

‘Christ’s Sinful Flesh’

‘Christ’s Sinful Flesh’:
Edward Irving’s Christological Theology
within the Context of his Life and Times

By

Byung Sun Lee

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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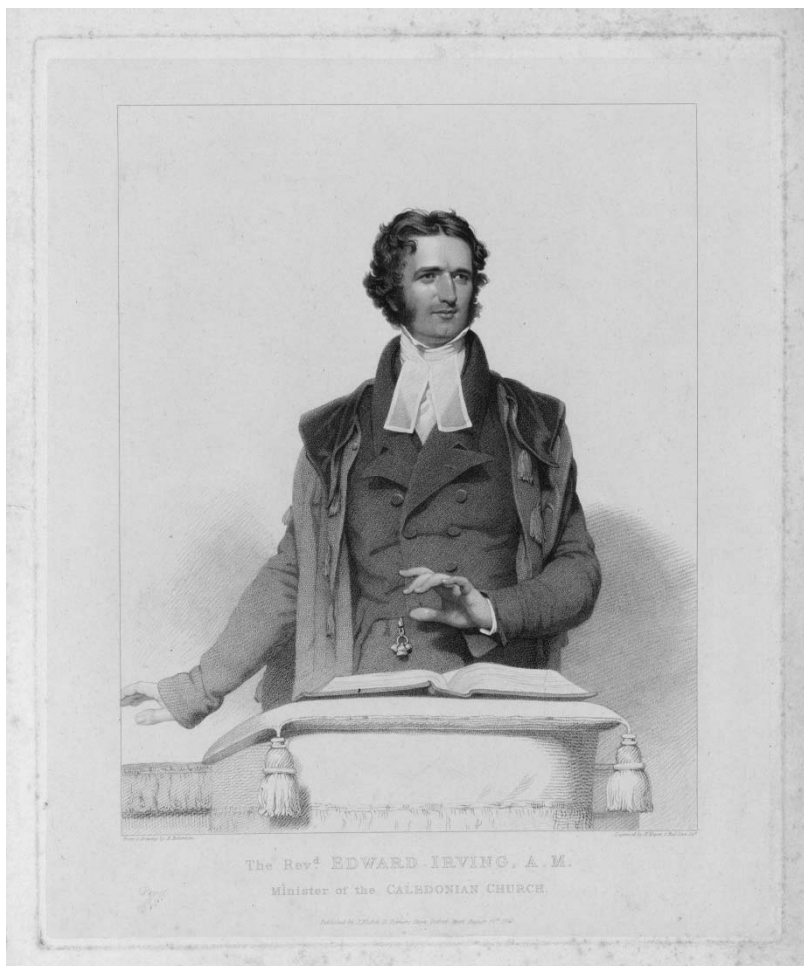
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To my beloved family, who have had an uneasy and extra-ordinary life in Scotland, supporting my study with their devoted livings; Soon-Kee Chung (wife), Seung-Hyun Lee (son), and Seung-Ju Lee (daughter).



Edward Irving (1792-1834), by Henry Meyer,
published by James Nisbet, after Andrew Robertson stipple engraving, 1823.
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PREFACE

Edward Irving (1792-1834) exercised a profound effect on developments in nineteenth-century theology within the English-speaking world. He is especially known for his thought regarding the return of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and his pre-millennialism, including his belief in the imminent physical return of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Irving is generally remembered as a central figure in the movement of early nineteenth century pre-millennialism and as a fore-runner of the modern Pentecostal movement. Most scholarly interpretations of Irving have focused on particular aspects of his thought, such as the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, his millenarianism, or his understanding of Christology. This research provides a new interpretation of Irving's contributions, examining the interrelationship of his theological ideas and exploring the development of them within the context of his life, including his childhood and youth within the Covenanting country of southwest Scotland, his education within the University of Edinburgh and his early teaching career, his assistantship to Thomas Chalmers in the celebrated St John's experiment in urban ministry in Glasgow, his move to London in 1822 and his meteoric rise to fame as a preacher there, his personal trauma, including his unhappy affair with the future Jane Welsh Carlyle, the deaths of his children and the tragic accident at Kirkcaldy, his connections with Romantic intellectual and religious circles in the capital, and his growing involvement with the prophetic movement. Under the influence of the Romantic Movement, Irving's religious sensibility had matured.

This book shows that Irving's theological views, including his views on the gifts of the Spirit and his millennialism, formed a coherent system, which focused on his doctrine of Christ, and more particularly on his belief that Christ had taken on a fully human nature, including the propensity to sin. Only by sharing fully in the human condition with its "sinful flesh" concerning all temptations, Irving believed, could Christ become the true reconciler of God and humanity and a true exemplar of godly living for humankind. When we view Irving's theology from the perspective of his idea of Christ's genuine humanity, we can comprehend it more clearly; Irving's understanding of the spiritual gifts and his apocalyptic visions of Christ's return in glory had clear connections with his Christology. Irving's distinctive ideas on Christ's human nature and his

eloquent descriptions of Christ's "sinful flesh" resulted in severe criticisms from the later 1820s, and finally led to his being deposed from the ministry of the established Church of Scotland in 1833. His belief that we encounter God through Christ's sinful flesh reflected Irving's Romantic emphases, including the striving to transcend human limits. The Romantic sensibilities of the age and Irving's belief that the Church was locked in impotence and spiritual lethargy led him to expect a divine interruption, and to long for an ideal world through an eschatology that would bring glorification to the Church. Irving's view of the person of Christ must be understood within this broader theological framework and historical context, in which he maintained that common believers could achieve union with Christ through both their sharing of Christ's genuine humanity and the work of the Holy Spirit.

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This is a work based on my PhD research finished in 2012 at the University of Edinburgh, so I give my best regards to all the staffs at New College, University of Edinburgh and my friends who were willing to support and contribute on this work in various ways.

Prof. Stewart Jay Brown should be on the top of the list that I should give my great gratitude. Without his huge support and advice, I would not have completed this research. As an ideal supervisor to a muddle-headed student, Jay continuously gave me tremendous encouragement whenever I knocked at his door on the top floor of New College.

