

HUMAN NATURE IN THE LIGHT OF THE INCARNATION

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What can the Incarnation tell us about human nature? To judge by two recent monographs dealing with the subject of sin the answer would be indeed be very little.¹ Granted Plantinga's definition of sin, 'not the way its supposed to be', in reference to the biblical concept of *shalom*, sets the stage in terms of a contrasting positive. Nevertheless, the Incarnation features very seldom in either presentation. Why is this so?

The answer, I believe, is to be found in our understanding of theological method, clearly outlined for us by TA Noble.² Are we involved with a 'theological anthropology', or Christian theology? The dangers of an anthropological focus are many indeed, and with all such pietistic groups, Wesleyans have been characterised as being excessively subjective. The reality is that unless doctrine is to be based upon the fact that '...in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself...' (2 Cor. 5:19 NRSV), it will remain as anthropology and never become Christian theology. But if doctrine is based upon Christ, the Holy One, we can rest upon an objective foundation for faith and theological enquiry; a rock upon which to build our lives.

To truly understand the human condition is therefore to understand it in the light of God's self-revelation in Christ Jesus. Only when we understand not only the 'how' and 'why', but the 'who' of Christ will we begin to penetrate the depths of the human condition. To consider humanity, or for that matter, original sin, in any other light is to attempt to assert our own understanding over and against the grace of God in Christ.³ And so it is that we begin by turning to the understanding of the Church catholic in Nicene Christology.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, Light from Light, true God from true God,

¹ D L Smith, *With Wilful Intent*, (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1994), C Plantinga Jr, *Not The Way Its Supposed To Be*, (Leicester: Apollos, 1995).

² T A Noble, *Prolegomena For A Conference On Original Sin*, (paper circulated in advance to participants in the conference).

³ '...there can be no place in dogmatics for an autonomous section *De peccato* constructed in a vacuum between the doctrine of creation and that of reconciliation. Who can summon us to keep a law of God which is supposed to be known to man by nature? Who can try to measure the sin of man by such a law? To do that – even in the form of a 'doctrine of sin' – is surely to do precisely what we are forbidden to do by the real Law of God revealed by God Himself. To do that is surely to bypass the grace of God, to evolve on our own thoughts in relation to the will of God instead of those which He Himself has given us in the commandment held out before us in His grace.' K Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4.1.58.

begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

TRUE GOD

To confess Christ is true God is to acknowledge the soteriological focus of our Christology. Indeed, the christological controversies surrounding the formation of the creed reflect the struggles of the Church grappling with these issues. Were he not God, how could he save us?

The question was answered in various ways, often beset by the prevailing dualist modes of thinking, current even in our own day. Some argued that God is so far removed that he cannot come near his creation. Or, that he is so fundamentally other, that Spirit and creation can have nothing to do with each other. Or, that if God were to approach, he would require some sort of intermediary agent. Underlying all of these tendencies is a dualist framework that not only separates God from his revelation in Christ, but his Being and his Act. Salvation must therefore be a matter of an external moral transaction between humanity, the intermediary, and God.

Nicene Christology would have none of this. *Homoousion* shatters these dualist forms of thought and affirms that God as man⁴ has come to redeem us. Acting in absolute freedom, free love towards humanity, God becomes what he was not. As Gregory of Nazianzen puts it, ‘What he was he continued to be; what he was not he took to himself’.⁵ He is not utilising man instrumentally, but enters the human condition. By approaching the matter *a posteriori* from the Gospel of salvation revealed in Christ the Church began to reflect upon personal relations within the Godhead, ultimately coming to an understanding grounding the reality of Christ’s humanity within the very being of God.

TRUE MAN

However, when we talk of Christ’s humanity, what do we mean? McIntyre brings the question into sharp relief posing two options. Were it sinful humanity, how

⁴ The word is used specifically for its dual meaning in English, *viz.*, Humanity in general, and an individual (male) person, Jesus.

⁵ Gregory of Nazianzen, *Third Theological Oration ‘On The Son’*, xxix.xix contained in H Wace & P Schaff (eds.), *A Select Library Of The Nicene And Post-Nicene Fathers Of The Christian Church* 2 series, 24 vols, 1887-1900 (hereafter abbreviated NPNF), NPNF2 vii.308.

could Christ avoid sinning? Were it sinless humanity, how did he truly enter into our condition to redeem us?⁶ Augustine himself struggled with this thought saying, ‘I was afraid, therefore, to believe him to be born in the flesh, lest I should be compelled to believe him contaminated by the flesh’.⁷ But how else was Christ to effect reconciliation between God and humanity? How else was God to redeem us from sin and death, and to reconcile us to himself? Irenaeus states the question, ‘But how could we be joined to incorruptibility and immortality unless, first, incorruptibility and immortality had become that which we also are’.⁸

