

INAUGURAL LECTURES

SOMETHING MUCH TOO PLAIN TO SAY

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In his recent anthology entitled, *The Impossibility of God*, Michael Martin notes that there are “basically two kinds of arguments for the nonexistence of God: arguments for the improbability of God and arguments for the impossibility of God.”¹ Arguments for the improbability of God deal, in the main, with the notion of evidences. The anthology that Martin produced is meant to address and support the latter kinds of arguments, that is, arguments for the impossibility of God.

In that anthology, Martin arranges arguments for the impossibility of God into five categories: there are *definitional disproofs* based on an inconsistency in the definition of God; there are *deductive evil disproofs* based on an inconsistency between the existence of God who has certain attributes and the existence of evil; there are *doctrinal disproofs* based on an inconsistency between the attributes of God and a particular religious doctrine; there are *multiple attributes disproofs* based on an inconsistency between two or more divine attributes; and finally there are *single attribute disproofs* based on an inconsistency within just one attribute. While Martin is clear that this categorization is not written in stone, it should be noted here that in *every case* the disproofs for the existence of God have to do with God’s attributes and with how a God who is supposed to have certain attributes can, at the same time, relate to his creation or to other attributes he might have by virtue of creation. Since Martin’s contributors—call them Martin’s Minions—argue that there are insuperable contradictions between a God who has these attributes and creation, this kind of God simply cannot exist. Clearly, according to Martin, since the traditional concept of God provides nothing but “an ocean of contradictions,” God cannot exist.² Or, to put it in the common philosophical vernacular, given certain agreed upon attributes of God, there is no possible world in which he can exist. His existence is, therefore, impossible.

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¹ Michael Martin and Ricki Monnier, eds., *The Impossibility of God* (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 2003).

² *Ibid.*, 14.

As most of us realize, attacks on the attributes of God are not reserved only for unbelievers. The history of the church is replete with examples of many within the church who have attempted to deny what traditionally have been seen as essential attributes of God. Open theism is perhaps the most recent example; Karl Barth's theology is perhaps the most modern extensive example.

My purpose in this lecture is, first of all, apologetic; it is a defense of Christian theism. We will not be dealing with every specific argument for the impossibility of God offered by Martin's Minions, but will, instead, offer a corrective that any philosopher or theologian worth his salt would have to take seriously if objections to God's existence based on his attributes are to be taken seriously by a Christian audience. (And it should be noted here that, in lodging objections against God's existence, Martin's Minions attempt to stand on the ground of theism; they attempt to argue their points *on the basis* of certain attributes of God that theism affirms.)

My second purpose is an attempt to justify my title as Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology. I want to incorporate both disciplines in my argument and response to Martin. More importantly, however, and more central in the overall scheme, I want to use the tools and methods of philosophy, incorporated with Reformed systematic theology, to develop a response to these objections to God's existence, based as they are on a supposed incompatibility of properties. I will attempt as well to respond to much, if not most, of the discussions of God's existence and attributes in Martin's anthology that seek to undermine a biblical, and by that I mean Reformed, understanding of who God is and how he relates to his creation. I should say here that what I am attempting to do in responding to Martin's Minions is to lay out different strands of an argument, which will only finally resolve itself in the conclusion. So, while you might think at times that our discussion is not related to Martin's objections, the relationship, I hope, will be more obvious and explicit when these different strands are brought together at the end.

Two methodological notes of importance to remember in this discussion:

I will not be moving from exegetical to theological to philosophical considerations. I will rather be presupposing that, since no significant exegetical or theological refutations have been forthcoming concerning the central elements of a Reformed doctrine of God, those efforts in the history of the church remain in place, whole and intact.

Secondly, note that I will be using the *tools and methods of philosophy* in order to respond to the objections given. In using those tools, please note carefully what I am *not* saying. I am *not* saying that philosophical tools are the best, certainly not the most efficient, way to discuss these matters. And I am *not* saying that *the way* to discuss the doctrine of God is by way of philosophy. All of the doctrinal points that I will make here have exegetical and theological support behind them, and those are primary when discussing who God is.

But we should note here that, in using philosophy's own language and tools, not only is this in keeping with Van Til's own approach to apologetics, but it has a rich and deep tradition which itself was at the heart of Reformed and post-Reformation doctrinal developments. Without belaboring details here, we can

simply note that in such cases where philosophy is used in the service of theology, it can be a useful handmaiden, especially when objections to Christianity are lodged within that context. And it should not escape us that, in using such language and tools, there is a persuasive value that would not be present otherwise.

So, in response to Martin's Minions, we can begin with the question, "Is the existence of God really impossible?" How would we go about answering such a question? One rather dismissive, though fundamentally correct, answer might be Hamlet's response to Horatio: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Perhaps one, and even one legitimate, response would be to say that philosophy is just not able to imagine who the true God is and what he is able to do. But, true as it is, there is little of persuasive value in such a response. Is there a way to respond that would contain something of a persuasive element in that it would seek to discuss such objections within the context in which they are given? Maybe so.

