

A PERSONAL CREDO: SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY FOR YOUNG INTELLECTUALS

[...]

The problem confronting young minds today is that life seems hopeless. Innately, they may feel purpose or morals inside themselves, but these cannot be deduced or affirmed by human resources. And so, they are left with the futility of existence. I believe, though, that Christianity can answer this problem and utilize human reason to do so. Some of the most direct understanding of this problem comes in Christianity's anthropology, but the final solution is not reached until the end—in its eschatology. To begin, though, we turn to that in Christianity which is closest to us and knows this problem most intimately: Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

CHRISTOLOGY

I believe that Christ is both fully God and fully man. The existence of such a being tells us two things: first, God in his divinity has chosen to know us in our humanity, and second, these two natures are not entirely exclusive. As God the Son, Christ existed before creation and outside of time; his spirit existed before the incarnation (Colossians 1:15-8). But in these last days, the Son has taken on flesh—2000 years ago in the town of Bethlehem—taking on a human mind and human body (Philippians 2:7-8). As a human, he did nothing miraculous by his own ability (John 5:19-21).

Christ's humanity is essential to understanding his work, which will be discussed in detail below. For now it is important to appreciate that Jesus was tempted in every way that we are

(Hebrews 4:15). Although he was God in his very nature, he did not have a special advantage that allowed him not to sin. In fact, we understand that Christ had two natures—divine and mortal—and two wills corresponding to those natures, but as a single *hypostasis*—one person—he continuously aligned his human will to his divine will and acted accordingly.¹

Despite his humanity, Jesus Christ remained perfect. He did this by reliance on the Father and on the Spirit. Through their guidance, he consistently chose to live righteously; through their power, he did many miraculous signs; and through their fortitude, he was able to accept the cross and align his will with the Father's.

THEOLOGY PROPER

I believe in the Holy Trinity and in its three members, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Trinity is a human term for a divine phenomenon: 3 persons with 1 nature.² Nothing in creation is entirely like the Trinity, and so this distinctly Christian concept is hard to grasp and is often relegated to Sacred Mystery. The Trinity moves beyond monotheism, containing three distinct persons, but by rejecting tritheism's anthropomorphic jealousy and discord on account of its members' shared godly nature, the Trinity does not achieve the tritheistic heresy.³

The doctrine of the Trinity is also concerned with its three persons' ontological relationship—their existence together—through *perichoresis*. Through the process of perichoresis, the three persons of the Trinity indwell within each other, sharing an unparalleled

¹ “Chalcedonian Definition of the Christian Faith,” *The Christian Theology Reader*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2011).

² “Athanasian Creed,” *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, ed. John H. Leith (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982).

³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: the Doctrine of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 129-144.

intimacy with each other. Their hypostases are discrete, but their nature and relationship make them one.⁴

In the Trinity, the three members have distinct economic roles. We are most familiar with the Father and his work since he is the executive force. He is the will of the Godhead, directing creation and eventually designing the atoning work of Christ. Though the members of the Trinity are ontologically equal and coeternal, the Father holds a managerial role within it. This does not off-balance the Godhead, since in all of his decision-making, the Father lovingly looks to the Son's best interest and the Son humbly submits—the Spirit embodying the love between them.⁵ Part of the economic roles of the Son and Spirit are, in short, atonement for creation and indwelling in creation—but these will be discussed more below.

The Trinity, having one nature, has a particular set of characteristics. These characteristics can be divided up into the traits God has in the incarnate Christ (indispensable) and the additional traits he has in his heavenly state as the Father (dispensable)—or his “good” and “eternal” attributes, respectively.⁶ The characteristics of goodness would be God's holiness and compassion, the character traits that set the standard for human living (I John 3:16). God's eternal traits would be the classical conceptions of omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence.⁷ The former set of attributes is of priority for us since it represents the core of God's nature and the moral standard for which humanity strives.

⁴ Moltmann, 169.

⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 102.

⁶ Grenz, 90.

⁷ Grenz, 92-3.

Though it is only a penultimate concern of this essay, it seems relevant at this point to address theological apologetics. It has been suggested that the human mind, its sense of morality, and its ability to even recognize a problem of hopelessness suggest a greater, metaphysical reality that is reflected in humanity.⁸ In the same fashion, it has been suggested that the physical world's existence requires a pre-existent creator.⁹ Either method of apology begins its reasoning for the "Unmoved Mover" with the physical world.

