

*The End of Humanity
and the Beginning of Kenosis*

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“That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind,” Neil Armstrong famously declared as he landed on the moon. But how do we know according to which scale we should measure this event, and which horizon best describes its significance? Which particularities do we pick out in characterizing an event? If we describe Armstrong’s leap with regard to physical distance crossed, the objectively true measurement will only miss what makes the step remarkable. Contextualizing it as “stepping out of a spacecraft unto solid ground” would at least clarify that comparing it with jumps of Olympic athletes is beside the point. Only calibrating the scale of measurement to the hitherto uncrossed boundary between “earth” and “moon” allows us to understand what set this leap apart.

However, once we discern this salient boundary, we might wonder whether “mankind” really picks out the subject well, or whether Armstrong might more precisely be described as an “earthling” stepping onto the moon. Then again, in the fierce international competition that characterized the “race to the moon,” a Russian observer might register the incident as “an American” having set foot on the moon. Does the narrower national lens obscure the historic achievement? Or is the generalization more misleading, since it insinuates a united effort that did not historically exist? Conceptual calibration matters, not only in terms of accuracy, but also in terms of the ramifications it brings into view or forecloses.

(Cur) Deus Homo, or How to Measure a Leap?

How to measure a leap? How to understand a crossing? Different descriptions are not only a matter of scale; they also open up meanings pertaining to different reference systems. Consider the claim, “Esmeralda swam across a river before giving birth to a baby girl.” From this characterization, we might infer that an existential, life-changing event took place. Recalibrating the statement to “a Mexican woman crossed the Rio Grande before giving birth to a baby girl” clarifies that the crossing was not merely a strenuous exercise, but the overcoming of a national boundary with legal consequences. Both descriptions are correct, and both might indeed be adequate in different contexts. The former might be more relevant in a medical assessment of Esmeralda’s physical condition. But the latter will be more helpful in ascertaining the citizenship of the newborn baby. Conceptual calibration thus prefigures what meanings we may discern in an event.

The incarnation marks a very particular crossing. The measure of this “leap” defines the Christian understanding of God and constitutes Christian hope for redemption, salvation, and the promise of communion between creator and creature. *Which* categories ought to bear theological weight in its description, and *what* comes into view by drawing them out? In reference to widespread assumptions about God—what God *ought* to be like in order to be God—three “scandals of particularity” come into view: the incarnation’s historical singularity, its indelible materiality, and its irreducible suffering.¹ From Chalcedon’s focus on “human nature” through Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo?* to contemporary theologies of God becoming human,² we are so used to describing all three scandals of this crossing in terms of the “humanity of God” that it almost seems ridiculous to ask whether this is, in fact, the most precise and useful theological calibration of the incarnation. Nevertheless, I ask: Can we be sure humanity is indeed its most salient horizon? What alternative calibrations are possible, and what overlooked theological ramifications would they bring to the fore?

Let me state from the outset: I am not saying that God did not become human. I am not saying that Jesus was not human. I am not saying that the incarnation does not have ultimate significance for humanity. My caution is twofold: (1) identifying the incarnation with “becoming human” has led

1. Cf. Niels Henrik Gregersen, introduction to *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015), 4.

2. Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God Becoming Human: Incarnation in the Christian Bible*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021).

to the (potentially misplaced) reification of the category of humanity as a theological universal, even as a soteriological category in itself; and (2) permitting ourselves to recalibrate the same event with reference to other categories might afford valuable theological insights. I draw out these concerns in two rounds. Building on Rosemary Radford Ruether, I ask whether foregrounding the “humanity” of Christ might miscalibrate the particularity of the incarnation in a similar manner as stressing his “maleness” would. With Gregory Nazianzen’s soteriological axiom, I then inquire whether spelling out the comprehensive significance of the incarnation in aspects pertaining to “human nature” might miscalibrate the universality of the incarnation.

The rest of this chapter is a thought experiment. Revisiting the biblical testimony without the habitual predetermination to interpret it along the lines of “humanity,” it is surprising how little salience the category has in the testimony of the New Testament. (Due to the limited scope of this chapter, I focus primarily on Paul and John.) The New Testament foregrounds three concentric horizons with regard to which the relevance of the one incarnational “leap” is typically expressed: there is an almost indexical insistence on the redemptive movement of God in the *singular* person of Jesus Christ (the scandal of singularity); then, his relevance for the cosmic, *universal* horizon of “the world,” “the *kosmos*,” “all flesh” is clearly proclaimed (the scandal of materiality); and finally, the incarnation obviously has immediate relevance in the adoption of those who “belong to Christ” into the *particular* horizon of God’s history with God’s people, where God’s redemptive presence is already historically effective. Even as all three of these horizons can obviously be described with reference to humanity, it is clear that none of them precisely maps onto the boundaries of humanity. But even so, the third, intermediary category is surprisingly challenging to pin down. I ultimately find its horizon not to be constituted by a creaturely particularity at all, but by the particularity of God: behind the scandal of suffering lies the scandal of God’s essential kenosis.

