

# ‘To Gather Up All Things in Christ’: John Betz’s *Christ, the Logos of Creation* as an Exercise in the Relation of Doctrines

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**Abstract:** This article considers John Betz’s book *Christ, the Logos of Creation* as an exercise in the relation of doctrines within Christian systematic theology.

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*Christ, the Logos of Creation* (John Betz, Emmaus Academic, 2023) is a study of many things: it is an essay in ‘analogical metaphysics’, as the subtitle informs us, but equally an exploration of Christology, and an exercise in ecumenical theology, not least in the attention Betz gives to Karl Barth, and the Protestant concerns he represents. There is, that is to say, a breadth to this book, and that breadth is also represented in what I will address here, with the suggestion that Betz’s book is also a consideration of the relation of doctrines.

Betz’s acute eye for how one part of systematic theology bears upon another is on display from the first chapter, even from its first sentence, where he will not pass over the title ‘Christ’ without setting it out in a wider doctrinal context, writing that ‘For Christians, Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed One, who is anointed with the Holy Spirit to bring salvation to the world’. Comments about the relation of creation to the Son as Word soon follow, reminding us, for instance, that the Word is both ‘the Father’s word... [and] also the Logos of creation’, both God’s Word addressed to creation and creation’s ‘original, indwelling, and ultimate reason’. Here, Betz draws upon the language of Chalcedon: that the Word and created being belong together ‘without confusion’ and ‘without separation’. Connecting this to salvation or deification is equally important, and neglected, Betz thinks: ‘not knowing how to connect Christology to the doctrine of creation’, he writes, ‘we tend in practice to separate the doctrine of creation from the doctrine of redemption – although, according to Scripture, creation

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from the beginning was never anything other than a “plan” laid down before all ages “to gather up all things in Christ”, who is not only creation’s origin and pattern, but also the one in whom ‘all things reach their perfection’. In this, the Word is said not only to create *ex nihilo* but also justify *ex nihilo*. That is quite a concatenation of doctrines and their relations, present at the beginning of the book. The pace of this sort of exercise in connection hardly slackens through 11 further chapters.

Betz’s approach is resolutely analogical. By that, he means at least two things: first, that one doctrine repeats the features and structure of another without doing so identically. Second, that this is no merely accidental resemblance, nor is it grounded simply in the human poetic imagination. One doctrine reflects or recapitulates another because of some connection in reality, and not simply something suggested by the mind. In particular, in language that will echo throughout the book, doctrines have their analogically related features or structures in relation to Christ, and the hypostatic union, who is the primary analogate for theology. Christ is the template, the source, the cause, the bond, the one to whom all things point: ‘in him our primary analogate, our very form and archetype, has appeared and become the cornerstone of a new creation’.

Some chapters in this book were first produced as papers, so there is a little more independence between them than might otherwise be expected in a monograph. (This means that they would stand alone more effectively, for use in graduate teaching, than individual chapters from a book might otherwise do). We can therefore gauge the importance of an idea for Betz from the way in which it might recur, or be brought back, from one chapter to another. For instance, Betz more than once dwells on the idea that the coming forth of the Son from the Father is the wellspring of creation as a different sort of coming forth from God. The relation is analogical, which is to say a relation of similarity which appears against the background of a yet greater dissimilarity: the gratuitous procession of creation from God is both inexpressibly different from the eternal generation of the Son, yet also entirely related to it, even derived from it. Creation is an expression, a reflection of the Trinitarian processions; the dynamism of the act of creation carries on the dynamism of the eternal coming forth in the Godhead. As Betz puts it, this is the relation between ‘the Ex-istence of the Son from the Father, who is in the Son but other than the Son, and the ex-istence of the world from the Son, who is in creation, but other than creation’.

Although this book is deeply philosophical and profoundly interested in analogy as a concept across philosophy and theology, Betz does not linger over second-order reflection on how analogy might be characterised. For instance, we have just encountered a relation of relationships: between the relation of creation-to-creator and the relation Son-to-Father. This obviously presents us with an analogy of proportionality. However, Betz is equally clear that something more is going on here: while an analogy of proportionality need not imply causation or exemplarity (understanding may be to the mind as sight is to the eye, but that does not imply that one relationship causes the other, or

tell us anything about why that relation holds), the eternal generation *is* the wellspring of creation. It would be unfair to say that Betz ignores discussion of kinds of analogy and their taxonomy, but such discussions tend to fall into the background. He is simply more interested in the doctrines and the relations between them than he is in how to categorise those relations. All of that also goes to say that there is no sense in this book that analogy might be primarily a matter of speaking or semantics: for Betz analogy follows being, and being itself is an analogical matter.

