

Difference & Identity

A Theological Anthropology

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for Ann

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on trinitarian grounds thus holds out the promise of an inclusivity that is not purchased at the price of forcing the bewildering diversity of human beings to fit a procrustean bed of underlying sameness.

Whether the book realizes this promise is another question. Where difference is affirmed as a central value, the possibility of drawing firm conclusions regarding human being is called into question. At the same time, it hardly makes sense to mount an argument at all unless one is prepared to risk a few generalizations. In my attempt to honor both these considerations, compromises have been unavoidable, and the resulting product is far from a comprehensive Christian doctrine of human being. It is more a series of progressive theological meditations, and my hope is that together they raise some pertinent questions and suggest a way of addressing them that, if not always convincing, at least contributes constructively to theological conversation.

For what is of value in these pages, the reader should thank my colleagues in the School of Divinity and Religious Studies at the University of Aberdeen. Their friendship and support over the last three years have been a constant source of encouragement. Special thanks are due to Iain Torrance and Francis Watson whose questions and corrections were invaluable in the process of revising the manuscript for publication. I am also most grateful to George Graham and the rest of the editorial crew at Pilgrim Press for seeing this project through to print and patiently enduring requests for last-minute corrections to the text. It goes without saying that whatever faults remain are my responsibility and not theirs.

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The Difficulty of Defining Personhood



This book is a study in theological anthropology, or Christian reflection on human being. Its central theme is that knowing what we are as human beings is less important than knowing who makes us what we are. It is not my contention that this thesis is original. On the contrary, I view it as nothing more than a rephrasing of the biblical claim that our lives are "hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3).¹ Its upshot is that even though we are not able to define what it is to be human, our destiny is secure in the one who made and redeemed us. In the words of another New Testament writer, "We are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2, RSV; cf. Col. 3:4).

Deeply rooted in the tradition though my theme may be, however, it is far from self-evident. Nevertheless, I place it at the beginning because I find myself unable to identify any other starting point for this topic that seems less open to question. Since what will count as appropriate evidence and effective argumentation depends largely on the assumptions with which one begins, there seems no better strategy than simply to make a beginning and trust that the product that emerges will prove compelling, or at least interesting, enough to justify the chosen point of departure.

For this reason, the argument that follows is less an attempt to prove my thesis than to explicate its meaning. By way of introduction, however, I can note that one reason I begin where I do is that I

1. Except where otherwise indicated, quotations from the Bible are from the New Revised Standard Version or are my translations.

believe that the many attempts to define what we are as human beings have proved to be dead ends. They are dead ends in one respect because (as I shall have occasion to note at a number of points in what follows) they invariably entail the exclusion of significant categories of individuals on rather arbitrary grounds. But they are also dead ends because they tend more or less explicitly to measure human being in terms of conformity to some norm or standard—an approach that necessarily treats the differences between people as irrelevant to their identities as human beings.

EQUALITY, DIFFERENCE, AND DISCRIMINATION

In a society that continues to be scarred both by open bigotry and by myriad more subtle forms of discrimination based on the differences between people, highlighting difference as constitutive of identity may seem a questionable move. In this context, I have no wish to deny that a major (if by no means fully realized) accomplishment of the last two hundred years has been to erode the prejudices that have seen in the differences between people a rationale for excluding some from full participation in the life of society at large. Following the principles laid out in the American Declaration of Independence, people subject to indignity the world over have appealed to the principle that “all men are created equal” to demand recognition as human beings possessed of the same dignity and worthy of the same regard as anyone else. Though it has been subject to a continuous process of reinterpretation since it was first written, this one phrase has become the functional credo of the worldwide movement for human rights.

The undoubted good that has been accomplished by appeal to this phrase makes it difficult to criticize. Yet, notwithstanding the near universal acceptance now commanded by the principle that all human beings are created equal, the claim of the Declaration that this equality is “self-evident” is open to question. It is certainly not corroborated by a dispassionate assessment of the natural endowments of individuals. If anything is self-evident, it is surely that human beings differ enormously from one another: speed, strength, endurance, courage, wisdom, intelligence, compassion, and any other quality one might name are distributed most unequally among people.

An obvious rejoinder to this point is that the equality of which the

Declaration speaks is meant prescriptively, rather than descriptively. In other words, what is “self-evident” is not that all human beings have the same endowments, but that the differences in their endowments should not be a bar to equal treatment.² Yet this response begs the question of why human beings should be treated as equals apart from an appeal to some state of affairs (e.g., some shared characteristic or property) that warrants their equal treatment.

In any case, no consensus has emerged regarding the qualities or capacities to be used as a reference point for equal treatment. The enormous diversity among human beings renders more inclusive criteria frustratingly vague and more concrete measures intolerably exclusive. What makes a particular individual a (fully) human being with a claim to “equal” status therefore remains a matter of debate. Thomas Jefferson himself was inclined to deny the full humanity of Africans on what he held to be objective, scientific grounds, and the nation he helped to found initially withheld equal participation in the rights of government from poor white men, people of color, and women of every race and class. Indeed, it is an ominous characteristic of the modern idea of equality that its emergence in the Enlightenment period went hand in hand with theories of racial and sexual difference that justified the exclusion of non-European men and all women from the equal status granted white men of property.³

While few today would accept the reasons that Jefferson used to support his views on the humanity of Africans as either objective or scientific,⁴ agreement on the basis for affirming human equality remains elusive. One strategy is to correlate an individual's claim to equal treatment (or at least to basic rights) with her or his status as a person. The rhetorical appeal of this approach is reflected in the colloquial distinction between being treated “like a person” instead of “like a number” (when dealing with a bureaucracy) or “like a piece of meat” (when in a doctor's office). But what exactly does it mean

2. This position is defended by, among others, Peter Singer in his *Animal Liberation*, 2nd ed. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 5.

3. According to Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, the modern rhetoric of equality “has produced considerable inequalities because its standard and *tertium comparationis* for being human has been—and still is—the elite propertied educated man” (*Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999], 158).

4. For a survey of scientific arguments impugning the full humanity of various groups, see Stephen J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).

to be treated in this way? Why is it desirable to be a person? And on what basis do we claim that status?

