Chapter 8
Alcuin's Christology

The crisis over Adoptionism, and the rigour and sophistication of Felix's theology, drew forth from Alcuin some profound reflections about Christology, which were imbued with his earnest desire as a teacher and pastor to articulate clearly, and in a demonstrably authoritative manner, the core of the Christian faith. This becomes readily apparent when his seven books against Felix and his subsequent four books against Elipandus are read, not just as polemic, but more deeply as creative and responsive theology of a pastoral and didactic kind. They work tenaciously within the patristic tradition of the Catholic Church, and evince thereby great mastery of the Bible and also access to a range of high quality patristic texts. Nonetheless it is sobering to realise the tenuous manuscript tradition that now underlies Alcuin's four remaining writings against Adoptionism: his initial letter to Felix, written in 797, survives in a single manuscript in Vienna;[1] likewise the *Liber contra Felicem* only survives in a single Vatican manuscript.[2] The slightly later *Adversus Felicem* is found in just two Paris manuscripts of the ninth century,[3] while his final work *Adversus Elipandus* fared slightly better, being preserved in four manuscripts, two of which are from the ninth century.[4] Yet we know from Alcuin's own letters that several copies of his anti-Adoptionist writings were circulated simultaneously for consultation and approval by the king and others during the development of the controversy. His last two substantial works in particular give an invaluable insight into Alcuin's method and prowess as a theologian at the height of his powers, during the last phase of his life and ministry. The paucity of manuscripts remaining therefore cautions against assuming too wide a circulation of this material beyond those immediately involved in the controversy at the time, and its later use by certain disciples of Alcuin such as Hincmar of Rheims. By the end of the ninth century, Adoptionism was a fading memory, although Alcuin's contribution to the stability of Western Catholic theology remained secure and of abiding importance right up to today.

The *Adversus Felicem* begins with a preface addressed to Charlemagne in which Alcuin carefully listed his principal patristic sources: Jerome, Augustine, Gregory, Hilary, Leo, Fulgentius and Ambrose; also Cyril of Alexandria against Nestorius, Peter of Ravenna, Bede, Gregory Nazianzen,

Isidore and Juvencus from Spain, whom he deployed against Felix and his compatriots in a deliberate manner. Interestingly he also defended his selective use of Origen and Cassian, both of whom were suspect in some Catholic circles, by appealing to the example of Jerome himself. Alcuin noted the way in which Paul alluded to pagan writers: 'nearly all the holy teachers followed his example and inserted many things into their books drawn from the philosophers and poets of the Gentiles,' as did Augustine himself, who quoted Virgil at various points in his *Enchiridion*.

Alcuin went on in the opening part of his book to lament that his *eirenikon* to Felix had fallen on deaf ears and how in response Felix had sent him a tract, in which he advanced his use of *nuncupativus* or 'nominal' when referring to the divine character of Christ in his human sonship. This novelty was unheard of in the Catholic Church, alleged Alcuin, while Felix defended it by a dubious use of patristic authorities. Neither this term nor the original term 'adopted' could be found in use in the Creeds or in the decrees of the ecumenical councils, nor among the Fathers properly understood. 'There are two things among human error that are most difficult to tolerate: presumption rather than open truth; and then, when things are made clear, a persistent defence of false assumptions.' To rebuff this, Alcuin promised to 'seek out the solid ground of truth and to shore up the defences of the holiness of the Catholic faith.'

Alcuin took apart passages from the writings of Felix with great skill and determination, showing their inconsistency in professing, for example, the unity of the Church while persisting in an error that was entirely local in character and origin. 'Who then is to be deemed a heretic: the one who follows the Catholic meaning of the holy Fathers and the entire Church since the beginning of the Christian faith, or the person who devises at the end of the ages new categories to describe the humanity and divinity of Christ our Lord who was born of a virgin?' By reference to both Eastern and Western synods, and to those of Spain itself, Alcuin ascertained that neither of these new terms had ever been used before. 'We should never, as you might say, transfer the stones of Catholic meaning from the stable structure of the Church of God; but rather choose the Stone that was cut from the mountain without human hands, that fills the whole world. Let us build upon this foundation, and place it at the root of our own structure of belief.'[5] Alcuin accused the Adoptionists through Felix of disturbing the long and well-established peace of the Church. He urged Felix and his followers instead 'not to be exiles from her brilliance, or aliens from the clear fullness of her perpetual light.'

