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978-0-521-87352-9 - Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered

Oliver D. Crisp

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Divinity and Humanity

The doctrine of the Incarnation lies at the heart of Christianity. But the idea that ‘God was in Christ’ has become a much-debated topic in modern theology. Oliver Crisp addresses six key issues in the Incarnation, defending a robust version of the doctrine, in keeping with classical Christology. He explores perichoresis, or interpenetration, with reference to both the Incarnation and the Trinity. Over two chapters Crisp deals with the human nature of Christ and then provides an argument against the view, common among some contemporary theologians, that Christ had a fallen human nature. He considers the notion of divine kenosis or self-emptying, and discusses non-incarnational Christology, focusing on the work of John Hick. This view denies that Christ is God Incarnate, regarding him as primarily a moral exemplar to be imitated. Crisp rejects this alternative account of the nature of Christology.

OLIVER D. CRISP is Lecturer in Theology at the University of Bristol. He is author of *Jonathan Edwards and the Metaphysics of Sin* (2005).

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Preface

This book is a small contribution to the doctrine of the person of Christ. It is physically small by comparison to a number of other books on the topic. It also covers a limited range of topics and notions pertaining to the person of Christ. There is much more to be said on this than I have been able to say here. Still, one has to begin somewhere. I have tried to tackle problems to do with the person of Christ that focus upon the relation of the divinity to the humanity of Christ. Every important issue to do with the person of Christ deals with his divinity and humanity in some fashion, even if it is only as a means to saying something else. But there are issues to do with the person of Christ that touch upon the relationship of his divinity to his humanity in particular, important ways. I have not dealt with all of them, but I have dealt with six that seemed to me to be central and defining problems in this area.

The shape of the book is as follows. There are three chapters expounding issues in a broadly Chalcedonian Christology, followed by three chapters that defend a broadly Chalcedonian Christology (as I construe it) against three doctrines that attempt to modify or, in one case, replace it.

The first chapter offers a reconsideration of the doctrine of perichoresis. This is a doctrine that has had considerable vogue in recent theology, but most of this interest has been directed towards the Trinitarian application of the doctrine (with respect to the mutual interpenetration of the different persons of the Trinity). Much less has been said about its potential for application to matters Christological. This is curious, not least because, as I argue, the application of

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perichoresis to Christology helps to explicate the doctrine of the union of Christ's two natures (divine and human) in important respects. The discussion in this chapter outlines a way in which Christological perichoresis might be useful, and distinguishes it from the doctrine of the communication of attributes between Christ's two natures. In a closing section, the application of perichoresis to the Trinity is also considered. The two uses of the doctrine are different, but both may be helpful in theology.

Chapters two and three deal with the human nature of Christ. In the second chapter, consideration is given to what the human nature of Christ consists in. There have been several traditional ways in which this has been understood, and, although insufficient attention has been paid to this issue in recent systematic theology, several recent philosophical discussions of the matter are helpful in surveying the terrain. I opt for a version of the medieval view of Christ's human nature: that it is a concrete particular composed of a human body and soul, assumed by the Word of God at the Incarnation. But the main alternative view, that Christ's human nature is a property of the second person of the Trinity, may also be defensible, although I do not defend it.

The third chapter builds on this discussion, considering whether or not Christ's human nature is 'impersonal', and whether it is 'personalized', so to speak, by the Word, in his assumption of human nature. These intertwined problems, mooted in modern theology by Karl Barth among others, but with roots earlier in the tradition, are often referred to as the *anhypostatos physis* (impersonal (human) nature) and *enhypostatos physis* (personalized (human) nature), respectively. I have deliberately combined these two issues, calling their product the *en-anhypostasia* question, since the problem this raises for Christology is whether Christ's human nature is either impersonal, or personalized by the Word, or both. What this chapter shows is that an adequate answer to these issues depends on prior commitments pertaining to what Christ's human nature consists in. This is a point that has not always been appreciated in the literature.

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The second section of the book, concerning revisions to a broadly Chalcedonian Christology, continues the theme of issues concerning the humanity of Christ in chapter four. There, the matter of whether or not Christ had a fallen human nature is discussed. A number of modern theologians have claimed that, in order for Christ to redeem human beings, he must assume the fallen human nature human beings possess. However, this reasoning faces considerable objections, not least the traditional notion culled from the doctrine of sin, that fallenness and moral culpability go hand in hand. I argue that the claim that Christ had a fallen human nature must be rejected, because Christ is without sin. But it is possible that Christ's human nature was affected by the Fall. After all, Christ wept, hungered, was thirsty and experienced fatigue.

Chapter five deals with another way in which a broadly Chalcedonian Christology might be revised – in this case, with respect to the notion of divine kenosis. This is, roughly, the idea that somehow the Word of God empties himself of certain divine attributes in order to become incarnate. The doctrine of divine kenosis was popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and has become popular once more, among certain philosophical theologians. It is this recent literature that is in view in this chapter. I show that there are several strengths to divine kenosis, and that there are serious objections to the strong and the weak versions of the doctrine. However, there is a related view (which may turn out to be a weak version of the doctrine), called divine kryptosis, or divine concealment. According to this view, the Word of God restricts the way in which he acts in and through his human nature, but not in any way that requires him to divest himself of his divine attributes. (This, as we shall see, takes up themes from the first chapter, on Christological perichoresis.)

