

Kathryn Tanner and the receptivity of Christ and the Church

Anglican Theological Review

2022, Vol. 104(2) 134–147

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/00033286211068747

journals.sagepub.com/home/atr



Mike Higton 
University of Durham, UK

Abstract

In conversation with Kathryn Tanner’s Christology, I argue that Jesus’ receptivity matters. He is who he is, and his story goes the way it goes, only because of what he receives and goes on receiving from all that surrounds him. Similarly, Jesus’ church grows and learns by what it encounters in the world. These encounters can be occasions for the work of the Spirit upon it, drawing it into the life that God has established in the world in Jesus. Neither Jesus’ incarnate life nor the life of the church should be conceived as involving preservation from creaturely interaction and dependence.

Keywords

ecclesiology, incarnation, Kathryn Tanner, missiology, receptivity

Introduction

Jesus’ receptivity matters. He is who he is, and his story goes the way it goes, only because of what he receives and goes on receiving from all that surrounds him. Similarly, Jesus’ church grows and learns by what it encounters and hears in the world. These encounters can be occasions for the work of the Spirit upon it, drawing it into the life that God has established in the world in Jesus. Neither Jesus’ incarnate life nor the life of the church should be conceived as involving preservation from creaturely interaction and dependence.

In this article, I will make a case for these claims in conversation with Kathryn Tanner’s Christology. I will begin by looking at her discussion of the union between human and divine natures in Christ—the “hypostatic” union. I will summarize what she says about other human beings getting drawn into relationship with Christ by the Spirit, so as to share the benefits secured by that union. And then I will highlight the central role

Corresponding author:

Mike Higton, Department of Theology and Religion, University of Durham, Abbey House, Palace Green, Durham DH1 3RS, UK.

Email: mike.higton@durham.ac.uk

that action plays in her account of these matters. That is, Tanner places a strong emphasis on the union between divine and human *action* in Jesus, and a similarly strong focus on the *action* of the other human beings who are drawn into relationship with him. I will suggest that the Christological story Tanner tells is a story in which first Jesus' activity and then the activity of Jesus' followers are placed at center-stage.

I don't draw attention to this focus on action simply as an interesting facet of Tanner's theology. It resonates with a prominent strand of theology that I encounter in my own ecclesial context—the Church of England, nationally and locally. In that context, there is often a strong focus on the Church's activity, especially its missional activity, seen as a participation in the activity of God in Christ, or as a sharing in the *missio dei*. In a variety of ways, some subtler than others, the story of the church's participation in the mission of God is told as a story about agency. I will be suggesting, with the help of a recent discussion of Whiteness in Christology, that this focus on Christ's divine–human agency, and especially on the agency of Christians as bearers of Christ's agency, can become a problem. It can reinforce the tendency of those in positions of power to place their own agency at the center of the picture of what God is doing in the world.

Finally, I will make some suggestions as to how to modify a Christological and soteriological approach like Tanner's in response to this critique. I am not going to suggest sweeping her work away in order to build something very different. I will suggest, instead, that responding to this critique might lead to some significant retexturing of her account, and especially to a greater emphasis on receptivity in Jesus and in the church. Jesus is who he is only because of all that he encounters and engages with in the world. It is the whole story of the life that he receives from all that surrounds him that is assumed by the eternal Word and that communicates the light, life, and love of God to the world. Similarly, the church is what it is only because of all that it encounters and hears in the world. To the extent that the church shares the light, life, and love of God, it will be because these encounters have been occasions for the work of the Spirit upon us, uniting us to Christ. We become who we are—in our discipleship, in our holiness, in our witness—only in among others, with them and from them.

Tanner's Christological grammar

Tanner begins with God, and with God's desire to share God's own life with creatures.¹ God has bought creatures into being *in order* to share God's "life, light and love" with them. In a fallen world, however, creatures share only imperfectly in that divine life, light, and love—and they are incapable of securing a return to that life, light, and love by their own agency.² To be rescued from this plight, creatures need God to act. And God does act. God acts in many and various ways, but above all in the incarnation of the Word. God brings into being in the midst of the world a human life that shares perfectly in the life, light, and love of God. Jesus of Nazareth displays this divine life, light, and love over the whole course of his life. He is God's own human life in the world. He is the

¹ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 1–2. The following account is largely drawn from the first chapter of this book.

² Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ch. 2.

means by which God acts *in* the world to share God's own life *with* the world. His actions are properly attributed to God, as God's own action on behalf of the world.

For Tanner, the act of incarnation is not simply an act of God that takes place at the start of Jesus' life. God does not, as it were, establish the hypostatic union, and then let the human life constituted by that union run its course. The act of incarnation is the act by which God lays out this whole human life in the world—a life that extends from conception to birth to growth to ministry to death to resurrection to ascension and beyond. This whole life, by the whole way that it is lived, by the whole course that it follows, exhibits the life, light, and love of God. This whole life shares God's life with the world.

To put it another way: to describe the act of incarnation, you need the whole narrative of the gospels. The incarnation is an act that unfolds over that whole story. Tanner is willing to speak of the "deification" of Jesus' humanity—God's making this to be a human life utterly transparent to God's life, light, and love. This deification, she says, "does not happen all at once, but over the course of Jesus' life and death."³ That is not at all because she sees Jesus becoming more divine over time; there is no gradual accession to divinity here. She does not envisage some transition of Jesus into the hypostatic union from outside it. Rather, Jesus' whole life is a message from God in creaturely form, and that message takes time to be spoken. All the various happenings of Jesus' life are, Tanner says, "made part of God's assumption of the human" as they occur.⁴

In a sinful world, this act of incarnation takes the form, moment by moment, of an overcoming of sin and its effects.

Jesus does not overcome temptation until he is tempted, does not overcome fear of death until he feels it . . . does not heal death until the Word assumes death when Jesus dies; Jesus does not conquer sin until he assumes or bears the sins of others by suffering death at their hands.⁵

The act of incarnation is the act of God by which a human life is established in righteousness, in a victory won over sin and death. Tanner is not claiming that Jesus is first mired in unrighteousness and subsequently established in righteousness. This act of incarnation, which establishes Jesus in righteousness, is the very act by which his humanity is constituted. His humanity is, therefore, wholly and at every moment established in righteousness, and has no existence prior to or outside righteousness. Nevertheless, the act by which Jesus' humanity is constituted and established in righteousness is the act in which it is brought into being in the midst of the world, and so it is at every moment a victory over against the unrighteousness of that world.

To put this another way, think of Gregory of Nazianzus' saying that "what is not assumed is not healed."⁶ Put positively, what *is* assumed *is* healed. The assumption of humanity by the Word is an act by which that humanity is healed—and an act by which *every part* of that humanity is healed. We are used to the claim that every

³ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 27.

⁴ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 27.

⁵ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 28.

⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, Letter 101 to Cledonius.

element that makes up a human person—body, mind, soul, will, and so on—must be healed. But in Tanner’s picture, every temporal part is healed, too. Each episode, each development in Jesus’ life is, as it occurs, united to God, established in righteousness, and healed.

Because the life of Jesus has been established in the world in this way, other human beings can, by being joined to him, share in this healing. “The perfected humanity of Jesus is the means of our salvation,” Tanner says; “we are saved as we are united with him, perfected and glorified, in faith and love.”⁷ This takes place, according to Tanner, by the Spirit.

The Spirit radiates the humanity of Jesus with the Father’s own gifts of light, life and love; and shines through him, not simply back to the Father, but through his humanity to us, thereby communicating to us the gifts received by Jesus from the Father.⁸

Other human beings receive the Spirit as a pledge, as a sign that they are claimed as Christ’s own, that they are now part of his company. The Spirit, in Tanner’s word, “attaches” them to Christ.⁹ And then the Spirit that they have received begins to work on the material of their lives. The Spirit awakens “justifying faith that adheres or cleaves to Christ.” The Spirit animates their participation in the eucharistic community, drawing them into “praise, prayer and worship, empowered by the Spirit.”¹⁰ And the Spirit works on them, however uneven and partial the results may be, to turn them toward lives of “service to God,” “entering into the conflicts and struggles of history for the betterment of the world.”¹¹

For Tanner, in other words, the incarnation is the establishment by God in the midst of the sinful world of a human life wholly filled with God’s life, light, and love. The work of salvation is the Spirit’s drawing of other human beings into union with this one human life and so into union with God. And just as the deification of Jesus’ humanity is worked out only over time, in the whole course of the story that God tells with this human life, so, in a similar way, the salvation of other human beings is itself worked out over time. Jesus’ sanctified life is shared with them, by the Spirit, over the whole course of their lives.