Can a Male Savior Save Women? Miscalibrating Particularity

Many foundational documents in Western history talk about “man” as an anthropological universal: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”³ More contemporary declarations have typically corrected masculine equivocations of humanity to read, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”⁴

3. US Declaration of Independence 1776, Preamble.

4. UN Declaration of Human Rights 1948, art. 1.

Rosemary Radford Ruether's provocative question, "Can a male savior save women?," is an excellent example of questioning such a miscalibration in theology. Ruether points out how an anthropological ontology according to which "only the male represents the fullness of human potential" justified itself by reasoning: in Christ, God assumed male flesh, therefore only male flesh could adequately represent the divine.⁵ With reference to the particularity of incarnation, it thus foreclosed the admission of non-males to church offices.

Ruether's question was obviously rhetorical. Soteriologically, the tradition she critiqued clearly held that Christ's soteriological significance was universal. Her question thus exposed that interpreting Christ narrowly through the particularity of his (historically presumably accurate) masculinity was as ridiculous as suggesting that he was only the savior of human males. Ruether questioned whether the anthropological, ecclesiological, and ethical conclusions drawn actually attached relevance to the right category of his earthly existence. She insisted that the incarnation needed to be recalibrated to be about God's humanity, not about God's masculinity, and thus she stripped the sexism rampant in much of the tradition of any theological warrant.

Ruether's intervention thoughtfully exposed what we may call a fallacy of misplaced concreteness. The Whiteheadian term describes the equivocation of an (otherwise helpful, even necessary) abstraction with the object it was supposed to represent.⁶ This diagnosis of unhelpful reification also allows us to inquire: Which particularity should qualify for abstraction in any given process of conceptual modeling, including theological reflection? Regarding salvation in Christ, it may seem rather obvious that masculinity is a misplaced concreteness. While there is little reason to doubt that the historical Jesus was male, it also seems clear that isolating and reflecting on his maleness will not provide an adequate account of the incarnation. Similarly, we may ask, are we sure that we are not committing a similar miscalibration when picking out the salient particularity as "God becoming *human*" in Christ?

Quod non assumptum, non sanatum? Miscalibrating Universality

Which particularities "matter" in the event, how, and to whom? That the incarnation "matters" (pun intended), and matters tremendously, is what

5. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Christology and Feminism: Can a Male Saviour Save Women?," in *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 45.

6. Alfred N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 74.

Christian faith has always assumed, and nothing less than the non-docetic efficaciousness and comprehensive scope of salvation is at stake: “God [sent the Son into the world] in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17). Gregory Nazianzus famously claimed, “The unassumed is the unhealed, but what is united with God is also being saved.”⁷ Presupposing *that* the incarnation had comprehensive significance, Gregory thus historically maintained against Apollinaris of Laodicea that Christ needed to be “fully” human, i.e., endowed with all human faculties and capacities in order that all of these might be reconciled in the incarnation.

Gregory’s dictum is often called “the soteriological axiom,” and it has become a widely invoked theological touchstone for calibrating the incarnation. On closer examination, there seem to be several separate theological assumptions wrapped up in it. In order to warrant the conclusion that Christ must have been “fully human,” Gregory implicitly stipulates: (1) only God can save; (2) God saves through uniting what is to be saved to Godself in Christ (“assuming”); (3) uniting one specimen to Christ redeems its “nature,” i.e., the redemptive effect extends to all members of its class; (4) the whole human being is in need of salvation; (5) all that is necessary for salvation has been accomplished in Christ. Leaving aside other questions that could be raised about these assumptions, I want to point out that as Gregory meant to safeguard effective, comprehensive salvation (5), he did so in terms of the particularly *human* condition (4). While none of the consequences drawn may be incorrect, the calibration to humanity leads to an implicit identification of “the whole human being” and “all that is necessary for salvation.” Ever since the early christological controversies, the full humanity that is assumed by Christ has thus been reified as the scope of salvation. Other calibrations have dropped out of view.

If “full humanity” was used in the ancient church and beyond as signaling the comprehensive significance of the incarnation, we might question whether it casts the horizon of its significance wide enough. Narrowing our reflection to the incarnation’s significance engenders an anthropocentrism that at least excludes the nonhuman creation from view, but can also inform its treatment as other, subordinate, and fit for exploitation. Just as Ruether questioned whether the *logos* exclusively assumes *male* flesh, we may thus

7. Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 158.

ask whether Christ's flesh is exclusively *human*, or rather, more generally creaturely—with potential ramifications for all creatures?⁸

Furthermore, identifying the scope of salvation with the scope of the human being inadvertently leads to the reification of humanity as in and of itself a soteriological category. "He was made human so that he might make us gods,"⁹ as Athanasius described the soteriological goal of the incarnation. Contemporary theologies prefer to speak of "the God who became human—and our becoming human."¹⁰ Somewhere in the history of interpretation the conviction that "only God can save" has become congruous with "(true) humanity" as redemptive. Slippage between taxonomic (humanity as species) and moral meanings (humanity as virtue) testifies to this shift.

