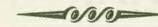


**MARK A. NOLL**  
Jesus Christ *and*  
*the* Life of the Mind

Jesus Christ and the  
Life of the Mind



MARK A. NOLL

WILLIAM B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN / CAMBRIDGE, U.K.

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Published 2011 by  
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.  
2140 Oak Industrial Drive N.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49505/  
P.O. Box 163, Cambridge CB3 9PU U.K.  
www.eerdmans.com

Printed in the United States of America

17 16 15 14 13 12 11 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Noll, Mark A., 1946-  
Jesus Christ and the life of the mind/ Mark A. Noll.  
p. cm.  
Includes index.  
ISBN 978-0-8028-6637-0 (cloth: alk. paper)  
1. Jesus Christ — Person and offices.  
2. Learning and scholarship — Religious aspects — Christianity.  
I. Title.

BT205.N65 2011  
232'.8 — dc22

2011005879

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To  
*Jon Pott*

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### THREE

## *Jesus Christ: Guidance for Serious Learning*



General admonitions are, of course, quite different from specific guidelines. If for believers the door to learning is opened wide by Jesus Christ, that fact by itself does not provide detailed directions for those who pass through the doorway. The children in C. S. Lewis's stories who went into the land of Narnia were often befuddled, lost, and confused even on that other side of the wardrobe. To say that "all things" have been made by the Son of God and now "hold together" in him can remain hollow triumphalism unless it is shown that such affirmations make a difference in concrete practice. As difficult as it may seem to reorient thinking toward the "treasures of wisdom and knowledge" found in Jesus Christ, it can be just as difficult to move past slogans and actually carry out real intellectual activity.

It is foolish to underestimate the barriers standing in the way of a christological approach to study. Apart from the work of some philosophers, serious academic research guided by explicit Christian norms has been thin on the ground for at least two hundred years. To be sure, the sterling record of luminaries from the heights of European Christian civilization — from Anselm and Aquinas to Boyle, Pascal, Bach, Edwards, and Malebranche — provides remarkable historical precedent for Christian intellectuals today who want to walk where these forerunners ran. But for at least the last two centuries the

drift has been the other way— for first-order research and compelling arguments to be defined by a values-neutral conception of truth and energized by liberation from dogma.

Resources, however, are abundant for trying to advance scholarship on a Christian foundation. For instance, the claim that modern science, ethics, aesthetics, history, social science, psychiatry, and even criticism rest on a presumed or submerged theism deserves much more consideration than it regularly receives. The issue specifically is whether there is any good reason, apart from an active deity, to take for granted the regularity, communicability, universality, durability, and repeatability that are so basic for so many intellectual endeavors. But even that significant contextual assertion has been advanced only rarely by Christian thinkers in the modern marketplace of ideas. The much more obvious reality is that scientists, philosophers, historians, and critics have long been acting as if general theistic considerations, much less explicitly Christian concerns, were irrelevant.

The result is that even basic intellectual moves can pose difficulties. In my own case I have been thinking about the bearing of Christology on historical practice for more than a quarter century and am not at all certain that I have cracked this particular nut successfully. Nonetheless, as a stimulus for others who are expert in the various disciplines of modern learning and who would like to explore the call of Christ in their labors, this chapter and the four that follow try to suggest specific ways that the teaching of the creeds might make an intellectual difference. Although this effort means rushing in where angels fear to tread, it may still indicate live possibilities in Christian orthodoxy for orientations, dispositions, attitudes, or preferences in carrying out specific intellectual tasks.

In this chapter the focus is on four general expectations that might inform intellectual life if the grand claims of John 1, Colossians 1, and Hebrews 1 are taken seriously, and if the formulations in the major creeds could function as guides to understanding the world. The four concern duality or doubleness, contingency, particularity, and self-denial. Care is required to spell out how such stances derive from basic orthodox Christology and how they can guide expectations for learning— perhaps more care than I can provide. Yet once the na-

ture of Christ's person and work is grasped, and then the centrality of Christ for all things, these four stances should seem noncontroversial.

I offer specific suggestions about the actual workings of several academic disciplines in the next chapters, but my aim is not pontification but stimulation. These chapters are not pretending to lay down laws for Christian intellectual life but are trying to show that such life can arise as a natural extension of Christian belief itself.

