

The Incarnation of Christ

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Introduction

When we speak of Christianity or the gospel we must not only examine and understand what Jesus did, but also who He was and is. For, just as a trust or belief in the historical events in our Lord's life (e.g., the virgin birth, His sinless life, His sacrificial death, His resurrection and ascension to God's right hand) are necessary for salvation, so is a belief in the person of Christ. The Savior emphasized the central importance of His own person when He asked the disciples, "Who do men say that I, the Son of man, am" (Mt. 16:13)? This question continues to divide men throughout history. The different answers to Jesus' question are what separate the saved from the lost, the sheep from the goats, the orthodox from the heterodox. Given the importance of who Christ is for an understanding of the gospel and our own salvation we will turn our attention to the doctrine of the incarnation. How does the Bible define the mediator, the redeemer of God's elect? How did the Savior come to dwell among sinful mortals? Why is the orthodox creedal definition of the hypostatic union of the two natures in one person so important for understanding the gospel? While the doctrine of Christ is one of the most difficult and perplexing teachings in all of Scripture, it also is the most rewarding. There is nothing better in life or death than to know, love and serve Jesus Christ.

The Manner of the Incarnation: The Virgin Conception and Birth

The virgin birth is an essential belief of the Christian faith that gives us some very important information regarding the mission and nature of the Christ. The doctrine of the virgin birth is based on two explicit gospel accounts (Mt. 1:18-25 and Lk. 1:26-38); is found in the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 and is presupposed in Paul's epistles (see Rom. 1:3; Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:7). The birth narratives emphasize the following teachings.

(1) The virgin birth is presented in Scripture as a great miracle or sign. "The Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14). Although there are accounts in Scripture of births that are the result of supernatural intervention (i.e., of God miraculously enabling women who were infertile and/or past the age of child bearing to conceive and give birth to sons, e.g., Sarah [Gen. 17:17-19, 21; 21:1-8]; Hannah [1 Sam. 1:5-11, 17-20]; the wife of Manoah [Judg. 13:2-24]; and, Elizabeth [Lk. 1:7, 13-25, 57]), the conception and birth of Jesus is totally unique. The conception of Christ did not even involve a human father. The salvation of sinners is to be supremely supernatural. Redemption can only be accomplished through the God-man. The supernatural virgin birth of Christ was an announcement to the Jews and the whole world that this child was like no other child. He was not simply a man of God or a prophet or a leader but God of very God. God Himself, the second person of the trinity had come to earth to redeem people throughout the whole world.

Modernist scholars reject the virgin birth of Christ and argue that the Hebrew word *'almah* simply designates an unmarried woman or a young maiden. The "Christian" liberal interpretation of the incarnation must be rejected for the following reasons. (a) While an

argument can be made that *`almah* does not necessarily refer to a virgin but simply an unmarried young woman, further revelation in the New Testament has settled the question once and for all. Mary was a virgin when the child was conceived and the baby was born. Modernist scholars are imposing their unbelieving naturalistic presuppositions upon the text of Scripture. The virgin birth is a fact of God's word that cannot be denied without also denying everything we need to know and trust to be saved. Pagans and atheists make very poor interpreters of the Bible. (b) If Mary was not a virgin (as Modernists assert) then the conception and birth of Jesus could not have been a sign. In ancient as well as modern times there is nothing unusual about an unmarried woman becoming pregnant. It happens all the time. If a woman had committed fornication and became pregnant, the Jews nor anyone else would have regarded the event as significant at all. (c) If Mary had not become pregnant by the power of the Holy Spirit then Joseph, a godly man, would have put her away. Unfaithfulness on the part of a betrothed woman could be punished with death (see Dt. 22:23). Because the Jews were under Roman law on the matter of adultery, divorce was Joseph's only option. Note, however, that God communicated the truth to Joseph that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Mt. 1:20). Joseph responded to this revelation by taking Mary as his wife (Mt. 1:24). It is typical of Modernists who are the enemies of God to side with the Pharisees who accused the sinless Son of God of being a bastard (Jn. 8:41). Their judgment will be just.

(2) Mary was enabled or caused to conceive the Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke writes, "And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God'" (1:35). The Holy Spirit comes upon Mary and works the conception by His almighty power. Because the Messiah had to be divine it took a special divine action to accomplish the incarnation. How this exactly occurred (i.e., the scientific details) we are not told. We can surmise, however, that the human nature of Jesus came directly from Mary while the second person of the trinity was united to the human nature at the very moment of conception. Theologians refer to this moment as the assumption. God the Son took upon Himself a true human body and a rational soul. When speaking of the action of the Holy Spirit in the conception of Jesus, Luke uses terminology that calls to mind the special Shekinah presence of God—"the power of the Highest will overshadow you" (see Ex. 40:34-38).

(3) The narratives which speak of the virgin conception and birth of Jesus give the unborn child titles of essential divinity. He is called "Son of the Highest [or Most High]" (Lk. 1:32); "the Holy One" (Lk. 1:35); "the Son of God" (Lk. 1:35); who is to be called "Emmanuel" (i.e., God with us; Mt. 1:23). Although the expression "Son of God" is sometimes used in Scripture as a messianic title (e.g., Lk. 4:41; Ac. 9:20, 22), it often does not simply refer to a title of office but of nature (see Mt. 11:27; 14:28-33; 16:16; 21:33-46; 22:41-42; 26:63; Rom. 1:3; 8:3; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 1:1; etc.). The name *Emmanuel* which literally means *with us is God* is a doctrinally descriptive appellation. To be with Jesus is to be with God. The expression "holy One" is often interpreted as a reference to our Lord's sinlessness or moral perfection. The phrase, however, may only mean in this context that Jesus is separated or set apart. From the moment of conception the Son of God was set apart for special service. The gospel narratives exclude all adoptionist conceptions of Christology for they teach that the human nature of our Lord never existed for a single moment without the divine. From the moment of conception Mary was the God bearer.

(4) The manner of the incarnation as well as the incarnation itself teaches us that the second person of the trinity's coming into the world and assuming a human nature was a

voluntary condescension; a submitting to humiliation on the part of the Son. This point is taught most clearly in Philippians 2:5-8. Paul writes, "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross."

In the midst of some practical exhortations (where Paul is emphasizing Christian unity, love and humility), the apostle turns his attention to the incarnation as the supreme example of humility and self-renunciation. Although the passage is difficult and sometimes ambiguous in the English translation, its teachings are of great importance. Note the following observations.

(a) Paul asserts that Christ is truly God and continues to be God. When the apostle says that Jesus was in the "form of God" he does *not* mean that the Son was like God or only appeared as God but that He had the specific character of God. Our Lord had everything (nature, attributes, essence, character) that makes God God. In classical Greek and the Greek of Paul's day "a thing cannot be said to be in the *morphē* [form] of another unless it possesses the essential qualities of that other."¹ Paul could not have chosen any other words "which would more explicitly or with more directions assert the deity of ...Jesus Christ.... He who is in the form of God is God."² The verb used by Paul in this sentence is unusual. It "denotes that both the previous existence of Christ and His continued existence was 'in the form of God.'"³

(b) Paul teaches that the incarnation which brought the Son into a state of humiliation was a conscious choice on the part of Christ. "Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation..." (2:5-7) Jesus was free as God to maintain His state of supreme glory in the throne room of God surrounded by myriads of worshipping angels. But for our sake, He did not regard the state of supreme glory as a valuable possession that must be retained at all costs. On the contrary, because of His love, grace and mercy toward His sheep He entered into a state of humiliation, a state of servitude, suffering and anguish.

(c) Paul teaches that in the incarnation our Lord *emptied Himself*. The apostle writes, "Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal to God, but did empty himself, the form of a servant having taken, in the likeness of men having been made, and in fashion having been found as a man, humbled himself...(Phil. 2:5-8, Young's Literal Translation of the Bible). The central question of interpreters of this section of Scripture is: "Of what did our Lord empty Himself?"

When answering this question two things need to be kept in mind. First, the broad context of Scripture and the systematic theology derived from this analogy of faith must be considered when defining the *kenosis* (emptying) of Christ. If the Bible teaches (as it indeed does) that Jesus is fully God and God is immutable (i.e., The triune God is incapable of change [see Ex. 3:14; Ps. 102:26-28; Isa. 41:4; 48:12; Mal. 3:6; Rom. 1:23; Heb. 1:11, 12; Jas. 1:17]. He cannot grow or diminish in His Being or attributes.), then the second person of the trinity cannot set aside or empty Himself of any of His attributes. He would have to deny Himself and cease to be God to do so, which is impossible. Further the "divine attributes are not characteristics that are separate and distinct from the divine essence so that God can set them aside as one might remove a pin from a pincushion and still have the pincushion. Rather, the divine essence is expressed precisely

¹ J. Hugh Michael, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (London: Hoddes and Stoughton, 1928), 86.

