

Fallenness and *anhypostasis*: a way forward in the debate over Christ's humanity

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Abstract

The doctrine of the incarnation suggests that Christ is necessarily *like us* in some respects, and also *unlike us* in others. One long-standing debate in modern christology concerns whether Jesus' human nature ought to be regarded as 'fallen' – as conditioned by the effects of the Fall – despite the fact that he himself remained without sin (Heb 4:15). Is fallenness a condition which is necessary in order for Christ to sympathise with human beings, to represent them, and so to reconcile them to God? Is fallenness logically separable from sinfulness? Recent literature has suggested an increasing intractability on both sides of this debate. This article seeks to bring clarity to the question of the fallenness of Christ's human nature by identifying areas of common ground between advocates and opponents of this position. It engages the work of representatives from both sides – Oliver Crisp in opposition and Karl Barth in support – in order to determine the different ways in which they approach the matter of Jesus' fallenness and impeccability, and to locate points of potential consensus. Crisp argues that fallenness cannot be detached from sin and guilt – i.e. Augustine's notion of both original sin and original corruption, in which sin is an inevitability. Barth, on the other hand, is critical of the Augustinian view and takes as his point of departure Jesus' unity and sympathy with fallen creatures. Yet the fallenness of Jesus' humanity does not mean that sin was a real possibility for him.

In this article the christological doctrine of *anhypostasis* – a way of speaking exclusively of human nature apart from its hypostatic union with God the Son – is suggested as the primary way forward. Advocates of the fallenness position seem to have this qualifier in mind when describing Jesus' human nature as 'fallen': it is true of the assumed nature only when considered in itself, apart from the hypostatic union. There are logical and historical grounds for opponents to accept fallenness strictly on these terms, as well. Beyond this, I argue that *anhypostatic* fallenness should be acceptable to both sides because it is never without a corresponding sanctification of Jesus' human nature by its encounter with God. Though Jesus' humanity was conditioned by the fall, by virtue of the *communicatio gratiarum* it was not left in a state of peccability.

Keywords: Christology, fallenness, humanity, impeccability, Karl Barth, Oliver Crisp, sin, two natures.

The question of whether Jesus' human nature was fallen (like ours) or unfallen (like Adam's original nature) remains a matter of serious debate, as evidenced by recent literature.¹ Both sides seek to articulate their position in keeping with Hebrews 4:15, which affirms two things: (1) that Jesus Christ 'in every respect has been tempted as we are', except (2) that he was 'without sin'. The gospel narratives contribute to this portrait of a Saviour who endured temptations which were utterly real to him: three temptations by Satan after forty days of fasting in the desert (Matt 4:1–11), and the temptation in Gethsemane to flee from the Father's will and escape death (Matt 26:36–46; Luke 23:35–9). Jesus did not commit any sin nor, in Augustinian terms, did he inherit the original sin and the concomitant guilt of Adam and Eve's transgression. The basic question in the dispute, then, is whether the notion of 'fallenness' is coherent, or has any useful content, if it does not entail sinfulness by necessity. On one side are those who answer this question in the negative: fallenness is not a concept which can be detached from sin and guilt, for these were both the first cause and the consequences of the Fall for all men and women. To be fallen and sinless is a contradiction. On the other side are those who answer positively: fallenness need not include sinfulness because it is a descriptor of the human condition under the judgement of God, and not of the reason for that judgement. Now it just so happens that every man and woman who has ever lived has actually

¹ For a contextual history of the debate, as well as an objective look at its terms and conduct, see Kelly Kopic, 'The Son's Assumption of a Human Nature: A Call for Clarity', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3/2 (2001), pp. 154–66. An important engagement of the issue on the side of the fallenness position is in Thomas G. Weinandy's monograph, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (London: T&T Clark, 1993), which also includes an examination of historical support for and against. Finally, Ian A. McFarland's 2008 article is extraordinarily helpful for working out the theological issues of what 'fallenness' does and does not necessarily entail. See McFarland, 'Fallen or Unfallen? Christ's Human Nature and the Ontology of Human Sinfulness', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10/4 (2008), pp. 399–415. Representing the opposition, I will examine in some detail Oliver D. Crisp's articles 'Did Christ have a Fallen Human Nature?', in *Divinity and Humanity: The Incarnation Reconsidered* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 90–117, and 'Was Christ Sinless or Impeccable?', in *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 122–36. In support of Crisp's line of argument is Demetrios Bathrellos, who claims that the fallenness position relies upon a Socinian denial of the doctrine of original sin – that sin is reducible to acts and excludes the human condition of being alienated from God. See Bathrellos, 'The Sinlessness of Jesus: A Theological Exploration in the Light of Trinitarian Theology', in Paul Louis Metzger (ed.), *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 113–26. I am grateful to Kelly Kopic for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

sinned – save Christ alone. But this does not mean that the human condition we call ‘falleness’ must entail the human’s *non posse non peccare*.

