

Spring 2020 Sunday School: Beholding the Glory of God in the Face of Jesus Christ

Lesson 7 - Distinct & United: Two Natures in One Glorious Person

O Sing of Christ by Stephen P. Starke (© Concordia Publishing House)

O sing of Christ, whose birth made known
The kindness of the Lord,
Eternal Word made flesh and bone
So we could be restored.
Upon our frail humanity
God's finger chose to trace
The fullness of His deity,
The icon of His grace.

What Adam lost, none could reclaim
And Paradise was barred
Until the second Adam came
To mend what sin had marred.
For when the time was full and right
God sent His only Son;
He came to us as life and light
And our redemption won.

He came to that which was His own,
But He was not received;
Yet still through Him God's glory shone,
And some His name believed.
To these He gave the right to be
The heirs of heav'n above,
Born not of human ancestry,
But born of God in love.

Lord Jesus Christ, You deigned to dwell
Among us here on earth
As God with us, Emmanuel,
To bring this holy birth.
Though rich, You willingly became
One with our poverty,
That we might share Your wealth and name
For all eternity!

Introduction

As we've walked through our study on glorious truths about the nature and characteristics of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we've been moving through things in roughly a chronological sequence.

After an introductory lesson about the study, we started at the beginning...or before the beginning...as we looked at the importance of knowing that the Son of God is eternally pre-existent. I'm not exactly sure where eternity fits in a chronological study, but it seemed like a good place to start. From there, we moved into history to see how God's declarations and intent in the creation of man, as well as His design in temple worship and priestly ministry, gave us foreshadowing of the One True Mediator who would come at the fullness of time.

We then pondered the mystery of the incarnation as the descent of the Son to take on the form of a servant and thought about how that should shape our view of our own lives and purpose. In these last two lessons, we took out the microscope so to speak, and examined the unique attributes of the person Jesus. First in regards to His divinity, then in regards to His humanity. We saw how the accounts of His life in the gospels and the pronunciation of His Lordship in the epistles presents information that is understandably confusing at first because it breaks apart merely human conceptions of the nature of existence, volition and cognition. When we come to these majestic accounts of the life of the incarnate Son of God with our own presuppositions about what is possible and how things typically work, we stumble over the Cornerstone (Acts 4:11).

Within our consideration of Christ's humanity and divinity we worked through the biblical record as our foundation. We then moved into how the early church sought to systematize the teachings of the scripture, often in response to heretical teachings. We've looked at ancient creeds from the fourth and fifth centuries as well as more recent confessions of faith. The boundaries that began to be laid out in regards to the true divinity and true humanity of Christ were helpful to acknowledge the two natures of the Savior. From that place, the church moved into deliberations and clarifications on how those two natures interacted.

In this lesson, we'll continue to mull over the new realities brought to bear by Jesus. In His words and actions He declared that He truly is equal with the Creator God. The wind and the sea obeyed Him (Mk. 4:39) and He had power over death (John 11:33-34). Concurrently, He spoke as someone whose knowledge had limits (Mt. 24:36). He needed sustenance and rest during His life that is not what we would typically associate with an eternal, self-sufficient divine being. Holding all these

passages together, we would need to come to the conclusion that, 1) Jesus is fully human, and 2) Jesus is fully God. This lesson will help us think through how these two truths are held together and united in the one person of Jesus Christ. We'll look at some early misunderstandings of this glorious reality and we'll see how the church worked hard to set out the orthodox view.

A Complete Biblical Picture

We'll again start by reminding ourselves of four simple points that comprise a biblically faithful view of the person of Jesus.

1. Jesus Christ is fully and completely *divine*.
2. Jesus Christ is fully and completely *human*.
3. The divine and human natures of Christ are *distinct*.
4. The divine and human natures of Christ are completely *united* in one person.

These last two points are our focus in this lesson.

