

DOCTRINE OF THE HYPOSTATIC UNION AND KENOSIS

- I. Introduction.
- A. It must be acknowledged at the outset that any consideration of the person of Jesus Christ clearly involves a great mystery that we must accept by faith. I Tim. 3:16
 - B. In order to understand the nature of the Incarnation, one must properly understand the Christian theistic view of God, which involves an understanding of both the unity and the trinity of God.
 - C. God is triune, existing eternally and simultaneously as three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; these three persons of the Godhead equally and eternally share one divine nature, sharing the same attributes, nature, and glory.
 - D. The relationship between the Father and the Son is described by the doctrine of Eternal Generation, which is fully beyond the realm of human comprehension.
 - 1. The doctrine of eternal generation essentially teaches that God the Father eternally and by necessity generates or begets God the Son in such a way that the divine essence of God is not divided.
 - 2. The Person of God the Son derives His deity from this generation.
 - 3. In other words, there is a communication of the whole, indivisible substance of the Godhead in such a way that God the Son is the exact representation of God the Father. Col. 1:15
 - 4. There is still one divine essence that eternally exists in two persons through eternal generation.
 - 5. Therefore, He did not become a Son of the Father by His birth, His resurrection, or any other factor; He is “begotten” eternally, by a birth that never occurred.
 - 6. As Chafer notes, *“The terms Father and Son, as applied to the First and Second Persons in the Godhead, are somewhat anthropomorphic in character. The sublime and eternal relationship that existed between these two Persons is best expressed to the human understanding by the terms father and son, but wholly without implication that the two Persons are not equal in every particular.”*¹
 - E. Therefore, as one considers the person of Jesus Christ, he must account for His eternal pre-existence as God the Son, as well as accounting for His complete human nature as a man.
 - F. The doctrine of the hypostatic union, and other doctrines related to it, are fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, since they are necessary to an accurate Christology.
 - G. The need for an accurate Christology should be evident, since the biblical concept of salvation is based solely on the person and work of One Individual. I Tim. 1:15; Heb. 10:10,12,14
 - H. Further, an accurate Christology protects the believer from the various forms of false teaching that are so prevalent in both the religious and secular world.

¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, Vol. 1

- I. F.F. Bruce expresses the importance of accurate language and theology: *"Inasmuch as the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity are embedded in the New Testament, although not explicitly formulated there, we must make the effort of wrestling with difficult terminology if we are not to fall an easy prey to misunderstanding or to actual heresy."*²
- J. This understanding of the need for accurate and precise theology is seen in the early history of the Church, which wrestled with the issues of what would constitute the Canon of Scripture, defining the nature of God, and accurately describing the person of Jesus Christ.
 1. While it is not possible to deal with all the councils that were convened during the course of Church history, there were several important ones that should be considered.
 2. The first was the Council of Nicea, which was convened in 325 A.D. to combat the bitter division in the Church concerning the nature of Jesus Christ.
 - a. The major dispute was over the teaching of Arius, but there were other doctrinal issues that were addressed; a primary one was establishing an accepted Canon of Scripture and identifying spurious writings, which had become numerous.
 - b. Arius of Alexandria believed that Jesus Christ was created ex nihilo (out of nothing) by the Father to be the means of creation and redemption; Jesus was fully human, but not fully divine.
 - c. The council rejected Arianism, and issued a creed that stated that *"We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, Begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father through Whom all things were made. Who for us men and for our salvation came down and became incarnate, and was made man, suffered and rose on the third day, And ascended into heaven, And is coming with glory to judge living and dead."*
 3. The second major council convened at Constantinople in 381 A.D., and essentially confirmed the statement of the Nicean Council.
 4. The third council convened at Ephesus in 431 A.D. to combat attacks on the faith, which once again focused on the person of Christ.
 - a. Jesus Christ is both God and man; however, while that is simple to say, what does that actually mean?
 - b. The Gnostics advocated a divine Christ masquerading in the appearance of flesh; their view was that matter was evil, and therefore, Jesus could not be material.
 - c. Apollinaris had argued that the divine Word had taken to Himself a human body and soul, but had no human spirit.
 - d. These heresies had been condemned by the Apostles' Creed and Councils at Nicea and Constantinople.
 - e. The Ephesian Council condemned the teaching of Nestorius, who took issue with the fact that the Virgin Mary was described as the θεοτόκος (theotokos--God-bearer).
 - f. Nestorius objected strenuously to the term, as he argued that God is eternal and infinite; He cannot be born or brought forth.
 - g. In this, he was correct; however, from this he concluded that the Child born of Mary could not be God, and could not be the Son of God, the eternal Logos. Jn. 1:1,14
 - h. At this point, he essentially rejected the Christian gospel.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*