We may be careful to define true humanity christologically as, for example, Karl Barth has famously done, and subsequently emphatically endorse universal human rights on theological grounds.¹¹ Even so, we are still reifying the category and imbuing it with soteriological significance, engendering the need to negotiate what (and, more importantly, who) *counts* as human. History teaches us that postulated humanity does little to make those lives we habitually disregard grievable or recognizable as human. Postulated humanity creates economies of salvation according to who is able to "achieve" common humanity, e.g., along lines of racialization or ability. Is "humanity" really the best heuristic to calibrate redeemed being? What is won—and what (and who) slips from sight—by using "humanity" as the primary category to calibrate redeemed being?

Which Particularity? Whose Universality? And What Salvation?

Hermann Cremer helpfully reminds us, "All errors committed in the discussion of . . . God have to do with the fact that one does not begin with its actuality as it can be perceived and experienced in the self-affirmation of God in his revelation, but seeks to gain knowledge of it a priori."¹² His

8. David Clough, *On Animals: Systematic Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), insightfully elucidates the arbitrariness of traditional anthropocentric readings with regard to the incarnation, and across doctrinal loci, offering the first full-fledged systematic theology that reflectively takes into account the nonhuman creation.

9. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, translation anonymous (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 54.3.

10. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God Becoming Human*, 367.

11. Cf. Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*, trans. Thomas Weiser and John Newton Thomas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999).

12. Hermann Cremer, *Die Christliche Lehre von den Eigenschaften Gottes* (Giessen:

caution applies to any theological axiom, including soteriological ones. In our search for an adequate understanding of particularity and universality for describing the incarnation, we thus turn to its singularity: Jesus Christ, as attested by the Scriptures.

The Incarnation's Anti-Particular Singularity: "Christ Jesus"

First and foremost, the New Testament testimonies gesture toward a scandalous singularity: that God incarnates into an—otherwise not very remarkable—individual creature and insists that something happened *here* that does not equally happen anywhere else. God's willingness for relationship with God's creation as well as God's boundary-crossing humility and love—which is well-attested throughout God's history with God's people—incarnationally intensifies, culminates, and becomes definitive of who God is in a singular, unprecedented, and inimitable manner: in the person of Christ Jesus. Gregersen calls this the "strict sense view" of incarnation, reserved to Jesus alone.¹³

For Paul, Christ demonstrates that God is "God for us" (Rom 8:31), "that is to say, as the one who addresses this world to save it."¹⁴ While Paul never directly attributes divinity to Christ, he acclaims him as *Kyrios Jesus Christos* and integrates him into a christologically reformulated *Shema Yisrael* (Phil 2; 1 Cor 8:6).¹⁵ He thus indicates that this individual is irreducible to the understanding of who God is and how God is at work in the world. This significance extends beyond those who believe in him to the whole of creation (cf. 1 Cor 8:6; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). For Paul, the point of the Christ-event is soteriological, and its particular quality becomes apparent in the word of the cross (1 Cor 1:18–2:16) and the Philippians hymn (Phil 2:6–11): God's love scandalously upends the hierarchies of the world. Through the eternal Son, God adopts believers as children of God so that they become new creatures, a vanguard of the newness of all creation. God's transvaluative election of that which is weak, foolish, and poor in the eyes of the world is transformative for, and communicatively effective beyond, the elect.

John goes even further than Paul in describing the singularity of Christ. From the prologue to the witness of Thomas, he refers to Christ in terms

Brunnen, 2005), 83, famously adopted by Karl Barth as his own "rule" in *Church Dogmatics I/1*, 2nd ed., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 479.

13. Gregersen, "The Extended Body of Christ: Three Dimensions of Deep Incarnation," in *Incarnation*, 238.

14. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God Becoming Human*, 250.

15. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God Becoming Human*, 247.

that are usually exclusively reserved for the one God of Israel. Even more, he ascribes to him eternal preexistence, co-creatorship, and equal originality with the Father. John affirms, as Feldmann and Spieckermann note, “that one cannot speak appropriately about God if one prescind from his relation to the Logos and hence to Jesus Christ.”¹⁶ For John, in fact, there are three distinct realities: God, the coeternal Logos predestined to become human, and the whole of the cosmos, “a reality that will likewise be a central element of the Gospel from now on: ‘everything’ as all things without distinction.”¹⁷ That “God is love” manifests itself in God’s passion for the world and in Christ’s passion at the cross. This love, however, is also communicative of the reciprocal immanence between the Father and the Logos to the believers. John describes the Logos both as origin and as goal of creation. He is, Feldmann and Spieckermann observe, the “path towards a new closeness on the part of God,” first “to make creatures into children of God” and eventually “overcoming of the separation between the creator and the creature.”¹⁸

One might be tempted to parse out Christ’s singular significance in the particularities of this creature’s existence. If *this* person reveals who God is and what God is like, then what about Jesus is theologically significant? As even our initial, theologically more inconspicuous examples of Neil Armstrong or Esmeralda demonstrate, some particulars of Jesus Christ will obviously seem more salient than others. His shoe size? Obviously not. His gender? Probably not. His Jewishness, however, well . . . !

