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Jesus Christ: Model Man of Faith, or Saving Son of God?

Dr David Parker last wrote for us on 'Evangelical Spirituality Reviewed' in the Evangelical Quarterly 63:2, 1991, 132–148. His present article was stimulated by a discussion of the relationship of the divine and human natures of Jesus which has interesting implications for the character of contemporary spirituality.

I. Jesus—Human and Divine

Roger Helland has tackled an important but neglected subject in his article, *The Hypostatic Union: How did Jesus Function?* [EQ 65:4 (1993), 311–327], which sets out to explore how the divine and human natures 'actually functioned practically' in the day by day life of Jesus of Nazareth.¹

Despite warnings from devout theologians not to try to distinguish the human from the divine action in the life of Jesus,² this is a subject likely to fascinate the believer who contemplates Christ's earthly ministry, whether devotionally as a form of spiritual discipline or as a theological exercise arising out of an enquiring mind. It is a topic which is not often treated in detail by major systematic theologians as Helland has done. However, most of the issues involved are included in full discussions of the Chalcedonian settlement, at least in principle, especially under sections dealing with the unity of the person.³ But perhaps we can be sympathetic with the authors of systematic theologians who do not delve into this matter because it is difficult, obscure and likely to be controversial, unless one is content simply to adopt the kind of latter-day Nestorianism, to which

¹ All bracketed page numbers refer to Helland's article.

² T. C. Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men* (6th edition edited & revised by David F. Wright) (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 100, 101; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–5), 735.

³ For a recent evangelical example, see Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 555–576; J. Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962–3), II/30–31 devotes space specifically to the 'psychological problems' of the person of Christ.

Helland refers (325–6). According to this view, Jesus' tiredness, hunger and thirst can be attributed to his human nature while his miracle working powers are attributed to the divine.⁴

Another popular option is a docetic 'Superman Christology' by which Jesus normally manifests himself in human form, involving 'the veiling of His preincarnate glory';⁵ however, when the needs are particularly pressing, he resorts to the use of his true, divine nature and works some miracle. From this perspective, the Transfiguration (Mk. 9:2–8) is interpreted as a virtually uncontrollable 'flash of glory'⁶ bursting through the limitations of Jesus' humanity and witnessed by the privileged few for their edification. But according to Helland, this amounts to a theophany and not incarnation.⁷

Rejecting these and other possibilities, Helland has sought to take the incarnation seriously. Depending heavily on the exegesis of the gospels, he argues that the mighty powers displayed by Jesus and indeed all his human activities were carried out 'as a total human person by faith,' (325) although empowered by the Spirit. To put it simply, 'Jesus as a man was dependent on the Father's will and derived his power not from his own inherent deity but from the Holy Spirit.' (312; see also 321) Helland declares that this is a literal statement of the actual relationship between the human and the divine in the life of Jesus. However, such a view contrasts strongly with traditional popular ideas as reflected by Walvoord, for example, who states that there are only two situations like this recorded in the gospels (Mt. 12:28, Lk. 4:14–18); for the rest of the time, according to Walvoord, 'Christ exercised His own power when

⁴ See, for example, Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (revised by Vernon D. Doerksen) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 216, who follows John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ our Lord* (Chicago: Moody, 1969) and states, completely contrary to Buswell, (*Systematic Theology*, II/30), that Jesus' miracles were wrought 'by the power of his own deity' in contrast with the prophets who worked 'through the power of the Holy Spirit.'

⁵ Walvoord, *Jesus Christ our Lord*, 143.

⁶ Walvoord, *Jesus Christ our Lord*, 143.

⁷ Helland, 324, quoting Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and Power* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 212. Helland follows Hawthorne's position quite closely here as in other places, but he does not state as emphatically as Hawthorne does the importance of orthodox Christological presuppositions and he does not concede the speculative nature of Hawthorne's conclusions about Spirit and the kenosis (199, 215); however, Helland does follow Hawthorne in drawing questionable conclusions about Christ's role as a model for believers because of a failure to take full account of Christ's uniqueness. Hawthorne in turn acknowledges his dependence on Vincent Taylor for his kenotic Christology (210ff), a point which Helland does not mention.

He chose to do so⁸ and thus performed his miracles by the use of divine power.

Although it may seem contrary to the interests of piety, Helland's solution certainly avoids the charge of docetism and places the emphasis firmly on the reality of Christ's humanity. As such it does justice to those parts of the biblical record, such as those examined by Helland, which bear witness to Jesus' human nature. It also provides a simple explanation of the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth in contrast with the tortuous explanations often presented by advocates of the traditional view.⁹

Therefore, as anyone who has reflected on the issues faced in the Chalcedonian controversy must surely realise, whatever else must of necessity be said about the person of Jesus of Nazareth, it is clear that we are dealing with someone who is authentically human. It is not possible to resort simplistically to a hidden divine nature to account for the mighty works, which would fly in the face of both the gospels and the theology of incarnation.

However, to endorse Helland's proposals about the relation of the human and divine in Jesus is not necessarily to support all the details of his exegesis, the particular form of his conclusions or the specific terms in which he states his case. Even more seriously, it does not constitute support for the major conclusions he draws from the argument about Christian spirituality and the definitive ministry of believers. These conclusions, it should be noted, are in fact the primary but hidden purpose of his article.

