

The Flesh of Christ and the *Extra Calvinisticum*

Approaching the Topic

The doctrine known as the *extra Calvinisticum* states that the eternal Son of God, during his incarnate life on earth, was not enclosed by or limited to the physical body of Jesus Christ but continued to uphold the universe by virtue of maintaining a form of presence beyond or outside Jesus' physical body.¹ This counterintuitive area of Christology

1. We might refer to this minimal definition of the *extra* as the “weak *extra Calvinisticum*,” since it merely maintains that (1) the Son cannot be reduced to Christ's physical body and (2) there is some form of presence exercised by the Son beyond the Son's incarnate life in Christ. In other words, the weak *extra Calvinisticum* is agnostic about the *what* and the *how* of the Son's life *extra carnem*, and it does not make inferences from the *fact* of the Son's presence beyond Christ's physical body to additional theological ramifications of such presence. According to the “weak” view, the eternal Son remains such in his relationship to the Father even in the act of becoming incarnate. This weaker view stands in contrast to what we might call the “strong *extra Calvinisticum*,” which is motivated by further theological claims regarding the specifics of the Son's presence *extra carnem*. On the stronger version of the *extra*, the mere fact of the Son's presence *extra carnem* is bound up with the assertions that (1) the Son is not exhaustively revealed in the person of Christ, (2) the Son *simpliciter* does not participate in the full range of human experiences of the person of Christ, and (3) the incarnation is contingent to the Son's life. As will become clear in what follows, the weak and strong *extra Calvinisticum* have never been distinguished in the tradition. Further, those who hold to the *extra Calvinisticum* are almost always maintaining what we have labeled the strong *extra Calvinisticum*, and those who argue

has received little attention in the history of theological reflection, so much so that Edward Oakes has claimed that “no topic in Christology . . . is more arcane than that of the *extra Calvinisticum*.”² Despite being an “esoteric topic of Christology,”³ there are numerous complex theological issues bound up with this seemingly insignificant doctrine.

Take, for example, the fact that the *extra* appears, at least at first glance, to depend largely on a specific concept of God as a “perfect being” possessing certain essential and necessary properties or attributes that the Son, as essentially and necessarily divine, must retain in the act of becoming incarnate in order to remain fully divine.⁴ Moreover, the “great-making” attribute of omnipresence relies on the extension of divine omniscience and omnipotence to every locale.⁵ The *extra*’s apparent reliance on so-called perfect being theology may be attractive to some and off-putting to others.

Those who appreciate “analytic theology”⁶ may be comfortable with the metaphysical commitments required to discuss persons, natures, properties, and essences in making sense of the *extra* within the framework of the Chalcedonian affirmations. Analytic theology, which is a mode of theological and philosophical discourse receiving an increasing amount of attention, is “just theology done with the ambitions of an analytic philosopher and in a style that conforms to the prescriptions that are distinctive of analytic philosophical discourse.”⁷

against the *extra Calvinisticum* are almost always arguing against the strong *extra Calvinisticum*. So, unless otherwise specified, when I refer to the *extra* or *extra Calvinisticum* in the context of this project, I am referring to the stronger version of the doctrine—what I have deemed the strong *extra Calvinisticum*. The account I will develop in what follows is close in many ways to the strong version of the doctrine but differs significantly from it in several ways that will become clear below.

2. Edward Oakes, *Infinity Dwindled to Infancy: A Catholic and Evangelical Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 265.
3. *Ibid.*, 270.
4. For an example of this type of argument, see esp. Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 58–92.
5. Cf. Edward Wierenga, “Omnipresence,” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., ed. Charles Taliaferro, Paul Draper, and Philip L. Quinn, BCP (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 258–62.
6. See, e.g., Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
7. Michael Rea, “Analytic Theology: Précis,” *JAAR* 81 (2013): 575. This diverse approach to theological topics—what Sarah Coakley refers to as a “‘family resemblance’ group” (Sarah Coakley, “On Why *Analytic Theology* Is Not a Club,” *JAAR* 81 [2013]: 603)—shares commitments to the analytic style of philosophy (broadly conceived) and “its basic methodological commitment to explore