The final chapter of the book concerns non-incarnational Christology. This is the view that the importance attaching to the life and work of Christ has nothing to do with a divine Incarnation, but rather with the moral example Christ puts before us as a fully but merely human being. Indeed, for many who take this view,

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Christ is not God Incarnate at all. He is a mere man. This view, often associated with nineteenth-century theological liberalism, can still be found today in the work of theologians like John Hick. It is Hick's work that is the basis of discussion in this chapter, since Hick can rightly claim to be one of the clearest and most forthright defenders of a non-incarnational Christology in recent theology. I argue that there are serious shortcomings with Hick's view, the most important of which is that his doctrine cannot, in the final analysis, be considered an adequate piece of *Christian* theology, since the Incarnation is an essential constituent of Christian teaching. Removal of the Incarnation from Christology is like removal of the heart from a living human being.

Finally, let me mention two additional matters by way of introduction. First, as I have already said, my approach to Christology in this volume is 'broadly' Chalcedonian. I say this because I do not claim that my construal of Chalcedonian Christology is the only way one could make sense of the Chalcedonian definition. What is important for the arguments I lay out is that they are compatible with a Chalcedonian account of the person of Christ. I draw the reader's attention to this because I shall not do so again in the body of the text, when I refer to 'Chalcedonian Christology'.¹

¹ As I shall be using the term in what follows, Chalcedonian Christology refers to that tradition in Christology which looks to the Chalcedonian definition given at the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451, for the definitive churchly pronouncement on what it is Christians should believe about the person and work of Christ, as expressed in the Scriptures, which the definition seeks to make clear. Nothing I say here suggests that this definition is a substitute for Scripture. As I understand it, the Fathers who canonized the Chalcedonian definition thought of themselves as making clear what Scripture teaches, in the face of heresies that would have undermined the teaching of Scripture in the life of the Church. I choose to deal with the Chalcedonian definition directly, rather than with Scripture, because it is a convenient summary of Christian teaching on this matter that is endorsed by the universal Church. There have been theologians in recent times who have argued that we should dispense with Chalcedonian Christology because it is confused, or somehow contrary to Scripture. For an argument against these views, see Gerald Bray, 'Can we dispense with Chalcedon?' in *Themelios* 3 (1978): 2–9.

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Secondly, what is attempted here is a descriptive account of Christology, not a revisionist account. That is, this volume seeks to defend one traditional picture of the person of Christ. I am not offering a substitute for the Chalcedonian view, nor do I think one should do so. Theology should not be novel – or, at least, it should not be novel for the sake of novelty. To my mind, systematic theology should be faithful to Scripture and take seriously the chorus of voices that constitute the Christian tradition. But this means making relevant to new audiences the Gospel that has been committed to the Church. Hence, this is an essay in traditional Christology, but without being hide-bound or antique. For faithfulness to a tradition is surely consistent with new ways of thinking about that tradition, and new tools with which to make sense of its relevance for today. (Of course, new ways of thinking about a tradition are not necessarily helpful or benign. But they may be.)

Earlier versions of two chapters contained in this volume have previously appeared elsewhere:

Chapter one: ‘Problems with perichoresis’, in *Tyndale Bulletin* 56 (2005): 118–140;

Chapter four: ‘Did Christ have a *fallen* human nature?’, in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 (2004): 270–288.

I am grateful to the editors and publishers of these journals for allowing this work to be reproduced here.

As with the writing of any piece of theology, this work has been considerably enhanced by the attention given to it by the following friends and colleagues: Claire Crisp, Chris Eberle, Tom Flint (whose help was invaluable for chapters two and three), Steve Guthrie, Trevor Hart, Daniel Hill, Hugh McCann, Richard Muller, Michael Pace, Robin Parry, Myron Penner, Alvin Plantinga, Luke Potter, Richard Sturch and Alan Torrance. Paul Helm and Mike Rea deserve special thanks for reading the entire manuscript in draft (in Paul Helm’s case, more than once!) and offering many helpful comments that saved me from not a few errors. Tom McCall read a number of the chapters

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and pointed out several mistakes, particularly with respect to kenoticism. Gavin D'Costa read through the material on John Hick to my considerable benefit. Chapter one was the Tyndale House Philosophy of Religion Lecture for 2004. An earlier version of chapter four was presented at a theology seminar in St Mary's College, University of St Andrews. Much of chapter two was presented at a seminar in Calvin Theological Seminary. I am grateful to those present on these different occasions for raising issues that helped me see several matters more clearly than I had done beforehand.

I would also like to register my thanks to the Center for Philosophy of Religion, University of Notre Dame, where the bulk of this book was written during a research fellowship in the academic year 2004–2005. The faculty and staff of the Center, as well as the other fellows there, made writing this volume stimulating and enjoyable. I am doubly indebted to Iain Torrance. Not only did he encourage me to write the book for this series, but also, some years ago when I was an undergraduate, he was the first person who made me seriously think I might become a theologian. Finally, I would like to thank Kate Brett of the Cambridge University Press, who was most gracious and helpful at several points along the way.

This volume is dedicated to my children, Liberty Alice Crisp and Elliot Anselm Crisp, who ask the best theological questions that I have ever heard.