### Doubleness

The expectation that some important results of scholarship will have a dual or doubled character would seem to flow naturally from the realities summarized by the Chalcedonian Definition. Those realities point to a paradox or an apparent antinomy in the most basic understanding of the Christian faith. It would then seem to follow, if "all things" exist from, in, and for Christ, that the dual nature of Christ would give shape to at least some of what humans grasp in their efforts to understand existence in general.

The crucial phrases from Chalcedon affirm a particular two-in-one-ness about the Lord whom Christians have always trusted as the bedrock of their existence. Specifically, the incarnate Son of God was "one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>1</sup> Christianity in its entirety is a religion grounded in what Chalcedon tried to describe: Jesus Christ accomplished his mediatorial work because he was both divine and human — moreover, divine and human joined in one integrated person without confusion, change, division, or separation.

1. *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, 3 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1:181.

Some Synergy

Even though ordinary human wisdom declares that divinity and humanity cannot be conjoined as Chalcedon affirms they were, Christ was and is a being with two natures in one integrated person. All the orthodox Christian traditions are based on this foundational truth instead of ordinary human wisdom. Believers, therefore, have every reason to expect breakthroughs in scholarship, insofar as they allow crucial christological convictions to guide their scholarly perspectives.

The transition from inward faith resting on christological affirmation to outward study informed by christological reality can be simply stated, even if it is difficult to execute: the doubleness of Christ as divine and human, which undergirds the whole edifice of Christian life and thought, is a model for studying the spheres of existence.

Christian scholars who take to heart Chalcedonian doctrine about the divine and human present in one integrated Person should be predisposed to seek knowledge about particular matters from more than one angle. The wisdom of that expectation is underscored by frequent illustrations in Scripture.

Acts 2:23: "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross."

Nehemiah 2:8 (and parallels in Ezra 7:6, 9): "And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests."

Psalms 77:19: "Your path led through the sea, / your way through the mighty waters, / though your footprints were not seen."

These instances show the biblical authors recognizing multiple legitimate skeins of cause and effect to explain single human actions. One lies in the purposes of God; others in the realm of ordinary human activity. They are models to be taken seriously, not as if humans can have God-like understanding, but that they too can approach reality with Chalcedonian expectations.

The way four theologians have written about this perspective suggests what a Christ-centered angle of vision might entail for

learned exploration of academic subjects. First is an assertion in the famous prayer of Anselm of Canterbury at the start of his *Proslogion*, the work from the late eleventh century that tried to demonstrate the existence of God by what would later be called the ontological argument. In this prayer, Anselm enacted a common Christian pattern by basing what he knew on what he had experienced: "I do not attempt, O Lord, to penetrate Thy profundity, for I desire to understand in some degree Thy truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand, in order that I may believe; but I believe that I may understand. For I believe this too, that unless I believed, I should not understand."<sup>2</sup> What Anselm in his heart believed and loved was clearly the Savior Jesus Christ, the nature of whose sacrifice on behalf of sinners he had also explored in a famous treatise on the atonement, *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why did God become human?) In other words, Anselm's contemplation of philosophical proof for the existence of God proceeded from his faith in Christ.

A second theologian expanding upon this same vision was Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, the conservative Presbyterian who at the end of the nineteenth century reiterated the crucial standing of creedal affirmations for all of Christian life. In Warfield's view, the life of Christ "everywhere" reveals "a double life unveiled before us in the dramatization of the actions of Jesus. . . . [A] double life is attributed to him as his constant possession." Warfield readily acknowledged that "this conjoint humanity and deity, within the limits of a single personality, presents serious problems to the human intellect, in its attempts to comprehend it, in itself or in its activities." But despite these difficulties, Warfield proclaimed that "we cannot afford to lose either the God in the man or the man in the God; our hearts cry out for the complete God-man whom the Scriptures offer us." Christianity in its entirety hung upon this biblical picture: "Because he is man he is able to pour out his blood, and because he is God his blood is of infinite value to save . . . it is only because he is both God and Man in one person, that we can speak of God purchasing his Church with his own

2. Anselm, *Proslogion*, quoted in Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Image, 1962), 177.

blood. . . . And unless God has purchased his Church with his own blood, in what shall his Church find a ground for its hope?"<sup>3</sup> In the essay containing these considerations, Warfield did not apply his reasoning to other issues. But as we will see in later chapters, his sense of the doubleness of the incarnation proved very important as he approached controversial questions in science and for the study of Scripture itself.<sup>4</sup>

More recently, Gabriel Fackre has noted the tendency in Christian history for believers to shy away from what he calls the "antinomies all over scripture and Christian teaching, paradigmatically in the doctrine of the incarnation." The reason, claims Fackre, is that "the assertion of mutually exclusive propositions — humanity and divinity in one person — never satisfies human reason, which is always interested in relaxing the tension in one direction or the other."<sup>5</sup> Like Warfield, Fackre did not go on to make applications for scholarship in general from his theological point, but the applications would seem to flow naturally: If the center of human history has the character he described, why not at least some of the peripheries?

