

I An Incarnational Theology

THE STORY OF GOD

There are two realms: essence and existence. Essence names that which is forever; existence names that which abides for a limited time. There need have been no existence. Essence is sufficient unto itself. Essence is constituted by three persons, so in one another that we call them one, so with one another that we call them three. When we consider their relations with one another, we call them Trinity; when we consider their purpose beyond themselves, we call them God.

God is characterised by these three persons being with one another in utter and mutual relationship. 'Utter' means they have no need or urge to look beyond themselves; these relationships are completely absorbing and rewarding, creative and fruitful. 'Mutual' means these relationships are entirely complementary, and there is no sense in which one party is more important, powerful or directive than the others. They are relationships of joy and delight.

Yet in the mystery of these utter and mutual relationships, God chooses to be with another beyond these relationships, not because these relationships in any way fall short, but because God is characterised by effervescent abundance.¹ This abundance emerges initially

¹ Robert Jenson provides perhaps the best way around the infelicitous language of 'choosing' here, although he cannot avoid it altogether. '

According to Barth, the event of God's choice to be one with us in Jesus Christ must itself be a prevenient reality of Jesus Christ in God's eternity. This is so because God's choice to be one with us is in itself a self-determination of God to unity with us, and just so is itself the chosen state of affairs; and Jesus Christ *is* the chosen state of affairs. Thus, Jesus Christ, the God-*man*, happens in eternity before all time, as the reality of the choice by God to be God with this man. . . . We must acknowledge God's being as itself *event and action*. For Barth, this is the same as to say that God is

and principally in the Son, who in Jesus Christ is primed to participate in something beyond God: something called existence. Jesus Christ is to be the way the relationship between essence and existence is embodied. Only in the realm of existence, when the persons of the Trinity are given narrative display, can we begin to consider the story of God, and distinguish God from all there is. The Holy Spirit fosters the relationship between Jesus and creation.

In order for embodiment to take place, existence needs to come into being. The creation of existence comes about because of God's effervescent abundance. The purpose of existence is first of all to provide the theatre for the encounter between Jesus Christ and his companions. Those companions are known as human beings. But Jesus Christ's encounter, while definitively an encounter with human beings, is truly an encounter with the whole of existence, with, through and beyond human beings: that whole is called creation.

While all things in creation find their animation and apogee in Jesus Christ, creation itself has an integrity and abundance of its own. The detail and exquisite artistry of the living world is indescribable, and exceeded only by the extent and diversity of the universe beyond this planet. The billions of years before humankind began to dwell on earth and the elaborate process by which it came into existence likewise indicate the boundless imagination and abiding patience of the creator.

For all its detail and extent, existence is not essence. It does not last forever. It is the object of the Father's attention, the scene of Christ's incarnation, the sphere of the Holy Spirit's activity: but it will one day come to an end. Essence does not come to an end. The astonishing mystery of Jesus Christ's embodiment is not just that God

perfectly *person*. The perfection of his personhood must mean that he himself chooses what he is; thus we must even say that God is his own *decision*.

Robert Jenson, God after God: The God of the Past and the God of the Future, Seen in the Work of Karl Barth (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 31, italics original

Interestingly, in the light of my language of eternity and essence, Jenson goes on to say, 'the history of Jesus has taken over the place in the structure of reality which "eternity" had in religious Christianity' (70, italics original).

willed to dwell among us and experience our life and share our griefs and consolations; it is that in due course, God wills to elevate our life from existence to essence – to draw humankind and all creation into the forever that is the realm of God. This forever will not be entirely foreign to humankind, that is, so swathed in the utter and mutual relationship of God that no persons shaped by existence could recognise themselves in it; it will instead be a realm, for humans, of so being with God, themselves, one another and the renewed creation that it epitomises and transfigures the highest experiences of created existence. It will thus not be new, but largely composed of reincorporated elements of the old. In this realm the utter and mutual relationship in which the persons of the Trinity experience one another will be the pervading experience of the elevated creatures. Every moment of true and genuine being with in existence is inspired by the Holy Spirit and transfigured in God's ultimate realm. The language of the realm (or 'kingdom') of God identifies those moments when God's original purpose in becoming incarnate, and God's final purpose in transfiguring existence, become visible in social relations of trust, dynamism and transformation on earth.