I also give great thanks to Prof. David Fergusson, Prof. Jane Dawson, and Dr Paul Parvis, who encouraged me and gave valuable direction for my thesis in the first year boarding. The development from their advice became the backdrop of this research.

Prof. David Bebbington in Stirling University helped to turn my eyes on Romanticism when I asked questions on this area in the first stage of this research, enabling me to see Edward Irving in another perspective. I deeply appreciate David's contribution to my work.

I cannot miss to mention my gratitude for my friend, the Rev. Mike Harris in Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire, who helped my English from the time of my Master's research at the University of Aberdeen. He is also the person who introduced the name of Edward Irving to me when I was finishing the Master's course.

I greatly appreciate every effort contributed to my work by all the librarians at New College and Main Library, University of Edinburgh, and National Library of Scotland, who kindly delivered all the materials of Irving.

Finally, I humbly give thanks to my wife and children. To my children, I apologize for not being around as much while I produced this work. To my wife, Soon-Kee Chung, I am eternally grateful for her contributions to the completion of this research. Her tremendous support was shown not only as she took care of our family while abroad, but also as she gave huge spiritual encouragement to her husband.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CW</i>	<i>The Collected Writings of Edward Irving in Five Volumes</i>
<i>MW</i>	<i>The Morning Watch</i>
<i>PW</i>	<i>The Prophetical Works of Edward Irving in Two Volumes</i>
CHA	Thomas Chalmers Papers, New College Library, Edinburgh
NLS	National Library of Scotland

INTRODUCTION

In 1833, the Scottish Presbyterian clergyman, Edward Irving (1792-1834), was deposed from the ministry of the Church of Scotland ministry by the Presbytery of Annan, because of his claim that Christ had taken on fallen human nature, including “sinful flesh”, in order to become one with us and that Christ had remained free from actual sin only. Irving’s soteriological concerns, as well as his desire to assert the “reality” of God, drove him to conclude that Christ took on sinful human flesh. To become a true saviour for humankind, Irving believed, Christ had to have a truly human nature. Although Irving also insisted that Christ had remained sinless by the special ministry of the Holy Spirit, Irving’s efforts to minimize the difference between Christ and Christian believers were angrily rejected by most of his contemporaries.

Irving’s life and thought continue to fascinate us. Previous scholars have tended to focus on particular aspects of his theological thought, such as his views on the nature of the Holy Spirit, the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in human society, or his Christology. However, an emphasis on particular aspects can lead to distortions of his thought as a whole. A full understanding of his theological views can be come only by appreciating the interrelationship of his ideas, and by viewing his thought from several different angles. This book will explore the wide range of his theological framework within the context of his life and times.

Although described as a “genial and high-minded” boy, Irving had not been remarkable in his youth, while his early career in Scotland had not been promising. But his rapid rise to “unprecedented popularity in London”, which occurred shortly after his settlement in the city in the early 1820s, transformed him into a leading early nineteenth-century evangelical figure. Although there have been several studies of Irving, which have struggled to vindicate Irving’s legacy against his opponents’ portrayal of him as mentally “unhinged”, Irving’s name remains associated with heresy and even with mental confusion. This is partly, as I have noted, because former studies have focused on particular aspects of his character or have stressed particular sides of his theology. Further, since he was deposed from the Established Church of Scotland in 1833, some studies have been shadowed by the preconception that he must have been “wrong” in some important respects.

My aim in this book is not to determine whether Edward Irving was right or not, but rather to understand the intentions behind his theological writings, what motivated him to express his ideas, and how he developed his theological views, especially concerning Pneumatology and Millennialism that were connected with his understanding of the Incarnation.

Literature Review

During the later nineteenth century, several works about Edward Irving, either biographical studies or studies of his circle, were published. The most extensive biography was the two-volume study published in the early 1860s by the Scottish historian and novelist, Mrs Margaret Oliphant, who collected many documents and letters concerning Irving, and whose biography conveyed “chiefly an interest in the man himself, and his noble courageous warfare through a career encompassed with all human agonies”.¹ This work arguably remains the most detailed and thoroughly documented biography and it provides as attractive picture of Irving. Most later writers on Irving’s life and work have drawn heavily from her work. However, Oliphant’s biography also has its critics. Some find her style of writing to be heavy and ornate, and feel that she makes too many historiographical digressions. Also, by inserting critical comments into her narrative instead of reserving them for a later critical summary, her account is sometimes ambiguous—while the work as a whole lacks analytical rigour.² Despite these criticisms, however, Oliphant’s work has remained until very recently the major biographical work on Irving.

Another biographical study, which deserves to be mentioned, is Thomas Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*, in which the celebrated Scottish historian and essayist described, near the end of his life, his friendship with Irving from their teens up to Irving’s death, and provided a compelling portrayal of Irving, which included the publication of several letters between the two men.³ Other nineteenth-century works might be

¹ Margaret O. W. Oliphant, *The Life of Edward Irving*, 2 vols. (London: Hurst and Blackett, Publishers, 1862), ix.

² I am indebted for this review to Paul Davies, who wrote “An Examination of the Views of Edward Irving Concerning the Person and Work of Jesus Christ” as a PhD thesis in New College, Edinburgh, 1928.

³ Thomas Carlyle, “Edward Irving” in *Reminiscences* Vol. I. (ed. J. A. Froude, Longmans, 1881).

mentioned.⁴ But I would like to concentrate on academic theses because they provided more rigorous scholarly interpretations of Irving. Before going into the academic theses, I will consider a few more biographical studies published in recent decades.

