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The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon: A Review

Bruce L. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xi + 316 pp. $39.99.

Bruce McCormack has led a distinguished career as a scholar of the theology of Karl Barth. His written work has primarily focused on sorting out what Barth meant, and he is perhaps best known today for his gradualist interpretation of Barth's doctrine of election. With this book, he turns to systematic theology; here we get McCormack's own views, not Barth's, though Barth is surely the key figure in the background. The first in a trilogy, *The Humility of the Eternal Son* explores the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ. The second will focus on the doctrine of God, and the third will address the atoning work of Christ and a revised account of penal substitution. By ordering the volumes this way, McCormack follows Barth: what we know of God is known only in the history of Jesus Christ. Theology can know nothing about God without going through that history: "Nothing will be said of the immanent life of God that does not find a firm and clear root in the economy" (p. 19). Christology then is the entry point for his systematic theology, an entry point that requires we reject all forms of "classical metaphysics" and conceptions of divine impassibility, simplicity, and related doctrines (except, interestingly, divine immutability).

McCormack proposes a Reformed kenotic Christology. "Kenosis" is the Greek term for the Son's 'self-emptying' in the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2:6-11. A kenotic Christology can take various forms, but in the modern period, especially among Lutheran theologians, it often refers to the claim that the Son empties himself of his divinity by becoming incarnate. Reformed theologians have not typically been proponents of kenotic Christology for many reasons. Crucially, McCormack holds that kenosis does not mean "depotentiation" or "divestment" of divinity as it did for some Lutherans. Rather, it refers to the eternal Son's "ontological receptivity" (p. 19, 263, *inter alia*). The Son, or the Logos, does not give up his divinity in the act of kenosis, but is

disposed to be effected by the man Jesus Christ and his human history. The electing God is always disposed for incarnation, and the second person of the Trinity therefore is disposed not only to be incarnate but to be really influenced in some way by that act.

McCormack thinks this proposal resolves several long-standing problems in ancient conciliar teaching on Christ. For him, the Definition of Faith of the Council of Chalcedon (451) is not only incomplete but requires correction (p. 14). It rests on a fundamental logical problem. The problem is generated by two "pressures." The first pressure comes from the council's commitment to a single subject of the incarnation, the Logos, and a soteriology of deification. Both of these lead to "instrumentalization" of the man Jesus Christ.[1] And such instrumentalization entails that the man Jesus is not free like we are and that he is merely a passive recipient of divine influence from the Logos. The second pressure is commitment to divine impassibility. This doctrine also entails that the man Jesus's life is instrumentalized; the Logos "acts through and even upon his human 'nature'" (p. 29). Thus, deification and impassibility are both undesirable and need to be rejected.

These two pressures lead to the fundamental logical problem with Chalcedon (although, I'll admit, I'm still not entirely sure how). And that is this: the divine Logos is the subject of the "person of the union" (p. 31). But if the Logos is the subject, so McCormack argues, then "Jesus contributes nothing to the constitution of the 'person'" (p. 31). Why? McCormack thinks it is obvious: human properties cannot be attributed to a divine and impassible Logos. He leaves this premise largely unexplained, as far as I can tell. But McCormack thinks that it's the basic problem underlying Chalcedon and the Christological tradition of the ancient Church.

In a historical chapter on the legacy of Chalcedon, McCormack argues that the Church Fathers from Origen to Cyril of Alexandria and the Chalcedonian Definition claimed that the impassible Logos is the subject of the incarnation. But in the eighth century, John of Damascus realized that human properties can't be realistically applied to an impassible Logos. He employed the notion of "composite hypostasis" gained from the sixth century thinker Leontius of Byzantium to solve the problem. On McCormack's reading, John attributes human predicates to "Christ", or "the God-human in his divine-human unity" (p. 59), and not the eternal Logos. When he is concerned with deification, John swaps out this language for the earlier Logos Christology. But

when he wants to get serious about applying human predicates to Christ, he turns to this idea of "the God-human" as the subject. But McCormack thinks that the Damascene can't have it both ways. It's best to give up on the idea of the impassible Logos and opt for the "God-human" as the subject of the Gospels.

This reading of ancient Christology leads into McCormack's constructive proposal. We must reject the divine Logos as the subject and replace it with a "composite hypostasis" composed of the eternal Logos and the human Jesus. After two chapters arguing that a "God-human in his divine-human unity" is the subject of description in the Synoptics, Paul, Hebrews, and John, and not an eternal Logos, McCormack argues, drawing on Barth, that the eternal Son is always disposed for a relation of ontological receptivity (p. 253). The Son has an "eternal determination" for incarnation, so that he makes himself ontologically receptive to the man Jesus of Nazareth's act of being (p. 252). The Logos takes "all that Jesus did and experienced … up into his own life" (p. 258). This receptivity grounds the realistic predication of human predicates to the eternal Son that we've been looking for.

