

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sharing in nature or encountering a person: A tale of two different supralapsarian strategies

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Abstract

Supralapsarian christologies all hold that the incarnation is not contingent upon sin but may differ on the nature of the gift given to us in the incarnation. In this essay I conceptualize and evaluate a crucial difference between two supralapsarian strategies. One strategy, exemplified by Kathryn Tanner, focuses on the natures of the incarnate One: it argues that in the incarnation the Word takes on a human nature which, being transformed in the act of assumption, becomes the conduit of grace for those who share in the same humanity. The other, represented by Samuel Wells, thinks of the incarnation as a gift of a transforming presence of the incarnate person. In taking on human form, the person of the divine Word comes as close to us as God can – the invisible God now can be seen, touched, heard – and draws us into a community of friendship and love.

Keywords: christology; eschatology; incarnation; supralapsarianism; Kathryn Tanner; Samuel Wells

Supralapsarian christology holds that the incarnation is not contingent upon sin. God's relating to what is not God by becoming incarnate is embedded in a reality deeper than the dynamic of sin and forgiveness. The gift of the incarnation does more than counteract the result of the fall. On this, supralapsarian theologians agree. But they do not all agree on what then we should say about the difference the incarnation makes. In this respect, the name 'supralapsarian christology' stands for a family of theological accounts.

In this essay I conceptualize and examine a hitherto unexplored difference among two kinds of supralapsarian christologies. The difference concerns our understanding of the nature of the gift given to us in God's becoming incarnate. To analyse this difference, I draw on a Chalcedonian account of persons and natures. According to Chalcedon, the second person of the Trinity, the divine Word, who from all eternity shares in the divine nature of the triune God, in a moment in time assumes a second, human nature in the incarnation. On this ontological framework, person and natures relate to each other as 'who' relates to 'what'. The incarnation is the event in which the 'who' of the divine Word assumes a 'whatness' – humanity – that he shares from that moment onwards with human beings.¹ Both kinds of supralapsarian christologies

¹For a contemporary account of Chalcedonian christology, see Ian A. McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019).

I discuss in this essay consider this divine act to have a transformational effect on creation, but they differ on how this transformation comes about. One kind thinks of it as a gift coming to us through the *natures* of the incarnate One. In the incarnation the Word takes on a human nature, which, transformed as it is in the act of assumption, becomes the conduit of grace for those who share in the same humanity. The other kind thinks of the transformation as taking place through the presence of the incarnate *person*. In taking on human form, the person of the divine Word comes as close to us as God can – the invisible God now can be seen, touched, heard – and draws us into a community of friendship and love.

These two kinds of supralapsarian approaches are exemplified in the work of two contemporary theologians, Kathryn Tanner and Samuel Wells. In this essay, I engage Tanner and Wells as my main conversation partners. In the first section I explore the internal logic of each of their accounts. For each, I identify the main supralapsarian christological intuition that drives their theological proposals and then analyse how that intuition shapes a resulting account of creation, atonement and the eschaton. In the second section I switch from an analytic to a constructive mode. I argue that, while Tanner's approach is better represented in both ancient and modern theological traditions, Wells' approach is constructively more fruitful. While the logic of thinking about the incarnation as a gift channelled by Christ's natures may be internally consistent, it is challenging to weave this position together with other theological commitments concerning christology and eschatology.²

Two different supralapsarian strategies

Kathryn Tanner: grace communicated through Christ's human nature

Kathryn Tanner's supralapsarian christological design can be found in her two books *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* and *Christ the Key*.³ At the core of her theological vision is the image of a God who is the ultimate gift-giver, who engages the world in an ongoing communication of goodness which culminates in the giving of Godself.⁴

²This essay is part of a wider project to map and analyse supralapsarian christologies, in preparation for a constructive supralapsarian christology. For example, earlier I mapped arguments for a supralapsarian approach alongside the three biblical story lines of divine relating in creation, redemption and eschatological consummation: *Incarnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology* (Oxford: OUP, 2008). In 'Supra/Infralapsarianism', in Adam J. Johnson (ed.), *The T&T Clark Companion to Atonement* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), pp. 769–74, I offer a short overview of different ways in which supralapsarian christological accounts make sense of the atonement. In 'God and God's Beloved: A Constructive Re-Reading of Scotus' Supralapsarian Christological Argument' (forthcoming) I analyse a distinction between understanding the incarnation as an intrinsic or a functional supralapsarian good.

³Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001); and *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010).

⁴See *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, pp. 1–2: 'In short, God, who is already abundant fullness, freely wishes to replicate to every degree possible this fullness of life, light, and love outward in what is not God; this is possible in its fullness only to the extent the world is united by God to Godself over the course of the world's time.' Cf. *Christ the Key*, pp. vii–viii: 'The central theological vision of [this book is]: God wants to give us the fullness of God's own life through the closest possible relationship with us that comes to completion in Christ. ... In order to give us the entire fullness of what God enjoys, God must give us God's very own life and not simply some created version of it. God cannot give us everything that God has to give by merely transforming human life itself into some created approximation of divinity. God must attach us, in all our frailty and finitude, to God.'

