

USAGE STATEMENT & AGREEMENT

- **This document is the property of the author(s) and of www.epsociety.org.**
- **This document has been made available for your individual usage.**
- **It's possible that the ideas contained in this document are of a "preprint" quality. Please consult the author(s) for any updated content.**
- **If you quote from this document, whether for personal or professional purposes, please give appropriate attribution and link to the original URL whenever you cite it.**
- **Please do not upload or store this document to any personal or organization owned website, intranet, portal, server, FTP area, or any other shared space.**
- **You are permitted to store this document on your own individual, privately-owned computer or device.**
- **By opening this document, you have agreed to abide by the above stated usage policy.**
- ***We welcome your comments and interaction about the ideas shared in this document by going to www.epsociety.org!***

Christian Philosophy: For Whose Sake?

Richard Davis
 Philosophy Department
 Tyndale University
 Toronto, Canada

Abstract: Paul Moser’s “Christ-Shaped Philosophy” is a game changer for the Christian philosophical community. It penetrates to the heart of what Christian philosophy really is; it charts a way forward. After endorsing the broad outline of Prof. Moser’s project, I explore the idea that “Gethsemane union with Christ” requires being “knit together” with other members of Christ’s body—of which he is Head. If so, I argue, Christian philosophy isn’t reducible to the propositional content of its teachings. It is also an activity engaged in *for the sake of* other members of the body. It is not about reputation, peer recognition, or self.

There is much to agree with (indeed celebrate) in Paul Moser’s “Christ-Shaped Philosophy.” It is in many ways a corrective, and certainly a reminder of what is distinctive about Christian philosophy, what it *is* at its essence, and therefore what it *ought to be* in our thinking. In the last fifty years or so, Christians in philosophy have shown without question that they can master the tools of contemporary analytic philosophy, putting them to good use in defense of a generic theism. One thinks here of Plantinga’s elaborate use of possible worlds and counterfactuals in *The Nature of Necessity*, Swinburne’s deployment of Bayes Theorem in his cumulative case for theism, and Craig’s excursus into the realms of mathematics and cosmology in his tireless defense of the *kalam* argument. There are also impressive demonstrations of the coherence of uniquely Christian doctrines—for example, Trinity and Incarnation.¹ All in all, we’ve done a pretty good job following Plantinga’s *Advice*.²

¹ On the Trinity, see Keith Yandell, “The Most Brutal and Inexcusable Error in Counting: Trinity and Consistency,” *Religious Studies* 30 (1994): 201-217; and Peter van Inwagen, “And Yet They are not Three Gods but One God,” in *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, ed. Thomas Morris (Notre Dame, 1988), pp. 241-278. On the Incarnation, see Tom Morris’ classic *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Wipf and Stock, 2001), as well as Keith Yandell, “A Gross and Palpable Contradiction? Incarnation and Consistency,” *Sophia* 33 (1994): 30-45.

² See Alvin Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” *Faith and Philosophy* 1 (July 1984), pp. 253-71.

In hindsight, we might say that the first phase of the movement had a good deal to do with acquiring and mastering the tools in the analytic philosopher's toolkit, and then applying them to distinctly religious truth claims. However, as the "pillars" of 20th century Christian philosophy begin to move off the scene, the question arises: *what's next?* Do we just keep doing what we've been doing? Or do we branch off and try something different—say, tackling certain neglected areas (e.g., ethical theory, philosophy of mind, and eastern religions)? Then after our turn is done, we'll hand things over to another generation of Christian philosophers; they'll cover still more territory, and eventually we'll have everything covered. No doubt that's one way to proceed, and we really do need more powerful and penetrating work by Christian philosophers in the areas I mentioned. But Moser's point, if I understand him, is far more radical and basic. Indeed, it comes as something of a shock: Do we Christian philosophers even know what Christian philosophy *is*? And it's far from clear that we do.

Moser draws our attention to what should be an obvious truth: Christian philosophy is *about Christ*. He must be preeminent, which "includes giving pride of place to Christ" (p. 9) and to "Gethsemane union" with him, where the indwelling Christ empowers us "with divine *agapē* from within, as long as we are receptive and cooperative" (p. 6). This has enormous implications. For one thing, it implies that Jesus can guide not only *what* we think, but *how* we think. His indwelling presence then "shapes how Christian philosophy is to be done" and "yields a distinctive religious epistemology" with a "a special role for Christian spirituality" (p. 1). To separate the doing of Christian philosophy from Gethsemane union with Christ is therefore a "serious problem." For apart from our operating out of the "agent-power of *agapē*," we Christian philosophers are vulnerable to two powerful temptations. The *first* is that we can become so enamored with the trappings of philosophy—its tools and techniques, its methods, its endless debates, and the twin idols of getting published in the "right" journals, and recognized by the "right" people—that we can lose sight of Christ completely, reducing Christian philosophy to *nothing but* an impersonal, academic exercise. We remove Christ from Christian philosophy. One cannot help but think of what Luke says about the Athenian intellectuals of his own day: they "spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas" (Acts 17:21). It was stimulating, exciting, but ultimately pointless.

