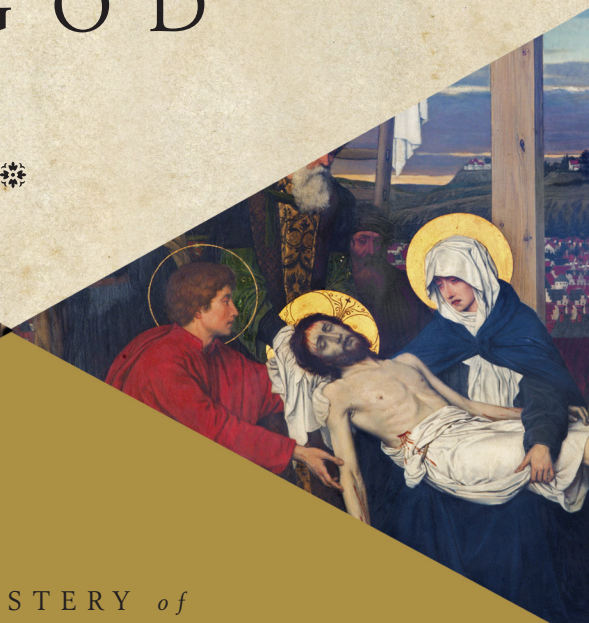
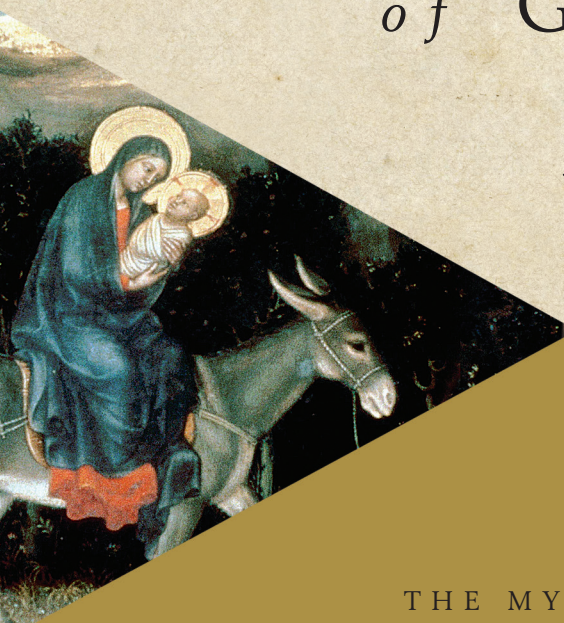


THE
INCARNATION
of GOD



THE MYSTERY *of*
THE GOSPEL AS THE FOUNDATION
of EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY



JOHN C. CLARK *AND*
MARCUS PETER JOHNSON

“*The Incarnation of God* is a theological juggernaut grinding into dust all modern dichotomous thinking about the person and work of Jesus Christ. Reclaiming grossly neglected biblical, patristic, and reformational teaching, Clark and Johnson reestablish the incarnation as the proper center and ground for all evangelical theology, and demonstrate with profundity and potency the tectonic implications of our Lord’s assumption of human flesh.”

Joel Scandrett, Assistant Professor of Historical Theology and Director of the Robert E. Webber Center, Trinity School for Ministry

“Clark and Johnson clearly and eloquently lay out the significance of the incarnation as the centerpiece of Christian theology. Their fascinating reflections on the relation of the incarnation to other aspects of Christian faith introduce us to depths of truth that most Christians have never dreamed of, let alone explored. Their exposition grows out of the rich tradition of Christian reflection on the incarnation, and it is a joy to see my hero Athanasius and my late mentor T. F. Torrance figure so prominently in these pages. It is a pleasure to recommend this book.”

Donald M. Fairbairn Jr., Robert E. Cooley Professor of Early Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; author, *Life in the Trinity* and *Grace and Christology in the Early Church*

“Remedying a major deficiency in evangelical literature, this fine book on the incarnation informs readers of how the central apostolic confession—in Jesus of Nazareth, God has come among us as man—governs our understanding of every aspect of the Christian faith, informs every feature of our discipleship, and grounds pastoral comfort in the heart of God. The authors of this profound study highlight why the incarnation guarantees our salvation, acquaints us with the only Savior we can ever have, allows us to know God, enlivens our obedience, renders the church the bride of Christ, and, not least, informs Christians concerning the logic of God’s intention for human sexuality.”

Victor A. Shepherd, Professor of Theology, Tyndale University College and Seminary; author, *Interpreting Martin Luther* and *The Nature and Function of Faith in the Theology of John Calvin*

“*The Incarnation of God* is an engrossing and stunningly well-conceived book. The theological significance of the great central miracle of Christian faith is laid forth with clarity and conviction. Reflecting an impressive range of research and timely apologetic concern, this is a book for thoughtful reading. I endorse it with enthusiasm.”

Andrew Purves, Jean and Nancy Davis Professor of Historical Theology, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary; author, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology* and *The Crucifixion of Ministry*

“This tightly argued and comprehensive theology centered in the incarnation makes a fitting textbook for introductory theology courses. Clark and Johnson’s incisive claims reflect the decisive importance of Jesus’s incarnation for the Christian faith and life. The student not only will come away with a better grasp of the incarnation’s significance, but also will be grasped more profoundly in holistic worship by the incarnate Lord through this compelling read.”

Paul Louis Metzger, Professor of Christian Theology & Theology of Culture, Multnomah Biblical Seminary; coauthor, *Exploring Ecclesiology*; editor, *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*

“Recent attention to the theme of the believer’s union with Christ has stimulated renewed interest in the person of the Christ with whom Christians are united. In dialogue with the best of the Christian tradition and recent theology, Clark and Johnson explore the incarnation in ways that both academics and pastors will find helpful.”

William B. Evans, Younts Professor of Bible and Religion, Erskine College; author, *Imputation and Impartation* and *What Is the Incarnation?*

THE INCARNATION *of* GOD

THE
I N C A R N A T I O N
of G O D



THE MYSTERY *of*
THE GOSPEL AS THE FOUNDATION
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MARCUS PETER JOHNSON

 **CROSSWAY**
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

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To our wives and children,
with immense affection
and gratitude

Contents

Preface	11
Abbreviations	15
1 The Supreme Mystery at the Center of the Christian Confession <i>The Incarnation of God</i>	17
2 Knowing the Father through the Son <i>The Incarnation and Knowledge of God</i>	47
3 Beholding God in the Face of Jesus Christ <i>The Incarnation and the Attributes of God</i>	71
4 Becoming Human, Becoming Sin <i>The Light Shining in Our Darkness</i>	103
5 Christ for Us, Christ in Us <i>The Mediation of Our Incarnate Savior</i>	127
6 The Abundant Blessings of Salvation <i>Our Union with the Incarnate Savior</i>	157
7 Christ's Body and the Body of Christ <i>The Incarnation and the Church</i>	183
8 The Gospel of Christ and His Bride <i>The Meaning of Marriage and Sex</i>	209
Conclusion	233
Bibliography	239
General Index	246
Scripture Index	252

Preface

C. S. Lewis observed in 1941 that modern Christians are too easily pleased, that our desires, far from being too strong, are, in fact, too weak. “We are half-hearted creatures,” he said. But do we not tend to be a restless and weary people, an aspiring and ambitious people, those who long for, and often lust after, a great many things? Yes! This illustrates Lewis’s point, for he contended that our preoccupation with relative trivialities “when infinite joy is offered us” only punctuates our halfheartedness, showing us to be “like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.”¹ If this described Christians of Lewis’s day, then all the more does it describe those of our own, when our sense of reality is skewed by media manipulation and our scope of vision is stunted by technological inundation. To Lewis’s astute appraisal we thus add: the church’s awareness of mystery and sense of wonder are presently in short supply.

This situation prompts another question, more basic and searching than the one above. What might prompt the church, Jesus Christ’s holy bride, to do anything less than sing with full heart, full throat, and abiding, abounding wonder to him who is her infinite joy, to him who alone can both fortify and satisfy her desires? This book was born of the conviction that, at bottom, the modern church does not sufficiently see and savor the astounding mystery—the supreme mystery—at the very heart of our Christian confession: God the Son, without ceasing to be fully God, has become fully human. The eternal Word became flesh, entering our existence, the deepest ground of our being, to forevermore live his divine

¹C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (1949; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 26.

life in our human nature. This our Lord did to grant us a life-giving, life-transforming share in his communion with the Father through the Spirit, the glorious firstfruits of his reconciling all things in heaven and earth in himself (Eph. 1:10; Col. 1:20). The nineteenth-century Reformed churchman John Williamson Nevin thus exclaims:

“The Word became flesh!” In this simple, but sublime enunciation, we have the whole gospel comprehended in a word. . . . The incarnation is the key that unlocks the sense of all God’s revelations. It is the key that unlocks the sense of all God’s works, and brings to light the true meaning of the universe. . . . The incarnation forms thus the great central fact of the world.²

Nevin’s assessment is spot-on. God entered the world in and as the man Jesus Christ, such that the meaning of God, man, and the world—the meaning of the Creator, the human creature, and all creation—is given full and final, concrete and definitive, expression in him. Scripture testifies that the fullness of deity dwells bodily in the man Jesus Christ; that he is the visible image of the invisible God; that all things were created by, through, and for him; and that in him all things hold together, so that in everything he might be preeminent (Col. 1:15–18; 2:9). The incarnation of God, therefore, is the supreme mystery at the center of our Christian confession, and no less at the center of all reality. Consequently, *all* conceptions of reality that fail to see and savor that all things hold together in Christ, and that he is preeminent in all things, can never be anything but abstract conceptions of virtual realities—that is, invariably hollow and ultimately vacuous concepts *pulled away from reality*.

Because the incarnation of God lies at the heart of all reality, all books about the incarnation are necessarily noncomprehensive and nonexhaustive. This book is positively no exception to that rule. Its aim is to explore the relation of the incarnation to other major facets of the Christian faith, demonstrating that Christ holds together, and should indeed be preeminent in, the whole of our Christian confession. We, the authors, long to see the great central fact of the incarnation deeply penetrate and captivate the hearts and minds of modern Christians, to the end that the modern church

² John Williamson Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippencott, 1846), 199.

might more robustly delight in Jesus Christ, who is altogether worthy of nothing less.

The proper context of theology is the worshiping community, which means authentic theology is done *by* and *for* the church to cultivate her fidelity and vitality. Given that theology is done *by* the church, this book reflects the utter seriousness with which we, the authors, take the great tradition of the historic Christian faith. Orthodoxy is a sacred trust to be prized, protected, and passed along; thus, it is our privilege to stand on the shoulders of giants—predecessors and contemporaries alike. We value theological creativity, but not theological novelty; so if anything here initially suggests the latter, we submit that what is old, when long neglected or forgotten, sometimes seems new. Given that theology is done *for* the church, moreover, this book is intended to be read with benefit by those burdened to advance the work and witness of the worshiping community—including undergraduate and graduate theology students, pastors, and informed lay Christians.

As professors of theology, we wish to thank our students at Moody Bible Institute. The eagerness and earnestness of your engagement with us is immensely encouraging and instructive. Special gratitude goes to Chesney Crouch, Caleb and Lynnae Douglas, Kate Kuntzman, Fred Morelli, Jenna Perrine, and Liz Slinger, whose generous input has directly influenced this book. Of course, whatever shortcomings that remain are attributable only to us. We are by no means unaware that theology—both our writing and your reading—is done east of Eden. As such, this book is offered with humility, in the hope that it shall be received in kind.

Finally, this book is dedicated to our wives and children. How might one adequately express love and gratitude to the bride who is bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh? Kate and Stacie, our living unions with you have helped us grasp the glorious reality of being in living union with Jesus Christ, and what it means that male and female are together the image of God. Two becoming one has not always been easy, but you have pressed into this holy calling with such gentle strength, and done it so well. And now to you, William, Gwyneth, and Peter—living images of the gospel, so bright and beautiful. You have shown us how sweet it is to be dads and, in turn, helped us marvel at how sweet it is to be children of the Father. May the three of you, now and forever, taste and see with us that our Lord is

good. Drink deeply the life and love lavished upon you by the Father in and through his incarnate Son, for he has come in your flesh to be your ever-faithful, never-failing Savior.