Oliver Crisp argues that analytic theology is nothing new, but is consistent with historical Christian theology, specifically in that it “is not intended as a vehicle by which theology may be enslaved to philosophy. Instead, it is a means of making sense of substantive theological claims.”⁸ This is certainly the case, but another element often overlooked in the family lineage of analytic theology is the type of analytic philosophy of religion that became popular in the second half of the twentieth century. This movement within the broader field of philosophy invested substantial energy in putting the classical “theistic proofs” or arguments for God’s existence to work in showing that theistic belief had a place in academic philosophical discussion. Because analytic theology’s patron saint—“St. Alvin,” as William Abraham calls him⁹—and others around him worked within the Anselmian tradition of describing God as a “perfect being” with certain necessary or essential properties, contemporary analytic theology has in large part inherited this variety of theism without much critical reception or understanding of the reasons why contemporary post-Barthian theologians might object to such a conception.¹⁰ Due to analytic theology’s appropriation of perfect being theism, the *extra Calvinisticum* seems to fit well with the idea that God is essentially omnipresent and therefore must retain omnipresence in the incarnation in order to remain fully divine. The *extra*, then, is just an entailment of a certain concept of God and the conjunction of the incarnation. In short, analytic theologians who think perfect being theism is a legitimate concept of God will largely embrace the *extra Calvinisticum* without objection.¹¹

the full range of Christian doctrine (and the truth generally believed to be contained therein) with the utmost precision, clarity, and rigor, in general conformity with the analytic style of philosophizing” (Paul A. Macdonald Jr., “Analytic Theology: A Summary, Evaluation, and Defense,” *ModTheo* 30 [2014]: 40). Cf. Michael Rea, “Introduction,” in Crisp and Rea, *Analytic Theology*, 5–6.

8. Oliver Crisp, “On Analytic Theology,” in Crisp and Rea, *Analytic Theology*, 42.
9. William J. Abraham, “Turning Philosophical Water into Theological Wine,” *JAT* 1 (2013): 7.
10. See esp. Brian Leftow, “Why Perfect Being Theology?,” *IJPR* 69 (2011): 103–18, and Thomas V. Morris, “The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Anselm,” *FP* 1 (1984): 177–87.
11. Note that I am not claiming that *all* analytic theologians think perfect being theism is a project worth pursuing. For further discussion of analytic theology, see the following: William Wood, “On the New Analytic Theology, or: The Road Less Travelled,” *JAAR* 77 (2009): 941–60; Andrew Chignell, “The Two (or Three) Cultures of Analytic Theology: A Roundtable,” *JAAR* 81 (2013):

In stark contrast to analytic theologians, however, stand those so-called dogmatic theologians who wonder whether the concepts of perfect being theology truly account for how God's ways and works in the economy of salvation inform one's concept of God. Within such dogmatic approaches, we can distinguish between two groups who follow Barth, albeit down different paths—whose goals are complementary but whose approaches to the task of theology, metaphysics, and ontology differ quite significantly.¹² On the one hand, there are those whose dogmatic theology, following John Webster, attempts to give a strong account of God's life *in se* while at the same time taking God's works *ad extra* quite seriously. Such dogmatic theology will, as Webster puts it, "seek to avoid the mistake of abstraction: the mistake . . . of thinking that the doctrine of the Trinity makes no real difference."¹³ To put the critique differently, contemporary dogmatic theologians worry that the "god" of perfect being theology is not the God of Israel and the God revealed in the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. Indeed, given the broad acceptance of Barth's insight that there is no other god behind the back of Jesus Christ—an unknown *Logos asarkos*—it is easy to see how the *extra*

669–72; Ray Paul Bitar, "The Wisdom of Clarity and Coherence in Analytic Theology," *JAAR* 81 (2013): 578–85; Jesse Couenhoven, "Fodge-ogs and HedgeOxes," *JAAR* 81 (2013): 586–91; William Wood, "Philosophical Theology in the Religious Studies Academy: Some Questions for Analytic Theologians," *JAAR* 81 (2013): 592–600; Oliver D. Crisp, "Reason, Style, and Wisdom: More on Analytic Theology," *JAAR* 81 (2013): 609–13; Michael Rea, "Analytic Theology Roundtable: Replies to Bitar, Couenhoven, and Wood," *JAAR* 81 (2013): 614–19; Paul C. Anders, review of Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, *FP* 29 (2012): 236–40; Dermot Cassidy, review of Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, *HeyJ* 52 (2011): 175–76; Kevin Timpe, review of Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, *RelS* 46 (2010): 274–80; Richard Cross, review of Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, *IJST* 12 (2010): 452–63; and Simon Oliver, review of Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea, eds., *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, *IJST* 12 (2010): 464–75.

