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**Grace and Transcendence: A Critical Analysis of
the Role of Grace in Human Salvation**

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Thesis

The crucial question that this paper answers is: “*What* made God to suspend his transcendence, in the incarnate state, to take up human nature in the person of Jesus Christ, and to die on Calvary for human beings?” Clearly, Jesus died on Calvary to redeem human beings from sin and death, but why did he give up his transcendence in the process? I first define God’s transcendence and grace, then I make some preliminary remarks about God’s relationship to human being,

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and I explain our focal question. I answer the question by saying that it is God's grace that compelled God to give up his transcendence, to take human nature, and to die on Calvary to save us from sin and death.

Introduction

Supposing I make a highly sophisticated robot, call it Mr. T. I endow Mr. T with all essential intellectual properties so he can have fellowship with me. I, especially, give Mr. T the property of being able to discern and choose between good and evil. Then, I leave Mr. T in my beautiful garden to care for it while I travel to a far away country. On returning from my trip, I find the garden totally wrecked and Mr. T severely damaged to the extent that we can no longer have any meaningful fellowship. Who should I blame for wrecking the garden and blocking our fellowship? Obviously, I should blame Mr. T. But that is not the only person to blame. In a way, I am also culpable because I made Mr. T such that he could go wrong, wreck the garden, and damage our fellowship. Had I made Mr. T such that he could never go wrong, wreck the garden, and damage our fellowship he could not have gone wrong, wrecked the garden, and damaged our fellowship.²

This story of Mr. T illustrates God's relationship with human beings. God made human beings in his own image and gave them all the essential intellectual properties they need to have fellowship with God. He gave human beings a cosy home – beautifully landscaped with assorted trees, vegetation, and flowers – in a place fittingly

² Let me briefly substantiate this claim by saying that some theologians, using the principle of secondary causation, blame God for the entry of sin in the world because it is God who gave human beings the free will to choose between good and evil. God could have created human beings such that they always do only what is right. If God had the power to create human beings to always do only what is right but he did not, then God should be blamed for creating human beings with the ability to go wrong. (cf. John Mackie, "The Problem of Evil,")

called the Garden of Eden. Eden had diverse groups of animals and spring waters running through it from four rivers.

God made human beings custodians over Eden. They were to make everything in Eden functioned well. For food, God gave human beings all the fruits in Eden, except the fruits of the tree that was in the middle of Eden. God barred human beings from eating the fruits of that tree because they were deadly to human beings.

But, soon after God left human beings in Eden, Satan came and told them that the fruits of the tree in the middle of Eden were not deadly at all. On the contrary, Satan said, the fruits would make human beings as wise as God. Indeed, Satan added that it is because the fruits would make humans as wise as God that God bars them from eating it. Satan urged human beings to eat the fruits and be like God.

Being given two divergent pieces of information about the fruits of the tree in the middle of Eden, (one from God, the other from Satan) human beings had to choose which information to believe. They foolishly chose to believe Satan rather than God and they ate the fruits of the tree in the middle of Eden. After eating the fruits, human beings realized that they were not wise like God; rather they were naked. So, they sewed fig leaves for covering and fled from God to hide in bushes.

Eating the fruit alienate human beings from God and subjected them under Satan. But while Satan had full control over human beings, Satan did not provided for their daily upkeep. Human beings had to fend for themselves under treacherous conditions through hard work and toil outside Eden. Consequently, human beings were dejected and disconcerted about life. They longed for fellowship with God and tried to restore that fellowship. But they could not efface sin and death from their lives; hence they could not restore their original fellowship with God. But then, just when it seemed that human beings were doomed to sin and death, God took giant steps to redeem human beings from sin and death, and to restore them into fellowship with him.

The giant step God took was to become a human being. This paper says what made God to save human beings from sin and death. The decision to become a human being was not easy neither was the process of becoming human easy. To save human beings from sin

and death, God sacrificed his transcendence and took human nature. The most difficult aspect of God taking up human nature is the reconciliation of ontological opposition between human nature and divine nature. It seemed that God could not hold every aspects of both natures simultaneously. So, although Jesus was fully God he had to give up certain divine properties and although he was fully human he had to give up certain human properties.

Why did God to take up human nature? Simply stated, God took up human nature to fully represent human beings and to let his victory over sin and death count as human victory over sin and death. For both reasons, God gave up his transcendence and took human nature during the incarnate state. But notice that this answer addresses the purpose for which God took human nature, while our question is about causality. St. Anselm adequately answered that question of purpose in *Cur Deus Homo?*³ And John Calvin (and others) adequately answered the question of *how* God save human beings from sin and death in the theories of atonement.⁴

Returning now to the question of causality, it is important to note that nothing outside God can cause God do anything. Hence what made God to take up human nature and to save human beings from sin and death must be in God. So, what *made* God to give up his transcendence and to take the humble servant nature in Jesus to save human beings from sin and death?

