Introduction: Making the Story New

Three times in the New Testament we hear the phrase 'before the foundation of the world'. We find it at John 17:24, Ephesians 1:4 and 1 Peter 1:20.[1] In each case it means the same thing: God chose to be incarnate in Jesus before there was any creation, because in Christ, God willed to be in relationship with us. Which means God's intention to become incarnate in Jesus was the reason for creation. All of which sounds fittingly Christocentric, until one realises what else it means, but does not actually say. And that is that Jesus could not have come to fix the results of the fall – because God's decision to become incarnate in Jesus was made before there ever was a fall.[2] So every theory that elaborates upon the conviction that Jesus had to die to fix the problem of evil, sin and death misses the crucial revelation made three times in the New Testament itself: that was not why Jesus came. Jesus came to be with us in time so that we could be with him forever.

This study seeks to work out the implications of this realisation. In doing so, it aims to overturn the anthropocentrism of so much theology and preaching. Popular Christianity often focuses almost

[1] John 17:24: 'Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.' Ephesians 1:4: 'Just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.' 1 Peter 1:20: 'He was destined before the foundation of the world, but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake.' See also John 17:5: 'Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed.'

[2] It will be clear that this way of phrasing the matter imitates the language of Karl Barth – hence the use of the term 'decision', which is his terminology rather than mine. A consistent theme of the book is the degree to which I follow a number of Barth's distinctive theological moves, yet seek to make major revisions in his characterisation of reconciliation and eschatology. I do that in conversation with theologians of different eras and in developing constructive alternatives.

exclusively on human problems – mortality and guilt – that it looks to Jesus to fix. In this book I offer a theocentric account, based on God's purpose, and a Christocentric story, centred in God's purpose to be with us incarnationally in Christ and eschatologically forever. It is not that sin is underestimated – it is that overcoming sin is too short a story, and one that insufficiently attends to God's original and ultimate purpose.

There is an ecclesiology and a politics assumed in both the conventional account and my own. A church that claims to be able to determine who finds eternal life, by developing a particular theory of the atonement and by identifying what convictions and behaviours dovetail with that theory, is making an unwarranted bid for control – not just of human beings, but of divine purpose. By contrast a church that perceives God's original, unfolding and ultimate purpose as being with us in Christ redirects its attention to fostering relationships of being with God, one another and the creation as its principal form of ministry and mission. Meanwhile a church that perceives a narrow aperture to a specific understanding of salvation will have its eyes focused on getting the maximum number of people through the neck of that bottle; whereas a church that understands its calling as living God's future now will concentrate on modelling relations of trust, dynamism and wisdom and catalysing such interactions across all aspects of society, whether explicitly Christian or not.

I understand that my judgements on the reason for and significance of the incarnation constitute a case that needs defending and asserting on a number of fronts. I do that as follows.

In Chapter 1 I set out a summary of a truly incarnational theology. In doing so I touch on all the themes that will subsequently arise, and put them in a logical sequence. The questions raised by this summary are the ones I seek to address in the subsequent chapters: the summary is thus a taster for my whole argument. In addition, in the first chapter I elucidate seven principles that are derived from the summary and that guide my investigations and proposals in the rest of the book. This is a theocentric story that centres God's abundance, in

contrast to the anthropocentric tendency of much theology, which introduces and comes to define God largely as the provider of the solution to human problems. It is a story whose beginning, middle and end are about Jesus, rather than one in which Jesus has a specific role to fix the human predicament. It is a story of God's sovereignty and freedom, not one in which God has to obey absolute laws around honour or justice. And it is a story in which God's means and ends are identical: there is no detour by which God achieves good things in a dubious way: God's who is characterised by how as much as by what and why. The first chapter is thus a challenge to which the subsequent chapters seek to rise.

Then I make a scriptural case for my proposal. Almost every theological account has to set different emphases and pronouncements of scripture alongside each other, and acknowledge that there are very few questions on which the Bible speaks with a single voice. Part of the task of the theologian is to pull strands together and highlight trajectories of thought, noticing correspondences and resonances and drawing inferences and interpretations – and then to set out thoughts in an ordered sequence that attends to the whole. This is what Chapters 2 and 3 seek to do. In Chapter 2 I consider what God truly wants for humankind and creation, and the ways Jesus' incarnation both embodies and advances that purpose. I discern three forms that purpose takes: covenant, community and communion. I then explore the scriptural and incarnational grounding of these three themes. What these themes have in common is that they are both means and ends: they model in temporal existence the character of eternal essence, being with God forever. While it would be oversimplifying to ascribe the three terms respectively to Israel, church and eschaton, because they overlap so greatly, nonetheless such an ascription highlights the comprehensiveness of the three terms in their rendering of God's unfolding purpose for how people are to respond to divine initiative. This also entails an account of where and how evil, sin, suffering and death are addressed, if dismantling them is not perceived as what the incarnation is principally about.

