

TRIUNE GOD

December 28, 2021

God is one. Yet God is three. How do we reconcile these two claims? Each of our previous “home studies” have considered the Triune (three but one) nature of God, but it came to a climax last year when asking if the Father forsook the Son on the cross. Sadly, the Trinity of God remains peripheral rather than central to my thought and life. So I would like us to spend a year considering this most important of teachings.

Questions for the Year

Below are questions we will consider in this study, among others:

1. Is God Triune in eternity?
2. Does “God” refer to the Father, Son, and/or Spirit?
3. Did the Old Testament teach the Trinity of God?
4. What does it mean that “God is one” (Deut. 6)?
5. Was Jesus the Son in eternity?
6. Does the Father have a higher status than the Son in eternity?
7. How could Jesus be fully God and truly human?
8. Is the Spirit a person or merely a force?
9. To Whom should we pray?
10. Are there other gods in heaven?
11. What does it mean that we are “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4)?
12. How should the Trinity of God affect our lives?

Definition of Terms

Although Christians speak of the *Trinity*, this term is not found in our Bible; this term derives from the Latin word *trinitas*, meaning “threefold.” So when we speak of the *Trinity*, we are referencing the threefold nature of God. While helpful, this term misses the oneness of God, so I prefer the term *Triune God*. Triune means “three in one” (i.e., *tri* = three & *une* = one). So this year will consider the *Trinity* of God.

- Trinity = God is three.
- Triune = God is three in one.

PART 1: THE ONENESS OF GOD

Asking the Right Questions

Much as our definitions will shape our study and the answers we conclude, so we must also ask the right questions. Generally, I have noticed a tendency among Christians to focus on one Person of the Triune God when studying any facet of the nature of God. Yet the Scriptures provide a portrait of the Triune God that is deeply connected. Notice the apostle Paul's thoughts in Galatians 4:6; Ephesians 4:4-6; & 2 Corinthians 13:14. When thinking about God, Paul is considering not one Person but all three. See also 1 Peter 1:2.

So rather than asking questions that presuppose a division among Father, Son, and Spirit, let us ask questions that recognize the eternal connectedness among them. To talk about worship of the Father is to speak of adoration of Christ. To think of prayer to the Father is to think through praying in the Spirit. To consider regeneration of the Spirit is to consider the sacrifice of the Son. Again, let us ask questions that assume the connectedness rather than the division of Father, Son, and Spirit.

God Is One

The foundational principle of the Old Testament was that "God is one" (Deut. 6:4). Even in the Three Persons of God, He has one name (Mt. 28:19). Yet how can God be one if He is three? The gospel of John helps answer this.

In John 10:30, Jesus made the radical claim, "I and the Father are one." The Jews understood that this was a statement of equality with the Father, so they took it as heresy. Jesus, quoting from Psalm 82:6, claimed that He was the Son in whom was eternal life while they were but people destined to die (Jn. 10:34-36). What separated Jesus the Christ from people? Eternal life (Jn. 10:28).

This eternal life is the eternal communion among the Father, Son, and Spirit. Two later sections of John add additional clarity to this. First, in the "true vine" address in John 15:1-17, Jesus claimed, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in his love" (Jn. 15:9). Abiding in the love of the Father bound not just the Son to the Father but people to God. Likewise, Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 offers clarity. Toward the end of the prayer, Jesus says, "...I in them and you in me, that they may

become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me” (Jn. 17:23; see also 17:24, 26). Eternal love connected the Father, Son, and Spirit together in an inseparable essence of life.

Government or Marriage?

Two analogies may help to understand this profound truth. Is the Triunity of God more similar to a marriage or to the federal government? The federal government has three branches yet is one government; however, the foundation of this structure is the separation of powers. The judicial must not be the legislative, and neither must be the executive. Central to the federal government is separation. A healthy marriage, however, is built on love. When two people have loved one another for decades, they build one life together. Their phrases, thoughts, actions, intentions, and plans start to become one. The Father, Son, and Spirit have co-existed in an eternal communion of love, which is eternal life. They love one another so much that they have always been and always will be one. They are one through love. We are welcomed into the love of God, which is to be welcomed into the life of God.

As a second analogy, let’s turn to geometry. When an equilateral triangle spins, it looks like a circle. We see this in a fidget spinner. What makes a triangle become a circle? Connection and movement. The Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct persons, yet their love for one another is so intense and eternal that we have but one God. Love makes three into one. In this sense, Figure 1 is preferable to Figure 2 in conceptualizing the oneness of God (see page 4).

A Case Study: Creation

Let us use creation as a case study to ask about the revelation of our Triune God. Who created: the Father, Son, and/or Spirit? Well, as recommended above, let us make sure we probe this question from the proper biblical perspective. Assuredly, the work of creation is only of the one God (Isa. 40:28), yet all three Persons worked together in this great act. In an intensely Triune passage, the Psalmist writes, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host” (Ps. 33:6). So who created? God! Yet in this united act of the one God, each Person worked in unity with the other Two. The Father spoke; the Son was the Word spoken; & the Spirit was the animating breath. And such a united work is consistent with the one nature of God.

One Being, Three Persons

So then let us conclude emphatically with faith that God is one! God shares one love. God shares one life. God is one! The Father, Son, and Spirit differ from one another only in relation to one another. Returning to John 15 and 17, the distinctions among Father, Son, and Spirit derive not from differences in will or truth but in relationship. The Father is not the Son, and neither is the Spirit. Each shares a unique relationship with the other two. Yet how fascinating this is! Even the distinctions in relationships still concern their relatedness to one another! God is one. Concisely, we can conclude that God is *One Being in Three Persons*.

OUR TRIUNE GOD: One Being, Three Persons



Figure 1, Ryan's Version

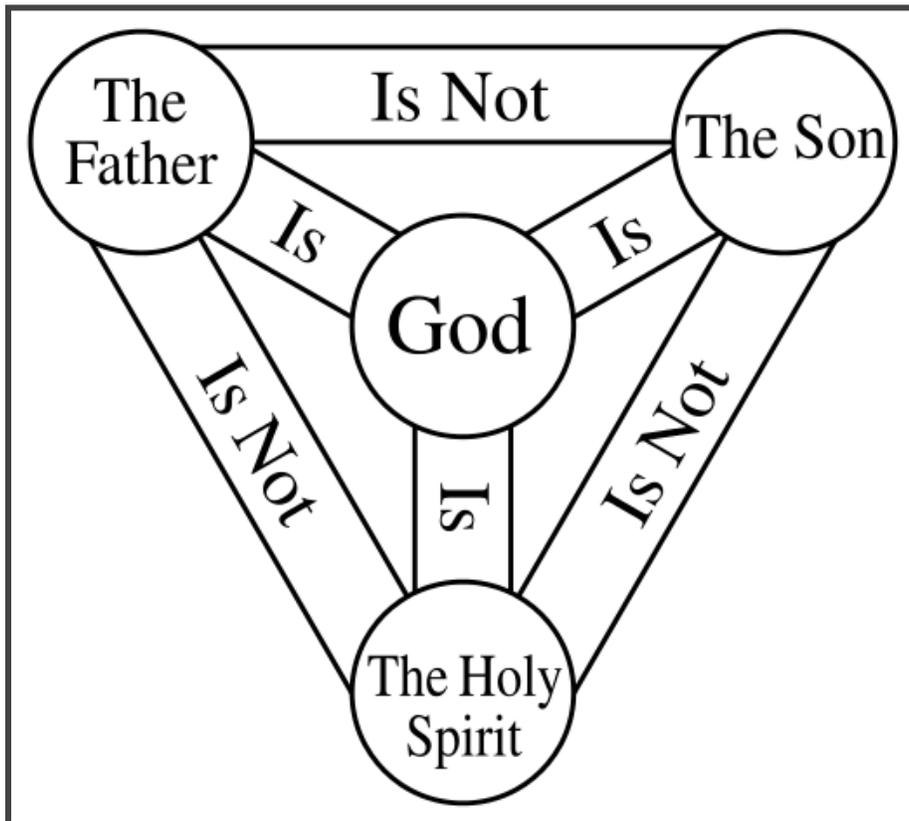


Figure 2, A Common Handout

PART 2: ETERNAL GENERATION

The Eternal or Adopted Son?