What is striking about Alcuin's starting point was his ecclesiology: this was inseparable from Christology in his mind; and in this his approach was very similar in its intuition to that of Beatus of Liebana, whom he overtly supported in this book against Felix's criticisms. Alcuin's sense of the Church was truly global, being found in the historic patriarchates of

Rome, Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria; but also in Italy, Germany, and Gaul, Aquitaine, 'and even in Britain'. He asked, 'do any of these churches support you in your assertion?' Very much in the spirit of Bede in his *De Templo*, Alcuin portrayed the Church as the holy city of the Bible and Augustine's *City of God*: 'the bulwarks of this city are the Holy Scriptures, and also the examples of the Fathers who have gone before us, by whom it has been armed against all its foes.'

Alcuin's understanding of Christ was consistent with that set out in Augustine's *Enchiridion*, which was fundamental to his whole approach, both in terms of his doctrine and also his mode of argument. The unity of the two natures within the person of Christ was such that there was a true *communicatio idiomatum*:[6]

> On account of this inherent unity it may truly be said that the Son of Man descended from heaven and that the Lord of glory was crucified.[7] Thus the Word of God suffered impassibly, and the Son of Man miraculously descended from heaven. His hands, that created heaven and earth, were fixed by nails to the Cross; and His blood, by whom all things were created, was outpoured for the salvation of all, even as the apostle affirms, saying: "The blood of the Son of God has redeemed us."[8] All these things we should venerate in faith rather than subject to rationalistic discussion. For where reason fails, there faith becomes necessary.[9]

The foundation of Alcuin's argument was the complete sovereignty of God the Creator: 'is He able to procreate His own Son in the flesh of the Virgin, or not? For which is the greater dignity: to be the natural Son or an adopted one? *What can be born of God except true God?'* It was in this context that Alcuin cited explicitly the middle section of the Nicene Creed concerning belief in Christ, using the revised version drawn up by Paulinus of Aquilea. From this fundamental conviction about God's omnipotence the rest of his extensive and informed argument against Adoptionism flowed: he urged his interlocutors to 'recall to yourselves the eyes of your heart and understand the implications of this most reliable creed.'

Repudiating Nestorianism, Alcuin asserted that 'Christ is one, both as God and man, uniting in his words and deed whatever pertains to the divine and human natures, so that they each express themselves in his one person, and so that the proper nature of the Son and the dignity of his deity are one.' To his mind the use of terms such as 'adopted' and 'nominally God' fatally divided Christ, as Nestorius had done in a different way much earlier. Nestorianism was therefore the template against which the implications of Adoptionism might be measured and found wanting from the standpoint of orthodox Christianity: but it was not simply a matter of asserting that it was in fact the old heresy *redivivus*. The Nativity narratives in the gospels and the stories of the Baptism and the Transfiguration were, as for Paulinus of Aquilea, the starting points for Alcuin's Christological argument, supported

by the exegesis of Bede and Gregory the Great. In the light of these stories, Christ could not in his person be the unique Son of God and 'adopted' at the same time. One of the interesting features about the Catholic response to Adoptionism was the prominence given by Alcuin and others to the story of the Transfiguration as well as to the Baptism of Jesus in the gospels.

To corroborate his argument, or rather that of the Fathers, Alcuin laid down a rich tapestry of Biblical references, weaving them together like a great symphony that was harmonious because of its inherent unity. With consummate irony he asked whether Felix had received some new revelation 'from the midst of a Pyrenean whirlwind?' Consistent with the teaching of Augustine, Alcuin affirmed that 'it was no diminution of Christ's divine nature to assume human nature, but rather the exaltation of humanity by participation in divinity,' teaching encapsulated in the *Quicunque Vult*. Around this fundamental principle, Alcuin wove a copious cloud of patristic witnesses, asking generally about heretics: 'Do they not diminish the fullness of divine love, who refuse to believe that Jesus Christ is truly the Son of God?'