II. Humanity and Incarnation

The first major problem with Helland's case arises, ironically, out of its strength. He takes seriously the humanity of Jesus in a way that popular piety often does not. However, in the process of doing this, he seems to have fallen into another error, when, for example, he states, 'When Jesus emptied himself, he became what he was not before—a man.' (319)

Lest we should be uncertain about what is meant by this, Helland repeatedly emphasises that Jesus 'became a man, and experienced human circumstances and limitations' (324); in fact he had to 'live fully within . . . limitations' which are typical of human existence (319, 320); Helland even goes so far as to point out that 'Humanness implies and requires limitations.' (320) According to Helland, therefore, 'whatever Jesus did, he as a normal healthy person

⁸ Walvoord, *Jesus Christ our Lord*, 144.

⁹ For one such example, see, Walvoord, *Jesus Christ our Lord*, 143f.

functioned as a *total finite man*¹⁰ although one who was nonetheless 'empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Helland rightly affirms that anything less than a full incarnation is not an incarnation at all (324—quoting Hawthorne). He also correctly recognizes that the incarnation involves not a casting off or loss of anything (viz., divine attributes) as some forms of the Kenotic theory would imply; on the contrary, it involves an assumption of something (viz., human nature). (319, again quoting Hawthorne)

However, Helland's statement of this assumption of humanity needs further investigation. His most typical statement is 'he became what he was not before—a man.' (319) Yet he also states, 'Jesus as God took on the nature and characteristics of a slave and a man . . .' (319) This could be interpreted to mean that 'Jesus maintained his divine nature even though he was a man,' to use Hawthorne's words as quoted by Helland. (319; see also 325) This at least is how Hawthorne understood the concept in his commentary on the key word, *ekenosen*, in Philippians 2:7:

Christ's self-giving was accomplished by taking, his self-emptying was achieved by becoming what he was not before, his *kenosis* not by subtracting from but by adding to.¹¹

If this is so, then Helland is echoing the orthodox position as presented by many others; Buswell, for example, states in a discussion of this point,

*He had a human spirit in the sense that His spirit became human. This statement can be insisted upon without implying that His spirit in any sense or in any degree ceased to be divine.*¹²

But Helland's involved statement that Jesus' divine attributes 'would have been curtailed although potential yet latent' (324) indicates considerable lack of clarity about the divine nature in relation to the incarnate life.¹³

Furthermore, the rest of Helland's argument is highly emphatic that 'Jesus was nevertheless a human being' (to use the words of Hawthorne again, 326), that he 'functioned as a total finite man' (312) and 'lived a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life of submission and

¹⁰ Helland, 312 (emphasis added); see also page 325, 'as a finite man.'

¹¹ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians Word Biblical Commentary* 43 (Waco: Word, 1983), 86; Helland does not cite this work, and nor does he indicate that the words of Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, page 207, which he cited on page 319 of his article are taken from a passage where Hawthorne exegetes Philippians 2:7.

¹² Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 53 (emphasis original).

¹³ Terms like 'potential' and 'latent' are occasionally found in other writers as well. Note that Hawthorne who uses them consistently is at least conscious of the difficulty of putting this concept into words (*The Presence and the Power*, 230).

obedience to the Father's will *as a man.*' (321) Therefore it seems that Helland, like Hawthorne, really proposes a kind of kenotic (or even modalistic) Christology¹⁴ in which the divine is exchanged for the human, thus seriously threatening the reality of the deity in the incarnate state.¹⁵ This is aggravated by Helland's talk of 'emptying himself of himself' (319—following Gordon Fee this time) meaning that Jesus 'figuratively emptied himself of what he was when he became what he was not—a man.' (319)

This is admittedly a difficult concept to express. Dale Moody's statement that 'Christ emptied himself into the man Jesus'¹⁶ is a little more satisfactory, except that it too can be read in an adoptionistic manner which, as will be seen later, is contrary to the post-Chalcedonian enhypostatic Christological tradition. What is important is to avoid any idea that at the incarnation the second person of the Trinity was involved in any kind of metamorphosis along Greek lines which, as Moody well recognizes, goes against the fundamental idea of Chalcedonian Christianity:

Looking at the existence of Jesus Christ in one way, Christ emptied himself into the man Jesus, and at the same time the man Jesus was filled with the Christ. It is more than God in a human body, as Cyril of Alexandria taught in the fifth century and many have repeated since. It is a Spirit-filled, God-filled man, complete and perfect man, the humiliation and incarnation of the Christ, the Son of God.¹⁷

However, Helland, taking the position that he does, cannot avoid a merely human Jesus, despite repeated disclaimers about the radical uniqueness and sinlessness of Jesus. Neither can he avoid endorsing a purely functional interpretation of 'Son of God,' which he finds supported in the synoptic gospels; nevertheless had he looked also to other parts of the New Testament as Moody does,¹⁸ he would have found ample data to adopt a more comprehensive position.

III. Jesus—Man of Faith

But this leads to the second problem with Helland's case. At first sight, his article seems to be intended as a helpful proposal for

¹⁴ Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 206ff.

¹⁵ See James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology* (Volume 1) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 625 for this warning about the loss of the divine nature: 'The unity of the person of Jesus Christ means that in assuming human nature the eternal Word did not abandon his divine nature. The nineteenth-century German expressions of Kenotic Christology that majored on the surrender of divine attributes threatened the loss of the divine nature.'

¹⁶ Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 404.

¹⁷ Moody, *The Word of Truth*, 405.