In the vast majority of arguments that are given by Martin's Minions for the impossibility of God, the problem that these authors set out is not, in the first place, that there is no evidence for God's existence. That approach has a rich history as well, but it is not the one these authors take. *Rather—and this is all important for our purposes here—the problem is that God, as he is traditionally thought of, cannot exist because of an inherent incompatibility or inconsistency either between his own attributes, or between his attributes and the properties of creation.* Thus, there is no possible world in which this kind of God can exist. So, the proper response to such objections is not to turn to evidential proofs for God's existence, but rather to provide a context in which the existence of God as he is traditionally understood can be articulated consistently, though, of course, not and never exhaustively.

One response, therefore, to Martin's Minions might be this: Suppose we assume the notion of essentialism in our discussions about God.³ Essentialism goes back at least as far as Aristotle, and has been part and parcel, in one form or another, of Christian theology from its earliest days to the present. Not only so, but along with a revival of discussions about God in philosophy has come a revival, through Saul Kripke and others, of a state-of-the-art notion of essences. Put simply, essentialism affirms that there are such things as essences, and that some things are essential and some contingent. But then just what is an essence? Typically, essences have been defined as that which something *must* be, in contrast to that which a thing *might* be. An essence is that which is *necessary* to something.

But then how do we understand this notion of *necessity*? Again, one of the ways that philosophers and theologians have understood necessity is as a basic "mode" of truth or of existence. Modes of truth deal with propositions and are called *de dicto* modalities; modes of existence deal with those things to which propositions point, and are called *de re* modalities. Our interest here is in *de re* modalities, modalities of things rather than propositions. And whenever modes of existence are discussed, the primary modes articulated are necessity, contingency, possibility, and impossibility. Something is necessary if it *must* be; something is impossible if it *cannot* be; something is contingent if it *may or may not* be;

³ We cannot engage the details here, but any notion of essentialism utilized in this context must be *Christian-theistic* essentialism, in which case God himself, and not bare possibility, determines what is essential to a thing and what is contingent.

and something is possible if it is necessary or contingent, but not if it is impossible. In discussions about God relative to essentialism, the modal notions that will occupy us are primarily the necessary and the contingent. In order to understand what we mean by these modes of existence, a couple of definitions are in order.

Modal notions are routinely discussed in terms of possible worlds semantics. Though there are a number of definitions available, to keep matters simple we will define a "possible world" as a "possible state of affairs." This is important in the discussion. We should not think of a possible world as a "thing" like our world or like the universe. It is simply a possible state of affairs. Given our understanding of possibility—that is, that it includes both the necessary and the contingent—a possible state of affairs, or possible world, may exist either necessarily or contingently. That is, a possible world includes (1) a state of affairs that may not exist but could, (2) a state of affairs that *must* exist, or (3) a state of affairs that *may* exist. So, a possible world can include the actual, the contingent, the necessary, as well as the non-actual. Further, if we define essence as "a property, or set of properties, which something has necessarily," we can readily see that entailed in the concept of essence is a notion, or a *mode*, of necessity. Part of the design of possible worlds semantics is to help us see just what we mean when we ascribe modalities, like necessity (and contingency), to things.

In "possible worlds speak," something has a property necessarily if it has that property in every world in which it exists. Or, to put it another way, necessity, in the way that we are discussing it here, is about essential properties. That is, if W equals "a possible world," then we could define essence as

E_{df} = For any thing x and any possible world, W , in which x exists and any property P , x has P in W .⁴

Since, therefore, x has P at any possible world in which it exists, P is essential to it; it does not exist at any world at all unless its existence includes the property P (this entails, of course, that it is impossible that x exist without P). Contrast this with properties that are not essential to a thing, contingent properties. In such cases, we could define these properties as

C_{df} = For any thing x and any possible world, W , in which x exists and any property P , x has P in W and x does not have P in W_1 .

There are some worlds, W , at which x has P and some worlds, W_1 , at which x does not have P .⁵ This means that P is a contingent property of x .

⁴ Assumed in this discussion, without argument, is a notion of the actual such that only those things that exist have properties. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, "Actualism and Possible Worlds," *Theoria* 42 (1976): 139-60.

⁵ This account of contingent or accidental properties depends for its cogency on the S5 system of modal logic. The details of the various systems are beyond the bounds of our discussion here. Suffice it to say at this point that, to the extent that modal logic and possible worlds semantics is useful, S5—including (and advancing) as it does its lesser cousins, S4 and T—seems to make the most sense. For a helpful summary of the differences in these systems, see Jay Wesley Richards, *The Untamed God: A Philosophical Exploration of Divine Perfection, Simplicity and Immutability* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 53-54 n. 14.

