

In Him Was Life: The person and work of Christ, by Trevor Hart

20 NOVEMBER 2020



Austin Stevenson reads a work of Christology

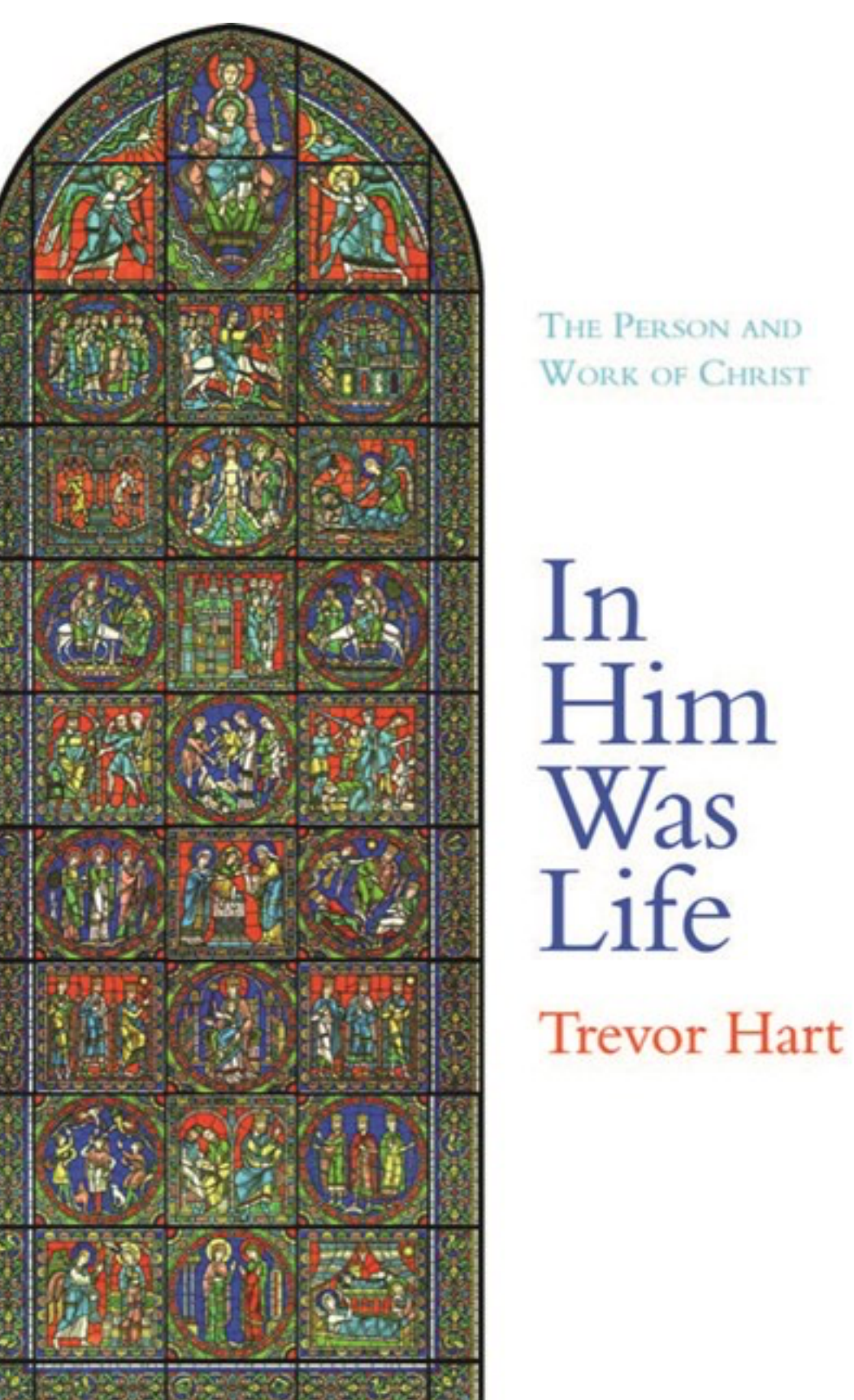
THIS valuable and wide-ranging collection of essays represents three decades of reflection on the person and work of Christ by one of Scotland's great contemporary theologians. Trevor Hart, Rector of St Andrew's Episcopal Church and long-time director of the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St Andrews, has here combined a number of his previously published essays with some new material to present a largely cohesive book.