As we look at the scriptures regarding this topic, we do not find long, detailed doctrinal statements which address how exactly the two natures of Christ coexist in a single person. The biblical authors just present this as fact within their writing and do not dwell long on the metaphysical or ontological aspects of this reality. They know that Jesus was an altogether unique person. They knew he had a physical body and all the sensory experiences a human typically has and they also knew he is worthy of worship as Lord of all creation. The facts are laid out to be accepted by faith without much mental anguish. Generally, it is to be reveled in, not diagnosed.

With that said, many passages point to the distinctions in Christ's person within terms that seem to emphasize his individuality. There is a unity in all his actings despite terms that relate to both divine and human attributes. There's never a disharmonious tension presented among his varying characteristics. There is no indication that one nature is subservient to the other. It is always Jesus Christ acting.

Many passages bring together and speak simultaneously of Christ's divine glory with his humility as a human. While both realities are spoken of in the following verses, there is no indication that either nature is compromised by the sharing of its existence within a single individual. Many of the verses below will be familiar to you and we've cited some of them in previous lessons, but please don't just skim over them and move onto the rest of the lesson. Please pause and linger over these verses and ask God to reveal more of his kindness and mercy as you read these. Ask God to show you more

about the wonderful person who is Christ Jesus, our Lord. Seek to have your heart softened by the Word to love him more.

“And 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 1:14–15

“...concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh [4] and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord...” Romans 1:3–4

“But when the fullness of time had come, 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.” Galatians 4:4–5

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.” Colossians 1:15–20

“But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering.” Hebrews 2:9–10

These verses point us towards a dynamic unity among all of Christ's attributes, first and foremost in how he fulfills his appointed role as Savior. The verses contain language that relates to both divine and human characteristics, but these are aligned toward a singular purpose.

Other verses that we've cited in the past, especially in the gospels, seem to emphasize one or the other nature being more prominent in something that Jesus does or says. A helpful two-part summary of this interplay between distinction and unity is as follows, *“One nature of Christ is sometimes seen doing things in which his other nature does not share, but anything that either nature does, the person of Christ does. He, God incarnate, is the active agent every time.”* (ESV Study Bible, pg. 2519)

Having the terms ‘nature’ (*physis*) and ‘person’ (*hypostases*) straight in our minds has been an important distinction. Seeking to use these terms correctly and consistently helps us better conceptualize this reality. The *natures* remain distinct while being united in one glorious *Person*.

Donald Macleod summarizes the chronological development of the doctrine of the Person of Christ in the early church in the following quote:

“As a result of the Docetic, Arian, and Apollinarian controversies the church found itself, by the close of the fourth century, in secure possession of a two-nature Christology. Christ was truly and perfectly God; and Christ was truly and perfectly man. It fell to the theologians of the fifth century to debate the remaining question: What is the relation between these two natures? Do they represent separate persons or agencies? Are they mixed or commingled in one person? Or have they been fused together to produce a tertium quid, neither human nor divine?” (The Person of Christ, pg. 181)

This is where we’ll turn our attention to now by examining mistakes made in how these questions were answered.

Errors and Corrections

As the church tried to fully understand and rightly apply the scriptural witness to Jesus, they ran into some errors in how these complex truths were being elaborated. The two most prominent errors can be summarized simply as either overly emphasizing the distinction or overly emphasizing the unity of the natures.

Nestorianism

Nestorianism seems to have been a reaction to the error of Apollinarianism which undercut the completeness of the human nature of Christ, but in the reaction, this school of thought went too far in the other direction. Donal Macleod summarizes, “*Nestorius believed that after the incarnation there were two distinct subjects or agents in Christ, God and man, joined together in a graduated partnership or co-operative (servant and master) rather than being unified in one being.*” (pg. 182)

This almost gives the impression that while the humanity of Christ was retained, it became subordinate to a more dominant divine nature. This evokes something along the lines of Christ being possessed by God instead of being God himself.