In virtually all of Martin's anthology, the notion of God as a necessary being is assumed. It is just *that* assumption that causes problems for most of his contributors. But, for the most part, the authors understand that if there is such a being who is in every way perfect and in no way lacks anything good, then this being must exist necessarily. The problems, therefore, revolve around the fact that this perfect and necessary being either cannot co-exist with other attributes he is supposed to have, or cannot have a particular attribute, given what we know of the universe.

So, let us begin to address this problem by applying essentialism to the traditional understanding of God. Within the domain of possible worlds, the argument for the necessity of God's existence entails the fact that God exists at every possible world. If there were a possible world, *per impossibile*, at which there was no God, then God's existence would be merely possible, and he could not be One without lack or privation, since his existence would be reduced to a contingency. That is, there would be a possible world at which God did not exist. If that were true, then it would be the case that his existence was dependent on a certain possible world obtaining, in which case he would be dependent on something that was independent of his own existence, that is, a possible world, or the notion of possibility itself.

Now entailed in the notion of God's necessary existence is God's essence. Assuming for the moment that existence is a property, p , the proposition,

(1) God has p in every world,

extends not only to his existence but (remembering E_{df} above) to anything else that God has (or *is*) essentially.⁶

Without rehearsing the exegetical material here, one further point must be understood. Reformed theology has historically often made its way to the attributes of God by way of the *names* that he gives to himself in Scripture. And prominent among God's given names in Scripture (used over 5000 times) is the "I Am" name, or Yahweh, which gives rise to the focus of our understanding of God as *a se*.

With this in mind, how do we begin to understand certain attributes of God as essential attributes? One way, though admittedly not the only way, would be to take those attributes that are entailed by his character as the "I Am," attributes that are necessarily exemplified at every possible world, attributes, we could say, that are related strictly to God (quite apart from anything else), and affirm them to be of the essence of who he is. In other words, given that God is essentially *a se*, we could begin to posit attributes or properties that are entailed

⁶ We should note here that to say that God *has* a property is not to undermine the biblical doctrine of simplicity. It is simply to say *what kind of* God we are talking about, without pronouncing, at this point, on the relationship of his properties, or of him to his properties. The doctrine of simplicity, together with an essentialist understanding of God's properties, would affirm that whatever properties or attributes are essential to God are, themselves, identical to him. They are not parts or properties in some way added to or divisible from him.

by his essential independence, which would themselves, therefore, also be exemplified at every possible world.

For example, is it the case that God is essentially infinite? If we affirm that God is a perfect and necessary being who lacks nothing, if we affirm his character as *a se*, then it cannot be the case that he is in any way limited by anything outside of himself, since to be limited would, by definition, be a lack; it would be a constraint placed on God by something else, be it space, or time, or human choices. We can affirm, then, that God is essentially infinite. Entailed in his independence and his perfection is infinity itself.

On the other hand, is the property "Creator" of the essence of God? One way to answer that question is to ask if there is a possible world in which God is not the Creator.⁷ Or, to put it another way, is it possible that God not create anything? The orthodox answer to this question is, of course, yes. To answer no to this question would mean that God *had to* create the world, in which case there is no possible world in which God is not the Creator, in which, therefore, the creation of the world would itself be a necessary property of God's.⁸ But then God would have a necessary property that (1) was not entailed by his independence (since the necessity of God's creative activity would entail a dependence on something besides God), and (2) implied some kind of lack in God (since the necessity of something *ad extra* would mean that God was in need of it in order to be who he essentially is). So "being Creator" is not an essential property that God has.

It would seem, then, that God has essential properties, and others that are not essential to him. How should we delineate between these two? What is it that helps us to see God's essential properties as essential, and what is it that helps us to see God's other properties as non-essential? According to our definition of essential properties, E_{df} essential properties are essential in case they are exemplified at every possible world. Not only so, but that which is exemplified at every possible world (and thus necessary) is anything that is entailed by the fact that God is the "I Am."

That is, God's essential properties are properties that God has that in no way depend on anything but himself in order to obtain at every world. Since God has these properties in every possible world, they are essential properties; they are necessary attributes of his. It is not possible, then, that God not have these properties (i.e., there is no possible world in which God does not have these properties).

We can say as well that God is essentially omniscient; he knows himself exhaustively. There is nothing hidden from his understanding of himself. Unlike us, God has exhaustive knowledge of his Triune character. He is also eternal; there is nothing constraining God's essential character such that he is

⁷ We may be tempted to say there is no possible world in which God is not Creator, since for any possible world to exist at all, God has to create it. However, this is to think of a world as something actualized, rather than as a maximal state of affairs.