In this article I will suggest points of agreement between the two sides of the falleness question. First I will examine what I take to be the key arguments on both sides, in turn, with respect to the moral quality of Jesus’ human nature. With a pair of recent articles on the topic, Oliver D. Crisp has emerged as a standard-bearer for the opposition to the falleness view. In contrast is Karl Barth, who provides an account of falleness which is helpful to this debate – not necessarily because his position is an ideal representative but because of where he locates the doctrine dogmatically, and because of his alternative account of Christ’s impeccability. Taking this cue from Barth, I will suggest that recent entries into the debate have largely overlooked a vital element of christology – one which may help to break through the current impasse. This is the *communicatio gratiarum*, the teaching that Christ’s human nature was made to be the recipient of divine grace by virtue of its union with God. With this in mind, those on both sides of the issue may find themselves closer than they thought.

‘Like us’ and ‘unlike us’

To recognise the helpfulness of the communication of grace to the question of Christ’s fallen humanity we begin by considering the debate on its current terms. What does it mean to be ‘fallen’? One might associate this quality with concupiscence, or with separation from God, or with being *incurvatus in se*. Each of these is certainly correct, but they address the question of falleness from different dogmatic starting points. Hamartiology (particularly standing in the tradition of Augustine) looks to the Fall and describes the human condition in terms of guilt and the propensity to commit sins. Like our first parents, men and women find themselves justly condemned together as an entire race; and, furthermore, we justify that judgement by continuing to sin, because under the Fall men and women are *non posse non peccare*. From the doctrine of reconciliation, on the other hand, to be ‘fallen’ is to be separated from fellowship with God, living in a ruptured relationship² or needing to make sacrificial amends. And theological anthropology concludes from the Fall that human persons are turned in upon themselves, locked in a state of desire for self-justification and self-gratification. From whatever dogmatic angle one looks, the human condition is woeful indeed.

The need for a Mediator is obvious. If his work is to atone for the sins of our entire species, Jesus had to be completely like us – and not just like us but

² Such is the definition of sinfulness with which Bathrellos is operating. See Bathrellos, ‘Sinlessness of Jesus’, pp. 114–15.

one of us.³ On the other hand, he had to be unlike us – that is, not one human among many who stands equally condemned.⁴ It is not enough that Christ die as one of us; he must also be greater than us, so that the one human can represent the whole of humanity and so that his death is meritorious to give life to all. This is, of course, the affirmation by the author of Hebrews. Like us and unlike us: on which side does the moral quality of Jesus' human nature fall? If it is like ours, then it is a point of real solidarity – but its fallenness therefore needs to be overcome. If it is unlike ours, then it is rather a point by which human sin is overcome. Jesus' humanity is either an object of his atoning work or it is a subjective aid.

The divinity of the Mediator further implicates doctrinal matters related to the hypostatic union: in becoming human the Son's divinity was not in any way jeopardised. If fallenness is regarded as separation from God, for example, logic would seem to dictate that such a nature cannot be united with the divine any more than sinfulness could. Christ remains in the relationship of the Son's sharing in the one divine life, or he does not remain divine. We have, then, a conflict between the 'tempted as we are' and the 'yet without sin' clauses of Hebrews 4. Or, put in dogmatic terms, should we be willing to describe fallen humanity as separation, the conflict is between Christ's *being God* and Christ's *being separated from God* (or from the Father). Both positions on fallenness have their theological appeal and suggest exegetical possibilities – Christ the sympathetic brother, or Christ the Second Adam. One imagines that he entered into our condition and redeemed us from within; the other that he grabbed hold of us from without and hauled us out of the mire. Does Christ have to be 'as like us as possible' to save us, or must he transcend us at this critical point? On the grounds of the doctrine of the atonement, both sides have a case.

Oliver Crisp points to the most basic question upon which this issue hinges: does fallenness necessarily entail sinfulness?⁵ If orthodox Christianity

³ McFarland is probably right that Gregory of Nazianzen's maxim – that the unassumed is the unhealed – is wrongly applied to fallen humanity in this discussion, 'for if the effects of the Fall are a matter of damage to human nature, they are by definition not constitutive of that nature and thus do not need to be assumed in order to redeem it'. McFarland, 'Fallen or Unfallen?', p. 406. Instead McFarland raises the question of whether the Son's assumption of a fallen human nature may be defended on the grounds of fittingness rather than necessity – like God's choice of the Passion as the means of reconciling the world to himself. See *ibid.*, p. 407.

⁴ On the importance of an element of discontinuity, see Kacic, 'The Son's Assumption', p. 166; McFarland, 'Fallen or Unfallen?', p. 400.

⁵ Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity*, p. 114. Kacic, too, warns: 'To speak of fallen man is to speak of man the sinner' – or at least, I would add, within the context of theological

is agreed that Jesus was sinless, what other aspects of human existence might fallenness entail? Sin is distinguished conceptually from original *guilt* and from the corruption of nature, the latter of which ‘involves a propensity or proneness to actual sin, but is not the same as actual sin’.⁶ Corruption does not immediately indicate sinfulness or guilt, though it does mark the nature’s inclination towards them. On Crisp’s account the fallenness view thus posits that Christ’s human nature was in such a state, but with the element of original *guilt* removed.⁷

