

BOOK REVIEW

E. Jerome Van Keiken, *Christ's Humanity in Current and Ancient Controversy: Fallen or Not?*

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The doctrine of the vicarious humanity of Christ was a key one for T. F. Torrance. In one of his earlier publications, *The School of Faith*, he writes in his Introduction to the catechisms of the Reformed Church of "the sanctification of human nature through union in Christ with his divine nature." He explains: "That concerns the reconciling and sanctifying work carried on throughout the whole course of his human and historical life, but it also concerns the union wrought in the assumption of our fallen and estranged humanity which he sanctified in the very act of assuming it."¹ Surprisingly in the light of this very clear statement, Torrance has been attacked for compromising the sinlessness of Christ by teaching that he assumed our fallen humanity. This is part of a wider dispute which has persisted for decades.

This new work by E. Jerome Van Kuiken, based on his doctoral thesis at the University of Manchester, will therefore be welcomed by readers of *Participatio*. Van Kuiken addresses the question posed in his title and provides the most comprehensive and judicious examination of this lengthy debate which has been published. Was the humanity of Christ 'fallen' human nature, or not? This comprehensive scholarly work puts Torrance's contribution in perspective and clarifies the issues. It is perhaps too hopeful to say that it will end the dispute, but if those criticizing T. F. Torrance read this carefully, it really ought to!

Van Kuiken examines five theologians from the modern era whom he identifies as advocates of the "fallenness" of Christ's human nature: Edward Irving, Karl Barth, Thomas F. Torrance, Colin Gunton, and Thomas Weinandy. He then examines five who advocate the view that Christ's humanity was "unfallen": Marcus Dods (the elder), A.B. Bruce, H.R. Mackintosh, Philip E. Hughes, and Donald Macleod. He notes the strong Scottish flavour in this debate. In the first

1 T.F. Torrance, *The School of Faith* (London: James Clarke, 1959), lxxxv.



group, Irving and Torrance were Scots, and even more strongly in the second group, all except Philip E. Hughes were Scottish. Is there a particularly Scottish context to this debate, and if so, what is it?

Van Kuiken then turns to the Fathers to adjudicate the dispute and, interestingly, studies not only five Greek Fathers (to whom Torrance was wont to appeal), but also five Latin Fathers. The Greek five are Irenaeus, Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory Nyssen, and Cyril of Alexandria. The five Latin fathers are Tertullian, Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose, Augustine, and Leo the Great. With the exception of Hilary, those were not usually championed by Torrance and indeed came under suspicion of losing the 'vicarious humanity' of Christ. The final chapter of the book tries to adjudicate the dispute with judicious fairness to both sides, drawing on the Fathers in order to come to some conclusion on whether the 'fallenness' or 'unfallenness' theologians were right.

To this reviewer, one of the clearest conclusions coming out of this work of first-class scholarship is that the perpetuation of this dispute is largely due to the distorting effect of the Christology of Edward Irving. The 'blinded eagle' as Harry Whitley called him,² was assistant to the great Thomas Chalmers, leader of the Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland, before his eloquence took him to fame as the minister of the Caledonian Church in London. His meteoric career ran into opposition when he advocated the view that the gifts of tongues and prophecy had not ceased but should be exercised today, and published views on Christology which led to his dismissal for heresy from the ministry of the Church of Scotland. Van Kuiken gives a clear exposition of Irving's sometimes confusing Christology (14-19). According to Irving, Christ remained sinless in his divine Person, but his assumption of human flesh meant that the human nature he assumed *remained* sinful, being sanctified, *not* by union with the divine Son, but throughout his earthly life by the Spirit. Van Kuiken identifies Irving's 'three kinds of sin': *original sin*, which the Son did not assume, *constitutional sin*, the sinful substance of human nature, which he did assume, but which did not result in *actual sin* because of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. His conclusion is that Irving's teaching that Christ's humanity bears constitutional sin, including concupiscence, has no patristic grounding. Irving gathered patristic proof texts, but according to Van Kuiken, he "interpreted these texts under the belief that the attributes of fallenness are indivisible and infirmities imply sinful concupiscence even in Christ's case" (156). In other words, Irving assumed that when the Fathers allude to the fallen humanity of Christ, this not only implied that he took mortal, decaying flesh with all its infirmities, but that he took flesh that was actually sinful and remained sinful.

2 H.C. Whitley, *Blinded Eagle* (London: SCM, 1955).

The second conclusion which comes from Van Kuiken's work is that the strong Scottish reaction against Irving explains why four of the five 'unfallenness' theologians he selects are Scottish. The strong tradition of Scottish Calvinism rejected altogether the notion that Christ assumed our fallen, sinful humanity since they assumed that his compromised his sinlessness. Thomas Chalmers led the Evangelicals out of the Kirk in 1843 in the great Disruption to form the Free Church of Scotland, and Marcus Dods and A.B. Bruce were part of that Evangelical, Calvinist Free Church tradition. H. R. Mackintosh (who was of course, T. F. Torrance's beloved teacher) stood in that Free Church tradition too, although he was not a traditional Calvinist. Donald Macleod represents that tradition today, still embodied in the continuing Free Church of Scotland which took no part in the reunions of 1900 and 1929 forming the present united Church of Scotland. The Christology of that whole Calvinist tradition is marked by the reaction against Irving. What Van Kuiken's analysis makes clear is that it was from one point of agreement that their disagreement stemmed. They shared with Irving the assumption that "fallenness" was identical with "sinfulness" and that therefore, assuming our 'fallen humanity' must mean that the human nature of Christ must remain "sinful" throughout his life. If that assumption were true, then in order to safeguard the sinlessness of Christ, one would have to assume that Christ did not assume fallen humanity. But what Van Kuiken's analysis makes clear that it is precisely that assumed equation which has to be questioned. The whole point is that by taking that fallen humanity, the Son of God sanctified it from conception. While the humanity of Christ remained "fallen" in the sense that it was mortal – ontologically fallen – until raised immortal in the resurrection body, it was not sinful. From conception and by the work of the Holy Spirit throughout his life, he sanctified in such a way that he was without sin.

