

The Son's Assumption of a Human Nature: A Call for Clarity¹

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Abstract: This article seeks to bring some clarity to the controversial question of whether the Son of God assumed a *fallen* or *unfallen* human nature. We briefly survey conflicting historical assessments and continuing perplexity related to this question. Next we argue that much contemporary confusion can only be removed by first noting how John Calvin and Reformation catechisms tended to understand the idea of Jesus' sinlessness. In conclusion, from the vast literature on the subject we outline seven points which may serve contemporary reflection on this question by showing where the two views agree, disagree, or show internal divisions.

Introduction

What language should one use to describe the nature assumed by the Son? Why do the least excitable Christians turn instantly into the most passionate debaters when the discussion of whether or not the Son assumed a *fallen* or *unfallen* human nature arises? Professional theologians, pastors and lay people quickly become impassioned because of what they believe is at stake. Suspicion and misunderstanding instantly arise on all fronts. On the one hand, those who seek to affirm that the Son assumed a *fallen* human nature (or sinful flesh) are often interpreted as sacrificing the sinlessness of Jesus and thus leaving believers still in need of a Savior. On the other hand, those who affirm that the Son assumes an *unfallen* human nature (cf., Adam *prior* to the fall) are often charged with presenting a generic Jesus who is not truly man, thus losing the soteriological significance of his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Both parties think nothing less than the very heart of the gospel is in jeopardy.

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These two positions, which appear to be utterly at odds, may have more in common than is often realized. One suspects that there is actually less disagreement than is often granted, and it is our contention that many – though not all – of the problems grow out of preconceptions and continuing misunderstanding. We will attempt to demonstrate this by first briefly surveying conflicting historical assessments of this debate, particularly in reference to the Fathers. From there we will seek to explain why the particular language of ‘fallen’ has proven to be so problematic, specifically for some steeped in Augustinian theology and/or the catechisms and confessions of the Reformation. Finally, presenting some concluding observations regarding what each position tends to endorse, deny, and where ambiguity and debate remains, we hope to suggest areas in which the discussion can progress productively.

Conflicting historical assessments and confusion

One of the most persistent themes arising out of Christological studies in the past one hundred and fifty years has been a renewed attack upon the enticement of docetism in its various forms – a persistent problem plaguing the church since St Paul’s day. There have always been those who, in an effort to defend the true deity of Jesus, have either denied or neglected his full humanity. The result has often been a two-thirds human or a phantom spirit who simply *appeared* to be human though never personally entering into the painful experiences and temptations of a fallen world. In order to combat this error theologians have emphasized the Son’s assumption of a *complete* human nature (*contra* Apollinarius). Neglecting this truth inevitably results in a half-baked Jesus impotent to redeem humanity.

Growing out of these concerns some theologians and pastors called for the church to rethink her understanding and language related to the assumption. Through the voices of Edward Irving (1792–1834) and Thomas Erskine of Linlathen (1788–1870),² the idea that the Son of God assumed not simply a human nature, but a *fallen* human nature gained widespread attention in nineteenth-century Britain. For the most part this language reflected a minority viewpoint, though on the Continent there was a growing tendency to employ this understanding in order to protect the true humanity of Christ. So for example, Eduard Böhl and Emil

2 See Edward Irving, *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving*, ed. G. Carlyle, vol. 5 (London: Alexander Strahan, 1865); Colin E. Gunton, ‘Two Dogmas Revisited: Edward Irving’s Christology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 41 (1988), pp. 359–76; Graham W.P. McFarlane, *Christ and the Spirit: The Doctrine of the Incarnation according to Edward Irving* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996); C. Gordon Strachan, *The Pentecostal Theology of Edward Irving* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), esp. pp. 25–52. On the less known Erskine, see his *The Brazen Serpent, or Life Coming Through Death* (Edinburgh, 1831) and Trevor A. Hart, *The Teaching Father: An Introduction to the Theology of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1993).

Brunner employ similar ideas and language.³ Finally, when Karl Barth more persuasively argued this position he was able to bring his concerns to a larger and more sympathetic audience.⁴ Through the efforts of such pioneers who employ this idea of the assumption of a fallen nature there has been a profound influence upon contemporary theological reflection.