A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Given the wealth of important material on the topic of personhood that has been produced by scholars working with the tools of critical theory, neuroscience, phenomenology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, as well as the many subdisciplines of anthropology, it is necessary to say something about the sources and methods I use in addressing these questions. This study is specifically theological. While I seek to remain in dialogue with other disciplines, I do not pretend to be conversant with any more than a small fraction of the material available from them. I draw on this material eclectically but also selectively, with the result that much of undoubted value is simply left out. Readers will find the influence of feminists, literary theorists, and philosophers more in evidence than that of natural and social scientists.⁵

These omissions in my use of nontheological resources do not mean that I find the work of scientists uninteresting or unimportant, but only that it does not bear as directly on the questions of interest to me as the work of scholars in other fields. My choice of dialogue partners therefore should not be interpreted as a judgment about the absolute value of any particular discipline. As philosophers of language have argued for some time now, phenomena are patient of more than one kind of explanation. Various types or levels of explanation need not directly contradict one another, but neither are they reducible to a single way of speaking. Instead, given forms of explanation are appropriate to particular circumstances and should be evaluated according to their own standards (so that, for instance, a physiologist's account of a ballet will be different from an art critic's). Because my central concern is who makes us what we are rather than what we are as such, the kinds of explanation that interest me (e.g., how we identify or describe a particular someone) have more in common with those of philosophy and critical theory than with the results of scientific re-

5. For theological studies of human being in closer dialogue with the natural sciences than my own, see Philip Hefner, *The Human Factor: Evolution, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1985).

search—though I hope that scientists will not find what I have to say to be in obvious contradiction with (even if it is not directly supported by) their own research.

Even where I draw on sources from outside of theology, my way of using them is governed by theological concerns. In an earlier book, I argued that one of the most important of these was the need to test the authenticity of Christian proclamation against its reception as "good news" by those at the margins of the church.⁶ My aim was to avoid the simple juxtaposition of biblical and experiential criteria (whether in the mode of a Tillichian system of correlation or the elevation of present experience over tradition characteristic of some liberation theologies) by arguing that the character of the biblical witness was not consistent with any systematic demarcation of these two spheres. Because Jesus' status as Savior is inseparable from his ongoing commitment to the life of the church, he cannot be identified apart from reference to its sociopolitical contours.

I concluded that while the claims of the marginalized cannot be understood as a norm of Christian theology set over against Christ, neither is it possible to view the Christian kerygma as a fixed datum without reference to the reception of that proclamation by those at the margins. In line with this concern, my use of sources in this study is not governed by any theological "method," in the sense of an ordered set of protocols for deriving orthodox doctrines. Instead, I follow a more ad hoc procedure of attempting to tease out the logic of the tradition in light of what I perceive as ongoing challenges to its claim to preach the good news of Jesus to the poor.

It is my sense that this way of proceeding helps to check both naked biblicism and ecclesiastical triumphalism. In order to distinguish the church's inevitably biased and in any case provisional understandings of who Jesus is and what his identity implies for Christian faith and practice, it helps to look beyond the boundaries of the church, not in an archeological "quest for the historical Jesus," but rather, by way of a critical encounter with the "little ones" with whom Jesus identified himself. If they do not recognize the church's proclamation as "good

6. Ian A. McFarland, *Listening to the Least: Doing Theology from the Outside In* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1998).

news," then the church has good reason to question whether the Savior it proclaims is truly Jesus of Nazareth.

With respect to issues of theological anthropology in particular, the problematic character of the reception of the gospel at the church's margins is fairly clear. Although there is broad theological consensus regarding the central place of Jesus as the touchstone for Christian talk about human being, large numbers of people find themselves unable to hear what the church has to say about being human as good news for them. For many women, in particular, Jesus has been presented as a model for human life in a way that renders those who do not share his gender less than fully human. Still more broadly, Christians of European descent have all too frequently understood their own identity as normative in a way that has led them to denigrate or even deny the humanity of those whose skin color and cultural practices differ from their own. Given this legacy, it is hardly surprising that critics both within and outside of the church have regarded the "news" that Jesus is the measure of genuine humanity as less than "good."

Over against these more dominant strands of Christian practice, however, there are also the repeated irruptions of those who have seen in the figure of Jesus grounds for challenging narrower interpretations of humanity promoted by Christians and non-Christians alike. Given the difficulty that these voices have had in being heard, the mere fact of their existence does not by itself address the concerns of those who question whether a Christian understanding of human being is genuinely good news. Nevertheless, these alternative positions do suggest that the Christian tradition possesses resources, however inadequately developed, for challenging those narrower visions of human being that have had so devastating an impact on the shape of contemporary Western society. The theological challenge lies in showing that an anthropology that incorporates these more disruptive features represents a plausible interpretation of Christian belief.

THE CATEGORY OF THE PERSON

Though it plays a central role in many anthropologies, it is open to question whether invoking the category of the person is theologically either an effective or appropriate means for affirming the full humanity of marginalized groups. However broadly or narrowly the term "per-

son" may be defined, its deployment as part of a strategy for affirming human equality tends to suppress the differences between people. On one level this is precisely the point: to the extent that the fact of difference is used as a rationale for denying some people the rights of which the Declaration of Independence speaks, one way of promoting the dignity of all is to deny that such differences are relevant to an individual's status as a person. This strategy corresponds to a general trend in the modern period toward the homogenization of experience. In the same way that seventeenth-century thinkers began to insist that natural phenomena in general should be described in terms of a fixed set of discrete, measurable features without reference to their wider contexts, so it seemed desirable to define an individual's humanity without reference to the particularities of family, culture, or tradition.⁷

As noted above, however, the internal logic of this strategy invariably raises the question of what those properties are that qualify any given individual as a person. In mathematics, equal quantities may be substituted for one another, and the rhetoric of equality likewise implies some underlying commonality. If persons are equal because they are at some level the same, then nonpersons may be withheld such consideration because they lack this underlying sameness. There is no positive role for difference within such an anthropology: where it is judged to be real, it is a mark of inequality; where it is viewed as merely a matter of appearance, it needs to be eliminated, or at least studiously ignored.⁸

Needless to say, any number of possible answers can be given to the question of what constitutes the underlying sameness of human persons. As the curtain was falling on the ancient world, Boethius defined a person as "the individual substance of a rational nature,"⁹ and this correlation of personhood with self-conscious rationality has proved

7. For a detailed discussion of how the homogenization of reality was seen as crucial to the understanding and control of nature and society in Enlightenment thought, see Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), esp. 68–72, 342–45.