The scriptural story is oriented towards God being with us so that we in turn might be with God, one another and the wider creation. Creation comes about because of God's desire to be with us in Christ. The notion of being with is pervasive in the Bible from God creating Adam and Eve as companions (Gen 2:22) and seeking to walk with them at the time of the evening breeze (Gen 3:8) to the moment the loud voice from the throne says that the home of God is among mortals, that God will dwell with them and that God will be with them (Rev 21:3). But the potential of being with has not always been fully appreciated. So in Chapter 3 I revisit the eight dimensions of being with articulated in my earlier work, and highlight the scriptural and incarnational significance and resonance of these eight dimensions. This establishes that being with is not a sweeping label or slogan but a textured, nuanced, scripturally founded and incarnationally rich notion describing not just the destiny of God's purpose but the great part of the way God – and we – realise that purpose. Presence, attention, mystery, delight, participation, partnership, enjoyment and glory are all profoundly scriptural notions, found throughout the Bible, and constitute a fair portrayal of the ministry of Jesus. These dimensions ensure that being with is no abstract concept but a rich account of God's inner-Trinitarian life and God's life with us now and always. This chapter completes Part I.

In Part II I engage with those who have trod this path before.[3] I am seeking here not to tell a historical tale of theologians and their cultural and political circumstances, but to take the opportunity to glean from them transferable themes and insights that can assist with my argument. I treat such theologians in three groups. The first,

[3] Karl Barth explains this transition adeptly:

> Exegetical theology investigates biblical teaching as the basis of our talk about God. Dogmatics, too, must constantly keep it in view. But only in God and not for us is the true basis of Christian utterance identical with its true content. Hence dogmatics as such does not ask what the apostles and prophets said but what we must say on the basis of the apostles and prophets.
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> Church Dogmatics, *vol. I/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 16*

stretching back to the earliest theologians such as Irenaeus but beginning in earnest with the seventh-century monk Maximus the Confessor, shares the conviction that Christ's coming was not a reaction to the fall, but is generally much more focused on the eschatological aspects of the story, notably our deification by the Holy Spirit, and the insight into eternal life offered by Christ's transfiguration. This is the subject of Chapter 4. The second, most fully represented by the late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Franciscan John Duns Scotus, asserts that the incarnation of Christ has primacy among all God's purposes, and insists that Christ's coming was not dependent on the fall. The third, clustering around the twentieth-century work of Karl Barth, especially his *Church Dogmatics*, recalibrates the old debates about election (that some are predestined for salvation, others for damnation), to suggest that election refers to Jesus Christ. Christ is not just the object of election (chosen by God); he is also, as a person of the Trinity, the subject of election (the God who chooses). Almost without exception, despite their shared emphasis on incarnation, all the authors examined revert to a fairly conventional account of salvation hinged around Christ's passion, death and resurrection; which puts my rendering of Christ's cross in tension with all of them, and leaves me wondering if they truly uphold my key principle, the consistency of God's means and ends. Nonetheless these three investigations significantly enrich the notion of being with and its implications for theology.

Once I have garnered key themes from these theologians, I move to Part III, in which I match together these gleanings with the theological principles, scriptural themes and dimensions of being with articulated above. I elucidate a brief theological conspectus in four chapters, expanding on the story of God outlined in Chapter 1. In the spirit of offering a truly incarnational theology, I cover several of the traditional topoi of systematic treatments, but within an incarnational narrative that affirms the theocentric rather than anthropocentric emphasis of theology. I first look, in Chapter 7, at the Trinity, and perceive the ways it embodies being with in its ultimate and

definitive form. The persons of the Trinity are utterly occupied with one another's attention, delight, mystery and enjoyment. While the church came to understand the significance of Christ before articulating the doctrine of the Trinity, I assume that in presenting God's purpose we must explore who God is ahead of describing how God acts. I then move in Chapter 8 to God's purpose, understood first as expressed in the incarnation, which entails creation and finally yields eschatology. Here I am concerned to examine how scripture grounds both creation and eschatology incarnationally in the narrative of Jesus. Next in Chapter 9 I take up God's unfolding purpose. Here I explore the Holy Spirit, narrated through Israel, church and God's realm. I understand the work of the Holy Spirit as making Christ present in these different spheres of God's story. Finally in Chapter 10 I address God's unbreakable purpose, where Christ's cross, resurrection and ascension are explored, and evil, sin, suffering and death are revisited; meanwhile the notion of the fall is renarrated. In my conclusion I indicate where the argument lands and which areas invite further exploration.

The project is one of relocation – from anthropocentrism to theocentrism, from a concentration on reversing the results of the fall to a focus on the coherence of God's original purpose with incarnation, creation and eschatology. En route I make a case for a corresponding reading of scripture and reception of tradition. I also argue for the scriptural and incarnational potential of the dimensions of being with, and for a constructive theology built around God's desire to be with us in Christ incarnationally and eschatologically – a desire that governs our reading of Christ's death and resurrection. The book is designed as nine chapters assembling all the resources to ensure that the claims put forth in Chapter 10 make sense.