Arnold Dallimore’s 1983 biography of Irving gives us a clear and gripping picture of Irving’s life, though the book is heavily dependent on the works of Margaret Oliphant and Thomas Carlyle for the historical content.⁵ Dallimore suggested that a study of Irving is important in light of his charismatic beliefs. He endeavoured to describe Irving “without bias and [as] presenting historic truth with honesty and accuracy”, and his work gives us the impression of Irving as a pathetic figure who finally failed

⁴ Peter Blackburn, *Reasons for Thinking Mr. Irving Deceived; or A Discussion of some Questions Relating to the Gift of Tongues* (Cambridge: J. G. & F, 1836); William Harding, *A Word of Testimony; or, A Corrected Account of the Evidence Adduced by the Trustees of the National Scotch Church, in support of their charges against the Rev. Edward Irving, and his defence* (London: Adam Douglas, 1832); William Watson Andrews, “Martin Luther and Edward Irving: Their Work and Testimony Compared” in *The Hartford [U.S.] Daily Times* (December 29th, 1883); William Watson Anderson, *Edward Irving*, reprinted from *The New Englander* (1863; Edinburgh, 1864); Charles J. T. Böhm, *Who are the Irvingites?: An Answer to Serious and Candid Inquirers* (London: Goodall and Son, 1851); James Fleming, *The Life and Writings of the Rev. Edward Irving, M.A.* (London: Knight and Eacey, 1823); William Flewker, *A Few Words about “Irvingism”* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1848); William Graham, “Edward Irving and James Hamilton”, *United Presbyterian Magazine* (October, 1879); John Hair, *Regent Square, Eighty Years of a London Congregation* (J. Nisbet, 1899); William Hanna, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers, D.D. LL. D.* in 4 Vols. (Edinburgh: Sutherland and Knox, 1849-1852); Henry F. Henderson, *The Religious Controversies of Scotland* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1905); William Jones, *Biographical Sketch of the Rev. Edward Irving, A.M.* (London: John Bennet, 1835); Charles Kegan Paul, “Edward Irving” in *Memories* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1883); Williams Landels, *Edward Irving* (London: Young Men’s Christian Association, 1864); Jabez Marrat, “Edward Irving” in *Northern Lights* (London: T. Woolmer, 1885); Robert Norton, *The Restoration of the Apostles and Prophets in the Catholic Apostle Church* (London: Bosworth & Harrison, 1861); J.E. Ritchie, *The London Pulpit* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1854); William Tabert, *Edward Irving and the Catholic Apostolic Church* (London: Bosworth & Harrison, 1856); John Tulloch, *Movements of Religious Thought in Britain During the Nineteenth Century* (Longmans, 1885); Norman L Walker, “The Trials of Irving and Campbell of Row” in *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review* (April, 1867); Washington Wilks, *Edward Irving, An Ecclesiastical and Literary Biography* (London: W. Goddard, 1854).

⁵ Arnold A. Dallimore, *The Life of Edward Irving, the Fore-Runner of the Charismatic Movement* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983).

both in his life and thought. Dallimore has not been without his critics from among Irving's admirers, including David W. Dorries.⁶

David Bebbington has explored Irving's role in British Evangelicalism and "reputation for erratic ways" in his excellent and highly influential book, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*.⁷ He has portrayed Irving as one of the leading figures in early nineteenth-century Evangelicalism, especially in his taking up pre-millennialism which "was part of the Romantic inflow into Evangelicalism".⁸ But Irving's main contributions rested, for Bebbington, on his "capacity for blending Evangelical religion with the latest intellectual fashions".⁹ For Bebbington, who saw Romanticism as having an "immense potential affinity for religion", Irving was a Romantic figure who represented "the dramatic, the extraordinary and the otherworldly element in religion".¹⁰ Bebbington's arguments concerning Irving's debt to Romanticism, and concerning Irving's key role in exemplifying the relations between Romanticism and religion, contributed significantly to a renewed interest in Irving's career; indeed, Bebbington's work is the standard work on British Evangelicalism, and his views on Irving are highly influential.

Sheridan Gilley's article-length study of 1993 approached Irving's thought, especially his millennialism, from the perspective of a religious and cultural historian, and provided a vivid account of the cultural environment that helped to mould Irving's thought. According to Gilley, the spirit of the Evangelical Revival, which began in the 1730s, profoundly shaped Irving's London ministry. Irving's distinctive character and profound spirituality placed him in the ranks of the "otherworldly" Christians—as, for example, when Irving denounced the British religious culture as a "worldly world".¹¹ He was also, for Gilley, extremely conservative in his religious thought. "Irving's theology", Gilley insisted, "was at heart founded on the profoundest

⁶ Dorries made a serious criticism of Dallimore's work, when he says "we believe that until a positive assessment of Irving's Christology is recognized, contemporary writers such as Dallimore will continue to publish superficial condemnation of his doctrine" in his PhD thesis "Nineteenth Century British Christological Controversy, Centering Upon Edward Irving's Doctrine of Christ's Human Nature" (University of Aberdeen, 1987), 8.

⁷ David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 79.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹ Sheridan Gilley, "Edward Irving: prophet of the millennium," in *Revival and religion since 1700* (ed. J. Garnett and C. Matthew; London: Hambledon, 1993), 98.

antiliberalism and anticatholicism”.¹² Gilley agreed with Gordon Strachan, whom we will consider shortly, that Irving’s Pentecostalism was unique and did not directly affect the modern Pentecostal movement. He saw Irving’s millennialism as being deeply influenced by the French Revolution and the arrival of French refugees in England, and this can be discerned in Irving’s *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God*. This gloomy pre-millennialism, according to Gilley, reflected Irving’s “melancholy strain”, and stemmed from the difficulties he experienced as a probationer for the ministry, his thwarted love affair with his former pupil, Jane Welsh, his wife’s ill-health and his children’s early deaths. Gilley viewed Irving’s millennialism as offering the believer little hope, in contrast to the more optimistic, post-millennial Adventism.