Having discussed the oneness of God, we will now consider the eternal relationships among the Father, Son, and Spirit. Let's begin with the Father and the Son. Here are the general approaches to understand this relationship:

1. Adoptionist Theology: Jesus was the adopted Son of God, being exalted as Son after the crucifixion and resurrection. He did not eternally exist with the Father.
2. Eternal Generation: Jesus was eternally generated from the Father (i.e., Jesus was always the Son).

To be upfront, I take view 2. But what is at stake with this question? Well, from the perspective of the early Christians, who convened the Council of Nicea to discuss this question, the very nature of our Christ. Let me demonstrate this through a simple argument. Only God can save. Jesus Christ is the Son of God. I am saved by Jesus Christ. So I am saved. If Jesus is not the eternal Son of God, then the very hope of our salvation is on the line! If Jesus is merely a human who was posthumously exalted to the Father's right hand, then our hope is uncertain. So given the weight of this doctrine, let us consider the biblical teaching on the eternal nature of Jesus. Below I will take us through the relevant passages in John and Hebrews before turning to the help of Athanasius and Augustine to probe the teaching of eternal generation.

John's Witness

It is no surprise that we return to the gospel of John to consider eternal generation as the fourth gospel takes as serious the relationships within God's own Self as any book of the Scriptures. In his magnificent prologue, John states, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). Although the ESV does not capture the meaning within this verse fully, the phrase *only Son* in Greek is *monogenes*, which we could translate as "only generated." So within his prologue, John wants to make it clear that Jesus Christ shares a special relationship with the Father—He is the only Son.

John carries this high view of Jesus throughout the gospel. In perhaps the most well-known verse in John, Jesus says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). Yes, Jesus is the *monogenes* of the Father, made manifest in time as the only Son of God. Returning to our earlier discussion of the oneness of God, Jesus says a bit later, “For the Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hands” (Jn. 3:35). The eternal Sonship of Jesus rests on the love between the Father and the Son.

Perhaps the most important section of the Bible relating to eternal generation comes from John 5, so I will quote an extended section below:

So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life. Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself” (John 5:19-26).

How beautifully Triune this text is! Most relevant to our discussion, Jesus claims that the Father, who has life in Himself, has granted this life to the Son. Although some limit this granting of life to the incarnation, Jesus’ identification as the “Son of God” recommends this to be an eternal relationship [note the “son of man” language tied to the incarnation in v. 27]. What separates the Father from the Son in eternity? Not that one is God and the other isn’t. Rather, the Father gives life, and the Son receives life. Why does the Father grant this life to the Son? Because “the Father loves the Son.” As we have already noted, love is the eternal light of God that has bound together the Father, Son, and Spirit. Because of this love, “whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.”

Not just during the incarnation but throughout eternity, the Son receives the life of the Father through love, returning obedience and honor to the Father.

Hebrews' Witness

Having discussed eternal generation within John, let us now turn to Hebrews, which offers a complementary voice. Much like John, the letter to the Hebrews begins with a strong declaration of the eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Throughout eternity, Jesus Christ was the Son of God, who was the only Father. Whereas John talks about the life that Jesus gives by the Father, Hebrews talks of the glory that Jesus Christ radiates from the Father. Much as Adam and Camden resemble my appearance and often my behaviors, Jesus Christ is the exact imprint of the Father's nature. Such was true for eternity. Throughout a string of Old Testament passages, the letter to the Hebrews emphasizes the Sonship of Jesus Christ throughout chapter 1, to which we will return later.

After discussing the humanity of Jesus Christ in chapter 2, the author returns to His Sonship in chapter 3:

Therefore, holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house...Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son (Heb. 3:1-2, 5-6a).

In relationship to humanity, Jesus is our apostle (one sent from the Father) and high priest, among other roles. In relation to the Father, Jesus is not merely a servant like Moses but a Son. The Father has one Son, and He came as Jesus Christ.

So before probing eternal generation further, let us return to the original question of this section: is Jesus Christ a human who then became divine or God become

human? The witness of John and Hebrews is consistent. Jesus eternally was (and remains) the Son of God—the only Son—the Son whom the Father loves! The Son of God was eternally generated by the Father’s life through love (and communion of the Spirit, to which we will return later).

Generated or Created?

So if the Son is generated by the Father, does that mean that the Father created the Son? Such is a natural question to pose, one that Christians have asked since the earliest days of the church. Fortunately, earlier readers of the Bible can give us wisdom in biblically, clearly explaining how the Son was generated but not created. So here we will turn to Athanasius and Augustine.

Arius and Athanasius typify the two differing views of the generation of the Son of God. Arius argued that Jesus was a created being:

Our faith from our forefathers, which also we learned from you, blessed father, is this: We acknowledge One God, alone unbegotten, alone everlasting, alone without beginning, alone true, alone having immortality, alone wise, alone good, alone sovereign, judge, governor, and provider of all, unalterable and unchangeable, just and good, God of the Law and the Prophets and the New Testament; who begat an only-begotten Son before time and the ages, through whom he made both the ages [Heb. 1:2] and all that was made; who begot Him not in appearance, but in reality; and that he made him subsist as his own will, unalterable and unchangeable, the perfect creature (ktisma) of God, but not as one of the creatures; offspring, but not as one of the other things begotten.

And God, being the cause of all that happens, is absolutely alone without beginning; but the Son, begotten apart from time by the Father, and created (ktistheis) and founded before the ages, was not in existence before his generation, but was begotten apart from time before all things, and he alone came into existence (hypeste) From the Father). [Arius, Confession of faith from Arius and his followers to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria]

To Arius then, for the Son to be generated by the Father, He had to be created by the Father. In response to Arius, Athanasius spoke boldly of the eternally generated yet uncreated Sonship of Jesus Christ:

For, behold, we take divine Scripture, and thence discourse with freedom of the religious Faith, and set it up as a light upon a candlestick, saying:—Very Son of the Father, natural and genuine, proper to His essence, Wisdom Only-begotten, and Very and Only Word of God is He; not a creature or work, but an offspring proper to the Father's essence. Wherefore, He is very God, existing in one essence with the very Father; while other beings to whom He said, 'I said you are Gods,' had this grace from the Father, only by participating of the Word, through the Spirit. For He is the expression of the Father's Person, and Light from Light, and Power, and very Image of the Father's essence. For this too the Lord has said, 'He that has seen Me, has seen the Father' (Jn. 14:9). And He ever was and is and never was not. [Athanasius, Discourse 1, *Against the Arians*, chapter 3, section 9]

Drawing from a wide array of the biblical texts, Athanasius offers a compelling, clear case for the uncreated nature of the Son. Most helpfully, he refers to the Son as "Light from Light."

Augustine picks up on this analogy, noting that we should conceive of eternal generation not as "water flowing out from a hole in the ground or in the rock, but like light flowing from light" (Augustine, *De trin.*, IV.27, 172). Expecting resistance from Arians, he likewise asks:

How does an eternal, someone says, beget an eternal? As temporal flame generates temporal light. For the generating flame is of the same duration as the light which it generates, nor does the generating flame precede in time the generated light; but the light begins the instant the flame begins. [Augustine, *Tract.*, 20.8, 171]

Not only is this light analogy consistent with John's prologue (Jn. 1:1-18), yet it offers help in understanding the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son. Generation does not refer to chronology but to relationship. Did the Father create the Son? No. Has the Father granted His life to the Son? Yes. Does there remain a mystery within this doctrine? Of course, but we are talking about the eternal God.

