

The Concept of the Person in Theological Perspective



An obvious response to the question of what distinguishes our relationship to Jesus from that of other creatures is that Jesus was himself a human being and not a horse or a fungus. This answer, however, only raises the further question of why theological anthropology needs the concept of person in the first place. Why not simply speak of human beings? After all, specifying what it means to be human is likely to prove no more complicated than defining "person" and would have the ancillary effect of limiting the proliferation of technical terms.

One way of responding to this challenge would be to refer once again to the colloquial sense in which our categorization of others as persons, though doubtless connected with our humanity in some way, refers to a value we assign them that is not simply identical to their membership in a particular species. From this perspective, to be treated like a person is not simply—or even primarily—to have a given biological identity, but to be acknowledged as having the right to expect, for example, the preservation of one's physical and psychological integrity, respect for one's freedom of action, and a claim on the attention of others.¹

And yet to define personhood in terms like these could easily be taken to imply that all who for whatever reason cannot communicate, whose freedom of action is limited, or whose ability to make decisions is impaired are not persons in the full sense of the word. In this context, it is small wonder that some have questioned whether "person" is a particularly useful category when reflecting on our status

1. Something like this perspective underlies the arguments for the personhood of certain nonhuman mammals in Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), ch. 5.

as creatures before God.² Given that one looks in vain in scripture for the kind of technical use of the term "person" characteristic of modern philosophical and theological discussion, Christians in particular might be thought to have good reason to give serious consideration to such counsel. Over against these suspicions, however, it is the burden of this chapter to argue that there are good theological reasons for assigning "person" a central role in Christian reflection on human being, the most important being that the term plays an important role in the Christian confession of Jesus as savior.

THE THEOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE CONCEPT OF THE PERSON

Needless to say, if the term "person" is to be granted a central role in theological anthropology in spite of the absence of any equivalent in biblical Hebrew or Greek, a case needs to be made that it illumines some aspect of the biblical understanding of human being. As already noted, one way in which the distinctiveness of humankind is highlighted in scripture is by way of the claim that it is the only creature made in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27; cf. 5:1).³ While the meaning of this phrase remains unexplored in the Old Testament, it acquires special significance in the New, where Jesus is explicitly identified as the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), so that the salvation he brings can be described as a matter of our being restored (Col. 3:10) or conformed (Rom. 8:29; cf. 1 Cor. 15:49) to his image.⁴ From this perspective, Jesus is the touchstone for any claims about the ultimate character of human being. It follows that if human beings are to be described as persons, it will be because the term applies first and foremost to Jesus.

As it happens, the use of the term "person" in theology can be seen as a consequence (albeit a rather indirect one) of early Christian reflection on this identification of Jesus with the divine image. The

2. See, e.g., Stanley Hauerwas, "Must a Patient Be a Person to Be a Patient? Or, My Uncle Charlie Is Not Much of a Person but He Is Still My Uncle Charlie," in *Truthfulness and Tragedy: Further Investigations in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1977), 127–31.

3. For other references to humanity's place in the created order, see Genesis 2, Psalm 8, and (albeit in a less confident vein) Job 7:17; but cf. Eccl. 3:19.

4. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 93, art. 1.

characterization of Jesus as God's image seems to be related to certain terminological developments in the intertestamental literature, where the phrase "image of God" is applied to the figure of divine Wisdom. Already in the Old Testament, Wisdom appears as a distinct aspect or manifestation of the divine being who is active alongside God in the work of creation (see Prov. 8:22–31). In the later Wisdom of Solomon, she is conceived as a sort of mediator between God and creation and, in this capacity, is described as "an image of [God's] goodness" (Wis. 7:26).⁵ Jesus himself is identified explicitly with divine Wisdom in 1 Cor. 1:24 (cf. Matt. 11:19; Luke 11:49), and the affirmation in Colossians that "all things were created in him . . . through him and to him, and he is before all things, and all things are sustained in him" (Col. 1:16–17) also seems to reflect earlier descriptions of Wisdom as the agent of creation (see, e.g., Wis. 7:22).

But if the New Testament succeeds in giving definite historical form and content to the somewhat shadowy figure of Wisdom by identifying Jesus with the image of God, this move raises questions about the character of Jesus' relation to God. As the one described not only as the "reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being," but also as "Son," Jesus is evidently superior to the angels (Heb. 1:3–14). But is he therefore equal with God? The witness of the New Testament writers seems ambiguous at first glance (John 1:1; 10:30; 20:28; but cf. Mark 10:18; John 14:28), and it was not until the fourth century, when faced with Arius's claim that the Word made flesh was a creature, that the Council of Nicea explicitly declared that the Word (or Son) who became incarnate was "of the same essence" (*homoousios*) as the God whom Jesus called Father. But even this definition did not solve the problem of Jesus' relationship to God, because it remained unclear how it was possible to affirm that the Father and the Son shared the same essence without either rendering them indistinguishable or, worse, implying that Christians worshiped two gods instead of one.