The intersection between God's original and final purposes is the incarnation of Jesus Christ – at a moment in time, at a place on earth, in particular circumstances and within the context of contingent events. It is of immense significance that Jesus spent the great majority – 90 per cent – of his life in obscurity, being with the people of Nazareth (besides such time as was spent in Bethlehem and Egypt, according to the scriptural account). On this profound underpinning of being utterly with the people of Israel, and humankind in general, rests his subsequent ministry. While he transitions following his baptism into more of a working-with approach – training and equipping his disciples, dialoguing with and confronting the crowd and the authorities, performing symbolic actions and offering wisdom, counsel and guidance – every aspect of this working with is directed at demonstrating, advocating and encouraging people towards profound relationships of being with God, themselves, one another and the

creation. His commitment to being with is put to the ultimate test as he faces execution. But in his agonising death, facing the choice whether to be with humankind and creation or to be with God, he yet remains faithful to his commitment – God’s original and final purpose – to be with us, even at the cost of jeopardising the utter and mutual relationships of the Trinity. And in his resurrection we behold the fundamental and ultimate inseparability of the Trinity and the unbreakable character of God’s commitment to be with us. In Christ’s ascension, we see for the first time the destiny God has for each one of us, that we shall enter the utter and mutual relationship of being with God, ourselves, one another and the renewed creation in the realm of essence: the prospect that constitutes God’s final purpose. The name for this final purpose is communion.

Besides its definitive and focal embodiment in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God’s original and final purpose is disclosed in several ways. Perhaps the first is through covenant. The covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David described in the Old Testament each, to different degrees and in diverse dimensions, anticipate the embodiment of God’s purpose in Christ by setting out what it means for God’s people to be with one another and be a blessing to the whole world. When that covenant is inscribed in the Ten Commandments, there emerge a set of expectations and guidelines for how Israel is to live sustainably with God and with one another. A covenant is fundamentally a commitment to be with one another through sunshine and rain, and an indication of what practices will uphold, foster and enrich that togetherness. In this it differs from a contract, which is a set of undertakings between parties who are seeking not to be with each other or ‘enjoy’ one another, but instead to ‘use’ one another in legitimate, appropriate, non-exploitative and enforceable ways. The story of Israel is one in which God continues to cherish the covenant, while Israel sometimes lets it lapse into a contract and sometimes fails to honour it. When Israel has not lived sustainably and has fallen into exile, God renews the covenant by being made known to Israel definitively as a God of with, not of

for – as a God who shares Israel’s sufferings rather than simply conspiring to fix them. Such is the pattern of incarnational logic.

The name for the manner in which God’s original and final purpose is understood by human beings is revelation. Revelation encompasses all the ways individuals and communities have witnessed, experienced and reflected upon God’s desire to be with them, and the pattern by which such testimony has been distilled, refined and compiled by those given authority. While there may be many questions about how the scriptures reflect and embody some of the inadequate and unworthy social structures and communal expectations of the milieu within which they were recorded – one thinks for example of the dominance of men in public roles and the routine suppression of women’s voices – there is no question that the Holy Spirit continues to speak through the text we have today. Revelation fundamentally proclaims God’s purpose to be with us in Christ and our destiny to be with Christ forever. It does not and cannot examine every complex issue in succeeding generations, which can be addressed by exploring what forms of life most fully anticipate God’s coming realm and equip God’s people to be with God, themselves, one another and the creation. The scriptures continue to bring inspiration and revelation to this discernment, as does the tradition of God’s people and the reflection on scripture, tradition and manner in which the Holy Spirit yields wisdom in the world at large.

