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CHRIST AS INDISPENSABLE MEANS

TO THE END FOR WHICH GOD CREATED THE WORLD:

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRIST'S RESURRECTION IN JONATHAN EDWARDS

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What is at stake in resurrection belief? Although the question of veracity has dominated much modern inquiry into the resurrection of Jesus, the question of its theological significance is equally important. What other beliefs hang on this belief? How does this belief cohere with the whole tapestry of Christian doctrine? What work is it doing? If these questions of significance cannot be answered adequately, then the question of veracity becomes irrelevant. An attempt to prove or disprove the resurrection unaccompanied by an account of its significance is rightly received with a shrug and a “So what?” The theological task is to explicate what is at stake in resurrection belief.

One such account of the theological significance of Christ’s resurrection can be found in Jonathan Edwards. In this paper, I will show how the bodily resurrection of Christ is incorporated into Edwards’ larger vision of God’s creative purpose. Christ’s resurrection is systematically significant for Edwards because the humanity of Christ is an indispensable means to the end for which God created the world.

In order to substantiate this claim, I will first offer an exposition of Edwards’ dissertation, *Concerning the End for which God Created the World*, arguing that his understanding of the singularity of God’s creative purpose depends on the hope of union with God. Second, I will show from selected texts that Edwards understands this human union with God to be perpetually mediated by the God-human Jesus Christ. The resurrected flesh of Christ *unites* God and creation and *mediates* between God and creation, so that even as God accomplishes his singular creative purpose the Creator-creature distinction is preserved. Therefore, since the humanity of Christ is indispensable, the resurrection of the incarnate son becomes a necessary presupposition of Edward’s theology.

I. God's Singular Creative Purpose and Union with God

In order to identify the role of the risen Christ in God's creative purpose, we must first identify what God's creative purpose is. Why did God create the world? For what reason(s), if any, did God create? In his dissertation, *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, Jonathan Edwards' answer is that God not only had a purpose for creating, but a *singular* purpose: God's self-communication to creatures.¹ God is inclined toward this one end out of regard to himself as well as to creatures.² This dual-regard forms a single end in view of the progressive union between God and creation. Such a union is necessary to prevent a duality in God's creative purpose. The heart of Edwards' argument is thus the singularity of God's creative purpose. God creates out of regard for himself, which *includes* God's regard for sentient creatures in view of their progressive union with him. In what follows, I will show how Edwards' recurring account of union with God functions within his argument for the singularity of God's creative purpose.

The claim that Edwards argues for the singularity of God's creative purpose is uncontroversial, but the bolder claim that this argument is the central concern of the dissertation requires justification. Although this bolder claim will be supported by the exposition of Edwards' argument as a whole, it is nevertheless prudent at the outset to identify literary clues that corroborate this claim. In particular, the introduction and conclusion of the dissertation indicate that the governing question of Edwards' dissertation is whether God's end in creating is singular or plural.

¹ God's glorification in creation is *self*-glorification because the triune God *repeats* his fully actualized disposition to know and love himself in time and space. Thus God is "in some sense" enlarged by creating the world. Cf. Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) pp. 201-210.

² This inclination is not accidental to God's being because Edwards has introduced an element of potentiality into his doctrine of God alongside an affirmation of God's actuality. According to Edwards, God is *fully* actual, but not *purely* actual. The conceptual means for integrating these notions is the language of disposition. Cf. S. H. Lee, *Philosophical Theology*, pp. 175-185

Edwards' introduction sets this question as the agenda. Although the explicit purpose of the introduction is the explanation of terms, Edwards identifies the larger problem he aims to address. After distinguishing between chief and ultimate ends, Edwards suggests that there may be a being for whom a whole series of actions serve one end: "if any being had but one ultimate end in all that he does, and there be a great variety of operation, his last end may justly be looked upon as his *supreme* end."³ In such a case, one's chief end and ultimate end would be the same thing: "the ultimate end of all must be valued more than any one of the particular means" (410). Edwards hints that "[t]his seems to be the case with the works of God" (410). But he goes on to note that one may have *multiple* supreme ends:

if an agent in his works has in view more things than one that will be brought to pass by what he does, that are agreeable to him, considered in themselves ... then he must have more things than one that he regards as his last ends in what he does. But if there be but one thing that an agent seeks, as the consequence of what he does that is agreeable to him, on its own account: then there can be but one last end which he has in all his actions and operations (411).

