

The Practical Application of the Doctrine of the Two Natures of Christ

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On the altar in many of our churches one finds two candles which are lighted when Holy Communion is celebrated. As we teach our children in confirmation instruction classes, these communion lights represent the two natures of Christ. Jesus calls himself the Light of the world (Jn 8:12; 12:46). As that Light he is the source of light and life for all who believe in him (Jn 1:5).

Holy Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus is both true God and true man. This is an elementary and essential article of our Christian faith. In the Apostles' Creed we confess that Jesus Christ is God's "only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary." Because of the controversies that arose in the fourth century the church sharpened its confession in the Nicene Creed, asserting its faith in "one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made, who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary and was made man."

Even more explicit in defining this doctrine is the Athanasian Creed, which seems to have originated in southern France in or around the sixth century. The pertinent section of this creed declares that it is necessary to everlasting salvation to believe faithfully the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ:

For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man, God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man of the substance of His mother, born in the world; perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting. Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood; who, although He be God and Man, yet He is not two but one Christ: one not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking the manhood into God; one altogether; not by confusion of Substance, but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ.

The fullest confessional delineation of the doctrine of the Person of Christ appears in Article VIII of the Formula of Concord. This was necessary because some crypto-Calvinistic Lutheran theologians accepted the argument of the Sacramentarians that nothing could be ascribed to the human nature of Christ which is above or contrary to its natural, essential properties. Because Melancthon and his followers employed ambiguous language in discussing Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper, Article VIII of the Formula of Concord insists that Christ's body is omnipresent and actually received by the communicants in the sacrament in, with, and under the bread and wine.

These confessional statements are based on clear and plain passages of Holy Scripture. Before discussing the practical application of the doctrine, we will do well to review briefly the scriptural basis of the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. This is a large subject, and so we shall have to limit ourselves to a few important points. As we shall see, both the Old and New Testaments clearly teach that Jesus Christ is not only true man, but also true God.

Jesus Christ Is True Man

In the very first Gospel promise God pointed to the human nature of the coming Savior. He spoke of him as the “seed” of the woman (Gn 3:15). He would have a human mother and be a member of the human race.

Many years later God repeated his promise and identified the Savior as a descendant of Abraham. God told Abraham, “Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed” (Gn 22:18). As a man, Jesus counted Abraham as one of his forefathers (Mt 1:1; Lk 3:23–34).

As time went on, God forged link after link in the human genealogy of the promised Messiah: Isaac, Jacob, Judah, and then David, Israel’s great warrior-king. “Hosanna to the Son of David,” the crowd chanted as Jesus entered Jerusalem shortly before his suffering and death (Mt 21:9). “The Son of David” is a Messianic title that bears witness to his human origin.

In the New Testament the title “the Son of Man” is applied 78 times to Jesus of Nazareth. This title, too, is derived from the Old Testament. Daniel was clearly speaking about the Messiah when he wrote, “In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Dn 7:13, 14).

“The Son of Man” was Jesus’ favorite way of referring to himself. While this term obviously points to his human nature, it does not denote that nature exclusively. It is, rather, as our dogmaticians say, a “concrete” of the human nature, that is, a term which, while referring to the human nature, at the same time includes his divine nature since both natures are united in the one person, Jesus Christ.

Recall Jesus’ assertion in Matthew 20:28, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” To ransom the world of sinners was a divine work. But if Christ was to be man’s substitute and give his life as a ransom for many, he had to become a human being. He had to assume our flesh and blood. By calling himself “the Son of Man” Jesus was emphasizing his essential unity with mankind, especially in its weakness and mortality. The article in the title as it occurs with but few exceptions in the New Testament is significant. Jesus is not merely *a* son of man, that is, one among many, but the one, outstanding representative of mankind. He is God’s Son, who, as Paul says, was “born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Ga 4:4).

The Jews had no doubts about the human nature of Jesus. To them it was obvious that he was a true man. In fact, he was so much like them that they questioned his claim to be more than a man. “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?” they asked. “How can he now say, ‘I came down from heaven?’” (Jn 6:42).

The strongest evidence for Jesus’ humanity presented to us in the Scriptures is his crucifixion, death and burial. That he actually died and did not merely slip into a coma was demonstrated beyond any doubt when the Roman soldier pierced his side with a spear. The apostle John was a witness. He saw a stream of blood and water pour from the wound and later wrote, “The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true” (Jn 19:35). Only in one respect did Jesus’ death differ from ours: God preserved his body from decay (Ac 2:31). Normally decay begins the moment a person dies.

In his resurrection Jesus’ body was, to be sure, changed. It was glorified. It was no longer subject to such human weaknesses as hunger, thirst, weariness, pain or death. But it was still the same body he had had before. To prove that he was no ghost Jesus invited his disciples to touch him, for, as he said, “A ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Lk 24:39). As further proof he ate the broiled fish they gave him. In fact, his body still bore the stigmata, the marks of the nails in his hands and feet and the spear scar in his side.