The Sending of the Son

Not only does eternal generation help us in understanding the eternal relationships of God, but it also helps to bridge God's actions in human history with His eternal relationships. Said with more technical jargon, eternal generation bridges the economic Trinity (that is, the actions of God worked out within human space and time) with the immanent Trinity (that is, the nature of God outside of human space and time). Let's explore this connection.

Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus Christ emphasizes time and time again that He was sent by the Father. Consider the words of Jesus: "For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me. And the Father who sent me has himself borne witness about me" (Jn. 5:36-37). Let us notice the logic in these words. The works that Jesus does in human space and time bear witness to the Father's sending of the Son. What does this mean? God reveals Himself through the sending of the Son.

Such is why the gospel of John is emphatic that the Father sent the Son (Jn. 5:23-24, 36; 6:38; 7:29, 33; 8:42; 13:20; & 17:3, 8; see also Mt. 10:40; Lk. 4:43; & Gal. 4:4). How can we know the Father? Only through the Son (Jn. 14:6), the Son whom the Father sent. If the Father's sending of the Son is arbitrary to God's own nature, then we have no true revelation of God's own Self. Only through the sending of the Son (by the Spirit) can we know the Father.

While the Father has granted His life eternally to the uncreated Son, His eternal desire is to grant that life to His created children as well (Jn. 3:36). Perhaps the best word for this is communion. Theologian Keith Johnson defines eternal generation in a helpful way: "This doctrine [eternal generation] teaches that the Father eternally, necessarily, and incomprehensibly communicates the divine essence to the Son without division or change so that the Son shares an equality of nature with the Father yet is also distinct from the Father" (Johnson, 26). At the heart of eternal generation is the revelation of God's intent in Jesus Christ—communion with God. Indeed, as Jesus prayed, the Father's desire is to "make us one, much as the Father and Son are one" (Jn. 17:23).

Summary of Eternal Generation of the Son

Eternal generation teaches that Father God has eternally given life to His only Son (Jn. 1:14 & 5:26). The life the Father gives to the Son is reciprocated in the love of the Son; their love (in communion with the Spirit) draws them into one will—of the one true God. The Son is God from God; light from light; life from life; & love from love.

In knowing our Triune God, this doctrine holds two important biblical pieces together: (1) How can the Son and the Father be distinct yet one? & (2) How can the Son be one with the Father yet “from” the Father?

Of metaphors to understand this, a flame is helpful. Much as a flame gives forth light, so the Father gives life to His Son. Their essence is the same, yet their relationship is distinct.

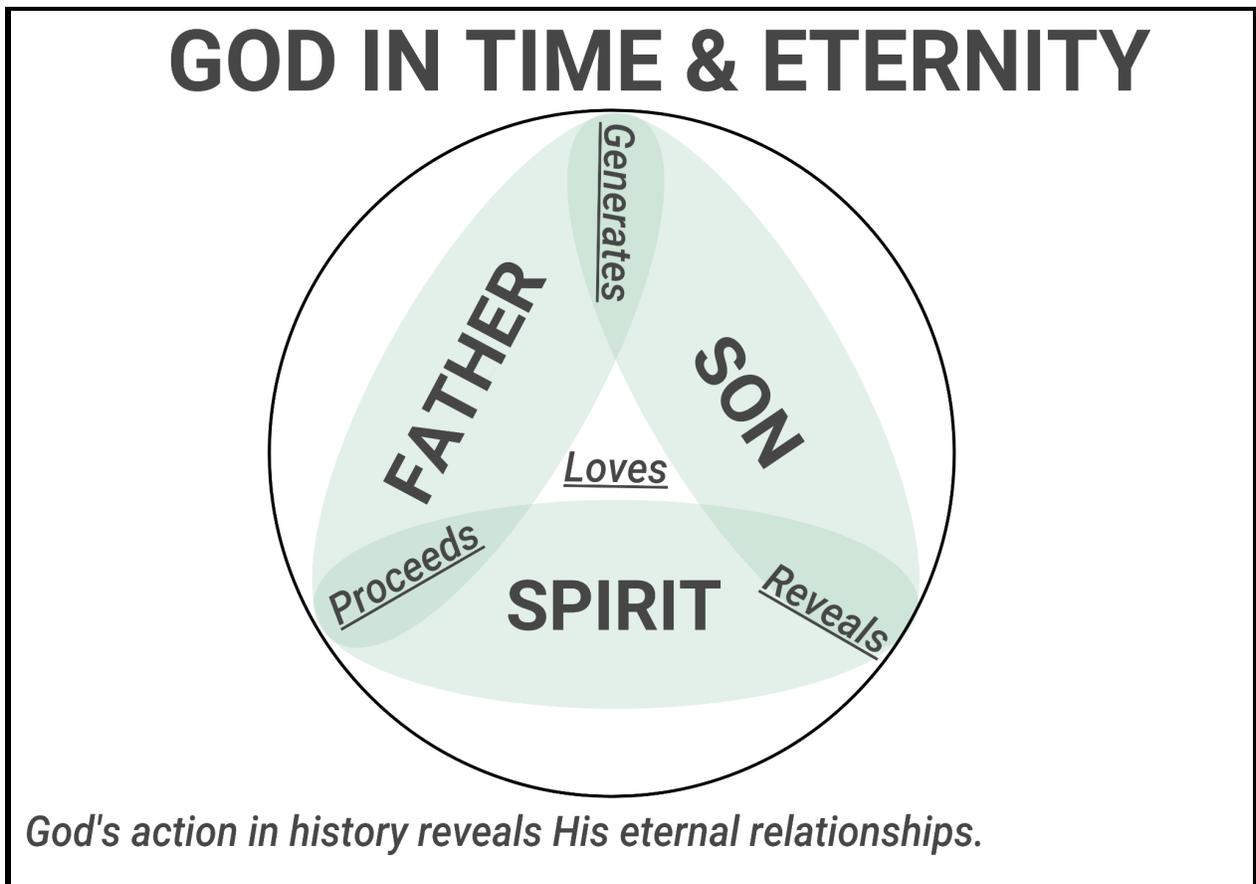


Figure 3, God's Intra-Trinitarian Relations

PART 3: ETERNAL PROCESSION

In part 1 of our study, we considered the oneness of God, hearing the Scripture's witness that God is one because of His eternal love. Much as a fidget spinner has three sides yet forms one circle in motion, so the Creator is three Persons who are one God by their love and life. In Part 2 of our study, we considered the relationship between the Father and the Son, hearing the Scripture's witness that Jesus Christ has eternally been the Son of the Father. The eternal communion of the Father and Son motivated the Father's sending of the Son, and the Son's work on earth revealed the Father's nature in heaven. Yet all of the claims to this point still hang in the air, resting on the breath of God's own Spirit. So now let us turn our attention to the Spirit.

The Spirit Who Proceeds

Of course, we must first go to the gospel of John to hear the Scripture's witness toward the Spirit. In John 14-16, Jesus Christ offers words of encouragement and exhortation to His apostles before His crucifixion, and central to this section are promises of the Spirit. After His return to the Father's right hand, Jesus Christ promised to send the Spirit: "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you" (Jn. 14:16-17). Indeed, God would not leave His people; once the Son returned to heaven, the Spirit would remain.

Yet how does the Spirit relate to the Father and the Son? In perhaps the most important passage relating to this question, Jesus states:

But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness about me (Jn. 15:26).

Let us note the depths of God's wisdom revealed in this one verse. Most relevant to our discussion, the Spirit proceeds from the Father. The word translated *proceed* is a general term for going out (see Jn. 5:29 & Rev. 11:5 for uses of this word). Stagnation is not within the nature of God's Spirit; rather, God's Spirit goes out. On that note, the Spirit's very nature is to work outward from the Father. Whereas humans are overcome with selfishness, the Spirit of God proceeds.