The incarnation is the climax of this divine self-giving: 'Jesus is the one in whom God's relationship with us attains perfection. In Jesus, unity with God takes a perfect form; here humanity has become God's own. ... The effect of this perfect relationship with God is perfect humanity, humanity to which God's gifts are communicated in their highest form.'⁵ This perfected humanity of Christ in turn becomes the conduit of God's transformative self-giving to the rest of humanity: 'The point of incarnation is ... the perfection of humanity. By way of this perfected humanity in union with God, God's gifts are distributed to us – we are saved – just to the extent we are one with Christ in faith and love; unity with Christ the gift-giver is the means of our perfection as human beings, just as the union of humanity and divinity in Christ was the means of his perfect humanity.'⁶

In *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity* this distributing of divine gifts is made possible by what is best described as a qualified transitivity of God's assumption of human nature. Just as Christ the Word assumes a human nature and perfects it, so other human beings are 'assumed into Christ's life', which allows for the transformative 'workings of Christ in us through the powers of the Spirit'.⁷ In this way, 'Christ's incarnation is matched by our assumption into Christ. Assumed by Christ, Christ becomes the subject of our actions in much the way the second Person of the Trinity is the subject of Jesus' acts'.⁸ The qualification is that 'there are two subjects here, where a human being is assumed by Christ, and not one, as when the Son of God assumed humanity rather than a man. ... Our relation to Christ has more the flavor, then, of Christ's own relation to the Father, a relationship of fellowship and correspondence of wills'.⁹ In *Christ the Key*, Tanner wields the notion of assumption as well, but she embeds it in the concept of participation. The divine Word mirrors the Trinity's first person, says Tanner, echoing the church fathers. A perfect image must reproduce its original from top to bottom. This can only happen when the image 'shares or participates wholly in what its archetype is ... Perfect imaging requires a community of nature'.¹⁰ By contrast, creation mirrors the Word by participating in what it is not: God. Tanner distinguishes two kinds of creaturely participation in the divine. In a weak sense, all creatures participate in God by deriving their existence from God and being shaped according to their paradigms as held within the divine Word.¹¹ In a strong sense, human creatures participate in God not simply 'by imitating God, but in virtue of the gift to them of what remains alien to them, the very perfection of the divine image

⁵Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity*, p. 9.

⁶*Ibid.*; cf. p. 53: 'Once perfected by the inpouring of gifts from the Father, Jesus' humanity becomes the means by which those gifts are poured out to us through the working of the Holy Spirit. ... The Spirit radiates the humanity of Jesus with the Father's own gifts of light, life, and love; and shines through him, not simply back to the Father, but through his humanity to us, thereby communicating to us the gifts received by Jesus from the Father. ... The condition for this inclusion of us in the dynamic of the Trinity's own life is our humanity with Christ, which is also worked by the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ, the Son, sent by him for the completion of the Father's work *ad extra*.'

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁹*Ibid.*, p.57; cf. pp. 55–6: 'our humanity is not assumed by Christ's, as Christ's was by the Word; our already formed persons are ... This union with Christ requires tending in a way that humanity's assumption by the Son of God in Christ did not. Our union with Christ must be nurtured through the workings of the Spirit.'

¹⁰Tanner, *Christ the Key*, p. 6.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

that they are not, now having become their own'.¹² Of this form of participation the incarnate Christ is the paradigm and source.¹³ The assumed human nature in Christ becomes in turn 'the very means' for our strong participation in God, as we are attached to Christ.¹⁴

Tanner stresses that humans enjoy their strong participation in God from the moment of their creation. From the beginning the Spirit modelled human nature into imaging the divine Word.¹⁵ Human beings were however too immature to receive this gift.¹⁶ Here the incarnate One makes the difference. 'Jesus Christ, the perfect human image of God because the perfect divine image, brings human life in himself back to its perfect beginning – the perfect beginning that in a sense never was.'¹⁷ In Christ is realised the gift of self that from the beginning God offered to humanity. This human nature participates in the Word not as something that is foreign to it, but by being identical to it.¹⁸ This in turn has a transformative effect on us, as

in virtue of the humanity we share with him because the Word has made our humanity its own in him ... we can have the Spirit that forms Christ's humanity according to the divine image as our own too, with the same sort of consequences. Before Christ came, the divine image of the Word was simply foreign to us. ... Now that the Word has taken our humanity to be its own, the Word has become in a sense proper to us. ... We can be knit into the Word as never before in virtue of the fact that the Word has made our humanity its own in the incarnation.¹⁹