In response to this, Cyril of Alexandria introduced the term ‘hypostatic union’ (*kath hypostasin*) in his ‘Tomes against the Blasphemies of Nestorius’. This term, first used in the middle of the fifth century, has been retained in all the major creeds and confessions of the church since that time including the Anglican Articles and the Westminster Confession. In English terms, it is summarized as “joined together in one person.” Macleod helps us understand the full breadth of the ideas underlying this term:

“The term ‘hypostatic union’ encapsulates three truths: that Christ is one person; that the union between his two natures arises from the fact that they both belong to one and the same person; and that this one person, the Son of God, is the Agent behind all of the Lord’s actions, the Speaker of all his utterances and the Subject of all his experiences...The one who already existed in the form of God made himself nothing, took the form of a servant, submitted to crucifixion and was exalted by God the Father. In the whole sweep of mediatorial history, from pre-existence through humiliation to exaltation, the person acting and affected is the same...This means that whenever we look at the life of Christ and ask, Who did this? Who suffered this? Who said this? The answer is always the same: ‘The Son of God!’ We can never say, ‘The divine nature did this!’ or, ‘The human nature did this!’ We must say, ‘He did this: he, The Son of God!’...He is a man: yet the man of universal significance, not because his humanity is in any sense infinite but because it is the humanity of God. In him, God adds human being to his divine being and human experience to his divine experience. In him, God lives a truly human existence. This is the heart of the miracle of the incarnation: the Son of God exists not only in heavenly form, but also in earthly-historical form.” (The Person of Christ, pg. 189-190)

This is a union that is glorious and totally unique to Christ. While there are some intriguing parallels to this union in other facets of redemptive history and even in ecclesiology, it is crucial to maintain that there is no human analogy that fully captures the grandeur and glory of the truth that Jesus Christ is Yahweh, God and man in one person. The uniqueness of Christ starts to dissolve if we try to somehow equate our experience as Christians to the incarnation of the Son of God, or if we try to talk about other things being an extension of the incarnation or if we apply modern psychological analysis to the mystery of the hypostatic union. We must stand in awe of the Incarnation and be cautious and discerning if we encounter any attempts to relativize this historical act of God.

Eutychianism

Almost the mirror image of the Nestorian teaching is what became known as Eutychianism after its main proponent, Eutychus. The pendulum swung towards ‘monophysitism’. ‘Physis’ is the Greek term for ‘nature’, so monophysitism emphasized the union of the two natures so much that the distinction was lost. The simplest way to summarize Eutychianism is its claim that “*while there were two natures before the union there was but one afterwards.*” (Macleod, pg. 184) Eutychus taught that the divine nature of Christ was dominant and determinant in the person of Jesus. In this view, the humanity of Jesus was swallowed up in the divinity. His followers went even further when they taught that, “*the union of the two natures resulted in a compound which was neither human nor divine but formed some kind of ‘tertium quid’ [third thing].*” (Macleod, pg. 184)

This teaching undercuts the true humanity of Jesus which is so crucial for a proper understanding of the atonement and his role as the One Mediator between God and men.

Just as hypostatic union was developed as the proper way to think about the unity of the two natures in the one person, another concept was fleshed out how the natures interacted yet remained distinct in the one person. The idea of ‘communion in attributes’ has been used for centuries to explore how the relationship between the coexistent natures.

The first principle is that all the attributes of each nature became the attributes of the one person. In this way, each nature retained its distinct attributes while communing with the attributes of the other in the one person. The second principle is that the two natures commune by being aligned in accomplishing the work of Christ. Both natures are united in their purpose, but contribute in distinct ways. Lastly, there is a teaching regarding the communion of graces. Again, the divine nature did not fuse with the human nature to grant Christ extraordinary faith, hope, and love. Christ did indeed possess extraordinary faith, hope, and love along with supernatural gifts, but these were granted to Christ’s human nature as they are in all humans, by the indwelling of the Spirit.

So, according to this principle of communion, attributes of both divinity and humanity existed in Christ in dynamic, real union. This does not mean, however, that the attributes of one nature are communicated to the other nature. The human nature does not become infused with divine attributes, but retains full humanity. W.G.T. Shedd states, “*While the acts and qualities of either nature may be attributed to the one theanthropic person, the acts and qualities of one nature may not be attributed to*

the other nature." Again, we see the importance of knowing the terms being employed especially in regards to 'nature' and 'person'.