The Spirit carries out this work of salvation in the midst of the world of creatures, by means of creaturely processes. The Spirit works through preaching, baptism, the celebration of the eucharist, the slow or sudden transformation of human patterns of affection, thought, speech, and action. The Spirit, Tanner says, works “gradually . . . in and through the usual fully human and fully fallible, often messy and conflict-ridden public processes of give and take in ordinary life.”¹² The work of the Spirit in salvation is mediated through the actions of creatures.

⁷ Tanner, *Christ the King*, 30.

⁸ Tanner, *Christ the King*, 53.

⁹ Tanner, *Christ the King*, 86.

¹⁰ Tanner, *Christ the King*, 60.

¹¹ Tanner, *Christ the King*, 61, 63.

¹² Tanner, *Christ the King*, 274.

Tanner's focus on action

A strong focus on action runs through this account. Tanner says that

Christ's incarnation is matched by our assumption into Christ. Assumed by Christ, Christ becomes the subject of our acts in much the same way the second person of the Trinity is the subject of Jesus' acts. *Our acts are Christ's acts, we can say that Christ acts when we act, insofar as what we are and do comes by way of the power of Christ, in so far as we are carried beyond our capacities by Christ who takes us to himself.*¹³

Our union with Christ is seen above all in our acts, insofar as they flow from our relationship with him, just as the hypostatic union is seen above all in Jesus' acts, which are the acts of the eternal Word. In fact, Tanner says, "Our assumption by Christ has *as its whole point* such a correspondence in action between Christ's life and ours."¹⁴

This focus on action is not simply an eccentricity of Tanner's. One could look at Ian McFarland's account of the incarnation in *The Word Made Flesh*—an account similar to Tanner's. "Jesus," says McFarland, has from birth "the unimpeded openness to grace characteristic of deification," and so his acts are all human acts "performed in a divine mode." "Jesus *does* human things divinely and divine things humanly."¹⁵ And other human beings can be drawn to share in that action.¹⁶ "[B]y grace," says McFarland, "humans may participate in the divine energies, with the result that their activity may take forms that are symptomatic of the divine nature."¹⁷ "In such cases, human beings may be said to perform human acts . . . divinely."¹⁸

Or we could also look to Rowan Williams, in his recent book *Christ the Heart of Creation*. He sees the classical formulation of Christology at the Council of Chalcedon as affirming "the complete and unequivocal presence of divine action and human action inseparably united with one another."¹⁹ And his explorations in the history of Christology frequently circle around questions of agency. When discussing Pauline language about being "in Christ," for instance, he says that

the identity of Jesus is understood as generating a "lineage," a communal identity, that allows its members to see themselves as gifted with *the same mode of activity* that belongs to their "ancestor," so that his acts can be attributed to them.²⁰

The story Williams tells of the development of Christology is in significant part a story about this sharing of action.

¹³ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 56–57, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 71, emphasis added.

¹⁵ Ian McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 94.

¹⁶ McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh*, 91.

¹⁷ McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh*, 92.

¹⁸ McFarland, *The Word Made Flesh*, 92.

¹⁹ Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), xii, 221.

²⁰ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 54, emphasis added.

In these accounts, as in Tanner's, the hypostatic union is, in its effects at least, above all a union of agency. This union allows us to say that Jesus' acts are the acts of the eternal Son. His acts are the acts of God in the world. And when other human beings are caught up by the Spirit into union with Jesus, that too shows itself above all in their action. When they act, Jesus acts. Their acts too are the acts of the eternal Son. Their acts too are the acts of God in the world. And for Tanner, that is the "whole point."

