Discuss the claim that in the incarnation Christ took into union a fallen human nature.

The doctrine of Jesus’ humanity has been called, “the single most important article of the Christian faith.”¹ The Apostle John teaches that a denial of Jesus’ actual humanity is the distinguishing quality of the Antichrist (1 John 4:2-3).

It is with little wonder then that the discussion surrounding the claim that in the incarnation Christ took into union a fallen nature is conducted with ferocity. Allen notes how supporters of the claim are often accused of denying the sinlessness of Christ while opponents are often caricatured as holding to a Jesus who is not truly human and therefore of little or no relevance to the human race.² Both deny the ability of the other’s Jesus to truly save.

To others however the debate may seem superficial. If both parties claim to hold to the Apostle John’s qualification that Christ is truly human (1 John 4:2-3) or to the Apostle Peter’s insistence that the Saviour be sinless (1 Peter 1:19), does not the argument reduce to mere questions of semantics? McFarland suggests that to many the argument appears as a prime example of theologians overindulging doctrinal intricacies and engaging in “theological hair-splitting.”³

For those who support the ‘fallenness’ view it is a deeply pastoral issue. They can make no sense of a Saviour who has not shared in their fallen nature. Speaking of the intention of Irving, an early postulator of this view, McFarlane says, “It is sin that needs to be tackled, the sort of sin the human creature has to battle daily.”⁴ Clearly

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the concern is for a Christology which results in a Christ who can relate to his people and have his people relate to him.

Those who oppose the fallenness view see it as a corruption of the Gospel. Letham argues that if the fallenness view is held we are faced with a number of inevitable consequences which undermine the requisites of our salvation.\(^5\)

The position of the fallenness view was first articulated by the Scottish Theologian Edward Irving.\(^6\) The position was popularized later by Barth.\(^7\) That which was to become the mantra of the fallenness view was first written by Gregory of Nazianzen in response to Apollinarianism, “The unassumed is the unhealed.”\(^8\)

Proponents of the fallenness view take this not only to mean that Christ was required to become fully human in order to redeem humanity, but had to become a *fallen* human in order to redeem a *fallen* humanity.

Barth argues that unless the human nature that Christ assumed is identical to mankind’s now fallen nature, he cannot be their Saviour, “What concern would we have with Him?” A saviour who does not assume humanity’s fallen nature may as well not have a human nature; he would be an ineffective, insincere saviour.\(^9\) Christ’s humanity must be wholly continuous with mankind’s.

What is being said has further implications. A claim is not only being made about the extent to which Christ must be like man, but the very definition of ‘man’. Barth clearly equates humanity with fallenness. Christ must be like mankind in this respect or else, “if that is not true then precisely in the critical definition of our nature Christ is not a man like us...”\(^10\)

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\(^{7}\) Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956).

\(^{8}\) Gregory of Nazianzen, “First Letter to Cledonius” (generally attributed).

\(^{9}\) Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 152.

\(^{10}\) Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 153.
The opponents of the fallenness view would disagree on both points. Firstly, to the claim that in order to redeem humanity their saviour must be exactly like them is a fallacy. Letham employs the example of counselling someone who has committed adultery. There is no requirement of the counsellor themselves having committed adultery in order to be a good counsellor.  

11 Must Jesus really become all things to redeem all things? Must he also become a woman to redeem women or autistic to redeem those on the spectrum? The principle described by Gregory of Nazianzen seems useful only to a point.

Indeed there are other areas of Christ’s humanity which those of the fallenness persuasion would insist he is discontinuous with humanity. Jesus’ birth, life and death are all markedly different from the entirety of the human race. Who else is born of a virgin? 12 Who else has lived a life without sin? 13 Who else has died and risen three days later? 14 Barth himself concedes this point in his robust defence of the Incarnation, “The Virgin Birth at the opening and the empty tomb at the close of Jesus’ life bear witness that this life is a fact marked off from all the rest of human life.” 15

Opponents go further and claim that it is in the area of fallenness that scripture requires Jesus to be discontinuous from all other humanity. Not only must the Saviour live a life free from committing actual sin but he must also be free from ‘humanities’ sin. What is it to be fallen but to not share in the guilt of Adam? “To be ‘fallen’...is to have sinned against God.” 16

Scripture demands that the Saviour does not first make payment for his own sins as the High Priests once had to. 17 Christ must be spotless, blameless, without guilt. If he

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12 Matt 1:18 NIV
13 1 Pet 2:22 NIV
14 1 Cor 15:3-4 NIV
15 Barth, Church Dogmatics, 182.
17 Heb 4:14-5:10 NIV
shares in humanity’s fallenness then he shares in their guilt and cannot make atonement.

In respect to the second assertion, that humanity is defined by its fallenness, opponents once again find fault. There are two ‘groups’ found in scripture who are human and yet unfallen. There is Adam before the fall, without sin or knowledge of sin. Adam is seen as evidence that humanity was created unfallen. Secondly there are those redeemed in heaven who are fully human and yet no longer fallen. It is therefore impossible to suggest that fallenness is essential to being human.

Perhaps a better understanding is that to be human is to be made in the image of God, to be an image bearer. This is exactly what set Adam apart from the rest of creation in Gen 1:26. Adam bore the image of God perfectly in the garden before the fall and the redeemed shall do so in glory.

Humanity at present then, i.e. post fall, pre resurrection, can be understood as a corruption of this image. While man is still an image bearer, he currently bears a corrupted image. Thus mankind is essentially less human for being fallen, not more human. It can be understood that in Christ’s taking on of humanity, being a perfect image bearer of God, free from mans corruption, he has associated himself with humanity in the way that Irving and followers so earnestly desire. As a true image bearer, Jesus is a true human.