Let us turn now to the doctoral theses. Irving’s life and thought were explored in Paul Ewing Davies’ doctoral thesis, “An Examination of the Views of Edward Irving Concerning the Person and Work of Jesus Christ”, submitted to New College, Edinburgh (then the theological college of the United Free Church of Scotland) in 1928.¹³ This work stimulated later scholarly exploration about Irving and his theology. Davies did not question the Church of Scotland’s decision to depose Irving in 1833; rather, he portrayed Irving’s views as being genuinely heretical. Indeed, he described his thesis as “a study in heresy the theology of Edward Irving”, which, he said, “may warrant some consideration and study as an example to others of wrong emphases and faulty logic”.¹⁴ He interpreted Irving’s “apparent absurdities” as emerging from “his strenuous reaction to other orthodox absurdities in his religious environment”.¹⁵ Davies’ approach was highly critical: while agreeing with some parts of Irving’s argument on the humanity of Christ, he rejected the large portion of Irving’s ideas. In most cases, Davies agreed with the criticisms that had been previously made by Irving’s contemporaries. Since the work of the Holy Spirit was for Irving more important than the person of Christ in the work of redemption, Davies claimed that for Irving “there is little or no difference between union with the Spirit and union with the Son”.¹⁶ He claimed that the general tendency of Irving’s thought was to make the Holy Spirit, rather than Christ, the object of faith.¹⁷

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Paul E. Davies, “An Examination of the Views of Edward Irving Concerning the Person and Work of Jesus Christ” (PhD thesis, Edinburgh, New College, 1928).

¹⁴ Ibid., 5f.

¹⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., 219.

¹⁷ Ibid., 220.

Another doctoral thesis was submitted to New College only two years later by Andrew Landale Drummond, who approached Irving from a very different perspective in his historical and psychological study.¹⁸ Drummond explored Irving's gift of the Holy Spirit in terms of "Glossolalia", and noted that this phenomenon was a distinctive characteristic of Irving and his circle, the Irvingites, although he also recognised that Irving himself was not personally involved in the practice of speaking in tongues. Drummond analysed the "Irvingite herd" in comparison with other sects, and he explained glossolalia from the standpoint of psychology. Emphasising the outward phenomena Drummond concluded that Irving was misled by "false lights" and that his management of the manifestations was muddle-headed.¹⁹ Irving's over-emphasis on the Holy Spirit led him to the view that the Spirit's work in Christ and the Spirit's work in men were similar in their nature but different in degree, and that this led to the practice of "Perfectionism" in the Irvingite circle.²⁰ Drummond subsequently produced a very readable biography of Irving.

In 1953, Henry Charles Whitley produced another doctoral thesis on Irving, entitled "Edward Irving, An Interpretation of his Life and Theological Teaching", which was also prepared at New College, now home to the Faculty of Divinity of the University of Edinburgh.²¹ Portraying Irving in a most favourable light, Whitley emphasised Irving's efforts to reform the theology of the Church of Scotland, efforts which ultimately rebounded upon himself and brought his destruction: "Irving's mission was to rend the tomb of dead theology."²² According to Whitley, Irving's ideas were difficult to sympathise with in their extremes, although his instincts moved in the right direction.²³ Later, Whitley published a short popular biography, *Blinded Eagle*, in which he maintained that Irving's passionate love for God had blinded him in a religious sense.²⁴

¹⁸ Andrew Landale Drummond, "Edward Irving and the Gift of Tongues: An Historical and Psychological Study" (PhD thesis, Edinburgh, New College, 1930).

¹⁹ Andrew L. Drummond, *Edward Irving and His Circle* (London: J Clarke & Co Ltd, 1937), 272, 277.

²⁰ Drummond, thesis, 17f.

²¹ Henry C. Whitley, "Edward Irving, An Interpretation of his Life and Theological Teaching" (PhD thesis, Edinburgh, New College, 1953).

²² *Ibid.*, 230.

²³ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁴ Henry Charles Whitley, *Blinded Eagle: An Introduction to the Life and Teaching of Edward Irving* (London: SCM, 1955).

In his doctoral thesis to the University of Edinburgh, in 1972, C. Gordon Strachan explored Irving’s view of the Holy Spirit in relation to his ideas on the humanity of Jesus Christ.²⁵ Strachan subsequently published a well-received book based on his thesis and entitled *The Pentecostal Theology of Edward Irving*.²⁶ Strachan believed that the connection between Irving’s ideas of the human nature of Christ and his ideas of the gifts of the Holy Spirit would be found in “Irving’s understanding of the former as preliminary and preparatory to his understanding of the latter”.²⁷ Strachan regarded Spirit baptism as the focal point in Irving’s views of Christology and the Holy Spirit, and he showed its essential role in Irving’s theological framework. In Strachan’s view these two ideas should have been regarded as other than heretical; by systematising or formulating Irving’s theology, Strachan sought to demonstrate Irving’s theological orthodoxy. However, Strachan’s study was questionable in defining Irving as a “Pentecostal” or “Charismatic”. Since his account has been so widely accepted, it has left a strong impression which cannot be easily altered. Applying the label of “Pentecostal” to Irving does specify one of his theological characteristics; but there are other characteristics, which were arguably more important to his thought and which require a deeper exploration of his varied writings.

Further scholarly investigations, which aimed to vindicate the orthodoxy of Irving’s Christology, were conducted at the University of Aberdeen by Jacob Jamani Nantomah and David William Dorries.²⁸ Nantomah investigated Irving’s view on the doctrine of the incarnation, and then explored the usefulness of Irving’s Christology as an evangelistic tool in his African homeland of Ghana. Nantomah’s methodology was shared by Dorries. According to Dorries, Irving struggled against both a conception of a God who had made a “contract” with humankind and the Calvinist doctrine of limited atonement, and embraced instead an

²⁵ Gordon Strachan, “The Relation of the Holy Spirit to the New Humanity of Jesus Christ, with special reference to the Writings of Edward Irving” (PhD Thesis, Edinburgh, New College, 1972).

²⁶ Gordon Strachan, *The Pentecostal Theology of Edward Irving* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁸ David William Dorries, “Nineteenth Century British Christological Controversy, Centering Upon Edward Irving’s Doctrine of Christ’s Human Nature” (PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1987); Jacob Jamani Nantomah, “Jesus the God-Man: the doctrine of the Incarnation in Edward Irving in the light of the teaching of the Church Fathers and its relevance for a twentieth century African context” (PhD thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1982).

