



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 6.4 – The Doctrine of Jesus, Son of God, Messiah (Christology)

The Union of Jesus' Two Natures in One Person

Jesus has a human nature and a divine nature. He is both God and man. But He is not two persons; He does not have two personalities. The person of the Son of God, who is eternal, has now taken on human nature, but He is the same person as before. **“The Word became flesh”** (John 1:14). For this reason, the angel Gabriel told Mary: **“That Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God”** (Luke 1:35). And Mary’s cousin Elizabeth called Mary **“the mother of my Lord”** (Luke 1:43). So, it is correct to give Mary the title “mother of God”, for He who was in her womb from conception was true God. The angel announced to the Bethlehem shepherds at the birth of Jesus: **“There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”** (Luke 2:11). We do not know how soon Jesus realized that He was the Son of God, but we do know that by the age of twelve Jesus was fully aware of the fact that God was His Father in a very special sense (Luke 2:49).

The apostle John fought against false teachers who denied that the Son of God had assumed human flesh and blood. That is why he established this truth as a way to separate true teachers from false teachers: **“By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God”** (1 John 4:2-3). The apostle Paul’s words concerning Jesus have been true from the moment of His conception: **“In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily”** (Colossians 2:9).

The incarnation of the Son of God brought about a union of Jesus’ divine nature and Jesus’ human nature in one Person. The human nature retains all the characteristics of humanity, and the divine nature retains all the characteristics of deity. Yet there is only one Person, one personality, the God-man Jesus, the Christ. From the moment of His conception in Mary’s womb, the human and divine natures are united in such a way that they cannot ever be divided. When Jesus died, the Son of God died. The divine nature shared in the death of Jesus, even though God as God cannot die. This is all-important to us, because **“We were reconciled to God through the death of His Son”** (Romans 5:10), that is, the death of the Son of God. Many who knew Jesus on earth did not recognize Him as the Son of God, but His disciples knew who He was. Peter confessed for them all: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”** (Matthew 16:16).

The beginning of the personal union between human and divine natures can be described in different ways. We can say that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb. We can say the eternal Son of God became flesh. The deity assumed humanity. Before this union the Son of God was the eternal Word *without flesh*. After the incarnation the Son of God was and is the eternal Word *in flesh*, permanently. **“The Word became flesh”** (John 1:14). In the Old Testament, the Son of God sometimes appeared in human form, for example, when He visited Abraham. This was not incarnation, however. It was not the beginning of a permanent union between divine and human natures. The Angel (or Messenger) of God in Old Testament was still “the Word without Flesh”; His taking on of an earthly body was only temporary.

Man did not become God, but God became man. This is one of the greatest miracles of all. It is far beyond our understanding or ability to explain. **“Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh”** (1 Timothy 3:16). In an attempt to explain this mystery, some of the early church fathers said it was like iron glowing with fire, or like the union of body and soul in a human being.

There are other unions described in the Bible, but none of them are identical to the personal union of the two natures in Jesus. For example, there is the general union that God has with all created beings: **“He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being”** (Acts 17:27-28). There is also the so-called mystic union between God and all those who believe in Jesus. Peter says that in some way believers in Jesus become **“partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust”** (2 Peter 1:4). On the night before His death Jesus said to His disciples: **“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him”** (John 14:23). Then too there is the sacramental union between the earthly elements in the Lord’s Supper and the body and blood of Christ. Paul writes: **“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?”** (1 Corinthians 10:16).

In the history of the church there have been two individuals in particular who went to one extreme or the other in explaining the personal union of the two natures of Jesus. Nestorius taught that there are two separate persons in the incarnate Christ: the divine person and the human person. He was particularly opposed to the saying that Mary was the mother of God. He insisted that Mary was the mother of the human nature and person, but not of the Son of God. But this divided the natures into two persons. The Baby born to Mary was indeed the Son of God, and therefore, in that sense, Mary was indeed the mother of Him who is God. The Nestorian Church survives to this day as the remains of the Church of the East, the Assyrian Christians.

The teacher with the extreme view on the other side was Eutyches. He taught that Jesus had only one nature, the divine nature, and that the human nature was absorbed by the divine nature. This created a new type of nature that was a combination of the two. His followers were called Monophysites (one nature). His teachings survive among the Copts in Egypt, the Jacobites in Syria, and the Armenians.

The early Christians rejected both of these false teachers and their teachings, and our Lutheran fathers rejected them also. The Council of Chalcedon of 451 A.D. condemned both Nestorianism and Eutychianism, and summarized the true teaching with four terms: Jesus has both the divine and human natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.

Eutyches was guilty of confusion. He confused the two natures. He was also guilty of change, saying that the human nature changed into the divine nature.

Nestorius was guilty of division. He divided the two natures into two persons. He was also guilty of separation. He separated the two natures so that each of them could be in two different places. John Calvin and his followers teach a similar division. They still teach today that Jesus’ human nature ascended to heaven and is thus in a separate place from His divine nature. Jesus’ divine nature can still be with us on earth, but His human nature is limited to a place in heaven. Following this thought, Calvinists and other Reformed groups wrongly teach that Jesus’ body and blood cannot really be present in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, because Jesus’ body ascended to heaven. We will discuss this in greater detail in a future lesson.

Questions

1. What does it mean that Jesus' two natures are united in one person?
2. In what sense is it correct to say that Mary is the mother of God?
3. Show that by the age of 12 Jesus knew that He was the Son of God.
4. Why is it important to know that Jesus' divine nature shared in His death?
5. What is the difference between the Word *without flesh* and the Word *in flesh*?
6. What are three unions mentioned in Scripture that are not the same as the personal union of the two natures in Christ?
7. What was the false teaching of Nestorius?
8. What was the false teaching of Eutyches?
9. What happened at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D.?
10. In what way do present-day Calvinists divide the two natures of Christ?