

The Doctrine of Christ

What Is Partitive Exegesis? How the Church Has Read Scripture on Christ

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“You just had to be there!”

We fall back on this excuse when words fail to capture the precise reality of an experience—often a comedic interaction or visual beauty. The reality is that *reality itself* is often hard to describe. We do our best to describe it with words, but we’ve all experienced the frustration of falling short.

This is especially true when we use our words to describe God. Herman Bavinck asks, “The moment we dare to speak about God the question arises: *How can we?*”¹ The same question can be asked of the person of Christ: When we dare to speak about the One who is *both* infinite God and finite man, *how can we?*

¹ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 30. Emphasis added.

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Scripture tells us Jesus slept, ate, walked, and learned new things. But it also tells us He created the universe, sustains it, and is omniscient. You can see the dilemma—how do we accurately describe Jesus when He has these seemingly contradictory categories?

We can navigate this difficulty through a practice known as *partitive exegesis*. Partitive exegesis presupposes that Christ's two natures are unified in His person without confusion, change, division, or separation. Therefore, we must recognize and maintain the distinction between Christ's two natures when we read the Bible.² While that may sound complicated, this practice arises from Scripture itself—it is an inspired way of describing the reality of the incarnation.

2

A BIBLICAL PATTERN

As we read through the New Testament, we see passages variously emphasize attributes of both Christ's humanity and His divinity. Consider these five ways that the Bible makes statements about Christ.

1. When Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, I am," the person is the subject, but the attribute (eternality) is only appropriate for the *divine nature* ([John 8:58](#)).
2. When Jesus said, "I thirst," the person is the subject, but thirst is only appropriate for the *human nature* ([John 19:28](#)).
3. Titles like "Redeemer" or "King" are applied to Christ and is appropriate for *both natures* ([Psalm 10:16](#); [Luke 1:32–33](#)).

So far, so good. But Scripture also contains more complicated statements about Christ.

4. Some things are ascribed to Christ that are appropriate to the *human nature* but predicated on Christ as *divine*. In [Revelation 1:17–18](#), Christ identifies Himself as "the first and the last" (a *divine* title), then He says He "was dead" (something only possible for a *human*). A human quality (death) is applied to the person even though the Son as God is emphasized in this passage.
5. On the other hand, some things are ascribed to Christ that are appropriate to the *divine nature* but predicated on Christ as human. [John 6:62](#) refers to "the Son of

² I am borrowing terminology from Jamieson and Wittman here: "Partitive exegesis discerns the precise referent and scope of scriptural statements about Christ. Since Scripture proclaims a single Christ who is both divine and human, partitive exegesis recognizes and maintains a distinction between Christ's divine and human natures." R.B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 155.

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Man ascending to where He was before.” “Son of Man” emphasizes Christ’s humanity, but ascending to “where He was before” can only be truly said of Christ as divine.³

In each of these instances, Scripture applies a property true of one or both natures to the person. It is our job as interpreters to discern which attributes are appropriate for each nature.

3

While some people may object that we read too strong of a distinction between the natures, the Bible itself uses this logic as well. [Romans 1:3](#) says that Christ “was born of a descendant of David *according to the flesh*.” Christ is not descended from David according to the divinity. This is logically obvious, but Paul makes it verbally explicit.⁴

Partitive exegesis is an attempt to apply this same inspired logic to every biblical statement about Christ. Some things are true of Christ *according to* His humanity and some things are true of Christ *according to* His divinity.

This way of thinking was worked out in the early church. As [Chalcedon states](#), “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.” Because the two natures are unified in the person of Christ, anything said of either nature is true of the person (“concurring in one Person”) while remaining untrue of the other nature (“the property of each nature being preserved”).

Yet, some confusion may arise in light of examples 4–5 above. How do we interpret those verses that apply the property of one nature to the other?

THE COMMUNICATION OF PROPERTIES

The properties of both natures are predicated on the person. However, because both natures are united in the one person, Scripture seemingly attributes properties of one nature to the other. This biblical way of speaking has become known as the “communication of idioms” or “communication of properties.”

³ This list is adapted from John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 117–118.

⁴ R.B. Jamieson and Tyler Wittman explain, “Why does Paul specify that Jesus’s human lineage is from the seed of David? Because that is not the only lineage he has. Jesus is not only David’s son but also God’s Son. So, even though Paul’s partitive qualifier [i.e., ‘according to the flesh’] only faces one direction, we can fittingly paraphrase Paul’s partition with a Chalcedonian parallelism. In [Romans 1:3](#), Jesus is God’s Son as regards his divinity, and David’s son as regards his humanity.” Jamieson and Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning*, 157.