Even if this conceptual separation is successful, however, Crisp believes it is dubious to suggest that a Saviour with a *corrupted* humanity can be regarded as sinless – even if Jesus himself committed no sinful acts. According to Crisp, two possibilities suggest themselves. ‘Strong original corruption’ would mean that Jesus is *non posse non peccare*; his humanity is so corrupt that sin is an inevitability (without the prevenient grace of God). This is ruled out as a violation of Hebrews 4:15.⁸ The only possibility which remains is a ‘weak original corruption’, wherein Jesus is *posse non peccare*: his human nature ‘has the propensity actually to sin, although it may not do so, on any particular occasion’.⁹ With respect to its unity with the divine nature, however, it is prevented from actually sinning. (Elsewhere he calls this position the ‘sinlessness’ view, as distinguished from the ‘impeccability’ view.¹⁰) Crisp then subjects this only remaining solution to a number of damning criticisms. He implicates even weak original corruption with sinfulness – it is a ‘deformity of soul’, and ‘metaphysically impossible’ for the impeccable Word of God to unite himself with it, lest he himself be implicated in its vitiated state.¹¹

Crisp, however, must still account for the Gospels’ narration of Jesus’ temptation. Was Jesus merely sinless *de facto*, though he could have acquiesced to Satan in the wilderness? Or was he not only sinless but impeccable, so

anthropology. ‘To try and separate these two can be perceived as artificial, leading only to further debate’. Kacic, ‘The Son’s Assumption’, p. 163.

⁶ Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity*, p. 97.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁸ See *ibid.*, pp. 95–6, 109–10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111. It is worth noting here that Crisp’s view of human nature is ‘concrete’: it is the particular body, soul and spirit assumed by the Word of God. My suspicion is that advocates of the fallenness view will invariably opt for an abstract definition of a nature, as a conceptual list of attributes (or, in Barth’s case, as the reality of a lived event) – though, for the purposes of this article, we must set aside that question. For Crisp’s discussion of these two nature types, see *Divinity and Humanity*, pp. 34–71.

¹⁰ See Crisp, *God Incarnate: Explorations in Christology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), pp. 122–36; cf. *Divinity and Humanity*, p. 96.

¹¹ Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity*, p. 112. For the full discussion see pp. 109–16.

that sin was never a real possibility? The latter would seem to suggest that, if it was impossible for him actually to waver, the temptations of Jesus were mere theatre. If Jesus was impeccable, how could his temptations have had any authentic, psychological pull on him? Crisp sides with the impeccability view, but argues that this does not make Jesus' temptations any less real to him. Adam, after all, felt the pull of temptation while he was still sinless. But by virtue of Jesus' divinity there is simply no question that he will triumph. Should he fail to withstand the temptation 'in his humanity', his divine nature would step in and prevent him from sinning. Thus, Jesus could be both impeccable and really tempted with respect to one of his natures.¹² Crisp's analogy is to 'an invincible pugilist battling it out in the ring with an opponent. The outcome is a foregone conclusion if our pugilist is invincible; but that does not mean [that] he does not have to put up a real fight in the ring.'¹³ Citing the medieval tradition of habitual grace, he observes:

One traditional account of the Incarnation suggests that the Divine Son of God assumes a sinless but peccable human nature, which, by virtue of being united to the Son, is rendered incapable of sin. If this is right, then this strand of classical Christology has the resources to deal with the 'no-capability to sin' objection that is raised by the advocates of the sinlessness view.¹⁴

Crisp is right to point this out, but wrong to contrast such a position with the fallenness (or 'sinlessness') view. The argument to be made here is not for the impeccability of the human nature itself, but precisely for its fallenness in the absence of divine influence. In short: one may hold to the fallenness of Christ's humanity *and* his lack of actual sin by virtue of divine grace. An affirmation of the latter does not rule out the former; indeed it confirms that his human nature was fallen, i.e. that in itself it was in such a state that a special divine grace was *required* in order to render Christ impeccable in his hypostatic person.

Crisp acknowledges as much, suggesting that Christ's humanity may be regarded as fallen only *anhypostatically* – considered in itself, in abstraction from its subsistence in union with God the Son: 'Christ's human nature may have the disposition or capacity to sin (in abstraction from the incarnation, as it were), and yet be rendered incapable of sinning by being in personal

¹² See *God Incarnate*, pp. 124–32 (especially p. 129).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127; cf. Bathrellos, 'Sinlessness of Jesus', p. 115.

union with his divine nature.’¹⁵ This, I believe, is finally all that advocates of the fallenness position want to say. Even Edward Irving, the nineteenth-century Scottish clergyman commonly cited as one of the modern fathers of the ‘fallenness’ view, affirmed as much:

Whenever I attribute sinful properties and dispositions and inclinations to our Lord’s human nature, I am speaking of it considered as apart from Him, in itself; I am defining the qualities of that nature which he took upon him, and demonstrating it to be the very same in substance with that which we possess. To understand the work which he did, you must understand the materials with which he did it.¹⁶

The first key to unlocking the door which separates advocates and opponents of the fallenness view is thus the classic christological distinction between persons and natures. As Ian McFarland observes, ‘fallenness’ is a condition that is rightly predicated of Christ’s nature and not his theandric person; ‘sinfulness’, by contrast, speaks of action and is properly predicated only of his person. ‘A nature can be damaged (and thus fallen); but a nature cannot sin, because sin is ascribed to agents, and thus is a matter of the hypostasis.’¹⁷ Sinfulness and fallenness are not necessarily coincident because they are ‘ontologically incommensurable categories’,¹⁸ and so ‘the fact that [Jesus] human will is fallen is bootless: its hypostatization by the divine Word means that its relation to God is such that even when assuming a nature afflicted by postlapsarian corruption, it cannot sin’.¹⁹

Crisp has thus suggested the conditions under which the sinlessness view and the impeccability view can say the same thing, by granting fallenness to Christ’s *anhypostatic* humanity and coupling it with the grace of his divinity.²⁰

¹⁵ Crisp, *God Incarnate*, pp. 132–3. To say that Christ cannot sin is not the same as to say that Christ does not have the capacity to sin, because of reduplication: he cannot sin qua divine, but he has the capacity to sin qua human. (Note that Crisp himself does not invoke *anhypostasis* language here.)