These parallel threats were answered through a terminological innovation that entailed distinguishing the Father, Son, and Spirit as a Trinity of three "persons" sharing one divine essence. Each person

5. See also Philo of Alexandria's descriptions of Wisdom (or Logos) as the divine image in *Legum allegoria* 1.43 and *De confusione linguarum* 146–47 (in Philo, 10 vols., Loeb Classical Library [London: William Heinemann, 1929–62], vols. 1 and 4).

was understood to be truly distinct from the other two (and thus not simply a more or less transient manifestation of some underlying divine reality) and yet inseparable from them in life and action (so that the three persons are not three gods in the way that Peter, Paul, and Mary are three independently subsisting human beings).⁶ From this specifically trinitarian perspective, the justification of Christians' confession of Jesus as Savior lies in the fact that he is one of these persons. Of course, the term "person" was not invented for this purpose, and the consolidation of trinitarian language was complicated somewhat by the fact that the Greek theologians who hammered out the orthodox form of the doctrine shied away from the word *prosopon* (the Greek cognate of the Latin *persona*) in favor of the philosophically more respectable *hypostasis*. Terminological variations aside, however, the trinitarian controversy established that the Father, Son, and Spirit were not to be understood as masklike modifications of some ontologically more fundamental divine nature, but rather as that most basic reality which gives the divine nature its specific form.⁷

In short, while in ancient Greek thought the category of essence or nature was primary, the trinitarian controversy of the fourth century led Christians to the conclusion that the concept of person was primary. Father, Son, and Spirit were not names for variations or modes of some primordial divine essence, but were in fact constitutive of that essence. It is therefore not owing to the properties of an impersonal (or prepersonal) divine nature that God is God; rather, God's divinity is a function of the relationships between the three persons.⁸ Put in other words, "God" does not so much name a particular kind of being as a communion of persons whose existence is characterized by the qualities of simplicity, unity, omnipotence, omniscience, and the like.

6. "But though we take it for granted that there are three persons and names, we do not imagine . . . three different lives. . . . Rather is it the same life which is produced by the Father, prepared by the Son, and depends on the will of the Holy Spirit" (Gregory of Nyssa, "An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying That There Are Three Gods," in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954], 262).

7. "The person is no longer an adjunct to a being, a category which we add to a concrete entity once we have first verified its ontological hypostasis. It is itself the hypostasis of the being" (John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* [Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985], 39).

8. "Thus God as person . . . makes the one divine substance to be that which it is: the one God" (*ibid.*, 41).

Trinitarian doctrine thus addresses the question of Jesus' (and, by extension, the Holy Spirit's) relationship to God by arguing that God's oneness is not an abstract or undifferentiated singleness, but a living unity defined by the communion of three fully and equally divine "persons." Insofar as God is none other than these three in their trinity, the persons are not to be conceived as independent entities; rather, they coinhere in each other in such a way that each is equally the subject of every divine act. Because talk about any one of the persons entails talk about the other two, it is impossible to define what a person is in or by itself.⁹ Trinitarian personhood is therefore characterized by the loving commitment of each one to the other two rather than by autonomy or self-sufficiency.¹⁰ Indeed, to speak of the "person" within a trinitarian context is not to define some (generic) thing, but to identify some (concrete) one by reference to her or his relationships to other, equally concrete someones.¹¹

JESUS AS A PERSON

The modern Western concept of the person derives from these trinitarian roots.¹² Obviously, the primary application of the term "person" to God does not render its use in the human sphere illegitimate, but it does require that any such use be shown to be consistent with the term's primary reference to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, the theological ascription of the term to human beings needs to be governed by what we are given to know of God rather than by what we imagine we know of ourselves.

We may begin by pointing out that if "person" is predicated most properly of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then it cannot be defined in terms of the possession of certain shared qualities or characteristics. After all, that which the divine persons have in common is precisely

9. "The definition of divine persons as relations of origin means that to be a person is to be defined by where a person comes from; what a person is in itself or by itself cannot be determined" (Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991], 69).

10. Ibid., 289. Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 426–27, 430.

11. In the words of the medieval theologian Richard of St. Victor, a person is "an incommunicable existence of the divine nature" ("*divinae naturae incommunicabilis existentia*") (*De Trinitate* 4.22; cited in Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 29, art. 3).