Polemic was thus transcended, and Christian theology articulated anew with clarity, learning and urgency, but also in a creative dialogue with those who had taught and written it earlier. Alcuin and the Fathers were each responding critically to heresy in their day, but also creatively to the language of the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. They demonstrated what they each discovered in their different generations: that the language of the Bible is its own landscape of thought and expression, the living environment for encountering Christ the Word of God, who is 'the same, yesterday, today and forever.'[10] It was the genius of Alcuin to be sensitive to this dimension and to give it voice in his day: it was for him the threshold of divine mystery, and a living tradition of experience in prayer and worship. The sense of the reality of the person of Christ was what compelled him in his belief and teaching, and therefore in his response to Adoptionism, which was always deeper than merely polemical. To read *Adversus Felicem* is therefore to hear Alcuin as he taught. For he wrote as he spoke, drawing from his carefully ordered memory as well from actual texts that he had checked, revealing thereby his rich and sympathetic knowledge of the Bible and of the Fathers, which was moulded by deep meditation and long years of instruction of others.

The last of Alcuin's direct writings against the Adoptionists was his *Adversus Elipandus*, written in the summer of 799 and prefaced by two letters to his colleagues, the bishops Leidrad of Lyon and Nefridus of Narbonne, as well as to his close friend the Abbot Benedict of Aniane, seeking their help in perfecting his work as he had been pressed for time. These letters provide the context for Alcuin's final overt assault on this heresy that they were tackling directly in the mission field along the borders between the southern Frankish church and Spain.[11] The first letter is dedicatory, while the second relates the treatise to relevant correspondence between himself,

Elipandus and Felix.[12] The book was clearly written to try and secure Spanish agreement for the settlement being imposed with papal support by the Frankish church at the synod of Aachen in the spring of 799, which resulted in Felix's house-arrest and apparent recantation.

Adversus Elipandus is in two parts:[13] the first two books replied directly to a letter sent by Elipandus to Alcuin in 798; the third part is a treatise in two books on Christology, entitled *De Incarnatione Christi et de duabus in eo naturis libelli duo necnon de veritate unius personae.* Together they constitute a fitting summary of his Christological teaching and his approach to the Bible and the Fathers. His dedicatory letter contains an interesting personal allusion to the prophecy made to him while in England by a certain very holy man about his mission to assist Charlemagne in his great enterprise of reform of the Church, a tradition also found in the *Life of Alcuin* and attributed there to his mentor, Archbishop Aelberht of York. For Alcuin saw himself alongside his missionary friends as allies in a great and timely vocation on behalf of the Catholic Church. Their duty was to follow the footsteps of the Fathers and to preach the Christian faith in its original apostolic purity. His letter to Elipandus, with which he prefaced his treatise, gave a clear and irenic summary of Catholic doctrine in repudiation of Adoptionism in the hopes yet of winning Elipandus over, and with him Felix too. He concluded with this appeal: 'let he who reads, read happily, understand truly and believe faithfully.' Once again his charitable instincts and reasonableness were bent towards his antagonists in the hope of a pastoral response resulting in a willing return to the peace and unity of the Church. This tone persists throughout the first two books of his reply to Elipandus, tempered perhaps by a certain weariness and sense of advancing age. He drew strength for his argument once again from the collects of Gregory the Great, in which he spoke often of Christ as 'the Only-begotten', prayers that Alcuin clearly prized and had used for many years.

The Christological treatise, begins with the Baptism of Jesus in the gospels of Luke and John, linking it closely once again with the Transfiguration as interpreted in the light of John's discussion of the divine glory in Christ, and with a reference also to the first letter of John, as well as to the testimony to the Transfiguration in II Peter.[14] Reflecting on the meaning of the Transfiguration, Alcuin says that in it was revealed 'the entire truth and fullness of divine power, the perfection and consummation of our salvation.'[15] This theophany became for him the focal point for his demonstration of the truth of the unity of person of Christ in his two natures. The other crucial testimony was the special way in which Christ spoke of his Father in the gospels, notably in the gospel of John. It was around this central conviction that Alcuin assembled a backdrop of Old Testament texts from the Psalms and the prophets before embarking on another catena of patristic teachings, citing the same authorities as he had

done in his *Adversus Felicem*, giving pride of place once again to Augustine, and concluding the first book with quotations from Isidore of Seville, whom he deliberately described as 'the light of Spain'. The second book begins by appealing to the authority of the first council of Nicea and then of all the subsequent ecumenical councils, giving no quarter to the novel terms 'adopted' and 'nominal' being used by Elipandus and his Spanish fellow-bishops. Did they really want to stand obstinately *contra mundum*? After citing Gregory and Jerome, Alcuin again reached for Cyril and his denunciations of Nestorianism, distilling his teaching with considerable skill and tenacity. He sensed that this was probably his last chance to get through to Elipandus, and Alcuin's mastery of the decrees of the council of Ephesus and their context was very evident.