While modern quests for the historical Jesus in particular have been interested in demonstrating his extraordinary qualities (if in different registers—as prophet, teacher, moral example, healer, revolutionary, and so on), the first New Testament testimonies are notoriously indifferent to the particulars of Jesus’s earthly existence, and the ancient church maintained that parsing out Jesus’s creaturely particularities does not lead to theological insight. While it thus generally resisted spelling the incarnation out in terms of particulars of whatever kind, the church did pick out Christ’s humanity as the only particularity that “counts” in the incarnation. Thus, the “crossing” effected by the incarnation was described as the one between God and humanity. But can we be so sure that the church understood Christ’s humanity as a *particularity*, even? They seem to have used it as the most generic category available: Humanity was rather de-particularized into representing the universal horizon of the incarnation.

16. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God Becoming Human*, 314.

17. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God Becoming Human*, 315–16.

18. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God Becoming Human*, 320, 322.

The tradition thus pointed indexically to this person as the site of the incarnation and maintained that “Jesus Christ” is untranslatable into categories of whatever kind, whether pertaining to characteristics of the historical Jesus of Nazareth or to conceptual abstractions. Any theology that calls itself Christian can only legitimate itself by pointing to Christ and by anchoring its interpretations in his singularity. It is the gesture that insists that it is here that God is to be found, “in, with, and under” Jesus’s flesh, “unconfused, undivided, unchanged, unseparated,” rather than attempting a translation into a specific *whatness*. And we have seen that once we reread Jesus’s humanity as a particularity, it might quite quickly belong in the same category as his masculinity: a historical fact, undeniably, but in and of itself not more revelatory of the divine than other personal particulars. The singularity of Christ in that sense indeed entails an almost kenotic renunciation of any particularity that would make Jesus seem significant in and of himself or comparable to other historic figures.

The Incarnation’s Anti-Particular Universality: “All Flesh”

Eponymous for the theological notion of “incarnation” is, of course, John’s “the Word became flesh” (1:14). Interestingly, this pivotal text does not invoke humanity. Why then is the humanity of Christ the category that has traditionally been foregrounded in establishing the event’s significance?

The Greek *sarx* and the Hebrew *basar* have both a wider and more specific meaning than “human.” Neither reducible to a merely physical, material aspect of life, nor necessarily carrying a negative connotation (cf. Ezek 11:19; 36:26), *basar* typically refers to the psychosomatic unity of the creature in its finitude and transience.¹⁹ This quality might be felt especially acutely by human beings, but it is not unique to humanity. While *basar* can metonymously stand for the human being, its use for nonhuman animals and even the totality of living creatures is well-documented (Gen 6:12, 13, 17; 7:21; 9:11–17; Num 18:15; Ps 136:25; Dan 4:9; Job 34:15). Similarly, *sarx* clearly ranges across the diversity of creaturely life (1 Cor 15:39–40). While it can be deployed in opposition to *pneuma*, it cannot be reduced to mere matter. Rather, it stands for existence within a “worldly” horizon, as marked by interdependence, vulnerability, and transience (1 Cor 7:28; 2 Cor 4:11; 7:5). While not in and of

19. Thorsten Klein, “Fleisch (NT),” in *WiBiLex: Das Wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet* (May 2017), <https://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/stichwort/48865/>, accessed July 1, 2021.

itself negative, *sarx* is thus also the aspect in which the creature is “chronically endangered” and “self-endangering” concern for self-preservation makes creatures notoriously vulnerable to hubris, self-dependence, and sin.²⁰

Incarnation literally signifies the scandalous fact that the Logos enters this world of flesh. In the singular, concrete body of Jesus of Nazareth, it embraces the materiality, sociality, vulnerability, transience, and death that mark fleshly existence at large.²¹ The incarnation’s materiality has always been scandalous because it posits the revelation of God in that which is, according to received wisdom, most remote from being divine. It finds the transcendent in immanence, the eternal in a temporal existence, the infinite in very finite conditions, the omnipotent in vulnerability. What is scandalous is that God does not insist on “God-likeness” in counter-distinction and even opposition to God’s creation. Who God really is thus reveals itself, kenotically, in the apparently “ungodlike” temporal, material, creaturely existence that the preexistent, transcendent, divine Logos makes its own.

This kenotic enfleshment has breathtaking implications. The creator overcomes the all-defining boundary and even the split between creator and creation as such, to become truly present in, with, and for the created world. Henceforth, nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God” (Rom 8:38–39). Incarnation in the flesh signals redemption of all flesh. John can almost interchangeably speak of the Son coming into the “the world,” indicating the realm of creation as a whole rather than a specific emphasis on humanity as such (cf. 3:16), and attest Christ’s soteriological authority “over all flesh” (1:3; 17:2). Paul describes the whole creation as waiting for redemption in Christ (Rom 8:19–23) and envisions the *anakephalaiōsis* as “gather[ing] up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph 1:10). Christ promises new life to those who already belong to him, and eventually the whole “kingdom” and “all things,” everything that would have been subject to death. Colossians paints Christ as “the firstborn of all creation . . . in whom all things hold together” and in whom God reconciled “all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Col 1:15, 17, 20). Recognizing this cosmic horizon, Johnson thus discerns a promise of “deep resurrection” that extends to “every creature that passes through death.”²²

20. Cf. Michael Welker, “Was kann theologische Rede von Inkarnation und Auferstehung zur Anthropologie beitragen?,” in *Verkörperung als Paradigma theologischer Anthropologie*, ed. Gregor Etzelmüller and Annette Weissenrieder (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016), 316–25.