Contemporary theologians have proffered two answers to this question: “the Two Minds” theory⁵ and “the Kenosis” theory.⁶ I will

³ St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2vols. ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1949). Gustav Aulen, *Christos Victor*,

⁵Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986); Thomas V. Morris, “The Metaphysics of God Incarnate,” in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological*

Essays, eds. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

⁶ Cf. Gottfried Thomasius, “Christ’s Person and Work” in *God and Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology*, trans. and ed. Claude Welch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965). Ronald J. Feenstra, *Pre-Existence, Kenosis, and Incarnation of Jesus Christ*, Dissertation (Yale University, 1984). Ronald J. Feenstra, “Reconsidering Kenotic Christology,” in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, eds. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

examine both answers briefly, dismiss the formal as inaccurate, and accept the later as approximating the truth, though still needing augmentation. I augment the Kenosis answer by inserting the concept of divine grace in our treatment of intrinsic divine causality to meet our question.

Let me begin by defining transcendence and grace, as I am using the terms in this paper.

Transcendence

Transcendence is that essential divine quality that undergirds God's holiness and righteousness. God's holiness pertains to his ontological constitution, which we affirm by the claim that God is Spirit. It is hard to say exactly what Spirit is, but loosely speaking Spirit lacks matter. So, being Spirit, God is not a material being. God's righteousness pertains to his moral standard. The claim that God is righteous implies the absence of sin in God. So, ontologically and morally, God transcends human beings.

Grace

Grace is that unique divine quality that allows God to extend human life even though human beings ought to have died. Theologians distinguish between common grace and special grace by letting common grace denote God's work of sustaining human life after the fall and by letting special grace denote God's work of restoring human life to its original state without the possibility of dying – eternal life. Although this distinction is vital, I will not use it here because it does not help us to answer our question. Here, I will speak simply of God's grace.

The Question

This paper addresses the question: "What made God to take up human nature and to die for human beings?" To adequately answer this question, I first briefly explore relationships between God and human beings. Ontologically and morally, God and human beings are not equals. Rather, God is a superior being who relates with human beings as subordinates. God is a necessary transcendent spiritual being, while human beings are contingent material beings. St. Anselm aptly captures the transcendence of God in his definition of

God as the most perfect being than which none more perfect can be conceived.⁷ A perfect being necessarily exemplifies great making properties like omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience and moral goodness. So, God essentially exemplifies these properties while human beings essentially lack them.

Some a-theologians may be tempted to argue that since the Bible attests to God creating human beings in his image and likeness, human nature approximate divine nature to the point that it is no stretch for God to take up human nature. Such argument lacks justification because human nature is material while divine nature is spiritual. Furthermore, the tremendous negative effects of sin on human nature alienated it from the divine nature to the extent that there isn't any real approximation between them.

Paul acknowledges the universal negative effect of sin on human nature saying that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.⁸ Similarly, John rebuts anyone who denies being a sinner charging such a person with lying and not having the truth of God.⁹ Sin made human beings mortal but God is eternally immortal.¹⁰ It is foolhardy to claim ontological and moral proximity between human beings and God.¹¹

Had God not saved human beings from sin, their nature would continued to rot in sin, as they debase their bodies and worship idols rather than God. Paul attests to the corruptness of human nature saying that humans are "... full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice."¹² It is because God restored human beings to fellowship with him that human beings are now glorious.

So if there is such ontological and moral divergence between God and human beings what made God to take up human nature? In a word, it is God's grace. It is God's grace that made God to give up his transcendence and to take human nature to save human beings from sin and death. Although God is essentially transcendent, God is

⁷ St. Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogium* chapter II, in *St. Anselm's Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (La Salle: Open Court Pub.Co.1961), pp. 53-54.

⁸ Romans 3:23

⁹ 1 John 1:8.

¹⁰ Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:1.

¹¹ Romans 5:12.

¹² Romans 1: 24-31.

also gracious. So, God's grace correlates with God's transcendence in a way that, for the sake of saving human beings from sin and death, God's grace took pre-eminence. The grace of God compelled God to put off his transcendence, for a time, in order to save his most precious creation – human beings.

God took up human nature in the person of Jesus Christ – who is Immanuel – God with us. Indeed, in Jesus Christ, God became fully human in all ways, except sin. Since Jesus Christ is God incarnated in human nature, he exemplified both holiness and righteousness, which are necessary for human beings to enter into fellowship with God. God now imputes Jesus' righteousness unto human beings so they can fellowship with God. God no longer sees human beings as sinners; rather God sees them as righteous and holy in Jesus Christ.