- K. The Council at Chalcedon in 451 A.D. affirmed the unity of Jesus' person, the duality of His natures, and His identity with the divine substance.
 - 1. The conclusion, which has been called the *Chalcedonian Box*, stated that four factors need to be balanced in order to have an accurate understanding of the person of Jesus Christ.
 - 2. These four considerations include His deity, His humanity, the unity of one person, and the distinction between the two natures.
 - 3. While the Chalcedonian creed may fall short of perfectly defining things, it at least defines the boundaries of orthodoxy, within which any question about the person of Christ must be answered.
 - 4. It laid out the essential elements of Christology and began to define the boundaries of error.
- L. Since those in the early Church took the Bible seriously, and sought to define an accurate and rational faith, bringing rigorous theological and intellectual efforts to bear in working out the details of these doctrines, should we expect less of believers today?
- M. An accurate understanding of these critical doctrines is essential to both define orthodoxy and defend the church against heretical teachings.

II. Definition and description of terms.

- A. **Hypostatic** is a term taken from the Greek noun ὑπόστασις (hupostasis—lit. to stand under), which refers to the union of the two natures οὐσίαι (ousiai, nature) of Christ, the divine and the human.
- B. **Incarnation** is the term which refers to the act whereby the eternal Son of God, **The Logos**, became flesh; the term can be traced to the Latin version of John.1:14, while the nearest Greek equivalent is ἐν σαρκί (en sarki). IJn. 4:2. This term refers to the whole experience of His human life, and the fact that Christ retains his full humanity forever.
- C. **Condescension** means a voluntary descent from one's rank or dignity in terms of his relations with an inferior, and means to descend to a less formal or dignified level. It is used of the willingness of God the Son to humble Himself to assume the nature of man. Phil. 2:6
- D. **Kenosis** comes from the Greek verb κενόω (kenoo—to empty, to make something empty), and deals with the fact that Christ chose to restrict the display of His divine nature, and likewise chose to restrict the use of His divine attributes during His humiliation. Phil. 2:7
- E. **Humiliation** is a theological term that refers to the action of Christ's humanity by which He voluntarily agreed to submit Himself to the sufferings and limitations associated with His life on earth, including His death on the Cross. Phil. 2:8
 - 1. The first step in His humiliation began with His deity; the Eternal Son refused to cling to His equality with the Father. Phil. 2:6
 - 2. The next step in His humiliation is the Incarnation, as the Eternal Son assumes the limitations of humanity. Phil. 2:7
 - 3. As people observed the God-Man, all they could see was a man; nevertheless, there was much more to this man than could be seen with the eye. Phil. 2:8a
 - 4. His humiliation included rejection by His family and acquaintances (Jn. 6:42), being accused of being demon-possessed (Jn. 8:48), and being treated like a criminal.
 - 5. Nevertheless, he continued to humble Himself, and endured the worst form of humiliation ever devised by man—death on a cross. Phil. 2:8b