8. See Schüssler Fiorenza, *Rhetoric and Ethic*, 158.

9. "Naturae rationalis individua substantia" (A Treatise against Eutyches and Nestorius, in *The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*, Loeb Classical Library [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973], 84–85).

enormously influential in shaping the modern image of the person.¹⁰ Although various criteria are invoked in contemporary discussions of what makes someone a person, appeals to cognitive function (understood chiefly as a mark of the capacity for self-determination) continue to play an important role.¹¹ And while it is no longer fashionable for such criteria to be deployed in a way that suggests a correlation between personhood and race or gender,¹² continued focus on cognition means that newborn infants and the severely retarded may still fail to qualify.¹³

Nor are the disadvantages of a definition of human being in terms of some anthropological lowest common denominator limited to those whose divergence from the norm causes them to be excluded from consideration as persons. Even those who make the cut may find themselves marginalized by established views of what it means to be a person. Because the criteria used to define personhood are in practice shaped by the dominant group within society, acknowledgment as a person invariably brings with it pressure to assimilate to this norm. This tendency leads some feminists to worry that gains achieved in the battle against sexual discrimination often have less to do with the affirmation of women as women than with women acquiring the "right" to participate more fully in forms of domination developed by men.¹⁴ Members of other traditionally marginalized groups raise simi-

10. See, for example, Locke's classical liberal definition of a person as "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places" ("Personal Identity," bk. 2, ch. 27, §9 of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch [New York: Oxford University Press, 1975], 335).

11. For example, intelligence remains the "cardinal indicator" among Joseph Fletcher's fifteen benchmarks of "humanhood." Joseph Fletcher, "Indicators of Humanhood," *Hastings Center Report* (November 1972): 1-3.

12. For an exception to this general rule, see Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York: Free Press, 1994). Stephen J. Gould offers a short but convincing refutation of Herrnstein and Murray's argument in the revised edition of *The Mismeasure of Man* (London: Penguin, 1997), 367-78.

13. See, for example, Michael Toole, "A Defense of Abortion and Infanticide," in *The Problem of Abortion*, ed. Joel Feinberg (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1973), 51-91; cf. the more detailed argument in his monograph *Abortion and Infanticide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

14. For example, although Rosemary Radford Ruether objects to Mary Daly's contemptuous dismissal of socially and economically successful females as "hench-women," she acknowledges the problems posed for women by pressure to assimilate to the male norm (*Women and Redemption: A Theological History* [London: SCM, 1998], 220-21).

lar concerns regarding the ways in which the norm of the propertied white male underlying the Jeffersonian vision of equality serves to mask ongoing practices of oppression and exclusion.¹⁵

Granted that difference ought not automatically be viewed negatively as reason for impugning someone's personhood, the fact that the Enlightenment's correlation of equality with uniformity seems unable to provide a sufficiently inclusive understanding of human being at least raises the question of whether difference should not be interpreted positively as constitutive of personal identity. Unfortunately, it is not at all clear how difference can be employed as a criterion of the personal. After all, the act of predication by which we call someone a person involves subsuming a particular individual ("Mary") under a general category ("person"). This linguistic fact would seem to imply that the individual in question possesses certain characteristics making it more appropriate to describe her as a person than a chair. From this perspective, defining "person" in terms of difference would seem to render the term vacuous by making it impossible to invoke definite criteria for distinguishing between what is a person and what is not. → Difficulty of Difference

If, however, we reconceive our analysis of persons in terms of who makes us persons rather than by trying to define what a person is, then the situation changes. Once this switch is made, our status as persons, instead of being understood as a function of some *thing* supposed to inhere in our physical or psychological makeup, can be reconceived as the result of some *one* acting toward us in a particular way. The activity of this someone may be a factor that all persons share in common, but it remains external to the individual. As a result, it is possible that every person may be constituted as a person differently, since it is the relation to this someone, and not the individual qualities that may shape or be shaped by this relationship, that counts.

In this context, it is worth noting that the interests that determined Boethius's definition of a person were not anthropological but theological. His intention was to explain to his Latin audience how the

15. See, for example, James H. Cone's criticism of white integrationist views of racial equality, *God of the Oppressed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975), 45-53, and Elizabeth Stuart's remarks on liberal denunciations of homophobia, "Sex in Heaven: The Queering of Theological Discourse on Sexuality," in *Sex These Days: Essays on Theology, Sexuality and Society*, ed. Jon Davies and Gerard Loughlin (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 184-204.

word "person" was to be understood in the doctrine of the Trinity. That he had to do this highlights the fact that the concept of the person as a particular kind of entity—so fundamental to the sensibilities of modern Western culture—was not a basic category of classical thought.¹⁶ It emerged only in the fourth century as Christians tried to explain what they meant by the seemingly incoherent assertion that the New Testament terms "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" referred to entities that were both genuinely distinct from each other and yet still just one God. What emerged was the trinitarian claim that Father, Son, and Spirit were three "persons" in one essence. Because each person was understood to coinhere in the others, they were not three gods but one. Yet they remained distinct as persons by virtue of their differing relationships with each other—relationships that characterized the unique way in which each was the one God. In this context, the term "person" referred not to any quality that the three had in common, but precisely to their irreducible difference from one another.

A TRINITARIAN FRAMEWORK

In the chapters that follow, I use this trinitarian framework to provide an account of human personhood that gives a positive role to difference. I do this by arguing that our claim to be persons is derived from our relationship to the triune God. It is therefore not rooted in any property or collection of properties that we possess as individuals, but in the fact that we stand in a certain relationship to the divine persons. This relationship is not one in which we naturally exist, nor is it one we secure for ourselves; rather, our being in relationship with God depends on the prior fact that God has chosen to live in relationship with us (1 John 4:19). → Grace is at the heart of the matter.

This divine choice takes concrete form when God comes among us as one of us in Jesus of Nazareth. In this one respect, our claim to personhood is based on a shared characteristic: we all stand in relationship to this one man. But this characteristic is not a property that can be derived from an examination of the individual. The fact

16. See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 32; cf. 27–28.

of anyone's being a person cannot be determined by looking at her or him in isolation, but only by examining that person's relationship to Jesus. It is Jesus who, as one of the divine persons, establishes us as human persons.

Difference is integral to this account of personhood, since no two people stand in the same relationship to Jesus. My relationship to him is very different from that of Mary Magdalene or Pontius Pilate. It follows that no two of us are persons in the same way, just as no two of the trinitarian hypostases are persons in the same way. Even though it is true that we all stand equally in the shadow of Jesus' cross, none of us occupies the same place under that cross. Peter stands in a place different from that of Judas or John, even though in every case it is Jesus who provides the necessary reference point for determining one's place—and thus one's own specific identity as a person.

