

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

The Person of Christ

How is Jesus fully God and fully man, yet one person?

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1

EXPLANATION AND SCRIPTURAL BASIS

We may summarize the biblical teaching about the person of Christ as follows: *Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man in one person and will be so forever.*

The scriptural material supporting this definition is extensive. We will discuss first the humanity of Christ, then his deity, and then attempt to show how Jesus' deity and humanity are united in the one person of Christ.

A. THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

1. Virgin Birth

When we speak of the humanity of Christ it is appropriate to begin with a consideration of the virgin birth of Christ. Scripture clearly asserts that Jesus was conceived in the womb of his mother Mary by a miraculous work of the Holy Spirit and without a human father.

"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*" (Matt. 1:18). Shortly after that, an angel of the Lord said to Joseph, who was engaged to Mary, "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*" (Matt. 1:20). Then we read that Joseph "did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus" (Matt. 1:24–25).

The same fact is affirmed in Luke's gospel, where we read about the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary. After the angel had told her that she would bear a son, Mary said, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel answered,

The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;

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therefore the child to be born will be called holy —
the Son of God. (Luke 1:35; cf. 3:23)

The doctrinal importance of the virgin birth is seen in at least three areas. First, it shows that salvation ultimately must come from the Lord. Just as God had promised that the “seed” of the woman (Gen. 3:15) would ultimately destroy the serpent, so God brought it about by his own power, not through mere human effort. The virgin birth of Christ is an unmistakable reminder that salvation can never come through human effort, but must be the work of God himself. Our salvation only comes about through the supernatural work of God, and that was evident at the very beginning of Jesus’ life when “God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4–5).

Second, the virgin birth made possible the uniting of full deity and full humanity in one person. This was the means God used to send his Son (John 3:16; Gal. 4:4) into the world as a man. If we think for a moment of other possible ways in which Christ might have come to the earth, none of them would so clearly unite humanity and deity in one person. It probably would have been possible for God to create Jesus as a complete human being in heaven and send him to descend from heaven to earth without the benefit of any human parent. But then it would have been very hard for us to see how Jesus could be fully human as we are, nor would he be a part of the human race that physically descended from Adam. On the other hand, it probably would have been possible for God to have Jesus come into the world with two human parents, both a father and a mother, and with his full divine nature miraculously united to his human nature at some point early in his life. But then it would have been hard for us to understand how Jesus was fully God, since his origin was like ours in every way. When we think of these two other possibilities, it helps us to understand how God, in his wisdom, ordained a combination of human and divine influence in the birth of Christ, so that his full humanity would be evident to us from the fact of his ordinary human birth from a human mother, and his full deity would be evident from the fact of his conception in Mary’s womb by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit.¹

Third, the virgin birth also makes possible Christ’s true humanity without inherited sin. As we noted in chapter 24, all human beings have inherited legal guilt and a corrupt moral nature from their first father, Adam (this is sometimes called “inherited sin” or

¹ This is not to say that it would have been *impossible* for God to bring Christ into the world in any other way, but only to say that God, in his wisdom, decided that this would be the best way to bring it about, and part of that is evident in the fact that the virgin birth does help us understand how Jesus can be fully God and fully man. Whether any other means of bringing Christ into the world would have been “possible” in some absolute sense of “possible,” Scripture does not tell us.

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“original sin”). But the fact that Jesus did not have a human father means that the line of descent from Adam is partially interrupted. Jesus did not descend from Adam in exactly the same way in which every other human being has descended from Adam. And this helps us to understand why the legal guilt and moral corruption that belongs to all other human beings did not belong to Christ.

This idea seems to be indicated in the statement of the angel Gabriel to Mary, where he says to her,

The Holy Spirit will come upon you,
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you;
therefore the child to be born will be called holy —
the Son of God. (Luke 1:35)

Because the Spirit brought about the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary, the child was to be called “holy.”² Such a conclusion does not necessarily mean that the transmission of sin in the human race comes only through the father, for Scripture nowhere makes such an assertion. It is enough for us merely to say that *in this case* the unbroken line of descent from Adam was interrupted, and Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Luke 1:35 connects this conception by the Holy Spirit with the holiness or moral purity of Christ, and reflection on that fact allows us to understand that through the absence of a human father, Jesus was not fully descended from Adam and

² I have quoted here the translation of the ESV, which I think to be correct (so NIV margin). But it is also grammatically possible to translate the words as “so the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (NIV; similarly, NASB). The Greek phrase is *dio kai to gennōmenon hagion klēthēsetai, huios theou*. The decision on which translation is correct depends on whether we take *to gennōmenon* as the subject, meaning “the child to be born,” or whether we think that the subject is *hagion*, “the holy one,” with the participle *gennōmenon* then functioning as an adjective, giving the sense “the being-born holy one” (this is the way the NIV and NASB understand it).

Recently, more extensive lexical research seems to indicate that the expression *to gennōmenon* was a fairly common expression that was readily understood to mean “the child to be born.” Examples of this use can be seen in Plotinus, *Nead*, 3.6.20–24; Plato, *Menexenus*, 237E; *Laws*, 6,775C; Philo, *On the Creation*, 100; *On the Change of Names*, 267; Plutarch, *Moralia*, “Advice to Bride and Groom,” 140F; “On Affection for Offspring,” 495E. More examples could probably be found with a more extensive computer search, but these should be sufficient to demonstrate that the mere grammatical possibility of translating Luke 1:35 the way the NIV and NASB do is not a strong argument in favor of their translations, because Greek-speaking readers in the first century would ordinarily have understood the two-word expression *to gennōmenon* as a unit meaning “the child to be born.” Because of this fact, the ESV represents the sense that first-century readers would have understood from the sentence: “therefore *the child to be born* will be called holy.” (I discovered these examples of *to gennōmenon* by searching the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae data base on the Ibycus computer at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.)

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that this break in the line of descent was the method God used to bring it about that Jesus was fully human yet did not share inherited sin from Adam.

But why did Jesus not inherit a sinful nature from Mary? The Roman Catholic Church answers this question by saying that Mary herself was free from sin, but Scripture nowhere teaches this, and it would not really solve the problem anyway (for why then did Mary not inherit sin from her mother?).³ A better solution is to say that the work of the Holy Spirit in Mary must have prevented not only the transmission of sin from Joseph (for Jesus had no human father) but also, in a miraculous way, the transmission of sin from Mary: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you ... *therefore* the child to be born will be called *holy*” (Luke 1:35).

It has been common, at least in previous generations, for those who do not accept the complete truthfulness of Scripture to deny the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ. But if our beliefs are to be governed by the statements of Scripture, then we will certainly not deny this teaching. Whether or not we could discern any aspects of doctrinal importance for this teaching, we should believe it first of all simply because Scripture affirms it. Certainly such a miracle is not too hard for the God who created the universe and everything in it—anyone who affirms that a virgin birth is “impossible” is just confessing his or her own unbelief in the God of the Bible. Yet in addition to the fact that Scripture teaches the virgin birth, we can see that it is doctrinally important, and if we are to understand the biblical teaching on the person of Christ correctly, it is important that we begin with an affirmation of this doctrine.

³ The Roman Catholic Church teaches the doctrine of the *immaculate conception*. This doctrine does not refer to the conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb but to the conception of *Mary* in her mother’s womb, and it teaches that Mary was free from inherited sin. On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius IX proclaimed, “The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception ... preserved immune from all stain of original sin” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 491). The Catholic Church also teaches that “By the grace of God Mary remained free of every personal sin her whole life long” (*ibid.*, paragraph 493).

In response, we must say that the New Testament does highly honor Mary as one who has “found favor with God” (Luke 1:30) and one who is “Blessed ... among women” (Luke 1:42), but nowhere does the Bible indicate that Mary was free from inherited sin (original sin). The expression, “Greetings, O *favored one*, the Lord is with you!” (Luke 1:28) does not mean that Mary was “full of grace” but simply means that Mary has found much blessing from God; the same word translated “favored” in Luke 1:28 (Gk. *charitoō*) is used to refer to all Christians in Eph. 1:6 (RSV): “his glorious grace which he *freely bestowed* on us in the Beloved.” In fact, Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch (Rockford: Tan, 1960), says, “The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of Mary is not explicitly revealed in Scripture” (p. 200), though he thinks it is implicit in Gen. 3:15 and Luke 1:28, 41.

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2. Human Weaknesses and Limitations

a. Jesus Had a Human Body. The fact that Jesus had a human body just like our human bodies is seen in many passages of Scripture. He was born just as all human babies are born (Luke 2:7). He grew through childhood to adulthood just as other children grow: “And the child *grew and became strong*, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40). Moreover, Luke tells us that “Jesus increased in wisdom *and in stature* and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52).

Jesus became tired just as we do, for we read that “Jesus, *wearied* as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well” in Samaria (John 4:6). He became thirsty, for when he was on the cross he said, “I *thirst*” (John 19:28). After he had fasted for forty days in the wilderness, we read that “he was *hungry*” (Matt. 4:2). He was at times physically weak, for during his temptation in the wilderness he fasted for forty days (the point at which a human being’s physical strength is almost entirely gone and beyond which irreparable physical harm will occur if the fast continues). At that time “angels came and were ministering to him” (Matt. 4:11), apparently to care for him and provide nourishment until he regained enough strength to come out of the wilderness. When Jesus was on his way to be crucified, the soldiers forced Simon of Cyrene to carry his cross (Luke 23:26), most likely because Jesus was so weak following the beating he had received that he did not have strength enough to carry it. The culmination of Jesus’ limitations in terms of his human body is seen when he died on the cross (Luke 23:46). His human body ceased to have life in it and ceased to function, just as ours does when we die.

Jesus also rose from the dead in a physical, human body, though one that was made perfect and was no longer subject to weakness, disease, or death. He demonstrates repeatedly to his disciples that he does have a real physical body. He says, “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. *For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have*” (Luke 24:39). He is showing them and teaching them that he has “flesh and bones” and is not merely a “spirit” without a body. Another evidence of this fact is that “they gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them” (Luke 24:42–43; cf. v. 30; John 20:17, 20, 27; 21:9, 13).

In this same human body (though a resurrection body that was made perfect), Jesus also ascended into heaven. He said before he left, “I am leaving the world and going to the Father” (John 16:28; cf. 17:11). The way in which Jesus ascended up to heaven was calculated to demonstrate the continuity between his existence in a physical body here on earth and his continuing existence in that body in heaven. Just a few verses after Jesus had told them, “A spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39), we read in Luke’s gospel that Jesus “led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up

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his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them and was carried up into heaven” (Luke 24:50–51). Similarly, we read in Acts, “As they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight” (Acts 1:9).

All of these verses taken together show that, as far as Jesus’ human body is concerned, it was like ours in every respect before his resurrection, and after his resurrection it was still a human body with “flesh and bones” but made perfect, the kind of body that we will have when Christ returns and we are raised from the dead as well.⁴ Jesus continues to exist in that human body in heaven, as the ascension is designed to teach.

b. Jesus Had a Human Mind. The fact that Jesus “*increased in wisdom*” (Luke 2:52) says that he went through a learning process just as all other children do—he learned how to eat, how to talk, how to read and write, and how to be obedient to his parents (see Heb. 5:8). This ordinary learning process was part of the genuine humanity of Christ.

We also see that Jesus had a human mind like ours when he speaks of the day on which he will return to earth: “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32).⁵

c. Jesus Had a Human Soul and Human Emotions. We see several indications that Jesus had a human soul (or spirit). Just before his crucifixion, Jesus said, “Now is my soul *troubled*” (John 12:27). John writes just a little later, “After saying these things, Jesus was *troubled* in his spirit” (John 13:21). In both verses the word *troubled* represents the Greek term *tarassō*, a word that is often used of people when they are anxious or suddenly very surprised by danger.⁶

Moreover, before Jesus’ crucifixion, as he realized the suffering he would face, he said, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death” (Matt. 26:38). So great was the sorrow he felt that it seemed as though, if it were to become any stronger, it would take his very life.