12. The key distinction between these two groups of so-called dogmatic theologians rests largely in the extent to which one judges Barth's mature theology, and the trajectory thereof, to entail either a correction of the classical doctrine of God on the one hand (as in McCormack's case) or an affirmation of it on the other hand (as in Webster's case). Both groups have in common an attentiveness to the economic works of God as the primary way in which God's being is known, as opposed to philosophical approaches to the doctrine of God that begin elsewhere than in God's self-disclosure.
13. John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 36. Cf. John Webster, "Principles of Systematic Theology," *IJST* 11 (2009): 70; and John Webster, "Perfection and Participation," in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?*, ed. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 379–94.

Calvinisticum, which “implies a particular, by no means uncontroversial, understanding of *revelation*,”¹⁴ is often seen as a speculative remnant of perfect being theology.¹⁵ Bruce McCormack, who is representative of the other group within dogmatic theology, has noted, following Barth, that the *extra Calvinisticum* is a central issue in different conceptions of divine ontology—such as essentialist and actualistic understandings of God’s being.¹⁶ Theologians like McCormack worry about the identity of the *extra Calvinisticum*’s *Logos asarkos* and wish to maintain a strict identity between God in Godself and God as God relates to humanity—that is, between the immanent and economic Trinities. If, then, the doctrine of the *extra Calvinisticum* relies on a type of perfect being theology, one may wonder whether it has any place in contemporary theological discourse; as goes perfect being theism, so goes the *extra Calvinisticum*. Alternatively, dogmatic theologians may seek to distance the *extra* from essentialist ontologies and instead reframe the doctrine in a strictly theological context.¹⁷

Still further, aside from the ontology required to make sense of the *extra*, the issue of whether the doctrine is *scripturally warranted* remains significant and largely ignored. In the wake of modern historical-critical biblical studies, numerous scholars are seeking to recover the ancient practice of reading Scripture as Triune self-communication, a unified canon, and a theological—rather than purely historical—text given for the enrichment of the community of faith. This movement, often referred to as “theological interpretation of Scripture,”¹⁸ has

14. Christian Link, “Die Entscheidung der Christologie Calvins und ihre theologische Bedeutung. Das sogenannte Extra-Calvinisticum,” *EvT* 47 (1987): 110 (italics original).
15. Cf. Robert Jenson, “A Theological Autobiography to Date,” *Dialog* 46 (2007): 47; and Robert Jenson, “Once More the *Logos Asarkos*,” *IJST* 13 (2011): 133.
16. Cf. Bruce McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster, CCR 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 97.
17. See, e.g., Darren Sumner, “The Twofold Life of the Word: Karl Barth’s Critical Reception of the *Extra Calvinisticum*,” *IJST* 15 (2013): 42–57; Bruce McCormack, “Seek God Where He May Be Found: A Response to Edwin Chr. van Driel,” *SJT* 60 (2007): 68; and Christopher R. J. Holmes, “Bonhoeffer and Reformed Christology: Towards a Trinitarian Supplement,” *ThTo* 71 (2014): 28–42.
18. While the literature concerning the precise nature of theological interpretation of Scripture is too vast to survey here, the following provide a helpful introduction to the practice: Stephen E. Fowl, ed., *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, BRMT (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997); Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al., eds., *Dictionary of Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005); Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*:

spawned much discussion in recent decades concerning *how* one ought to approach reading the Bible with hermeneutical and theological sensitivity. If, as John Webster suggests, systematic theological constructions are “paraphrases of the scriptural testimonies,”¹⁹ it is worth asking whether the *extra* does in fact paraphrase anything remotely akin to that which is contained in the scriptural witness and what ramifications it may have on the way in which the people of God read biblical texts.

While one could focus on almost any area of theology as an intersection of these methodological conflicts between the various groups discussed above, they are especially evident in discussion of the *extra Calvinisticum*. Moreover, current discussion in each of the three major “families” discussed above has come to the conclusion that the viability of the respective movements depends largely on moving from methodological discussion into actual theological formulations. The dogmatic theologians and Barthians push for scholars to move beyond interpretation of Barth into constructive dogmatic theology; analytic theologians resist the call for definition of the practice and instead call for examples of analytic theology; and theological interpreters agree that the future of reading Scripture theologically depends not on discussing what it means to read Scripture theologically but in actually doing so. Put simply, the well of the discussions of method in Barthianism, analytic theology, and the theological interpretation of Scripture is running—or perhaps, has run—dry.