John C. Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson
Chicago, Illinois
September 2014
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Abbreviations

<i>ANF</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>BCMT</i>	<i>Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology</i>
<i>BETS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>CC</i>	<i>Creeds of the Churches</i>
<i>CNTC</i>	<i>Calvin's New Testament Commentaries</i>
<i>Comm.</i>	<i>Calvin's Commentaries, Calvin Translation Society series</i>
<i>DPHL</i>	<i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i>
<i>ICC</i>	<i>International Critical Commentary</i>
<i>Inst.</i>	<i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i>
<i>IJST</i>	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
<i>LW</i>	<i>Luther's Works</i>
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>

The Supreme Mystery at the Center of the Christian Confession

THE INCARNATION OF GOD

“Truth must necessarily be stranger than fiction; for fiction is the creation of the human mind and therefore congenial to it.”¹ With characteristic playfulness, G. K. Chesterton makes an observation about which he is deadly serious, a profound point that none of us can afford to miss. All forms of fiction, no matter how skillfully, creatively, and compellingly crafted, are shaped by and limited to the confines of our imaginations. It simply cannot be otherwise, given that fiction is, at bottom, the product of human ingenuity. Truth, on the other hand, shares neither the origin nor the inherent limitations of fiction. It does not follow, of course, that the two are innately adverse. On the contrary, truth and fiction can sometimes coexist in harmonious and complimentary ways, as long as no illusions are cherished as to which is which. But whenever fiction is accepted as truth, whenever nonreality is confused with reality, dangers and difficulties inevitably ensue.

Due to the inclinations of our hearts and the prevailing convictions of

¹ *Chesterton Day by Day: The Wit and Wisdom of G. K. Chesterton*, ed. Michael W. Perry (Seattle: Inkling Books, 2002), 99.

our cultural milieu, it is all too easy for us to live under the influence of deeply seated and rarely challenged assumptions. Among the most basic and common assumptions of contemporary culture is that the nature, meaning, and goal of human existence is self-explanatory, that one's self-understanding is the proper starting point and controlling principle for understanding all of reality. Thus, as J. I. Packer notes in his modern Christian classic *Knowing God*, "It is no wonder that thoughtful people find the gospel of Jesus Christ hard to believe, for the realities with which it deals pass our understanding."² Such "thoughtful people" pose manifold questions: How could Jesus of Nazareth have performed the numerous miracles recorded in Scripture? How could the sufferings of this man, culminating in his death between two criminals on a Roman gibbet, result in God's forgiveness of sinners? How could the same pierced, pummeled, and ruined body that was lowered from the cross and placed in a tomb have been raised to incorruptible life? How could this man have ascended into heaven, reconciling the redeemed to the God from whom they were alienated? Questions of this sort could certainly be multiplied.

Packer observes, however, that such questions arise when difficulties are found in the wrong places, when we fail to identify and apprehend "the supreme mystery" of the gospel. That mystery is not found in the Good Friday event of Christ's crucifixion or even in the Easter Sunday event of his resurrection. Rather, the Christmas event of Christ's birth is where "the profoundest and most unfathomable depths of the Christian revelation lie. . . . Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the Incarnation."³ This same point is stressed by C. S. Lewis, who remarks:

The Central Miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation. . . . Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this. . . . The fitness, and therefore credibility, of the particular miracles depends on their relation to the Grand Miracle; all discussion of them in isolation from it is futile.⁴

These observations by Packer and Lewis are neither new nor novel. They merely echo a conviction deeply rooted in the consciousness of the Christian church from her inception. Martin Luther, the sixteenth-century

²J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 20th anniversary ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), 52.

³*Ibid.*, 52–53.

⁴C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (1947; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1996), 143.

Reformer, notes that the “church fathers took particular delight” in the apostolic testimony that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Luther himself wholeheartedly shared the early church’s delight in the incarnation, exulting:

He [Jesus Christ] condescends to assume my flesh and blood, my body and soul. He does not become an angel or another magnificent creature; He becomes man. This is a token of God’s mercy to wretched human beings; the human heart cannot grasp or understand, let alone express it.⁵

Yet while Packer and Lewis show considerable continuity with their Christian predecessors, they seem somewhat out of step with many of their Christian contemporaries. In 1937, Dorothy Sayers laments, “The Incarnation is the most dramatic thing about Christianity, and indeed, the most dramatic thing that ever entered into the mind of man; but if you tell people so, they stare at you in bewilderment.”⁶ Bewilderment would be understandable, even expected, if Sayers were describing only the reactions of non-Christians or if by “bewilderment” she meant something akin to the sense of wonder Luther exhibits. Regrettably, this is not the case. Moreover, the situation Sayers describes has not shown signs of widespread improvement since she wrote. The supreme mystery that the Word became flesh, that God, in the person of Jesus Christ, participates unreservedly in the same human nature that we ourselves possess, is at the very center of the Christian faith. All too often, however, modern Christians view the incarnation with something closer to consternation than wonder, and as a result, they tend to push this grandest of realities from the center to the periphery of their confession.

Our contemporary situation notwithstanding, the incarnation must ever remain what John Webster calls “the primary affirmation of the church,” for Jesus Christ can never be other than “the incomparably comprehensive context of all creaturely being, knowing and acting, because in and as him God is with humankind in free, creative, and saving love.”⁷ This is an as-

⁵“Sermon on the Gospel of St. John 6:47,” in *Luther’s Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–), 22:102–3 (hereafter *LW*).

⁶Dorothy Sayers to Father Kelly, October 4, 1937, *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers*, vol. 2, ed. Barbara Reynolds (Cambridge: Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1997), 43.

⁷John Webster, “Incarnation,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 204 (hereafter *BCMT*).

toundingly bold declaration in that it situates the knowledge of all things in the context of our knowing Jesus Christ as the divine self-exposition of God and man, identifying the incarnation as the watershed between truth and fiction. The apostle Paul says nothing less when he announces that in Jesus Christ “all things hold together . . . that in everything he might be preeminent” (Col. 1:17–18).

This book is a sustained yet necessarily nonexhaustive exploration of the incarnation, a subject as rich and unfathomable as the incarnate God himself. The aim of this chapter is to give this exploration some needed background and vocabulary, contours and context, a broad and sturdy skeletal structure to be filled in by the chapters that follow. We shall pursue this aim by discussing: (1) the nature and function of doctrine; (2) Trinitarian and christological developments regarding the incarnation in the early centuries of the church; and (3) several core convictions that characterize our approach to this supreme mystery of the gospel.

THE PERIL AND EXCITEMENT OF CHRISTIAN ORTHODOXY

It is not the case, of course, that modern Christians are in the habit of explicitly denying or overtly repudiating the incarnation. Rather, it is that modern Christians routinely find themselves in a subtle state of malaise regarding the enfleshment of God in the person of Jesus Christ, in that their ongoing affirmation of this essential feature of Christian orthodoxy is coupled with an ever-increasing vagueness as to its significance and implications. Among the most salient reasons for this malaise is the perception among many modern Christians of the doctrines that constitute Christian orthodoxy. In their assessment, doctrine in particular, and orthodoxy in general, suggest something petty, pedantic, outmoded, and irrelevant. Matters of doctrinal orthodoxy, including a doctrinally orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ, are thus met with exasperation, irritation, or, worse still, that most subtle and chilling form of contempt, indifference.

To be sure, such perceptions and responses are not completely lacking in warrant, given that the doctrinal expositions of some theologians possess all the winsomeness, clarity, and pastoral warmth of an electrical diagram for a nuclear submarine. It is altogether good and wise to be repelled by that which distorts and perverts, and caricatures of orthodoxy are certainly no exception to this rule. Yet it appears that modern Christians need to exercise

a greater degree of discernment when experiencing such repulsion, because in rejecting caricatures of orthodoxy, many have come to undervalue and overlook the very nature and function of doctrine itself.

Chesterton makes an apt observation when he quips, “People have fallen into a foolish habit of speaking of orthodoxy as something heavy, humdrum, and safe.” More insightful still is his retort to this tired and ultimately unfounded sentiment: “There never was anything so perilous or so exciting as orthodoxy.”⁸ In other words, anything but tedious and benign, orthodoxy enriches, sustains, and heals precisely because its doctrinal substance enshrines the triune God of the gospel—singing to Jesus Christ and drawing the church ever more deeply into the inexhaustible wonders and innumerable implications of new life in him.

Yet what exactly is orthodoxy? In the sense it is used here, orthodoxy refers to a set of key doctrines articulated by the early church and, from that time forward, embraced by all major expressions of Christianity—Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism. Though all doctrines are considered important, these particular doctrines are deemed to be so essential to the integrity of the church’s confession that to deny them is tantamount to denying the triune God of the gospel, and thus to departing from the Christian faith. Significantly, the term *orthodoxy* is a combination of two Greek words, *orthos*, which means “right” or “true,” and *doxa*, which means “belief” or “worship.” Thus, the etymological structure and meaning of the term *orthodoxy* indicates that right belief and true worship are inextricably and symbiotically related, so that whenever one falls down, the other is certain to follow. In other words, because the church is first and foremost a worshipping community, she can exist with authenticity and vitality only when her worship is informed and impelled by sound doctrine. It is for this reason that whenever the church has been most robust throughout history, she has been marked by a passion for doctrine, not an aversion to it. For this same reason, the diminished and confused sense of worship all too common to the modern church is invariably attended by a failure to appreciate the importance of doctrine.⁹

Lest we make an idol of doctrine, however, we must clearly grasp that

⁸G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; repr., Colorado Springs, CO: Harold Shaw Publishers, 2001), 148–49.

⁹Gerald L. Bray, *Creeds, Councils and Christ: Did the Early Christians Misrepresent Jesus?* (Fearn, Ross-shire, U.K.: Mentor, 1997), 8–9.

doctrine is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an infinitely greater and grander end. Doctrine is neither a substitute for God nor a set of preconceived notions about God, as doctrine does not possess an abstract reality and truth independent of the God to whom it refers.¹⁰ Because the Christian faith is not a theory about God, it never has been, nor ever could be, merely a matter of formulating the right combination of words about him. The Christian faith is about the living Word. Thus, the substance and sum of the Christian faith is not a well-ordered series of factually true propositions, but a person who is himself the embodied Truth of both God and man, the Truth who is God *as man*. This person gives rise to doctrine the moment we begin to wrestle with the questions of who he is and what it means to be encountered, claimed, and redeemed by him.¹¹

Clearly, then, it is crucial to discern the nature of the relationship between the person who is the embodied Truth (John 1:14; 14:6) and doctrinal truths about the Truth. On the one hand, we acknowledge that there is a categorical, qualitative distinction between the living person of Jesus Christ and the propositional pronouncements the church makes about him; the two must never be confused or conflated. On the other hand, we recognize and embrace the living person of Jesus Christ as the Truth only as he comes to us clothed in his gospel, only as the propositional pronouncements of the church accurately describe the living Word for us and commend him to us. These truths about the Truth, these words about the Word, constitute the God-given, Spirit-vivified vehicle in and through which Jesus Christ gives himself to us and forges himself within us; thus, the two must never be sundered, severed, or set against one another. Doctrine, rightly understood, concerns both the propositional and the personal. That is because factually true propositions, apart from the living person of Christ, become dry, doctrinaire, and dead, just as the living person of Christ, apart from biblically sourced and normed propositions about him, becomes ambiguous, malleable, and unintelligible. As such, Christian orthodoxy sets itself sharply against arid rationalism and idiosyncratic subjectivism by the settled conviction that the Truth is always both living person and living Word.¹²

¹⁰ Andrew Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology: A Christological Foundation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 13.

¹¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine: What It Is—and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), viii, 2–3.

¹² Thomas F. Torrance, *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1959), xxxii.

Consequently, the peril of orthodoxy is determined by nothing less or other than the service these doctrinal truths render to the Truth; disregard for them is, quite simply, disregard for him. Yet the excitement of orthodoxy lies in the reality that the living Truth claims and masters us precisely as we continue to immerse ourselves in the truths by which he enhances our knowledge of him, intensifies our affections for him, quickens our trust in him, and enlivens our obedience to him.¹³

WHO DO MY PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?