Jesus had a full range of human emotions. He “*marveled*” at the faith of the centurion (Matt. 8:10). He wept with sorrow at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35). And he prayed

⁴ See chapter 28, pp. 753–54, and chapter 42, pp. 1021–26, on the nature of the resurrection body.

⁵ See further discussion of this verse below, pp. 698–700.

⁶ The word *tarassō*, “troubled,” is used, for example, to speak of the fact that Herod was “troubled” when he heard that the wise men had come looking for the new king of the Jews (Matt. 2:3); the disciples “were troubled” when they suddenly saw Jesus walking on the sea and thought he was a ghost (Matt. 14:26); Zechariah was “troubled” when he suddenly saw an angel appear in the temple in Jerusalem (Luke 1:12); and the disciples were “troubled” when Jesus suddenly appeared among them after his resurrection (Luke 24:38). But the word is also used in John 14:1, 27, when Jesus says, “Let not your hearts be *troubled*.” When Jesus was troubled in his spirit, therefore, we must not think that there was any lack of faith or any sin involved, but it was definitely a strong human emotion that accompanied a time of extreme danger.

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with a heart full of emotion, for “in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, *with loud cries and tears*, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence” (Heb. 5:7).

Moreover, the author tells us, “Although he was a son, *he learned obedience* through what he suffered. And being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him” (Heb. 5:8–9). Yet if Jesus never sinned, how could he “learn obedience”? Apparently as Jesus grew toward maturity he, like all other human children, was able to take on more and more responsibility. The older he became, the more demands his father and mother could place on him in terms of obedience, and the more difficult the tasks that his heavenly Father could assign to him to carry out in the strength of his human nature. With each increasingly difficult task, even when it involved some suffering (as Heb. 5:8 specifies), Jesus’ human moral ability, his ability to obey under more and more difficult circumstances, increased. We might say that his “moral backbone” was strengthened by more and more difficult exercise. Yet in all this he never once sinned.

The complete absence of sin in the life of Jesus is all the more remarkable because of the severe temptations he faced, not only in the wilderness but throughout his life. The author of Hebrews affirms that Jesus “*in every respect* has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). The fact that he faced temptation means that he had a genuine human nature that could be tempted, for Scripture clearly tells us that “God cannot be tempted with evil” (James 1:13).

d. People Near Jesus Saw Him as Only a Man. Matthew reports an amazing incident in the middle of Jesus’ ministry. Even though Jesus had taught throughout all Galilee, “healing every disease and every affliction among the people” so that “great crowds followed him” (Matt. 4:23–25), when he came to his own village of Nazareth, the people who had known him for many years did not receive him:

And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “*Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?*” And *they took offense at him....* And he did not do many mighty works there, *because of their unbelief.* (Matt. 13:53–58)

This passage indicates that those people who knew Jesus best, the neighbors with whom he had lived and worked for thirty years, saw him as no more than an ordinary man—a good man, no doubt, fair and kind and truthful, but certainly not a prophet of God who

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could work miracles and certainly not God himself in the flesh. Although in the following sections we will see how Jesus was fully divine in every way—he was truly God and man in one person—we must still recognize the full force of a passage like this. For the first thirty years of his life Jesus lived a human life that was so ordinary that the people of Nazareth who knew him best were amazed that he could teach with authority and work miracles. They knew him. He was one of them. He was “the carpenter’s son” (Matt. 13:55), and he was himself “the carpenter” (Mark 6:3), so ordinary that they could ask, “Where then did this man get all these things?” (Matt. 13:56). And John tells us, “*not even his brothers believed in him*” (John 7:5).

Was Jesus fully human? He was so fully human that even those who lived and worked with him for thirty years, even those brothers who grew up in his own household, did not realize that he was anything more than another very good human being. They apparently had no idea that he was God come in the flesh.

3. Sinlessness

Though the New Testament clearly affirms that Jesus was fully human just as we are, it also affirms that Jesus was different in one important respect: he was without sin. Some have objected that if Jesus did not sin, then he was not *truly* human, for all humans sin. But those making that objection simply fail to realize that human beings are now in an *abnormal* situation. God did not create us sinful, but holy and righteous. Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden before they sinned were *truly* human, and we now, though human, do not match the pattern that God intends for us when our full, sinless humanity is restored.

The sinlessness of Jesus is taught frequently in the New Testament. We see suggestions of this early in his life when he was “filled with wisdom” and “the favor of God was upon him” (Luke 2:40). Then we see that Satan was unable to tempt Jesus successfully and failed, after forty days, to persuade him to sin: “When the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13). We also see in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) no evidence of wrongdoing on Jesus’ part. To the Jews who opposed him, Jesus asked, “Which one of you convicts me of sin?” (John 8:46), and he received no answer.

The statements about Jesus’ sinlessness are more explicit in John’s gospel. Jesus made the amazing proclamation, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). If we understand light to represent both truthfulness and moral purity, then Jesus is here claiming to be the source of truth and the source of moral purity and holiness in the world—an astounding claim, and one that could only be made by someone who was free from sin. Moreover, with regard to obedience to his Father in heaven, he said, “I always do the things that are

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pleasing to him” (John 8:29; the present tense gives the sense of continual activity, “I *am always doing* what is pleasing to him”). At the end of his life, Jesus could say, “I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10). It is significant that when Jesus was put on trial before Pilate, in spite of the accusations of the Jews, Pilate could only conclude, “I find no guilt in him” (John 18:38).

In the book of Acts Jesus is several times called the “Holy One” or the “Righteous One” or is referred to with some similar expression (see Acts 2:27; 3:14; 4:30; 7:52; 13:35). When Paul speaks of Jesus coming to live as a man he is careful not to say that he took on “sinful flesh” but rather says that God sent his own Son “*in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin*” (Rom. 8:3). And he refers to Jesus as “him ... who knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21).

The author of Hebrews affirms that Jesus was tempted but simultaneously insists that he did not sin: Jesus is “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, *yet without sin*” (Heb. 4:15). He is a high priest who is “holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens” (Heb. 7:26). Peter speaks of Jesus as “a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:19), using Old Testament imagery to affirm his freedom from any moral defilement. Peter directly states, “*He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth*” (1 Peter 2:22). When Jesus died, it was “the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18). And John, in his first epistle, calls him “Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 John 2:1) and says, “In him there is no sin” (1 John 3:5). It is hard to deny, then, that the sinlessness of Christ is taught clearly in all the major sections of the New Testament. He was truly man yet without sin.

In connection with Jesus’ sinlessness, we should notice in more detail the nature of his temptations in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13). The essence of these temptations was an attempt to persuade Jesus to escape from the hard path of obedience and suffering that was appointed for him as the Messiah. Jesus was “led by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil” (Luke 4:1–2). In many respects this temptation was parallel to the testing that Adam and Eve faced in the garden of Eden, but it was much more difficult. Adam and Eve had fellowship with God and with each other and had an abundance of all kinds of food, for they were only told not to eat from one tree. By contrast, Jesus had no human fellowship and no food to eat, and after he had fasted for forty days he was near the point of physical death. In both cases the kind of obedience required was not obedience to an eternal moral principle rooted in the character of God, but was a test of pure obedience to God’s specific directive. With Adam and Eve, God told them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the question was whether they would obey simply because God told them. In the case of Jesus, who was “led by the Spirit” for forty days in the wilderness, he apparently

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realized that it was the Father's will⁷ that he eat nothing during those days but simply remain there until the Father, through the leading of the Holy Spirit, told him that the temptations were over and he could leave.

We can understand, then, the force of the temptation, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread" (Luke 4:3). Of course Jesus was the Son of God, and of course he had the power to make any stone into bread instantly. He was the one who would soon change water into wine and multiply the loaves and the fishes. The temptation was intensified by the fact that it seemed as though, if he did not eat soon, his very life would be taken from him. Yet he had come to obey God perfectly in our place, and to do so *as a man*. This meant that he had to obey in his human strength alone. If he had called upon his divine powers to make the temptation easier for himself, then he would not have obeyed God fully *as a man*. The temptation was to use his divine power to "cheat" a bit on the requirements and make obedience somewhat easier. But Jesus, unlike Adam and Eve, refused to eat what appeared to be good and necessary for him, choosing rather to obey the command of his heavenly Father.

The temptation to bow down and worship Satan for a moment and then receive authority over "all the kingdoms of the world" (Luke 4:5) was a temptation to receive power not through the path of lifelong obedience to his heavenly Father but through wrongful submission to the Prince of Darkness. Again, Jesus rejected the apparently easy path and chose the path of obedience that led to the cross.

Similarly, the temptation to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the temple (Luke 4:9–11) was a temptation to "force" God to perform a miracle and rescue him in a spectacular way, thus attracting a large following from the people without pursuing the hard path ahead, the path that included three years of ministering to people's needs, teaching with authority, and exemplifying absolute holiness of life in the midst of harsh opposition. But Jesus again resisted this "easy route" to the fulfillment of his goals as the Messiah (again, a route that would not actually have fulfilled those goals in any case).

These temptations were really the culmination of a lifelong process of moral strengthening and maturing that occurred throughout Jesus' childhood and early adulthood, as he "increased in wisdom ... and in favor with God" (Luke 2:52) and as he "*learned obedience through what he suffered*" (Heb. 5:8). In these temptations in the

⁷ I say "the Father's will" because Jesus' whole life was lived in obedience to his heavenly Father. "He who sent me is with me.... I always do the things that are pleasing to him" (John 8:29); "I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do" (John 17:4); "Behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased' " (Matt. 3:17). Another reason is the parallel with the temptation of Adam and Eve in Gen. 3.

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wilderness and in the various temptations that faced him through the thirty-three years of his life, Christ obeyed God in our place and as our representative, thus succeeding where Adam had failed, where the people of Israel in the wilderness had failed, and where we had failed (see Rom. 5:18–19).

As difficult as it may be for us to comprehend, Scripture affirms that in these temptations Jesus gained an ability to understand and help us in our temptations. “*Because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted*” (Heb. 2:18). The author goes on to connect Jesus’ ability to sympathize with our weaknesses to the fact that he was tempted as we are: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then [lit., ‘therefore’] with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15–16).

This has practical application for us: in every situation in which we are struggling with temptation, we should reflect on the life of Christ and ask if there were not similar situations that he faced. Usually, after reflecting for a moment or two, we will be able to think of some instances in the life of Christ where he faced temptations that, though they were not the same in every detail, were very similar to the situations that we face every day.⁸

4. Could Jesus Have Sinned?

The question is sometimes raised, “Was it possible for Christ to have sinned?” Some people argue for the *impeccability* of Christ, in which the word *impeccable* means “not able to sin.”⁹ Others object that if Jesus were not able to sin, his temptations could not have been real, for how can a temptation be real if the person being tempted is not able to sin anyway?

⁸ Particularly with respect to family life, it is helpful to remember that Joseph is nowhere mentioned in the Gospels after the incident in the temple when Jesus was twelve years old. It is especially interesting that Joseph is omitted from the verses that list Jesus’ mother and other family members, even naming his brothers and sisters (see Matt. 13:55–56; Mark 6:3; cf. Matt. 12:48). It would seem very strange, for example, that “the mother of Jesus” was at the wedding at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1) but not his father, if his father were still living (cf. John 2:12). This suggests that sometime after Jesus was twelve Joseph had died, and that for a period in his life Jesus grew up in a “single-parent home.” This would mean that, as he became older, he assumed more and more of the responsibility of male leadership in that family, earning a living as a “carpenter” (Mark 6:3) and no doubt helping care for his younger brothers and sisters as well. Therefore, although Jesus was never married, he no doubt experienced a wide range of family situations and conflicts similar to those experienced by families today.

