

The Word Made Flesh

A Theology of the Incarnation

Ian A. McFarland

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

Contents

Preface	vii
Abbreviations	ix
Introduction: A Chalcedonianism without Reserve	1

Part 1. The Great Divide

1. The Life of the Creator	19
The Problem with God-Talk	20
The Perfections of Divine Love	27
The Perfections of Divine Presence	34
2. The Being of Creatures	43
“From Nothing”: The Contingency of Creatures	44
“Each according to Its Kind”: The Diversity of Creatures	51
“For Everything a Season”: The Transience of Creatures	61

Part 2. The Bridge

3. “One and the Same”	71
Nature and Hypostasis	72
“Became Truly Human”	78
“A New Theandric Energy”	88
4. “Perfect in Divinity”	99
Preliminary Considerations: The Divine Name	100
Lord	106
Savior	111
Son	116

5. “And Also Perfect in Humanity”	127
Born	130
Suffered	138
Dead and Buried	150
 Part 3. The Crossing	
6. Christus Victor	159
Risen	162
Ascended	168
Coming	179
7. Jesus’ Presence Now	187
Word and Sacrament	189
The Church	194
“Always and Everywhere”	200
Conclusion: “As Is the Word, so Is God”	213
Bibliography	225
Scripture Index	233
Subject Index	243

Preface

Although many of the ideas in these pages have been gestating for some time, I only began to set them to paper when I moved back to the United Kingdom to take up a position in Cambridge University. This book was thus written from a position of immense privilege, even beyond that which I already enjoyed as a man who is also white and who has held full-time university appointments throughout the past twenty years.

This privilege marks the book in various ways, many of which will have eluded me but will be embarrassingly evident to those who read it from social locations different from my own. But even as it stands, I cannot help but be aware that the sorts of problems that take center stage in this exploration of what it means to confess Jesus as the Word made flesh—the form of his existence before his birth and after his resurrection, the character of his relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit, the conceptual distinction between nature and hypostasis—may to many readers seem hopelessly abstract, far removed from the concrete realities of life for those who seek to live as faithful disciples in situations of deprivation and danger that I can scarcely imagine.

I have no defense against this charge other than to note that to write is unavoidably to be bound by the limits of one's own perspective. That rather obvious fact is certainly no excuse for ignoring, let alone discounting, other perspectives of which the writer is aware, and I have therefore tried to acknowledge and engage the views of other writers whose approach to the topic is different from my own, but whose concerns, both dogmatic and pastoral, I deeply respect. Moreover, it is my hope that the center of my argument—that all talk of divinity in Jesus must be controlled at every point by attention to the concrete particularity of his humanity—bears witness to a shared conviction that the measure of Christian God-talk is the life of this marginal Jew, who, whatever the privileges that may have fallen to him by virtue of his ontology, ancestry, gender, or class, claimed none for himself.

Yet as much as drawing attention to the privilege that has provided both the wider and more immediate contexts for my writing this book highlights its

shortcomings, it is also provides a stimulus for giving thanks. For the advantages I have enjoyed in working at Cambridge have been an immeasurable gift, for which I am profoundly grateful. My gratitude extends, first of all, to my colleagues in the Faculty of Divinity, who have given me both a gracious welcome and countless models of excellence in theological scholarship to emulate. I am equally thankful to the Master, Fellows, and staff of Selwyn College, who provided me not only a place of tranquil seclusion where I was able to write much of this volume, but also a community of scholars and of friends that has enriched my life beyond all expectation.

Special thanks also are due to Professor Mona Siddiqi and the members of the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh, whose invitation to deliver the 2018 Croall Lectures gave me the opportunity to present a large part of this book before an audience whose friendly yet critical engagement with my ideas helped enormously in my revision of the manuscript. I am similarly grateful to Professor Dr. Hans-Peter Großhans and the Evangelical Theological Faculty of the University of Münster for their kind reception and robust discussion of a lecture version of chapter 7, which likewise proved very useful in helping me to clarify my ideas. And, of course, the final form of the text would not be before you at all without the support and careful work of Bob Ratcliff, Daniel Braden, and the rest of the production staff at Westminster John Knox, with whom it has been a pleasure to be able to work once again.

But my deepest thanks are reserved for my wife, Ann, and our two daughters, Maggie and Olive, who allowed their lives to be turned upside down by a move back across the Atlantic that was as little anticipated as it was desired. I will never forget it, and it is my hope that it may prove to be true that, when all is said and done, in this, too, all things will have worked together for the good.

