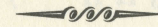


MARK A. NOLL

Jesus Christ *and*
the Life of the Mind

Jesus Christ and the Life of the Mind



MARK A. NOLL

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To
Jon Pott

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required for practicing a Christian scholarship worthy of the name. They offer believers the stuff needed for engaging minds for Christ. Thus, the greatest hope for Christian learning in our age, or in any age, lies not primarily in heightened activity, in better funding, or in strategizing for the tasks at hand — though all these matters play an important part. Rather, the great hope for Christian learning is to delve deeper into the Christian faith itself. And going deeper into the Christian faith means, in the end, learning more of Jesus Christ.

Evangelical Christians, in particular, do not necessarily need to abandon the activism, the emphasis on conversion, or the democratic biblicism that define evangelical history in order to pursue the life of the mind. But if evangelicals are to make a genuinely Christian contribution to intellectual life, they must ground faith in the great traditions of classical Christian theology, for these are the traditions that reveal the heights and depths of Jesus Christ. Intellectually, there is no other way.

But how to go about that task? How is it possible to pursue goals defined by lofty phrases like “first-rate Christian scholarship” or “the Christian use of the mind” when those words sound to some in the church like backsliding and to many outside the church like simple oxymorons? For Christian believers, the only possible answer must come from considering Jesus Christ.

This claim rests on convictions about who Jesus Christ was and is. Since the reality of Jesus Christ sustains the world and all that is in it, so too should the reality of Jesus Christ sustain the most wholehearted, unabashed, and unembarrassed efforts to understand the world and all that is in it. The Light of the World, the Word of God, the Son of Man, the True Vine, the Bread of Life, the Bright and Morning Star — for believers, this One is the Savior, but also the Paradigm. Whatever is true of the world in general must also be true for those parts of the world that emphasize intellectual life. The light of Christ illuminates the laboratory, his speech is the fount of communication, he makes possible the study of humans in all their interactions, he is the source of all life, he provides the wherewithal for every achievement of human civilization, he is the telos of all that is beautiful. He is, among his many other titles, the Christ of the Academic Road.

TWO

Jesus Christ: Motives for Serious Learning

Evangelical Christians are often faulted for treating the Bible as a mechanical bequest from the skies in which verses function like puzzle pieces to be assembled according to the reader's predetermined assumptions about what God is like and how he must act. This charge is not groundless, although it can be pointed out that such evangelical excesses only reverse the reflexes of some secular readers whose presuppositions rule out — without serious investigation or even much thought — any supernatural presence in the content of the Bible or its composition.

In this chapter I risk approaching the caricature of forced evangelical interpretation by using selected New Testament passages concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ to draw out intellectual implications from the christological affirmations of the creeds. If patient exegesis was the main purpose of this book, and if I had the expertise to carry out such work, I am confident that disciplined scholarship would more or less confirm the conclusions drawn below. But since the main point of this book is to encourage those who already accept traditional interpretations of the Bible, and since I do not possess the requisite skills for technical exegesis, brief exploration of the texts must suffice.

The important points do not, however, require elaborate exe-

getical enterprise. If only a fraction of the rapid survey that follows is true — if the conclusions below reflect only a partial grasp of the Scriptures — it would be enough to establish the overwhelming importance of Jesus Christ for the tasks of human learning. In 1960 Jaroslav Pelikan described “the virtues of the Christian intellectual” in Trinitarian terms that parallel the arguments advanced here. In his rendering, those virtues included “a passion for being because the Father is the Creator and Source of all being; a reverence for language because Jesus Christ is the Word and Mind of the Father; an enthusiasm for history because the Holy Spirit works through history to produce variety and to unite all men to himself.”¹ In a simpler, more directly christological approach, I am pointing to the same conclusions.

“Through Whom He Made the Universe”: The Origin of All Things in Christ

The New Testament could not be clearer in its multiple affirmations about the role of Christ in creating the world. Significantly, the same message comes in different ways from different voices in the New Testament canon. That message is straightforward and direct: a Christian doctrine of creation must be christological. So from the first chapter of John: “He [the Word] was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:2-3). So also it appears from the apostle Paul, as in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Colossians: Christ is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities: all things were created by him and for him” (Col. 1:15-16). The same message comes from the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews: “In these last days,” God has spoken conclusively “by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe” (Heb. 1:2).