12. See the discussion of Boethius on pp. 7–10 above.

their divine nature (with its attendant qualities of omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, etc.), and it is not this shared nature that distinguishes them as persons. Quite the contrary, their personhood refers precisely to what they do not share.¹³ As Vladimir (Lossky) has pointed out, where the persons of the Trinity are concerned, "the only common definition possible would be the impossibility of a common definition."¹⁴ In short, to be a person is not to be a certain kind of thing (e.g., self-conscious, rational, or relational), but simply to be the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. And what it is to be any of these three is describable only in terms of the particular relationships in which they stand with each other.

We are given to know something about these relationships through *Incar-nation* the life of Jesus of Nazareth, since Jesus himself is understood to be one of these three persons—the Son or Word—made flesh. As the stimulus for the emergence of the theological concept of the person in the first place, Jesus remains the key to understanding personhood as the one in and through whom God's triune life becomes visible in history. In any case, allowing the doctrine of the Trinity to guide our use of the term "person" reminds us that Jesus' status as a person has nothing to do with his satisfying some general criteria of "the personal," but is simply a function of his being one of the three divine persons.

But if Jesus' personhood is not reducible to any general definition of the personal, its content can nevertheless be described in terms of his relationship to the other persons of the Trinity. Jesus is, for example, the one given (John 3:16) or sent (John 4:34; 5:24, 30, 36, 37, and passim) by the Father, and to whom the Father has committed all judgment (John 5:22–27) and authority (Matt. 28:18; cf. John 3:35; 13:3; 1 Cor. 15:24–28). Likewise, he is the one who is equipped to minister (Matt. 3:16–17 and pars.) and is raised (Rom. 1:4) by the power of the Spirit, and to whose sovereignty the Spirit bears witness (John 15:26; 1 Cor. 12:3; 1 John 4:2). This kind of description does not amount to a definition of personhood, since the Father and the Spirit are equally persons even though they do not relate to Jesus in

13. See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 104–5.

14. Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 113.

the same way Jesus relates to them. At the same time, however, that the personhood of the Father, Son, and Spirit is inseparable from their standing in mutually constitutive, albeit diverse, relationships with one another seems to rule out the possibility of the term "person" being predicated of creatures.

And yet closer attention to the particular form of Jesus' personhood suggests that it may be possible to conceive of non-divine persons. Jesus himself declares that his mission as the Son sent from the Father is continued in the mission of the disciples whom he, in his turn, sends forth: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me" (Matt. 10:40; cf. Mark 9:37; Luke 9:48; 10:16; John 12:44–45; 17:18). In a manner analogous to Jesus' representation of the one he calls Father, the disciples represent Jesus in and to the world as this Father's "Son." By entrusting his disciples with the ministry that identifies him as the second person of the Trinity, Jesus effectively calls them to share in the life of the Trinity in a way that identifies them as persons.

If the possibility of human personhood is understood to depend on Jesus treating people in a particular way, it follows that the disciples' status as persons does not depend on any specific qualities they possess. Their personhood rests entirely on their election by Jesus.¹⁵ As persons, they are commissioned to represent Jesus in the same way that Jesus represents the God he calls Father, but their personhood is not constituted by their fidelity to this mission. It is established instead by the fact of Jesus' representing them before God as friends (John 15:13–15), for whom he prays (John 17:9; cf. Luke 22:31–32) and consecrates himself (John 17:19), so that they might join the communion he shares as a person with the Father (John 17:21, 26). This theme is taken up and developed in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where Jesus is described as a priest who is able to intercede on our behalf before God (2:17; cf. 4:15; 6:20; 1 John 2:1). If Christ is a person because he is the Son, then we are persons insofar as Christ intercedes for us by claiming us as fellow sons and daughters of the Father. In the words of Hans Urs von Balthasar, "This Jesus is a person. Others

15. "It is impossible to become a person except by becoming a brother of the 'First-born'" (Hans Urs von Balthasar) *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992], 249).

can claim to be persons only in virtue of a relationship with him and in dependence on him."¹⁶

REPRESENTATION AND SUBSTITUTION

Is this way of understanding human personhood consistent with the commitment to the integrity of the other that was placed at the core of Jesus' identity in chapter 2? There it was argued that the chief threat to personhood is the process of occlusion in which the other is neither acknowledged nor accepted as a person in her own right. Instead, she is either regarded as fundamentally the same as oneself, or, to the extent that her difference from oneself is recognized, her full personhood is questioned. Doesn't the thesis that we are persons only by virtue of Jesus' intercession for us constitute just such a process of occlusion, since we appear to count as persons only to the extent that our individual distinctiveness is subsumed under (and thus hidden behind) that of Jesus?