In fact, 'by being in a hypostatic union with it, by being one with the second person of the trinity, humanity gains a sort of natural connection to the divine comparable to the natural connection that the Word enjoys with other members of the Trinity'.²⁰

It is possible to read this part of Tanner's argument as an infralapsarian understanding of the incarnation: God intends to give humans to participate in Godself; as this fails due to human immaturity, God finds another way by binding humanity to Godself through incarnation. However, such reading runs into trouble when Tanner places her christological argument within the dynamic of nature and grace. The incarnation should be understood as 'the highest possible form in which the good of God's own life can be given to us', and as receiving the grace of God's own life is what nature is created for, the incarnation is the culmination of the original design of creation.²¹

This account of the role of incarnation shapes how Tanner reads the subsequent stages of the relationship between God and humanity. For example, when it comes to the work of countering sin, Tanner locates the atonement not in a particular moment

¹²Ibid., p. 12.

¹³Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 14: 'Jesus Christ is more than a paradigm for what is involved here; he has become for us the very means. The humanity of Jesus has the perfect attachment or orientation to the Word in virtue of his being one with the Word, nothing apart from it; and we gain the capacity of something like that through our connection to him.'

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 24, 26.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 36.

²⁰Ibid., p. 73.

²¹Ibid., p. 60.

of Jesus' life (such as the cross), but asserts that incarnation itself is 'the primary mechanism of atonement'.²² In the incarnation, the Word brings 'the life-giving powers of the divine nature' to bear upon Christ's human nature, and, through him, upon all of humanity.²³ The cross only 'exemplifies in paradigmatic fashion' the very character of the pain and sin of human life that the incarnated One redeems.²⁴

Tanner's understanding of the incarnation as transforming our existence through our sharing in Christ's humanity also shapes her account of humanity's eschatological future. Confronted with the scientific expectation of creational entropy, Tanner refuses to contest the finality of the world's end by appealing to God's creative and recreative powers. Instead, she explores what it looks like to embrace the scientists' expectation that the world does not have a future, and to design an eschatology in which preoccupations 'would not center on the world of the future but on the world as a whole and on an ongoing redemptive (rather than creative) relation to God that holds for the world of the past, present, and future'.²⁵ The key to such an eschatology lies in the unity we have with God as we are assumed into the humanity of Christ.²⁶ We can now imagine eternal life as a spatialised existence, that is, 'a living *in* God, a kind of placement within the life of God' even 'when the world no longer exists'.²⁷ Were eternal life understood in this way, Tanner holds, 'Death itself ... in the sense of temporal cessation, in the sense that each of us, the species, and the planet have a limited duration would remain a simple fact of existence, a concomitant of the finite constitution of things as we know them'.²⁸ Instead, 'we are taken up into the life of God as the very mortal creatures we are. It is only in God that we gain immortality; considered independently of this relation to God we remain mortal ... Immortality is not, then, granted to the world in the form of some new natural principles that prevent loss or transience; instead, God's own animating eternity shines through or suffuses the very mortal being of those who hold their existence in God'.²⁹

Samuel Wells: grace communicated through Christ's person

In turning to the work of Samuel Wells, we are encountering a supralapsarian approach in which the gift of the incarnation is not located in our transformation through Christ's human nature but rather through the presence of his person. Wells situates his christological account within a network of four models of social engagement:

²²Ibid., p. 252.

²³Ibid., p. 254.

²⁴Ibid., p. 260.

²⁵Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, p. 102.

²⁶Ibid., p. 108; cf. p. 110: 'Jesus is the one who lives in God, the one who is all that he is as a human being without existing independently of God, the human being whose very existence is God's own existence – that is the meaning of the hypostatic union. Otherwise expressed, in Jesus God becomes the bearer of our very human acts and attributes. By grace – by virtue, that is, of a life-giving relationship with Jesus that is ours in the power of the Spirit – we enjoy something like the sort of life in God that Jesus lives. We (and the whole world) are to live in God as Jesus does, through him. In short, there is an approximation to the hypostatic union that the world enjoys through grace, most particularly after the world's death, when it transpires that, like Christ, the only life or existence we have is in and through God ... When the fire of our own lives grows cold, we come to burn with God's own flame.'

²⁷Ibid., p. 111.

²⁸Ibid., p. 114.