Once the largely philosophical base has been laid, the discussion can turn in earnest to the narrative of the life of Jesus found in the gospels for support or criticism of the claims made by those of the fallenness view. Three key areas are generally sighted in order to substantiate the assumption of fallen nature, namely Jesus’ birth, his suffering and his temptations.
While both sides of the discussion cling to a truly human Christ as evidenced by Jesus’ physical growth\(^{18}\), emotions\(^{19}\) and so on, polar opposite conclusions as to Jesus’ nature are drawn from observations of the virgin birth.

The fallenness view requires that the virgin birth evidences Jesus’ assumption of Mary’s nature, not just her humanity. Irving suggests that this virgin birth is the first point in the mystery of Jesus’ formation, “His taking the substance of the fallen Virgin Mary.”\(^{20}\) That is to say that as Christ was born physically then he must have inherited everything from his mother, not only a physical body but \textit{the substance of the fallen nature}.

Those who refute the fallenness view would cite the same virgin birth as an argument against the assumption of a fallen nature. That in lacking an earthly father Christ was able to avoid the inherent guilt in humanity.\(^{21}\) This has been the orthodox view of the Church through its history. It is understood as necessary so to avoid Jesus having to make a sacrifice for his own guilt.

The real suffering of Christ is also acknowledged by both sides. It is plain to see in the passion passages of the gospels and Heb 5:8. Despite this apparent converging of the two camps, yet again markedly different interpretations follow.

In his effort to popularize Irving’s Incarnation theology, McFarlane adds the following, “suffering cannot come to one who is unfallen, for there is not such a thing in the records of being, as that an unfallen creature should suffer. The will must fall first by sinning, before suffering can be felt.”\(^{22}\) His conclusion is that Christ as a sufferer must first be fallen.

\(^{18}\) Luke 2:52 NIV
\(^{19}\) John 11:53 NIV
\(^{20}\) Irving, \textit{Collected Writings}, 117.
\(^{21}\) Luke 1:35 NIV
\(^{22}\) McFarlane, \textit{Christ and the Spirit}, 146.
Once again opponents would note that the conclusion drawn by McFarlane is a step further than the evidence in scripture would lend itself, based on a fallacious claim that to suffer is to first be sinful. Christ’s sufferings can equally be understood as an isolated example of a perfect being humbly submitting to the effects of a fallen world.23

Opponents see McFarlane’s final sentence as most troublesome as it suggests that the will of Jesus must have sinned. The New Testament is clear that Christ was entirely sinless, free from blemish.24

The final example from Jesus’ life that he took into union a fallen human nature is his real experience of temptations.25 The fallenness view compares the capacity to be tempted to the capacity to suffer. Being tempted (or at least temptable) is a sign of fallenness. It cannot be said in this framework, that something which is not fallen could ever be truly tempted.

Macleod attempts to explain Irving’s understanding of temptation in his work The Person of Christ. He concludes that to Irving at least, ‘unfallen’ and ‘not liable to temptation’ are synonymous.26 The converse must therefore be true. To be liable to temptation as Jesus was is to be fallen.

The opponents have no trouble in confirming that Jesus was truly tempted, citing Heb 4:15 as confirmation of the gospel accounts. However it is noted once again that the conclusion drawn from this plain fact is incorrect.

Suppose there is an impenetrable army, which is one that cannot be taken over. Is it possible for another army to attack? Of course, but this has no effect on the object truth that the first army is impenetrable. Likewise Christ, although tempted, is not

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23 Phil 2:5-11 NIV
24 1 Pet 1:19 NIV
tempted from any fallen nature in himself, but is tempted solely from the devil, another army attacking that which can not be overtaken.

One final principle is applied by those with concerns over the fallenness viewpoint. The validity of an argument such as the fallen nature of Jesus’ humanity, which is not clear from scripture, can be assessed by its impact on other doctrines which are clearer in scripture. Letham helpfully employs this principle;

Here, a claim concerning the humanity of Christ has the profoundest results, affecting the entire doctrine of salvation. The gospel itself is at stake. Entailed in the gospel are the eternal deity of Christ, and his unabbreviated humanity with its assumption into personal unity by the Son. Following all this comes his conquest of sin and death. If he had assumed a fallen human nature he could not have achieved this, for he would have needed a Saviour himself.

Thankfully, Christ did not come to share our terminal illness but to deliver us from it.27

Conclusion
Those who hold to the fallenness position assert that Jesus must assume humanity’s exact nature to save it. The critics note that the foundations upon which Irving, Barth et al. argue this is crucially flawed in their requirement for complete continuity between Jesus and humanity, something which is discredited by obvious discontinuities such as the virgin birth, sinless life and resurrection of Jesus.

Secondly Barth in particular argues that humanity’s defining feature is its fallenness. Again the critics note crucial flaws in this argument and propose an alternative of humanity as defined by it’s bearing the image of God.

Finally the instances from the life of Jesus, his virgin birth, sufferings and temptation are manipulated to support the fallenness doctrine. Opponents suggest a reasonable alternative to each which requires a greater authority be given to scripture than to the theologians own reason.

With the undesirable secondary effects on other doctrines more clearly laid out in scripture and the ability of the critic to undermine the claim of fallenness at each hurdle, any argument that Jesus’ taking into union of a fallen human nature must be dismissed.
Bibliography