The succeeding chapters are an effort to work out the implications of this trinitarian framework, with its emphasis on the constitutive role of difference, for the practice of identifying both others and ourselves as persons. Chapter 2 takes the form of a rather general reflection on how our ways of talking about persons affect our assessment of others as persons. The insights of poststructuralist thinkers in particular are used to analyze the ways in which the language we use to talk about others blocks our acknowledgement of them as persons who are (for that reason) different from ourselves. I then offer some preliminary reflections on how the biblical depiction of Jesus provides a narrative framework capable of overcoming this blockage by directing us to the other as someone whose identity as a person may be understood in terms of difference from ourselves.

This preliminary study sets the tone for the rest of the book, in which the figure of Jesus serves as the central reference point for a series of progressively broader characterizations of the diversity of human personhood. Chapter 3 focuses specifically on Jesus' status as the source of human personhood by tracing the development of "person" as a technical theological term through the trinitarian and christological controversies of the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries. Chapter 4 then explores how Jesus' personhood shapes our own through reflection on the biblical image of the body of Christ. Especially as developed in the later Pauline literature, the language of the body provides a means of expressing both our subordination to Christ as "head" and

our difference from Christ and each other as persons whose status as "members" of the body is not reducible to any common essence.

The next three chapters deal with the interpersonal dimensions of the christological framework laid out in chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 5 argues that the christological matrix of our personhood rules out the possibility of direct encounter between any two human persons. Because (in line with the analysis presented in chapter 2) the categories in which we speak of persons invariably block our perception of the other as a person, we can encounter the other as a person only through Jesus: he defines the other as a person by directing us to her or him. This argument is supported and illustrated through an exegesis of the parable of the good Samaritan as the biblical episode in which Jesus addresses most directly the question of who counts as a person.

Given that Jesus is not physically present among us, but (according to orthodox Christian belief) has ascended to God's right hand, chapter 6 offers an account of how Jesus mediates our encounters with others by reference to his presence in the Spirit on the one hand, and in the church on the other. These two dimensions of Jesus' presence, while closely interrelated, are distinguished as complementary ways of understanding how he encounters us in the present. Talk of the Spirit highlights Jesus' freedom both from the constraints of time and space and from human control. By contrast, the reality of the church connects Jesus' presence with the concrete reality of other human beings. Together, these two closely interrelated modes of Jesus' presence suggest that our life as persons is realized through communion in Christ with those who are different from us.

This situation raises the question of how I should conceive my relationship with a neighbor whose irreducible difference both from myself and from every other person would appear to make recourse to generalized rules of ethical conduct problematic. This problem is explored in chapter 7, with reference to the case of gender difference. Proceeding by way of an extended exegesis of the last third of Ephesians 5, I conclude that taking difference seriously makes it advisable to conceive of the relationship between persons in terms of reciprocity rather than equality. To focus on reciprocity is to recognize that the relationships between persons are characterized by a definite order, but also allows that the order is subject to change and development in light of the evolving character of each person's unique calling.

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Having stressed the importance of difference in defining our identity as persons, I turn in chapters 8 and 9 to the question of the common nature that marks us as specifically human (as opposed to divine) persons. Here, too, the Trinity serves as the starting point for reflection on the relationship between personal difference and shared nature. In God, the divine nature is not prior to the distinction of the persons of the Trinity; rather, the unity of the divine nature is defined by the relationships in which the persons stand to one another. Following this model, I argue that human nature should not be conceived primarily as an ontological precondition of personal existence, but as an eschatological reality defined by the emerging pattern of relationships between those summoned by God in Christ. At the same time, I contend that in light of this call it is possible to identify certain "symptoms" of the human that mark out the created ground (though not the cause or condition) of our lives as persons, without which our destiny could only be interpreted as a negation rather than the gracious fulfillment of our creaturely existence.

The theological anthropology that results from this study does not provide easy answers to the ethical dilemmas that surround the question of personhood. Focus on the one who makes us persons over what a person is does not render issues like abortion, euthanasia, or gender politics ethically transparent. But it does suggest that the central question that should govern my decision making when addressing these issues is not, "Is this other a person?" but rather, "How do I show myself to be a person to this other?" After all, if difference is integral to our being persons, then there is no set of criteria that I can infallibly apply to decide on the personhood of the other. The best I can do is to consider the one who claims me as a person and attempt to discern the form that that claim takes in a given situation. In the process, I do not so much discover *what* a person is as come to be reminded *how* a person is.

Persons and the Problem of Difference



The question of what it means to be a person is hardly new in theology, but it has been posed with renewed urgency over the past generation. On the one hand, traditional answers have been challenged by those whose personhood had long been viewed inside and outside the church as somehow inferior or deficient (especially men of color, and women of all backgrounds). On the other hand, reflection on the situation of people suffering from severe mental retardation, psychosis, and dementia has cast doubt on ancient and modern attempts to understand personhood in terms of self-consciousness or some other mental capacity.

The word "person" derives from the Latin term for a social, legal, or theatrical role (a meaning preserved in the English transliteration "persona"). One's "person" was defined by the part one played, whether on the stage or in society at large.¹ Today, there is an instinctive urge to recoil from this conception of what it means to be a person. Being a person is understood to be something far more fundamental than any role we play. Although a person may have many roles—chemist, mother, wife, daughter, administrator—she is only one person; and while roles can change, personhood tends to be conceived as an inalienable part of who we are.²

1. Even though Cicero describes persons as characterized both by a shared rational nature and by individual particularity (*De officiis* 1.107), "there is always an echo of the theatrical background (that is, the 'role' the individual has to play in life)" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992], 210).