Has this always been the orthodox position? This remains a somewhat debated point. Apparently Barth, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, recognized that by his willingness to affirm something similar to what Irving proposed he was going against the majority of theologians of old. Barth writes, ‘All earlier theology, up to and including the Reformers and their successors, exercised at this point [regarding the humanity of Christ in relationship to the fall] a very understandable reserve, calculated to dilute the offence, but also to weaken the high positive meaning of passages like 2 Cor. 5:21, Gal. 3:13. In virtue of its distinctive moralism, modern theology as a whole is obviously unable to change this.’⁵ D. M. Baillie argues that Barth ‘knows very well that the orthodox tradition, whether Catholic or Protestant, has always most explicitly answered [the question regarding the assumption of fallen or unfallen human nature]: “Unfallen human nature.”’⁶ Even so, both Barth and Baillie affirm that this position is not altogether new in the history of ideas; rather, it can be found not only in the likes of Irving, but also in the older theology of the eighth-century Spanish Adoptionists and in the thought of Gottfried Menken of Bremen in the nineteenth century.⁷ Of significance for our study at this point is not the propriety of Barth’s own assertion, but his acknowledgement of this view’s relative novelty. Whereas prior to the nineteenth century orthodox theologians for the most part appeared hesitant to speak of Jesus assuming a ‘fallen’ human nature, now the environment is such that to deny this language – or even worse to deny the affirmation itself – makes one vulnerable to the charge of *unorthodoxy*!

Such supposed novelty, however, rests uneasy in the mind of contemporary theologians who seek to affirm this position, and therefore there has been an effort to revisit the past, especially the Fathers, in order to demonstrate that they actually affirm something similar to Irving and Barth. For example, D. Dorries’ thesis on Irving argues at great length that the controversial preacher was not saying anything

3 E.g., E. Böhl, *Zur Abwehr* (Amsterdam: Verlag Von Scheffer, 1888); Emil Brunner, *The Mediator: A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), esp. in his development of ‘incognito’ on pp. 328–54.

4 E.g., Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957–69), I/2, pp. 147–59; Cf. *CD* II/I, pp. 397–8.

5 Barth, *CD*, I/2, pp. 153–4.

6 D.M. Baillie, *God was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958 2nd edn.), p. 16.

7 Baillie, *God was in Christ*, pp. 16–17. Cf. A. B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ: In its Physical, Ethical, and Official Aspects*, 3rd edn., The Sixth Series of the Cunningham Lectures (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), pp. 248ff.

radically different than what the Fathers believed.⁸ T.F. Torrance, in his comprehensive work *The Trinitarian Faith*, likewise reads throughout patristic literature a clear affirmation of the assumption of a fallen human nature. It is not that they actually tend to use the specific language 'fallen', but rather that their explicitly realistic and earthy assertions regarding the human nature assumed can only be understood in this way. He cites Gregory of Nyssa, for example, who claims that Jesus was 'clothed with the defiled nature of man, so that his sublime activities are abased through being united with what is so degraded'.⁹ The redeeming work of Christ can only be understood by the Fathers in light of a clear affirmation of the Son's assumption of fallen human nature.

Reading only these authors might lead to the mistaken impression that only ill-informed Presbyters¹⁰ denied that the Fathers affirmed the assumption of a *fallen* nature. However, the testimony of others, especially older scholarship and those working from different theological influences, seem to confirm Baillie's claim noted above. For example, John S. Romanides, former editor of *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, appears to read the Fathers in this way when he claims: the idea that 'the Logos united to Himself manhood as it was *before the fall* is . . . accepted by all Fathers'.¹¹ He is here arguing that what is wrong with Julian of Halicarnassus'

8 D. Dorries, 'Nineteenth Century British Christological Controversy, Centering Upon Edward Irving's Doctrine of Christ's Human Nature' (PhD, University of Edinburgh, 1987).

9 T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theory of the Ancient Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), p. 153. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Or.*, 1.23; 30.5f.