A final statement comes from an essay by Robert Palma on connections between Michael Polanyi's conceptions of scientific practice and "christological dualisms." According to Palma, who examined several of the seeming tensions in twentieth-century conceptions of Christ (for example, the Christ of faith versus the Jesus of history), "such valid dualities did not function as dichotomies or divisions" for the early Christian fathers. Rather, the authors of the creeds felt that such dualities were "bound up together personally through God's own life and [could be] viewed as components of a divinely constituted historic and coherent gestalt of grace."<sup>6</sup> Palma suggested that Polanyi's

approach to science, which describes it as simultaneously objective conclusions about nature and human practices aimed at understanding nature, illustrates how approaches to thought from the early Christian centuries might lead to another kind of gestalt for modern interpreters who confront apparently irreconcilable dichotomies.

Where Christian scholars might go in their scholarship, if Chalcedon were fixed centrally in their minds, depends very much upon individual disciplines and specific problems. Engineering, some forms of math, and some aspects of musical theory might not be different in Chalcedonian perspective. But a Chalcedonian orientation might make a difference in contemporary epistemology that puts point of view into conflict with information coming from outside the self; in basic physics with investigations of light as waves or particles; in historical interpretations that find two or more plausible explanations for the same event; in theories of human behavior stressing sometimes free choice and sometimes determined action; or in biology confronted with the randomness of evolutionary change and the complexity of advanced organisms. The natural human urge moves to adjudicate competition among overarching claims. This urge, which relies on the practical necessity of the law of noncontradiction, must certainly be trusted in many specific scholarly arenas. But for a Christian who has experienced the saving power of Christ, it will be a smaller step, when confronting at least some dichotomous intellectual problems, to seek the harmonious acceptance of the dichotomy than for a scholar who does not believe that the integrated person of Christ was made up of a fully divine and a fully human nature.

### Contingency

Traditional Christianity involves a central place for contingency because of the biblical accounts that describe how earnest seekers found Christ or proclaimed Christ. Although a full definition of contingency would involve heavy philosophical sloggging, a simpler definition is adequate here. Contingent statements are those that are neither necessarily true ( $2 + 2 = 4$ ) nor necessarily false (ordinary sheep

3. B. B. Warfield, "The Human Development of Jesus," in *The Bible Student*, vol. 1 (1900), 12-19; quoted here from *Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 1, ed. John E. Meeter (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 163, 164, 166.

4. See below, 110-16 and 130-32.

5. Gabriel Fackre, "An Evangelical Megashift?" *Christian Century*, May 3, 1995, 485.

6. Robert J. Palma, "Polanyi and Christological Dualisms," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 48 (1995): 212.

have five legs). Contingency in general means that something is the way it is, not because it has to be that way, but because it developed or worked out the way it did. For intellectual purposes, contingency means that if we want to find out about the workings of nature, the reasons why historical events took place and historical circumstances existed, or the motives behind human actions in the present or the past, we must not simply reason downward from philosophical or theological convictions, but must seek out as much evidence as possible about whatever we are studying.

Contingency in this basic sense frames the search for God as described in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms. Thus, God is known in his works of creation as humans heed what nature communicates:

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
 the skies proclaim the work of his hands.  
 Day after day they pour forth speech;  
 night after night they display knowledge.  
 There is no speech or language  
 where their voice is not heard.  
 Their voice goes out into all the earth,  
 their words to the ends of the world.

(19:1-4)

After relating the deliverance he had experienced by God's mercy, another psalmist urges women and men to "taste and see that the LORD is good" (34:8). And the well-known prayer of Psalm 119 is that God would

Open my eyes that I may see  
 wonderful things in your law.