Our discussion so far indicates a significant focal point for this book in the relation of God and creatures, taking Christ as the central and paradigmatic example. More could be said about Betz on this, but two additional points will have to suffice, one, we might say, bearing principally upon God and the other principally on creation. For the former, I have in mind Betz's use of what has come to be known as 'Non-Contrastive Transcendence', since its now paradigmatic exposition by Kathryn Tanner in *God and Creation in Christian Theology* (alongside whom we might more recently add Philipp Roseman in *Omne Agens Agit Sibi Simile* and Rowan Williams in *Christ, the Heart of Creation*). Such is God's transcendence in relation to creation that God is not simply different from it, as one thing is different from another. God is not comparable with creation, nor in a relation of contrast or competition with it. That is then also seen as the basis of the profound immanence of God within creation. Betz offers a particularly striking and crystalline formulation of what this means in Christological terms, (by which I mean, as will often be the case in this book, both 'for Christology' and also 'more generally, but with Christology the model, way in, or viewpoint'). Betz writes that God's transcendence is such – standing so much beyond and before all creaturely being and every creaturely category – that to be God is *not* to be a creature. By analogical metaphysics 'we do not mean any dialectic between them [the two natures of Christ], which the Incarnation somehow overcomes – as though to be human were essentially *not* to be God and to be God were essentially *not* to be human, and the hypostatic union were therefore an utterly incomprehensible uniting of antitheses.' (Here is an example of Betz's contention that Catholicism tends to relate aspects of theology by analogy, while Protestant theology favours dialectic and paradox).

Approaching the relation of God and creation as it were from the side of creation, and again in a Christological light, we have the idea that creation (not least in human beings) has an *obediential potency* towards the incarnation. The catholic tradition is circumspect here, and Betz with it, since nothing of the initiative for the Incarnation comes from creation. There is no latent power of 'incarnatability' to the created order. The point about *obediential potency* is simply that the Incarnation is something that God can give to or achieve with creation. Nonetheless, every caveat having been sounded along the line I have just set out, the Incarnation is a perfection beyond perfection for creation, not its violation. In going so far beyond what creation could be by itself (and creation could not be *anything* by itself), the Incarnation nonetheless goes with its grain.

I have mentioned Christ and the hypostatic union as characteristic prime analogates in what Betz writes. Such, indeed, is Betz' commitment to the primacy of Christ, that the Incarnation appears to have first place in the intention of God, before any need for repair or restoration. Recall the comment, quoted above, that 'creation from the beginning was never anything other than a "plan" laid down before all ages "to gather up all things in Christ"'. Betz's position on this question seems to be the Scotist or 'Incarnation Anyway' perspective: that the Incarnation is not contingent upon sin, and stands as God's first and best purpose for creation. That said, this position is not quite endorsed strictly as such. Not unrelated is the author's perspective on universalism. His commitment to the historic centre of gravity of Catholic thought is too strong for him unambiguously to espouse universal salvation, but it does receive a footnote, which concludes by saying that 'It is sufficient to hope that the love of God will prove victorious, even if it has to burn through every last fibre of resistant creation, and that in the end God really will be all in all, as Paul says (1 Cor 15:28)'.

The relation creation to Christ, as Son and revelation of the Father, takes on another dimension when Betz considers what he calls the relationship between the ontological and the noetic aspects at play (noetic meaning the capacity for creation to bear witness to God in virtue of its relation to Christ as creator). No reader of this journal will need to have it pointed out that this is contentious territory, and one in which Barth, and his concerns about Catholic theology, therefore again plays a significant role in this book. Does not any sense of creation bearing witness to God simply as creation (the challenge goes) short-circuit divine gratuity: in becoming Incarnate, in salvation, in revelation, and in the sovereignty of divine hiddenness? Betz offers a multifaceted response. One aspect is to say that creation and its capacities cannot be said to usurp gift and grace, since creation (as both noun and verb) is supremely undeserved and freely given. Betz also holds that it is one thing to say that the *Logos* is the foundation and template for creation, as he thinks we are required by Christian doctrine to say, and another to equate that relationship with knowledge or revelation that we might in some straightforward sense read from creation. The way in which all created things rest on the Word means, as Betz sees it, that Incarnation and revelation, when given, will never contradict the nature of creation as made in Christ. That is quite different from saying that what comes to be known in Christ by the Incarnation can be calculated or extrapolated in advance from the nature of the created order. Since Christ, and the hypostatic union, is the primary analogate, much of the congruence between the logic of creation and what is known of the *Logos* as encountered in Christ will only be discerned once the Word has become flesh and has been known as such. Here we again encounter the principle that Christ stands at the heart of the web of Christian doctrine not as some further general principle, but in the concreteness of his life and work. Thus, 'analogy itself is judged according to the revelation of the *Logos*'. Betz calls this the priority of theological analogy over philosophical analogy. A