²⁹Ibid., p. 116.

working for, working with, being for and being with. ‘Working for’ focuses on doing things to make the life of others better. ‘Working with’, like ‘working for’, is aimed at problem solving, but is interested in building coalitions with those who are to benefit from one’s work. ‘Being for’ orients one’s life towards the well-being of others – although there is no reason why, on this model, one would actually have to engage these others personally. ‘Being with’, finally, is not so much focused on problems that need solving or a well-being that needs to be enhanced, but on personal encounter and enjoyment of presence.³⁰ When it comes to God’s relating to what is not God, Wells holds, the driving force and purpose is a divine desire ‘to be with’.³¹ And the very heart of this is the incarnation:

The crucial point is that the humanity of the Son is prior to the existence of the world: that the incarnation is prior to the fall; that God’s desire to be in relationship is the trigger for the universe’s coming into being. But a theology of with assumes more than this. It does not define the Son through the lens of the term ‘Savior’: the Son is the principal, determinative way in which God is with us – but God is with us not primarily to do things for us, even to secure our salvation; God is with us because that is the purpose of creation. Immanuel is prior to Savior. God’s working for is subordinate to and designed to restore God’s being with. The fall does not determine the shape or character or purpose of God; such things are defined by the original decision of God – the decision to be with.³²

‘The most important word in theology’, Wells therefore claims, is ‘the word with’.³³

Exegetically, Wells roots his prioritising of ‘being with’ in a surprising place: the ‘hidden 90 percent’ of Jesus’ life that the incarnate One was not working for, or with, his disciples and all of humanity, but that were rather ‘30-odd years Jesus spent in Nazareth’, simply being with those he loved. ‘Nazareth is important’, Wells submits,

not because it is a stage on the way to something more significant, but precisely because it is an extended window into heaven: God and humanity in peaceable interaction, perhaps with good work, perhaps with good food, perhaps with learning and growing and nurturing and celebrating, but fundamentally just being, because there is no better place to be and no better company to keep and no better thing to be doing. This is Sabbath – the crown of creation; simply being with God.³⁴

³⁰See Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 20–1; see also his *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2017), pp. 7–10; and, earlier, Samuel Wells and Marcia A. Owen, *Living without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), esp. pp. 19–47.

³¹All the other actions of God – in being for us, working for us, and working for us – are all ways of preparing and redeeming the ground for the fundamental purpose of creation, salvation, and final redemption: God being with us. That is what was ever in God’s heart, and what ever shall be.’ Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, p. 24.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 232–3.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 27. Wells admits that his is an argument from silence: the Gospel writers seem to devote very little attention to what, according to Wells, is the crux of the matter. But Wells argues that the Gospel writers’ silence goes back to Jesus’ own attitude: ‘I suggest that Jesus took the centrality of with for granted. Part of my evidence for this comes in the frequent controversies in which Jesus reacts with exasperation when

'Being with' is thus the lens through which Wells reads the narrative of creation, reconciliation and eschatological consummation. He takes creation itself to be embedded in a divine design 'to be with'. He therefore rejects theological models that describe God's creative activity as flowing forth out of divine goodness – either as an unselfish sharing of being with that what is not God, or as a demonstration of divine glory and power. Both accounts, Wells charges, are governed not by the logic of 'being with', but of 'being for'. God is thought to create either for the sake as of yet non-existent creatures, with whom God shares that what they did not have by themselves, or for the sake of Godself, as God shows forth divine perfection. Instead, Wells suggests, 'creation is not principally *for* anybody – God or us. Creation is to bring about *with*. With means creation is God's decision never to be except to be with us. ... God's desire to be in relationship is the trigger for the universe's coming into being.'³⁵

As that which motivates creation, 'being with' is an eschatological notion.³⁶ The eschaton is the place where 'being with' comes to full fruition.³⁷ The Christian hope for eternal salvation is, Wells argues, really a reaching for the fullness of communion – 'a state of being with God and being with one another and being with the renewed creation'.³⁸ The eschaton is shaped by 'a rejoining of such relationship, a restoration of community, a discovery of partnership, a sense of being in the presence of another in which there is neither a folding of identities that loses their difference nor a sharpening of difference that leads to hostility, but an enjoyment of the other that evokes cherishing and relishing'.³⁹

Atonement in turn relates to eschatological consummation as a means relates to a goal. It is a divine 'being for' in the service of God's desire to 'be with'.⁴⁰ As such, this act 'for us' takes once again the shape of 'being with'. Wells rejects traditional atonement models such as *Christus victor*, Anselmian satisfaction theory, or subjective accounts as expressions of a 'working for' or 'working with' understanding of God's

disciples and others don't grasp what seems to Jesus to be something that goes without saying. ... Over and again Jesus is in debate about the company he keeps – about whom he is with. ... Examples abound, but perhaps the most familiar arises in the controversies over whom Jesus eats with. ... All these stories demonstrate the same principle: that Jesus takes for granted that being with the Father means being with this whole range of people; and that it is so intrinsic to his ministry that he only articulates it when he is criticised by those who find that ministry of being with problematic' (ibid., pp. 146–8). In this essay, I am less interested in the arguments for the respective supralapsarian positions of Tanner and Wells than in their theological shape. However, in 'All Things have been Created for Him: On Christ, Election, and Creation', forthcoming in Edwin Chr. van Driel (ed.), *The T&T Clark Companion to Election*, I offer an exegetical case for a position much akin to Wells' that is, I believe, on sounder footing than his argument from Nazareth.