Although these ultimate ends may be crucially distinguished as either original or consequential, Edwards leaves open the question concerning the singularity of God's end in creation. In the final paragraph of the introduction, Edwards sets up the two possibilities:

if there be but one thing that is originally, and independent on any future supposed cases, agreeable to God, to be obtained by the creation of the world, then there can be but one last end of God's work, in this highest sense: but if there are various things, properly diverse one from another, that are, absolutely and independently on the supposition of any future given cases, agreeable to the Divine Being, which are actually obtained by the creation of the world, then there were several ultimate ends of the creation, in that highest sense (415).

³ Jonathan Edwards, "Concerning the End for which God Created the World," in Paul Ramsey, ed., *Ethical Writings, The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 410, italics original. Hereafter cited in-text.

As we shall see, the remainder of the dissertation seeks to argue for the first: the complex singularity of God's end in creating. But from the beginning, the question is being raised.

The "conclusion" explicitly answers the question of the singularity of God's creative purpose. The title of the final section in Edwards' dissertation is "Showing That the Ultimate End of the Creation of the World is But One, and What That One End Is" (Ch. II, Sec. VII). This section ought to be read as the conclusion of the whole dissertation and not only as the conclusion of chapter two. This concluding section answers the question raised by the introduction, forming an arc under which the whole dissertation labors. More attention will be given to the material content of this section at the close of my exposition, but from the outset these textual clues indicate that Edwards' primary focus is the singularity of God's creative purpose.

In the body of his dissertation, Edwards argues for the singularity of God's creative purpose in three steps: first, by arguing that in God's act of creating, God makes *himself* his own end; second, that God's consequential ends in creation are *also* intrinsically valuable to God; and third, that these first two claims are not incompatible in view of the progressive union between God and creatures. The three steps of this argument correspond exactly to the first three sections of chapter one. The following exposition will elaborate each of these steps as well as indicate how the remaining sections fit into this argument.

Step One: God's highest end in creating must be himself (Ch. I, Sec. I)

The first step in Edwards' argument is to assert that God's end in creating is himself. Edwards comes to this conclusion by identifying three conditions God's end must satisfy. (1) Whatever God's end in creating is, it cannot imply a deficiency in God

on account of God's aseity: "That no notion of God's last end in the creation of the world is agreeable to reason which would truly imply or infer any indigence, insufficiency and mutability in God; or any dependence of the Creator on the creature, for any part of his perfection or happiness. Because it is evident, by both Scripture and reason, that God is infinitely, eternally, unchangeably, and independently glorious and happy" (420).

Therefore, God's end in creation must be something internal to his being. (2)

Furthermore, this end must have intrinsic value: "Whatsoever is good and valuable in itself is worthy that God should value for itself" (421). (3) To be God's highest end, this end must be "in itself most valuable" (421). Edwards concludes that the only being which satisfies these conditions is God himself: "if God himself be in any respect properly capable of being his own end in the creation of the world, then it is reasonable to suppose that he had respect to *himself* as his last and highest end in this work; because he is worthy in himself to be so, being infinitely the greatest and best being" (421). God's own self-regard thus governs all his works *ad extra*.

The final two points of this section serve as a transition to the next section by raising the problem of the unity of God's ends. On the one hand, reason dictates that God is his own end. On the other hand, we can infer from what God actually accomplishes that God values something other than merely himself: "Whatsoever thing is actually the effect or consequence of the creation of the world, which is simply and absolutely good and valuable in itself, that thing is an ultimate end of God's creating the world... For we may justly infer what God intends by what he actually does" (427). Edwards explores what God "actually does" in the following section.