*Selwyn College
June 2018
The Feast of John the Baptist*

Introduction

A Chalcedonianism without Reserve

The name “Jesus” means “God saves” (see Matt. 1:21), and the conviction that God is the one and only Savior has always been central to those who look to Jesus as the “pioneer and perfecter” of their faith (Heb. 12:2). Its importance can be gauged from the fact that one of the favorite biblical texts of the earliest Christian writers was Isaiah 63:9 (LXX): “Neither an elder, nor an angel, but the Lord will save them because he loves them, and will spare them: he will set them free.”¹ Yet those writers used this text in support of what to Jews and Gentiles alike seemed to be a claim much more contentious, if not downright outrageous. For since it was the defining belief of these same early Christians that *Jesus himself* is the agent of our salvation, the truth that God—and God alone—saves seemed to demand the conclusion that Jesus was none other than God. It was presumably following this chain of reasoning that already at the turn of the second century an anonymous Christian preacher declared, “Brothers and sisters, we ought to think of Jesus Christ as of God, as the judge of the living and the dead; and we ought not to belittle our salvation. For when we belittle him, we hope to get but little.”² If Christians expect salvation from Jesus, then they cannot regard him as any less than God.

But how could they so regard him? For these same Christians were no less convinced that this Jesus was a human being, “born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4), who was crucified under the Roman governor Pilate, died, and

1. See, e.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.20; and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 88; Tertullian, *Five Books against Marcion* 4.22; Cyprian of Carthage, *Three Books of Testimonies against the Jews* 2.7; Methodius, *Oration concerning Simeon and Anna*. While in the LXX the finite verbs of Isa. 63:9 are all in the past tense, these writers always quote them as future.

2. See 2 Clement 1.1–2, in *Early Christian Fathers*, trans. and ed. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 193; translations slightly modified.

was buried. To be sure, they also confessed that he was risen from the dead, but that further claim, albeit far more contestable as a biographical datum, did not in any sense qualify belief in his humanity. On the contrary, only one who had truly died could rise again, so precisely as the risen One, Jesus was confessed as one who had died—a defining feature of human existence, but emphatically not of divinity (Rom. 1:23, 1 Tim. 6:16; cf. Ps. 68:20).³ And while there were early Christians (usually described as “docetists”) whose belief in Jesus’ divinity led them to deny his humanity, the majority tradition consistently affirmed it. The most obvious ground for this affirmation was the Gospel narratives themselves, which describe Jesus in explicitly human terms as someone who walked, talked, hungered, slept, wept, and so forth. Interestingly, these very ordinary human characteristics came to be seen as having soteriological implications of their own, as evident in Paul’s judgment that “since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being” (1 Cor. 15:21). So if at one level the confession of Jesus as Savior implied that he could be no less than God, at another level the fact that this Savior took human form seemed to be equally significant. For if God had determined that human salvation was to come through a human being, then no aspect of our humanity could be excluded from Jesus’ life; rather, he had to become like us “in every respect” (Heb. 2:17) in order that every dimension of human life might be transformed by him. As Gregory of Nazianzus would put it in the fourth century, “that which he has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved.”⁴

And so Christians came to develop a Christology (that is, a formal account of the person of Jesus) characterized by the confession that he is both God and a human being. This dual confession was given classic form at the fifth-century Council of Chalcedon, which decreed that Christ is neither only God nor only a human being nor some sort of divine-human hybrid, but rather

one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in divinity and also perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly a human being composed of rational soul and body, the same one in being with the Father as to the divinity and one in being with us as to the humanity, like unto us in all things but sin. The same begotten from the Father before all ages according to the divinity and . . . born as to his humanity from Mary, the virgin mother of God, . . . one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son, [who] must be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion or change, without division or separa-

3. Here and throughout this volume, I use “divinity” and “humanity” as alternative expressions for (and thus as synonymous with) “divine nature” and “human nature,” respectively.

4. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Letter 101 (To Cledonius against Apollinaris)*, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 218.

tion. The distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person and hypostasis. He is not split or divided into two persons, but he is one and the same only begotten Son, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.⁵

It is my contention in this book that a thoroughgoing commitment to Christology developed in these terms—a Chalcedonianism without reserve—continues to provide the most adequate account of Christian convictions regarding Jesus. I speak of a “Chalcedonianism without reserve” because in practice the Christology that has been typical of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Reformation traditions that all share allegiance to the council frequently fails to follow through fully on the implications of its teaching, especially with respect to the question of Jesus’ humanity. The problem is not that his humanity is explicitly denied or even qualified, since that would be flatly inconsistent with the conciliar definition, but rather that it tends to be marginalized as a point of dogmatic interest.⁶ In other words, although in the majority tradition Jesus’ full humanity is formally affirmed, it is not viewed as integral to his identity, since it is only where his humanity is overshadowed by the power of his divinity that God is revealed.