³⁵Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, p. 232. Wells continues by drawing out an explicit supralapsarian christological position: 'The incarnation is the epitome of with; together with the resurrection, it is the epistemological center of a theology conceived around the notion of with. The question that discloses the dividing line between a theology grounded in with and a theology rooted in for is... "If there had been no Fall, would Christ still have come?" A theology rooted in for invariably replies, "No – since what would there be for the Messiah to do?" Such a perspective presupposes sin, in that it makes Christ's humanity dependent on a deficit – on a problem to be solved. By contrast a theology oriented to and shaped by with takes for granted that Christ would have become incarnate had there be no fall – since Christ being incarnate was the *raison d'être* of the universe. The incarnation is the heart of a mystery, not the solution to a problem.'

³⁶Ibid., p. 244.

³⁷Ibid., p. 58.

³⁸Ibid., p. 43.

³⁹Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 25.

relationship with humanity. Instead, he proposes we understand the cross as God's ultimate enactment of 'being with'. If sin is our desperate effort not to be with God, on the cross Christ embodies God's absolute commitment to be with us 'whatever happens'. If being with people is what brought Jesus to the cross, then Jesus' 'Father, forgive them' is Jesus' finding a way to be with them even when they have abandoned him. Jesus 'outlasted humanity's hatred, cruelty, and enmity. After everything the crowds and authorities could throw at him, he was still there. His endurance demonstrated the love that holds on, whatever happens – the love that will never let go. His perseverance showed that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Our isolation has been overcome – from his side.'⁴¹

Sharing in nature versus encountering a person: a constructive analysis

The common nature of Christ and humanity appeals to theologians' ontological imagination. From Gregory of Nyssa to T. F. Torrance, they have used Christ's human nature as the springboard to account for the ways the incarnation transforms human existence. Tanner's christology thus exemplifies a long-standing tradition. Wells' approach represents a road less travelled. Nonetheless I will argue that the latter account is the constructively more fruitful one. When we try to weave each of these two approaches into a larger theological tapestry, an account based on a common humanity causes things to unravel. I will argue so with regards to christological ontology, eschatology and a supralapsarian read on the goal of the incarnation.

Natures and persons

On Tanner's account, the human nature of Christ is the central link in the giving of Godself to creation. In assuming a human nature, the divine Word perfects this nature by making it God's own; by virtue of the humanity we share with him, this nature becomes the means through which God's gifts are distributed to other human beings.

What does this assume about the nature of 'nature'? On the philosophical framework from which the distinction between persons and natures stems, a distinction is made between primary and secondary substances. A secondary substance is a generic nature; for example, 'humanity'. A primary substance is an individual substance nature; for example, 'Paul'. When Tanner says that the Word's assumption of a human nature has a transformative effect on all of humanity due to our sharing in nature with the incarnate One, does she take the divine Word to have assumed a primary or a secondary substance?⁴²

At numerous places of her argument, Tanner seems to hold to the assumption of a secondary substance. For example, she argues that 'in virtue of our community of nature with the humanity of Christ – in virtue of the humanity we share with him because the Word has made our humanity its own in him – we can have the Spirit that forms Christ's humanity according to the divine image as ours too'.⁴³ Likewise, she argues that we are 'one with Christ in and through the humanity we share with him', and that 'by being in a hypostatic union with it, by being one with the person of the trinity,

⁴¹Ibid., p. 243.

⁴²Oliver D. Crisp also wrestles with this interpretative question concerning Tanner's christology: see his *Revising Christology: Theology in the Reformed Tradition* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 124–8.

⁴³Tanner, *Christ the Key*, p. 36.

humanity gains a sort of natural connection to the divine comparable to the natural connection that the Word enjoys with other members of the Trinity.⁴⁴ All these statements assert that the very act of incarnation in and by itself had immediate implications not just for the humanity of Christ, but for the humanity of all. It is hard to make sense of this without the notion that humanity as a secondary substance exists, and was assumed in the act of incarnation. Such reading would be confirmed by Tanner's seeming admission (this time in the context of a discussion on incarnation and atonement) that her preferred account of the incarnation 'trades on a Platonic reification of universal terms such as "humanity"'.⁴⁵

To premise one's christological account on the idea of an assumption of a secondary substance is, however, theologically problematic. If a secondary substance like 'humanity' indeed exists in such a way that what happens to it in the particular events of Christ's life has a direct effect on all human beings, the very same thing should be said about what happens in the particular events of other people's lives. That is, if there exists an ontological web of connections between all human beings that allows for the Word's assumption of a particular life in first-century Palestine to result in me being assumed by the divine, that very same web would allow for ontological connections to go in other directions. It would allow for the events of my life to also count as the events of Christ's life – but, more than that, it would allow for the events of each single human being to be counted as the events of all other human beings, and vice versa. However, central to the Christian life are events that are particular to some, but not to all: sin, love, repentance, forgiveness, conversion, faith and so on. If every human being shares in the same, one human nature, there would be no particular events that count as theirs, and only theirs. This is theologically undesirable.