¹⁶ Edward Irving, *The Orthodox and Catholic Doctrine of Our Lord’s Human Nature* (London: Printed by Ellerton & Henderson for Baldwin & Cradock, 1830), p. vii. Also see Colin Gunton, ‘Two Dogmas Revisited: Edward Irving’s Christology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41/3 (1988), pp. 359–76. Irving had his membership revoked by the Church of Scotland for his views.

¹⁷ McFarland, ‘Fallen or Unfallen?’, p. 413; cf. pp. 411–13. See also n. 41, below.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 412–13.

¹⁹ Ian A. McFarland, *In Adam’s Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 128.

²⁰ Crisp does not see this as a solution between the two, but rather insists that, because the impeccability view can say this, as well, the sinlessness view must do more to distinguish itself. See Crisp, *God Incarnate*, p. 133. This is an unnecessarily contentious

Fallenness may certainly be restricted to *anhypostasis* for advocates to achieve the sort of sympathy with and participation in real human existence that they desire. As we will see below, this was Barth's solution as well – though he nuanced it rather differently.²¹ In short: the Son assumed a fallen humanity, but he did not leave it in this state. Furthermore, this anhypostatic condition of fallenness should not subsequently be set aside as something which has no impact upon Jesus' hypostatic life – for it remains very real, by virtue of the relation of fallen humanity to the incarnation. If this were not the case – if the frailty of his human nature were 'for all practical purposes, obliterated'²² – it would be difficult to see the temptations as exercising a legitimate pull upon Jesus' psyche.

But Crisp concludes that no coherent account of fallenness can be given which disentangles it from sin.²³ If the aspects of sinfulness and original guilt are stripped away, even the remaining element of corruption is morally loathsome. The only other option for fallenness advocates, he thinks, is to abandon Chalcedonian christology (such that this state could be predicated of a Nestorian second subject, and not of the Word of God).²⁴ But in fact, the proper object of the predication of fallenness is Jesus' human nature, not his theandric person. Crisp's discussion is further hampered by traditional Augustinianism, according to which fallenness entails original sin, and original sin entails both original guilt and the corruption of human nature. On his account these are causally and necessarily connected.²⁵ The Fall is both the result of sin and perpetuates sin by corrupting human nature. Under these conditions it would be difficult indeed to speak coherently of Christ's fallen nature without at least also attributing to him concupiscence, if not original guilt, as well.²⁶ Crisp is therefore unwilling to grant the premise of his opponents' view – namely, that fallenness is a useful concept in its

claim, since the goal of the sinlessness view, of course, is not to distinguish itself from its theological competitors.

²¹ Crisp grants as a logical possibility that Christ qua human (and not only his abstracted nature) has the capacity to sin, even if Christ qua divine does not. If we affirm such a capacity for Christ qua divine, or even as the God-human, 'then it is a very short step from here to the view that the Triune God can sin'. See Crisp, *God Incarnate*, pp. 133–5 (citation on pp. 134–5). Barth is unwilling to make use of such distinctions (i.e. Christ existing or acting according to one nature), preferring to speak of the acts and the capacity of Jesus *simpliciter*.

²² Crisp, *God Incarnate*, p. 125.

²³ Crisp, *Divinity and Humanity*, p. 115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 113–14.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, pp. 107–8.

²⁶ See *ibid.*, pp. 93–106.

own right apart from sinfulness – because theirs is not a view of falleness as ‘traditionally understood’.²⁷

Falleness and divine determination

To find a discussion of falleness which does not rely upon Augustine we must look elsewhere. Karl Barth’s comments on Jesus’ humanity and his capacity for sin in volume IV/2 of the *Church Dogmatics* are helpful to the conversation, not because his is the most representative or accessible presentation of the view, but because it is a potential challenge even to those who hold to falleness, and so may suggest further ground for agreement. Unlike many other advocates of the falleness position, Barth denies the actual possibility of Jesus committing sinful acts. As we will see below, the dogmatic placement of his treatment of Christ’s impeccability is also instructive.