10 During the crisis Irving claimed that he was simply returning to the basic orthodox tradition which goes back to the Fathers: e.g., Irving, *The Morning Watch or Quarterly Journal on Prophecy and Theological Review*, vol. I, pp. 75–79. His opponent Marcus Dods counters at great length and with severe venom by arguing that Irving misinterpreted and misrepresented sources, concluding instead that he should be considered a heretic: Dods, 'Review of Publications on Christ's Human Nature', *The Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, January 1830, pp. 1–96. For historical background see Strachan, *Edward Irving*, pp. 38–40.

11 Romanides, p. 52, Emphasis mine. The context in which Romanides makes this comment is in response to V.C. Samuel's presentation, 'One incarnate Nature of God the Word', pp. 37–51, who first discusses Julian of Halicarnassus, pp. 42ff. The exchange was part of the 'unofficial consultation' between theologians of Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches: 11–15 August 1964. The essays and responses are found in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, vol. X.2, 1964–65. McFarlane, *Christ and the Spirit*, pp. 185–6, first brought this article to our attention. Samuel finds three orthodox and three heretical strands in Julian's thinking. Of note is his belief that Julian conveys the erroneous idea that Christ's manhood 'was not only sinless, but was also without a real relation with the fallen human race', p. 51, cf. p. 43. What exactly 'real relation' means remains somewhat ambiguous. Interestingly, another participant in the discussion was G. Florovsky; he goes so far as to claim that Samuel's statement that 'the manhood of Christ was absolutely sinless is not enough. We must also say that Christ was free from original sin', p. 53. In so doing Florovsky seems to believe this addition would be a more accurate representation of the Fathers, though he is referring back to a comment concerning Severus and the non-Chalcedonian position. A. Houssiau, 'The Virginal Birth of Christ', in *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed A.D. 381*, ed. T.F. Torrance

teaching is not his assertion of an assumed pre-fallen nature, but that Julian considers Christ's human nature 'incorruptible before the resurrection'. Assuming a human nature according to Romanides' reading of the Fathers means that this nature was mortal, 'but not by nature under the power or sentence of death and corruption which are the wages of sin', because 'only God is by nature immortal. It is for this reason that the death of the Lord of Glory in the flesh was voluntary and not the wages of *personal or inherited sin*.'¹² Along similar lines A.B. Bruce, writing at the end of the nineteenth century in his extensive historical survey of the doctrine of the humiliation, believes that the theory found in Irving, 'or at least hints of it' appear in the Fathers. To which he adds a significant qualification: 'But the theory in the hands of the Fathers did not mean that Christ took a portion of sinful humanity and made it holy, and through it sanctified the whole lump; but only that He took a portion of humanity in a sinless state, and kept it sinless through a life of temptation, and presented it to His Father as the first-fruits of a renewed humanity.'¹³ Bruce's allusion and interpretation of 'the lump' is without reference. If he is thinking of Basil, his interpretation is at odds with Torrance's more detailed handling of the same passage.¹⁴ On the other hand, if he is thinking of a passage from Augustine then it is hard to deny the accuracy of his claim.¹⁵

In the examples of Baillie, Romanides and Bruce we find confident assertions which appear – at least on the surface – to be contradicting the conclusions already noted above. Is this simply the result of outdated scholarship or are there legitimate differences regarding how best to represent the language and intent of the original authors?

What are we to make of this apparent confusion over the sources? Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia finds himself in an awkward position regarding this debate. Seeing both historical and biblical evidence for both views he attempts to synthesize them. He claims that while one should uphold 'the first alternative, that Jesus took unfallen human nature, we need also to uphold the second [which he believes resembles the Irving/Barth thesis], that he lived out his human life under the conditions of the fall'.¹⁶ While attempting to uphold them both, Bishop

(Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1981), pp. 111–26, reports similar findings in at least Leo the Great and Philoxenus. Leo uses the virgin birth in order to declare Christ's conception allowed him to be free from any stain of sin, while Philoxenus affirms that the Christ 'receives the condition of Adam before he sinned', p. 123.