Step Two: God's consequent ends in creating are intrinsically valuable (Ch. I, Sec. II)

The second step in Edwards' argument is to assert that God's consequent ends are also intrinsically valuable and thus part of God's ultimate end in creating. Edwards identifies four intrinsically valuable consequences of God's creation of the world. This list need not be exhaustive to prove that God values what God actually does in creating the world. These ends are not means to other ends but intrinsically valuable ends-in-themselves. (1) The *exercise of God's attributes* is intrinsically valuable: "As God therefore esteems these attributes themselves valuable, and delights in them, so 'tis natural to suppose that he delights in their proper exercise and expression" (430). (2) The *knowledge of God* is intrinsically valuable: "'Tis a thing infinitely good in itself that God's glory should be known by a glorious society of created beings" (431). (3) The *love of God* is intrinsically valuable: "If the perfection itself be excellent, the knowledge of it is excellent, and so is the esteem and love of it excellent" (432).⁴ (4) The *emanation of God's being* is intrinsically valuable: "as this fullness is capable of communication or emanation *ad extra*; so it seems a thing amiable and valuable in itself that it should be communicated or flow forth" (433).

The intrinsic value of these four consequent ends is problematic for Edwards, because they in some sense compete with the supreme value of God's own self as God's end in creation. Edwards begins to address this problem by means of a caveat at the end of this section. "But here as much as possible to avoid confusion, I observe that there is some impropriety in saying that a disposition in God to communicate himself *to the creature*, move him to create the world... But the diffusive disposition that excited God to give creatures existence was rather a communicative disposition in general" (435). In other words, God was moved to create by an intransitive disposition, which is

⁴ N.B.: for Edwards, (2) and (3) correspond to the procession of the Son and the Spirit.

consequently exercised transitively once God has created an objective toward which to be disposed. This subtle distinction preserves God's self-regard as the supreme end of all God's works *ad extra*. However, it does not yet answer in what sense God's consequential ends are really ends in themselves, and how such a claim is consistent with God making himself the end of creation. For such an answer, we must turn to the next section.

Step Three: The intrinsic value of God's consequent ends is compatible with God making himself his end in creating the world (Ch. I, Sec. III)

The third and final step in Edwards' argument is to explain the compatibility of his first two assertions. He makes this intention plain in the opening words of this section: "In the last section I observed some things, which are actually the consequence of the creation of the world, which seem absolutely valuable in themselves, and so worthy to be made God's last end in this work. I now proceed to inquire, how God's making such things as these his last end is consistent with his making himself his last end, or his manifesting an ultimate respect to himself in his acts and works" (436). Edwards' argues for the compatibility of God's consequent ends with himself as his end by making three claims.

First, God's consequent ends are *implied within* God making himself his end in creating. Edwards marches through the four consequent ends identified in the previous section in order to show how each is implied within God's own self-regard. "God's regard to himself, and value for his own perfections, should cause him to value these exercises and expressions of his perfections" (437). God's own knowledge and love of himself contains within it a disposition that others know and love him (437). Regarding

“God’s being disposed to an abundant communication, ... herein also God makes himself his end” (438). Everything can be traced back to a prior disposition in God: “This disposition or desire in God must be prior to the existence of the creature, even in intention and foresight” (438). So, God’s ends with regard to creation itself are implied within God making himself his end.

Second, God’s original and consequent ends share the *same object*: God himself. Without setting aside the priority of God’s intransitive disposition to create for his own sake, Edwards takes a further step in unifying God’s original and consequent ends. God’s self as his end and God’s self-communication to creatures are compatible because they share the same object: God himself. God knows, loves and enjoys God; creatures know, love and enjoy God. So God’s original self-regard and consequent regard for creatures are teleologically united in God. “[I]n making this [communication of himself] his end, God testifies a supreme respect to himself, and makes himself his end” (443).

Third, the union of the elect with God is the *material basis* for the singularity of God’s original and consequent ends. The apparently diverse ends of God come to their closest unity when viewed from the perspective of the eternal progressive uniting of the elect with God. Inasmuch as certain creatures are united with God, there is no divide between God’s self-regard and God’s regard for creatures. Edwards uses the language of becoming “one with God,” “more and more conformed to God,” “nearer and nearer to an identity with that which is in God” (443). This process, viewed as a whole, unites the apparently diverse ends of God: “In this view, those elect creatures which must be looked upon as the end of all the rest of creation, considered with respect to the whole of their eternal duration, and as such made God’s end, must be viewed as being, as it were, one

with God” (443). The result is that the “interest of the creature is, as it were, God’s own interest, in proportion to the degree of their relation and union to God” (443). Therefore, God’s end in creation is one.