It is with concerns of this sort in mind that Dorothee (Sölle) has insisted on the need to conceive of Christ's work on our behalf as a matter of representation rather than substitution. A substitute, she notes, displaces someone and thereby renders that person superfluous; consequently, a Jesus who is our substitute leaves us no place before God. Insofar as Jesus comes precisely to secure us such a place, Sölle argues that he is more accurately conceived as our representative (Stellvertreter, literally "placeholder").¹⁷ While a substitute implicitly undermines our distinctiveness by taking our place, a representative affirms it by keeping a place open for us.¹⁸

Sölle maintains that Christ's status as our representative must be conceived as provisional, on the grounds that genuine representation anticipates the time when the person for whom a place is held will be able to occupy it in her or his own right.¹⁹ When representation

16. Ibid., 207. Cf. Karl (Barth) *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter CD], 13 vols., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Clark, 1956–74), III/2, 135: "the ontological determination of all men is that Jesus is present among them as their divine Other, their Neighbour, Companion and Brother."

17. Dorothee Sölle, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology after the "Death of God"* (London: SCM, 1967), 103–4.

18. Ibid., 55.

19. Ibid., 105; cf. 107–12.

is permanent, she argues, it ceases to be representation and becomes substitution, in which the effective replacement of the one "represented" makes it impossible to affirm that she or he has irreplaceable value before God. Although Sölle's position diverges sharply from the idea (on which the Reformers in particular insisted) that human beings are never able to hold their own before God apart from Christ, it does pose the question of how Christ's ministry of representing us before God can be permanent without making our own presence redundant.

Sölle's discussion of the relationship between substitution and representation reflects modern concerns about the value of the individual, but the issues she raises echo far older concerns about Christ's relationship to us. The christological debates of the church's early centuries were also driven by the need to clarify what had to be true about Jesus if his work was to be defended as the salvation and not the occlusion or annihilation of other human beings. Clearly, if Jesus were the unique Savior of the human race, he could not be captive to sin in the same way that the rest of us were; at the same time (as suggested by biblical passages like Gal. 4:4–5 and Heb. 2:14–18), it would be impossible for him to intercede for us if he were not like us. How are these demands for similarity and difference to be reconciled?

The issue of Jesus' distinctiveness was largely settled with the formal definition of orthodox trinitarianism at the Council of Constantinople in 381, where the Word made flesh was defined as one of three consubstantial divine persons, each equal in divinity to the other two. By contrast, articulating Jesus' likeness to the rest of humankind proved a more intractable problem. Gregory of Nazianzus (who had played a significant role in working out the trinitarian language adopted at Constantinople) established a touchstone for subsequent debate by arguing that Jesus could redeem the whole human person only if he himself were fully human.²⁰ This principle acquired dogmatic status in 451, when the Council of Chalcedon confirmed that Christ was consubstantial (*homoousios*) with humankind as well as with God; but assent to the principle that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine did not translate into agreement on how these two natures were

20. "That which he has not assumed he has not healed; but that which is united to his Godhead is also saved" ("To Cledonius the Priest against Apollinarius," in Ep. CI, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, vol. 7 of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995 (1894)], 440).

united in him. Specifically, it was unclear whether Christ, insofar as he was confessed to be consubstantial both with God and with humankind, should be described as one person or two. Either alternative posed serious problems: the former option seemed to suggest that in Jesus divinity and humanity had been blended into some third substance, while the latter risked the specter of two parallel Christs, with the divine Word shadowing the human being Jesus.

The christological formula adopted at Chalcedon addressed this issue by declaring that while the divine and human *natures* in Christ retained their separate integrity (having been joined "without confusion, without change"), they nevertheless subsisted as a single person, or *hypostasis* (since they were united "without division, without separation"). This "hypostatic union" between the divine and human natures meant that Jesus' various experiences were not to be divided up between his divinity and humanity, but were simply to be attributed to Jesus Christ as the one Word made flesh. In this way, the force of the Chalcedonian formula was grammatical rather than metaphysical: rather than try to explain how divinity and humanity were united in Christ, the Council simply decreed that to identify Jesus was to identify the divine Word, and, likewise, that the Word was identified by pointing to Jesus.²¹

A review of the objections raised against the Chalcedonian formula is beyond the scope of the present study, but even the Council's defenders soon recognized that the claim that Jesus was just one hypostasis raised the question of what kind of hypostasis he was. In the course of the trinitarian controversy, "hypostasis" had come to be defined as the particular instantiation of a nature, so that, for example, Peter and Paul constitute distinct human hypostases, and the persons of the Trinity could be characterized as divine hypostases. Since Chalcedonians worked initially under the presupposition that a nature could be present only if instantiated in a distinct hypostasis, defenders of the Council had to explain how it was possible to say that Christ had two natures if one of them was "anhypostatic" (i.e., without a corresponding hypostasis).