COSMOLOGY & ANTHROPOLOGY

I believe that God created the cosmos and humanity as an extension of himself and an outflowing of his love. The means of this creation, whether theistic evolution or six days of proclamation, is not as important as the result: "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).¹⁰ Everything he did, he did in an orderly manner, so that the universe operates by certain rules, sustained by him but running itself. As an extension of this, miracles are not commonplace in God's creation, except at special times in his redemptive plan (particularly in the life of Moses, Elijah and Elisha, and Jesus and the Church). Instead, God typically opts to operate through providence.¹¹

Mankind is the magnum opus of God's creation. This is because man has been created in the image of God—the *Imago Dei* (Genesis 1:26-7). Being made in the *Imago Dei* means that "we mirror for the sake of creation the nature of the Creator."¹² We imitate God's good and

⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 3-30.

⁹ Aquinas, I.2.iii.

¹⁰ This and future quotes are from the ESV.

¹¹ For a scientific examination of how God might do that and a theological discourse as to why, see J. C. Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos & Christianity: Questions to Science and Religion* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

¹² Grenz, 177.

indispensable characteristics and exercise dominion over (i.e. compassion for) his creation.

Another part of having the divine impression within us has been the universal longing for God that we see in the religions of the world.¹³

Originally, God dwelt with humanity and walked daily with his children (Genesis 3:8). All people gathered to him, and he led us. Our faith was in him. This is the way that the cosmos and humanity were created to be—but mankind sinned, and creation was corrupted.

HAMARTIOLOGY & SOTERIOLOGY

I believe that mankind has separated itself from God through sin, but by his grace, Christ has redeemed us and erased the gap between God and man. This gap originated in humanity's state of sin brought on by the Fall. The Fall, described in Genesis 3, is an archetypal event prevailing over all mankind since every individual sins.¹⁴ We sin when we decide to defy and reject God and live life by our own terms, living by sight and by the flesh, instead of allowing God to take us by the hand.¹⁵ By these choices, the Imago Dei has been badly distorted—we are no longer the unblemished reflection of the Lord we were designed to be. And as further consequence for our choice, death, suffering,¹⁶ and God's righteous indignation¹⁷ have ensued (Romans 2:6-11).

¹³ Alan Watts's *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon, 1957) is an exploration of eastern religion for a western audience. Works such as this have become increasingly popular for young intellectuals in the west and show an obvious interest in religions outside of Christianity that maintain similar or liberal beliefs (e.g. peacefulness).

¹⁴ A historical event for the Fall is understandable/acceptable as well, especially in light of natural evil and the fallen state of creation.

¹⁵ "Eastern Orthodox Catechism," adopted from *The Mystery of Faith* by Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, *Russian Orthodox Church*, n. d., accessed May 5, 2015.

¹⁶ A part of that suffering is a longing to be reconnected with the giver of life as well as a general depression. An abundance of this depression, as noted in the introduction, can be seen in modern popular culture.

¹⁷ God's wrath is an unpopular subject in modern culture—and for good reason. Fierce anger seems to be incompatible with certain understandings of divine compassion. However, knowing the rest of the story, we know that God still lavishes grace on us, and so this anger cannot contain hate but rather deep concern.

Now mankind is defined by the nature of the flesh. While we are not imputed with guilt from previous generations (Ezekiel 18:20), we have been imputed with a sinful tendency—evil allures us, catering to our immediate and selfish gains.¹⁸ And so, due to our own limitations and unwillingness to depend on God’s limitlessness, we retain the ability to act righteously but assuredly choose to sin.¹⁹

In order to help us—as an act of grace—God gave us the law (Galatians 3:19-24). This law described how God intended his people to live. If we could live in the manner put forth by the law, we could erase the gap between God and us. In addition, the law also provided us with a way that we could communicate with God and present ourselves as pure before him despite our imperfection and inability to dwell with him—this was done by sacrifices. Sacrifices were an accommodation to human custom, as the blood of animals does not really please God, but he accepted them by grace (Hebrews 10:4). Sacrifices thus depend on God’s mercy yet satisfy his justice—a compensation (suitable as the lifeblood of animals in exchange for our own) for defiance against him. Lastly, the law prepared us for the second phase of God’s redemptive plan for humanity—Christ (Galatians 3:24). Sadly, no one could live up to the standard of the law by their own merit and living by the flesh (Romans 3:9-20).