² B. B. Warfield, *Person and Work of Christ* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950 [1980]), 566-567.

³ Jac J. Muller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 78.

in the sum total of its attributes. To hold that God the Son actually emptied himself in his state of humiliation of even one divine characteristic is tantamount to saying that he who ‘enfleshed’ himself in the Incarnation, while perhaps more than man, is now not quite God either.”⁴ Anyone who asserts that Christ set aside all or even some of His divine attributes (even temporarily) has gone beyond the pale of Christian orthodoxy.

Second, the verb “emptied” is defined by the immediate context. The Son emptied Himself not by subtraction (i.e., not by divesting Himself any divine attributes such as omniscience or omnipresence) but by addition. Richard Melick Jr. writes, “Two ideas modify the verb ‘made himself nothing.’ They are: taking the very nature of a servant and being made in human likeness. These statements explain both how this took place and what it means. Paradoxically, being ‘made nothing’ means adding humanity to deity rather than subtracting deity from his person.”⁵ How, then, did Christ empty Himself? He did it not by laying down some of His divine attributes but by being made in the likeness of men (i.e., He assumed a human nature), by taking the form of a servant. Jesus came not to be served but to serve. “He was not revealing Himself on earth in glorious or glorified human form, but in the humble form of a servant. The expression ‘form of a servant’ denotes more than just the ‘form of man;’ it depicts servitude and subjection, unattractiveness and lack of distinction, which were essential characteristics of the humanity which Christ adopted.”⁶ God’s Son “concealed the divine glory under the veil of flesh and as it were laid it aside; not by putting off what he was, but by assuming what he was not.”⁷ From the supreme position of glory our Lord voluntarily humbled Himself and became the suffering servant, a man of sorrows (Isa. 53:3), despised by His own people Ps. 22:6; Jn. 1:11; Isa. 53:3), obedience even to the death of the cross (Phil. 2:8).

⁴ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1998), 616.

There are many problems associated with all the varieties of kenotic theories of Christology besides poor exegesis and a contradiction of God’s immutability. (a) Kenotic doctrine destroys the doctrine of the trinity for if the Son ceases to be God in any way, the eternal generation of the Son as well as the eternal spiration of the Holy Spirit from both the father *and the Son* would cease or be destroyed during the incarnation. “The second Person of the Godhead cannot be severed from the first and third Persons in such a way, without exchanging the doctrine of the Trinity for tri-theism” (Jac J. Muller, p. 84) (b) Also, if Jesus was not “God of very God” then His atoning death and sinless life would not have the infinite vicarious value needed to save the elect which consists of millions of people throughout the whole world. “The kenotic theory makes the mediatorship of Christ impossible.... For [if] He was not God very God and very man then, [He was] no true mediator between God and man. Christ without divine attributes is no God-man, but only man” (*Ibid.*). (c) Gordon Clark makes another excellent theological observation. He writes, “There would be cosmic repercussions [if the Son set aside His divine attributes]. Not only does John say that Christ created the universe, but Hebrews 1:3 declares that Christ upholds all things by the word of his power. If he ceased doing so, the world would have collapsed the day of his birth. Would he have recreated it thirty years later? On this schedule he could not have met the Samaritan woman at the well. In fact there would have been no cross on which to crucify him. Colossians 1:7 enforces this point: ‘by Him all things hold together,’ the solar system and even the Roman Empire” (*The Incarnation* [Jefferson, MD: The Trinity Foundation, 1988], 64–65). (d) Calvin adds this refutation: “It is also asked, secondly, how he can be said to be *emptied*, while he, nevertheless, invariably proved himself, by miracles and excellences, to be the Son of God, and in whom, as John testifies, there was always to be seen a glory worthy of the Son of God? (John i. 14.) I answer, that the abasement of the flesh was, not withstanding, like a veil, by which his divine majesty was concealed. On this account he did not wish that his transfiguration should be made public until after his resurrection” (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980], 57).

⁵ Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1991), 103.

⁶ Jac J. Muller, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians*, 82.

⁷ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889), 2:274.

The best way to understand the biblical concept of *kenosis* is to distinguish between the *existence* of the divine nature in the person of the Mediator and the *manifestation* of this existence. Christ was fully God with all the attributes of God. However, in humbling Himself and becoming a servant he voluntarily restricted the *exhibition* of the attributes which He had. “The Logos constantly existed in Jesus Christ, but did not constantly act through his human soul and body. He did not work miracles continually; nor did he import to the human soul of Christ the whole of his own infinite knowledge.”⁸ Shedd writes, “The finite and limited human nature hindered a full manifestation of the omniscience of the deity. This was a part of the humiliation of the eternal Logos. He condescended to unite himself with an inferior nature, through which his own infinite perfections could shine only in part. When deity does not work as simple deity untrammelled, but works in ‘the form of a servant,’ it is humbled. The Logos in himself knew the time of the day of judgment, but he did not at a particular moment make that knowledge a part of the human consciousness of Jesus Christ. In so doing, he limited and conditioned his own *manifestation* of knowledge in the theanthropic person, by the ignorance of the human nature.”⁹ Further, by the communion of attributes (i.e., the divine and human attributes are attributed to the one divine-human person) the one person is said to suffer, agonize, bleed and die (cf. 1 Cor. 2:8; Mk. 13:32; Rom. 9:5; Jn. 6:62; Rev. 5:12).

The Purpose of the Incarnation: The Salvation of the Elect

The Bible teaches that the reason that the Son came into the world was to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). The salvation of souls was the reason the Father sent the Son into the world. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (Jn 3:16-17). “The giving of the only Son clearly embraces both incarnation and vicarious death; it is the entire mission of the Son that is in view”¹⁰ Paul writes, “This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief” (1 Tim. 1:15).

If man had never sinned there would have been no reason for the Son to assume a human nature. The coming of Christ is always proposed in Scripture as a mission of salvation or as something connected to man’s deliverance. In the protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15 immediately after the fall, a promise is made to send a savior who will crush the head of the serpent. Jesus’ mission of salvation is prominent in the birth narratives (Mt. 1:21, 25; Lk. 1:31, 54, 67-70; see Jn. 1:12, 29, 36). It is the central message in our Lord’s first teaching in the synagogue (Lk. 4:16-21); His own stated purpose in coming to earth (Mt. 9:13; 20:28- “to give His life a ransom for many”). By typology it is presented in the Old Testament as the very foundation of redemption (Gen. 4:4; Ex. 12:13; Lev. 16:6-28). The prophets teach that the only path to salvation and victory for God’s people is the Messiah’s sacrificial death (Isa. 53:1-12; Dan. 9:24-26). The epistles present Christ’s redemptive work as the foundation and axis of everything in a believer’s deliverance (Rom. 3:21-28; 4:22-25; 5:1-21; Heb. 2:14; 1 Tim. 1:15).

Although Jesus’ role as king and prophet is also emphasized in Scripture (see Ac. 3:22; Ps. 2:6; Lk. 1:33, etc.), these aspects of His mediatorial work cannot be separated from His priestly work--His vicarious atonement. Christ does establish a kingdom as the God-man. He,

⁸ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1889), 2:274.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:273.

¹⁰ George R. Beasley Murray, *John* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 51.

indeed, is the exalted king. The mediatorial kingdom, however, is a kingdom of grace. He directly governs His people by His Spirit and law-word. This governance, however, flows from His redemptive work. He was exalted at the resurrection as a reward for His redemptive obedience (Mt. 18:18f; Rom 1:4; Rev. 5:2-10). The Great Commission, the sending of the Holy Spirit and the spread of the gospel into all the world could only take place *after* the Savior's suffering, death and resurrection. As a king, Jesus defends His people against the world, the flesh and the devil. He governs the nations with a rod of iron (Rev. 2:27) for the sake of the church (Eph. 1:22).