12 Romanides, 'Response', p. 53. Emphasis mine.

13 A.B. Bruce, *The Humiliation of Christ*, p. 253; cf., pp. 308–10.

14 Cf. Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, p. 153. See Basil, *Ep.*, 261.2f.

15 Augustine argues that 'flesh only did [Jesus] derive from Adam, Adam's sin he did not assume. He who took not upon him sin from our lump, he it is who taketh away sin', *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, NPNF, Vol. VII, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), quoted by Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), who goes on to try and explain Augustine's apparent conflicting concerns of solidarity and sinlessness, pp. 32–3.

16 Kallistos Ware, 'The Humanity of Christ: The Fourth Constantinople Lecture', in *Journal of Anglican and Eastern Churches Association* (1985), p. 4. Interestingly,

Kallistos is most clearly trying to recapture an emphasis on the latter position, which he deems has been severely neglected. Is such a synthesis possible, and if so, does that actually help clear up some of the conflicting historical and theological conclusions reached?

Our purpose here is not to evaluate the specific historical claims noted above, though it appears that the Dorries–Torrance thesis at present seems the most viable with its massive compilation of evidence. This overview has simply served to show that this question has historical, theological, and by implication practical ramifications, and as such is subject to serious debate.

Instead of continuing with a historical survey it seems better to conclude this section by turning to the recent book *In The Likeness of Sinful Flesh*. Here the Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Weinandy argues in favor of the Irving/Barth thesis, and in doing so he looks for further biblical and historical precedents. Rather than evaluating his treatment of individual primary sources it seems far more illuminating for our purposes to hear what he believes the employment of this language of sinful flesh or fallen nature conveys.

Weinandy is convinced that Christian theologians 'have almost universally neglected and ignored, both in the present and the past' the idea that the Son assumed 'not some generic humanity', but instead 'our own sinful humanity'.¹⁷ Following such a strong statement we expect to read startling and revolutionary conceptions apparently absent from most past theological discussions of Christ's humanity. Instead, we find a description that seems broad enough that almost everyone, on both sides of the debate, would agree with:

While [Jesus] never sinned personally, or ... had an inner propensity to sin (concupiscence), nonetheless his humanity was of the race of Adam and he experienced, of necessity, many of the effects of sin which permeate the world and plague human beings – hunger and thirst, sickness and sorrow, temptation and harassment by Satan, being hated and despised, fear and loneliness, even death and separation from God. The eternal Son of God functioned from within the confines of a humanity altered by sin and the Fall.¹⁸

Even those who oppose the idea that the Son assumes a fallen human nature would find plenty to agree with in Weinandy's basic outline. By his concession that Jesus does not even have 'an inner propensity to sin (concupiscence)', it seems that he has distanced himself from others who think such 'proclivities' *must* be maintained if his fallen nature is affirmed. Furthermore, he creatively leaves the crucial question of the relationship between the assumed nature to original sin and guilt ambiguous in this definition, thus enabling a wider acceptance of his proposal. It seems that given this general definition of 'sinful flesh' the struggle is not so much

among the various authorities used to affirm language similar to Irving he includes Nestorius and Julian of Norwich.

17 Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh*, pp. 17–18.

18 Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh*, p. 18.

finding theologians of the past and present who affirm these truths, but finding those who wish to deny them! But if this is all that is argued for then why has there been such conflict? We will now offer a brief overview of how certain emphases from the Reformation seem to contribute to the perplexity of the debate.

The Reformation and confusion over ‘without sin’

Upon reflection it seems that much of the division has arisen from confusion over what the phrase ‘without sin’ implies. In other words, the humanity of Christ demands an affirmation that he is like us in all ways, facing all manner of temptations and troubles, with only one exception: he is without sin. Does claiming that the Son assumes a fallen nature imply personal sin? Answering this question depends greatly on how one understands the idea of the fall and sin. While it is a mistaken charge, though often made, that those who posit ‘fallen nature’ are actually forced to conclude that Jesus was personally a sinner, this misunderstanding does not arise *ex nihilo*. An all too brief overview of Calvin and Reformation creeds and confessions will show from where much of this confusion arises.¹⁹ The question we seek to understand is how they could affirm that the Son assumes a true human nature from Mary, a fallen woman in a fallen world, without personally inheriting original guilt and sin in the same manner as everyone else.