The denial of Christ’s humanity is not a problem for the church today as it was in the early centuries of the church’s history. Under the influence of the popular philosophy known as Gnosticism the so-called Docetists, one of whom was a man named Marcion who lived in Rome about 150 A.D., claimed that Jesus had only a phantom body. He only *seemed* to be a man. He was really a divine being who appeared in human guise and whose death was a sham. In the fourth century Apollinaris and his followers, believing that a human being

consists of three parts, held that Jesus had a human body and a human soul but that in him the Logos took the place of a human spirit. In response the church insisted that what Jesus did not assume, he did not redeem (*quod non assumpsit, non redemit*). Citing Hebrews 2:17, “He had to be made like his brothers in every way,” the church maintained that Christ took on the entire nature of a human being.

Yes, Jesus was like us in every respect except one. He was sinless (He 4:15). The attacks made on Jesus’ true humanity were, in fact, directed against his deity and his work of redemption. An old German proverb applies, “*Er haut den Sack und meint den Esel.*” The driver strikes the bag his donkey is carrying, but he intends the blow to spur on the animal. The devil realized that anything that undermined the theanthropic person of Christ robbed man of the assurance of the vicarious atonement. Luther rightly noted, “If ... He is not a real and natural man, born of Mary, then He is not our flesh and blood. Then He has nothing in common with us; then we can derive no comfort from Him.”¹

The error the church must contend against today is the claim of some theologians that if Jesus fully shared our humanity, he must also have sinned. If he was sinless, they say, he was not entirely like us. So they have speculated about his sexuality, about the possibility that he was married, and about psychological hang-ups he may have had.²

Jesus did not lay aside his human nature when he rose from the dead, and he never will. He still possesses it and will possess it to all eternity. When the Bible tells us that at Jesus’ return on the last day “every eye will see him” (Re 1:7), it is speaking of him according to his human nature. According to his divine nature he is “the King eternal, immortal, invisible” (1 Tm 1:17), “whom no one has seen nor can see” (1 Tm 6:16). Let us now examine the scriptural basis for the church’s confession that he is true God.

Jesus Christ Is True God

People are generally ready to grant that a man by the name of Jesus of Nazareth lived two thousand years ago and that he was a true man. It is his claim that he was also true God, the Lord from heaven, that evokes their denials, laughter and ridicule, and even makes them angry. And yet the Bible teaches that he was and is true God just as clearly and emphatically as it teaches that he was and is true man.

The Old Testament believers understood that the Savior whom God promised to send would be God himself. Only God could accomplish the work of crushing the devil’s head and delivering sinners from his power, as God promised Adam and Eve (Gn 3:15). Abraham, too, realized that when God said, “Through your off-spring all nations on earth will be blessed” (Gn 22:18), this involved far more than any mere man could do. Abraham understood that God was giving him the promise of a Savior who would obtain the blessing of salvation for all of the human race. Jesus himself tells us that this was Abraham’s understanding of God’s promise, for he says, “Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad” (Jn 8:56).

When God revealed to David that he was to be a forefather of the coming Savior and King and then added, “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Sm 7:14), David was overwhelmed. He burst into a hymn of thanksgiving and praise (2 Sm 7:18–29). In several psalms that he wrote after receiving this revelation he plainly shows that he fully realized that this Descendant of his would be the Son of God himself. In Psalm 2:7 David under the inspiration of the Holy Ghost records the words that God the Father spoke to the Messiah, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father.” Could it have been made any plainer? Twice the writer to the Hebrews cites these words from Psalm 2 to establish the deity and authority of Christ (He 1:5; 5:5).

David also wrote Psalm 110, which begins, “The LORD says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (v. 1). Jesus quotes this verse and asks the Pharisees, “If David then calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” (Mt 22:45). David recognized that this Descendant of his who was to come would be not only a true man but also true God.

In reviewing the evidence from the Old Testament that the promised Messiah would be true God, we cannot fail to mention two familiar and crystal clear passages from Isaiah, the evangelist of the Old Testament.

¹ LW 22:23

² Cf., e.g., William E. Phipps, *Was Jesus Married?* New York, Evanston and London: Harper and Row, 1970

In Isaiah 7:14 we have the great Immanuel prophecy: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel,” a name that means “God with us.” This is followed by the beautiful Christmas Gospel, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Is 9:6). Each of these lofty and comforting names is in itself a testimony to his deity.

Time does not permit us to cite all the passages in the Old Testament through which God told his people that he himself, in the person of his Son, would be their deliverer. We must content ourselves with but two more references. The first is from Micah, an eighth century contemporary of Isaiah. Not only did Micah foretell the very town where Christ would be born, namely, in Bethlehem, the city of David in the hill country of Judea, but he also described the coming Ruler as one “whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Mi 5:1) literally, “from days of eternity,” Mic 5:2), an unmistakable proof of his deity. Only God has existed from eternity.