21. Gregersen, “Extended Body,” 225, 232.

22. Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 209.

In Gregory Nazianzen's term, the Scriptures seem to imply all along that "creatureliness" rather than "humanity" has been assumed in Christ as they sketch "creation" rather than "the whole human being" as the scope of God's healing action. Might reading the incarnation as "God becoming human" instead of "God becoming flesh" be a similar miscalibration as earlier generations' talk about "men" instead of "humanity"? Pondering Neil Armstrong's leap, we earlier considered replacing "man" with "earthling" for added precision. If the Logos's "becoming flesh" is not *merely* about "humanity," then conceptually recalibrating the incarnation "as God stepping over the boundary between creator and creation and taking on creatureliness" would more adequately capture the extension and significance of the incarnational leap.²³ Pushing Ruether's provocative question further, we thus ask critically: *Can a human savior save the nonhuman creation?* Focusing narrowly on Jesus's humanity only obfuscates the scope, boundary, and relevance of the incarnation.

Against possible suspicions that "deep incarnation" leads to panentheism,²⁴ I want to state very clearly that recalibrating the incarnation this way is not necessarily any more panentheistic than the Chalcedonian formula has been all along. It continues to describe the same, singular act of the second person of the Trinity making the full creaturely existence of Jesus of Nazareth its own. The recalibration simply picks out "flesh" instead of "humanity" as the scale according to which one and the same "leap" is best measured.

The recalibration is also ethically significant. Instead of turning "true humanity" into a soteriological category and from there into a norm of right relationship, we might reflect on what embracing "true creatureliness" would look like. Many of the commitments traditionally treated under "true humanity" would retain their place—the relationship as a creature with one's creator, the embrace of one's own finitude, interdependence, and particularity as a creature—but we would additionally be challenged to envision relations of co-creatureliness with the beyond-human creation of which humans are part and parcel, rather than extend habitual anthropological supremacy.

While I am convinced that such a recalibration has important theological and ethical potential, we should also be cautious that, in exchanging one perceived universality for another, we are not just falling into a different

23. Clough, *Animals*, 103. A similar move is proposed by contemporary advocates of "deep incarnation."

24. This suspicion was confronted head-on by the main proponents of deep incarnation in the 2011 symposium "Is God Incarnate in All There Is?," whose proceedings were published as Gregersen, *Incarnation*.

misplaced concreteness. Any particular calibration is always in danger of reifying—and deifying—the respective particularity theologically, resulting in “a strangely blinkered underestimate of the scope and grandeur of God’s creative and redemptive purposes” as well as problematic ethical consequences.²⁵ The cosmic horizon of the incarnation calls into question any proprietary claim under the name of human (or other) particulars. However, we also need to be cautious against reifying the “soteriological axiom” instead of the incarnation it was meant to interpret: starting from an *a priori* assumption that “all” *must* be saved, merely to discern the most comprehensive category imaginable to fulfill this definition. In other words, while we have shed light on the incarnation’s scandalous singularity and materiality, we still need to gain more clarity about the incarnation’s particularity.

The Particularity That Was Singular: “Imago Dei”?

Is there not, after all, a *particular* creature of *particular* interest to the creator? Is the incarnation not aimed at humanity in a special (if not altogether exclusive) way, as healing that *particular* split between God and that creature created in the image of God who wanted to be *more* and therefore became *less* than God’s image? Such is obviously the most widespread account of the incarnation.

Indeed, the New Testament emphasizes that the incarnation overcomes the rift worked by sin, which finds its most intensive and extensive expression in the actions and attitudes of human beings, even as all of creation is seen as suffering under it.²⁶ And indeed, the Hebrew Bible speaks of the human being as created specifically and uniquely “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27). In an essential or relational interpretation of this *imago*, the tradition has typically insisted that the human being retained it after the fall, and that God becoming human in Christ redemptively opened the way for us to become true images of God once more.

25. Clough, *Animals*, 103.

26. For the “groaning of creation” for redemption, cf., e.g., Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008); Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*. For interdisciplinary research that challenges the assumption that sin is an exclusively human affair, cf. Clough, *Animals*, 105–30; Gregor Eitzelmüller, “The Evolution of Sin,” *Religion & Theology* 21 (2014): 107–24; Joshua M. Moritz, “Animal Suffering, Animal Sin, Theistic Evolution, and the Problem of Evil,” in *Anticipating God’s New Creation: Essays in Honor of Ted Peters*, ed. Carol Jacobson and Adam Pryor (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2015), 280–93.

But what if the *imago dei* was instead *the only thing* that was lost in the fall? If, as current exegetical scholarship widely agrees,²⁷ the image is not an essential quality of the human being, but rather a function, a role, a commission—of the vicarious presence in God’s place on earth, attending to and preserving the goodness of God’s creation—then the actuality of this presence and the capacity to fulfill that role were indeed impaired by sin. And what makes us so sure that the incarnation aims at *restoring that function*, which was never quite as central in biblical anthropology in any case? In the whole canon, only Genesis 1:26–27 and 9:6 refer to the human being as image of God, and the New Testament reserves that title for Christ (most prominently, 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15).