Indeed that activity of the Holy Spirit is another way in which God’s original and final purpose is disclosed and discerned. The Holy Spirit’s definitive activity is to make Christ present in the human world and creation more generally. While celebrated moments may be those when glimpses of God’s realm are most explicit – when a political dictator is unseated, when a major breakthrough is made to enhance humanity’s relationship with the creation it has so depleted, when two parties are reconciled after a painful story of hurt and damage, when a community embraces and is enriched by the diverse identities and talents of people who have elsewhere experienced exclusion and rejection – the Holy Spirit is by no means active only

in celebrated moments. The Holy Spirit is active in every instant of every life of every kind. Its activity is to enhance the utter and mutual relationship of being with and to draw all creation towards its destiny of being with God in Christ forever. The scriptures are accounts and perceptions of definitive ways the Holy Spirit has been active; but they are indescribably far from being comprehensive, because the Holy Spirit's work of catalysing and brokering being-with relationships is constant and ceaseless. The name for these relationships is community.

The abundance of God's imagination and the wideness of God's mercy are such that, while relationships characterised by being with are the icon and goal of the Holy Spirit's activity, the creativity and vibrancy of God's realm is experienced and cultivated in myriad ways. The arts imitate and echo the artistry and playfulness of God; universities seek to expand knowledge and by training and reflection to turn that knowledge into wisdom; sports exult in the agility of the body, the adaptability of the mind and the collaboration of a team to go beyond the sedentariness of conversation and personal endeavour alone. Labour preserves us from idleness, and can offer glimpses of a rewarding working with that makes evident how in organisations and institutions we can each be more than the sum of our parts. Opportunities to exercise gifts, acquire skills, develop habits, foster practices and form relationships of mutual upbuilding and respect create energy and give substance to the otherwise empty quest for independence or autonomy. Politics and struggle identify places where power and flourishing are unequally distributed and constantly evaluate whether conditions or commitments reflect or further the relationships that herald God's realm. Because of the Holy Spirit's ubiquitous activity, one can never say one is engaging in something other than the business of God. And the wider creation conducts its own drama of existence and symphony of praise, whether or not inhibited by the activity of humankind. All this – particularly that which is unjustly misused or cruelly discarded – is material ripe for reincorporation into God's ultimate realm.

From the moment Jesus embarks upon his ministry, he is surrounded by followers and thronged by the crowd. These near and distant disciples experience and embody the devotion, confusion and pathologies that his followers have replicated ever since. Jesus commissions Peter as the rock on which to found this community, breathes his Holy Spirit on his disciples at Easter and sends them forth them on the mount of Ascension. At Pentecost the Holy Spirit inspires and empowers a dozen fragile followers to turn the world upside down and do unbelievable things. Henceforth the community of people dedicated to modelling in its life the utter and mutual relationship of being with God, oneself, one another and the creation, and heralding this relationship as embodied in Jesus Christ and fostered by the Holy Spirit, is called church.

Like any human activity, church cannot simply practise being with to the exclusion of other ways of relating.² There is a great deal of working with, for example in church administration and decision-making, and some degree of working for, although on closer inspection preachers for example are working with when they dovetail their words with the activity of singers, accompanists, intercessors and presiders, let alone reviewers of draft sermons and participants in theological reflection and reading groups. Likewise voluntary congregational monetary giving looks like a form of working for but becomes an action of working with when seen as a common practice shared by all participants. Whatever the elements of working for and working

² The distinctions between the four categories of working for, working with, being with and being for are foundational for all my work about being with. Working for is where I have skills and knowledge and configure a relationship in terms of my assets, which I exercise, and your deficits, which I alleviate. Working with is a collaboration in which I join a group of agents who each bring their assets to the table to overcome a problem together. Being with is where I relate to you for your own sake, not for any ulterior goal. Being for is where I do not directly interact with you but nonetheless advocate for you or consider myself to address your problem without engaging you in that pursuit. For a succinct summary of the four categories see my *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, and Norwich: Canterbury, 2017), 8–13.

with, the telos of every activity is being with God, oneself, one another and the creation in truthful, reconciled and sustainable relationships of dignity, dynamism and mutual cherishing. The calibre of the church is the degree to which these communities exist – more than the number of communities seeking to claim the name ‘church’, or the number of individuals identifying with Jesus, or the influence those claiming to represent Jesus or church have over politics or society. The fact that the church in every age throws up egregious examples of communities far from this model and leaders using what should be enjoyed, including using people particularly vulnerable to exploitation, is a matter for prolonged repentance, and an indication of the difference between church and God’s realm.