“incarnationally-revealed God [who] could not stop his love even at the boundaries of man’s fallen and sinful nature”.²⁹ Following his historical and theological exploration, Dorries concluded that Irving’s Christology, which was supported by the writings of some early Church Fathers, had been “mistakenly” and “unjustly” condemned by the Church of Scotland.

A systematic theological approach to Irving’s theology was undertaken by Graham McFarlane in a doctoral thesis at King’s College, London, in 1990.³⁰ McFarlane contributed significantly to the study of Irving through his effort to systematise aspects of Irving’s teaching, arguing that Irving overcame a long-standing Western Christological tendency, which had separated the doctrine of God as Father, Son and Spirit from an understanding of the incarnation, and which had ultimately made the role of the Spirit redundant.³¹ McFarlane’s chief interest was in the place of the Holy Spirit in Irving’s Christological thought, claiming that Irving’s doctrine of the Trinity and understanding of the incarnation placed emphasis on the Spirit’s place in the redemptive narrative. Through a theological analysis of three topics – divine being, human being, and Christ – McFarlane presented Irving’s view of salvation and the grace of God; arguing that the source of grace and its beneficiaries could be found in God’s plan of salvation through the incarnation. He claimed that Irving’s controversial view of the humanity of Christ could only be properly understood as a direct consequence of Irving’s understanding of the Trinity and of human nature. Thus he regarded Irving’s doctrine of the incarnation as an expression both of God’s justice and God’s grace and glory.³² McFarlane hoped to open “a new morning of theological possibilities” through the exposition of Irving’s understanding of the Incarnation.

Substantial research into Irving’s views on pre-millennialism was conducted by Mark Patterson in his doctoral thesis, “Designing the Last Days”, submitted to King’s College, London, in 2001.³³ Patterson explored the Albury Circle’s expectation of the Second Advent, to be

²⁹ Dorries, “Nineteenth Century British Christological Controversy”, chapter IV – B.

³⁰ Graham McFarlane, “Christology and the Spirit in the teaching of Edward Irving” (PhD thesis, London, King’s College, 1990).

³¹ Graham McFarlane. *Christ and Spirit: The Doctrine of the Incarnation According to Edward Irving* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996), 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 135.

³³ Mark Patterson, “Designing the Last Days: Edward Irving, The Albury Circle, and the Theology of The Morning Watch” (PhD. thesis, King’s College, London, 2001).

followed by the millennium, while he did not make distinction between the ideas of Irving and those of his fellow members of the Albury Circle, which needs to be clarified. For understanding Irving’s theology, the Second Coming of Christ was, in Patterson’s point of view, “made the lens through which every event and doctrine was interpreted and applied”.³⁴ The imminent Second Advent and establishment of the pre-millennial kingdom were portrayed, by Irving and the Albury Circle, “as the essence of the Divine mind, the goal of God’s labours, and the product of historical progress wherein his will was manifested”.³⁵ The downside of Patterson’s research was that in expounding Irving’s pre-millennial theology he depended heavily on the *Morning Watch* rather than Irving’s main writings.

Another valuable recent study of Irving is the PhD thesis of David Yat Tong Lee which was submitted to Brunel University in 2003. Based mainly on the previous two works of Graham McFarlane and of Mark Patterson, Lee endeavoured to display Irving’s theology and ecclesiology as based on a “Christ-centredness emphasizing both the humiliated and exalted humanity of Christ”.³⁶ He claimed that Irving’s understanding of the humanity of Christ was an “over-arching principle” to integrate all his other Christian doctrines.³⁷ “By re-appropriating the humanity of Christ as his theological centre”, according to Lee, “Irving reconstructed and re-interpreted the traditional Calvinist Christian theme in a relational, organic, unitary, missional, ethical and eschatological manner”.³⁸ He claimed that Irving’s understanding of the church as the body of Christ had a very eschatological character, putting the church firmly, together with Christ, in the eternal plan of God.³⁹ Irving’s idea of the church as a restored image of God, within the divine activity in history, for Lee, brought “the eschatological community towards the glorious *parousia*”.⁴⁰ Lee argued that Irving’s theological perichoretic structure as well as his incarnational ideas were influenced by Coleridge’s philosophical understanding, especially Coleridge’s Logos philosophy and views on the will.⁴¹ However, Lee agreed with G. McFarlane’s argument, that Irving did not

³⁴ Ibid., 99.

³⁵ Ibid., 245.

³⁶ David Yat Tong Lee, “The Humanity of Christ and the Church in the Teaching of Edward Irving” (PhD Thesis. Brunel University, 2003).

³⁷ Ibid., 54.

³⁸ Ibid., 186.

³⁹ Ibid., 22, 187.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 70, 105.

⁴¹ Ibid., 76.

merely follow Coleridge's teaching but adopted it in his own theological system, demonstrating that "Irving was a creative and innovative thinker in his own right".⁴² Lee was in line with G. McFarlane in stressing Irving's understanding of the Trinity as a dynamic and inter-active interpretation and also believing that creation, incarnation, redemption and millennialism were events that revealed the triune God through the Son.⁴³ Irving's theological reconstruction was, Lee concluded, "to connect the Spirit's normative operation in the church with the Spirit's activity in the humiliated and ascended humanity of Christ".⁴⁴ Lee's approach as a systematic theologian is very different from my own approach as an historian and historical theologian, and he is less interested in the historical development of Irving's thought. None the less, he has made major contributions, and his work of systematic theology largely supports my own conclusions about the historical development of Irving's Christology.

In a beautifully written and engaging PhD thesis at Murdoch University in Australia, Peter Elliot has recently explored Irving's theology through the lenses of Romanticism, and has built upon David Bebbington's invaluable work in perceiving Irving and his theology within larger Romantic conceptions and through his relations with such leading Romantic thinkers as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle.⁴⁵ Seeing the roots of Irving's Romanticism in his Scottish background, Elliot described Irving's life and theology within the Romantic mindset. Influenced by Isaiah Berlin's view that Romanticism as "the largest recent movement to transform the lives and the thought of the Western world", Elliot argued that "only Romanticism is capacious enough to coherently accommodate all of Irving's theological passions".⁴⁶ Irving's Christology and pro-charismata views were, for Elliot, both infused with an egalitarianism that was in tension with his more hierarchical Presbyterian context, and he processed Christian theology through the filter of a Romantic worldview.⁴⁷ Elliot portrayed Irving's incarnational idea as a profoundly Romantic conception and as representing the ultimate encounter

⁴² Ibid., 33.