⁹ The Latin word *peccare* means “to sin.”

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In order to answer this question we must distinguish what Scripture clearly affirms, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, what is more in the nature of possible inference on our part. (1) Scripture clearly affirms that Christ never actually sinned (see above). There should be no question in our minds at all on this fact. (2) It also clearly affirms that Jesus was tempted, and that these were real temptations (Luke 4:2). If we believe Scripture, then we must insist that Christ *“in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin”* (Heb. 4:15). If our speculation on the question of whether Christ could have sinned ever leads us to say that he was not truly tempted, then we have reached a wrong conclusion, one that contradicts the clear statements of Scripture. (3) We also must affirm with Scripture that *“God cannot be tempted with evil”* (James 1:13). But here the question becomes difficult: if Jesus was fully God as well as fully man (and we shall argue below that Scripture clearly and repeatedly teaches this), then must we not also affirm that (in some sense) Jesus also *“could not be tempted with evil”*?

This is as far as we can go in terms of clear and explicit affirmations of Scripture. At this point we are faced with a dilemma similar to a number of other doctrinal dilemmas where Scripture seems to be teaching things that are, if not directly contradictory, at least very difficult to combine together in our understanding. For example, with respect to the doctrine of the Trinity, we affirmed that God exists in three persons, and each is fully God, and there is one God. Although those statements are not contradictory, they are, nonetheless, difficult to understand in connection with each other, and although we can make some progress in understanding how they fit together, we have to admit that there can be no final understanding on our part, in this life at least. Here the situation is somewhat similar. We do not have an actual contradiction. Scripture does not tell us that *“Jesus was tempted”* and that *“Jesus was not tempted”* (a contradiction if *“Jesus”* and *“tempted”* are used exactly in the same sense in both sentences). The Bible tells us that *“Jesus was tempted”* and *“Jesus was fully man”* and *“Jesus was fully God”* and *“God cannot be tempted.”* This combination of teachings from Scripture leaves open the possibility that as we understand the way Jesus' human nature and divine nature work together, we might understand more of the way in which he could be tempted in one sense and yet, in another sense, not be tempted. (This possibility will be discussed further below.)

At this point, then, we pass beyond the clear affirmations of Scripture and attempt to suggest a solution to the problem of whether Christ could have sinned. But it is important to recognize that the following solution is more in the nature of a suggested means of combining various biblical teachings and is not directly supported by explicit statements

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of Scripture. With this in mind, it is appropriate for us to say:¹⁰ (1) If Jesus' human nature had existed by itself, independent of his divine nature, then it would have been a human nature just like that which God gave Adam and Eve. It would have been free from sin but nonetheless *able to sin*. Therefore, if Jesus' human nature had existed by itself, there was the abstract or theoretical possibility that Jesus could have sinned, just as Adam and Eve's human natures were able to sin. (2) But Jesus' human nature never existed apart from union with his divine nature. From the moment of his conception, he existed as truly God and truly man as well. Both his human nature and his divine nature existed while united in one person. (3) Although there were some things (such as being hungry or thirsty or weak) that Jesus experienced in his human nature alone and were not experienced in his divine nature (see below), nonetheless, an act of sin would have been a moral act that would apparently have involved the whole person of Christ. Therefore, if he had sinned, it would have involved both his human and divine natures. (4) But if Jesus as a person had sinned, involving both his human and divine natures in sin, then God himself would have sinned, and he would have ceased to be God. Yet that is clearly impossible because of the infinite holiness of God's nature. (5) Therefore, if we are asking if it was *actually* possible for Jesus to have sinned, it seems that we must conclude that it was not possible. The union of his human and divine natures in one person prevented it.

But the question remains, "How then could Jesus' temptations be real?" The example of the temptation to change the stones into bread is helpful in this regard. Jesus had the ability, by virtue of his divine nature, to perform this miracle, but if he had done it, he would no longer have been obeying in the strength of his human nature alone, he would have failed the test that Adam also failed, and he would not have earned our salvation for us. Therefore, Jesus refused to rely on his divine nature to make obedience easier for him. In like manner, it seems appropriate to conclude that Jesus met every temptation to sin not by his divine power but on the strength of his human nature alone (though, of course, it was not "alone" because Jesus, in exercising the kind of faith that humans should exercise, was perfectly depending on God the Father and the Holy Spirit at every moment). The moral strength of his divine nature was there as a sort of "backstop" that would have prevented him from sinning in any case (and therefore we can say that it was not possible for him to sin), but he did not rely on the strength of his divine nature to make it easier for him to face temptations,¹¹ and his refusal to turn the stones into bread at the beginning of his ministry is a clear indication of this.

¹⁰ In this discussion I am largely following the conclusions of Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 339–42.

¹¹ Two other examples can also illustrate this: a swimmer who swims across the English Channel accompanied by a rescue boat but never uses the rescue boat for help, and a tightrope walker who has a safety net below but never falls into it.

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Were the temptations real then? Many theologians have pointed out that only he who successfully resists a temptation to the end most fully feels the force of that temptation. Just as a champion weightlifter who successfully lifts and holds over head the heaviest weight in the contest feels the force of it more fully than one who attempts to lift it and drops it, so any Christian who has successfully faced a temptation to the end knows that that is far more difficult than giving in to it at once. So it was with Jesus: every temptation he faced, he faced to the end, and triumphed over it. The temptations were real, even though he did not give in to them. In fact, they were most real *because* he did not give in to them.

What then do we say about the fact that “God cannot be tempted with evil” (James 1:13)? It seems that this is one of a number of things that we must affirm to be true of Jesus’ divine nature but not of his human nature. His divine nature could not be tempted with evil, but his human nature could be tempted and was tempted. How these two natures united in one person in facing temptations, Scripture does not clearly explain to us. But this distinction between what is true of one nature and what is true of another nature is an example of a number of similar statements that Scripture requires us to make (see more on this distinction when we discuss how Jesus could be God and man in one person, pp. 690–700).

5. Why Was Jesus’ Full Humanity Necessary?

When John wrote his first epistle, a heretical teaching was circulating in the church to the effect that Jesus was not a man. This heresy became known as *docetism*.¹² 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 that confesses *that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh* is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist” (1 John 4:2–3). The apostle John understood that to deny Jesus’ true 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.

¹² The word *docetism* comes from the Greek verb *dokeō*, “to seem, to appear to be.” Any theological position that says that Jesus was not really a man, but only appeared to be a man, is called a “docetic” position. Behind docetism is an assumption that the material creation is inherently evil, and therefore the Son of God could not have been united to a true human nature. No prominent church leader ever advocated docetism, but it was a troublesome heresy that had various supporters in the first four centuries of the church. Modern evangelicals who neglect to teach on the full humanity of Christ can unwittingly support docetic tendencies in their hearers.

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As we look through the New Testament, we see several reasons why Jesus had to be fully man if he was going to be the Messiah and earn our salvation. We can list seven of those reasons here.

a. For Representative Obedience. As we noted in the chapter on the covenants between God and man above,¹³ Jesus was our representative and obeyed for us where Adam had failed and disobeyed. We see this in the parallels between Jesus' temptation (Luke 4:1–13) and the time of testing for Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen. 2:15–3:7). It is also clearly reflected in Paul's discussion of the parallels between Adam and Christ, in Adam's disobedience and Christ's obedience: "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so *one act of righteousness* leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so *by the one man's obedience* the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:18–19). This is why Paul can call Christ "the last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45) and can call Adam the "first man" and Christ the "second man" (1 Cor. 15:47). Jesus had to be a man in order to be our representative and obey in our place.

b. To Be a Substitute Sacrifice. If Jesus had not been a man, he could not have died in our place and paid the penalty that was due to us. The author of Hebrews tells us that "for surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he *had to* be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:16–17; cf. v. 14). Jesus had to become a man, not an angel, because God was concerned with saving men, not with saving angels. But to do this he "had to" be made like us in every way so that he might become "the propitiation" for us, the sacrifice that is an acceptable substitute for us. Though this idea will be discussed more fully in chapter 27, on the atonement, it is important here to realize that unless Christ was fully man, he could not have died to pay the penalty for man's sins. He could not have been a substitute sacrifice for us.

c. To Be the One Mediator between God and Human Beings. Because we were alienated from God by sin, we needed someone to come between God and us to bring us back to him. We needed a mediator who could represent us to God and who could represent God to us. There is only one person who has ever fulfilled that requirement: "There is one God, and *there is one mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).¹⁴ In order to fulfill this role of mediator, Jesus had to be fully man as well as fully God.

¹³ See chapter 25, pp. 650–51; also chapter 27, pp. 707–9.

¹⁴ For reasons that I explained in chapter 22 (p. 589), I have continued in this book to use the singular word *man* to refer to the entire human race. But I have not used the plural word *men* to mean "people" or

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d. To Fulfill God's Original Purpose for Man to Rule Over Creation. As we saw in the discussion of the purpose for which God created man,¹⁵ God put mankind on the earth to subdue it and rule over it as God's representatives. But mankind did not fulfill that purpose but fell into sin. The author of Hebrews realizes that God intended everything to be in subjection to man, but he admits, "At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him" (Heb. 2:8). Then when Jesus came as a man, he was able to obey God and thereby have the right to rule over creation *as a man*, thus fulfilling God's original purpose in putting man on the earth. Hebrews recognizes this when it says that now "we see him [Jesus]" in the place of authority over the universe, "crowned with glory and honor" (Heb. 2:9; cf. the same phrase in v. 7). Jesus in fact has been given "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18), and God has "put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1:22). Indeed, we shall someday reign with him on his throne (Rev. 3:21) and experience, in subjection to Christ our Lord, the fulfillment of God's purpose that we reign over the earth (cf. Luke 19:17, 19; 1 Cor. 6:3). Jesus had to be a man in order to fulfill God's original purpose that man rule over his creation.

e. To Be Our Example and Pattern in Life. John tells us, "Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk *in the same way in which he walked*" (1 John 2:6), and reminds us, "when he appears we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2–3). This hope of future conformity to Christ's character even now gives increasing moral purity to our lives. Paul tells us that we are continually being "transformed into the same image" (2 Cor. 3:18), thus moving toward the goal for which God saved us, that we might "be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). Peter tells us that especially in suffering we have to consider Christ's example: "Christ also suffered for you, *leaving you an example*, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21). Throughout our Christian life, we are to run the race set before us "looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). If we become discouraged by the hostility and opposition of sinners, we are to "consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself" (Heb. 12:3). Jesus is also our example in death. Paul's goal is to become "*like him in his death*" (Phil. 3:10; cf. Acts 7:60; 1 Peter 3:17–18 with 4:1). Our goal should be to be like Christ all our days, up to the point of death, and to die with unflinching obedience to God, with strong trust in him and with love

"human beings" generally, except here in discussing 1 Tim. 2:5. I believe the ESV translation (which I have quoted here) is correct when it speaks of "one mediator between God and *men*, the *man* Christ Jesus," because the combination "men ... man" faithfully represents the fact that Greek *anthrōpos* ("man, human being") is used twice in this verse, once to refer to human beings generally, and once to refer to Christ.

¹⁵ See chapter 15, pp. 347–49, and chapter 21, pp. 565–67.

