
God in Eternity and Time (part 2)

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God in time

In our discussion to this point we have considered the relation between God's transcendence above all created reality and his immanence in time, and the implications that that has for God's salvific purposes and for our human condition. If, in our doctrinal formulation, we were to sacrifice the transcendence of God, we would be in danger of falling into one or the other of forms of polytheism or pantheism. And if we sacrificed the immanence of God, we would be in danger of shipwreck on the rocks of deism.¹ We hold, therefore, to both the transcendence and the immanence of God. We hold to the position stated by the prophet Isaiah, 'Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, [and] with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit' (Is. 57:15). The relations that we bring into view in that manner may be understood in terms of the names by which God has made himself known. His name of *Elohim* declares his transcendent, independent, eternal, unchangeable, omnipotent being and nature. But his name of *Jehovah* is his covenant name that declares his immanent presence with his people to save them in grace and mercy and faithfulness.

As we move now to consider God's immanent entrance into time, the focus of our thought falls on four issues. *First*, we shall note that in all of the works of God external to the Godhead, the *opera ad extra*, each of the three Persons of the Godhead is engaged. *Second*, before the incarnation of the Second Person of the Godhead he appeared in this world in the likeness of man in order, on several occasions, to communicate data and information regarding his purposes. *Third*, God has entered this world for our redemption in the Personal incarnation of his Son. And *fourth*, in his spiritual presence he has come to his people in fulfillment of the promise of our Lord on the night on which he was betrayed.

On the cooperation of the Persons of the Godhead in the *opera ad extra* of God, we state, in the interests of brevity, the following relevant paragraph from Herman Bavinck's previously cited *Our Reasonable Faith*. 'While the Father gives the Son to the world (John 3:16), and while the Son Himself descends from heaven (John 6:38), that Son is conceived in Mary of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20 and Luke 1:35). At His baptism Jesus is anointed by the Holy Spirit, and is there publicly declared to be the beloved Son of the Father, the Son in whom he is well pleased (Matt. 3:16-17). The works which Jesus did were shown Him by the Father (John 5:19 and 8:38), and they are fulfilled by him in the strength of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:28). In His dying He offers Himself to God in the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:14). The resurrection is a raising up by the Father (Acts 2:24) and is at the same time Jesus' own act by which He is greatly proved to be the Son of the Father according to the Spirit of holiness (Rom. 1:3). And after his resurrection He, on the fortieth day, ascends in the Spirit which quickened Him on high in heaven and there He makes the angels and authorities and powers subject to Himself'.²

The appearances of God to man in the preincarnate Person of the Son are well-known and do not call for extended comment. We understand that the preincarnate Son

walked and talked with Adam in the garden in the cool of the day (Gen.3:8), and that he appeared to the patriarchs on numerous occasions. He appeared to Abraham before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:1ff.), he wrestled with Jacob before he bestowed his blessing on him (Gen. 32:24ff.), and he appeared to Joshua as he entered the land of Canaan (Jos. 5:13ff.).

But it is in the incarnation of his Son that we have God's entry into time in order to bring to full realization the objectives of the Covenant of Redemption that issued from the predeterminate council of the Godhead before the foundation of the world (Acts 2:23, Acts 4:28, Rom. 8:28–30, Eph. 1:4, 1 Peter 1:2). We turn now to consider the fact and the mystery of the incarnation, not now to explore the full redemptive accomplishment to which it pointed, but to inspect the relevant doctrinal locus within the orbit of our present discussion of God in eternity and time. While the *Savoy Declaration* gives in later chapters a relatively full treatment of Christology, Soteriology, and the doctrines relevant to God's covenantal commitments, in chapter 2 that occupies us at present it does point unmistakably to the redemptive presence of the Son of God in this world.

The incarnation of Christ in historical time

No more profound mystery deserves our contemplation than that of the incarnation of the Son of God. If there is any point at which we stand in awe and wonder and amazement at the 'mystery of godliness' (1 Tim. 3:16), surely it is here. At this point we 'see through a glass, darkly', we 'know in part', and we hold to the hope of the fuller revelation that is yet to come (1 Cor. 13:12). But we assent to the statement of the apostle John that here we confront the very touchstone of Christian confession. 'Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God' (1 John 4:2). We know that the Word, who was with God and was God 'was made flesh, and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth' (John 1:1, 14). The atonement that accomplished our redemption was a real-time, definitive, historical atonement.

