

The Doctrine of Christ

“Very God and Very Man, Yet One Christ”: One Person, Two Natures

RICHARD BARCELLOS

1



As a relatively new believer in Christ, I read a book on Christology (i.e., the study of Christ). Most of the material was over my head. I noticed that the author used technical terminology of which he largely assumed his readers were somewhat familiar. Two terms especially come to mind: person and nature. When Christians confess that our Lord is one person, two natures, what do they mean? Most believers are aware of Christmas hymns which were written to depict the Scripture’s teaching on the incarnation (i.e., God becoming man). One example of this is found in the well-known hymn *“O come, all ye faithful.”*

The second line reads as follows: *“God of God, Light of Light; Lo, he abhors not the virgin’s womb: Very God, Begotten, not created; O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.”* The fourth line in that hymn includes these words: *“Born this happy morning... Word of the Father, Late in flesh appearing...”* Both the second and fourth lines of this familiar hymn contain startling language. The hymn-writer is actually borrowing from ancient Christian creedal statements. Our Lord is God, yet *“he abhors not the virgin’s womb”*? He is very God yet *“Late in flesh appearing”*? The one

The Doctrine of Christ

Christ is both God and man? The one person of the Son is our two-natured redeemer? The answer to these questions is a resounding yes.

The hymn cited above and the creedal statements behind it are an attempt to explain what Scripture itself asserts about our Lord. For example, [1 Timothy 3:16a](#) says, “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh” (NKJV). Mark these words carefully: “God was manifested in the flesh.” During the incarnate ministry of our Lord on the earth many years ago, it was God who was manifested and it was in the flesh that he was manifested. Here we have one Lord Jesus Christ, both God and flesh. Another famous text which asserts what we call the incarnation of the Word, or Son, is found in [John 1:14](#), which reads, “And the Word became flesh...” There are several such texts in the New Testament (especially) which require careful explanation. What is required is not the bare repetition of the words of Scripture but an *explanation* of their meaning. In other words, sometimes it is necessary to use words not in the written word of God to explain the written word of God. The term Trinity is one such example. Similarly, we use the terms person and nature to best account for Holy Scripture’s teaching on our two-natured redeemer. I want to define these terms then show how the terms so defined help us understand Scripture’s teaching on Christ as both very God and very man in one person. I will also introduce readers to the well-known language of hypostatic union.

By “person” is meant the who or the acting subject. Let me illustrate this. If deacons of a given church observed that a window was broken in the fellowship hall, they might ask “Who did this? Who was the acting subject to cause this effect?” They find out it was Joe. Joe is a person, an acting agent who causes certain things. By “nature,” on the other hand, is meant the what of an acting subject that allows him to act as he acts. We might say the thing by which he acts. If it is asked, “How did Joe do this?” The answer could be: by punching it with his fist. If we thought a bit more about Joe, we would conclude, Joe has a fist and is able to cause it to break a window. And he is able to do that because he has a body which is moved by his soul. Joe is a human person with a human nature by which he does things.

So “person” refers to an acting agent and “nature” refers to the agency by which an agent or person acts. By “hypostatic union” is meant that the Son of God incarnate is one “who” (one person) yet two “whats” (natures) united in him by which he acts. The two “whats” are the divine nature and the human nature, natures by which he (i.e., the one person) acts. If we ask, who is Christ? We rightly answer the Son of God incarnate. If we ask, what is Christ? We rightly answer God and man in one person. In terms of persons, nature is that by virtue of which they know, will, and act. The one person of the incarnate Son acts by virtue of two natures. Persons are “whos” or the active subjects of natures. With

The Doctrine of Christ

reference to our incarnate Lord, he is one person acting conjointly by virtue of two natures. He is one subject or agent, the Son of God incarnate, acting or operating by virtue of or according to two agencies—his divine nature and his human nature. These “two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, were inseparably joined together in one Person: without conversion, composition, or confusion...” (2 LCF 8.2). There is a saying that seeks to capture this Christian confession: “‘I am what I was’ (to wit, God) ‘nor was I what I am’ (namely man) ‘now I am called both’ (to wit, God and man).”¹ Great, indeed, is the mystery of godliness!

3

*During the incarnate ministry of our Lord on the earth
many years ago, it was God who was manifested and
it was in the flesh that he was manifested.*

Let’s look at some important texts from John’s Gospel, chapter 1. In [John 1:1–2](#) we read, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” The Word is said to be “in the beginning,” “with God,” and “God.” So there was in the beginning the Word and God but the Word is also named God. We will come back to this. [John 1:3](#) says, “All things were made through Him [i.e., “the Word”], and without Him nothing was made that was made.” These words introduce readers to creation, effected by virtue of the Word or Son. Then in verse 14 we read, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Here is the incarnation of the Word. The order in this passage is very instructive. First “the Word” and “God” (vv. 1 and 2), then creation (v. 3), and then incarnation (v. 14). This order is not merely to be observed, but it must condition our reading of the entire Gospel of John.