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and forgiveness to others. Jesus had to become a man like us to live as our example and pattern.

f. To Be the Pattern for Our Redeemed Bodies. Paul tells us that when Jesus rose from the dead, he rose in a new body that was “imperishable ... raised in glory ... raised in power ... raised a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:42–44). This new resurrection body that Jesus had when he rose from the dead is the pattern for what our bodies will be like when we are raised from the dead, because Christ is “the firstfruits” (1 Cor. 15:23)—an agricultural metaphor that likens Christ to the first sample of the harvest, showing what the other fruit from that harvest would be like. We now have a physical body like Adam’s, but we will have one like Christ’s: “Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49). Jesus had to be raised as a man in order to be the “firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:18), the pattern for the bodies that we would later have.

g. To Sympathize as High Priest. The author of Hebrews reminds us that “because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Heb. 2:18; cf. 4:15–16). If Jesus had not been a man, he would not have been able to know *by experience* what we go through in our temptations and struggles in this life. But because he has lived as a man, he is able to sympathize more fully with us in our experiences.¹⁶

6. Jesus Will Be a Man Forever

Jesus did not give up his human nature after his death and resurrection, for he appeared to his disciples as a man after the resurrection, even with the scars of the nail prints in his hands (John 20:25–27). He had “flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39) and ate food (Luke 24:41–42). Later, when he was talking with his disciples, he was taken up into heaven, still in his resurrected human body, and two angels promised that he would return in the same way: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, *will come in the same way* as

¹⁶ This is a difficult concept for us to understand, because we do not want to say that Jesus acquired additional knowledge or information by becoming man: certainly as omniscient God he knew every fact there was to know about the experience of human suffering. But the book of Hebrews does say, “*Because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted*” (Heb. 2:18), and we must insist that that statement is true—there is a relationship between Jesus’ suffering and his ability to sympathize with us and help us in temptation. Apparently the author is speaking not of any additional factual or intellectual knowledge, but of an ability to recall a personal experience that he had himself gone through, an ability he would not have if he had not had that personal experience. Some faint parallel to this might be seen in the fact that a man who is a medical doctor, and has perhaps even written a textbook on obstetrics, might know far more *information* about childbirth than any of his patients. Yet, because he is a man, he will never share in that actual experience. A woman who has herself had a baby (or, to give a closer parallel, a woman physician who first writes a textbook and then has a baby herself) can sympathize much more fully with other women who are having babies.

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you saw him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Still later, Stephen gazed into heaven and saw Jesus as “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:56). Jesus also appeared to Saul on the Damascus Road and said, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5)—an appearance that Saul (Paul) later coupled with the resurrection appearances of Jesus to others (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8). In John’s vision in Revelation, Jesus still appears as “one like a son of man” (Rev. 1:13), though he is filled with great glory and power, and his appearance causes John to fall at his feet in awe (Rev. 1:13–17). He promises one day to drink wine again with his disciples in his Father’s kingdom (Matt. 26:29) and invites us to a great marriage supper in heaven (Rev. 19:9). Moreover, Jesus will continue forever in his offices as prophet, priest, and king, all of them carried out by virtue of the fact that he is both God and man forever.¹⁷

All of these texts indicate that Jesus did not *temporarily* become man but that his divine nature was *permanently* united to his human nature. He lives forever not just as the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, but also as Jesus, the man who was born of Mary, and as Christ, the Messiah and Savior of his people. Jesus will remain fully God and fully man yet one person forever.

B. THE DEITY OF CHRIST

To complete the biblical teaching about Jesus Christ, we must affirm not only that he was fully human but also that he was fully divine. Although the word does not explicitly occur in Scripture, the church has used the term *incarnation* to refer to the fact that Jesus was God in human flesh. The incarnation was the act of God the Son whereby he took to himself a human nature.¹⁸ The scriptural proof for the deity of Christ is very extensive in the New Testament. We shall examine it under several categories.¹⁹

¹⁷ See chapter 29, pp. 767–74, on the offices of Christ.

¹⁸ The Latin word *incarnāre* means “to make flesh” and is derived from the prefix *in-* (which has a causative sense, “to cause something to be something”) and the stem *caro, carnis-*, “flesh.”

¹⁹ In the following section I have not distinguished between claims to deity made by Jesus himself and claims made about him by others: while such a distinction is helpful for tracing development in people’s understanding of Christ, for our present purposes both kinds of statements are found in our canonical New Testament Scriptures and are valid sources for building Christian doctrine.

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1. Direct Scriptural Claims

In this section we examine direct statements of Scripture that Jesus is God or that he is divine.²⁰

a. The Word *God* (*Theos*) Used of Christ. Although the word *theos*, meaning “God,” is usually reserved in the New Testament for God the Father, there are several passages where it is also used to refer to Jesus Christ. In all of these passages the word *God* is used in the strong sense to refer to the one who is the Creator of heaven and earth, the ruler over all. These passages include John 1:1; 1:18 (in older and better manuscripts); 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8 (quoting Ps. 45:6); and 2 Peter 1:1.²¹ I have already discussed these passages in chapter 14, where I argued that each person in the Trinity is fully God, and readers may wish to review those pages briefly at this point.²² It is enough to note that there are at least these seven passages in the New Testament that clearly and explicitly refer to Jesus as God.

One Old Testament example of the name *God* applied to Christ is seen in a familiar messianic passage: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called, ‘Wonderful Counselor, *Mighty God*’ ” (Isa. 9:6).

b. The Word *Lord* (*Kyrios*) Used of Christ. Sometimes the word *Lord* (Gk. *kyrios*) is used simply as a polite address to a superior, roughly equivalent to our word *sir* (see Matt. 13:27; 21:30; 27:63; John 4:11). Sometimes it can simply mean “master” of a servant or slave (Matt. 6:24; 21:40).

Yet the same word is also used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was commonly used at the time of Christ) as a translation for the Hebrew *yhwh*, “Yahweh,” or (as it is frequently translated) “the LORD.” The word *kyrios* is used to translate the name of the Lord 6,814 times in the Greek Old Testament. Therefore, any Greek-speaking reader at the time of the New Testament who had any knowledge at all of the Greek Old Testament would have recognized that, in contexts

²⁰ An excellent discussion of New Testament evidence for the deity of Christ, drawn especially from the titles of Christ in the New Testament, is found in Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 235–365.

²¹ Titus 1:3, in connection with the fact that v. 4 calls Christ Jesus “our Savior” and the fact that it was Jesus Christ who commissioned Paul to preach the gospel, might also be considered another example of the use of the word *God* to refer to Christ.

²² See chapter 14, pp. 276–80, for discussion of passages that refer to Jesus as “God.” See also Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), for the most extensive exegetical treatment ever published dealing with New Testament passages that refer to Jesus as “God.”

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where it was appropriate, the word “Lord” was the name of the one who was the Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth, the omnipotent God.

Now there are many instances in the New Testament where *Lord* is used of Christ in what can only be understood as this strong Old Testament sense, “the Lord” who is Yahweh or God himself. This use of the word *Lord* is quite striking in the word of the angel to the shepherds of Bethlehem: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ *the Lord*” (Luke 2:11). Though these words are familiar to us from frequent reading of the Christmas story, we should realize how surprising it would be to any first-century Jew to hear that someone born as a baby was the “Christ” (or “Messiah”)²³ and, moreover, that this one who was the Messiah was also “the Lord” — that is, the Lord God himself! The amazing force of the angel’s statement, which the shepherds could hardly believe, was to say, essentially, “Today in Bethlehem a baby has been born who is your Savior and your Messiah, and who is also God himself.” It is not surprising that “all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them” (Luke 2:18).

When Mary comes to visit Elizabeth several months before Jesus is to be born, Elizabeth says, “Why is this granted to me that the mother of *my Lord* should come to me?” (Luke 1:43). Because Jesus was not even born, Elizabeth could not be using the word *Lord* to mean something like human “master.” She must rather be using it in the strong Old Testament sense, giving an amazing sense to the sentence: “Why is this granted me, that the mother of the Lord God himself should come to me?” Though this is a very strong statement, it is difficult to understand the word *Lord* in this context in any weaker sense.

We see another example when Matthew says that John the Baptist is the one who cries out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of *the Lord*; make his paths straight” (Matt. 3:3). In doing this John is quoting Isaiah 40:3, which speaks about the Lord God himself coming among his people. But the context applies this passage to John’s role of preparing the way for Jesus to come. The implication is that when Jesus comes, *the Lord himself* will come.

Jesus also identifies himself as the sovereign Lord of the Old Testament when he asks the Pharisees about Psalm 110:1, “The Lord said to *my Lord*, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’ ” (Matt. 22:44). The force of this statement is that “God the Father said to God the Son [David’s Lord], ‘Sit at my right hand.’ ” The Pharisees know he is talking about himself and identifying himself as one worthy of the Old Testament title *kyrios*, “Lord.”

²³ The word *Christ* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *Messiah*.

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Such usage is seen frequently in the Epistles, where “the Lord” is a common name to refer to Christ. Paul says, “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and *one Lord*, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6; cf. 12:3, and many other passages in the Pauline Epistles). Jesus is called “Lord” in this sense that affirms his deity over 400 times in the New Testament.²⁴

A particularly clear passage is found in Hebrews 1, where the author quotes Psalm 102, which speaks about the work of the Lord in creation and applies it to Christ:

You, *Lord*, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning,
and the heavens are the work of your hands;
they will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment,
like a robe you will roll them up,
like a garment they will be changed.
But you are the same,
and your years will have no end. (Heb. 1:10–12)

Here Christ is explicitly spoken of as the eternal Lord of heaven and earth who created all things and will remain the same forever. Such strong usage of the term *Lord* to refer to Christ culminates in Revelation 19:16, where we see Christ returning as conquering King, and “On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and *Lord of lords*.”

c. Other Strong Claims to Deity. In addition to the uses of the word *God* and *Lord* to refer to Christ, we have other passages that strongly claim deity for Christ. When Jesus told his Jewish opponents that Abraham had seen his (Christ’s) day, they challenged him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?” (John 8:57). Here a sufficient response to prove Jesus’ eternity would have been, “Before Abraham was, I was.” But Jesus did not say this. Instead, he made a much more startling assertion: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, *I am*” (John 8:58). Jesus combined two assertions whose sequence seemed to make no sense: “Before something in the past happened [Abraham was], something in the present happened [I am].” The Jewish leaders recognized at once that he was not speaking in riddles or uttering nonsense. When he said, “I am,” he was repeating the very words God used when he identified himself to Moses as “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14). Jesus was claiming for himself the title “I am,” by

²⁴ The English word *Lord* occurs 447 times in the ESV text of Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation, and I think 441 of them attribute deity to Christ by calling him *kyrios*, “Lord,” in the strong Old Testament sense as the name of God. (*Lord* is used in a weaker sense in Acts 25:26; 2 Cor. 1:24; 1 Peter 3:6; and perhaps Acts 9:5; 22:8; and 26:15, first instance.)

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which God designates himself as the eternal existing One, the God who is the source of his own existence and who always has been and always will be. When the Jews heard this unusual, emphatic, solemn statement, they knew that he was claiming to be God. "So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple" (John 8:59).²⁵

Another strong claim to deity is Jesus' statement at the end of Revelation, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Rev. 22:13). When this is combined with the statement of God the Father in Revelation 1:8, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," it also constitutes a strong claim to equal deity with God the Father. Sovereign over all of history and all of creation, Jesus is the beginning and the end.

In John 1:1, John not only calls Jesus "God" but also refers to him as "the Word" (Gk. *logos*). John's readers would have recognized in this term *logos* a dual reference, both to the powerful, creative Word of God in the Old Testament by which the heavens and earth were created (Ps. 33:6) and to the organizing or unifying principle of the universe, the thing that held it together and allowed it to make sense, in Greek thinking.²⁶ John is identifying Jesus with both of these ideas and saying that he is not only the powerful, creative Word of God and the organizing or unifying force in the universe but also a man: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Here is another strong claim to deity coupled with an explicit statement that Jesus also became man and moved among us as a man.

