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## The Incarnation: The Dignity and Honor of Human Personhood

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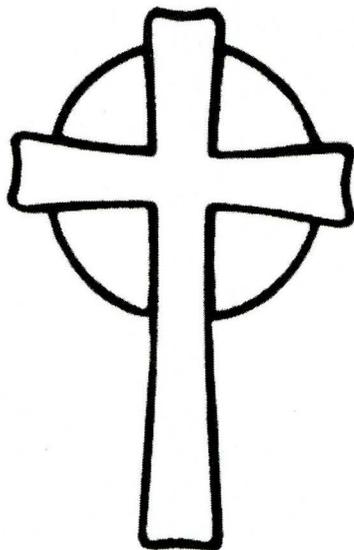
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# THE INCARNATION: THE DIGNITY AND HONOR OF HUMAN PERSONHOOD<sup>1</sup>

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Is Christianity good for a person? Or is it a source of oppression, a hindrance to human development? Our society has increasingly raised these questions. It continues to confront Christianity, not with an intellectual critique, but with a moral challenge, asking whether Christian faith promotes the dignity and honor of human beings. This critique poses an important challenge to Christianity.

In this essay, I want to accomplish three things. First, I offer a brief account of an important challenge to Christian theology, namely, the question of whether Christian faith promotes the dignity and honor of human personhood. The challenge to Christian theology, in this sense, calls us to secure appropriate resources for responding to this moral critique of Christian faith. Second, I offer Athanasius of Alexandria's thought as an important example of the early Christian understanding of the incarnation. The discussion of Athanasius will highlight some relevant theological insights in Scripture. The incarnation, I want to argue, serves as an important theological resource for addressing the moral critique of Christian faith. Third, I conclude with some brief reflections on the significance of the incarnation for the life of the church and for its ministerial task to surrounding communities. In short, I believe that the incarnation furnishes a proper theological model for helping the church maintain its ecclesial identity and its mode of being in the world.

## I

In "Academic Theology in Pastoral Perspective," Ellen Charry astutely notes the eclipse of the 'sapiential' dimension of Christian theology. The sapiential dimension of Christian theology entails the practical task of cultivating human beings as Christians. More specifically, Charry believes this task involves reclaiming the pastoral dimension of Christian theology in which

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<sup>1</sup> Presented to the "Theology in Service of the Church" pre-conference of the Christian Scholars Conference, Abilene, TX, July 17, 1997.

theology accepts the challenge "to champion grateful love of God and thereby allow the grace of God to shape human personhood." In this sense, Christian theology "is called both to demonstrate the truth of the gospel and to persuade that 'for us and for our salvation [the Son of God] came down from heaven.'"<sup>2</sup> Understood in this way, sapiential theology seeks to promote grateful love of God as the theological basis from which Christians learn to flourish in the world.

In addition, Charry contends that the moral critique of Christian faith parallels the eclipse of sapiential theology. She elucidates the moral critique of Christian faith given in the works of Julian the Apostate, David Hume, and Friedrich Nietzsche. For the sake of time and the nature of this conference, I will not recount the critiques of Christian faith articulated by these thinkers. Common to all three, however, is the notion that Christian faith does not promote the dignity and honor of human personhood.<sup>3</sup> Charry also notes the extent to which all three thinkers serve as the background "for understanding the breadth of the tradition in which the current wave of objections from multiculturalist and ethnic ideologies and liberation theologies stand."<sup>4</sup>

In my estimation, Charry informs us of an important challenge to Christian theology. She rightly points out that a fundamental challenge to Christian theology is "to demonstrate that Christian faith, at its very heart, and not only in its moral preachments, promotes the dignity and honor of human personhood."<sup>5</sup> Does Christian doctrine truly promote human well-being? Do knowing and loving God enable human beings to flourish and, consequently, to attain the apex of human happiness?

With this challenge in mind, is there a way (or are there ways) in which Christian theologians may respond to the question of whether Christian faith promotes the dignity and honor of human personhood? What are some theological resources from which Christian theology may address such a

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<sup>2</sup> Ellen T. Charry, "Academic Theology in Pastoral Perspective," *TToday* 50 (1993) 101. Charry argues that "patristic theology is the primary model for sapiential theology." Augustine, for Charry, is the "most forceful representative of the Western tradition." For further discussion of sapiential theology, see Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Doctrine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. chap. 10.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., David Hume, *The Natural History of Religion*, in *Writings on Religion*, ed. Antony Flew (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1992) 172, contends that the Christian doctrine of election—the notion that God elects only a few—shows the capricious nature of the God Christians affirm and "makes God odious, a hater of souls, rather than a lover of them; a crude vindictive tyrant, an impotent or a wrathful daemon, rather than an all-powerful, beneficent father of spirits."