Also, John 15:26 refers to the Spirit as the Helper. This word can also be translated as Advocate. The Spirit is noted as our Advocate in John 14:16, 26; 15:26; and 16:7; the Son is noted as our Advocate in 1 John 2:1. So for what purpose does the Spirit go out from the Father? To be our Advocate! The Father reaches out to us through the Son and the Spirit. Likewise, let us note the Spirit's naming as the "Spirit of truth." Much as our Father is of the truth (Jn. 8:38), the Spirit is of the truth. He has no part in the deceptions of the Adversary (Jn. 8:44).

Finally, let us note the dual-work of the Spirit in John 15:26. Not only does the Spirit go out from the Father, but He also leads us back to the Father. Let's consider this first process again by asking, who sent the Spirit—the Son or the Father? Well, John claims both. The Father sent the Spirit (Jn. 14:26), and the Son sent the Spirit (Jn. 16:7). And we could also say the Spirit willed to be sent. It was the united will of God for the Spirit to come. Yet while the Spirit proceeds from heaven, He also leads humanity from earth back to the Father. Through witness and guidance, the Spirit sanctifies humanity back toward relationship with the Father (Jn. 16:12-14).



Figure 4, The Spirit of Revelation & Searching

Searching & Revealing

The Spirit's procession consists of two complementary, concurrent works: searching and revealing. As noted above, the Spirit moves inward and outward. So let us consider how these two directions of the Spirit relate to His work among God and God's people. Refer to Figure 4 for a visual representation of this.

Within God's own Self, the Spirit searches. Let us note the apostle Paul's words about the Spirit of God:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away...these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. (1 Corinthians 2:6, 10-12)

With this declaration in mind, let us briefly consider whether we should consider the Spirit a Person or a Force. Such is a common question and can only be worked out in relation to the Father and Son. Here the apostle Paul suggests that the Spirit shares the nature of the Father. As personal as the Father is, so personal the Spirit is. Suggesting that the Spirit is a mere force not only misunderstands the nature of the Spirit but also confuses the essence of the Father. See Ps. 139:1-7, 23 for an OT parallel to this passage.

What are the depths of God that the Spirit searches? Within the context, it refers to the crucified Lord (1 Cor. 2:2). Yet the Spirit has always searched the Father and Son's own Selves. Isaiah proclaims, "Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD, or what man shows him His counsel? Whom did He consult, and who made Him understand?" (Isa. 40:12-13). To this, we must answer with the voice of the apostle Paul that the Father consulted no one but His own Spirit, both in the acts of first and new creation.

THE TWO AGES

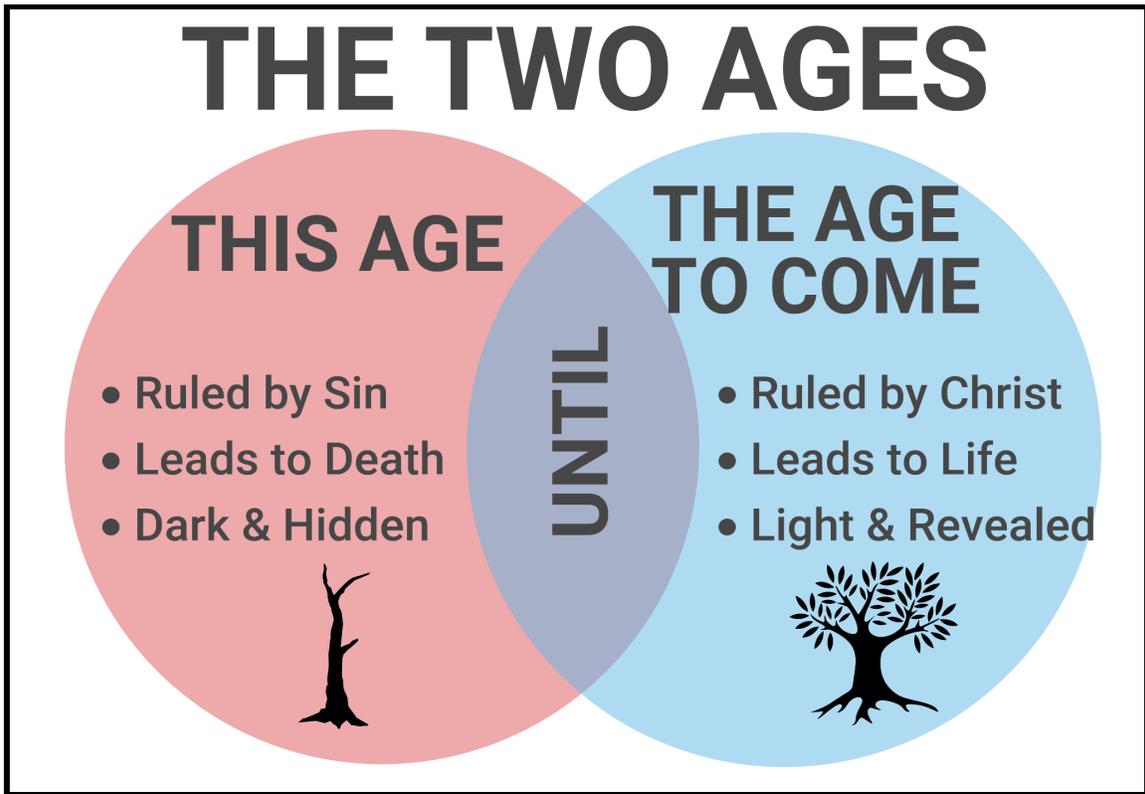
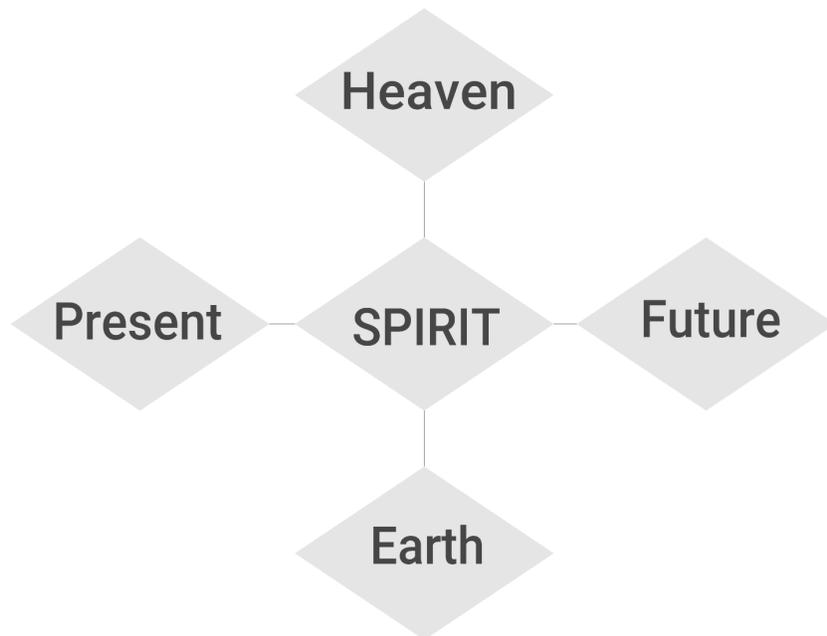


Figure 5, The Two Ages

THE SPIRIT OF REVELATION



The Spirit reveals the future to the present & heaven to earth. He is the bridge.

Figure 6, The Spirit of Revelation

While the Spirit searches the depths of God, He reveals to humanity. In this sense, we may perhaps say that the Spirit is the most consistent bridge that God has ever given. In searching, the Spirit does not hoard the depths of God's wisdom but reveals them to humanity. Truly all that we know of God is by the revelation of God's own spirit. See figures 5 and 6. Who alone can bridge the future to the present? God's Spirit. Who alone can reveal the glories of heaven to earth? The Spirit. The Spirit gives.

And on this note, let us return to the discussion of time and eternity. When considering eternal generation, I suggested that the Son's work in human space-time revealed God's nature outside of our space-time. Such is true with the Spirit. Much as the sending of the Son bears witness to the Father's eternal generation of the Son, so the revelation of the Spirit in human space-time bears witness to the Spirit's procession from the Father outside of human space-time. And so we are to understand these truths as those who are spiritual (1 Cor. 2:13).