This tendency is already visible in the document that perhaps more than any other is associated with the formulation of the Chalcedonian definition, Pope Leo the Great’s *Tome to Flavian*, in which it is written that “each nature does what is proper to each in communion with the other. . . . One shines forth with miracles; the other succumbs to injuries.”⁷ While one might argue that Leo’s intention here was simply to affirm the integrity of both Jesus’ divine and human natures throughout the course of his ministry, his language is infelicitous. Most obviously, the idea that miracles display Jesus’ divinity is clearly wrong: since miracles were performed by the Old Testament prophets, who were not divine, and since Jesus himself taught that his equally nondivine followers would perform miracles greater than his (John 14:12), the ability to do miracles clearly cannot count as evidence of divinity.⁸ Furthermore, to argue

5. DH §301–302, trans. slightly alt.

6. It is striking, e.g., that for all the considerable theological sophistication Dante displays in the *Divine Comedy*, “the Word” nowhere appears in the poem as a human being, but only in the allegorical form of a griffin (*Purgatorio* 29–32), as a light of unbearable brightness (*Paradiso* 23), and as a circle (albeit one that assumes a vaguely human shape) of colored light (*Paradiso* 33).

7. DH §294.

8. This is not to deny that Jesus’ miracles both were and continue to be a factor in his disciples’ confession of him as divine (see, e.g., John 20:30–31), but only that they are but one such factor among many others that include much less spectacular acts of teaching, table fellowship, and even more ordinary features of his daily life. As will be discussed at various points in the pages that follow, because it is the *entirety* of Jesus’ earthly existence, as vindicated in his resurrection from the dead, that displays his identity as the Word made flesh, no one aspect of that existence can be singled out as revelatory of his divinity apart from the rest.

that the divine nature “shines forth” anywhere in Jesus’ life seems to contradict the fundamental Christian conviction that the divine nature is inherently invisible and thus not subject to perception in space and time (1 Tim. 6:16). But from the perspective of a Chalcedonianism without reserve, the chief problem with Leo’s language is that it turns our attention away from Jesus’ humanity by linking the revelation of the divine to special powers that are added to it, thereby implying that the quotidian realities of Jesus’ flesh and blood are not in themselves a suitable vehicle for God’s self-revelation.⁹

In order to avoid this kind of Christology, in which attention to Jesus’ divinity had led in practice to the marginalization of his identity as a first-century Palestinian Jew, theologians in the modern era have sought to formulate alternatives that do a better job of honoring Jesus’ humanity in all its historical, cultural, and physiological specificity. Two approaches have proved particularly influential. One, kenotic Christology, first arose among nineteenth-century German Lutherans, but subsequently spread beyond that confessional context and has been especially influential in the English-speaking world. The term “kenotic” comes from Philippians 2:6–7, which states that Jesus, “though he was in the form of God, . . . emptied [*ekenōsen*] himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.” Over against traditional Christologies, in which Jesus’ divinity overshadows his humanity, kenoticists see in Paul’s letter evidence for just the opposite: in order for God to fulfill the aim of becoming like us “in every respect” and become truly human (Heb. 2:17), Jesus must empty himself of divinity. Kenoticists share with Chalcedonians commitment to a Christology “from above,” that is, an understanding of the incarnation as the unique enfleshment of the eternal Word of God, who comes down from heaven to dwell with us on earth below. But they argue that in order to lead a genuinely human life, with all its natural limitations, God must surrender certain divine properties (e.g., omniscience and omnipotence). So kenoticists confess that God is truly present in Jesus, but only in a changed (that is, ontologically compressed or diminished) fashion. In this way, for all their worries about the perils of Chalcedonianism, kenoticists share with Leo the assumption that Christ’s humanity and divinity stand in an essentially competitive relationship with one another, such that where one nature is more visible, the other is less so. To be sure, kenoticists typically insist that in taking flesh the Word retains what they hold to be God’s essential attributes of love, holiness, goodness, and truth; but if Leo depicted a Jesus whose humanity is eclipsed by his divinity, kenotic theologies

9. “Clearly . . . Jesus does not act as the ‘one teacher’ (Matt. 23:10) solely in virtue of his divine nature. . . . Both his sovereign lordship and his lowliness are human, just as they represent in human form . . . God’s sovereignty and lowliness.” Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth of God*, vol. 2 of *Theo-Logic*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004 [1985]), 70.

suffer from the opposite problem, in that their emphasis on the integrity of the incarnate Word's humanity is purchased at the price of qualifying the confession of his perfect divinity.

Also dating from the nineteenth century, the major modern alternative to kenoticism seeks to avoid this competitive understanding of the relationship between divinity and humanity in Christ by defining Jesus' divinity in human terms. Although the range of variations on this strategy is too broad for its representatives to be considered a single theological "school," they can all be characterized as advocating a Christology "from below."¹⁰ That is, they share the common worry that the language of the Word's descent "from above," common to kenotic and Chalcedonian Christologies, sets Jesus' humanity and divinity in opposition to each other, so that the one can be affirmed only at the expense of the other. To avoid this problem, they offer instead a Christology in which Jesus' divinity is defined by his humanity. In some cases, Jesus' divinity is equated with the perfect realization of some human characteristic (e.g., his God-consciousness, his openness to divine grace, or his dedication to the kingdom of God); in others his life as a whole is understood as constitutive of the divine being, such that God's very existence is conceived in historical terms.¹¹ Either way, Jesus' full humanity is not in tension with confession of his divinity since the latter is now defined in human, historical terms. But this coordination of divinity and humanity in the life of Jesus succeeds only by collapsing the two together, such that while humanity can now indeed serve as a vehicle for disclosing divinity, this is only because divinity is no longer clearly differentiated from humanity, but rather identified with some set of observable, creaturely characteristics.¹²