The Mediator is also *the Prophet*. Truth and knowledge of the Father come directly from Him (Jn. 1:17-18, 6:63, 7:17, 8:12, 14, 19; Heb. 1:2). In Him "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). However, saving truth and a true knowledge of God cannot be separated from Jesus' redemptive work. Because of man's fall into sin, men are dead spiritually (Eph. 2:1-5), unable to repent (Jer. 13:23; 2:Pet. 2:13-14, 22), cannot please God (Rom. 8:6-8), do not seek Jehovah (Ps. 14:2-3, Rom. 3:11), are under the power of Satan (2 Cor. 4:3-4; 2 Tim. 2:26; cf. Ac. 26:17-18), dwell in darkness (Jn. 1:45; 3:19-20), are spiritually deaf and blind (Isa. 6:9-10; cf. Mk. 4:12; Lk. 8:10; Jn. 8:43-44, 47) and totally unable to understand or receive spiritual truth (Jn. 3:3; 1 Cor. 2:14). Christ's redemptive work achieved the foundation or ground of salvation *and its application to the sinner*. That is why faith and repentance are gifts from God (cf. Jn. 3:3-8; 6:44-45; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29; 2 Pet. 1:2). It is only because of our Lord's life, death and resurrection that men can have their eyes and ears opened by the Holy Spirit and can be enabled to embrace the person and work of Christ (Jn. 6:44, 45; Ac. 13:48; Jn. 3:5-6, 8; Tit. 3:5; 1 Cor. 3:6-7; 4:7; 12:3; 1 Jn. 1:20; 2 Cor. 4:6). The mediator came into the world to free us from the guilt and penalty of sin, to place us in His own family and to present us spotless before God (Eph. 5:27).

The incarnation was necessary for God to save His own people. Note the following reasons: (a) For God to justify sinners (i.e., save a vast multitude of men guilty of breaking the moral law who are therefore under a curse, a sentence of eternal death), the penalty of their sins must be paid in full and a perfect righteousness imputed to their account. God cannot simply overlook sin and forgive it in an arbitrary manner because of His own nature and character. God is righteous (Gen. 18:25; Ex. 23:7; 34:7; Dt. 32:4; Ps. 89:14; Zeph. 3:5; Rom. 9:14; 1 Jn. 1:5), holy (Ex. 15:11; Lev. 11:44; Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8), hates sin (Ps. 5:4-6; Nah. 1:2; Rom. 1:18), condemns all sinners to death and hell (Gen. 2:17; Dt. 27:36; Ezek. 18:20; Rom. 1:18, 32; 6:23; Jas. 1:15; Rev. 20:14-15) and cannot have fellowship with anyone guilty of sin (Hab. 1:13; Ps. 5:4-5; Isa. 59:1-2). Therefore, Paul argues in Romans 3:25-26, that it was necessary that Christ should be offered as an atoning sacrifice for sin in order that God might be just while justifying the sinner. In other words God had to forgive sinners in a manner that maintained His own justice. God's infinite holiness, justice or righteousness of *necessity* demands the infliction of punishment on the sinner himself or on an *appropriate substitute--Jesus*.

(b) In order for this substitute to eliminate the guilt and penalty of sin and provide a perfect righteousness for a vast multitude of people he must be both fully God and fully man.

Jesus had to be a man because it was man who was guilty of sin and deserving of punishment. The penalty for sin was death and the suffering of body and soul. The Son had to assume a true human nature, without sin, yet liable to the infirmities and sufferings after the fall in order to suffer and die as a man (Jn. 12:27; Ac. 3:18; Heb. 2:14; 9:22). The Bible teaches that the blood of bulls and goats cannot atone for sin (Heb. 9:12-14). The offering of clean animals, "without spot" (Num. 19:2; 28:3, 9, 11; 29:17, 26, etc.) and "without blemish" (Ex. 15:5; 29:1;

Lev. 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23, 28, 32; 5:15, 18; 6:6; 9:2, 3; 14:10; 22:19, 21; 23:12, 18; etc.) typified the moral perfection of Jesus Christ. Christians are redeemed “with the precious blood of Christ, as a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:19; cf. Heb. 7:25-27; 9:14). Further, as the Mediator between God and man “he ought to be between both and like Jacob’s ladder join heaven and earth by a participation of the nature of both.”¹¹

The Messiah also had to be God. A mere man could not render a sacrifice of infinite value from God, that could atone for millions of people from, every tribe, nation and tongue (Rev. 5:9). A mere man could not have withstood the assaults of Satan, the constant temptations and the immense suffering and agony that Jesus endured. A mere man could not intercede or mediate between God and man. Who but the Lord of glory, the God-man could endure the unmitigated wrath of God that millions deserved in the space of a few hours? Who but God’s only begotten Son could intercede *simultaneously* for millions of believers twenty four hours a day? “For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross” (Col. 1:19-20). There is no other name under heaven by which men can be saved (Ac. 4:12). Animals, prophets, gurus and mighty angels cannot save. Only Jesus Christ, who is both God and man in one person, meets all the exigencies arising out of God’s nature and men’s predicament.

We must look to the Christ of Scripture alone if we are to be saved. We must believe that he is both God and man in one person. “He is a child born in time as man, but also a Son who is the Father of eternity as God (Is. 9:6). The offspring of David according to the flesh, but Jehovah our righteousness according to the Spirit (Jer. 23:6) a son to be born of a virgin, but whose name would be Emmanuel (Is. 7:14). The Angel of the covenant sent by God for the work of salvation, but the same one, the Lord who comes into his temple (Mal. 3:1). A citizen of Bethlehem to be born in an obscure place, but a ruler whose goings forth are from eternity (Mic. 5:2). A Priest, but forever; a King whose kingdom shall have no end. The seed of David according to the flesh, but the Son of God according to the spirit of sanctification (Rom. 1:3, 4).”¹²

The Nature of the Incarnation: The Hypostatic Union of the Two Natures in One Person

When discussing the doctrine of the two natures of Christ it is helpful to divide this topic into two areas of consideration: First, we will examine the scriptural proofs that Jesus is both God and man. This part is relatively easy. Then second, we will examine the unipersonality of our Lord. The relationship of the two natures in one person is perhaps the most difficult doctrine in all of Scripture.

¹¹ Francis Turretin, 2:303.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2:304. Martin Luther’s comments on this topic are excellent. He writes, If Christ is not true and natural God, born of the Father in eternity and Creator of all creatures we are doomed...we must have a Savior who is true God and Lord over sin, death, devil and hell. If we permit the devil to topple this stronghold for us, so that we disbelieve His divinity, then His suffering, death, and resurrection profit us nothing (Luther’s Works [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967], 22:21-22).

A. Jesus Christ is God

The biblical evidence for the divinity of Christ is overwhelming. Only a person who is spiritually blind would deny this fact. There are many passages in the Bible which specifically refer to Jesus Christ as God.

(1) The prophet Isaiah identifies the future Messiah as Immanuel which means “God with us” (Isa. 7:14). He says the Christ child is “the Mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6-7). Jeremiah refers to the coming King as “The LORD Our Righteousness” (Jer. 23:5-6) Jesus is literally “Jehovah Our Righteousness.” Micah says that the Messiah is not a created being; He is God Almighty who has existed “from everlasting” (Mic. 5:2). Malachi describes Christ as the Lord who comes to His temple to judge Israel (Mal. 3:1-2). The Psalmist of Israel says that the messianic throne is God’s own throne (Ps. 45:1, 6-7). In Psalm 2 the phrase “the Son” is set poetically in parallel with Jehovah. The Son and the Father are equal in power and glory (see Ps. 110:1).

(2) The apostle John says that “the Word was with God, and *the Word was God* (1:1). All things were made by God’s Son (1:2-3). And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us (1:14). When the apostle Thomas saw the risen Messiah he “said unto Him, My Lord and my God” (Jn. 20:28). Jesus identified Himself as Jehovah when He said “before Abraham was I AM” (Jn. 8:57-59). Our Lord’s enemies understood that Christ taught His own divinity when they said that Jesus “said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God” (Jn. 5:17-26). When the Savior said “I and my Father are one,” the Jews took up stones again to stone Him “...because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God” (Jn. 10:33). Instead of emphatically denying that He was God, Jesus told the Jews that His works proved that He was divine, “that the Father is in Me, and I in Him” (Jn. 10:39). Jesus told the apostle John, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end...He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son” (Rev. 21:6-7).