For God to attempt to do so by divine *fiat* would not prevent the Fall from re-occurring nor deal with the sinful condition of humanity. Athanasius presents the divine dilemma clearly. ‘It would, of course, have been unthinkable that God should go back upon his word and that man, having transgressed, should not die; but it was equally monstrous that beings which once had shared the nature of the Word should perish and turn back again into non-existence through corruption’.⁹ The only possible solution is for a re-creation of humanity dealing with the problem from within; the answer revealed to us as Incarnation. The writer to the Hebrews states, ‘Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the power of death, that is, the devil’ (Heb 2:14, NRSV). Torrance summarises the situation thus: ‘Nicene theology had no doubt about the fact that unless the death of Christ on the Cross was the vicarious act of God himself in order to effect atoning reconciliation in the ontological depths of our creaturely existence, then what took place on the Cross would have been in vain.’¹⁰ And again, ‘If Jesus Christ the incarnate Son of God is not true God from true God then we are not saved, for it is only God who can save; but if Jesus Christ is not truly man, then salvation does not touch our human existence and condition.’¹¹

INCARNATION

In driving towards such an understanding of our redemption in Christ, which is ultimately eschatological, we also come to a fuller understanding of our great need of Christ. ‘For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich’ (2 Cor 8:9). Mozley describes this as a ‘double metathesis’, that is, the Word took what was ours, fallen humanity, and gives us what was his,

⁶ J McIntyre, *Theology After The Storm*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), Chapter 1.

⁷ Augustine, *Confessions* v.x.20, NPNF1.i.87. Here Augustine reflects upon his own earlier Manichean dualist perspective.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* iii.xix.1, contained in A Roberts & J Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols, 1885-1896 (hereafter abbreviated ANF), i.488/9.

⁹ Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi*, (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary, 1989), 32.

¹⁰ T F Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 142.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 149.

perfected humanity.¹² In a similar fashion, reflecting upon the parable of the lost son, and the parabolic Christology found in Phil. 2, Barth describes this as the humiliation of the Son of God and the exaltation of the Son of Man.

What form does this humiliation take? It is that God sent ‘...his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh’ (Rom 8:3). ‘For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:21).

Realising that holiness is not caused by the absence of something, even the lust of a human father, but by the positive presence of God, the Fathers, pre-dating Augustine, had a somewhat different understanding of what this might mean.¹³ Their christological issues meant the continual re-affirmation of the full humanity of Christ. He was not lacking human flesh, soul or mind. Indeed, he was lacking nothing human, summarised by Gregory of Nazianzen as, ‘For that which he has not assumed he has not healed...’.¹⁴ This did mean, though, that of necessity he participated in our fallen mortal humanity. Cyril of Jerusalem states, ‘The Lord took on Him from us our likeness, that He might give greater grace to that which lacked; that sinful humanity might become partaker of God.’¹⁵

It is the differentiation in thought between Nicene Christology and later Western tradition in the understanding of fallen, or sinful, humanity that is vital for correct understanding. To generalise a complex issue, for the Eastern Fathers fallenness equated with mortality. Therefore, in order to redeem us, Christ assumed fallen mortal humanity. The more dualistic framework within Western thought attaches sin to flesh itself, with the requirement that Christ must somehow have assumed pre-fallen Adamic humanity.

Adam’s sin, his rebellion and turning away from relationship with God, his rejection of covenant, resulted in the self-alienation of all of humanity from its Source of being in God, leading ultimately to death, often stylised as corruption, decay, falling apart, *phthora*.¹⁶ As Paul states, ‘...sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin...’ (Rom 5:12). So too are we alienated from one another, the creation, and even within ourselves—the divided mind. It is this *deprivatio* that leads to *depravatio*, weakened humanity falling prey to the

¹² J K Mozley, *The Doctrine Of The Atonement*, (London: Duckworth, 1915), Chapter 4.

¹³ It is this mistaken understanding of holiness by absence that leads to the necessity of Mary’s virginity to break the ongoing cycle of participation in original sin. But then, if sin could be transmitted not only by a father, but by a mother, something else is required, hence the concept of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Logically, this should go on *ad infinitum* throughout the ancestry of Jesus, which is in stark contrast to the genealogy of Matthew’s Gospel!

¹⁴ Gregory of Nazianzen, *Epistle ci, ‘To Cledonius The Priest Against Apollinarius*, NPNF2 vii.440.

¹⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures xii.15*, NPNF2 vii.75. For reasons which will become apparent below we prefer the designation ‘fallen’ to ‘sinful’ in order to avoid confusion.