At other places Tanner explicitly asserts that in the incarnation Christ assumes an individual and not a universal human nature: 'We are not included in Christ's life simply because the humanity assumed by the Son in Christ is common, shared by Christ and every other human being. It is this particular person – and not the humanity of Christ *per se* – that has universal efficacy, in so far as everyone else is drawn to it, united with Christ's own life.'⁴⁶ This in turn raises the question of *how* we are united with Christ's life. If the transformative effect of the incarnation comes to us by way of Christ's human nature, but the nature assumed is an individual human nature (primary substance), not a universal nature in which we all share (secondary substance), how does what happened to Christ's human nature affect us?

As I observed above, Tanner employs here a move that amounts to the idea of a qualified transitivity of assumption. Because they are in Christ, other human beings also share in his assumption, and thereby participate in the divine life – although in their case it is not only their natures, but also their persons, that are assumed.⁴⁷ The problem with this move is that it is inconsistent with the Chalcedonian logic of assumption. Chalcedonian christology employs the notion of 'assumption' to differentiate the unique relationship between the divine Word and his human nature from other ways in which God takes hold of human beings. In the act of assumption, the human nature, its properties, powers and acts become the Word's very own. The Word is therefore said to be this nature's term, or supposit – its ontological owner. The Word *personifies* this

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 72, 73.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 258.

⁴⁶Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, p. 54.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 55.

nature. To unpack this further, we may turn to Tanner's own explanation of the Chalcedonian logic. Church fathers hold that Christ's human nature is anhypostatic, which means that 'apart from his existing in the Word, Jesus has no existence of his own'. Moreover, Jesus' existence is enhypostatic: 'Jesus has a human existence but only in virtue of having his existence in God. Jesus does not just get his existence from God, as we do; he exists in God; his very existence is God's existence.'⁴⁸ To put it even more sharply: because Jesus' human nature is assumed by the divine Word, there is no interpersonal over-againstness between the divine Word and Jesus' humanity. Due to the assumption, when we encounter Jesus' human nature, we encounter the person of the Word. This is different in the case of encountering another human being. Its human nature is not personified by a divine person, but by a human person, and thus, even when God draws such human into the closest intimacy, there continues to exist an interpersonal over-againstness between God and the human person who personifies this particular nature. For example, God may inspire a prophet through the Spirit; the prophet may start speaking and acting in the name of God; but, on Chalcedonian christology, we would not say that in encountering this prophet we encounter God in the same way we encounter God in Jesus. In the prophet's case there continues to be an interpersonal over-againstness between God and the human which does not exist in the case of Jesus. This difference goes back to the logic of assumption. It is also for this reason that later medieval theologians, reflecting on Chalcedonian christology, would argue that while God could assume any human nature, God cannot assume another person. God can inspire, transform, sanctify, recreate another person. But it belongs to the definition of a person that it cannot be assumed, and thereby personified, by another person.⁴⁹ And so, if a human person's human nature were to be assumed by another person – say, the second person of the Trinity – it would thereby cease to be that human person's nature. In fact, since human persons by definition need to have a human nature in order to exist as a person, if its nature were to be assumed by another person, the former ontological owner of that nature would thereby cease to exist.

To summarise, Tanner's account of divine self-giving through the means of the human nature of Christ either presupposes the existence of numerically one universal human nature, which is a notion that runs into steep theological difficulties; or it relies on the idea of a transitivity of assumption, which runs afoul the logic of Chalcedonian christology.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 25.

⁴⁹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3.4.2; John Duns Scotus, *Quodlibet*, q. 19.61. To approach the same point from a different angle again: this is where the logic of creation on the one hand, and of incarnation and assumption on the other hand, are diametrically different. In creation, as Tanner has rightly argued, the relationship between God and what is not God is non-competitive (see *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, p. 2 and *passim*). Given God's transcendence, God and humanity do not operate within the same plane of causality and therefore the creature does not have to decrease as God increases. But acts like assuming a human nature and thereby becoming incarnate mean for God to enter the created nexus of causality in which rules of ontological competitiveness do apply.

⁵⁰An additional question for the account represented by Tanner is how God perfects the human nature of Christ so that it may become an instrumental of transformation for Christ's fellow human beings. Tanner locates this in a deifying communication between Christ's divine and human nature (see, for instance, *Jesus, Humanity, and Trinity*, pp. 26–7, 30–32). This is a neo-Chalcedonian understanding of the metaphysics of the incarnation that is not universally accepted as legitimate. For this essay, though, I set this issue aside and concentrate on the transformative interaction between the incarnate One and other human beings.

