism Q.42-45.

Divinity

If Jesus does not shout "I am the great prophet and king" at every turn, even less so does he make the direct claim, "I am God!" As sceptics are quick to point out, Jesus never applies the term *theos* (God) to himself in his earthly ministry. But does that mean he did not think he was fully divine? Is it something the later church invented? We can trace a handful of ways that Jesus does, in fact, present himself as fully divine.

For this sceptical view, see Bart Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2014). For a survey of the counterevidence, see Greg Lanier, *Is Jesus Truly God? How the Bible Teaches the Divinity of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020).

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus exercises **divine prerogatives**, doing things that traditionally only Israel's God can do.

- *He forgives the sins of others* (Mark 2:5). While anyone can forgive sins committed specifically against them, no one but God – as the scribes acknowledge (2:7, mentioned above) – can offer all-encompassing forgiveness.

- *He calms the storm* (Mark 4:35-41). No mere human has the power to make the weather obey, but only God alone (Ps 107:28-30; Isa 51:15; Jonah 1:15-16).

- *He walks on water* (Mark 6:45-52). Two details in 6:48 – *peripatōn epi thalassēs* ("walking on water") and *parelthein* ("pass by") – are unmistakable allusions to nearly identical phrasing in Job 9:8-11 (Greek), where God himself tramples the waves of the sea and passes by Job.

- *He penetrates hidden thoughts* (e.g. Luke 5:22; 6:8). God alone has the ability to pierce the hearts of others (Matt 6:18).

- *He raises the dead*. While other prophets (Elijah, 1 Kgs 17:21-22) or apostles (Peter, Acts 9:40) call upon God to revive the dead, Jesus alone can raise them from afar (Luke 7:1-10) and by a mere word (Mark 5:41; John 11:43). Indeed, Jesus declares he has the ability to "give life" (John 5:21) – a verb (*zōopoieō*) customarily applied to God (2 Kgs 5:7; Neh 9:6).

- *He sends the Spirit* (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 24:49; John 20:22). Though Elijah sends some of his "spirit" (lowercase) upon Elisha (2 Kgs 2:9), it is a unique prerogative of God to send the Holy Spirit upon his people (Isa 44:3; 59:21; Joel 2:28-29) – something Jesus himself executes.

These actions go beyond the "ordinary" miracles of, say, Moses or Elijah. They put Jesus in a class of his own, generating a cumulative force throughout the Gospels that leads us to ask, "Who can this person be but God himself?"

Moreover, Jesus's expression of a **sonship** relation to the Father transcends what mere humans possess. In a nearly unprecedented move, he refers to God not simply as "*our* Father" (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3) but "*my* Father" (Matt 26:53; Luke 22:29; 24:49; John 5:17; 6:40; 8:19). At the moment of his deepest need, he appeals to the Father not as "Lord" or "Most High" (as is common in Jewish prayers) but quite intimately as "Abba" (Mark 14:36). He asserts that he uniquely knows and reveals the Father in a way even the wisest cannot (Matt 11:25-27; Luke 10:21-22). And he reveals, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), and, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (10:38; 14:10-11). These claims underwrite what we mean by confessing Jesus to be *God the Son*.

This burst of praise is often called the "Johannine Thunderbolt," for it sounds like something we would see in the Gospel of John (e.g. 10:15) – but it is found in Matthew and Luke.

Jesus's famous "**I am**" statements also convey a sense of divine status. There are two types. Those featuring a predicate ("I am ____") function as mini-parables for how Jesus fills the greatest of human needs: "bread of life" (John 6:35); "light of the world" (8:12; 9:5); "gate for the sheep" (10:7-9); "good shepherd" (10:11-14); "resurrection and life" (11:25); "way… truth… life" (14:6); "true vine" (15:1). But several have no predicate; Jesus simply says "I am" (*egō eimi*). They occur in particularly important contexts (e.g. Mark 6:50; 14:62; John 4:26; 6:19-20; 8:24, 27-28, 57-58; 13:18-19; 18:5-6) and, in the Greek form, either allude to God's self-defining name (Exod 3:14) or to strong monotheistic claims (e.g. Deut 32:39; Isa 41:4; 43:10; 45:18).

Richard Bauckham comments, "Mark himself presents Jesus' ambiguous 'I am' sayings as implicit echoes of the divine self-declarations in Deuteronomy and Isaiah. John merely extends the category and, in some cases, eliminates the ambiguity. … The salvation Jesus gives is inseparable from Jesus himself and his divine identity" (*Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015], 194).

At various points Jesus shows awareness of his **preexistence**. The theme is somewhat subtle in Matthew/Mark/Luke, as when Jesus claims "I have come to bring fire on the earth" (Luke 12:49-51) or "give [my] life" (Mark 10:45). Such statements seem to presuppose he has "come" from *outside* the world to do something of cosmic significance *inside* it. The theme is more overt in John. Jesus repeatedly declares that he has come "from above" (3:31; 8:23) or "from heaven" (6:38, 41, 50), conveying *spatial* preexistence in the heavenly realm. Elsewhere he declares, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (8:58), and he even references "glory that I had with [the Father] before the world began" (17:5) – both of which convey *temporal* preexistence.

"Preexistence" refers to his real, though spiritual, existence prior to taking on flesh.

See Simon Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

It is significant that Jesus refers to himself as "**Lord**" occasionally: when he implies he is "Lord" of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28); when he requests his disciples to find a colt for him to ride into Jerusalem (Mark 11:3; Luke 19:31); and when he subtly claims to outrank David by alluding to himself, via Ps 110:1, as the one David calls "Lord" (Matt 22:41-45).

Finally, in the Great Commission Jesus makes a memorable twofold claim. Not only has he attained "All **authority** in heaven and on earth" – no mere man can claim sovereignty over "all" things – but he also includes himself under one divine "**name**" distributed across Father, Son, and Spirit (Matt 28:18-19).

Jesus, thus, gives plenty of evidence of his divine identity. In fact, one could argue that the way he does it speaks louder than calling himself *theos*, since that word is applied to angels (John 10:34, citing Ps 82:6), Paul and Barnabas (mistakenly, of course; Acts 14:11), and Satan (2 Cor 4:4). *Showing* himself to be fully divine is, on inspection, stronger than merely using the word "G/god."

We can add one other form of self-reference to wrap up this discussion: Jesus's use of "**Son of Man**" (over eighty times). While there remains debate about the significance of this term, multiple clear allusions (Matt 19:28; Mark 13:26; 14:62; Luke 21:27) show that Dan 7:13-14 is the appropriate background. Daniel sees "one like a son of man" enter into the heavenly throne room of the "Ancient of Days" and receive an eternal kingdom. When applied to Jesus it connotes not only humanity (since the "son of man" is contrasted with four inhuman "beasts") but also divine stature as eternal ruler, cosmic judge, and inhabitant of a heavenly throne. This use of Daniel in both revealing

Most church fathers typically interpret "Son of Man" in terms of Jesus's human nature (e.g. Ignatius, *Eph*. 20.2; Justin, *Dial*. 76.1; 100.3; Irenaeus, *Haer*. 3.10.2; 3.19.3; Tertullian, *Marc*. 4.10.6). However, there is more than meets the eye. Revelation 1:13-14 applies Jesus as "Son of Man" with the characteristics of the "Ancient of Days," effectively fusing their identities. The Old Greek tradition of Dan 7:13 has the "son of man" enter the throne room "as" (*hōs*) the "Ancient of Days." And in the Pseudepigrapha, *1 Enoch* 48.2-3 and *4 Ezra* 13.25-26 imply the Daniel-influenced "Son of Man" is perhaps preexistent. (The Pseudepigrapha consists of texts attributed to a variety of biblical characters, generally written between 200BC and AD200. They are not accepted by any church as canonical, but offer a helpful context in which to understand the New Testament.)

Image from p247 of *The Bible Panorama* (1891)

and concealing Jesus's identity leads to one final witness: Scripture itself.

Witness of Scripture

We have surveyed how all the character groups contribute to the cumulative portrayal of the Son in the Gospels. But there is one other witness that needs to be heard: Scripture itself. The evangelists engage the OT in a way that contributes greatly to how the person of Jesus should be understood.

For more on how the OT shapes the Christology of the Gospels, see Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016).

Matthew's account of the virgin conception is an illustrative starting point. He not only narrates the miracle but explains it by means of a citation of Isa 7:14, bringing together Jesus's **humanity** ("the virgin shall conceive and bear a son") and **divinity** ("Immanuel… God with us") as a tightly-integrated whole (Matt 1:22-23). Let us probe other select examples.

Humanity

The NT begins with Matthew's **genealogy** (Matt 1:1-17), which accomplishes several things. It roots the story of Jesus in the history of Israel. It specifies Jesus's ancestral link to David, which is key to Matthew's statement that Jesus is "the Christ" (1:16-17). It makes clear that Jesus is truly human through his mother, Mary. But through the shift from the active "begat" repeated throughout the genealogy, to the passive "was begotten," it signals that God is his true Father, not Joseph. Furthermore, Matthew solidifies Jesus's **messianic** status by explaining his Bethlehem birthplace through a citation of Mic 5:2, which prophesies a future ruler of Israel from David's hometown (Matt 2:6).

Matthew's actual phrase in Matt 1:1 is "book of the genealogy" (*biblos geneseōs*), which alludes to similar phrases in Genesis (e.g. 2:4, 5:1), and the details of the genealogy draw on the OT, too (e.g. 1 Chr 1-8).

The Gospels also frame Jesus as the end-times **prophet** – better than Moses – leading a new exodus. For instance, Matthew's early chapters are shaped in such a way that retraces Israel's history: Jesus escapes to Egypt (explained through Hos 11:1 and Jer 31:15 in Matt 2:15, 18), is baptised (like the Red Sea crossing), endures the wilderness for forty days (like Israel's forty years), and ascends a mountain to teach the Law (like Moses at Sinai).

In a complementary way, Luke presents Jesus as the final prophet appealing to Israel through an extended, ten-chapter travel narrative that occupies nearly forty percent of the entire Gospel (9:51-19:48).

Though Jesus cryptically foretells his death as way of reframing his messianic identity (e.g. Mark 8:31), the evangelists go one step further to ground his **suffering** in the OT. First, Matthew (8:17), Luke (22:37), and John (12:38) explicitly connect Jesus to the Isaianic "suffering servant" (Isa 52:13-53:12). Second, Matthew (27:39-43) and John (19:24) invoke the wording of Psalm 22 to show how Jesus fulfils the role of the righteous psalmist who suffers at the hands of the ungodly. These OT connections underlie Jesus's claim that the Scriptures foretell that "the Messiah will suffer" (Luke 24:46).

Divinity

The Gospel authors also provide intriguing glimpses at the divinity of Jesus through their OT exegesis.

First, John cites Isa 6:9-10 to explain why Jesus's miracles counterintuitively harden some people (John 12:40). This kind of reaction is exactly what God told Isaiah would happen to him in his own day. But John adds a fascinating comment: "Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him" (John 12:41). But when we read the rest of Isaiah 6, we find that Isaiah "saw" the enthroned LORD, whose "glory" (once in Hebrew, twice in Greek) fills heaven and earth (Isa 6:1-3). Thus, according to the apostle, what Isaiah was really seeing was the "glory" of "him" – that is, Jesus himself. It is a powerful suggestion of his **preexistence** as the Son in the heavenly throne room.

Second, Mark opens with a combined quotation of Mal 3:1 and Isa 40:3 (Mark 1:2-3). The first OT passage features the LORD promising to send a "messenger" who will "prepare the way before me." The second features a "voice" crying in the wilderness, "prepare the way for the Lord." In both, then, the forerunner announces the coming of *God himself*. But Mark reconfigures these quotations in a subtle way. John the Baptist fills the role of the "messenger"/"voice". And God remains the "I" who sends him. But Mark tweaks the quotations to introduce another person: God sends the messenger "ahead of *you*" to prepare "*your* way." This "you" can only be Jesus himself, whom John the Baptist precedes. The coming of God in Malachi and Isaiah is now the coming of Jesus. Mark, in sum, uses these two passages to express the **lordship** of Jesus as the God of Israel made flesh.

See also Matt. 3:3; 11:10; Luke 1:17, 76; 3:4; 7:27; John 1:23.

This leads to a third passage that captures the essence of orthodox Christology more clearly and profoundly than, perhaps, any other: the first eighteen verses of John. Throughout this intricate passage, the author weaves together phrasing from Genesis 1-2: "in the beginning," "light," "dark," "life," "men," "world," and "made." The description of the Son is staggering:

- He is distinct from the Father yet fully **God** (1:1).

John's use of "Word" (*Logos*) may echo Hellenistic (i.e. Greek-influenced) Jewish ideas but mainly points to the repetition of "God said" (from the Greek verb *legō*) to bring things into existence in Genesis 1.

- He is **preexistent** creator, who was already "in the beginning with God" and is, as "Word," the agent of the creation of "all things" and source of all life (1:2-4).

- He became **flesh** and dwelled among us (1:14).

Whether John's use of *monogenēs* (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18) should be translated "only" or "only-begotten" remains debated. What is clear is that Christ's divine begetting as the true "Son" of the Father is utterly unique.

- He is "the **only**[**-begotten**] God" who uniquely reveals the Father (1:18).

This text is a first-order witness to the Son's glory: fully God, yet clothed in human flesh. But I saved it for last to drive home how it is not an outlier – an invention by the fourth evangelist – but rather the mature expression of core ideas already found in the other Gospels.

Conclusion...

Though more could be said, these five witnesses construct the **narrative identity** of Jesus as it emerges cumulatively through his own actions/deeds and others' reactions to him in the Gospels. The people, angels/demons, Father/Spirit, Jesus himself, and Scripture each add something valuable to the portrait. Let us step back to view the whole, synthesised along four main christological patterns:

- **Roles and designations:** Jesus is given an array of titles/epithets reflecting who he is and what he does. He is a great *rabbi/teacher*. He is the eschatological, miracle-working *prophet*. He is the anointed *Messiah-king* and *saviour* from the line of David. He is the mysterious *Son of Man* yet also the *priest* who suffers and dies as the consummate *sacrifice*. What once were disparate OT and Jewish expectations – fuelling rumours among the populace as Jesus steps onto the scene – are unified in Christ's person. For good reason this same man is also called *Lord* and *God*.

- **Heaven-to-earth:** The preexistence of the Son is implicitly and explicitly signalled at various points – yet he is also the one who comes down from above to dwell in human flesh. That is, the incarnation is specifically that of a heavenly person.

- **Exalted sonship:** Though "Son of God" can be roughly equivalent to "Christ," the thrust of the Gospels reveal Jesus to be far more. He is the eternally-begotten Son of the Father, sharing in his glory before the world began. Yet Jesus's humanity enables him to reveal the Father in an unprecedented way.

- **Divine prerogatives:** The Gospel authors read the OT as a witness to Jesus's human role as well as divine status, even placing him in God's position in OT passages. Moreover, though Jesus eats, sleeps, sweats,

and weeps, he also exercises exclusive divine authority, from creation to calming the storm.

Along each of these themes we should note something incredibly important. The portrayal of the person of Christ in the Gospels is not a matter, as often (mis)construed, of finding "low Christology" here or "high Christology" there. The strands, even at the plot level, are integrated. When lepers or demons or Thomas encounter Jesus of Nazareth, they are encountering – and often recognising – God the Son as well. In the Gospel narratives, Christology "from below" and Christology "from above" cannot be divorced.

Perhaps this is what John, often billed as having the highest Christology of the four evangelists, is getting at when he states the purpose of his account: "that you may believe that Jesus is the **Messiah**, the **Son of God**" (John 20:31). In one person we meet human Messiah and divine Son.

For more on this theme of divine identity in the NT, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

The language of "low" or "high" Christology" is a way of describing the extent to which texts present Jesus's divinity. Generally, Mark is thought to be at the "low" end and John at the "high" end.

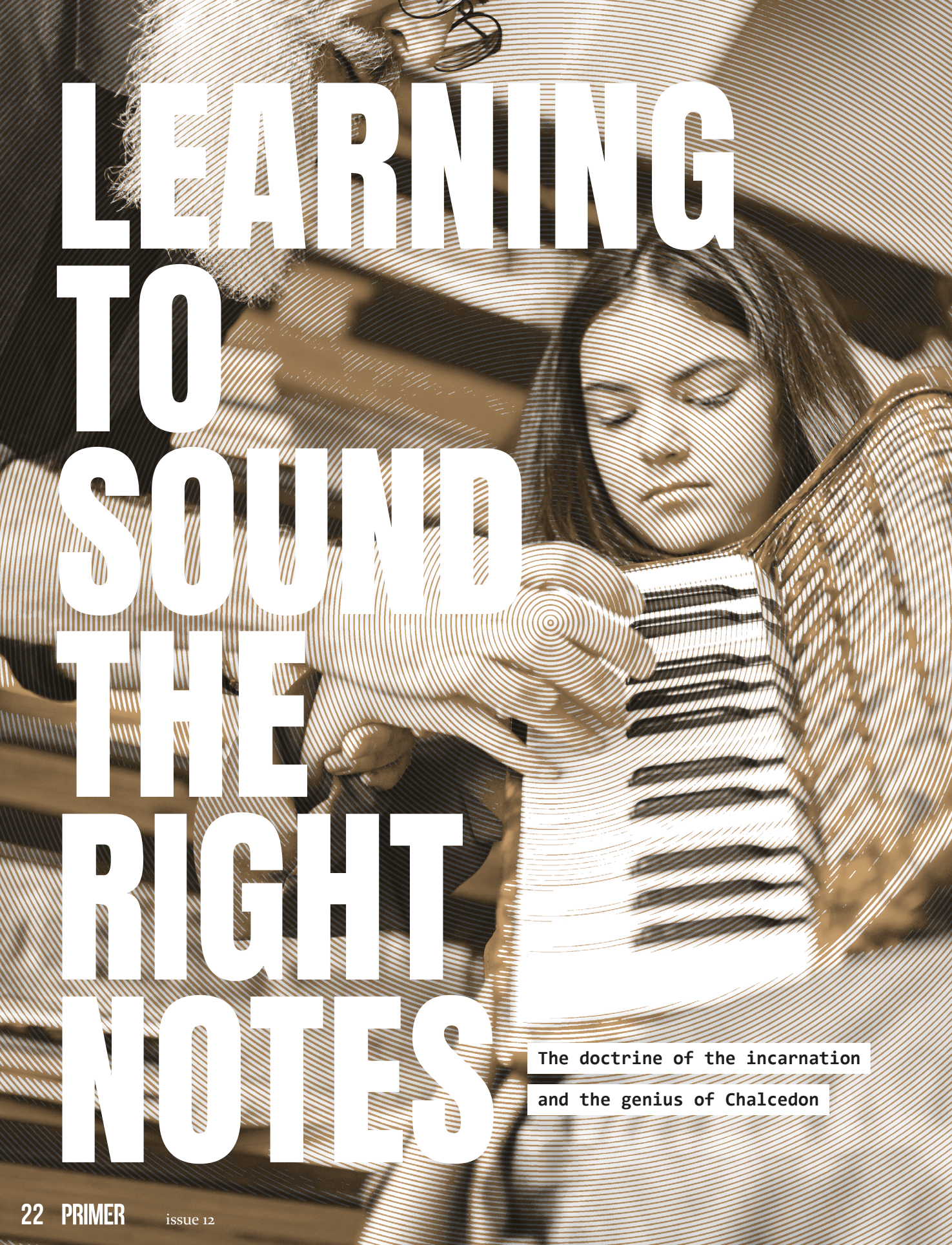
Questions for further thought and discussion

1. How can tracing the portrayal of Christ's identity as it unfolds (somewhat unsystematically) in the Gospel narratives be a helpful entry point for non-Christians?