One important caveat is necessary before we begin. It may be objected that Barth and Crisp rely upon substantially different accounts of theological ontology – in Crisp’s case, the essentialism of the classical tradition, and in Barth’s case an actualism which calls into question that tradition’s metaphysical presuppositions. This suggests that the two figures simply are not comparable here (‘like a whale . . . and an elephant meeting with boundless astonishment on some oceanic shore’²⁸), where the question depends heavily upon the description of a sinful and corrupted *state* rather than sinful *acts*. And it is true that, although he does speak of the humanity of Jesus Christ in terms of ‘falleness’ and ‘anhypostasis’, Barth did not embrace the person/nature dynamic of the ancient church without substantial revision: Jesus’ humanity is not a static thing of which he came into possession but a lived history, and so talk of ‘human nature’ will necessarily be a somewhat artificial imposition. While I will attempt to stay close to Barth’s own language by substituting terms such as ‘essence’ and ‘existence’ for ‘nature’, it should be recognised that here I am largely allowing the terms of the falleness debate to control the discussion – which means classical Chalcedonianism. In short, I am attempting to find a ‘common denominator’ by accommodating Barth’s discussion of sin and the incarnation somewhat to classical terms. This is justified, to some degree, by the fact that in the *Church Dogmatics* Barth put himself into direct conversation with the tradition on such matters. I do

²⁷ Ibid., p. 93.

²⁸ Karl Barth, *Karl Barth–Rudolf Bultmann: Letters 1922–1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspert (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 24 Dec. 1952, p. 105. Barth’s comparison is between himself and Bultmann, though elsewhere he applied the analogy to other seemingly ‘impossible’ dialogue partners – such as evangelical and Roman Catholic theology. See Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), p. 32.

not believe that Barth's contributions to this topic are materially affected by this methodological decision, though his own ontology should be borne in mind – and will serve an important point below.

Throughout the *Dogmatics* Barth insists on Jesus' unity and sympathy with fallen creatures. Here in IV/2 he states that the Word became not just human, but 'the bearer of our human essence, which is marked not only by its created and unlost goodness but (in self-contradiction) by sin, so that it is a perverted essence and lost as such'.²⁹ The implication seems to be that, if the temptation narratives and indeed the whole of Jesus' human existence are to be authentic, Jesus must have the real capacity to lose the battle, to disobey his calling and turn from the Father's will. If this were not so, his victory would be hollow and no longer on our behalf – hollow, because he is operating under a perfect divine agency and never faced sin in the way that we do, and no longer on our behalf because he has not assumed our broken state and succeeded where we failed. Indeed, Barth's prevailing approach to the doctrine of reconciliation is to speak of Jesus Christ as *obedient* to the Father.³⁰ But without a human will by which he *can* choose to sin, talk about Christ's faithful 'obedience' seems empty. Christ simply is.

Barth's treatment of the Son's obedience to the Father requires an important distinction, however. It is possible that Jesus could have chosen to do otherwise, because his humanity is like ours; but it is impossible that he would have actually done so, because Jesus lives from his divine origin.³¹ This is the first way in which Barth describes the one grace given to Christ's humanity under the *communicatio gratiarum* of the hypostatic union, and the distinction allows him to say that Christ bore in his own human existence our sin and guilt:

but He bore them without sin. 'Without sin' means that in our human and sinful existence as a man He did not sin. He did not become guilty of the transgression which we in our human essence commit. He bore an alien guilt, our guilt, the guilt of all men, without any guilt of His own. He made our human essence His own even in its corruption, but He did not repeat or affirm its inward contradiction. He opposed it with a superior contradiction. He overcame it in His own person when He became man.³²

²⁹ 'If His human essence were sinless as such, how could it be our essence? How could He really be our Brother at this decisive point? How could there be any solidarity with us in our lostness?' Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (CD), 4 vols. in 13 parts, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), IV/2, p. 92; cf. CD I/2, pp. 151–5.

³⁰ See CD IV/1, §59: 'The Obedience of the Son of God'.

³¹ CD IV/2, pp. 90–2.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 92 (emphasis mine).

The human essence of Jesus Christ (which is our human essence) is 'determined wholly and utterly, from the very outset and in every part, by the electing grace of God'.³³ It is rightly called 'fallen', because it is our marred nature taken from Adam; but this is not the final word to be spoken about it. Because this nature is confronted and determined by the divine essence according to electing grace, it is given its true *telos* as redeemed for fellowship with God. Christ bears our sinfulness without being sinful (2 Cor 5:21), a guilt and a corruption which are alien to him and which he did not make his own. If this is the state of Christ's humanity, then, why does Barth not simply reject the fallenness view? His point is that Christ redeems us by coming to where we are, and not by superseding our condition. Sin is opposed not simply by Christ's person, but in his person. He opposes it not by attacking it from without but by bearing it from within, and so bearing it away.³⁴

Christ's human nature may thus be described as both fallen and divinely determined. What are the consequences for his capacity to act sinfully, to seize upon temptation and violate the will of the Father? To understand Barth's intent in arguing for a functional (and not essential) impeccability, we must keep in mind his doctrine of sin as an 'impossible possibility'. For the human person to sin is not to engage in a free choice of her will, but in fact just the opposite: sin is capitulation to the bondage of the will, not a true expression but a contradiction of her nature. 'It is not really of necessity, but only in fact, that human nature wills to sin, and does sin, and therefore can sin. We are in self-contradiction in this capacity, in our *posse peccare*. It is not our genuine freedom, our *liberum*, but our *servum arbitrium*, that we choose evil.'³⁵ Sin is not necessary for Jesus, even in his fallen humanity, because it is not necessary for us either. This is what Barth has in mind by humanity's 'fallen' nature – not an essence which is corrupted and so unavoidably leads to sin, per the Augustinian tradition, but the self-denial of God's will for human creatureliness. We are all guilty because we all recommit the sin of Adam every day, and 'although we cannot shake it off, [it] is supremely inappropriate and improper'.³⁶

Jesus knew of sin and temptation well enough from taking on human essence, 'even as a tempting question addressed to Himself, as emerges clearly enough in the Gospels. But there could be no question of it ever becoming His act. Because and as he was man only as the Son of God, it was

³³ Ibid., p. 88.