As Jesus traveled with his disciples to a district of Galilee called Caesarea Philippi, he posed a monumental question regarding his identity and significance: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Then, as now, there was no shortage of speculation on this matter. Thus, the disciples answered, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Pressing the matter further, Jesus replied, “But who do *you* say that I am?” Speaking for his fellow disciples, and setting apostolic precedent for the church ever since, Peter proclaimed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:13–16).

Looking more broadly at the New Testament, we find two apostolic exclamations that affirm and develop Peter’s statement. Together they constitute not only the earliest recorded witness of the Christian faith, but also the doctrinally orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ that has been integral to the Christian faith from its inception.

The first exclamation is that Jesus is Lord (Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; 2 Cor. 4:5; Phil. 2:11). This earliest and most basic element of the church’s confession speaks to Jesus’s lordly claim upon his people and, in turn, to their fitting commitment to and worship of him. Further, this exclamation speaks to the nature of Jesus’s relationship to God, in that the apostles seized upon the title *kyrios*, or “Lord,” a title employed to translate the sacred name of God from Old Testament Hebrew into New Testament Greek, and used that title regularly throughout their writings to refer to Jesus (Rom. 1:7; 5:1; 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 1:2–3; Phil. 3:8; Col. 2:6; 1 Thess. 5:9; James 2:1; Rev. 1:8).¹⁴

The second exclamation is not so much a confession as a doxology, for

¹³Victor A. Shepherd, *Our Evangelical Faith* (Toronto, ON: Clements Publishing, 2006), 11–12.

¹⁴McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine*, 123; Webster, “Incarnation,” 208.

unlike the first, it is not a proclamation of faith directed primarily to men, but a cry of praise addressed to God. That cry is “Abba! Father!” In the epistle to the Romans, we find that, after believers receive the Spirit, who bears inner witness to them that they are children of God, they cry to God as their Abba, or Father (Rom. 8:15–17). Or, as Paul writes elsewhere, “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6). Paul’s words signal the coming to fruition of Jesus’s promise that his Father would grant his disciples the Spirit, whose ministry would acquaint them with Jesus in an even more profound and intimate manner. The soon-to-ascend Jesus consoled his disciples by telling them that when he came to them in the indwelling Spirit, they would “know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (John 14:16–20).

The apostolic confession that Jesus is Lord indicates that from the outset Christians equated Jesus—the man from Nazareth, the son of Mary, born in Bethlehem—with God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the One who revealed himself to the Hebrew patriarchs as Yahweh. At the same time, we must not miss the implicitly Trinitarian context and meaning of the cry “Abba! Father!” This form of address is not a product of the church’s own choosing or making. This address is distinctive to Jesus, who alone spoke of God in this fashion. To utter this cry after Jesus—or, better, in, through, and with Jesus—is to acknowledge that Christians learned to do so from Jesus himself through the indwelling ministry of the Spirit, who grants us the benefits that first belonged exclusively to the utterly unique and eternal Son of the Father.¹⁵

When the apostles confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord, the One who teaches us to call his Father our Father, they were by no means publicizing a series of novel speculations about God. On the contrary, they were describing an experience that they believed they already shared with their fellow Christians: the experience of God opening his inner life to them through the revealing and reconciling ministrations of the Son and the Spirit. In the apostolic confession of Jesus Christ, we see how that experience reshaped human thought and language into a vehicle capable of articulating a mystery that unaided reason was, is, and forever shall be unable to fathom. From the beginning, Christian knowledge of God in Christ was first experiential and then doctrinal.

¹⁵ Thomas A. Smail, *The Forgotten Father* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 30–31.

Let us be altogether clear on this point: to affirm the primacy of experiential knowledge of God in this sense is not to suggest that the apostolic confession of Jesus Christ is a theoretical construct that is the product of the apostles' reflection upon themselves and their intuitions about God. True knowledge of God is neither unmediated nor intuitive; this knowledge is not the product of independent self-analysis, and thus cannot be obtained by self-generated efforts to probe one's inner thoughts or feelings. We are affirming, therefore, that the apostolic confession of Jesus Christ is the Spirit-generated, Spirit-superintended witness of the church's experience of the saving incursion and ongoing presence of God in Jesus Christ. Knowledge of God in Christ is first experiential and then doctrinal because it is revelatory and relational knowledge rather than neutral and detached knowledge—the kind of knowledge that neither is nor can be generated by logical syllogisms. Doctrine is absolutely indispensable in that it interprets and informs this experience, articulating what it means and entails to know God in Christ.

The order of the relationship between experience and doctrine is anything but arbitrary, in that it constitutes an order of knowledge that has always marked authentic Christian understanding and confession.¹⁶ In fact, whenever this order of knowledge has been inverted, so that theory gains the pride of place over experience, the apostolic confession of Christ has been terribly distorted and sometimes altogether denatured.¹⁷

No Shortage of Speculation: The Post-Apostolic Church and Heresy

The Trinitarian and christological controversies that attended the early centuries of the post-apostolic church were prompted by such inversions of this apostolically established order of knowledge. The byproducts of these inversions are known as heresies. To be sure, the very word *heresy* has become so unfashionable of late as to be something of an embarrassment, finding precious little place in modern Christian discourse. But lest

¹⁶ For instance, John Calvin excoriates “the cold exhortations of the philosophers” by cautioning that true knowledge of God in Christ “is not apprehended by the understanding and memory alone, as other disciplines are, but it is received only when it possesses the whole soul, and finds a seat and resting place in the inmost affection of the heart.” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.6.4 (hereafter *Inst.*). Here Calvin enlarges upon Luther's pithier observation that “experience alone makes the theologian.” “Table Talk Recorded by Veit Dietrick, 1535,” in *LW*, 54:7.

¹⁷ Gerald L. Bray, “Out of the Box: The Christian Experience of God in Trinity,” in *God the Holy Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice*, ed. Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 39.

we too quickly and facilely attribute this phenomenon to our generosity and largeheartedness, we would be wise to consider how this phenomenon might also betray a confusion and dullness—a failure of faith and nerve—that would rightly vex our Christian predecessors. The word *heresy*, which comes from the Greek *hairesis*, was not a description used by our Christian predecessors to identify or assess forms of self-consciously non-Christian belief. Consequently, we must avoid the common misconception that heresies are the byproducts of challenges posed to the church from *outside*, attacks on the church's confession by those who overtly oppose the Christian faith. On the contrary, heresies are the byproducts of challenges posed to the church from *inside*. In other words, heresies arise when ostensibly well-intentioned interpretations of key elements of the Christian faith prove to be so inadequate and erroneous that espousing and propagating them forfeits core Christian affirmations about the triune God of the gospel.¹⁸

Understandably, then, Christians through the centuries have viewed heresy as dangerous and, if left unchecked, positively destructive. Ironically, however, heresy has also proved to be quite valuable to the church, for when confronted by interpretations of the faith that seemed problematic, the church has been prompted time and again to reexamine: (1) Scripture, the apostolic source and norm of her faith, life, and worship; (2) the connections between doctrines, so as to assess the cogency and coherency of her confession; and (3) the connection between right doctrine and right worship—between the faith and faithful living—as these are as inseparable as two sides of a coin. Inadequate and erroneous interpretations of the Christian faith have thus been used by God to sanctify the church's thinking as she seeks to faithfully articulate the apostolic confession of Jesus Christ, the doctrinal orthodoxy that has been integral to the Christian faith from its inception.

Amidst such challenges, the early church sought to examine and evaluate not only those challenges but also her teaching, preaching, worship, witness, and mission in light of those challenges. Assessing where and why there was adequacy or deficiency, the early church purposed to take the doctrinal orthodoxy of the apostolic confession of Jesus Christ and render the substance of that orthodoxy more pointed, explicit, and amplified as the demands of each situation warranted. Of course, proponents of all such

¹⁸ McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine*, 112–16.

challenges claimed biblical support and championed those challenges in the thought and language forms of their time and culture. To magnify the true meaning of the biblical witness, therefore, the early church found herself having to move beyond the mere recitation of biblical proof texts in order to give accurate expression to God's identity and acts in a biblically coherent manner. Fidelity to Jesus Christ required the early church to be theologically critical and constructive, to be theologically creative without succumbing to theological novelty, and to adapt to the thought and language forms of the context without adopting its ideologies.

A recurring theme quickly emerged, and it constitutes a major and momentous difference between Christian orthodoxy and heresy. Christian orthodoxy is characterized by a commitment to articulating doctrine in a manner that safeguards the mystery and wonder that must always retain a place in the church's thinking and speaking about the triune God of the gospel. Heresy, on the other hand, does not seek to safeguard this mystery. Instead, heresy attempts to solve it. As Chesterton hints in his remark cited at the beginning of this chapter, heresy is characterized by a deep reticence, even a dogged refusal, to be appropriately unsettled when faced with the inherent strangeness of truth; in an effort to domesticate that strangeness, to remove its scandal, heresy creates a fiction more readily congenial to the human mind.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the Trinitarian and christological controversies that precipitated the First Council of Nicaea (325) and the Council of Chalcedon (451). The pronouncements of these two councils are among the most significant theological statements in the entirety of post-apostolic church history, and both are inestimably important for our exploration of the incarnation. Here we have Christian orthodoxy's definitive response to the all-important question that Jesus poses to his church, namely, "Who do *you* say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

Who Is the Incarnate Christ in Relation to God?

The First Council of Nicaea came about as a direct result of the first major doctrinal challenge faced by the post-apostolic church. This challenge concerned Trinitarian controversies that arose within the church regarding the deity of Jesus Christ, or more to the point, regarding the nature of the relationship between the man Jesus from Nazareth and Yahweh, the God

and Maker of heaven and earth. These controversies came in various forms, including the heresies of modalism and adoptionism.¹⁹

Modalism—sometimes called Sabellianism after a third-century Roman named Sabellius, who championed this view—maintained that God is not three persons, but rather one person who projects himself in three different “modes,” doing so in three successive stages as Father, Son, and Spirit. Defending monotheism against what appeared to some as tritheism—the belief in and worship of three gods—modalism “solved” the mystery of God’s three-in-oneness by denying the personal distinctiveness of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Thus, according to modalism, the nature of the relationship between Jesus and Yahweh is that they are not only one God, but also only one person.

Adoptionism, on the other hand, maintained that the man Jesus from Nazareth was not God in any essential, substantial sense, only a mere man, but he was adopted by God due to his extraordinary piety, thereby becoming the Son of God. In an effort to explain how Jesus could be divine and God could still be one, adoptionism “solved” the mystery of God’s three-in-oneness by denying the Son’s pretemporal equality with the Father. Thus, in the view of adoptionism, the nature of the relationship between Jesus and Yahweh is that of distinct divine persons, but not distinct persons who are both inherently God.

Yet the most significant of the pre-Nicene controversies came in the form of Arianism, a movement that derived its name from Arius, a prominent minister in Alexandria, Egypt, during the early fourth century. Arius insisted that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not coeternal and essentially, substantially coequal persons. He used the term *uncaused* or *unoriginate* as the most basic definition of what God is like. But only the Father is eternally existent, he said, as the Father alone is inherently God. The Son is but a creature, created from nothing like all other creatures. By Arius’s definition,

¹⁹The aim of this book is to expound upon the incarnation in accord with the Trinitarian and christological theology of Nicaea and Chalcedon, not to trace with great depth or breadth the historical and doctrinal developments that precipitated Nicaea and Chalcedon. Much fine research is available on the latter. In addition to the pertinent material in the multivolume overviews of the history of doctrinal development by Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 2nd rev. ed., 3 vols. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1987), and Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975–1991), see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1958); Edmund J. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972); Frances M. Young, *From Nicaea to Chalcedon: A Guide to the Literature and Its Background* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (London: T&T Clark, 1988).

then, the Son, by virtue of his very sonship, cannot truly be God. However, the Arians were quick to add that the creatureliness of the Son is unique, since he was created before all other things and took part with his Father in the creation of all things brought into existence after him. As such, the relationship between Jesus and Yahweh is indeed singular and exceptional, as Jesus is the only Son that Yahweh made in this particular sense. Nonetheless, while Jesus can be called the Son of God as a title of honor, he is not God the Son, as his nature is not that of God the Father. Thus, by imposing the alien logic of the classical Greek philosophical tradition upon the Christian faith, Arius “solved” the mystery of God’s three-in-oneness by dissolving the triune God of the gospel into a hierarchy of beings, reducing the Son and the Spirit to creatures ontologically inferior to the Father.²⁰

The brilliant and indefatigable Athanasius was stunned by the presumption and naiveté of his older Alexandrian contemporary. He asked: Can there be knowledge of an uninvolved God absent from human history? Is it not the case that God can be known only when and where he discloses himself to us? How, then, could we speak about knowledge of God, in terms of God’s *self*-disclosure, if such knowledge were to come from created things—even from a created Son? Are not all created things, by very definition, categorically and qualitatively different from God, and thus not God? Is it not then the case that we truly know the meaning of God as Creator only as a result of knowing God as Father, not the other way around? And if so, is it not the case that God is known as Father only as God is known in the Son? Let us turn to Athanasius himself:

And they [Arians], when they call Him Unoriginate, name Him only from His works, and know not the Son any more than the Greeks; but he who calls God Father, names Him from the Word [Jesus Christ]; and knowing the Word, he acknowledges Him to be Framer of all, and understands that through Him all things have been made. Therefore it is more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call Him Father, than to name Him from his works and call Him Unoriginate. . . . And “Unoriginate” is a word of the Greeks, who know not the Son; but “Father” has been acknowledged and vouchsafed by our Lord. For He, knowing Himself whose Son He was, said, “I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me;” and, “He that hath seen Me, hath seen the Father,” and

²⁰Bray, “Out of the Box,” 39; McGrath, *Understanding Doctrine*, 117.