In short, whether ancient or modern, loyal to Chalcedon or critical of it, all these approaches end up so construing the relationship between divinity and

10. Though sometimes used to contrast the ancient Christologies of, e.g., Cyril and Nestorius, the terminology of "above" and "below" seems to have originated with F. H. R. Frank, who proposed that "our knowledge of Christ, as of God, moves from below to above [*von unten nach oben*]." F. H. R. Frank, *Zur Theologie A. Ritschl's*, 3rd ed. (Erlangen: Andreas Deichert'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1891), 27; cited in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), 2:279–80, n. 12. For criticism of the distinction, see, e.g., Nicholas Lash, "Up and Down in Christology," in *New Studies in Theology 1*, ed. Stephen Sykes and Derek Holmes (London: Duckworth, 1980), 31–46; and Wesley Wildman, "Basic Christological Distinctions," *Theology Today* 64 (2007): 285–304.

11. In rough terms, the former group (including thinkers as diverse as Albrecht Ritschl, Donald Baillie, and Catherine Keller) takes after Schleiermacher, while the latter (including Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Robert Jenson) follow the lead of Hegel, for whom history is the theater of God's self-realization. I would also include contemporary advocates of non-Trinitarian Spirit Christologies (e.g., Roger Haight, SJ; Geoffrey Lampe; James Mackey) in the first group, inasmuch as they all correlate Jesus' divinity with his unique and exemplary receptivity to the Spirit.

12. Cf. the assessment in Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 10–11.

humanity that emphasis on one invariably obscures the distinctive significance of the other. Leo certainly had no interest in denying Jesus' humanity, but by stressing the miracles as the place where his divinity shines forth, the human fades into the background as a focus of theological interest. Modern Christologies, by contrast, seek to correct this traditional bias by highlighting Jesus' humanity, yet the result is simply the converse: the human qualities of Jesus come into relief, but at the price of Jesus' divinity being either heavily qualified (in kenoticism) or reduced to a particular set of distinctively human attributes (in Christologies from below). By contrast, a Chalcedonianism without reserve, holding firmly to the council's teaching that in Christ the divine and human natures are united "without confusion or change," refuses both Leo's linking the revelation of Jesus' divinity with the eclipsing of his humanity and the modern tendency for attention to Jesus' humanity to obscure either the fullness or the ontological distinctiveness of his divinity.

Fundamental to a Chalcedonianism without reserve is the principle that because the divine nature is inherently invisible and so not capable of perception (1 Tim. 1:17; cf. Col. 1:15; 1 John 4:12), when we look at Jesus, what we see is his humanity only. It follows that no aspect of that which we perceive in Jesus—his miracles, his faith, his obedience, or anything else—can be equated with his divinity; all are fully and exclusively human, and thus created, realities. Yet this claim need not entail any qualification of the confession that Jesus is God. On the contrary, in proposing a Chalcedonianism without reserve, I seek to uphold Martin Luther's claim that "whoever wishes to deliberate or speculate soundly about God should disregard absolutely everything except the humanity of Christ."¹³ In other words, to know God *rightly*, one must look at Christ's humanity *only*—without claiming that what we see, hear, touch, or otherwise perceive of Jesus is anything other or more than human substance. Following that advice would seem to bring us crashing onto the shoals of blasphemy, inasmuch as Christ's humanity is created, and it is a fundamental conviction of Christians (and not only of Christians) that the created should never be identified with the Creator, because to do so is to commit idolatry—to honor as God that which is not God. To claim that Christ's humanity is the sole ground and source for right knowledge of God seems not simply to risk idolatry but actively to endorse it by identifying a creature directly with the Creator (cf. Rom. 1:25).

13. "Ideo repeto iterumque monebo: quicumque velit salubriter de Deo cogitare aut speculari, prorsus omnia postponat praeter humanitatem Christi." Martin Luther, Letter to Spalatin (February 12, 1519) in WA Br. 1:226. Cf. Kathryn Tanner's equation of "what the Trinity is doing for us" with "what is happening in the life of Christ," in *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 234.