³⁴ Cf. CD IV/1, pp. 197, 247.

³⁵ CD IV/2, p. 93.

³⁶ Ibid.

excluded from the choice of His acts.³⁷ In virtue of this origin of His being, He was unable to choose it. Therefore He did not choose it. And He did not do it.³⁸

Thus the man Jesus does not transcend the limits of the humanity common to Him and us, or become alien to us, when in His acceptance of human essence even in its perversion he does not repeat the perversion or do wrong, when in virtue of His origin He cannot will or do it. He is just what we are and how we are. The only difference is that he is it in genuine human freedom. If He takes to Himself the contradiction of our essence, it is only to overcome and resolve it.³⁹

Barth therefore insists that the Son of God assumed a fallen nature because he became as we are, but also that he 'is the same in quite a different way from us; in other words, in our human being what we do is omitted, and what we omit is done'.⁴⁰ His sinlessness is not a quality of his humanity, but a deed of his person.⁴¹ Christ is sinless not because his nature lacks concupiscence or is *non posse peccare*, but because he is obedient to the Father. His taking on of our flesh was a sanctification of that flesh – 'nevertheless, the reality of a sanctified life was a fight, not just a being. Jesus had to obey. But it was a fight that could not have another result.'⁴² (The similarity to Crisp's pugilist analogy should not go unnoticed.)

A second key beyond the impasse in the fallenness debate is now apparent. Barth's ontology is radically different from that of Augustine, such that

³⁷ Ian McFarland reminds us that, according to Maximus the Confessor and Constantinople III, Christ's will is not gnostic (or deliberative) in character. Jesus knows the full implications and consequences of all possible actions. Sin is therefore not properly described as an impossibility for him, nor is his temptation a fiction, but rather he lives and chooses from the certitude of his divine life. See McFarland, 'Fallen or Unfallen?', p. 410; cf. McFarland, 'Willing is Not Choosing: Some Anthropological Implications of Dyothelite Christology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9/1 (2007), pp. 3–23.

³⁸ CD IV/2, p. 93.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ CD I/2, p. 155.

⁴¹ Karl Barth, *Karl Barth's Table Talk* (Scottish Journal of Theology, Occasional Papers, 10), ed. John D. Godsey (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1963), p. 68.

⁴² Barth, *Table Talk*, p. 69. G. C. Berkouwer captures what Barth intends here in his comments on the 'necessity' of Jesus' victory over temptation: 'By "necessity" we mean only that which God has disclosed to us about him and his work: we mean the redemptive intent of the personal union in Christ. . . . He could not fall, not from a lack of freedom, but precisely because of his freedom before God, the freedom consisting in obedience, which could therefore bring liberation and salvation to man'. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 263.

the Fall need not be thought of as rendering an essential change to human being. Instead, men and women follow after Adam and stand guilty of their own stubborn contradiction of the will of God. This displacement of the Augustinian notion of natural corruption allows Barth to suggest a way in which Jesus might be impeccable not by virtue of his metaphysical make-up but by virtue of his act, i.e. a distinction between sin as an essential possibility and sin as an actual possibility. While this is a decidedly non-Augustinian approach, it remains closely tied to scripture while opening up additional avenues of exploration with regard to the question of falleness.

Sanctified by grace

It is of great significance that Barth's discussion of Jesus' impeccability takes place within his treatment of the communication of grace. In view here is the classical doctrine that Jesus' human nature was *made* sinless by virtue of its hypostatic union with God the Son – not as the transfer of a property of divinity but as a created gift. Other gifts are communicated as well: for example, Jesus' humanity has the right to be worshipped, and participates in the triune life of God.⁴³ His blood can cleanse sin and vivify believers.⁴⁴ The point of all this is twofold: (1) to include the creaturely nature in the identity of God the Son; and (2) to specify the ways in which Christ, though he had taken on our nature and dwelt among us, remained *unlike* us, as well. His humanity is both similar and dissimilar to our own: similar, because it is *our nature* which was assumed, and dissimilar, because this nature was then elevated by virtue of its direct union with God. Thomas Aquinas spoke of this in terms of an infused *habitus* of grace: because 'Christ had grace and all the virtues most perfectly . . . the 'fomes' of sin [i.e. concupiscence] was nowise in Him'.⁴⁵ Protestant theologians recast this *habitus* by way of their expansion of the *communicatio naturarum*. This is where Barth locates the actuality of Christ's sinlessness: not in his lack of a fallen nature, but in that nature's divine giftedness.

From the sixteenth century both the Lutheran and Reformed traditions agreed that Christ's human nature receives benefits by virtue of its union with God the Son, including sinlessness. Lutheranism distinguishes between the benefits conferred upon Christ's humanity by virtue of the *genus maiestaticum*

⁴³ See CD IV/2, pp. 93–4.

⁴⁴ The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, ch. 8, paragraph 59.