“I and the Father are One;” but nowhere is He found to call the Father Unoriginate. . . . A vain thing then is their argument about the term “Unoriginate,” as is now proved, and nothing more than a fantasy.²¹

Athanasius maintained, with unmistakable clarity and conviction, that the Arians started their thinking about God in the wrong place, and did so with profoundly detrimental results, because faithful and theologically accurate thinking about God must begin with Jesus Christ.²² “Christian faith starts with the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ,” concurs T. F. Torrance.²³ And John Leith echoes this sentiment with irreducible concision, declaring, “God, for Christians, is defined by Jesus Christ.”²⁴

Beginning his prolific career in the early 1870s, church historian Adolf von Harnack popularized the notion that the early centuries of the post-apostolic church featured an acute Hellenization of the Christian faith.²⁵ Athanasius’s words, representative of his own prodigiously influential career as a churchman and theologian, strongly suggest otherwise. To be sure, Athanasius and his fellow shapers of early Christian orthodoxy adapted to their context by appropriating Greek thought and language. Yet far from adopting the ideological substance of classical Hellenism, the early church altered the basic assumptions of that worldview so as to espouse and propagate a distinctively Christian Trinitarian and christological confession. For the early church, terms such as *word, image, form, being, act, substance*, and the like took on meanings very different from those in Platonic, Aristotelian, or Stoic thought—meanings that were distinctly “un-Greek.” Rather than building an acutely Hellenized Christian faith, in fact, the early church transformed familiar Greek thought and language into vehicles capable of giving faithful and theologically accurate expression to the identity and acts of the triune God of the gospel.²⁶

In response to challenges posed by the likes of modalism, adoptionism, and Arianism, the church affirmed her faith in one God who exists eternally

²¹ Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 1.33–34, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1890; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 4:326 (hereafter *NPNF*).

²² Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 21–22.

²³ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 37.

²⁴ John H. Leith, *Basic Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 45.

²⁵ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan (London: Williams & Norgate, 1894), 1:47ff., and elsewhere throughout von Harnack’s published works.

²⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (London: T&T Clark, 1991), 68–75.

as three distinct, coequally divine persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Reflecting the sentiments we just observed in Athanasius, the first confession in the Nicene Creed regarding the first person of the Trinity is that he is “Father,” and *subsequently*, that he is “creator of all things visible and invisible.”²⁷ The order of this confession is intentional and crucial, as there is precisely nothing robustly or even distinctively Christian in the mere confession that God is Creator. This is readily and routinely affirmed by non-Christians of many sorts, and always has been. In itself, this affirmation requires or suggests no knowledge of God as Father and no particular conviction regarding Jesus Christ. By identifying the first person of the Trinity as Father and *then* Creator, therefore, the Nicene Creed indicates that the meaning of God as Creator is truly known only as a result of knowing God as Father; and God is truly known as Father only as he is known in the Son—by, through, and for whom all things were created, and in whom all things hold together (John 1:3; Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:1–3).

With respect to Jesus Christ, the Nicene Creed confesses his deity without qualification or condition, affirming the church’s belief that the man Jesus is not only the Son of God, but also God the Son. On the nature of the relationship between the Son and the Father, the Creed states:

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father as only begotten, that is, from the essence [reality] of the Father . . . God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created . . . of the same essence [reality] as the Father . . . through whom all things came into being, both in heaven and in earth.²⁸

The Nicene confession of God’s three-in-oneness means the term *Trinity* is not merely a way of thinking and speaking about God, an intellectual construct that gives us a tidy handle on him. On the contrary, Christian orthodoxy maintains that God is actually and intrinsically triune, as opposed to God’s triunity being some sort of nonessential appendage that may be added to or removed from him at whim. Because God is triune, he cannot be rightly thought or spoken of except as triune. Thus, any and every confession of God not freighted with Trinitarian content is the confession of

²⁷ “The Creed of Nicaea (325),” in *Creeeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed., ed. John H. Leith (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1982), 30 (hereafter CC).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30–31.

a necessarily non-Christian deity, a “god” intrinsically different from and alien to the God of Scripture.

What is more, the Nicene affirmation that Jesus Christ is of the same essence as the Father means that Christ participates unreservedly in the Father’s divine nature and majesty. If the Son is only like the Father, then the Son is ultimately different from the Father, given that no *quantity* of similitude, no matter how great, constitutes the *quality* of sameness. With respect to his deity, whatever we say about the Son can and must be said about the Father, except “Son.” Likewise, whatever we say about the Father can and must be said about the Son, except “Father.”

That Jesus Christ is identical in essence with the Father is inexhaustibly rich in gospel significance. It means that who the triune God has been eternally in his inner life he now is and forever shall be toward us in Jesus Christ through the Spirit, the personal agent of Christ’s presence and power (John 14:16–20, 25–26; 15:26; 16:4–15). Jesus Christ really and truly is Immanuel, God with us (Matt. 1:23). John’s Gospel tells us that Jesus Christ makes the Father known, that the Son exegetes, or interprets, the Father for us in the intimate and loving manner that previously only the eternal Son, in the eternal communion of the Spirit, has known him (John 1:18; 17:25–26). There being no true knowledge of God as Father independent of or remote from God the Son, Christ causes us to participate with him in his own relationship with the Father; thus, Jesus insists that no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son graciously chooses to reveal the Father (Matt. 11:27; Luke 10:22).

To see, hear, and receive Jesus Christ, then, is to see, hear, and receive the Father, just as to deny and reject Jesus Christ is to deny and reject the Father (Luke 10:16; John 14:9–10). In other words, there is no search to be undertaken or appeal to be made to God over the head or behind the back of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, the fact that Christ is identical in essence with the Father means the Father’s sending of the Son is nothing less, different, or other than the self-giving of God as God has forever been in himself. To say otherwise would render the gospel bleak news indeed, as it would mean there is no ontological, and thus no epistemological, connection between the gifts of God—love, truth, righteousness, holiness, life, and so forth—and the Giver of those gifts. Those gifts would be but created mediums—dissoluble, detachable, and with no inherent relation to God

himself. For instance, we could confess that God is love (1 John 4:8) and that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to needy sinners (John 3:16). Tragically, however, we would be forced to conclude that the love God is in himself is not the love we know and possess in our reception of Jesus Christ.²⁹

Who Is the Incarnate Christ in Relation to Humanity?

Working knowledge of the First Council of Nicaea is indispensable for exploring the meaning and implications of the incarnation. Yet Nicaea does not provide the whole of the necessary background. No sooner did this council pronounce on the deity of Jesus Christ than the church was faced with a second major doctrinal challenge, one directly related to the first. This challenge consisted of christological controversies that arose within the church regarding Jesus's humanity and its relation to his deity, or, more to the point, regarding the nature of the relationship between God the Son and humankind.

Much like the Trinitarian controversies that precipitated the formulation of the Nicene Creed, these christological controversies came in various forms. The first of note was Apollinarianism, named after Apollinarius, the fourth-century bishop of Laodicea. An energetic advocate of Nicene orthodoxy, Apollinarius maintained that while God the Son did assume a true and full human body at the incarnation, the same could not be said about a true and full human mind. The human mind is the seat of sin, reasoned Apollinarius, so Jesus's mind cannot be truly and fully human; that would diminish the dignity of God the Son and subject our Savior to the very condition from which fallen humanity needs saving. Consequently, while Apollinarius affirmed the true and full deity of Jesus Christ, he "solved" the mystery of the incarnation of God by denying that Christ is truly and fully human.

Gregory of Nazianzus, the fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople, was profoundly troubled by the claims of Apollinarius. Even if it were plausible to so neatly dichotomize the human body from the human mind, he asked, what benefit would an Apollinarian view of the incarnation be with regard to addressing and healing the corrupted state of fallen humanity? If the human body is not what needs redeeming, why did God the

²⁹Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 132–45.

Son assume such a body? On the other hand, if the human mind is indeed the seat of sin, then is not the mind what needs to be addressed and healed by an encounter with God in Christ? Is it not then all the more important that God the Son would assume such a mind? When Apollinarius speaks of the incarnation, does he not speak of an abstract and hypothetical “humanity” that is not actually *our* humanity? Does Apollinarius then not speak of an incarnation that fails to address and heal what actually ails fallen humans, leaving them in their corruption? Moreover, is it not that corruption affects the totality of our fallen humanity, making it imperative that God the Son would assume every aspect of that humanity? Gregory writes:

If anyone has put his trust in Him [Jesus Christ] as a Man without a human mind, he is really bereft of mind, and quite unworthy of salvation. For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole. Let them not, then, begrudge us our complete salvation, or clothe the Saviour only with bones and nerves and the portraiture of humanity.³⁰

Following Apollinarianism in the fifth century were Nestorianism and Eutychianism. The former emerged when Nestorius, an archbishop of Constantinople subsequent to Gregory, took exception to the church’s long-established confession that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was *theotokos*, a Greek term meaning “God-bearer.” How could Mary, being finite and temporal, really and truly give birth to God the Son, who is infinite and eternal? The second person of the Trinity was surely joined to a true and full human nature in Mary’s womb, thought Nestorius, yet all the human attributes and experiences of Jesus Christ should be ascribed to a humanity that remains a personal subject *distinct* from God the Son. Nestorians were accused of maintaining that while Jesus Christ is truly and fully divine and human, there is no intrinsic union between his divine and human natures. Whereas Nestorians affirmed the true and full reality of both the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, then, they “solved” the mystery of the incarnation of God by denying

³⁰Gregory of Nazianzus, “To Cleodnius the Priest against Apollinarius,” *Letters on the Apollinarian Controversy*, no. 101, in *NPNF*, 7:440.

that Christ's deity and humanity are truly and fully united in one personal subject. Does this suggest that Jesus's two natures are related in an extrinsic and abstract manner? Might this imply that his deity and humanity may be turned on and off, as it were, by being exhibited and exercised intermittently? Would espousing Nestorian notions cause the church to think and speak of her Lord as if he were two persons, or as if he had a split personality?

Eutyches was a contemporary of Nestorius and a fellow churchman in Constantinople. He deemed Nestorian claims immensely erroneous, and in countering those claims, championed a position known as Eutychianism. Sometimes called Monophysitism, a compound Greek term derived from *monos*, which means "single," and *physis*, which means "nature," Eutychianism maintained that a person must possess one nature, not two. God the Son assumed a true and full human nature in Mary's womb, contended Eutyches. But that human nature was taken up into God the Son's divine nature and absorbed like a raindrop in the ocean, with the result that the incarnate Christ has only a single nature. Therefore, while Eutychians affirmed that Jesus is one personal subject, they "solved" the mystery of the incarnation of God by denying the true and full reality of both Christ's deity and humanity; rather, they saw his two natures intermingling in such a way as to render him a *tertium quid*—that is, a "third something"!