(119:18)

In the New Testament, the message of the apostles did not primarily concern necessary truths of reason, but rather truths hard-won through experience. Peter and John explained their boldness in addressing Jerusalem's religious rulers about Christ by saying, "we can-

not help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). And the apostle Paul told one of his Roman interrogators that the way Christ directed Paul's life course had not escaped the official's notice "because it was not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). The author to the book of Hebrews urged believers who could not make out the promised rule of God over all things to take heart, because "we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb. 2:9). Confidence in the promise unseen, in other words, rested on what had been seen. The First Epistle of John offers the same reliance on firsthand experience as the basis for believing the Christian message: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched — this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life. . . . We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard" (1 John 1:1, 3).

In such proclamations, the apostolic authors were only following the lead of the Gospels. The Gospel of John records that after Philip had encountered Jesus, Philip told his friend Nathanael he had "found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote — Jesus of Nazareth." But Nathanael simply knew that God's promised one could not come from Nazareth, to which Philip offered this assured reply: "Come and see" (John 1:45, 46). The Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well in Sychar likewise urged her fellow citizens to put aside their prejudice against Jewish teachers and "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" (John 4:29). Jesus, memorably, responded in the same way to the disciples of John when they came asking on behalf of their imprisoned leader if Jesus was "the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" The reply was to tell John "what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Matt. 11:3, 4-5). In these scriptural cases, the evidence of experience was to guide thinking; mental dispositions, while not unimportant, were not most important.

The specific christological implication of these passages con-



cerns the surface implausibility of an incarnate deity and the further implausibility of a hope for human salvation arising from such an incarnation. To all forms of unbelief, however, the response is the same: come and see.<sup>7</sup> For any number of reasons, Christian realities do not make sense, until and unless they have been experienced. They are in that sense contingent realities.

The contingency of the incarnation and the work of Christ would seem to justify a related commitment to empirical procedures as a way of learning about the world. If we come to know God best by correcting our prejudgments about what God can or cannot do through experiencing what God has actually done, it follows that we learn about the world by opening up our prejudgments about what we think the world must be like to how we actually experience the world. The principle is that if we want to know something, we must not only think about that something, but actually experience it. God may be able to think his way to reality, but we cannot. If we know God by experiencing him, so also do we come to know the world.

A preference for empirical over deductive reasoning can never be absolute, but it is a reliable preference that allows for an escape from pure constructionism (the assertion that reports of "experiences" are simply coded statements about our own social, political, or gender locations). A reliance on sense experience for genuine insights is too well established in too many biblical texts. Even more valuable, it allows for an escape from deductive dogmatism. A sobering example of such dogmatism from recent American history is the Vietnam War. Because key national leaders held the general belief that communism was a monolithic ideology controlled by the Soviet Union and aimed systematically at world domination, there seemed no need

7. David Hume's famous argument that the experience of ordinary human life trumps every claim to have experienced the supernatural has been thoughtfully treated in several recent works. For a sympathetic interpretation of Hume with the relevant texts, see Robert J. Fogelin, *A Defense of Hume on Miracles* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). Treatments that find serious weaknesses in Hume's arguments include David Johnson, *Hume, Holism, and Miracles* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), and John Earman, *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument against Miracles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

for close study of what was actually happening in Southeast Asia. Inductive experience about the actual situation on the ground in Vietnam was less important for policy makers than what they simply knew must be the case about communism in general. The result of such thinking was military and diplomatic disaster.

Examples abound of similar instances, with classic standoffs on scientific questions probably foremost. Some individuals who properly trust the revelation of Scripture simply know that, since God created everything, evolution cannot be true — and so there is no need to carefully gather and weigh evidence about how the world actually works. Other individuals who properly trust the evidence of their senses when exploring nature conclude that evolution works randomly, and since they simply know that randomness excludes divine providence, God cannot superintend nature — and so there is no need to carefully gather evidence about how the existence of divinity and the existence of a material world might be related.

More such deductive dogmatisms will be explored in later chapters, but here it is enough to conclude with testimony by Christian thinkers from several venues who felt it was a Christian duty to pursue the way of empiricism. Thus, the eighteenth-century poet Christopher Smart once wrote about how best to honor the Scriptures as God's written revelation. The way to go was not reasoning downward from what one knew the Bible must be, but reasoning upward as one actually read it:

O take the book from off the shelf,  
And con it meekly on thy knees;  
Best panegyric on itself,  
And self avouched to teach and please.<sup>8</sup>

The great theologian and New Testament scholar Adolf Sch[atter] battled throughout his career in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Germany to defend orthodox and pietistic interpretations of the faith. Once in writing on the mistakes of atheism, he paused to

8. Smart, quoted from *The Poet's Book of Psalms*, ed. Laurance Wieder (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), xvi.