For Alcuin, as in every generation of the Church, right Christology was the heart of the matter, the grand *cause celebre*. He urged Elipandus for the last time to lay aside the weight of heresy and to return to the serene light of truth and unity in Catholic peace. What could be a greater blasphemy than not to believe in the explicit testimony of the Father to His own Son recorded in the gospels? To do this was to spurn the whole authority of the Scriptures, and to ignore the tradition of the Fathers in their correct exegesis and consensus of faith. Towards the end of the treatise, Alcuin adopted the singular device of addressing Elipandus as a bishop by using the voice of God and recalling him to his charge, and challenging his infidelity in the face of the inscrutable mysteries of divine existence. The last chapter of the work is a little Christological creed, comprising a beautiful hymn in praise of Christ, 'the mediator of our life and our remunerator in glory'.

The heart of Alcuin's response to the Adoptionist challenge and his understanding of its spiritual significance and theological importance was summed up in a short letter that he wrote in the middle of 799 to a noble virgin, perhaps Gundrada, the sister of Adalhard of Corbie, mentioning how his friend and pupil Candidus was taking a copy of the *Adversus Felicem* to Charlemagne, and outlining to her the key questions of the controversy and how to respond to them.[16] It is notable for his use of dialectic to advance his cause and his assumption of her education and intellectual proficiency. It is appended here as a fitting glimpse of Alcuin's writing as a theologian about the issue that commanded all his powers and experience towards the end of his life, as well as of his capacity to address a woman friend as an equal.

> *Your devoted father in faith sends greetings to his most beloved daughter in Christ. I have often written to your most upright charity when your love has given me opportunity, either in words of peaceful greeting or in cheerful and familiar letters. . . . I read these words once in St Jerome: 'A friend is long sought after, hard to find and difficult to retain.' Indeed as the Apostle testifies in words that I often carefully reflect upon: 'It is impossible without faith to please God. (Hebrews 11.*

6)' Any friendship among human beings that is pursued without trust counts for nothing and is of no esteem. Therefore faith must be conjoined to love, so that by careful agreement and harmony its twofold nature may be nourished.

I have sent Candidus by command of my Lord the King (i.e. Charlemagne) with a copy of the book which I completed recently against those who assert that Christ is 'adopted', intending thereby to strike at the roots of this novelty wherever it may be found. You of course remain firm and inviolate of mind in the Catholic faith, with your answers prepared by which you may overcome your adversaries. . . .

We often speak using proper nouns which are not according to our substance, but which have special significance for our substance. For example, we are accustomed to speak about our landed possessions, which came to us by inheritance, as 'ours' even though they are far removed from our own substance as human beings. There is a good example of this when the evangelist says of the Son of God: 'He came unto his own people and his own received him not (John 1. 11).' The people of whom he spoke were not of his nature as God; however the evangelist could speak of them as God's own upon divine authority. For long before in the Psalms this privilege was granted to the people of Israel in the words: 'In Judah God is known: His Name is great in Israel. (Psalm 76. 1)'

If then in human affairs many things are described in this way, why must it be asserted only of the unique Son of God that he cannot be the true Son of God who was born of the Virgin? For he alone among the sons of God has this property of being one divine and human person in himself, being eternally begotten of God the Father. He is not twofold but a single person; nor is there one entity and another on account of the difference between the divine and human natures. There is rather the one true Son: as man become divine because of his divine nature, and as God become man because of his human nature, being the true and perfect Son of God in both natures. Your own revered faith firmly holds this belief and faithfully proclaims it.

Because I know that you are well versed in the subtleties of dialectic, I will now set before you in this letter some questions of a dialectical nature, in order thereby to render void the assertion that Christ is either 'adopted' or 'nominal' as the Son of God. It must first be asked whether any human person, comprising soul and body, is the true child of its parents. If so, it may then be asked whether the soul descends from the parents as does the flesh? If the answer is 'no', it remains to enquire in what way the soul is natural to the child if it does not descend with the flesh? It may also be asked why this is not to be believed about Christ as the son of the Virgin when it is true of all other human beings.