Chalcedonian Christology seeks to avoid this pitfall by maintaining that Jesus' humanity, while inseparable from his divinity, is at no point to be identified with it. In order to avoid any such confusion of the divine and human, a conceptual distinction is drawn between *nature* and *hypostasis*. The definition of Chalcedon makes use of this distinction in its claim that in Jesus Christ "two natures," divine and human, "came together in one . . . hypostasis." But the precise character of the difference between nature and hypostasis only came to be clarified gradually in the decades following the conclusion of the council in 451.¹⁴ The upshot of these postconciliar developments can be summarized as follows: nature refers to the *whatness* of an entity, as defined by its constitutive qualities or attributes (e.g., "immaterial intellect" as the definition of angelic nature).¹⁵ By contrast, hypostasis (or person) applies to entities that have rational or spiritual natures, and which therefore take individualized form as *whos*.¹⁶ In other words, to be a hypostasis is to have a personal identity: to be *someone* in addition to being *something*.

The conciliar language of the two natures constituting "one person and hypostasis" puts the claim that Jesus is a single someone at the heart of Chalcedonian Christology. Who is this someone? The Chalcedonian answer is, "God the Son, the second person of the Trinity." That is, Jesus is hypostatistically (or personally) divine. His hypostasis is therefore not human, meaning that he is not, like the prophets of old, a *human* person who has received special divine powers but is rather from the beginning of his life a *divine* person: God the Son. Crucially, however, the Chalcedonian equation of hypostasis

14. The inchoate character of the distinction in the mid-fifth century is clear in the text of the definition itself, since the language of the two natures "coming together" (*syntrechein*) could easily be understood to suggest that the one hypostasis was the product of the union rather than its agent and ground. See chap. 3 below for more detailed discussion of the conceptual development that led to the mature (or "neo-Chalcedonian") doctrine of the hypostatic union.

15. Insofar as an entity's whatness is described in terms of particular qualities or attributes, a nature can be considered in abstraction from its instantiation in any particular being. Nevertheless (and as I hope my subsequent usage will make clear), I hold to the position that the human nature Christ assumes is concrete rather than abstract, in the sense that the "nature" assumed by the Word is an individual instance of humanity rather than a property or set of properties. For a fulsome discussion of the distinction, see Timothy Pawl, *In Defense of Conciliar Christology: A Philosophical Essay* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 34–39.

16. *Hypostasis* continued to be used even in Chalcedonian circles in a more generic sense to refer to the concrete instantiation of any nature (e.g., Lassie as a particular hypostasis of canine nature); it is therefore useful to distinguish the hypostases of humans and angels as inherently personal, in distinction from the hypostases of other creatures (e.g., apple trees, *E. coli* bacteria, etc.). Importantly, the modification introduced by the adjective "personal" entails a shift in ontological categories; indeed, that is the upshot of the difference between nature and hypostasis as developed within a Chalcedonian theology: to qualify a hypostasis as a *person* is to affirm that it is not to be identified with a concrete instance of a nature as such, but rather with the subject whose concrete instance it is. See, e.g., Leontius of Byzantium, *Contra Nestorianos et Eutybianos* (PG 86.1:1277C–1280B).

with personal identity means that the claim “Jesus does not have a human hypostasis” does not entail any diminishment or qualification of the claim that he has a fully human *nature*.¹⁷ For although the character of humanity as a rational nature is such that there cannot be a concrete instance of human being that is without any hypostasis at all (that is, it is impossible to have a human nature and to lack a personal identity), the distinction between nature and hypostasis—between *what* and *who*—means that there is no inconsistency in affirming that the hypostasis of the particular instance of human nature known as Jesus of Nazareth is divine. Indeed, that is just the point of the doctrine of the incarnation: the claim that in Jesus a person who is and has always been divine (viz., the eternal Son or Word) “became flesh” so as to live a fully human life. On this basis later Chalcedonians took up Cyril of Alexandria’s description of the incarnation as a “hypostatic union,” in which the hypostasis of the Son unites in his person both divine and human natures.

The upshot of applying the distinction between nature and hypostasis to the person of Jesus may be summarized in the following two theses:

1. When we perceive Jesus of Nazareth, we perceive *no one* other than God the Son, the second person of the Trinity.
2. When we perceive Jesus of Nazareth, we perceive *nothing* other than created substance, and thus nothing that is divine.

Together, these theses affirm that although the one *whom* we see in Jesus is none other than the Son of God, *what* we see in Jesus is simply and exhaustively human flesh and blood. Much of what follows in this book will take the form of the exposition of this double claim as foundational for an account of the incarnation capable of affirming the full and unsurpassable revelation of God in Christ without either diminishing his humanity or conflating it with his divinity. Furthermore, insofar as Jesus’ status as Savior is understood to mean that he is the one in and through whose life all humanity and, with it, the whole creation are brought into eternal and unbreakable fellowship with God, this book also seeks to show that a Chalcedonianism without reserve can meet the challenge of providing a conceptual framework capable of affirming that finite creatures can dwell with God in their finitude, and thus that creation can be affirmed as unqualifiedly good in its difference from God. For the burden of the Christian claim that the Word became flesh is that God can draw infinitely near to the creature, even to the extent of rendering the creature’s life inseparable from God’s own, and yet the life

17. Although here I use the traditional language of Jesus not “having” a human hypostasis, this phrasing is infelicitous because, strictly speaking, a hypostasis is not something one *has*, but rather who one *is*.

of the creature is not thereby overwhelmed, but rather affirmed precisely in its createdness.