¹⁶ Not that humanity has fallen completely from God, but broken covenant with him. Barth says, ‘He is continually bound to him, but doomed to pass away and perish as the one who is bound to him.’ Barth, *CD* 4/1.60.3.

power of sin. Deprived of intimate relationship with the very Source of being, we have turned inwards upon ourselves in sin (*incurvatus in se*). The two cannot be separated. The breach in relationship results not only in the corruption of the physical, but in the depravity of the spiritual.¹⁷ *Sarx* not only describes our corporate humanity, but our corporate liability to the judgement of God. The ontological and the relational consequences of the Fall are bound together. Together they must be redeemed. Athanasius thus asserted that it must be as human being that God redeems humanity, thereby destroying both sin and death. ‘...[We] had not been delivered from sin and the curse, unless it had been by nature from human flesh which the Word put on.’¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa states, ‘Therefore did he become obedient unto death in order that through his obedience he might remedy the disorder that had entered through disobedience and, by rising from the dead, might annihilate the death that entered through disobedience.’¹⁹

The Incarnation is the Good News that the eternal Word assumed fallen humanity in order to redeem it. He is not God *ab extra* acting upon humanity but God *ab intra* embodying what he mediates. Much more than a forensic transaction, he sanctifies humanity from within. He has penetrated the ontological depths of our humanity, standing in solidarity with the human race. Just as the nation is represented by the king, the Hebrews by Abraham, and humanity by Adam, so the Pauline second Adam language presents Christ as our representative. It was *humanum* that was his.²⁰

The christological concepts of *anhypostasis*, that is, the humanity of Christ having no existence of itself, and *enhypostasis*, that is, the humanity of Christ has reality because of the Incarnation, help to explain this. Jesus was both a man and the bearer of our corporate humanity. It is through him that all things were made. It is in him that all things hold together. He is the one inseparably united with us. He is the *archē* of the new humanity. If guilt was in any way ours in Adam, that which Augustine referred to as the *reatus*, then we must also acknowledge that in Christ all are acquitted. ‘...[Just] as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all’ (Rom 5:18). The ‘old man’ has been crucified.

¹⁷ Barth’s analysis is of humanity’s fall in trying to exalt ourselves, and of death in trying to take for ourselves life, *CD* 4/1.60.3.

¹⁸ Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against The Arians*, ii.70, NPNF2 iv.386. See also *De Incarnatione Verbi*, Sections 9&10.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Apollinarius*, 21/160.26, translation located in A Meredith Gregory *Of Nyssa*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 58.

²⁰ Barth comments, ‘...primarily and of itself “flesh” does not imply a man, but human essence and existence, human kind and nature, humanity, *humanitas*, that which makes a man as opposed to God, angel or animal,’ *CD* 1.2.15.

But lest we fall into the error of attributing salvation only to the physical fact of Incarnation we must remind ourselves that it is also a personal act of the Word. It is to affirm *anhypostasis* and *enhyposstasis*. The key to understanding is the link between the ontological and the personal, for while we may be able to distinguish between them, we cannot separate nor fuse them.

Much of Wesleyan theology focuses exclusively upon the personal and relational, and so tends to ignore the profound nature of the Incarnation.²¹ Thus, sanctification becomes only my 'personal' relationship with Christ. The objective basis for such a relationship is obscured. The Fathers, however, in struggling with their linguistic problems made it possible to hold the ontological and the personal or relational together. *Ousia* referred in the first instance to individual substances, such as 'this chair', while at a secondary level to substances in general, such as 'chairs'. *Hypostasis* on the other hand referred mainly to existence, with the more individuated as a secondary meaning. By holding both concepts together within a Trinitarian framework they held on to both that which is common and that which is particular.²² They recognised that the essence of being is to be in relationship. As the Son is in relationship with the Father through the Spirit, so by means of the hypostatic union humanity is in relationship with the Son through the Spirit, and therefore participates in the inner Trinitarian life of God himself.

Ontology is constructed in a matrix of relationships, and since the basic ontological concept must be Trinity, communion itself is an ontological concept. This principle of being-constituting-relationships I sometimes refer to as an 'onto-relational matrix'.²³ While one may arise out of the other, it cannot be reduced to the other, and to attempt to delineate watertight distinctions between the ontological and the personal or relational is to lapse into scholastic theology.²⁴

1. *God, acting as God, moves humanward in the assumption of humanity by the Son, thereby mediating reconciliation, dealing with our alienation from the Source of our being. His penetration of the ontological depths of humanity hallows it by his very presence. In his person humanity and divinity are reconciled. As Torrance states, 'Christ and gospel belong ontologically together,*

²¹ I refer to the excellent analysis by S Powell, *A Critical Analysis of Relational Theology*, (Point Loma Nazarene University: unpublished paper, 1997).

²² I am indebted to V Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Press, 1976).