⁸ The Reformed scholastic notion of hypothetical necessity, as pertaining to creation, is not denied here, because contained in that notion is the possibility of no creation at all.

subject to the passing of moments or is in some essential way bound to a past, present, and future. But it is precisely at these points, to use just two examples, where philosophers of religion, atheistic philosophers, and many Christian theologians have problems. Examples could be almost endlessly multiplied, but since I began with Martin's Minions, let me give just one example from their anthology. In his survey of what he calls "incompatible properties arguments," Theodore Drange offers the following argument:

1. If God exists, then he is immutable.
2. If God exists, then he is omniscient.
3. An immutable being cannot know different things at different times.
4. To be omniscient, a being would need to know propositions about the past and future.
5. But what is past and what is future keep changing.
6. Thus, in order to know propositions about the past and future, a being would need to know different things at different times (from 5).
7. It follows that, to be omniscient, a being would need to know different things at different times (from 4 and 6).
8. Hence it is impossible for an immutable being to be omniscient (from 3 and 7).
9. Therefore, it is impossible for God to exist (from 1, 2 and 8).⁹

In offering a response to this kind of argument, and any other argument that seeks to deny God's aseity, or to show an inherent conflict in God's essential character by virtue of his creation, we can sum up our initial response to this argument by considering the Westminster Confession's initial and thus more general notion of *covenant*:

WCF 7.1. The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

In other words, the Confession recognizes that there is an ontological distance between God and man. The distance here is not, of course, spatial. It is a distance of *being*, a distance that comes about by virtue of the fact that God creates something, some *being*, that is ontologically different from himself. How, then, does God bridge the gap between himself and those he has created in his image? "By some voluntary condescension," the Confession says. It is this "condescension" that I would like for us to think about in light of what we have said thus far, and in light of the objections of Martin's Minions.

Just what is this condescension? It is *not*, we should make clear, God's attempt to try to fit into an otherwise hostile, or perhaps neutral, context. It is not God coming down to take to himself habits and customs that are foreign to him in order to blend in with a particular culture. God's condescension is much broader and deeper than that. But just what does this voluntary divine condescension entail? We should note that, *as far as God's relationship to that which he creates*, it entails

⁹ Theodore M. Drange, "Incompatible-Properties Arguments: A Survey," in *The Impossibility of God*, 189.

everything that he does, says, and is *with respect to that relationship*.¹⁰ For example, the very fact that God brings something into existence, to which he himself is in some way related, entails, automatically, an act of condescension.

It entails an act of condescension because of who God is essentially. Given that God is supremely perfect and without need or constraint, to begin to relate himself to that which is limited, constrained, and not perfect is, in sum, to condescend.¹¹ For example, the very fact that Scripture tells us that “the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2) is evidence of God’s own condescension; he had to “come down” to hover over the waters. God, as Infinite Spirit, has no need to constrain himself by hovering over the face of the waters. He is altogether infinite, without constraint. But he does hover, and he condescends to do so.

Not only so, but just after Adam and Eve had sinned, “they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Gen 3:8).¹² God condescends to his creation in order to maintain a relationship with those creatures whom he has made in his image. Evidence of (something of) the extent of that condescension is found in the next verse as well: “But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, ‘Where are you?’” (Gen 3:9). In condescending to relate to Adam and Eve, he is, like them, (not essentially, but covenantally) restricted in his knowledge of where they might be hiding in the garden.

In order to see this condescension in its clearest light, however, it should be obvious to all of us, though it seems almost universally to escape the notice of most philosophers and many theologians, we need to turn to that supreme example of condescension as given to us in the Person of Christ. As with our discussion of theology proper, we will not enter into the exegetical material here, but will have to content ourselves with the traditional, Reformed understanding of Christ, resting as it does on the historic creeds and on the thus far irrefutable exegetical work that produced it.

And here we will need to be all too brief and must presuppose at least a rudimentary understanding of Christology as we proceed. Any doctrinal discussion of the Person of Christ must begin with the Chalcedonian Creed. In that Creed, you will remember, the relationship between the Person of the Son of God and his human nature is laid out in a series of four negatives. The Creed affirms that the Son of God, as God, is to be “acknowledged in two natures inconfusedly (*ἀσυγχύτως*), unchangeably (*ἀτρέπτως*), indivisibly (*ἀδιαίρετως*), and inseparably (*ἀχωρίστως*).” It goes on to affirm, concerning this hypostatic union, that with regard to these two natures,

¹⁰ When we say that God’s condescension involves everything that he is, we are not saying that all that he is, is exhausted in this act of condescension; that would be to deny what we have already affirmed with respect to God’s essential character.

¹¹ To say that creation is not perfect is not to say that it was not good, as God himself declared it to be. It is simply to say that it was inherently dependent and thus not in any way necessary, as a perfect being would be.

¹² For an analysis of this “theophany,” see James A. Borland, *Christ in the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), 83-86.

