



Exploring Christology and Atonement: Conversations with John McLeod Campbell, H. R. Mackintosh and T. F. Torrance

Available September 2015

\$30, 272 pages, paperback

978-0-8308-4077-9

Who is the incarnate Savior of the world?

Consideration of the relation between Christology and the atonement means first of all that we begin with the incarnation, with who was born of Mary, and not with discussion of so-called eternal decrees of God, with the divine reign or covenant of law, or with a predetermined set of assumptions concerning God's holiness and righteousness, for example. The question "Who is the incarnate Savior of the world?" immediately and rapidly takes us away from consideration of any form of abstract philosophical theism, as well as from a speculative account of human nature as a kind of "something" that the Son adopted as his own. This operating question opens up the doctrine of God in view of Jesus Christ in a manner that allows light to shine on the understanding of the atonement, and it also invites us into critical reflection on the doctrine of the two natures of Christ in traditional doctrine. In other words, the primary concern for our understanding of the atonement is the doctrine of God that arises out of the incarnation, out of God's actual saving event that gives content to who God is as the God who saves in, through and as the man Jesus of Nazareth.

The basic *fact* of Christian theology is the person of Jesus Christ, God with us, the incarnate, crucified and risen Lord who in his ascension reigns over all things and who will come again. According to Luther, "To this man thou shalt point and say, Here is God." And again, "I have no God, whether in heaven or in earth, and I know of none outside the flesh that lies in the bosom of the Virgin Mary. For elsewhere God is utterly incomprehensible, but comprehensible in the flesh of Christ alone." And from Calvin, "God is comprehended in Christ alone." Or again, more directly relating to the atonement, "If, then, we would be assured that God is pleased with and kindly disposed toward us, we must fix our eyes and minds on Christ alone." And from Barth, "We start out from the fact that through His Word God is actually known and will be known again." And again, "Christology . . . is the touchstone of all knowledge of God, in the Christian sense, the touchstone of all theology."

In Christian faith everything depends on knowing who Jesus Christ is, on what it means that he is confessed as Lord and Savior. If we go astray right here at the beginning by asking the wrong question, we will never grasp the radical heart and significance of the gospel. Christianity's central doctrine – Jesus is Lord! – is given as the answer to the question "Who is the incarnate Savior of the world?" Biblically, this question comes in a number of forms. John the Baptizer asks, "Are you the one who is to come?" To this Matthew has Jesus immediately reply, "Go and tell John what you hear and see" (Mt 11:3-4). This question is set in terms of the inauguration of the reign of God in and as Jesus. Then there is Jesus' question "Who do you say that I am?" (Mt 16:15), in which the messianic categories are transformed. Finally, Saul of Tarsus asks, "Who are you, Lord?" (Acts 9:5). The struggle behind these questions is the birthing of the movement from Jesus who preached to Jesus who is preached. Here is the origin of Christology.

– Adapted from chapter one, "Christology"

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