¹⁸ Moody, *The Word of Truth*, 402.

understanding a subtle Christological problem, viz., the practical outworking of certain aspects of the hypostatic union. However his real aim soon becomes clear.

According to Helland, there is an important conclusion to be drawn from a proper understanding of Jesus' humanity, viz., 'His Kingdom ministry of miracles through the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit is available for all who believe in Him.' (326) Thus Helland's intention is to show that Jesus, as a Spirit-empowered man who carried out a supernatural ministry, is an 'accessible human model' (312) for the church and all Christians.

Now if this is true, there are profound and far-reaching implications for Christian salvation, spirituality and ministry. For example, pointing to the many references in Luke-Acts to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus and in the early church, Helland declares,¹⁹

Luke is making a paradigmatic point: that just as Jesus was baptised, anointed, filled, led, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the Father's messenger, so the Church is to be baptized, anointed, filled, led, and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be Christ's messenger. (327)

Just how crucial this line of thought is for the structure of Helland's argument and the aim of his essay is revealed by another remark. After reemphasising that 'Jesus did not draw on his own inherent divine attributes for power and knowledge,' Helland makes this observation: 'If we say that he did, then he is not a model for us.' (326) Later he makes his point quite explicit: 'He is a model to be presently followed by his disciples—in his words and work of preaching and practicing the Gospel of the Kingdom.' (327)

Clearly, Helland makes the basic prior assumption that Jesus is a model for the believer and a '*glorious paradigm*' for the church (327); but this assumption would be invalidated if it were to be proven that his miraculous ministry arose out of his deity and not out of his humanity, since 'we humans do not have the prerogative of drawing upon inherent divine power.'²⁰ Since he thinks this is not the case, Helland concludes that it is open to and obligatory for any and every similarly Spirit-indwelt, Spirit-empowered Christian to follow Jesus' example.

To put this in other words, Jesus is human like other people but distinguished from them in the extent of his faith and dependence on God. In fact, Christians are caught up into the amazing powers of

¹⁹ Presumably on the basis of John 20:21-22 quoted a few sentences earlier, 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you . . . Receive the Holy Spirit.'

²⁰ Helland, 326; see also 320, 321 'human beings cannot and do not do that!'

Jesus' relationship with God, and he thereby becomes literally a model for them to emulate as there is no qualitative difference between the Spirit-empowered man Jesus and other Spirit-empowered human believers. According to Helland,

To be human means to be dependent and finite. Jesus lived a Spirit-filled and Spirit-led life of submission and obedience to the Father's will *as a man*. (321)

So the special point about Jesus is that he 'realistically shows what a "son of God" is to be like in this life' (321) and accordingly he 'models what his disciples and Church ought to pattern themselves after.' (321) Therefore, it is the example of Christ as a model man of faith that is the key to his earthly mission, and this example Christians must follow—perhaps only partially in this life, but certainly fully in the eschaton, because then they too will then be sinless like Jesus. (312)

To be sure, Helland does not overlook the uniqueness of Jesus, but it does not affect his reasoning about the relationship between Jesus and other people, including believers. (This applies especially to his sinlessness which will be examined later.) He also acknowledges that Jesus was 'Son of God in a unique way', but the significance of this is cancelled out when the term is interpreted only in functional terms, excluding the ontological.

Consequently, there is nothing essentially different about Jesus in comparison with other people—he was God become man *simpliciter*, and through the empowering of the Spirit and his perfect faith and obedience, he was able to enter into a 'perfect intimacy' with the Father which was unique only because of his 'incredible faith and trust' (327). Hence Jesus was more successful at this relationship than other 'men', but if they allow faith to control them more they too will be able to enjoy the same relationship and accordingly exercise the same supernatural ministry.

Helland also points out that Jesus is viewed in many New Testament passages 'essentially as a *prophet*.' (325) Again, he does concede that 'Jesus was no ordinary prophet, but the prophet *par excellence*' who 'exercised a unique ministry' in that he did not merely 'predict the coming of the Kingdom' but 'proclaimed that the Kingdom came in himself.' (325) But Helland does not go on to examine in detail the meaning of the Kingdom as trust and submission to a sovereign God, how it was accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus or how it must be entered by repentance and faith; he thereby fails to take proper account of Jesus' unique role as prophet when explaining his ministry. Dale Moody is on safer grounds when he notes that the 'The prophetic mission of

Jesus was a great achievement, but the mission and the message of Jesus are inseparable' and that therefore 'He was no less than a prophet, but he was far more.'²¹

These limitations arise partly because of a lack of rigour in the argument and partly because Helland's kenotic Christology will not allow it. But the consequence is that it is easy for Helland to argue that Jesus, (who became what he was not—a man *simpliciter*) is an 'accessible model' whom Christians can and must emulate.