The Two-Minds Theory

Although, I have said that God gave up his transcendence, for a time, and took human nature in order to save human beings from sin, Thomas V. Morris denies the self-emptying of divine transcendence in the incarnation. Instead, Morris proposes the two-mind theory of incarnation, which essentially says that God retained his divine nature when he took up human nature during the incarnation.

According to Morris, God the son remained fully divine during his incarnation as Jesus. That is, God the son retained all essential great making properties and he took all essential human properties. Morris attests,

I take omnipotence and omniscience, for example, to be such properties essential to deity. And, following standard Anselmian intuitions, I take the strongly modalized properties of *necessary* omnipotence (omnipotence in all possible worlds, and at all times in any such worlds) and necessary omniscience to be ingredient in deity as well. Thus, on this picture, no individual could possibly be God without being omnipotent.¹³

Therefore, Morris concludes that at every time and in all possible worlds Jesus exemplified all essential great making properties of God.

The transcendence of God, says Morris, consist in God's exemplification of essential great making properties. If these great

¹³ Thomas V. Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement*, Eds. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1989), p. 114.

making properties are essential to God, then Morris denies that God can give them up and still be God. Categorizing these divine properties as essential underscores God's necessary exemplification of them at all times, no matter what. These properties define God.

To show how possible Jesus can be fully human and fully God, Morris distinguishes between being *fully* human, which is the possession of essential human properties, and being *merely* human, which is the possession of ordinary human properties. Morris argues that although merely human properties are divergent from God's essential properties, fully human properties are compatible with God's essential properties. Since Jesus did not take merely human properties, Jesus did not have to give up any essential divine properties. Thus, Morris concludes: "Only if we assume that it is necessary for being human, or for having a human nature, that an individual lack any of those properties ingredient in deity, do we have an obvious logical and metaphysical obstacle to the orthodox two natures view of God."¹⁴

According to Morris, to say that Jesus had two natures is to say that Jesus had two minds: the divine mind and the human mind. Morris thinks that having the divine mind and the human mind sufficiently explains apparent contradictions in Jesus' claim regarding his second coming. Since Jesus had a human mind, Morris recommends we attribute Jesus' claim to lack of knowledge regarding his second coming to his human mind. As per the divine mind of Jesus, Morris says that even during his incarnation, Jesus was omniscient so he knew when he would come again.

The hardest thing for Morris to explain is the apparent contradiction in the biblical depiction of Jesus as possessing tremendous knowledge at some times and as lacking knowledge at other times. Similarly, at times, Jesus seems to exhibit extraordinary powers, but at other time he appears weak and in need of power from heaven. Further, it is just hard for us to see how one person can have two minds. A person, in the simplest and ordinary sense, is a center of consciousness, which is the mind. So, it seems that one person cannot have two centers of consciousness.

¹⁴ Morris, "The Metaphysics of God Incarnate," p. 115.

It seems that where there are two minds, there are two persons. So if there are two minds in Jesus, then two persons are in Jesus. If so then Jesus is not one person, but two persons. This is absurd and counterintuitive. In defense of his two minds theory, Morris cites numerous cases such as dream states, artificial intelligence, split personality, and cerebral commissurotomy that purport to show that one person can best be described as having two minds. But Eleonore Stump rebuts this line of argument on the ground that these cases are sufficiently controversial and disanalogous to the case of the incarnation of Jesus.¹⁵

More questions are asked about the logical coherency of Morris' two-minds theory: "What is the relationship between God's mind and human mind in Jesus?" How are the two minds welded together in Jesus? In answering these questions, Morris grants asymmetrical accessing relationship between the divine mind and the human mind. That is, the divine mind has full access to the content of the human mind of Jesus but the human mind of Jesus has only limited access to the content of the divine mind of Jesus. Granting asymmetrical accessing relationship between the two minds entails disharmony and privation between the two minds of Jesus. One person holding two disharmonious and private minds leads to gross personal and ontological contradiction.

The Kenosis Theory

In the mid 19th century a conceptual shift occurred in theological thinking about God from being to becoming. Sara Joan Miles observes that previous theologians commonly believed that an immutable God created a static nature and gave us an absolute revelation of Himself in the Scriptures. But with the shift in thinking about God from being to becoming, theologians like John Wesley attempted validating a continuing dynamic revelation of God.¹⁶ Following this new conceptualization of God, H. R. Macintosh and Gottfried Thomasius proposed the kenosis theory of God's incarnation, which suggests that a change occurred in the divine

¹⁵ Eleonore Stump, "Review of *The Logic of God Incarnate*," *Faith and Philosophy*, 6:2 (1989), p. 221.

