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## Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) on the Person of Christ

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## SUMMARY

This thesis is chiefly concerned with the following research question: What is the impact that Edwards' philosophical commitments have for his Christology? This question is one for which only a few scholars have proposed an answer. Fewer still are the number of scholars who have paid sufficient attention to the philosophical axis of Edwards' thought. This thesis is the first book-length analysis of Edwards' Christology whose principal interest is in work of constructive philosophical theology and theological retrieval. I argue in the following four chapters that Edwards has a great deal more to say about the doctrine of the person of Christ that is both philosophically and theologically significant, original, and profitable for contemporary Christological discourse than has hitherto been believed.

The four chapters that together compose this thesis are an attempt to contribute to the literature where these two interests meet. Because what Edwards has to say about the person of Christ is equal parts metaphysics and theology, making sense of his Christological commitments is, from chapter to chapter, an exercise in abductive argumentation. That is, each chapter attempts to faithfully construct and clarify what Edwards says about this or that Christological matter in a way that makes sense of the most significant and explicit parts of the doctrine. Because Edwards offers little in the way of any systematic exposition of his Christology, I have undertaken to isolate, interrogate, and partition Edwards' Christology into various manageable parts in order to make sense of those parts with a view to reconstructing his doctrine in such a way that displays its advantages and liabilities for contemporary theological discussion. As one of the least-researched aspects of his theology, shedding analytic philosophical light, as it were, on what Edwards thinks about the doctrine of the person of Christ and its metaphysical substructures is a project that is long overdue.

Chapter one is concerned with Edwards' doctrine of divine decrees. Specifically, it is concerned with the decree of the election of Christ. Here, I demonstrate that Edwards proposes a two-stage doctrine of election, according to which he thinks that Christ is the elect one in whom the election of particular individuals 'in Christ' logically and necessarily follows. Situating the discussion in the context of post-Reformation

Christological innovations that attempt to put the work of Christ together with the doctrine of divine decrees, I engage directly with the work of Oliver Crisp on Edwards' doctrine of the divine decrees. I argue that Crisp's account overlooks this two-stage account of election. I then offer up two possible explanations related to Edwards' doctrine of atonement for why he might have proposed this two-stage doctrine.

According to the first explanation, I argue that there is strong evidence that Edwards thinks that Christ and the elect are somehow metaphysically united via a shared humanity in what he calls at more than one point in his literary remains a 'moral whole'. I then offer up a constructive explanation of the metaphysics that account for Edwards' account of this 'moral whole' in keeping with contemporary proposals of how objects persist through time and the doctrine of union with Christ. I then consider a second possible explanation of the evidence in accordance with the debate that continues to surround the doctrinal relationship of Edwards and the secondary generation Edwardsian Joseph Bellamy and his development of a doctrine of hypothetical universalism. In the end, however, I show that the evidence points to back to Edwards' doctrine of union with Christ as a way to explain Edwards' account of this two-stage decree of election.

Beginning as it does with Edwards' doctrine of the work of Christ, this chapter is an important starting place for his doctrine of the person of Christ. For as I suggested at the outset of the chapter, Edwards' Christology at large is driven by his soteriology and what Edwards says about the union that Christ shares with humanity—something that is at the heart of his doctrine of atonement—bears significantly upon the how we understand some of the theological and philosophical mechanics of what he thinks about the union between the divine nature of the Son and the human nature he assumes at the incarnation.

In chapter two, I take up Edwards' two-natures doctrine directly. In order to motivate this inquiry, I look specifically at Edwards' doctrine of Christ's hypostatic union in light of both his commitment to immaterialism and Reformed debates about the moral ability of the human nature that the Son of God assumed at the incarnation. While Edwards' immaterialism has been a source of varied and occasional philosophical interest in the literature, no one has explicated his account of Christ's impeccability. By looking at his account of hypostasis, I show how Edwards' immaterialism seems to fortify Christ's impeccability against those more recent claims that Jesus of Nazareth is merely sinless,