However, these problems disappear if we unpack divine self-giving not in terms of the communication of natures but in terms of the presence of a person. While Wells does not clarify this explicitly, his account of the incarnation also relies of the Chalcedonian logic of assumption. In the incarnation, the divine Word takes a human nature as his own, and when we meet and engage this nature, that is, when we are 'with' Jesus of Nazareth, we truly are with the one who personifies this nature, the divine Word. The 'who' we meet is the Word; in the incarnation this 'who' acquires the 'what', the nature, that makes this meeting possible. At the same time, 'to be with' demands that the ones who are meeting are truly distinct. 'To be with' implies difference, not sameness. It implies interpersonal over-againstness, not the assumption of one by another. Therefore, what on Tanner's account is a problem – the enduring interpersonal over-againstness between the person of the divine Word and the persons of those human beings who encounter Jesus – is the very core and strength of Wells' proposal. In the incarnation, the Word acquires the embodied, human properties and powers that allow us to see, to hear and to touch the otherwise invisible Creator of heaven and earth. It is because of the incarnation that we can sit down with him, that he can look us in the eye, and that we can engage this person and become friends. Without incarnation God would continue to be at a distance. God could have been *for* us, but not *with* us. God could have interacted with us, but only as one whose appearance would resulted in our death (Exod 33:20). But in the incarnation the God who could not be seen has been made known (John 1:18).

Eschatology

If Christ's nature is the channel through which God's gift-giving reaches our nature, it is unclear how God's grace also engages our personhood. Tanner's assertions notwithstanding, on a Chalcedonian logic natures can be assumed, but persons cannot. God can assume, and thereby cleanse, elevate and perfect my nature, but not my person. The implications of this become clear in Tanner's eschatology.

Responding to the scientists' claim that the cosmos is on its way to an inevitable end, Tanner refuses to appeal to God's creative and recreative powers to imagine an eschatological future for creation beyond its dooming collapse. Instead, Tanner embraces the scientists' claim and enfolds it in an eschatological imagination according to which at one day the world indeed no longer exists, but all of creation, mortal as it was and will continue to be, nonetheless has an eschatological future. Finite and finished creatures will, as such, receive a place within the life of God. Tanner's preference for this eschatological construction not only aligns with the scientists' expectation, but it also flows forth out of her understanding of the gift of grace.⁵¹ On Tanner's proposal, the world has eschatological life – but as a world that has been. Our histories will be preserved as histories that definitively have come to an end. We will receive a place in God – but as beings whose lives have come to end, not as agents who continue to make history and whose lives continue to unfold in new chapters. This fits with Tanner's belief

⁵¹Tanner first formulated her eschatology in 'Eschatology without a Future?', in John Polkinghorne and Michael Welker (eds), *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), pp. 222–37. There she still presented it as a 'thought experiment' (p. 224). In the last chapter of *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, which is a slightly expanded version of this essay, Tanner makes clear her position on eschatology flows forth from her wider systematic theological commitments (p. 97).

that divine grace is ultimately expressed by the assumption of our natures. As I argued above, on a Chalcedonian logic the assumption of our natures comes at the price of casting aside what makes us persons. If the logic of assumption rules the relationship between us and the incarnate Word, our natures can be assumed, but not the 'whos' who are the ontological agents of these natures. And if the eschatological future of creatures depends on their assumption by God, then persons fall outside the reach of eschatological life. Human beings can only be preserved as a creatures whose histories have come to an end.⁵²

Tanner's eschatological account fits her christology. One might wonder however whether it coheres to the promise of a creation that not just once existed but is created anew (see Revelation 21); a world in which creatures continue as active agents as every tongue confesses Christ as Lord (Phil 2:11); a world in which humans thus continue to exist in interpersonal over-againstness vis-à-vis the incarnate One. These biblical themes cannot easily be woven into Tanner's eschatological design.

Wells' account does again not suffer from these challenges. The very goal of 'being with' is for God and creation to enjoy each other in an ongoing personal encounter and enjoyment of presence. This demands a twofold agency. Since 'being with' is for Wells an eschatological notion, on his model such interpersonal engagement describes the shape of the eschaton. This eschatological expectation does not deny that, within the current framework, creation's energy necessarily will run out, the cosmos will collapse and the world will come to an inevitable end. It also does not suggest that simply by creating people, God thereby is obliged to them eschatologically. But if this 'being with' is the very goal of creation, then God thereby commits Godself to do to creation what God already did to Jesus: to recreate it into a life of transformed, but continued existence of agency and interaction. This seems to be what Paul lifts up as both the eschatological ordering of and promise to creation: that human beings will be conformed to the image of the resurrected Son, 'so that he might be the firstborn within a large family' (Rom 8:29).