¹⁶ Sara Joan Miles, "From Being to Becoming: Science and Theology in the Eighteenth Century," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, 43:4 (Dec. 1991), p. 215.

nature when Jesus emptied himself of deity to take human nature in his incarnate state.

The kenosis theorists explain that Jesus emptied himself of great-making properties like omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience in order to take human nature during his incarnate state. These great making properties or attributes ground God's transcendence. So in giving them up, God actually gave up his transcendence, which is a great sacrifice on the part of God.

To explain Jesus' assumption of humanity, Paul attests to Jesus emptying himself of divinity and taking on humanity to become human in all ways, except sin.¹⁷ Thomasius explains Jesus' self-emptying of divinity as the putting off his great making properties during the incarnate state. The great making properties ensure God's glory or transcendence but they are not necessary for God to have when God takes human nature and enter the state of humility.¹⁸

Giving up great making properties entails God not being transcendent during the incarnation. Rather God the son became like us in all ways, except sin. The great making properties are necessary for God to hold in his ruling state because they help God rule the world, but they are not necessary for God in his servant state. When God became human to save humanity from sin and death, he had no need of great making properties; thus he gave them up. After his mission of saving humanity, God returned to his state of glory and again took his great making properties.

The heated debate among theologians is whether these great making properties are essential to God such that God must have them. If they are essential to God, then Jesus must have them to be God. But if Jesus was divine and not omniscient, in his incarnate state, then kenosis theologians are right to deny that these are essential properties to God. Indeed, kenosis theologians urge us to review the list of God's essential properties in light of the incarnation before settling on which properties are essential to God. Stephen T. Davis says:

¹⁷ *Philippians 2:8ff.*

¹⁸ Gottfried Thomasius, "Christ's Person and Work," in *God and Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology*, trans and ed. Claude Welch, A Library of Protestant Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 37.

I certainly hold that they are properties of God, and I also believe that God (like all beings) must have certain of his properties essentially. But with most actually existing beings (as opposed, say, to mathematical entities like squares or segments) it is not easy to say which of their properties are essential to them. ... Furthermore, the fact that I believe both that Jesus Christ was God and that Jesus Christ was non-omniscient leads me to deny that omniscience is essential to God.¹⁹

Davis's claim here is that it is not easy to make prior determination about which properties are essential to a class such that every member of the class exemplifies them. The best way to determine properties that are essential to a being is to verify which properties it exemplifies in all its states of existence. Similarly, the only cogent way to determine which properties are essential to God is to look and see which properties God exemplifies in all states of God's existence.

If we look at what the Bible says about properties that Jesus exemplified during the incarnation it appears that Jesus lacked omniscience. Prior to his incarnation, Jesus exemplified omniscience but during his incarnation Jesus seems to lack omniscience. So, there are properties Jesus held prior to his incarnation, such as being omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, but which he lacked during his incarnate state. If Jesus held certain properties at a time but lacks them at a later time, it is fair to conclude that those properties are not essential to God, at least, in the incarnate state. If there are such non-essential divine properties, then they are the properties that God sacrificially gave up during the incarnation to take up human nature in order to save humans from sin and death. That which God sacrificed in order to become human is, I suggest, his transcendence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me reiterate that God indeed gave up his transcendence in the incarnate state and took human nature to save human beings from sin and death. It was God's grace over human beings what compelled God to give up his transcendence and to take human nature in order to save human beings from sin and death. Since, it was necessary for God to sacrifice his transcendence in order to save human beings from sin and death, God sacrificed his

¹⁹ Stephen T. Davis, *Logic and the Nature of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub, 1983), p. 124.

transcendence to save human beings from sin and death. God did so in the person of Jesus Christ, the second member of Godhead. The incarnation, therefore, marks God drastic humiliation in the self-emptying of divine glory or transcendence and the assumption of servant properties to save fallen humanity from sin and death.

Still, this process of saving human beings from sin and death sufficiently demonstrated God's unfailing grace and love for human beings that all human beings ought to respond in love to God. Had God not gone to extreme lengths to saved human beings from sin, humans would not have known or appreciated God's unconditional love and abundant grace to human beings. Indeed, even though God demonstrated both properties in creating human beings, only God by redeemed self-emptying of divine glory to save human beings from sin could human know it.

Had God failed to save humans or restore humans to their original fellowship with God, the blame would also have been on God. The only justification God would have had for not saving human beings from sin and death would have been God's transcendence, which bars God from being involved with sinful humanity.

But thank God, God gave up his transcendence to save human beings. God graciously gave up his transcendence, for a time, to be involved in the sinful life of human beings so he can save humans from sin. It is, indeed, with great pleasure that reformation theologians announced our salvation by the grace through the faith in God. Indeed, God's grace has saved us from sin. Thank God for the grace of God.



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