Our final testimony from the Old Testament is from the prophet Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, who lived and worked in the second half of the fifth century B.C. Malachi foretold the coming of the Messiah’s forerunner, John the Baptist, and added, “‘Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,’ says the LORD Almighty” (Mal 3:1). This Messenger of the Covenant, who is called “the Lord,” is often described in the Old Testament as the “Angel of the LORD.” He is none other than the Second Person in the Holy Trinity, the Son of God.

The New Testament, like the Old, offers a wealth of evidence for the deity of Christ. At his birth a messenger from heaven told the shepherds, “He is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:11). Paul writes to the Galatians, “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Ga 4:4, 5). To the Romans he writes that Christ “is God over all” (Ro 9:5). In his letter to Titus he calls him “our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Tit 2:13).

In proving the deity of Christ our teachers have followed the pattern set by the early church fathers, who pointed out that the Scriptures ascribe to him divine names, divine attributes, divine works and divine honor. Peter, for example, speaking for all the disciples, confessed, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16). Jesus not only accepted Peter’s confession, but personally took an oath before the Jewish Sanhedrin that he was the Son of God (Mt 26:63f). In a debate with the Jews Jesus claimed the divine attribute of eternity, asserting, “Before Abraham was born, I am” (Jn 8:58). “I AM” was the sacred name by which God identified himself to Moses (Ex 3:15). Because the Jews realized that Jesus was claiming to be God, they picked up stones to kill him for blasphemy. Not only his many miracles, but above all his resurrection testifies to the truth of his claim. In the Book of Revelation he is accorded divine honor and worship by the angels in heaven when they sing, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and strength and honor and glory and praise” (Re 5:12). One of the most explicit statements in the New Testament to the deity of Christ is found in Hebrews 1:3 where the holy writer calls him “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.”

Just as the title “Son of Man” is, in dogmatic terms, a concrete noun, designating him according to his human nature but at the same time referring to the entire person of Christ, including his divine nature, so also the title “Son of God” is a concrete term, which, while naming the divine nature, designates the whole person, including also his human nature. This is true because both natures are most closely and inseparably united with each other in the person of Christ.

Incidentally, we recall that there are also passages which refer to Christ’s human or divine nature as such. Such references, called abstract nouns, are “flesh” and “blood” (Jn 6:53–56; 1 Jn 1:7), expressions which are abstracts of the human nature, and “Godhead” or “Deity” (Col 2:9), an abstract of the divine nature. We will have more to say about the matter of abstract and concrete terms in the next part of this essay.

Clearly then both the Old and New Testaments bear indisputable testimony to the truth: Jesus Christ is true God. And this has been the doctrine of the Christian church from apostolic times. Repeatedly, however, through the centuries heretics have appeared who have denied the deity of Christ, beginning with Cerinthus, a contemporary of the apostle John. The list of these false teachers includes not only those outside the Christian

church like the Unitarians, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses, but, incredibly, even many who have professed to be Christians. In the fourth century Arius taught that there was a time when Jesus did not exist. According to Arius Jesus was not God but a kind of demi-god through whom God created the world. Though Arianism was rejected in the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, it flourished for several hundred years among the Goths and Teutons, who were converted to Christianity by Arian missionaries. In their theology the Socinians of Luther's time were precursors of the Unitarians of today.

Denials of Christ's deity are resurrected and repeated by heretics in every generation. A few years ago a book was published under the title *The Myth of God Incarnate*. In it seven Church of England theologians assert that Jesus was only a man, not the Son of God incarnate. Their thesis is "that Jesus was (as he is presented in Acts 2:21) 'a man approved by God' for a special role within the divine purpose, and that the later conception of him as God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life, is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us."³ They believe that the Christ of the creeds is an invention of the church, not the Christ portrayed in the Scriptures. For them the deification of Jesus was the end result of an evolutionary process in pious imagination. Belief in the pre-existence of Jesus is, they insist, incompatible with a belief in his being human in the ordinarily accepted sense. This book sparked a heated debate that has not yet subsided, some arguing hotly for, others against the doctrine of Christ as it is incorporated in the three ecumenical creeds.

If we are not to lose the precious Gospel of our salvation, we must continually "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jd 3). This biblical faith includes not only the humanity and deity of Jesus Christ, but also the union of these two natures in his one person. We turn our attention now, therefore, to this personal union.

The Personal Union

In Christ the divine nature and the human nature are so closely united that wherever the one nature is the other is, and whatever the one nature does the other participates in doing. From the moment of his conception in the womb of his mother Mary, Jesus has been and always will be both God and man in one person.