- III. There are three phases to the existence of God the Son.
- A. The first portion of these periods is His eternal preexistence as the Son of God, which is affirmed throughout the New Testament. Jn.1:1,14, 8:58, 17:5; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:16,17; Rev. 1:8.
 - B. The second phase deals with His humiliation as the God-Man, extending from His birth to His physical death. Heb. 5:7
 - C. The final portion of His existence deals with the period that began with His exaltation via resurrection, includes His ascension, and His session at the right hand of God, which extends into the eternal future. IThess. 4:17; ITim. 6:14-16
- IV. The deity of Christ.
- A. The preincarnate existence of God the Son is both explicitly and implicitly affirmed in the New Testament.
 - B. The deity of Jesus Christ is seen in direct statements that indicate that He existed prior to the Incarnation. Jn. 1:1; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:17
 - C. Jesus clearly taught His preexistence as deity, which was one of the major areas of controversy He had with those that were negative. Jn. 3:13,31, 6:38, 17:5
 - D. Jesus accepted worship from people, and performed actions that are reserved for God alone.
 1. Worship. Matt. 14:33, 28:9,17; Jn. 9:38, 20:28
 2. Forgiving sins. Matt. 9:2-6; Mk. 2:7
 3. He claimed the power to resurrect and judge. Jn. 5:19-29
 4. The creation of all things is ascribed to Him. Jn. 1:3,10; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2
 - E. Most of the divine attributes are either claimed by Jesus directly, or are ascribed to Him by others.
 1. Sovereignty. Matt. 27:11, 28:18
 2. Righteousness/justice. Matt. 27:19; Lk. 1:35, 4:34; Jn. 6:69
 3. Love. Jn.13:1,34, 15:9 (Jesus equates His love with the love God has)
 4. Omniscience. Matt. 9:4; Jn. 2:24-25, 6:64, 13:11, 16:30
 5. Omnipotence. Lk. 4:36; Matt 12:29 implies that Jesus must be greater and stronger than Satan if He is to be successful.
 6. Omnipresence. Matt. 18:20, 28:19-20
 7. Veracity. Matt. 22:16; Jn. 1:14,17, 14:6, 18:37
 8. While immutability is not ascribed to Jesus Christ during His lifetime, it is ascribed to the glorified God-Man. Heb. 13:8
 - F. Observations on those that deny the deity of Jesus Christ.
 1. This was a doctrine that was attacked very early in the Church Age by the Gnostics, and later by others in various forms. Col. 2:6-9
 2. Those that reject the Lord's deity are called **antichrists**. IJn. 2:22,23, 4:3
 3. Rejecting the deity of Jesus Christ is the basis for eternal condemnation. Jn. 3:36; IJn. 5:12
 4. It is a characteristic of cults that include the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Christian Scientists, etc.
 5. It was prophesied that liberal unbelievers of the last days also would reject the deity of Christ. IIPet. 2:1; Jude 1:4

- V. The humanity of Christ in the hypostatic union.
- A. The doctrine of the true humanity of Christ is as indispensable to Christian faith as is the doctrine of His deity.
 - B. The evidence for His human body is as compelling as the evidence for His deity.
 - C. According to the Scriptures, Christ was born of the virgin Mary, fulfilling in this notable historical event of His incarnation all that would normally be expected of a human birth. Physiologically, His birth was normal and not extraordinary (Isa. 7:14, Matt 1:23 cp. Lk. 2:7).
 - D. The Scriptures also state that His body was composed of flesh and blood. Heb. 2:14; IJn. 4:2, IIJn. 1:7
 - E. Following His birth in Bethlehem, the Word of God indicates that Jesus Christ developed as any normal person, growing physically and spiritually. Lk. 2:52
 - F. Jesus Christ experienced the same feelings and limitations as other normal human beings; nothing is ascribed to him that does not correspond to a genuine human nature and human body.
 - G. According to Scriptures, He suffered emotional and physical pain (Jn. 11:33-35), thirst (Jn. 19:28), hunger (Matt. 4:2), fatigue (Matt. 8:24), happiness (Lk. 10:21), anger (Jn. 2:13-17), and physical death. Mk. 15:37-39
 - H. The fact that He possessed a physical body is noted by the fact that people could see and feel Him. Jn. 12:21; Lk. 7:38; Matt. 26:67
 - I. Following the resurrection, it is evident that Jesus still possessed a tangible, physical body. Lk. 24:39-43; Jn. 20:17
 - J. The title ascribed to Jesus Christ in the Bible also point to His true humanity.
 1. The title Son of Man is ascribed to Jesus some 88 times in the New Testament. Matt. 8:20, 9:6
 2. He is presented by Pilate as **the Man**. Jn. 19:5
 3. The title **Son of David** provides information concerning his genealogy and humanity. Matt. 9:27, 12:23
 - K. The Scripture also indicates that He possessed a human soul (Matt.26:38), and a human spirit. Mk. 2:8; Jn. 19:30
 - L. Similarly, those that do not accept what the Bible clearly teaches about the true humanity of Jesus Christ are labeled as antichrists. IIJn. 1:7
- VI. The union of the divine Son of God and the human nature of Jesus.
- A. The biblical evidence strongly teaches that the deity of God the Son was united with the humanity of the Man Jesus, bringing together two widely differing sets of attributes into a personal, permanent, and eternal union. Jn. 1:14,18
 - B. The hypostatic union of the human and the divine natures in Christ is explicitly treated in several passage found in the New Testament. Jn. 1:1,14; Rom. 9:5; Phil. 2:6-11; ITim. 3:16; Heb. 2:14; IJn.1:1-3
 - C. These passages make it evident that the eternal Son of God took upon Himself a complete human nature and became a man; however, the incarnation was not a temporary arrangement that ended with His death.
 - D. His earthly body, which died on the Cross, was transformed into a resurrection body suited for His glorious presence in heaven. Phil. 3:21; Heb. 10:12-13

