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Christ the Key

Through the intensely intimate relationship that arises between God and humans in the incarnation of the Word in Christ, God gives us the gift of God's own life. This simple claim provides the basis for Kathryn Tanner's powerful study of the centrality of Jesus Christ for all Christian thought and life: if the divine and the human are united in Christ, then Jesus can be seen as key to the pattern that organizes the whole, even while God's ways remain beyond our grasp.

Drawing on the history of Christian thought to develop an innovative Christ-centered theology, this book sheds fresh light on major theological issues such as the *imago dei*, the relationship between nature and grace, the trinity's implications for human community, and the Spirit's manner of working in human lives. Originally delivered as the Warfield lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary, it offers a creative and compelling contribution to contemporary theology.

KATHRYN TANNER is Dorothy Grant Maclear Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago Divinity School. She is the author of *Economy of Grace* (2005) and *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (2001).

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Preface

This book is the promised sequel to my brief systematic theology, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*.¹ The central theological vision of both books is the same: God wants to give us the fullness of God's own life through the closest possible relationship with us as that comes to completion in Christ. In the incarnation one finds the immediate convergence of the most disparate things – God and humanity suffering under the weight of sin and death – as the means by which the goods of God's own life are to be conveyed to us in fulfillment of God's original intentions for us.

The first book developed the basic import of this Christ-centered theological vision by showing how it could be productively used to talk about almost anything of Christian interest in an integrated way. By carrying it through a number of different topics and thereby interconnecting them, my intent was to give readers a general sense of this overall vision and sufficient confidence about its fruitfulness to employ it themselves, if they so chose, on topics the book either did not raise or fully explore. The present book takes the heart of that theological vision – Christ – and shows in less systematic fashion how this understanding of Christ throws fresh light on otherwise tired theological topics and opens up new avenues for approaching them by breaking through current impasses in the theological literature. This understanding of Christ illuminates and unlocks discussion of these topics, and in that sense provides a key to them.

¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress, 2001).

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It does so by making evident what might not otherwise be clear: that, in order to give us the entire fullness of what God enjoys, God must give us God's very own life and not simply some created version of it. God cannot give us everything that God has to give by merely transforming human life itself into some created approximation of divinity. God must attach us, in all our frailty and finitude, to God.

As the culmination and completion of what is true generally of God's interactions with us, Christ is the key, this book suggests, to what God is doing everywhere. Christ clarifies and specifies the nature, aim, and trustworthiness of all God's dealings with us because Christ is where those dealings with us come to ultimate fruition. For example, as I have argued elsewhere, from the supreme fashion in which God achieves intimacy with us in Christ we gain a new confidence about, and have a more definite sense of the point and manner in which, God has always been present with the world as its creator and providential guide. If God saves by taking the radical step of uniting the whole of human nature to itself, we can be sure that God is responsible for the created goodness of our world through quite direct involvement with every aspect of it.²

Christ epitomizes in supreme form God's overall intent with respect to us; and thereby gives that intent a concrete shape we can follow. The whole of who God is for us as creator and redeemer, which in its varied complexity might simply overwhelm and mystify us, is found in concentrated compass in Christ. Christ in this way provides, we shall see, a clue to the pattern or structure that organizes the whole even while God's ways remain ultimately beyond our grasp.³

Like its predecessor, this book is highly eclectic in its use of the history of Christian thought (although because of its focus on

² For Christ as key in this way to God's creation and providential guidance of the world, see Kathryn Tanner, "Is God in Charge?" in William C. Placher (ed.), *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 2003), pp. 119, 121–2, 128, 130.

³ See Thomas F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), pp. 258–60; and his *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), pp. 121–3.

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attachment to God in Christ it trades more heavily than the first book on specifically Neo-Platonic strands of early Christian theology). In this respect it imitates much of the earlier Christian thought it employs. Rather than find me an “eclectic compiler” because of it, and the book “a syncretistic concoction of pre-existing givens,” the reader, I hope, will extend to me the courtesy now afforded someone like Gregory of Nyssa, in which “looking backward towards the sources and the basic elements” does not “replace a looking forward that endeavors to grasp the synthesis that has been effected, the irreducible novelty that has been attained.” “The fruit of these labors, even though ... contained in the roots,” is, I hope to convince the reader, “something new and unexpected.”⁴

While I do not believe I have distorted any of the material I directly or indirectly quote, my thinking often pushes that material in directions beyond its own explicit statement, without any great defense of the uses to which it is thereby put.⁵ While I welcome specialist interest in the question of my faithfulness to sources, my main intent is simply to show the fruitfulness of a kind of internalizing of the history of Christ thought for its creative redeployment. In much the same way scripture (particularly the Psalms) was internalized (through repeated direct reading, liturgical recitation, and theological commentary) and redeployed in earlier Christian thought – for example, in Anselm’s poetry and prose meditations, which for all their prayerfulness took a quite analytical and rigorous form not unlike this book.⁶

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), pp. 16–17, 79. He is defending the eclecticism of Gregory of Nyssa’s thought, which he thinks unfairly led to its dismissal.