Calvin

According to Calvin, *fallen* usually refers not only to sufferings and limitations, but also to moral corruption, since the fall has its roots in ‘unfaithfulness’ – a category which can never be applied to Christ.²⁰ Though the cosmos suffers from the fall, humans in particular are born ‘from impure seed’, for which they are ‘infected with the contagion of sin’. As a result, even before leaving the womb a person is ‘soiled and spotted in God’s sight.’²¹ Defining original sin Calvin writes: it ‘seems to be a hereditary depravity and corruption of our nature, diffused into all parts of the soul, which first makes us *liable* to God’s wrath, then also brings forth in us those works which Scripture calls “works of the flesh.” And that is properly what Paul often calls sin.’²² So is it possible to be born in direct relation to original sin and yet be considered sinless? Here we are getting closer to seeing a possible source for much of the misunderstanding.

19 Luther, it must be acknowledged, appears at times to sound extremely similar to the later Irving. E.g., *Lectures on Galatians*, in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), p. 277.

20 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, LCC, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2.1.4. He adds that Adam’s unfaithfulness gave rise to pride, ambition, ungratefulness, etc.

21 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.5. Cf. 2.1.6.

22 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.1.8.

So how does Jesus escape this contamination and thus become able to act vicariously? The way Calvin maneuvers at this point is by turning to the importance of the sanctifying work of the Spirit. It is only 'because he was sanctified by the Spirit that the generation might be pure and undefiled as *would have been true before Adam's fall*'. He argues, accordingly, that when the scriptures refer to Jesus' purity or holiness it must be understood as a reference to his human nature, 'for it would have been superfluous to say that God is pure'.²³ Since the original creation of humanity was good, sin is considered accidental rather than essential to human nature.²⁴ Such purity of a true human nature after the fall is possible only by the Spirit's involvement, from conception to ascension. Therefore, reference to the virgin birth is primarily in order to stress both the true humanity of Christ and his 'incorruption in Adam's race', rather than his divinity.²⁵ In other words, there was never a time when his human nature was not sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Calvin's Geneva Catechism of 1541 demonstrates most clearly that Christ is pure because of his unique relationship to the Spirit. He alone 'received the Holy Spirit in full perfection with all His graces, that He may lavish them upon us and distribute them'.²⁶ The reason the Son had to assume human nature in the first place was 'because it was necessary that the disobedience committed by man against God should be redressed in human nature' (q. 51). In this context we see that Calvin employs the unique birth of Jesus as the means for maintaining both continuity and discontinuity between the humanity of Christ and fallen humanity; because of the Spirit Jesus is uniquely conceived in such a way as to be free from inherited guilt and sin.²⁷ The Catechism goes on to show that the reason Christ can sanctify others was because he 'was free from every stain, and from His mother's womb He was consecrated to God in purity from the very beginning, in order that He may not be subject to the universal corruption of the human race' (q. 54).²⁸ The logic here is that Jesus, if not for the immediate intervening work of the Spirit, would have been unable to act as a redeemer (cf. q. 59). But here again, would not both parties want to agree that it was the Spirit which enabled Jesus to be free from sin?

23 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.4. Emphasis mine.

24 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.4: 'Nor do we imagine that Adam's seed is twofold, even though no infection came to Christ. For the generation of man is not unclean and vicious of itself, but is so as an *accidental* quality arising from the Fall.' Emphasis mine.

25 *Institutes*, 2.16.5 (vol. 1, p. 507, n. 8). See also T.F. Torrance, 'Introduction', in *The School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: James Clarke, 1959), pp. lxxx f. Furthermore, we must bear in mind that for Calvin the *fall* of Adam meant man was 'alienated from God' and ultimately he was 'so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity', *Institutes*, 1.15.4.

26 Torrance, *The School of Faith*, The Geneva Catechism, q. 41. Mark Noll's collection, *Confessions and Catechisms of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) was also used throughout.

27 Cf., 'As the seed of man is in itself corrupt, it was necessary that the power of the Holy Spirit should intervene in this conception, in order to preserve our Lord from all corruption, and to fill Him with holiness' (q. 53).

