
Pro Rege

Volume 21 | Number 1

Article 7

September 1992

Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Williams, Michael (1992) "Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 21: No. 1, 25 - 27.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol21/iss1/7

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neither holds up under biblical scrutiny. "A proper understanding of the kingly rule of God does not allow Christians to escape the present but calls them to be co-workers for the realization of God's rule in and for creation" (92).

Vernon Visick's contribution to this book was perhaps the most difficult. The key question that he addresses is "Does the NT—in particular, the life of Jesus—suggest to us an effective, politically relevant method for responding to the ecological crisis?" (95). Since direct texts and passages are essentially absent on this topic, the context of Jesus' life is investigated. He bases much of his argument on D. Erhenfeld's work on the Jewish tradition, which was very much law and land ethic: 1) do not destroy, 2) prohibition against inflicting pain, and 3) keeping Sabbath. "On the basis of both historical research and reasonable conjecture, therefore, we may assume that Jesus personally lived a profoundly ecological ethic, even though it was kept in the background in the context of Jesus' particular historical situation" (98).

Visick correctly points out the fact that Jesus' life and teachings were very much political. He called for justice, especially for those marginalized. His was a politics of "servanthood." Visick argues, in essence, that a Christian ecological ethic must approach problems the way that Jesus did: by critiquing [sic] the received way of doing things, by applying solutions in the context of new situations, and by bringing the treasured

insights of the past into a creative and life-giving relationship with the present. This approach will keep us from abstract idealism, utopianism, or legalism (101).

Visick concludes that ". . . Jesus can be our inspiration and our guide" (106). Perhaps Visick should have opened up a major section of his essay/assignment on this matter, but he deals with it in three rather brief paragraphs. I was left asking for more.

This book is a very important work. It is not the last word on the environment and the Christian, but it certainly is an important word for the Christian's role in creation. It is not a long book; it is easy to read. Each chapter is amply referenced with endnotes. The book has a general and scripture index. There is a 17-page appendix by David Wise which reviews environmental stewardship literature. This appendix is useful, but a more comprehensive review of Christian environmental literature is now available in *Rediscovery of Creation: A Bibliographic Study of the Church's Response to the Environmental Crisis*, by Joseph K. Sheldon (ATLA Bibliographic Series, 29. Scarecrow Press, 1992).

There is one glaring omission. In the section "About the contributors," which contains brief biographical notes, Gordon Zerbe, author of chapter 4, is missing. Other than that, the book is highly recommended for general reading, adult discussion groups, or as a supplemental classroom text.

The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology, by Millard Erickson (Grand Rapids: Baker) 1991. 625 pages. Hardback. \$29.95. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

The early church struggled with the question of who Jesus Christ is for almost four centuries before it reached a consensus in the Chalcedonian formula of 451 A.D. The first four ecumenical councils of the church were given over to such questions as how Jesus relates to God, how he is the savior, and how we are to understand his person. The formula adopted at Chalcedon was that the incarnate Christ is two natures in one person, and thus is fully God and fully man. Erickson's thesis is that Chalcedonian christology is still "intellectually justifiable" today, even after close to three hundred years of critical inquiry and examination. In short, Erickson states and defends what he takes to be an orthodox christology.

Erickson, who is certainly one of the most prolific Baptist theologians writing today, advances his thesis under three major headings. In the first section he lays out an evangelical christology. This section is the least problematic of the book, but it is also the least in-

teresting and helpful. Erickson's use of biblical materials is painfully proof-textish and Bible College-conventional. The chapter on second century heresies is pretty well done, however.

The second section consists of a series of essays in which Erickson reviews the major post-Enlightenment christologies. He treats separately Norman Perrin's form-critical christology, the existentialist christologies of Kierkegaard and Bultmann, liberationist christology, black christology, feminist christology, the process christologies of Norman Pittenger and John Cobb, universalistic christology, the post-modern christology of Mark C. Taylor, the mythological christology articulated in *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977, edited by John Hick), and the narrative christology of Robert Krieg. Erickson's presentations of these positions are informative and generally well done. His analyses are often somewhat limp-wristed, however, as he fails to take many of the positions to

task for their inherent reductionisms and their blatant departures from the Christ of Scripture.

While intimations and warnings of problems surface throughout the first two sections, it is not until the third that they are fully articulated. The problematic that informs the book is the alleged debate between functional and ontological christology. Erickson holds that functional christology emphasizes what Jesus did, while ontological christology concerns itself with who Jesus is. According to functionalists, biblical writers did not discuss the nature of Christ in any metaphysical or ontological sense, but were concerned solely with the question of christological relationship and function. Thus, functionalist christology denies any and all metaphysical claims regarding the person of Jesus. According to Erickson, the functionalist approach says that "Jesus is not God; he is God's tool. Jesus is God's agent and representative" (216). Naturally, "Jesus' preexistence is also rejected by the functionalist Christologists" (231). At one point, Erickson refers to the biblical theology movement as functionalist in its christology (219ff). Considering his characterization of functionalism as rejecting the deity of Christ, has he not claimed that people like Oscar Cullmann—whom he even cites here—are radically unorthodox, even heretical in their christologies?

Erickson quite rightly points out that functionalism versus ontologism is a false dilemma. Persons act according to their natures. Yet whenever a difference appears between the two approaches, Erickson invariably favors the ontological and demeans the functional. He admits that the early church thought of Jesus in terms of his "redemptive activity" rather than in terms of essence. New Testament statements about Christ are not formal and systematic; they speak of him in terms of his redemptive acts. Thus there are few ontological christological statements in the New Testament (513). Yet, Erickson contends, the functional statements about Christ presuppose an ontological basis. While no school of philosophy that reflected upon the ultimate questions concerning the nature of reality arose in either the Old Testament community of Israel or the New Testament church, biblical thinking about God and Christ proceeded from a metaphysical base.

