

Chapter 8 – The Humanity of Christ

Having discussed the deity of Christ in the previous chapter, we must move on to his humanity. The doctrine of the humanity of Christ tends to get less attention than other aspects of Christology, such as the deity of Christ. However, it is just as critical for a proper understanding of the Person of Christ. Christ's humanity encompasses discussion of things like the virgin birth and incarnation, the relationship of Christ's humanity to his deity (Christ's two natures), the exercise (or not) of his attributes as God while a man on earth, and his sinlessness.

The humanity of Christ is not merely important for accurate theology. In practical terms, it is key to the doctrine of salvation, for God's solution to the human dilemma of being separated from God by sin was to become a man. Without the incarnation, there is no specific connection between humanity and God the Father. What is needed is a reversal of the curse of death brought on by sin (Gen 3). Reversing death requires resurrection to eternal life. For resurrection to become reality, a death needs to first occur. For death to be possible, the person whose life will be a substitutionary forfeit to pay for sin must be human; that is, he must be capable of dying. For this whole construct of the plan of salvation to be effective for all humans of all time, the sacrifice (Christ) had to also be eternal, transcending time. Hence God had to become man for sin to be atoned for and cover all humans to whom it can be applied throughout the course of human history. Without the humanity of Christ, there could be no atonement for sin and no salvation from sin forever.

There are still other factors of importance. As we saw in our discussion of God and his attributes, God is ultimately only knowable if revelation about him is provided. God cannot be known or understood by human reason or nature alone. God must reveal himself. The ultimate revelation of God is the incarnation, for by this God could live among people as a human being. The incarnation is thus a means of God making himself known. In addition, by becoming a man, God the Son could experience human temptations and trials, allowing him to empathize with us in our struggles.¹

The Incarnation of Christ

The word "incarnation" is not a translation of any specific term in the Hebrew or Greek text of the Bible. It is, rather, a modern term that describes embodiment, specifically that of a spiritual being into human flesh. Its literal meaning is "in flesh." The apostle John's vocabulary of Jesus ("the word") becoming flesh is perhaps the best scriptural illustration of the idea (John 1:1-3, 14). In the incarnation, then, the second Person of the Trinity became human; that is, he took on human flesh and became fully human. This is what John was referencing when he spoke of Jesus coming "in the flesh" (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7).

Not surprisingly, "There is ample biblical evidence that Jesus was a fully human person, not lacking any of the essential elements of humanity that constitute each of us."² Jesus was born of a woman (Mary). He had a human body that developed and aged. He grew physically, intellectually, and spiritually. Luke 2:52 sums up these obvious points ("Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and

¹ This identification is part of Christ's ministry as great high priest which will be discussed in another chapter.

² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 645.

man"). While the origin of the earthly life of the second Person of the Trinity began under unusual circumstances (the virgin birth), there is nothing in Scripture to indicate the Jesus's prenatal development, birth process, childhood development, and growth to adulthood was any different than those of every human. Jesus had to learn how to talk, walk, eat using utensils like bowls, cups, and spoons; etc. His body experienced all the developmental stages (e.g., puberty) we experience as humans. Jesus grew hungry (Matt 4:2; 21:18) and thirsty (John 4:7; 19:28). He participated in meals and celebrations involving eating and drinking (Matt 11:18-19; Luke 5:30-33). He grew tired and needed sleep (John 4:6; Matt 8:23-24//Mark 4:38; Luke 8:23). He did not know all things (Matt 24:36). Finally, Jesus's humanity was quite evident during his trial and crucifixion. He was beaten, impaled with a spear, and nailed to a wooden cross. There was no super-human response to all this: he bled, suffered, and died (Matt 27:32-44; John 19:31-37; cf. Isa 52:14; 53:5).

Scripture also makes it clear that Jesus experienced and expressed the full range of human emotions and psychological trauma. Jesus loved (John 11:35; 13:23; 20:2). He wept (John 11:35). He felt compassion for people (Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34). Jesus could be angered (Matt 21:12-13//Mark 11:15-19//John 2:14-17; Mark 3:5; 10:14). He could be sarcastic (John 10:31-32). He experienced joyfulness (John 15:11; 17:13). He could be troubled and anxious (Matt 26:27; Luke 24:44).