. . . the distinction of natures [is] by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature [is] preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And here is the crucial and profound truth of the matter. While there are careful distinctions that must be maintained with respect to God (e.g., that God's essence is identical with God himself), there is no question that what orthodox Christology has always taught is that God *came down*, in the second Person of the Trinity, who was, is, and remains fully God, and he took on a human nature without thereby in any way changing his essential nature as God. To think that because God interacts with creation he must necessarily change or in some way limit his essential deity, is, in effect, to fail to see the Incarnation for what it is. It is to fail to see Christian theism for what it is. It is, to use the standard ecclesiastical jargon, heresy. It is, we could say, to fail to see the most basic truth of Christianity as in any way relevant to philosophical discussions of theism. A truly Christian theology, a truly Christian philosophy or philosophy of religion, will take seriously the principle that God came down; while remaining who he is essentially, he condescended in order, first, to create something other than himself, and then also to relate to that creation by taking on that which is and was in no way essential to him.

Here again, certain theological categories that have been useful in helping us expand the truth of the Chalcedonian Creed can be helpful in our discussion. Let us think first of all about the *communicatio idiomatum*. The basic notion of *unio personalis* was and is non-controversial in the history of the church. Orthodox theology has always affirmed the basic hypostatic union with respect to the Person of Christ. From this basic agreement, however, matters become a bit more complex. Once the personal union is affirmed, the next obvious question that we are confronted with is just how we should think about the relationship of the divine Person to his assumed human nature. Even if the heresies of Nestorianism and Eutychianism are avoided, as they are in the Chalcedonian Creed, there are still questions looming about the relationship of the divine Person of the Son of God to the human nature that he has taken on.

The question is, "Is there any sense in which we can speak about a *communication of properties* in the Person of Christ, while at the same time affirming all that the Chalcedonian formulation says?" John Murray suggests that this notion of a communication of properties is not a Reformed one. The reason he suggests that, it seems to me, is because over time the *communicatio* came to mean, primarily at least, the communication of properties from the divine Person to his human nature. Indeed, if that is what is meant by the *communicatio*, then Reformed theology would reject that notion. This is not, however, what Calvin meant:

It is equally senseless to despise the "communication of properties," a term long ago invented to some purpose by the holy fathers. Surely, when the Lord of glory is said to be crucified [1 Cor 2:8], Paul does not mean that he suffered anything in his divinity,

but he says this because the same Christ, who was cast down and despised, and suffered in the flesh, was God and Lord of glory. In this way he was also Son of man in heaven [John 3:13], for the very same Christ, who, according to the flesh, dwelt as Son of man on earth, was God in heaven.¹³

The sense of the *communicatio* that is affirmed by Calvin, and the Reformed after him, is that properties of each nature, and both together, can be ascribed to the *one Person*. The *communicatio*, therefore, has to do with the relationship of the human nature to the divine Person. So, we can affirm the *communicatio idiomatum* just so long as what we are denying is that the properties of one nature are communicated to the other, and we are affirming that the properties of either nature are rightly referred to the one Person of Christ. In that regard, we should note as well the usefulness of what has been called the *extra Calvinisticum*.

The notion of the *extra Calvinisticum* or the "Calvinistic outside" is another label that surfaced in the context of Lutheran theology. It is a label given by the Lutherans to try to show the error in Reformed Christology. As most note, however, even though this notion of the extra arose out of the controversy over the Lord's Supper with the Lutherans, the concept itself is not restricted to Calvin. Some have argued, rightly in my opinion, that it could be better labeled the *extra catholicum* in that it represents the majority view of the church in history. The supposed error, according to Lutheran theology, is this: The Person of the Son of God is not contained within the Person of Christ as the God-man, but rather the *Logos* transcends, in his deity, Christ in the flesh. There is, then, an "outside" (*extra*) aspect to the Son of God, even as Incarnate. But this view is not erroneous from a Reformed perspective. Part of what motivated this *extra* was the standard dictum: *Finitum non capax infiniti*—the finite cannot contain the infinite. But there was more to it than that. One other (lengthy) quotation from Calvin summarizes the position well:

But some are carried away with such contentiousness as to say that because of the natures joined in Christ, wherever Christ's divinity is, there also is his flesh, which cannot be separated from it. As if that union had compounded from two natures some sort of intermediate being which was neither God nor man! So, indeed, did Eutyches teach, and Servetus after him. But from Scripture we plainly infer that the one person of Christ so consists of two natures that each nevertheless retains unimpaired its own distinctive character. And they will be ashamed to deny that Eutyches was rightly condemned. It is a wonder they do not heed the cause of his condemnation; removing the distinction between the natures and urging the unity of the person, he made man out of God and God out of man. What sort of madness, then, is it to mingle heaven with earth rather than give up trying to drag Christ's body from the heavenly sanctuary? . . . They bring forward these passages for their side: 'No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man, who is in heaven'; and again: 'The Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known'. In this manner, he is said to have descended to that place according to his divinity, not because divinity left heaven to hide itself in the prison house of the body, but because

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols.; LCC; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2:1402 (4.17.30).

even though it filled all things, still in Christ's very humanity it dwelt bodily, that is, by nature, and in a certain ineffable way. There is a commonplace distinction of the schools to which I am not ashamed to refer: although the whole Christ is everywhere, still the whole of that which is in him is not everywhere. And would that the Schoolmen themselves had honestly weighed the force of this statement. For thus would the absurd fiction of Christ's carnal presence have been obviated.¹⁴

The primary reason Calvin gives for affirming the *extra* is that, without it, we cannot say that Christ became like we are in every way, yet without sin. If the omnipresence of God is communicated to the human nature, for example, then Christ became like us in every way, except for sin and *omnipresence*. This is why Calvin thinks that not affirming the *extra* produces a third thing, something neither man nor God.