¹⁸ The work of Enlightenment thinkers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke on this subject has been particularly interesting. I see biblical merit to Hobbes’s view on human nature—people look to their own interest and to immediate satisfaction—over Locke’s—people are born *tabula rasa*. However, I tend to agree more with Locke’s conclusions over Hobbes’s—without the state, people would be in constant strife. My optimistic view derives from my faith in heightened ethics in a community. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1914); John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (New York, Dover Publications, 1959).

¹⁹ In the legacy of men like David Hume and B. F. Skinner, the idea of free will is often rejected in modern circles. Polkinghorne’s *Quarks, Chaos & Christianity* offers some insightful critiques of this radical behaviorism, suggesting that there are strong influences in our decision-making, but decision-making is too complex to be deterministic.

But Jesus Christ, the Son of God, took on flesh. He was tempted just as we are tempted and subjected himself to the law (Galatians 4:4). He, unlike us, perfectly lived out God's intention described in the law, and he gained the communion with God that man had been unable to attain. But so that his life might have universal import, Christ became the ultimate sacrifice according to the law and died that this connection might be for all (Galatians 4:5). Like sacrifices of the past, Jesus's death satisfied God's justness but also exemplified the grace of the Godhead since the sacrifice was provided for us.²⁰ In another way, Christ's death was the natural result of living a perfect life in a fallen world (Matthew 5:12); however, the natural consequence of being totally justified before God is that the Father's glory would restore one from death, and thus Christ was raised (Philippians 2:8-11).

Christ's blood was poured out for all of us—blood for blood—a fair restitution for our sin, but one that left neither party, God nor humanity, at a loss. Moreover, the work of Christ called us to repentance (Romans 2:4) and to restore our reliance on God through faith (Romans 5:2).²¹ If we do this, God indwells with us and in us, and we have access to him. In addition, we are no longer under the law, our trespasses no longer being amplified by our legal guilt (Galatians 5:18). In this way we are sanctified to eventually be glorified in the same way Christ was glorified (Romans 8:30).

It is worth noting that Christ's solution to the problem facing humanity and the proof of his bodily resurrection provide the best apologies for the faith.²² Christ is central not only to the

²⁰ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus homo?* n. p., I.xi-xii.

²¹ This seems to support the classic moral-influence atonement theory, as popularized by Peter Abelard.

²² Peter Kreeft, "The Resurrection," in *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, ed. Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 175-98.

salvation story and humanity's connection to the divine, but he is also central to a logical defense of Christianity.

PNEUMATOLOGY

I believe that God continues to redeem us and guide us through the third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit. Everyone, all creation, is influenced by the work of the Spirit. Since God loves his created people, he convicts and calls all of us to return to him (John 16:8). For those who choose to return, committing their lives in baptism,²³ the Spirit indwells within them and grants to them his power (Acts 2:38).

One of the primary tasks of the Spirit in the believer is to conform them to God's will, making the believer more like God in his indispensable qualities. In this way, Christians who live by the Spirit are converging on a likeness to Christ (Galatians 5:16-26), though we are never perfected until after death. Another role of the Spirit is to guide us indirectly (or less directly compared to indwelling) through Scripture. He first does this by inspiring the Scriptures. Inspiration involves giving the writers enhanced recall, *amplifying* their skills, and perfecting their theology (II Timothy 3:16-7). On the other side, the Spirit illuminates the text for believers (a natural phenomenon rather than mystical), giving them an increased appreciation of the text.²⁴

In addition to tasks done with the other members of the Trinity like atonement, the Spirit has countless other duties he performs particularly for the Church. For instance, the Spirit intercedes on our behalf in prayer and helps know what to pray for (Romans 8:26). In addition,

²³ I affirm baptism of the Holy Spirit for believing adults as practiced in many congregations of Restoration Movement. This baptism was previously described by the Anabaptists; see "The Schleithem Confession," (Crockett, KY: Rod and Staff Publishers, 1985).

²⁴ Byron C. Lambert, "The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Douglas Foster (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 404.

the Spirit maintains unity in the church, despite our constant fissures (Ephesians 4:1-6).²⁵ In every way, the Spirit is intimately involved with God's church, giving it life and sustaining it.

ECCLESIOLOGY

I believe that the church is God's Kingdom on the earth, shining his light and doing his will. This of course leads to the question, is the world any better off because of this kingdom? Yes, it certainly is. In the same way that the Spirit is converging Christians on perfection, so the Church with the Spirit's help is leading the world back to its original state of perfection (Luke 4:18-9), though, again, this goal will not be reached until Christ returns.