Responding to the challenges of Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism, the church affirmed her faith in the incarnate One, Jesus Christ, who is truly and fully God, truly and fully man, and whose deity and humanity are truly and fully united in his one person. The Council of Chalcedon's pronouncement, known as "the Definition of Chalcedon," reads:

Following, then, the holy fathers, we . . . confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect . . . both in deity . . . and also in human-ness; this selfsame one is also actually . . . God and actually man, with a rational soul . . . and a body. He is of the same reality as God [*homoousion tō patri*] as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we are ourselves [*homoousion hēmin*] as far as his human-ness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. . . . For us and on behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer [*theotokos*] in respect to his human-ness. . . . We apprehend . . . this one and only Christ—Son, Lord, only-begotten—in two natures . . . ; [and we do this] without confusing

the two natures . . . , without transmuting one nature into the other . . . , without dividing them into two separate categories . . . , without contrasting them according to area or function. . . . The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the “properties” . . . of each nature are conserved and both natures concur . . . in one “person” . . . and in one *hypostasis*. They are not divided or cut into two *prosōpa* [persons], but are together the one and only and only-begotten Logos of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.³¹

Christian orthodoxy confesses that Jesus Christ possesses two natures, a perfect divine nature and a perfect human nature, the former being the same as that of God the Father and God the Spirit, the latter being the same as ours, his fellow humans. Inextricably united in Mary’s womb, these two natures shall remain forever united in one person, the person of Jesus Christ. In other words, Christ’s divine and human natures are joined in *hypostatic*, or personal, union—an intrinsic and concrete union, as opposed to an extrinsic and abstract union, one that is merely metaphorical, moral, volitional, legal, or ideational. Moreover, the integrity of each nature is upheld in this personal union, not undermined or overturned. As stated in what are often called the Definition of Chalcedon’s “four fences,” which are meant to safeguard rather than solve the mystery of the incarnation of God, deity and humanity subsist in Jesus Christ without: (1) confusion, (2) transmutation, (3) division, or (4) contradistinction.

The all-important question Jesus poses to his church is, “Who do *you* say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15). When the church dares to respond according to the apostolic witness of Scripture and the benchmarks of Christian orthodoxy derived from Scripture—including the Nicene Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon—the answer is staggering: Jesus Christ is the very content and meaning of reality. The incarnation teaches us that just as there is no true knowledge of God the Father to be had independently of or remotely from God the Son, there is no true knowledge of humanity to be had independently of or remotely from the God who comes to us in and as the man Jesus. Blaise Pascal touches on this point when musing: “Not only do we only know God through Jesus Christ, but we only know ourselves through Jesus Christ; we only know life and death through Jesus

³¹“The Definition of Chalcedon (451),” in CC, 35–36.

Christ. Apart from Jesus Christ we cannot know the meaning of our life or our death, of God or of ourselves.”³² Fashioning notions about God and humanity, then projecting those notions on God and humanity independently of or remotely from him who truly, fully, perfectly embodies God and humanity, is but an exercise in idolatry, betraying a failure to grasp the significance of the incarnation, a failure to have learned Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer thus remarks:

Christian belief deduces that the reality of God is not in itself merely an idea from the fact that this reality of God has manifested and revealed itself in the midst of the real world. In Jesus Christ the reality of God entered into the reality of this world. The place where the answer is given, both to the question concerning the reality of God and to the question concerning the reality of the world, is designated solely and alone by the name Jesus Christ. . . . In Him all things consist (Col. 1:17). Henceforward one can speak neither of God nor of the world without speaking of Jesus Christ. All concepts of reality which do not take account of Him are abstractions.³³

And again:

There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is the reality of God, which has become manifest in Christ in the reality of the world. Sharing in Christ we stand at once in both the reality of God and the reality of the world. . . . The world has no reality of its own, independently of the revelation of God in Christ. One is denying the revelation of God in Jesus Christ if one tries to be “Christian” without seeing and recognizing the world in Christ.³⁴

If the incarnation designates Jesus Christ as the content and meaning of reality, surely the incarnation designates Jesus Christ as the content and meaning of salvation. We observed that Gregory of Nazianzus attested to the profound gospel significance of the incarnation by stating that any humanity God the Son has not assumed is humanity God the Son cannot save; for only that assumed humanity can be brought into a true, full, perfect, and personal relationship with God in the person of Christ. To say

³²Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, no. 417, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1995), 141.

³³Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Neville Horton Smith (1955; repr., New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1979), 194.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 197.

otherwise is to suggest that there are aspects of our humanity that do not need saving, or that fallen humans can receive the saving benefits of God independently of or remotely from Jesus Christ. Gregory's point reverberates through the thought of the two greatest shapers of the Protestant Reformation, and thus of historic evangelicalism. Luther marvels, "He [Jesus Christ] condescends to assume my flesh and blood, my body and soul."³⁵ And the point Calvin stressed before all others when discussing salvation is that we receive the saving benefits of God only as those benefits are mediated to us as humans in and through the humanity of Jesus Christ. Calvin proclaims:

First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us, and we are separated from him, all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and to dwell within us. . . . We also, in turn, are said to be "engrafted into him" [Rom. 11:17], and to "put on Christ" [Gal. 3:27]; for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him.³⁶

When the church dares to grasp the gospel significance of the incarnation according to the apostolic witness of Scripture and her Scripture-derived creeds, she refuses to separate Christ's person from his work, as if his incarnate humanity were little more than a prerequisite for his atoning activity. Likewise, the church refuses to separate Christ's saving benefits from Christ himself, as if salvation were the reception of an objectified commodity given on account of Christ yet apart from him—that is, as if Christ were the agent or condition of our salvation but not that salvation himself. Finally, the church refuses to separate the objective accomplishments of Christ's saving activity for his people from the subjective effects of Christ's being with and in his people, as if our relation to Christ were extrinsic and abstract—that which is merely metaphorical, moral, volitional, legal, or ideational—as opposed to an inner experience of the life-giving, life-transforming presence of God. The glorious reality of which the gospel speaks is not the reception of an impersonal benefit called salvation, but the reception of Christ, and thus salvation *in him*.

³⁵"Sermon on the Gospel of St. John 6:47," in *LW*, 22:102.

³⁶*Inst.*, 3.1.1.

FACING AND FILLING THE VOID: ABOUT THIS BOOK

Let us now call to mind the observation of Dorothy Sayers near the beginning of this chapter, namely, that to tell most modern Christians about the staggering reality of the incarnation is to invite a response of bewilderment. This situation is troubling and saddening, but not altogether perplexing, for telling people about the incarnation is telling them that Jesus Christ is not only the content and meaning of salvation, but also the content and meaning of reality, given that in him the reality of God entered into the reality of our human existence. However, most modern Christians do not sufficiently grasp that Jesus Christ holds all things together and is preeminent in all things, such that the meaning of God, and no less the meaning of human existence, must be revealed in him. Though perhaps not all that perplexing, this situation is certainly grave, and its gravity requires that it be faced squarely. It is a grave state of affairs that many modern Christians are unable to think and speak about the incarnation with any considerable sense of competency, let alone any particular sense of wonder and delight. After all, the very center of the Christian confession is the conviction that the Word became flesh, our flesh, in Jesus Christ; thus, this current state of affairs cannot help but have the most detrimental effects on every dimension of the Christian life, individually and corporately. Graver still, this state of affairs dishonors the incarnate God himself, who is supremely worthy of all our faith, hope, love, and worship.

This book is aimed at addressing and, in some modest measure, redressing this state of affairs by providing a sustained exploration of the inexhaustible wonders and vast implications of the incarnation. We shall proceed on the premise that the supreme mystery—and, indeed, scandal—at the center of Christian confession, and no less at the center of all reality, is the incarnation of God in and as the man Jesus Christ. As we immerse ourselves in the doctrine of the incarnation, our prayer is that the One to whom this doctrine sings, the incarnate Savior, will graciously impart to us a richer knowledge of himself and, in turn, of the triune God, ourselves, salvation, the church, and more. With a view to moving forward in this exploration, let us identify and briefly discuss a few core characteristics of this undertaking.

First, this book is a work in theology. As such, it prioritizes the question of *who* over the question of *what*. In other words, priority is given to the

question, “Who is the incarnate Christ?” over the question, “What is the relevance of the incarnate Christ?” Ours is a pragmatic culture; it prizes and praises utility, efficiency, and expediency. Consequently, the latter question is routinely prioritized in contemporary Christian discourse, sometimes to such a degree and extent as to nearly eclipse the former question altogether. Let us speak plainly: this betrays an idolatrous tendency to place more value and interest in the blessings of Christ than in Christ himself, a tendency to see Christ not as a matchlessly beautiful end in himself, but as a means to other greater and grander personal, social, or cultural ends.³⁷ Because everything in the Christian confession depends upon knowing who Jesus Christ is, to begin by asking the wrong question is to make our first step a misstep, ensuring our failure to grasp the heart and significance of the gospel.³⁸ Is this to suggest that theology is not practical or pastoral? No! On the contrary, we should sooner ask if anything could be so impractical or nonpastoral as a lack of knowing God. Theology is both practical and pastoral for the express reason that it is *theological*, that its aim is to give true and accurate expression to the identity and acts of its subject: the triune God of the gospel, whose divine self-exposition of God and man is embodied in the incarnate Christ.³⁹

Second, this book is a work in confessional theology, as distinguished from speculative or overtly apologetic theology, at least insofar as apologetics is often understood. As it is used here, the adjective *confessional* does not indicate an exclusive allegiance to the confessional documents of any one denomination. Rather, the adjective identifies an ecclesial and doxological posture that insists that Christian theology cannot be an exercise in convictional detachment, an exercise in which we step outside the presence of revelation, the practice of faith and worship, or participation in the church to adopt a different—a more abstract or supposedly neutral—stance toward the Christian confession. Used in this sense, confessional theology rejects as a piece of Enlightenment mythology the notion that the operations of reason are a sphere from which God’s presence may be effectively banished.⁴⁰

As such, this book prioritizes the question of *who* over the question

³⁷ James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996), 28–29.

³⁸ Andrew Purves, “Who Is the Incarnate Saviour of the World?” in *An Introduction to Torrance Theology: Discovering the Incarnate Saviour*, ed. Gerrit Scott Dawson (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 23.

³⁹ Purves, *Reconstructing Pastoral Theology*, 7, 12.

⁴⁰ John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 14–15.

of *how*. In other words, priority is given to the question, “Who is the incarnate Christ?” over the question, “How could an incarnate Christ be possible?” As Bonhoeffer poignantly attests, the latter question is a godless question inasmuch as it seeks to establish the possibility and knowledge of God apart from God—that is, it tacitly denies not only that God alone is able to reveal and authenticate God, but also that Jesus Christ is God incarnate. To demand an answer to the question of how an incarnate Christ could be possible is to tacitly deny that Christ’s witness to himself is either self-authenticating or sufficient. Such a denial requires a search above and beyond Christ for reasons independent of or remote from Christ that are deemed capable of rendering Christ’s witness to himself legitimate and viable.⁴¹ At bottom, those who will not confess Jesus Christ as the incarnate Lord according to his own witness must establish the conditions for this possibility according to other self-identified, self-appointed, and, at least in effect, self-verifying standards of authentication. The legitimacy and viability of Jesus Christ’s being the incarnate Lord must then be evaluated and concluded by those standards, with his claim to lordship being rejected or conferred accordingly.

Confessional theology maintains that conferred lordship is a contradiction in terms. If Jesus Christ is Lord, and thus Lord of his own self-disclosure, then the conditions of his lordship can only and ever be set by him, not his followers or his critics. The incarnation is the God-given reality from which theology begins, not a plausible possibility toward which theology moves. Is the charge of “foolishness” sometimes waged against confessional theology by those who prefer “the free play of intellectual judgment”? Indeed. This charge “is a permanent accompaniment for any authentically Christian theology.”⁴² Does confessional theology have a low estimation of reason? No. Confessional theology simply insists that our reason is not a transcendent and autonomous entity before which God is summoned and by which God is judged. On the contrary, our reason is summoned into the presence of God, where it must be purged of idolatry and self-lordship by being crucified and raised to new life in Jesus Christ if it is to be made a fit handmaiden to faith in praise of God and service to his church.⁴³

⁴¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Christ the Center*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 30–37.