²³ Since my first thought on this matter, the film 'The Matrix' was produced. Interestingly, as we observe the characters in the movie switch between differing spheres of reality, we are led to believe that both are interconnected, and that what happens in one affects the other. This is precisely the point with ontology and relationality. I also note that Torrance has occasion to use the term 'matrix', though not necessarily with the same connotations.

²⁴ It is at this very point that Torrance and Zizioulas part company, since the latter continues to emphasise ontology deriving from personhood in an attempt to defend the monarchy of the Father.

for that is what he is, he who brings and actualises and embodies the Gospel of reconciliation between God and man and man and man in his own person.’²⁵

2. Lest we think of this only in static terms, *we can also say that God, acting as man moves Godward*. The reconciliation begun in the Virginal Conception continues throughout Christ’s life. Having taken flesh, which (in terms of the parable of the prodigal son) was on its journey to the far country, he has turned it around and led it home, making the journey via death, resurrection and ascension, to the Father.²⁶

Irenaeus was one of the earliest Fathers to develop this theme of recapitulation. ‘Wherefore also he passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God.’²⁷ Augustine also noted Christ’s rejection of the false gods and powers so alluring to humanity. ‘All of the things which men unrighteously desired to possess, he died without and so made them of no account. All the things which men sought to avoid and so deviated from the search for truth, he endured and so robbed them of their power over us.’²⁸ This is a complete reversal of human experience, and with it our consequent liberation.

His life of perfect filial obedience, of correct moral choice, preferring the Father’s will at all times, is such that he triumphed over sin in the flesh, bringing divine judgement upon it. Despite sharing in all of our disadvantages, our weakness in the face of sin’s power, he lived a sinless life. In the ultimate sense he sanctified our humanity by dying to it, condemning sin in the flesh, such that on the cross the ‘old man’ died. Here he cries, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani’, penetrating our ultimate separation from God, yet rising victorious over death. Again, Torrance comments,

If in Jesus Christ the Son of God became incarnate within our fallen guilt-laden humanity, then in becoming incarnate he not only took what is ours to make it his, but thereby *really* took upon himself our sin and guilt, our violence and wickedness, so that through his own atoning self-sacrifice and self-consecration he might do away with our evil and sanctify our human nature from within and thus present us to the Father as those who are redeemed and consecrated in and through himself.²⁹

3. Our tendency towards static forms of thought makes it difficult for us to hold these concepts together. In reality, *the question is one of the relationship of the Incarnation to the Atonement*. Only as we recognise the profound relationship

²⁵ T F Torrance, *The Mediation Of Christ*, 2nd ed, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 63.

²⁶ See further Torrance, *Mediation*, 84f.

²⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, iii.xviii.7 (ANF 1.448).

²⁸ Augustine, ‘Of True Religion’, xvi.31, in J H S Burleigh (ed), *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, (London: SCM, 1953), 240. He compares, among others, riches vs. poverty, pride vs. insults, avoidance of pain vs. crucifixion.

²⁹ Torrance, *Mediation*, 63.

between them can we begin to probe the mystery of Christ. The hypostatic union is the ontological aspect of atoning reconciliation of humanity to God, while atoning reconciliation is the dynamic aspect of the hypostatic union.³⁰ Yet, they are inseparably bound. Only by viewing them as the one christological movement can we begin to realise the awful depths God sunk to in order to redeem us from sin.³¹ Barth describes this as ‘*completed event*’ and ‘*completed event*’. On the one hand it is accomplished fact (static-ontic) while on the other we recognise the movement from non-revelation to revelation, from promise to fulfilment, from cross to resurrection (dynamic-noetic).³² He writes, ‘When, above all, we recollect there is a riddle in the fact itself, and that even in the New Testament two lines can be discerned in this matter, we will at least be on our guard against thinking of over simple solutions.’³³

4. Our tendency towards dualist thought also makes it difficult for us, for *we are prone to see the divine and human as mutually exclusive, and thereby struggle to understand how Christ could really have assumed fallen humanity if he were divine*. Surely his divinity would swamp his humanity. Torrance uses the couplet of ‘personalising Person’ and ‘humanising Man’ to develop this unitary approach we have been describing.³⁴ While we are created beings, he is the Creator. Thus we are personalised persons, while he is the personalising Person. Rather than de-personalising human being, Christ personalises human being in a much more profound way. Our broken humanity, estranged from the personalising Source of being, and deeply divided within itself, is assumed by Christ and healed. Image and reality come together thereby re-personalising us. So too, our de-humanised humanity, at war with itself and others, is assumed and converted to a proper relationship with God and others, sanctifying and humanising it.