that is, that he never sinned despite having the capacity or power to do so. For this reason, I argue that Edwards might provide a resource for contemporary theologians interested in defending Christ's impeccability. First, I sketch out the constituents of an orthodox councilor Christology, which I take to be, minimally, that the Son assumes a reasonable human soul and human body. I then discuss some of the features of Edwards' immaterialism and his Christology, utilizing some recent discussion on the matter offered up by Oliver Crisp and Seng Kong Tan. At this, I put together what I call a 'synthetic account' of Reformed accounts of what contemporary philosophers call mind-body dualism, pointing to what I think is a not an insignificant obstacle that stands in front of those who want to uphold both the Son's impeccability and the Son's possession of a material body (i.e. a body made of matter). To this end, rather than an appeal to one theologian in the Reformed tradition, I take a core sample of ideas about theological anthropology from thinkers that I think represent a spectrum of commitments within the tradition. By roughing out this synthesis of ideas, I show how this enables us to see those ideas to which the majority of theologians in the Reformed tradition have historically subscribed as well as identify with greater clarity the extent to which mind-body dualism makes up the metaphysical apparatus for Reformed Christological anthropology. What is more, I show how this metaphysical apparatus seems to imply that Christ must be merely sinless and not impeccable. This too is something that I show is not an inconsiderable conclusion as it pertains to claims within the historic Reformed tradition. Finally, I consider how Edwards' Christology plays out along the lines of immaterialism as it pertains to his doctrine of the Son's impeccability. I conclude by giving some reasons why one might think that immaterialism may actually offer a more theologically robust defense for the doctrine of impeccability because it makes sense of human moral corruption, appropriations of a mind-body dualism, and how we best make orthodox sense of the hypostatic union and the humanity of Christ.

In chapter three, I explore—near to the point of imponderability—what I refer to as Edwards' Continuous Christology. That is, I look at Edwards' doctrine of continuous creation, according to which God is somehow, moment by moment, re-creating the world *ex nihilo* and the impact this has for making sense of Edwards' commitment to an orthodox Christology. Some of his interpreters have claimed that Edwards' version of

continuous creation has nothing but a corrupting effect on his Christology, among other doctrines. So in the first part of the argument, I work out how his interpreters argue that on Edwards' account of continuous creation, created things persist through time for no more than a moment (however long that might be) before they cease to exist whereupon facsimiles or copies of those created objects are then immediately re-created anew (*ex nihilo*), that together generate the illusion of that created object's persistence through time. As a result, so they argue, continuously created humans do not exist long enough—from one 'moment' to the next—to either perform or be responsible for any moral act. This, it is argued by these interpreters, is evidence of several insuperable problems that Edwards' account faces, Christological and otherwise. The reason why, so the argument goes, is because of the eternal status of the Son and because he is a divine agent assigned with the performance of all moral acts attributed to the hypostatic union. In other words, because the Son is eternally 'constant' (a-temporal), it makes no difference whether his assumption of a human nature is, as Edwards says, 'in constant flux'. Against this line of reasoning, I argue in favor of the coherence of both Edwards' doctrine of continuous creation as well as his Continuous Christology. The chapter then unfolds in two stages. The first stage has two parts and the second has only one. Methodologically speaking, this chapter is a bit different from the previous one because it is marked expressly by the interplay of philosophical clarification and theological construction. In the first stage, I revisit and ultimately revise several aspects of Edwards' ontology, aspects which, I go on to show in the second stage, necessarily bring revision to several aspects of Edwards' Christology. Those revisions I propose in the first stage of the chapter are threefold: First, that Edwards is an immaterial realist and not an immaterial anti-realist, which means in this case (among several other things) that he thinks that all created human minds are substances by virtue of their being substantialized by their union with archetype of all human nature, namely, Jesus of Nazareth. Second, I propose that on Edwards' account of stage theory, stages are composed exclusively of ideas or perceptions with which created minds have only phenomenal interaction, whose duration is necessary and sufficient unto the upholding of moral responsibility instead of their being composed of created minds. Third, I propose that Edwards' notion of occasional causation is limited to God's causing perceptions rather than the intentions of created minds. In the second stage, I propose

three corresponding revisions to Edwards' Continuous Christology. First, I propose that the humanity of Christ is a real substance, composed of an immaterial mind and a body that is composed entirely of ideas presented to him by the Spirit. Second, I propose that the mind of Jesus persists through time by enduring moment-to-moment whereas the body of Jesus, like all other perceptible objects, is continuously created (by the Spirit) and re-presented *ex nihilo* to the mind of Jesus. Third and finally, I propose that the Spirit (of the Son) is the principal actor and sole cause of this continuously creative activity, ever bringing the world into view for Jesus to perceive. Such revisions, I show, derive a great deal of their meaning from Edwards' Pneumatology, which is the subject of final chapter.