⁵ Note that I have routinely altered archaisms of capitalization and grammar in nineteenth-century translations of early Christian sources in order to ease comprehension by the contemporary reader.

⁶ See Benedicta Ward, “Introduction,” in *The Prayers and Meditations of St. Anselm with the Proslogion*, trans. Benedicta Ward (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 28–9, 43, 46.

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In large part because of the particular sources utilized most often, the book is also full of references to pre-critical scriptural interpretation. While I know of current efforts to resuscitate forms of biblical interpretation common in the early church, I do not intend my own work here (with the exception of Chapter 4's highly qualified remarks) to be a contribution to such efforts.⁷ There is much more to be said on this score of course. But suffice it to say now that I am principally interested in the theological claims that result from such interpretation, and believe the theological merits of those claims to be separable from biblical commentary that at least in its particulars is often dubious from a modern historical-critical perspective.

The chapters of this book came together as the Warfield lectures at Princeton Theological Seminary in 2007. I am deeply grateful to Iain Torrance, the President of Princeton Theological Seminary, and to my faculty host, Daniel Migliore, for the invitation to deliver them. Several chapters are revisions of papers written prior to that occasion and in earlier forms have been previously, or are now in process of being, published. Chapter 1 is a substantially revised version of a paper written for a conference organized under the auspices of Catherine Keller at Drew University in 2006 and presented again in 2007 both at the University of Otago, New Zealand, for a conference on "Christian Salvation," and at a conference on "The Self" at the University of Chicago organized by Jean-Luc Marion. Different

In his *Confessions*, of course, Augustine also develops Neo-Platonic themes in language that is a "pastiche of the Psalter," as Henry Chadwick puts it. See his "Introduction" in Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1992), p. xxii.

⁷ See, for example, some of the contributions in Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (eds.) *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2003), especially the first of the Nine Theses of the combined contributors, p. 1, and the essay by Robert Jenson, "Scripture's Authority in the Church," pp. 28–9, 33–6. See also Lewis Ayres, "Patristic and Medieval Theologies of Scripture: An Introduction," in Justin S. Holcomb (ed.), *Christian Theologies of Scripture* (New York University Press, 2006), pp. 11–12.

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versions are published under the titles, “In the Image of the Invisible,” in Christopher Boesel and Catherine Keller (eds.), *Apophatic Bodies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), and “Creation and Salvation in the Image of an Incomprehensible God,” in Ivor Davidson and Murray Rae (eds.), *God of Salvation: Essays in Systematic Theology* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, forthcoming). A much compressed treatment of material from Chapters 1 and 3 is published as “Grace without Nature,” in David Albertson and Cabell King (eds.), *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009) and was delivered as a lecture in that combined form at a conference organized by them on this theme at the University of Chicago in 2007. A much different version of Chapter 5 appeared as “The Trinity,” in William Cavanaugh and Peter Scott (eds.), *Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). A shortened version of Chapter 5 was published under the title “Kingdom Come: The Trinity and Politics,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 27/2 (2007), pp. 129–45; this same version was revised for a conference on “Christology and Ethics,” organized by Brent Waters and L. LeRon Shults at Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary in 2008, and is to be published under the title “Trinity, Christology, and Community” in a book edited by them on that theme (Eerdmans, forthcoming). Chapter 6 was originally presented at a meeting of the Society for the Study of Theology in Newcastle, England, in 2003, delivered in 2004 at Yale University as the Pitt Lecture and at Kampen Theological University, Netherlands, and published under the title “Incarnation, Cross, and Sacrifice: A Feminist-Inspired Reappraisal,” *Anglican Theological Review* 86/1 (2004), pp. 35–56. A version of Chapter 7 appeared as “Workings of the Spirit: Simplicity or Complexity?” in Michael Welker (ed.), *The Work of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2006). I would like to thank everyone who attended these lectures and asked questions, and the editors of these volumes for suggested revisions. I am especially grateful for the extended responses to the written

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manuscript that I received from Paul DeHart, Kevin Hector, Catherine Keller, Ian McFarland, Joy McDougall, David Newheiser, Jean Porter, John Thiel, and the Yale–Princeton Theology Group. This book and the lectures upon which it is based could not have been written without the unwavering support of my family; my greatest debt of gratitude is to them.