Within the church there are particular practices that offer opportunities to perceive that utter and mutual relationship of being with. Notable among those are sacraments. In baptism believers are with Israel as it crossed the Red Sea from slavery to freedom, and as it received the commandments on Mount Sinai showing it how to keep its freedom. Believers are also with Christ in going down into the waters and being raised back up again, both in his own baptism by John and in his death and resurrection. Believers become disciples as they are anointed in the tradition of Israel’s prophets, priests and kings and take a candle to become lights in the world: thus again they share with Israel and walk with Jesus. Meanwhile in the Eucharist the community models what it means to live sustainably with God. Praise and scripture-reading align worshippers with God’s original and final purpose; preaching locates that purpose in the present day; confession and peace restore worshippers in being with God, themselves, one another and the creation; then human labour and God’s abundance are brought to the table, whereupon the retelling of God’s original and final purpose, embodied in Christ, transforms them from the limitations of existence to the effervescence of essence, and the congregation becomes what it eats, the body of Christ, ready to be sent out to celebrate, foster and advance the utter and mutual relationships it has experienced together, thus making the whole world a

Eucharist. The sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, together with the life of prayer and the timely presentation of God's original and final purpose in preaching, are so important that the church sets aside and equips particular individuals to convene and prepare and offer them well; this is ordination. Such people invariably play important roles in governing and organising the community – but their key function is to trust and practise the time-honoured ways the Holy Spirit has proved to be with God's people.

While Christians long to be fully with God, and for their relationship with themselves, one another and the creation to be unshuffled by the distortions, subversions and distresses of life in the world, they cannot assume that God's final purpose will immediately be realised – either upon their own death or upon the conclusion of the earth's story. For God may have many other stories to tell; the incarnation may be just one of God's several ways of interacting with something beyond; and there may be some things beyond yet to appear: we are, after all, talking about eternity, in which this might be one of many universes and the wonder of the Christian gospel may be exceeded by yet more exhilarating manifestations of God's glory. The one thing of which Christians may be confident is that the character of God, explicitly and definitively set forth in the incarnate Jesus, will not change. Christianity is, in the end, about a faithful God in whom we may place our utter trust. It is that, rather than any particular doctrine, that is the touchstone of all things.

A DIFFERENT STORY

This way of portraying the Christian faith highlights abundance, relationship, transfiguration and blessing. It differs significantly from other portrayals of the faith in a number of respects, which I shall now outline.

First, this is a story about God. That might sound obvious; but many renderings of Christian faith are really stories about us. "God with us" is the centre of the Christian message – and always in such a way that it is primarily a statement about God and only then and for

that reason a statement about us.³ The anthropocentric story of the need to address the panic about the past (guilt and bitterness), and to dismantle the fear of the future (death and the unknown), unduly shapes, if not overshadows, the Christocentric story described above. Theology is consistently displaced by anthropology. The story above is from beginning to end about God; even at the end it opens the door to future initiatives on God's part that might have little or nothing to do with us or the creation we know, but might be above and beyond our existence. They could be in another existence entirely, to which, in all likelihood, the second person of the Trinity will relate (or perhaps is currently relating) in Christoform ways.

Second, this is a story about Jesus. Again, that might seem to go without saying. But alternative versions of Christianity tend not to focus on Jesus, for diverse reasons. Most often, they instead centre on sin. Sin and mortality become the key players in the story, and Jesus is introduced some while after the story has begun (around three-quarters of the way through, if one calculates by a scripture page-count). In such narratives, Jesus is not the centre of the story; instead, he has a clear job to do, a role whose responsibilities are not set by him: he turns out to be not the shepherd but a hired hand, brought in to fix the sin and mortality problem. But there are other common ways of decentring Jesus. One is to highlight the eschaton, for example by portraying a rapture in which the faithful are taken up to heaven. The cost of overemphasising what lies ahead is to underemphasise what lies behind: the more dramatic and decisive is the climax, the less significant and definitive becomes the incarnation. One subtler way to decentre Jesus is to employ theological language, yet to offer no account of ways in which Jesus' incarnation, passion or

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 3, 5. I shall detail in Chapter 6 my concerns that Barth does not successfully disentangle his notion of with from his deeper assumption of for. But his insistence that this is a story about God is consistent and distinctive.

resurrection provide a template for discipleship and church today. Jesus quickly becomes a source of endorsement for whatever cause or initiative one planned to advance anyway. In contrast with each of these accounts, the story above is about Jesus from beginning to end. Creation is because of and through Jesus, all in scripture that precedes or follows him is anticipating or reflecting him, and all else is the activity of the Holy Spirit, which becomes recognisable when it looks like Jesus.