28 The Genevan Confession (esp. articles 4–7) of 1536, whether written by Calvin or Farel, clearly reflects similar concerns.

Other voices from the Reformation

If space permitted we would hear the echoes of Calvin's concerns and conclusions throughout the literature of the Reformation period. A few samples will suffice to demonstrate that the inheritance of original sin is commonly thought equivalent to claiming one is a sinner. This conclusion was always overcome as a Christological problem by assigning great significance to the Holy Spirit's role in the conception of the Savior.

Arguing against the 'stupid Sophists' who claim a strong distinction between original and actual sin, Melancthon pleads for their inseparability: 'But Scripture calls both the actual and the original defect (*vitium*) simply "sin" (*peccatum*), although sometimes it calls those sins which we call "actual," the "fruits of sin."' ²⁹ So if Jesus' relationship to original sin is like all other humans – without qualification – then we have what appears to be a blemished Savior who is guilty of sin. The Augsburg Confession (1530) likewise describes original sin in such a way as to make it possible for Jesus to avoid moral contamination, again by relying largely on the virgin birth. ³⁰ Against the Pelagians it adds that original sin must be viewed as sin itself, not simply the potential for sin. Looking at the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) we see similarly that original sin poisons human nature to such a degree that people are 'born in the state of sin', ³¹ which is potentially problematic for Jesus since it also claims that 'the man who is himself a sinner cannot pay for others', (q. 15, 16). Again Christ's 'holy conception' comes to the theological rescue, allowing Jesus to be 'our Mediator, and that in God's sight, he covers over with his innocence and perfect holiness the sinfulness in which I have been conceived'. ³² Original sin, according to The Articles of Religion, is not simply 'in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the fault and corruption of nature of every man, that *naturally is ingendered of the offspring of*

29 Melancthon, *Loci Communes Theologici*, in *Melancthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck, LCC (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 31.

30 Augsburg Confession, art. 2: 'since the fall of Adam all men who are *born according to the course of nature* are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. Moreover, *this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God.*' Emphasis mine.

31 The Heidelberg Catechism, q. 7; cf. q. 6.

32 The Heidelberg Catechism, q. 36. Even so, Christ's entire life, though particularly in his death, testifies to the reality that he 'bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole of the human race . . .' (q. 37). Can we interpret this text within the framework of affirming the assumption of a fallen human nature, partaker of original sin? If so we must do so with the qualification that Jesus, unlike every other human born after the fall, was not a sinner by birth in need of a redeemer, for he himself was the Redeemer sanctifying human nature. He assumes it in order to heal it. How can he both be 'made sin' (2 Cor. 5:21) and yet 'without sin' (Heb. 4:15)? Whatever we call *it* we are still forced to acknowledge that 'without sin' requires a clear qualification, something many Reformers found easily through an affirmation of the Spirit's role in the virgin birth.

Adam', bringing the inevitable conclusion that such a person 'deserveth God's wrath and damnation'.³³ Thus, when Article XV claims that Christ assumed our nature and was made like us in all ways, it understands the qualification 'sin only except' as meaning he was 'clearly void [of sin], both in his flesh, and in his spirit'. Finally, in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 6, the tie between original sin and fallen humanity is kept. Sin's entrance into the world means that fallen humanity 'by ordinary generation' has been severed from communion with God, resulting in spiritual death.³⁴ Again, the loophole for Christ is subtly apparent.

According to these testimonies, it seems difficult to separate fallenness not only from the possibility of sin, but from sin itself. One is not simply cut off from communion with God by committing sin, but as a result of original sin.³⁵ So, to speak of the unqualified assumption of a *fallen* human nature under original guilt and sin is to be understood within this structure as equivalent to claiming that the Son did not simply assume 'sinful flesh', but was actually a sinner – a claim few seek to endorse.

Here lies much of the confusion. To speak of fallen man is to speak of man the sinner.³⁶ To try and separate these two can be perceived as artificial, leading only to further debate. While historians may agree that Irving's adversaries misunderstood his position, they did so for a reason. The Presbyterian tradition was one steeped in the language and categories of the Reformation, and so they had tremendous difficulty making the conceptual leap required by Irving's fluid language and ideas. He was able to speak of Christ as 'fallen' with 'sinful flesh' and yet also maintain that he was 'without sin'. Much to his dismay his opposition could not so easily separate the two, especially in the midst of inflated rhetoric and church politics.