1. Jaroslav Pelikan, “A Portrait of a Christian as a Young Intellectual,” *The Cresset*, Trinity 2005, p. 65 (from a commencement address delivered at Valparaiso University, June 6, 1960).

Oceans of commentary have been written on these passages, much concerning the possibility that New Testament writers were borrowing Platonic or Neoplatonic notions of a Demiurge through whom the eternal and unchanging Spirit of Pure Form bequeathed order to the chaos of the material world. Whether such borrowings took place or not is a consequential matter. Even more important is what such passages affirm.

That affirmation carries the strongest possible implications for intellectual life. Put most simply, for believers to be studying created things is to be studying the works of Christ. For the argument that the second person of the Trinity was the active agent in the divine creation of the world, it does not follow that his work of redemption was less important. Loyalty to the reality of Christ the Redeemer does not require disloyalty to the reality of Christ as Creator.

Taking this strand of New Testament teaching seriously reveals the world in a new light. There simply is nothing humanly possible to study about the created realm that, *in principle*, leads us away from Jesus Christ. To be sure, humans may misunderstand knowledge gained by studying the world, put it to evil uses, transform it into an idol, or otherwise abuse it. But these shortcomings do not alter the fact that, in the biblical view, the world was brought into existence by Jesus Christ.

The Catholic theologian Robert Barron recently summarized well the implications for learning that flow from a “high Christology,” that is, a Christology that insists on both the complete deity and the complete humanity of Jesus. “Because Jesus Christ is the Logos incarnate — and not simply another interesting religious figure among many — signs of his presence and style are found everywhere, and he can relate noncompetitively to them.” Barron goes on to suggest that “the higher the Christology,” the more payoff for learning, since “it is precisely the epistemic priority of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, that warrants the use of philosophical and cultural tools in the explication and propagation of the faith, since those means come from and lead to the very Word.”²

2. Robert Barron, *The Priority of Christ: Toward a Postliberal Catholicism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 152.

The Irish poet Evangeline Patterson expressed the same liberation found in acknowledging Christ as the Creating Word when she wrote about her own experience: "I was brought up in a Christian movement where, because God had to be given pre-eminence, nothing else was allowed to be important. I have broken through to the position that because God exists, everything else has significance."³ In sum, to confess Christ is to make an extraordinarily strong statement about the value of studying the things Christ has made.

**"In Him All Things Consist":
The Comprehensiveness of Jesus as the Word of God**

For Christian believers who pursue an academic vocation, Paul's letter to the Colossians should be a central text, especially for how it expands upon the Christ-centered creation of the world. In particular, we have from verse 13 in chapter 1 a memorable conjunction of affirmations with much to ponder for anyone engaged in any facet of intellectual life. The complex interconnections of the passage require full quotation:

He [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things

3. Joy Alexander, "In Conversation with Evangeline Patterson," *Journal of the Irish Christian Study Centre* 4 (1989): 42.

on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. . . .

I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Col. 1:13-20; 2:1-3)

The guiding message of this passage would seem to be clear: the lordship of Christ over all things is inextricably related to the salvation offered through his work on the cross. There is no point in talking about Christian scholarship without first talking about the need to be Christian. The final hope of believing intellectuals or academics is no different from the hope of believers of any sort. And that hope is found in the one who makes "peace through the blood of the cross."

The passage in Colossians explicitly exalts the person and work of Christ as the key to human salvation; implicitly it affirms that salvation is the overwhelmingly central concern of human existence. To be rescued from darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God's Son is what it means for the Son to provide redemption, the forgiveness of sin. Such a rescue by such a savior deserves to be the most important concern of all humans everywhere and in all times.

But precisely within the framework provided by this proclamation of salvation, and interwoven seamlessly with soteriological realities, come other statements, which are almost as remarkable, about the meaning of Jesus Christ for everything else. Thus, Christ is not only the firstborn in creation, but he is also the source and energy of all things, for everything was created in him and for him. The extent of Christ's creative work, according to the apostle, is universal. Whether we consider realms of the spirit or realms of nature (things "in heaven and on earth"), external life or internal life (things "visible and invisible"), the interactions of humans with spiritual realities or with other humans ("whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities") — in other words, the stuff of academic study in all its diversity — we are

dealing with the effulgence of Jesus Christ. In the passage, the apostle Paul moves rapidly, effortlessly, and without even pausing for breath between describing the salvation that Christian believers find in their Redeemer and depicting the cosmic scope of what is “held together” through that same Redeemer.