This may seem like unnecessary quibbling or splitting of hairs, but these ideas have real consequences. One way that different understandings of this issue played out was in a conflict between Calvinists and Lutherans during the Reformation about what was happening in the Lord's Supper.

The Reformed stream of faith, following after how the Calvinists articulated the doctrine of the Lord's Supper during the time of the Reformation, believe that there is a spiritual presence of Christ during the administration of the Communion meal. They believe this because it seems nonsensical to think that Christ's actual body and blood are present given that he was raised bodily and is seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven with an actual glorified body. How could his physical body be both in heaven and on earth in millions of places at once? This is not consistent with an actual human nature. It does not make sense that the divine attribute of omnipresence could be applied to the human physical body of Christ.

Lutherans, however, believe that there is an actual presence of the body and blood of Jesus in the sacraments. Catholics also believe this, but their view is much further afield than the subtleties of the Lutheran view. They cite the verses in Matthew, Mark, and Luke where Jesus institutes the Lord's Supper by saying, "Take eat, this is my body." The Lutherans say that Jesus clearly said it was his body so they aren't going to say it isn't. This is admirable in the desire to stick to the plain reading of the Word, but, related to our point about the communion in attributes, it seems to confuse what's going on in the distinction between the two natures. They ascribe omnipresence to the human body of Jesus in order to keep the actual presence as a tangible option in the meal. The Lutherans have a unique doctrine to back up their view of the Lord's Supper called *genus majesticum* which refers to the Son of God communicating his divine majesty to the flesh he assumed. Furthermore, the Lutheran doctrine claims that the divine attributes were communicated at inception.

This view causes many difficulties. Foremost, "*A humanness which has divine attributes is not humanness at all.*" (Macleod, pg. 197) so we are again in the position where the humanity of Christ dissolves and, along with it, the underlying force of the atonement and mediatorial work of Jesus Christ. This is just a short overview of the issue to illustrate that very fine points of doctrine which may seem to be splitting hairs flow downstream and have larger implications for church belief and practice.

To conclude the thought about the Lord's Supper, we should remember that even though the human nature does not have divine attributes, such as omnipresence or omniscience, Jesus Christ has those attributes as a complete person. As we think about the nature of the sacrament and the power of what is happening there, we don't need to fully rationalize it and say that Jesus is not present. He is present by the power of His Spirit and as the Triune God who comes to distribute a spiritually refreshing meal to his people. The actual presence of Jesus is not limited to a physical bodily presence. This is a great comfort and a great outflowing of holding tightly to the fact that Jesus is both true God and true man in one glorious Person.

Credal Summaries

The way the church formally responded to these heresies was to convene a council at Chalcedon in 451. The Council reaffirmed the Nicene Creed and also blatantly condemned Nestorius and Eutychus by endorsing letters written in opposition to those teachings. As discussed above, some of the terms in the Chalcedonian Creed have been carried forward for centuries as the delineating terms around orthodox beliefs. We see these terms and concepts carried through into the Athanasian Creed and the much later Westminster Confession.

I've wanted to spend more time dissecting the statements in the following creeds, but time is running short and my words are running long so I will just copy the relevant sections below.

Chalcedonian Creed

As we've seen before, Chalcedon begins with laying out the reality of the two natures as it states,

"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 [co-essential] 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;"

After establishing the existence of the two natures, it moves into the relationship between these natures,

"one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ..."

The Athanasian Creed

The Athanasian Creed contains some wonderful summaries of the doctrine of the Trinity, but we'll focus on the statements about Christ. You can find a full copy of the Athanasian Creed here:

<https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/athanasian-creed>.