This vital yet profound truth is revealed by the Holy Spirit in the simple words of John 1:14, "The Word became flesh" (οἱ οἶοι σαρκὸς ἐγένετο)." The Logos or "Word" is John's name for the Second Person of the Godhead. He is the "Word" because he is God's final and complete revelation of himself to man (He 1:1, 2). God's Gospel message of grace and truth is embodied in him (Jn 1:17), and he makes it known to us. He is the God-Revealer. John says, "No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (Jn 1:18). Already in the Old Testament there were hints that the "Word of God" sometimes had a personal sense (compare, eg., Ps 33:6, 9 with Jn 1:3 and He 11:3). But in the New Testament this is expressly stated. In the first verse of his Gospel John tells us that the Word was in the beginning, that he was with God, and that he was God.

This divine Person "became flesh." This does not mean that he turned into a man and stopped being God. For John at once goes on to say, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). Rather, the meaning is that the eternally existing Logos took on or assumed a human nature consisting of both body and soul. As Luther points out, "In Scriptural parlance 'flesh' denotes a complete human being ... The word 'flesh' embraces both body and soul, for without the soul the body is dead."⁴ The human nature is united with the divine nature, as the Council of Chalcedon declared in 451 A.D., "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation (ἀσυγχυτῶν, ἀτρέπτῶν, ἀδιαίρετῶν, ἀχωρίστῶν)."⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr may ridicule this as the "wooden-headed literalism of orthodoxy,"⁶ but his ridicule cannot overthrow the clear testimony of the Scriptures.

³ *The Myth of God Incarnate*, John Hick, ed., Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977, p IX

⁴ LW 22:110f

⁵ "Catalog of Testimonies," *Concordia Triglotta* (hereafter *Trig.*), St. Louis: Concordia, 1921, p 1108

⁶ *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946, p 28

Both the act of incarnation and the resulting hypostatic or personal union of the two natures in Christ are without parallel in all the world. Because they are unique, no comparison can be made that will adequately illustrate them. The union has, to be sure, been compared with the union of body and soul in a human being. The Athanasian Creed states, “As the rational soul and the flesh [body] are one man, so God and man are one Christ.” That this is an imperfect comparison can be seen from the fact that one cannot say that the body of a human being is the soul or the soul is the body. Of Christ one can, however, say that God is man and man is God. When Jesus died, the centurion at the foot of the cross exclaimed, “Surely he [the man hanging on the cross] was the Son of God” (Mt 27:54).

The fathers of the church have also compared this union with the union of fire and iron in a hot, glowing piece of iron. Pointing out the inadequacy of such comparisons, the Formula of Concord says, “It is a far different, more sublime, and ineffable communion and union between the divine and human nature in the person of Christ, on account of which union and communion God is man and man is God, yet neither the natures nor their properties are thereby intermingled, but each retains its essence and properties.”⁷

The fact remains that the union of the Godhead and the manhood in Christ is a profound mystery. To human reason it is a logically insoluble, mind-boggling enigma. Human reason rebels against the thought that the infinite God could take up his residence in a finite human body. Calvinists have always insisted that the finite cannot contain the infinite (*finitum non est capax infiniti*). That is sound logic, to be sure, but not sound theology.

In Colossians 2:9 Paul writes, “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form (ἐν αὐτῷ κατοικεῖ πάν τὸ πλῆρωμα τῆς θεότητος σωματικῶς).” By heaping one expression on another Paul emphasizes that Christ’s finite human body did contain his infinite divine nature. In him the *Godhead* dwells. Not only a portion of the Godhead, however, but the *fullness* of it. And not only some of the fullness, but *all* the fullness. And not only briefly, for a limited time, but perpetually, as the present tense, “dwells (κατοικεῖ)” indicates.

For us the union of the divine and human natures in the one person, Jesus Christ, is an article of faith. Scripture teaches it, and so we believe it, even though we cannot understand or explain it.

An immediate result of the hypostatic union is the so-called communication of idioms. “Idiom” is a term that refers to the attributes, activities or experiences that are peculiar either to the human or the divine nature in Christ. Being born, suffering and dying, for example, are idioms of the human nature. Creating, being immortal, omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient are idioms of the divine nature. We cannot here go into all the details of the scriptural doctrine of the communication of idioms. A few points will have to suffice.

There are some passages in Scripture which ascribe the idioms of one or the other nature to the person of Christ, that is, to the God-Man. So, for example, 1 Peter 4:1 states that “Christ suffered in his body.” Suffering, an idiom of the human nature, is ascribed to “Christ,” a name for the person in whom the two natures are united. Hebrews 13:8, on the other hand, says that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Being eternal and immutable are idioms of the divine nature, and they are here likewise ascribed to the person Jesus Christ, the God-Man.

Of special significance are those passages in which a divine idiom is ascribed not merely to the person, but to the human nature of Christ considered by itself. So 1 John 1:7, for example, states that “the blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, purifies us from every sin.” “Blood” is an abstract term, as was explained earlier. It refers to the human nature as such. But here the Bible ascribes to Christ’s blood the power to purify us from all sin, a power which belongs essentially to his divine nature. In John 6:55, similarly, Jesus says, “My flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.” His human nature, designated by the terms “flesh” and “blood,” is real, spiritual, life-giving food. Such power is an essential characteristic of his divine nature.