(3) The apostle Paul says that “Christ...is...the eternally blessed God” (Rom. 9:6), who before the incarnation existed “in the form of God” (Phil. 2:5-8). “He is the image of the invisible God” who created everything (Col. 1:15-16). Paul teaches, “For in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:8-10). Therefore, it is appropriate for the apostle to refer to Jesus as “The King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God” (1 Tim. 2:3-4); as “God our Savior” (1 Tim. 2:3-4; Tit. 1:3; 2:10); or, “our great God and Savior” (Tit. 2:13); or, “the only wise God our Savior” (Jude 25). Paul says that only the King of kings “hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto” (1 Tim. 6:14-16). The author of the Hebrews says that God the Father explicitly identifies the Son as God. “But unto the Son he saith, ‘Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever’” (Heb. 1:8).

(4) There are a number of instances in the Bible where the names “Son of God” and “Lord” indicate Christ’s essential deity. For the title “Son of God” used in a Trinitarian sense see: Mt. 11:27; 14:26, 33; 16:16; 21:33-46; 22:41-46; 26:63-65. For passages in which the title “Lord” indicates deity see: Lk. 2:11; 3:4-6; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11. There are many Old Testament passages which speak of God or Jehovah which are taken by the Spirit inspired authors of the New Testament and applied directly to Jesus Christ (e.g., read Isa. 40:3—Mt. 3:3; Mal. 4:5-6—Lk. 1:17; Isa. 45:22-23—Rom. 14:10; cf. Phil. 2:10; Ps. 68:17-18—Eph. 4:7-8; Ps. 45:6-7—Heb. 1:6-9; Ps. 102:1, 25-27—Heb. 1:8-12; Dt. 31:6—Heb. 13:5; etc.). These parallels between Jehovah and Jesus are so explicit one could say that “the whole New Testament is based

upon the thought that there is...[an] essential unity between Jesus Christ and the covenant of the God of Israel.”¹³

There are many passages in God’s Word where Jesus Christ is worshiped as God not only by His disciples but also by the holy angels (e.g., read Mt. 2:1-2, 10-11; 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 28:9; Mk. 5:6; Lk. 24:51-52; Jn. 9:35-38; 20:28; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 5:8-14; 15:3-4; Ps. 22:27-28). In the book of Revelation, the worship offered to the Lamb is indistinguishable from the worship offered to the Lord God Almighty (5:8, 13; 15:3-4). These passages are especially devastating to Arian heretics and their step children when we consider the fact that the apostles (Ac. 10:25-26; 14:12-15) and even mighty angels emphatically rejected such worship or adoration (e.g., Rev. 19:10). Jesus, however, openly accepted and even encouraged such devotion.

(6) Further, Jesus Christ is the object of saving faith (Jn. 14:1-6). No angel, prophet or apostle could speak as Christ spoke; only God can be the object of saving faith. Our Lord doesn’t just point men to God, but to Himself. Hodge writes, “We are to exercise the same faith and confidence in Him that we do in God; yield Him the same obedience, devotion, and homage. We find, therefore, that such is the case from the beginning to the end of the New Testament writings. Christ is the God of the Apostles and early Christians, in the sense that He is the object of all their religious affections. They regarded Him as the person to whom they specially belonged; to whom they were responsible for their moral conduct; to whom they had to account for their sins; for the use of their time and talents; who was ever present with them, dwelling with them, controlling their inward, as well as their outward life; whose love was the animating principle of their being; in whom they rejoiced as their present joy and as their everlasting portion.”¹⁴

(7) The Bible repeatedly ascribes attributes to Christ which can only be predicated of God. Jesus the Messiah is: all-knowing or omniscient (read Mt. 12:25; 27:18; Lk. 6:8; Jn. 2:24-25; 21:17; Rev. 2:23); all powerful or omnipotent (Mk. 4:37-41 and parallels; Eph. 3:20; Phil. 3:20-21; Col. 2:10; Heb. 1:3; Rev. 1:8; 2:26-27); everywhere present or omnipresent (Mt. 18:20; Rom. 8:10; 1 Cor. 10:4; Rev. 2:1; 3:20); eternal—without beginning or end (Isa. 9:6; Jn. 1:2-3, 8:58; Rev. 1:8); the creator of all things¹⁵ (Jn. 1:2-3, 10; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:2-3; 2:10; 3:3-4; Rev. 4:11; 10:6; Gen. 1:26); and the judge of all mankind (Mt. 7:22-23; 25:31-33, 41; Jn. 12:48; Ac. 10:42; 17:31; Rom. 2:16; 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Tim. 4:1, 8; Heb. 10:30). Further, God’s word teaches that the Holy Spirit not only proceeds from the Father but also the Son—the second person of the trinity (Mt. 3:11; Jn. 15:26; Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6; Rev. 5:6). The Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ are the same: the Holy Spirit, the third person of the trinity.

B. Jesus Christ is Truly Man

The genuine humanity of the Mediator is clearly taught throughout the Bible and is irrefutable. Jesus was a real man just like us in all things, except for sin both original and actual (Heb. 2:17-18). There are many passages of Scripture which teach that the Messiah had a human nature.

¹³ J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian Faith in the Modern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936 [1065]), 151.

¹⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1:498.

¹⁵ The preposition *dia* (translated *through* in 1 Corinthians 8:6) does not lower the Son to a mere instrument in creation (as Arian cults assert), for this preposition is often applied to God Himself (Rom. 11:36; Gal. 1:1; Heb. 2:10). The trinity follows a certain order in creation as well as the economy of redemption. This fact has confused many and has been twisted by anti-trinitarian cults.

(1) The portrait of the Christ painted by the Old Testament is one of a very special person who is both God and man. Regarding the humanity of the Mediator the Old Testament says that He will come through the woman's, i.e., Eve's, seed (Gen. 3:15). He is a prophet like unto Moses (Dt. 18:18); a lineal descent of Abraham (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; cf. Ac. 3:25; Heb. 2:16) and David (2 Sam. 7:12; cf. Lk. 1:32; Rom. 1:3); who will be born of a virgin (Isa. 7:14) in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). He is a man of sorrows (Isa. 53:3), a servant of Jehovah (Isa. 42:1); who will be forsaken by God (Ps. 22:1); cut off from the land of the living (Isa. 53:8, 12); and placed in a tomb (Isa. 53:9). The Messiah will arise from the dead (Ps. 16:8-11) and be exalted and seated at God's right hand (Ps. 68:18). The Christ had clothes that would be gambled over (Ps. 22:18); real bones that could be broken (Ps. 34:20; 22:14, 17); could experience real human anguish and pain (Ps. 22:1, 2, 14-17); and, had hands and feet that could be pierced (Ps. 22:16).

There are many explicit passages in Scripture which teach that the Son assumed a human nature. Paul says regarding the incarnation that: "God was manifested in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:16); "We have known Christ according to the flesh" (2 Cor. 5:16); the Son was "born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal. 4:4); He came "in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7). The author of Hebrews says that the Son has partaken of flesh and blood and in all things was made like His brethren to make propitiation for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:14, 17). The apostle John says that every "spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God" (1 Jn. 4:2); that "the word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14).

Why does Paul, the author of Hebrews, and John often use the term flesh (*sarx*) instead of saying "the Word became man"? One likely reason is that the term "flesh" (*sarx*) completely refutes early Greek gnostic and docetic concepts of the incarnation which denied the reality of Jesus' fleshly body. Some people who followed Greek philosophy, who therefore regarded material substances as intrinsically inferior and defiling (especially compared to that which is spiritual) taught that Christ only *appeared* to have a body, but in fact, did not. The apostles used the term "flesh" to be very clear about the genuineness of the Messiah's humanity. Another reason is that the term "flesh" is frequently used in the Old Testament to describe the whole man (Lev. 27:11; Dt. 12:15). Later, in the gospel of John the term flesh is used as a term to represent all that man is (Jn. 27:2). Perhaps the most important reason that the term "flesh" is used is because in Scripture the word often indicates the weakness and mortality of humans (e.g., Ps. 56:4; 78:39; Isa. 40:6-8). The Word not only assumed a human nature, but a human nature liable to all the infirmities after the fall. Jesus was without original sin and was morally perfect. Yet, He was able to suffer and to die. He not only became a man, but a man who descended to our wretchedness in order to bring us to glory.

(2) When Jesus instituted the Lord's supper He taught that the bread represents His human body and the wine His shed blood (cf. Mt. 26:26-29; Mk. 14:22-24; Lk. 22:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:24-25). The wine is separate from the bread indicating that Jesus' blood was separated from His body by sacrifice. "Sacrifice and offering [i.e., of bulls and goats] You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me.... By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:5, 10).