Further evidence of claims to deity can be found in the fact that Jesus calls himself "*the* Son of Man." This title is used eighty-four times in the four gospels but only by Jesus and only to speak of himself (e.g., Matt. 16:13 with Luke 9:18). In the rest of the New Testament, the phrase "*the* Son of Man" (with the definite article *the*) is used only once, in Acts 7:56, where Stephen refers to Christ as the Son of Man. This unique term has as its background the vision in Daniel 7 where Daniel saw one like a "son of man" who "came to the Ancient of Days" and was given "dominion and glory and a kingdom, *that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away*" (Dan. 7:13–14). It is striking that this "son of man" came "with the clouds of heaven" (Dan. 7:13). This passage clearly speaks of someone who had heavenly origin and who was given *eternal rule over the whole world*. The high priests did

²⁵ The other "I am" sayings in John's gospel, where Jesus claims to be the bread of life (6:35), the light of the world (8:12), the door of the sheep (10:7), the good shepherd (10:11), the resurrection and the life (11:25), the way, the truth, and the life (14:6), and the true vine (15:1), also contribute to the overall picture of deity that John paints of Christ; see Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 330–32.

²⁶ See Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, esp. p. 326.

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not miss the point of this passage when Jesus said, "From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64). The reference to Daniel 7:13–14 was unmistakable, and the high priest and his council knew that Jesus was claiming to be the eternal world ruler of heavenly origin spoken of in Daniel's vision. Immediately they said, "He has uttered blasphemy.... He deserves death" (Matt. 26:65–66). Here Jesus finally made explicit the strong claims to eternal world rule that were earlier hinted at in his frequent use of the title "the Son of Man" to apply to himself.

Though the title "Son of God" can sometimes be used simply to refer to Israel (Matt. 2:15), to man as created by God (Luke 3:38), or to redeemed man generally (Rom. 8:14, 19, 23), there are nevertheless instances in which the phrase "Son of God" refers to Jesus as the heavenly, eternal Son who is equal to God (see Matt. 11:25–30; 17:5; 1 Cor. 15:28; Heb. 1:1–3, 5, 8). This is especially true in John's gospel where Jesus is seen as a unique Son from the Father (John 1:14, 18, 34, 49) who fully reveals the Father (John 8:19; 14:9). As Son he is so great that we can trust in him for eternal life (something that could be said of no created being: John 3:16, 36; 20:31). He is also the one who has all authority from the Father to give life, pronounce eternal judgment, and rule over all (John 3:36; 5:20–22, 25; 10:17; 16:15). As Son he has been sent by the Father, and therefore he existed before he came into the world (John 3:17; 5:23; 10:36).

The first three verses of Hebrews are emphatic in saying that the Son is the one whom God "appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Heb. 1:2). This Son, says the writer, "is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3). Jesus is the exact duplicate of the "nature" (or being, Gk. *hypostasis*) of God, making him exactly equal to God in every attribute. Moreover, he continually upholds the universe "by the word of his power," something that only God could do.

These passages combine to indicate that the title "Son of God" when applied to Christ strongly affirms his deity as the eternal Son in the Trinity, one equal to God the Father in all his attributes.

2. Evidence That Jesus Possessed Attributes of Deity

In addition to the specific affirmations of Jesus' deity seen in the many passages quoted above, we see many examples of actions in Jesus' lifetime that point to his divine character.

Jesus demonstrated his *omnipotence* when he stilled the storm at sea with a word (Matt. 8:26–27), multiplied the loaves and fish (Matt. 14:19), and changed water into wine (John

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2:1–11). Some might object that these miracles just showed the power of the Holy Spirit working through him, just as the Holy Spirit could work through any other human being, and therefore these do not demonstrate Jesus' deity. But the contextual explanations of these events often point not to what they demonstrate about the power of the Holy Spirit but to what they demonstrate about Jesus. For instance, after Jesus turned water into wine, John tells us, "This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and *manifested his glory*. And his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11). It was not the glory of the Holy Spirit that was manifested but the glory of Jesus himself, as his divine power worked to change water into wine. Similarly, after Jesus stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples did not say, "How great is the power of the Holy Spirit working through this prophet," but rather, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea *obey him?*" (Matt. 8:27). It was the authority of Jesus himself to which the winds and the waves were subject, and this could only be the authority of God who rules over the seas and has power to still the waves (cf. Ps. 65:7; 89:9; 107:29).²⁷

Jesus asserts his *eternity* when he says, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58, see discussion above), and "I am the Alpha and the Omega" (Rev. 22:13).

The *omniscience* of Jesus is demonstrated in his knowing people's thoughts (Mark 2:8), seeing Nathaniel under the fig tree from far away (John 1:48), and knowing "from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him" (John 6:64). Of course, the revelation of individual, specific events or facts is something that God could give to anyone who had a gift of prophecy in the Old or New Testaments. But Jesus' knowledge was much more extensive than that. He knew "who those were who did not believe," thus implying that he knew the belief or unbelief that was in the hearts of all people. In fact, John says explicitly that Jesus "needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself *knew what was in man*" (John 2:25). The disciples could later say to him, "Now we know that *you know all things*" (John 16:30). These statements say much more than what could be said of any great prophet or apostle of the Old Testament or New Testament, for they imply omniscience on the part of Jesus.²⁸

Finally, after his resurrection, when Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, Peter answered, "Lord, *you know everything*; you know that I love you" (John 21:17). Here Peter is saying much more than that Jesus knows his heart and knows that he loves him. He is rather making a general statement ("You know everything") and from it he is drawing a specific

²⁷ I recognize that other passages attribute some of Christ's other miracles to the Holy Spirit—see Matt. 12:28; Luke 4:14, 18, 40.

²⁸ See below, pp. 698–700, on Mark 13:32, and on the question of how omniscience can be consistent with Christ's learning things as a man.

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conclusion (“You know that I love you”). Peter is confident that Jesus knows what is in the heart of every person, and therefore he is sure that Jesus knows his own heart.

The divine attribute of *omnipresence* is not directly affirmed to be true of Jesus during his earthly ministry. However, while looking forward to the time that the church would be established, Jesus could say, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, *there am I among them*” (Matt. 18:20). Moreover, before he left the earth, he told his disciples, “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).²⁹

That Jesus possessed divine *sovereignty*, a kind of authority possessed by God alone, is seen in the fact that he could forgive sins (Mark 2:5–7). Unlike the Old Testament prophets who declared, “Thus says the LORD,” he could preface his statements with the phrase, “But *I say to you*” (Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44)—an amazing claim to his own authority. He could speak with the authority of God because he was fully God. He had “all things” delivered into his hands by the Father and the authority to reveal the Father to whomever he chose (Matt. 11:25–27). Such is his authority that the future eternal state of everyone in the universe depends on whether they believe in him or reject him (John 3:36).

Jesus also possessed the divine attribute of *immortality*, the inability to die. We see this indicated near the beginning of John’s gospel, when Jesus says to the Jews, “Destroy this temple, and in three days *I will raise it up*” (John 2:19). John explains that he was not speaking about the temple made with stones in Jerusalem, “but he was speaking about the temple of *his body*. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken” (John 2:21–22). We must insist of course that Jesus really did die: this very passage speaks of the time when “he was raised from the dead.” But it is also significant that Jesus predicts that he will have an active role in his own resurrection: “*I will raise it up.*” Although other Scripture passages tell us that God the Father was active in raising Christ from the dead, here he says that he himself will be active in his resurrection.

Jesus claims the power to lay down his life and take it up again in another passage in John’s gospel: “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it again. This charge I have received from my Father” (John 10:17–18). Here Jesus speaks of a power no other human being has had—the power to lay down his own life *and* the power to take it up again. Once

²⁹ I do not mean to imply that these verses show that Jesus’ human nature was omnipresent. Jesus’ human nature, including his physical body, was never more than one place at one time. It is probably best to understand these verses to refer to Jesus’ divine nature (see below, pp. 690–700, for discussion of the distinction between Christ’s two natures). See also Matt. 8:13.

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again, this is an indication that Jesus possessed the divine attribute of immortality. Similarly, the author of Hebrews says that Jesus “has become a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by the power of *an indestructible life*” (Heb. 7:16). (The fact that immortality is a unique characteristic of God alone is seen in 1 Tim. 6:16, which speaks of God as the one “who alone has immortality.”)

Another clear attestation to the deity of Christ is the fact that he is counted *worthy to be worshiped*, something that is true of no other being in all creation, including angels (see Rev. 19:10), but only God alone. Yet Scripture says of Christ that “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9–11). Similarly, God commands the angels to worship Christ, for we read, “When he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him’ ” (Heb. 1:6).

John is allowed a glimpse of the worship that occurs in heaven, for he sees thousands and thousands of angels and heavenly creatures around God’s throne saying, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (Rev. 5:12). Then he hears “*every creature* in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne *and to the Lamb* be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!’ ” (Rev. 5:13). Christ is here called “the Lamb who was slain,” and he is accorded the universal worship offered to God the Father, thus clearly demonstrating his equality in deity.³⁰

3. The Kenosis Theory: Did Jesus Give Up Some of His Divine Attributes While on Earth?

Paul writes to the Philippians, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, 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” (Phil. 2:5–7). Beginning with this text, several theologians in Germany (from about 1860–1880) and in England (from about 1890–1910) advocated a view of the incarnation that had not been advocated before in the history of the church. This new view was called the “kenosis theory,” and the overall position it represented was called “kenotic theology.” The *kenosis theory* holds that Christ gave up some of his divine attributes while he was on earth as a man. (The word *kenosis* is taken from the Greek verb *kenōō*, which generally means “to empty,” and is translated “emptied himself” in Phil. 2:7.) According to the theory Christ “emptied himself” of some of his divine attributes,

³⁰ See also Matt. 28:17 where Jesus accepted worship from his disciples after his resurrection.

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such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence, while he was on earth as a man. This was viewed as a voluntary self-limitation on Christ's part, which he carried out in order to fulfill his work of redemption.³¹

But does Philippians 2:7 teach that Christ emptied himself of some of his divine attributes, and does the rest of the New Testament confirm this? The evidence of Scripture points to a negative answer to both questions. We must first realize that no recognized teacher in the first 1,800 years of church history, including those who were native speakers of Greek, thought that "emptied himself" in Philippians 2:7 meant that the Son of God gave up some of his divine attributes. Second, we must recognize that the text does not say that Christ "emptied himself of some powers" or "emptied himself of divine attributes" or anything like that. Third, the text *does* describe what Jesus did in this "emptying": he did it by "taking the form of a servant," that is, by coming to live as a man, and "being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). Thus, the context itself interprets this "emptying" as equivalent to "humbling himself" and taking on a lowly status and position. Thus, the NIV, instead of translating the phrase, "He *emptied* himself," translates it, "*made himself nothing*" (Phil. 2:7 NIV). The emptying includes change of role and status, not essential attributes or nature.

A fourth reason for this interpretation is seen in Paul's purpose in this context. His purpose has been to persuade the Philippians that they should "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3), and he continues by telling them, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). To persuade them to be humble and to put the interests of others first, he then holds up the example of Christ: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, 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" (Phil. 2:5–7).