Technically such passages are classified by our dogmaticians as belonging to the *genus maiestaticum*. They show that Christ’s divine nature shared its idioms with the human nature. The human nature took on these divine characteristics or properties without any change in its essential characteristics as a truly human nature.

⁷ F.C., S.D., VIII, 19, *Trig.*, p 1021

When Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, his disciples exclaimed, “What kind of man is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mt 8:27). They were amazed. Here was a man who possessed divine power. His divine nature communicated its attribute of omnipotence to his human nature. So also when Jesus taught the people in the synagogue at Nazareth, they asked, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? Isn’t this the carpenter’s son?” (Mt 13:54, 55). Jesus demonstrated to them that he possessed the divine attributes of wisdom and power.

There is no passage, on the other hand, that says that the divine nature ever gave up any of its divine idioms or that it ever took on the idioms of the human nature. The divine nature as such did not suffer or die. Only the person, Christ, the God-Man, suffered and died. So 1 Peter 4:1, a passage cited earlier, asserts that “Christ suffered *in his body*,” that is, according to his human, not his divine nature. “In his body” is a so-called diacritical particle which indicates that suffering is an idiom that belongs essentially to the human nature.

In passages like 1 Corinthians 2:8, where Paul states that the rulers of this age crucified the Lord of glory, the name “Lord of glory” is a concrete term referring to the person who possesses both natures (cf. also “the author of life” in Ac 3:15). The church recognized that it is proper to call Mary the mother of God (q̄otokoj) because “God” is also a concrete term. We can properly sing, as we do in one of our Lenten hymns, “*O grosse Not, Gott selbst ist tot*, O sorrow dread, God himself is dead.” Again, “God” is a concrete of the divine nature. It designates the whole, undivided person, the God-Man, who experienced death according to his human nature. Although the divine nature did not die, it participated in the experience of dying through its union with the human nature. It strengthened and sustained the human nature as the theanthropic person suffered the terrifying experience of dying.

In all of Christ’s official acts as our Prophet, Priest and King, therefore, both natures participated jointly. Each one contributed its own characteristics to the redemptive act, and neither nature ever acted or acts without the other.

Now, admittedly, our discussion has become rather technical. And certainly in presenting these truths in his preaching and teaching a pastor will not plague his people with these theological terms. The same thing applies here that the Formula of Concord says about the terms “substance” and “accident” as they are used by theologians in defending the biblical doctrine of original sin. The Formula states: “A church of plain people ought to be spared these terms in public sermons, because they are unknown to ordinary men.” But the Formula also points out that among learned men these terms are “necessary to explain the doctrine in opposition to the heretics.”⁸

The theologians of the church used technical terminology in order to distinguish carefully between what Scripture teaches and what the errorists claimed it teaches. John Schaller points out, “While fully conscious that no logical skill can bring this mystery [of the person of Christ] nearer to our comprehension, our old teachers make use of philosophical distinctions to show that the antithesis of *Calvinism* is not even reasonable.”⁹

What Franz Pieper writes regarding the battery of ecclesiastical terms used in defending the scriptural doctrine of God applies also in the area of Christology:

The Church did not invent these terms from an itch for novelty. (Chemnitz says: “Not from any mischievous desire for innovation”), much less from a sort of malice to worry future generations. But the terminology has become necessary because the enemies of the Church have constantly devised new perversions of God’s Word and devious subterfuges to attack God’s self-revelation.¹⁰

Pieper also explains why Luther, the Formula of Concord and the Lutheran dogmaticians treat the doctrine of Christ’s two natures, the personal union, the communion of natures and the communication of attributes in such great detail:

⁸ F.C., S.D., I, 54, *Trig.*, p 877

⁹ *Biblical Christology*, Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1981, p 60

¹⁰ *Christian Dogmatics*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1950, I, 418

... the notion that the old teachers treated the subject at such great length from mere contentiousness or the desire to plague mankind is not in accord with history. The facts in the case put the blame for this detailed presentation on the false teachers. These false teachers never tired of going very much into detail in denying the true deity or the true humanity or the personal union of the two natures in Christ. They forced the teachers of the church, who recognized the importance of this doctrine, to present and defend all these truths as they are taught in Scripture.¹¹

The devil recognized that whether his attack was on the deity of Christ, on the human nature or on the personal union, each heresy had the potential of robbing men of their salvation. In rejecting these errors and coining theological terms with which to define its faith the church was not developing new doctrines. Pieper points out that Luther “is perfectly right when he sets forth that the true doctrine of the Person of Christ, inclusive of the *communicatio idiomatum*, was known and believed in Christendom from the very beginning, before any council passed any resolution, *on the basis of the clear statements of Scripture*. All that our Confessions teach concerning the Person of Christ every Christian knows and believes because it is found in the clearly revealed Word of the Prophets and Apostles.”¹²

