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# THE DOCTRINE OF THE INCARNATION IN SCOTTISH THEOLOGY: EDWARD IRVING

DONALD MACLEOD, EDINBURGH  
*The Finlayson Lecture for 1990*

I had the privilege of being taught for two years by Professor R. A. Finlayson. He was a fine teacher, with a sharp, analytical mind and an ability to express himself clearly and memorably. But if he was an outstanding theologian he was also a great preacher. He never lost his love for people or his love for the truth; or his ability to bring the two together. His preaching ranged widely, but it is fair to say that one theme predominated: the person and work of Christ. That is why I have chosen to speak tonight on 'The Doctrine of the Incarnation in Scottish Theology'. Rather than cover the whole field, however – an impossible task in the time available – I want to focus on Edward Irving and his influence on subsequent developments.

## **Irving and Christ's Fallen Humanity**

Irving had distinctive views on many topics, notably prophecy, spiritual gifts and church order. But most distinctive were his views on the incarnation. He argued that Christ took a fallen humanity. Otherwise, he said, the Lord would not have been one with us and he could not have been tempted. Neither could he have healed, reconciled and redeemed us. His power to save lay in the fact that in our fallen nature he lived a sinless life and endured to the uttermost the penalty due to our sin.

Irving published these views in 1828 in *The Doctrine of the Incarnation Opened in Six Sermons (The Collected Writings of Edward Irving, London, 1865, V, pp. 3–446)*. Further treatises followed: *The Orthodox and Catholic Doctrine of our Lord's Human Nature* (London, 1830); *The Opinions Circulating Concerning our Lord's Human Nature* (London, 1830); and *Christ's Holiness in Flesh* (Edinburgh, 1831).

As a result of his widely publicised advocacy of these views Irving was prosecuted for heresy and deposed in 1833. The specific charge against him was that he denied the sinlessness of Christ and argued that he was tainted with original sin.

Many have questioned this judgement. It merits three comments. First, even those who were most disturbed by Irving's teaching respected his piety and acknowledged his devotion to Christ. Robert Murray McCheyne, for example, noted in his diary for November 9,

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1834: 'Heard of Edward Irving's death. I look back upon him with awe, as on the saints and martyrs of old. A holy man in spite of all his delusions and errors. He is now with his God and saviour, whom he wronged so much, yet, I am persuaded, loved so sincerely.' A huge crowd attended his funeral and no one thought it incongruous that the preacher took as his text 2 Samuel 3:38, 'Know ye not that there is a prince and a great man fallen this day in Israel?'

Secondly, Irving vehemently affirmed his personal belief in the sinlessness of Jesus. 'The soul of Christ', he wrote, 'did ever resist and reject the suggestions of evil' (*Collected Writings*, V, p. 126). 'I believe it to be necessary unto salvation', he continued, 'that a man should believe that Christ's soul was so held in possession by the Holy Ghost and so supported by the divine nature, as that it never assented unto an evil suggestion, and never originated an evil suggestion... and that thus, though at all points assailable through His flesh, He was in all respects holy; seeing wickedness consisteth not in being tempted, but in yielding to the temptation'. Irving believed implicitly in 'the birth-holiness of our Lord Jesus Christ' (129) and stated unambiguously that '[Jesus] differed from all men in this respect, that He never sinned' (137). The charges brought against him were inferences from what he had said: inferences that he himself had not drawn and could not have drawn.

Thirdly, there can be no doubt that Irving used extremely provocative language. 'The flesh of Christ', he declared, 'like my flesh, was in its proper nature mortal and corruptible' (*Collected Writings*, V, p. 115); 'His flesh was of that mortal and corruptible kind which is liable to all forms of evil suggestion and temptation, through its participation in a fallen nature and a fallen world' (126); 'unless He had been liable and obnoxious to do the evil, there would have been no merit in refraining from it, and keeping the commandment' (127); 'I hold, that wherever flesh is mentioned in Scripture, mortality and corruption are the attributes of it; and that when it is said Christ came in the flesh, it is distinctly averred that He came in a mortal and corruptible substance' (136).