All of this is to say that, rather than an isolated and obscure doctrine limited to specialists in Christology, the *extra Calvinisticum* has

Recovering a Christian Practice (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); J. Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway to the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008); Daniel J. Treier, “Biblical Theology and/or Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Defining the Relationship,” *SJT* 61 (2008): 16–31; Daniel J. Treier, “What Is Theological Interpretation? An Ecclesiological Reduction,” *IJST* 12 (2010): 144–61; Richard B. Hays, “Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis,” *JTI* 1 (2007): 5–21; R. W. L. Moberly, “What Is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?,” *JTI* 3 (2009): 161–78; Francis Watson, “Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture: Why They Need Each Other,” *IJST* 12 (2010): 118–43; and Mark Alan Bowald, “The Character of Theological Interpretation of Scripture,” *IJST* 12 (2010): 162–83.

19. Webster, “Perfection and Participation,” 389.

ramifications for multiple fields in contemporary biblical, systematic, and philosophical theology. For this reason, we agree with Gordon Dicker that while the *extra* “is a doctrine that never gained much support, and even amongst theologians is not well known, let alone addressed . . . it is surely time to revisit it.”²⁰ In order to discern precisely what trajectories within the discussion of the *extra Calvinisticum* need to be pursued, we must first survey the past discussions of the doctrine, which have seen a modest increase in attention in recent years.

History of Research

The standard monograph on the *extra Calvinisticum* is E. David Willis’s *Calvin’s Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-Called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin’s Theology*,²¹ a revision of Willis’s 1963 Harvard University PhD dissertation.²² Willis’s work is the standard not only because of its quality but also because it is one of two monographs to date explicitly devoted to an extended treatment of the *extra Calvinisticum*.²³ Because of the significance of Willis’s work for the present topic, it is necessary to offer an extended overview and evaluation of its contribution.

Willis begins by noting that his interest in the *extra Calvinisticum* was “whetted” by Karl Barth’s revolutionary Christocentrism of the early twentieth century and, more specifically, the following question: “Is the Word of God so fully incarnate that he has no existence also beyond the flesh he assumed?”²⁴ Calvin’s theology and the christological commitments contained therein, for Willis, provide a definitive answer to Barth’s question. Willis is clear that the purpose of his study “is to clarify the meaning and test the legitimacy of the term ‘*extra*

20. Gordon Dicker, “The Christology of Isaak Dorner Revisited,” *Pacifica* (2003): 44.

21. E. David Willis, *Calvin’s Catholic Christology: The Function of the So-Called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin’s Theology*, SMRT 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1966).

22. Edward David Willis, “The Function of the So-Called Extra Calvinisticum in Calvin’s Theology” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1963).

23. The other monograph is Andrew McGinnis, *The Son of God beyond the Flesh: A Historical and Theological Study of the extra Calvinisticum*, SST 29 (London: T&T Clark, 2014).

24. Willis, *Calvin’s Catholic Christology*, preface.

Calvinisticum,' to trace the origins of the doctrine so designated, and to examine its function in the theology of John Calvin."²⁵ This means, significantly, that Willis's purpose is *primarily historical*; he attempts to give an account of the origin of the term *extra Calvinisticum*, to point out John Calvin's continuity with the christological tradition he received, and to note the specific ways in which the *extra* functioned in Calvin's theology. In other words, Willis's work is not primarily evaluative but rather descriptive, and the significance of this will become clear below.

Early on in his work, Willis offers a concise definition of the *extra*; stated most simply, "The so-called extra Calvinisticum teaches that the Eternal Son of God, even after the Incarnation, was united to the human nature to form One Person but was not restricted to the flesh."²⁶ Numerous other works on Calvin prior to Willis devote attention to the ways the *extra* shaped Calvin's Christology, either positively or negatively, but none examined how the christological doctrine shaped—or was shaped by—the rest of Calvin's theology.²⁷ *Calvin's Catholic Christology* attempted to fill this void.

One can detect Barth as an angel on Willis's shoulder throughout the work, but especially in the question driving his research: "The difficulty is this: *if* the 'extra Calvinisticum' involves an implicit distinction between the *logos ensarkos* and the *logos asarkos*, is not God's full revelation of himself exclusively in Jesus Christ menaced, and is not the way opened to a natural theology alongside and complementary to revealed theology?"²⁸ Further along the lines of natural theology and philosophical speculation, Willis notes that numerous critics of the *extra* argue that it is nothing more than "an effort to explain the Incarnation in terms not violating the philosophical principle *finitium non capax infiniti*."²⁹ Still others have misunderstood both the *extra* and

25. *Ibid.*, 1.