Final observations

So far we have been forced to move at lightning speed through vast amounts of literature and debate. Now we must conclude by demonstrating that the issues at hand are less clear than sometimes acknowledged, requiring more than simply an

33 Articles of Religion, IX, 'Of Original or Birth-sin'.

34 WCF 6:6: 'Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, doth, in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, and curse of the law, and so made subject to death, with all miseries spiritual, temporal, and eternal.'

35 Howard Watkin-Jones, *The Holy Spirit from Arminius to Wesley* (London: Epworth Press, 1929), rightly claims: 'The general opinion of Protestant divines [throughout the Reformation and Post-Reformation period] was that the sinlessness of our Lord on earth was due to His supernatural conception by the Holy Spirit, the word "sinlessness" also excluding original sin', p. 193.

36 Timothy George, describing Calvin's view, writes: 'Sin, then, according to Calvin is not simply the name for evil acts which we commit; it is rather the direction and inclination of human nature itself in its fallen condition. We do sins because we are sinners', *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), p. 215.

affirmation or denial of whether the Son assumes a *fallen* or *unfallen* nature. Given the lack of clear and agreed definitions, claiming one position or the other does not actually convey much of theological substance. Little can be decided about the Fathers, for example, if everyone is not agreed what these labels entail. In this last section we simply have time to make seven observations, showing where the two views agree, disagree, or show internal divisions.³⁷

1. Both fallen and unfallen adherents oppose those who have treated Mary simply as a 'channel',³⁸ affirming rather that the Son is able from Mary to assume a complete human nature: including a reasonable soul (with all its various faculties) and physical body.
2. Both positions affirm that the incarnate Son of God entered not a pre-fallen paradise, but a sin-ravaged world as the true son of fallen Mary; thus, the Son assumes our *common infirmities* and weaknesses, including hunger, thirst, pain, sorrow and ultimately death. As such, Jesus is never outside of a relationship to a sinful and chaotic world.³⁹
3. Both positions affirm the Holy Spirit's involvement in allowing Jesus Christ to be 'without sin'. The unfallen position claims that because of the Spirit's sanctifying work at conception it is impossible to speak of a time when the human nature was fallen, although the Spirit's activity does not end at conception but remains essential for the incarnate Lord to continue in obedience. The fallen position emphasizes the Spirit's role in keeping the *person* of Christ free from sin, though the human nature is itself 'sinful flesh'. Further clarity is needed at this point since unfallen advocates still claim that the fallen position inevitably ends up in Nestorianism by so sharply dividing the natures.
4. Both sides believe that the temptations of Jesus were not empty drama but agonizing experiences, allowing him to be a sympathetic high priest. Nevertheless, there is no general agreement concerning how best to describe

37 Besides the sources already noted above, other key versions of the *fallen* view are found in J.B. Torrance, 'The Vicarious Humanity of Christ', in *The Incarnation*, ed. T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1981); and T.F. Torrance, 'The Mind of Christ in Worship: The Problem of Apollinarianism in the Liturgy', in *Theology in Reconciliation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), pp. 139–214. Besides the traditional sources, versions of the unfallen view can also be found in John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. G.R. Potter and E.R. Simpson, vol. II (Berkeley, 1955), p. 121; A.T.B. McGowan, *The Federal Theology of Thomas Boston* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1997), pp. 24–32; M. Dods, *The Incarnation of the Eternal Word* (London: 1831). Two contemporary critics of the fallen view include Philip E. Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 125–35, pp. 213–23; Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), esp. pp. 221–30.

38 E.g., *contra* Menno Simons, who spoke of Christ's 'celestial flesh'. See George, *Theology of the Reformers*, pp. 280–85.

39 'Common infirmities' is the preferred language of much of Protestant Scholasticism (e.g. WCF 8:2).

Jesus: as able to sin (*posse peccare*), not able to sin (*non posse peccare*), or if this is even a legitimate question.