The problem with action

There is a danger here, though, and it is one that is named by Jennifer Harvey, in her article, "What Would Zacchaeus Do? The Case for *Disidentifying* with Jesus."²¹ Harvey is discussing Whiteness—the patterns of imagination and action that emerge in a culture that has come to categorize some people as "White," to see such White people as the norm, and to position everyone else as abnormal or marginal. "One of the many effects of whiteness," she argues,

is that it always already locates white people at the center of most narratives and structures. Such positioning is mitigated by class, gender and sexual orientation, but when racial difference is present white people tend to be positioned as primary actors in whatever location we find ourselves.²²

She gives the example of the civil rights movement, and the way in which work against racism was often undermined by "the presence of well-intentioned white people who were inclined to dominate agenda-setting," who tended to adopt "paternalistic postures" that "reiterated the very white dominance characteristic of white supremacy."²³

Her wider argument is that such Whiteness can be unhelpfully buttressed by Christology. "It just so happens," she says,

that identifying with or as the central agent in the narratives we embody is one of the broken ways of being toward which white people are prone. It just so happens that being inclined to do "for" in postures that are paternalistic is another damaged side-effect of white racialization.²⁴

Yet in any

move by the white Christian to identify with Jesus, the centrality and power of the white actor is reiterated and reaffirmed. Simply put, identifying with the divine is about the last thing that a white person whose life is embedded in white-supremacist structures should be doing.²⁵

²¹ Jennifer Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do? The Case for *Disidentifying* with Jesus," in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?*, ed. George Yancey (New York: Routledge, 2012), 84–100.

²² Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do?," 94.

²³ Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do?," 94.

²⁴ Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do?," 94.

²⁵ Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do?," 95.

We could expand this. Identifying with the divine is about the last thing that a White person whose life is embedded in White-supremacist structures should be doing—at least in contexts where the relations between differently racialized group are at stake. It is also about the last thing that a man whose life is embedded in sexist structures should be doing, at least in contexts where gender relations are at stake. It is about the last thing that a middle-class person whose life is embedded in classist structures should be doing, at least in contexts where class relations are at stake. And we could go on, in a familiar litany, in relation to sexuality, and disability, and gender identity, and so on. Identifying with the divine is, unavoidably, a move made in the midst of the flows of power that shape our world, and it cannot help but interact with those flows. And however innocent it sounds, its interactions with those flows of power can make it toxic.

Harvey has in her sights one particular pattern of Christological thinking—a social justice Jesus combined with a “What Would Jesus Do?” vision of discipleship—but it is not hard to turn her critique against other patterns of Christological thinking. And that includes the pattern I have just been exploring, precisely because of the role played in it by action.

What story am I, as a White Christian—and a middle-class, male, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied, western White Christian at that—telling about my own agency when I tell the Christological story I have related so far in this paper? I am saying that, albeit fallibly and fitfully, albeit in a way utterly dependent upon grace, my acts are Christ’s acts. I am saying that Christ acts when I act. I am saying that my acts can bear the characteristic signature of God’s own active life—that they can be “symptomatic of the divine nature.” And yes, I will only be able to say this with integrity when my acts are acts of giving, acts of love, acts undertaken for others and on others’ behalf. I will only be able to say it when I am “being actively there on behalf of the other.”²⁶ But that rather clearly does not evade the challenge that Harvey has thrown down. It still leaves me as the agent, the doer. It still leaves me in the center of the picture.

In one sense, a Christology like Tanner’s might knock my agency out of this center. I will now understand that my action does not flow from what I myself securely possess, but from Christ upon whom I am utterly dependent. I may affirm wholeheartedly that my action is a gift that I receive, undeserving, from the Holy Spirit. In another sense, however, my agency is placed right in the center of the picture. When I act, Christ acts; when I act, God acts, and the divine life flows out through me into the world. Is that really what someone in my position most needs to be saying?

We can take this question beyond the level of individual discipleship. I was first alerted to Harvey’s article by Al Barrett, in the PhD thesis that became his book, *Interrupting the Church’s Flow*.²⁷ It is also discussed in the book that he has written with Ruth Harley, *Being Interrupted*.²⁸ And Barrett and Harley give Jennifer Harvey’s question a strong

²⁶ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 203.