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This is described in the 1689 London Baptist Confession, 8.7: “Christ, in the work of mediation, acts 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.”

Consider these verses:



- [Acts 20:28](#), “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”
- [1 Corinthians 2:8](#), “The wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”
- [Zechariah 12:10](#), [Yahweh says] “I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn.”

In each example, something human (blood, crucifixion, and death) is predicated of divinity (God, the Lord of Glory, and Yahweh). Does God, who is spirit ([John 4:24](#)) have blood? Can the Lord, who has life in Himself ([John 5:26](#)), be crucified? Can Yahweh be “pierced?”

The only way any of these statements can be true is if they refer to a single *person* who is both God and man. Concerning biblical passages like the ones listed above, Theodore Beza explains,

In the first place, these statements are made by means of the communication of individual properties, which truly does not exist. For if it were really true—that is, if the properties of the divine nature in actual fact belonged to the human nature, or vice versa—there would be no union, but a confusion. But it is put like this so that the unity of the person might be understood.⁵

When Beza says the statements like those from [Acts 20:28](#) are not “really true,” he means that they are attributed verbally instead of ontologically. It is not that God has blood, but

⁵ Theodore Beza, *A Clear and Simple Treatise on the Lord's Supper*, trans. David C. Noe (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), 67.

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the person who is God has blood as a man. Therefore, it is appropriate because of the unity of the person to say “God has blood.” John Calvin [explains](#), “It very frequently happens, on account of the unity of the Person of Christ, that what properly belongs to one nature is applied to another.”

How can both statements be true? How can Jesus be in heaven *and* with His disciples? The only possible answer to these questions is that He is both God and man. God is omnipresent ([1 Kings 8:27](#); [Psalm 139:7–10](#); [Jer. 23:24](#)) and this did not change when the Son assumed a human nature. This must be the case because it is *impossible* for God to change ([Mal. 3:6](#); [Jas. 1:17](#)).⁶

Calvin gives us the Chalcedonian key here: The communication of properties is possible “on account of the unity of the Person of Christ.” And as Beza notes above, this close unity of the two natures in the one person teaches us about the person of Christ. We know that the natures are unified in the person by the very fact that both are predicated of Him—even to the point of verbally applying properties of one nature to the other.

A TEST CASE: DIVINE PRESENCE AND HUMAN DISTANCE

What does partitive exegesis look like in practice? We can use the divine attribute of omnipresence as a test case. On the one hand, Christ made it clear to His disciples that He was leaving them: “It is to your advantage that I go *away*” ([John 15:7](#); see [Acts 1:9–11](#)). On the other hand, Christ makes statements that indicate His continuing presence with the disciples after His ascension: “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” ([Matt. 28:20](#)).

*God is omnipresent and this did not change
when the Son assumed a human nature.*

The Son lost nothing in the incarnation, but instead assumed a human nature. As it pertains to His presence, He did not lose omnipresence, but assumed locality as a man. His infinite being was veiled in a finite location, but not fully contained in it. So, although

⁶ Some people have interpreted Paul’s claim that the Son “emptied Himself” in [Philippians 2:7](#) to mean that He “set aside” or “gave up” certain divine attributes in the incarnation. Thankfully, Paul explains what “emptied Himself” means in the very next phrase. He writes that the Son “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.” For a complete explanation of [Philippians 2:6–8](#), see Mike Riccardi’s article “[Veiled in Flesh the Godhead See: A Study of the Kenosis of Christ](#)” in *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 30/1 (Spring 2019): 103–127 and Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 174–179.

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Christ is truly a man and localized in one place as such, He is simultaneously the omnipresent God.

This mind-bending reality was helpfully articulated in the period of the Reformation. The belief that Christ is omnipresent as God yet localized as man has come to be known as the *extra Calvinisticum*. This title is somewhat misleading because Calvin did not invent the doctrine. It is simply associated with his name because of how it played into the Reformation debates over the Lord's Table.

Positively, the *extra Calvinisticum* teaches that God the Son *retains* all his divine attributes, specifically omnipresence. Negatively, (because of the positive point) the *extra Calvinisticum* teaches that God the Son is *not contained* within the human nature which he assumed.⁷ Calvin poetically articulates this position,

For even if the Word in his immeasurable essence united with the nature of man into one person, we do not imagine that he was confined therein. Here is something marvelous: the Son of God descended from heaven in such a way that, without leaving heaven, he willed to be borne in the virgin's womb, to go about earth, and to hang upon the cross; yet he continuously filled the world even as he had done from the beginning.⁸

The Genevan Reformer carefully avoids two errors here. First, he refuses to divide the person of Christ. The Son who fills all things is the same person who was born of a virgin. Second, he refuses to blend Christ's two natures—humanity is not omnipresent and divinity is not contained locally.