(3) There are a number of New Testament passages which refer to the Messiah as a man or identify Him as the Son of man. In John 8:40 Christ said to the Pharisees, "you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth." Peter referred to Jesus as "a Man attested by God" (Ac. 2:22). When Paul contrasted the first and second Adam in Romans chapter 5, he refers to our Lord as a man three separate times (vs. 15, 17, 19). When the apostle discusses the resurrection of the body in 1 Corinthians 15 he refers to the last Adam as a man in verses 21 and 47. Paul's whole

argument concerning the resurrection presupposes that Jesus was truly a man with a natural human body just like us (see 1 Cor. 15:44). The apostle in 1 Timothy 2:5 teaches that there is only “one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.” The most common self designation of our Lord was the title “the Son of Man” (Mt. 9:6; 11:19; 12:8, 32; 13:37, 41; 16:13, 16, 27, 28; 18:11; 19:28; 20:18 24:27, 30, 37, 44; 25:13, 31; 26:2, 24, 45, 64, etc.). The messianic title points to Jesus’ essential humanity.

(4) The New Testament teaches that Christ possessed the essential elements of human nature. Jesus exhibited real human growth both with regard to His body and soul. Luke says that “He increased in wisdom and stature” (2:52); “the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom” (2:40). The author of Hebrews says, “that He learned obedience by the things which He suffered (5:8); that the captain of our salvation was made “perfect through sufferings” (2:10). Although many times in the gospel accounts we can observe the Savior exercising divine intellectual qualities (e.g., He knows the character of Nathaniel [Jn. 1:47-48]; He knows all men and what is in man [Jn. 2:25]; He knows the thoughts of both friends and foes [Lk. 6:8; 9:47]; that Lazarus was dead [Jn. 11:14]; that Judas would betray Him [Mt. 26:25]; that Peter would deny Him three times [Mt. 26:34]; that He would be betrayed, suffer, die and rise again [Jn. 2:19; Lk. 24:7]), in one Gospel passage Jesus admits ignorance with regard to the specific day and hour of His coming (Mk. 24:36). The gospel portrait of our Lord can only be explained if Jesus had two natures united in one Person in such a manner that each retained its own properties. “There would be no impropriety, therefore, in saying that Christ, who *knew all things* (John xxi. 17) was ignorant of something in respect of his perception as a man, for otherwise he could not have been liable to grief and anxiety, and could not have been *like us*.”¹⁶

Jesus exhibited all the functions of a real physical human body. He was wearied on a journey and had to sit down to rest (Jn. 4:6). He was greatly weakened by the torture and beating from the Romans and needed some one to carry the cross (Mt. 27:32; Mk. 15:21). When our Lord was on the cross He became very thirsty from the loss of blood (Jn. 19:28; Mt. 27:47). In the garden of Gethsemane Christ was in such agony that His sweat became like great drops of blood (Lk. 22:44). When the Savior fasted in the wilderness He became hungry (Mt. 4:2; cf. Mt. 21:18). He became tired and needed sleep just like other men (Mt. 8:24). The Messiah bled and died in a real human body (Lk. 23:46; Mt. 27:50; Jn. 19:30, 34). Even after the resurrection Jesus instructed the disciples to touch His body and see that “a Spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have” (Lk. 24:39). Doubting Thomas was even instructed to place his finger in the holes in Jesus’ side (Jn. 20:27-28). In His post resurrection body our Lord ate boiled fish and honey in the presence of the disciples (Lk. 24:39). After our Lord died on the cross His dead physical body was turned over to Joseph of Arimathea for burial (Mt. 27:57-61). That Christ had a real, human, flesh and bones body cannot be denied by anyone who claims to believe the Bible.

Christ also had a genuine human soul and exhibited the whole range of human emotions. When our Lord saw the hypocrisy and legalism of the Pharisees He was grieved and looked at them with anger (Mk. 3:5). When He saw the merchants at the temple He became so angry He drove them out of the temple with whips, overturned their tables and poured out their money (Jn. 2:15-17). When the Savior saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion because of their condition (Mt. 9:36). Similarly, He loved the rich young ruler (Mk. 9:21). When Jesus saw the Jews weeping at the death of Lazarus, “He groaned in the spirit and was troubled” (Jn. 11:33) and even wept Himself (Jn. 11:35). When Christ contemplated His impending suffering on Golgotha He prayed “Now My soul is troubled” (Jn. 12:27). Before He prayed He said to the

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 154.

disciples “My soul is exceedingly sorrowful” (Mt. 26:38). When the disciples refused to allow the little children to come to Him, Mark says Jesus was “greatly displeased” (Mk. 10:14). Twice in the life of our Lord the gospel accounts say that He “marveled” or was amazed; once at the great faith of the centurion (Mt. 8:10; Lk. 7:9) and another time at the unbelief of the people of Nazareth (Mk. 6:6). Obviously, the gospel accounts portray the Messiah as possessing a real human soul with real human emotions. Jesus was and continues to be perfect in manhood with a reasonable soul and body. Anyone who denies this truth is an anti-Christ (1 Jn. 4:3).

The Hypostatic Union

Thus far we have seen that the Bible teaches that the Christ is both God and man. Proving the deity and the genuine humanity of the Mediator is not difficult. Therefore, we should not be surprised to find that the church has always dogmatically affirmed that Jesus is both truly God and truly man. The major difficulty in defining the Mediator has been how God and man exist together in the one Person.¹⁷ Not only are there several heresies regarding the person of Christ (see the discussion on this matter below), but the orthodox definition of the two natures in one person is a very difficult doctrine for our small minds to fathom. Therefore, we will examine the orthodox, confessional statement regarding the two natures in one person and then explain it in the simplest language possible.

The most complete statement of Christological orthodoxy that to this day has not been surpassed or improved upon, even by the Reformed symbols, is the Creed of Chalcedon (A.D. 451). It declares: “We, then, following the holy [Nicene] fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God, and truly man, of a reasonable [i.e., rational] soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, yet without sin; eternally begotten of the Father according to the godhead, and in the latter days, for us and our salvation, born of the virgin Mary, the mother of God, according to the manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without mixture, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person and one subsistence, not parted or divided into two person, but, one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning him, and the

¹⁷ Although believers have always acknowledged the genuine manhood and Godhood of the Mediator, it took a long period of time for the church to explain how the two natures exist in one person. Gordon Clark notes why such a careful, detailed explanation of the person of Christ took centuries to develop. He writes, “If we put ourselves imaginatively in the situation of the early Christians, we can understand how puzzled they were when they tried to think of what sort of person Jesus Christ was. The initial Jewish complexion of the church was soon lost, and anyway, the Old Testament did not clearly indicate the nature of the Messiah. The Gentiles, who soon became the overwhelming majority in the Church, could not, with their pagan background, easily understand the nature of Christ. Nothing in paganism gave them any hint. Accordingly it took the Church some centuries to digest the teaching of the Bible. First came the doctrine of the Trinity, formulated by the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325. The next important advance was to define the doctrine of Christ as one Person with two natures. This was done at Chalcedon in A.D. 451. Those who are interested both in history and in the significance of these definitory statements will enjoy reading Schaff’s *Creeeds of Christendom* and Shedd’s *History of Christian Doctrine*. The latter is particularly full and clear.” (*What Do Presbyterians Believe* [Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1965], 94).

Lord Jesus Christ Himself has taught us, and the creed of the holy fathers has handed down to us.”

Before we define and analyze terms such as nature, person and consubstantial, it will be helpful to guard the church against a wide variety of heresies. In God’s providence the counsel of Chalcedon was the brilliant orthodox capstone to generations of conflict over the person of Christ. Note how virtually every perversion of Christology under the sun is refuted by the Creed of Chalcedon.

(1) Chalcedon refutes everyone who teaches that the Messiah was not truly God; or, was not consubstantial (i.e., of the same substance; or, identity of essence) with the Father.

The denial that Jesus was truly God in every way was a common problem that had to be dealt with by the early church as it still does today. There were the second century Jewish heretics, the Ebionites (this group was zealous for the ceremonial law; refused to fellowship with Gentile believers and denied the divinity of Christ) and Elkasites (i.e., ascetic versions of the Ebionites) who taught that the Messiah was only a man.¹⁸

There were the Arians (c. A.D. 320) who plagued the fourth century and beyond. They believed that the Son was the first created being. He was the highest or greatest of created beings. However, he was not God and there was a time “when he was not.” They also believed that this great creature simply inhabited the flesh of Jesus; that the Messiah did not have a real human soul. (The modern Jehovah’s Witnesses have a heretical Christology almost identical to the early Arians).