Inasmuch as the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople had af-

21. Eric W. Gritsch and Robert W. Jenson, *Lutheranism: The Theological Movement and Its Confessional Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 93–94.

firmed that the Word that became flesh was the second person of the Trinity, it was a matter of consensus in the Chalcedonian church that the one hypostasis of Jesus Christ was divine.²² It followed that Christ's human nature had no corresponding human hypostasis of its own. On a grammatical level, this conclusion merely reaffirmed the point that Jesus' identity was that of the Word; but in light of the metaphysical assumption that a nature could only be said to be present if it was "hypostasized," the idea that Christ lacked a human hypostasis appeared to undermine the claim that he had a fully human nature.²³ How could Jesus be fully human if he lacked a concrete human identity?

In answering this question, the trinitarian ontology developed by the Cappadocians proved helpful. As already noted, the Cappadocians argued that within the Godhead the three divine persons (or hypostases) were ontologically prior to the divine essence or nature.²⁴ God is not first an undifferentiated essence that is subsequently divided into hypostatically distinct persons; rather, the divine essence is a manifestation of the freedom of the persons of the Trinity in relation. It is this ontological priority of the hypostasis over the nature that distinguishes the three divine hypostases as "persons" in the trinitarian sense. Individual creatures, whether humans in a city or roses on a bush, are also distinct hypostases, but they do not exhibit the combination of mutuality and freedom characteristic of the divine persons: we can conceive of Paul without Peter, and of human being in general without either of them; by contrast, we cannot conceive of the Father

22. For a review of the search for a conceptual framework capable of supporting this conclusion, see Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 2.2 (London: Mowbray, 1995), 186–89, 277–82, 437–38.

23. Grillmeier (*ibid.*, 284) points out that even staunch Chalcedonians feared that to characterize Christ's human nature as anhypostatic was equivalent to declaring it unreal.

24. Technically, the trinitarian controversy turned on the distinction between hypostasis and essence (*ousia*), and the christological controversy on that between hypostasis and nature (*physis*). But while the distinction between essence and nature was important for certain Christologies developed after 451, the two terms tended to be functionally synonymous among Chalcedonians, for whom the decisive issue was the conceptual priority of hypostasis with respect to essence and nature alike. Thus, by the eighth century, one Orthodox writer saw no problem in affirming that "ousia and nature [*physis*] are the same" (Anastasius, *Doctrina patrum de incarnatione Verbi*, 6.1; cited in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*, vol. 2 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974], 81).

without the Son, or of God apart from the particularity of Father, Son, and Spirit.

The idea that the hypostasis is properly conceived as the active source rather than a derivative of the divine nature could also be deployed to answer the question of how two natures could be joined in the single, personal hypostasis of the Word. The solution lay in distinguishing the principle that a nature could not subsist without some individuating hypostasis from the claim that every subsisting nature had to have a separate hypostasis.²⁵ Because the trinitarian hypostases are ontologically prior to the divine nature, they are not limited or restricted by it. The Word is therefore free to adopt a human nature without any loss of divinity.²⁶ Correspondingly, the claim that the human nature assumed by the Word lacked a human hypostasis does not force the conclusion that it has no hypostatic instantiation at all; instead, it can be argued that the human nature subsists within the hypostasis of the divine Word.

In this way, the Word's taking flesh extends the priority of person over nature characteristic of the Trinity to the human sphere: human nature is reconfigured as a manifestation of personal freedom (specifically, the freedom of the second person of the Trinity) rather than a set of ontologically given constraints on individual existence. God in Christ thereby opens human nature to "personal" existence in the specifically trinitarian sense of "sharing in the mutual love of the Father, Son, and Spirit." Moreover, the anhypostatic character of Jesus' human nature means that the Word makes space for human beings to exist as persons without filling that space in a way that would displace or occlude the particularity of other human beings. John Meyendorff puts it as follows:

God assumed humanity in a way which did not exclude any human hypostasis, but which opened to all of them the possibility of restoring their unity in [God]. [God] became, indeed, the

25. In other words, hypostasis could be characterized as "the personal, 'acting' source of natural life; but... not 'nature,' or life itself" (John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* [New York: Fordham University Press, 1974], 154).