Reconsidering the scale of calibration allows us to consider that the incarnation might, in fact, signal God’s gracious *taking away* humanity’s responsibility for creation from humanity at large, and conferring it directly and exclusively upon Christ. Christ manifests God’s presence on earth and preserves (even restores) the goodness of creation. Christ thus conclusively fulfills that function. Humanity is neither a condition nor the ontological realization of the *imago dei*, neither its boundary nor as such even its site. The *imago dei* then pertains to the incarnation’s singularity rather than identifying its particular scope with humanity.

Indeed, a “most beloved creature,”²⁸ a distinct and distinguished addressee within creation, God’s elect exists, and it is the *singular* person of Jesus Christ. Yes, Christ opens the door for Christ’s creaturely siblings to become children of God in and through Christ. Other creatures may thus be enabled for participation in Christ as Christ’s extended body—but the *imago dei* is mediated exclusively christologically, not anthropologically. It does not afford a theologically distinguished position of humanity *qua* humanity.

We remain convinced that the need for redemption is intensified among (yet surely not restricted to) *homo sapiens*. It also stands to reason that human writers would describe the significance of Jesus Christ in human terms. But is it conceivable that acclamations of Christ as “the light of all people” (John 1:4) or “mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus,

27. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God Becoming Human*, 12. Centuries of scholarship have been unable to find an essential quality that would clearly set the human being apart from the rest of creation (a delightful survey of candidates can be found in Clough, *Animals*, 63–65). Wentzel van Huyssteen thus ascertains a growing consensus on functional or relational interpretations; cf. *Alone in the World: Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 128–32.

28. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God Becoming Human*, 367.

himself human” (1 Tim 2:5) would retain their meaning if we took them to be speaking about the recognition of the creator by the creature and the mediation of the divide between creator and creature? Even in talk about Christ as the “second Adam” (1 Cor 15; Rom 5:12–21), we might recognize that Adam is the proverbial, literal, and exemplary “earthling.” Would our recalibration allow us to appreciate most biblical references to humanity as synecdoches for the incarnation’s singular and universal significance, rather than its particular extension?

This Particularity That Is Not One—The Scandal of Particularity

Still, there is a particular horizon to which the incarnation “matters,” a realm where it becomes *actually* effective historically. However, it is not humanity at large.

The Unparticular Particularity of “the People of God”

The category of “the people of God” that comes into view here is an important site of theological negotiation in the New Testament. Kinship metaphors serve to inscribe Jesus into a particular history of a particular people, and at the same time to mark transgressions of categorical boundaries rather than their reification. In short, they speak of election more than of anthropology.

The New Testament describes Jesus’s particularity in terms that firmly locate him in the story of God with God’s people, e.g., as son of David (Rom 1:3), descendant of Abraham (Heb 2:14–17), or descendant of Israel (Rom 9:5). The image of Sonship in particular links Jesus equally firmly to the Father *and* to the created order—often in one and the same breath—to mark a communicative effect. Paul talks about God sending “his Son, born of woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children” (Gal 4:4–5). The point of the divine Son becoming “son of woman” is that it allows others to become his siblings, and thus, by extension, children of God (cf. Gal 3:26; 2 Cor 6:18; Rom 8:14). John similarly uses kinship language to carve out an extension of the incarnation into a community: “to all who received [Christ], who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:12; cf. 1 John 3). The nearness of God in Christ is communicative. The singular radiates out and establishes a particular horizon of the incarnation, integrating those who belong to Christ into the history of God with God’s people. It thus

marks a reality that is presently distinct—particular—and yet gestures toward the eschatological, universal horizon where, ultimately, “all things” belong to Christ (John 17:2) and “what happens to the children of God now becomes, for the waiting creation, the ground of its own hope for redemption.”²⁹

Paul adopts the ancient image of the social body and transforms it christologically, signaling that, in a certain sense, “the incarnation of God in Christ continues in the community of those who believe in Christ.”³⁰ God’s singular incarnation in Christ that promises a universal reconciliation of “all things” already transformatively expands the body of Christ to the participation of other creatures. This body of Christ is obviously rather *more particular* than “humanity” at large: God’s election, into which those who believe in Christ are adopted, is the realm in which God’s closeness becomes communicatively and transformatively effective and efficient in history.

This body also has notoriously, scandalously indeterminate boundaries. The emergent community is not simply the universal horizon of the incarnation’s reach, nor is it based on the particularities of Jesus’s earthly existence. It is not constituted by a shared characteristic with him (whether calibrated in terms of shoe size, profession, gender, religion, species). If we look for fixed categories that define the horizon of particularity that engenders “the church” or “the people of God,” we will be sorely disappointed. This horizon of particularity is surprisingly *un-particular*. In Galatians 3:26–29, Paul even emphatically declares the non-salience of any particulars as qualifiers of belonging or standing: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” In fact, negotiating the counter-intuitive de-particularization of this emergent community and the relativization of any boundary markers centrally characterizes Paul’s work in his letters and the development of the early church according to Acts.