Erickson seems to have missed the real question. He has allowed those functionalists who deny the deity of Christ to set his agenda and force him into an ontologist straight-jacket. Following James Barr's work in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Erickson holds that the Greek and Hebrew mentalities differ little. He

takes metaphysical thinking to be as characteristic of the Hebrew mind as it was of the Greek.

I believe Erickson has misconstrued the problem by viewing it as a conflict between functionalism and ontologism. The question, "who is Jesus," is not to be approached by choosing between functional-soteriological questions (what did he do) versus ontological-metaphysical questions (what is his essence). As Erickson himself points out, the one cannot be cut loose from the other. Rather, the real issue is whether the christological statements of the New Testament, and our christological thinking, are historical and relational or abstract and speculative. Quite simply, does Christ come to us in the pages of Scripture as he is in-and-of-himself, or is Scripture concerned to communicate Christ in his relation to us, the Savior who is always there for us? Erickson rightly states that there are "indications that the people of Israel saw what God did as being very closely tied to who and what he was... The psalmist praises God for what he is" (511). But this is where Erickson stops. The psalmist praises God for what he is for us, on our behalf. There is an existential import, and a personal relationship, that stands behind and gives relevance to questions of ontological status. Any thinking about the character of God that is abstracted from a covenantal, creational, and redemptive relationship is biblically questionable. Biblical writers thought historically and relationally: what has God done for us, who is he on our behalf? Such thinking does not stress essence but character.

Erickson, however, refuses to think historically. He considers history no more than the accidental "instantiations" of essences. This is made clear when he finally lays out his metaphysic in the last one hundred pages of the book. Erickson's metaphysic—his understanding of the nature of reality (513) or worldview (523)—centers on two commitments: reality is fundamentally spiritual rather than material, and reality is fundamentally personal rather than impersonal. Erickson identifies himself as a platonist (529), an objective idealist (526). "The most basic fact about reality is the spiritual...[or]...mental" (525). This is the key to his placing of the functional-ontological debate into an ahistorical framework. Functions, acts, history, are no more than accidental positivizations of concepts held in the mind of God.

Not surprisingly, as Erickson reduces reality to mind he also tends to reduce it to persons, or better, the concept of person. Personhood does not extend to sparrows or sheep, or the material universe. Only God and humans are persons. The material universe exists, but

it is no more than the occasion for the interplay between persons, between minds, between essences. "The most significant aspects of reality are persons, selves, subjects" (529). The locus of human identity "is the concept of the mind of God" (530).

This highly abstract and historically decontextualized metaphysic is necessary for Erickson to make sense of the incarnation. In order for God to become man, man must be essentially like God. There is a natural similarity, even a "genetic similarity" (548) between God and man. The Christ could not have become a dog. The "clash of levels of reality" would have been too severe. Christ became a member of that species which is qualitatively like God. Thus, there is no fundamental or categorical difference between the being of God and human beings. Christ could become a man because God is of the same order as man—both are mind. The fundamental reality of a biblical worldview, the Creator-creation distinction, is lost in Erickson's articulation of the difference between man and God as being primarily quantitative rather than qualitative.

Is God man writ large, and man God in the small? Is reality really no more than mind? Erickson plainly exhibits the problem of ontologistic thinking. It is difficult to make sense of history, to appreciate creation in all its inter-relationships, to know Jesus Christ as any more than a doctrine under such a view. Erickson admits that Nicea and Chalcedon tended toward the ontologist in their articulations of the person of Jesus Christ. They used Greek materials in their constructions: *ousia*, *persona*, *substantia*. Yet they stood far closer historically to the biblical materials than we. Is it not possible then, Erickson rhetorically asks, that they knew something we do not? It is interesting, however, that the Apostles' Creed, which in its primitive form as the Rule of Faith stands two centuries closer to the New Testament era than Chalcedon, is nowhere in sight in Erickson's christology. The Creed's understanding of Christ is thoroughly

historical; ontological, yes; but historical. It does not get into the problematics of Greek metaphysics at all. It is content to recite the mighty deeds of God in Jesus Christ and affirm Jesus as the unique Son in the process.

Erickson's wish to affirm the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ is to be appreciated. But his defense of the incarnation is ultimately self-defeating due to his own idealist metaphysic. Early in the book he pleads that he is not a docetist, even though his construction may lead some to read him that way (14. fn), yet the book is concerned only to defend an essentialist deity. This is not a problem in his eyes because the humanity of Christ is not an issue of debate. I would suggest that it is. In fact, I would contend that it is *the* issue of debate for the probable clientele of his book, the evangelical college and seminary student. The evangelical, and many Baptists in particular, have no problem believing in the deity of Christ. Their problem is in accepting the humanity of Jesus Christ. Erickson's own metaphysic shares this problem, unless humanity is reduced to mind. Over against Erickson's idealism, I would suggest that Scripture assumes that the material universe is as real, as ontologically fundamental as mind. In fact, the human mind cannot be understood as anything other than creature, as a constituent of the material universe.

To play off Erickson's own title, John 1:14 does not say that the Word became nous. It says that the Word became sarx—the bodily stuff of God's good creation. The Word became flesh not in some abstract realm of truth where only minds exist, but in history. And he did so in such a way that it was real and relevant for God's creation, kingdom, and covenant—three realities that are painfully lacking from Erickson's treatment. He dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory of the unique Son, full of grace and truth. Dwelling among us, he was seen by flesh and blood, particular human beings. Pretty material stuff. Pretty historical. Glorious.