The incarnation as instrumental good or intrinsic good

When we think about the overall intentions of God for that what is not God, where does the incarnation fit? Supralapsarians agree that incarnation is not contingent upon sin, but this still leaves multiple ways open for how one conceives of the incarnation among God's eschatological intentions.

Some supralapsarians think of the incarnation as a means by which God accomplishes a larger goal. The incarnation may not be contingent upon sin, but is still an instrumental good contingent upon something else. For example, Friedrich Schleiermacher took the incarnation to be the supralapsarian means by which God imparts Godself to all humanity.⁵³ On this line of thought, God's desire to be imparted to humanity is logically prior to the intention to become incarnate. Other supralapsarian theologians think of the incarnation as that which has absolute priority within God's relating to what is not God. For example, Karl Barth argued that Christ is not just the

⁵²Even while she does not mention him in this context, Tanner's eschatology is virtually identical to Karl Barth's, who argues that the eschatological future of creation is the preservation of the life lived. I analysed Barth's eschatology in *Incarnation Anyway*, pp. 111–18. For a wider analysis and critique see Nathan Hitchcock, *Karl Barth and the Resurrection of the Flesh: The Loss of the Body in Participatory Eschatology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013).

⁵³See Van Driel, *Incarnation Anyway*, pp. 22–5.

object of election but also its subject, as the very first divine self-determination in relationship to that what is not God is to be a God for others.⁵⁴ This line of supralapsarian thought amounts to the idea of the incarnation as an intrinsic good, not contingent upon a larger goal.

Tanner's model is another expression of a model in which the incarnation is a supralapsarian instrumental good. In some ways, the structure of her model is in this respect remarkably similar to Schleiermacher's.⁵⁵ The incarnation is the means by which God distributes the gift of Godself to humanity. Incarnation is not the ultimate gift itself; the assumed human nature of Christ is the conduit through which the ultimate divine intention is accomplished, the participation of the creature in the divine. This is particularly visible in Tanner's eschatological expectations, in which no further personal interaction between the incarnate One and humanity is imagined. Like all of creation, humanity is preserved as that which has been, and having lost creaturehood and particular identity, it continues to exist 'in God'.⁵⁶

Wells' model on the other hand is an expression of a supralapsarian model according to which the incarnation is an intrinsic good. The very goal of creation is for God to be with others, and incarnation is not the means to this goal but its very expression. The eschaton is the celebration of incarnation: 'God and humanity in peaceable interaction ... fundamentally just being, because there is no better place to be and no better company to keep.'⁵⁷

The theological issue at stake in the difference between these approaches is the priority of Christ. Significant supralapsarian traditions take their clue from the imagery in Colossians and Ephesians, in which all things are said to be created for Christ (Col 1:16) and to be gathered in him (Eph 1:10). If all things were created for Christ, the incarnation cannot be in the service of a larger goal; rather, Christ is the goal of whatever is created. A christological model that implies the functional good of the incarnation can be supralapsarian; but it will have to downplay the priority of Christ implied by these Pauline notions.⁵⁸ On such functional understanding Christ can be the 'key' to creation, as the title of one of Tanner's studies reads; but a key is neither the goal nor the centre of what it unlocks.

Conclusion

To locate the transformative effect of the incarnation on other human beings in the assumption of our common nature leads to theological complications down the road.

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 63–82.

⁵⁵Tanner hardly ever refers to Schleiermacher, and, as far as I know, the relationship between their theological models has never been explored. The structural parallels are however remarkable. Schleiermacher's notion of absolute dependence could be read as a version of Tanner's principle of non-competitiveness. In both theological designs the relationship between God and what is not God is conceived of as a salvation ontology rather than a salvation history. For neither does God's covenant with Israel, Jesus' resurrection, his ascension or his return play a substantial role.

⁵⁶Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and Trinity*, p. 119. Presumably, the same holds for Christ. If eschatologically creation will only continue to exist as a 'has been', this would also apply to the created human nature of the incarnate One.

⁵⁷Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto*, p. 27.

⁵⁸Such is indeed the position of Schleiermacher: see Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith*, vol. II, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine L. Kelsey and Edwina Lawler (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), §99, addendum; p. 620.

To assume a nature is to personify it. What this nature is and does, count as the being and actions of the divine Word. In this, the Word's relationship to his nature is different from his relationship to other human beings; in the latter case there is a personal over-againstness that is lacking in the former case. Assumption is therefore not a category that can be applied to Christ's relationship to other human beings; for Christ to assume us would be to cancel out 'us', the suppositis who personify our natures. And thus, we would not receive the transformative grace of Christ; only our natures would. This, in turn, has important eschatological implications. The better way forward is to locate the incarnation's transformative effect in our 'being with' the person of the divine Word, who, in taking on a human nature, comes to us as close as he can and engages us in a relationship of friendship and love. On such an account, the incarnation is also not a means of a larger goal; it embodies the very goal itself: God's being with God's people.

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