Chapter four is about more than Edwards' Pneumatology. It is about his Spirit Christology. That is, it is about Edwards' understanding of the constitution, the identity, and the agency of the Spirit of God as he establishes and maintains the hypostatic union of Christ's divine and human natures. Situating the discussion in the context of a debate about Edwards' understanding of dispositions, in this chapter I put together a model for making sense of Edwards' Spirit Christology, using as a way into the discussion his doctrine of regeneration and the Spirit's indwelling of the saints. In the first part of the chapter, I make the argument that Edwards' Spirit Christology is best made sense of along a so-called 'episodic' approach rather than an 'incarnation-inspiration' approach. Upon this constructive footing, we considered one recent approach to the subject of Edwards' Pneumatic Christology based on a theory of Edwardsian metaphysics that is referred to in the literature as dispositional ontology. Differentiating our approach from what I call Dispositional Christology, we then moved into an examination of Edwards' Spirit Christology via the doctrine of regeneration. Here we saw that as a result of the Spirit's work of regeneration, Edwards thinks that created minds undergo an ontological and an epistemic change. That is, the Spirit changes both the mind of the believer and his ideas, and as a result they then have new and stable ideas about God and creation. With echoes of chapter three looming large in the background of this chapter, particularly those having to do with the perichoretic union of the saints with the God-man, I finally turn to Edwards' account of those changes that he thinks are similarly wrought in the created minds by the Spirit's indwelling and the manner in which Christ's humanity is indwelt. In

other words, I argue that Edwards thinks that there is an equivalence of sorts between the way that the Spirit indwells the saints and the way the Spirit indwells the humanity of Christ. Then, keying off several places where Edwards talks about the supposed degreed difference between this indwelling in contexts where he describes what he calls the ‘sameness of consciousness’ that is forged in the hypostatic union of the Son and his humanity, I went on to suggest that Edwards thinks that the humanity of Christ possessed some sort of Spiritually endowed set of ideas about being divine. I concluded this chapter with several suggestions for further research in this still fruitful area of Edwards-studies.

The four chapters of this thesis are aimed precisely at the question: How do Edwards’ philosophical commitments shape his Christology? Each chapter answers this question in part by grappling with some of Edwards’ most fundamental, albeit exotic, philosophical assumptions in the context of his commitment to an orthodox Christology. No doubt, the result of this study should make clear that there are, indeed, enormous and still largely underappreciated aspects of Edwards’ Christology that are of a significant, original, and profitable nature for contemporary Christological discourse.

Having now summarized the findings for each chapter of the thesis—looking intentionally at both the broad and specific aspects of the original research question—we now come to one final and perhaps obvious question that must be answered. And the question is this: What is the impact that Edwards’ philosophical commitments have for his Christology? Simply put, the impact of Edwards’ philosophical commitments for his Christology is nothing short of colossal. Or maybe we could say that their impact is total or comprehensive. In fact, so colossal and so total are these commitments that Edwards’ Christology is not understood without them. It is not enough to simply assert that he was christologically orthodox, as many have suggested. He was—at least, that is what I have argued for here. But how did he arrive at christological orthodoxy in light of a commitment to such things as immaterialism, Augustinian realism, and Four-dimensionalism? To answer these (and other) questions is the work required if we are going to conclude much, if anything, substantive about his Christology. Now, if you’re not ‘into’ Edwards’ philosophy, I understand. It is not easy sifting through the thoughts of

a man who had what Holmes once called ‘a mind on fire’.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, I wish I could say you could skip to the end of each chapter of this thesis and quench your intellectual thirst, so to speak. Unfortunately, it is not that easy. Edwards was a *philosophical* theologian. Highlighting this fact has been the trend in Edwards-studies for some time now, and this thesis is but another recent reassertion of that fact. Avoiding his philosophy in this context in particular is to imperil one's understanding and, frankly, one's enjoyment of the significance and wonder of what he actually believed about the God-man. So too does it puts us at greater, if not total, risk of altogether missing the uniqueness of his contribution to the development of this doctrine in the Christian tradition. I suggested in the introduction that the reader will find it surprising just how significant is the impact of his philosophy for his Christology, far more than one might expect. Upon reflection, it now seems to me that so impactful are these philosophical commitments that it is a wonder that Edwards' Christology has been the subject of any inquiry whatsoever that consciously avoids working them out in detail. For this reason, I think, it is safe to assume that attempts to mine greater conceptual treasures from Edwards' Christological trove run more than a mere risk of running into some occasional philosophical resistance. And yet, the immense labor required to work through these aspects of Edwards' philosophy is itself one of unique rewards that awaits those intent on understanding his Christology.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *Christian History* 77 (22.1): pp. 10-15.