The Virgin Birth

The New Testament is clear that Jesus was born of a virgin:

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

²³ "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us). ²⁴ When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, ²⁵ but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus. (Matt 1:18-25; ESV)

The virgin birth of Jesus is therefore the means by which the incarnation of the Son took place. The virginity of Mary is made clear not only by Matthew's appeal to the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, but by his careful insistence that Joseph did not "know" Mary until after she had given birth to a son (Jesus). To "know" a woman is an Old Testament expression for sexual relations (Gen 4:1, 17, 25; Gen 19:4-8 [esp. v. 8]; Judges 19:25). Joseph did not have sexual relations with Mary until after Jesus was born.

Liberal critics seek to undermine this clarity by appeal to the word translated “virgin” in Isa 7:14. The Hebrew word there is *almah*, which can be translated “young woman, young girl; woman [of marriageable age].” The normative Hebrew word for sexual virgin, though, is *betulah*. Had Isaiah wanted to say that the woman in his prophecy was a sexual virgin, he would have used this latter word. Liberals also insist that the fact that Isaiah’s prophecy was fulfilled in Isaiah’s own lifetime (read Isaiah 8-10) means that Isa 7:14 has no bearing on a distant, future messiah.

These arguments are misguided and, frankly, poorly informed. In regard to the prophecy itself, biblical prophecy often operates by analogy. That is, Matthew sees an analogy between the circumstances of the child in Isaiah 7-10 (note that in Isaiah 9:6 this child is called *el gibbor*, “mighty God) and Jesus. In the context of Isaiah, the child is the key to the survival of David’s dynasty, the messianic line. It is therefore an appropriate messianic prophecy.³

As for Hebrew *betulah*, it is true that the term is more narrowly used for sexual virgin than *almah*. But the key question is whether or not *almah* is used to describe a woman who is certainly a sexual virgin. The answer to that question is yes. Outside of Isa. 7:14, the word *almah* occurs only six times in the Old Testament. In Exod 2:8 for example, the little girl sent by Pharaoh’s daughter to get a nurse for the newly-discovered baby Moses is very likely a pre-adolescent girl, though the text doesn’t go out of its way to make this point. Virginity is certainly suggested, however, in Song of Sol 6:8, where *almah* occurs in the plural alongside other categories of women: “There are sixty queens and eighty concubines, and virgins (*almah*; plural: *alamot*) without number.” As I have written elsewhere,

The distinction between queens, concubines, and *alamot* (עלמות) is important. A queen was a royal wife, which obviously entails a sexual relationship with the king. A concubine was a sexual partner who held certain privileges, but not to the level of a wife. This would suggest that the third group, the *alamot*, had no sexual relationship with the king. An *almah* in this text is a candidate to become a concubine or a wife. . . . This would suggest that the third category, the *alamot*, had no sexual relationship with the king. An *almah* in this text was, in essence, a candidate for become either a concubine or a wife.⁴

This categorization is what we see in the book of Esther. As the king searched for a new queen, Esther stayed with other “young virgins” (*na’arah betulah*) for twelve months under the supervision of a man named Hegai (Esther 2:3, 8). Esther was eventually taken to the king for a sexual liaison, after which she did not return to where the “young virgins” were residing. She was now placed in a second harem supervised by Shaashgaz, who “was in charge of the concubines” (Esth 2:14). This clearly indicates that Esther’s status had now changed to concubine. She was no longer a virgin.

The clearest proof that an *almah* points to a sexual virgin, however, is the story of Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 24. In that chapter “Rebekah is referred to with *all three* terms noted above (*na’ar* in 24:14, *betulah* in 24:16, and *almah* in 24:43), indicating that the terms could certainly be construed as

³ The details of this controversy extend far beyond the scope of this book. Two important studies of the virgin birth and the woman of Isaiah’s prophecy are: J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth*, and Christophe Rico, *The Mother of the Infant King (Isaiah 7:14)*.