PART 4: THE LORD OUR GOD

Below is a brief summary of our study so far:

- Part 1: The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct Persons who are one in being because of their eternal love.
- Part 2: The Father eternally generates the Son, who is the exact image of the Father. Consider a flame and a light.
- Part 3: The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son, searching the depths of God while revealing these mysteries to humanity.

In this next section, we will consider the names that God used to reveal Himself to us in the New Testament. Such will give us not only a clearer understanding of the Persons of the Triune God but also our one God's nature.

God the Creator

What distinguishes God from all other beings? Such is an important question for us monotheists to ask and is far from an original inquiry. Isaiah asked, "To whom will you like God, or what likeness compare with Him" (Isa. 40:18)? After considering various qualities of God that separate Him from all others, Isaiah concludes, "The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth" (Isa. 40:28; see also Ex. 20:2; Deut. 4:32-39; & Isa. 43:15-17). So then God is separated not only in nature and qualities but more fully in identity. Quite simply, God is Creator; all other beings are not. Such a claim is simple but will serve as an important assumption in moving forward.

The Shema in 1 Corinthians

In contrasting the one God to idols, the apostle Paul declares, "...yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor. 8:6). So then, we may naturally ask, is there one Creator or two (the Lord and God)? Unpacking this rich verse through its Old Testament overtones is a fruitful exercise.

Within this verse, the apostle Paul is drawing from the Shema (the Hebrew word for *Hear*, denoting the most important passage in the Hebrews' Bible):

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deut. 6:4-5)

Let us note the brilliance of what the apostle Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians. In meditating upon the Shema, he is not adding a second Deity; rather, he finds the Father and the Son nestled right within it. In unpacking the Shema through the revelation of Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul claims

There is

One God

The Father

From whom are all things &

One Lord

Jesus Christ

Through whom all things are.

So then, let us note this general pattern in Paul's writings.

- God = The Father
- Lord = Jesus Christ

This can be seen throughout 1 Corinthians, but one passage is helpful for clarifying this concept: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God, who empowers them all in everyone" (1 Cor. 12:4-6). Let us note how determinedly Triune the apostle Paul is. There is one Creator in Three Persons: God the Father, Jesus Christ the Lord, and the Holy Spirit.

At this point, we must not confuse the apostle Paul's wording with our contemporary wording. Distinguishing the Creator from all other beings is helpful here. We may ask, does this mean that Jesus Christ isn't God or that the Father isn't Lord? Clearly and vehemently, no! Rather, the Father God is Creator. The Lord Jesus Christ is Creator. And the Spirit is Creator. What the apostle Paul is offering is a Christian

reading of the Shema to lead us into communion with the one Creator. This is the apostle Paul's brilliant way of distinguishing the Father from the Son while also uniting the one Creator.

The Shema in 1 Thessalonians

Is Paul's connection between God/Father and Jesus Christ/Lord unique to 1 Corinthians? No, rather it runs throughout all of his writings. The apostle Paul begins 1 Thessalonians by writing, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father, your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:2-3). Again, let us note that Paul identifies the Father as God and the Son as the Lord. Why? To reveal the one Creator in three Persons. And even within this context, the Spirit is close to the apostle's mind (1 Thess. 1:5). This pattern follows throughout the rest of the book (see especially 1 Thess. 2:13-15 & 3:11-13).

Prayer to Jesus

Realizing the apostle Paul's God/Lord pattern is helpful in reconsidering prayer to Jesus. I have heard arguments from both sides (can/should Christians pray to Jesus?) for years without much clarity from either side. Yet let us turn to 2 Corinthians for guidance. Throughout the book, the apostle Paul continues the pattern of distinguishing between God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (see especially 2 Cor. 1:1-7; 4:1-6; 8:16-24; 12:1-10; & 13:11-14). As a sample, note the end of the book: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

In his discussion about the thorn in the flesh, the apostle Paul states, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me" (2 Cor. 12:8). To whom did the apostle Paul plead? The Lord Jesus Christ! Such makes sense as the Son is able to empathize with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:15). Yet I would also return us to the original discussion of this study, noting that any discussion about God should always seek to bring God into oneness rather than division. Earlier in the book the apostle Paul praised the Father (2 Cor. 1:3), and he does so through the Spirit. Can Christians pray to the Son of God, who most fully understands our suffering? Absolutely. But let us never do so to the neglect of the Father and the Son.

Jesus Christ the Lord

Why does the apostle Paul—along with other New Testament writers—refer to Jesus Christ as the Lord? In short, the term *Lord* (Greek, *kurios*) encompasses Jesus both the identity of Yahweh and the ruling role as Master. See Figure 7.