SINLESSNESS

We must be careful to note exactly what Nicene theology is stating at this point. To acknowledge that the Son of God took fallen humanity as his own in order to redeem and sanctify it is not to call into question the sinlessness of Christ. Irenaeus states, ‘If, then, any allege that in this respect the flesh of the Lord was

³⁰ See further T F Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical And Evangelical Theologian*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 201f. He further writes, ‘The hypostatic union could not have been actualised within the conditions of our fallen humanity without the removal of sin and guilt through atonement and the sanctification of human nature assumed into union with the divine. On the other hand, atoning union could not have been actualised within the ontological depths of human existence where human beings are alienated from God without the profound penetration into those depths that took place through the Incarnation and the hypostatic union between divine and human nature that is involved’ *Mediation*, 66.

³¹ This is precisely the single parabolic movement of Philippians 2.

³² Barth, *CD* 1/2.15.2

³³ Barth, *CD* 1/2.15.2. See also T Oden, *The Word Of Life*, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 177.

³⁴ See, further, Torrance, *Mediation*, 68f, and W Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* vol. 2, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 385f.

different from ours, because it indeed did not commit sin, neither was deceit found in his soul, while we, on the other hand, are sinners, he says what is the fact.’³⁵ The Scriptures testify to his sinless life. Although as Son of Man truly sharing in our *deprivatio*, living in the weakness of our mortal flesh, as obedient Son of God this did not lead to a sinful life, to *depravatio*, for he was always perfect in obedience to the will of the Father through the Spirit. Gregory of Nyssa states,

[God] with a view to the destruction of sin, was blended with human nature, like a sun as it were making His dwelling in a murky cave and by His presence dissipating the darkness by means of His light. For though he took our filth upon Himself, yet He is not Himself defiled by the pollution, but in His own self He purifies the filth.³⁶

This distinction is best maintained if we refrain from pressing into service at this juncture the Augustinian understanding of original sin.³⁷ C N Kraus comments,

Sinlessness does not mean that Jesus was not subjected to the normal psychological and spiritual as well as physical development, or that he had no human self-will to be submitted to God, or was immune to real temptation. Sin is asserting one’s self-will in opposition to God’s will. Sin is putting one’s self in God’s place and refusing to come under his authority. Thus by sinlessness we mean that Jesus never set himself in conscious opposition to the will and authority of God—not even when it meant his own agonising humiliating death. He always did the will of the Father. In this respect he was the true image and Son of God. And, of course, from the Biblical perspective, to be in God’s image is what it means to be fully human.³⁸

We may usefully re-consider the Rabbinic understanding of the *yetser ha-ra* ‘ and its Pauline and Augustinian counterparts, the *phronēma tēs sarkos* and *concupiscentia* respectively, to clarify the issue.³⁹ The *yetser ha-ra* is an understanding of the human condition that is both theological and psychological. It affirms both free will and moral weakness, and offers an internal analysis of its workings. The Pauline counterpart is that *sarx* becomes the very thing in which we have put our trust, rather than Almighty God. Our natural desires have become self-seeking egocentric desires. Augustine, distinguishing *reatus* and *vitium* deals with the latter as *concupiscentia*. His metaphorical use of language indicates that this weakness, or disease, is a matter of twisted inner motivation, of

³⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, iii.xix.1, ANF1.448-9.

³⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Apollinarius*, 26, quoted by J H Strawley, ‘St Gregory of Nyssa on the Sinlessness of Christ’, *Journal Of Theological Studies* 7 (1906), 434-441.

³⁷ Barth, in a statement that is slightly ambiguous, remarks, ‘He bore innocently what Adam and all of us in Adam have been guilty of’ *CD* 1.2.15.

³⁸ C N Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, (Scottsdale: Herald, 1990), 72, italics his,

³⁹ One would suspect Wesley’s understanding of the ‘tempers’ could be explored along similar lines.

inordinate self-love (*amor sui, superbia*), of egocentricity.⁴⁰ To be human means we have physiological needs, desires and corresponding choices. In this context *sarx* is a neutral term. Yet these are the very things which we distort, and are distorted by the power of sin, in our lives, deprived of true relationship with the Source of our being, and are experienced by us as ‘the mind-set on the flesh’, which in Pauline terms is now anything but neutral. But in Christ these desires never led to sin. His experience of humanity’s *deprivatio*, our mortality and weakness, did not lead to *depravatio*, to the *yetser ha-ra*’, to the *phronēma tēs sarkos*, to the *vitium*. Fallen humanity did not make Christ sinful; rather Christ made fallen humanity holy. He resisted temptation, learned obedience, even to the point of death, dying to sin, and thus condemned sin in the flesh. In Christ, there was no sin, but rather salvation for all mankind.⁴¹

The Scriptural witness is that the Mediator is the Father’s Son. Conceived by the Spirit, he sanctifies the flesh he took.⁴² Endued with the Spirit at his baptism, he took his place with the repentant sinners. Led by the Spirit into the wilderness he overcame temptation. Through the Spirit he offered himself vicariously as our Representative and Substitute without blemish to the Father. Vindicated by the Father, he is raised from the dead by the Spirit. He is ‘...the first (and in one sense the *only*) entirely sanctified man.’⁴³ It is in his solidarity with humanity in this onto-relational matrix that humanity itself is sanctified in Christ. Thus in contrast to much current Western theology the Nicene Christology of the Church catholic holds to the reality of the assumption of fallen humanity by the incarnate Word, and yet to the salvific reality of his utterly sinless life.