Therefore (and as paradoxical as it may seem), it is a central thesis of this book that an orthodox account of Jesus' divinity necessarily includes the affirmation that nothing divine can be perceived in him. All that can be perceived in him is his humanity, and because his humanity is purely and exhaustively human, no empirically identifiable feature of Jesus—his height, strength, speed, knowledge, gender, piety, or anything else—may be identified with the divine. A Chalcedonian understanding of the incarnation thus denies that Jesus' status as the "one mediator between God and humankind" (1 Tim. 2:5) depends on his possessing certain empirically observable characteristics that constitute a link or bridge between the human and the divine. This does not mean that God is to be sought behind or beneath Jesus' humanity. On the contrary, God is very much on its surface, so to speak, since God (or more specifically, the second person of the Trinity) is simply who Jesus is, and thus the one *who* is seen when he is seen—even though *what* is seen in any such encounter is purely human. In this way, Jesus mediates between Creator and creature not by standing in some imagined ontological space between God and the world (as Arius and other advocates of subordinationist Christologies believed), or by collapsing the distinction between them (as in modern Christologies from below), but by uniting in his person the being of God and humanity "without confusion or change, without division or separation."

The vision of the incarnation unfolded in this book is correspondingly broad, since it proposes that the Word's taking flesh initiates a comprehensive transformation of creation, reaching through humankind to bring the whole world to a glory—a renewed existence before God that is no longer subject to the futility of decay and alienation (Rom. 8:19–21; cf. 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1). The incarnation has not always been conceived in this way. In line with Paul's correlation of Christ and Adam, as well as Jesus' interpretation of his mission in terms of repentance and forgiveness (Matt. 26:28; Mark 1:14; cf. Luke 24:47; Acts 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18), it has been common in the Christian tradition to conceive of the incarnation chiefly in terms of the doctrine of reconciliation, that is, as God's means of rescuing humanity from the effects of sin (*viz.*, guilt, death, and damnation). By contrast, conceiving the incarnation in terms of glorification, as the means by which God bridges the divide between Creator and creature so as to draw creatures into God's own eternal life, suggests a "supralapsarian" interpretation of the Word's enfleshment. That is, because the "problem" that the incarnation addresses is overcoming the divide between Creator and creature, and because this divide is intrinsic to the very ontology of creation and is not a consequence of human sin, the Word's taking flesh is not dependent on and is thus logically prior to (*supra*)

humanity's fall (*lapsus*). The ontological divide between transcendent Creator and finite creatures means that human beings simply cannot exist in communion with God (that is, "become participants of the divine nature," in the words of 2 Pet. 1:4) by the exercise even of their unfallen natural capacities; they can do so only as they become recipients of a gift of grace that supervenes on their nature. In short, God becomes incarnate because God wishes to share the divine life with us, so that the incarnation is part of God's plan for creation independently of human sin.

This sort of supralapsarian interpretation of the incarnation is not without precedent. It is found already in the late second century in the work of Irenaeus of Lyon, who maintained that in taking flesh the Word "did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself."¹⁸ A century and a half later, Athanasius of Alexandria—while anything but inattentive to the specifically redemptive dimensions of the incarnation—gave classic expression to the idea that God's purposes in taking flesh are not limited to redressing the effects of the fall when he wrote that the Word "was made a human being that we might be made God."¹⁹ And to allude to a text that is the touchstone for a later chapter of this book, Maximus the Confessor's affirmation that "the Word of God, who is God, wishes always and everywhere to effect the mystery of his embodiment" likewise implies a commitment to divine enfleshment that is not contingent on the accidents of earthly history.²⁰ Much more explicitly, in the medieval period Robert Grosseteste and John Duns Scotus both affirmed that God's commitment to communion with human beings is such that the Word would have become incarnate even if humankind had not sinned.²¹ Though very much a minority report at the time, variations on this perspective have gained considerable currency in modern theology. In the nineteenth century Friedrich Schleiermacher regarded the coming of Jesus not primarily as a remedy for sin, but as "*the completion, only now accomplished, of the creation of human nature.*"²² And still more recently Karl Barth insisted that the logic of the claim that Jesus of Nazareth is none other than God demands that the

18. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Against Heresies* 5 (Preface), in ANF 1.

19. Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 54; in Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 107.

20. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* 7 (PG 91:1084C–D).