Now in holding up Christ as an example, he wants the Philippians to imitate Christ. But certainly he is not asking the Philippian Christians to "give up" or "lay aside" any of their essential attributes or abilities! He is not asking them to "give up" their intelligence or strength or skill and become a diminished version of what they were. Rather, he is asking them to put the interests of others first: "Let each of you look not only to his own interests,

³¹ A very clear overview of the history of kenotic theology is found in the article "Kenosis, a Kenotic Theology" by S. M. Smith, in *EDT*, 600–602. Surprisingly (for the volume in which his essay appears), Smith ends up endorsing kenotic theology as a valid form of orthodox, biblical faith (p. 602)!

NIV New International Version

NIV New International Version

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but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:4). And because that is his goal, it fits the context to understand that he is using Christ as the supreme example of one who did just that: he put the interests of others first and was willing to give up some of the privilege and status that was his as God.

Therefore, the best understanding of this passage is that it talks about Jesus *giving up the status and privilege that was his in heaven*: he "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (or "clung to for his own advantage") but "emptied himself" or "humbled himself" for our sake and came to live as a man. Jesus speaks elsewhere of the "glory" he had with the Father "before the world existed" (John 17:5), a glory that he had given up and was going to receive again when he returned to heaven. And Paul could speak of Christ who, "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor" (2 Cor. 8:9), once again speaking of the privilege and honor that he deserved but temporarily gave up for us.

The fifth and final reason why the "kenosis" view of Philippians 2:7 must be rejected is the larger context of the teaching of the New Testament and the doctrinal teaching of the entire Bible. If it were true that such a momentous event as this happened, that the eternal Son of God ceased for a time to have all the attributes of God—ceased, for a time, to be omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, for example—then we would expect that such an incredible event would be taught clearly and repeatedly in the New Testament, not found in the very doubtful interpretation of one word in one epistle. But we find the opposite of that: we do not find it stated anywhere else that the Son of God ceased to have some of the attributes of God that he had possessed from eternity. In fact, if the kenosis theory were true (and this is a foundational objection against it), then *we could no longer affirm Jesus was fully God while he was here on earth*.³² The kenosis theory ultimately denies the full deity of Jesus Christ and makes him something less than fully God. S. M. Smith admits, "All forms of classical orthodoxy either explicitly reject or reject in principle kenotic theology."³³

It is important to realize that the major force persuading people to accept kenotic theory was not that they had discovered a better understanding of Philippians 2:7 or any other passage of the New Testament but rather the increasing discomfort people were feeling

³² Sometimes the word *kenosis* is used in a weaker sense not to apply to the kenosis theory in its full sense but simply to refer to a more orthodox understanding of Phil. 2:7 in which it means simply that Jesus gave up his glory and privilege for a time while he was on earth. (This is essentially the view we have advocated in this text.) But it does not seem at all wise to use the term *kenosis* to refer to such a traditional understanding of Phil. 2:7, for it is too easily confused with the full-blown kenosis doctrine that essentially denies the full deity of Christ. To take a term that formally applies to a false doctrinal teaching and then use it to apply to a scripturally sound position is just confusing to most people.

³³ Smith, "Kenosis, A Kenotic Theology," 601.

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with the formulations of the doctrine of Christ in historic, classical orthodoxy. It just seemed too incredible for modern rational and “scientific” people to believe that Jesus Christ could be truly human and fully, absolutely God at the same time.³⁴ The kenosis theory began to sound more and more like an acceptable way to say that (in some sense) Jesus was God, but a kind of God who had for a time given up some of his Godlike qualities, those that were most difficult for people to accept in the modern world.

4. Conclusion: Christ Is Fully Divine

The New Testament, in hundreds of explicit verses that call Jesus “God” and “Lord” and use a number of other titles of deity to refer to him and in many passages that attribute actions or words to him that could only be true of God, affirms again and again the full, absolute deity of Jesus Christ. “In him *all the fullness of God* was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19), and “In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). In an earlier section we argued that Jesus is truly and fully man. Now we conclude that he is truly and fully God as well. His name is rightly called “Immanuel,” that is, “God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

5. Is The Doctrine of the Incarnation “Unintelligible” Today?

Throughout history there have been objections to the New Testament teaching on the full deity of Christ. One attack on this doctrine deserves mention here because it created a large controversy since the contributors to the volume were all recognized church leaders in England. The book was called *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick (London: SCM, 1977). The title gives away the thesis of the book: the idea that Jesus was “God

³⁴ Smith points out that one of the primary influences leading some to adopt kenotic theology was the growth of modern psychology in the nineteenth century: “The age was learning to think in terms of the categories of psychology. Consciousness was a central category. If at our ‘center’ is our consciousness, and if Jesus was both omniscient God and limited man, then he had two centers and was thus fundamentally not one of us. Christology was becoming inconceivable for some” (ibid., 600–601). In other words, pressures of modern psychological study were making belief in the combination of full deity and full humanity in the one person of Christ difficult to explain or even intellectually embarrassing: How could someone be so different from us and still be truly a man?

Yet we might respond that modern psychology is inherently limited in that its only object of study is simple human beings. No modern psychologist has ever studied anyone who was perfectly free from sin (as Christ was) and who was both fully God and fully man (as Christ was). If we limit our understanding to what modern psychology tells us is “possible” or “conceivable,” then we will have neither a sinless Christ nor a divine Christ. In this as in many other points of doctrine, our understanding of what is “possible” must be determined not by modern empirical study of a finite, fallen world but by the teachings of Scripture itself.

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incarnate” or “God come in the flesh” is a “myth” — a helpful story, perhaps, for the faith of earlier generations, but not one that can really be believed by us today.

The argument of the book begins with some foundational assumptions: (1) the Bible does not have absolute divine authority for us today (p. i), and (2) Christianity, like all human life and thought, is evolving and changing over time (p. ii). The basic claims of the book are laid out in the first two chapters. In chapter 1, Maurice Wiles argues that it is possible to have Christianity without the doctrine of the incarnation. The church has given up earlier doctrines, such as the “real presence” of Christ in the Lord’s Supper, the inerrancy of Scripture, and the virgin birth; therefore, it is possible to give up the traditional doctrine of the incarnation and still keep the Christian faith as well (pp. 2–3). Moreover, the doctrine of the incarnation is not directly presented in Scripture but originated in a setting where belief in the supernatural was credible; nevertheless, it has never been a coherent or intelligible doctrine through the history of the church (pp. 3–5).

Regarding the New Testament teaching, Frances Young, in chapter 2, argues that the New Testament contains the writings of many diverse witnesses who tell of their own understanding of Christ, but that no single or unified view of Christ can be gained from the entire New Testament; the early church’s understanding of the person of Christ was developing in various directions over time. Young concludes that the situation is similar today: within the Christian church many diverse *personal responses* to the story of Jesus Christ are acceptable for us as well, and that would certainly include the response that sees Christ as a man in whom God was uniquely at work but not by any means a man who was also fully God.³⁵

From the standpoint of evangelical theology, it is significant to note, first, that this forthright rejection of Jesus’ deity could only be advocated upon a prior assumption that the New Testament is not to be accepted as an absolute divine authority for us, truthful at every point. This question of authority is, in many cases, the great dividing line in conclusions about the person of Christ. Second, much of the criticism of the doctrine of the incarnation focused on the claim that it was not “coherent” or “intelligible.” Yet at root this is simply an indication that the authors are unwilling to accept anything that does not appear to fit in with their “scientific” worldview in which the natural universe is a closed system not open to such divine intrusions as miracles and the incarnation. The assertion that “Jesus was fully God and fully man in one person,” though not a contradiction, is a paradox that we cannot fully understand in this age and perhaps not

³⁵ The book was quickly answered by another series of essays, Michael Green, ed., *The Truth of God Incarnate* (Sevenoaks, UK: Hodder and Stoughton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977). Later the authors of *The Myth of God Incarnate* and several of their critics published the proceedings of a three-day meeting in a third book: Michael Golder, ed., *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued* (London: SCM, 1979).

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for all eternity, but this does not give us the right to label it “incoherent” or “unintelligible.” The doctrine of the incarnation as understood by the church throughout history has indeed been coherent and intelligible, though no one maintains that it provides us with an exhaustive explanation of how Jesus is both fully God and fully man. Our proper response is not to reject the clear and central teaching of Scripture about the incarnation but simply to recognize that it will remain a paradox, that this is all that God has chosen to reveal to us about it, and that it is true. If we are to submit ourselves to God and to his words in Scripture, then we must believe it.

6. Why Was Jesus’ Deity Necessary?

In the previous section we listed several reasons why it was necessary for Jesus to be fully man in order to earn our redemption. Here it is appropriate to recognize that it is crucially important to insist on the full deity of Christ as well, not only because it is clearly taught in Scripture but also because of the following: (1) Only someone who is the infinite God could bear the full penalty for all the sins of all those who would believe in him. Any finite creature would have been incapable of bearing that penalty. (2) “Salvation is from the Lord” (Jonah 2:9 NASB), and the whole message of Scripture is designed to show that no human being, no creature, could ever save man—only God himself could. (3) Only someone who was truly and fully God could be the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5), both to bring us back to God and also to reveal God most fully to us (John 14:9).

If Jesus is not fully God, we have no salvation and ultimately no Christianity. It is no accident that throughout history those groups that have given up belief in the full deity of Christ have not remained long within the Christian faith but have soon drifted toward the kind of religion represented by Unitarianism in the United States and elsewhere. “No one who denies the Son has the Father” (1 John 2:23). “Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9).

C. THE INCARNATION: DEITY AND HUMANITY IN THE ONE PERSON OF CHRIST

The biblical teaching about the full deity and full humanity of Christ is so extensive that both have been believed from the earliest times in the history of the church. But a precise understanding of how full deity and full humanity could be combined together in one person was formulated only gradually in the church and did not reach the final form until the Chalcedonian Definition in AD 451. Before that point, several inadequate views of the

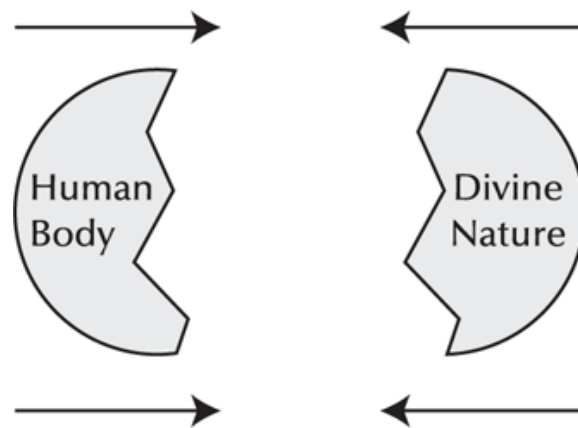
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person of Christ were proposed and then rejected. One view, Arianism, which held that Jesus was not fully divine, was discussed above in the chapter on the doctrine of the Trinity.³⁶ But three other views that were eventually rejected as heretical should be mentioned at this point.

1. Three Inadequate Views of the Person of Christ

a. Apollinarianism. Apollinaris, who became bishop in Laodicea about AD 361, taught that the one person of Christ had a human body but not a human mind or spirit and that the mind and spirit of Christ were from the divine nature of the Son of God. This view may be represented as in figure 26.1.



Apollinarianism

Figure 26.1

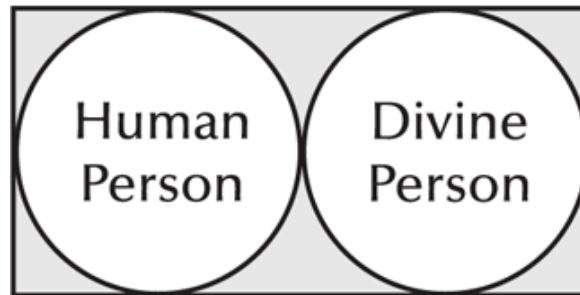
But the views of Apollinaris were rejected by the leaders of the church at that time, who realized that it was not just our human body that needed salvation and needed to be represented by Christ in his redemptive work but our human minds and spirits (or souls) as well: Christ had to be fully and truly man if he was to save us (Heb. 2:17). Apollinarianism was rejected by several church councils, from the Council of Alexandria in AD 362 to the Council of Constantinople in AD 381.³⁷ The leaders of the early church were correct in rejecting this view because it results in a Christ who is truly God but is not truly and fully a man as we are.