2. See John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 33–35.

In light of the importance of relationships in giving shape to our lives, some have argued that our personhood is constituted by our relations with God and each other, as these are formed through a cumulative pattern of address and response.³ The problem is that such a definition appears to leave out those who for whatever reason are not able to respond to God's address in any recognizable manner.⁴ In light of this difficulty, it seems preferable to view personhood as the basis for our relationships with each other rather than their product. In short, it is because we are persons that we have the capacity for relationship, not the other way around.⁵

This perspective seems broadly consistent with the biblical account of creation, in which the distinctiveness of the human creature lies primarily in God's decision to relate to it in a particular way rather than in its inherent abilities. In Genesis 1, for example, human beings are distinguished as the product of the divine decision to make a creature to oversee the rest of creation as God's plenipotentiary⁷ (Gen. 1:26–27). Although humanity is said to have been created "in the image of God," the text nowhere equates the divine image with the possession of any specific ability. Similarly, the second creation narrative relates that God, having breathed life in to Adam (Gen. 2:7), gave him responsibility for keeping the garden (v. 15) and naming the other creatures (v. 19); but at no point are these privileges correlated with any particular capacity. Needless to say, this is not to deny that human beings have capacities—they could hardly "fill the earth and subdue it" without them—or that these capacities might include self-consciousness, rationality, will, openness to the transcendent, and the like. It is simply to argue that such capacities are better deduced

3. See, for example, Alistair I. (McFadyen) *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), esp. 69–78.

4. McFadyen wants to avoid any such exclusion, arguing that "mere personal presence is enough to make some sort of claim for recognition" on the part of those who cannot communicate; but it is not clear how this idea squares with his earlier claim that "there is essence and personal identity only in communication" (McFadyen, *Call to Personhood*, 180, 156).

5. See the critique of relational models of personhood in Harriet A. Harris, "Should We Say That Personhood Is Relational?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51, no. 2 (1998): 214–34. Cf. John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1991), 48–51.

* Person ground relation-ship

face/garden

cognitive ability

5/17

a posteriori from the life for which God has elected humankind than posited as prior conditions of this election.⁶

And yet, as shown by the debate between Las Casas and Sepúlveda over the personhood of native Americans,⁷ the witness of the creation narratives does not eliminate the possibility of disagreement over who is a legitimate heir of the dignity that God grants to Adam. Detaching the status of "person" from the possession of particular capacities therefore does not by itself guarantee that the resulting understanding of personhood will include all persons. However self-evident someone's personhood may be to one observer, others may be expected to call it into question. Even where the respect due to human beings is located exclusively in their status as creatures of God, the need to specify how the respect owed human beings as persons differs from that owing to other creatures leaves room for disagreement over which beings are to be treated as persons.⁸

THE PROBLEM OF THE OTHER

The analysis of language offered by poststructuralists suggests that merely formulating more inclusive definitions of the word "person" cannot solve this perennial problem. Poststructuralist theory is grounded in Ferdinand de Saussure's insight that meaning is generated by phonetic and semantic oppositions between words.⁹ This play of differences between words is closely intertwined with what is viewed as normative in particular communities of discourse. For example, to the extent that "man" is defined by opposition to "woman" and functions as the generic term for "person," the personhood of women is occluded. In this way (as feminist theorists have long noted), "woman"

6. See chapter 9 for further discussion of this point.

7. For analysis of the dynamics that shaped this debate, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 146–67 and passim. Cf. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993), esp. chs. 5 and 6.

8. While Kathryn Tanner asserts that human beings are owed respect solely by virtue of their status as God's creatures, her admission that "the minimum standards of well-being to which one has a right will obviously vary depending upon the creature at issue" implies that some other quality or qualities besides the fact of creaturehood contribute to our ethical perspective on fellow human beings (*The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 179).

9. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (Chicago: Open Court, 1988).

serves as the foundation upon which patriarchal views of humanity rest.¹⁰

Because semantic differentiation is intrinsic to the generation of meaning in language, no system of discourse can be fully inclusive: some "other" is always left over—and thereby left out.¹¹ Broadening the relevant definition (e.g., by explicitly including "women" in the definition of "mankind") cannot resolve the problem, because it does not change the underlying system of differences. Such inclusion simply "incorporat[es] the Other under the terms of the current discursive regime."¹² As a result, the differences that mark the other are homogenized rather than affirmed.

Deconstructionists have exploited these insights to argue that the semantic foundation laid by the excluded other is inherently unstable, since the system of differences between words is not grounded in anything other than established patterns of use. Because the accumulated weight of linguistic practice is the only basis for semantic stability, the other that grounds meaning in a discursive system is also a potential source of destabilization, precisely by virtue of its role in anchoring the system as a whole. Once identified, the occluded other exposes the fact that no configuration is exempt from the threat of further destabilization, because there is no point at which the play of differences between words comes to an end.¹³

As Mary McClintock Fulkerson points out, however, a theology that incorporates these ideas is not necessarily driven to relativism, since the possibility of exposing the process of occlusion is logically independent of the commitments and aims that lead one to do so. One may have no interest beyond exposing the "play of differences" in language, but one might equally well be motivated by concern for the

10. See, for example, the essays by Paula M. Cooey, Janet R. Jakobsen, and Mary McClintock Fulkerson in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition, and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

11. According to Emmanuel Levinas, the goal of Western philosophy from Plato to Heidegger has been the overcoming (and thus the exclusion or denial) of the other. See, for instance, Emmanuel Levinas, "Ethics as First Philosophy," in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 77; cf. his *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 33–40.

12. Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "Contesting the Gendered Subject: A Feminist Account of the *Imago Dei*," in Chopp and Davaney, eds., *Horizons in Feminist Theology*, 107.

13. See Charles Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 108–9.

promotion of social justice.¹⁴ In this context, Fulkerson maintains that the impossibility of creating a fully inclusive system of discourse does not prevent the episodic performance of "good sentences" that identify who is excluded at any given time from established definitions of, for example, personhood.¹⁵ The question for theologians, she maintains, is how these episodic events can be linked together in a self-critical program of Christian practice.

Narrative
Fulkerson proposes that narrative provides a category that allows feminists in particular to maintain a given set of commitments (specifically, to the liberation of women) without succumbing to the kind of totalizing language that promotes the occlusion of the other. She defines narrative (in contrast to explanation) as that feature of storytelling that focuses on the "what for" of events. In distinction from diachronic accounts of how particular situations arose, narrative is a rhetorical mode that relates different situations synchronically within some larger story of the world.¹⁶ Because the synchronic mode highlights contrasts between different situations, it is a more effective tool for calling particular developments into question than diachronic accounts. The trick lies in finding a narrative framework that resists complacency with respect to the reality of new "others" hidden even in discourse that has successfully unearthed past practices of occlusion.

Suspecting that the narratives of liberal humanism may be too limited to serve as such a story, Fulkerson proposes instead "an incomplete story of a God-loved creation" that allows "commitment to the particular situation to develop new sensibilities for the outside."¹⁷ Because no story is free of an "outside," and because the boundaries that mark every such outside are inherently fluid, what is to be hoped for is not a single liberating story but a series of stories that are able to affirm the partial as partial. In this way, she hopes it will prove possible to develop practices that "enable us to . . . hear from rather than explain the Other."¹⁸

14. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza makes the same point in *Rhetoric and Ethic: The Politics of Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 42–46.