⁴⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q15 a2, ad; cf. q7 (especially a1, a5, a7), where Thomas addresses Christ's habitual grace and gifts. Barth critiques the predication of this *habitus* properly to Jesus' human essence, arguing instead that 'grace is a divine giving and human receiving' and can therefore be 'had' only in the course of his history. See CD IV/2, p. 90.

and the gifts of communicated grace. The former is a consequence of the hypostatic union: the divine nature superabundantly shares its attributes with the human nature, such that humanity enjoys their benefits without properly possessing those attributes. In Christ's state of glory, these benefits are perfected.⁴⁶ The communication of grace occurs not by virtue of the union so much as from the divine will, as God imbues the humanity of Christ with 'such supernatural gifts in order that it can be the fully and properly prepared instrument with and through which the deity of the Logos exercises and carries out its activities'.⁴⁷ Because they are created and finite these gifts are inferior to what the humanity of Christ receives more directly, via the *genus maiestaticum*.

By contrast, in rejecting the *genus maiestaticum* the Reformed held to a stronger account of the communication of grace in order to secure some of the same benefits. 'These *gratiae habituales*, of which impeccability or *non posse peccare* is one (since Christ could not sin), were of course imparted to the humanity of Christ without measure, since they are the highest gifts of the Spirit which a creature can receive at all'.⁴⁸ The Reformed agreed that the gifts are finite and created, emphasising that their context was Christ's state of humiliation. These gifts were given to him gradually and not all at once, 'so as not to impair the natural development of his humanity'.⁴⁹ The result was that the *gratiarum* functioned as a conceptual container for everything that the Reformed wanted to say about Christ's humanity in distinction from other men and women, but which they did not wish to attribute to his divinity and the hypostatic union. The *genus maiestaticum* logically required all that is proper of divinity to be enjoyed by Christ's humanity, at least in theory. If divinity includes omnipresence, then his flesh has at least the potential to be ubiquitous. By refuting that doctrine and using the communication of grace to do much of the same work, the Reformed were able more selectively to predicate divine qualities – such as impeccability – to Christ's humanity.

While Barth follows the broadly Reformed pattern in his treatment of the *communicatio naturarum*, he avoids static or essentialist talk of 'natures' in favour of Jesus' lived history as God and human. He defines the communication of grace, then, not in terms of the nature's receipt of additional benefits but as 'the total and exclusive determination of the human nature of Jesus

⁴⁶ See *Solid Declaration*, ch. 8, paragraph 12; Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), p. 251.

⁴⁷ Chemnitz, *Two Natures*, p. 252.

⁴⁸ Heinrich Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson, ed. Ernst Bizer (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), p. 434.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Christ by the grace of God'.⁵⁰ It is a description not of graces compounded onto the human nature, which does not possess them by right, but of the one grace in which the incarnate Son exists in orientation to the triune life. Christ's humanity is fallen, then, because it is our humanity; but this is not its ultimate determination. That belongs to God alone.

It is important to take these two topics – the falleness and giftedness of Christ's humanity – together. For Barth, Christ is impeccable and therefore holy. This allows him to be a suitable sacrifice for the sins of the people. But he is not so by virtue of his divinity, as if the nature of humanity has simply been overwhelmed by a superior sort of being, nor even as if the nature which is proper to the Logos takes precedence over the nature which is merely assumed. And he is not so by virtue of being born with a pristine humanity untouched by the Fall, as implied, for example, by the Leiden Synopsis:

The Son of God humbled himself and took unto himself true, entire, perfect and holy flesh of the Virgin Mary by the operation and effectuality of the Holy Spirit in the unity of his person.⁵¹

In this case, the two natures which were united were in themselves both perfect natures – in the case of humanity, the nature as it was created to be. This, Barth believes, is not true to the human condition. Rather, the Son of Man is holy and impeccable because, as a human like us, he has received this *ab extra* – as a gift from God the Father through the Holy Spirit. In his humanity Christ is therefore at once both naturally under the curse of Adam and supernaturally free from the consequences of that curse. These are the only conditions under which he may be the Mediator.

The fact that both of these must remain true of Jesus' sanctified life already anticipates an objection to the falleness position. If his human nature is sanctified in the union, is it not restored to a pre-Fall condition – effectively made *unfallen*? If this is the case, then the previous distinction of *anhypostatic* falleness is irrelevant. But we must not overlook: (1) the nature of the sanctification of human existence, which is not mere repristinisation but cleansing and redirection; and (2) the soteriological importance of fallen humanity, i.e. Jesus' being like us and so representative of us before God the Father. Taking these two together, the falleness position insists that the history of humankind's alienation from God is not to be overlooked, even as it is brought to an end on the cross.

⁵⁰ CD IV/2, p. 88.

⁵¹ Leiden Synopsis, 25.4 (quoted in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 412).