Third, this is a story of abundance. It is not dominated by deficit, either transactional (some kind of affront to honour) or relational (guilt at what we have done and bitterness at what has been done to us). It is not shaped around resolving a problem: there are undoubted obstacles, resistances and sabotage, as well as grotesque parodies of what God offers in Christ; but these do not get the prerogative of determining the narrative. The story begins, continues, is definitively characterised by and concludes in abundance. Fundamentally the story is one of the prevailing quality of more. There is at the beginning no shortfall in God; yet the Trinity's plentitude still finds it yields something beyond, and a relationship with that something beyond, known as creation. The incarnation is not an addition to God, being inherent in the configuration of the Trinity: and yet it still resembles more. Even in the mystery of cross and resurrection, there abides an inextinguishable surplus: when death has done its worst, God still has more. Should existence ever seem boundless and breathtaking, essence presents infinitely more. When creation has run its course, there is with God forever indescribably more. Even the incidentals are about abundance, not scarcity: there is far more of creation, in extent and detail, than anyone could possibly assess. There are myriad forms of social existence; even the variety of religious expression, rather than be perceived as heretical, schismatic, barbarous or alien, may be taken as a sign of effervescence. The life of God's realm is not so much about learning to be right not wrong, or better not worse, but more about finding ways to accommodate, enjoy and embrace endless dimensions, difference and diversity, and bring

to the surface a variety of skills, gifts and identities. The life of being with always trusts that God has given enough and to spare.

Fourth, this is a story of God's sovereignty and freedom. There is here no extraneous justice to which God must pay respect, no honour to which God owes dues, still less an authoritative adversary that God must trick, surprise, bargain with or defeat.⁴ God has no rescue to perform in Christ, and humanity is in no prison to which some formula or activity unlocks the key; there is no necessity governing every actor including God to which God and all others are subject, or obligation that Christ must uphold, or debt the Trinity must scramble about in its pockets to repay.⁵ Such strictures are absurd: we are talking about the one whose glory fills the entirety of essence, and who initiated and choreographed the entirety of existence. How could the Trinity, whose life exudes generosity, mercy and creativity, be subject to some sinister, incorrigible, unyielding abstract compulsion? That is not to say the story does not need to reckon with sin, evil, suffering and death; but not as truculent landlords requiring back payment or desultory tyrants threatening obliteration. This is a narrative of God and God's glory and God's grace and God's generosity –

⁴ Gustav Aulén refers to God's love as spontaneous – by which he means it is always prior to human action and never a response to the human predicament. See his *The Faith of the Christian Church*, trans. Eric H. Wahlstrom (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 113–15. He also rejects the tension between divine love and divine justice described by Anselm. Instead, he understands that God's love *is* God's justice. He perceives the answer to evil as reconciliation rather than judgement (120, 147). The process by which God forgives is not one in which, by some transaction, Jesus satisfies divine justice. Jesus' life and death express God's love. Forgiveness is unconditional – there is no question of substitution (182–83). See also William G. Witt and Joel Scandrett, *Mapping Atonement: The Doctrine of Reconciliation in Christian History and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2022), 49–60.

⁵ Here I refer to Anselm of Canterbury and his scholastic successors, who shift the basic metaphor of atonement from victory to punishment, honour and retribution, and the penal substitution model from John Calvin onwards. Anselm's work is a cause of controversy because he begins with notions that accord with Irenaeus and Athanasius: thus he sees humankind as created to enjoy God, and sin as disrupting the divine beauty and order of creation. However, he then switches to notions of sin as debt, divine justice as demanding punishment or satisfaction, and salvation as restoration of divine honour.

not about a kindly uncle agreeing to pay off an overdraft before getting in over his head and finally escaping.