²⁷ Al Barrett, *Interrupting the Church’s Flow: A Radically Receptive Political Theology in the Urban Margins* (London: SCM, 2020), 233–34.

²⁸ Al Barrett and Ruth Harley, *Being Interrupted: Reimagining the Church’s Mission from the Outside*, In (London: SCM, 2020), 139.

ecclesiological spin. Like me, they are Anglicans, working in the context of the Church of England. They point out how pervasively, in Anglican contexts, descriptions of the church focus on action. The church acts in the world, the church is the doer, the giver—and, as long as that action is properly configured, when the church acts, Christ acts. When the church acts, God acts, and the divine life flows out through the church into the world.

In this picture, which is widespread in current ecclesiological and missiological thinking around the Church of England, those around the church, especially those in need, those in situations of deprivation or marginalization, tend to be positioned fundamentally as recipients. What matters most about the church is its agency, but agency is what matters least about those among whom the church acts. If we are talking about a predominantly middle-class church in a working-class area, or a predominantly White church in UK Minority Ethnic communities, or a predominantly able-bodied church relating to disabled people, the entanglements of those claims with the flows of power that shape our world are not hard to see. Is this really what the church needs to be saying?

Repairing the picture

In the remainder of this article, I want to look back over the whole of the Christological picture that I have sketched, with Jennifer Harvey's challenge in mind. I am not going to suggest that this will require abandoning Tanner's whole account. Rather, I think it requires some retexturing—some shifts in rhetoric, some changes in emphasis, some different resources brought to bear, some different avenues of development explored. And, in particular, it will involve questioning at various points the priority she gives to action.²⁹

I started my description of Tanner's account with her focus on God, on God's desire to share God's own life with creatures, and on incarnation as the central form that this sharing takes. There is one subtlety that I left out, however. Tanner affirms that, although the act of incarnation is an act of the whole undivided Trinity, it is nevertheless an act that establishes a union between humanity and the second person of the Trinity. Jesus is the incarnation specifically of the eternal Son or Word.³⁰ And that means that what happens in Jesus is shaped by the union of his human nature with the divine nature in the mode of this second person. In technical terms, the hypostasis that hypostasizes Jesus' humanity is the hypostasis of the Son. But, as Rowan Williams says,

the divine Word . . . is what it is in virtue of its eternal relation to God the Father—[it is] an eternal living-out of the divine life in the mode of “filiation” . . . the divine life *receiving* divine life as eternal gift and eternally *giving* it in return.³¹

In the eternal Son, then, there is giving *and* receiving.

²⁹ The retexturing is, especially when it comes to the church, in line with Tanner's approach in *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997). There she insists that “Christian communities are never self-contained nor self-sufficient”; the “boundaries between Christian and non-Christian ways of life . . . are fluid and permeable” (152).

³⁰ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 141–45.

³¹ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 29, emphasis added.

I want to tread cautiously at this point. I do not want, any more than does Tanner, to start making claims about relations within the eternal Trinity as if they were like relations between creatures.³² My point is a rather austere grammatical one. In the Son, the one divine essence subsists in a mode, or has a hypostatic character, marked by what we might call reception or passivity—but by using those words “reception” and “passivity,” I am not yet saying any more than that the Son is in some unimaginable way “*from* the Father.”

When we turn to the incarnation, however, we can speak more concretely. Jesus of Nazareth’s human life is the human life of this divine person, the eternal Son. This life, therefore, displays in a creaturely mode—that is, in a graspable way, to which our language *is* fitted—the life, light, and love of the triune God precisely in this mode of “filiation.” This creaturely transcription of the life of God is therefore, fittingly, a life that both gives and receives. In fact, whatever giving there is in this life, whatever action, emerges from what has been received. In this life, *everything* is received. And in this creaturely context, those words are now capable of a much richer explication.