Who was it that walked in this world as the Messiah and Redeemer, who healed the sick and the lame, who wept with compassion at human distress, and who pursued the dusty and often derisive way to the cross? We have said, on the basis of more abundant Scripture than we need to recall, that this was the Son of God.

But let us look closely again at Jesus Christ of Nazareth as he makes his messianic claim. Here is one who clearly partakes of our full, though sinless, humanity. We say that here is the Son of God, and we say, too, that here is the man Christ Jesus. What are we to say of the Person of Jesus Christ? Was he, then, a human person? We have already looked briefly at the answer. To say that he was a human person would be to say that not only did he come from the eternity that he knew with the Father and the Spirit, but that by a transformation about which the Scriptures do not speak, he ceased to be God. Such a claim, moreover, would belie the necessity of his coming and the respect in which that necessity determined the very possibility and definition of our redemption. For it was impossible that a human person could have wrought our redemption. The realities of the Fall and of sin, the damning inheritance that Adam's dereliction projected to all his posterity, stand in the way of any possibility of our redemption by a human person.

Are we to say, then, that Jesus Christ of Nazareth was, in some sense which we should then endeavor to unravel, a divine-human person? Presumably, the meaning of such a claim would be that he was a person in whom the divine and the human natures were commingled or blended together in a manner that, by virtue of their

interpenetration, rendered it impossible to say that the one confronting us was either uniquely divine or uniquely human. Again our answer must be in the negative. Jesus Christ was not a human person. He was not a divine-human person. We are required to say that Jesus Christ was a divine person.

The eternal Son of God did, in fact, come into this world and take unto himself a truly human nature, being born of the virgin and thereby truly man. He took into union with his divine nature a truly human nature, assuming to himself all of the faculties of human soul. But in combining the two natures in his one person, that person was, and continued to be, a divine person. The failure to hold clearly to our doctrinal position in this matter, or to suggest that a communication of properties between the divine and human natures of our Lord occurred or that the human nature was personalized, has given rise to heresies of which that of *monothelism* is an example. That heresy, which claimed that only one will existed in the person of our Lord, 'a will that was not solely divine, nor human solely, but divine-human',³ was rejected by the early church.

We say that the second Person of the Godhead became, at his incarnation, Jesus Christ. His human name was Jesus, connoting that he came to 'save his people from their sins' (Matt. 1:21). He was the Christ, the anointed One who came into the world to fulfill all of the messianic prophecies that pointed to the fulfillment of the covenantal promises of redemption. He has been called the theanthropic person, combining the Greek words '*theos*' meaning God and '*anthropos*' meaning man. He was the God-man. The designation is appropriate, provided it is understood to imply the careful distinctions that orthodox theology has found it necessary to make. The biblical doctrine of the Person of Christ was brought to clear formulation in the early church, following the heresies that had developed in relation to it. That doctrine quickly came under attack even in the apostolic times. In his letter to the Colossian church Paul was concerned to refute certain heresies that were akin to what later became a more fully developed Gnosticism, and John in his epistle was very much concerned with the same problem. Gnosticism in its many expressions and aspects was essentially a heresy that denied the reality of the deity and the divinity of Christ. It argued, for example, that there could not have been a true union of spirit with matter. Divinity, in which essential goodness inhered, could not come into union with humanity and matter in which, as it was supposed, evil inhered. It was impossible, therefore, it was claimed, that Jesus Christ could be both divine and human. One expression of Gnosticism argued that Jesus Christ was a man on whom and to whom the Spirit of God came at an early stage of his life, but that the Spirit departed from him before his death.

The many-sided aspects of such heresies as these need not detain us. The important fact is that at an early stage in the history of the Christian confession attacks were made on the biblical revelation of the Person of our Redeemer. It is understandable that this should have occurred. For if the reality of the Person of Christ is destroyed, then the reality of our redemption is destroyed, and the entire Christian gospel and the hope that it holds for our eternal security is also destroyed.