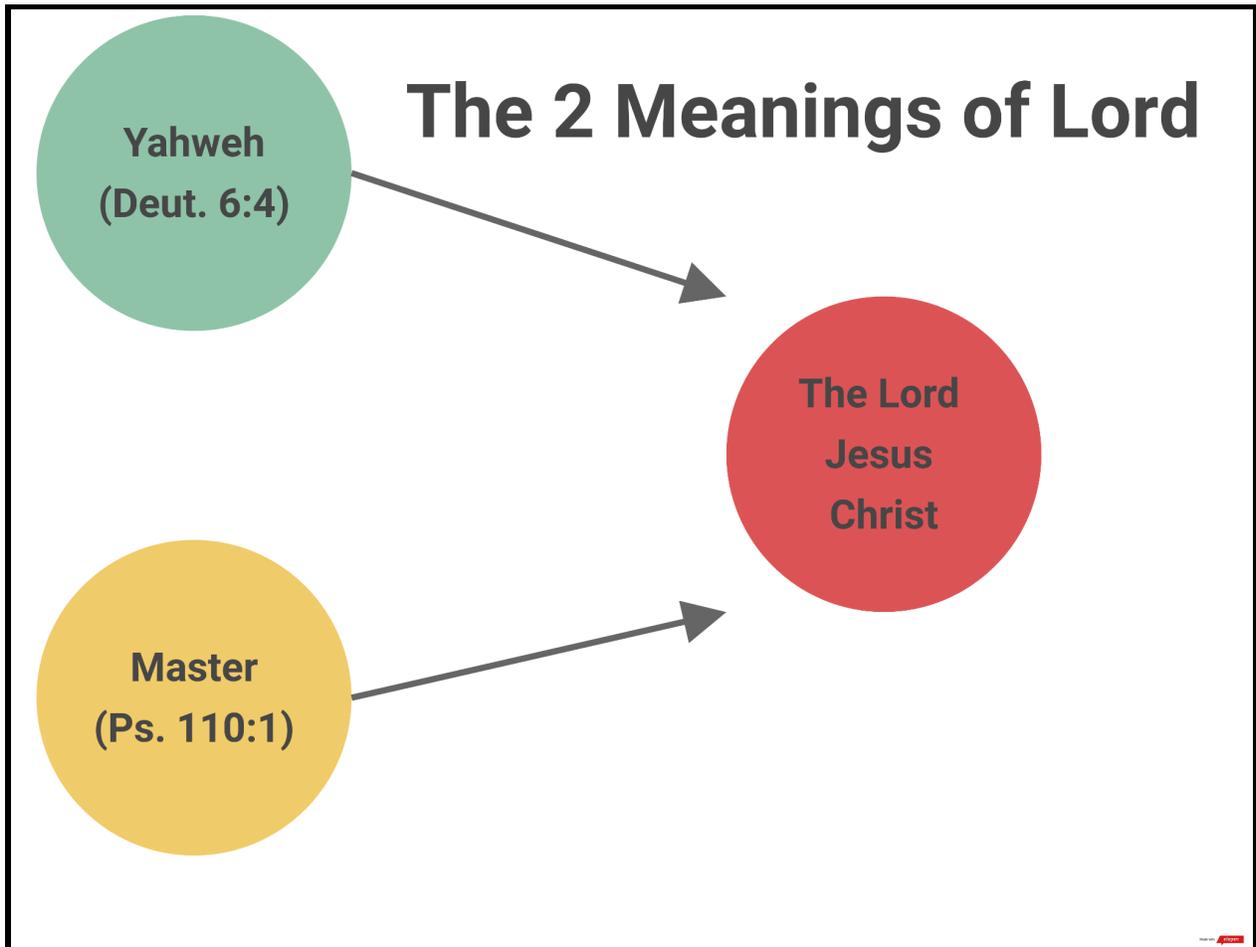


Figure 7, the Meaning of Lord

The first meaning carried by *Lord* is the demonstration of Jesus Christ as within the identity of the one Creator, Yahweh. As seen in Paul's echo of the Shema in 1 Cor. 8:6, Jesus Christ is Yahweh. Another clear demonstration of this is in Romans 10:13, where the apostle Paul quotes from Joel 2:32. Yet the term *Lord* also demonstrates Jesus Christ as the Ruler and Master, who carries the authority of God. We will explore this more fully through the lens of Ps. 110:1 in the next section. Yet let us continue by observing Mike Bird's declaration: "Profession of Jesus as Lord is not asking for assent

to the mere fact of his deity, but calling people to faithfulness, obedience, and allegiance towards him. Jesus wants followers, not fans!”

The NT Author’s Favorite OT Passage

While the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4 was a first-century Hebrews’ most-quoted passage in their lives, the OT passage that the NT authors quoted most came from Psalm 110:1. Let us note Matthew’s inclusion of this passage:

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord says to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet”’? If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son?” And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions. (Matthew 22:41-46)

The Lord Jesus Christ’s reasoning is above their reproach! In Psalm 110:1, David calls his son *Lord*. Why would David call his son his Master? Only if that son were not only his son but also the Son of God. Truly, Jesus is Lord! For the NT’s use of Psalm 110, see also Mt. 26:64; Mk. 12:36; 14:62; 16:19; Lk. 20:42-43; 22:69; Acts 2:33-35; 5:31; 7:55-56; Rom. 8:34; 1 Cor. 15:25-27; Eph. 1:20; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22; & Rev. 3:21.

Yet the apostle Peter’s use of this verse in the sermon on Pentecost is startling, as he concludes, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36; see the quotation in 2:34-35). What does it mean that God the Father has made Jesus Lord? Was there a time at which the Son of God wasn’t the Lord? To probe this question, we must turn to Hebrews.

The Lord of Heaven and Earth

We have already considered Hebrews 1-2 in consideration of the Father and Son’s eternal relationship, but now let us note this Scripture’s teaching about the lordship of Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 1, the author is emphatic that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And as the Son of God, he is the “heir of all things” (Heb. 1:2). In Hebrews

2, the author is emphatic that Jesus Christ is the true son of man. And as the son of man, he now holds authority over the earth (Heb. 2:5-9; notice the use of Psalm 8).

Yet why is the Son Lord of heaven and earth? The Psalmist declared, “The heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth He has given to the children of man” (Ps. 115:16). So then only who is both the Son of God and son of man can be the rightful Lord of heaven and earth. Such was the purpose of the incarnation—for God to reclaim humanity’s rightful authority over the earth from the Adversary and the Kingdom of Darkness. By humbling himself and partaking of flesh and blood, the Son of God has reclaimed humanity’s rule over the earth (Heb. 2:9, 14-15). Recapitulation! See Figure 8 below.

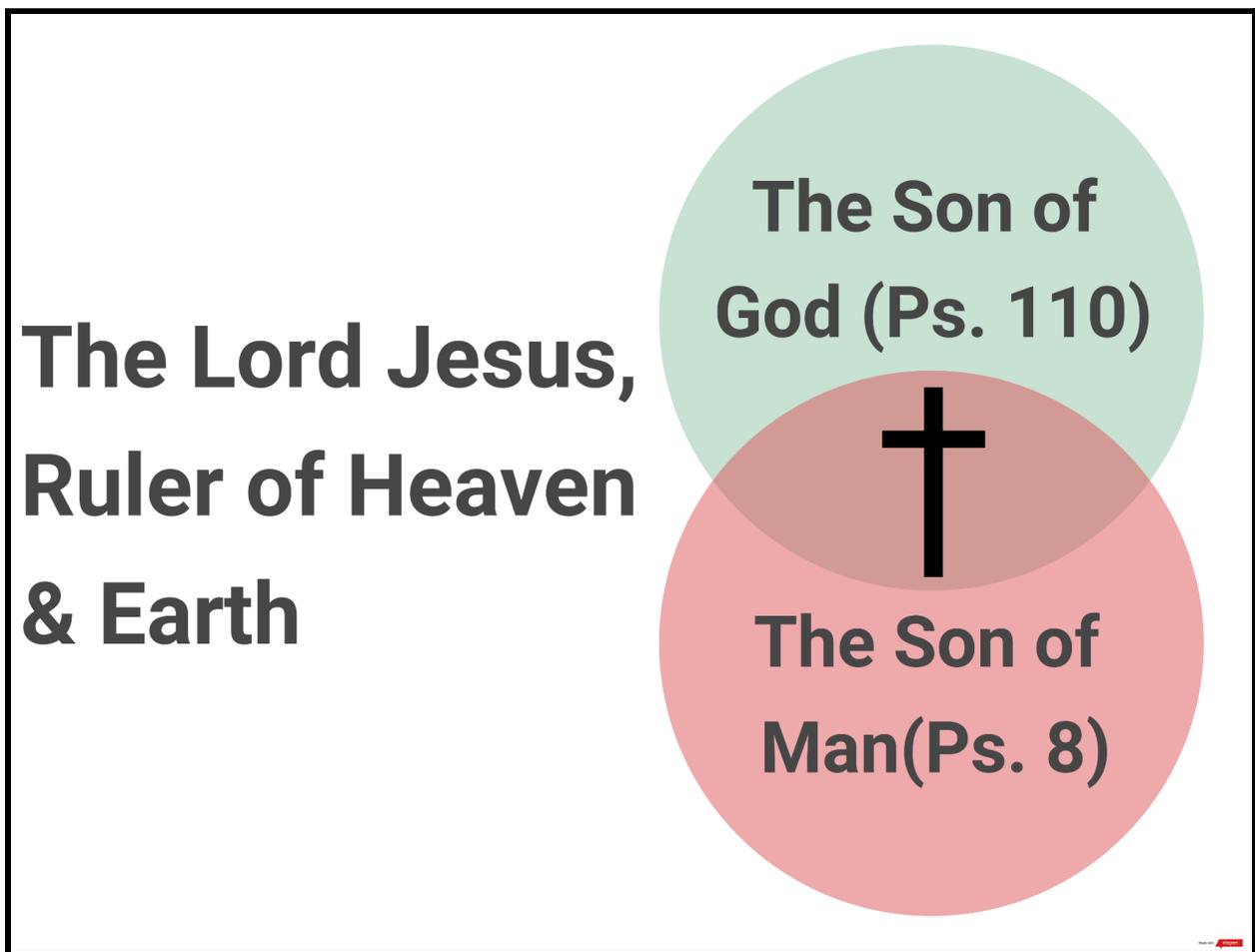


Figure 8, The Lord of Heaven & Earth

The Three Phases

Tracing the Lordship of Christ is helpful when considered by stage.

- Phase 1: Pre-Existence. During this time, Jesus Christ was the eternal Son of God and the Creator of all things (Heb. 1:1-2).
- Phase 2: Earthly Incarnation. During this phase, Jesus Christ was humbled to become the son of man, taking on our flesh and blood to offer purification for sins (Heb. 1:3 & 2:9, 14-15).
- Phase 3: Exalted Ascension. During this phase, Jesus Christ was exalted to the Father's right hand as the Lord of heaven and earth (Heb. 1:3-4).