Do you see how partitive exegesis helps us answer the question of how Christ is both personally present with us but also in heaven? It faithfully harmonizes texts like [Matthew 28:20](#) and [Acts 1:9–11](#). Those verses that indicate omnipresence refer to Christ by His divinity and those that indicate local movement or limitation refer to Christ by His humanity.

⁷ Paul Helm offers a succinct definition of *extra Calvinisticum*: "This is the view that in the Incarnation God the Son retained divine properties such as immensity and omnipresence and that therefore Christ was not physically confined within the limits of a human." Richard Muller explains further, "The Reformed argued that the Word is fully united to but never totally contained within the human nature and therefore, even in the incarnation, is to be conceived of as beyond or outside of (extra) the human nature." Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 58 and Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 116.

⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), II.13.4.

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WHY WE NEED PARTITIVE EXEGESIS

Concerning the time of His return, Jesus says in [Matthew 24:36](#), “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.” This verse tells us that the Son is ignorant of something (the time of His return).

Based on everything we’ve seen above, how should we interpret this statement? Is ignorance appropriate to Christ’s divinity, humanity, or both? We know that God is omniscient ([1 John 3:20](#)), so ignorance cannot be true of divinity. Therefore, it must be true of Christ according to His humanity.

Some will object that this interpretation neuters the force of [Matthew 24:36](#), but this conclusion is not necessary. Christ’s statement is still true—the One who is God is ignorant of something as a man. Understanding that Christ’s ignorance is only possible for Him as a man in no way undermines the meaning of this verse. In fact, it should cause us to marvel at the fact that Christ is both ignorant and omniscient!

Furthermore, we frequently interpret the Bible this way without even realizing it. We don’t read a passage about Jesus getting hungry ([Mark 11:12](#)) and assume that God suddenly has a digestive system. Instead, we know that hunger indicates the genuine humanity of the Son. Likewise, when we read that Jesus upholds the universe ([Col. 1:17](#)), we don’t assume that He is doing so with human hands.

Whatever is said of either nature is true of the person, but what is said of one nature is not necessarily true of the other nature. So when Scripture makes a statement about Christ, we have to ask ourselves, “Is this statement true of *both* natures or just *one*?” Then, “If it is true of only one nature, *which one*?”

The One who is God suffered on the cross as a man. The One who is man upheld the universe while it happened.

If we do not interpret Scriptures concerning Christ correctly—in light of the reality they describe—we end up with a God who thirsts, sleeps, suffers, submits, and lacks knowledge. We also end up with a man who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and eternal. If we fail to retain the properties of each nature to themselves, we blend them and start on

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the short road to heresy. In fact, this is exactly how certain heretics have interpreted [Matthew 24:36](#).⁹

DID MY SOVEREIGN DIE?

Partitive exegesis is a way of making explicit what many Christians do intuitively. If you've ever sung Isaac Watt's hymn "Alas! and Did My Savior Bleed," you're familiar with partitive language. The opening lines state,

Alas! and did my Savior bleed,
And did my *Sovereign* die!

The third verse goes even further:

Well might the sun in darkness hide,
And shut its glories in,
When God, the mighty maker, died
For his own creature's sin.

Did God die? Yes—as a man! God the Son suffered, bled, and died on the cross as a real human while retaining full divinity. Cyril of Alexandria embraces this reality: "To the same one we attribute both the divine and human characteristics, and we also say that to the same one belongs the birth and the suffering on the cross since he appropriated everything that belonged to his own flesh, while ever remaining impassible in the nature of the Godhead."¹⁰

The One who is God suffered on the cross as a man. The One who is man upheld the universe while it happened. The one undivided person is the same in both cases. And instead of simplifying this mystery, we should be compelled by it to adore Christ more. This great mystery of God the Son in two natures should cause us to continue singing with Watts,

Was it for crimes that I have done,
he groaned upon the tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
And love beyond degree!¹¹

⁹ See, for instance, the Socinian John Biddle, *A Brief History of the Unitarians* (1691), 4.

¹⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John Anthony McGuckin (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 133.

¹¹ Some of the material in this post was originally posted [here](#) and [here](#).

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