In the post-apostolic age similar problems arose. The Sabellians, named after their founder Sabellius, argued that the Son and the Father were not distinct persons, but only different aspects or emanations of the one Being. The Arians followed their founder Arius, an Alexandrian priest, in maintaining that the Son was not equal with the Father, but that he was created by him. Orthodoxy was thus forced to articulate the

doctrine of the Person of Christ in such a way as to avoid the Sabellian heresy on the one side and that of the Arians on the other.⁴

The Arian heresy was condemned by the church at the Council of Nicea in the year 325 A.D.⁵ An important figure in the early history of the church, Athanasius who became Bishop of Alexandria in 328, argued strongly for the Nicene orthodoxy. The church steadily adhered to that position. The continuing problems surrounding what we can refer to as the church's Christology, or its doctrine of the Person of Christ, were confronted and settled definitively at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. That Council has become justly famous for its achievement of what has become referred to as the Christological settlement.⁶

In its judicious formulation, the Creed of Chalcedon expressed the doctrine of the Person of Christ by stating that the divine and the human natures were so related in him as to be 'two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation'. In the first two of these explanatory statements, without confusion and without change, a safeguard is erected against the idea that the two natures are in any sense intermingled. The last two explanatory statements assert, on the other hand, the full reality of the union of natures that existed.

We have spoken previously of the attributes of God. It follows from that discussion that the Person of Jesus Christ, as he walked in this world as the eternal Son of God, remaining as he did very God of very God, did not lay aside his divine identity and glory. He did, as the Scriptural data make clear, lay aside in many respects the insignia or the demonstrable signs of his glory. But he was, and continued to be, one with the Father. Staggering as the realization is to our unpracticed ears, we may observe something of the significance of it.

It has been claimed that when our Lord came into the world he did, in some sense, lay aside his divine attributes. That false doctrine has gone under the name of the *kenotic* theory. It has acquired currency, unfortunately, in the well-known hymn that states that when Christ came he 'emptied himself of all but love'.⁷ But such a teaching is in no sense supported by a sound exegesis of the paragraph in the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians on which it is supposedly based. Our Lord, as Paul there says, 'made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself ...' (Phil. 2:7-8). Where both the KJV and the NKJV state that Christ 'made himself of no reputation', the Greek text has the word 'ekenosen' in the aorist tense, which means literally, 'emptied' himself. The 'kenotic' theory derives its claim from that Greek word. It would not serve any purpose to discuss further the various degrees in which different forms of the kenotic theory imagine Christ to have 'emptied himself' of his deity, or his divine attributes. Suffice it to say that the Philippian passage does not address such a conception. That text is plainly concerned with the manner in which the Second Person of the Godhead humbled himself that he might be our redeemer.

Many aspects of the life and experiences and actions of our Lord that are clearly and uniquely attributable to his human nature are attributed in the Scripture to his Person. Similarly, many actions and expressions and realizations that are as clearly and uniquely referable to his divine nature are also attributed to his Person. But what should be understood in considering those facts is that his Person, in all its uniqueness and individual identity, was determined essentially by his divine nature. By this we mean that the divine nature dominated and determined and controlled the human nature.

That becomes clear from the inspection of only one point of fact in relation to him. We know that he was sinless. We know that as to his human nature he grew, that he was ignorant of certain things, and learned, and developed to maturity. How, then, could it have been true that in his human ignorance he remained free from sin? Are we to say that he was not humanly ignorant of anything? We should contradict the Scriptures if we were to do so. And yet we say that he did not sin. Do we say, then, that he was impeccable, meaning by that that it was impossible for him to sin? On the basis of Scriptural testimony as to his Person we have to say that that was so. It was impossible for him to sin.