⁴² Webster, “Incarnation,” 204, 207–8.

⁴³ Webster, *Holiness*, 8, 17; Kelly M. Kopic, *A Little Book for New Theologians: Why and How to Study Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 49–63.

Confessional theology insists that the incarnation of God is and shall always remain a mystery. In no sense does this imply that nothing may be known about the incarnation. Rather, it means that the incarnation's depth and breadth are such as to prohibit its ever being plumbed or spanned. The incarnation can never be exhaustively explained, much less explained away. Far from being a concession to irrationality, acknowledging the irreducibly mysterious nature of the incarnation is a mark of intellectual maturity, displaying sanctified reason's proper suspicion of all ostensibly sophisticated forms of infidelity that presume to "solve" the One who became what he created without ceasing to be God. In other words, confessional theology refuses to degrade biblical mysteries by reducing them to problems. Problems are subject to solution by the application of an appropriate technique, whereas biblical mysteries transcend every conceivable solution or technique. Problems elicit frustration and invite resolution, whereas biblical mysteries elicit contemplation and invite adoration. Problems obscure other related matters until solved, whereas biblical mysteries illumine related matters without ever surrendering their own inherent inscrutability.⁴⁴ Such is the mystery of the incarnation, splendidly set to song by H. R. Bramley:

A Babe on the breast of a Maiden he lies,
 Yet sits with the Father on high in the skies;
 Before him their faces the Seraphim hide,
 While Joseph stands waiting, unscared, by his side. . . .
 O wonder of wonders, which none can unfold,
 The Ancient of Days is an hour or two old;
 The Maker of all things is made of the earth,
 Man is worshiped by Angels, and God comes to birth.⁴⁵

Third, this book is a work in evangelical theology in two important senses. On the one hand, the adjective *evangelical* aptly locates this book's authors within the evangelical tradition—that tributary within the broader stream of Christian expression rooted in classical Christian orthodoxy and shaped by the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation and its heirs. Our work on the incarnation is thus grounded in Scripture, committed to

⁴⁴Vernon C. Grounds, "The Postulate of Paradox," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 7, no. 1 (Winter 1964): 4–5 (hereafter *BETS*).

⁴⁵H. R. Bramley, "The Great God of Heaven Is Come Down to Earth," no. 29 in *The English Hymnal* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 51.

Christian orthodoxy as articulated in the Nicene Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon, and informed by a wide range of theologians within the broader Christian tradition, both past and present. On the other hand, the adjective *evangelical* also describes a theological conviction of this book's authors that was quite simply bedrock to the theology of sixteenth-century Reformers such as Luther and Calvin, but is often absent from the thought of many who now consider themselves heirs of those Reformers. The conviction is that theology is faithful to Jesus Christ and beneficial to his church only when the living Truth himself prescribes the method by which God is known and confessed. The God-given vocation of theology is to be a servant of the Truth, never his self-appointed master. Thus, theology adopts a posture of suspicion and incredulity toward its Lord and his claim to be the divine self-exposition of God and man whenever it prescribes a method of its own choosing and assumes for that method an independent and authoritarian role in its vocation.⁴⁶ For this reason, Webster notes that perhaps the primary mark of authenticity for any theologizing on the incarnation is whether it resists the temptation of self-lordship, "or prefers, instead, to establish an independent colony of the mind from which to make raids on the church's confession."⁴⁷ As such, we maintain that theology is aptly called "evangelical" when it relates to Jesus Christ in a way that is specifically ordered by the "theo-logic" of the gospel, when it refuses to undermine and obscure the identity and significance of Jesus Christ by lifting him from the habitat of scriptural witness or laying for him a foundation alien to his own self-authenticating lordship.

CHAPTER PROSPECTUS

The remaining chapters of this book fill in the skeletal structure provided in the present chapter by exploring the relation of the incarnation to other major facets of the Christian faith. Chapter 2 is about the incarnation in relation to the Trinity. Here we discuss how the incarnate Jesus Christ manifests the inner being and heart of God by disclosing the intimate and eternal relationship enjoyed by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Further, we discuss how believers are granted saving experiential knowledge of the triune God of the gospel as they are joined to the incarnate Jesus

⁴⁶Torrance, *The School of Faith*, 1.

⁴⁷Webster, "Incarnation," 204.

Christ so as to partake in the life and love Christ shares with the Father in the communion of the Spirit.

Chapter 3 looks at the incarnation in relation to the attributes of God. Here we discuss how beholding the face of God in the face of Jesus Christ radically challenges all our self-styled expectations and assumptions regarding the nature and character of God. The attributes of God are indelibly Trinitarian and definitively displayed in the incarnate Christ, and so must be understood in dynamic, relational, and communicative terms. Christ assumed our flesh not to provide an object lesson on divine attributes, but to participate as God in our humanity, redeeming and remaking us, so that the life of God might be imaged in the life of Christ's body and bride, the church.

Chapter 4 moves our exploration of the incarnation more decidedly and explicitly into the realm of salvation by discussing the kind of humanity that God the Son assumed in becoming flesh. Because most modern Christians think our Lord assumed a human nature different and dissociated from our own, they tend to view the incarnation as merely an incidental prerequisite for our redemption. Here we propose that our redemption began with the incarnation, when God the Son penetrated the depths of our darkness to seize our corrupted and estranged humanity and make it his own, re-creating and reorienting our humanity by taking it into the very life of God.

Chapter 5 moves us more deeply still into the realm of salvation by discussing how the incarnation is inherently and dynamically related to the entire scope of our salvation, given that the incarnate Christ is himself the very substance and sum of that salvation. Here we propose an understanding of salvation with the incarnation at its center. The great soteriological significance of Christ's vicarious humanity is addressed with respect to his birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension in the hope of deepening and broadening common notions of what it means to be reconciled to God in Christ by every aspect of our incarnate Savior's embodied existence.

Chapter 6 discusses the incarnation in relation to the application of Christ's reconciling activity, a topic commonly called applied soteriology. The logic of the incarnation indicates that salvation consists in nothing less or other than our being joined to the incarnate Christ, who has joined himself to us. Our incarnate Mediator comes to us clothed in his saving

benefits, and he cannot be sundered from them. Thus, it is only by receiving Christ himself that we come to enjoy all he has done for us and our salvation. Here we address this glorious reality, giving particular attention to three major aspects of applied soteriology: justification, sanctification, and adoption.

Chapter 7 considers the incarnation in relation to the church. Seeing the church in light of Christ's humanity helps us grasp that the church is, in fact, the very body and bride of Christ. The incarnation also clarifies the nature and purpose of the preached word of God and the visible words of baptism and the Lord's Supper, constituting as they do the God-ordained means by which we commune with the living Word himself. This chapter aims to retrieve some of the richness found in historical evangelical ecclesiology so as to fortify the holiness and vitality of the contemporary evangelical church.

Finally, chapter 8 addresses the incarnation in relation to marriage and sex. Christians too often think and speak about these precious gifts of God in ways that abstract them from the *imago Dei* ("image of God") and the reality of Christ's intimate, saving union with his bride. Here we propose that our understanding of marriage and sex must not be detached from the union of God and man in Jesus Christ, because God intended marriage and sex to be life-affirming, life-enriching, life-giving manifestations of the gospel. Further, we propose that understanding marriage and sex in light of the incarnation punctuates the destructive and absurd nature of marital infidelity and sexual unholiness, which are, in effect, contradictions of the gospel.

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General Index

- abortion, 229–31
abstraction, 184, 237
absurdity, 55–56
accommodation, 80
active obedience, 172–73
Adam, 106–7, 114–15, 116, 138, 139, 209,
216–17, 222
adoption, 178–82
adoptionism, 28
adoration, 42, 204
adultery, 211
agnosticism, 80
alienation, 51n5, 90, 113, 122, 144, 153
Allen, R. Michael, 119n30
almightiness, 84
analogy, 187, 188, 216n8
Anderson, Ray S., 217n12
anhypostasis, 122n35
anointing of the sick, 197n24
anthropology, 213, 214n3
anthropopathism, 97
anti-creation, 219, 227
apatheia, 97
apathy, 99
Apollinarianism, 33–34, 114
apologetics, 52
Apostles' Creed, 145
apostolic confession, 23–25, 64, 167–68
Arianism, 28, 97–98
Aristotelianism, 30
ascension, 103, 151–55
aseity, 84
Athanasius, 29–30, 66, 129
atonement, 49, 103–4, 120, 125
attributes, of God, 73–85
Augustine, 189, 191
authentication, 41
authenticity, 43
autonomy, 228
baptism, 136–38, 192, 197, 198–200
Barth, Karl, 196, 216n8, 217
Basil of Caesarea, 114–15
beauty, 212
Berkhof, Louis, 106, 182n53
bewilderment, 19, 39
biblicism, 194
bidirectional, mediation as, 129
birth, of Jesus Christ, 132–35
Blocher, Henri, 216, 228
body, 119
body of Christ, 186–89
Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, 37, 41, 52n10, 196, 234
Boston, Thomas, 161–62
Boyer, Steven D., 218n17
Bramley, H. R., 42
Bromiley, Geoffrey, 195n19
burning bush, 96
Calvin, John, 25n16, 38, 49, 52, 56n18, 63,
84, 94n41, 96n43, 117–18, 119, 124, 128,
130–31, 134, 151, 152, 155, 159, 162, 164,
167, 169, 172, 173–75, 180n49, 182, 189,
192, 200–205, 215n7, 217n14, 220n19,
222
Cappadocians, 66
Carmelites, 105
Carson, D. A., 165
Chan, Simon, 188
Chesterton, G. K., 17, 21, 27
christenings, 198
Christian orthodoxy, 20–23, 104
Christmas, 135
christology, 158, 191n10
church
as body of Christ, 186–89, 236
as bride of Christ, 221–24
great need of, 205–7
holiness of, 91
and love of God, 87
persecution of, 95

- soteriology of, 184–85
- and union with Christ, 162–63
- Clark, John C., 151n40
- cloud, 100
- comfort, 189
- communicable attributes, 84
- communion, in Trinity, 66–67
- communion of saints, 83, 91
- compassion, 99
- completeness, 142
- condemnation, 90, 113, 122, 144
- condescension, 80, 89, 100
- confession, 23–25, 31, 79, 137
- confessional theology, 40–42
- confirmation, 197n24
- confusion, 219, 225, 227
- consistency, 97
- consolation, 189
- constancy, 97
- contemplation, 42
- corruption, 34, 113
- cosmology, 191n10
- Council of Basel (1431–35), 105
- Council of Chalcedon (451), 27, 35–36, 114
- Council of Constantinople (381), 138n20
- Council of Constantinople (553), 146n28
- Council of Nicaea (325), 27–33, 138n20
- Council of Trent (1545–63), 105, 174n37
- Cranfield, C. E. B., 113, 124
- creation, 86
- creativity, 13
- creatureliness, 29, 119
- credulity, 47
- crucifixion, 101
- Cyril of Alexandria, 47–48

- Davis, Thomas, 202
- death, 51n5, 90, 93, 142–47
- Definition of Chalcedon (451), 48, 68, 104, 120–21
- deism, 129
- demonic affliction, 93
- descent, 153
- desires, 11, 72
- dichotomies, 103–4, 112, 124
- differentiation, 88
- disease, 93
- disobedience, 140
- disruption, 219
- distinctio sed non separatio*, 166
- distortion, 225, 227

- divine impassibility, 97
- divine invasion, 80
- divine simplicity, 75
- divisions, 184
- divorce, 211, 224–25, 226–27, 230
- docetism, 113n17, 187
- doctrine, 20–23, 25
- Dominicans, 105
- doxology, 23–24, 204

- Eastern Orthodoxy, 21
- ecclesiology, 191n10
 - as minimalistic, 236–37
 - and soteriology, 184–85, 205–7
- economic Trinity, 78
- economy of salvation, 61
- Edwards, Jonathan, 86, 168, 180, 223, 224
- egoism, 101
- Elijah, 195
- emotions, 99
- endurance, 97
- enhyphostasis*, 122n35
- Enlightenment, 40, 50, 109
- “epistemic Pelagianism,” 52, 74
- epistemology, 49, 52, 53, 78
- equality, 28
- essence, 32
- estrangement, 153
- eternal life, 58, 69–70, 159, 179–80
- Eutychianism, 35
- evangelicalism, 38, 42, 106–7, 206–7
- Eve, 209, 216–17, 222
- exaltation, 95
- excitement, 23
- existence, 39, 143
- experience, 25, 50, 51

