

**FULLY HUMAN IN CHRIST:  
The Incarnation as the End of Christian Ethics**

**Todd H. Speidell. Eugene, OR**

Wipf and Stock, 2016. 152pp.

Todd H. Speidell, Lecturer in Theology at Montreat College, Editor of *Participatio: The Journal of the Thomas F. Torrance Theological Fellowship*, and General Editor of *The Ray S. Anderson Collection*, has produced a very stimulating volume of reflections that develop a robust and nuanced trinitarian-incarnational social ethic. Speidell draws widely from Church Fathers to Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ray S. Anderson, John Macmurray, James Torrance, and Thomas F. Torrance. His choice of T. F. Torrance as a conversation partner in this particular project may seem odd to some (since Torrance did not devote a significant amount of his writing to explicit ethical themes) – an issue Speidell takes up in his very first chapter.

Speidell was my first seminary professor, and his course on Christian Ethics was my first introduction to the theological model utilized here. That course altered the trajectory of my theological development. It did so because Speidell was a gracious and tenacious teacher, determined to coax out of my soul the contractual fundamentalism of my youth in order to encourage in me a sustainable and empowering faith. For that I will always be grateful.

But that transformation was born of conflict – regular, predictable, and emotionally upsetting every Friday night from 6-9. Now, some years later, and after having (happily) taken on board a number of Speidell's theological assumptions, I find myself having a few conflicts with Speidell again, although for very different reasons, and with regard to assumptions that are not as deep. But first, the general contours of the book.

The six chapters (and two appendices) of *Fully Human in Christ* have been previously published. Speidell collects and revises them (in some cases substantively) into a cohesive theological argument that he has carried on with himself and others over the years. That is a strength of the book. Paramount is Speidell's concern that a Christian social ethic ought to enable one to make progress toward the affirmation of differences in ways that promote reconciliation, not polarized division or parochial privilege. An ethic that is "autonomous" (and

as such cannot be a *Christian* ethic) seeks to “be good and do good” through compliance to a moral vision that isolates human agency from the agency of God in Christ. Understanding morality in this autonomous way, according to Speidell, throws human persons back upon themselves and into a self-justifying, self-defeating, person-undermining, and neighbor-marginalizing ethic of legalistic moralism and systemic conflict. Instead, Speidell argues that the incarnation is the “end” or abrogation of anthropocentric ethics (including some that go by the name of “Christian ethics”) and the establishment of a genuine christocentric ethic based on the vicarious humanity of Christ.

Chapter One (“The Soteriological Suspension of Ethics in the Theology of T. F. Torrance”) is foundational to Speidell’s overall ethical vision and is composed in conversation with the theology of T. F. Torrance, particularly as others have criticized him for lacking ethical emphases and a robust view of human agency. It is a substantive articulation of the myriad resources in Torrance’s thought for the development of a trinitarian-incarnational social ethic. Speidell takes particular aim at the critiques of John Webster and David Fergusson, both of whom fault Torrance for not spending much of his corpus engaged with ethical themes. They then go further to suggest that this lack of engagement might be a sign of internal deficiencies in Torrance’s overall theological vision. Speidell confronts these critiques straight on, identifying multiple ways in which an ethical vision is implicit throughout Torrance’s theological work, and then demonstrating that vision explicitly at work on a number of issues engaged by Torrance himself (women in ministry, abortion, God-language, etc). Speidell extends the development of this model into Chapter Two (“Incarnational Social Ethics”) where he looks more closely at the issue of homosexuality (gay ordination, marriage, and rights) and in explicit conversation with one of Torrance’s students, Ray S. Anderson. Speidell’s work in these two chapters will, at the very least, force those critical of Torrance’s theological ethic (or the absence thereof, as they see it) to focus their critiques more narrowly, if they venture into such critiques at all.

Chapter Three (“A Christological Critique of Adjectival Theologies”) and Chapter Four (“A Trinitarian Ontology of Persons in Society”) were the most suggestive and constructive for this reviewer, and in my opinion the arguments of Chapter Three would have been much helped if the framework/argument of Chapter Four had come first. But this is only to nitpick. There are exceptional resources here, theologically and ethically, for the challenges that contextual/adjectival/anthropocentric theologies pose to the theological/ethical model developed throughout the book. The conceptuality in Chapter Four provides a flexible and nuanced set of criteria for helping one think theologically and ethically about

what it means to initiate and sustain truly personal and personalizing relations in diverse social groups (such relations must be “suprapersonal, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and infrapersonal”).

Speidell is more critical of liberation theology than I, evidenced in his assertion that Boff’s “theological framework . . . often reverts to slogans that supplant a realistic discussion that evaluates which societies actually liberate” (94). Why “slogans”? What entails “a realistic discussion”? Are Boff’s formulations any more an example of sloganeering than when Speidell continuously refers us to “the vicarious humanity of Christ” or “participation in the triune God of grace”? In spite of these concerns Speidell does a fantastic job of providing the reader with a broad and flexible theological framework (Chapter Four in particular), robust theological resources from theologians past and present, and a myriad of concrete examples and case studies that attempt to work out the implications of his theological assumptions for ethical issues, both “personal” and “social” (a regrettable distinction in ethics, as Speidell himself notes).

The final two chapters (“The Humanity of God and the Healing of Humanity” and “Theological Anthropology as a Basis for Christian Ethics in the Theology of Ray S. Anderson”) bring the work of Ray Anderson to the forefront in Speidell’s reflections, and in particular Anderson’s exceptional work in the development of a theological anthropology and its ethical/pastoral implications. Again, the great value in these two chapters is seeing Speidell improvise with the various assumptions of his theological model with regard to additional ethical cases such as those having to do with themes of social justice (Chapter 5, where human diversity, education, and abortion are briefly treated), and a whole chapter devoted to the culturally prevalent problem of alcoholism (Chapter 6).

In sum, this is a very welcome and rich book that articulates a distinctively theological ethic based on God’s grace in Christ, and one that I will be reading again and again – allowing Speidell’s instruction once more into my theological development. Gladly so.

Eric Flett