At this point, Edwards has concluded the basic movement of his argument. It is striking that here at the climax of his argument, Edwards appeals to union with God. As he moves on to answer objections to and develop aspects of his argument for the singularity of God’s creative purpose, Edwards will make recurring appeal to union with God. The remainder of my exposition of Edwards’ dissertation will focus on these references to union with God in order to identify the framework in which the risen Christ’s perpetual mediation operates.

Union with God

Although the basic steps of the argument have been taken, Edwards continues by defending and elucidating his understanding of God’s singular end in creation. The last section in chapter one contains replies to four objections (Ch. I, Sec. IV). In a number of these replies, Edwards appeals to the eternal uniting of God and the creature to ward off misunderstandings. For instance, God is not selfish in making himself his end because God’s self-regard “inclines him to seek the good of his creature” (452). Again, God cannot be criticized for seeking praise in itself because God is seeking to communicate that which is intrinsically good to the creature: “For a being that loves himself, necessarily loves Love to himself. If holiness in God consists chiefly in love to himself, holiness in the creature must chiefly consist in love to him. And if God loves holiness in himself, he must love it in the creature” (456).

Last and most importantly, Edwards refers to creaturely union with God in order to uphold the gracious character of God's act of creating. "God and the creature, in this affair of the emanation of the divine fullness, are not properly set in opposition; or made the opposite parts of a disjunction. Nor ought God's glory and the creature's good be spoken of as if they were properly and entirely distinct" (458). God is still gracious to us even as he makes himself his own end: "God in seeking his glory, therein seeks the good of his creatures" (459). This is so because in view of the creature's "greater and greater nearness and strictness of union with [God] ... it appears that God's respect to the creature, in the whole, unites with his respect to himself" (459). So the concept of union with God not only is crucial in arguing for the singularity of God's end in creating, but also is helpful for answering objections concerning the character of God's act of creating.

The bulk of chapter two is dedicated to the exegetical elaboration and substantiation of Edwards' argument concerning God's singular creative purpose. The penultimate section in this chapter is particularly important for its focus on the biblical term "glory" (Ch. II, Sec. VI). Edwards shows how the term "glory" refers both to God's "internal glory" (513) and to God's self-communication of his internal glory (515).

According to this dual reference, Edwards unites God's own glory and the grace given to humans:

The glory of God, and the emanations and fruit of his grace in man's salvation, are so spoken of by Christ on this occasion [John 12: 23-32] in just the same manner, that it would be quite unnatural to understand him as speaking of two distinct things. Such is the connection that what he says of the latter must most naturally be understood as exegetical of the former (520).

So God's glory is found not only in himself but also in his creatures: "the expression of divine grace, in the sanctification and happiness of the redeemed, are especially that glory

of his [Christ's], and his Father" (521). So the biblical notion of God's glory expresses the complex singularity of God's end in creating the world.

In a concluding section, Edwards asserts explicitly that God's end in creation is one (Ch. II, Sec. VII). Edwards reiterates what he has said before about the unity of God's self-regard and God's regard for creatures, but with the help of concrete biblical terminology discussed throughout chapter two: "Thus we see that the great and last end of God's work which is so variously expressed in Scripture, is indeed but one; and this one end is most properly and comprehensively called, 'the glory of God'" (530). In seeking the externalization of his own internal glory, God "seeks the creature's good; yet therein appears his supreme regard to himself" (531). These two aspects, God's "respect to himself, and to the creature in this matter, are not properly to be looked upon as a double and divided respect of God's heart" (531). Here Edwards once again refers to union with God: "God's respect to the creature's good, and his respect to himself, is not a divided respect; but both are united in one, as the happiness of the creature aimed at is happiness in union with himself" (533). Edwards makes it abundantly clear that "there never will be any particular time when it can be said already to have come to such a height" and thus our union with God will "continue thus to move to all eternity" (534). Nevertheless, viewed as a whole from God's perspective, this progressive union renders identical God's interest and our interest: "viewed thus, their interest must be viewed as one with God's interest" (535). So the hope of union with God makes possible Edwards' claim that God's creative purpose is in fact one.