Jesus’ human identity, as the incarnate life of the Son, is what it is only in relation to the Spirit and the Father. Yet in the economy, these relationships are transcribed in thoroughly creaturely terms. That is, Jesus is shaped toward the Father by the Spirit,³³ but the Spirit does this shaping work in and through creatures. Jesus’ knowledge of the Father, for instance, his ability to imagine the Father, his readiness to address the Father, is shaped by his reading of the scriptures and by his practices of prayer. Yet those are things into which he is led by others. Although the gospels pass over these matters in near silence, we may assume that they took place as he “increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor” (Luke 2:52, NRSV). Jesus first heard the scriptures read by others, and then was taught by others to read for himself. He first took part in practices of prayer that he did not himself initiate and then was taught by others to become one who himself prayed. Jesus’ relationship to the Father—a relationship that constitutes his identity as the incarnate Word, as the Savior—is a relationship that he receives from the Spirit. But he receives it from the Spirit working in part through the voices, the hands, the bodies of others.

We can look at Jesus’ sheer physical existence—his existence as a body. Jesus’ body is as it is only because in the womb it was fed on Mary’s blood, as later on it was fed on her milk. It is as it is only because of the ways in which she carried him, the meals she prepared for him, the ways in which she trained and embraced him. Jesus is as he is, his life takes the shape it takes, only because of the body that he receives from Mary.

We can look at Jesus’ ministry. The creaturely receptivity that underpins that ministry is perhaps made most visible in scattered incidents in the gospels—incidents that show us Jesus as interrupted, as learning, as acted upon—as when, for instance, he is challenged by the Syrophenician woman.³⁴ Perhaps most tellingly, the Gospel of John tells

³² Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 226–28.

³³ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 163–67, 182.

³⁴ Al Barrett and Ruth Harley (in *Being Interrupted*, 101–105) tell the story of the Syrophenician woman as a story in which Jesus is interrupted, and turned around by the interruption. This woman is, in the phrase used in the title of Pablo Alonso’s book, *The Woman Who Changed Jesus* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011).

us that the first of Jesus' signs—the first of those incidents in which his glory was revealed and the disciples' belief in him was awoken—took place only because Mary overrode Jesus' objections to acting (John 2:1–11). Jesus reveals the glory of God as he does only because of Mary's interference.

We can go further than this, however. An underlying receptivity is present even when Jesus is presented simply as agent, as the one who confidently speaks and acts on his own initiative. When he preaches, for instance, he speaks the language of his people and his time, a medium he has received from those around him. When he acts, his acts make sense against the background of the scriptures that he has learnt to read with others. Look more deeply, and we might begin to see that there is, in one sense, *nothing* in his action that is not first received. His action is unique, certainly; it is by no means a repetition of what has been said and done before—but its uniqueness emerges from the particular way in which all that precedes and surrounds him has come together in him.

I think we can even say this of Jesus' holiness. God brings it about that, at each moment of his existence, Jesus lives a life transparent to the life, light, and love of God, over against the sinfulness of the world. This deification is not, however, achieved by the protection of Jesus' from the world. That is, it is not achieved by the substitution of the influence of the Spirit for the influence of Jesus' fellow creatures upon him. It is not achieved by a strictly internal influence that can be set against all the external influences that would otherwise have disturbed him. (Tanner's language at times suggests this, as when she speaks of "the Spirit as an *interior* power for action" within Jesus, saying that "the Spirit is *in* him as his own power," as an "*interior* motor of a human life that enacts the Word's own mission from the Father."³⁵) I think we have to say, instead, that the deification of Jesus' humanity by the Spirit takes place in and through all the ways in which Jesus becomes the human being he becomes, in all the company that he keeps.

We should not, therefore, conceptualize Jesus' holiness as an overcoming of creaturely dependence. It does not involve separation from interaction, relationship, and receptivity. It is a work of providence, or of something like providence, working in and through creaturely existence. Jesus is who he is, his story goes the way his story goes, his life communicates the life, light, and love of God in the way that it does, only because of what he receives and goes on receiving from the people, the animals, the environment, the institutions, the texts, and the objects that surround him. And it is the whole story of Jesus' giving and receiving, the whole story of the life that emerges in and from his interaction with all who surround him, that is assumed by the eternal Word. That whole story is the means by which the light, life, and love of God are expressed. That whole story *is* God's healing of broken humanity.