- E. Following His resurrection and ascension, the glorified God-Man administers the plan of God from the right hand of His Father. Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20-22; Heb. 8:1; IPet. 3:22; Rev. 1:20
- F. This union is not to be understood as deity possessing humanity, or of humanity being indwelt by deity.
 1. The doctrine of Appollinarianism argued that in the Incarnation the Son of God assumed a human nature, but did not possess a human soul.
 2. Instead, his divine nature took the place of the soul.
 3. This view diminished the full humanity of Jesus and was condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D.
- G. While we are not told explicitly, at some point the human boy Jesus became aware of the fact that God the Son was present within Him. Lk. 2:49

VII. The relationship between the human and divine natures.

- A. The two natures are united within Christ, without any loss of essential attributes, but the two natures always maintain their separate identities.
- B. Through the incarnation, the two natures were inseparably united in such a way that there was no mixture of properties, or loss of their separate identity; further, there was no loss or transfer of any property or attribute from one nature to the other.
- C. It should be clear that the divine attributes must necessarily belong to the corresponding divine nature, while the human attributes belong to the corresponding human nature; additionally, the attributes of both the human and the divine nature belong to the person of Christ.
- D. Because the attributes of either nature belong to Christ, He is theanthropic in person, but it is inaccurate to refer to His natures as being theanthropic, since there is no mixture of the divine and human to form a third new substance.
- E. Although it is true that there are two completely different natures brought together in the Incarnation, these two natures always remain separate and distinct.
 1. There are those that advocate the doctrine of monophysitism (Eutychianism), which erroneously states that Jesus' two natures are combined into one new, third nature.
 2. The problem with fusing the two natures into one is that neither God nor man was fully represented in Christ.
 3. Instead, one should understand the hypostatic union as that—a union; the best example may be found in marriage, where two distinct individuals (who always remain distinct) are united as one flesh. Gen. 2:24
- H. On the other hand, even though it is evident that there were two natures in Christ, He is never considered a dual personality; the normal pronouns I (Matt. 5:18,20), you (Matt. 17:4), and he (Matt. 3:11) are applied to Him.
- I. Therefore, Jesus Christ is no less God because He is man; neither is He any less human because He is God.
- J. When one considers the person of Jesus Christ, he should recognize that He sometimes spoke and operated in the sphere of His humanity and, in other cases, He spoke and operated in the sphere of His deity; however, in all cases, what He did and what He was could be attributed to His one person.
 1. Something only true of His deity. Jn. 3:13, 6:62
 2. Something only true of His humanity. Matt. 26:36-39
 3. Something true of both deity and humanity. Matt. 11:27; Jn. 14:6

- F. What is true during the Incarnation (the phase of His hypostasis from His birth to death) is that no attribute of the divine nature was changed or lost; however, there was a change in the manifestation of His deity.
- G. This change in the manifestation of His deity is known as the Kenosis, which is derived from the Greek verb κενόω (kenoo—to empty, to make empty).