The claims are striking and bear repeating. The apostle says, in effect, that if we study anything in the realms of nature or the realms of the spirit, we study what came into existence through Jesus Christ. Likewise, if we study human interactions or spiritual-human interactions (thrones, dominions, rulers, powers), we are studying realms brought into existence by Jesus Christ. If our study concerns predictability, uniformity, regularity, we are working in the domains of the one who “is before all things, and [in whom] all things hold together.” If our study concerns beauty, power, or agency, it is the same, “for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.” And if we succeed to any degree, we are only following after Jesus Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

This passage in Colossians lies behind a question that the Presbyterian theologian B. B. Warfield once posed to a group of seminarians who assumed that pursuits of study and pursuits of godliness could not function together: “Why should you turn from God when you turn to your books, or feel that you must turn from your books in order to turn to God?”⁴

Of the many other faithful commentators who have stretched language in order to capture the stunning reach of the apostle’s message, I am selecting only two more. So from John Piper:

All that came into being exists for Christ — that is, everything exists to display the greatness of Christ. Nothing — nothing! — in the universe exists for its own sake. Everything — from the bottom of the oceans to the top of the mountains, from the smallest particle to the biggest star, from the most boring school subject to the

4. B. B. Warfield, “The Religious Life of Theological Students” (an address at Princeton Theological Seminary, 1911), quoted here from *Selected Shorter Writings of B. B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 412.

most fascinating science, from the ugliest cockroach to the most beautiful human, from the greatest saint to the most wicked genocidal dictator — everything that exists, exists to make the greatness of Christ more fully known — including *you*, and the person you have the hardest time liking.⁵

Again, from N. T. Wright:

There is no sphere of existence over which Jesus is not sovereign, in virtue of his role both in creation (1:16-17) and in reconciliation (1:18-20). There can be no dualistic division between some areas which he rules and others which he does not. “There is no neutral ground in the universe: every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counterclaimed by Satan.” The task of evangelism is therefore best understood as the proclamation that Jesus is already Lord, that in him God’s new creation has broken into history, and that all people are therefore summoned to submit to him in love, worship, and obedience. The logic of this message requires that those who announce it should be seeking to bring Christ’s Lordship to bear on every area of human and worldly existence.⁶

Such claims about the origin and sustaining of all things in Christ are coordinated in the Colossians passage with the message of salvation. Because those who trust in Christ for salvation are defined so completely by that message, they should be the first to explore what Christ has made and what his ongoing power sustains. If this passage was believed, it would never be appropriate to set matters of salvation and matters of wisdom or knowledge in opposition. Priorities or urgent necessities would still matter in how redemption and wisdom are arranged against each other, but as a matter of principle these two di-

5. John Piper, *Spectacular Sins: And Their Global Purpose in the Glory of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 33.

6. N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 79-80. The quotation is from C. S. Lewis, “Christianity and Culture,” in *Lewis’s Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 33.

Dimensions of reality could not conflict. Rather, both the salvation won by Christ and the study of "all things" would be viewed as intimately related to each other because both are dependent upon Jesus Christ.

But there is still more to say. Because for a Christian the tasks of scholarship are tied so closely to the unearned gift of salvation, there can be no genuine Christian learning that is arrogant, self-justifying, imperious, or callous to the human needs of colleagues, students, and the broader public. The tight conjunction of assertions in Colossians underscores the fact that all humans, including academics, are needy sinners who require God. All humans, including academics, remain in need of divine grace even as they explore the depths of "wisdom and knowledge" hidden in Jesus Christ.

Not coincidentally, Paul in this same passage also says important things about the community of faith: that Christ "is the head of the body, the church" (Col. 1:18). And that in Paul's own "flesh" he fills up "what is still lacking in regard to Christ's affliction, for the sake of his body, which is the church" (Col. 1:24). The apostle joins consideration of the church to a description of the salvation won by Christ on the cross and to an understanding of the rule of Jesus Christ over all things. By so doing he points believers to the corporate nature of life and to the historical character of human existence. By implication, if Christ-sanctified human learning is parallel to Christ-accomplished human salvation, then corporate and historical relationships are as foundational to the enterprise of learning as they are to the existence of the church.