If the incarnation terminates in a "hypostasis" composed of the Logos and the man Jesus, then how does McCormack think about the concept of "hypostatic union"? On his view, "hypostatic union" and "hypostasis" are neutral metaphysical terms, unlike "nature" and "substance." Hypostasis refers to a concrete existent. It is like the term "existence", which is not a predicate that adds a feature to a thing, and thus it is metaphysically neutral (p. 255). McCormack still thinks "hypostasis" belongs to the language of classical metaphysics he is concerned to reject everywhere else, but he thinks we can keep this term precisely because of this neutrality (see p. 282). "Nature" and "substance", however, must be rejected.

What should Reformed catholics make of this proposal, especially those of us who think that the coherence of our faith with the faith of the ancient Church is not only highly desirable but indispensable? McCormack has no time for Reformed catholics, "who are often more 'catholic' than the Catholics" (p. 273). We treat conciliar creeds and definitions as "irreformable" (p. 293), and anyone who does that has forsaken Protestant identity. I object to this claim about Reformed theological identity that really proceeds without an argument. I think that there is a

good Reformed argument for the irreformability of the teaching on God and Christ of the seven ecumenical councils, but I'll leave that aside for now.

For the sake of argument, however, suppose that we reject the Chalcedonian Definition and compare McCormack's proposal to the grammar of Scripture alone. For McCormack, two options are in play: (1) we can hold that the eternal Logos becomes incarnate, or (2) the man Jesus is united to the Logos so that the Logos exists in an ontologically receptive relation with him. But if we go with McCormack's proposal, (2), then we are faced with a problem of coherence with the way the Bible speaks about Christ. Scripture regularly predicates divine things of the human being Jesus. For example, Paul says that the man Jesus is "God, blessed forever" (Rom. 9:5). It also assigns human predicates, including actions and sufferings, to God. In a standard example in the tradition, "the Lord of glory was crucified" (1 Cor. 2:8). Scripture insists in these sentences that the Logos and the man Jesus are really one and the same person: the same subject receives divine and human predicates. I suggest that this biblical way of speaking is one reason that the Church's teaching on Christ at Chalcedon went the way it did. With Cyril, the Council Fathers at Chalcedon profess faith in "one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son."[2] "One and the same" is Cyril's language, and it is language of numerical identity: subject *a* is one and the same as subject *b* if and only if subject *a* is identical to subject *b*. In this statement, Chalcedon equates Jesus and the Logos: they are the same person. It also distinguishes the two natures, or kinds, in which this person exists, and this distinction is "never abolished" in Christ.

It is this biblical way of speaking that Cyril and Chalcedon try to unpack that McCormack's proposal cannot explain. If the hypostatic union consists in the eternal Son's receptive relation to the man Jesus, then we do not have one hypostasis, or concrete existence, but two: we can count Jesus and the Logos. This account of the union cannot underlie the predication of human attributes to the Logos, or divine attributes to Jesus, as Scripture does. It would make no sense to say that "the Lord of glory was crucified"; we would be limited to saying "the man Jesus is crucified." The Logos may be affected by Jesus's death, but the Logos is not the subject of that death.

And it will not do to say, as McCormack does, that the "God-human in his divine human unity" is the subject of this death. He claims that the "God-human" is one complex hypostasis composed of Jesus and the Logos (p. 282). He regularly speaks of a distinct Jesus from the eternal Logos after the union. At a basic level, however, this violates the law of identity: two hypostases can't be a single hypostasis. And when there are two 'things', we can't apply the predicates of one subject to another one. But as we saw, Scripture does just this; therefore, the Logos and Jesus must be the same person.

Reformed catholics will do better to go with the wisdom of the ancient Church and say that the subject of the incarnation is God himself, the eternal Son, the Logos: "The Word (*logos*) became flesh and dwelled among us" (John 1:14). The solution to the problems in this book is a long and steady training in the refined language of the tradition, especially the distinction of concrete and abstract terms (how language for persons and natures work) as well as reduplicative propositions as they appear in medieval theologians like Aquinas.[3] These refined ways of speaking about the incarnation go back to the ancient teaching of the Church which is, I would suggest, firmly rooted in Scripture. The coherence of our speech about Christ with Scripture is really what we need to seek in the end; it is a shame, therefore, that this book cannot offer us what we need.

References

1 This is how McCormack describes "instrumentalization." Orthodox patristic theologians like John Damascene and Thomas Aquinas after him do not think that the man Jesus Christ is an instrument; that was Nestorius's language. They think that Christ's human nature was the instrument of his divinity, which is a different claim. On this ancient doctrine see my article "The Flesh of the Logos, *Instrumentum divinitatis*: Retrieving an Ancient Christological Doctrine", *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 23, no. 3 (2021): 313-332.

2 Council of Chalcedon, "Definition of Faith", in Henrich Denzinger, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. Peter Hünermann (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), §302.

3 See my article "Tools for Interpreting Christ's Saving Mysteries in Scripture: Aquinas on Reduplicative Propositions in Christology", *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73 (2020): 285-94.