In Irving's view, Christ's body was 'all-liable to sin, as the body of every fallen man' (139). That it did not commit actual sin was due not to any intrinsic quality of his own person but to the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Without this, the corruption would have erupted. This is what really set Christ apart: 'no one was ever thus anointed with the Holy Ghost' (128). Only thus was his body 'prevented from ever yielding to any of those temptations to which it was brought conscious, and did reject them every one - yea, did mourn and grieve, and pray to God continually, that it might be delivered from the mortality, corruption, temptation, which it felt in its fleshly tabernacle' (128). The responsibility of the Holy Spirit was to make

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this flesh incorruptible: 'I have the Holy Ghost manifested in subduing, restraining, conquering the evil propensities of the fallen manhood, and making it an apt organ for expressing the will of the Father' (170).

The overall impression conveyed by Irving was that he minimised the difference between the Lord and Christian believers. In his treatise *On The Human Nature of Christ* he admitted attributing sinful properties, dispositions and inclinations to Christ's human nature and went on to suggest that what Christ received at his conception was 'a regenerate life...in kind the same which we receive in regeneration, but in measure greater, because of His perfect faith' (*Collected Writings*, V, p.564). He continued: 'This is the substance of our argument: that His human nature was holy in the only way in which holiness under the fall exists or can exist, is spoken of or can be spoken of in Scripture, namely, through inworking or energising of the Holy Ghost... enforcing His human nature, inclining it, uniting it to God'.

It is hardly surprising that such sentiments gave offence, especially when we recall that Irving's published statements were carefully considered and, for him, cautious. His pulpit and private utterances were even more extreme. One hearer was horrified to hear him refer to Christ's human nature as 'that sinful substance' (C.G. Strachan, *The Pentecostal Theology of Edward Irving*, London, 1973, p. 27). In a subsequent conversation Irving was challenged as to whether he believed that Christ, like Paul, had 'the law of sin' in his members, bringing him into captivity. 'Not into captivity', Irving replied, 'but Christ experienced everything the same as Paul did, except the "captivity"' (Strachan, p. 28).

### Critical Response

The early response to Irving was almost entirely critical. Marcus Dods (*The Incarnation of the Word*, London, 1831; <sup>2</sup>1845) ignored Irving's protestations of belief in the sinlessness of Jesus and accused him of Manichaeism, Nestorianism and logical confusion. Forty years later A.B. Bruce (*The Humiliation of Christ*, Edinburgh, 1876, pp. 269ff.) still accepted the church's judgement unquestioningly. Bruce pointed out the antecedents of Irving's teaching in the Spanish Adoptionists of the eighth century and the preaching of Gottfried Menken of Bremen in the nineteenth (although there is no evidence that Irving had any direct contact with either of these sources), and went on to charge him with rhetorical inexactitude and with confusing sinless infirmities with vices. He also subjected Irving's view of temptation to a rigorous critique, pointing out that even a sinless person can be tempted, since temptation can come not only from lust but from its opposite – for example, from a holy shrinking

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from desertion by God. 'Temptations arising out of sinless infirmities may be far fiercer than those which arise out of sinful appetites', wrote Bruce (291 n.).

This critical attitude towards Irving's position continued well into the twentieth century. H.R. Mackintosh (*The Person of Jesus Christ*, Edinburgh, 1912; <sup>2</sup>1913, pp. 276ff.) referred to it as 'this eccentric though touching view' (277). Irving had secured the Lord's sympathy with us, particularly his oneness with us in moral conflict, but only at the cost of ascribing to him a corrupt nature: so corrupt, in fact, that nothing but the Holy Spirit could keep it in check. Donald Baillie, writing in 1948 (*God Was in Christ*, London, pp. 16ff.) was still not very sympathetic, pointing out that the idea that Christ's humanity was fallen had always been deemed heretical, in both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions. It is interesting, too, that Baillie's knowledge of Irving appears to have been second-hand (*via* A.B. Bruce): obviously Irving was not then, as he is now, required reading in the Scottish universities. This probably explains why Baillie handles Irving with a less than sure touch. He points out, quite rightly, that Irving was surprised by the accusation of heresy but explains this by suggesting that to him 'fallen' carried no connotations of original sin. It meant only that Christ was subject to pain and death. This is by no means the whole truth, as we have seen. To Irving, the idea of fallenness was closely linked with the idea of temptation. He insisted that Christ was tempted through his own flesh: there was a proclivity to sin which was kept in check only by the power of the Holy Spirit.