⁴⁰ Pannenberg states, ‘The classical significance of Augustine for the Christian doctrine of sin consists in the fact that he viewed and analysed the Pauline link between sin and desire more deeply than Christian theology had hitherto managed to do’, *Systematic*, vol 2, 241.

⁴¹ H Johnson, *The Humanity of the Saviour* (London: Epworth, 1962), raises and attempts to counter several arguments born of a misunderstanding of this very point. To summarise: Firstly, is not the sinlessness of Christ endangered? Not so, if sin is understood primarily relationally. Secondly, does not fallen human nature lead inevitably to sin? Not in the case of the Spirit-filled, entirely sanctified Son of God! Thirdly, does this not imperil the uniqueness of Christ? No, for he was the Incarnate Word. Fourthly, is the success of the Incarnation endangered? Perhaps it is here we need to remember the ‘paradox of grace’. Finally, does this not invalidate Christ’s sonship? Not when we recognise that in Christ humanity is restored to relationship with the Father. His treatment of the whole issue is somewhat clouded by the obscure range of witnesses he calls, and by his neglect of Athanasius and the Alexandrian school.

⁴² Calvin states, ‘For we make Christ free of all stain not just because he was begotten of his mother without copulation with man, but because he was sanctified by the Spirit that the generation might be pure and undefiled’, J Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.13.4.

⁴³ T A Noble, *The Foundation Of Christian Holiness* (Canadian Nazarene University College: unpublished Collins Holiness lectures, 1988), 48, italics his.

THE GIFT OF PERFECTED HUMANITY

In this 'wonderful exchange' Christ takes our sin and gives us his holiness. He takes our death and gives us his life.⁴⁴ But just as Christ did not become less divine in the Incarnation, we do not become less human in salvation. Thus, the concept of *theosis* is not one of a blurring of the distinction between God and humanity, no confusion of *ousia* but rather reconciliation to the Father by being taken into the inner Trinitarian relations of God's own life through union with the Son by participation in the Spirit.

1. How then do we receive the benefits of the mediation wrought by the Son? Firstly, in light of the discussion above, *we must affirm that we are united with Christ according to the flesh*. He is flesh of our flesh. The very ontological basis of our humanity has been changed in its union with him, and not only humanity. Clark Pinnock comments, 'The Spirit effected by Incarnation a union between God and humanity which has transformed time and space.'⁴⁵ Humanity has been re-created, sanctified and raised to immortality. This is the objective basis of salvation and of our sanctification, and is corporate in nature, in stark contrast to the individualism of much Western culture and Christianity. Ironically, the Augustinian position of regarding humanity as a mass of perdition from which we must escape lends towards such individualism.⁴⁶

2. Calvin writes, '...as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value to us.'⁴⁷ Since Christ is the pioneer, the firstborn among many brothers, he is able to pour out his Spirit upon all flesh. Thus, secondly, *we can be united to Christ according to the Spirit*.

This conscious volitional relationship is based entirely upon our union with him according to the flesh. The onto-relational matrix is once again held together in the person of Christ. Both Torrance and his mentor Barth can be rightly critiqued as being weak at this point, allowing this onto-relational matrix to crumble. For it is not only that Christ is our response to the Father, but also that by the Spirit we answer for ourselves.⁴⁸ While Barth illustrates the Word having completed the journey to the far country and returned home, we must add that the Spirit is given in order that we may participate in that journey. Here the objective is made subjective. John Zizioulas refers to this as the Church 'in-stituted' by Christ and

⁴⁴ To fully appreciate the realities of this it would be appropriate to discuss the implications of the resurrection of Christ for our humanity. However, that is outwith the scope of this paper. See further J Paton, *Incarnation And Resurrection As Paradigms For Holiness*, unpublished paper presented to the 35th annual meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society, Azusa Pacific University, 2000.

⁴⁵ C H Pinnock, 'The Role Of The Spirit In Redemption', *Asbury Theological Journal* 52 (1997), 57.

⁴⁶ C E Gunton, *Theology Through the Theologians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 212.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.1. Calvin himself works with the concepts of 'union and communion'.