2. Why does it matter pastorally that we hold in tension the stark humanity and the exalted divinity of Jesus Christ? Why *must* he be both?

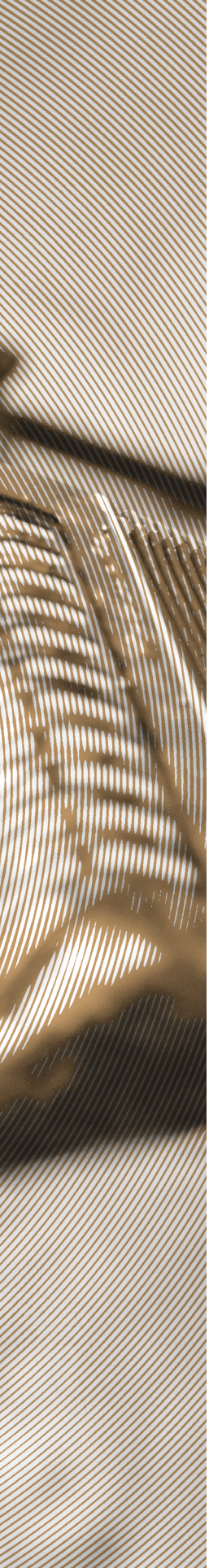
3. What do you find to be the most compelling indications of the deity of Jesus in the Gospels?

4. What aspects of the Christology found in the Gospels do you see further developed elsewhere (Acts, Epistles, Revelation)? Why does it matter that we see consistent patterns throughout the NT?



LEARNING TO SOUND THE RIGHT NOTES

The doctrine of the incarnation and the genius of Chalcedon



ONE OF SIMON PETER'S FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS CHRIST INTRODUCES THE STARTLING REALITY THAT HERE, BEFORE US, WE HAVE NO MERE MAN, EVEN THOUGH HE IS, TRULY, A MAN.

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In Luke 5, as the boat sinks under the enormous haul of fish provided by a word of authority from Jesus, Simon sees greater peril in front of him than mere drowning. He falls face-to-foot with the Nazarene carpenter and pleads for mercy. In a scene similar to Isaiah 6, the presence of the Holy One of Israel prompts fear and awe and the fisherman melts like an ice-cube in a furnace. And yet, like Isaiah's experience of the LORD, the one to be feared is one who offers comfort, and mercy. Instead of departing, Jesus draws close in grace and atonement.

Who is this in the boat? Indeed, *what* is he? These two questions form the heart of Christological conversation, and being able to answer them with precision and clarity is vital to faithful ministry. Jesus Christ, the man with clean hands and pure heart, the glorious king who ascends the holy hill, is at one and the same time the LORD of hosts (Psalm 24:10). Rightly describing this truth must always be constrained by careful attention to the biblical text; weighing passages and working through what must be true of Christ in order to account for the biblical witness. However, we are not beginning from scratch. The early church worked hard to understand these same Scriptures, seeking to honour the same Jesus with the same Spirit within them as helps us, and came to a settlement that offers a succinct summary of the biblical Jesus. Formulated by the Chalcedon council in 451AD, this definition of Christology has served as an authoritative statement across church traditions and affiliations, marking the orthodox boundaries for speaking about the person of Christ.

I propose to cover the same ground twice. My colleague, Matt Bingham, compares explaining doctrine to playing an accordion: with the accordion squeezed tightly together, you get a compressed view and can sound out the main notes; and then, you stretch it out, and allow some air in to let the notes sound for longer. Well, along those lines – the first section is the squeeze, the short sharp notes of Chalcedon's definition of Christology, with a brief note about the different missteps it seeks to correct. Then, drawing on John 1:1-18, I will go back over the same material, but this time letting in more air, filling more space, to think about the theological issues and implications a little more deeply. So, first: the squeeze.

1. THE ACCORDION SQUEEZE: CHALCEDONIAN CHRISTOLOGY

The definition offered by the council at Chalcedon in 451AD was intended to bring together all of the biblical material and make sense of its witness as a unity, and also to push back against various errors. Some of the biblical texts that needed accounting for were the Old Testament background and promises concerning the Messiah. Then there are the clear statements of the unqualified *deity* of Christ, alongside his full and real *humanity* expressed in a way that emphasises the *singularity* of this central character (i.e. at no point is the *one who* says 'I' as a man different from the *one who* says 'I' as God). And finally there is the *simultaneity* of both divine and human realities (i.e. both seem to be continually true for Jesus without one being cancelled or diminished by the other).

You could try Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology* (Collegeville, MN.: The Liturgical Press, 1983), who sets a great historical scene for Chalcedon. See also Gerald Bray, *God Has Spoken: The History of Christian Theology* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2014), 323-402, for a survey of the doctrine's development in its unfolding contexts.

I am not too interested, for our purposes, to enter into the specific political and ecclesial wrangling that happened in the run-up to Chalcedon, 451. This is not because the history is unimportant, but simply that we only have so much space, and I want to focus on the theological question. That said, the wording of the Chalcedonian Definition does engage specific proposals and beliefs about Jesus in decades prior to the council, and to that extent it is worth knowing some of the major personalities and pressures in order to make better sense of Chalcedon's priorities.

Christologies that couldn't affirm Jesus's complete deity (i.e. that he was fully God):

- **Arianism** – named after Arius, a 4th century presbyter who claimed that the Son was the first of God's creatures, this error covers a range of subordinationist teachings (in other words, views that refuse to say Jesus is God in the same sense that the Father is God).

- **Adoptionism** – this is also a kind of subordinationism, but holds specifically that Jesus was adopted as God's Son at his baptism, and received some sort of divine honour/power/prerogatives from then on – Paul of Samosata is a third century name often cited. The idea that deity was somehow bestowed upon the man Jesus at a point later in his life was also believed by, amongst others, the Ebionites, who thought that Jesus received deity as a reward for sinless living.

The views of this group are described by the early church Fathers Irenaeus and Origen.

Christologies that couldn't affirm Jesus's complete humanity (i.e. that he was fully man):

- **Docetism** – perhaps crudely put, this is 'seem-ism', namely that Jesus only seemed to be human. It sprang out of a Gnostic system of thought which treated physical matter as inherently evil, in contrast with the pure realm of spirit. The Son never became a man in reality, but used some human appearance to rescue fallen souls from a material world.

- **Apollinarianism** – this takes its name from the 4th century teacher who wanted to protect the deity of Christ, and so proposed that the divine second person of the Trinity simply replaced part of Jesus's human soul.

Christologies that couldn't affirm Jesus's singularity as one subject:

- **Nestorianism** – associated with a group of churchmen from Antioch, including Nestorius and his mentor Theodore of Mopsuestia, this teaching held that the deity and the humanity both had their own 'personal' reality. So when it came to Jesus, you can speak of 'the *one* assuming' as well as 'the *one* assumed'. The two natures are separate from each other, even as they are held together, with unfortunate implications for how many 'sons' Jesus actually is.

Christologies that couldn't affirm Jesus's deity and humanity as existing simultaneously without ceasing to be what they are:

- **Monophysitism** – 'one-nature-ism', this covers a few different flavours of error, all of them generally holding that in the incarnation, divine and human realities somehow blended, mixed, or mingled, so as to become one new natural thing. Prior to Chalcedon, Eutyches is the name most directly associated with this blending, as his Jesus ended up looking rather like some sort of super-enhanced human being (think of the demi-god Hercules, or Captain Marvel perhaps).

Some of the above errors were addressed at earlier church councils: Arius was condemned at Nicaea (325), Apollinaris at the First Council of Constantinople (381), and Nestorianism at the Council of Ephesus (431). However, at Chalcedon, a number of different loopholes were skilfully closed, and it is worth now hearing one of the passages where Chalcedon gets closest to offering a definition of orthodox Christology:

> Following the holy Fathers we teach with one voice that the Son [of God] and our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same [Person], that he is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, very God and very man, of a reasonable soul and [human] body consisting, consubstantial with the Father as touching his Godhead, and consubstantial with us as touching his manhood; made in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of his Father before the worlds according to his Godhead; but in these last days for us and for our salvation born [into the world] of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God according to his manhood. This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son [of God] must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably [i.e. unchangeably], indivisibly, inseparably, and that without the distinction of natures being taken away by such union, but rather the peculiar property of each nature being preserved and being united in one Person (*prosopon*) and subsistence (*hypostasis*), not separated or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only begotten, God the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Prophets of old time have spoken concerning him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ hath taught us, and as the Creed of the Fathers hath delivered to us.

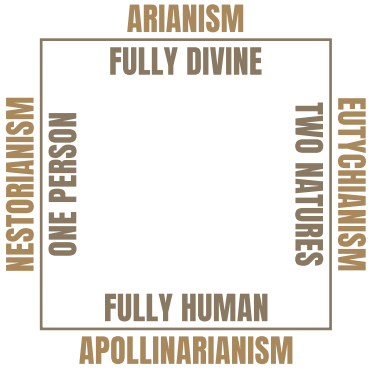
The text in brackets isn't original to the Chalcedonian creed but is supplied by modern editors to clarify the meaning.

Of the same essence.

A close reading of this reveals what is being denied and affirmed here. Divinity and humanity, distinct but not separate, united in the second person of the Trinity ("the only-begotten Son").

Eutyches gets a red card (no change or confusion in the natures that continue perfectly as what they are); Nestorius is dropped (no division or separation between the natures that exist in one, and only one, Person); Arius and his friends are off side (Jesus is God in the same sense the Father is God. And being "of a reasonable soul and body...consubstantial with us as touching his manhood" means that Apollinarians are sent off too, because Jesus possesses every human faculty. Here are some of the big shapes and emphases as set out in a helpful diagram:

I first came across this "Chalcedonian box" in Fred Sanders, "Chalcedonian Categories for the Gospel Narrative," in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 24.



As I said earlier, this does not answer all questions, and in fact seems to generate more: what did Jesus know? Could Jesus sin? (and if not, how is he really like *me*?) What does this mean for the cross? What, indeed, is a *nature*, and a *person*, as understood here? What does it mean to say that the Son 'emptied' himself (as Paul does in Philippians 2)? Is he somehow squashed into human nature? And so on.

Furthermore, there is no problem in admitting that this is quite precise, theological/philosophical language that is not all immediately taken from the Bible. Chalcedon is not attempting to undermine the mystery of the incarnation or improve upon Scriptural teaching, but rather to try and make sense of a whole range of truths within the entirety of God's word in order to appreciate the mystery. It helps us ask questions of our own assumptions that we bring to the text, and offers us a framework that is well tried and tested, and thoroughly biblical.

What follows now is an attempt to work through some of the above with a bit more air supporting the notes. We will turn to John's Gospel in particular – it is a foundational text for our Christology, and it always keeps our goal in view: life in his name (John 20:31), a life that finds its final home in the triune love of God (John 17:26).

2. THE ACCORDION STRETCH: JOHN 1:1-18

I've grouped the discussion around three points that arise from this passage:

a. It was *the Word who* became flesh (John 1:1-3, 14a)
b. It was *flesh* that the Word became (John 1:14b)
c. The eternal Son truly exists *as a man* (John 1:18)

I have borrowed and adapted this threefold schema from Thomas Weinandy, who uses it in a number of different writings on the incarnation. A clear example is in his essay 'Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation' in *The Theology of Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 30: "1. It is *truly God* the Son who is man… 2. It is *truly man* that the Son of God is… 3. The Son of God *truly is* man."

a. It was *the Word who* became flesh (John 1:1-3, 14a)

In the biblical material, there is a clear singularity of subject; there is only one person who is Jesus, and definitely one. But *who* is the person we're dealing with?

The synoptic gospel accounts start with Jesus's earthly life/ministry. In John, we see that his personal identity begins further back, even beyond Genesis 1:1. We cannot understand the identity of Jesus without starting 'back' beyond the beginning, in the eternal depths of the triune God. This is the ultimate ground of the gospel, the fullness of life and being *from which* Jesus comes, and John thinks it is important for us to place everything about Christ's earthly life into the context of his eternal identity as this Word and Son.

Jesus Christ is *no one* other than the Word, the second person of the Trinity. This name and identity carries with it two important truths. Firstly, we learn that the "Word was God," one who stands on the Creator side of the Creator/creature distinction (1:3). Here is a straightforward assertion of the deity of Christ. Jesus makes the startling claim that "before Abraham was, I am" (8:58), which is Jesus claiming *the* divine name, as explained in Exodus 3:14. Elsewhere, Jesus is spoken of as one with the same life as the Father who does the works of the Father. I will not dwell long on showing the deity of Christ, save to say that these straightforward identifications Jesus makes between himself and his Father is why the church calls him *homoousios*, or 'consubstantial', with the first person of the Trinity. Jesus shares the identity and function with the Father (and Spirit) as Israel's Lord and Saviour.

See Greg Lanier's article in this issue.

See Ian A. McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox, 2019), 126.

Secondly, "the Word *was with God.*" Here, the focus moves from God's being to the relations between the three who *are* that being. That these two ways of speaking about God are biblically legitimate can be seen again, for instance, in John 8, where just a few verses prior to Jesus's use of the 'I am', he says "'If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me" (v54). He can speak about himself plainly as God, but also as one related to the Father as one entirely *from* the Father. Perhaps most pertinently in John's Gospel, we have the statement in John 5:26 that "as the Father has life in himself,

so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself." As Son, he is and has the divine life and being, but he has it as a gift from the Father. This is known as the eternal generation of the Son; his relation to the Father as one begotten by the Father. This eternal reality is captured in the John 1:1 'Word', as coming from a speaker and manifesting the innermost reality of that speaker.

See Mark Smith's article in *Primer 09: All Being Equal*.

In short: *what* he is, is God, all the way down. But the way in which he is God is eternally with and oriented towards the Father, (the Greek phrase *pros ton theon* in John 1:1 likely expresses both those ideas) faintly begins to capture, an eternal way of being from the Father that is also somehow always being *toward* the Father, in love. Why does this matter? First, because we can be sure we have really seen one who is God! He truly is Immanuel. But further: why dwell on *trinitarian* realities? Because, quite simply, the Word has an infinitely realised and unchangeable 'personal' existence as the second person of the Trinity quite apart from, and 'before', the Incarnation. He is the perfect one to be the representative image of God in the incarnation because by eternal generation he is the essential image of the Father in God's own life.

John Owen, *The Person of Christ in The Works of John Owen* (ed. William H. Goold; London: Banner of Truth, 1965), 1:71-72.

Mother of God

The New Testament's emphasis on the *one* who has taken on flesh suggests that it is not so helpful to begin by thinking of Jesus as two things we need to combine. Instead, it is better to begin with his identity as the eternal Son who has taken a human nature to himself.

In the early church, there was a ferocious debate around just this issue, which centred on a phrase which you might frequently have heard on the lips of *Line of Duty's* DSU Ted Hastings: *"Mother of God!"* Perhaps surprisingly to Protestants who (rightly) oppose unhealthy patterns of venerating the blessed virgin, it is the *affirmation* of Mary as the 'mother of God' that leads us to a good Christology. In short: Mary is the mother of *one who is* God, namely God the Son, *according to his humanity*. The subject, the personal identity of the child in her womb, was never anyone else than the eternal Word.

Theodore and Nestorius: two natures = two persons

Two notable figures whose theology led to problems with the question of subject(s) were Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428) and Nestorius of Constantinople (386-451). Both were schooled in the thought of Antioch, a large city and an important seat of church authority. One of the fundamental features of Theodore's thought (and, by extension, Nestorius's) was that the nature of a thing is a total existing concrete being, which includes the *prosopon*, the particular manifestation of that nature. What this means is that when you have an instance of human *nature*, you

have a human *prosopon*, or person, which makes that instance a concrete individual. And so it goes with the divine nature, too. Therefore, if the incarnation is the union of a human nature with the divine nature, then each nature comes already packaged with its own personal identity; the man Christ Jesus is, in various respects, not simply 'one of the Trinity in the flesh'.

For Theodore, the union between divine and human in Christ was more like the Spirit dwelling in us, but to a greater degree. When it came to the sinless obedience of the man Jesus, the Word was united with him and gave him the Spirit in the womb, but was not the acting subject; instead, the Word *cooperated* with the Spirit-empowered moral performance of the man by urging him on. It was not the Son whose work as the second Adam saved us, except insofar as he cheered on the man Jesus.

Theodore was not formally condemned until over a century after his death, at the second Council of Constantinople, AD 553.

Nestorius assumed a very similar model to his mentor, Theodore. In order to keep God unaffected by creation, some distance was needed between the divine and human in Christ. Again, because nature and 'person' go together, you could not have both in Christ without also having two persons.

Nestorius's teaching on the unity of Christ, the 'who', focuses on the *prosopon* of presentation, an historical phenomenon; a name or word 'Christ' behind which the two *prosopa* of the natures, divine and human, were joined by agreement. The 'person' Mary bore in her womb, then, could not be called 'God' because there was also a human personal reality involved. Nestorius's proposal was that Mary should be called 'Christ-bearer' so as to indicate the fact that the Word "did not participate in the human events of Christ's life." Nestorius's opponents even accused him of reading different bits of the gospels as in one part speaking about the man separate from the Word of God, and others speaking of the Word as separate from the man Jesus.

Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 53.

The saving significance of Jesus's life comes into question. Again, similar to Theodore, the obedience by the man, as an acting subject in himself, is what matters. He cooperates with the Word, aligning his will with the divine will and offers an obedience to the law which is done without any special endowment. This is precisely because he serves as the example of the principle that "none will be crowned unless he strives lawfully." As has been pointed out by others, a Nestorian Christology answers a Pelagian account of humanity, namely that humanity has all it needs within itself for self-salvation. The Nestorian Christ is the example of a human, Jesus, working with the divine Son so as to be perfectly aligned and united with him and thus achieve glory.

Nestorius, *Bazaar of Heracleides*, 1.1.83.

Most fundamentally, an account of the incarnation that moves in these sorts of directions undermines the insistence that it is the Word who became flesh. We cannot say with conviction and celebration that *God* is here saving us, but rather that God is using a man to show us the way to be saved.

Cyril of Alexandria (378-444) – One person, at once God and man.

Cyril was a bishop in Alexandria, and the church remains in his debt for his sparkling clarity, despite some unsavoury personal and political characteristics in his opposition to Nestorianism. We'll spend more time with Cyril later. But for now, we note the relentless singularity of subject in his writings. In one place, his third letter to Nestorius, Cyril lists twelve things that need to be believed about Christ, including the affirmation of Mary as Mother of God (the one in her womb was God), the insistence that the union between natures cannot be reduced to one of honour or dignity, that the Word simply *is* now both God and man, that the Word of God suffered in the flesh, and so on. He explains:

> One and the same is called Son: before the incarnation whilst he is without flesh he is the Word, and after the incarnation he is the self-same in the body. This is why we say that the same one is at once God and man, but do not split our conception of him into a man separate and distinct, and the Word of God equally distinct, in case we should conceive of two sons. No, we confess that there is one and the same who is Christ, and Son, and Lord.

Cyril of Alexandria, *Explanation of the Twelve Chapters*, 2, in McGuckin, *Saint Cyril*, 285.

b. **It was *flesh* that the Word became** (John 1:14)

When referencing the Word "in the flesh", Cyril (and the apostle John) isn't only speaking about the meat of Jesus's body, but the entire human reality that the Son assumed. The emphasis on *flesh* reminds us that the Son didn't only appear to become human, but was willing to take on the fullness of embodied human life in his mission to seek and save the lost. He had to be made like his brothers and sisters in every respect, in all that it means to be human, in order to destroy all that holds us captive in this fallen world and render atonement (Heb 2:14-18); willingly born of a woman and subjecting himself to the law as a means to achieve *our* redemption and glory (Gal 4:4-7).

This fulness of humanity included what has been called "the scandal of particularity" – Jesus is not every human, but a particular human. Jesus was a Jewish male, born within a specific set of human relations, in a particular place at a particular time. Not everything about *his* life must be exactly replicable of *your* life in order to be a *truly human* life sufficient to qualify him as your high priest and saviour.

So, even as the humanity that the Son assumed was (and is) a full humanity, the way he assumed it, and the way he lived it out, were not like ours. Most pertinently of course, think of his conception. He was born of a virgin. Now is not the place to delve deeply into all that can (and has) been said on the theological significance of the virgin birth, but here is a (non-exhaustive) smattering of illuminations it sheds on the person of our Lord.

First, as a matter of biblical fidelity (Luke 1:1-4, 34-35) and creedal consensus (e.g. the Apostles Creed), failing to uphold the virgin birth marks a radical departure from historical orthodoxy:

> "...there can be no doubt that at the close of the second century the virgin birth of Christ was regarded as an absolutely essential part of the Christian belief by the Christian church in all parts of the known world... no gradual formation of the tradition can be traced, but [it] appears just as firmly established at the beginning of the second century as at the close.
>
> J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (London: James Clarke &Co, 1958), 3, 380.

Secondly, the virgin birth highlights that in Christ we have a singular and supernatural instance of humanity. Historically, it was believed that the lack of sexual reproduction in Christ's conception kept him free from sin; we may want to question that particular assumption! However, Christ's sinlessness is theologically linked to the virgin birth insofar as the nativity accounts (Luke in particular) place strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit's role in the miraculous conception, creating a humanity that from the very first is described as 'holy'. You could also argue that by being born out of the ordinary way, Christ didn't inherit a corrupted nature, nor find himself in the rest of humanity as represented (and condemned) in covenantal solidarity with Adam.

Finally, the virgin birth helps us appreciate that 'new thing' God was doing: an extraordinary birth for an extraordinary moment in redemptive history. The Spirit hovered over the waters at creation (Genesis 1:2), and now the Spirit hovers over the womb-waters at the moment when new creation dawns in the advent of Jesus. Redemption and glory do not come about by human effort, but by the sovereign grace of the God who does the impossible.

"Perfect in manhood... very man, of a reasonable soul and human body consisting"

Nevertheless, even as we consider the uniqueness of the way Jesus has his humanity, we must swing back to remembering that he nonetheless shares *our* humanity. In particular, as Hebrews says, Jesus was "in every respect... tempted as we are, yet without sin" (4:15). To be tempted, even sinlessly (i.e. without resulting in sin, nor having indwelling sin upon which temptation could latch), Jesus had to be furnished with the same

equipment as us. In body and soul, the Son needed all the faculties and capacities essential to humanity. We have minds, wills, and affections, all of which render us prone to wander in our fallenness. So, Jesus had to have each of these, in order to fulfil our calling as image-bearing humanity to offer himself entirely in worship and obedience to God.

Mind over matter – the angst of Apollinaris

Apollinaris wanted to protect the Son's full deity, and personal unity, and ended up compromising both. Apollinaris's thought and philosophical background are complex, but in essence, his Christological proposal was to see the human mind, the *nous*, replaced by the Word's divine spirit. Thus, the controlling force of Jesus's life was not so much the person of the Son giving shape to a complete human nature, but the Son's divine spirit directly controlling the lower parts of Jesus's soul and body:

> "...an invincible divine Nous, an inalienable will and a divine power, is ensouled in the flesh of Christ, thus making it sinless.
>
> Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition: Volume One – From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)* (trans. John Bowden; Atlanta, GA.: John Knox Press, 1965), 333.

Apollinaris had good intentions. He wants to preserve God's sinlessness, but it comes at the costs of Christ's full humanity and our salvation. Humanity fell in body and soul, in mind, will, and emotions, and if the Son did not take to himself every part of us that fell, then he could not put every part of us right with God. Gregory of Nazianzus famously said "that which is not assumed, is not healed", and that concern for the relationship between Christology and our salvation justified Apollinaris's condemnation of his teaching at Constantinople I in 381.

Jesus had a fully human intellect; we might well insist that Jesus had a fully human mind, and a fully human consciousness and knowledge. Now, the relation between mind, consciousness, and knowledge is a tricky one, and the issue of what Jesus knew *as a man* has been complicated through the ages. Texts like Luke 2:52, and Mark 13:32, demonstrate that Jesus's knowledge and intellect are as human as ours, and therefore limited and capable of growth. Yes, there were supernatural gifts of knowledge and graces accompanying the unique event of incarnation, but if we hold to Jesus's full humanity, we cannot avoid the humanness and finitude of his knowledge.

Jesus's humanity does not compromise or alter his divinity. What he knows as God remains uncreated, simple, and infinite. The point here is that in addition to his divine knowledge, in taking up full humanity he also assumed a human method and content of knowledge.

One other key debate was whether Jesus has a human and a divine will. The same argument holds here for Jesus to be a perfect representative of humanity, and in the 7th century, another council (Constantinople III) declared that to uphold Chalcedon's teaching: Jesus must have a human will, as well as a divine will, because the will is a faculty of nature. As the eternal Son, of course, Jesus wills in the same manner as man as he wills

as God; but he wills both as a man, and as God, and necessarily so. Garry Williams's article unpacks the two wills of Christ in greater detail.

Summary and significance

As Chalcedon says – "This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son [of God] must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, inseparably... the peculiar property of each nature being preserved."

The Son of God took all that human existence entails into himself and did it willingly, for us. He did it, of course, to save us and do what we never could; but he also provides an example of how to be content in our own humanity:

> All that we do to protect ourselves against the consequences of our finitude – against our involvement with others, the materiality of our lives and our indebtedness to our material environment, our mortality, our need to learn and change – is put radically in question by this divine embrace of the ordinary.

Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 238-9.

This "divine embrace of the ordinary" took place without loss to the 'divine' or compromise of the 'ordinary'. So we turn now to face the centrepiece of the Chalcedonian settlement and its account of that 'embrace' – what it will call "the hypostatic union."

c. **The eternal Son truly exists *as a man*** (John 1:18)

God is invisible. God cannot be seen with fleshly eyes, and cannot be seen by creatures. However, the Word, the Son from the Father's bosom, has made him known by taking flesh and entering creaturely existence. Divine sonship shines forth in Jesus, and therefore God's triune life is truly revealed in the incarnation.

Here is the nub of the issue. Jesus Christ *is* the eternal Son who has become a man. We are talking about one person in two natures. One 'who', and two 'whats', if you will. In this final section, we think about how to understand that one subject existing in two natures.

Two natures: not competing for space

The 'taking flesh', or 'assuming to himself human nature', is traditional language summarising what must be true if Jesus is as the Bible says. The two natures aren't two of the same thing that somehow need fitting alongside one another. One nature would have to give way to the other, or be qualified or restricted or altered in some way – and this is the root of

pretty much all Christological error. But divine and human nature don't exist on the same order of being. They are not symmetrical realities jostling together in the individual like powers or attributes which Christ can switch on/off as the mood takes him. No, the divine nature or essence is infinite, and uncreated. The Son's divine life does not compete with his humanity for space or action.

The concept of 'person' was crucial in the development of a Christology that makes best sense of the biblical witness. Without entering a word-study rabbit hole, the language of person and subsistence (*prosopon* and *hypostasis*) was used to speak about the individual, unique way in which a nature existed. The Son's person is the way he is God, being from (and toward) the Father in perfect love. He has existed, personally, for eternity. But at the incarnation he *added* a nature to his personal existence, without changing *who* he is. His divinity cannot be shared, at the creaturely level, as though bits of divine being or attributes could be juiced into humanity; but his way of being, his personal reality as perfect *Son*, became the personal reality of the human nature individualised in Mary's womb. The Son now lives out his sonship in two natures, and when we get hold of this we can hold the fulness of the humanity without needing to cancel out or qualify either nature.

Two natures: without confusion

Why is this? Well, to say it again: the pure relation of perfect Sonship is the way in which the Son 'has' the divine nature. And so when he takes up human nature into himself, he is human in the identical way in which he is God; his person does not change. At no point could the human existence be identified and described as any*one* other than the second Person of the Trinity. This means that the thing which unites both natures in Jesus is not anything at the 'natural' level, but the individual, unique way in which each nature exists, namely, as the eternal Son. So each nature remains free to be fully what it is, without needing to alter at all.

This unity at the personal level evaded Eutyches (c.378-456). Not entirely unlike Theodore and Nestorius, he believed that nature and person go together, but resolved things in the opposite direction. They ended up with two things; he believed that divine and human blend into a third thing – a humanity supercharged by participating in the divine nature, and indeed getting lost in it, like a drop of vinegar in the ocean. Incarnational unity was not a personal assumption of human nature by the Son, but mingling two natures into one. Hence the species of error was known as *monophysite* ('single-nature-ite'). As with Apollinarianism, the loss of Christ's true humanity means that he cannot be considered an appropriate carrier of our griefs and sorrows (Isa 53) or offer obedience in our place (Rom 5:12-21); but then, as the divinity finds itself blended with humanity, even as the dominant nature in the mix, we're left with one who also isn't God in the same way, and we cannot speak truly of him as Immanuel. Eutyches' Christ is some new thing that is neither fully God, nor fully man.

The hypostatic union and the communication of properties

The term 'hypostatic union', a Cyril-inspired gem, captures the pre-existent identity of the Son who adds a human nature to his personal existence.

First of all, a key part of Cyril's uncompromising emphasis on the one subject of the incarnation was his use of the 'communication of properties', a particular way of making sense of the two distinct natures, and the Son's existence in both simultaneously. The one *person* can be spoken of according to properties that are only true of one or other nature.

For instance, there are Scriptural texts where we have a divine title, but a human attribute – Paul refers to God's blood (Acts 20:28), an impossibility for God *as God* but entirely possible for one who is God and who also has a human nature. Scripture also speaks in places about Jesus with a very human title, but attributes an exclusively divine reality as it does so – the seed of David is God over all (Rom 9:5), the Son of Man was in heaven 'before' becoming flesh (John 6:62). Jesus himself speaks as one self-consciously divine and eternal, even as he does so with a human voice in time (John 8:58). The properties of either nature are communicated to the one person, such that he really has them and can be spoken of accordingly to that reality, even if the properties cannot be communicated between the natures themselves.

Basically, if you like singing old hymns, chances are you'll know the communication of properties. Charles Wesley puts it best: "'Tis mystery all, the immortal dies." Immortal God cannot die. But if that God takes to himself a human nature, then we can say of the relevant *person* (i.e. the Son) that, in fact, God dies, according to his human nature.

Hypostatic union: the true nature of incarnational 'becoming'

It is precisely this move that contemporary theologian Thomas Weinandy uses to frame the incarnational 'becoming' of John 1:14 as 'personal/existential.' It is at once quite simple, and yet really profound. The union of natures in the incarnation is according to the person of the Son, and so we must say that the person of the Son, eternally existing as God, 'now' exists *also* as a man.

> Jesus is the *person* of the Son *existing* as a man. He who is truly God actually lives an authentic human life without ceasing to be truly God.

Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 197.

The life of Jesus is the human life of the second person of the Trinity, who exists in and through these two natures without mixing them up, making them different to others who have them, but also without a sliver of

daylight between them. In a paraphrase of some early church thinking, *he remains what he was, even as he became what he was not*.

The Word became flesh.

CONCLUSION

We have only skimmed the surface of the church's theological reflection on the person of Christ, but I hope there's a flavour here of the help available from centuries of searching the Scriptures. There really is nothing better to spend your time contemplating, considering, and celebrating than him. As John Owen says:

> Let us get it fixed on our souls and in our minds, that this glory of Christ in the divine constitution of his person is the best, the most noble, useful, beneficial object that we can be conversant about in our thoughts, or cleave unto in our affections... The sun hath no glory, the moon and stars no beauty, the order and influence of the heavenly bodies have no excellency, in comparison of it.

John Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*, in *Works* 1:312, 313.

Questions for further thought and discussion

1. Can you explain the diagram on page 26 to someone? And can you say why each of the heretical views (Arianism, Nestorianism, Eutychianism and Apollinarianism) would be disastrous for our knowledge of God and/or salvation?

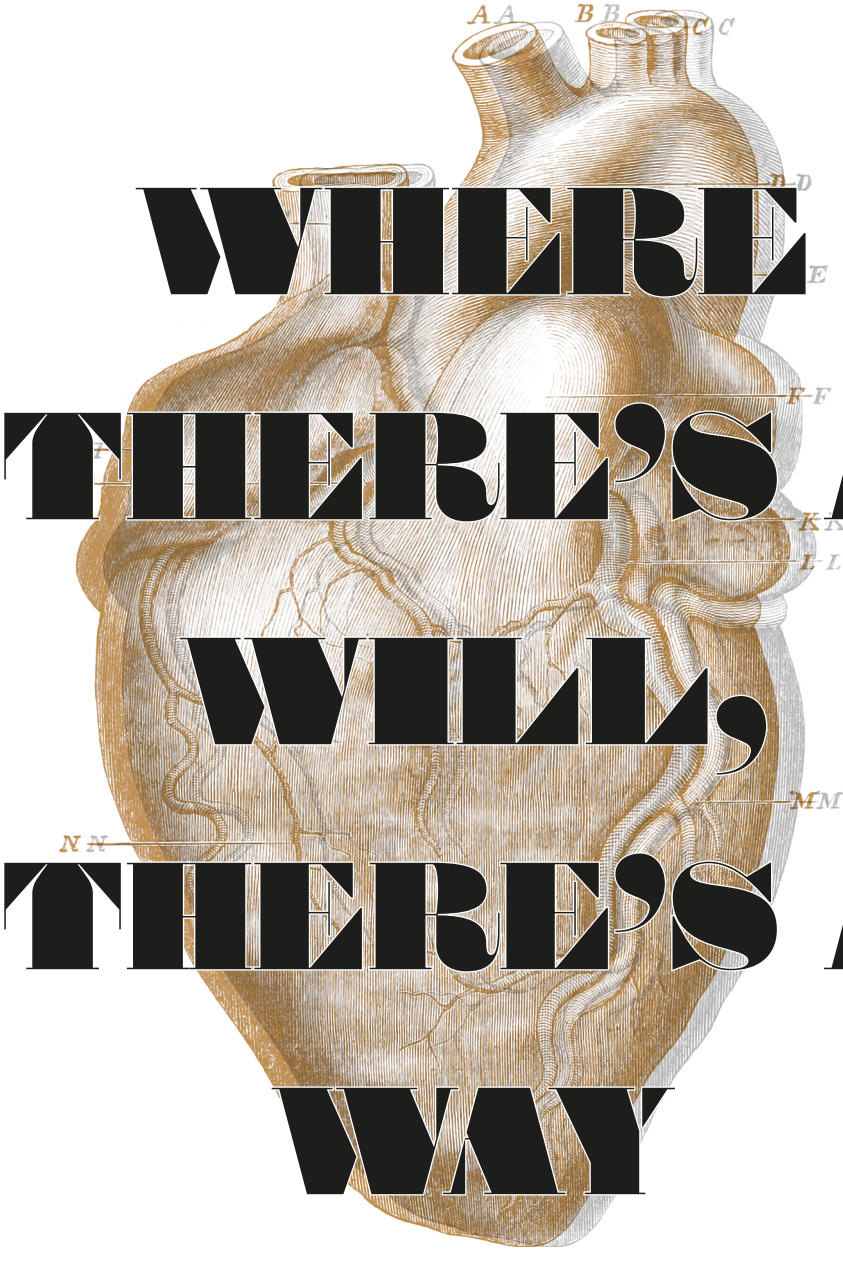
2. What is the significance of the phrase "that which is not assumed, is not healed"?