recommend the intellectual method that he felt best reflected the character of the universe as God had made it: "What obligates as members of the *universitas litterarum* [scholarly guild] as an inviolable duty is that we, in the field of labor appointed to us, succeed at seeing, at chaste, unsullied observation, at a comprehension of the real event, be it one that took place in the past or one that is just now happening." Schlatter felt that "every labor within the university" demanded that same perspective. He concluded by stating boldly that "Science is first seeing and secondly seeing and thirdly seeing and again and again seeing. . . . Therefore it is a general and inviolable scientific rule that every judgment must be preceded by painstaking observation, and all our own conclusions must be preceded by the act of reception, without which our own production bursts into wind and illusions."<sup>9</sup> For Schlatter this was the way not just of academic respectability but also of Christian integrity.

During World War II the archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, recommended a similar empirical approach as the best strategy for churches to handle social or political issues. In particular, he thought that churches should not pontificate on "any particular policy," since experience in the world was the crucial element in adopting any specific way ahead: "A policy always depends on technical decisions concerning the actual relations of cause and effect in the political and economic world; about these a Christian as such has no more reliable judgment than an atheist, except so far as he should be more immune to the temptations of self-interest."<sup>10</sup> Temple did not mean that Christian principles or truth claims were unimportant; he did mean that knowledge of a particular situation gained by experience with that particular situation was critical for determining the best public policies.

Even more recently, C. Everett Koop complained about the rush

9. "Adolf Schlatter on Atheistic Methods in Theology," trans. David R. Bauer (from 1905), in appendix to Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: A Biography of Germany's Premier Biblical Theologian*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 218-20.

10. William Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977; original 1942), 40.

of conclusions before facts that bedeviled his tenure in the 1980s as surgeon general of the United States. Early in that tenure Koop was blasted from the left for his strong personal stance against abortion on demand. But later he came under fire from the right for insisting on humane treatment for those who suffered from HIV/AIDS. His comments about this bombarding amounted to an appeal for patient contingency appropriate for this book: "What bothered me most . . . was the lack of scholarship by Christians — as if they felt that by leaning on a theological principle they didn't have to be very accurate with the facts. People talk about knee-jerk liberals. The liberals have no corner on that market; I've learned there are also knee-jerk conservatives."<sup>11</sup>

Contingency in academic practice reflects the pattern by which God made himself known to earnest seekers in the Old Testament and to the followers of Jesus in the New. It provides an especially strong counter to the tendency of academics to trust their own conclusions instead of letting their ideas be challenged by contact with the world beyond their own minds.

### Particularity

One of the most helpful guides for scholarship from classical Christology comes from reflecting on what it means that Jesus was born as the Savior of the world to the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem during the days of Herod, king of Judea. In the Christian scheme of things, this very particular event carries universal meaning for all people at all times and in all places. The implication can be stated succinctly: because God revealed himself most clearly in a particular set of circumstances and at a particular time and place, every other particular set of cultural circumstances takes on a fresh potential importance. The payoff for intellectual life is to provide mediation between the one and the many, the specific and the general, the perspectival and the universal.

Biblical religion offers numerous reasons for paying full atten-

11. Koop, quoted in Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor: How Thirteen Unlikely Mentors Helped My Faith Survive the Church* (New York: Galilee/Doubleday, 2001), 197.

tion to the specific and for valuing the perspectival. Many accounts in the book of Acts, for instance, point toward the potential value of all local human situations. Thus, as commentators have frequently pointed out, the Day of Pentecost reversed the linguistic disorder caused by the hubris on display at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). In that ancient story, diversity of languages led to chaos. But at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit's testimony to the resurrected Christ enabled people of all languages to hear the good news, even as each language retained its own identity: "When they heard this sound [the blowing of a violent wind], a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language" (Acts 2:6).

Later in Acts the linguistic diversity of Pentecost is matched by an acceptance of cultural diversity. In chapter 10 the apostle Peter receives repeated divine instructions to set aside Jewish dietary laws in order to communicate the gospel to those who did not observe those laws. Immediately thereafter, when Peter begins his presentation to the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household, he makes a statement with broad cultural, as well as religious, application: "Then Peter began to speak [to Cornelius]: 'I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right'" (Acts 10:34-35). While God calls people "from every nation" to repent and turn to him, God also does not play favorites, and so looks on "every nation" as a source of potential good.