And if this is what we say of the Incarnate one, we might also speak differently about all those of us who are being incorporated into Christ. We might, in particular, not focus in quite the same way upon *our* agency. In the first place, we might talk about the whole Body of Christ. And we won't simply talk about it as the place where we find the activities of worship, of baptizing, of celebrating the eucharist, and so on, that the Spirit awakens and that mediate the Spirit's work. We will talk about it as a Body in which all who

³⁵ Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 166–67 (emphases added).

are being united to Christ are members, and in which they are becoming *both* gifts to one another *and* recipients of the gifts that others are becoming. As Rowan Williams says, “the ‘filiation’ that characterizes Jesus is in some measure lived out in believers” in “an organic interdependence that radically changes our involvement with and responsibility for others, inside and outside the visible community of faith.”³⁶ To become a member of this community is to become a recipient—and to go on receiving, and learning how to receive. It is to become a recipient, and to go on receiving and learning how to receive, even in our agency: we receive all that we give, and we receive the very activity by which we give.

Being healed, having our humanity transformed so that it, too, in its own place and in its own way, displays the light, life, and love of God, is not simply a matter of developing an attitude of receptivity, a stance toward the gift of others. It is a matter of what we actually receive and go on receiving—of what we are made by what we receive. We become who we are called to be, who we were made to be, only as we receive and go on receiving. We become who we are called to be, who we were made to be, only together. We are united to Christ with, through, and from others.

Our healing therefore involves the whole Body, across all its differences. It involves the interaction of all the parts of the church, in all the different places where the life of Christ has taken root. It means that learning to receive, and actually receiving, across barriers of geography, race, gender, class, disability, tradition, and so on, is not simply a consequence of our salvation, something into which we are called by our salvation. Because these others’ hands are hands that mediate the work of the Spirit toward us, uniting us to Christ, they are the means by which our sanctification takes place. They are the means by which we are being united to Christ by the Spirit, and so becoming recipients of the life that God has established in the world in him.

We also need, however, to think about the life that the whole Body of Christ leads in the world. Jesus became who he was in interaction with all those around him. As I said, the deification of his flesh was not achieved by his being protected from the world, nor by the substitution of the influence of the Spirit for the influence of his fellow creatures upon him. It was not achieved by the overcoming of the creatureliness of his flesh, nor by the overcoming of the pervasive forms of dependence that mark that creatureliness. It was achieved by God, working in, with and through all of those creaturely realities. And it is just the same with Christ’s Body, the church. The church becomes what it is in interaction with all that surrounds it. Its identity as healed, as glorified, as transparent to the light, life, and love of God—to the extent that such an identity becomes visible at all—is not achieved by its protection from the world, nor by the influence of the Spirit *rather than* the influence of other creatures upon it. The church receives its identity in Christ before the Father from the Spirit, yes—but the Spirit’s work is mediated in all manner of creaturely ways, by means of all the creatures among whom the church lives.

Christians are not simply those who have received from God in Christ by the Spirit, and who are now turned by the Spirit outward to become givers of that gift, means by which it is passed on and passed out. We are not simply agents, those made by the Spirit into doers of the Word that we have heard, acting it out toward others who have not yet

³⁶ Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 120.

received. It is not enough to say that “Our assumption by Christ has as its whole point . . . a correspondence in action between Christ’s life and ours” such that “Christ acts when we act.”³⁷ Our assumption by Christ also has as its point a correspondence in receptivity, between Christ’s life and ours. We are also drawn into union with Christ as we receive as Christ received, and learn as Christ learned. We become who we are called to be in Christ, we become who we were made to be, at others’ hands, among others, with others. Our salvation is worked out in and through all the ways in which we interact with others, learn from others, and grow alongside them. Not, of course, simply as passive flesh upon which the will of others is imprinted—but in an ongoing living interaction between what we have already received and what we encounter.

One resource for thinking this through is Ben Quash’s book, *Found Theology*—a book that is, in effect, an account of this aspect of the Spirit’s work. Quash imagines Christian life in the world, and the life of the church in the world, as a constant interaction between the given and the found—that is, between all that the church has already received, and carries with it, and all that the church encounters in its life in the world.