In sum, to follow the apostle Paul as he reasons about Christ in the first and second chapters of Colossians is to encounter a bracing and multidimensional reality. The name of the reality is Jesus Christ. The scope of the reality is boundless.

**"He Will Never Leave You":
The Christian Doctrine of Providence**

The Christian doctrine of providence restates what it means for all things to "hold together" in Christ. With this theme, however, the per-

spective moves away from the activity of the Son to the energetic oversight of the Father. This doctrine, where Christology plays an indirect but no less powerful role, should also communicate great confidence in pursuing intellectual tasks. From the perspective of providence, everything that exists is sustained by the wisdom and power of God. The way that acknowledging God as the origin of all things leads on to recognizing providence (or God's active rule over all things) was put very well in the Belgic Confession of 1561. In its statements, this confession also shows how general revelation (what humans know by studying the world) can be connected to special revelation (what they know by studying the Bible). In explaining the "means" by which "we know God," the confession affirmed that "We know him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book, in which all creatures, great and small, are like letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1.20. . . . Second, he makes himself known to us more openly by his holy and divine word, as much as we need in this life, for his glory and for the salvation of his own."⁷

By speaking of God's preservation and government of the universe, the Belgic Confession attempted to capture the dynamism of God's present rule over the earth. The intellectual implications of that rule are also hinted at many times in the Scriptures, as for example in Psalm 19, when the psalmist personified inanimate forces of nature:

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.

(Ps. 19:1-4)

7. *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, 3 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2:407.

The same sense of dynamic, all-encompassing providence infuses passages from the New Testament, like 1 Timothy 4:4-5: "Everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer." These scriptural descriptions of God's active, loving, energetic, and beautiful providence have provided rich themes for many pious minds, but few as telling as the energy that the English Catholic poet Gerard Manley Hopkins once pictured like this:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God;
It will flame out like shining from shook foil.⁸

But what is the christological meaning of a doctrine of providence that features the Creator God's care over what he has made? The surest proof offered in Scripture for the contention that God rules *everything* is the divine testament, ratified by the death of his Son, that "he will never leave *you* nor forsake *you*." In the Bible this promise appears in two very different contexts. We hear the words first as an encouragement to ancient Israel not to fear the military might of its foes: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you" (Deut. 31:6). Then at the end of the book of Hebrews, which was written to show how God's work in Christ had absorbed and excelled his work from ancient days, the same words reappear as a general exhortation not to worry about amassing great worldly treasure: "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, for God has said, 'Never will I leave you; / never will I forsake you.' So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. / What can man do to me?'" (Heb. 13:5-6). The final quotation, which the author of Hebrews uses to complete the circle by referencing another promise made to ancient Israel, comes from Psalm 118:

The LORD is with me; I will not be afraid.
What can man do to me?

8. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," in *A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 128.

The LORD is with me; he is my helper.

I will look in triumph on my enemies.

(Ps. 118:6-7)

The message conveyed by such passages has been the theme of countless Christian statements, but none so effective as the Heidelberg Catechism of the sixteenth century. Its opening words affirm that the Christian's only comfort in life and in death is "that I belong . . . not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ . . . ; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation."⁹ Believers may be confident that God sustains the world and everything in it — that is, the realms explored by the academic disciplines — because by faith in Christ they experience the sometimes unfathomable but always beneficial rule of God in every aspect of their own lives.

The academic payoff for this confidence in providence is the conclusion that, if God rules all things with respect to the individual's salvation, certainly he rules as well the more general events and circumstances of the wider world. And this fact must be true even if (as usually happens) we cannot see clearly the mechanisms of that control. In sum, to believe that we are attached to Christ inspires the confidence that God can be attached to anything we might study.