21. Grosseteste develops his arguments in several texts, but most extensively in the second part of his *De cessatione legalium*. Scotus addresses the question in his *Ordinatio* 3, 7.3 (but cf. his *Reportatio Parisiensis* 3, 7.4). See the discussion in Daniel C. Horan, OFM, "How Original Was Scotus on the Incarnation? Reconsidering the History of the Absolute Predestination of Christ in Light of Robert Grosseteste," *Heythrop Journal* 52 (2011): 374–91.

22. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 2nd ed., §89, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928 [1830]), 366.

incarnation be understood as the first of God's decrees, prior even to the willing of creation. Barth reasoned that to confess that Jesus is God, and thus rightly affirmed as the ultimate object of faith, entails the belief that God has no identity more fundamental than Jesus. In other words, here stands the most complete account of who God is: God is just the One who became flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Everything else that Christians claim to know about God, including God's identity as Creator, is therefore logically subsequent to God's determination to take flesh.²³

Indeed, Barth's analysis suggests that traditional forms of incarnational supralapsarianism are not quite right precisely because they continue to explain the incarnation as a solution to a problem, albeit that of human finitude (i.e., overcoming the ontological distance between Creator and creature) rather than human sin. Against attempts to construe the incarnation in these terms, one might object that Christian convictions regarding God's omnipotence render problematic the idea that God is constrained to use certain means to achieve God's ends for creatures.²⁴ But Barth shows that the real difficulty with such approaches is that they conceive of the incarnation—and thus the person of Jesus—as a means to an end, and thus as theologically secondary: occasioned by and thus logically subsequent to more fundamental truths regarding the being and relationship between God and the creature (whether fallen or not). It is more in keeping with the centrality of Jesus to Christian faith to put it precisely the reverse. For if Jesus of Nazareth is truly God, such that Jesus discloses the fullness both of God's being and of God's will for creation without reservation or qualification (Col. 2:9), then (as Barth reasoned) God's determination to be Jesus must enjoy logical precedence over even the creation, let alone the fall (Col. 1:15). From this perspective, the work of creation follows from the primordial election of Jesus: because God elects to be Jesus, and because Jesus is a particular human being—one who breathes, eats, drinks, and bleeds, a Jew, the son of Mary, announced by Gabriel, and so forth—God's willing to be Jesus entails willing the whole created order, from angels to mud puddles and from the big bang to eschaton, within which Jesus lives, moves, and has his being. In other words, the existence of the world and the human beings within it depends on the incarnation rather than the other way around: the truth is not that God had to become flesh to save the world, but that the world's creation and consummation alike are rooted in God's will to be made flesh.

23. See Karl Barth, *CD II/2* (1957), §33.

24. Calvin, e.g., affirmed that God could have effected communion with unfallen human beings apart from the incarnation, even as God enjoys communion with angels without having assumed angelic nature. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.12.6–7, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 471–73.

Now, all of this is not to deny that by taking flesh in Jesus, God does in fact bridge the divide between the infinite being of the Creator and the finite existence of creatures, or that in and through the incarnation of the Word God actually does break the power of sin. On the contrary, both the form and content of this book is predicated on the conviction that God does both these things in and as Jesus of Nazareth. Yet it remains the case that the incarnation is not best conceived as the solution to a problem, whether the problem is the incommensurability of finite and infinite or the destructive power of sin. The incarnation is instead more appropriately understood as the ground of our being, such that these “problems” are secondary, known and knowable by us as the obstacles to life in communion with God that they most certainly are only as they have been overcome and canceled in the person of Jesus. The bridging of Creator and creature in Jesus is therefore not a response to a logically prior divide, but rather the ground of that very distinction. It is just because God has determined first of all to share the divine life fully with the creature that God brings creatures into being, or, to put it still more sharply, creation happens because God wills to take flesh, and God cannot do that without bringing into being the world that flesh inhabits.

Thus, while affirming the priority of Christ does nothing to compromise his character as the “one mediator between God and humankind,” it does require that this work of mediation be described carefully. For Christ is mediator not as a *tertium quid* positioned between two predefined realities, but rather as the one in whom God and humankind acquire their identities as Creator and creature in the first place, that is, the one in and through whom the distinction between Creator and creature is itself established. After all, God is Creator only in relation to the creature, and so while God is eternally God apart from creation, because it is only through the Word who became flesh that all created things came into being (John 1:3; cf. Heb. 1:2), so it is only through the Word that God is Creator.