The story of the apostle Paul in Athens, related in Acts 17, points in the same direction. Paul has come for the first time to this metropole of Hellenism, where he is struck by the altars erected to various gods. In response he proclaims the message of the one true God who has now manifested himself fully in the person of Jesus Christ and demonstrated the proof of that revelation by raising Christ from the dead. In the course of this exclusionary message, Paul makes a broadly inclusionary statement about the nature of human civilizations: "From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:26-27). The very diversity of

human kinds and cultures speaks not only of God's good creation, but also of his merciful plans for redemption.

Missiologists like Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls have seen most clearly how the universal meaning of the incarnation both relativizes and dignifies all other cultural situations. Andrew Walls depicts the tension like this:

Christ took flesh and was made man in a particular time and place, family, nationality, tradition and customs and sanctified them, while still being for all men in every time and place. Wherever he is taken by the people of any day, time and place, he sanctifies that culture — he is living in it.... But to acknowledge this is not to forget that there is another, and equally important, force at work among us. Not only does God in His mercy take people as they are: He takes them to transform them into what He wants them to be.<sup>12</sup>

Sanneh extends the insight to show how Christian particularity is also the basis for exchange among cultures:

The localization of Christianity is an essential part of the nature of the religion, and . . . without that concrete, historical grounding Christianity becomes nothing but a fragile, elusive abstraction, salt without its saltiness. This is the problem which dogs all attempts at defining the core of the gospel as pure dogmatic system without regard to the concrete lives of men and women who call themselves Christian. And it is precisely the historical concreteness of Christianity which makes cross-cultural mutuality possible and meaningful.<sup>13</sup>

The implications for Christian scholarship from such a double-sided picture of redemption stretch the mind considerably. On the

12. Andrew Walls, "Africa and Christian Identity," in *Mission Focus: Current Issues*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980), 217.

13. Lamin Sanneh, "Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scriptural Translation," in *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years*, ed. Philip C. Stine (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 10-11.

one hand, the particularity at the center of Christianity justifies a rooted, perspectival understanding of truth that embraces unabashedly the crucial significance of all other particularities of time, place, cultural value, and social location. On the other hand, since the birth of Christ was for all people in all times and places, the incarnation undergirds confidence in the possibility of universal truth. Christian support for theories of culture based on the particularity of social expression is, therefore, very strong. But that support does not verge over into nihilism or a relativism denying the presence of universal value. The key is that God used the particular means of the incarnation to accomplish a universal redemption.

With this understanding, believers can negotiate calmly through the perilous tides of modernity and postmodernity. On the one side, the once-for-all character of the incarnation of God in Christ establishes the universality of truth as vigorously as did the most ardent advocates of the Enlightenment. But on the other side, the incarnation represented a divinely constituted particularity and so affirms the perspectival character of truth as radically as the postmodernists. Believers in the biblical religion defined by classical doctrines about Christ can, thus, hold together concrete absolutism and nearly infinite flexibility.

What such a conjunction of opposites might mean for studying the particular expressions of culture has only begun to be explored. At the least, however, to confess that the very Son of God who offers salvation to all people everywhere was born during the reign of Augustus Caesar, that he was (in the words of the Apostles' Creed) "crucified under Pontius Pilate," and that he was raised from the dead on the third day—this confession must also affirm the potential value of learning at least something about all other particular cultures in all other times and all other places. The particularity of the Christian story of redemption is meant, first of all, to teach the truth about redemption; but it also communicates a truth about particularity. To confess that Christ experienced a very particular life in first-century Judea and that he is the universal Savior of the world offers a scholar who trusts the Christian story extraordinary intellectual balance when studying other particular lives in other particular places.

The meaning of the category-breaking realities affirmed by orthodox Christology has been put superbly in two poems, one by John Donne at the start of the seventeenth century, the other by G. K. Chesterton at the start of the twentieth. First, John Donne:

Salvation to all that will is nigh,  
That All, which alwayes is All every where,  
Which cannot sinne, and yet all sinnes must beare,  
Which cannot die, yet cannot chuse but die,  
Loe, faithful Virgin, yeelds himself to lye  
In prison, in thy wombe; and though he there  
Can take no sinne, nor thou give, yet he will weare  
Taken from thence, flesh, which deaths force may trie.  
Ere by the speares time was created, thou  
Wast in his minde, who is the Sonne, and Brother,  
Whom thou conceiv'st, conceiv'd; yea thou art now  
Thy Makers maker, and thy Fathers mothe,  
Thou hast light in darke; and shutst in little roome,  
Immensity cloystered in thy deare wombe.<sup>14</sup>

In Donne's complex metaphysical vision, the antinomies of the incarnation are expressed as the concrete enfleshment of absolutes ("That All, which alwayes is All every where, / . . . yeelds himself to lye / In prison, in thy wombe"; "Ere by the speares time was created, thou / Wast in his minde [conceiv'd], who is the Sonne, and Brother, / Whom thou conceiv'st"; "Immensity cloystered in thy deare wombe"). It is a vision that stresses both particularity and universality, but—like the incarnation—in one coherent form.