3. From this article, why is right to sing "'Tis mystery all, the immortal dies" or to speak about "God's blood" (Acts 20:28)?

4. What about singing that Jesus "emptied himself of all but love"? How would Chris's article help you to read Philippians 2:7 and reflect on that lyric?

"FOR THIS IS WHY THE WORD BECAME MAN, AND THE SON OF GOD BECAME THE SON OF MAN: SO THAT MAN, BY ENTERING INTO COMMUNION WITH THE WORD AND THUS RECEIVING DIVINE SONSHIP, MIGHT BECOME A SON OF GOD."

IRENAEUS
AGAINST HERESIES, III.19.1



WHERE THERE'S A WILL, THERE'S A WAY

Maximus the Confessor's Christology and our salvation

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The 7th century theologian Maximus the Confessor earned his nickname by defending the view that Jesus Christ had two wills: one human and one divine, known as the *dyothelite* position. Far from being an abstract debate, Maximus develops a vital window onto Christ's sinless suffering. In this article I will argue that his insights can be used to enrich the Reformed doctrine of justification and bear pastoral fruit in the life of the believer.

The alternative view is the *monothelite* positon – that Jesus had just one will.

I begin with a brief outline of the life and work of Maximus and then turn to his reading of Scripture and his use of philosophy. With those preliminaries in place I outline his account of human passions and within it his defence of dyothelite Christology and his understanding of the passions of Christ. In the final section I bring that understanding into contact with the Reformed doctrine of justification. The importance of his account of the passions will become clear from within an argument for the imputation of the life-long obedience of Christ to the believer.

INTRODUCING MAXIMUS

His life

Maximus paid a high price for his defence of orthodox Christology against the monothelite heresy that asserted that Christ had and has only one will. During his lifetime this view came to dominate the Byzantine Empire. Having been arrested in Rome in 653 for opposing it, he was tried for treason in Constantinople and exiled to Thrace. Refusing to stay quiet, he was brought back for further examination in 661/2. Because he refused to stop using his tongue to defend the dyothelite position the imperial monothelite party cut it out and cut off his writing hand. He was exiled to Lazica on the shore of the Black Sea where he died in 662.

The Byzantine Empire was the eastern half of the Roman Empire, which held together after the fall of Rome and endured to the 15th century.

Thrace was an area that straddled modern-day Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey.

In his own day Maximus stood almost alone. As Andrew Louth notes, by the time he was arrested the resistance to monothelitism had been "virtually reduced to one man." Apart from two loyal disciples, he died alone and defeated. Even when the Council of Constantinople adopted the dyothelite teaching in 680, it managed to do so without mentioning Maximus. He was evidently an incredibly brave and determined advocate of Christological orthodoxy who was prepared to stand for it in lonely isolation, no matter the price.

Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, The Early Church Fathers (London: Routledge, 1996), 18.

His writings

Maximus is, as Joseph Farrell notes, "often characterised as a systematic thinker, but not a systematic writer." Georges Florovsky describes Maximus's achievement as less a systematic theology and more a "symphony of experience." The unsystematic presentation of his thought in his writings is partly because he wrote his more extensive pieces in two main genres: *chapters* (we might call them paragraphs), sometimes short and pithy, and a question and answer format concerned with elucidating perplexing passages from Scripture or the church fathers (known as *ambigua* or *quaestiones*). There is no doubt about the historical significance of works. In his classic study Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks of the vision of the world in the work of Maximus as "the completion and full maturity of Greek mystical, theological, and philosophical thought." Jaroslav Pelikan describes the view that Maximus "combined the speculative genius of the East with the soteriological genius of the West as few before or since have done" as a cliché with some merit.

In Maximus the Confessor, *The Disputation with Pyrrhus of Our Father Among the Saints*, trans. by Joseph P. Farrell (South Canaan, PA: St Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1990), iii.

Cited in Maximus the Confessor, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St Maximus the Confessor*, trans. by Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken, Popular Patristics Series, 25 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 16.

Cited in Maximus the Confessor, *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. by George C. Berthold, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), xi.

Cited in *Cosmic Mystery*, 2.

His interpretation of Scripture and use of philosophy

To modern evangelical readers Maximus feels like a figure from another world, particularly in the way that he interprets the Scriptures. Having read his entire translated corpus I do not think it is an overstatement to say that the great majority of his interpretations are outlandish and, to put it plainly, wrong. To give just one example, he offers ten interpretations of the presence of Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration, not in order to evaluate them in favour of the best, but simply to grasp the richness of the event. Surely we will never exhaust the profundity of the truth found in even a single verse of Scripture, but that is different from his habit of finding an endless number of meanings in a single verse.

Aside from the exegesis, Maximus is also susceptible to the charge that he drank too deeply from the wells of Greek philosophy, a charge often levelled against the fathers. At this point we need to be more cautious. It is true that Maximus, via some of his main influences (Gregory Nazianzen, Evagrius of Pontus, and Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite), participated in a tradition of Christian theology and spirituality that was formed in a world framed by Greek philosophy, particularly Neoplatonism. If we are not familiar with this world and its preoccupations then he may seem to have a surprising interest in concepts such as the One and the many, being and principles (*logoi*), and motion and rest. We may suspect that he has simply imported, uncritically, an entire Greek philosophical worldview. But that is not how he would have read to a pagan philosopher (say Plotinus) or to other Christian theologians (such as Origen or Evagrius). They would have immediately spotted what we easily miss, which is that Maximus teaches a theology and philosophy that is distinguished by its *rejection* of the accepted tenets of pagan Neoplatonism, and its careful vetting of even the Christian theological and philosophical tradition as it came to him from his sources. Space forbids me exploring this further, but there is more to be said for the Christ-filled philosophy of Maximus than we might initially think.

Neoplatonism is rooted in the philosophy of Plato (c. 428-347 B.C.) and developed from the third to the fifth century A.D. Plotinus (c. A.D.204-270) is considered the first main proponent.

Neoplatonists describe the "One" as the uncaused cause of everything; a principle rather than a personal God – the highest "Good" from which all things come and to which all things return.

MAXIMUS ON THE PASSIONS

The centrality of love

With these preliminary remarks in place I turn now to consider the theology of the passions in the works of Maximus. From his earliest writing Maximus is clear that the centre of reality is not a resolution of all things into the simplicity of the One, but into the love of the triune God. He wrote to John the Cubicularius that "love is the goal of every good, being the highest of goods with God, and source of every good." Love is the "shortest way to salvation" and the "power which preeminently divinises all." Indeed, "all other ways of true religion are subordinate to it." Letter 2, *Maximus*, 90.

Louth draws this contrast, *Maximus*, 42.

Letter 2, *ibid.*, 86. A cubicularius was a chamberlain of the imperial palace.

Maximus the Confessor, *On Difficulties in Sacred Scripture: The Responses to Thalassios*, trans. by Maximos Constas, The Fathers of the Church, 136 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 1.2.20; 89; Maximus the Confessor, *On the Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, ed. and trans. by Nicholas Constas, 2 vols, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 28–29 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 21; 435. When Maximus speaks of divinisation he means it not in an ontological sense but in the ethical sense of 2 Pet 1:4, as for example when he states that "anyone who through fixed habit participates in virtue, unquestionably participates in God, who is the substance of the virtues" (*ibid.*, 7; 103).

Adam without passions

Given the centrality of love in the theology of Maximus it may seem odd that he denies the existence of passions in Adam before the fall. He argues that when Adam fell he exercised his free choice and was corrupted, "losing the grace of impassibility." Does Maximus then embrace the Stoic view that the passions are inherently evil? His position is more subtle than that: God "did not create sensible pleasure or pain" with human nature, but he did give it "a certain capacity for intelligible pleasure, whereby human beings would be able to enjoy God ineffably." This suggests that Maximus does have space for what we might call sinless passions in Adam, as we will see he does for Christ too.

Responses to Thalassios, 42.2; 241; PG, 90:405C. PG is an abbreviation for J. P. Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*, a 161-volume collection of early church writings in Greek published in 1857-1866.

Ibid., 61.2; 434; PG, 90:628A.

The fall as the source of the passions

Maximus says that when Adam fell he surrendered his spiritual capacity for delight in God, choosing created things instead of the Creator. He reports that he learned from Gregory of Nyssa that upon the fall the passions arose in the "more irrational part of human nature" and that they make us more like "irrational animals." Fixing his attention on created matter, Adam "surrendered his whole being to the power of sensation." At the heart of the fall was a particular creature, the self, and love's opposite, self-love, "the cause of all passionate thoughts."

Ibid., 1.2; 94, 95. Constas (94n2) identifies Gregory's *On Virginity* 12.2 and 18.25 and *On the Soul and the Resurrection* 3 as the possible sources.

Ambigua, 10; 247.

The Four Hundred Chapters on Love, 56, in *Maximus Confessor*, 69.

The effect of the fall was to divide that which had been united, separating us from God, from one another, and from righteousness. Where there was once a unity of love, the devil has created a confused chaos of competing desires. What exists is still good in its created substance but it is disrupted in its way of existing. Adam mixed together his intellect with sensation, drawing into himself "the composite, destructive, passion-forming knowledge of sensible things." In this way the devil "divided nature at the level of mode of existence, fragmenting it into a multitude of opinions and imaginations." The division means that the human will is now no longer naturally inclined to the good or to God, the source of the good.

Responses to Thalassios, 1.2.13; 83.

Letter 2, *Maximus*, 87; PG, 91:396D.

Rather, a second kind of willing is introduced so that in our ignorance we hesitate between options, no longer naturally knowing what to do and having instead to deliberate over both what the good is and whether we will do it. This new kind of willing is called by Maximus the "gnomic will," as distinct from the "natural will" that was inclined solely to

the good in prelapsarian Adam. The gnomic will is not a distinct "principle of nature," as if it were another natural faculty of willing, but "a mode of employment" of the natural will that arises only subsequent to the fall.

Prelapsarian = before the fall.

Disputation, 87; 31.

Following the work of Nemesius, a 4th century bishop of Emesa, Maximus devotes himself to the study of the passions that arise in man after the fall, providing especially in the lengthy *Ambiguum* 10, a detailed taxonomy of anger and desire and their subdivisions. Finding that every sinful pleasure is followed by pain, fallen man desperately seeks the impossible, a way to love himself while enjoying pleasure without pain.

Responses to Thalassios, 1.2.14; 83.

Passions redeemed not denied

Given the origin of passions in the fall we might expect Maximus to deny their place in the new creation. In fact, he holds that the passions can be redeemed if we "separate them from corporeal objects and use them to acquire the things of heaven," for example by refashioning desire into a yearning for the divine, or grief into repentance. Godly passions centre around the priority of loving God: "desire, pure of the passion of self-love, ought to be driven by yearning for God alone." It is love that "gathers together what has been separated," bringing about unity and "once again fashioning the human being in accordance with a single meaning and mode." The model for this union with God, a model which itself effects the union, is found in the incarnation. In Christ "the human being is made God, and God is called and appears as human." Maximus underlines the connection between the incarnation and the reunion of what has been sinfully divided by using the four key terms from the Chalcedonian definition to describe the effect of the fall as confusion, change, division, and separation.

Responses to Thalassios, 1.3; 95.

Letter 2, *Maximus*, 87.

Ibid., 88.

Ibid., 90. In the later monothelite controversy he moves away from the view expressed in this letter that we have "one inclination and one will with God and with one another" (87; see also 204 n. 6).

The connection is noted by Louth, *ibid.*, 50.

THE MONOTHELITE CONTROVERSY

In speaking of the incarnation we arrive at the great controversy in which Maximus took his stand. The affirmation of the 'one Son existing in two natures' at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 was a brilliant summary statement of biblical Christology, but it continued to be resisted in large parts of the empire such as Egypt and Syria by the proponents of the incarnate Christ having only one nature (monophysites). In the days of a vulnerable empire, theological division in the church was a political problem, so the pro-Chalcedonian emperors had political as well

as theological and spiritual reasons to find a way to reconcile the anti-Chalcedonians. The controversy that would engulf Maximus originated in attempts to reconcile them by teaching that the incarnate Christ has only one will (monothelitism) and one energy (monenergism, where "energy" denotes a power of operation, a capacity for action). This teaching gained significant ground in the 620s and 630s and was enforced by the *Ecthesis*, an imperial edict endorsing monothelitism, penned by Sergius the Patriarch of Constantinople and published by the Emperor Heraclius in 638.

Note that *monoenergism* should not be confused with *monergism*, the true belief that salvation is God's work and not something in which we co-operate.

The heart of monothelitism, as expressed by Maximus's opponent Pyrrhus, is the conviction that the will is an aspect of a person, not a nature, so that the one Son must have just one will because he is one person: "If Christ is one person, then He willed as one person. And if He willed as one person, then doubtless He has one will, and not two." For Maximus, a monothelite Christology must be rejected on the basis of the doctrine of God (known simply as "theology" in the east), Christology, and soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). His deepest insights emerge when he expounds the words of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt 26:39). I will term the two parts of this statement the *si possibile* (Latin for "if possible') and the *verumtamen* ("Yet").

Disputation, 10; 4. The dialogue records a debate between the two men in 645.

To avoid utter confusion, we need to be careful to understand at the outset the different senses of the term "will," in both Maximus's and our own usage. There are two senses that are not in view when Maximus affirms two wills in Christ:

On the terminology see Demetrios Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ: Person, Nature, and Will in the Christology of St Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 119–20.

i) He is not referring to *what* Christ wills (which he terms *thelēton* or *thelēthen*). If I speak of my "will to run around the park" in that sense, then I refer to the proposed park run itself. To say that Christ has two wills in this sense would mean him having two contradictory plans. This is not what Maximus has in mind when he speaks of two wills in Christ.

ii) Nor does he mean two *particular enactments* of will. If I speak of my "will to run around the park" in that sense, then I refer to me as an individual agent enacting the plan to run, perhaps as I rise from my desk to put on my trainers. To say that Christ has two wills in this sense would be to imply that there are two acting subjects or individual persons in Christ, which would be Nestorianism.

Rather, when Maximus speaks of Christ having two wills he means that he has two dispositions or *faculties of willing*. The disposition to will (which he terms *thelēsis* or *thelēma*) is distinct from particular acts of willing: "to be disposed by nature to will and to will are not the same." To be disposed to will "belongs to the essence" while actually to will is a particular enactment of the person, "at the wish of the one who wills."

Opuscule 3, in *Maximus*, 193. An opuscule is a small or minor work.

Dyothelitism thus claims that Christ has a human disposition to will and a divine disposition to will. Often people are puzzled by the dyothelite claim that will pertains to nature because they think it is obvious that *persons* will. The dyothelite scheme does not deny this. Maximus agrees that every particular enactment, every "will" in sense (ii), is made by the single person Christ. His dyothelite conviction is that the particular enactments are accomplished through two natural faculties of willing. The wills are two, the agent is one.

Disputation, 172; 59.

Arguments from theology

Taking "will" in the sense of *faculty of willing*, Maximus argues that the will of God is one because God has one nature. Thus the will of the Father must be the divine will of the Son If there were two natural faculties of willing in God then there would be two natures: a difference of will means "a complete difference of nature." Two natures would mean that the Son is not *homoousios* with the Father: he would then either not be God or there would be two gods.

Opuscule 7, *Maximus*, 186.

Of the same nature.

The fact that God has one will means that Christ cannot have spoken according to his divine nature when he asked for the cup to be taken away in the *si possibile*. Since the cup was the Father's will for him it must have been his own divine will. If Christ as God had inclined toward the *si possibile* then he would not have had a will "identical with and equal to that of the Father, but another one, different by nature." At stake in our interpretation of this saying is the very unity of God himself. If God the Son as God willed something different from the Father then we face "the collapse of theology."

Opuscule 7, *ibid.*, 186.

For Maximus a further reason that the *si possibile* cannot be the will of God is that this would introduce a contradiction within

Opuscule 3, *ibid.*, 196. He says this of the Severan teaching. Michael Ovey argues that the theology of Maximus has "the resources to cope with the eternal subordination of the Son" by assigning it to the personal relation of the Son to the Father rather than to the divine nature (see his *Your Will Be Done: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility*, Latimer Studies, 83 [London: The Latimer Trust, 2016]. The quote is from *Your Will Be Done*, 105). Maximus would reject the idea of such distinct willing for the Father and the Son on two grounds. First, the will as the will of one of the persons cannot vary in content from the will as the undivided will. Second, a divine person can no more submit as a person than he can as God: for Maximus, God does not obey (*Disputation*, 136; 45).

the divine will understood as willed content (sense i). The *si possibile* cannot be God seeking the negation of the plan to save because "we know that is what God wills by his very nature." God would be willing to negate his own will. Perhaps most devastating of all is the picture that Maximus paints of a god who might will not to drink the cup according to his divinity: "what kind of a God is this who is naturally afraid of the death of the flesh, and because of this begs the cup to be taken away, and possesses a natural will other than that of the Father?' The very idea is an absurdity.

Opuscule 6, *Cosmic Mystery*, 175.

Opuscule 7, *Maximus*, 186-87.

Argument from Christology

Maximus rejected the monothelite and monenergist position because he believed that it was a betrayal of Chalcedonian orthodoxy. While he did not join the controversy until 640, when he did so he was drawing on the Chalcedonian convictions that had already shaped him. Indeed, Cyril O'Regan characterises his whole theology as "an extended and richly textured gloss on the Chalcedonian Definition."

Summarised thus in *Cosmic Mystery*, 16.

Maximus argues that to have two natures *is* to have two wills and energies: "with the duality of his natures there are two wills (*thelēseis*) and two operations (*energeiai*) respective to the two natures." A human nature without a human will is a contradiction in terms: "what kind of a nature is that which has suffered loss of what belongs to it by nature?' Such a Christ would be "an unreal delusion, a mere form deceiving the senses." Christ is either fully man or he is no man at all. As he put it during his trial, Christ without a human will would be like a lion without a roar or a dog without a bark: "any other thing which has lost something naturally constitutive of it is not any more what it was." The very human nature of Christ is at stake here, because without a human will that nature would not exist. Maximus applies exactly the same logic to defend the view that Christ has two energies: if he has a divine and human nature then he must have a divine and human energy because "the principle of natural energy is what defines the essence of a thing."

Opuscule 6, *ibid.*, 174. I have transliterated the Greek terms here.