Secondly, to ignore the "agent-power of *agapē*" is to empty the power of the cross in our lives, and to walk according to the flesh, in a manner indistinguishable from the world, following worldly examples (not Christ's) laid down in the profession. This spills over into our attitudes, speech, and

interactions—both inside our departments, as well as at conferences and colloquia. I have seen Christian philosophers “verbally destroy” (read: humiliate) those less aggressive and quick on their feet than themselves—all for the sake, one suspects, of demonstrating just how impressive they are, so that they can bid up their “ranking” in the grand pecking order. Here Moser’s assessment is right on the money. That kind of behavior results in “a conflicted witness *at best*” (p. 9). That’s putting things nicely. At worst, it brings contempt upon the person of Christ, in whose name we claim to be doing philosophy.

So I must confess, I find myself in full agreement with Moser’s proposal. It is both timely and indispensable. Indeed, it seems unthinkable to work out the contours of Christian philosophy and *not* begin with Christ. Where *else* would we begin? Thomistic philosophy begins with Aquinas. Cartesian philosophy begins with Descartes. Why should Christian philosophy begin with anyone other than Christ? Graham Oppy may insist that *all proper philosophy begins with generally accepted principles*—“the common intellectual heritage of all people.”³ But that isn’t itself generally accepted; nor does it follow from principles that are. Like Moser, I think we must turn first to Paul’s letter to the Colossians to get our bearings. There Paul warns against “hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world [sounds rather familiar, doesn’t it?] rather than on Christ” (Col 2:8)? The clear implication is that there is (or at least can be) such a thing as a philosophy that *depends on Christ*. In what follows, I’d like to add just a bit to Prof. Moser’s proposal by highlighting another aspect of Paul’s thinking as it relates to “Christ-shaped Philosophy.”

Take it for granted, then, that Christian philosophy essentially involves “Gethsemane union with Christ” and hence “agent-power *agapē*.” Then note that Paul also tells us that “he (Christ) is the head of the body, the church” (Col 2:18). Further, we know that every *truly* Christian philosopher is a member of Christ’s body, as indeed are all Christians (cf. 1 Cor. 12:27). Accordingly, every Christian philosopher has *agapē* obligations to every other member of the body and to its Head. Philosophy mustn’t be done in a way that would cause me to violate those obligations. It must be Spirit-directed; it must result from the exercise of “agent-power *agapē*.” What this means, in part, is that it can’t be carried out with a *sensuous* mind—a mind ruled by and devoted to the flesh (and thus prisoner to the world system and its architect. cf. Eph. 2:1-3.). Doing Christian philosophy with this mindset is a serious breach of one’s *agapē* obligations to Christ.

Consider the sensuous mind. When it thinks and philosophizes, it’s all for the sake of self. It *claims* to pursue philosophy for its own sake, but really

³ Graham Oppy, “Moser, Ambiguity, and Christ-Shaped Philosophy,” pp. 3-4.

it's just a means to a greater end—satisfying what Richard Baxter once called the “grand Idol that is exalted against the Lord...[the] *Carnal Self*.”⁴ The sensuous mind thinks about its own interests, admires its own abilities, and demands that others do the same. Paul says of the gnostic infiltrators at Colossae: they go “on in detail about visions”—their own visions of course—and are “puffed up without reason by [a] sensuous mind” (1:19). “Puffed up” because they’ve got the epistemic high ground. They’ve had the “visions” and have the gnostic insights; the rest do not. As a result, they feel superior and look down on others. That’s the thing about a sensuous mind; it’s always comparing.

Consequently, when others are recognized, it doesn’t *rejoice*; it *resents*. The intellectual and spiritual giftings of others are a danger; for they threaten to rob the fleshly mind of attention and admiration. And thus arise many of the “works of the flesh” (Gal 5:20-21), especially jealousy, envy, strife, rivalries, enmity, and dissensions. Listen to how one well known philosopher describes the early stages of his career before becoming a Christian:

Besides my family, my only interests were philosophy and my career in philosophy. Perhaps my former wife and my daughter would say that the qualification “besides my family” is unnecessary. I certainly was taken up both with my researches and my desire to be recognized and admired. My researches, I think, went very well indeed, but I haunted my departmental mail box mostly in vain, and was subject to frequent periods of depression and spasms of anger because of my lack of professional recognition. The anger was directed at certain of my former teachers (the more famous ones), who, I believed, were in a position to advance my career and yet were doing nothing for me. I believed that they just didn't see how good I was, and wasted their influence in advancing the careers of people who were less good than I.⁵

Not surprisingly, therefore, a sensuous mind—even in the life of a Christian philosopher—is a *separated* mind, “not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” (1:19). It isn’t “knit together” with other parts of the body; it competes with them, and this makes spiritual growth

⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Crucifying of the World by the Cross of Christ* (London, 1658), p. 14.

