The Four

Peter J.
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THE FOUR

a survey of
the Gospels

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INTRODUCTION

Christology appears to be one of the most complicated, technical, jargon-ridden areas of Christian theology. Beginning with the church fathers, theologians developed a sophisticated conceptual apparatus and vocabulary for dealing with Christological issues. To get it right, we need to distinguish between person and nature, know the difference between substance and subsistence, know that there can be union without mixture and distinction without separation, and believe that the Word is en-hypostatically related to an an-hypostatic human nature.

Even those who agree with the orthodox formulas of Nicea and Chalcedon do not always function within the same Christological framework. J. N. D. Kelly long ago distinguished the mainly Alexandrian Word-flesh Christologies from the mainly Antiochene Word-man Christologies. The former tend to maximize the confession that the Word of God was the subject of the story of Jesus and to minimize the full humanity of Jesus, and at the heretical margins turned into Apollinarianism (which denies that Jesus has a human soul). Since the Eternal Son acts in Jesus for our salvation, Word-flesh Christologies are soteriologically monergistic, but since they tend to minimize the historical Jesus they lean toward docetism, characterizing salvation as escape from the material world. Word-man Christologies

insist on the full humanity of Jesus, but tend to divide the human nature from the divine nature, and at the margins turned into Nestorianism. Soteriologically, Word-man Christologies lean toward synergism, since salvation is the product of the cooperative work of the divine Word and the human nature. Neither the Word-man nor the Word-flesh is heretical or orthodox in itself, but both have tendencies toward one or another heresy.

Chalcedon's formulation of the relation of the two natures in the one person has been particularly difficult to manage, no doubt because the council was an effort, not always or altogether coherent, to combine different strains of patristic Christology. Among the many disputed questions is, Does the Word constitute a single Person by uniting divine nature and human nature, or does the one Person of the Word precede the incarnation and remain the same Person in the incarnation? Is the incarnation about two natures coming together to *form* a single Person, or is it about a single Person taking on a second nature? Is the formula, Divine Nature + Human Nature = the one Person of the God-Man? Or is it, Person of Word + Human Nature = the one Person of the God-Man?

Chalcedon's creed appears to answer the question straightforwardly:

> [O]ne and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion,

> without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but *rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence,* not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has handed down to us (emphasis added).

The fathers at Chalcedon say that the one person is *formed* by the addition of a human nature to the divine nature of the son: "coming together to form one person and subsistence." That's been the opinion of many orthodox Christians since the fifth century, but it was definitely *not* the opinion of Cyril of Alexandria, the great opponent of Nestorius. For Cyril, nearly everything hinged on the continuity of the Person of the Word from the pre- to the post-incarnate state; it all depends on the fact that the God-man is not some "new" Person, but the very Son of God in the flesh.

The sixteenth century contributed to Christological conflict as well. Reformation debates between Calvinists and Lutherans added new intensity to traditional questions about the *communicatio idiomatum,* the communication of attributes from one nature to the other. Do the attributes of one nature become the attributes of the other nature? Does the human nature of Jesus become omnipresent and omnipotent? Conversely, does the nature of God the Son take on human attributes of limitation, finitude, weakness? Or, as Calvinists argued, do we *attribute* the characteristics of each nature to the single *Person* of the God-man, without any *actual* "transfer" of attributes across the boundary of the natures? If we say, "The Son of God was finite," are we simply saying, "The human nature is finite, but since that

human nature belonged to the Son of God, we can *say* that the Son of God experienced human limitations. Even though he didn't. Not really"? Or do we really mean, "The Son of God went through the human experience of limitation"?

If the complications of orthodox Christology are bewildering, the array of heretical options is more so. Barth deftly classifies Christological heresies as either "Ebionite" or "Docetic"—the former treating Jesus as the "apotheosis of man" and the latter treating Jesus as the embodiment or personification of some Idea, so that the specific actions and character of Jesus of Nazareth are an arbitrary husk that we discard to get to the nut. The Ebionite uses Christology as a springboard for a thoroughgoing humanism; for the Docetist, the Savior could just as easily have been Jason of Athens as Jesus of Nazareth. The intriguing thing about this classification is that both of these theories were originally theories about *Jesus,* not about the Eternal Son as such, yet Barth uses them to discuss dogmatic errors regarding the Eternal Son. For Barth, of course, there could be no knowledge of the "Eternal Son as such," since He reveals Himself only as Jesus.