<sup>4</sup> Charry, "Academic Theology in Pastoral Perspective," 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

question? I believe that the early Christian understanding of the incarnation is a particularly appropriate response to this very question. The incarnation reveals the extent to which God attempts to restore dignity and honor to human personhood.

## II

The doctrine of the incarnation played a crucial role in early Christian thought and practice. Early Christian thinkers saw the incarnation as a theological basis from which to address the question of the nature, purpose, and destiny of human existence. In fact, the doctrine of the incarnation served as a theological lens through which humanity could reorient itself in the meaning of the image of God. That is to say, the early Christian understanding of the incarnation answered an important theological question: To what end were human beings created and destined?

In *On the Incarnation of the Word (De Incarnatione Verbi)*, Athanasius seeks to show the necessity, purpose, and appropriateness of the incarnation. Is it appropriate for God to become human? Is the incarnation a befitting act of the divine? Athanasius's fundamental premise is that the eternal Word of God assumed a human body in order to rescue humanity from a path of self-destruction and to enable it to fulfill its divinely intended purpose. For this reason, the incarnation is a completely fitting act of God. It reveals God's attempt to liberate humanity from the power of sin and death and, more importantly, to restore its dignity and honor—the *imago dei*.

The incarnation, for Athanasius, also shows the interrelation of creation and redemption. The renewal of creation occurred by means of the work of the "Self-same Word who made it in the beginning" (§1, p. 25).<sup>6</sup> In other words, the eternal Word of God through whom humanity was created is also the redemptive agent by whom it is reclaimed (e.g., John 1:3, 12–14; Gen. 1:1, 26). As divine pedagogue of the world, the creator took on a human body in order to re-educate humanity about its nature, purpose, and destiny. Thus, knowledge of God, which is provided in the incarnation, secures for humanity access to living a truly "happy and blessed life" (§11, p.38).

The question, then, which preoccupies Athanasius's discussion is this: why did God become human? Ultimately, the incarnation enables humanity to share in the divine nature of God.<sup>7</sup> Such participation in the divine nature of God is possible, however, only under one condition; namely, the agent of human salvation must be divine. More specifically, the renewal of the image

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<sup>6</sup> Athanasius, *The Incarnation of the Word of God* (New York: MacMillan, 1946). All references hereinafter are to this edition.

<sup>7</sup> For Athanasius's famous statement that "God became human that we might become divine," see §54, p. 93.

of God in humanity could be accomplished only by means of the work of the incarnate Word of God, who is the true image of the Father. Humanity could not accomplish this renewal since it was “only made after the Image; nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own person, because it was He alone, the image of the Father, who could recreate [humanity] made after the Image” (§13, p. 67; see also §20, p. 74). Only a divine agent could repair human brokenness, corruptibility, and subjection to death. Without the act of a divine agent, the ontological gap between God and humanity would remain. Thus only the incarnate Word of God could rescue humanity and enable it to share in the divine nature of God.

To what end, then, were human beings created? For Athanasius, human beings were created to commune with God and to reflect his divine nature in the world. In creation, God bestowed upon human beings

the impress of His own image, a share of the reasonable being of the very Word Himself, so that, reflecting Him and themselves becoming reasonable and expressing the mind of God, even as He does, though in limited degree, they might continue for ever in the blessed life of the saints in paradise. (§3, p. 28)

Humanity, however, turned away from eternal things and became inordinately preoccupied with corruptible things—inferior things. By moving in this direction, humanity became the source and cause of its own self-destruction. Furthermore, humanity “defiled [its] own soul so completely that [it] not only lost [its] apprehension of God, but invented for [itself] other gods of various kinds (§11, p. 38; Rom. 1:25). By means of its own self-inflicted process of destruction, humanity, “who was created in God’s image and in [its] possession of reason reflected the Word himself, was disappearing, and the work of God was being undone” (§6, p. 31f.).

The cosmic significance of such a gradual move away from God and to corruption elicited a divine response. Thus it was completely fitting for God to rescue humanity from this path of self-destruction. In fact, Athanasius argues that it would be “equally monstrous that beings who shared the nature of the Word should perish” (§6, p. 32). This insight reveals God’s concern for repairing the human situation in order to enable humanity to live up to its divinely intended purpose. Divine inactivity would raise the question of why God, in allowing humanity to be carried off by corruption, would create humanity for such behavior, and more importantly, for such a destiny.