Zwingli was not content to let Scripture stand as it reads. He claimed that a figure of speech which he called allooesis was involved in a passage like John 6:55, “My flesh is real food.” According to Zwingli this means, “My divine nature is real food.” On the other hand, a passage like 1 Peter 3:18, which says, “Christ died for sins,” Zwingli claimed must be understood to say: Only the human nature, not the person who is both God and man died. So Zwingli wanted to change the subject of a passage to make it agree with the predicate according to his preconception that human idioms can be predicated only of the human nature and divine idioms can be predicated only of the divine nature. To this Luther replied:

Beware, beware, I say, of this allooesis, for it is the devil’s mask since it will finally construct a kind of Christ after whom I would not want to be a Christian, that is, a Christ who is and does no more in his passion and his life than any other saint. For if I believe that only the human nature suffered for me, then Christ would be a poor Savior for me, in fact, he himself would need a Savior. In short, it is indescribable what the devil attempts with this allooesis.¹³

In no uncertain terms Luther rejected the charge of Zwingli and his followers that the Lutherans were guilty of Eutychianism:

They raise a hue and cry against us, saying that we mingle the two natures into one essence. That is not true. We do not say that divinity is humanity, or that the divine nature is the human nature, which would be confusing the natures into one essence. Rather, we merge the two distinct natures into one single person, and say: God is man and man is God. We in turn raise a hue and cry against them for separating the person of Christ as though there were two persons.¹⁴

Realizing that the doctrine of salvation itself is at stake, every conscientious Lutheran pastor will make every effort to preach and teach in full harmony with the Holy Scriptures. He will carefully avoid speaking of the death of Christ as if it were a mere man who died. On the other hand, he will also avoid saying that it was the Godhead or Christ’s divine nature that died. It was Christ, in whom the divine nature and the human nature were inseparably united in one person, who “was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Ro 4:25).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, II, 56

¹² *Ibid.*, II, 57

¹³ LW 37:209f, Cited in F.C., S.D., VIII, 40, *Trig.*, p 1029

¹⁴ LW 37:212

Applying the Doctrine of Christ's Human Nature

As a man Christ is a creature and had a beginning in time. What a miracle and what a mystery confronts us here! The Creator became a creature! For that reason the Athanasian Creed states that he is “equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood.”

Athanasius, the church father who fought so courageously against the Arian heresy that Christ was only a creature, said that our salvation depends as much upon Christ's human nature as upon his deity. Colossians 1:20 tells us that it was God's will to reconcile all things unto himself through Christ “by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” God's plan of rescue for the world hinged on the shedding of his Son's innocent blood. This made the incarnation necessary.

To serve as our substitute Jesus had to become like us. He had to become our Brother. The writer to the Hebrews states, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people” (He 2:14–17).

Here a word of caution to preachers is in order. In speaking about Christ's incarnation they are sometimes inclined to present it as an act of great humiliation that the Creator of all things stooped to become a creature. But this is not what Scripture describes as the humiliation of Christ. Taking on a human nature was not an act of humiliation on the part of the Son of God but rather a manifestation of his power. If his humiliation consisted in his becoming flesh, then his exaltation would consist in putting off his human nature. But there is no such thing as an excarnation on the part of Christ.

Christ's humiliation consists rather in the lowly manner of his incarnation. He took the form of a servant (Php 2:7). He became a weak and helpless infant, totally dependent on his mother. She had to nurse him and change his diapers. His bed was a manger, a feedbox for cattle. He lived a life of poverty. “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests,” he said, “but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Mt 8:20). Though he was the giver of the law, he put himself under the law, obeying it perfectly in our stead. He experienced hunger, thirst, fatigue, hardship, sorrow and pain. He suffered insult, ridicule, rejection, injustice and finally the shame of death on a cross. All this he endured patiently and willingly. That was his state of humiliation as Paul describes it for us in Philippians 2.

Jesus might have come into this world, as someone has said, “trailing clouds of glory.” He might have come as a full-grown man, like Adam. He could have come with all the majesty and glory he let his disciples see at his transfiguration. As Paul says in Philippians 2:6, he, “being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” (NIV, footnote; $\epsilon\theta\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta\eta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon=\beta\alpha\rho\chi\omega\nu\omicron\upsilon\alpha\theta\eta\sigma\alpha\tau\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\iota\eta\alpha\iota\iota\varsigma\alpha\ \kappa\epsilon\omega\tau$ —Living on an equal plane with God, which is what $\tau\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\iota\eta\alpha\iota\iota\varsigma\alpha\ \kappa\epsilon\omega\tau$ means, was his right. He was in the $\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta\eta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ =He possessed the majesty and glory of God. But he refrained from making a display of this. Rather, he emptied himself ($\epsilon\kappa\epsilon\theta\eta\omega\sigma\epsilon\nu$), taking the form of a servant ($\mu\omicron\rho\phi\eta\eta\ \delta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omicron\upsilon$). He adopted the humble life-style that is pictured for us in the Gospels. Few of those who saw him noticed anything special about him. It was not flesh and blood, not their own human insight, but a special revelation from the Father that enabled the disciples to see his glory, “the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). The Father opened their eyes so that they were ready to confess with Peter, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16:16).