⁴³ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 193.

⁴⁵ Peter Elliot. "Edward Irving: Romantic Theology in Crisis" (PhD Thesis. Murdoch University, 2010).

⁴⁶ Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), 1; Peter Elliot. "Edward Irving: Romantic Theology in Crisis" (PhD Thesis. Murdoch University, 2010), 319.

⁴⁷ Peter Elliot. "Edward Irving: Romantic Theology in Crisis", 276, 313.

with the divine sublime.⁴⁸ According to Elliot, the trajectory of Irving’s career, including even his loss of authority in the Newman Street congregation, was a result of his “pursuing his Romantic agenda”.⁴⁹ Both Irving’s Romanticism and his personality led him, Elliot maintained, to propose and pursue grand visions, for which there could be no compromise. Indeed, Irving’s uncompromising sense of righteousness was described as a “Romantic metaphor”.⁵⁰ Inspired by Bebbington’s path-breaking work on Evangelicalism and Romanticism, Elliot sought to develop a new understanding of the mutual influences between Irving and two major Romantic thinkers – Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle. He suggested controversially that Samuel T. Coleridge had been influenced by Irving’s ideas. Elliot’s doctoral thesis on the role of Romanticism in shaping Irving’s thought and accounting for his influence is an important contribution to the growing body of Irving scholarship.

The Aims and Methodology of this Research

Our task in this research is to explore the thought of Edward Irving in its historical context. If we regard the previous works as highlighting aspects of Irving’s theological and religious thought, it is time to set out the theology of Edward Irving in its integrity, and within the larger context of his life and times. Our aim is not to defend all aspects of Irving’s theology; rather, by taking a broad view of Irving’s ideas, we will assess his thought as a whole and consider his larger contributions to early nineteenth-century British religious and intellectual culture. This research aims to provide a clearer understanding of Irving’s theology and life, demonstrating that Irving had a coherent theological framework that included a view of Christ’s genuine humanity. I do not claim that Irving’s incarnational ideas were the source of his other ideas or doctrines; rather, I argue that we can comprehend his overall theology more clearly when we view it from the perspective of his idea of Christ’s genuine humanity, often referred to as his notion of Christ’s sinful flesh. Throughout his life, Irving endeavoured to form a coherent theological system. The humanity of Christ was at the heart of Irving’s theological project and this conception helps us to bring his other ideas together and to understand his larger theology.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 224, 320.

Irving's rather "eccentric" Christology ("eccentric" at least in the eyes of his contemporaries) will form the central theme of my analysis. From his early writings, I found, his incarnational idea was widely spread throughout his works on a variety of subjects.⁵¹ Indeed, I will argue, his other ideas can be easily understood when we review them in the perspective of his idea of the incarnation. In the first stage of the research, I will concentrate on his developing Christology, and then I will move on to explore his other ideas, which, I maintain, were broadly connected to his views of the incarnation.

My methodology will be that of an historical theologian. I will focus my efforts on exploring the relationships between his ideas – especially concerning his pneumatology, his millennialism, and his understanding of the Incarnation – by a careful, contextualised reading of his corpus of writing, including *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving*, *The Prophetical Works of Edward Irving*, and *The Morning Watch*. Irving's doctrine of the sinful nature of Christ's humanity played an essential role in several areas of his theological project. I will explore, firstly, how his idea of the person of Christ worked in his understanding of the Trinity; secondly, how the miraculous works of the Holy Spirit could be applicable to both human beings and Christ in the same manner; and thirdly, how the work of the Spirit in changing sinful flesh to a glorified body, within the expectation of the *Parousia*, became associated with Irving's doctrine of the Lord's Supper. The idea that Christ's "sinful flesh" is essential to Irving's theology will be our working hypothesis in explaining his larger theological framework. In exploring Irving's thoughts and life, I will consider also the theology and ministry of some of his close associates, including Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, John McLeod Campbell of Row, and Alexander J. Scott.

The first chapter will provide a brief sketch of Irving's life, in which I will highlight several key historical events that affected the formation of his theological views, including his commitment to a close connection of Church and State. I will also explore several factors that shaped Irving's sense of personal identity and his distinctive religious character.

In the second chapter, I will consider the central place of the doctrine of the atonement for understanding the religious context of early

⁵¹ There are a number of Irving's works containing his views on the incarnation, including *Preliminary Discourse to the work of Ben Ezra: Entitled the Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty*, *Homilies on the Lord's Supper* in *The Collected Writings of Edward Irving in Five Volumes* (ed. Rev. G. Carlyle, London: Alexander Strahan, 1864-5; hereinafter called CW), *John the Baptist* in CW, *The Temptation* in CW, and *God's Glory in the Church* in CW.

nineteenth-century Scotland. The tension between the Reformed doctrine of predestination, which was clearly stated in the Westminster Confession, and the doctrine of that Christ had died for the sins of all humankind, which many found to be clearly expressed in Scripture, would deeply trouble the early nineteenth-century Church of Scotland and lead to significant heresy trials in the early 1830s. Irving's theological and cultural interactions with a number of Scottish thinkers, including Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, John McLeod Campbell, and Alexander J. Scott, will provide vital background for the following chapters.

The next chapter will focus on Irving's Christology. Irving's Christology is intimately related to his Trinitarian views, including the dynamic interactions of the persons of the Trinity. The chapter will introduce his controversial idea of Christ's "sinful flesh" and explore his ideas through a critical reading of his own writings, along with a consideration of some of the key influences on his thought. In this consideration of influences, we will seek to determine the origins of Irving's distinctive Christology.