IV. Jesus as Model

Helland's concept of 'model' should also be examined. The term may be used in a weak, popular sense to refer to the way in which a prominent person functions as a role model or 'object lesson' (326) for someone else. But it is clear from the overall thrust of the argument that Helland uses the idea of model in a much stronger, quite literal sense. Jesus is a 'realistic and accessible model' and his ministry '*stands as a glorious paradigm* for a Spirit-empowered and Spirit-led church.' (327)

Helland uses this stronger literal view because it is needed as the basis for the major purpose of his article. To be precise, 'Jesus functioned as fully human and fully alive—we are called to do the same.' (327) Even more clearly, Helland refers to believers doing 'all that he did.' (326)

This kind of reasoning is a central element in Wimberism, (the theology behind one important stream within the Signs and Wonders movement) with which Helland, as a member of the Vineyard movement, is associated. It is a basic principle in Wimber's 'power evangelism' which claims that Christians as 'cobelligerents' of Christ are trained and called to emulate him in his supernatural ministry of signs and wonders in the battle for the Kingdom of God against the kingdom of Satan.²²

But this scheme fails to take account of the decisive difference the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ made in salvation history by overcoming the power of Satan. Before the crucifixion the disciples were indeed sent out as agents of Jesus in preaching the kingdom, as recorded in Lk. 9:1ff, which therefore becomes a crucial text for Wimberism. But it is altogether different since the resurrection and

²¹ Moody, *The Word of Truth*, 371, 369.

²² John Wimber with Kevin Springer, *Power Evangelism* (Revised), (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1992), 43, 41, 161, 194–203. On the Signs and Wonders movement, see, Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Mind and Heart* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 153–172.

Pentecost, for as even Hawthorne points out, they are eschatological events marking the beginning of the new age.²³ Since the inauguration of the new age, Christians are called to bear witness to Christ's victory in the power of the Spirit (Acts 1:8). Their commission is to proclaim in the name of the risen Lord that it is the gospel of Christ's atoning death, resurrection and glorification that is the power of God for salvation (Mt. 28: 16-20; Rom. 1:16-17).²⁴

But there is no room for a doctrine of atonement in Wimberism, and, as in Helland's case also, the uniqueness of the person of Jesus is compromised. So the concept of Jesus as a model man of faith to be emulated does not do justice to the biblical presentation of Jesus Christ as incarnate Son of God and his mission of redemption of fallen humanity. As Moody asserts, 'A description of Jesus as a Spirit-filled man is true but inadequate and incomplete.'²⁵

V. A Personal Union

Since, as Helland notes, Chalcedon is recognized as 'the last word' (311) for orthodox Christology, it is appropriate to relate further reflection on this topic directly to the conclusions of that Council. While the Chalcedonian Definition may well have its limitations, it does set useful guidelines for most Christological issues, including those under discussion at present.

It has been argued that Helland's proposal is kenotic or at least ambivalent about the relation of the divine nature to the incarnate Christ. However, Chalcedonian Christology is clear in its requirement that we speak of the second person of the Trinity (who already bears the divine nature) assuming human nature in the incarnation. Thus, the stress is on the person; as Louis Berkhof states, 'it is better to say that the *person* of the Son of God became incarnate than to say that the *divine nature* assumed human flesh.'²⁶

Furthermore, according to Chalcedonian Christology, in the incarnate state the properties of the two natures are attributed to the person.²⁷ Thus it is the person of Christ who is properly referred to as the subject of volition and action, not either one of the natures or the two natures together. If this is kept in view, there is less tendency to speak of Jesus acting according to the properties of one or another of

²³ Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 189.

²⁴ David Parker, 'Evangelism the Wimber Way', *The Australian Evangelical*, No. 2, 1993, 19-20.

²⁵ Moody, *The Word of Truth*, 402.

²⁶ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 323 (emphasis original).

²⁷ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 324.

the natures, (perhaps to the detriment of the other) in a somewhat Nestorian sense which tends to divide and separate the natures.

This was a problem in the post-Chalcedonian period, when it was resolved in A.D. 681 at the Third Council of Constantinople in the so-called dyothelite theory. According to this understanding of the person of Jesus Christ, there are two wills, with each one working 'what is proper to it, in communion with the other' and in particular, the 'human will following, and not resisting or opposing, but rather subject to his divine and all-powerful will.'²⁸

This is admittedly a difficult concept which is treated superficially by some theologians, and rejected outright by others.²⁹ Nevertheless, it draws some strength from biblical passages which show the subordination of the Son to the Father's will; also it was brought in to deal with the perception that the authenticity of the humanity of Christ was threatened by monothelitism.³⁰ Much depends upon one's theological anthropology and metaphysics,³¹ but some residual difficulties are helped by the Reformer's doctrine of *Communicatio Idiomatum* to which, significantly, Helland makes no reference at all.

This concept proposes that, because of the union of the two natures in the person of the Son, it is proper to attribute the properties of either one or both the natures to the person. Thus it is possible to attribute both ignorance and tiredness as well as almighty power and infinite love to Jesus Christ; it is also correct to treat the saving work of Christ and his status as one to be worshipped and glorified in the same way.

While there are some profound differences between Lutheran and Reformed understandings of this doctrine,³² both traditions emphasise the unity of the person of Christ and thereby implicitly warn of the danger of 'artificially attributing'³³ Jesus' deeds or qualities to one nature or the other. Furthermore, they provide a model which helps

²⁸ John H. Leith, *Creeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), 51–52; Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 212–3.

²⁹ For some examples of these positions, see Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 322; Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 53; Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 624; A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1907), 695.

³⁰ Note that the Third Council of Constantinople referred specifically to John 6:38: 'for I have come down from heaven, not to do my own [will], but the [will] of him who sent me.' (Leith, *Creeds of the Churches*, 51.)

³¹ This is specifically recognized by Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 52f, 112.

³² For example, see L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 324–7; Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 72–74.

³³ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1982), 145.

to understand better and clarify the basic position of Chalcedon and its categorical affirmation of the unity of the person of Christ.