26. "The distinction between substance and hypostasis in the Trinity... is a way of indicating that the hypostasis of the Word... is not restricted to its own substance or nature. Without loss to itself, it may therefore take on a created nature" (Kathryn Tanner, "Who Is Jesus? Christological Conundrums," unpublished MS of the *Scottish Journal of Theology Lectures*, 1999).

Divine
essence

→ This statement is actually important and I don't think it's all lost on me at this point.

"new Adam," in whom every [human being] finds his [or her] own nature realized perfectly and fully, without the limitations which would have been inevitable if Jesus were only a human personality.²⁷

In other words, the incarnation is not the election of the particular man Jesus as a person to the exclusion of all other human beings, but rather the election of all human beings to be persons in and through the particular man Jesus.

Yet this way of understanding Christ's work of representation has two outstanding problems. First, the suggestion that Jesus establishes human nature as a hypostatically open space that we can fill seems to imply that there comes a point where we need to assume responsibility for filling it—a possibility at odds with the principle that our acceptance by God is at no point conditional on our own merits or abilities. Second, when Christ's role is defined as the essentially passive one of not taking our place,²⁸ our own particularity as human persons seems to be secured at the price of obscuring Jesus' human particularity: by confessing Jesus' humanity as anhypostatic, we seem to reduce it to an ontologically empty space. According to the witness of the Johannine literature in particular, love characterizes the relationship of the divine persons with one another and with ourselves; but how can we either love or be loved by someone whose personhood is seemingly detached from his flesh-and-blood existence?

These difficulties can be resolved only by providing a fuller account of Christ's person. If human beings remain permanently incapable of securing a place before God, then clearly, Christ's work as our representative must involve something more than the negative condition of not taking our place before God. It is certainly important that Christ leaves us space to be persons; but for this part of his work to be of any use to us, he must also actively and effectively secure that space for us. While the claim that Jesus' human nature is anhypostatic is a necessary condition of our being able to be counted as persons, it is not sufficient, since it does no good for Christ to leave us space before God unless he also makes it possible for us to occupy it. The question is how our occupying that space can be said to depend on Christ's presence for us without rendering our own presence redundant.

27. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 159.

PERSONHOOD AND REPRESENTATION

As already noted, the point of the doctrine of the anhypostasis was to affirm that the divine Word was Jesus' sole and entire identity. By defining Jesus' human nature as anhypostatic, the church made it clear that the second person of the Trinity did not take the flesh of an independently existing human being, but rather, became man by assuming human nature. In other words, the fact that Jesus' human nature was anhypostatic did not mean that it lacked any hypostasis at all, but that it had one divine hypostasis as its identity. Thus, at the same time that his human nature was declared to lack a separate human hypostasis, it was affirmed to have been "enhypostasized" by (and therefore to be "enhypostatic" in) the divine hypostasis of the Word. In this way, the category of enhypostasis complemented that of anhypostasis by affirming the concrete particularity of Jesus' human life over against any suggestion that his humanity was featureless or generic.

In order to explain the significance of this point for our existence as persons, it is necessary to be more precise about what it means to say that our personhood derives from Jesus representing us as persons before God. Etymologically, to "re-present" is to make present. One represents a tree, for example, by painting a picture of it or writing a poem about it; while the tree itself may not be at hand, it is made present—and thus made known as the particular tree it is—for the one seeing the picture or reading the poem. In a specifically social context, representation describes the work of standing in for another as her or his official (in the sense of publicly recognized) proxy. For example, an attorney represents his client in a court of law; and, on a larger scale, a Senator represents her constituents in Congress.

The scope of a representative's activity depends on the setting. In a rehearsal for a graduation ceremony, for example, someone may be chosen to represent the keynote speaker in the procession or on the dais. Such a "representative" need have no personal knowledge whatsoever of the one being represented; he merely marks her place in the ceremony. The scope of representation is greater in a legislative context. While the legislator may be personally acquainted with only a tiny fraction of her constituency, she nevertheless will need to possess a general sense of their interests in order to represent them effectively.

Moving still further along the spectrum, a defense attorney in a capital case requires a detailed knowledge of his client if he is to represent her competently.