⁴ Michael S. Heiser, *I Dare You Not to Bore Me with the Bible*, ed. John D. Barry and Rebecca Van Noord (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press; Bible Study Magazine, 2014), 88.

synonymous.”⁵ Rebekah was a *betulah*, the word that definitively speaks of sexual virginity and also called *almah* in the same verse. There is nothing “off target” with Matthew citing Isa 7:14 as proof of Jesus’ birth from a virgin. His follow-up that Joseph “knew her (Mary) not until she had given birth to a son” makes the point forcefully.⁶

The “Self-Emptying” of Christ

An important passage related to the humanity of Christ—yet while retaining his deity—is Phil 2:1-11. Theological discussion of this passage has been persistent since the time of the early church. The controversy surrounds verses 6-7, where we are told that Christ Jesus: “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (ESV). Invariably this passage is part of the discussion as to how Jesus, in whom Paul says dwells “the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col 2:9) could not know everything (Matt 24:36), grow weary (John 4:6; Matt 8:23-24//Mark 4:38; Luke 8:23), and ultimately die (Matt 27:32-44; John 19:31-37; cf. Isa 52:14; 53:5).

What does it mean that Christ “emptied himself”? Was he no longer God while a man? The Greek word translated “emptied” is referred to as *kenosis*. The Greek wording (verb, *kenōō*, “to empty”) gave rise to one theory about what Christ emptied himself (“kenosis” or “kenotic” Christology), but the theory remains controversial, in part because the text never answers the question of what Christ emptied himself, but also because the interpretation of the wording of v. 7 is invariably involved in the difficulty of understanding the relationship of Christ’s dual nature (in one person), human and divine. Expressions of “kenotic theology” vary, with some “kenotic theologians” drawing the heretical conclusion that Jesus was not completely God (i.e., that the two natures were not wholly and simultaneously present). Bray explains the problem:

The Greek words for “emptied himself” are *ekenōsen heauton*. From this theologians developed the noun *kenōsis*, or emptying, which they then used as the foundation for their new theory, known to us as “kenotic Christology.” According to this theory, the Son of God voluntarily surrendered his divinity, or at least its prerogatives, in order to become a man. As Jesus of Nazareth, he therefore did not know everything, was not directly involved in ruling the universe, and could not call on his divine nature to get him out of trouble when the occasion arose. This last assertion is the most difficult one, because it is clear that Jesus did do things during his earthly ministry that a normal human being could not have done. . . . In support of the kenotic view, a theologian can point to the words of Jesus in John 17:5, where he says, “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” If the Son had never lost that glory nor laid it aside, the argument goes, why would he have prayed

⁵ Ibid., 89.

⁶ The point is also made more technically in Matt 1:16, the end of the genealogy of Jesus. Matthew writes of “Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.” Throughout this genealogy (Matt 1:1-15) Matthew describes one male “fathered” by another in succession from Abraham down to Joseph, the man engaged (betrothed) to Mary to be her husband (Matt 1:18). However, when he gets to verse 16, Matthew changes his wording. Jesus was not “fathered” by Joseph. Rather Joseph was simply the husband of Mary “of whom Jesus was born.” The words “of whom” are, in the original Greek, grammatically feminine and point back to Mary. The Greek text therefore makes the point that Jesus came from Mary alone, not Joseph.

in this way? There are also certain statements of Jesus which suggest that he was inferior to the Father, and these must also be taken into account. For example, in John 14:28 he tells his disciples, “I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I.” . . . There are two difficulties in interpreting verses like these. In the first place, no one denies that *as a servant* the Son is “inferior” to the Father, because it is the Father’s will that he has come to do. This does not mean, however, that he had to give up his divinity; on the contrary, it can be argued that it was precisely because he was divine and therefore equal to the Father that the Son could choose to become a servant. Had he been genuinely inferior, either in being or by having surrendered his divine attributes, the Son would have had no choice, and the nature of his submission would have been entirely different.⁷

We must not consider vv. 6-7 in isolation from the immediately juxtaposed verses (5, 9). In fact, vv. 5-8 form the core cluster in the passage that is crucial to an accurate understanding of *kenosis*:

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (ESV)

In parsing this issue, and interpreting Phil 2:7, several things must be noted. First, it is important to recall that the incarnation was more about *adding* a human nature to the pre-existing divine nature than a loss of divine attributes. Second, Phil 2:7 must be interpreted in conjunction with Col 2:9 (“For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (ESV), which makes clear that the incarnation involved no loss of divine attributes. The grammar of Phil 2:7 helps put these things in perspective, for it changes the question from “*of what* did Christ empty himself?”—recall that the passage never actually answers this question—to “*how* did Christ empty himself?”