15. Fulkerson, "Contesting the Gendered Subject," 111.

16. *Ibid.*, 112.

17. *Ibid.*, 114.

18. *Ibid.*, 115.

HUMAN BEINGS IN THE GOSPEL NARRATIVES

Fulkerson's emphasis on narrative as a means of affirming political commitments without necessarily subscribing to totalizing constructions provides a framework for reclaiming the etymological connection between being a person and having a role. This approach need not imply that personhood can be taken on or off like a mask, so long as the role in question has an inalienable quality to it.¹⁹ Nor does such an understanding equate personhood with the possession of a particular set of capacities. After all, a character in a novel does not cease to be a character with the onset of Alzheimer's disease; nor does the fact of severe mental retardation prevent someone from being a character.

The problem comes in defining the story in which one's personal role is established. If the story is defined too narrowly (i.e., in terms of career, or of a significant friendship), then any lack, deficiency, or alteration in the relation between character and the story line is sufficient to cast doubt on an individual's status as a person. Alternatively, defining the narrative more broadly entails a degree of generalization that occludes the particularity of individual roles. For these reasons, it seems a bad idea (as Fulkerson suggests) to try to encompass the diversity of claimants to personhood in a single, grand narrative.

Scripture not a Unified Narrative
Christians' commitment to reading the Bible as a single narrative (albeit one containing many distinct genres) would therefore appear to cast doubt on the possibility of using scripture as the basis for an account of personhood that avoids totalizing pretensions. Nevertheless, I suggest that a person is best described theologically as a certain kind of character in the biblical story. Specifically (insofar as there are other "characters" in this story whom we would probably not want to call persons, like the stars that fight against Sisera in Judg. 5:20), a person is the kind of character to whom God proclaims the good news in Jesus of Nazareth. Three things need to be said in connection with this proposal.

** Def. of Person*
The first is that what is intended here is a description rather than a definition. It is not that any one character (or even any sum of characters) in the biblical narrative encapsulates some identifiable essence

19. Cf. von Balthasar, *Persons in Christ*, esp. ch. 2.B.

of personhood, but that the story of Jesus is the central reference point for Christian talk about persons. Personhood is not, in other words, reducible to a certain set of qualities that Jesus exemplifies; it is simply shorthand for the kind of character the biblical God is depicted as addressing in Jesus.

Second, God's proclamation of the good news in Jesus is not simply to be identified with Jesus' speaking as such. Jesus addresses many "characters" in the Gospels, including various unclean spirits, a fig tree, and the wind on the Sea of Galilee; but these instances of speech do not have as their content the good news that Jesus both proclaims and embodies. That news is quite specifically the advent of God's reign (though it need not always take the form "The kingdom of heaven is at hand"). In other words, in the Gospels personhood is not a correlative of divine speech in general, but of speech that takes the particular form of gospel.

It is tempting at this juncture to highlight the diversity of those to whom Jesus proclaims the gospel: Jews and Gentiles, men and women, Pharisees and Samaritans, lepers and scribes, even the dead alongside the living (Mark 5:41; Luke 7:14; John 11:43). As striking as this diversity is, however, it does not provide any firm criteria for describing the kind of character God addresses in Jesus. Apart from the ability to isolate some particular character as somehow exemplary of what a person is, the variety of Jesus' addressees risks either opening the door to an indefinite number of rival views of personhood or abstracting the personhood of the Gospel characters from their distinctive identities.

In this context, a third point to be made is that Jesus himself is one of those to whom the gospel is addressed. If Jesus, as the Word of God incarnate, is the *autobasilea* who represents the reign of God in himself, as a fully human being he is also one to whom the reign is proclaimed. In fact (as Christians have affirmed from the very beginning), he is the first to taste the life of God's reign (1 Cor. 15:20–23) and, in this sense, is the person par excellence.

THE OTHER AND THE STORY OF JESUS

One way of characterizing Jesus' central status in Christian talk about persons is to use the language of the *imago Dei*. If other human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26–27), for the writers of

the New Testament, Jesus is God's image (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; cf. Heb. 1:3).²⁰ Insofar as Jesus is a particular individual, however, he, too, can only be identified by reference to a series of oppositions that distinguish him from other characters in the biblical narrative. Most obviously, as a Jewish man, he is contrasted with Gentiles and women (see especially Matt. 15:22–27 and par.; John 4:16–22); but he is also contrasted with Jewish scribes (Matt. 7:29; Mark 1:22), John the Baptist (Matt. 3:11 and pars.), Abraham (John 8:58), Moses (John 1:17), and even his own family (Mark 3:21, 32–35 and pars.). Focus on Jesus therefore by no means eliminates the problem of the other. The Johannine opposition between Jesus and "the Jews" in particular is a reminder of the church's tragically consistent practice of excluding the children of Israel from consideration as the object of God's gracious address.

To be sure, there are also narrative counterindicators to this pattern of characterizing Jesus in terms of opposition to others. In addition to being distinguished over against various groups and individuals, Jesus is also identified by his commitment to sinners (Matt. 9:13 and pars.) and children (Matt. 19:14 and pars.), as well as to the more amorphous category of the "least of these" (Matt. 25:31–46; cf. Matt. 18:6 and pars.). Yet the very breadth of these categories raises the suspicion that others are included only at the price of obliterating their particularity. And given that even these more inclusive strands of the canonical depiction of Jesus invariably rest upon some excluded other, the hermeneutical privileging of these texts does not resolve the problems associated with Christian claims for Jesus' normative status.

I therefore suggest that focusing on the patterns of difference by which Jesus is identified in the New Testament represents the most promising strategy for defending the central role Christians attribute to him. These patterns are by no means exhausted by figures listed above. Indeed, insofar as the decisive way in which Jesus is identified in the Gospels is as the one who been raised from the dead, his status as the risen Savior entails difference *from himself* as the one who died on the

20. Though the link between the Pauline characterization of Jesus as the image of God and the creation narratives is disputed, Francis Watson points out that the correlation of the term "image" and the language of creation in both Col. 3:9–11 and 2 Cor. 4:6 supports the contention that these passages allude to Genesis 1 (*Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* [Edinburgh: Clark, 1997], 281–82). See pp. 31–32 below for further discussion of this issue.

cross. This is certainly not to say that he is a different individual than the crucified one, but rather, to emphasize that he can be identified as the same only by way of contrast with what appeared on Good Friday to be his final destiny. As risen, Jesus is *not* dead, with the paradoxical result that his identity as the one who *was* dead (and thus the whole of his earthly career as the ground of that identity) is the decisive category of otherness that founds the Christian identification of him as Lord (see Rev. 1:18; cf. 1:5; 2:8).