⁵ Peter van Inwagen, “Quam Dialecta,” in *God and the Philosophers*, ed. Thomas Morris (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 34.

impossible since Jesus nourishes his body “through its joints and ligaments.” Competition and comparison—even with philosophers outside the Christian community—is such a deadly spiritual cancer; it severs connection to the Head and cuts off one’s spiritual air supply. For it replaces Christ with the grand idol of Carnal Self. Just as a severed limb is of no use to the body to which it once belonged, a sensuously minded Christian philosopher is no use to Christ or his body. S/he is spiritually insensible.

By contrast, Spirit-filled, *agapē* empowered thinking is for the sake of the Savior, and is directed upon him since in him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). This sort of thinking—the sort that holds fast to the Head—doesn’t start from itself—e.g., from principles it finds attractive, say, those based on “human tradition and the basic principles of this world.” It doesn’t begin with an earthly foundation, waiting to see how things will turn out, and hopefully pleasing the Lord in the long run. That is to reason like Dawkins’ blind watchmaker; you wander *aimlessly* about, picking up a few truths (as well as plenty of errors), all the while insisting that you’re simply following the arguments where they lead. And in a sense that’s right. You are following the chain of argument where it leads *provided that you first accept those worldly starting points*. But why should a Christian philosopher do a thing like that?

A Christian pursuit of wisdom is by its very nature *teleological*. It has definite starting and ending points. It begins with revealed truth about Christ that is simply given; it thus operates under divine authority. More exactly, it operates in light of Christ’s *person* (1:15), his *pre-eminence* (1:16-18), and his *purpose* (1:20). These are inter-connected. Jesus is above and before all things (i.e., pre-eminent) *because of* who he is: the invisible God made visible (cf. “in his body of flesh” – Col 1:21), who created and sustains all things, and is the head of the church. But notice that *who* he is—i.e., the fact that he is the one in whom “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (1:19)—was *for the sake of* something. We see this in Col 1:19-20 – “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.”

It’s important to remember that the incarnation wasn’t a necessity; after all, God’s fullness didn’t have to find a bodily dwelling place. Nor, on the other hand, was it an event that happened without a reason. It had a definite purpose. But it wasn’t for God’s own sake that his fullness was pleased to dwell in Christ. It was for ours—for the sake of sinners and enemies. The *intermediate* end is reconciliation (of the many offenders to the One offended). The *ultimate* end, however, is that those who were once “alienated” and “hostile in mind” might not only be at peace with God, but also pleasing in his sight. Col 1:21 –

“And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, *in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him.*”

Now just think about that for a moment. There wouldn't be a Head of the church—or any church at all—if it weren't for God's acting for the sake of the body. You'll see the same thing in Paul. His suffering, he says, is a source of rejoicing for him because it is “for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister” (1:24). Every Christian philosopher needs to ask: *why* am I doing this? What's the point? The fact is: who you are as a philosopher is determined by the purpose for your writing, thinking, and speaking. For whose sake are you doing it? Philosophers have chosen many ends: the profession, their students, their school, their careers, and so on. But if the Apostle Paul is right (Rom 8:5), there's only two patterns for living (and therefore for doing philosophy): *according to the flesh* (to serve its interests) or *according to the Spirit* (to please the Lord). It's a harsh reality, but if nothing you do in your philosophical activities is for the sake of Christ's body, then you might be doing good philosophy, but it's not Christian philosophy since it's not being done for the proper end. So Moser is absolutely right: you can be a Christian and a philosopher without being a Christian philosopher.

But then it follows that you can't be a proper Christian philosopher, if you are ambivalent towards the local body of believers. You must be “knit together in love” (Col 2:2) with them. Otherwise, you'll simply be a spiritually useless corpse, and you just won't care enough about the body to expend the energy needed to encourage your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Christian philosophy is hard work; plus, it takes time away from other things. Something *deep* has to move you to do it, and to conquer the paralyzing fear we may feel at the prospect of losing the approval of the secular philosophical establishment—our department chairs, colleagues, hiring and tenure committees, journal editors, influential bloggers, and the like. We have Paul Moser to thank for impressing upon us that only Christ's indwelling *agapē* power can carry us over these daunting obstacles, freeing us to engage in the kind of philosophy that *depends on* Christ, and is therefore “worthy of the Lord” and “fully pleasing to him” (Col 1:10).

Richard Davis is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Chair of the Philosophy Department at Tyndale University, Toronto, Canada.