In light of the dehumanizing habits of humanity, the incarnation serves as the means by which God attempts to renew the image of God in humanity so that it might come to know him again and to act accordingly. In order to accomplish this renewal, as we have already seen, the Word had to do away with death and corruption; the Word had to renew humanity through the works of creation. Since humanity attempted to find an ultimate point of reference in corruptible things, Christ became the object of the senses. The eternal Word

of God became human so that we, who were looking for God in sensible things, "might apprehend the Father through the works which He, the Word of God, did in the body (§15, p. 43). Citing what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:21, Athanasius argues that the incarnation reveals the willingness of God to condescend to human level in order to re-educate humanity in the wisdom and love of God.

In summary, Athanasius understood the incarnation as the means by which God intended to restore the image of God in humanity. None other could accomplish this act of restoration but the incarnate Word of God. Only he had the power to endow humanity, though destined for self-destruction, with the proper understanding of its nature, purpose, and destiny. Though humanity tended to wander away from God and to pursue inferior things, precipitating the loss of human dignity and honor, God created humanity "in integrity" and destined it "for eternity."<sup>8</sup> Hence, the incarnation restores humanity's original honor and dignity.

### III

Athanasius's understanding of the incarnation should help us see the purpose and destiny for which God created humanity. He illuminates Scripture's view that human life should be ordered primarily in terms of ascent to and communion with God. Redemption brings the renewal of creation. As human moral agents created in the image of God, we are called to "become participants of the divine nature" of God (2 Pet 1:4). The incarnation is the means by which God's image is renewed in us and participation in the divine nature of God is ensured.

The incarnation, therefore, provides the proper understanding of human personhood. As it is stated in Col 3:10, in Christ, we are called to clothe ourselves with "the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according the image of [the] creator." This call involves a moral transformation in accordance with the "new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:24; see also Rom 8:29). As the "reflection of God's glory and exact imprint of God's very being," Jesus Christ shows us how God intended us to commune with him and with others in the world (Heb 1:3). As mentioned in the prologue to the Gospel of John, Jesus Christ reclaims us and empowers us to be the children of God so that we might reflect his glory in the world (John 1:12-14; 2 Cor 3:17, 5:17, 1 Tim 3:16).

God, then, does not call humanity to some mode of autonomous existence in which it finds the reference point of life in something other than the very life of God. This is idolatry, which leads to disintegration, confusion, and an

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<sup>8</sup> Charry, *By the Renewing of Your Minds*, 89.

improper knowledge of God and of ourselves (Rom 1).<sup>9</sup> The proper mode of existence is rooted in the very life of God, which has been presented to us in the coming of the Son of God (Phil 2:5–11). However, humanity's "role in the created world can be fulfilled only if [it] keeps intact the 'image' of God which was part of [its] very humanity from the beginning."<sup>10</sup> In other words, the proper dignity and honor of human personhood lies in the appropriation of what God intended us to be, namely, moral human agents who reflect the very life of God in the world. As John Meyendorff points out, the "image of God is not an external imprint, received by [humanity] and preserved by human nature as its own property independently of its relationships with God. Image implies a *participation in the divine nature*."<sup>11</sup> Communion with God, then, enables humanity to realize the apex of human dignity and honor.

The incarnation also reveals the extent to which God created us to find our identity in communion with other human beings in the world. The imprint of the image of God stamped on humanity in creation has a social bearing. God did not create us to live in isolation, but rather he made us to live in communion with other human beings in the world. Participation in community enables us to grow and to render suitable acts of love, befitting of beings created in the image of God. As the true embodiment of the image of God, Jesus Christ is the "primary norm" for the new humanity and its communal acts of love.<sup>12</sup> That is, Jesus Christ unfolds the true meaning of human communion with God and with other human beings in the world (Col 1:15; Rom 5:12–21; 1 Cor 15:45). In beholding the image of the incarnate Word of God, the church grows into the same image; consequently, it reflects the glory of God in the world by means of its various gifts of ministry.

#### IV

The church's role in human transformation is the background for our understanding of the significance of the incarnation for the life of the church and for its ministerial task. The incarnation serves as an appropriate theological model for helping the church maintain its ecclesial identity and extend its communal witness to surrounding communities. The church achieves this goal when it allows the eternal Word of God to shape its

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<sup>9</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993) 102, 107.