This intermediary horizon does not indulge those who are looking for a particularity in the sense of a particular property that could be turned into a possession. Those who inscribe themselves into this history orient themselves between two fixtures—the cosmic horizon of creation and the singularity of Christ—and negotiate their own strangely de-particularizing existence in between. Sharing in the “promise” for all flesh, and taking on the name of “Christ-ians” strips all their particulars of relevance or turns their meaning into its opposite (1 Cor 1:18–25), just as God’s election has

29. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God Becoming Human*, 259.

30. Feldmeier and Spieckermann, *God Becoming Human*, 265.

tended to do throughout the story of Israel. This unparticular tendency of God is neither an erasure of difference nor necessarily an inversion of all hierarchies. Instead, it is the non-insistence on sameness as a condition of redemptive unity.

The Particularity of God: Essential Kenosis

Have we thus abolished all particularity in the incarnation? By no means! What we have called into question is the assumption that the particularity of the incarnation is definitively expressed in the “humanity” of Christ. Human beings and communities share in the promise of the children of God, and they share the creaturely transience and interdependence of “all flesh” with the rest of the nonhuman creation. But humanity defines neither the incarnation’s *universal* horizon nor the *particular* extension of this story. As a category of reference, it says either too much or too little.

The particular horizon we *have* identified as engendered by the incarnation—the engendering of a “people” who participate in that union—is remarkably undistinguished by particularity, and even actively de-particularizing. The incarnation’s particularity does not come into play as a specific property of the flesh of Christ or of those who belong to him. Instead, it is signaled by the irreducible elements of the story of God’s faithfulness to God’s election, into which Jesus in his life, suffering, and resurrection is inscribed as God’s servant, God’s messiah, God’s wisdom, God’s word, and God’s elect. If anything, then, one could describe this particularity as that of Jesus’s *Jewish* flesh, and this is indeed the only particular “property” of Jesus that is of theological significance. Even so, this scandal of particularity is not primarily one of *Jesus’s* fleshly particularity but one of *God’s* particular character. It thus even exceeds the “Jewish flesh” (while never being separable from it)—and throws the story wide open for those who “belong to Christ”—that is, ultimately, “all things”—to participate in it.

The name of this particularity, which is the particularity of God’s own being, is kenosis. We have already found its traces in the singularity and the universality of the incarnation. Now it is time to spell it out as the true scandal of particularity at work in the incarnation.

The Philippians hymn (Phil 2:6–11), most likely the earliest concise Christology,³¹ describes a particular double movement: of self-emptying and

31. Cf. *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, ed. Ralph Martin (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

humiliation from godlikeness to death on a cross, and of subsequent exaltation in cosmic authority under divine name. The poles of the movement are marked by the antithesis of “the form of God” and “the form of a slave.” Even as the passage highlights Christ’s humanity explicitly, it is clear that the point is not the particularity of the species, but the humility manifested in the incarnation: references to his human “likeness” (*homoïōma*) and “form” (*schēma*) are but the “factual side” of the “form of a slave” that reflects the “‘quality’ of his incarnation.”³² Indeed, Paul can equally use metaphors of impoverishment to describe the same movement: “though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9).

Put differently, the point the hymn is making is not about humanization but kenosis. The references to poverty, servanthood, death, and the cross mark something particular, but not the particularity of Jesus’s humanity in and of itself. Rather, they mark the particularity of God—the particularity of God’s self-giving love, manifested in the incarnation. Indeed, biblical scholars have stressed that the humility indicated in the hymn is *not* the renunciation of the Son’s divinity, but its expression: “For in ‘pouring himself out’ and ‘humbling himself to death on the cross,’ Christ Jesus has revealed the character of God himself. Here is the epitome of God-likeness: the pre-existent Christ was not a ‘grasping, selfish’ being, but one whose love for others found its consummate expression in ‘pouring himself out.’”³³ Kenosis is precisely how Christ enacts his being “equal with God.”

Kenosis, then, is not about “divestiture of something (whether divinity itself or some divine attributes)” nor about “self-limitation regarding the use of divine attributes.”³⁴ Neither is it about the exchange of properties between different “natures.” Kenosis is not even primarily about “humility” or “downward mobility”—although both will be its typical and recurrent expressions. Before it is any and all of these things, kenosis is about the “not regard[ing] equality with God as something to be exploited” (Phil 2:6b). This “mindset”—this quite particular “way of thinking, acting, and feeling”³⁵—is what allows Christ to humble himself. Christ’s insistence on the non-salience of sameness, and thus the non-

32. Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 213.

33. Fee, *Philippians*, 197.

34. Michael Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul’s Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 21.

35. Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation, and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 118.

limitation by particulars, allows for crossing over into, and uniting with his own being, that which is “different.” This particularity is what makes incarnation into that which is not-God possible, and even essential to who God is: essential non-insistence on sameness, turned into active insistence on the non-salience of sameness, reconciles the irreconcilable. Kenosis is both the condition of possibility of unity across difference, and the resulting shape of the union described in incarnation, redemption, and communion.