Fifth, this is a story about an ongoing role for Jesus from beginning to end. In some prominent versions of the story, there is no particular role for Jesus before Gabriel announces to Mary that she is with child of the Holy Spirit: Jesus' function is to suffer and die – and in some cases to rise, although there are accounts in which even that is supernumerary. Likewise, thereafter Jesus is perceived as sitting at the right hand of the Father, a role that sometimes appears to be a reward for a mission accomplished – but not necessarily having any further part to play. Thus Jesus becomes an instrumental figure, more or less discarded once his work is done, although sometimes he returns on the clouds at the last day. In the story above, Jesus is foundational to the creation of the world, being indeed its *raison d'être*, is the embodiment of God and humanity's shared future, and sets forth in his life a template for all social existence in the light of God's mercy and grace. Jesus is made present by the Holy Spirit in constant and countless, almost continuous ways, though seldom recognised or credited, even by those who seek his face at every turn. It is an utterly Christocentric story: a story all about Jesus.

Sixth, this is a story of humanity and the creation's genuine flourishing. God wants all human life to be characterised by non-instrumental relationships of mutuality and utter offering to one another. This is not about a version of faithfulness that stunts development, stifles expression, silences energy or trammels all into one style of life. Created existence is one enormous offertory procession, in which human beings and diverse forms of life bring forward, consciously or not, amazing gifts of beauty and endeavour, patience and inspiration, kindness and endurance, creativity and hope, love and laughter. On some accounts, there is no explicit explanation of why God created the universe at all; nor any particular reason why God would want in Christ to release it from the vice in which it is held. In the story above, there are constant analogies of grace, gestures of solidarity, living patterns of love scattered throughout the world; God

is not checking to discern if these are genuine forms of worship or intentional acts of discipleship – they are part of the human impulse to rejoice in God’s glory, whether named, acknowledged, understood, revered or not. Relationships of utter mutuality can surface in any community or neighbourhood, among the most affluent or deprived, among the ardent atheist or humble believer. The Holy Spirit’s work is relentless, and will never be suppressed. God is an artist, assembling and bringing to fruition every aspect of creation on the canvas of life – not an internet hacker, investigating our secret follies, or a bailiff come to make reckoning for our unpaid debts. Worship is humankind and creation’s recognition of and response to God’s original and final purpose; but that worship is a celebration of all that God is, not a grovelling statement of gratitude that implies that God in all justice should not have bothered. Likewise, discipleship is glad engagement in the ways of personal and social existence that lead to life, not a tight-lipped resistance to the world, the flesh and the devil, casting suspicious glances at any influence that might lead one from the narrow path.

Seventh and last, this is a story in which God’s means and ends are identical. There is no detour via which God must adopt tactics or strategies inimical to the ways the persons of the Trinity mutually indwell and embrace each other. Throughout the story, the incarnate Christ – the reason for creation, anticipated in covenant, embodied in Jesus, made present by the Spirit, dwelling with us in glory – exercises entire congruence between who he is and what he does, why he does it and how he does it. He comes as a tiny child – utterly with, to the point, remarkably, of almost complete dependence. He grows as a youth, still with, known chiefly by his dialogue with the teachers in the temple (Lk 2:46, a moment that discloses who he is, what he embodies and whom he is called to be with), he lives with his disciples, still with, there being no place to lay his head (Mt 8:20), he is with the curious and the desperate, the sex worker and the collaborator, until he is arrested and forced into a crisis where it seems he cannot continue to be with both the Trinity and humankind

(Mk 15:34). Beyond this moment, in his resurrection he is once again with both the Trinity and all creation, and in his ascension he goes to be with the Trinity, promising to be with his disciples always (Mt 28:20), an undertaking fulfilled by the events of Pentecost. It is, throughout, a continuous story of with. There is utter, undeviating consistency of purpose and conduct. God does not change character to pull off some necessary activity to secure or guarantee something other than God. God is with; creates to be with; is with in Christ; is with despite all challenges; is with in Christ through the Holy Spirit; and will be with us and the renewed creation in Christ and the Holy Spirit forever.

In short, the whole story is about God's abundance, not our scarcity.