Opuscule 7, *Maximus*, 183.

Opuscule 7, *ibid.*, 184.

Opuscule 3, *ibid.*, 194-95.

"The Trial of Maximus," 8, in *Maximus Confessor*, 23.

Ambigua, 3; 15.

Argument from soteriology

Why would the denial of Christ's full humanity matter so much? Because a Christ who is not fully human cannot save. Here again we see the influence of Gregory Nazianzen on Maximus. Many of the *Ambigua* are attempts to explain

or vindicate difficult passages from Gregory and it is Gregory who provides in his first letter to Cledonius the famous soteriological principle at stake in Christology: "that which He has not assumed He has not healed."

Letter 101, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* Series 2 (NPNF2), 7:440. "Assumed" here means "taken upon himself."

Gregory, like Athanasius before him, proves the human soul of Christ by asking who Christ needed to be in order to save us from our sins. The prerequisites of Christology are determined by hamartiology (the doctrine of sin) and soteriology (the doctrine of salvation). A half-human Christ would be a fit saviour for a half-fallen Adam, but since the whole human nature fell then the whole human nature must be assumed in order to be saved. Gregory lays out the logical connection from the giving of the commandment to Adam through to the incarnation. The same human nature

> which received the command was that which failed to keep the command, and that which failed to keep it was that also which dared to transgress; and that which transgressed was that which stood most in need of salvation; and that which needed salvation was that which also He took upon Him.

Letter 101, *NPNF2*, 7:441.

Gregory argued that since our minds are fallen, Jesus needed to have a human mind. Our Saviour needed to be made like us in every respect. Maximus takes the same principle and applies it to the human will, arguing that anyone who denies that Jesus has a human will makes Jesus less than fully human and an imperfect saviour. If the will is not assumed then there is no freedom from sins of the will.

MAXIMUS ON THE HUMAN WILL OF CHRIST

No gnomic will in Christ

These are the arguments that Maximus uses to prove that Christ has a natural human will and that it was according to his human will that God the Son spoke the *si possibile*. This human faculty of willing was revealed most clearly when Christ "humanly begged to be spared from death" in Gethsemane. To understand the kind of act of will involved in this begging it is vital to recall the distinction that Maximus makes between a natural and a gnomic will. In his later writings he denies that Christ had a gnomic will,

Opuscule 7, *Maximus*, 186.

In the earlier *Responses to Thalassios* he seems to allow a gnomic will in Christ (62.6; 453; *PG*, 90:649D).

the type of will that is found in man only as a result of the fall. Maximus tells Pyrrhus that he has found twenty-eight senses of this term ('gnomic will') in Scripture and the fathers, and that the meaning must therefore be "determined by the context." His own later definition specifies that Christ having a gnomic will would mean him being "a mere man, deliberating in a manner like unto us, having ignorance, doubt and opposition." Not only would he then be a mere man, he would be a sinner, because "evil consists in nothing else than this difference of our *gnomic* will from the divine will."

Opuscule 7, *Maximus*, 186.

Ibid., 87; 31.

Opuscule 3, *Maximus*, 197.

While Maximus himself traces even this precise point about the gnomic will to his predecessors, Louth observes that he "virtually creates the notion of the will," at least for the Eastern church. The distinctions he draws prove to be crucial in explaining the sinlessness of Christ during his agony in the garden. Christ's desire not to die expressed in the *si possibile* was not the fruit of a divided will that deliberated in ignorance as he wavered between two alternatives. Because he subsisted as a divine person always inclined to the good it is "not possible to say that Christ had a gnomic will." His human will was a natural will, not a will that deliberated uncertainly between obedience and disobedience.

Ibid., 60. Maximus traces his denial of a gnomic will in Christ to the fathers in Opuscule 3, *ibid.*, 193.

Disputation, 87; 32.

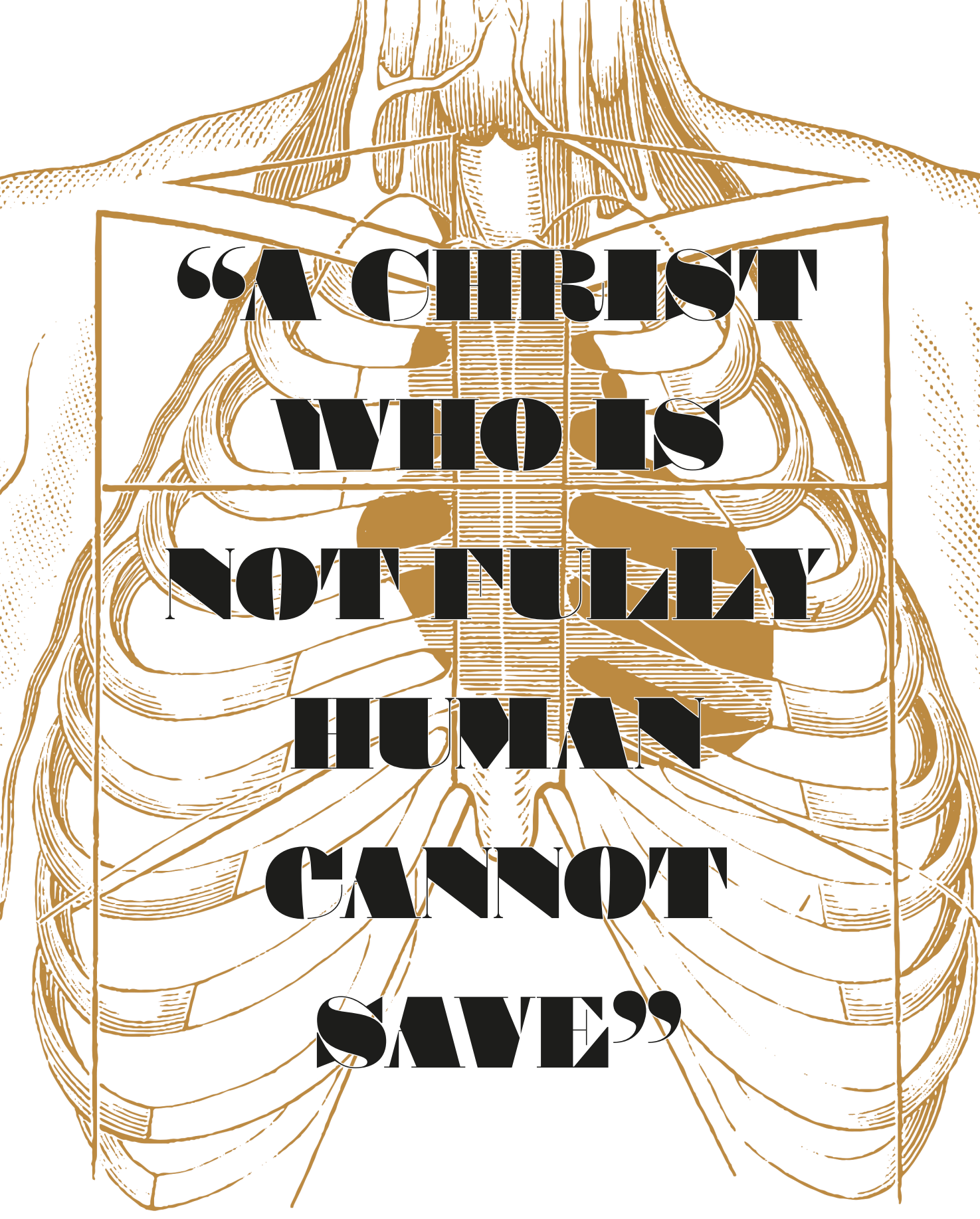
Did Christ choose?

Does this denial of deliberation mean that Christ did not make a choice in the garden? Only if we have a definition of free choice that equates it with liberty of indifference – an un-inclined balanced choice between good and evil. Christ had no such choice. If that is freedom, then God himself is not free, since he cannot choose to sin. Moreover, acts done with such supposed liberty of indifference would by definition be inexplicable in terms of causes, and would be reduced to randomness. Any inclination we might use to explain an action would have to be denied in favour of preserving neutrality before the options. The philosopher Thomas Nagel makes the point well: "the problem is, if the act wasn't determined in advance, by your desires, beliefs, and personality, among other things, it seems to be something that just happened, without any explanation. And in that case, how was it *your doing*?" Maximus rejects liberty of indifference, but he asserts very often that Christ was, and must have been, free. He can do so because he has a better definition of freedom. True freedom of choice, Maximus explains, requires not deliberation between good and evil but only the power to act without being compelled. Indeed, true freedom is the liberty to act with a right orientation toward God. As Louth puts it, for Maximus "human beings are creatures whose nature finds its fulfilment in their freely turning towards the God to whom they owe their being. What is meant by freedom, in this sense, is lack of coercion." For Maximus, free will means having the power to act without external compulsion, to choose what we will. It is what we now term "liberty of spontaneity" rather than liberty of indifference. To have to deliberate in ignorance of the good is to be less, not more human. Christ is the truest man because he knows the good.

What Does It All Mean? A Very Short Introduction to Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 55–56.

Disputation, 25; 11; *PG*, 91:293B.

Maximus, 60.


“A CHRIST
WHO IS
NOT FULLY
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CANNOT
SAVE”

MAXIMUS ON THE PASSIONS OF CHRIST

According to Maximus, Christ did not have a gnomic will because he did not have any sinful passions. The gnomic will only arises where there are sinful passions clouding the soul's knowledge of the good. While he did not have sinful passions, Maximus insists that in the incarnation Christ did take on *sinless* human passions. He did so to redeem us by defeating the sinful passions and their consequences.

Conceived in Mary's womb without sinful passions, Christ in his suffering redeemed us from them by the way in which he exercised his own sinless natural passions. Maximus explains that there are passions that are properly human but also sinless. These "natural, blameless passions" Christ took on in the incarnation and they came to a climax in his sufferings. Central to his account is the passion of fear. There is a sinful kind of fear that is "contrary to nature," but there is also a type of fear that is sinless because it is "proper to nature." The fear that Christ experienced in Gethsemane was sinless because "fear is proper to nature when it is a force that clings to existence by drawing back." As true man, Christ rightly drew back from the horror of the cross. To do otherwise would be less than human. Hence the *si possibile* reveals the human will of Jesus functioning properly, rather than any opposition between his divine and human wills. As Louth puts it, it expresses duality not double-mindedness. Any hint of opposition is removed by the *verumtamen* coming immediately after the *si possibile*: this "absolutely precludes opposition and instead demonstrates harmony between the human will of the Saviour and the divine will shared by him and his Father."

Ambigua, 4; 25.

Disputation, 35; 17.

Maximus, 61.

Opuscule 6, *Cosmic Mystery*, 176.

The agony in the garden

Does the denial of a gnomic will and sinful passions in Christ mean that for Maximus he had no genuine struggle in Gethsemane? If he was not agonising over the right choice as sinful passions surged within him, did he struggle at all to go to the cross? And, if he did not, then how can he be our sympathetic high priest? Nothing that Maximus says lessens the agony faced by Christ. He endured true temptation and had to engage all of his human powers to obey his Father in dependence on the Spirit. He was temptable not because he had a gnomic will and sinful passions but because he had a created human nature alive with all its natural passions, most especially the fear that surged within his heart as he contemplated the horror of the cross. Satan could not play on Christ's sinful passions, but he could tempt him to turn aside on the basis of his natural recoil in the face of the sin of the world bearing down upon him. Christ's agony was not the agony of clouded moral vision, it was the agony of having before his eyes the prospect of drinking the cup of God's wrath, and of being buffeted by Satan's wheedling voice calling him to a shortcut to the kingdoms of the world.

Penal substitutionary atonement, but not as we know it

Maximus uses the forensic language to describe the work of Christ. Christ chose to bear the natural passions which were the *penalty* for Adam's sin:

> Yet as the *form of the slave*, that is, having become man by nature, "He came down to the same level as His fellow slaves and servants, and received an alien form," clothing Himself in our nature together with our nature's condition of passibility. For the penalty imposed on the sinner is alien to Him who by nature is sinless, and this penalty is precisely the passibility of human nature as a whole, a condition that has been condemned because of transgression.

Ambigua, 4; 23.

Passibility = he had sinless passions and endured suffering.

Maximus teaches here that Christ took on himself the passible, condemned condition which was the penalty imposed on Adam. By doing this he "absolved our penalty in himself."

Ibid., 4; 24, 25.

This is not the familiar doctrine of penal substitution because Maximus does not, as far as I can tell, identify the condemnation borne by Christ with the eschatological punishment merited by sinners. Christ comes to share with us a non-eschatological death, strictly the first death (at the end of our earthly lives) and not the second (eternal punishment). In a stronger doctrine of penal substitution Christ dies the eschatological death so that his people never die it. But the sinless passion-bearing work of Christ is penal and still has a substitutionary effect for Maximus. By bearing a death intended as condemnation when he himself did not deserve to be condemned, Christ transformed the death of the saints so that it would not be condemnation for them. In that sense he substituted his own condemnatory death in the place of theirs. The saints still die, but because Christ has died their death they do not die as they would have died.

Like so many other church fathers, Maximus weaves together the language of penalty and the language of victory over the devil. Beholding Adam's passible nature in Christ, the wicked demons were deceived by God into thinking that "through His natural passibility" they would be able to get Christ "to form an image in His mind of an unnatural passion and act on it as they would," turning from the cross. They were wrong. Christ did not turn aside. Since he was conceived without sin and did not deserve to die, his condemnation backfired upon the devil. His death became not his own end but the death of death itself, "the destruction of the sin of the forefather." This weaving together of penalty and victory language should

Responses to Thalassios, 21.4; 145.

Ibid., 61.10; 440.

warn us off the over-neat categorisations of distinct (let alone supposedly incompatible) atonement "theories." The two are integrated: Christ was victorious over Satan by bearing Adam's penalty.

LEARNING FROM MAXIMUS

There are many things in the theology of Maximus that are best left behind. Most obvious among them are the swathes of outlandish exegesis. When it comes to his theology of the passions we should leave behind his idea of an impassible Adam before the fall, of the sinfulness of sexual pleasure, and the lingering sense that material reality and the passions are ideally set aside in favour of purely intellective contemplation. And Athanasius and Augustine are more reliable guides to the way in which Jesus's death is substitutionary for his people.

On a happier note, what might we learn from this giant of the east? Certainly a concern to kill sinful passions and to grow godly ones. Reading Maximus makes me wonder if we are serious enough about our own personal holiness. Has a fear of justification by works led us into an indifference to works? Have we forgotten that though we are not saved *by* works we are saved *for* them?

The most significant element of his theology is of course the Christological teaching for which he gave his hand and tongue and for which he is named "the Confessor." All of the arguments that I have described here for the dyothelite position should be maintained, as they have been by the best of the evangelical and Reformed tradition. Maximus is right that theology proper (i.e. the doctrine of God), Christology, and soteriology all prove that Christ had and has two wills.

For my purposes the particular strand that I wish to draw out of his theology is the account of the passions of Christ within the context of a Chalcedonian and dyothelite Christology. It seems to me to be both true and profound. Its significance will emerge when it is viewed from the perspective of a Reformed doctrine of the imputation of the life-long obedience of Christ.

The usual label for this is the "imputation of the active obedience of Christ" (sometimes abbreviated in the literature to "IAOC'). I am happy to use the active-passive labels, but, as nearly everyone who does so has to note, they run the risk of suggesting that Christ suffered passively when in fact he actively laid down his own life (John 10:18). "Life-long" obedience avoids the misleading antithesis and draws attention to the aspect of Christ's obedience that is actually in view.

THE IMPUTATION OF THE LIFE-LONG OBEDIENCE OF CHRIST

In his penal substitutionary death on the cross, the Lord Jesus Christ bore the punishment for the sins of his people. This is how our forgiveness is possible. But is this the sum of his justifying work? A minority among the Reformed have said so, but there is more to our justification than the remission of sins. We also need the substitutionary life-long obedience of Christ imputed to us. We need penal and *preceptive* substitution.

Perhaps the most common objection to the imputation of Christ's life-long obedience is the conceptual argument that forgiveness itself suffices for justification. This argument is best answered within a biblical-historical framework, specifically within the context of God's pre-fall covenant with Adam. Upon his creation outside the garden of Eden (Gen 2:15), Adam was automatically obligated to obey God. Indeed, any and every rational creature is obligated to obey God simply by having him as Creator. God is necessarily worthy of our obedience and honour. In addition to that natural obligation, God then placed Adam in the garden of Eden and gave him his specific tasks in the covenant of works. He was to work and keep the garden (Gen 2:15), to defend it and his wife from the serpent's looming attack, and to extend his dominion down from the mountain of Eden (Ezek 28:13-14) until it embraced even the fish of the sea (Gen 1:26). He was to do this with but one restriction upon him: he must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:17). Adam was therefore to obey God in order to continue in his created state. Only then would he receive his eschatological promotion to a higher condition of life akin to resurrection glory.

For more on this, see David Shaw's article in *Primer 11*.

Christ came as the last Adam, so what obligations did he inherit from his forefather? (Luke 3:38). He came to pay Adam's debt of punishment, but if he only did that then in what condition would the people of this new Adam find themselves? Some are tempted to ask this question in mathematical terms: "Adam plunged us down to -10. Christ by bearing our sin brought us back to 0. To reign in glory as sons of God we need not just to be at 0 but to be at +10. Thus we also need his life-long obedience." This is an unfortunately ugly and cold way of expressing the argument. We should think rather of the narrative of Genesis. If Christ bears the punishment for Adam's sin, then to which point is an Adamic person restored? The answer is clear: he would be innocent, back in the garden with the sin erased. But he would not, if he only received forgiveness, have any obedience. He would be poised afresh before the tempter, the sin undone but no righteousness enacted. Forgiven Adam would be like Adam before the serpent struck: innocent, but not yet obedient. James Buchanan states the difference: "Adam before his fall was innocent, – *i.e.* not guilty, and even personally holy; but while he continued in a state of probation, he was not righteous, in the sense of having a title to eternal life, which was promised only on condition of perfect obedience." In the vocabulary

James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification: An Outline of Its History in the Church and of Its Exposition from Scripture* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1961; repr. 1991), 261.

of Paul in 1 Cor 15:44-46, Adam would have the natural body, but he would not have attained to the spiritual body.