parallel is seen in to what Betz describes as the proper attitude towards theology as a systematic venture (drawing particularly on Thomas Aquinas and Erich Przywara). As in creation, so in theology: what is given is never closed and finished, but always open and oriented towards God in an attitude of worship.

I have noted the emphasis in this book on the primacy and priority of Christ in all Christian thinking. That is not undermined by discussion of the *Filioque*, although it is perhaps qualified. Betz is concerned that the Son, and the Son's coming forth in the Godhead, is given such priority in the West as to render the Holy Spirit, and his spiration, secondary ('as a *temporal* third, and thus as an "afterthought"). Betz's response is not to deny that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (or perhaps principally from the Father but in relation to the Son), as the love they share. Rather, it is to suggest (alongside others such as Thomas Weinandy and Kathryn Tanner) that this should be balanced by postulating a role for the Spirit in the generation of the Son. As we might expect from this book, that is to suggest that the two processions are more analogous than the West has typically supposed: the Son is generated from the Father in the love of the Spirit, while the Spirit proceeds in the love between the Father and the Son. Even someone not inclined to be worried by the *Filioque* – and I number myself among such people – will find a good deal of provocation to fruitful thought here, not least in how it accords with a scriptural balance, saying both that the Son sends the Spirit and that the Spirit brings Christ (to Mary, to the Church, in the Eucharist).

Turning to soteriology, and to its place at the heart of a network of doctrines, I will begin with the observation, which I have already made, that Betz takes Christ to lie at the centre of every relation and of everything that can be said theologically. Since Christ is already at the heart of creation, and especially at the heart of humanity, he is the true and most representative human being. The Incarnation, and how Christ inhabits his humanity, is therefore salvific simply as such. In Christ, humanity does right what it has previously done wrong. Notably, therefore, we find no sense in Betz's writing that Christian theology involves God treating Christ 'as if' or 'instead of'. Whenever any logic of substitution might perhaps otherwise have been invoked or expected, we find that Christ is already so much in solidarity with humanity – or we might say that humanity is already so much constituted in relation to Christ – that substitution turns out to be the wrong category. Christ, for instance, is not on the cross instead of humanity, but precisely as human. No one spoke more truly than Pontius Pilate when he displayed Christ to the crowd and said *Ecce Homo!* In a sense, this is familiar theological territory, but I found it so forcefully expressed here as to become newly clear.

Also important and illustrative is the image of turning: of Adam turned away and Christ turned towards the Father. For Betz, Christ's attitude, or disposition – or almost we might say posture – does not simply *differ* from that of humanity as represented by Adam. Rather, Christ's being turned to the Father *restores* errant humanity. Betz explores similar territory in discussions of clinging and

holding lightly, and being willing to give up. Adam clung possessively to what he had, and sought to possess it with a certain independence (as the tradition has also said of Satan). In doing so, he lost that to which he sought to cling. In contrast, in a certain sense Christ held even his godhead lightly and, in that holding lightly, he retrieved the gift that had been lost. Betz insightfully links this disposition to offering. It is not that Christ holds lightly in the sense of being willing for God's gifts to fall away, but rather so as to offer them back to the Father. In Christ's holding lightly we do not find anything casual or careless, but rather the sort of letting go which is characteristic of, and characterised by, worship. This naturally connects to discussions of the Eucharist.