Finally, it is important to stress the second person of the Trinity as the one who became incarnate. Thus Berkhof again declares, 'It is better to say that the Word became flesh than that *God became man*.'³⁴ The use of this more specific terminology reduces the likelihood of the misleading and erroneous conclusions found in kenotic and modalistic Christology by which the incarnation seems to be attributed to the godhead generally. This leads to problems of the kind found in Helland's approach where deity seems to be exchanged for humanity.

This stress on the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity is supported by the important concepts of pre-existence and eternal sonship which were witnessed to in the New Testament and clarified in the process leading up to Chalcedon.³⁵ It is also supported by the Reformation doctrine known as the *Calvinistic extra* by which it is asserted that full explanation of the incarnate Christ must go beyond the merely human form of Jesus of Nazareth, for as Colossians 2:9 declares, in Christ dwells all the fullness of deity in a bodily form.³⁶

Therefore, it is not enough ever to speak about Jesus as being merely human. As Strong puts it,

This consciousness and will, moreover, is never simply human, but is always theanthropic—an activity of the one personality which unites in itself the human and the divine.³⁷

If orthodox Christology is not kenotic, it is also not adoptionistic—as if the divine nature simply indwelt or united with an actual human person. Rather, post-Chalcedonian developments spoke of 'anhypostatic' and 'enhypostatic' Christology—that is to say, there is no personal humanity in the incarnate Christ (an = without), but the human nature of Christ finds its person in the second person of trinity (en = in).³⁸ This again emphasises the importance of referring to the Word-become-flesh as the centre and subject of all action.

Although this terminology may seem to exhibit an inherent docetism or monophysitism, it cannot be avoided because what is

³⁴ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 333 (emphasis added); in this context, 'flesh' is meant to be taken in its full New Testament sense, as Berkhof indicates on page 334.

³⁵ Moody, *The Word of Truth*, 402.

³⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 735.

³⁷ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 695.

³⁸ These concepts are historically associated with Leontius of Byzantium (6th Cent) and St John of Damascus (ca 675 - ca 749). See also Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 213, who firmly rejects this terminology.

being referred to is the incarnation of the eternal Son, not the coming into the existence of a 'merely human' person, or the indwelling of a person by the divine presence. As Thiessen puts it,

It follows that Christ's personality resides in his divine nature, because the Son did not unite with a human person but with human nature. Christ's human nature was impersonal apart from the incarnation; this, however, is not true of the divine nature.³⁹

Thus, according to Chalcedon, the humanity of Christ is real and tangible, but equally so is the deity. Not that there should be any difficulty with this, as if humanity and deity were utterable incompatible. For as Helland (quoting Hawthorne) acknowledges in concert with many others, there is a 'God related element'⁴⁰ in all people by their very constitution as human beings created in the divine image. Thus there is 'an innate suitability of humanness for God and God for humanness.'⁴¹

So therefore the incarnation is not a matter of exchanging incompatibles, but a union with something that is compatible. However, this is not to say that Jesus is related to God in the same way as people—for they are his creatures.⁴² Rather it is only to say that there is a certain correspondence between people and God, and by virtue of this, Christ as the unique theanthropic being and bearer of the divine image is able, by his atoning death, to restore people to their intended state in the image of God.

VI. The Incarnate One

Now we can make three further observations:

1. *Jesus as Son of God*

Because the person or subject of the incarnation is the eternal Son, not merely the man Jesus, the term 'Son of God' has ontological as well as functional significance. In other words, it is important to avoid confusing functional subordination with essential equality.⁴³

³⁹ Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 223 (emphasis added).

⁴⁰ Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 20.

⁴¹ Helland, 319, quoting Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 207–8; note also Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, II/20, '... God becoming man is not a paradox or a contradiction.' See also Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 693.

⁴² Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 20.

⁴³ Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, I/106; Moody, *The Word of Truth*, 402; Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 210, 212.

Therefore, the term 'Son of God' does not relate primarily to soteriology as in Helland's understanding, whereby Christ's Sonship shows what sons are and can be. Instead, it refers to the essential being of the second person of the Trinity as manifest in his person, whether in the incarnate or pre-incarnate state. This, of course, does have important implications for soteriology, as is made clear, for example, in the Epistle to the Hebrews with its stress on the atonement for sins and access to the divine presence through the efficacious sacrifice of the sinless High Priestly Son.

The ontological significance of the term 'Son of God' means that the relation of human and divine in Jesus is unique and cannot be compared with or equated to believers who are adopted as children of God through faith in saving work of Christ.⁴⁴

2. Not 'Merely a Man'

The accepted terminology does not refer to the exchange of deity for humanity and neither does it refer to the divine attributes and nature being 'latent' or 'potential' or the Son 'becoming what he was not.' Instead, it uses other phrases including the assumption of humanity, the voluntary restriction of divine powers and the relinquishment of divine prerogatives. Terms such as these seem to be less open to misleading implications than others; in particular, they preclude the tendency towards Nestorianism (of which Helland warns) in favour of the concept of a voluntary non-use of divine powers (which Helland endorses).