The decisive argument in favour of the imputation of Christ's life-long obedience is that it follows from our union with him. We are united to the person of Christ, which means the whole Christ, including his life. While some argue that the single "act of righteousness" that justifies us must be limited to Christ's death, the whole of his obedient life formed the road to the cross, from his incarnation on. He grew up under the sound of the words of his Father through the prophets setting his destiny before him. When he came into the world he said to his Father, "I have come to do your will," which was that he should die (Heb 10:7, quoting from Ps 40). In each and every subsequent moment he needed to maintain his sinlessness in order to be a fitting, unblemished sacrifice. At the beginning of his public ministry he was baptised with John's baptism, a baptism of repentance (Luke 3:3), thus symbolising his identification with our sins. In the wilderness temptations he chose the cross when he refused the easy road to the kingdom offered by Satan (Matt 4:8-10). He set his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). His entire life was an act of self-consecration to his sacred duty, a life-long obedience culminating at the cross. Hugh Martin beautifully describes the double imputation that follows from union with Christ:

> He is made *all* our sin, as truly as He has none of His own; we are made all His righteousness, as truly as we have none of ours. For it is *we*, wholly and completely, that are His sin; *He*, wholly and completely, that is our righteousness. For *us* He is made sin; in *Him* we are made the righteousness of God. [...] And all His righteousness; – the righteousness of His heart, and life, and nature; His original and His actual righteousness; the entire lovely moral beauty of His person, His every righteous principle of thought, affection, will, desire, and deed; the righteousness, in short, which He *is*; – *this*, we are made in Him.
>
> Hugh Martin, *The Atonement: In Its Relations to the Covenant, the Priesthood, the Intercession of Our Lord* (1870; repr. Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 1997), 217–18.

CHRIST'S SINLESS PASSIONS FOR US

Bring together in your mind this theology of the imputation of Christ's life-long obedience to you as a believer with Maximus's account of the sinless passions of Christ. Take anger and desire as examples: your sinful anger and impatience; the raised voice and harsh words; the lustful lingering of the eye; the greed for just a little more to attain security and comfort. Or think of your fear: the sacrifices of money for the work of the kingdom that you have shied away from for fear of losing your future security, the bold conversations you have not had for fear of being rejected, the ways in which great ventures for the Lord have been left in the scrapyard of your imagination after the first fear of failure killed them off.

Now recall the Lord Jesus Christ who lived an entire life filled with natural human passions all exercised in perfect obedience to his Father. Recall the perfect anger of Christ: in the temple for the honour of his Father's house; bearing our sin but with a righteous loathing of it even as he was "made sin" on the cross; wrathful on the day of judgement as every unrepentant sinner receives a perfectly just penalty. Marvel before the righteous desires of Christ: full of teenage hormones but not once sinning even mentally because he prized purity; longing for his Father's glory alone so that he would not worship Satan for all the world; moved with perfect pity for the lost and willing to heal them with foretastes of the balm of the new creation; loving the will of his Father and his sinful people so deeply that he drank the cup of wrath despite a natural recoil that led him to sweat blood.

May we find deep spiritual resources of comfort and joy in the coming together of the Christology of Maximus with Reformed soteriology. Together, they reveal our Saviour and his perfect passions lived out for us, that we might be justified in him.

Questions for further thought and discussion

1. "A human nature without a human will is a contradiction in terms" – why is that such an important point as we think about the incarnation?

2. What does this article mean for how we read the Garden of Gethsemane and why does it really matter for our salvation that Jesus prays "not my will but yours"?

3. How does the final section of this article equip us to encourage a believer who feels a failure and at the mercy of their passions?

WONDER VISION

THE VALUE OF CONTEMPLATING JESUS IN JOHN OWEN'S *MEDITATIONS AND DISCOURSES ON THE GLORY OF CHRIST*

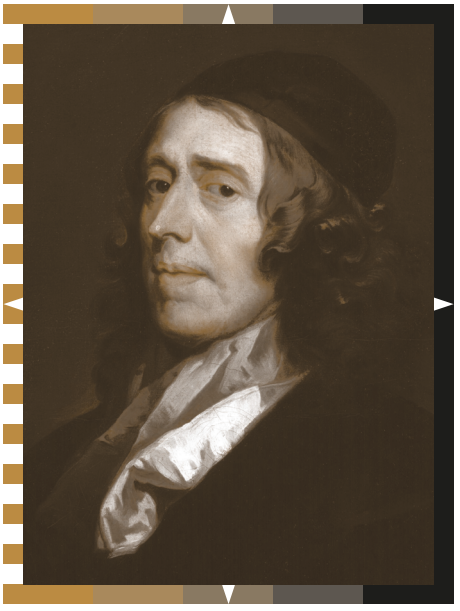
SUZANNE MCDONALD is Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. She is an Aussie by birth, English by heritage, and a graduate of Oxford, Cambridge, and St Andrews Universities. She loves John Owen and his theology, so Owen has found his way into almost all of the books, essays, and articles she has written.

THE "BEATIFIC VISION" MIGHT JUST BE THE MOST GLORIOUS TRUTH THAT MOST CHRISTIANS HAVE NEVER HEARD OF.

Let's be honest, it hasn't exactly been a prominent topic for Protestant theologians or pastors down the centuries. The beatific vision has found its home mostly within Roman Catholic theology, where it refers to the culmination of salvation, when the redeemed are able to contemplate the Triune God in an unmediated way, and so are brought into perfect union and communion with him.

I suspect that for many of us, that language of vision and contemplation might seem like a classic example of being so heavenly-minded that we are of no earthly use. What's more, the traditional understanding might seem like a highly abstract and over-intellectualised concept of eternal life. It can sound rather like we are simply going to be heavenly brains on sticks for all eternity, or contemplative souls without bodies. These days, many are rightly putting some serious question marks beside an all-but-disembodied idea of life in 'heaven,' and recovering a more scripturally robust account of eternal life in our glorified resurrection bodies in the transformed physicality of the new creation. This leads us to a far more embodied, dynamic, and active way of thinking about eternal life which seems to leave little place for the concept of the beatific vision as it is traditionally understood. The risk with this, though, is that we can place ourselves and our activities so much at the centre of how we envision eternal life that we end up displacing the scriptural focus upon God himself.

But what if there were a more strongly scriptural and Christ-centred approach to the beatific vision? And what if that helped us to see how much Christ's divinity and humanity matter not just for our salvation and our life now, but for all eternity? And what if there were an approach to the beatific vision that would help us to see the continuities between beholding the glory of Christ by faith now and by sight in the life to come, making clearer connections between the beatific vision and our ordinary life of discipleship now? And what if the beatific vision were to involve our glorified resurrection bodies as well as our minds, in a dynamic, never-ending, ever-new 'more and more-ness' of growing in knowledge, love, and blessedness?



Enter **John Owen** (1616-1683). He is amongst a handful of Reformed pastors and theologians who rework the traditional understanding of the beatific vision in a more scriptural and Christological direction. Perhaps you know Owen because of his staunch defence of a 'Calvinist' doctrine of election, or his robust involvement in controversies about justification, or perhaps as someone who wrote on our communion with each person of the Trinity. He was also a tenacious defender of classical Christology in the face of a growing tendency in his time either to deny the divinity of Christ outright, or to disregard it as irrelevant. He does this most fully in his doctrinal treatise, *Christologia*, and also, in a somewhat more pastoral and contemplative way, in his *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ*. This is the treatise from which our extracts below are taken, and it was the last book Owen prepared for publication before he died. We have an account of how a friend brought him some page-proofs from the printer on what turned out to be the day of his death. On seeing them, Owen is said to have responded: "O Brother Payne! The long wished-for day is come at last, in which I shall see that glory in another manner than I have ever done or was capable of doing in this world."

For Owen, the idea of "the glory of Christ" has a very specific meaning. It signifies the fullness of Christ's person, divine and human, and what that means for his saving work, along with the implications of his two natures for the whole Christian life, now and through eternity. *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ* encourages all believers to devote themselves to contemplating this understanding of the glory of Christ by faith now, in anticipation of - and as a foretaste of - beholding him in the fullness of his glory by sight in the beatific vision.

Owen knew that he would have an uphill battle trying to persuade his readers that there is no greater joy and privilege in the Christian life than this. In addition to those who questioned the two natures of Christ, he recognised that others would say that even if such things are true, they are irrelevant to our daily lives. But for Owen, there is nothing more necessary than contemplating the fullness of Christ in his person and work. After all, as he frequently points out, we cannot expect to enjoy for all eternity what we have never paid any attention to here and now.

Moreover, meditating on the glory of Christ in his two natures is a matter of shaping not only our knowing, but also our doing. With 2 Cor 3:18 and 4:6 very much in mind, Owen is adamant that beholding the glory of God in Christ is the primary means used by the Holy Spirit for our sanctification, and so for maturing us in our discipleship throughout our lives. Meditating on the glory of Christ now is therefore never simply about "heavenly musings", detached from earthly reality. It is as we behold the glory of Christ that we are transformed by the Spirit more and more

into his likeness now, until the full sight of Christ in the beatific vision will mean our full and final transformation and glorification. Owen is also very well aware that we will be transformed into the image of whatever fills our minds, and that this will both direct our actions now and have eternal consequences. Meditating on the person and work of Christ is what allows believers to live more fully for Christ in this life, and it establishes the continuity between our sanctification now and our glorification to come.

Owen's writing style is notoriously difficult, and this treatise is particularly diffuse and repetitive, perhaps because he was writing in haste, knowing that his remaining time on earth was short. In what follows, I have chosen some extracts from it, arranged as answers to four questions that we might want to put to Owen about the beatific vision: Why reflect on the beatific vision? What (or rather, whom!) will we behold? How will we behold Christ in the fullness of his glory? And What will the experience of the fullness of Christ's glory be like?

Owen's words in response will give you a flavour of the content and style of *Meditations and Discourses*, as he urges us to a lifetime of contemplating the glory of Christ by faith now, in anticipation of the time when we will behold him face to face and know as we are known.

Extracts from John Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ, in his Person, Office and Grace* (1684), commonly known as *The Glory of Christ*.

WHY REFLECT ON THE BEATIFIC VISION?

FROM THE PREFACE: The design of the ensuing Discourse is to declare some part of that glory of our Lord Jesus Christ which is revealed in the Scripture, and proposed as the principal object of our faith, love, delight, and admiration.... This, therefore, deserves... the best of our meditations, and our utmost diligence in them. For if our future blessedness shall consist in being where he is, and beholding of his glory, what better preparation can there be for it than in a constant previous contemplation of that glory in the revelation that is made in the Gospel...

FROM CHAPTER 1: That which at present I design to demonstrate is, that the beholding of the glory of Christ is one of the greatest privileges and advancements that believers are capable of in this world, or that which is to come. It is that whereby they are first gradually conformed unto it, and then fixed in the eternal enjoyment of it. For here in this life, beholding his glory, they are changed or transformed into the likeness of it (2 Cor 3:18); and hereafter they shall be "for ever like unto him," because they "shall see him as he is," (1 John 3:1-2).

From the outset Owen wants us to realise that contemplating the glory of Christ is not about some sort of detached 'heavenly mindedness.' It is the Spirit-driven engine of our growth in Christlikeness now.

There are, therefore, two ways or degrees of beholding the glory of Christ, which are constantly distinguished in the Scripture. The one is by *faith*, in this world, – which is "the evidence of things not seen;" the other is by *sight*, or immediate vision in eternity (2 Cor 5:7), "We walk by faith, and not by sight."... And it is the Lord Christ and his glory which are the immediate object both of this faith and sight. For we here "behold him darkly in a glass" (that is by faith); "but we shall see him face to face" (by immediate vision). "Now we know him in part, but then we shall know him as we are known," (1 Cor 13:12).

While there are obviously great differences between beholding the glory of Christ by faith and by sight, the continuity between them is also very important to Owen. Both are centred on knowing and loving Christ, and so on union and communion with him. This means that beholding of the glory of Christ now is an anticipation, and a genuine foretaste, of the fullness of life to come.

No man shall ever behold the glory of Christ by *sight* hereafter, who does not in some measure behold it by *faith* here in this world. Grace is a necessary preparation for glory, and faith for sight. Where the subject (the soul) is not previously seasoned with grace and faith, it is not capable of glory or vision... Most men will say with confidence... *that they desire to be with Christ, and to behold his glory*; but they can give no reason why they should desire any such thing, — only they think...that is better than to be in that evil condition which otherwise they must be cast into for ever, when they can be here no more... And the pretended desires of many to behold the glory of Christ in heaven, who have no view of it by faith whilst they are here in this world, are nothing but self-deceiving imaginations...Wherefore let no man deceive himself; he that has no sight of the glory of Christ here, shall never have any of it hereafter unto his advantage.

FROM CHAPTER 2: There are some who regard not these things at all, but rather despise them. They never entertain any serious thoughts of obtaining

a view of the glory of God in Christ, — which is to be unbelievers... If we were to abound in this duty, in this exercise of faith, our life in walking before God would be more sweet and pleasant unto us,...and we should more represent the glory of Christ in our ways and walking than usually we do, and death itself would be most welcome unto us.

Beholding the glory of Christ by faith and showing more of Christ in our daily lives are inseparably linked for Owen. This includes building our capacity for truly costly discipleship. As a prominent Nonconformist writing in the midst of the persecution of Dissenters after the Restoration of Charles II, he becomes poignantly specific later in the treatise when he talks about how meditating on the glory of Christ in his self-giving love fortifies us to be ready, if necessary, to relinquish our possessions, the people we love, and our own lives. That was the reality for many to whom he was writing.

When the minds of men are vehemently fixed on the pursuit of their lusts, they will be continually ruminating on the objects of them... The objects of their lusts have framed and raised an image of themselves in their minds, and transformed them into their own likeness...And shall we be slothful and negligent in the contemplation of that glory which transforms our minds into its own likeness, so as that the eyes of our understandings shall be continually filled with it, until we see him and behold him continually, so as never to cease from the holy acts of delight in him and love to him?

Notice Owen's shrewd insights here. While we say that we do not have the time to meditate on the glory of Christ, we find plenty of time to fill our minds with other things. When he mentions 'lusts' in this passage, he does not simply mean sexual desires and fantasies. He means *whatever* we most desire. As he notes elsewhere, that might be how to make more money, for example, or how to 'get on' in the world. We know what we most desire by what we think about the most, and we will be transformed into the image of whatever most fills our minds.

WHAT (OR RATHER, WHOM!) WILL WE BEHOLD?

FROM CHAPTER 2: The glory of Christ is the glory of the person of Christ... God and man... for we behold "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). Otherwise we know it not, we see it not, we see nothing of it; *that* is the way of seeing and knowing God, declared in the Scripture as our duty and blessedness... This is the foundation of our religion, the Rock whereon the church is built, the ground of all our hopes of salvation, of life and immortality... He who discerns not the glory of divine wisdom, power,

goodness, love, and grace, in the person and office of Christ, with the way of the salvation of sinners by him, is an unbeliever... such is the present condition of all by whom the divine person of Christ is denied...

The necessity of acknowledging the divinity of Christ is a central emphasis throughout Owen's theology. He was writing in a time when the doctrine of Christ's two natures was under significant threat, along with a rise in anti-Trinitarianism.

Nothing is more fully and clearly revealed in the gospel, than that unto us Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15)... so as that in seeing him we see the Father also; that we have "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in his face alone"... This is the principal fundamental mystery and truth of the Gospel; and which if it be not received, believed, owned, all other truths are useless unto our souls...

This is Owen's rebuttal to those who think that reflecting on the divinity of Christ is impractical and irrelevant, and that we should be focusing on how to live a good life instead. For Owen, if you lose or neglect the divinity of Christ, there is nothing left of the gospel. Apart from the divinity of Christ, we have no true knowledge of God, and no salvation, and that renders all attempts to live a 'good' life pointless.

FROM CHAPTER 3: The second thing wherein we may behold the glory of Christ, given him of his Father, is in the mysterious constitution of his Person, as he is God and man in one and the same person.

The first aspect of the glory of Christ to which Owen points us is his divinity. The "second thing" is the importance of the incarnation: the full humanity as well as divinity of Christ in the hypostatic union.

There are in him, in his one single individual person, two distinct natures; the one, eternal, infinite, immense, almighty, – the form and essence of God; the other, having a beginning in time, finite, limited, confined unto a certain place, – which is our nature, which he took on him when he was "made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

FROM CHAPTER 4: This, then, is the foundation of the glory of Christ in this condescension, the life and soul of all heavenly truth and mysteries, – namely, that the Son of God becoming in time... what he was not – the Son of man – ceased not thereby to be what he was, even the eternal Son of God... for although in himself, or his own divine person, he was "over all, God blessed for ever," (Rom 9:5) yet he humbled himself for the salvation of the church, unto the eternal glory of God, to take our nature upon him, and

to be made man: and those who cannot see a divine glory in his so doing, do neither know him, nor love him, nor believe in him, nor do any way belong unto him.

Owen is expressing the traditional understanding of *kenosis* here (Christ's 'self-emptying', based on Phil 2:6-11. Owen offers extended reflections on this text in this section of the treatise). *Kenosis* does *not* mean that the eternal Son relinquishes his divinity in the incarnation, but that he takes our humanity to himself, becoming what before he was not. In addition to the centrality of Christ's divinity, a proper understanding of the glory of Christ in his humanity is essential for Owen, both because our salvation depends upon Christ's humanity as well as his divinity, and because his humanity enables us to rightly understand our own. In particular, the ascended humanity of Christ, and the beatific vision, in which we will behold the fullness of Christ in both his humanity and his divinity, assure us that it is our full humanity, body and soul, that has been redeemed, and that there is a place for our glorified humanity in union and communion with God to all eternity.

FROM CHAPTER 14: In the vision which we shall have above, the whole glory of Christ will be at *once* and *always* represented unto us; and we shall be enabled in one act of the light of glory to comprehend it. Here, indeed, we are at a loss; – our minds and understandings fail us in their contemplations. It will not yet enter into our hearts to conceive what is the beauty, what is the glory of this complete representation of Christ unto us. To have at once all the glory of what he is, what he was in his outward state and condition, what he did and suffered, what he is exalted unto, – his love and condescension, his mystical union with the church, and the communication of himself unto it, with the recapitulation of all things in him, – and the glory of God, even the Father, in his wisdom, righteousness, grace, love, goodness, power, shining forth eternally in him, in what he is, has done, and does, – all presented unto us in *one view*, all comprehended by us at once, is that which at present we cannot conceive. We can long for it, pant after it, and have some foretastes of it, – namely, of that state and season wherein our whole souls, in all their powers and faculties, shall constantly, inseparably, eternally cleave by love unto [the] whole Christ, in the sight of the glory of his person and grace, until they are watered, dissolved, and inebriated in the waters of life and the rivers of pleasure that are above for evermore. So must we speak of the things which we admire, which we adore, which we love, which we long for, which we have some foretastes of in sweetness ineffable, which yet we cannot comprehend.