Yet how was the Son of God able to become the son of man? How is the one who was immutable (Heb. 13:8) become incarnate? For this, we must consider the humiliation and exaltation of the Lord.

Exaltation through Humiliation

God's plan to put all things in heaven and on earth under the lordship of His Son came through the Son's humiliation and exaltation. Yet holding these two statures becomes difficult as it appears a contradiction. Turning to the writings of Karl Barth provide wisdom in the road ahead:

As the Creator condescended to be a creature, He did not make the creature Creator, but in its unity of existence with His Son He adopted it into fellowship with His being as God, Creator and Lord...No, it is the act of the humiliation of the Son of God as such which is the exaltation of the Son of Man, and in Him of human essence. As the Son of God He goes into the far country. As the Son of Man He returns home (CD, 64/2, 100).

Notice Barth's careful story that holds this tension together. The exaltation of the Son is not separate from the humiliation of the Son. Rather, the difference lies in the one who is humiliated or exalted. The Son of God humiliated is the Son of Man exalted. For Barth, the focus is not an abstract question of divine versus human characteristics but of the story of salvation. So Barth says, "As God he was humbled to take our place, and as man he is exalted on our behalf." Yet let's explore this claim through the lens of Philippians 2 then the gospel of John.

Philippians 2

Before exploring this rich text, let's offer a quick review. Jesus Christ is Lord. As Lord, He is the Master of heaven and earth. As the Son of God, He is the Lord of heaven. As the Son of Man, He is the Lord of earth. Through exaltation through humiliation, He reclaimed God's authority over the earth. Yet let's explore this humiliation in Philippians 2. Below is a chart offering notes to each phrase in this section:

<i>Philippians Phrase (ESV)</i>	<i>Ryan's Notes</i>
Though he was in the form of God	Not a contrast of natures but forms in this passage. Specifically, this is a contrast between the "form" of the Father and the "form" of the servant.
Did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped	Also translated "used to his advantage" or "exploited"
But emptied himself	Or "poured out" Isaiah 53:12
Taking the form of a servant	Isaiah 52:14; 53:7; & 53:14 The Suffering Servant
Being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form,	Recapitulation!
He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.	Isaiah 53:12
Therefore, God has highly exalted him	Isaiah 52:13 & 53:12 Exaltation through humiliation
And bestowed on him the name that is above every name	The name <i>Lord</i> (or possibly <i>Jesus</i> , which means <i>Yahweh saves</i>)
So that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.	Isaiah 45:22-23

Drawing from Isaiah 45 and 52-53, the apostle Paul offers a powerful summary of the gospel story of reconciliation. God has exalted humanity through the humiliated Son. The Son emptied Himself to death, and those in Him shall be exalted. How manifold is the wisdom of God! But let us ask one more question in this regard: Does the humiliation of the Son reveal or conceal the Father? For this, let us turn back to John.

The Exalted Lord in John

Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus claims that the Son of Man will be lifted up or exalted (Jn. 3:14-15; 8:28; 12:32-34; & 13:31-32). Notice especially this proclamation of the Lord: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (Jn. 12:32). Over and over again, Jesus states that He will be exalted. Yet when these passages are read in harmony with Isaiah, it is evident that Jesus is connecting Himself to the exalted LORD of the Old Testament. For in Isaiah, only the LORD will be exalted (Isa. 2:11, 17; 6:1; 33:5; & 52:13). In a startling use of exaltation, Isaiah claims that the Servant will be exalted (52:13). So again, the humiliated Son of God is the exalted Son of Man.

Returning to our question, does the exaltation of the Son of Man reveal or conceal the Father? John is emphatic that the cross reveals the Father. In heaven, God is exalted on a throne. On earth, the Lord is exalted on a cross. And this is a revelation of “grace upon grace” (Jn. 1:14-18; cf. 5:19-39). So then we must be weary of any attempt to segment the cross from the nature of the Father. In the cross, the grace of God is revealed. In the cross, the love of God is revealed. In the cross, the righteousness of God is revealed. And such is the nature of the Lord our God!

PART 5: THE INCARNATION

Well I tried my very best to avoid this topic, but here we are. Even after laying groundwork with eternal generation, the Lordship of Christ, Karl Barth's wisdom, and a slow exegesis of Philippians 2, we still arrive at a discussion of the two natures of Jesus of Nazareth. Much thanks to our beloved brother Mark for leading us to this door—whose nickname forevermore shall be Brother Can of Worms!

So why did I want to avoid discussion of the two natures of Christ? In short, because I find most of the treatments of this doctrine offer more heat than light, giving more confusion than clarity. How could the divine nature mesh with the human nature? Readers of the Bible have been discussing and debating the two natures of Christ for 2,000 years, and while I have read most of the highly influential treatments of the two natures of Christ, I always come away with more questions than answers.

And there is a significant difference between mystery and confusion. Mystery reminds me that God is beyond my human grasp while confusion arises from my human failures. We must hold to the mystery of the incarnation, but I didn't want to create further confusion by bringing up this topic.

So below is my attempt to explain the incarnation in a way that is both biblical and edifying while retaining the mystery inherent to the doctrine. While I tried my best to avoid this inevitable topic in our studies, I am now thankful for the chance to teach on this greatest of biblical doctrines. Mark, Randy, and Wayne are due a special thank you for helping me clarify my own thinking about and communication of the incarnation. So here we go!

Definitions

In considering this doctrine, here are the key definitions that I am working from. I will use these technical terms in the remainder:

- Incarnation: The phenomenon in which the Word of God put on human flesh.
- Homoousios: Of the same substance/nature. This affirms that the Father, Son, and Spirit are of the same substance. Likewise, all humans share the same substance. And the substance of God differs from the substance of humanity.
- Hypostatic Union: The divine & human natures came into union in the personhood of Jesus of Nazareth. More literally, the divine nature was unchanged when it came into contact with the human nature of Jesus.

- Nature: The essence of a person; similar word for substance. Whereas God is eternal in nature, humans are mortal in nature. Whereas God is infallible in nature, humans are fallible in nature. Etc.
- Form: The particular way in which a person or object exists. For example, ice and water have the same nature but differ in form.
- Council of Chalcedon: This was the church council that met in 451 AD to establish a statement on the hypostatic union.

The Problem(s) of the Hypostatic Union

How could God become human? Such an idea is unique to Christianity, in many ways showing the worldly foolishness of our faith (1 Cor. 1:18-25). Understanding the logical problems of the incarnation doesn't take much explanation because the mere existence of the hypostatic union is an inherent contradiction. Said simply, one entity cannot contain more than one nature. The divine and human natures are incompatible. God is eternal. We are not. God is all knowing. We are not. God is all sovereign. We are not. The list goes on, but the problem remains. So are we affirming a clear contradiction in the hypostatic union of Christ?

Yet the problem is far more than one of mere logic and reason. There is also a more spiritual problem held within the hypostatic union. What are we declaring about the person and work of Jesus Christ in affirming the hypostatic union? If we affirm the divinity of Christ too strongly while neglecting his humanity, Jesus' sufferings and temptations seem vain. If we affirm the humanity of Christ too strongly while neglecting His deity, Jesus becomes another ancient prophet without much cosmic consequence.

Wayne and I met last week to discuss our respective views of the hypostatic union, and I deeply appreciate the heart that lies behind Wayne's beliefs. To Wayne, we must strongly affirm the humanity of Christ, lest we take away from the true weight of Jesus' sacrifices FOR US! Wayne used the parable in Mt. 13:44 to explain that Jesus indeed gave up glory, again (and let us not lose the impact of this) for us. If we neglect the humanity of Jesus, His temptations were meaningless as the Adversary had no hope of overcoming Him. And His sufferings weren't that bad because this Jewish superman was above the feeble attacks of the first-century persecutors. And behind Wayne's reasoning is a conglomeration of biblical passages (e.g., John 5, John 10, Hebrews 2, etc.) that affirm the humanity of Jesus.