This latter question is actually answered by the grammar in context. Harris notes:

While the question “Of what did Christ empty himself?” is both inevitable and proper, the context of our phrase answers a different question: “How did Christ empty himself?” Paul’s answer is “by taking the form of a slave.” Paradoxically, Christ emptied himself by taking on the external appearance of a slave—unattractiveness, lack of distinction, and submission. There is grammatical justification for this understanding. When a finite verb such as “he emptied” is followed by an aorist participle (here *labōn*, “taking”), that participle can define the means or mode by which the finite verb is carried out: “he emptied by taking.” Another example of this construction is found in the next verse. “He humbled himself by becoming (*genomenos*) obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”⁸

Millard Erickson picks up on this point and adds some relevant concluding thoughts:

⁷ Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 201.

⁸ Murray J. Harris, *Navigating Tough Texts: A Guide to Problem Passages in the New Testament* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020), 167.

A better approach to Philippians 2:6–7 is to think of the phrase “taking the very nature of a servant” as a circumstantial explanation of the *kenosis*. Since *labōn* is an aorist participle adverbial in function, we would render the first part of verse 7 “he made himself nothing by taking the very form of a servant.” The participial phrase is an explanation of how Jesus emptied himself, or what he did that constituted *kenosis*. While the text does not specify of what he emptied himself, it is noteworthy that “the very nature of a servant” contrasts sharply with “equality with God” (v. 6). We conclude that it is equality with God, not the form of God, of which Jesus emptied himself. While he did not cease to be in nature what the Father was, he became functionally subordinated to the Father for the period of his earthly life. Jesus did this for the purposes of revealing God and redeeming humanity. By taking on human nature, he accepted certain limitations upon the functioning of his divine attributes. These limitations were not the result of a loss of divine attributes but of the addition of human attributes.⁹ (Erickson, 670).

The Two Natures of Christ: Historical Heresies to Avoid

The two natures of Christ naturally raise certain questions: Was Jesus more God than human, or more human than God? Did the two natures ever oppose one another, so that one overruled the other? Conversely, was one nature absorbed into the other? Did one perhaps dilute the other. Was Jesus some sort of hybrid being?

Because of the difficulties involved in Christ being both fully God (his deity) and fully man (his humanity), various attempts to articulate the relationship of the two natures arose. We have already commented on one such attempt—*kenosis* theology. Though well-intentioned, certain forms of this theology are aberrant, for they have the Son (God incarnate in Christ) not being the Son in light of a presumed surrendering of divine attributes. Other aberrations took similar or different form, depending on which nature (divine or human) was emphasized. And indeed *emphasis* is at the core of the problem. Rather than affirming two natures in one Person—that Christ was one individual who happened to be both one hundred percent God and one hundred percent man—aberrant, heretical views emphasize one of the natures over the other.

1. Christ only Seemed to be Human, but Actually Was Not

This is the core claim of the early doctrinal heresy known as Docetism, “The belief that the humanity of Jesus was not genuine—he merely seemed to be human.”¹⁰ The term comes from the Greek verb *dokeō* (“to think, seem”). This was an early and severe heresy in the early church:

So serious was this denial of truth about Christ, that John could say it was a doctrine of the antichrist: “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses *that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh* is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist” (1 John 4:2–3). The apostle John understood that to deny Jesus’ true

⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 670.

¹⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 52.

humanity was to deny something at the very heart of Christianity, so that no one who denied that Jesus had come in the flesh was sent from God.¹¹

Docetism reflects the strong influence of Greco-Roman thought on early believers. This thought system external as it was to the New Testament, basically denied a number of things the New Testament clearly teaches. Docetism presumed God could not have become man because matter was *inherently* evil, an idea Scripture does not affirm. Becoming a man, docetists presumed, would have corrupted God. Consequently, Jesus' humanity must have been an illusion. For docetists, Jesus was more like a ghost than a genuine human being.