HOW WILL WE BEHOLD CHRIST IN THE FULLNESS OF HIS GLORY?

FROM CHAPTER 12: The view which we have of the glory of Christ by faith in this world is obscure... How imperfect are our conceptions of him! ... There is no part of his glory that we can fully comprehend. And what we do comprehend... we cannot abide in the steady contemplation of. For ever blessed be that sovereign grace, whence it is that He who "commanded light to shine out of darkness has shined into our hearts, to give us the light of the knowledge of his own glory in the face of Jesus Christ," (2 Cor 4:6) and therein of the glory of Christ himself; – that he has so revealed him unto us, as that we may love him, admire him, and obey him: but constantly, steadily, and clearly to behold his glory in this life we are not able...

Vision, or the sight which we shall have of the glory of Christ in heaven, is *immediate, direct, intuitive*; and therefore steady, even, and constant... Christ himself, in his own person, with all his glory, shall be continually with us and before us... As a man sees his neighbour when they stand and converse together face to face, so shall we see the Lord Christ in his glory... There will be use herein of our bodily eyes, as shall be declared. For, as Job says, in our flesh shall we see our Redeemer, and our eyes shall behold him (Job 19:25-27). That corporeal sense shall not be restored unto us, and that glorified above what we can conceive, but for this great use of the eternal beholding of Christ and his glory.

Don't miss the full force of this rather convoluted sentence! For Owen, *the* reason why we will have our bodily sight restored to us at the resurrection, glorified beyond anything we can now imagine, is to be able to look upon Christ and behold the fullness of his divine-human glory for all eternity.

Unto whom is it not a matter of rejoicing, that with the same eyes wherewith they see the tokens and signs of him in the sacrament of the supper, they shall behold himself immediately in his own person? But principally...this vision is intellectual. It is not, therefore, the mere human nature of Christ that is the object of it, but his divine person, as that nature subsisteth therein. What is that perfection which we shall have... in the comprehension of the hypostatical union, I understand not; but this I know, that in the immediate beholding of the person of Christ, we shall see a glory in it a thousand times above what here we can conceive. The excellencies of infinite wisdom, love, and power therein, will be continually before us. And all the glories of the person of Christ which we have before weakly and faintly inquired into, will be in our sight for evermore...

Owen is thinking of 1 Cor 13:9. We don't know what we will be, but we know who we will see. By *hypostatical union* he means the union of two natures (human and divine) in Christ.

The body as glorified, with its senses, shall have its use and place herein. After we are clothed again with our flesh, we shall see our Redeemer with our eyes. We know not here what power and spirituality there will be in the acts of our glorified bodies. Such they will be as shall bear a part in eternal blessedness... In the *resurrection of the body*, upon its full redemption, it shall be so purified, sanctified, glorified, as to give no obstruction unto the soul in its operations, but be a blessed organ for its highest and most spiritual actings. The body shall never more be a trouble, a burden unto the soul, but an assistant in its operations, and participant of its blessedness. Our eyes were made to see our Redeemer, and our other senses to receive impressions from him, according unto their capacity... so shall the bodies of the just be restored unto them to heighten and consummate their blessedness.

WHAT WILL THE EXPERIENCE OF THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST'S GLORY BE LIKE?

FROM CHAPTER 14: First, the vision which we shall have of the glory of Christ in heaven, and of the glory of the immense God in him, is perfectly and absolutely *transforming*... In the *first operation* of this light of glory, believers shall so behold the glory of Christ, and the glory of God in him, as that there with and thereby they shall be immediately and universally changed into his likeness. They shall be as he is, when they shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2). There is no growth in glory... though new revelations may be made... unto eternity. For the infinite fountain of life, and light, and goodness, can never be fathomed, much less exhausted.

Notice the dynamic 'more-and-more-ness' of Owen's understanding of eternal life here, alongside the emphasis we have just seen on the place that our glorified physical bodies will have. This idea of that we will be caught up in ever new, ever deepening knowledge and love of God in Christ is a theme to which Owen frequently returns.

All communications from the Divine Being and infinite fulness in heaven unto glorified saints, are in and through Christ Jesus, who shall for ever be the medium of communication between God and the church, even in glory... And on these communications from God through Christ depends entirely our continuance in a state of blessedness and glory. We shall no more be self-subsistent in glory than we are in nature or grace.

“AS A MAN SEES HIS NEIGHBOUR WHEN THEY STAND AND CONVERSE TOGETHER FACE TO FACE, SO SHALL WE SEE THE LORD CHRIST IN HIS GLORY…”

John Owen

This Christ-centred approach to the beatific vision is in contrast to the traditional Roman Catholic understanding, which involves the direct (and wholly intellectual) apprehension of the Triune God. Owen takes fully seriously the implications of 2 Cor 4:6 by asserting that we will always and only behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Even when they are glorified, our created minds will not be capable of directly apprehending the essence of the Triune God excepted as mediated to us through the divine-human person of Christ. As Owen puts it earlier in the treatise, "God in his immense essence is invisible unto our corporeal eyes, and will be so to eternity; as also incomprehensible to our minds... Wherefore the blessed and blessing sight which we shall have of God will be always 'in the face of Jesus Christ.'"

The way on our part whereby we shall receive these communications from God by Christ, which are the eternal springs of life, peace, joy, and blessedness, is this vision the sight whereof we speak...And this is the true cause whence there neither is nor can be any satiety or weariness in heaven, in the eternal contemplation of the same glory. For not only the object of our sight is absolutely infinite, which can never be searched unto the bottom, yea, is perpetually new unto a finite understanding; but our subjective blessedness consisting in continual fresh communications from the infinite fulness of the divine nature, derived unto us through vision, is always new, and always will be so to eternity.

That is, a sense of not wanting or having room for any more.

Here again we see Owen's highly dynamic understanding of the beatific vision, as we find ourselves eternally drawn more and more deeply into what it means to know and love Christ, in union and communion with the Triune God in him. How far this is from our often static, boring images of 'heaven'! This is eternal ecstasy.

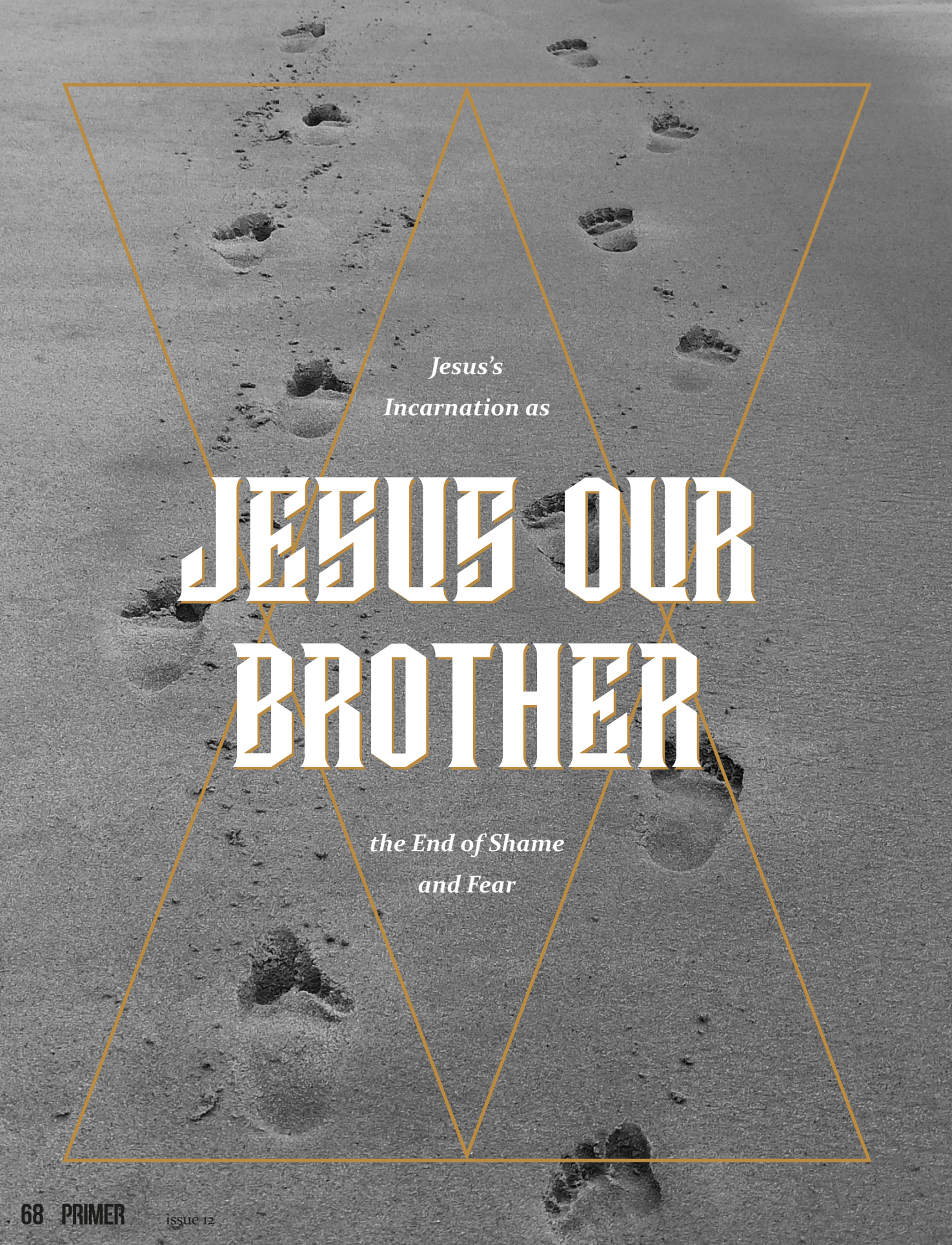
Herein shall all the saints of God drink of the rivers of pleasure that are at his right hand, be satisfied with his likeness, and refresh themselves in the eternal springs of life, light, and joy for evermore.

Questions for further thought and discussion

1. To what extent has the future face-to-face experience of Christ shaped your expectations of what we look forward to as believers?

2. How does Owen help us to see how that is central to our future hope and significant for how we live now?

3. If contemplating Christ now is "the Spirit-driven engine of our growth in Christlikeness now", how might we grow in that discipline? What might that look like as the church gathers, or as families or individuals?



Jesus's Incarnation as

JESUS OUR BROTHER

the End of Shame and Fear

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On 15th September 2020, the hashtag *#RIPJKRowling* began trending on Twitter. The author of the Harry Potter novels had not died. Instead she was in the process of being "cancelled" – a form of ostracism, enacted through public shaming on social media, designed to cower the person into silence and damage their reputation among their social and professional circles.

See the Wikipedia article about "Cancel Culture" on *wikipedia.org*.

Rowling's crime was to be an outspoken critic of the rhetoric of the transgender movement, particularly taking exception to women being referred to as "people who menstruate," so as to include transgender men. In response, former allies and friends of Rowling – including many stars of the Harry Potter films – lined up to distance themselves from the author. This all happened just two months after Rowling had been a co-signatory to an open letter condemning the practice of public shaming, and pleading for the right to free speech.

See "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" on *harpers.org*.

This outpouring of vitriol towards a beloved author – especially one with previously impeccable liberal credentials – may well make Christians afraid to express their beliefs in the public square. The threat of physical violence or death as a result of persecution is perhaps not yet in the offing for Christians in the West, but this form of "social death" through public shaming is a reality for many Christians in the West.

Perhaps the most acutely-felt shame of all is that which comes from one's own family. Within my own ministry context, I have met converts from other religions who have been stripped of the right to bear their family name; people who have been effectively disowned by their parents as soon as they reached adulthood because of their faith; and students whose new-found belief has met with such a scornful reception in the family home that they are not welcome back for the holidays. In the place of the honour and welcome that should be the hallmark of family gatherings, there is only shame and the fear of exclusion.

What does the incarnation say to all of this? In Hebrews 2, we find our answer. The doctrine of Jesus' incarnation means the end of shame and fear for those who put their trust in him. Because God has become man, Jesus is our brother. Christians have the honour and assurance of knowing they are members of his family. That's the amazing thought we'll dwell on in this article.

BROUGHT TO GLORY 2:5-10

The letter to the Hebrews was written to help a church whose members, largely from a Jewish background, were tempted to drift back to the familiar pattern of Jewish rituals and structures. Although there appear to be many reasons for this, we know that in the past they had been "publicly exposed to insult and persecution" (Heb 10:33). While they had previously stood firm under such trials, it is not too speculative to assume that this ongoing sense of shame – perhaps from their own family members whose way of life they had repudiated in their conversion – added to the temptation to drift away from Jesus.

The author of Hebrews is not named in the text, and theories abound concerning his identity! In this article we simply refer to him as "the author," using a masculine pronoun, as he does in Heb 13:22.

To combat this drift, the author aims to persuade them that Jesus is better than the Old Testament structures they are tempted to return to, precisely because he brings those structures to their fulfilment. In chapter 1, he has taught that Jesus is a better messenger than the angels – who, as the cream of the crop of God's messengers and the medium by which the Law came, are used as a shorthand to refer to the entire sweep of Old Testament revelation. Jesus is the Creator God; by contrast, the angels are creatures, sent to worship Jesus, and to serve those who will inherit salvation by pointing them to him (Heb 1:6-9). In other words, if the Hebrews want to return to the Old Testament revelation, that revelation will send them right back to Jesus – and if ignoring the Old Testament revelation was fraught with danger, ignoring its fulfilment is even more foolish (Heb 2:1-4).

In Heb 2:5 onwards, the author continues to express the supremacy of Jesus over angels, but on a different tack. He begins by stating that the angels will not be rulers in the world to come. As readers, we might expect the author to justify this by continual proof that Jesus is the Creator God. Instead he turns to Psalm 8 to argue that Jesus will be the ruler of God's new creation because he is *man*. In Psalm 8 King David reflects on God's original design plan which submitted all creation to mankind, those made in the image of God (Heb 2:6-8). This design has been forfeited by mankind, who – not content with being crowned with glory and honour – sought to usurp the position of God himself (Gen 3:5-7), and so were condemned to the judgement of frustration and death. Mankind, who were meant to rule over creation in God's image, are thwarted by it – they return to dust, their death the final forfeiture of the image of the living God. Far from being a little lower than the angels, men and women die like animals.

The author here uses a play on words - the Hebrew word in view can either refer to "a little bit lower" or "lower for a little while." In the psalm the first meaning seems preferable, but the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) takes it in the latter sense as does Hebrews, which fits perfectly with Jesus' ministry.

Yet as the author says, "we do see Jesus" (Heb 2:9). Jesus, the one who bears the exact imprint of God (Heb 1:3), bore God's image perfectly as a man, the time when he was "made lower than the angels for a little while." He perfectly demonstrated that control over creation which mankind was meant to wield, yet without sin and in full obedience to his Father, even throughout intense temptation and suffering, not to mention the shame of the cross (Heb 12:2).

Because of that obedience, Jesus is now sitting where mankind was always meant to sit – crowned with glory and honour at the right hand of the Father.

Heb 1:3. As the letter proceeds, we learn that this also refers to his finished work of priestly intercession, c.f. Heb 10:12.

However, Jesus, the glorious Son, is not the sole member of this new, restored humanity. Rather, God's intent is to bring "many sons to glory" (Heb 2:10). It is for this reason that Jesus the man suffered death (Heb 2:9), tasting death for everyone. Jesus therefore is the "pioneer of salvation" (2:10), the one who through his suffering has become "perfect" – that is, qualified to bring others to God.

"Christ's being perfected is a vocational process by which he is made complete or fully equipped for his office," Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 107.

NOT ASHAMED 2:11-13

In Heb 2:11-13 the author expands on this organic link between Jesus, the glorious Son, and the sons he is bringing to glory through his death and resurrection:

> **Heb 2:11** *Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.*

The masculine language here does not exclude women – quite the opposite. In Christ, both men and women are heirs, and therefore "sons" in the Bible's language. See Heb 1:2 and 6:17, as well as Gal 4:7.

The NIV's "are of the same family" is an interpretation of the Greek "are all of one," but, as we shall see, that is not an over-translation. Jesus is not ashamed to call those who trust in him – sinners though they are – his brothers and sisters. Jesus is set apart from sinners by virtue of his holiness (Heb 7:26), but that qualifies him to serve as our high priest. He makes others holy by means of his priestly representation of them (Heb 9:14). So together, Jesus and his people form a new family, a new mankind, brought to God and devoted to his praise.

That much is made clear in the Old Testament citations which follow, from Psalm 22 and Isaiah 8. As is common in the NT, the quotations are sparse, but the author clearly has the context of the verses he quotes in view. Although from disparate parts of the Old Testament, both passages have a similar shape. Both start with an individual unjustly suffering under the judgement of God, and both end with a family or congregation singing God's praise as the individual is saved from that judgement.

For a robust defence of this view of Old Testament citations, see G. K. Beale, "Did Jesus and his Followers Preach The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?", *Themelios*, 14 (1989).

Psalm 22

The first quotation is from Ps 22, the psalm which supplies Jesus with his "cry of dereliction" on the cross ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). In this psalm of David, the King is utterly alone, "scorned by everyone, despised by the people" (Ps 22:6), beset by enemies that are likened to "strong bulls" and "roaring lions" (Ps 22:12-13), and close to death (Ps 22:15). Although mediated through human enemies, David clearly sees God's hand behind his suffering ("you lay me in the dust of death," Ps 22:15), and expresses his horror that God's protection and

salvation have been removed from him, such that God is not answering his prayers for deliverance (Ps 22:1-2).

Yet in the midst of his suffering, David demonstrates unshakeable trust in God. Yahweh has previously delivered Israel's ancestors, honouring their trust in him and ensuring they were not put to shame (Ps 22:4-5); David has followed in their footsteps since birth, and so appeals to God for the same deliverance (Ps 22:10-11, 19-20). Thus the first half of the psalm is a picture of a lone, faithful Israelite, unjustly suffering under God's hand.