### Adoption by Barth and Successors

Before Baillie, however, something else had happened. Karl Barth (*Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I:ii, Zollikon-Zurich, 1938, p. 180; *ET Church Dogmatics*, 1:2, Edinburgh, 1956, p. 154) had enthusiastically espoused the idea that Christ took fallen humanity; and in doing so he had acknowledged the work of Irving (although Barth's knowledge, like Baillie's, was second-hand, this time through H.R. Mackintosh). Barth exegetes the idea of a fallen humanity energetically. It means a corrupt nature (*natura vitata*); one which is obnoxious (liable?) to sin; and one which exists in a vile and abject condition: 'there must be no weakening or obscuring of the saving truth that the nature which God assumed in Christ is identical with our nature as we see it in the light of the Fall. If it were otherwise, how could Christ be really like us? What concern would we have with Him? We stand before God characterised by the Fall. God's Son not only assumed our nature but He entered the concrete form of our nature, under which we stand before God as men damned and lost' (153). Like Irving, Barth denied that this meant actual sin on the Lord's part: 'He was not a sinful

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man. But inwardly and outwardly His situation was that of a sinful man. He did nothing that Adam did. But He lived life in the form it must take on the basis and assumption of Adam's act' (152).

Barth's Scottish disciples became zealous advocates of this Irvingite Christology. T.F. Torrance, for example, wrote: 'the Incarnation is to be understood as the coming of God to take upon himself our fallen human nature, our actual existence laden with sin and guilt, our humanity diseased in mind and soul in its estrangement or alienation from the Creator...it is the alienated *mind* of man that God had laid hold of in Jesus Christ in order to redeem it and effect reconciliation deep within the rational centre of human being' (*The Mediation of Christ*, Grand Rapids, 1983, pp. 48ff.). 'In Jesus', he continued, 'God himself descended to the very bottom of our human existence where we are alienated and antagonistic, into the very hell of our godlessness and despair, laying fast hold of us and taking our cursed condition upon himself, in order to embrace us for ever in his reconciling love' (53).

J.B. Torrance was even more enthusiastic. Commenting on Athanasius' *De Incarnatione* he wrote: 'Christ does not heal by standing over against us, diagnosing our sickness, prescribing medicine for us to take, and then going away, to leave us to get better by obeying his instructions - as an ordinary doctor might. No, He becomes the patient! He assumes that very humanity which is in need of redemption.... That was why these fathers did not hesitate to say, as Edward Irving the great Scottish theologian in the early nineteenth century and Karl Barth in our own day have said, that Christ assumed "fallen humanity" that our humanity might be turned back to God in him by his sinless life in the Spirit, and, through him, in us' ('The Vicarious Humanity of Christ', in *The Incarnation*, ed. Thomas F. Torrance, Edinburgh, 1981, p. 141).

One can sympathise with many of the concerns that lie behind such formulations. The stress on the Lord's humanness is welcome, as is the stress on his temptability. So, too, is the emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the incarnate Lord. Orthodoxy has always accepted that the humanity of Jesus was not autonomous, but dependent. Too often, however, it has expressed this in terms of the divine nature supporting the human. Scripture never speaks in this way. It speaks of the dependence in inter-personal terms. The Son is supported by the Father through the Spirit: 'I will put my Spirit on him' (Is. 42:1); 'through the eternal Spirit he offered himself without spot to God' (Heb. 9:14). Every power he possessed, every grace that adorned his character and every achievement that lies to his credit, flowed from the solicitous attention of the Father and the constant ministry of the Spirit: 'I can of mine own self do nothing' (John 5:30). But none of this requires us to describe Christ's

humanity as fallen. Neither do any of the more detailed arguments used by Irving, Barth and Torrance.