26. *Ibid.*

27. E.g., Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. H. Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956); and Werner Krusche, *Das Wirken des Heiligen Geistes nach Calvin* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957).

28. Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology*, 2. It is possible that the Barthian angel on Willis's shoulder has inhibited his ability to see other alternatives for affirming the existence of a *Logos asarkos* while still rejecting natural theology.

29. *Ibid.*, 3. Christina Aus der Au has argued that Calvin's Christology was a thoroughly pneumatic

the *Calvinisticum* in the *extra Calvinisticum*. Willis devotes significant attention to these issues throughout the course of his work. Interestingly, while the bulk of Willis's work is historical description, he offers significant theological reflection on the *extra* in two pages of the introduction, noting that the *extra* raises two significant issues: (1) the relation between creation and redemption and (2) the dogmatic location of Christology in the broader theological enterprise.³⁰

Turning now to the bulk of *Calvin's Catholic Christology*, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of Willis's main points. In chapter 1, he begins by making an important distinction both for his own work and for the present project, namely, the distinction that exists between the term *extra Calvinisticum* and the concept to which the term refers. The former, as Willis shows, was a product of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century christological and eucharistic debates between the Lutherans and the Reformed, while the latter was present in a significant portion of the Christian tradition prior to Calvin. This distinction is crucial, lest one make the fatal error of thinking the concept expressed by the term *extra Calvinisticum* had its origins solely in Calvin's version of Reformed doctrine.³¹ Willis devotes extensive attention to the debates between the theologians of Giessen and Tübingen, specifically with reference to the work of Brenz, Chemnitz, and Melancthon, noting that the Lutheran theologians thought the Reformed position brought about more troubles than it solved and added nothing substantial to the Lutheran confession of Christ's incarnate being.³²

Chapter 2 of *Calvin's Catholic Christology* turns from the christological and eucharistic developments after Calvin to those theological formulations that preceded and shaped (either explicitly or implicitly)

one, such that his formulation of the *extra Calvinisticum* was based neither on the philosophical maxim *finitum non capax infiniti* nor some sort of naive spatial geography (Christina Aus der Au, "Das Extra Calvinisticum—mehr als ein reformiertes Extra?," *TZ* 64 [2008]: 361–62).

30. Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology*, 6.

31. Willis uses the label "the so-called 'extra Calvinisticum'" to designate when he is referring to the historical label applied to a concept that predates the label. Unless otherwise noted, the term *extra Calvinisticum*, when used in this study, will consistently refer to the doctrine or concept to which the label refers.

32. *Ibid.*, 24.

Calvin's appropriation of the concept of the *extra Calvinisticum*. Willis notes that the doctrine was so ubiquitous prior to Calvin that "the significance of the doctrine in any theological system was not its presence but its function."³³ After examining the two oft-cited locations of the *extra* in Calvin's *Institutes* (2.13.4 and 4.17.30), Willis recognizes in Calvin an appropriation of the *totus/totum* distinction that was used by Lombard.³⁴ Specifically, Lombard said that during the three days between Christ's death and resurrection, Christ was *totus* in heaven, hell, and everywhere else, but he was not *totum* everywhere. According to Willis, "'Totus' refers to *hypostasis* or person, while 'totum' refers to nature."³⁵ In other words, the distinction "was between Christ as the second *hypostasis* of the Trinity, the Eternal Son of God, and Christ the second *hypostasis* with what he united to himself in the Incarnation."³⁶

Willis moves on to discuss briefly the function and location of the *extra* in the theologies of Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Occam, Biel, d'Étapes, Augustine, and the "orthodox and heterodox precursors of Chalcedon" (such as Origen, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Athanasius, and Cyril of Alexandria).³⁷ This helpful summary allows Willis to make the following provocative claim:

The label "extra Calvinisticum" applied to the affirmation that in the Incarnation the Eternal Son of God was united to but not restricted to his humanity, is misleading, to say the least. There is nothing uniquely Calvinist about the doctrine, for as a means of interpreting the Biblical witness to Christ it had widespread ancient usage. . . . If one wished to add to the terminological explosion which threatens and delights the theological world, one might coin "extra Catholicum" or "extra Patristicum" as being more appropriate than "extra Calvinisticum."³⁸

The point of Willis's first two chapters, therefore, is that while there are divergent dogmatic functions the *extra* serves, it was definitively

33. *Ibid.*, 26.

34. *Ibid.*, 34.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 35.

37. *Ibid.*, 36–60.

38. *Ibid.*, 60.