VIII. The doctrine of Kenosis as related to the hypostatic union.

- A. This doctrine deals with all that was involved in the condescension and humiliation of God the Son as He became man.
- B. The first question that must be addressed is how could the eternal God take upon Himself human limitations while retaining His eternal deity?
- C. While some have interpreted His self-emptying (the kenosis) to mean that He gave up part of His deity to become man, such is not the case.
- D. In opposition to any and all views that deny His deity during the Incarnation, it must be pointed out that God cannot change His nature by an act of His will any more than we can change our nature by an act of our will.
- E. The Divine attribute of immutability makes it impossible for God to change His nature; further, if God is perfect, any change would by definition render Him imperfect.
- F. Beyond that, a loss of even one of the Divine attributes would mean that God the Son was not God at all, which is contradicted by many scriptures. Jn. 1:1, 20:28; Rev. 1:17-18
- G. One thing that was necessary during the Kenosis is that God the Son would have to surrender His overt glory as God in order to fully identify Himself with humanity.
- H. Therefore, it was necessary for the Son to give up the outer appearance of God in order to take upon Himself the form of man. Phil. 2:6
- I. However, while He voluntarily surrendered the manifestation of His glory, God the Son did not surrender any of His Divine attributes such as omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience; however, He did voluntarily restrict the use of these attributes.
- J. Part of the rules for the Incarnation was that Jesus Christ could not exercise His Divine attributes simply for His own benefit (Matt. 4:3-4, 8:20); however, His glory was clearly displayed in His miracles (Matt. 8:24-27; Jn. 11:43), and at the transfiguration. Matt. 17:1-2
- K. The kenosis, as detailed in the book of Philippians, may be properly understood to mean that Christ surrendered no attribute of deity, nor were the attributes of deity diminished in any way; however, He did voluntarily restrict their independent use in keeping with His purpose of living among men and suffering the limitations of humanity. Phil. 2:5-9
- L. In answer to the prayer of Jesus Christ, God the overt manifestation of His glory was restored in connection with His resurrection and ascension. Jn. 17:5; 1Tim. 6:15-16; Rev. 1:12-16

IX. The relationship of the two natures to the volition of Christ.

- A. It should be evident that since there were two distinct natures in the God-Man, each nature had its own corresponding will.
- B. To say that these two wills were never in conflict is overstating the case; however, when there was any difference between the two wills, Jesus always humbled Himself to the will of the Father. Lk. 22:42
- C. The human will of Christ was subject to real temptation (Heb. 4:15), while the will of God the Son was not subject to temptation. James 1:13

- D. This has raised a great debate among orthodox theologians as to whether or not the humanity of Christ was really tempted, and was capable of committing personal sin.
 - E. The majority agree that He had no sin nature, and remained sinless throughout the course of His life; however, there is great division over whether or not He could have sinned.
 - F. If Christ could simply tap into His deity, and have infinite power to resist temptation, then He is not really on an equal footing with those that do not have that ability.
 - G. Further, how can He sympathize with those that are tempted to sin if He was never truly tempted to sin? Heb. 4:15
 - H. Infinite power to resist temptation is called impeccability, while the ability to sin by succumbing to temptation is called peccability.
 - I. With regard to all angels and all mankind from Adam forward, temptability presumes peccability the question arises as to why the humanity of Christ would be the single exception to something that is true of all other moral creatures.
 - J. Some have advanced the argument that Christ is now impeccable in heaven, and therefore He must have been impeccable while He was on the earth; however, this is obviously invalid since believers are peccable on earth but impeccable in heaven. Rev. 21:3-4
 - K. To argue that God would not have risked the whole plan of grace on the peccability of Christ ignores the attribute of omniscience and the doctrine of foreknowledge. IPet. 1:20
 - L. While the humanity of Christ possessed no sin nature, and could have resisted sin His entire life, it does not mean that He was not tempted and could not have sinned; this is seen in the example of Adam, who also had no sin nature.
 - M. One cannot adduce a Scripture that clearly declares that He could not sin; one can only cite scriptures that said that He did not sin. IJn. 3:5, IICor. 5:21
- X. Reasons and purposes for the Incarnation.
- A. Why did God find it necessary to permanently identify Himself with the human race, by becoming flesh?
 - B. The first reason was to save mankind from sin, and free them from the tyranny of Satan. Matt. 1:21; Heb. 2:15
 - C. Secondly, in order to fulfill the role of mediator, Jesus Christ had to be equal with both parties. ITim. 2:5; Job 9:32-33
 - D. Thirdly, apart from the Incarnation, He could not effectively function as the High Priest, who represents believers before God. Heb. 7:24-28, 10:11-14
 - E. Fourthly, He had to be true humanity in order to fulfill the particulars of the Davidic Covenant, which guaranteed David a descendant that would rule on his throne forever. IISam. 7:12-13
 - F. Additional purposes for the Incarnation include:
 1. Revealing God to the human race. Jn. 1:18, 14:7-9
 2. Sacrificing Himself for the sins of the world. Jn. 1:29; IICor. 5:21
 3. Providing an example for us to emulate. Matt. 11:29, 16:24; IPet. 2:21
 4. Destroying the works of the Devil. IJn. 3:8
 5. Being the righteous judge of the human race. Jn. 5:22-29