- face of God, 100
- Fairbairn, Donald, 58
- faith, 141, 166–69
- fall, 218–19, 227
- fiction, 17
- flesh, 119, 159n4
- foolishness, 41
- forensic justification, 171
- forgiveness, 171
- “four fences,” 36
- Franciscans, 105
- freedom, 75, 92–95, 134
- fullness, 142
- functional theory, of image of God, 214

- Gaffin, Richard, 148, 149, 172–73
 genealogies, 133–34
 glorification, 123
 glory, 75, 100–102
 God
 attributes of, 73–85
 as Father, 54–59
 freedom of, 92–95, 134
 glory of, 100–102
 holiness of, 88–92, 177
 as Holy Spirit, 59–64
 immutability of, 95–99
 love of, 85–88
 self-revelation of, 57, 60
 as triune, 31
 God-consciousness, 108
 Goroncy, Jason, 90
 gospel, 166–69
 blessings of, 169–82
 mystery of, 18
 reality of, 38
 as relational, 112
 transformation of, 177
 greatness, 101
 Gregory of Nazianzus, 33–34, 37–38, 76, 114
 Griffiths, Paul J., 188n6
 Grounds, Vernon, 161
 Grudem, Wayne, 106–7, 171n32
 Gunton, Colin, 216
- Hall, Christopher A., 218n17
 “hard saying,” 158n3
 harmony, 212
 Harnack, Adolf von, 30, 108–9
 Hellenism, 30, 97, 109
 heresy, 25–27
 heroism, 127
 Heron, Alasdair, 68–69n35
 Herrmann, Wilhelm, 108
 hierarchy, of beings, 29
 Hilary of Poitiers, 74, 122
 Hoekema, Anthony, 175n39
 holiness, 75, 88–92, 141, 176–77
 holy orders, 197n24
 Holy Spirit
 baptism by, 198
 communion of, 32
 as God, 59–64
 indwelling of, 153–54, 165
 in the Lord’s Supper, 203–4
 love of, 87–88
 power of, 134
 procession of, 63
 sanctification of, 123, 178
 work of, 111
 homoeroticism, 211, 230
homoousion, 66n26, 67–69, 110, 143
 homosexuality, 228
 Hooker, Richard, 124
hutothesia, 180–81
 humanity
 attributes of, 82–85
 of Jesus Christ, 33–38
 human nature, 113–18
 humiliation, 95, 123, 153, 231
 humility, 127
 hyper-spiritualism, 237
 hypostatic union, 36, 68n34, 84, 120, 122n35, 143, 146
- idolatry, 37, 40, 41, 53, 74, 155, 228
 illustrations, 187, 188
 image of God, 82, 99, 138, 214–24
 imitation, 141
 immaculate conception, 105–7
 immanent Trinity, 78
 immersion, 137, 198
 immutability, of God, 95–99
 impassibility, 97
 impotence, 93
 imputation, 131, 141, 171, 174
 incarnation
 delight in, 18–19
 minimizing of, 235–37
 as supreme mystery, 12
 incommunicable attributes, 84
 incorporation, 131–32, 137
 individualism, 110
 indwelling, 64, 211–14
Ineffabilis Deus, 105
 inherited sin, 107
 intercession, 152, 155
 intermediary, 117, 143
 interpretation, 26
 interruption, 113
 intimacy, 54, 67, 179, 201, 211–14, 222–24
 invasion, 113
 Irenaeus of Lyons, 80, 82, 115, 118, 140
 irony, 200, 210
 irrationality, 42
 isolation, 217
 Israel, 139

- Jesus Christ
 ascension of, 151–55
 baptism of, 136–38
 birth of, 132–35
 body of, 186–89
 death of, 142–47
 essence of, 32
 humanity of, 33–38, 128–32
 as image of God, 219–24
 life of, 138–42
 as Mediator, 62, 81–82, 117
 mystery of, 65
 obedience of, 172–73
 presence of, 166–69, 202
 resurrection of, 148–51
 self-testimony of, 55–59
 suffering of, 94–95
 as the Truth, 22
- John (apostle), 87
 John the Baptist, 136
 John of Damascus, 66, 81
 Johnson, Marcus Peter, 157n1
 joy, 212
 Judah, 133–34
 justice, 148n34
 justification, 151, 170–74, 181–82
- knowledge of God, 25, 29, 48–70
 Kuyper, Abraham, 118
kyrios, 23
- Lazarus, 150
 legal contracts, 160
 Leith, John, 30
 Letham, Robert, 66, 77, 165–66
 Lewis, C. S., 11, 18, 150, 194
 liberalism, 108–9
 life, 51n5, 64, 103, 138–42, 212, 230
logos, 234, 237
 Lord's Supper, 192, 197, 200–205
 love, 33, 55, 58, 67, 85–88, 70, 75, 98, 212
 Luther, Martin, 18–19, 25n16, 38, 59, 83–84,
 115–17, 122, 133–34, 144–45, 167, 168,
 170, 173–74, 176–77, 191n11, 192, 215
- Mariology, 105–6
 marriage, 163, 197n24, 209–32
 materialism, 237
 McGrath, Alister, 52
 mediation, 129
 Mediator, 62, 81–82, 111–12, 152–53
- memorialism, 201n27
 metaphors, 160
 mission, 26
 modalism, 28
 modernity, 50
 Monod, Adolphe, 53
 Monophysitism, 35
 monotheism, 28
 Moo, Douglas, 181n52
 moralism, 91, 110
 mortification, 199
 Moses, 100, 195
 murder, 230–31
 Murray, Andrew, 154
 mystery
 church's awareness of, 11
 of the gospel, 18
 and heresy, 27
 of Jesus Christ, 65
 of the Lord's Supper, 204–5
 of the sacraments, 189–92
 union with Christ as, 161–62
- mythology, 40
- nakedness, 209–10, 231
 naturalism, 74
 natural theology, 52n11
 “navel-gazing,” 169n25
 Nestorianism, 34, 98, 129, 145–46
 Nevin, John Williamson, 12, 118, 178, 196–97,
 233
 new creation, 135, 226
 new life, 230
 Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381),
 62–63, 138n20, 215
 Nicene Creed (325), 31, 67–68, 128–29,
 132–33, 138n20
 novelty, 13
 Nygren, Anders, 113n17
- obedience, 88, 139, 141
 objectification, 184
 O'Brien, Peter T., 190
 omni-affirmation, 99
 omnipotence, 84, 92–95, 134
 ontology, 78
 original sin, 105, 107, 116
 orthodoxy, 13, 20–23, 27, 104
- Packer, J. I., 18, 63n24, 85, 182
 participation

- in the gospel, 112
- in Jesus Christ, 131–32, 137, 141, 205–6
- in justification, 171, 173
 - and knowledge, 50–51
 - in the priesthood, 155
 - in the sacraments, 201, 202
- Pascal, Blaise, 36–37
- passive obedience, 172–73
- pathos*, 97
- Paul
 - on adoption, 180–81
 - on ascension, 151–52
 - on baptism, 137–38, 199–200
 - on the church, 187–88
 - on the death of Christ, 144, 147
 - on the flesh, 104–5, 119
 - on the Holy Spirit, 24
 - on knowledge of God, 61–62
 - on love, 98
 - on mediation, 129
 - on mystery, 190
 - on the preeminence of Christ, 20
 - on reconciliation, 128
 - on resurrection, 149–51
 - on salvation, 120
 - on sanctification, 175–76
 - on suffering, 94–95
 - on union with Christ, 161, 163
 - on works, 141
- Pelagianism, 52, 74, 206
- penance, 197n24
- perfection, 88
- perichōrēsis*, 66–67, 68–69, 77, 83, 212
- persecution, 95, 98
- personal union, 36, 68n34, 84, 120, 122n35, 143, 146
- Pharisees, 56
- Pius IX (Pope), 105
- Plantinga, Cornelius, 101, 219
- Platonism, 30
- plurality, 215
- pornography, 228–29, 230
- postmodernism, 190
- power, 75
- pragmatism, 40
- preaching, 26, 192–96
- premarital sex, 211
- priesthood of believers, 155
- problems, 42
- procession, 63–64
- progress, 109
- progressive revelation, 80
- propitiation, 148n34
- propositions, 22
- prostitutes, 163
- Protestantism, 21, 106–7, 237
- Protestant liberals, 108–9, 110
- Protestant Reformation, 38, 42–43, 159
- Pseudo-Dionysius, 81
- purity, 88
- Purves, Andrew, 51n7, 157, 186n3, 195, 206n35
- quality, 32
- quantity, 32
- rationalism, 22, 50, 52, 74, 190
- Rauschenbusch, Walter, 108
- reality, 233–34
 - meaning of, 36–37
 - as skewed, 11, 12
 - understanding of, 18
- reason, 40, 41, 49
- rebirth, 135
- recapitulation theory, of atonement, 140n21
- reconciliation, 49, 125, 128, 157, 190–91
- re-creation, 222
- redemption, 90, 148–49
- Reeves, Michael, 54n15, 146, 212
- Reformation, 38, 42–43, 159, 168, 170, 197, 200
- regressive revelation, 80
- relationship, 50
- Reno, R. R., 230n30
- repentance, 137
- representation, 131–32, 137
- resurrection, 95, 103, 148–51, 172, 176, 199
- Ritschl, Albrecht, 108
- Roman Catholicism, 21, 105–6, 110, 174, 197
- Sabellianism, 28
- sacraments, 189–205
- sainthood, 177
- salvation, 152, 236
 - economy of, 61, 62
 - meaning of, 37–38
 - as objectified, 158
- sanctification, 90, 123, 151, 174–78
- sarx*, 119, 159n4
- Satan, 92
- Sayers, Dorothy, 19, 39
- scandal, 49–50, 72, 79
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich, 108

- self-attestation, 136
 self-lordship, 43, 74, 90, 91, 139
 self-revelation, of God, 60
 self-righteousness, 91
 semi-Pelagianism, 52, 206
 sentimentalism, 160, 203
 sex, 209–32
 shame, 209–10, 231
 Shekinah, 100
 Shepherd, Victor, 59–60
 sickness, 93
 simplicity, 75, 77
 sin, 33, 89, 99, 119–20, 147
 skepticism, 190
 Smail, Thomas, 53n13
sola fide, 168–69
sola gratia, 170
 sonship, 178–82
 sophists, 116–17
 soteriology
 and adoption, 181–82
 and christology, 191n10
 and ecclesiology, 184–85, 206
 and epistemology, 53
 and preaching, 193–94
 and redemption, 149
 stability, 97
 Stoicism, 30, 99
 Strauss, David, 108
 stumbling block, 49–50
 subjectivism, 22
 submersion, 137
 substantive theory of the image, 214
 substitution, 131–32, 137, 144
 suffering, 93, 94–95, 99, 139
 supreme being, 74

 tabernacle, 100
 teaching, 26
 temple, 100
 Tertullian, 115, 122, 132, 134–35
 theology, 13, 39–40, 211, 234
 Thielicke, Helmut, 152, 217n13
 Thomas (apostle), 79
 Thomas Aquinas, 81
 Torrance, T. F., 30, 51, 66–67, 66n26, 69, 72,
 127, 165, 173, 185, 205, 218n16, 226
 transcendence, 88
 transfiguration, 195n18
 Trinity, 24
 attributes of, 76–79
 communion in, 66–67
 estrangement within, 146
 minimizing of, 235
 in Nicene Creed, 31
 self-revelation of, 53–54
 union with, 164–66
 tritheism, 28
 Troeltsch, Ernst, 108
 truth, 17, 22
 Turretin, Francis, 81

 unbelief, 90
 union with Christ, 57–59, 124, 158–69
 unitarianism, 110, 214n3, 225n24
 unity, 67, 77
 Upper Room Discourse, 79

 Vander Zee, Leonard, 191, 199
via causalitatis, 81
via eminentiae, 81
via negativa, 81
 vicarious humanity, 128–32
 victory, 91–92
 virgin birth, 105–7, 115, 134, 149
 virtual reality, 148–49n34
 virtual sex, 228–29
 vivification, 199
 vocation, 43
 Volf, Miroslav, 66