The point that we must recognize here, in light of our discussion above, is that God, in the Second Person of the Trinity, and in his condescension to us, was able to take on the entirety of human nature (without sin) and he was able to do so without in any way compromising, contravening, or undermining his essential deity. Paul Helm, speaking of Calvin's *extra*, puts it this way:

According to the Chalcedonian view of the Incarnation . . . , whatever is essential to the divine nature cannot be yielded up in the Incarnation. That is, if there are properties that are essential to God being God . . . then in becoming incarnate God cannot cease to be omnipotent or omniscient. . . . By insisting on the *extra*, Calvin is arguing that the Son of God is God, and therefore has God's essence. In other words, the Son has all of God's essential properties. . . . Therefore, if the Incarnation is truly the Incarnation of the Son of God, then it must preserve the divinity of the Son of God unaltered or unimpaired.¹⁵

I would like to add one further point on the *extra* before we move on, a point relevant to our entire discussion here. Although it is impossible to do justice to the complexity of Karl Barth's theology in this lecture, it is worth noting that a Reformed doctrine of God is compromised, not just in philosophy, but in neo-orthodoxy as well. As is the case with most of the doctrines of historic Christianity, Karl Barth had a problem with the historic Christian notion of the *extra*, and his problem relates directly to his unusual ontology. Barth's ontology has been labeled "actualistic." Included in that label is an opposition to any "essentialistic" ontology. Barth is adamantly opposed to any notion that would not identify God with his revelation. He also argues that God's freedom, which itself is ultimate, is the determining condition for God's being. In other words, it is God's absolute freedom, his absolute will, which is and must be free, that determines exactly who and what God is like.

The problem that Barth seems to have with the *extra*, given this ontology, is precisely the point that we are trying to support, that is, that there is a notion of God's essence that defines, and is presupposed by, everything else that God is

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61-62.

and does. That notion of essence carries with it at least two theological problems for Barth. The first problem is this: How can one relate the essence of God, in this case of God in Christ, to the Christ of history? On Barth's view, if there is a *Logos asarkos* "outside" of the *Logos ensarkos*, then this *Logos asarkos* is an indeterminate state of being which is above and prior to the determination to enter time. And if indeterminate, then there is or can be (who can really know?) a radical discontinuity between the *Logos asarkos* and the *Logos ensarkos*.

The second problem for Barth is related to the first. If there is a *Logos asarkos* that transcends, and even "pre-dates" the *Logos ensarkos*, then, in the words of Bruce McCormack,

the decision to assume flesh in time could only result in something being added to that already completed identity; an addition which has no effect upon what he is essentially. Being the Redeemer, in this view, tells us nothing about who or what the *Logos* is in and for himself. It is merely a role he plays, something he does; but what he does in time has no significance for his eternal being.¹⁶

Barth's solution to this problem is what McCormack calls a "covenant ontology." This is identical to what he elsewhere calls an "actualistic ontology." What it means is that the *act* of God Incarnating himself is of the essence of God himself. So, says Barth:

We have consistently followed the rule, which we regard as basic, that statements about the divine modes of being antecedently in themselves cannot be different in content from those that are to be made about their reality in revelation. . . . The reality of God in His revelation cannot be bracketed by an 'only', as though somewhere behind His revelation there stood another reality of God; the reality of God which encounters us in His revelation is His reality in all the depths of eternity.¹⁷

The important point to note here is that Barth denies the *extra* because, at least in part, he can think of no way in which God can determine to relate himself to his creation except by being *essentially* related to that creation. There is then, in Barth, no distinction between God as he is essentially and God as he is covenantally. That is, God is essentially Revealed; and this, I hope you can see, erases the Creator/creature distinction. God is dependent on his revelation to be who he is; to put it another way, he is *essentially* Incarnate, which is to say, essentially dependent on that which is created. If that is the case, then it is difficult to see how Barth could hold to any orthodox Christology at all.

It should also be said, though we cannot develop it here, that Barth's actualistic ontology, including his notion of God, requires either that God's freedom is who he "essentially" is, so that his freedom just *is* his essence, or as we have said, it makes God as dependent on creation as creation is on him. If Barthians would reply by saying that the only reason God is *essentially* "for us" is due to his free decision, then that free decision stands behind and above—it transcends—

¹⁶ Bruce McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (ed. John Webster; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 97.