Then it may further be asked, which is the higher dignity, to be a natural or an adopted son? If the answer is 'natural', then it must be asked why Christ's sonship is second-rate? It may then be asked whether a son of a father can be both adopted and natural. If this is denied, then how can it be believed of Christ, who is most certainly

a single person, that he is both the natural and the adopted Son of God? If it is then asked whether a son can be adopted from the same nature of the father or from another's, and the reply is 'from another nature', then it implies that Christ must be of another nature in relation to God the Father, being thus adopted as His Son.

Surely in his conception and birth Christ was truly God and the natural Son of God, both conceived and born? If it is asked whether the true Son of God can be also the son of a Virgin, and the answer is that he is both true and natural, then it must be asked in what way this might be 'true', as divine and human natures are so diverse? It must be asked also how the son of the Virgin cannot be the true Son of God, if according to the Catholic faith he is both the Son of God and the true son of the Virgin? For if the son of the Virgin is merely the adopted Son of God the Father, it is clearly absurd that the Son of God should have to be adopted as son of the Virgin. Therefore if the Son of God is truly the son of the Virgin, then the son of the Virgin is indeed the Son of God, and there is no room for speaking of him as 'adopted'.

It may then be asked whether it is appropriate to adore one who is only 'nominally' God. If the answer is 'no', then how come that Christ was adored by the angels of heaven, of whom the Apostle says: 'When He brings the firstborn into the world, He says: "Let all the angels of God worship him. (Hebrews 1. 6)"' For it may further be asked that if Christ is only nominally God, why is it not written that he prohibited his being worshipped as God in the way that Peter prevented Cornelius? If the reply is that St Peter was only a man, whereas Christ is both God and man, the inference is that if God and man comprise one person, then that one person is truly God and man, and the term 'nominal' is irrelevant to both.

If it is then asked what is the common ground between truth and untruth and the answer is 'nothing', it means that Christ as a human being either is or is not true God. For it would be absurd to describe him as God but not truly so! If your adversary dares to do so, let him resolve what is common between truth and untruth. Let him be asked this according to the principles of dialectic, whether a person can be at once a genuine human being and an apparent one, and therefore not a true one? If the reply is that this is impossible, then it must be conceded that it is no more possible for Christ to be truly and only apparently human at the same time, for he exists as one person in two natures. Rather in all things is he true, for in himself he is true God and truly the Son of God: for in him indeed is the fullness of truth, and there is nothing contrived in him.

Let it then be asked whether we should adore or worship anything other than the one true God, and if this is accepted then it must be asked upon what basis we may adore the son of the Virgin unless he is truly God? The next question concerns whether one who is only 'nominally' God should be so adored? If this is denied, then it follows that Christ being born of the Virgin should not be adored, because he is not truly God. But this results in two sons of God: Christ who is God and Christ the man: one may be adored but the other not.

May God turn away this misunderstanding from every Catholic heart! For Christ is entirely God, to be venerated in a single act of worship. Then it may further be asked, if he is not God, who was also the Son of David, then by what power could he give sight to the blind man, who acclaimed him with the words, 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon me! (Mark 10 .47-8).' Who can give illumination from himself in this way except God alone? If he is God, who thus healed the blind man, then he is both God and the Son of David.

It may further be asked if the blessed Virgin gave birth to one God or to two. If the answer is 'one', then it can again be asked whether this one person is true or untrue. If 'true' then it must be concluded without doubt that the son of the Virgin is one and true God. For if she gave birth to one who was both true and 'nominally' God, without doubt she would have procreated two gods, one 'nominal' and the other true. Finally it may be asked whether she in fact bore two sons or just one. If only one, was he natural or adopted? If the reply is 'both' then it must be concluded that the blessed Virgin in reality bore two sons: one the natural Son of God the Father and the other the adopted son, because adoption does not pertain to natural birth.

Thus it may be confirmed by these questions and answers that Jesus Christ must be believed to be truly and fully God, being the one and natural Son of God the Father, to be perfectly adored and praised by all creatures, even as the psalmist says: 'Let heaven and earth praise Him, the sea and all that is therein. (Psalm 69. 34)'