Though poststructuralist analysis suggests that the other over against which a term is (implicitly) defined within a given cultural-linguistic framework is necessarily occluded, the narrative depiction of Jesus in the Gospels seems to work against this process. Because the primary "other" in terms of which Jesus is confessed as risen Lord is none other than Jesus the crucified, the very process that would normally hide this other brings him into the open. In answer to the question of who the risen one is, the reader of the New Testament is pointed squarely to examine the one he is "not"—the dead Jesus who hangs on the cross. In this way, the form of this particular narrative subverts the occlusion of the other in terms of which the norm is defined.

Perhaps more importantly, this process of unearthing the other does not come to a halt with the crucified Jesus. The identification of the exalted Savior with the crucified carpenter injects a certain instability into the "image of God" that this man instantiates. If we want to know what this image is, the Gospel narratives point us to the risen one; but in the very process of pointing to him they direct us to the crucified man on Golgotha and, thereby, to the various other reputable and disreputable characters who he also is not, but with whom his narratively rendered identity is irrevocably linked. In short, the resurrection short-circuits the process whereby the distinctiveness of the other is occluded. In rising from the dead, Jesus explicitly directs us to the other, so that to look at Jesus becomes the means for perceiving the other as other.

This suggests that the *imago Dei* is properly conceived not as a model to which individual beings may or may not conform, but as a lens through which individuals can be perceived as persons. That human beings are created "in" this image thus means that they are the kind of being whose personhood is disclosed through Jesus. We

are persons because Jesus claims us as such, not because we possess a certain set of intrinsic ontological properties.

This way of interpreting the *imago Dei* also provides a useful framework for interpreting the more anthropologically inclusive passages of the New Testament. For example, it suggests that the point of the claim that in Christ there is "no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (Gal. 3:28) is not that the differences between persons are obliterated by Christ (as though the other ceased to be other), but that difference ceases to be an occasion for exclusion. The other who differs from Jesus becomes the one through whom Jesus shows us who he is. Because in baptism we have put on Christ (Gal. 3:27), our identities are a function of Jesus' identity, and thus bound up with the others who stand behind any given identification of Jesus.

It follows that if we want to encounter Jesus, it is the other whom we need to meet, because it is as we encounter the other that we encounter Jesus (Matt. 25:40, 45; cf. 18:5 and pars.). Herein lies a seeming paradox that shapes the logic of faith: Jesus is the one person through whom the personhood of others is visible, not only because others have their personhood through Jesus, but also because Jesus claims his distinctive personhood as Savior only through the other. Consequently, the affirmation of Jesus as *imago Dei* need not result in a totalitarian collapsing of every person into Jesus, but can result in a movement of release in which Jesus' own distinctive identity draws us to look to the other in relation to whom his own career and destiny assume their particular shape.²¹

AFFIRMING OTHERS AS PERSONS

The particularity of the Christian narrative thus allows humans to be characterized as persons without depending on a formal definition of personhood in terms of intrinsic properties or qualities. Our being persons is simply a function of our having been addressed by God in Jesus, quite apart from how we may respond to that address. In looking at Jesus, we see what it means to be a person; but the content of what we see is not yet fully determined, since Jesus' identity as the risen

21. See chapter 5 for further development of this point.

one directs us to the bewildering diversity of characters (including both the dead and the not yet born) from which his own particular identity as a person cannot be separated.

At this point, it needs to be asked whether or not the characterization of personhood laid out here avoids the problem of homogenization. While I have maintained that attention to the identity of Jesus allows the reader to affirm the other in her or his otherness, it might appear that this approach merely produces a "generic other" that is too amorphous to valorize the excluded in a way that presents a genuine challenge to established ways of conceiving personhood.

I have no way of answering this objection directly, for despite my own language in the foregoing pages, the fact is that texts—even the biblical texts—do not "subvert" ideas or "direct" actions; people do. What I have suggested is a way of construing the New Testament witness to Jesus in a way that provides a basis for acting in a certain way with respect to the use of the word "person." The reading I propose will not produce the results I suggest without a commitment on the part of readers to put it into practice, because the identity of the outsider in any particular case cannot be determined apart from the particular context within which the biblical story of Jesus is read.

Nevertheless, I think that there are ways of characterizing persons in the present that provide at least a preliminary check against the homogenization of the other. These ways do not proceed by explicitly including certain groups under the category of the *imago Dei*. Rather, they proceed by a process of denying that particular categories of person are the *imago*.

Mary Fulkerson advocates just such an approach in the essay to which I have already referred. In concluding her own reflections on the theological appropriation of the *imago Dei*, she writes the following:

Poststructuralism reminds us that there must be a purely negative function for the claim that woman is created *imago*... [namely,] that "men are not" *imago Dei* because the need to affirm *women* is constructed out of a pernicious system of significations which constitute *men*. This is not to say that woman is the real image of God; it is not even to say that both are. It is only to say that in this particular set of discursive arrangements,

in this context of male dominance, what the reigning discursive system means by *man* is not the *imago Dei*.²²

Fulkerson's move here brings into relief the fact that unearthing the other undercuts established ways of speaking. Only so can the other be affirmed as other, without being subsumed under existing categories in a way that smoothes away her or his particularity. So from a feminist perspective, it is fruitless merely to affirm that women are also created in the image of God. On the one hand, such an approach merely subsumes women under the generic man; on the other hand, it posits its own excluded "other" (as women of color have been quick to note).

What Fulkerson does not address explicitly is the basis on which she affirms that "men are not" *imago Dei*. Emphasis on Jesus' status as the image of God may prove able to provide good christological grounds for her conclusions. Jesus, as the true image of God, is identified in scripture as the risen one, and thus the one who is not in the tomb. Once again, the instability built into this way of describing Jesus suggests that it is not in the resurrected one considered in isolation that the *imago Dei* is found. This is not to deny that Jesus is risen from the dead, but only to suggest that in seeking the *imago*, we, like the disciples at the ascension, are told not to look toward heaven.