¹⁷ Quoted in McCormack, "Grace and Being," 100.

who God is and thus it becomes an “essence” in and of itself. Thus, Barth’s actualism is either essentialism in disguise, with the unhappy consequence of an arbitrary and capricious God, or it is another version of a God whose “godness” is defined by who we are, rather than the other way around.

In terms of our main consideration, and in stark contrast to Barth, we should note that, in the Incarnate Christ, the essential precedes and determines the covenantal (this provides the “link” between the essential and covenantal that Barth cannot find). With respect to the hypostatic union, the theological point that has been important historically to emphasize is that the human nature of Christ was both *anhypostatic* and *enhypostatic*. That is, the human nature is *anhypostatic* in that it has no existence in and of itself; it is *enhypostatic* in that it can only exist or subsist by virtue of the Person of the Son of God. The reason that this is crucial is because it properly and biblically safeguards the Creator/creature distinction in that it affirms that between the divine and human natures in Christ, the divine is, in every way, primary and foundational. This is an important point to realize any time we discuss the Incarnation (and, parenthetically, any time we discuss the nature of Scripture). To put it another way, in the Incarnation we do not have two natures coming together to produce a new Person. Rather, the Incarnation is the Person of the Son of God assuming human flesh, so that the Person of Christ just is the Person of the Son of God, but now with a human nature added.

The reason that this is important is because it highlights again to us that the ontological precedes, determines, guides, and regulates the historical and the temporal. Or to put it in Van Tilian vernacular, the ontological Trinity is the presupposition behind everything else, including history, and including redemptive history. In both the *communicatio* (in its Reformed mutation) as well as in the *extra Calvinisticum*, note that it is the *Person*, the *Person* of the Son of God, who takes precedence over any notion of human nature or of properties. That is, in the *communicatio*, both human and divine properties are rightly ascribed to the Person; so also in the *extra Calvinisticum* the *Person* of the Son of God is not constrained by the nature assumed. To put it more generally, it is the ontological and essential that determines and defines the contingent and covenantal, *and not vice versa*.

In the same way, it is God’s essential character—complete with his aseity, immutability, omniscience, and so on—that is the presupposition behind his contingent—what I prefer to call his “covenantal”—character, *and not vice versa*. There is, in this sense, an *asymmetrical* relationship between the divine nature of Christ, which itself is identical to the Person of the Son of God, and the human nature, depending as it does on the *Logos* himself. And the glory of God is manifested in the fact that the weakness of the Incarnate Christ is only understood and interpreted against the backdrop of the glory that is his as the Son of God. The glory of God in his covenantal character is what it is—and here we should recognize the historic faithfulness of Reformed orthodoxy—only against the backdrop of the glory of the fullness of his essential deity. Give up one iota of that deity, and his glory begins to recede into oblivion, only to be replaced by a

perverse glory that we seek for ourselves. Give up one iota of that deity, and the Incarnation cannot be seen in all its humility and in all of its glorious mystery.

Much more could be said in this regard, but we are now in a position to respond to Martin's Minions and to the charge of the Impossibility of God. And here we need only think of the Incarnation, without taking away from its uniqueness and its "once-for-all-ness," as the consummation and climax of God's dealings with his creation, dealings which commenced at the point of creation. That is, in line with our definition and distinction between (E_{df})—that which is essential—and (C_{df})—that which is contingent—we can say, as we have said with respect to the Incarnation, that God possesses both kinds of properties as a result of his decision first to create and then to redeem. There are essential properties or attributes of God, and there are properties or attributes that God has by virtue of his free decision to create and redeem, properties that are contingent and that, as in the Incarnation, effect no change whatsoever in his essential deity.

In other words, just as the Bible is Christocentric with respect to the *work* of Christ, it is also, in this important sense, Christocentric with respect to the *Person* of Christ who himself is the substance of the covenant. All too briefly, then, we can note that with respect to the *communicatio idiomatum* as well as the *extra Calvinisticum*, what is true uniquely and supremely of the Son of God in the flesh is *also true* generally, historically, and typologically of God himself from creation and into eternity. If by virtue of the *communicatio* we are able to ascribe the properties of both the divine and the human natures of Christ to the one Person without fear of inconsistency, *so also* are we able to ascribe essential properties and contingent or covenantal properties to God himself without fear of inconsistency. Scripture itself does this. It will speak of God relenting or repenting. And theologians have argued over whether this requires that we give up on the notion of God's sovereign control, or whether it is simply a figurative way of speaking, or some other attempt to reconcile inconsistencies, or, in a postconservative context, no attempt at all. But the fact of God relenting no more requires that we give up on his aseity than does the fact of Christ being hungry require that we give up on his full deity. We can ascribe the properties of both to the one Person, realizing all the while that some properties are essential—they exist in every possible world—and thus are foundational, and other properties are contingent—they exist in only some possible worlds—and thus they depend on the essential to be what they are.