The orthodox terminology is to be preferred even to the term 'kenosis' from Philippians 2:7, which has created many difficulties. 'Kenosis' is best defined within the context in Philippians to refer to Jesus' humble servant-state (*morphen doulou labon*) and his assumption of human life (*en homoiomati anthropon genomenos*) rather than constituting a reference to the divesting of the divine nature and attributes or Helland's confusing 'emptying himself of himself.' As Hawthorne explains,

⁴⁴ Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 222; Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men*, 101. A. M. Hunter states that the term 'reveals in Jesus a unique, intuitive and personal apprehension of God', an 'unshared sonship' which 'forms the deepest thing in Jesus' self-understanding', 'the mainspring of his messianic ministry' and 'the last secret of [his] works and words.' [*The Work and Words of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1973), 106]

These participles (i.e., *labon, genomenos*), although aorists, are nevertheless participles of simultaneous action and express the means by which the action of the verb *ekenosen* was effected.⁴⁵

The consequence is that we must support Helland's reference to a genuinely human person of Jesus of Nazareth. But we must also bear in mind that, since this was the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, the divine makes a profound effect upon the human. This can be expressed in various ways.

For example, following the tradition of dyothelite Christology which refers to the human in subordination to the divine and the doctrine of *Communicatio Idiomatum*, most theologians refer in some way to the human nature being 'possessed of the powers belonging' to the divine. According to this view, the Holy Spirit plays the key role of 'communicating' the divine to the human, which results in the unique situation whereby Jesus Christ 'knew, taught, and performed, not like the prophets, by power communicated from without, but by virtue of his own inner divine energy.'⁴⁶

So profound is this mystery that James Leo Garrett, appealing to the biblical record and the history of the church, suggests that a series of metaphors is necessary to express it adequately. He lists tabernacling (*skenosis*), indwelling (*enoikesis*), conjunction (*synapheia*), union (*henosis*) and the four famous Chalcedonian adverbs, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation (*asynchytos, atreptos, adiairetos, achoristos*).

All of this may be expressed in Hammond's simpler and more restrained words:

The nearest we can get is that our Lord's perfect divine nature (with the possession of all its attributes) was so united with a perfect human nature that one divine-human Person developed with the divine element (if such a distinction can here be made) controlling the normal development of the human. Beyond this we cannot safely go.⁴⁷

The crucial issue is that the properties of the human nature are not compromised or lost in this 'essential bond.'⁴⁸ Nevertheless, without losing its integrity, the human nature is subject to the divine. Yet it is also necessary to observe that by the doctrine of *kenosis*, there is

⁴⁵ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 96; see also Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 735 where the same point is made, and also talk of *kenosis* meaning 'pouring his divinity into his humanity' is firmly rejected; however, note that Erickson does use the term 'latent' in *The Word Became Flesh*, 556, 560, as does Strong in *Systematic Theology* 696.

⁴⁶ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 696. Note that this concept, and Strong's statement of it, is expressly rejected by Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 218.

⁴⁷ Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men*, 100.

⁴⁸ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 318.

prior submission of the Son to the Father so that, in the incarnate state, the divine powers are not consciously exercised.

But whatever way the relations between the human and the divine in the hypostatic union are expressed, the resultant theanthropic state cannot be ignored, underling how misleading it is to refer to the life and ministry of Jesus as being 'merely human.'

3. Jesus' Sinlessness

Another reason why Helland tends erroneously to confuse the spiritual state of Jesus and with that of ordinary people is that, as noted above, he fails to take full account of the sinlessness of Jesus. He does acknowledge it, but instead of examining its nature and implications, he is content to rely on Hawthorne's general statement that the Spirit 'met with no natural resistance in Jesus as in those of us whose lives have been hardened and scarred by sin.'⁴⁹

However, Jesus' sinlessness⁵⁰ needs to be understood in line with the New Testament data which indicates that he did not sin and showed no tendency to sin, yet was 'in every respect . . . tested (mg—tempted) as we are, yet without sin' (Heb. 4:15 NRSV). To put this in classic terms (if they are any help,⁵¹) he was free of original and actual sin.

Although the question of Jesus' inability to sin is a controversial issue, many would agree with Buswell's statement that the authenticity of his humanity means that 'it would be *morally* impossible (not physically impossible) that he should sin.'⁵² This emphasises the importance of the person, as discussed above. Jesus did not sin, not because of an ability to call on the divine nature as in superman Christology or because of a super-faith as a model man, but because even in his incarnate state, he was still the eternal Son, and in that state as Berkhof explains, there was an 'essential bond

⁴⁹ Helland 326 quoting Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 219. It should be noted that Hawthorne goes on to make a deeper analysis of this topic (page 229).

⁵⁰ On this topic generally, see Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 568–572.

⁵¹ David Parker, 'Original Sin: a Study in Evangelical Theology' *Evangelical Quarterly* Vol LXI/1 January 1989, 51–69. Note that Garrett rejects the Virgin Birth as a mechanism for sinlessness (Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 571).

⁵² Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, II/61; on this point he refers also to Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo?* who suggests there are two senses of the word power—one referring to disposition and the other to the act itself. See also Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power* (37, 83ff)

between the human and the divine natures' which rendered Jesus *non potuit peccare*.⁵³

Despite this, the reality of Jesus' temptations means that this is not a case of docetic or monophysite immunity from temptation; in fact, Hebrews 5:8 can go so far as to say that 'although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.'

Therefore Jesus' state of sinlessness shows an infinite qualitative distinction from humankind, for although Jesus was authentically human, he did not share humankind's sinful state, i.e., he was not corrupted by innate sin, nor suffer its penalty or its resultant guilt. Keeping such a distinction in mind will obviate any tendency to identify the spiritual state of Jesus with that of human beings, thereby precluding any tendency to adopt the idea that Jesus is simply a model man of faith for believers.