There were semi-Arians who sought a mediating position between the orthodox and the Arians. The Arians taught that Jesus was a dissimilar or different substance (*anomoios*) with the Father. The orthodox said that the Son was of the same substance (*homousios*) while the semi-Arian party said he was of a similar (*homoisios*) substance with the Father. In other words Jesus is not just a man but he is not the same as God either. Such a compromise is really no better than Arianism. It is a damnable heresy.

(2) Against all men who taught that Christ did not have a genuine human soul, Chalcedon declared that Jesus had a rational soul. This statement refutes Apollinaris (c., A.D. 310-390) who applied platonic psychology to the person of Christ. Instead of following the biblical concept of the dual nature of man as spirit and body, he followed the Greek concept of man as having an animal or irrational soul, a spirit and a body. He believed that if the Logos assumed a true and complete human nature which included a human spirit, then Jesus would have been corrupted with human sin. Therefore, the Logos took the place of the human spirit. Such a view does not really recognize the true humanity of the mediator and thus needed to be condemned.

(3) Against all forms of Monarchianism Chalcedon says that the Son is truly God consubstantial with the Father according to the godhead *and* eternally begotten of the Father according to the godhead.

There were two forms of Monarchianism that caused problems in the early church. One form developed by Paul of Samosata called Dynamic Monarchianism asserted that although the Logos was consubstantial or of the same essence with the Father, it was only because the Logos was an impersonal force or power from God. In other words they rejected the apostolic teaching of the Son as a second, distinct person in the godhead.

Another form of this heresy is called Modalistic Monarchianism (or Patripassianism because it asserts the Father suffered in the form of the Son). This view was first propagated by

¹⁸ Paul of Samosata (c. 250) was an early advocate of the idea that the Christ was a mere man. The early church historian Eusebius (A.D. 265-340) says that Paul of Samosata attempted to revive the heresy of Artemon.

Sabellius (early third century) who asserted that God is one divine person who sometimes exhibits himself as the Father, sometimes as the Son and sometimes as the Holy Spirit. Once again the personhood of the Son as well as the Spirit is denied. All modalistic theories are essentially Unitarian in their concept of the godhead. Such views are still quite popular today and can be found in cults such as the Jesus only Pentecostals (i.e., the United Pentecostal Church).

When Chalcedon asserts that the Son is truly God of the same essence with the Father and yet at the same time asserts that the Logos is eternally begotten of the Father, it recognizes that although Jesus is God of very God, He also is a distinct person in the godhead. He is not an impersonal force or simply the Father appearing as the Son.

(4) Against all those who confused the two natures, Chalcedon asserted that the two natures were united in one person without mixture, without change, with the property of each nature preserved. This teaching refuted Eutychianism (Eutyches was the aged head of a monastery in Constantinople, c., A.D. 378-454) which held that the human nature in Christ was so thoroughly overpowered and absorbed by the divine nature that even the corporeal element of Jesus' body was different than a regular human body. According to this bizarre theology the Christ only had one nature, not two. Another view rejected by Chalcedon was Monophysitism. According to this view the human divine natures fused together into a new different third nature that was neither really human nor divine.

(5) Chalcedon condemned the idea that Jesus was two distinct persons by declaring that the Son was two natures in one person and one subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons. This statement is a rejection of the heresy of Nestorianism (Nestorius died c., A.D. 451) which held that Christ was two persons; that there was not a unity of the one person. According to this view one should not think of Jesus as the God-man but as a man controlled by God. Nestorianism destroys the undivided (hypostatic) union of the two natures and the unipersonality of the Messiah. (This difficult subject will be considered in more detail below.)

(6) The Chalcedonian creed refutes all forms of docetism by teaching the real undivided union of the two natures in one person and by declaring that Mary was the mother of God (i.e., *theotokos*, literally, "God-bearer").

Docetism is a heresy which denies the true humanity of Christ. Its Christology was not derived directly from Scripture but from Greek philosophy. In the first centuries of the Christian era, platonic and neo-platonic philosophies were quite popular. According to the platonic world view, there were gradations of reality and ethical quality in the world. Spirit or mind is far superior to that which is material or matter. Physical things (according to this view) such as flesh, blood and bones were inherently defective and evil. Men who accepted these pagan Greek presuppositions argued that Jesus could not have developed inside of Mary or have had a real human body. Therefore, Jesus only appeared or seemed to have a body; thus, the name *docetism* comes from the Greek verb *dokeō* – "to seem or appear". (The rejection of the true humanity of our Lord was a serious problem in the early church and was advocated by other heretics such as the Gnostics [the apostle John dealt with an early form of Gnosticism in 1 John] and the Marcionites).

In order to combat such thinking, Chalcedon affirmed that Christ was "perfect in manhood," "truly man," "with a rational soul and body," "consubstantial with us according to the manhood." Further, Mary was the "God-bearer." Jesus derived his human nature directly from her and was truly of the seed of Abraham and David.

(7) Chalcedon condemns all varieties of kenoticism. This theory (which became quite popular in the nineteenth century) asserts that when God the Son became man he voluntarily laid

aside all or some of the divine attributes. This view is based on an erroneous interpretation of Philippians 2:7 which in some translations say that our Lord “emptied Himself.” The Chalcedonian creed refutes kenoticism by saying that “the distinction of natures being [is] by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved.” The union does not alter the divine nature in any way. Further (as noted above), the idea that God could somehow cease to be God is unbiblical and absurd.

(8) The Chalcedonian creed refutes the Lutheran doctrine of the communication of attributes between the divine and the human natures. “Luther and some of the early Lutherans occasionally spoke of a communication in both directions....In the subsequent development of the doctrine, however, the communication from the human nature to the divine soon receded from sight, and only that from the divine to the human nature was stressed.”¹⁹ Chalcedon says that the two natures are united “without mixture, without change.” The hypostatic union preserves the property of each nature. If, as Lutheran theologians assert, the divine attributes are communicated to Jesus’ human nature, then the Messiah ceases to be truly human. Further, the gospel accounts make it perfectly clear our Lord’s human nature was truly human in every conceivable manner (e.g., intellectual growth, limitations of knowledge, physical weakness, etc.). The Lutheran view probably came into being to explain their bizarre understanding of the Lord’s supper (i.e., consubstantiation: Jesus’ real flesh and blood is in, with and through the elements of the bread and wine all over the world at the same time). Lutheran theology “virtually destroys the incarnation.”²⁰

(9) Chalcedon condemns all forms of adoptionism. Adoptionists hold to the view that the Messiah was born a regular man. Then, at some time during His life (most Adoptionists choose Jesus’ baptism, while some prefer the resurrection) God adopts our Lord’s body. In other words, Christ exists independently for a lengthy period of time before God enters His body.

The Chalcedon creed rejects this heresy when it refers to Mary as the “God bearer” (*theotokos*). The orthodox view is that there never was a time when the human nature of the Savior existed independently of the divine nature. From the very moment of conception, Jesus was both God and man in one person. The orthodox teaching is clearly supported by the conception and prebirth narratives in the gospels, the meeting between the pregnant women: Elizabeth and Mary, the virgin birth as well as the worship that the baby Jesus received by men and holy angels.²¹

¹⁹ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 325.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 326.

²¹ Millard J. Erickson makes an excellent observation regarding how all the heresies regarding the person of Christ are all variations on a few ancient major themes. He writes, “We have noted several dimensions of biblical truth which will help us better understand the incarnation. Someone has said that there are only seven basic jokes, and every joke is merely a variation on one of them. A similar statement can be made about heresies regarding the person of Christ. There are basically six, and all of them appeared within the first four Christian centuries. They either deny the genuineness (Ebionism) or the completeness (Arianism) of Jesus’ deity, deny the genuineness (Docetism) or the completeness (Apollinarianism) of his humanity, divide his person (Nestorianism), or confuse his natures (Eutychianism). All departures from the orthodox doctrine of the person of Christ are simply variations of one of these heresies. While we may have difficulty specifying exactly the content of this doctrine, full fidelity to teaching of Scripture will carefully avoid each of these distortions.” (*Christian Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983], 738).

Two Natures—One Person: The Unipersonality of Christ

After noting how the orthodox statement of Chalcedon beautifully and succinctly defends the doctrine of two natures in one person, we need to examine and analyze some of the Chalcedonian propositions more closely. This examination will involve some review.