### Untenable Defences

It is argued, for example, that the idea that Christ took fallen humanity follows from the principle that 'the unassumed is the unhealed'. But this is an illegitimate use of a form of words which has a very definite context in the history of Christology. It belongs to the Apollinarian controversy. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example, used it in his *Letter to Cledonius against Apollinaris* and the context makes clear what he meant by it; 'if he has a soul, and yet is without a mind, how is he man, for man is not a mindless animal?' (*Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy, London, 1954, p. 219). The function of 'the unassumed is the unhealed' was to stress that Christ took a human *pneuma*, including intellect, will and affections. None of Irving's opponents denied this; and, conversely, none of the Fathers held that Christ took fallenness.

It is argued, secondly, that Christ took his humanity from the substance of his mother. This, of course is true and Irving's opponents fully acknowledged it, striving to do justice to the mystery of the umbilical cord. In fact no one has ever expressed it better than Marcus Dods: 'she imparted to her Son all that other mothers impart to their children' (*On the Incarnation of the Word*, p. 31). But this phrase, too, had its own historical context. It was a protest against Docetism with its suggestion that Christ's humanness was only a seeming, that he had no real physical connection with his mother and that in fact the Son of God had passed through the Virgin like water through an aqueduct. In this context the insistence that Christ was 'born of the Virgin Mary, of her substance' (*Westminster Confession*, VIII:II) was never remotely intended to suggest that Christ's humanity was fallen. It signified only that it was real. Christ's manhood was created by the Holy Spirit but not *ex nihilo*. Through his mother – through the umbilical cord – he was keyed into the genetic stream of humankind; related even to the dust of the ground and to the whole world of matter. But he never existed except as 'a holy thing', the subject of a 'con-created holiness'. The divine act that made his humanity made it holy.

Thirdly, Irving argued that unless Christ was fallen he was not like us. But surely all the identity we need is secured by the fact that he 'was made flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14)? He took a true body. He took a reasonable soul. He lived in our physical, social and spiritual environment. He shared our pains, our sorrows and our fears: even the loss of God. What more can we ask? In fact, even on Irving's own terms some discontinuity between us and Christ is inevitable. Christ was sinless. Christ had a unique measure of the

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Spirit's endowment – 'no one was ever thus anointed with the Holy Ghost'. He had unique power. He had a unique self-consciousness. Any one of these, let alone all of them together, would be enough to break the continuity between Christ and us and to lead to the challenge, 'How can he understand? What does he know?' Besides, the Christ of Christian faith is the exalted Christ, immune to sorrow and pain. Yet it is precisely of this Christ – 'who has passed through the heavens' – that Hebrews declares that he is touched with the feeling of our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15). How? Because he has taken our nature and shared our experiences; and because he has never forgotten his years in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. 'He remembers we are dust, he knows our frame.' The pain and exhaustion, the fear and bewilderment, are etched indelibly on his memory: 'I know exactly how that woman feels!'

### **Fallenness and Temptation**

But, above all, Irving argued that if Christ had not had a fallen humanity he could not have been tempted. Obviously he was tempted and it is enormously important to our own faith to be assured that he understands us at this point. The temptations were absolutely real. He felt the appeal of the sinful proposals put to him and had to struggle with all his might to repel them. In that struggle he depended on the Holy Spirit; and the Spirit's ministry was not physical but moral, so that he triumphed over temptation not by some effortless, Samson-like omnipotence but by faith, hope and love. In all this – in the reality of his temptations and in the means of his victory – the Lord was like ourselves. But in one crucial respect he was not like us: he was not tempted by anything within himself. He was not drawn away by his own lusts and enticed (James 1:14). There was no law of sin in his members (Rom. 7:23). There was in him no predisposition to sin, no love of sin and no affinity with sin. The Prince of this world had no foothold in him (John 14:30).