The turning point of the psalm occurs halfway through Ps 22:21. Although obscured by some English versions, a string of imperatives pleading for salvation is resolved with a sudden verb in the past tense. As the CSB renders it:

"Come quickly... Rescue my life... Save me... You answered me!"

After this dramatic, last-gasp deliverance, the picture is transformed. Suddenly the king is not suffering alone, despised and scorned by the people, but is surrounded by many "brothers" (Ps 22:22), a great congregation who he now leads in praise (Ps 22:25). This group is comprised of people from all walks of life (Ps 22:29), from every nation (Ps 22:27), from future generations (Ps 22:31), and even includes those who have apparently died and been raised to life (Ps 22:29c).

Although this suffering king was despised by the people, dying alone in shame, yet God did not despise him (Ps 22:24), and rescued him from death to a place of honour. This apparently has resulted in many others being rescued from death and brought into a huge congregation – indeed, a gathering of "all the families of the nations" (Ps 22:27) – who will similarly never be put to shame.

Isaiah 8

Hebrews 2:13 quotes from Isaiah 8 twice. The context of that Old Testament passage is the failure of King Ahaz of Judah to trust in God. Threatened with attack from an alliance of Syria and Israel, he is terrified, along with all the people of Judah (Isa 7:2). God sends word through Isaiah that he should not fear, but be "firm in faith" in Yahweh's word (Isa 7:9). Ahaz refuses to listen to God (Isa 7:10-13), and instead makes a political alliance with the King of Assyria (2 Kings 16:7-8) – a wholesale failure of trust which incurs the punishment of exile (Isa 7:17-8:10).

Into this national tragedy, Yahweh urges Isaiah to do what Ahaz failed to do - to trust and fear God, rather than fear the threat of invasion (Isa 8:11-13), and wait for Yahweh to act, even as his wrath falls on Jerusalem (Isa 8:14-15). Isaiah responds in faith:

Isa 8:17-18

> *17I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the descendants of Jacob. I will put my trust in him. 18Here am I, and the children the Lord has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.*

Isaiah and his children are here presented as the faithful remnant within Israel – a bastion of trust in Yahweh as the whole nation fearfully goes astray. The names of Isaiah's children also signify this. "Shear-jashub" (Isa 7:3) means "a remnant will return", and "Maher-shalal-hash-baz" refers to the speed with which the imminent threat will disappear, indicating that Judah should continue to trust in God (Isa 8:3-4).

In other words, the trust in the Lord embodied by Isaiah – a sole faithful man, who will experience the Lord's judgement even though he himself does not deserve it – forms the beginning of a new community of faith in Judah; indeed, a new family. This remnant awaits its typological fulfilment in the birth of another child who will be called "Mighty God" (Isa 9:6), a shoot from the stump of Jesse (Isa 11:1) who will finally gather his remnant from all nations (Isa 11:11-16).

It is this fulfilment which the author of Hebrews heralds to his readers. Jesus is the sole faithful man, the innocent who suffered under God's judgement. After "tasting death for everyone," his resurrection and ascension vindicates his innocence (Heb 2:9) and enables him to bring with him to glory a congregation of disciples, who he leads in worship and is not ashamed to call his family (Heb 2:10-11).

Therefore, the incarnation frees Christians from shame. Those who come to share the name of Jesus may well face dishonour even from their own family, and may not even find a place at the family table because of their conversion. But Jesus, the glorious Son of God, is not ashamed to own his brothers as part of his family. Indeed, he welcomes them as guests of honour to his table.

By extension, all who have been brought into the family of the incarnate Christ ought to extend the same table-fellowship to their new spiritual brothers and sisters, especially those who have suffered shame as a result of owning the name of Christ. Often, when a Christian suffers shame or hardship because of their faith, it is temptingly easy to find some reason to distance ourselves from them – by claiming we don't know them very well, or that we don't quite agree with the way they expressed themselves, or by some other mechanism. Of course, there may be times when Christians suffer for doing evil (1 Pet 2:20). But if shame comes to a believer for their faith in Christ, we need to remember that Jesus is not ashamed to count them as members of his family – and will not be ashamed of us if we stand with them.

Later in the book the author will commend the Hebrews for doing precisely this during an earlier period of persecution, Heb 10:32-34.

FREE FROM FEAR 2:14-15

A further consequence of Jesus' incarnation is that his new family can be free from fear. As discussed above, death is the ultimate curse on sinful mankind's ability to fulfil God's design for them. Death takes us from the dignity of ruling in God's image to the shame of experiencing God's judgement. Here the author strikingly claims that the devil wields "the power of death" (Heb 2:14). We learn why in the next verse – mankind is permanently enslaved by "the fear of death." Satan, the accuser of the brothers (Rev 12:10, Zech 3:1), now plays on our guilt and shame, as John Owen (commenting on this verse) explains:

> God having passed the sentence of death against sin, it was in the power of Satan to terrify and affright the consciences of men with the expectation and dread of it, so bringing them into bondage.

John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Vol.III* (Edinburgh: J. Ritchie, 1813), 471.

This dread might be consciously felt or not, and could result in a variety of behaviours, but as Peter Bolt explains:

> Everyone is afraid – they just do different things with it. Some run from death by simply not thinking about it; some lie awake at night worrying about it; some stave it off with all kinds of busy activities; some try to cheat death by maximizing their pleasure before death comes; some turn and face death and dare it to take them. But everyone is afraid... At this point, we begin to see the power the devil wields... He can make plenty of deceptive promises that cater for our desire for security.

Peter Bolt, *Living with the Underworld* (Kingsford: Matthias Media, 2007), 97-98.

But when the devil tempts Christians to fear and shame, he no longer has the grounds to make any accusation. As Owen goes on to say:

> When contending with [Jesus] for the continuance of his sovereignty, [Satan] was conquered, the ground whereon he stood, even the guilt of sin, being taken away from under him, and his title defeated... Nor can he longer make use of death as penal, as threatened in the curse of the law, to terrify and affright the consciences of men: for "being justified by faith" in the death of Christ, "they have peace with God" ...And thus was Satan, as to his power over death, fully destroyed by the death of Christ.

Owen, *Hebrews Vol.III*, 473.

Christians are sinners and deserve the judgement of death – but Jesus, their older brother, has shared their humanity in order to face that death for them. He has been raised to glory, vindicated as the founder member of a restored humanity, and has made his new family holy through his priestly intercession on their behalf. Therefore the devil's power is broken and Jesus' brothers and sisters are freed from their fear of death.

CONCLUSION

Christians in the West in the 21st Century might be tempted to fear many things – from physical death, to online "cancellation", to the pain of their own family disowning them. We may never gain approval and honour in the world's eyes.

Yet the incarnation of Christ means we need not be in dread. Christ's death in our place means we will never be put to the shame of judgement. The resulting disarming of Satan means we will never fear guilt and accusation. And our welcome into his family means that "though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me" (Ps 27:10).

Christians facing pressure may capitulate, denying or compromising their faith in order to fit in with their society. But as that society's views shift, the result for the Christian will be a permanent sense of rootlessness and anxiety, trying to cling on to faith in Christ while also aiming to please those who hate him. By contrast, Christians who are despised or shamed by their faith in Christ would do well to reflect on the extraordinary historical fact of the incarnation of Christ. It is the culmination of thousands of years of salvation history, during which God has progressively revealed his plan to send his Son as the "firstborn among many brothers and sisters" (Romans 8:29). Instead of modifying our every public utterance to find acceptance with those who appear to have power in our world, we can know that in Christ we are already accepted by the Father God who really rules the universe. And whatever our troubles, we can pour out our hearts in prayer to him, confident that we approach in the name of his Son, our older brother Jesus.

Questions for further thought and discussion

1. "Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me" How is this woven through the passages Nathan discusses?

2. Why do you think we don't we make more of the truth that Jesus is our brother? What would that add to our worship of him?

3. We often try to deal with fear and shame by trying to escape our creatureliness. Can you think of examples of that? How does the incarnation address that instinct?

Becoming a Bit More Human?

Some reflections on 'incarnational ministry'

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In every issue of *Primer*, we aim to move from theology to ministry, convinced that Christian ministry needs to be grounded in what God has revealed of himself and his works, and convinced that a genuine grasp of Christian theology will cultivate the love of God and of neighbour.

For the current issue, it might seem particularly easy to move from theology to practice, given how popular the language of "incarnational ministry" is in many circles.

Those two words can seem a natural pair because the incarnation is central to ministry. As we have consistently seen throughout this issue, the Son of God's assumption of a true human nature is the basis of our salvation, the antidote to fear and shame, and our great hope – we shall see the Lord. The incarnation is grand and it is central, and so we should serve in ways that take the incarnation seriously. But as you might imagine, we need to tread carefully when we describe our ministry as 'incarnational'.

- A noun, 'incarnation', has become an adjective 'incarnational'. There's nothing inherently wrong with that, but it means that "incarnational" can now be attached to all sorts of other nouns and the connection won't always be stated or justified. In some instances the connection will obviously be absurd, if, for example, I started selling "incarnational sandwiches." But other associations might need some more careful thought.

- A noun that refers to becoming flesh and blood and taking on a human nature is somehow being applied to the activity of human beings who are not capable of such transformations and, at any rate, are already embodied, flesh and blood creatures.

- And we are dealing with a marvellous noun, which makes connecting it with what we do especially appealing. If you'll forgive another adjective, no-one wants to say their ministry is 'unincarnational'. So, it's appealing but, as we'll see, we need to take some care as we move from the doctrine of the Son's incarnation to our ministry.

The concept of "incarnational ministry" is a relatively new one. Although there are some earlier examples, it has been on the rise since the 1980s and has proved popular in a few different spheres of ministry.

There is a really helpful overview in ch5 of J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

- In **youth ministry** resources in particular, the term has been used to emphasise the importance of entering the world of young people, engaging with them in the ordinary, everyday stuff of life, and crossing geographical, generational or cultural barriers to reach them.

See Pete Ward's works *Youthwork and the Mission of God: Frameworks for Relational Outreach* (London: SPCK, 1997); *God at the Mall: Youth Ministry That Meets Kids Where They're At* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998). More recently, Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 2007).

- It has also been prominent in **church planting** discussions of the last few decades, which often wanted to emphasise being embedded in local communities and not simply parachuting in, or expecting a secular culture to come to church. For example, one professor of Urban Mission, Jude Tiersma, writes that "the idea of the incarnation, of walking with and dwelling among people, of identifying with their sufferings, is essential for mission in the city. A theology that looks in from the outside, that sees the sin and wants to go in and rescue the city, is inadequate."

Jude Tiersma, "What Does It Mean to Be Incarnational When We Are Not the Messiah?," in *God So Loves the City: Seeking a Theology for Urban Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 18. See also Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009).

- Finally, it has also been used in **cross-cultural contexts** where advocates of incarnational ministry encourage sensitive engagement with a culture, contextualised ministry, and "becoming all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22) For example, the first chapter of Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin Mayers' work *Ministering Cross-Culturally* is entitled 'God's metaphor for ministry: Jesus, Incarnate Son of God.' In it, they argue that "we must love the people to whom we minister so much that we are willing to enter their culture as children, to learn to speak as they speak, play as they play, eat what they eat, sleep where they sleep, study what they study, and thus earn their respect and admiration." In wider missiology, as David Bosch traces, incarnational language has been championed in liberation theology and so can be bound up with the strengths and weaknesses of that movement, with its emphases on the plight of the poor and marginalised, the suffering of the church and activism towards justice and reconciliation.

Ministering Cross-Culturally, 25.

David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 524–25.

Most positively, the term has often been used to combat unhelpful trends. For example, enthusiasm for incarnational ministry can reflect a desire to prioritise

relationships over pragmatic or program-driven ministries, or a desire to make sure that we don't divorce verbal proclamation from faithful living. In cross-cultural mission we need to be wary of ignoring or importing our own cultural assumptions. In places, incarnational language serves to fight against a trend towards disembodied, or abstract ways of thinking about the Christian life and our formation as believers (the danger of *excarnation*, in Charles Taylor's striking language).

See James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 58–59.

More negatively, the arguments associated with the term are sometimes deeply unhelpful. In some contexts, "incarnational ministry" has been used to suggest that our presence is more important than our proclamation, as if the lesson of the incarnation is that it is loving simply to go and be with people. That would be to miss the ways in which the incarnate Christ was himself "a faithful witness," proclaiming repentance and faith (see Rev 1:5, Mark 1:15), and provoking a very mixed reaction. Or incarnational ministry can make "being with people" and addressing their immediate needs the goal of ministry, thereby neglecting the rest of Jesus' ministry (his teaching, death, resurrection, ascension, intercession and return). The danger is that our horizons quickly shrink to what *I* can do them for them *now*, rather than what God will accomplish at the consummation of all things.

One danger then is that we make the incarnation into a badly-fitting analogy for things we think are important. For example, many use incarnational language to emphasise just one aspect of Jesus' earthly ministry (his humility or tenderness) and neglect others. Here it would likely be more helpful to say "be Christ-like" than to reach for the language of the incarnation, since the emphasis is on what the incarnate Christ was like, not the fact that he was incarnate. Likewise, Philippians 2 is best understood as an invitation into a pattern of humble service (as exemplified in Jesus' self-humiliation in the incarnation and death), rather than a call to practice incarnational ministry.

Properly speaking, the incarnation describes the Son of God taking on a human nature. The Word *became* flesh and is evermore incarnate. That's very different to someone embracing a new culture for a period as a cross-cultural missionary. If I take the incarnation as my model I am thinking about taking on a *new* nature and becoming what I was not before. But in any cross-cultural setting I am already dealing with a fellow image-bearing human person. They are not "other" from me in that sense. The gulf overcome by the incarnation just isn't an issue in any cross-cultural encounter, even if there may be remarkably different cultures. Ironically, then, using the incarnational analogy can actually exaggerate distance.

Since the incarnation is an irreversible event, it makes a particularly unhelpful way of describing Paul's desire to be all things to all men, eating as a Gentile does when with Gentiles and as a law-observant Jew with Jews. In 1 Cor 9 the emphasis is on flexibility and reversability! To

be sure, Jesus is in view there (Paul is under "the law of Christ" in 1 Cor 9:21, which I think means that Christ's example is in view), but the model is Jesus' willingness to draw near and bear the burdens of others, not his incarnation per se.

Another danger would be to downplay the uniqueness of his incarnation. When Jesus says "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21b), he is not equating those missions in every respect. Jesus's incarnation uniquely reveals the Father. His incarnation is *the* revelation of God. The church's role is different. We are called to proclaim Christ, to point to him. To that extent, John the Baptist is our model: "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). That is a helpful guard against a Messiah complex which easily threatens to emerge when we speak about our becoming incarnate amongst those in need.

Alongside that, though, the church does have a revelatory role; the church displays God's wisdom in the world (Eph 3:10), our relationships are to be marked by a love that makes our discipleship visible to the world (John 13:34-35), and our lives are to be worthy of imitation insofar as we imitate Christ (1 Cor 11:1). Taken together, that means that Jesus can say "look at me to see God," in a way that church cannot without much more care and qualification. Indeed, it would seem best to avoid the language of incarnation altogether here, and adopt the biblical imagery of indwelling – the church and the believer as temples of the Holy Spirit.

All that said, faced with the claims of "incarnational ministry", it can be tempting to critique and leave it there. We might well decide to avoid the term in favour of language which emphasises our union with Christ or the call to be Christ-like. We must certainly defend the uniqueness of the incarnation. But we also mustn't neglect the earthly life of Jesus in the gospels when we reflect on the nature of Christian ministry. One terrific example of that is John Stott's last major public address (at the Keswick Convention in 2007). He begins with the themes we've been tracing.

Todd Billings for example prefers to speak (less catchily but more carefully) of "Ministry in Union with Christ the Servant." *Union with Christ*, 143.

> We are to be like Christ in his Incarnation. Some of you may immediately recoil in horror from such an idea. Surely, you will say to me, the Incarnation was an altogether unique event and cannot possibly be imitated in any way? My answer to that question is yes and no. Yes, it was unique, in the sense that the Son of God took our humanity to Himself in Jesus of Nazareth, once and for all and forever, never to be repeated. That is true. But there is another sense in which the Incarnation was not unique: the amazing grace of God in the Incarnation of Christ is to be followed by all of us... We are to be like Christ in his Incarnation in the amazing self-humbling which lies behind the Incarnation.

Find the whole talk online at *cslewisinstitute.org/Becoming_More_Like_Christ_Stott*

At that point Stott turns to Phil 2:5-8 and the "amazing self-humbling which lies behind the Incarnation." Helpfully, though, the incarnation does not govern the whole piece, rather the overriding theme is the call to be Christ-like. He turns next from Jesus's "Incarnation to his life of service" and a reflection on the footwashing in John 13 and Jesus' model of self-abasing service. From there, to Jesus's model of love (to which Eph 5:2 refers), his patient endurance (as highlighted in 1 Pet 2), and his mission. "Why is it" Stott asks, that "our evangelistic efforts so often fraught with failure? Several reasons may be given and I do not want to over-simplify, but one main reason is that we don't look like the Christ we are proclaiming."

It is an arresting thought, and not only for our evangelism but for all Christian ministry. We are not called to incarnate ourselves in imitation of Christ, but we are called to imitate the incarnate Christ. To offer just one further reflection on that, we can turn to Dane Ortlund's *Gentle and Lowly*. One chapter turns to Heb 5:2 which speaks of the high priest who "is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness." Having become a man, Jesus moves amongst us as one of us and *for that reason* deals gently with us. Not that Jesus was weak in the sense that he ever sinned (Heb 4:15), but "he did experience everything else that it means to live as a real human being in this fallen world: the weakness of suffering, temptation, and every kind of human limitation." Here's the point: it takes God to become a man to show us what proper fellow-feeling for another human being is like.

Dane C. Ortlund, *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2020), 57.

Questions for further thought and discussion

1. How does the incarnation teach us to treat others? What specific passages from the gospels would you choose to demonstrate that?

2. Where do think the contrast is strongest between Jesus's treatment of people and ours? What does that reveal? And how should we respond?

In this issue we marvel at the incarnation of the Son of God with help from Greg Lanier, Suzanne McDonald, David Shaw, Chris Stead, Nathan Weston, Garry Williams, and something old from John Owen.

noun | 'pri-mer

1. a textbook or introduction to a subject

2. a material used to prepare a surface for further treatment

3. a device or compound used to ignite an explosive charge

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