"The Word Was Made Flesh": The Materiality of the Incarnation

More directly related to the person and work of Christ, believers may be greatly heartened in studying the material world and the physical qualities of human existence by reflecting on the material character of the incarnation. The great expression of this reality is the passage in John 1 that we have already quoted: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). Theologian Michael Williams has provided the sort of gloss on

9. *Creeks and Confessions*, 2:429.

this passage that properly deflates the dangerous tendency to overspiritualize an understanding of God's work in the world: "John 1:14 does not say that the Word became *nous* [mind]. It says that the Word became *sarx* [flesh] — the bodily stuff of God's good creation. The Word became flesh not in some abstract realm of truth where only minds exist, but in history. . . . Dwelling among us, he was seen by flesh and blood, particular human beings. Pretty material stuff. Pretty historical. Glorious."¹⁰

Robert Barron has extended this acute reflection by showing how trust in the incarnate Christ protects against the extreme Platonism that Williams warns against, but also against the more modern sundering of matter and mind. First is the Christian truth: "The Word — the rational truth in all of its forms — manifests itself in the vagaries and particularities of history and is received according to the capacity and complexity of an embodied mind." Then the intellectual application: proper knowledge arises "neither through escape from the body (Platonism) nor sequestration of the mind from the body (modern Cartesianism and Lockeanism), but through a rough, incarnate interaction of matter and spirit."¹¹

The Southern Baptist educator William Hull stressed how the materiality of the incarnation is to be appropriated: "Flesh for God is not a mask, a disguise, or a subterfuge as the Gnostics supposed. Rather, it is a strategy, a witness, a vehicle for involvement. God's Son wants high visibility in order to be seen and heard and touched by others."¹²

If it is true that the Word became flesh, it must also be true that the realm that bore the Word, the realm of flesh, is worthy of the most serious consideration. Believers will never study the material world as if it were the only realm or necessarily the most basic realm. But to know that the material world is the realm in which God revealed himself most fully should be sufficient reason to study that realm with

10. Michael Williams, review of *The Word Became Flesh*, by Millard Erickson, *Pro Rege*, September 1992, 27.

11. Barron, *The Priority of Christ*, 182.

12. William W. Hull, "We Would See Jesus" (sermon on John 12:21), Occasional Papers of the Provost, Samford University (February 12, 1995), 10.

great, if not ultimate, seriousness. In sum, to confess the material reality of the incarnation is to perceive an unusual dignity in the material world itself.

"You Have Saved the Best Till Now": The This-Worldliness of the Incarnation

By a similar logic, the this-worldly character of the incarnation can lead to a particularly Christian delight in creative human engagement with the terrestrial realm. That is, the reality of Christ points, not simply to an engagement with the world, but to an engagement marked by delight, exuberance, and the aesthetic possibility of redemption. At the foundation of Christian self-definition is the process described in the fourth chapter of Galatians: "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons" (vv. 4-5). The full rights of son- and daughter-ship certainly must include the opportunity to take pleasure in what God is and what he has done.

At the marriage feast of Cana, to which we have already alluded, Jesus turned water into wine of such quality that the banquet host was startled. Instead of serving the best wine at the start of the feast, Jesus' astonishing act took place after the initial beverage supply had run out. Yet when the newly created wine was served, the emcee marveled that "you have saved the best till now" (John 2:10). The depiction of Jesus' actions at this wedding feast does not square easily with later Christian tendencies to extreme asceticism, or even with hyper-pious squeamishness about taking a drink — though of course at other points in his life Jesus also modeled ascetic self-discipline as well. More important even than the action itself, however, are John's words about the action's significance. Turning water into wine was Jesus' first public "sign" (RSV) or "miraculous sign" (NIV); it was an action that allowed his glory to be revealed; and it led his followers to "put their faith in him" (John 2:11).

The accomplishment of redemption in this world, more even

than the fact of divine incarnation in this world, is what gives Christian engagement with the world the potential of delight. The Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz, even after living under the worst that Stalinist colonialism could offer, did not lose his wonder at the marvels of redemption. He expressed that wonder once in a poem that began with a premise: "If God incarnated himself in man, died and rose from the dead," for which he then supplied the consequence: "All human endeavors deserve attention / Only to the degree that they depend on this." The result of the incarnation was to see "how human history is holy" and to realize that because in the incarnation "our kind was so much elevated," all people now had an opportunity to "testify to the divine glory / With words, music, dance, and every sign."¹³

The historian Richard Jenkyns has remarked on the potential exuberance of Christian engagement in the world by comparing that engagement with an ancient Greek way:

Platonism imposes a paradox: the beauties of the perceptible world are merely imperfect imitations of the eternal beauty of the world of forms. In a way this devalues the world known to our senses, but in another way it exalts it, for the perceptible world is indeed beautiful — that is not denied — and it is also our means of access to a higher and unchanging beauty. Christianity presents a similar paradox: this world may be of less account than the one to come, but that does not make it unimportant; it is, indeed, the theater in which the great drama of salvation and damnation is to be played out.¹⁴

In sum, to confess that the people of God have been redeemed by the action of God *in this world* is to bestow the potential of drama and delight on human engagement with the world.