The difficulty here is that the Creator, the Word, “became flesh.” How do we parse this in a manner that makes scriptural sense? Given that the Word is God, he is such eternally and immutably. Divinity cannot change but can bring being into being that had no being, including the flesh and soul of Christ. God creates. But flesh is not divinity and divinity is not flesh. Flesh can *not be* then *be*, but it cannot be divinity. It would no longer be flesh.

I think it is crucial to allow words in [John 1:1–2](#) to help us while trying to make our way through a proper understanding of verse 14. The Word is God and was in the beginning with God. If the Word is a divine person, it seems the one he was with is also a divine person, since he is God but not the Word. Assuming the Word to be a divine person, how can he become flesh and still be the Word while being flesh? We must be careful here. Our scriptural instinct is to preserve his Wordness (his divinity) *and* his fleshness (his

¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Volume 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 13.6.11 (2:313).

The Doctrine of Christ

humanity)—a good instinct. But how is this best stated? This is a mine-field for bad takes so we must be careful. Remember that the Word is a person, a divine person. Do we want to say the Word is a person and the flesh he became is a person? I hope not. That is Nestorian (an ancient heresy, a two-personed view of our Lord incarnate). It is orthodox to say one person/two natures. Given Scripture, we ought to protect the unity of person but not to the neglect of the distinct natures. Recall the words of our Confession: very God, very man, one Christ!



Moving back to [John 1:1–2](#) might help us again. The Word is a divine person. Given what the Old Testament says about God, the Word is omnipresent because he *is* God. If he is omnipresent, and if it is he, the Word, who becomes flesh, wasn't he already present, though in a divine mode of presence before becoming flesh? How can he become present if already present? Could it be that “and the Word became flesh” means the Word became present in a new way? If by “flesh” John means man—body and soul—then though the Word was present by virtue of his divinity, he became present in a new mode by virtue of his assumed humanity.

The incarnation was not the relocation, an act of moving to a new place, by the Word from heaven to earth. It was the assumption, the taking and uniting to himself, of a created human nature by the eternal Son of the eternal Father. And, by the way, if “without Him nothing was made that was made” and the flesh he assumed was made, then we need to leave room in our explanations of the incarnation for the Word to be the creative cause of his own flesh. He could be its cause because he exists beyond it as very God.

***The incarnation was not the relocation, an act of moving
to a new place, by the Word from heaven to earth.***

Carefully defining person, nature, and the union of the two natures in the one incarnate Son of God helps Christians articulate the mystery of the incarnation. It helps us explain how our Lord can be both God and man yet one Christ. It helps us work through difficulties that arise when contemplating the acts of our Lord during his state of humiliation (i.e., from his conception to his death/burial). During his state of humiliation, did our Lord sleep, hunger, thirst, weep, not know certain things, suffer, bleed, and die? Yes. Who did all these things? The Son of God incarnate. Did the Son of God incarnate do all these things according to both natures? No. He slept, hungered, thirsted, wept, did not know certain things, suffered, bled, and died according to the only nature that could experience those things—his human nature. But, while according to his human nature our Lord slept, hungered, thirsted, wept, was ignorant, suffered, bled, and died, what

The Doctrine of Christ

was he doing according to his divine nature at the same time? If it is the Word who is God who assumed flesh and God does not change, then in terms of his divine nature the one Son of God was acting according to it simultaneously doing the things God does. This is important to understand. While our Lord was among us many years ago, he retained “the form of God” (using Paul’s language in [Phil. 2:6](#)) while “taking the form of a bond servant” ([Phil. 2:7](#)). He was both “form of God” and “form of a bondservant” yet one Christ. The “taking the form of a bondservant” is his emptying; and the emptying is him “taking the form of a bondservant.” Remember, our Lord incarnate is very God *and* very man. He is one person (i.e., the Word, or Son, of God) yet two natures (i.e., divine and human); one agent/two agencies.

5

These are great revealed mysteries, indeed. One last question will suffice. Why? Why the Son of God incarnate? Why a two-natured redeemer? One way to answer this questions is as follows: “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” ([Gal. 4:4–5](#)). The Son was sent to assume our nature (“born of a woman”), to assume our duties (“born under the law”), and to assume our liabilities (“to redeem those who were under the law”) in order to bring us into the safe presence of God. He became man for us and for our salvation! Let us adore our two-natured redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ, very God *and* very man. Amen!

© Founders Ministries, March 13, 2025. Retrieved August 21, 2026.

<https://founders.org/articles/very-god-and-very-man-yet-one-christ-one-person-two-natures/>

NOTE: This post is in compliance with the Fair Use clause of the US Copyright Act of 1976 (17 U.S. Code § 107). The US Supreme Court has issued several major decisions clarifying and reaffirming the fair use doctrine since the 1980s, most recently in the 2021 decision *Google LLC v. Oracle America, Inc.*