In other words, the reason we can say that "what the reigning discursive system means by *man* is not the *imago Dei*" is that in looking to Jesus we are called to look away from him. It is important to attend to this order: looking away from Jesus is not the first but the second step, and is justified only on the basis of what we see when we look to him. We are not justified in looking away from Jesus by some independent insight into the nature of personhood that renders attention to him unnecessary. Instead, we are compelled to do so by the fact that by leaving the tomb and ascending to the right hand of God, Jesus does not allow us to contemplate him as the image of God in isolation. Rather (and in line with the teaching on the last judgment in Matthew 25), his status as the *imago* lies in the fact that he asks us to count as persons those who are most emphatically *not* the same as he.

22. Fulkerson, "Contesting the Gendered Subject," 114.

This does not mean that we can encounter persons apart from Jesus; on the contrary, we are able to encounter others as persons only insofar as we have already encountered Jesus. The point is that encountering Jesus is not an end in itself. Jesus himself makes this clear in his great valedictory prayer of John 17, where his repeated petition to God is that his disciples "may be one, as we are one" (vv. 11, 22; cf. 21, 23). For in the context of a world filled with religions promising unity with the divine, the special claim of Christianity was not that it provided a means of being one with God, but its declaration that through the activity of God, human beings had been made one with each other (see Eph. 2:13–15).

It follows that one task of the church as it looks to Jesus is (only seemingly paradoxically) to identify as persons those who are least like Jesus. By looking to Jesus we are prevented from taking our cue from those whose personhood seems the most self-evident (because most like ourselves) and challenged instead to consider as persons those we are inclined to view as somehow unworthy or deficient.²³

THE SCRIPTURAL UNDERDETERMINATION OF PERSONS

Because the peculiar identity of Jesus as the image of God presents an ongoing challenge to the norms that are invariably established in every attempt to talk about persons, theological anthropology is advised against attempting to draw closer to truth about human personhood by presenting ever more precise definitions of what a person is. Instead, its most important assertions may be expected to take the form of denials that a particular type of individual defines personhood. The anthropologies that result will be limited and fragmentary, but may for that very reason prove more flexible—and thus more useful—as the context of Christian proclamation changes.

From this perspective, the task of theological anthropology is less a matter of defining ontological categories than of guiding and correcting the church's preaching. As the first human being who experiences the good news of the kingdom, Jesus is the touchstone for Christian

23. David Ford speaks of Christ as "a self-effacing face, referring us to the Father and to the faces of human beings" (*Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 214; cf. 129).

talk about human personhood. But when we look at this person in the fullness of his glory, we find ourselves asked by him to look to the other whom he might otherwise conceal but to whom his ministry is in fact oriented.

Consequently, Jesus' status as *imago Dei* does not mean that he exhausts the content of personhood, or even that he exemplifies certain "personal" qualities. As the one who is himself the content of the gospel, he is also the original in whose image all those to whom the gospel is addressed have been created. But the features of this original are such that when we seek to describe what he is like, we are not permitted to treat him as an ideal against whom others are to be measured and to whom they may be judged to conform more or less closely. Instead, we find that he places our efforts at such categorization under judgment.

In this respect, the personhood Jesus instantiates is radically underdetermined. What it permits (and indeed demands) is a rejection of every ideology that holds up a particular category of person (whether "men" or "whites" or some other group) as normative. For the kind of character whom God addresses in Jesus—and thus the kind of character Jesus is—stands behind any such category as the occluded ground of its perceived normativity.

It follows that the content of personhood does not lie on the surface of human language or of human experience. The personhood of others—and, no less importantly, of ourselves—does not consist in conformity to what we imagine persons to be. Rather, we are instructed to seek what it means to be a person—to be an object of God's promise of the kingdom—in what is alien to our sensibilities and prejudices. In this sense, what it means to be a person is yet to be revealed. To paraphrase 1 John 3:2, though we are addressed as persons now, we do not yet fully know in what our personhood consists, because Jesus has not yet entered into the full number of relationships that shape his own personal identity.

The content of personhood is thus something that we can approach only by a series of exclusions, as we are led by the Spirit of Jesus to name those who precisely by virtue of their implicit claims to normative status do not point us to the *imago Dei* in the world. Because new norms displace old ones, and a shift in social location can radically alter the discursive landscape, the results we achieve will never be more

I recently bought this book.

Exhaustion

than provisional. Yet this fact is no cause for despondency, because the Christian story does not presume that we know what it means to be a person. What it means to be a person is something that we can only anticipate in the encounter with those who, insofar as they are not like Jesus, remind us who Jesus is.

This approach has the advantage of avoiding the invidious (and exegetically questionable) task of defining the image of God in terms of some intrinsic property, which particular individuals may or may not possess. If the *imago Dei* refers not to some thing within us, but to some one outside of us, then we are freed from trying to justify our status through the critical examination of others or ourselves. What matters is our relationship with Jesus as the decisive common factor in our lives as human persons.

The problem is that this foundational relationship seems to be one in which Jesus disappears as a concrete individual and becomes little more than a pointer to the personhood of others. It is correspondingly hard to see how our own integrity as persons is bound up with our relationship to him in his particularity as the incarnate Word of God, or, indeed, that it is possible to have a relationship with him at all.

If these implications are to be avoided, it must be made clear that Jesus points us to others not because he lacks a particular identity of his own, but rather, because his identity resists homogenization. That the risen Christ has ascended to the right hand of God gives him this stability, because his absence from our history, if taken seriously, undercuts every attempt to use him to define the boundaries of human personhood. Thus, if his resurrection displaces his identity in a way that exposes the occlusion of the other, his ascension proclaims that his identity (and that of the rest of us) is not thereby dissolved in a shifting array of signifiers, but rather, is hidden with God. As such, it provides the focal point in reference to which our identities are defined, but the discontinuity between this focal point and our own identities subverts every attempt to make either Jesus or those for whom he came conform to our established notions of what a person is.

Therefore, having suggested that we are enabled to see others as persons only by reference to Jesus, I now must explore in greater detail what this christological framework implies for our acknowledging of others as persons. After all, while rocks, trees, and nebulae are also

not Jesus, we don't attribute personhood to them. Given the Christian conviction that Jesus is the one in whom all things are reconciled (Col. 1:20; cf. Eph. 1:10), it is necessary to explain how the relationship to us through which Jesus claims us as persons differs from his relationship to the rest of creation. Filling in that content is the task of the rest of this book, beginning in the next chapter with an exploration of the theological roots of the term "person."

How do we
have a
relationship
with Jesus
rather than
just association?