The same combination defines Chesterton's "Gloria in Pro-fundis":

There has fallen on earth for a token  
A god too great for the sky.  
He has burst out of all things and broken

14. John Donne, "Annunciation," in *The Poems of John Donne*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1912), 319.

The bounds of eternity:  
 Into time and the terminal land  
 He has strayed like a thief or a lover,  
 For the wine of the world brims over,  
 Its splendour is spilt on the sand.

...

But unmeasured of plummet and rod  
 Too deep for their sight to scan,  
 Outrushing the fall of man  
 Is the height of the fall of God.

Glory to God in the Lowest  
 The spout of the stars in spate —  
 Where the thunderbolt thinks to be slowest  
 And the lightning fears to be late:  
 As men dive for a sunken gem  
 Pursuing, we hunt and hound it,  
 The fallen star that has found it  
 In the cavern of Bethlehem.<sup>15</sup>

Chesterton is a little lighter, but he appeals for the same response to unfathomable complexity that inspired Donne: this "fall of God" may be "The spout of the stars in spate," and it may be likened to "the thunderbolt" and "the lightning." But the "god too great for the sky" who "has burst out of all things and broken/ The bounds of eternity" can only be found by diving, pursuing, hunting, and hounding until it is discovered "In the cavern of Bethlehem."

These poems are trying to express how the universally significant incarnation of the Son of God was also the reality of one very specific local situation — in Donne's case the womb of a single maiden, in Chesterton's the darkness of a single cavern. For Christian believers pursuing the intellectual life, the universal significance of this stark particularity offers a compass for their vocations as well as a light for their lives.

15. G. K. Chesterton, *Gloria in Profundis* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1927), with wood engraving by Eric Gill.

## Self-Denial

Christology also provides a sure antidote to the moral diseases of the intellectual life. As all other God-given gifts and capacities can be turned to evil uses, so also scholarship can be abused to glorify the creature instead of the Creator, to display pride instead of gratitude, and to promote a righteousness of works instead of a righteousness by faith. Even as many believers have practiced scholarship out of gratitude to God, others have found reasons in the intellectual life for giving up Christianity. Yet if gifts from God can be abused, they remain gifts from God. To ensure that the divine gifts that make possible the life of the mind are not wasted or used for idolatry, facts of life as defined by the person and work of Christ are the surest guardian.

The sins of scholars are mostly those common to humankind: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. But the predispositions of intellectuals and the circumstances of formal learning also make a few temptations especially threatening. There is pride to be cultivated in degrees earned, books published, honors bestowed, or interviews granted; academic introversion can easily transform into callousness toward people of ordinary intelligence; cliquishness and partisanship can be exploited for promoting my faction, race, sex, or political persuasion at the expense of others; and there is an eagerness to view the gifts that are not congenial to scholarship as somehow less important. These and other sins of intellectuals are familiar to everyone with any experience in the academy. They amount not to an argument against scholarship, but to occasions for redemption. The redemption is found in Christ.

As believing scholars experience that redemption, they realize with full force that they are human and therefore finite. Before the mysteries of the incarnation, intellectuals who realize how much their own work depends on Christ's work simply accept that all intellectual endeavors are limited. Only when, in the words of 1 Corinthians 13, we see Christ "face to face" and are at last "fully known," will Christian believers "know fully." If the mysteries of the incarnation lie beyond full human comprehension, and if Jesus himself confessed during his earthly ministry that there were things he did not know,

then scholars following Christ should be doubly aware of how limited their own wisdom truly is. Knowing Christ, in other words, means learning humility.

Applied rightly, Christian intellectual acumen should resonate with passages like Matthew 11 where Jesus describes himself as "gentle and humble in heart" (11:29). It should warn scholars against trying to race ahead of their Savior who "made himself nothing" and took "the very nature of a servant" (Phil. 2:7). It should heed Jesus' blunt word for every servant of God: "So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty'" (Luke 17:10).