Or to use another example, one orthodox Calvinistic philosopher explains the transition from wrath to grace in this way:

So the truth about atonement, about reconciliation to God, has to be represented to us as if it implied a change in God, and so an inconsistency, an apparent contradiction, in his actions towards us. But in fact there is no change in God; he loves us from eternity. There is, however, a change in us, a change that occurs as by faith Christ's work is appropriated. The change is not from wrath to grace, but from *our belief* that we are under wrath to *our belief* that we are under grace.¹⁸

¹⁸ Helm, *Calvin*, 395.

This philosopher can see no way to reconcile the notion that God's disposition toward us changes, given his immutability. In good orthodox fashion, he is attempting to safeguard the aseity of God. In doing so, however, his solution comes closer to neo-orthodoxy than to orthodoxy. Why not affirm that there is indeed a change in God, specifically in his disposition toward us in history, but that such a change in no way obtains with respect to God's essential character? It only obtains with respect to God's covenantal character. Thus, there is no essential change in God, only a covenantal one, and one that depends on the essential in order to "be" at all. To think in the way this philosopher does, more typical than not in many Calvinistic contexts, is to attempt to map the dealings of God with man directly to his essential character. This would be similar to attempting to map Christ's humanity onto his deity, a practice that no orthodox theology has entertained.

So also with the *extra Calvinisticum*. Just as we affirm that Christ's actions here on earth in no way constrained the essential attributes of his deity as the Son of God, *so also* do God's acts here on earth in no way constrain the essential attributes of his deity. He is and remains essentially God, all the while, *really and truly*, interacting with us in creation. Since that is the case, then we can say that God, in dealing with his creation covenantally, has, from the point of creation, taken to himself characteristics, attributes, and properties of his creation in order to interact covenantally with his human creatures. While we agree with the Confession that Christ is *the substance* of the covenant (WCF 7.6), we should also be ready to affirm that the nature of condescension, which has been a part of God's dealings with his creation from the outset, is that God takes to himself created properties, all the while remaining who he is, in order to relate himself to man. We can look at the Incarnation, then, redemptive-historically as the climax and culmination of the way in which God has, since creation, interacted with that which he has made.

This, of course, has the effect of radically altering our notion of compatibility and consistency. Is it the case that the nature of God in the fullness of his deity is compatible or consistent with the nature of creation in the fullness of its dependence? Only if and when God is able, by virtue of his condescension, while remaining God, to bring the two together. And he *does* bring the two together in his dealings with man, but supremely in one Person, the Lord Jesus Christ. (Parenthetically, perhaps you can see that this notion of compatibility has ramifications across the entire spectrum of God's dealings with his creation, including such things as his control over us, his causality, his presence, and so forth. In each case, God can bring together his own "Godness" with respect to these things and relative to creation in such a way that the two—his control and our choices, for example—are brought together into a unity, and thus are compatible and consistent.) But is not this the way God has always acted? Is not God's making two otherwise incompatible things compatible part of his glorious design for creation? The two becoming one flesh, the union of the church

with Christ—these things are analogous to the Incarnation itself, and they show us that God is not hindered by our limited, creaturely, perhaps even sinful, notions of compatibility.

In closing, we come back to Martin's Minions. Is it the case, as Drange argues, that God cannot be both immutable and omniscient because to be omniscient would be for him to know different things at different times? This would be the case only if it were impossible for God to condescend. It would be the case only if the essential deity of God would be compromised if he took on contingent or covenantal properties. But we have already seen that there is no inherent incompatibility between that which is essential to God and that which is contingent. The Person of Christ is the supreme testimony to that fact. And here is the good news for Martin and his Minions. There is a possible world in which the Triune God takes to himself properties of his creation, all the while remaining fully God, in order, not simply to interact with us, but to redeem a people for himself. And that possible world just happens to be the actual world.

You may be wondering about the title of this lecture. Well, I take my cue from Dr. Trueman in deriving the title of my inaugural lecture from a poem. Only this time the poem is not from a Welshman, but from an Englishman, G. K. Chesterton, entitled, "The Wise Men," a part of which is this:

Oh, we have learnt to peer and pore
 On tortured puzzles from our youth,
 We know all the labyrinthine lore,
 We are the three wise men of yore,
 And we know all things but truth.

The gods of violence took the veil
 Of vision and philosophy,
 The Serpent that brought all men bale,
 He bites his own accursed tail,
 And calls himself Eternity.

The world grows terrible and white,
 And blinding white the breaking day;
 We walk bewildered in the light,
 For something is too large for sight,
 And something much too plain to say.

The Child that was ere worlds begun
 (. . . We need but walk a little way,
 We need but see a latch undone . . .)
 The Child that played with moon and sun
 Is playing with a little hay.

"Something much too plain to say—the Child that played with moon and sun is playing with a little hay." God is only impossible in a possible world where he is incapable of condescending to come to us to save us from ourselves and our sin. And thanks be to God that a possible world that God cannot redeem—that *kind* of possible world—is, as a matter of fact, impossible.

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