"But it is necessary for eternal salvation that one also believe in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ faithfully. Now this is the true faith: That we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son, is both God and human, equally. He is God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and he is human from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely human, with a rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity. Although he is God and human, yet Christ is not two, but one. He is one, however, not by his divinity being turned into flesh, but by God's taking humanity to himself. He is one, certainly not by the blending of his essence, but by the unity of his person (hypostatic union). For just as one human is both rational soul and flesh, so too the one Christ is both God and human."

Westminster Confession

The two most applicable sections of the Westminster Confession are found in Chapter 8, Of Christ the Mediator. They are posted below for reference.

II. The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fulness of time was come, take upon Him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin: being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person (hypostatic union), without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person

is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.

VII. Christ, in the work of mediation, acteth according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself: yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature, is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature.

Implications & Application

These past three lessons have involved some deep diving and heavy lifting regarding systematic theology, church history, metaphysical ideas, and ontological realities. We've looked at writings and church creeds from over 1700 years ago and we've investigated the meaning behind obscure Greek and Latin terms. We've called guys heretic who have names that I'm not sure I can even pronounce properly. These are deep, ancient, complex, mysterious realities springing forth from the realms of eternity and omniscience. They are wonderful and majestic, but they can feel very far removed from our modern, materialistic, post-Enlightenment existence.

To be honest, this lesson was hard to write. I did a lot of research and reading to prepare, but had a hard time being motivated to get it all down in writing. I was trying to get the key points, but it felt jumbled and obscure. I was having a hard time seeing how this truth about the union and distinction of the two natures in one person is helpful to us all. It is glorious and interesting, but I am still mulling on the implications of it all for the life of a believer in 21st century America. I welcome your insight and feedback on how this truth about our Savior has blessed you in your walk as a Christian.

Part of me thinks this inability to quickly or readily move into some nicely packaged, emotive application may be part of the glory of wrestling with these realities and seeking to have our minds shaped by God's Word. The wonder that arises at the foreignness of it all and the humility that is required to lay hold of such fantastic truths rocks our world and again forces us to remember that everything is not all about us. There certainly are points of application and ways that better understanding of this reality will change us deeply, but I think the main point is to just behold it and praise God for his wondrous works that no man could have designed to bring about salvation of the lost...us!

The other thing to make sure we're not guilty of is just acquiring knowledge or trivia about church history for the sake of our own egos. We seek out information to ensure that we are setting our hearts

on the true, reliable object of our faith and not following our own imaginings. We want our worship to be directed to the true Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, not a modern caricature we've dreamed up in our minds. That is the primary reason behind diligently searching the scriptures, learning church history and carefully thinking through the heresies that have come up in the past. From this place, we can strive to lovingly and convincingly call out misunderstandings and blasphemies we encounter in the world or in relationships of which we are a part.

Lastly, I rejoice that our God does not require us to fully understand and be able to clearly explain all of his truths in order to be affected by them. In one of many seeming paradoxes that characterize the Christian worldview and life, we must remember that our pursuit of greater understanding must always find roots in simple, child-like faith. Reading scripture and seeing the accounts of Jesus as a person moving through time and space with divine and human attributes must cause us to fall at his feet and say, "My Savior and my Lord!" That is the thing that is most needful. If we learn anything from a prolonged look at Jesus and the wonder of his incarnation may it be that God does not stand aloof and far off in his glory, but demonstrates that the very nature of his glory is to draw near to his weak, dim-witted, and dependent children to bring them to where he is. Hallelujah! What a Savior.

Prayer

Almighty God, whom to know is everlasting life, grant us perfectly to know Your Son, Jesus Christ, to be the way, the truth, and the life, that following his steps we may steadfastly walk in the way that leads to eternal life. Our Heavenly Father, without your help, our labor is useless and without your light, our search is in vain. Invigorate our study of your holy Word that, by due diligence and right discernment, we may be established and may help to establish others in true faith. You gave your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon himself. Grant that we, your adopted children by grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Song of the Week

Son of God, Eternal Savior by Somerset T.C. Lowry (1855-1932)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dIxzD3QcoEQ>

https://hymnary.org/text/son_of_god_eternal_savior