The Church is established on the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. We remember this by two sacraments: baptism, which we participate in once, and the Eucharist, which we partake in every Sunday.²⁶ In these sacraments, we also see a form of Sacred Tradition—an institution that the Church shares, stretching back to its conception. Tradition derives its authority from the community of faith that seeks to sustain the church as the world progresses.²⁷ Because Tradition is derivative of the community—i.e. human decision-making—it is subordinate to Scripture, which is the word of God.²⁸

The Church should desire to live ethically in this alien world. Our ethics, of course, derive from Scripture, but where Scripture is open, an ethical system seems appropriate. The main ethical systems—consequentialism, deontological ethics, virtue ethics, and pragmatic

²⁵ This belief is at the heart of the Restoration Movement. Campbell adamantly fought against creeds and denominationalism seeing them as destroying the unity of the Spirit, prayed for by the Savior; see Alexander Campbell, "Creeds Operate Against Christ (A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things)," no. 3., n. p. 1824.

²⁶ Grenz, 531.

²⁷ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001), 92-4.

²⁸ Stone, et al, *Last Will and Testament of The Springfield Presbytery*, n. p., 1804.

ethics—all seem to capture some level of truth, and it is hard to distinguish which is a purely “biblical” ethic. Virtue ethics, however, seem to align most with Scripture, particularly with Paul’s “fruit of the Spirit.” Virtue ethics can be understood as a constant effort to submit one’s will to the Spirit and let him lead.²⁹

The Church’s main responsibility is to act as a new *Imago Dei*, reflecting the Lord to his creation. We prepare the world until God decides to return.

ESCHATOLOGY

I believe that Christ will return and usher in his Kingdom, reconciling all things and restoring his creation, and the final result will be a Heaven and Hell. I cannot say with certainty what these will be like. Heaven may be the earth set right, or it may be another realm of existence. Regardless, I know that it will be with God (Isaiah 66:1). God’s people, those reconciled to him, will be glorified. This glorification will be a deification in which God strips away all of our limitations in the process of *theosis*.³⁰ Scripture seems to suggest that Heaven will maintain some degree of physicality—that creation will be made new (Revelation 21:1)—but it is impossible to know what that will look like, besides to look at the resurrected Christ.

Hell is just as hard to predict what it will be like, though it will certainly be away from God (II Thessalonians 1:9). In light of God’s characteristics—his justness and his compassion—the models for hell that seem most reasonable are annihilationism, which holds that those not reconciled will not be tormented but will be erased,³¹ and C. S. Lewis’s conception of hell put

²⁹ Kantian ethics also show promise because of their commitment to moral law—they are immutable as God is immutable. Pacifism is an example of a Christian ethic that is rooted in the idea of radical immutability—i.e. there is never a need for violence. Anabaptists affirmed pacifism of this sort; see “Schleitheim Confession.”

³⁰ “Eastern Orthodox Catechism.”

³¹ For an examination of the doctrine of annihilationism by a Church of Christ scholar, see Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

forth in *The Great Divorce*, which holds that hell is self-inflicted selfishness, loneliness, and fading from existence, and that the option always remains to turn back to God.³² This latter conception of hell has very little biblical support but sits best with the understanding of God put forth in this essay—particularly the ability to repent even after death, since a time for death seems so arbitrary and unjust. Furthermore, I think that there is a “reasonable hope” that hell is empty (or eventually will be).³³ With Lewis’s understanding of hell, it seems psychologically unlikely that anyone would not eventually choose to join with God. This also helps our understanding of cosmology and why God would make us (especially out of love) if he knew so many of us would end up separated from him; God had in mind the eternal and eventual redemption of his creation, and so our temporal fall was inconsequential (Romans 8:18).

CONCLUSION

Christian theology is in constant conversation with the philosophy of this world, listening to what it has to say and positing its own suggestions. But ultimately, Christianity identifies the problems of this world and offers a solution: participation in Christ’s death and subsequent life in him. Young intellectuals have rejected Christianity’s answers to their problem because they don’t think the answer is logical, or they don’t think the answer “feels” right. But I believe that there is no answer other than Christ.

³² C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946).

³³ Richard Beck, “Hell Exists But Is Emptied,” *Experimental Theology*, April 14, 2015, accessed May 5, 2015.