The third conclusion which is clear in Van Kuiken's scholarly examination is that the fathers, east and west, had a different doctrine from Irving. At the level of terminology, the five Greek fathers may not always appear to be entirely consistent in their occasional use of terms such as 'fallen' or 'sinful'. But at the conceptual level, Van Kuiken argues that the conclusion is clear: "The fathers view the Logos as taking a human nature which otherwise exists in a state of captivity to sin and mortality. In the virginal conception, he heals and hallows it so that it is freed from domination by Satan and death, from sinful passions, and, for those fathers who believe in it, from original guilt" (126). Similarly, while the five Latin Fathers never use the explicit terminology to say that the Son assumed a "fallen" or "sinful" humanity, they agree that "in salvific solidarity

with guilty humanity, he suffers from various effects of the Fall, including bodily torment and death." And at the conceptual level, they teach like the Greeks, "that in the virginal conception, God's Son breaks the hold of sin upon human nature so that his own humanity, like unfallen Adam's, is unblemished by sin, uncontrolled by Satan, and under no debt to die" (154).

In his final chapter, Van Kuiken examines the language and logic of the dispute. He notes that in addition to Irving's misinterpretation of the fathers, Barth criticizes them for the opposite reason, namely that they fail to teach that Christ assumed fallen humanity! Barth cites Irving with approval, but doesn't realize that he differs from him. Torrance and Gunton are more accurate on the teaching of the fathers, although only Torrance documents that extensively. And even then, he tends to accuse the Latin fathers of producing the "Latin heresy" of an unfallen humanity, when, according to Van Kuiken, they were actually in accord with the Greeks. Weinandy is more accurate on the consensus between east and west.

Van Kuiken then examines the categories used in the dispute and agrees with those who do not think that the fallenness-versus-unfallenness taxonomy is adequate. He examines a more sophisticated but still inadequate taxonomy suggested by Stephen Sykes and after modifying it, he comes to the conclusion that actually the twenty theologians covered in his study are largely in agreement! Firstly, they agree that "prior to Christ's conception, the human nature which he was to assume existed in Mary in a state of original sin, broadly defined, and of subjection to all the effects of the Fall" (165). Weinandy differs from the fathers and the Protestants because he holds the modern Roman Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Secondly, they agree that "at the time of Christ's conception, his humanity was transformed," and use either the language of purification or new creation to talk about that (165). Weinandy is again an exception for the same reason, but Irving is also an exception here, since in his view there was no transformation at conception. Thirdly, all agree that "throughout Christ's earthly life, his humanity suffered the Fall's amoral weaknesses but not its moral corruption," but once again, the exception is Irving (166). Finally, all agree that "Christ's humanity was free from original sin and guilty propensities from at least the moment of his conception (or from the moment of his mother's conception in Weinandy's case)" (166). Once again, the exception is Irving who "deviates radically from the consensus."

Van Kuiken's conclusion is clear: "The association of [Irving's] name with other fallenness theologians, whether done by themselves or their opponents, serves as a red herring regarding the fundamental differences between him and

them." He concludes by examining the terminology of "assumption", "fallen" and "unfallen". To say that Christ "assumed" sinful flesh is misleading unless it is made clear that it ceased to be "sinful" upon assumption. The terms "fallen" and "unfallen" are potentially misleading since they can refer to both the ontological state and whether the humanity was sinful, or they may refer only to the first of these. The result is what Donald Baillie called a terminological fog. The book concludes by looking briefly at the implications for all this for hamartiology and for our understanding of sanctification. The final word is an apposite quotation from what has been called 'the metrical theology' of Charles Wesley.

Returning to Van Kuiken's particular treatment of T. F. Torrance, it seems unbelievable in view of the evidence he produces that some commentators have identified Torrance's views with those of Irving and accused him of compromising the sinlessness of Christ. In his early Auburn Seminary lectures, he certainly uses "the lush language of fallenness" (33), but he clearly distinguishes his view from Irving's and embraces H. R. Mackintosh's distinction between "corruptible" (subject to physical death) and "corrupt" (morally depraved). In his later New College lectures, published as *Incarnation*, Van Kuiken judges that he is crystal clear that the Son assumed fallen, sinful flesh, yet in so doing fully sanctified it. Perhaps we may add that there are passages in Torrance where he does not sufficiently take account of the danger of misinterpretation and does not fully make clear that assuming fallen humanity does not mean that his humanity was sinful. Perhaps he did not always guard against that misunderstanding. But Van Kuiken also quotes Torrance's clearest statement of his doctrine in a letter to the editor of *The Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland* (Donald Macleod), provoked by his bracketing of Irving and Barth together. The problem lay in Macleod's question, "Did Christ HAVE a fallen human nature?" That static way of thinking must give way to a dynamic account that "in the very act of taking our fallen Adamic nature the Son of God redeemed, renewed and sanctified it AT THE SAME TIME . . . The only nature which our Lord HAD, therefore, was utterly pure and sinless" (37).

Jerome Van Kuiken has provided us with what must be the definitive study of this question. His meticulous scholarship is evident in the thick and exhaustive footnotes. His clear analysis of the logic of the dispute clears away the "terminological fog." This is a book which is not only essential reading for Torrance scholars, but a fair-minded and eirenic settlement of the question which brings the two sides together. There is surely no longer any excuse for perpetuating this dispute further.

T. A. Noble