The prominent place of union with God in Edwards' argument raises an important question: does this union with God abolish the Creator-creature distinction? It would

seem that, although from our perspective we will progressively experience our union with God over an everlasting duration, from God's perspective this infinite progress is achieved. In eliminating any duality from God's creative purpose by appeal to creaturely union with God, has Edwards also eliminated the distinction between God and creation? Although it is clear from the dissertation that this is not Edwards' intention, the ambiguity of his argument at this point requires clarification from supplemental texts. What these texts will show is that Edward's understanding of union with God does not undermine the Creator-creature distinction because union with God is mediated by the risen flesh of the God-human Jesus Christ.

II. Union with God as Mediated by the Risen Christ

According to Edwards, the saints' union with God is perpetually mediated by the humanity of Christ. It is the mediated character of this union that upholds the Creator-creature distinction in perpetuity. Numerous references to the perpetual mediation of Christ are spread throughout the vast corpus of Edwards' writing. In an Appendix to the Yale Edition of Edwards' dissertation *Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, Paul Ramsey discusses a thorough collection of texts from Edwards' "Miscellanies" on the progressive union with God.⁵ Within this collection, a distinct theme emerges: eschatological union with God is mediated through union with Christ. I will analyze a few representative texts in order to show how they presuppose the bodily resurrection of Christ and thereby offer a theological account of the significance of resurrection belief.

⁵ Paul Ramsey, "Appendix III: Heaven is a Progressive State," in Paul Ramsey, ed., *Ethical Writings, The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 706-738.

In an extended Miscellany on eschatology, Edwards asserts that *all* communication of God's glory to creatures is mediated by the God-human in his divine-humanity unity: "All communicated glory to the creature must be by the Son of God, who is the brightness or shining forth of his Father's glory. And therefore when the external world comes to receive its greatest brightness and glory, it will doubtless [be] by him, and it will be by him as God-man."⁶ Edwards connects God's singular creative purpose (communication of glory) to the mediation of the incarnate Son. God's creative purpose, the singularity of which requires creaturely union with God, is achieved through the God-human. The humanity of Christ is not dispensed with at the eschaton, but persists as a creaturely medium throughout the progressive union of humans with God. So the humanity of Christ is an indispensable means to the end for which God created the world.

Edwards' assertion of the permanence of the incarnation presupposes the resurrection of Christ, for it is only by Christ's overcoming of death that his humanity persists into eternity. Edwards makes this connection explicit in the immediately subsequent lines of this Miscellany: "For all that God doth by Christ, as the medium of communication between himself and the creature, since Christ became God-man—*or at least since as God-man he has been glorified and enthroned as Lord of the universe*—he doth by Christ as God-man."⁷ Edwards here links the perpetual mediation of Christ to the resurrection of Christ from the dead and his ascension to the right hand of the Father.

Therefore, since the resurrection makes possible the perpetual mediation of Christ, which

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, "CONSUMMATION OF ALL THINGS. NEW HEAVENS AND NEW EARTH. PROGRESS OF THE WORK OF REDEMPTION. HEAVEN SHALL BE CHANGED, AND EXALTED TO HIGHER GLORY AT THE END OF THE WORLD," 1741, p. 12, in Harry S. Stout, Kenneth P. Minkema, Caleb J. D. Maskell, eds., *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, 2005. <http://edwards.yale.edu/ref/12560/e/p/12>. Cited by P. Ramsey, "Heaven is a Progressive State," p. 718.

⁷ *Ibid.* Italics added.

in turn makes possible the creaturely union with God necessary for the accomplishment of God's singular end in creation, Christ's resurrection serves God's creative purpose.