⁴⁸ Smail rightly comments that we answer not *by* ourselves, for the Spirit enables us, but we must answer *for* ourselves. T Smail, *The Giving Gift*, 2nd ed (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994).

‘con-stituted’ by the Spirit.⁴⁹ The one element is a *fait accompli*, the other involves us in its very being. The one is to know Christ *pro nobis* the other to know Christ *in nobis*. He writes, ‘Pneumatology contributes to Christology this dimension of communion. And it is because of this function of Pneumatology that it is possible to speak of Christ as having a ‘body’, i.e. to speak of ecclesiology, of the Church as the Body of Christ.’⁵⁰

HUMAN NATURE IN THE LIGHT OF THE INCARNATION

What implications can we draw from this all too brief presentation of Nicene Christology?

Human nature

There is a great tendency for us to reify concepts, particularly when we use the word ‘nature’. Noble has already pointed out the (im)possibility of having three natures residing within us!⁵¹ I would suggest great caution in the use of the term ‘human nature’ for several reasons. Despite our prevailing Augustinian pre-understandings, Bray highlights a certain inconsistency in Augustine’s use of the word ‘nature’, referring at times to the moral, the psychological and the physical.⁵² I suspect our own thinking may be as unclear. Indeed, McIntyre convincingly argues that both philosophically and psychologically its meaning is unclear.⁵³ Clearly further research is required, and within the context of a Trinitarian understanding of what it means to be ‘person’.⁵⁴

Bible translation

On plain linguistic grounds there can be no defence of the NIV translation of *sarx* as ‘sinful nature’. Given our understanding of the Nicene theology of the Church catholic, it is clearly inappropriate for us to present the human condition as one suffering from the existence of a reified ‘sinful nature’. One practical step we could recommend would be the adoption of an alternative English translation in official church publications.

⁴⁹ J Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Press, 1993), 140.

⁵⁰ Zizioulas, 131.

⁵¹ Noble, *Prolegomena*, 14.

⁵² G Bray, ‘Original Sin in Patristic Thought’, *Churchman* 108 (1994), 37-47.

⁵³ McIntyre, *Theology*, Chapter 1. Likewise, the term ‘humanity’ is open to various interpretations, see T E Pollard, *Fallenness of Humanity* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1982).

⁵⁴ V Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary, 1985). Any definition of ‘nature’ must bear in mind our understanding of *ousia* and *hypostasis*.

Original sin

There is a pressing need for clarity both in our thinking and the expression of it. Much confusion is caused by sloppy use of language, not least by the NIV translators. To speak of ‘original sin’ in the first instance is to speak of *the* original sin of the first pair. That it has consequences for us is beyond doubt. Primarily that consequence is the breach in relationship between creature and Creator, one that God in Christ has reconciled. Thus, in his very person Christ has overcome the *deprivatio*, uniting humanity once more to the Source of its being. Death and sin have been defeated. It is this ontological foundation that allows us to articulate a doctrine of sanctification. The *depravatio* of our experience is overcome in Christ, who did not yield in his human weakness to the temptation to egocentricity, but always preferred the will of the Father. To argue that if original sin results primarily in *deprivatio* then we all have the possibility of not sinning is to do no more than Augustine would have said, and is to fall back upon a static form of thinking, as opposed to the biblical and Nicene dynamic understanding of both sin and salvation.⁵⁵ The reality is that in the absence of intimate personal relationship with the Father, humanity has cast itself not upon his mercy, but upon our own ingenuity, becoming self-reliant, self-centred, self-willed, and because of egocentric self-will we do indeed sin. What starts in the heart extends to the whole being.⁵⁶ How this works out in practical living may help us to understand why some seem more evil than others do, at least externally. Sin, even ‘original sin’, is dynamic and is worked out within the dynamics of our ontorelations. The social context of personal development will surely have great implications for how sin actually dominates in the lives of persons. It is in this context that the importance of ‘Christian nurture’ becomes highly significant.⁵⁷ Only Christ did not sin and it is only in Christ that we have the possibility of overcoming sin and death.

Infants

Such an understanding does away with the extra-biblical concept of limbo, and clarifies Wesleyan thinking that ‘infants are covered by the blood’. In their case *deprivatio* has had no opportunity to be expressed as *depravatio*.

Entire sanctification

The Wesleyan position is often described as being one of an ‘optimism of grace’, for in the tension between ‘the already’ and ‘the not yet’ there is not despair but a

⁵⁵ Gunton, *Theology*, 213. Although Gunton does not substantiate his argument at this juncture, he picks up on the tension within Augustine between possibility and impossibility.

⁵⁶ Barth describes this as ‘man is what he does’ and ‘man does what he is’—locked in a vicious circle which only Christ can break free from, *CD* 4/1.60.3.