(1) We have noted that Christ is truly God and truly man. Everything that can be predicated of God is true of Jesus. He is truly God in every way. He is consubstantial with the Father according to the godhead. When the creed speaks of the Mediator having God's nature (Greek, *ousia*; Latin *substantia*, or *natura*) it means identity of essence and implies numerical unity. God is three persons who are *one* in being. God the Son (who was and is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit) became man. The second person of the trinity assumed a human nature.

When Chalcedon speaks of Christ assuming a human nature consubstantial according to manhood, it refers to *generic* unity with man. Jesus has all the attributes of humanity: a real flesh and blood body, a rational soul that grows in knowledge, which is finite (i.e., He doesn't know all things), that experiences the full range of human emotions.

(2) In Christ two distinct natures or substances are united in such a manner that the distinct properties of both natures are preserved. The attributes of God are not somehow passed to man and the human properties are not transmitted to God. There is no mixing, intermingling or confounding of the two natures to form a new third substance. Not only is the intermingling or mixing of the two natures impossible (the finite cannot be made infinite), even if possible it would destroy the incarnation. Such a mixed being would be neither God nor man. Hodge writes, "In teaching, therefore, that Christ was truly man and truly God, the Scriptures teach that He had a finite intelligence and will, and also an infinite intelligence. In Him, therefore, as the Church has ever maintained, there were and are two wills, two *energeia* or operations. His human intellect increased, his divine intelligence was, and is infinite. His human will had only human power, his divine will was, and is almighty."²²

(3) The Bible and the Chalcedonian creed insist that the Mediator is one person, not two. When the second person of the trinity was incarnated He was hypostatically united to a genuine human nature. The Mediator did not unite Himself to a human person with a *separate* personality but with a human nature and thus the personality of Christ and the personality of the Logos are one and the same.

The unipersonality of the Mediator is by far the most difficult aspect of the incarnation to understand. The doctrine of the two natures in one person is to a certain degree beyond human comprehension. Thus, the best way to explain it is to first present the Scriptural evidence for the unipersonality of Christ and then define it theologically as best we can. Note the following arguments from Scripture.

(a) If our Lord was two distinct persons and not one there ought to be some scriptural evidence to prove it. However, there is none. On the contrary Jesus always speaks, prays and acts as one person. With the doctrine of the trinity there are three *persons* and one God. Thus, there are abundant examples of the Father speaking to the Son (Mk. 1:11; Lk. 3:22), of the Son speaking to the Father (Mt. 11:25, 26; 26:39; Jn. 11:41; 12:27; 28) and the Holy Spirit praying to God (Rom. 8:26). Yet, we *never* encounter the human person Jesus praying, speaking,

²² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:390.

worshipping or communing with the Son. There is no I—You consciousness or relationship within the Mediator at all.

(b) The Mediator is always represented in Scripture as one person. He is called or addressed as prophet (Ac. 3:22), priest (Heb. 5:5-6), king (Ps. 2:6), the good shepherd (Jn. 10:11), the Christ (Mt. 16:16; Phil. 1:1-2), the lamb of God (Jn. 1:29), the Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:6), the Lord of lords (Rev. 19:16), God (Jn. 20:28; Rom. 9:6), man (Jn. 8:40) redeemer (Prov. 23:11; Jer. 50:34; Gal. 3:13), savior (Eph. 5:23), Son of God (Ps. 73:15; Mt. 24:36; Mk. 13:32), son of Man (Ac. 7:56; Rev. 1:13), the head of the church (Eph. 5:23), the bridegroom (Mk. 2:19), the judge of all (Mt. 7:21ff.; 25:14ff.) and so on. These titles and functions are predicated of the God-man and apply to the whole person. Does this mean that the divine and human natures are mixed or confused in any way? No, not at all! It simply means that *the one person* Jesus Christ partakes of the attributes of both natures; “so that whatever may be affirmed of either nature may be affirmed of the person.”²³ Theologians refer to this doctrine as the communion of the attributes.²⁴

This union in one person explains why the human nature of Jesus receives special treatment by holy angels and men. The God-man Jesus Christ is the object of worship (Mt. 2:1-2; 14:33; 28:9; Rev. 15:3-4), prayer (Rev. 5:8; Mt. 8:2; 15:25) and adoration (Rev. 5:8-14). Although the ground of worship and prayer toward the Messiah lies in His deity, nevertheless, the union in one person of the two natures makes the religious worship of the divine-human person lawful, appropriate and commendable. The adoration of Jesus’ body would not be lawful if He were two persons.

Christ the person will make “I” statements that can only be applied to His divine nature (e.g., “Before Abraham was ‘I am,’” Jn. 8:58; cf. 10:30). At other times He will make statements that can only be applied to His human nature (e.g., “I thirst,” Jn. 19:28). Further, there are passages where what can only be said of our Lord’s human nature are spoken of as applying to the Lord or God (e.g., “crucified the Lord of glory,” 1 Cor. 2:8; *The Son* is said not to know the day or hour of his own coming; Mk. 13:32). There are even passages where the person Jesus Christ is addressed according to His human nature and then explicitly spoken of as God (e.g., “from whom according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen,” Rom. 9:5; Rev. 5:12; cf. Jn. 6:62). If our Lord were two separate persons the writers of Scripture could not freely and simultaneously ascribe to Christ attributes of humanity and divinity. “They call Him Lord, or Son, and attribute to Him, often in the same sentence, what is true of Him only as God, what is true only of his humanity, and what is true of Him only as the God-man.”²⁵ Berkhof writes, “In several passages both natures are set forth as united. The Bible nowhere teaches that divinity in the abstract, or some divine power, was united to, or manifested in, a human nature; but always that the divine nature in the concrete, that is, the divine person of

²³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:391.

²⁴ Francis Turretin notes that with respect to the person of the Mediator there is a three-fold communication: “(1) a communication of attributes and of the properties of each nature to the person; (2) communication of office and of effects, by which the mediatorial works bearing upon our salvation are ascribed to the person acting according to both natures; (3) communication of honor and worship due to the God-man (*theanthrōpō*)” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994], 2:322. The communication of attributes is real with respect of the one person. But, once again, it must be emphasized that there is no mixing of the two natures.

²⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:394.

the Son of God, was united to a human nature, John 1:14; Rom. 8:3; Gal. 4:4; 9:5; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 2:11-14; 1 John 4:2, 3.”²⁶

(3) Only the orthodox Chalcedonian doctrine of the two natures in one person does justice to Christ’s works, especially His work of redemption. One encounters Jesus the person controlling the weather (Mk. 4:39-41), forgiving people’s sins (Mt. 9:2), telling people that they are saved (Lk. 23:43), saying that He is the Lord of the Sabbath (Mt. 12:9), creating food (Mt. 14:14-21), shining like the sun (Mt. 17:1-6) and offering Himself on the cross (Heb. 10:12). The incarnate Son of God is the only source of life for the elect. Only the people who believe in Him as fully God and fully man (who as one person secured a perfect redemption) can obtain eternal life. Only a Mediator who is both God and man in one person can offer a sacrifice of infinite value and can provide a perfect righteousness for God’s people. It is because of the union of the two natures in one person that the infinite merit and efficacy of His work is due.

(4) The heretical idea that Christ is both two persons and one person at the same time not only contradicts Scripture but also defies simple logic. Jesus cannot be two persons and one person at the same time. If the Mediator were two separate persons then the incarnation would not be a true personal union but would be in effect a mere indwelling of the divine nature in a human person. Such a view is essentially adoptionist in nature.