Luther never tired of emphasizing that Jesus was *vere homo*. Christ did not assume the glorious and holy nature of angels, but our flesh and blood, our body and soul, our *Madensack* or “bag of worms,” as Luther called it.¹⁵ What mercy God showed us wretched human beings! According to Luther the most precious treasure and highest consolation that we Christians possess is that “the Word, the true, natural Son of God, has become man, complete with flesh and blood like any other man; and that He became man for our sake, so that we should

¹⁵ LW 22:104

come to great glory, and with our flesh and blood, skin and hair, hands and feet, stomach and back sit up in heaven as God does. Thus we may boldly defy the devil and whatever else assails us. For we are sure that our flesh and blood belong in heaven, heirs of heaven's kingdom."¹⁶

The doctrine of Christ's humanity is of vital importance to us, for, as Luther says, "if He were not true man, He could not have suffered and died to achieve our salvation."¹⁷ "We must have a Savior who is also our Brother, who is our flesh and blood, who became like us in all respects but sin."¹⁸ So it was that "He ate, drank, slept, awakened, was tired, sad, and happy. He chatted, worked, and prayed. In brief, He required the same things for life's sustenance and preservation that any other human being does. He labored and suffered as anyone else does. He experienced both fortune and misfortune."¹⁹

The faithful pastor who is alert to the spiritual needs of his people will discover many opportunities to draw comfort and spiritual strength from these truths. When a family is stricken with grief at the death of a husband and father, what a comfort it is to know that Jesus understands such feelings. He, too, wept at the grave of his dear friend Lazarus. When a Christian teenager suffers excruciating pain as the result of a car accident, it is comforting to hear that Jesus sympathizes with us. He himself felt indescribable pain when he was scourged and crucified. The prophet Isaiah described him as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Is 53:3). He then goes on to say, "Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows" (Is 53:4). During his life on earth Jesus assumed those infirmities that are common to all people such as hunger, thirst, weariness, etc. He did not assume personal infirmities such as physical handicaps or diseases which one person may suffer and not another. But in the life to come he will deliver his people from all evils for "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Re 21:4).

As Christians we may expect persecution. This is not always overt or physical. Often it may be subtle and psychological. What an encouragement it is at times like that to recall that Jesus "was despised and rejected by men" (Is 53:3). He knows what it means to experience ridicule and injustice. Has he not warned us, "No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (Jn 15:20)?

What a comfort it is for us to know that the Son of Man shared our sorrows, knows our needs, and from personal experience can empathize with us when troubles batter us like angry waves on a stormy sea. The inspired writer to the Hebrews reminds us, "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (He 4:15).

Temptation is something we must all wrestle with every day of our lives. It is such a painful struggle that even the apostle Paul cried out, "What a wretched man I am!" (Ro 7:24). But Jesus, too, experienced the bitter agony of temptation, even though there was not the slightest taint of evil in his human nature and there never was any doubt about the outcome of his struggle with the Tempter. It was no sham battle. It was a very real life-and-death struggle, so exhausting that when it was over, angels appeared and came to his aid.

As we now struggle to overcome the temptations of the Old Evil Foe, we have Jesus' promise, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you" (He 13:5). He is with us to help us, to strengthen us and to enable us to gain the victory.

While holding unreservedly to the truth that Jesus was and is a true man, our own flesh and blood, our Brother, we will not follow those who deny the virgin birth and argue: How could Jesus be like us in all respects if he did not have a human father? In a recent publication that has the title *Christian Dogmatics* Carl E. Braaten claims that "the primary interest of dogmatics is to interpret the virgin birth as a symbol and not as a freakish intervention in the course of nature." He asks, "Did not God create fatherhood and look upon it as 'very good'? Why then should human fatherhood be eliminated in the work of salvation?"²⁰ The biblical account of the

¹⁶ WA 46:631. Translated in Ian D. Kingston Siggins, *Martin Luther's Doctrine of Christ*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970, p 205. Also in LW 22:110.

¹⁷ LW 22:23

¹⁸ LW 22:24

¹⁹ LW 22:73

²⁰ *Christian Dogmatics*, Carl E. Braaten, Robert W. Jenson, ed., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984, I, 546f

incarnation is not however, a myth, not “a symbolic way of speaking,” as Braaten insists.²¹ It is an assured reality, a reality revealed by God for our comfort and hope. And just as surely as the Child born of the Virgin Mary was *vere homo*, so surely also was he *vere Deus*.