13. Czeslaw Milosz, "Either-Or," in *New and Collected Poems (1931-2001)* (New York: Ecco, 2001), 540.

14. Jenkyns, "The Bellow and the Uproar," review of *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, by R. Sennett, *New York Review*, March 2, 1995, 32.

"Who Do People Say That the Son of Man Is?": The Personality of the Incarnation

The sixteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew records a question, posed by Jesus to his disciples, that has been asked time and again in all ages and in every place to which the Christian message comes: "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13). Peter's answer has been definitive for all Christian traditions: "You are the Christ [i.e., Messiah, God's anointed one], the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). Traditionally, Christian believers have pointed to what this passage signifies for the meaning of the incarnation, the fact of God becoming human. But in recent decades, a number of Christian thinkers have wanted to say more. If Jesus Christ shows us God in human flesh, does not God-in-human-flesh also show us something of great importance about humanity? This emphasis has been especially prominent among Roman Catholic theologians.

Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI have referred frequently to statements in the Second Vatican Council's "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" (*Gaudium et Spes*) as they describe the meaning of Christ for understanding human nature. As the incarnate Son, "He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by a human choice, and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin." The consequence of Christ's full identification with humanity as a human himself is that "only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him who was to come, namely, Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear."¹⁵ A later Catholic author has summarized the prominent strand of Christian personalism

15. *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 221, 220 (par. 22 of *Gaudium et Spes*). For learned commentary on John Paul II's development of these themes, see George H. Williams, *The Mind of John Paul II* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 265-66.

grounded in the Council's statements: "God so esteems man as to assume his humanity and give Himself up to death for him."¹⁶

The importance of such reflections for scholarship is to dignify human study of human beings. Put differently, the *personality* of the incarnation justifies the study of human personality. When people examine other people, they are examining individuals who exist in actual or potential solidarity with Jesus Christ. Further insight from Christian teaching is necessary to explain the full meaning of that solidarity. But the solidarity itself offers a powerful Christian resource for taking up serious study of the human person and the human personality.

"His Face Shone Like the Sun": The Beauty of the Incarnate Son

In the seventeenth chapter of Matthew appears the story of Jesus' transfiguration. Just before relating this story, the Gospel records that "Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life" (Matt. 16:21). Then Jesus spoke words about the need for his followers to suffer (16:25) and about the relative unimportance of "the whole world" compared to the much more important matter of eternal life. This is the context for the account of Jesus taking three of his disciples onto a high mountain where "he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light" (17:2). As this startling transformation occurs the three disciples see two other figures — Moses, the great lawgiver, and Elijah, the prophet of righteousness — talking with the transfigured Christ. Peter proposes making some kind of memorial to commemorate this great event, but he is roughly broken off when "a bright cloud" overwhelms all of them and a voice comes from the cloud to

16. Thomas D. Williams, L.C., *Who Is My Neighbor? Personalism and the Foundation of Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 215.

say: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (17:5). The disciples fall to the ground, overcome with awe, but then Jesus comes to them, touches them, urges them to rise, and — most remarkably — tells them, "Don't be afraid" (17:7).

The primary meaning of this passage must surely be its singling out of Christ as the one to whom the great code of divine law (Moses) and the great work of prophetic revelation (Elijah) pointed as their fulfillment. That meaning has been the subject of a modern hymn by Carl Daw, which catches succinctly the burden of the passage as bringing to culmination several prominent themes of Old Testament revelation. Along the way, however, Daw's hymn also makes a strong aesthetic statement:

Light breaks through our clouds and shadows,
splendor bathes the flesh-joined Word;
Moses and Elijah marvel
as the heavenly voice is heard.
Eyes and hearts behold with wonder
how the Law and Prophets meet:
Christ with garments drenched in brightness,
stands transfigured and complete.¹⁷

The aesthetic bearing of the hymn concerns Christ as "light" and "splendor" with "garments drenched in brightness." The one who brings the law and prophets to completion is a being of unimaginable beauty. When the qualities of deity are unveiled, Jesus Christ appears in brilliant light. This is the one who will suffer and die for his people. The God who dwells in unapproachable glory has appeared in Jesus Christ, who as an ordinary human being is nonetheless a being of surpassing beauty.