It should also be noted that while limitation and finiteness are part of the human lot as Helland avers, (319, 320, 325) these features are not of the essence of humanity. So the locus of Jesus' humanity is not to be found in his limitations. Instead, the essence of humanity is to be created in the *imago Dei*, which signifies the capacity for a relationship of responsibility before God; this is what defines Jesus' humanity, as Moody well declares: 'A true man is one who loves God with all his heart, soul, strength and mind and his neighbor as himself.'⁵⁴

Jesus Christ is the one who by virtue of his status as the Son of God is 'the image of the invisible God' (Col. 3:15; 1 Cor. 15:49); by his complete submission to the will of the Father (Heb. 10:7-10) he is the one to whom all those called of God will be conformed (Rom. 8:29; Col. 3:10). Thus, in the words of Moody, because 'The truly human involves obedience and love,' we can say that 'Jesus lived a life of perfect freedom because of his perfect obedience to the Father's will.'⁵⁵ It is only the Word-become-flesh who can show that complete obedience which is the fulfilment and exemplification of true humanity.

⁵³ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 318. Note that Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 572, refutes Berkhof here claiming that it is not necessary to defend the sinlessness of Jesus Christ by saying he could not have sinned; Garrett charges that Berkhof has altered the nature of Jesus' temptations and reduced the significance of Jesus' will in obedience to the father. (He also finds fault with Berkouwer who claims that sinlessness is related to union with God but that is too Apollinarian for Garrett.) However, this problem can be overcome if the distinction made by Buswell between the two aspects of ability; is maintained, thus placing the focus on Jesus' will. In any case, as Hammond, points out, in last resort, the ability not to sin may not fall far short of inability to sin. (In *Understanding Be Men*, 104).

⁵⁴ Moody, *The Word of Truth*, 416.

⁵⁵ Moody, *The Word of Truth*, 419.

To be sure, the strength of Helland's discussion is that he shows the power of perfect faith and obedience as seen in the incarnate Son, but it is questionable whether its basis and consequences are as he proposes. It is also questionable whether he (or Hawthorne) has allowed enough for the uniqueness of Christ when it comes to the significance of Jesus as a model for Christians.⁵⁶

So, as noted at the outset, it is risky to try to distinguish the human from the divine in life of Jesus; accordingly, while it is not possible to account for the power of Jesus' ministry by saying simply that 'he was God,' it is equally not possible to attribute it merely to his humanity (321). Any solution to this mystery must take account of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son.

Now we can proceed to a final stage which deals with the implications of this conclusion for Christian salvation and spirituality.

VII. Christ and Salvation

Because Helland's argument that Jesus Christ is the model Son for all sons and daughters is questionable, it is not wise to employ it as a basis for understanding the nature of Christian salvation and spirituality. Instead, taking full account of the creation of humankind in the divine image, our fallen state and the consequences of original sin, it follows that the work of Jesus cannot be to divinise or make people into 'quasi-gods'⁵⁷ as Helland seems to imply by his talk of Christians being sinless like Jesus; nor can it support that idea of

⁵⁶ Helland's dependence on Hawthorne is most obvious and complete at this crucial point; although Hawthorne clearly states that 'Jesus was uniquely the Son of God and that he differs from us in kind' (216), yet at the same time declares that he 'was a genuine human being in the fullest sense of this term' (235); he therefore concludes that if Jesus was 'endowed with supernatural power' by the Spirit which 'enabled him to be and do the extraordinary', then what 'is true of Jesus' is also 'true of his followers', and hence Christians of any age, including today, are enabled by the same Spirit to 'burst the bounds of their human limitations and achieve the impossible' (238).

⁵⁷ C. Brown, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1975-8), Vol 2, 661. Hawthorne even uses the term 'God's contemporary "christs"' to refer to believers who have been empowered by the Spirit in the same manner as Christ himself was (*The Power and the Presence*, 237); although he is primarily referring to the root meaning of the word 'christ' (to anoint) in the context of passages such as 1 John 2:20, 27; 2 Cor. 1:21), he seems to be taking the word in a more than metaphorical sense.

Jesus as the son of God who patterns sonship for people and is the model of supernatural ministry for the church.⁵⁸

Instead, his work as the 'second Adam' is to redeem people, saving them from the penalty and power of sin by virtue of his atoning death and resurrection so that they may be people in fellowship with God as he created them to be. To put this in other terms, humankind, as created in the divine image, does not literally share the divine nature. As Strong explains,

Human nature is capable of the divine, in the sense not only that it lives, moves, and has its being in God, but that God may unite himself indissolubly to it and endue it with divine powers, while yet it remains all the more truly human. Since the moral image of God in human nature has been lost by sin, Christ, the perfect image of God after which man was originally made, restores that lost image by uniting himself to humanity and filling it with his divine life and love.⁵⁹

On the individual level, this process occurs when the believer is united to Christ by faith. This is in part what Romans 8:29 means by its reference to believers being 'conformed' to Christ's image. As Hammond states,

We are also brought into vital union with Him ('partakers of the divine nature') and are destined to be brought into a fuller conformity with His image and likeness.⁶⁰

It is not a case of transformation in any mystical or literal sense, since 'human nature does not become divine'—it is 'only the medium of the divine.'⁶¹ Therefore, it is only in a restricted, metaphorical sense that Eastern soteriology and its concept of divinization can apply.⁶²

⁵⁸ Helland also approvingly refers to Hawthorne's discussion of sharing the divine nature as found in 2 Pet. 1:3–4. (319; however at this point there seems to be some dislocation of references in Helland's article.) See further below; cf also on this point, Michael G. Moriarty, *The New Charismatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 106–108, 321–338.