Though the comprehensive character of Jesus' representation of us before God leads one biblical writer to understand his role as analogous to that of an attorney (John 14:16; cf. 1 John 2:1), Christians have interpreted his work of representation as involving a far greater degree of identification with us than that of even the most dedicated trial lawyer. Because Jesus does not merely speak for us, but actually sacrifices himself on our behalf, many Christians have followed the lead of the writer of Hebrews (see especially Heb. 9:24–26; cf. 2 Cor. 5:21) in interpreting his activity after the model of a priest.²⁸ The difference lies in the fact that a priest does not simply defend the "client's" interests, but actually effects reconciliation between the estranged parties. Jesus' work is priestly insofar as he accomplishes the work of reconciliation with God that the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament could only foreshadow. His intercession does not convince God of our acceptability (as though God needed to be made more fully aware of the facts of our situation); it actually renders us acceptable (1 Cor. 1:30; cf. Rom. 8:34).

As our (priestly) representative, Jesus creates the conditions under which we are acknowledged by God as persons in the trinitarian sense that Jesus is. Jesus thus represents us to God as his "fellow heirs" (Rom. 8:17), whom he is "not ashamed" to call sisters and brothers (Heb. 2:11). "Justification" is the term traditionally used to characterize this work in Christian theology, but insofar as its content is that God acknowledges us as "fellow heirs" with Christ and "children" alongside the only-begotten Son, in the present context it might as well be termed "personalization." In any event, the claim that we are "justified" (or "personalized") as a direct result of Jesus representing us before God can be elaborated in terms of two related principles. First, to attribute our justification to Jesus is to deny that human beings are acceptable in God's sight (i.e., that God treats them as persons) apart from Jesus' mediation. In this sense, justification is, to use the

28. See, for example, John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), II.15, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: Clark, 1928), §104. Cf. Barth, CD, IV/1, 135.

language of classical Lutheranism, "forensic," meaning that our acceptability (or righteousness) is imputed to us for Jesus' sake and is not a quality we possess on our own account. We are not justified (or "personalized") because we are worthy; rather, we are worthy because we have been justified.

At the same time, however (and this is the second point), insofar as human beings are seen by God as acceptable "in Christ," they truly are acceptable. A parallel may be drawn here with the event of creation. Even as the world must be confessed as genuinely good because God saw it as good at the time of its creation (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 25, 31), so in the work of redemption God's seeing us as persons in Christ means that we are genuinely persons. Because our status as persons depends entirely on our being in Christ, it is not something we can boast about as our own possession; but neither is it the case that God's seeing us as persons is arbitrary, as though God might just as easily see us in a different way. God's seeing, in redemption no less than in creation, is understood to be right and fitting, though the truth of what is seen cannot be separated from the act of God's seeing it. Because we are not persons (defined, once again, as sharers in the trinitarian communion of persons) apart from what God has done in Christ, an individual human being's personhood is visible only as one "sees" with God by refusing to look at her or him apart from Christ.²⁹

PERSONHOOD AND WITNESS

As our representative before God, Jesus does far more than define a hypostatically open space for us to occupy through our own efforts. Nor does his work consist in relating the facts of our situation to God in the fashion of an impartial observer. After all, it is a central conviction of Christian belief that such objectivity would only confirm our guilt as creatures that have willfully turned away from God. In representing us, Jesus intercedes on our behalf before God in a way that actually changes the facts of our situation. Jesus constitutes us as persons by putting us in the place he holds open for us.

One way to understand this process is by comparison with the practice of bearing witness in a court of law. The testimony of a character

29. See pp. 74–75.

witness in the sentencing phase of a trial provides an analogy to the idea of a third party confirming someone as a person in the eyes of another, thereby rendering her justified in a way that she would not be apart from that witness. For example, the purpose of bringing the mother of a convicted murderer to testify is not primarily to disclose new facts about the life of the guilty party. To be sure, a mother put on the stand will undoubtedly relate a great many such facts, but that is not the point of her testimony. What she has to say in no way changes the defendant's guilt. Its aim is rather to encourage the jury to "see" the defendant in a new way—as a person whom they have the responsibility to treat as a person, in spite of the evil that the defendant has done. Moreover, such witness is unique and irreplaceable: only the mother is in a position to "personalize" her child in this particular way; she alone is in a position to establish that person as her son or daughter.