The temptations, therefore, came entirely from outside: from the Devil himself. But if Christ was unfallen, what did the Devil work on? Part of the answer, surely, is that although the Lord had no vices he did have sinless infirmities. He could be tempted (and clearly was) through hunger, through the fear of pain and through love for a friend. It is not a mark of fallenness to feel any of these and yet the instinct to avoid them can create strong pressure to deviate from the course prescribed for us. Besides, Jesus had holy affections which, in the course of his work, he had to thwart. Foremost among these was the longing for communion with God; and he knew full well that the cross would involve the loss of that. Is it any great wonder that in Gethsemane the prospect overwhelmed him? or that every fibre of his

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being wanted to avoid it? He was not being called on to mortify a lust. But he was being called on to frustrate the holiest aspiration of which humanity is capable. Here what he wanted (and needed) and what his Father directed were in conflict. Hence the 'strong crying and tears' (Heb. 5:7).

It is fatally easy to misconstrue the effect of the Lord's sinless integrity at this point, as if it meant a shorter, painless struggle in the hour of temptation. On the contrary, precisely because he did not yield, the struggle was protracted; and because he was not (like us) easy prey, the Devil had to use all his resources. Precisely because of his unfallenness – his invincibility – Jesus alone experienced the full force of hell's ferocity.

There are two other serious difficulties in Irving's theory. First, it has no answer to the charge of Nestorianism. What was fallen? Was it the person? This would lead to the conclusion that the Son of God was fallen: a conclusion Irving, quite rightly, was not willing to draw: 'What was holy, was His person' (*Collected Writings*, V, p.565). What then was fallen? The human nature! This meant, however, that Irving had to separate that nature sharply from his divine person: 'whenever I attribute sinful properties and dispositions and inclinations to our Lord's human nature, I am speaking of it considered as apart from Him, in itself...we can assert the sinfulness of the whole, the complete, the perfect human nature, which He took, without in the least implicating Him with sin' (563, 565). This is surely hopeless. How can the nature be fallen without implicating the person? Only if the humanness is an agent in its own right, completely detached from the eternal Son!

This point was pressed home by Marcus Dods: 'Nature cannot exist excepting in a person. It floats not an invisible and infectious thing, like the *malaria* of a Campanian bog or Batavian fen, ready to seize upon all who may come within the sphere of its activity. If a fallen *nature* exist at all, it can exist only as the nature of a fallen *person*. If, then, there was a fallen *nature*, or a *nature* in a fallen state existing in Christ, the conclusion is inevitable that there was a fallen person in him; and, consequently, that either the humanity was a *person*, or the second person of the Holy Trinity was *fallen*. In every point of view, therefore, in which the question as to a *fallen nature* can be placed, it appears to me clear as the light of day, that he who persists in saying that our Lord took a fallen human nature, or human nature in a fallen state, has to choose whether he will preach the impiety of a fallen God, or the heresy of a distinct human personality, in the one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus' (*op. cit.*, pp. 279f.).

### **Fallenness and Humiliation**

Secondly, there is the difficulty of the historical connotation of 'fallen'. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, for example, tells us that, 'Our first parents...fell from the estate wherein they were created by sinning against God' (Answer 13). To have fallen, therefore, is to have sinned against God; and to be fallen is to be in a state of sinfulness – to lack original righteousness and to be corrupt in our entire nature (Shorter Catechism, 18). How can this apply to Jesus? It is impossible at this level to maintain any distinction between 'fallen' and 'sinful'. Fallen Adam is sinful Adam. Fallen nature is sinful nature, dominated by the flesh (in the Pauline sense) and characterised by total depravity. It is impossible to see how any of this can be true of him 'who knew no sin' (2 Cor. 5:21).

But if we cannot use the word 'fallen', how, then, are we to describe Jesus? By saying that he was man in a state of humiliation. This contrasts with other human states. He was not in a state of primitive bliss, like the First Adam. Nor was he in the state of glorious exaltation which he now knows as risen Saviour. He was man in a low condition.