5. There is disagreement among those holding to the fallen position whether Jesus had an inner propensity to sin (i.e. concupiscence), some affirming and others denying. Those who affirm this believe only by the Spirit is such inner pollution overcome. The unfallen position commonly denies such a propensity to sin,⁴⁰ granting only that Jesus experienced all sinless emotions and disruptions; he was free from sinful cravings and evil desires arising from within.⁴¹ These distinctions, however, can become fuzzy at times. Does 'without sin' require that Jesus' faculties are unaffected by the fall and thus resemble prelapsarian humanity? Or is it only possible for Jesus to be 'tempted as we are' when there is internal disorder to be overcome? Does such disorder necessarily entail impurity or sin? These questions require further reflection by the unfallen position, calling specifically for a renewed examination of Jesus' temptations, emotions and relationships.
6. In contemporary theological discourse, fundamental to being human is relationship to others and to God. If we simply say that Jesus experiences the painful realities of human relationships in a sin-infected world, then both sides can agree. No one appears willing to deny the strained relationships between Jesus and his friends, enemies, relatives, general followers, and close disciples as a result of their sin, unbelief, disloyalty, distraction, etc. However, if *fallen* entails rebellion and broken fellowship with the Father, then there seems real hesitancy from all sides to endorse this claim.
7. Perhaps the greatest need for clarity resides in the question of the relationship to original guilt and sin. Both positions want to affirm that Jesus acts vicariously for us, taking upon himself *our* guilt and sin. It is somewhat debated by unfallen proponents how and when this occurs; some narrowly concentrating on the cross, others more satisfyingly stressing the vicarious nature of his entire life culminating in his death, resurrection and ascension. Unfallen proponents do agree that Christ's ability to act vicariously is possible as a result of the Spirit's mysterious work in the holy conception, freeing Christ from personal guilt, sin or any form of moral corruption. On the other side, proponents of fallen language have been divided. Some have been hesitant, fearing that unless careful distinctions are made Jesus becomes a blemished

40 Cf. Huldrych Zwingli, when discussing the relationship between the two natures of the Person of Christ argues that 'according to his human nature he is in every way man, having all the properties which belong to the true and proper nature of man save only the *propensity of sin*, and not lacking any of them by reason of union with the divine nature,' *Exposition of the Christian Faith*, in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, LCC (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 251. Emphasis mine.

41 Cf. Berkouwer's conclusion: 'The Bible certainly speaks, not of a final victory over sinful, rebellious desire, but of a holiness which pervades his entire existence, inside and outside', *The Person of Christ*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 256.

lamb, and so unable to take away the sins of the world.⁴² Other fallen proponents seem to believe that *any* qualification only leads back to the original problem: the Son assuming a human nature somehow different than our own. Progress on this question will only occur when definitions of sin, guilt and vicarious are agreed upon.⁴³ An additional concern is how solidarity is maintained between Jesus and the rest of humanity. Since both sides uphold the Spirit's unique work at conception (in some form or other) some element of discontinuity between Christ and the rest of humanity must be admitted.

Our brief overview has attempted not only to serve as an introduction to a heated theological debate, but also hopes to clarify the controversy as we move from apparent disagreements to actual differences, allowing for the possibility of genuine dialogue between the two groups.

42 E.g., Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1900), pp. 79–101. It may surprise many readers that the neo-Calvinist Kuyper freely speaks of the assumption of a *fallen* human nature, believing that this has always been the position of the Reformed tradition (cf. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, p. 342). Additionally, the conservative Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield wrote a lengthy introduction to this English edition and shows no hesitation in his full endorsement of the entire book. Here we can simply point out that much may be gained by revisiting the debate between Kuyper and Böhl. Both represent versions of the fallen position, but Böhl wants to go farther than Kuyper; the latter does not want to speak of Jesus having personal sin, guilt, or any inward impurity. For the debate, see Kuyper, *De Vleeswording des Woords* (1887). Böhl's response is found in *Zur Abwehr* (1888). A summary of the debate is found in Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, pp. 338–43.

43 Henri Blocher's recent work, *Original Sin: Illuminating the Riddle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), illustrates how much disagreement remains regarding such ideas.