 Waltke, Bruce, 215n6
 way of causality, 81
 way of eminence, 81
 way of negation, 81
 weakness, 93
 Webster, John, 19, 43, 48n3, 52n8, 57, 62,
 122–23
 Weinandy, Thomas, 133
 Wesley, Charles, 54, 135
 West, Christopher, 230
 Western church, 77
 Westminster Shorter Catechism, 70
 wholeness, 142
 witness, 26
 wonder, 11, 19
 Word of God, 192–96
 worship, 21, 26, 91, 154–55, 228
 wrath, 89

 Zizioulas, John, 213n2
 Zwingli, Ulrich, 201n27

Scripture Index

Genesis

1	219
1:26	214
1:26–27	214
1:28	214, 227
2	219
2:7	146
2:17	141
2:18	216
2:23	217
2:24	222
3:15	222
3:22	176
38:1–5	134n13

Exodus

3:14	96
13:17–22	100
15:11	88
16:7	100
24:15–18	100
33:17–23	100
34:5–7	100
40:34–38	100

Leviticus

9:23–24	100
19:2	89

Numbers

9:15–23	100
---------	-----

1 Kings

8:10–11	100
---------	-----

Psalms

22	146
33:11	96
90:2	95
102:25–27	95
103:12	172
115:3	92
135:6	92

Isaiah

6:3	88, 91
12:6	89
43:3	89
43:15	89
46:10	92
48:12	95–96
53:3	172
53:12	88

Jeremiah

50:29	89
-------	----

Ezekiel

8:4	100
9:3	100
11:22–23	100
39:7	89

Daniel

4:35	92
------	----

Habakkuk

1:12	89
------	----

Malachi

3:6	96
-----	----

Matthew

1:1	133
1:18–21	134
1:18–25	106
1:23	32
3:6	136
3:11	136
3:13–15	146
3:13–17	136
3:15	137, 140, 198
3:17	136, 198
4:4	140
4:7	140
4:10	140
8:23–27	93
9:18–26	93, 150
9:35–36	99
11:27	32, 50, 78
13:53–58	71
16:13–16	23
16:15	27, 36
16:21–23	72, 147
16:24	94
16:24–25	102
17:5	57
19:4–6	226n25
20:29–34	99
26:36–38	99
26:57–68	71
27:15–23	71
27:46	146, 148
28:18–20	101
28:19	138, 198

Mark

1:4	136
1:9–11	136
1:11	57
1:24	89
1:40–41	99

3:5 99
 5:1–20 93
 7:31–37 93
 8:1–2 99
 8:34–35 102
 9:7 57
 10:13–16 99
 10:38 137
 10:39 137
 11:15–18 99
 14:32–34 99
 14:33 142
 14:36 64, 181
 14:66–72 72
 15:34 142, 146

Luke

1:26–35 149
 1:26–38 106
 1:30–35 134
 1:35 89
 2:52 123
 3:21–22 136
 3:22 57
 3:38 133
 4:1–13 140
 4:22 50
 4:31–37 93
 4:38–41 93
 5:12–26 93
 7:11–14 99
 7:11–17 150
 9:29–33 195
 9:35 57
 10:16 32, 195
 10:22 32, 78
 12:50 137
 19:41–44 99
 22:37 88
 22:39–45 140
 22:47 142
 22:50–51 140
 22:63–65 172
 23:53 149
 24:27 195, 222n21

John

1:1 234
 1:1–3 52n11, 93, 193, 227
 1:1–14 90
 1:3 30, 215
 1:4 141
 1:6–7 78
 1:11 71
 1:12 169
 1:12–13 135
 1:14 22, 100, 132, 193
 1:18 32, 78, 100
 1:29–34 136
 1:33 99
 1:34 136
 1:46 71
 2:1–11 93
 2:18–22 100
 2:19 158
 3:16 33, 86, 90
 3:19–20 90
 4:10 158

5:39–40 195, 222n21
 5:46 222n21
 6:35 158
 6:35–59 84
 6:53 202
 6:53–56 158
 6:54 236
 6:55–57 142
 6:56 128n2
 6:69 89
 8:12 158
 8:12–19 90
 8:19 56
 8:36 94
 8:41 56
 8:42–47 57
 8:46 121, 136
 8:56 57n19
 8:58 96
 10:17–18 93
 10:20 71
 10:22–30 84
 10:30 54, 66, 78
 11 99
 11:1–44 93
 11:25 141, 158
 11:38–44 150
 12:27–28 101
 12:44–45 78, 96
 12:44–46 90
 13:1 90
 13:21 99
 13:31–32 101
 14 167, 181
 14:1–11 97
 14:2 152n41, 179
 14:6 22, 52n12, 58, 135, 141, 158
 14:6–7 179
 14:7 50
 14:8 71
 14:8–10 78
 14:9 50
 14:9–10 32
 14:10 66, 179
 14:10–11 55
 14:15–20 60
 14:16–20 24, 32, 83, 87, 164, 203
 14:18–20 153
 14:20 69, 179
 14:23 55, 168, 179
 14:25–26 32
 14:27 99
 15:1–17 87
 15:5 178
 15:9 98, 179
 15:11 99
 15:12 98
 15:18–19 95
 15:26 32
 16:4–15 32
 16:12–15 61, 203
 16:14–15 179
 16:27 179
 16:33 95
 17:1–3 84
 17:1–6 101
 17:3 51

254 *Scripture Index*

17:5 100
 17:11 179
 17:13 99
 17:18 101
 17:19 176
 17:20–23 167, 193
 17:20–24 86
 17:20–26 86
 17:21 169, 179
 17:22 101
 17:22–23 179
 17:24 55
 17:25–26 32, 55
 17:26 169, 179
 18:20 153
 19:28–30 137
 20:24–25 72
 20:24–29 78, 153
 20:30–31 167
 20:31 169, 204

Acts

4:12 130
 9:5 95
 13:24 136
 19:4 136

Romans

1:7 23
 1:16 166, 193
 1:22–27 228
 1:25–27 228
 3:24 149
 4:25 172
 5:1 23
 5:5 88
 5:8 86
 6:1–4 175
 6:1–11 83, 91
 6:3 147, 151n39
 6:3–4 137
 6:3–5 199
 6:3–6 172
 6:4 176
 6:4–5 147
 6:5 151
 6:6 150, 151, 176
 6:9 147
 6:10 151
 6:10–11 147
 6:11 176
 6:18 176
 6:23 147
 8:1 173
 8:1–3 172
 8:3 105, 113, 119, 137, 150, 159n4
 8:9 181
 8:9–10 64
 8:9–11 83, 91, 203
 8:11 84, 94
 8:15 64, 181
 8:15–17 24
 8:23 119
 8:29 86, 135, 141, 176, 220
 8:35–39 226
 10:9 23
 10:14 168, 193
 11:17 38

1 Corinthians

1:10 23
 1:30 53, 90, 120, 130, 141, 149, 159,
 171, 175
 2:10 66
 2:11–16 62
 5:5 119
 6 187
 6:11 199
 6:15 188
 6:15–16 163
 10:16 159n4, 204
 11:24–26 204
 12:3 23
 12:12 188
 12:12–13 200
 12:27 188
 13:1–3 98
 15 150
 15:21–22 149
 15:44 119
 15:45 220
 15:47 220

2 Corinthians

3:17 94
 3:18 102
 4:4 80
 4:5 23
 4:6 100
 5:16–17 150
 5:21 105, 119, 144, 147, 148, 171
 13:3 168, 193
 13:5 169
 13:14 62, 235

Galatians

2:20 83, 151, 172
 3:1 168, 193
 3:13 130, 144, 145, 172
 3:26 169
 3:26–27 181, 199
 4:4 135
 4:4–6 181
 4:6 24, 64, 83
 5:1 94

Ephesians

1:2–3 23
 1:3–6 86, 180
 1:4 176
 1:7–10 93
 1:9–10 55, 190
 1:10 12, 237
 1:11 92
 1:13 167, 169, 193
 1:19–20 84, 94
 1:22–23 83, 187
 1:23 96n43, 189, 222
 2:1–3 141
 2:1–7 86
 2:4–7 152
 2:10 176
 2:18 62
 2:22 64
 3:4–7 190
 3:17 169
 4:5 138

4:8	142
4:21	168, 193
4:22–24	151
5:23–32	83
5:26–27	91
5:29–32	163, 221
5:30	83
5:31	222
5:31–32	187
5:32	190, 222
6:19–20	161, 190

Philippians

2:5–8	123
2:7	142
2:8	172
2:11	23
3:4–9	141
3:8	23
3:8–9	172
3:8–10	94
3:9–10	84
3:10	94n41

Colossians

1:15	80, 138, 189, 220
1:15–16	93
1:15–17	215
1:15–18	12
1:15–20	190
1:16	55, 227, 237
1:16–17	30, 52n11, 190
1:17	37, 234
1:17–18	20
1:18	149
1:19	138
1:19–20	93
1:20	12
1:22	117
1:27	161, 190
2:2	190
2:6	23
2:6–7	169
2:6–15	83
2:9	12
2:11	147, 150
2:11–12	138
2:11–13	91
2:12	169, 172
2:13	141
2:20	172
3:1–3	150
3:1–4	83
4:3	161, 190

1 Thessalonians

2:13	193
5:9	23

1 Timothy

2:5	51, 80, 81, 111, 128, 129, 164, 235
6:15	93
6:16	90

2 Timothy

2:13	92
------	----

Titus

1:2	92
3:4–6	88

Hebrews

1:1–2	93
1:1–3	30, 52n11
1:2	227
1:3	87, 100, 138, 220, 237
2:10	124
2:14–18	153
2:17	130
4:14–16	153
4:15	123, 136, 142
5:2	130
5:7–8	123
5:7–9	139
5:8–9	124
6:18	92
9:14	121, 136, 146
10:19–20	153
13:8	97

James

1:17	97
2:1	23

1 Peter

2:22	121, 136, 147
2:24	147, 172

2 Peter

1:17	57
------	----

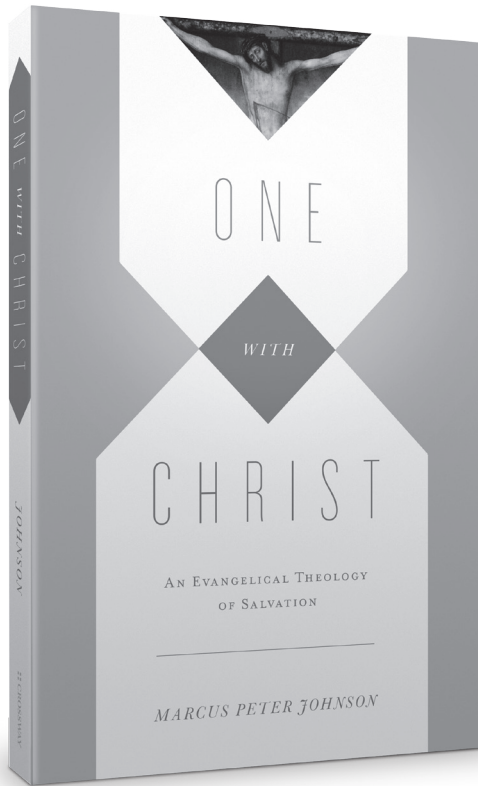
1 John

1:1–3	179n47
2:2	172
2:22	180
2:23–25	179n47
3:1–3	179n47
3:5	121, 136
3:9–10	179n47
3:24	179n47
4:2–3	180
4:7–11	98
4:7–17	179n47
4:8	33, 85
4:9–11	87
4:13–15	64
4:13–21	88
4:16	85
5:1–4	179n47
5:11–12	180
5:12	55
5:13	179n47
5:18	179n47
5:20	70, 179n47

Revelation

1:5	149
1:8	23, 93
4:8	88, 91
5	93, 153
6:16–17	90
15:4	88
19:6–9	223
19:15–16	93

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MARCUS PETER JOHNSON (PhD, University of Toronto) is associate professor of theology at Moody Bible Institute. He is the author of *One with Christ: An Evangelical Theology of Salvation* and is a member of Grace Lutheran Church.

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