2. Christ Wasn't Really God

There is more than one early heresy that emphasized the humanity of Christ and downplayed, or rejected, his deity. Ebionism was a very early teaching that had this tenet at its core. Ebionism was named after the Ebionites, an early sect in the Church that denied the deity of Christ. It can be traced to Judaizing elements in the early church against which New Testament writers (especially Paul) wrote against. Like the Docetists, Ebionism rejected the virgin birth of Christ. Erickson summarizes the movement's ideas:

Jesus was, according to the Ebionites, an ordinary human possessing unusual but not superhuman or supernatural gifts of righteousness and wisdom. He was the predestined Messiah, although in a rather natural or human sense. At the baptism, the Christ descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove. This was understood more as the presence of God's power and influence within the man Jesus than as a personal, metaphysical reality. Near the end of Jesus's life, the Christ withdrew from him. Thus Jesus was primarily a human, albeit a human in whom, at least for a time, the power of God was present and active to an unusual degree. The Ebionites maintained their position partly through a denial or rejection of the authority of Paul's letters. . . . Ebionism had to ignore or deny a large body of scriptural material: all of the references to the preexistence, the virgin birth, and the qualitatively unique status and function of Jesus.¹²

Along similar lines of denial was Arianism. It is perhaps the most familiar Christological heresy due to the (negative) attention it received at the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) when the influential teachings of Arius, Bishop of Alexandria at the time, were a focus of discussion. Arianism sought to affirm both natures of Christ but fell short of affirming his full deity. As Erickson notes, Arianism taught that Christ was "the highest of the created beings and is thus appropriately referred to as [a] god, but not *the* God."¹³

Arianism based its claims in a significant way on texts that referred to Christ as "only begotten" (Greek: *monogenēs*). The reasoning was based on this term being used of the human experiencing of producing children. This perception was misguided, as various references using *monogenēs* clearly intend to emphasize *uniqueness*, not the act of bringing forth something that did not otherwise exist. One obvious

¹¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 540.

¹² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 634.

¹³ Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 16. Erickson goes on to point out that in today's theological climate, Arianism is basically the view of Jehovah's Witnesses.

example is Heb 11:17, where Isaac, the son of Abraham, is called *monogenēs* (Isaac was uniquely the son of the barren Sarah). Likewise passages that refer to Jesus as “firstborn” are not intending to call attention to a presumed point of origin, but his pre-eminence. The Old Testament concept of “firstborn = pre-eminence” is behind such references (e.g., Psa 89:27, used of David, who was not chronologically firstborn in his family, but pre-eminent as the messianic model king). Lastly, passages that point to Christ’s full deity (e.g., John 1:1-3, 14-15; Col 2:9; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet 1:1) tended to be ignored or (grammatically) misunderstood by the Arian view.¹⁴

Arians further thought that God the Father’s absolute uniqueness required such a perspective. That is, God could not share his unique nature with any being. Consequently, Arianism requires the denial of the Trinity and any co-equality with the true God, which has serious ramifications, summarized by Erickson:

“Nothing else that exists, then, can have originated as some sort of emanation from God’s essence or substance. Everything other than God has, rather, come into being through an act of creation by which he called it into existence out of nothing. The Father alone is uncreated and eternal. . . . [T]he Word must have had a beginning at some finite point. The Arians’ slogan therefore became “There was a time when he was not.” It seemed to the Arians that if the Word were coeternal with the Father, there would be two self-existent principles. This would be irreconcilable with monotheism, the one absolute tenet of their theology. Second, the Son has no communion with or even direct knowledge of the Father. Although he is God’s Word and Wisdom, he is not of the very essence of God; being a creature, he bears these titles only because he participates in the word and wisdom of the Father. Totally different in essence from the Father, the Son is liable to change and even sin.”¹⁵

3. Christ was Really a Mixture of Divine and Human Attributes

This system of thought is most apparent in the early church heresy of Apollinarianism. This approach was similar to Docetism, but instead of totally denying the humanity of Christ, Apollinarianism lessens the humanity of Christ by asserting that *some* aspects or parts of Jesus were human, others were divine. That is, Christ was a composite; he was not one hundred percent human or divine. But in place of the awkward conclusion that Christ was neither truly man nor truly God, Apollinarianism could be boiled down to the idea that Jesus was physically (bodily) human but his soul was divine. Still, this distillation made the human Jesus something less than other “normal” humans. His humanity was reduced to his external body. As Erickson notes, “if, as Apollinarius claimed, Christ lacked the most characteristic part of humanity (human will, reason, mind), it hardly seemed correct to call him human at all.”¹⁶