Anhypostatic Christology

The most difficult aspect of the incarnation to understand is the doctrine that divine Son took into union with himself a human nature (i.e., a full complex of human attributes) but not a human person. This teaching (known as *anhypostasia* which means “no person”) asserts that the “Logos assumed a human nature that was not personalized, that did not exist by itself,”²⁷ that “the Logos provided the basis for the personality of Christ.”²⁸ This point does not mean that we should think of Christ as an incomplete man for He had a true human body, soul and will. What it does mean is that: “Jesus was personal, as a man, by virtue of the union of his manness in the person of the Son. In other words, as a person, the Son of God gave personal identity to the human nature which he had assumed without losing or compromising his divine nature.”²⁹ The

²⁶ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 323. G. I. Williamson makes an excellent observation regarding the union of the natures as it relates to common use of pictures of Christ. He writes, “Neither God nor men ever addressed him or dealt with him as one or the other, nor did he ever act at any time as if he were one or the other. The modern practice of making pictures of Christ as if his human nature could properly be portrayed by itself is not only a fearful error; it is *impossible*. For this reason the Westminster Larger Catechism consistently declares “the making of any representation of God, of all or of any of the three persons, either outwardly in our mind, or outwardly in any kind of image or likeness of any creature whatsoever” as a violation of the second commandment (Q. 109). For just as God is one God, and yet three eternally distinct Persons, so Christ is one person, and yet has two entire natures which are distinct from one another in the unity of his person. The scriptural proof for this is to be found in such texts as Acts 20:28. There we read that ‘God...hath purchased with his own blood’ the Church. But Scripture says that God is a spirit (John 4:24). ‘A spirit hath not flesh’ and blood. Such a statement is possible only because the person who purchased the Church is both God and man. Because he is one person with two natures, we may speak of him as God and as shedding human blood.” (*The Westminster Confession of Faith For Study Classes* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964], 74-75).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 322.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 610. “Athanasius (Contra Arianos, III. ii.) defines Christ as ‘a man impersonated into God;’ and describes Christ’s human body and soul as an instrument which the Logos appropriates personally....Witsius: Creed, Dissertation XVI. The

human nature of our Lord was never intended to exist or function by itself. From the very moment of conception the center of the Messiah's self-identity, self-consciousness and personality belonged to the eternal second person of the Godhead.

It is important to understand that when theologians refer to Christ's human nature as impersonal, they are only speaking hypothetically of the human nature as viewed by itself. The reality is that the human nature never had an independent existence or personal subsistence. The existence of the human nature and its subsistence or personality began the moment of the incarnation. Therefore, when theologians speak non-hypothetically of the actual incarnation they speak of the human nature as in-personal rather than impersonal (e.g., Witsius, Shedd, Berkhof). While the personality of the Mediator comes from the divine Son, theologians still refer to the God-man as a complex person by virtue of the fact that the divine Person has assumed a genuine human consciousness, intellect and will. Because our Lord's human nature is not lacking any of the essential qualities belonging to that nature (e.g., a real body, a genuine soul) and also has its individuality and personhood in the person of the Son of God, the human nature should not be considered imperfect and incomplete.³⁰

Is this doctrine very difficult to comprehend? Yes, indeed it is. Is it not excessive theological hairsplitting to insist that we adhere to such a hard teaching? No. It most certainly is not. This formulation has been the official creedal-confessional position of the Christian church among all ancient, medieval and Reformed Christians. It is the Christology of the Westminster Standards: "The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, did take upon him man's *nature* with all the essential properties thereof; so that the two whole, perfect and distinct natures, the Godhead [Godhood] and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person" (8:2). At this point in time all attempts to go beyond Chalcedon or to define the human nature as a separate individual human person have resulted in heresy and irresolvable theological and exegetical problems.

To all those who are not satisfied with the difficult, somewhat abstract language of "nature" we offer the following considerations.

(1) The term nature is used because the word person would result in a Nestorian impingement upon the oneness of the divine human *person*. Theologians must deal with the fact that although the Mediator has both a human and divine consciousness He possessed only one self-consciousness. "[T]he very notion of personality can never be predicated of him except as it draws within its scope his specifically divine identity. And if this is so, it is not feasible to speak of his human personality."³¹

(2) The word "nature" is used of the manness of Christ precisely because it is impersonal. "We measure the reality and dignity of a human nature by the essential properties of the nature,

human nature thus becomes an integrant constituent of one complex person, The God-man Jesus Christ. In the phraseology of Owen (Person of Christ, XVIII) 'assumption is unto [in order to] personality; it is that act whereby the Son of God and our nature become one person'" (William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* [New York: Scribner's Sons, 1889], 2:293). John Brown of Haddington writes, "Christ's manhood having been united to his divine person in the very formation of it, could never have any personality or particular subsistence of its own; nor did it need it, having, by the uniting act, received a divine personality, instead of its own human one. Nor doth the want of human personality, especially when supplied to infinite advantage, render his manhood less perfect, it being soul and body united, not its mode of subsistence, which constitutes a complete human nature. (*The Systematic Theology of John Brown of Haddington* [Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2002], 264).

³⁰ See L. Berkhof, 322.

³¹ John Murray, "The Person of Christ," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 1:138.

not by the characteristic of individuality subsequently added to it. Personality is not an integral and necessary part of a nature, as it were, the terminus to which it tends.”³²

(3) We must take into account that *a divine person* assumed a human nature. “If the Logos had obtained personality by uniting with a human nature, [then] he must have previously been impersonal. The incarnation would then have made an essential change in the Logos, and thereby in the Trinity itself.”³³ If the second person of the trinity had united with an individual human person then the Mediator would be two persons and not one.

(4) If the Mediator was two persons and not one then with regard to the ontological trinity there would be three persons; but, with regard to the economic trinity there would be four persons. The Bible teaches that the two natures in one person continue forever (Heb. 13:8; 4:14-15; Col. 2:9; Rom. 9:5). “A finite glorified human nature is now eternally united with the second Trinitarian person, and a God-man is now the middle person of the Trinity.”³⁴ If the incarnation involved two separate persons then there would be two Sons on the throne in heaven and not one. Instead of one harmonious work of redemption accomplished by the trinity as it works in creation, there would be a partnership between the triune God and a distinct human person—Jesus. Such a view of course is unbiblical and absurd.

(5) The all controlling self consciousness in the Mediator was the divine person and not the human nature. This was true regarding the *power* of the God-man as well as the *knowledge* of the theanthropic person. The Logos determined when and where the divine power was demonstrated. “If the Logos so determined, Jesus Christ was all-powerful. When the divine nature withdrew its support from the human, the latter was as helpless as it was in an ordinary human creature.”³⁵ The Son’s divine power knocked the soldiers who came to arrest Him to the ground and then permitted them to arrest Him and lead Him away to torture and the death of the cross (Jn. 18:6). When our Lord was dead and in the tomb, the Logos preserved the human body and kept it from decay (Ac. 2:27). The Logos also united Jesus’ human soul with His body, glorified it and raised it from the dead.

Many times in the gospels we can observe Christ exercising divine omniscience (Mt. 12:25; 27:18; Lk. 6:8; Jn. 2:24-25), yet at other times the divine Son does not reveal some things to His human consciousness. When our Lord was touched by the woman with the flow of blood He said, “Who touched My clothes?” (Mk. 5:30). When Jesus discussed the time of His coming, He said that He did not know the day or the hour (Mk. 13:32). The Logos knew these things, yet He did not reveal them to His human nature. Shedd writes, “The difficult subject of the ignorance of Christ, and his growth in wisdom and knowledge, has light thrown upon it, by distinguishing between the *existence* of the Logos in Christ’s person, and the *manifestation* of this existence. This is the key to the doctrine of the kenosis. The Logos constantly existed in Jesus Christ, but did not constantly act through his human soul and body. He did not work miracles constantly; nor did he impart to the human soul of Christ the whole of his own infinite knowledge.”³⁶

³² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* as quoted in William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1889), 2:291.

³³ William G. T. Shedd *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:280.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:280-281.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:272.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:273-274.

Conclusion

The biblical teaching regarding the incarnation of Christ and the person of the Mediator is awe-inspiring. This doctrine amazes us not simply because it is mysterious and somewhat beyond human comprehension, but because there is a sense in which the hypostatic union of the two natures in Christ is the greatest miracle in Scripture. In order to save us God had to become man. The Son assumed a genuine human nature in order to: perfectly obey God's law (in order to fulfill the covenant of works), suffer and die on the cross as a vicarious atonement and rise again victorious over Satan, sin and death. Even now the God-man sits enthroned at the right hand of God interacting and applying redemption to His people. It is a tremendous blessing to us that the Mediator will forever and ever be both God and man. For eternity we will be able to look at the scars in our Lord's hands, feet and side. His glorified human body will be an eternal testimony to His supreme love; the love that caused Him to descend from the room of heaven to the filthy manger in Bethlehem and the painful road to Golgotha.

If you are not a Christian, then it is now time to behold the God-man with the eyes of faith. Believe in His person and His work of redemption. There is no other name given among men by which we can be saved (Ac. 4:12). There is only one mediator between God and man, the Man Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5). Dear Christian, you know that there is no other greater motivation for obedience and good works than our love and adoration for Christ. Lord enable us to be continually faithful to our precious Lord and Savior—Immanuel. Amen.

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