The overarching theme is the inextricable relationship between Christology and soteriology, and a clear constructive argument to this end runs continuously through most of the collected essays. By rehabilitating the largely Eastern soteriological theme of "deification" for Western theology, Hart establishes a compelling paradigm for the relationship between the doctrines of the person and work of Christ, which he employs to address a range of complex and abiding theological issues.

The book comprises 15 chapters divided into three parts: (1) a critical discussion of Eastern patristic soteriology, focused especially on the relationship between scripture and Hellenism; (2) a reconsideration of characteristic themes in Western soteriology, such as satisfaction and substitution; and (3) a group of essays that address theological issues specific to the 20th and 21st centuries.

Hart's writing is characteristically lucid and compelling, and, in the opening chapters, he provides a welcome rejoinder to Adolf von Harnack's influential Hellenisation thesis. In Hart's hands, Irenaeus and Athanasius, in particular, show themselves well aware of the complexities involved in interpreting and contextualising meaning. As a result, the essentially biblical foundations of conciliar Christology are uncovered and re-emphasised. This opening section is the strongest and most cohesive of the three.

Despite the broad ecumenical focus of the first half of the book, the second half narrows considerably and is occupied primarily with Scottish theologians, such as P. T. Forsyth, D. M. Baillie, and especially T. F. Torrance. Indeed, the focus of numerous chapters is not so much the larger Christological questions as the vindication or critique of particular 20th-century Scottish theologians. This obviously has its own value, but it is unexpected, given that the titles of these chapters (e.g. "Sanctification", "Impeccability", "Universality") imply a full doctrinal treatment of the relevant theme. The usefulness of the book would have been improved by either retaining the original titles of the essays or offering descriptive subtitles for each chapter.



Occasionally, the focus on Scottish theology seems to restrict the range of resources brought to bear on the questions under discussion. For example, when wrestling with the compatibility of Christ's impeccability with his true humanity and free will, Hart does not even mention prominent traditional approaches — such as Maximus the Confessor's distinction between natural and gnomic will — instead languishing at the level of Forsyth's bleak kenotic Christology.

The particular theological slant of the book comes through most clearly in the fact that, even when issues are helpfully framed by way of dialogue with someone like Thomas Aquinas, Hart defaults to the frameworks of Karl Barth, T. F. Torrance, and Jürgen Moltmann for his constructive proposals.

A final chapter on imagination connects this volume to Hart's broader body of work, and, while the lack of a conclusion partly undermines the overall cohesion of the book, the essays in this volume are, none the less, fruitful, well-argued, and significant contributions to the field. This book is articulate and highly readable, which makes it valuable for a non-academic audience, despite its technical focus and intellectual rigour.

Austin Stevenson is a Ph.D. candidate in Christian Theology at the University of Cambridge whose research focuses on the relationship between metaphysics and historiography in historical Jesus studies.

In Him Was Life: The person and work of Christ

Trevor Hart

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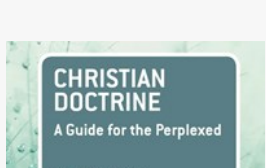
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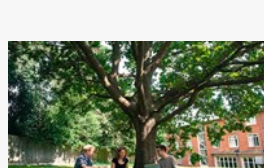
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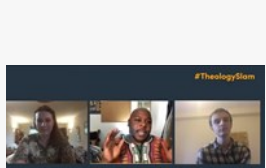
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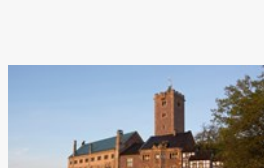
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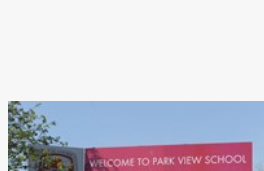
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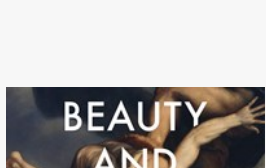
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