³⁶ See the discussion of Arianism in chapter 14, pp. 285–87.

³⁷ Surprisingly, and I think unfortunately, an Apollinarian view of the person of Christ has recently been advocated by William Lane Craig in a section he wrote for the book *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*. J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 608–13.

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b. Nestorianism. 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. Nestorianism may be diagrammed as in figure 26.2.



Nestorianism
Figure 26.2

Nestorius was a popular preacher at Antioch, and from AD 428 was bishop of Constantinople. 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.³⁸

It is important to understand why the church could not accept the view that Christ was two distinct persons. Nowhere in Scripture do we have an indication that the human nature of Christ, for example, is an independent person, deciding to do something contrary to the divine nature of Christ. Nowhere do we have an indication of the human and divine natures talking to each other or struggling within Christ, or any such thing. Rather, we have a consistent picture of a single person acting in wholeness and unity. Jesus always speaks as "I," not as "we,"³⁹ though he can refer to himself and the Father together as "we" (John 14:23). The Bible always speaks of Jesus as "he," not as "they."

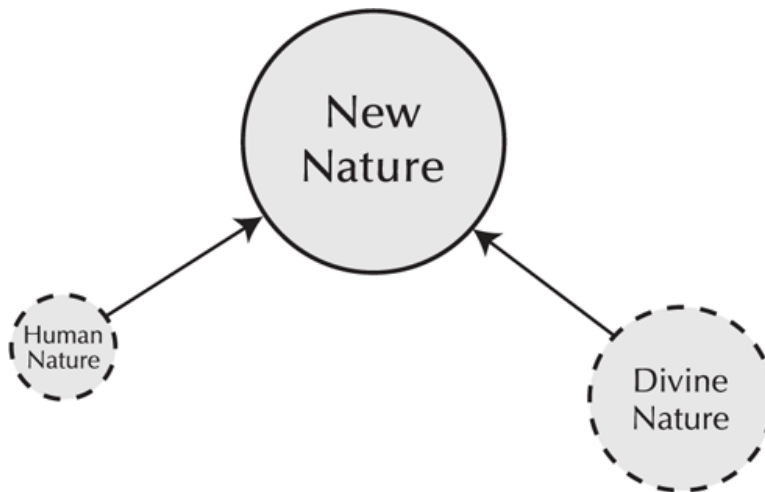
³⁸ Harold O. J. Brown says, "Nestorius' incarnate person was a single person, not two as his critics thought, but he could not convince others that it was so. Consequently he has gone down in history as a great heretic although what he actually believed was reaffirmed at Chalcedon" (*Heresies*, 176). Brown's extensive discussion of Nestorianism and related issues on pp. 172–84 is very helpful.

³⁹ There is an unusual usage in John 3:11, where Jesus suddenly shifts to the plural, "Truly, truly, I say to you, *we* speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen." Jesus may have been referring to himself and some disciples with him who are not mentioned, in contrast with the "we" of the Jewish rulers that Nicodemus alluded to when he opened the conversation: "Rabbi, *we* know that you are a teacher come from God" (John 3:2). Or Jesus may have been speaking of himself together with the witness of the Holy Spirit, whose work is the subject of the conversation (vv. 5–9). In any case, Jesus is not referring to himself as "we," but calls himself "I" in that very sentence. See discussion in Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, 221–22.

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And though we can sometimes distinguish actions of his divine nature and actions of his human nature in order to help us understand some of the statements and actions recorded in Scripture, the Bible itself does not say “Jesus’ human nature did this” or “Jesus’ divine nature did that,” as though they were separate persons, but always talks about what the *person* of Christ did. Therefore, the church continued to insist that Jesus was one person, although possessing both a human nature and a divine nature.

c. Monophysitism (Eutychianism). A third inadequate view is called *monophysitism*, the view that Christ had one nature only (Gk. *monos*, “one,” and *physis*, “nature”). The primary advocate of this view in the early church was Eutyches (c. AD 378–454), who was the leader of a monastery at Constantinople. Eutyches taught the opposite error from Nestorianism, for he 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.⁴⁰ An analogy to Eutychianism can be seen if we put a drop of ink in a glass of water: the mixture resulting is neither pure ink nor pure water, but some kind of third substance, a mixture of the two in which both the ink and the water are changed. Similarly, Eutyches taught that Jesus was a mixture of divine and human elements in which both were somewhat modified to form one new nature. This may be represented as in figure 26.3.



Eutychianism
Figure 26.3

⁴⁰ A variant form of Eutychianism held that the human nature was simply lost in the divine, so that the resulting single nature was the divine nature only.

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Monophysitism also rightly caused great concern in the church because, by this doctrine, Christ was neither truly God nor truly man. If that was so, he could not truly represent us as a man nor could he be true God and able to earn our salvation.

2. The Solution to the Controversy: The Chalcedonian Definition of AD 451

In order to attempt to solve the problems raised by the controversies over the person of Christ, a large church council was convened in the city of Chalcedon near Constantinople (modern Istanbul), from October 8 to November 1, AD 451. The resulting statement, called the Chalcedonian Definition, guarded against Apollinarianism, Nestorianism, and Eutychianism. It has been taken as the standard, orthodox definition of the biblical teaching on the person of Christ since that day by Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox branches of Christianity alike.

The statement is not long, and we may quote it in its entirety:⁴¹

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] 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, to be acknowledged in *two natures, without confusion, 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 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 been handed down to us.

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.")

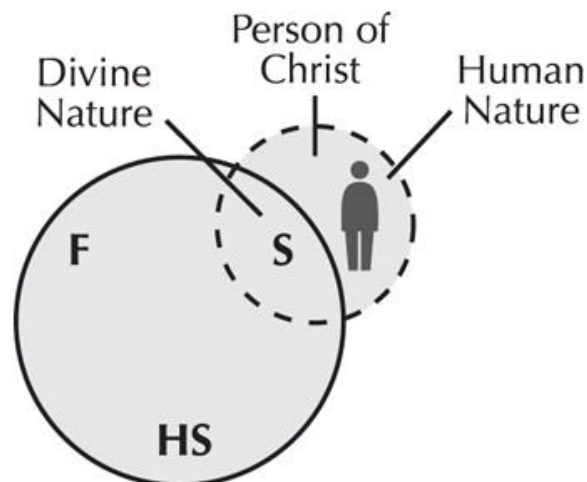
⁴¹ English translation taken from Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 2:62–63, but I have replaced Schaff's words "inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably" with the clearer expressions "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."

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In opposition to the view of Nestorianism that Christ was two persons united in one body, we have the words “*without division, without separation ... 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, without confusion, without change ... 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.

Figure 26.4 may be helpful in showing this. In contrast to the earlier diagrams, it indicates that the eternal Son of God took to himself a truly human nature, and that Christ’s divine and human natures remain distinct and retain their own properties, yet they are eternally and inseparably united together in one person.



Chalcedonian Christology

Figure 26.4

Some have said that the Chalcedonian Definition really did not define for us in any positive way what the person of Christ actually *is* but simply told us several things that it *is not*. In this way some have said that it is not a very helpful definition. But such an accusation is misleading and inaccurate. The definition actually did a great deal to help us understand the biblical teaching correctly. It taught that Christ definitely has two natures, a human nature and a divine nature. It taught that his divine nature is exactly the same as that of the Father (“consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead”). And it maintained that the human nature is exactly like our human nature yet without sin (“consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto

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us, without sin"). Moreover, it affirmed that in the person of Christ the human nature retains its distinctive characteristics and the divine nature retains its distinctive characteristics ("the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather *the property of each nature being preserved*"). Finally, it affirmed that, whether we can understand it or not, these two natures are united together in the one person of Christ.

When the Chalcedonian Definition says that the two natures of Christ occur together "in one Person and one *Subsistence*," the Greek word translated as "Subsistence" is the word *hypostasis*, "being." Hence the union of Christ's human and divine natures in one person is sometimes called the *hypostatic union*. This phrase simply means the union of Christ's human and divine natures in one being.

3. Combining Specific Biblical Texts on Christ's Deity and Humanity

When we examine the New Testament, as we did above in the sections on Jesus' humanity and deity, there are several passages that seem difficult to fit together (How could Jesus be omnipotent and yet weak? How could he leave the world and yet be present everywhere? How could he learn things and yet be omniscient?). As the church struggled to understand these teachings, it finally came up with the Chalcedonian Definition, which spoke of two distinct natures in Christ that retain their own properties yet remain together in one person. This distinction, which helps us in our understanding of the biblical passages mentioned earlier, also seems to be demanded by those passages.

a. One Nature Does Some Things That the Other Nature Does Not Do. Evangelical theologians in previous generations have not hesitated to distinguish between things done by Christ's human nature but not by his divine nature or by his divine nature but not by his human nature. It seems that we have to do this if we are willing to affirm the Chalcedonian statement about "*the property of each nature being preserved*." But few recent theologians have been willing to make such distinctions, perhaps because of a hesitancy to affirm something we cannot understand.

When we are talking about Jesus' human nature, we can say that he ascended to heaven and is no longer in the world (John 16:28; 17:11; Acts 1:9–11).⁴² But with respect to his divine nature, we can say that Jesus is everywhere present: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, *there am I among them*" (Matt. 18:20); "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20); "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my

⁴² Lutheran theologians, following Martin Luther, have sometimes claimed that Jesus' human nature, even his human body, is also everywhere present or "ubiquitous." But this position has not been adopted by any other segment of the Christian church, and it seems to have been a position that Luther himself took mainly in an attempt to justify his view that Christ's body was actually present in the Lord's Supper (not in the elements themselves, but with them).

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Father will love him, and *we* will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23). So we can say that both things are true about the *person* of Christ—he has returned to heaven, *and* he is also present with us.

Similarly, we can say that Jesus was about thirty years old (Luke 3:23) if we are speaking with respect to his human nature, but we can say that he eternally existed (John 1:1–2; 8:58) if we are speaking of his divine nature.

In his human nature, Jesus was weak and tired (Matt. 4:2; 8:24; Mark 15:21; John 4:6), but in his divine nature he was omnipotent (Matt. 8:26–27; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3). Particularly striking is the scene on the Sea of Galilee where Jesus was asleep in the stern of the boat, presumably because he was weary (Matt. 8:24). But he was able to arise from his sleep and calm the wind and sea with a word (Matt. 8:26–27)! Tired yet omnipotent! Here Jesus' weak human nature completely hid his omnipotence until that omnipotence broke forth in a sovereign word from the Lord of heaven and earth.

If someone asks whether Jesus, when he was asleep in the boat, was also "continually carrying along all things by his word of power" (Heb. 1:3, author's translation), and whether all things in the universe were being held together by him at that time (see Col. 1:17), the answer must be yes, for those activities have always been and will always be the particular responsibility of the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son of God. Those who find the doctrine of the incarnation "inconceivable" have sometimes asked whether Jesus, when he was a baby in the manger at Bethlehem, was also "upholding the universe." To this question the answer must also be yes: Jesus was not just potentially God or someone in whom God uniquely worked but was *truly and fully God*, with all the attributes of God. He was "a Savior, who is Christ *the Lord*" (Luke 2:11). Those who reject this as impossible simply have a different definition of what is possible than God has, as revealed in Scripture.⁴³ To say that we cannot understand this is appropriate humility. But to say that it is not possible seems more like intellectual arrogance.