By focusing on two "fundamental" Christological errors, Barth makes it look easy. But these two errors elaborate themselves in dozens of different specific directions. Among the "Docetic" heretics are "Monophysites" (also known as "Eutychians," after a monk named Eutyches), who believe that after the incarnation there was only one nature (*physis*) in Jesus; but there are also Apollinarians, who believe that the Word occupies the space of the human soul in Jesus. Perhaps Barth would place Nestorians among the Ebionites, since they treat the human nature almost as a second person. But where do we place the Adoptionists and Monarchians and Sabellians and Patripassians and Psilanthropists and all the rest?

And what's the point? Whatever happened to the Gospels in all this? Haven't we left the living, risen Jesus buried in a cave of jargon and metaphysics?

Classical Christology has its distortions. It has pitched its tent almost exclusively at the margins of the gospel story. The few narratives of Jesus' birth, along with John's great prologue, have been central to discussions of the nature of the Incarnation; the stories of the crucifixion have played a central role in the development of atonement theologies, though not nearly so great a role as Paul's discussions of the death of Jesus. The period between birth and death, the life and ministry and miracles of Jesus, have played very little role in the development of Christology. For some Protestants, the avoidance of the gospels partly results from embarrassment about Jesus' appalling lack of attention to justification by faith alone and His puzzling, and no doubt ironic, insistence on obedience. But the minimal use of the gospel stories in Christological discussion started long before the Reformation. For all the intense attention, debate, and exegesis, and for all the technical terminology and distinctions, Christology remains, two millennia into church history, in its infancy.

On the other hand (and there is always another hand): The Christological technicalities of the early Church, the Reformation, and the modern age are not intended to move Christians away from the gospels but to provide coordinates for reading the gospels. Christological controversies are about hermeneutics as much as anything else. They raise and answer the question, Whom are we reading about when we read the gospels? Who is the hero of the story? Answering "Jesus" is correct, but insufficient. Is the Jesus we read about in the gospels a God or a man? Or is He God now and then and man at other times—God when He's doing God-things like miracles but man when He is weak, God when

He's full but man when He's empty? Most importantly, who is that on the cross? Does Jesus suffer on the cross as a shell of a man abandoned by His better, divine half, or is God dying? And, if the latter, whatever could that mean?

And classical Christology provides the *right* coordinates. Orthodox Christology insists that the hero of the gospel story is the Son of God who has assumed human flesh. Everything Jesus does and says and suffers is what the Son of God does and says and suffers. Jesus is never a human shell, emptied of divine presence. He is, from the moment when the Spirit overshadowed Mary to knit Him in His mother's womb, to the last cry of dereliction, the Son of God.

This, especially the cross, was always the stumbling block of heretics. How can the exalted, pure Creator have such intimate contact with the grossness of human flesh? How can *God* enter a womb and be born? On the face of it, isn't that just *absurd?* How can God sweat blood and die in anguish? Arians said, God can't; so Jesus must be a secondary, not-quite-god. God can't do those things, so He sends an exalted creature to do His dirty work. Nestorians also said, God can't; so some happenings in the life of Jesus—birth and death especially—are happenings to the human, not the divine, nature, while other happenings happen to the divine nature. Docetists said, God can't; so it's all appearance; the Son has no real human flesh. These denials are only common sense, common Greek sense especially.

The Church, against all sense and through protracted struggle, consistently rejected those hedges and safe havens. Orthodoxy has always been a risk-taking enterprise, but it is nowhere so adventurous as in Christology. Bowing to Scripture, the Church said: *God the Son,* wholly eternally equal to the Father, took on flesh, *God* was born, *God* suffered human hunger and thirst, *God* took the lash and the spitting on His own flesh, and *God* died in that flesh on the cross.

Orthodoxy said that God experienced a human birth, lived a human life from the inside, finally died the death of man in order to destroy the power of death, and rose to become the first of the new human race.