This means, first of all, that he was liable to all the miseries of this life. He dwelt among us, making our physical, moral, social and economic environment his own; and experiencing with us hunger and thirst, weariness and pain, poverty and cruelty, bereavement, oppression and treachery.

Secondly, he experienced all the emotions appropriate to such a situation. Not that we should stress too much the darker side of the Lord's emotional life. He who condemned anxiety would not have been guilty of it himself; and he who commended contentment would scarcely have failed to practise it. Whatever the storms around him, all the evidence suggests that Jesus was a man of deep serenity and inner peace. We may not be told that he laughed, but we are told that he found delight and pleasure in doing the will of God (Heb. 10:7, quoting Ps. 40:8). But the dark emotions were there, too. Sometimes what he saw amazed him, at other times grieved him and sometimes made him blaze with anger. In Gethsemane he went to the emotional cliff-edge. There an almost mortal depression settled on his spirit. But it was not only depression. It was the supreme human experience of 'creature-feeling', as Jesus trembled in the presence of the Holy, overwhelmed by what God wanted him to do. He could not accept God's will easily and effortlessly. He had to struggle to submit and to persuade himself that Abba wanted *him* to drink *this* cup. Hence the strong crying, hence the tears, and hence, above all, the fear: the fear of humiliation and rejection; the fear of physical pain; the fear of death; the fear of the loss of God; the fear for his own humanness –

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could he take it into the unknown, into the uncharted waters of Dereliction?

Where was sorrow ever deeper? Where was bewilderment ever more overwhelming? Where was fear ever more chilling? But none of this was fallenness. It was humanness in a low condition.

Thirdly, Jesus experienced mortality. He died. He was not spared the fear of death and he was not spared the taste of it; he tasted death for every person (Heb. 2:9). Nor was there anything arbitrary – anything Docetic – about his death. Certainly it was his own free decision to submit to the nails and the spear. But it was not by any voluntary decision on his part that they had the same effect on him as they would on any human being. In the words of A.B. Bruce: 'It was not a miracle that the crucified and pierced One died; the miracle would have been had he lived in spite of nails and spear. Thus understood, mortality may properly be reckoned as belonging to the truth of Christ's humanity' (*The Humiliation of Christ*, p. 279).

Finally, Christ in his low condition experienced the loss of communion with God. Of course, this was not his habitual state during his life on earth. For almost the whole duration of his ministry the Father stood by him, upholding and encouraging him. Like Abraham and Isaac on the journey to Mount Moriah, 'they went up both of them together'. But at the climax, God is not there: 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' In the hour of his greatest need, he is alone. Heaven does not answer. And no one was less prepared or less suited for such an ordeal than the Son of God. He had never been without his Father, never out of his sight, never out of earshot. But now, as hell closes in, he cannot say 'Abba!' There is no sense of sonship, no sense of the Father's love, no grasp of the certainty of victory. In the words of an intriguing variant reading of Hebrews 2:9, he is *choris theou*, without God. He is outside. Indeed, he is *the* Outsider: the Lawlessness which he was, banished to the Darkness it deserved.

Why? Because he was fallen? No! He knew no sin. Why then? Because he was 'made sin for us'. *For!* Solidarity, representation, substitution. He suffers with us. He suffered on our behalf. But above all he suffered in our place. He was banished instead of us: banned, desolated, devoted to destruction so that we should never know the curse. Sin never stained or defiled him. But he bore it. By loving his people and binding them to himself he contracted their guilt. Bearing it he went into the Holy Place, face to face with the living God, taking his whole identity from sin ('made sin') and enduring all that it – that we – deserved. That, surely, is the glory:

'That on the Cross, my burden gladly bearing,  
He bled and died, to take away my sin.'

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That, I dare say, is not a greater vision than the one seen by Irving. But it is greater than what he taught. It is the journey of the Unfallen into the Far Country to redeem the fallen.