Such language of letting go, and holding lightly, alludes to Paul in Philippians. The associated notion of kenosis runs through the book. Indeed, kenosis is among the most prominent of all gathering points in Betz's relation of doctrines, and no other motif, analogically deployed, is more important for him. He links every part of the economy back to God and, in that, kenosis is frequently in view. Creation, for instance, reveals God as having a disposition of 'condescension' or humility towards creation (in a positive sense). For Betz, this then suggests further, more speculative, comments about the eternal nature of God simply as God.

We might describe this path as one that begins with a discussion of how the economy relates to God and proceeds to a discussion of God as such, as Trinity. For instance, Betz often returns to the idea that the Son is the manifestation of the Father. One might find this in Augustine, Aquinas, or Barth. However, Betz then also says that in this showing forth of the Father by the Son the Father vanishes behind the Son. There is a kind of kenosis: 'here the Father's self-expression in the Son is at the same time the Father's self-denial and self-withdrawal into hiddenness, indeed, into a kind of nothingness'. Here the Father is 'sharing himself to the point that He does not "ex-ist", so to speak, except in his Son'.

My question is why one would think this a necessary thing to say. It seems to confuse the mode or conditions under which God's love is shown in a sinful world – as death at the hands of violent humanity – with that love itself and the form it has eternally in the non-violent, sinless life of God. Such is my perplexity with much that is written on kenosis here, in marked contrast with the rest of the book, that I have come to wonder whether some such matters of interpretation and emphasis are fundamentally matters of mood or temperament. One theologian, discussing the Son as the manifestation of the Father, sees visibility and disclosure; another, discussing the same thing, reaches for the language of occlusion and kenosis. I suspect that we have come to a matter where it might be difficult to have a reasoned conversation. Much probably rests on individual disposition or spirituality, on theological principles that are so central to one's person that they are more argued from than argued to.

What could be sought, perhaps, is clarity about what is truly a matter of deep disagreement and what is more a difference over how a word is interpreted. An attribution of 'kenosis' eternally to God as Trinity might be relatively uncontroversial if it meant to say, for instance, that God has no airs and graces, or that Person gives way to Person in love, like some courtly Elizabethan dance. It seems however, that here more is meant than that, since Betz entertains Balthasar's idea (or at least does not censure it) that love eternally in God can fittingly be expressed in terms of wounding and death.

Betz acknowledges that much of this has proved controversial. We see that set out as a disagreement between two camps. On the contrary, we have Balthasar and his followers, on the other, a gathering of Thomists. The latter accuse Balthasar of degrading the doctrine of God, not least with the admission of suffering or distance into the godhead. In return, the Thomists face criticism for inhabiting their theology in a cold and unimaginative way. Betz allows for there to be fault on both sides. That adjudication, however, turns out to be rather one-sided. It is admitted the Balthasar could be incautious in how he expressed his ideas ('could stand to show more apophatic reserve'), but there is little sense that his theology might be at fault as such. If the Thomists have a point, it seems only to be at a relatively superficial level, while Balthasar comes across as a figure whose bold conjectures are most to be appreciated. Perhaps I would be bound to say it, but Betz's resolution does not seem to me to take the Thomist concerns sufficiently into account. That said, the value of the kenotic tradition is not something about which Betz and I will likely agree. As I have suggested, this might be as much a matter of temperament as it is of divergent paths of analytic reasoning.

While notions of kenosis bear upon Betz's discussion of the cross and crucifixion, one need not endorse that to appreciate these portions of the book, or even to find them some of Betz's best and most moving writing. If, following Aristotle, an analogy is a matter of *allo pros allo* (one thing in relation to another), and Christ is the nexus of all analogy, then the crucifixion takes that *pro* to its furthest reach, God being 'for' another – for us – to the extent of giving himself up. In his passion and descent into hell, Christ takes the presence of God in Christ to its furthest extent. In the depths of Christ suffering, the idea that analogy is best when most concretely about him reaches its apogee, since with the cross before us we are no longer talking 'about God and creation in the abstract but about God and creation in all their height and depths.'

I mentioned Betz's profound ecumenical impulse. His presentation of theology in *Christ, the Logos of Creation* is so much centred on Christ that it could and should serve as a fertile point of conversation and recognition between Christian traditions. Again and again, Betz writes that Christ is himself the key to the whole business of theology. Indeed, he finds that principle in the etymology of the word *Logos* itself: in *legein*, as 'gathering up'. The book follows exactly in that trajectory, seeking to gather up all doctrine in Christ, or rather finding it already gathered up in him.