⁵⁷ While these ‘supraindividual’ aspects and social contexts are vital to our understanding, they do not replace the fundamental of sin as to do with inner motivation. See Pannenberg, *Systematic*, vol 2, 255f.

certain degree of fulfilment. The Incarnation affirms that Christ took fallen humanity and sanctified it, thus enabling us to share in his sanctified humanity. The Resurrection tells us that guilt is dealt with and that we are justified in Christ. We are raised to newness of life in Christ. His filial obedience can be ours too by the same sanctifying Spirit, for the Spirit poured out by the resurrected Christ is our *arrabōn*, '...a promise that what is still lacking will surely follow.'⁵⁸ We may still be in this present evil age, but the eschatological Spirit is with us. The same simplicity of intention, purity of affection and single desire ruling all the tempers, the mind that was in Christ, can be in us. '...[He] died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them' (2 Cor 5:15). No longer deprived of intimate union with God, but rather 'in Christ', drawn into the inner Trinitarian life of God himself, our lives need not be characterised by *depravatio*, that mind set on the flesh, but rather, by gracious action of the Holy Spirit, we can know the mind of Christ, the mind set on the Spirit. The old mindset, those patterns of habitual behaviours and ways of thinking, can be done away with, and a new way of living, nurtured by the Spirit and a life of disciplined devotion, can be experienced. The foundation for this is the ontological and personal union with the One who has gone before. It is to be 'in Christ'. The onto-relational matrix as a model for understanding holds good; not only is our humanity objectively sanctified in him, but also this can become a subjective reality in our lives by action of the Spirit.

Just as he has been raised to new life, so in baptism we die and are raised also. As Christ is exalted on high, so we are seated with him in the heavenly realm. There he ministers on our behalf to the Father. It is this unfinished aspect of the Atonement that enables us to pray, 'Father forgive us'. Again we see the ontological and the relational, but yet there is something more still to be actualised in us. It is anticipated in that humanity is already ontologically changed, but not yet realised fully in us. That awaits the final consummation, the general resurrection. Yet, as the Spirit is already given it is not a static anticipation, but dynamic and relational.

Because our bodies are not yet glorified we must be careful in the description of entire sanctification within this eschatological tension. Body life is still an area of conflict, just as it was for Christ until his death. This need not be the Pauline conflict of flesh versus Spirit, but is rather the conflict of temptation and the will, of human weakness and intention. '...[We] ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Rom 8:23). Only the glorified body is free of this. Only the glorified body '...does not struggle with the passions that belong to the present psychosomatic interface...'⁵⁹ Only when raised with Christ will we know that perfection of knowledge, freedom from mistakes, infirmities and temptation that

⁵⁸ T Smail, *The Giving Gift*, 2nd ed (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994), 106.

⁵⁹ Oden, *The Word of Life* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 482.

are appropriate to exalted humanity in its new spiritual body. Until then we live within the tension and we die within the tension, ‘...but no longer as men condemned to death, but as those who even now are in the process of being raised...’.⁶⁰

Sin and Infirmities

Wesleyan theology has always sought to define sin in a narrow fashion, often to the bemusement of others. Rather than seeing this as an arbitrary distinction between sin and infirmities (which nevertheless require the benefits of the Atonement), it is here asserted as a necessary corollary of accepting the fact that the Word assumed fallen humanity. Acknowledging in faith that Christ did not sin is not to accept that he was a ‘super-man’. Either he lived and died as true man within the limitations we face or he did not. If he did, then he was exposed to tiredness, forgetfulness, and intention not matching performance.⁶¹ It is precisely here that Wesleyan theology can announce its optimism of grace, that by the Spirit we can follow where the Master has led, without leaving itself open to ridicule as ‘perfectionist’ heresy.

The corporate nature of salvation

The corporate aspect of sanctification has been discussed in the context of racial solidarity, likewise, the objective sanctification of all humanity in Christ. Our goal is not individualistic experience, but the redemption of the world; so, we pray and act as members of the body of Christ to that end. We have the privilege entrusted to us to share the ministry of reconciliation.

CONCLUSION

This study has attempted a brief oversight of Nicene Christology and its implications for our understanding of humanity. However, much requires to be done in the ongoing constructive theological task. What insights are given by the atoning death, resurrection and ascension of Christ? What are the implications of the outpouring and ongoing ministry of the Spirit of Christ? How does our understanding of the Triune God affect our self-understanding? These and many more questions must be answered before we can begin the process of re-defining our understanding of humanity and of sin. That such clarification is required for our age is doubtless true, but it behoves us to do so in light of the grand redemption.

⁶⁰ Athanasius, *Incarnatione*, 37.

⁶¹ ‘He took our infirmities...’ (Mt 8:17 quoting Isa 53:4 NRSV).