The link between the resurrection and the permanence of the incarnation is not an isolated insight. In his sermon, "The Excellency of Christ," Edwards speaks of the excellent conjunction of glory and humility in the risen Christ: "It is still manifest in his acts, in his present state of exaltation in heaven... Though Christ be now at the right hand of God, exalted as King of heaven, and Lord of the universe; yet *as he still is in the human nature*, he still excels in humility."⁸ Even after his exaltation (which begins at his resurrection from the dead), Jesus Christ retains his human nature. It is the excellence of the God-human in his God-human unity that the Holy Spirit enables us to contemplate.

Edwards' argument for the perpetual mediation of the risen Christ leads him to a revised conception of the beatific vision. For much of the Christian tradition, the beatific vision is understood as unmediated contemplation of the essence of God.⁹ Edwards introduces an element of mediation within the beatific vision. Edwards makes the argument for a mediated beatific vision by shifting the content of contemplation away from the attributes of God and toward the redemptive activity of God: "Hence that BEATIFICAL VISION that the saints have of God in heaven, is in beholding the manifestations that he makes of himself in the work of redemption: for that arguing of the being and perfections of God that may be a priori, don't seem to be called seeing God in

⁸ Jonathan Edwards, "The Excellency of Christ," in Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney, eds., *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 181. Italics added.

⁹ Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia, q. 12, a. 1.

Scripture, but only that which is by [the] manifestations God makes of himself in his Son.”¹⁰ Thus there is no vision of God that is not mediated through the incarnate Son.

However, the perpetual mediation of Christ is not meant to undermine the intimacy of human union with God, but to redefine it in view of the hypostatic union. Edwards does not place the vision of Christ as a buffer between God and the creature. Rather, Edwards boldly identifies the vision of Christ with the vision of God: “The seeing God *or* the Glorified Body of Christ is the most perfect way of seeing God with the bodily eyes that can be.”¹¹ Edwards is here following through on the implications of the traditional doctrine that one of the trinity became incarnate: “For in seeing a real body that one of the Persons of the Trinity has assumed to be his body and that he dwells in forever as his own, in which the divine majesty and excellency as much as ’tis possible for it to appear in outward form or shape, the saints do actually see a divine person with bodily eyes in the same manner as we see one another.”¹² Since the divine Son’s identity is permanently wrapped up with his assumed humanity, the saint who sees Christ sees him in his God-human unity. Therefore, one really sees God in the face of Jesus Christ. In other words, the *visio Christi* is the *visio Dei*.

In view of Edwards’ revised account of the beatific vision, the humanity of Christ is understood as intrinsically and not merely instrumentally necessary for the completion of God’s creative purpose of glorifying himself by communicating his glory to creatures. Christ’s mediation is rendered indispensable to God’s end in creation. And since God’s

¹⁰ Jonathan Edwards, “HAPPINESS OF HEAVEN IS PROGRESSIVE,” 1738, p. 5, in Harry S. Stout, Kenneth P. Minkema, Caleb J. D. Maskell, eds., *Works of Jonathan Edwards Online*, 2005. <http://edwards.yale.edu/ref/11993/e/p/5>. Cited by P. Ramsey, “Heaven is a Progressive State,” p. 719.

¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, “Sermon on Rom. 2:10,” cited in P. Ramsey, “Heaven is a Progressive State,” p. 723-724. Italics added.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 724.

creative purpose will be worked out over an infinite progression of time, the mediation of Christ will never cease. Accordingly, Christ does not cast off his creaturely existence. Thus the bodily resurrection of Christ becomes a necessary step in God's self-glorification in time.

Conclusion

What is at stake in resurrection belief? According to Edwards, God's very purpose in creating the world is at stake. The humanity of Christ is indispensable as a means to God's creative end. The bodily resurrection of Christ ensures the permanence of the hypostatic union, which mediates union with God. For Edwards, the Creator-creature distinction is not only sustained *in* the hypostatic union but also sustained *by* the hypostatic union.¹³ Edwards has thus fully integrated resurrection belief into his larger theological superstructure. Christ's resurrection is not a disparate belief that can be discarded without repercussions. Edwards' account may not be the only or even the best way to integrate resurrection belief into the deep structure of Christian thought, but it certainly is a good place to start.

¹³ For a suggestive exploration of Christ as the Creator-creature distinction, cf. Robert W. Jenson, "Creator and Creature," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4:2 (2002), pp. 216-221.

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