The Church has insisted that none of this compromised the utter and complete Lordship of God in the least. On the contrary, Jesus' life as the incarnate Son *reveals* the Lordship of God. It is one of Barth's most invigorating contributions to theology to insist that, far from being a compromise of God's sovereignty, the incarnation is *proof* of God's sovereignty. God the Son is so utterly and completely Lord that He can enter a womb and be born as man, hunger and suffer weakness, die on a cross, and yet all the while remain wholly Himself, the living Creator of heaven and earth who needs nothing of what He has made. To heretics who can't bring themselves to believe that God can so thoroughly identify Himself with His world and to the timid orthodox who want to maintain a buffer (however thin) between God and His creation, the orthodox answer is, Our God is great enough even for this; He is great enough even to become weak, poor, empty, man. To those outside the church, who scoff at our crucified God, we can boast: "Our God can die. Can yours?" Thus, and only thus, do we make our boast in the Lord, our Lord Jesus.

Orthodox Christology has also insisted on the Lordship of God the Son by identifying the incarnate God with the God of Israel. If this book has a single guiding insight, it is N. T. Wright's astonishing summary of Jesus as the incarnation of Yahweh:

> Let us suppose that *this* God were to become human. What would such a God look like? This is the really scary thing that many never come to grips with; not that Jesus might be identified with a remote, lofty, imaginary being (any fool could see the flaw in that idea), but that God, the real

> God, the one true God, might actually be like Jesus. And not a droopy, pre-Raphaelite Jesus, either, but a shrewd Palestinian Jewish villager, who drank wine with his friends, agonized over the plight of his people, taught in strange stories and pungent aphorisms, and was executed by the occupying forces.[1]

As Wright says, "To say that Jesus is God is of course to make a startling statement about Jesus. It is also to make a stupendous claim about God." That is the stupendous claim that orthodoxy has always made about Jesus. That is the wild gospel that the entire, apparently staid, apparatus of classical Christology is designed to protect.

* * * * *

This book is intended as an introduction to the gospels for students, especially high school students. As much as possible, I tried to write this book, as I wrote my Old Testament introduction, *A House for My Name,* from the "inside." Rather than hovering over the text and picking it apart, I attempted to interpret the Old Testament by telling the story of the Old Testament. That has proven harder, finally impossible, with this book. Chapters 1–2 are written in this vein, as I tell the story of "intertestamental" Israel using the coordinates provided by Daniel's prophecies and follow with a "harmonized" story of Jesus. Chapter 3 is terribly technical, and even when I get to the specific gospels, I am forced to step outside the text and go "meta." The alternative would be to follow the model of the gospels themselves and simply tell the story of Jesus four different ways. That would be a challenging and useful task, but I lack the imagination to accomplish it.

1. N. T. Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 52.

This book is the product of over a decade of teaching the Gospels to my students at New St. Andrews College. Through their papers, questions, and observations, my own understanding of the gospels has deepened, and I am grateful for their contributions. During the spring of 2009, I led a graduate seminar on the gospel of Mark, and that was stimulating and helpful not only for my writing of the chapter on Mark but for my work on the gospels as a whole. Kurt Queller of the University of Idaho generously shared his insights into Mark and the other gospels, and I am grateful to him for his insights. Jeff Meyers has lectured several times at Biblical Horizons conferences, and I have always benefited from his teaching. Of course, James Jordan, as always, is behind this work. And, finally, I thank my former student, Brad Littlejohn, who helped this project along by turning lecture notes into coherent prose.

This book is dedicated to my granddaughter, Darcy Bella Jane Tollefson, who has the distinction of being the Leithart grandchild who broke the gender barrier. As *The Four* goes to press, Darcy spends her days perfecting her sitting-up technique, learning to rock on hands and knees while avoiding a face-plant, teething on anything that comes within mouth-shot, charming everyone with blue eyes that are always wide with wonder. She cannot yet say the name of Jesus, or count to four, but she belongs to Him and He to her, and as she grows I trust that she will come to know that the breadth and length and height and depth of the Christ of the fourfold gospel, her Life, the One in whom she lives and moves: "Christ behind me, Christ before me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me."