Applying the Doctrine of Christ’s Divine Nature

According to 1 John 1:7 the blood of Jesus Christ “purifies us from every sin.” If that was the blood of a mere man, then it could not even purify him, much less us. But because it was the blood of the God-Man, of Jesus Christ who was true God and true man in one undivided person, it has atoning power. It has infinite value. We are saved from the punishment of hell because *God* was crucified for us.

In applying the doctrine of Christ’s divine nature we as preachers of the gospel will not want to fail to point out the comfort for sinners that lies in this truth. This comfort is expressed in a hymn by Johann Herrmann based on an original by Thomas Aquinas:

Thy blood, the golden show’r,
Has such a wondrous pow’r,
One little drop works purging
Of sin the world o’er-surgin’,
Yea, can release,
deliver From Satan’s jaws forever.²²

Luther expresses this thought also. He writes, “The Person is eternal and infinite, and even one little drop of His blood would have been enough to save the entire world.”²³

Had it not been for the sustaining power of his divine nature, Christ’s human nature would never have been able to bear the crushing load of the sins of the whole world. How many, like Judas, have not been driven to suicide by the intolerable burden of their guilt! They have been driven to despair only by their own sins. Imagine how unbearable the burden must have been for Jesus on whom God laid the sins of every single human being from the time of Adam to the end of the world! Only because his human nature was united with his divine nature was Jesus able to endure such an incredible weight of guilt.

How true it is when Luther writes:

If Christ is not true and natural God, born of the Father in eternity and Creator of all creatures, we are doomed. For what would Christ’s suffering and death avail me if Christ were merely a human being like you and me? As such He could not have overcome devil, death, and sin; He would have proved far too weak for them and could never have helped us. No, we must have a Savior who is true God and Lord over sin, death, devil, and hell. If we permit the devil to topple this stronghold for us, so that we disbelieve His divinity, then His suffering, death, and resurrection profit us nothing. Then we are bereft of all hope of eternal life and salvation; in short, we are not able to comfort ourselves with any of the consoling promises of Scripture.²⁴

Only because God himself became sin for us (2 Cor 5:21) is there any hope of life for us. Again Luther writes:

²¹ *Ibid.*, I, 530

²² This is the ninth stanza of the hymn entitled *Wo soll ich fliehen hin?* #380 in *Evang.-Lutherisches Gesangbuch*, Milwaukee: Northwestern, n.d. The translation is by Werner Franzmann, published in *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 44, No. 4, February 17, 1957, p 62

²³ St. L. VI, 686. Translated by Ewald M. Plass in *What Luther Says*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1959, I, 195

²⁴ LW 22:21f

How amazing it is that the Son of God becomes my servant, that He humbles Himself so, that He cumburs Himself with my misery and sin, yes, with the sin and the death of the entire world! He says to me: “You are no longer a sinner, but I am. I am your substitute. You have not sinned, but I have. The entire world is in sin. However, you are not in sin; but I am. All your sins are to rest on Me and not on you.”²⁵

This is what Luther in his comments on Isaiah 53:5 called “the wonderful exchange”: “One man sins, another pays the penalty; one deserves peace, the other has it.”²⁶

If Jesus Christ was not true God, such an exchange would have been impossible. To quote Luther once again:

Christians should know that if God is not in the scale to give it weight, we, on our side, sink to the ground. I mean it this way: if it cannot be said that God died for us, but only a man, we are lost; but if God’s death and a dead God lie in the balance, his side goes down and ours goes up like a light and empty scale. Yet he can also readily go up again, or leap out of the scale! But he could not sit on the scale unless he had become a man like us, so that it might be called God’s dying, God’s martyrdom, God’s blood, and God’s death. For God in his nature cannot die; but now that God and man are united in one person, it is called God’s death when a man dies who is one substance or one person with God.²⁷

In our preaching and teaching we will not attempt to explain what is inexplicable, a mystery which the human mind can never fathom. We will restrict ourselves to proclaiming the amazing truths God has revealed to us in his Holy Word and pointing out their significance for sinners. When the question is asked: How can this be?, we will not let ourselves be drawn into a futile intellectual debate. God has not revealed these wonderful facts for us to analyze logically but to appropriate and take to heart in simple, childlike faith. Then in humble awe we will bow down and worship our loving Savior.

Simple proclamation of his truth is the means used by the Holy Ghost to work faith in the hearts of sinners and to strengthen and comfort them in the face of temptations and troubles. Such preaching and teaching has the promise of God’s blessing: “My word ... will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Is 55:11). God help us to be faithful messengers of his saving truth!

²⁵ LW 22:166f

²⁶ LW 17:225

²⁷ LW 41:103f. Cited in F.C., S.D., VIII, 44, *Trig.*, 1029ff