The fourth chapter will discuss Irving's understanding of spiritual gifts and their relationship to his Christology. There were, for Irving, important parallels between Christ's baptism at the river Jordan and believers' lives after Pentecost. I will illustrate how Irving's conception of Christ's "sinful flesh" contributed to his understanding of the manifestation of spiritual gifts among humans.

In the final chapter, I will explore Irving's views of the millennium, the thousand-year reign of the saints on earth, which many Christians believed would precede the last judgement and the end of the world, and will show how Irving's conception of the millennium related to the theme of "sinful flesh", as well as to the larger context of the influence of Romanticism on religious thought, as this has been explored in the important work of Bebbington and Elliot. I will begin by reviewing how Irving adopted pre-millennialism, or the belief that the Second Coming of Christ in glory would precede the beginning of the Millennium and that the world was destined to grow steadily more sinful and debased before Christ's Second Coming. I will proceed to consider the message that Irving intended to deliver to British society through his writings on Christ's coming kingdom, and will offer a new interpretation of his millennialism in the light of his Christology and thus demonstrate that the whole corpus of his theological writings has a coherent theological framework. By interpreting Irving's prophetic works on the Second Coming in light of his Christology, we can appreciate the essential unity of Irving's theological contribution.

CHAPTER ONE

EDWARD IRVING'S THOUGHT IN ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Introduction

The life of Edward Irving represents a dramatic theological journey, inspired by a burning and passionate love for God. Almost all of Irving's theological ideas, from his Christology to his Millennialism, had their focus on humanity's desperate desire to approach God through the person of Christ. For Irving, the reconciliation of God and humanity through Christ was attainable mainly through the work of the Holy Spirit, which was a key to his theological framework. Irving's distinctive ideas resulted in severe criticisms in his lifetime, and finally led to his being deposed from the ministry of the Established Church of Scotland. Irving's personal life, along with his theological ideas, shows his passion to follow the spirit of Christ. His life and his theological ideas had worked interactively. Irving's final months, from his deposition to his death, had moments of high tragedy, and this has led some to view him as a pathetic or failed figure. When we re-examine his life in the context of his ideas on the Person of Christ, however, a more vivid image of him comes to light, which helps us to come to a much fuller understanding of him.

In this chapter I will present some factors which should be reviewed in a preliminary way prior to exploring Irving's theological ideas, along with some depictions of events from his early life – between his birth and the time of his settlement in London. This is not a biography of Irving, but rather some salient observations concerning Irving's early life and ideas.¹ The chapter will be organised thematically, rather than chronologically.

¹ This book does not provide a brief biography of Edward Irving because the story of his life is well known. For a recent brief and judicious account of Irving's life, see Stewart J. Brown, "Edward Irving," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), vol. 29, 378-82.

A. A Scottish Minister; the Identity of Edward Irving

A.1. Son of Scotland

Edward Irving was born the son of a tanner on 4 August 1792 in Annan, Dumfriesshire, “a peaceful little Scotch town” in the southwest of Scotland.² He was the second son of Mary and Gavin Irving, who had three sons and five daughters. Edward’s father Gavin Irving was by all accounts an honest and prosperous tanner by trade. Irving’s paternal ancestors were said to be the descendants of French Protestant refugees, and one of his forefathers had been a parish minister in Annan.³ Edward’s decision to enter the ministry of the Established Church was inspired in part by the example of this ancestor.

Mary Lowther, Irving’s mother, was “the handsome and high-spirited daughter of a small landed proprietor in the adjacent parish of Dornoch”. She was reputed to have been descended from Martin Luther, the German Reformer.⁴ Irving used to say of his mother: “There are no such women, now, as my mother”.⁵ For Irving, his mother was a model of “an excellent house-mother” who “had much of fluent speech, thrifty, assiduous, wise, and full of affection and tender anxiety for her children and husband”.⁶ In Irving’s mind this ideal motherly image remained throughout his lifetime and this led him to give up his passionate love for the intellectual Jane Welsh, and instead to marry the more domestic Isabella Martin, who reminded him more of his mother. Isabella was devoted to Irving throughout their marriage, and during Irving’s later years she showed a maternal affection for him, caring for him tenderly at his bedside during his final illness.

In Gavin and Mary Irving’s home, “the children must have been trained to habits of obedience and to a reverential spirit”. When later Irving preached on the importance of strict obedience to God, he recalled

² Margaret O. W. Oliphant, *The Life of Edward Irving* (2nd ed; London: Hurst and Blackett, Publishers, 1862), I, 1.

³ Concerning Irving’s French paternal ancestors, I consulted Mrs Oliphant’s *The Life of Edward Irving*, W. Andrews’ *Edward Irving: A Review*, footnote p.15., and T. Carlyle’s “Death of the Rev. Edward Irving.” in *Fraser’s Magazine* (January, 1835), 99.

⁴ Oliphant, *Life of Irving*, I, 1; Washington Wilks, *Edward Irving: An Ecclesiastical and Literary Biography* (London: W. Goddard, 1854), 2; W. Jones, *Biographical Sketch of the Rev. Edward Irving, A.M.* (London: John Bennett, 1835), 3.

⁵ Oliphant, *Life of Irving*, I, 10.

⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences* (ed. C. E. Norton; London: J. M. Dent, 1932), 172.

his parents saying; “Do my bidding and ask no reasons. Obey!” “And why should I obey?” “Because your father or your mother hath commanded you”.⁷

Irving’s hometown, the burgh of Annan, was a small town near the Solway Firth, and although separated from England by only a few miles, it had a definite Scottish social and religious tradition. Margaret Oliphant gives us a vivid picture of the religious life of Annan during Irving’s youth: “Household psalms still echoed of nights through the closed windows, and children, brought up among few other signs of piety, were yet trained in the habit of family prayers”.⁸ The community was so small that people knew each other well. Agriculture was booming, and corn-laden sloops sailed peacefully from Waterfoot of Annan to the Solway Firth and on toward England, through “a naked peel-house and austere towers of defence on both sides of the border”, which were reminders of the former border warfare between the two nations.⁹