The precedent for fallenness in Protestant thought runs beyond the sometimes esoteric locus of the *communicatio gratiarum*. While Catholic thought came to speak of Mary's own sinless purity as the source of Jesus' pristine humanity, the Reformed stressed that one of the acts of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Christ is explicitly to sanctify the human nature.⁵² Another way of framing the matter is this: is Jesus' sinlessness from the Virgin Mary or from the Holy Spirit? The Leiden Synopsis seems to suggest the former (though it was by no means done apart from 'the operation and effectuality of the Holy Spirit'), and is thus more Catholic on this point. Yet other Reformed scholars believed that Jesus' human sinlessness derived strictly from the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, whether in Jesus' conception or – as Irving had it – continuously throughout his life.⁵³ According to Heinrich Heppe, the nature in itself would have been blemished like ours were it not for this special act of consecration by the Holy Spirit – but the Holy Spirit 'keeps every speck of sin away from the humanity of Jesus in the Virgin's womb, and . . . the sin of Adam was not reckoned to Jesus' humanity, because Jesus did not belong to the covenant of works and so had not sinned in Adam'.⁵⁴

Barth, then, follows the Protestant tradition in linking the fallenness of Christ's humanity with its sanctification or determination by divine grace – a third key beyond the impasse. Barth and Crisp agree that Christ's victory over temptation was absolutely certain, though they arrive there from very different routes. The need for divine intervention in the life of the Son of Man, not to mention its actuality in the hypostatic union, requires that his human nature be anhypostatically fallen. For Crisp and the opponents of the fallenness position, because the peccable nature is made subject to the impeccable Son of God, Jesus is *non posse peccare*. The superior divine attribute trumps the inferior human attribute. According to Barth, however, the impeccability rendered by the communication of grace in the hypostatic union has an actualist character – i.e. it is contingent upon Christ's obedience, even if that obedience is a foregone conclusion by virtue of his divine identity. For Barth, Jesus is neither strictly *posse non peccare* nor *non posse peccare* but simply *non peccare*, because he lives his human life from his divine origin.⁵⁵ 'The determination of His human essence by the grace of God does not consist in the fact that there is added to Him the remarkable quality that He could not

⁵² See Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 424–7.

⁵³ See David W. Dorries, *Edward Irving's Incarnational Christology* (Fairfax, VA: Xulon Press, 2002), pp. 360–1.

⁵⁴ Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 426.

⁵⁵ Kacic is right to ask whether the matter of *posse peccare* or *non posse peccare* with respect to Jesus is 'even a legitimate question'. Kacic, 'The Son's Assumption', pp. 164–5.

sin as a man, but in His effective determination from His origin for this act in which, participant in our sinful essence, He did not will to sin and did not sin.⁵⁶ By virtue of his divine origin Jesus could not have lived any other way – but this does not make him impeccable in Crisp’s sense. His sinning was not impossible in theory, but impossible in actuality. He had the metaphysical capacity to commit a sinful act, but he did not (and never would have) by virtue of the grace of his divinity, grace extended in the *unio* to his broken humanity.

Conclusions

When treated under theological anthropology and the doctrine of sin, the debate over Jesus’ falleness and capacity for sinning is subject to misunderstanding: because he is *sui generis* among all human persons, the Augustinian ‘rules’ of original guilt and natural corruption do not necessarily apply. And under the doctrine of atonement, there is only a rhetorical impasse. Barth’s first insight was to relocate the dilemma to the doctrine of the communication of natures, which kept in view the divine–human relations and the necessity that Christ, in his humanity, be both like us and unlike us. And though the falleness position itself may be somewhat novel to modern theology, from the medieval divines to the Reformed scholastics Barth found centuries of precedence for considering the sinlessness of the Mediator not on the grounds of nature but of the divine election of grace.

As we have seen, there are many ways of speaking of the same empowerment of Jesus’ fallen human nature in the *unio hypostatica*: (1) the human Jesus is infused with a divine *habitus* enabling his life of sinless perfection, as in Catholicism; (2) the divine nature (or the hypostasis of the Logos) superabundantly shares its attributes with the human nature, as in Lutheranism; (3) the Holy Spirit works in the conception of Jesus to sanctify the nature taken from Mary, as in distinctly Protestant accounts; (4) a special grace is communicated to the human nature, especially emphasised in the Reformed. We might add a fifth expression: Jesus lives his human life in submission to the Holy Spirit and his empowering presence, as in some modern Spirit christologies. All of these are related doctrines, not necessarily in competition with one another but the respective formulations of different theological traditions seeking the same end. Outside a doctrine of Mary’s own immaculate conception and sinlessness as purifying Jesus’ humanity from all traces of the Fall, a broad spectrum of the Christian tradition has presumed that Jesus’ human nature is *anhypostatically* fallen and *enhyposatically*

⁵⁶ CD IV/2, pp. 92–3 (emphasis mine).

sanctified. As Barth expressed this, the Son of Man lives his human existence under the determination of the divine essence.

Based on the historically defensible belief that Jesus' human nature is fallen but sanctified, we have identified three points at which participants in the fallenness debate may find grounds for agreement. First, both advocates and opponents seem willing to specify that the human nature is fallen only *anhypostatically*. The condition of fallenness is attributable only to the nature, not to the acting person. Second, Barth suggests a way in which human nature need not be construed in an Augustinian sense of *non posse non peccare*, as essentially conditioned by the Fall (but rather only accidentally so). By virtue of this nature Jesus is only *possibly* sinful, but *actually* impeccable – and invariably so, because he lives from his divine origin. Finally, while Jesus' humanity is fallen, in the hypostatic union it is given a divine determination which does not leave him in this wretched state.