To the extent that scholars are themselves believers, they know that they are sinners who need this Savior. In turn, this knowledge should insulate intellectuals from thinking that any of their own efforts, including intellectual efforts, could do anything to secure their redemption. Put more strongly, a Christ-centered understanding of why all people require an atoning savior demands that scholars not trust their own wisdom as the source of their self-worth. Yet to grasp that scholars are justified by faith and not by their scholarship can also have a tremendously liberating consequence for learning itself. Freed from the delusion that we as scholars can exalt ourselves by our own academic insights, we are therefore freed to serve God joyfully in the academic labors we do attempt. Using God-given mental abilities in gratitude for salvation in Christ is one of the surest ways to avoid thinking that mental abilities bestow special merit.

The tendency to trust in the wrong things has been nicely described by Alice Fryling, who has written about habits all too common among scholars: "We want to impress ourselves and others with all we do and all we can produce. We take God-given gifts, push them beyond their limits and make them sources of pride." When hypocrisy is added to self-delusion, "our lips say that we want to honor God, but the truth may be that we want to show off our gifts or look impressive to others."<sup>16</sup> Such failings are by no means limited to academic are-

16. Alice Fryling, *Too Busy? Saying No without Guilt* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 16-17.

nas, but they do constitute standing temptations where intellectual competition is the order of the day.

Christian believers of whatever sort also know that they are members of the church, the body of Christ, where all members share equal dignity and are called to equally important service. Repeated apostolic descriptions explain in detail how the body of Christ needs all its members, whether prominent and publicly praised or little noticed and all but forgotten — not only to function together but to respect one another and work harmoniously with each other. (See, for example, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.)

In the end, believing scholars are protected from temptation generally, and academic temptations particularly, by the constant awareness that learning is not the most important thing. Significantly, George Herbert's great poem "The Agonie" begins with a reference to what lovers of wisdom ("philosophers") cannot discover on their own, no matter how extensive their learning. Instead Herbert points to the "two vast, spacious things" that enable all believers to approach their callings with gratitude instead of self-congratulation.

Philosophers have measur'd mountains,  
Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, and kings,  
Walk'd with a staffe to heav'n, and traced fountains:

But there are two vast, spacious things,  
The which to measure it doth more behove:  
Yet few there are that sound them; Sinne and Love.

Who would know Sinne, let him repair  
Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see  
A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,  
His skinne, his garments bloudie be.  
Sinne is that presse and vice, which forceth pain  
To hunt his cruell food through ev'ry vein.

Who knows not Love, let him assay  
And taste that juice, which on the crosse a pike  
Did set again abroach; then let him say  
If ever he did taste the like.

Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,  
Which my God feels as bloude; but I, as wine.<sup>17</sup>

\* \* \*

Scholarship that is keyed expressly to the person and work of Christ will not be disoriented by confronting the paradoxical or the mysterious; it will always be more comfortable in what comes to the mind from outside than in what the mind concludes on its own; it will realize the value of particulars because of Christian universals; and it will be humble, charitable, self-giving, and modest. The reason in each case is the same:

we believe in one God the Father all-powerful, Maker of heaven and of earth, and of all things both seen and unseen. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all the ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came to be; for us humans and for our salvation he came down from the heavens and became incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, became human and was crucified on our behalf under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried and rose up on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures; and he went up into the heavens and is seated at the Father's right hand; he is coming again with glory to judge the living and the dead; his kingdom will have no end.

17. "The Agonie," in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. C. A. Patrides (London: Everyman's Library, 1974), 58.

*The Atonement: A Theological Principle  
to Frame Scholarship*



Risks accumulate from this point in the book onward. This short chapter tries to show how an evangelical understanding of Christ's saving work might affect scholarship of several kinds. The next chapters move the other way as they consider how study of history, science, and the Bible itself might be undertaken under a christological canopy. All these expositions are self-consciously exploratory. They are not intended as final words laying down a law but as first words urging others to take up the task. Each chapter begins for orientation with an excerpt from one of the classical statements of faith. This one starts where the last chapter ended, by quoting words from the Nicene Creed:

for us humans and for our salvation he came down from the heavens and became incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, became human and was crucified on our behalf under Pontius Pilate; he suffered and was buried and rose up on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures . . .

The experiment in this chapter is to ask a theological principle to serve as a compass for the highways and byways of scholarship. It starts by summarizing a conception of the atonement drawn from