A.2. Attending Seceder Congregation

Irving’s first school teacher was Margaret Paine, or “Peggy Paine”, an older woman, who taught Irving and his elder brother John the alphabet and basic elements of literacy. Later, Irving moved on to Annan Academy, which had been recently founded.¹⁰ Here Adam Hope taught literature and languages, and Irving acquired from him “something of that old primeval basis of rigorous logic and clear articulation”.¹¹ Possessing an extensive knowledge of the classics, Hope taught Irving until he entered university. Thomas Carlyle, who would become Irving’s lifelong friend, was also one of Adam Hope’s pupils. Carlyle described his teacher as “an extremely proud man” and “an original, meritorious kind of man”, and religiously he was “a Calvinist at all points, and Burgher Scotch Seceder to the backbone”.¹²

Irving would attend Sunday services at a Secession church in Ecclefechan, following his school teacher Adam Hope, “a rigid Seceder”, instead of attending the local parish church. Although it required a walk of six miles twice a Sunday, Irving rather enjoyed the journey across the

⁷ William W. Andrews, *Edward Irving: A Review* (Glasgow: Hobbs. 1900), 16f.

⁸ Oliphant, *Life of Irving*, I, 7.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ T. C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People, 1560 – 1830* (London: Collins, 1969), 475.

¹¹ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 175.

¹² Ibid., 174f.

moors, passing the pasturing sheep, having the sense of God's presence with him (Ps. 23). For Adam Hope and his attendant pupils, the venerable Seceder minister, the Rev John Johnston of Ecclefechan, was their "only Minister". Irving's other family members duly attended their local parish church, and tolerated their "drunken Clergyman", believing that it was "ungentle" for Irving to join the Sunday "pilgrimage to Ecclefechan".¹³ According to Carlyle, the religious mood of Annan was easy-going and one could sense that "A man who awoke to the belief that he actually had a soul to be saved or lost was apt to be found among the Dissenting people, and to have given up attendance on the Kirk".¹⁴ From the age of ten, Irving seems to have continued to attend Seceder Sunday services in Ecclefechan regularly until he went to College – not every Sunday but at least occasionally.

The Rev John Johnston of Ecclefechan was regarded as a man "of stern theology, of simple life, of unbending moral standard and practice."¹⁵ Johnston did not preach on the topics of patronage or secular politics, but rather mainly on such universal themes as the divine Law.¹⁶ Scottish Seceders were usually very conservative theologically and opposed to any laxity in matters of doctrine and church discipline. Their claim to be returning to the primitive principles of the church can be matched with Irving's later efforts to revive the church's primitive doctrine.

As a young boy, with a sensitive and receptive mind for his age, Irving's experience of pilgrimages to the Secession meeting-house was deeply formative. He would have learned much from his long walks to Ecclefechan with his more mature companions and will have developed personal discipline. When he came back to Annan soaked with the evangelical rhetoric of the Rev. Johnston, Irving's mind might well have been full of the ideas of the omnipresence of God, the divine presence of Christ within, and His work of salvation for all human kind. Unfortunately, we have no testimony from Irving himself about these "pilgrimages". Instead, Carlyle said that Irving and he were "the last product" of it, and that this experience was "ineffaceable through life" for both of them.¹⁷ Robert H. Story evaluated Irving's journeys in his *St. Giles Lectures* as

¹³ Ibid., 176; Stewart J. Brown, "The end of the old Established Church ideal in Scotland, 1790 – 1850," in *The Scottish Churches and the Union Parliament 1707-1999* (ed. James Kirk, Edinburgh: Scottish Church History Society, 2001), 75-102.

¹⁴ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 176.

¹⁵ Robert H. Story, "Edward Irving," in *St. Giles Lectures, Third Series, Scottish Divines, 1505-1872* (Edinburgh: Macniven and Wallace, 1883), 226.

¹⁶ T. Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, 177.

¹⁷ Ibid.

being the most remarkable boyhood experience that formed Irving's character: "The solemnity, the moral intensity, the national fervour, of this covenanting company left, too, their impress on Irving's character."¹⁸

A.3. The Covenanting Tradition

Along with his Seceder church experience, the young Irving was drawn to the Covenanters' graves scattered around the district. This Lowland town of Annan was full of the heritage of the Covenanting tradition with many Covenanters' graves in the area, and the legendary stories of their desperate struggles on battlefields and also their individual martyrdoms. These heroic tales as the "highest epic and romance of national faith" were told around the "ingleside, kitchen fire, or in the farm-house chimney corner", and "thrilled and palpitated around the villages of Annandale". Irving evidently had an ardent ear for these legendary tales.¹⁹ Irving visited almost every one of the Covenanters' graves "in the moors and solitudes where they fell, martyrs to the doctrine of Christ's sole supremacy in His house".²⁰

While the Covenanting movement arose from religious motivation, it also contained a strong element of national sentiment. Scotland was regarded as a nation covenanted with God, and the Covenanters had, for a time, united much of the nation behind their vision.²¹ Scottish identity expressed in its religious and national faith was sparked up when Edinburgh rioted against the reading of the English Church Prayer Book including Laud's Liturgy on 23 July 1637. Through the National Covenant of 1638 and the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643, Scottish religious and national identity was vividly expressed for many of its people. The

¹⁸ Robert H. Story, "Edward Irving," in *St. Giles Lectures*, 226. A. L. Drummond, one of Irving's biographers, evaluates Irving's early pilgrimages to the Secession church that they "had prepared the way for entering into the spirit of the rejuvenated Church of Scotland, then reacting from prudential 'Moderatism' to the absolute claims of 'high-flying Presbyterianism'; that meant hide-bound Calvinism in doctrine and the Church's demand for spiritual independence from the State." (A. L. Drummond, *Edward Irving and His Circle*, 65)

¹⁹ Oliphant, *Life of Irving*, I, 8, 9, 19.

²⁰ Irving, *The Coming of Messiah in Glory and Majesty* (London: L. B. Seeley, 1827), cxci.

²¹ Stewart J. Brown, "The end of the old Established Church ideal in Scotland, 1790 – 1850", 75.