This understanding of kenosis as primarily the insistence on the non-salience of sameness also clarifies why the second part of the hymn does not constitute a reversal but an extension of the same movement.³⁶ It does not describe Jesus’s promotion to divine status, but “indicates that God has publicly vindicated and recognized Jesus’s self-emptying and self-humbling as the display of true divinity that he already had.”³⁷ Bruce McCormack has insightfully pointed out that, in giving God’s name to the Son and withholding nothing in terms of power and authority, the hymn even reports “a kenosis of the Father.”³⁸ Kenosis, then, is not a particular property of the Son alone; kenosis is the particularity of God: “God . . . is essentially kenotic.”³⁹

This realization exposes the mistake in looking for a particularity on the side of the incarnated flesh to explain or define the incarnation. Such a search rests on the assumption that the horizon of the incarnation needs a particularity to define its perimeter. But kenosis does not require a fixing of its horizon to become effective. Similarity or affinity on the side of the creature, shared experience and shared identity do not constitute its condition. Rather, God’s kenotic disregard of God’s own sameness creates the conditions of solidarity, creates the conditions of shared experience. Shared particularity and even shared identity are the effect of kenotic solidarity, not its presupposition.

The particularity of God in Christ *becomes* the particularity of those who are communities “in Christ.” Kenosis communicates the particularity *that it is* to those it draws into its movement. Constituting solidarity by conviviality, it permits shared experience, which eventually even turns into shared identity “in Christ.” The paraenetic context cannot be divorced from the hymn:

36. Gorman, *Inhabiting*, 32.

37. Gorman, *Inhabiting*, 28; cf. Fee, *Paul’s Letter*, 196.

38. Bruce L. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 207.

39. Gorman, *Inhabiting*, 28.

it is engendered by the kenotic movement that prompts kenotic concretions. A curious double exhortation can thus be discerned in the introductory verse 2:5: a direct prompt to take Christ's mind as one's own example, and an indirect one in which they build networks of examples for each other with each other.⁴⁰ This is a participation in the kenotic movement more than a particular *imitatio Christi*: it is the enactment of the very particularity by which one finds oneself constituted, not an ethical demand.⁴¹ Indeed, focus on imitation might put undue focus on the particularities of Jesus's life—but what the Philippians (and we with them) are called to imitate is not the life of Jesus, but the “mindset” of Christ—essential kenosis. The result will be lived in a plurality and diversity of concretions in a proliferating network of lived examples of kenotic existence.⁴²

We can thus now also make sense of the curious non-particularity of the communities that come into view as the particular horizon of the incarnation. Its de-particularizing effect forbids the reification of particularities into soteriological categories. In Christ, they are constituted by and participate in kenotic non-insistence on sameness that does not reify the boundaries of the community but acts to form shared experience. This non-particularity is an expression of their own particularity, as the particularity of the one to whom they belong. For those who become communities “in Christ,” kenotic solidarity is not a denial of oneself and one's identity, but its exercise: their “becoming the gospel” as the social body of Christ.⁴³

Kenosis as an Alternative to Becoming Human

The incarnation is not about humanity. It is not about becoming truly human. It is not even about true creatureliness. The incarnation is first and foremost an expression of who God is. God's essentially kenotic character does not insist on sameness. Instead, it insists on the non-salience of sameness—even that of divinity. This kenotic insistence of God is what becomes salvific, since it is what creates communion regardless of difference. The primary, most salient, and universally relevant unity achieved kenotically

40. Peter Wick, “Ahmt Jesus Christus mit mir zusammen nach! Imitatio Pauli und Imitatio Christi im Philipperbrief,” in *Der Philipperbrief des Paulus in der Hellenistisch-Römischen Welt*, ed. Jörg Frey, Benjamin Schliesser, and Veronika Niederhofer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 313–14.

41. Wick, “Ahmt Jesus Christus . . . nach!,” 319.

42. Wick, “Ahmt Jesus Christus . . . nach!,” 316.

43. Cf. Gorman, *Inhabiting*, 23.

is the reconciliation of creator and creature in the person of Jesus Christ. All other differences are encompassed in this singularity, and they can be spelled out along the universal horizon of “all flesh.” In the meantime, the category of the human can be safely relegated to a low-threshold biosocial status, because it bears little theological or moral weight.

The incarnation has a particular horizon, too, but it is not established by a particularity of the flesh of Jesus or of those who belong to him. The particularity of the incarnation is the kenotic *particularity of God* as manifest in Christ Jesus. Kenosis is essentially communicative, writing itself into and drawing out the history of God with God’s people. It thus engenders communal realities that are presently distinct—particular—while being drawn into the same kenotic movement. Their notoriously, scandalously open boundaries do not point to a lack of particularity; rather, they express their particular, their essentially kenotic, character.

The particularity that is kenosis renders our search for the “right” calibration of the incarnation moot. The question is neither whether a male savior can save women nor whether a human savior can save the nonhuman (or *even* the human) creature. Of course, interpretive calibrations will always be necessary. They will have to be negotiated contextually between the singular and the cosmic horizon of the incarnation as kenotic concretions themselves. In all this, the insistence on the non-salience of sameness opens the way for communion that does not ask creatures for their passport. Belonging to Christ, Christ’s kenotic particularity becomes our own. We too, then, do not have to compete for “true humanity.” We, too, may then participate in the extension of intermediary horizons—networking solidarity with other creatures, human or otherwise. We, too, will not regard sameness as something to be grasped and exploited, and insist instead on its non-salience—until “all things” may be restored.