The claim of impeccability is a claim that is made of the *Person* of Jesus Christ. He was an impeccable Person whose human nature was tempted and was in itself capable of sin. But in Christ the human nature was in no sense the isolated human nature in which Adam's posterity as created entities exist. In Christ the human nature was joined in union with a divine nature. And the divine nature so dominated and determined the scope of action of the human nature that it was impossible that *in his Person* Christ could sin. What the human nature might have been capable of in and of itself, it was incapable of when it was joined with the divine nature in the divine Person of Christ. We observed in an earlier context that while our Lord took unto himself a human nature, that nature was not in him personalized. In his very valuable discussion of 'the unipersonality of Christ', Berkhof has made the same point.⁸

That important doctrinal issue can be considered further. We have said in effect that the divine nature did not permit the human nature to sin, not even as Jesus of Nazareth, in whom the natures were combined, grew and learned until his maturity. But there did, of course, come a point in time at which the divine nature permitted the human nature to suffer in a unique and eternally significant sense. In his human nature Christ suffered for us when he bore the penalty for our sins on the cross. At that point he knew, in his cry of dereliction, that he was bearing the wrath of the Father, that he was thereby satisfying divine justice on behalf of the sinners for whom he died. It was only thus that their redemption could be secured.

God the Holy Spirit in time

A final consideration follows from all we have said to this point. We have addressed, adequately for our present purposes but in brief and inadequate terms when considered against the weight of their theological import, issues relating to God as he exists in his triune majesty and glory, transcendent outside of time; and we have taken similar brief note of certain of God's immanent entrances into time, notably in the incarnation of his Son. But if we are to reflect in any minimally adequate sense what we have advanced as the consubstantiality of the Persons of the Godhead, it must be noted that the third Person of the Godhead, the blessed Holy Spirit, is in a sense that is highly significant for our salvation also immanently active in time. That is, in many respects, the highest implication of our redeemed status in Christ. For he has fulfilled the promise he gave on the night of his betrayal and has sent his Holy Spirit to be with us.

It would take us beyond the scope of our present study to attempt even a summary of the critical issues of *pneumatology*, or the doctrines of the Person and work of the Holy Spirit. But two final comments should be made, as following from the *theology*, or the Doctrine of God, that is included in the *Savoy Declaration* and has provided the context of our discussion to this point.

First, in the immanent works of God that *Savoy* contemplates, the Holy Spirit is clearly the executive agent of the Godhead. Christ, having completed impeccably the work of redemption, has come to us by his Spirit, and we can say that the ultimate salvific effect of the obedience that he accomplished on our behalf is that we are now joined to him by his Spirit in an organic, vital, spiritual, and indissoluble union. No categories of explanation are now adequate finally to describe and define the Christian person except defining that individual as joined to Christ. If we say, as we must, that Christ is the mediator between us and the Father, it is correspondingly necessary to say that the Holy Spirit is the mediator between Christ and us. That is clearly established in terms of the distribution of redemptive offices among the Persons of the Godhead. For ‘when he, the Spirit of truth, is come’, our Lord said, ‘he will guide you into all truth; for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak ... he shall glorify me; for he shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you’ (John 16:13–14).

Finally, we should be delinquent if we did not allow our study of the doctrine of God to impact, not only on our theological consciousness, but on the life that we live as God’s people in the world. We do well to bear in mind that the objective of God’s provision of redemption is that we should be renewed in the likeness of his image, and that we might again become the agents of the glory of his Name. We concur with the Pauline reminder that God has ‘chosen us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy’ (Eph. 1:4). And Peter argues that God has made us ‘a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation ... that [we] should show forth the praises of him who hath called [us] out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (1 Peter 2:9).

In short, God has again entered into time in his immanent working in the Person of his Holy Spirit in order to accomplish our conformity to his image that he has destined for us. He has given us his Holy Spirit to be the agent of our sanctification. We do well to be sure that we heed the Pauline injunction and ‘grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby [we] are sealed unto the day of redemption’ (Eph. 4:30). May God give us grace to understand and to be true to the obligations that his gracious redemptive covenantal commitment has imposed upon us.

This article also appears on the website of the Reformed Congregational Fellowship of New England.

1 Cf. Herman Bavinck, *op. cit.*, 133ff.

2 Herman Bavinck, *op. cit.*, 151.

3 See W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d., Vol.2, 328.

4 See William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth [1862] 1960, Vol.1, 307ff.

5 See Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Revised by David S. Schaff, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, Vol.1, 24ff.

6 See Philip Schaff, *ibid.*, 29ff.

7 Charles Wesley, ‘And can it be ...’.

8 L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 321–22.

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