Aesthetically this depiction of Christ suggests that he is the summit of all that is beautiful. Where proportion, harmony, fittingness, excellence, and balance exist in this world, they reflect in human measure what appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration without reserve.

17. Carl P. Daw, "We Have Come at Christ's Own Bidding," *Worship and Praise* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing, 2001), no. 245.

The centrality of Christ for aesthetics was intimated powerfully in the writings of Jonathan Edwards, whose theological meditations have echoed far from his setting in western Massachusetts at the middle of the eighteenth century. What Edwards had to say on related questions repays attention from those who would try to explain the ineffable with mere words. Near the end of his life — as, in effect, a summation of four decades of intense theological reflection — Edwards wrote *Two Dissertations: Concerning the End for Which God Created the World* [and] *The Nature of True Virtue* (published posthumously in 1765). In these coordinated dissertations, Edwards combined biblical and ethical reflections on the being and actions of God considered in themselves, along with the dispositions of human life considered in relationship to God. Conceptions of beauty played a large part in Edwards's description of God as the supreme being: "For as God is infinitely the greatest being, so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent: and all the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but the reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory."¹⁸ The link to the person of Christ was the glory that burst forth on the Mount of Transfiguration: "On the whole," wrote Edwards, "it is pretty manifest that Jesus Christ sought the glory of God as his highest and last end; and that therefore . . . this was God's last end in the creation of the world."¹⁹

The chain of reasoning prompted by Edwards's reflections cannot function as an airtight proof to guide second-order considerations of beauty. It can, however, indicate how the revelation of divine glory in Jesus Christ — as singularly displayed on the Mount of Transfiguration — might frame thinking about first-order aesthetic experiences. In sum, the beauties of creation reflect the fullness of the being of God; the person of Jesus Christ is God incarnate in human flesh; through learning of Jesus Christ we learn of God's chief purpose in creating the world; that chief purpose is the manifestation of his own

18. Jonathan Edwards, *Two Dissertations: The Nature of True Virtue*, ed. Paul Ramsey, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 550-51.

19. Edwards, *Two Dissertations: Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 8:484.

glory; the manifestation of God's glory accounts for the deep origin of all that is beautiful in the world.

* * *

The Christian religion embodies a narrative that can be summarized simply, however profound the implications and however controversial those implications have become. God made the world and everything in it; God revealed himself in a particular manner to Abraham and his descendants (Israel); the culmination of God's revelation to Israel, and through Israel to all humankind, was the incarnation of Jesus Christ as a full human being; Jesus was born miraculously, he lived a perfect life, he was executed, he was raised from the dead; as he ascended into heaven, the resurrected Christ commissioned the Holy Spirit to continue his redemptive work in the world; at the end of time the triune God will renew the work accomplished in Jesus Christ through the restoration of all things. The primary purpose of this Christian story is (as an echo of Jonathan Edwards) for God through Christ to reconcile sinful human beings to himself, and all for the praise of his own glory.

But if redemption of humans for the glory of God is the great purpose of the Christian story, that overriding telos encompasses many other purposes. Because of a series of contingent events over the last two centuries, it has become conventional to think that belief in the Christian story opposes serious commitment to intellectual explorations of the world. There are no good reasons for this opinion. It rests on misreadings of the Christian story and misapprehensions of the intellectual life. The Jesus Christ who saves sinners is the same Christ who beckons his followers to serious use of their minds for serious explorations of the world. It is part of the deepest foundation of Christian reality — it is an important part of understanding who Jesus is and what he accomplishes — to study the world, the human structures found in the world, the human experiences of the world, and the humans who experience the world. Nothing intrinsic in that study should drive a person away from Jesus Christ. Much that is intrinsic in Jesus Christ should drive a person to that study.