⁵⁹ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 693; Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, II/20.

⁶⁰ Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men*, 101.

⁶¹ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 696 (quoting Kahmis); he also quotes Philippi's words, it 'possesses the divine only derivatively.'

⁶² Helland, 319, referring to 2 Peter 1.3–4. As J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (Peabody: Hendriksen, 1988) 303ff, points out, this verse was influential on Eastern soteriology (and other traditions) from Clement of Alexandria onwards, but it is simply an example of the vocabulary of contextualization, expressing a key element of the Christian message 'in terms which they [the readers] will find congenial', or as C. H. Dodd has it in reference to Johannine language, it is a case of 'naturalizing within Christian theology a widely diffused mystical tradition' which in no way insinuates 'that there is a natural kinship between the higher part of man and God.' See also NIDNTTH 2/661: 'The thought is evidently not that of a metamorphosis into quasi-deity, for the

Therefore, Christian believers can never become sinless like Christ the eternal Son, as Helland states (312), even in the eschaton. Instead, they remain as people created in the divine image but now forgiven and saved by Christ and glorified according to the pattern of his ascended humanity.

VIII. The Christian's True Calling

Following, therefore, Hammond's observation that 'Scripture, in almost every case of reference to the incarnation, suggests redemption as its purpose,'⁶³ we conclude that Christ appeared as the incarnate Son not as a model man of faith for people to emulate but as a Saviour. Furthermore, the power of his earthly ministry came through his dependence *as the incarnate Son of God* upon the Father in the power and under the guidance of the Spirit; thus it was a unique trinitarian relationship, involving a functional subordination of Son to Father and the exemplification of a perfect manhood lived in complete devotion to God.⁶⁴

It may be suggested that the message of Hebrews 10:7,9,10 and 9:14, which points to the obedient, trustful will of Christ as the crux of human salvation, provides a better key to understanding the practical dynamics of our Lord's earthly ministry than an analysis of the human and the divine elements in the life of Christ as recorded in the gospels.

Believers, on the other hand, are empowered by the Spirit to serve God and to witness to Christ's saving work, being indwelt by the Spirit for godliness of life and power of ministry. Therefore, we do not emulate Jesus' ministry, but are witnesses and heralds of his saving work, and we minister *in his name* by the Spirit—in fact, it is the Spirit alone who works new life in people.

So Helland's insights on the hypostatic union cannot be used to bolster the Wimberistic idea that Christians are to continue Jesus' supernatural ministry as agents of the Kingdom of God by virtue of their standing as daughters and sons of God through faith. It is better to follow the lead of others and see the uniqueness of Christ in his

results of this participation are expressed in positive human qualities. It is rather that to be truly human one needs an enabling which comes from God himself. The teaching is comparable with Paul's teaching on the new creation and the teaching in John on being born again.' In the one place where Hawthorne refers to this text, he does not seem to take it literally either. (*The Presence and the Power*, 216)

⁶³ Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men*, 97; Hawthorne makes the same kind of connection (*The Presence and the Power*, 228).

⁶⁴ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 696; Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 542-3; see also Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power*, 211.

divine person and his redeeming work, and to reject innovations on matters which are already covered, at least implicitly, by classical Christology, including its Reformation expressions. Without a fully trinitarian framework and the full understanding of Chalcedonian Christianity, the real danger of Helland's proposal is a Nestorian division of the human and the divine.

The answer to Garrett's question 'Did Jesus then teach and perform miracles as a mere man?'⁶⁵ is twofold: he certainly lived and died as a man, (thus affirming the authenticity of the incarnation); yet not simply as a man, but as the God-man. As Garrett points out, 'Never has the hyphen been used with greater significance than in the term "the God-man."⁶⁶

So Chalcedon, properly understood, provides parameters, if not a solution to the central Christological issue—how Jesus can be both God and man, although all would readily concede with Garrett that we are dealing here with an 'unfathomable, nonanalogical mystery.'⁶⁷

Abstract

In his article, *The Hypostatic Union: How did Jesus Function?* [EQ 65:4 (1993), 311–327], Roger Helland has focused helpfully on the humanity of Jesus. But in declaring that Jesus performed his mighty deeds as a man empowered by the Spirit and thereby functioned as a model of faith for believers, he has raised questions about the incarnation and Jesus' role in relation to his people; thus Helland is led to a reduced Christology and a dubious spirituality focused on the emulation of Jesus.

In response, it is argued that certain key aspects of Chalcedonian Christology provide a satisfactory explanation of the human and the divine in Jesus by stressing the unity of the person. Furthermore, the doctrine of *imago Dei* and Christ's atoning work suggest spirituality is based in forgiveness and reconciliation and the church's mission is the proclamation of the victory of the gospel in the name of Jesus.

⁶⁵ Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 605 (he puts the question in reference to adoptionism).

⁶⁶ Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 608, following Ian Ramsey and D. Baillie; Strong makes the same point by use of the word 'theanthropic'. (*Systematic Theology*, 695)

⁶⁷ Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 625; see also 607.