The idea that our status as persons is bound up with the witness given by another has certain affinities with relational models of personhood. Instead of focusing on our role in establishing and maintaining relationships, however (a strategy that renders the personhood of comatose, psychotic, and other mentally impaired persons problematic), the category of witness emphasizes the extrinsic character of our personhood by highlighting its dependence on the relation that someone else (viz., Jesus Christ) assumes with respect to us, regardless of the level or quality with which we reciprocate. The idea that I come to conceive myself as a person because other human beings treat me as such also has some psychological plausibility: if all those around me suddenly ceased to treat me like a person, I think it likely that I would start to doubt my personhood. Faced with forces attempting to erode my sense of personhood in the present, my ability to maintain some sense of myself as a person in such circumstances would in all likelihood depend on my experience of having been treated like a person in the past.³⁰

The problem, of course, is that the testimony other human beings might give to our personhood can never be more than partial: no human being has the comprehensive knowledge of the totality of

30. Primo Levi argues that life in the Nazi death camps approximated to just such a situation. See his *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (New York: Collier, 1995), and *The Drowned and the Saved*, ed. Erroll McDonald (New York: Vintage, 1989).

another's existence that would be necessary to establish her or his personhood. For example, however powerful a mother's witness to her child may be, it is incapable of shedding much light on her child's identity as a spouse or parent. Moreover, even if someone had the kind of comprehensive knowledge necessary to illuminate every aspect of another's identity, the fact that this potential witness has her own specific hypostatic identity means that she could not fully represent another without effectively annihilating herself as a distinct person in her own right, and thereby subverting the value of her testimony as the witness of an "other." *→ compare this to Suchocki's notion of God apprehending a subject in its totality.*

Dostoyevsky gave classic formulation to these inherent limits on human witness in Ivan Karamazov's story of a peasant woman forced to watch her son hunted down and killed by the local landowner's hounds:

I do not want a mother to embrace the torturer who had her child torn to pieces by his dogs! If she likes, she can forgive him for herself, she can forgive the torturer for the immeasurable suffering he has inflicted upon her as a mother; but she has no right to forgive him for the sufferings of her tortured child. She has no right to forgive the torturer for that, even if her child were to forgive him!³¹

The problem Ivan identifies is twofold. First, any one person's witness to another is only partial; second, it is nontransferable. So while the mother in the story can forgive the torturer for the wrong done to her, she cannot forgive him for the wrong done to her child. No one but the child can affirm his relationship with the torturer in the face of the evil the latter has committed against him. From Ivan's perspective, even God does not have the right to forgive the torturer, because God did not suffer the wrong.

Of course, it is Dostoyevsky's contention that Ivan is wrong: God does have the right to forgive and exercises it through the intercession of Jesus Christ. The question is how appeal to Jesus can escape the inherent limitations of human witness. Ivan's challenge allows that our being affirmed as persons can avoid the charge of "cheap grace"

31. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, vol. 1, trans. David Magarshack (London: Penguin, 1958), 287.

only if Jesus' witness to our personhood can transcend the partial and fragmentary character of all merely human testimony. In the particular case of the torturer, this means that Jesus' witness must be able to incorporate the standpoint of the victim, without depriving either the victim or the torturer of his own integrity as a person. To the extent that personhood is understood to entail an honoring of the person's irreplaceable and unsubstitutable particularity, these conditions seemingly cannot be met. We are back at the problem of how a Jesus who is concrete enough to constitute us as persons can do so in a way that does not smother our personhood. The next chapter explores the possibility of finding a way beyond this apparent impasse.

- 4 -

The Personhood of Jesus Christ



Ivan Karamazov's story of the torturer challenges Christians to explain how God can sustain us as persons without betraying the integrity of our personhood. This challenge highlights an apparent contradiction in the account of personhood with which the last chapter ended: on the one hand, we can be vindicated as persons only by an act of witness that encompasses the whole of our lives; but on the other hand, any testimony sufficiently comprehensive to secure our identities would seem to threaten our uniqueness and irreplaceability as persons. In short, it appears that the unsubstitutability of persons is incompatible with the kind of absolute commitment to the other necessary to guarantee her or his existence as a person.

A possible solution to this dilemma is suggested by the biblical depiction of Jesus as a person whose identity is defined from beginning to end by his witness to the sovereignty of God (John 5:30; cf. 4:34; 6:38; Matt. 26:38-44 and pars.; Luke 23:46). Far from diminishing Jesus' distinctiveness, this unwavering commitment to the one he calls Father is precisely what establishes Jesus' identity as "Son."¹ Moreover, as our window onto the inner form of God's triune life, Jesus' story reveals that the same kind of commitment to the other that marks his relationship to the one he calls Father is characteristic of all the relationships between the divine persons. So, for example, Jesus' witness to the divinity of the Father is matched by the Father's witness to Jesus as the Son (Matt. 3:16-17; 17:5 and pars.; cf. John 5:37; 12:28) to whom all authority has been given (Matt. 28:18; John 5:22). Likewise,

1. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Clark, 1989), 310-11.