⁴³ A. N. S. Lane explicitly denies the Chalcedonian view of Christ on the ground that it cannot be: "Omniscience and ignorance, omnipotence and impotence cannot coexist. The former swamps the latter" ("Christology Beyond Chalcedon," in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, ed. Harold H. Rowden [Leicester; Inter-Varsity Press; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982], 270). He says that Christ "explicitly denied his omniscience (Mt. 24:36 = Mk. 13:32) but even the clear words of Christ have not sufficed to counter the pull of docetism.... The affirmation of the omniscience of the historical Jesus has no biblical basis and indeed runs counter to the clear teaching of the Gospels.... It has serious theological implications in that it undermines his true humanity as taught in Scripture" (271). But (see pp. 697–700, below) Matt. 24:36 and Mark 13:32 are certainly capable of being understood to refer to Jesus' knowledge in his human nature. And when Lane says that omniscience and ignorance "cannot coexist" he is simply pitting one part of a biblical paradox against another and then asserting that one part is impossible. On what grounds are we justified in saying that an omniscient divine nature and a

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In a similar way, we can understand that in his human nature, Jesus died (Luke 23:46; 1 Cor. 15:3). But with respect to his divine nature, he did not die but was able to raise himself from the dead (John 2:19; 10:17–18; Heb. 7:16). Yet here we must give a note of caution: it is true that when Jesus died his physical body died and his human soul (or spirit) was separated from his body and passed into the presence of God the Father in heaven (Luke 23:43, 46). In this way he experienced a death that is like the one we as believers experience if we die before Christ returns. And it is not correct to say that Jesus' divine nature died, or could die, if "die" means a cessation of activity, a cessation of consciousness, or a diminution of power. Nevertheless, by virtue of union with Jesus' human nature, his divine nature somehow tasted something of what it was like to go through death. The *person* of Christ experienced death. Moreover, it seems difficult to understand how Jesus' human nature alone could have borne the wrath of God against the sins of millions of people. It seems that Jesus' divine nature had somehow to participate in the bearing of wrath against sin that was due to us (though Scripture nowhere explicitly affirms this). Therefore, even though Jesus' divine nature did not actually die, Jesus went through the experience of death as a whole person, and both human and divine natures somehow shared in that experience. Beyond that, Scripture does not enable us to say more.

The distinction between Jesus' human and divine natures also helps us understand Jesus' temptations. With respect to his human nature, he certainly was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin (Heb. 4:15). Yet with respect to his divine nature, he was not tempted because God cannot be tempted with evil (James 1:13).

At this point it seems necessary to say that Jesus had two distinct wills, a human will and a divine will, and that the wills belong to the two distinct natures of Christ, not to the person. In fact, there was a position, called the *monothelite* view, which held that Jesus had only "one will," but that was certainly a minority view in the church, and it was rejected as heretical at a church council in Constantinople in AD 681. Since then the view that Christ had two wills (a human will and a divine will) has been generally, but not universally, held through the church. In fact, Charles Hodge says,

The decision against Nestorius, in which the unity of Christ's person was asserted; that against Eutyches, affirming the distinction of natures; and that against the Monothelites, declaring that the possession of a human nature involves of

human nature with limited knowledge "cannot coexist"? Or that an omnipotent divine nature and a weak human nature "cannot coexist"? Such assertions fundamentally deny that infinite deity and finite humanity can exist together in the same person—in other words, they deny that Jesus could be *fully* God and *fully* man at the same time. In this way, they deny the essence of the incarnation.

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necessity the possession of a human will, have been received as the true faith by the Church universal, the Greek, Latin, and Protestant.⁴⁴

Hodge explains that the church thought that “to deny Christ a human will, was to deny he had a human nature, or was truly a man. Besides, it precluded the possibility of his having been tempted, and therefore contradicted the Scriptures, and separated him so far from his people he could not sympathize with them in their temptations.”⁴⁵ Moreover, Hodge notes that along with the idea that Christ had two wills is the related idea that he had two centers of consciousness or intelligence: “As there are two distinct natures, human and divine, there are of necessity two intelligences and two wills, the one fallible and finite, the other immutable and infinite.”⁴⁶

This distinction of two wills and two centers of consciousness helps us understand how Jesus could learn things and yet know all things. On the one hand, with respect to his human nature, he had limited knowledge (Mark 13:32; Luke 2:52). On the other hand, Jesus clearly knew all things (John 2:25; 16:30; 21:17). Now this is only understandable if Jesus learned things and had limited knowledge with respect to his human nature but was always omniscient with respect to his divine nature, and therefore he was able any time to “call to mind” whatever information would be needed for his ministry. In this way we can understand Jesus’ statement concerning the time of his return: “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). This ignorance of the time of his return was true of Jesus’ human nature and human consciousness only, for in his divine nature he was certainly omniscient and certainly knew the time when he would return to the earth.⁴⁷

At this point someone may object that if we say that Jesus had two centers of consciousness and two wills, that *requires* that he was two distinct persons, and we have really fallen into the error of “Nestorianism.” But in response, it must simply be affirmed that two wills and two centers of consciousness *do not* require that Jesus be two distinct persons. It is mere assertion without proof to say that they do. If someone responds that he or she *does not understand* how Jesus could have two centers of consciousness and still be one person, then that fact may certainly be admitted by all. But failing to understand something does not mean that it is impossible, only that our understanding is limited.

⁴⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (1871–73; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 2:405.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:404–5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:405.

⁴⁷ In commenting on Mark 13:32, John Calvin, Anglican commentator H. B. Swete (*The Gospel according to St. Mark* [London: Macmillan, 1913], 316), and Lutheran commentator R. C. H. Lenski (*The Interpretation of St. Mark’s Gospel* [repr., Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961], 590) all attribute this ignorance of Jesus to his human nature only, not to his divine nature.

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The great majority of the church throughout its history has said that Jesus had two wills and centers of consciousness, yet he remained one person. Such a formulation is not impossible, merely a mystery that we do not now fully understand. To adopt any other solution would create a far greater problem: it would require that we give up either the full deity or the full humanity of Christ, and that we cannot do.⁴⁸

b. Anything Either Nature Does, the Person of Christ Does. In the previous section we mentioned a number of things that were done by one nature but not the other in the person of Christ. Now we must affirm that anything that is true of the human or the divine nature is true of the *person* of Christ. Thus Jesus can say, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). He does not say, "Before Abraham was, my divine nature existed," because he is free to talk about anything done by his divine nature alone or his human nature alone as something that *he* did.

In the human sphere, this is certainly true of our conversation as well. If I type a letter, even though my feet and toes had nothing to do with typing the letter, I do not tell people, "My fingers typed a letter and my toes had nothing to do with it" (though that is true). Rather, I tell people, "I typed a letter." That is true because anything that is done by one part of me is done by *me*.

Thus "*Christ* died for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3). Even though actually only his human body ceased living and ceased functioning, it was nonetheless *Christ* as a person who died for our sin. This is simply a means of affirming that whatever can be said of one nature or the other can be said of the *person* of Christ.

Therefore, it is correct for Jesus to say, "I am leaving the world" (John 16:28), or "I am no longer in the world" (John 17:11), but at the same time to say, "I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20). Anything that is done by one nature or the other is done by the *person* of Christ.

⁴⁸ At this point an analogy from our human experience may be somewhat helpful. Anyone who has run in a race knows that near the end of the race there are conflicting desires within. On the one hand, the runner's lungs and legs and arms seem to be crying out, "Stop! Stop!" There is a clear desire to stop because of the physical pain. On the other hand, something in the runner's mind says, "Go on! Go on! I want to win!" We have all known similar instances of conflicting desires within. Now if we, being ordinary human beings, can have differing or distinct desires within us and yet be one person, how much more possible is that for one who was both man and God at the same time? If we say we do not understand how that could be, we simply admit our ignorance of the situation, for none of us has ever experienced what it is like to be both God and man at the same time, nor will we ever have such an experience ourselves. We should not say it is impossible, but if we are convinced that New Testament texts lead us to this conclusion, we should accept it and agree with it.

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c. Titles That Remind Us of One Nature Can Be Used of the Person Even When the Action Is Done By the Other Nature. The New Testament authors sometimes use titles that remind us of either the human nature or the divine nature in order to speak of the person of Christ, even though the action mentioned may be done only by the other nature than the one we might think of from the title. For example, Paul says that if the rulers of this world had understood the wisdom of God, “they would not have crucified *the Lord of glory*” (1 Cor. 2:8). Now when we see the phrase “the Lord of glory” it reminds us specifically of Jesus’ divine nature. But Paul uses this title (probably intentionally to show the horrible evil of the crucifixion) to say that Jesus was “crucified.” Even though Jesus’ divine nature was not crucified, it was true of Jesus as a *person* that he was crucified, and Paul affirms that about him even though he uses the title “the Lord of glory.”

Similarly, when Elizabeth calls Mary “the mother of *my Lord*” (Luke 1:43), the name “my Lord” is a title that reminds us of Christ’s divine nature. Yet Mary of course is not the mother of Jesus’ divine nature, which has always existed. Mary is simply the mother of the human nature of Christ. Nevertheless, Elizabeth can call her “the mother of my Lord” because she is using the title “Lord” to refer to the person of Christ. A similar expression occurs in Luke 2:11: “For unto you *is born* this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ *the Lord*.”

In this way, we can understand Mark 13:32, where Jesus says no one knows the time of his return, “not even the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*, but only the Father.” Though the term *the Son* specifically reminds us of Jesus’ heavenly, eternal sonship with God the Father, it is really used here not to speak specifically of his divine nature, but to speak generally of him as a person, and to affirm something that is in fact true of his human nature only.⁴⁹ And it is true that in one important sense (that is, with respect to his human nature) Jesus did not know the time when he would return.

d. Brief Summary Sentence. Sometimes in the study of systematic theology, the following sentence has been used to summarize the incarnation: “Remaining what he was, he became what he was not.” In other words, while Jesus continued “remaining” what he was (that is, fully divine), he also became what he previously had not been (that is, fully human as well). Jesus did not give up any of his deity when he became man, but he did take on humanity that was not his before.

e. “Communication” of Attributes. Once we have decided that Jesus was fully man and fully God, and that his human nature remained *fully* human and his divine nature

⁴⁹ Similar usage is perhaps seen in John 3:13 and Acts 20:28 (in this latter verse some manuscripts read “with his own blood”).

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remained *fully* divine, we can still ask whether there were some qualities or abilities that were given (or “communicated”) from one nature to the other. It seems there were.

1. From the divine nature to the human nature. Although Jesus’ human nature did not change its essential character, because it was united with the divine nature in the one person of Christ, Jesus’ human nature gained (a) a worthiness to be worshiped and (b) an inability to sin, both of which did not belong to human beings otherwise.⁵⁰

2. From the human nature to the divine nature. Jesus’ human nature gave him (a) an ability to experience suffering and death; (b) an ability to understand by experience what we are experiencing; and (c) an ability to be our substitute sacrifice, which Jesus as God alone could not have done.

f. Conclusion. At the end of this long discussion, it may be easy for us to lose sight of what is actually taught in Scripture. It is by far the most amazing miracle of the entire Bible—far more amazing than the resurrection and more amazing even than the creation of the universe. The fact that the infinite, omnipotent, eternal Son of God could become man and join himself to a human nature forever so that infinite God became one person with finite man—that will remain for eternity the most profound miracle and the most profound mystery in all the universe.

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⁵⁰ See above, p. 695n42, on the Lutheran view that ubiquity was also communicated from the divine nature to the human.

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