4. Christ was Really Two Persons, not One Person Having Two Natures

This was the approach of the early teaching called Nestorianism. Grudem summarizes the idea:

¹⁴ In regard to John 1:14, Arians (as do modern Jehovah’s Witnesses) argue that “the Word was God” should be translated “the Word as a god” due to the absence of the definite article. For reasons of Greek grammar (Harris, *Navigating Tough Texts*, 52; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics - Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Zondervan Publishing House and Galaxie Software, 1996), 257-277 (esp. 267-269, 276-277)). The grammatical information of these passages is ignored or misunderstood by Arians.

¹⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 635-636.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 653.

Nestorianism is the doctrine that there were two separate persons in Christ, a human person and a divine person, a teaching that is distinct from the biblical view that sees Jesus as one person. . . . Although Nestorius himself probably never taught the heretical view that goes by his name (the idea that Christ was two persons in one body, rather than one person), through a combination of several personal conflicts and a good deal of ecclesiastical politics, he was removed from his office of bishop and his teachings were condemned.¹⁷

The fundamental problem with Nestorianism is that Scripture nowhere teaches that Christ was two distinct persons, nor does it ever create the impression that the two natures of Christ might be separable or at odds with each other. Jesus is never depicted as exhibiting any behavior that would be explainable as his two natures being in conflict. Jesus is “he” not “they”; there is no hint of division.

Nestorianism wound up being condemned in two church councils. The first, the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D., upheld that Jesus was one Person, whereas Nestorianism taught that he was two individuals inhabiting one body—effectively creating three “parts” to Jesus (body, divine person, human person). Twenty years later the Council of Chalcedon (see below) articulated the biblically defensible position that Christ was one person with two natures.

5. Christ’s Human Nature was Absorbed by his Divine Nature

This attempt to understand the two natures was called Monophysitism or Eutychianism. The latter name derives from the name Eutyches, the leader of a monastery at Constantinople. Eutychianism is the opposite of Nestorianism; that is, Eutyches “denied that the human nature and divine nature in Christ remained fully human and fully divine. He held rather that the human nature of Christ was taken up and absorbed into the divine nature, so that both natures were changed somewhat and *a third kind of nature* resulted.”¹⁸ Consequently, in this view, Jesus emerges with one nature, not two, his one nature being a mixture of the divine and human natures. This view is still alive within the wider Church, being the perspective of Coptic and Ethiopic / Abyssinian churches.

How to Articulate the Two Natures of Christ

In terms of church history, it wasn’t until 451 A.D. that the Church arrived at an orthodox consensus on how to articulate the two natures of Christ. This was achieved at the Council of Chalcedon. The statement that resolved the difficulties for all branches of the Christian Church reads as follows:

We, then, following the holy 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 [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [coessential]² with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten,

¹⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 555.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 556.

to be acknowledged in two natures,⁴ *inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably*; 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 persons, 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 Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.¹⁹

Grudem summarizes how the Chalcedonian Creed addresses the range of heretical approaches to the two natures of Christ:

Against the view of Apollinaris that Christ did not have a human mind or soul, we have the statement that he was “*truly man of a reasonable soul and body ... consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us.*” (The word *consubstantial* means “having the same nature or substance.”)

In opposition to the view of Nestorianism that Christ was two persons united in one body, we have the words “*indivisibly, inseparably ... concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons.*”

Against the view of Monophysitism that Christ had only one nature, and that his human nature was lost in the union with the divine nature, we have the words “to be acknowledged in *two natures inconfusedly, unchangeably ... the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved.*” The human and the divine natures were not confused or changed when Christ became man, but the human nature remained a truly human nature, and the divine nature remained a truly divine nature.²⁰

Difficult as it is to affirm both of Christ’s natures, the New Testament does in fact teach that Jesus was both one hundred percent man and one hundred percent God. Like the doctrine of the Trinity, we may not be able to completely understand how this works, but if our theology is to be biblically-based, this is the conclusion toward which we are driven.

¹⁹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes: The Greek and Latin Creeds, with Translations* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 63. Italics are from the source translation.

²⁰ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 557.