Conceiving the Word in this way, as the one who both grounds and defines the character of the relationship between God and creation, underlies the structure of this book, which falls into three main parts. The first uses the Johannine account of the Word as God on the one hand and nevertheless enfleshed on the other hand to introduce the distinction between Creator (chap. 1) and creation (chap. 2). This distinction cannot be described without stressing the radical discontinuity between the transcendent being of God and the radically contingent and finite existence of creatures—to the extent that I have titled part 1 as “The Great Divide.” Moreover, the affirmation that creation is genuinely other than God, and that this otherness is the reason for creatures’ vulnerability to the power of sin and death, is crucial to affirming

not only Christ's status as mediator but also the utterly free and gracious character of his mediating work. Yet against the charge that in proceeding in this way I have compromised the christocentric focus of my argument at the outset, I seek in these two chapters to ground the distinction between Creator and creatures in the life of the Trinity. My point in so doing is to underline the claim that this distinction is inseparable from the being and act of the triune God and thus not a state of affairs that may be conceived apart from the One through whom it is bridged.²⁵ Thus, although in their focus on the Creator-creature distinction these chapters cover much of the same material found in my book *From Nothing*, it is my hope that their orientation to Christology keeps them from being dully repetitive of the arguments I developed there.²⁶

The book's second part explores the meaning and defends the coherence of the claim that the bridging of the divide between Creator and creature happens through the Word taking on a creaturely life through a study of the doctrine of the hypostatic union. The analysis attends first to the claim that in taking flesh the Word remained just one *person*, the very Word or Son of God (chap. 3); it then moves to an exploration of the confession that the Word who became flesh was fully *divine* (chap. 4), and yet in taking flesh became no less fully *human* (chap. 5). These three chapters thus move from a discussion of the metaphysics of the incarnation through an exploration of the peculiar identity of the incarnate one as the God of the Jews, who in the fullness of time took on Jewish flesh so as to be born, suffer, and die. The third part of the book then shows how Jesus' victory over death in the resurrection gives rise to a new, redeemed mode of created existence that is rooted in God's own life and is thereby secured from the natural vulnerability of created being (chap. 6), culminating in a discussion of how the effects of God's taking human flesh spread through creation to catch up the whole world in glory (chap. 7). Finally, the book concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of this Chalcedonian framework for the traditional distinction between Christ's person and work.

In all this the point that I hope stands at the forefront is that the confession of the incarnation, that the Father's only begotten Son has come among us as one of us, is good news. It is *news* because it is incomprehensible. That God, who is not a creature, should nevertheless become a creature and, indeed,

25. "It is, then, proper for us to begin the treatment of this subject [of the incarnation] by speaking of the creation of the universe, and of God its Artificer, that it may be duly perceived that the renewal of creation has been the work of the selfsame Word that made it at the beginning." Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word* 56.

26. Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014).

share creatures' radical estrangement from God, taking the form of a slave and humbling himself "to the point of death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8)—is quite beyond our grasp. How can God be human without at any point ceasing to be God and Lord of all? The coherence of this claim can be defended (such defense is the aim of this book), but how it comes about can never be explained.

And the incarnation is more specifically *good* news. It is a mystery, but (in contrast to the original meaning of that word) not therefore something before which we are to fall silent. On the contrary, it is mystery that we have "been given to know" (Matt. 13:11; Luke 8:10) and that we are charged to proclaim (Matt. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15; cf. 1 Cor. 4:1; 9:16), because God has become a creature "for us and for our salvation," to wrench us from captivity to sin, death, and the devil (Rom. 7:23; 8:2; 2 Tim. 2:26) so that we might enjoy the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). In this way, the point of a Chalcedonianism without reserve is finally to defend a still more fundamental theological claim: that while God is good, it is not necessary to be God in order to be good, since both now and in eternity the goodness of God the Creator is fulfilled in establishing the goodness of the creature too. For to proclaim the incarnation is to affirm the truth contained in Jesus' very name: that God saves. And because this salvation is effected in God's coming among us as Jesus, it does not depend on isolating some spark of divinity within us, and thus does not consist in the setting aside of our contingent and finite creatureliness in order to achieve some terminal apotheosis. Quite the contrary, it is precisely as creatures who are other than God that we are saved because God, in a love beyond all telling, has willed not to be other than us.

There is one more point that needs to be made before proceeding to the substance of the argument. It might seem odd that in a book that claims to take its lead from Luther's maxim that "whoever wishes to meditate or speculate soundly about God should disregard absolutely everything except the humanity of Christ," just one chapter has the humanity of Christ as its explicit subject. This fact might seem evidence that Chalcedonianism is guilty of just the shortcomings that its modern critics allege: a Christology in which (to use the vivid metaphor of Catherine Keller) the dogmatic frame covers over the picture of the human being who is ostensibly its subject.²⁷ Against this charge, I would simply say that the point of this book is not to say everything that can or even should be said about Jesus (see John 21:25!). It is rather to give an account of how and why his humanity is rightly understood as the center of Christology in spite (and indeed, just because) of the confession of Jesus

27. Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 133.

as divine. That is, it seeks to show how things that Christians say about the hypostatic union, two natures, preexistence, ascension, and promised return do not divert us from Jesus' humanity, but rather—if rightly understood and explicated—serve precisely to turn our attention back to the life that extended from Mary's womb to Pilate's cross, on the grounds that this life, in all its seemingly provincial particularity, opens for us the mystery of the love that moves the sun and the other stars.