<sup>10</sup> John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press) 4.

<sup>11</sup> On this point, Meyendorff argues that an "absolute consistency" exists in the Greek patristic tradition. See *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987) 114 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 130.

character. When the church fails to conform itself to the true image of God, the incarnation remains merely an abstract idea.

The church finds its ecclesial identity in the model of the incarnation. God calls the church to conform itself to the image of the Son of God and to live accordingly. This call serves as the ground upon which the church moves and has its being. More concretely, the call to follow Jesus' example of self-emptying acts of love furnishes the model and justification for the church's involvement in various social ministries. These involvements open up possibilities for extending the continuing presence of Jesus Christ to the world (e.g., caring for the poor; denouncing forms of injustice).

In this sense, the church continues the ministry of Jesus Christ. As the body of Christ, "the fullness of him who fills all," the church completes the works of Jesus Christ in the world (Eph 1:23). Ecclesial acts of love demonstrate the extent to which grateful love of God shapes the character and nature of the church's mode of being in the world. The church becomes the agent by which God shapes and nurtures human beings as excellent persons. In other words, the formation of Christian character occurs in the most appropriate context. In the process, people ascertain what it means to be created in the image of God and the manner in which this theological reality can be realized. Furthermore, the church's concern for the well-being of surrounding communities shows the extent to which dehumanizing activities are fundamentally opposed to what God called us to be. As an extension of the continuing presence of Christ in the world, the church constantly guards against the tendency to become an instrument of dehumanizing activities.

The church, then, functions as a continuing presence of Jesus Christ. Or as Rubel Shelly and Randall Harris have suggested, the church may take on the form of "God's second incarnation."<sup>13</sup> In order for this to occur, the church must be conformed to the image of the Son of God, not to its own constructed image. The church must submit itself to God in loving obedience and offer itself as "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Rom 12:1-2). As Everett Ferguson rightly points out, the "church is a people whose character is determined by the call and choice of God and by the Christ in whom it is called. Persons sometimes try to make a congregation into their own image. Instead they need to be fashioned into the image of Christ."<sup>14</sup>

When the church cultivates the mind of Jesus Christ, it engages "in its proper work, it becomes Christ's very presence in the world. It carries on what he started among us. It is the grand finale for living in the world in fullness

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<sup>13</sup> Rubel Shelly and Randall J. Harris, *The Second Incarnation: A Theology for the Twenty-first-Century Church* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1992) 4.

<sup>14</sup> Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 90-91.

rather than in mere memory."<sup>15</sup> The life of the church supplies the context for inquiring into the nature, purpose, and destiny of human existence. In its communal acts of worship, teaching, and witness, the church bears witness to the new humanity. As the new humanity, the church serves as the means by which God redirects people to their true destiny.

Of course, the church experiences a gradual process of growth. God's desire for humanity to commune with him will be fully realized in the eschatological consummation of all things. For now, the church, albeit an imperfect communion of believers, embodies God's intentions to some degree. In its worship, teaching, and witness, the church bears witness to that which will be fully realized in the second coming of the Word of God. The church's existence, nevertheless, is marked by a tension; it moves gradually to that which God intended it to be. On its way, the church may stand in need of some correction and reorientation.

A fundamental mission of the church, therefore, is to embody and to continue the work of Jesus Christ. The church does not yet know fully what it will be, for as John says, when the Son of God "is revealed, [the church] will be like him, for [it] will see him as he is" (1 John 3:3). The cultivation of Christian virtues, modeled after the life of the incarnate Word of God, will enable the church to make progress towards its ultimate destiny.

## V

A theology of the incarnation, as I have been arguing, furnishes a theological basis for constructing a Christian anthropology. More specifically, the incarnation supplies an important theological response to the current search for a Christian theology that promotes the dignity and honor of human personhood. What the incarnation reveals, when viewed in terms of the divine economy of God, is the means by which God restores dignity and honor to human personhood. That is to say, the incarnation discloses the model by which humanity finds the proper meaning, significance, and destiny of human existence. The incarnate Word of God connects with us and repairs the image of God blunted in the fall. As Paul reminds us, it is in Christ that we are gradually "being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18). Knowledge of the divine economy of God as revealed in Christ, then, precipitates this process of participation in the life of God.

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<sup>15</sup> Shelly and Harris, *The Second Incarnation*, 54.