God’s revelation in Christ is [he says] not compromised by—indeed, [it] precisely implies—an ongoing historical dynamic whereby, in God, human beings are constantly invited to relate the given to the found. The givens come alive only in this indefinitely extended series of encounters with new circumstances, and the Christian assumption ought to be that no new found thing need be construed as a threat to what has been given, for we have to do with the same God both in the given and in the found.³⁸

The church grows and learns by what it encounters and hears, as much as by holding fast to what it already carries. These encounters, these interactions between the given and the found, are occasions for the work of the Spirit upon us, uniting us to Christ. They are among the means by which our sanctification takes place—the means by which we are being united to Christ by the Spirit, and so becoming recipients of the life that God has established in the world in him.

So, just as with the holiness of Jesus’ humanity, we can’t conceptualize the holiness of the church as its preservation from creaturely dependence, its protection from interaction and exchange. We can’t conceptualize it as a matter of the church as passive in relation to God but active in relation to the world, or passive in relation to what is passed down inside it and active in relation to what it encounters outside. It is a matter, instead, of what the Spirit makes of us in and through the encounters, interactions, and exchanges by which the church is part of the world. We become who we are only in among others, with them and from them.³⁹

³⁷ Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity*, 56, 71.

³⁸ Ben Quash, *Found Theology: History, Imagination and the Holy Spirit* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), xiv, emphasis removed.

³⁹ In the context of theological education, a focus on such receptivity would cohere with Willie James Jennings’ argument in *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020). He identifies the distorting pull still exercised over much western theological education by the image of the White, self-sufficient man (6). Such self-sufficiency is the antithesis of true receptivity.

Finally, the mission of the church, too, is a matter of what the church receives in and from the world, as well as a matter of what the church gives and tells. A recent report from the Church of England's Faith and Order Commission, which describes a series of case studies of flourishing witness from around the Church, puts it this way:

All the stories of witness that we tell in the case studies below are stories that involve people who have been . . . fed by Scripture, shaped by worship, and led by the Spirit.

There is a second sense, though, in which they are stories of seeing and hearing before they are stories of doing. In different ways, each of them is a story of people who pay attention to the world around them. With ears and eyes shaped by all that they have been learning about God, they look closely at the people and situations around them. They look for the opportunities, the resources, the gifts, the challenges that God has placed in their path. They listen out for the sound of God already at work in the lives of those they meet. They see the work of God, blazing unexpectedly beside their path.

The work of witness is never simply our own initiative. It is always a response. It depends completely on what we have received and go on receiving, on what we have been shown and told and go on being shown and told, and on what we have learnt and go on learning.⁴⁰

Conclusion

To sum up, then: God saves by bringing into being, in the midst of the world, the healed human life of Jesus of Nazareth, and by bringing others to share in this life. This saving work is God's work, enacted among creatures by the Spirit. It is certainly a work in which human beings' own agency is caught up—a work in which they are healed *as* creaturely agents, and a work that therefore shows itself in their action. But even as such it is and always remains a work in which they are *acted upon*, by the Spirit. And whatever other forms it takes, the Spirit's ongoing action upon them is also mediated by all manner of creaturely actions, coming to those who are being saved from outside of themselves. Their growth at the hands of the Spirit is therefore always also a growth being received from others' hands—from the various members of the Body of Christ in all its worldwide variety, and from all those in the world whom they encounter and among whom they live. They are saved by being united to Jesus of Nazareth, in whom God became a creature and, in becoming a creature, became utterly enmeshed in the patterns of giving and receiving that constitute the creaturely world.

Declaration of conflicting interests


The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

⁴⁰ The Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, *Witness* (London: Church House Publishing, 2020), 13. The report is available online at www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Witness%20-%20A%20resource%20from%20the%20Faith%20and%20Order%20Commission.pdf.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Mike Higton  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1272-3164>

Author biography

Mike Higton, an Anglican theologian specializing in doctrine, teaching at Durham University, is part of the leadership for the Common Awards scheme, which provides academic validation much of the Church of England's ordination training. He is the vice-chair of the Church of England's Faith and Order Commission, president of the Society for the Study of Theology, and the author of a number of works, including *The Life of Christian Doctrine*, *A Theology of Higher Education*, and *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams*.