Yet at the same time, Jesus has always been (even and especially in the incarnation) the Son of God. If we lose this, Jesus becomes an ancient prophet or

religious figure, not the Savior of Adam's race. So how do we hold these two apparently incongruous pieces (the divine and human natures of Christ) together in a way that is both biblical and helpful? I would like to welcome you into the rest of Wayne's and my conversation, where we were able to come to a consensus together about the biblical teaching of the hypostatic union. We sharpened each other, and I am already looking forward to your continued edification as we grow in Christ together.

Affirmation 1: Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

To have any hope of moving forward, we must first begin with the bold affirmation that Jesus is the Son of God. Throughout eternity, the Son had a Father, the Father had a Son, and both shared in the love of the Spirit. Much as a flame generates a light, so the Father generates the Son. The Father, Son, and Spirit all share a divine nature (*homoousios*). Again, their nature is not similar but the same. [This differs from saying that the Father and Son are of a similar substance—that doctrine is called *homoiousios*, which is what the Council of Nicea met to discuss. It could be said that the council met to discuss one iota!] The first few months of our Triunity study considered the nuances of these biblical doctrines, so I will move on with this assumption in mind.

Even and especially in the incarnation, Jesus Christ remained the Son of God. Gal. 4:4-6 is helpful here, reminding us that the Father worked through the Spirit and a woman to beget His Son on earth. At the baptism of Jesus, the Father proclaimed Jesus to be His Son (Mt. 3:17). At the transfiguration, the Father proclaimed Jesus to be His Son (Mt. 17:7). And throughout His ministry, Jesus proclaimed that He was doing the works of His Father (Mt. 11:27). The Jewish leaders understood that these claims spoke to the special relationship between Jesus Christ and our Father God that no other human shares. I am not THE Son of God. I am an adopted Son of God. Jesus was THE Son of God. See especially John 5 & 10 for Jewish reception of these claims.

Affirmation 2: Jesus Christ took on a human form in the incarnation.

While sharing a nature with the Father, the Son took on a human form in the incarnation. Such is the explanation in Philippians 2. The Son was eternally equal with the Father (Phil. 2:5—*homoousios*). Yet He emptied Himself of all of the privileges of His divine form by taking on a human form (Phil. 2:6-7). Like a man who sold all that he had to buy and sell a field, so the Son of God left behind all of the glories of His heavenly home to become incarnate among us (Mt. 13:44). This form was not arbitrary to the

human situation but the very revelation of who we are—sick and in need of redemption (see Isaiah 53’s description of the Servant as the representative of the people). And in this form, the Son of God experienced the most human of phenomena—death (Phil. 2:8). God cannot die, but humanity can. So the Son of God entered into a human form to die for our redemption. Having accomplished this reconciliatory work, the Son of God has now been exalted to the right hand of the Father (Phil. 2:9-11; see also Ps. 110:1).

The New Testament repeatedly uses one word to describe the human form of Jesus Christ—flesh. John the Apostle proclaims, “the Word became flesh” (Jn. 1:14; see also 1 Jn. 1:1-4). The Apostle Paul teaches that the Son of God was “descended from David, according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3). The author of Hebrews writes, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things” (Heb. 2:14). So we must proclaim that in the incarnation, the Son of God put on flesh.

Affirmation 3: As a human, Jesus Christ had flesh & spirit.

Over the past few years, I have repeatedly taught that humans consist of two components—body and breath (Gen. 2:7; think back through my image of God series). We can say this in various ways: body/breath; flesh/spirit; dust/air; etc. And this composition differentiates us from God. God is Spirit (Jn. 4:24). We are flesh and spirit. So then, when the Son of God took on a human form, He added flesh to His Spirit. See figures 9 and 10.

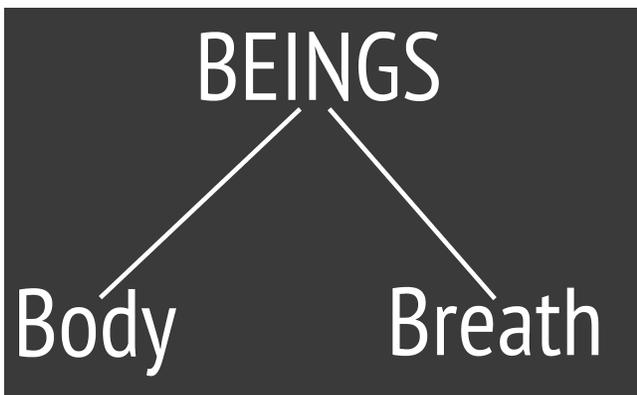


Figure 9

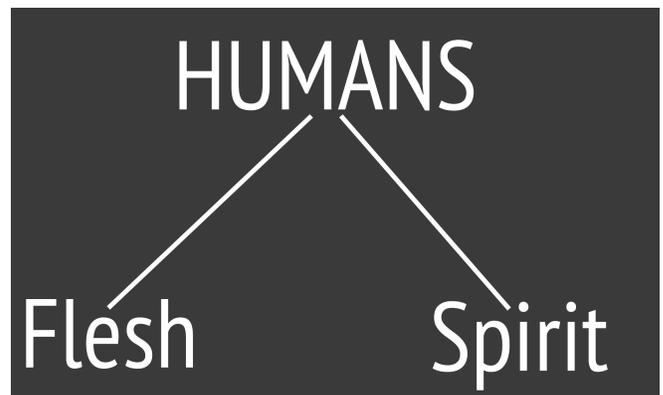


Figure 10

Affirmation 4: Talk of the flesh & spirit of Jesus Christ is more helpful than talk of the “two natures” of Christ.

At this point, I would like to return to Sunday’s class concerning the NIV’s rendering of Philippians 2 as *nature* instead of *form*. Why was I so opposed to such a translation? Well, not only do I find such a translation a stretch of the semantic range of the original word used there, but I also find such a translation confusing in talk of a great biblical doctrine. Let me pose a few questions to illustrate this. While the Son of God was on earth, was He omnipotent? If so, how is He able to empathize with other humans in the weaknesses of our flesh (Heb. 2)? If not, can we then claim that God is not omnipotent? Another example. Can God die? If not, how do we explain the cross? If so, what warning does this give us about our creator? You can see the dilemma.

Theologians have wrestled with these questions for 2,000 years, and from my reading, even the most mature of these works trip over their own feet in trying to understand the incarnation this way. Again, God has a different, incompatible nature from humanity. So how could this nature be united with humanity’s? I could show examples of deep philosophical musings on these two “natures” that end up going to even sci-fi books about alien possession to make sense of the two “natures” of Christ. May I suggest that if we have to turn to Martians to make sense of Jesus, perhaps we are not holding onto the mystery but wallowing in confusion!

However, considering the incarnation from the flesh/spirit perspective is not only how the New Testament guides us but also helpful in making sense of some of the thorniest questions surrounding the hypostatic union. Let me illustrate through a few questions below:

1. How did Jesus remain the Son of God during the incarnation? Through His Breath! Jesus’ birth was unique in many ways, but most of all, He was granted life not by a human father but by the Spirit of God (Mt. 1:18; Gal. 4:4-5; etc.). By being granted the Spirit at His birth and at His baptism (Mt. 3:16; see also Isa. 42:1-3), the Father abided with the Son through the Spirit. How beautifully Triune this statement is!
2. How can Jesus be fully human in the incarnation? Through His flesh! I return to Hebrews 2 for this. Jesus became “like his brothers in every respect” (Heb. 2:17) through the flesh. Jesus “suffered when tempted” (Heb. 2:18) through the flesh.

Indeed, the form of Jesus was the same as ours—of the flesh. See also Col. 2:9-11.

3. How could the man Jesus perform great signs and speak great wisdom?
Through the Spirit! Jesus spoke and worked by the utterances of the Spirit (Mt. 12:18-19 & 28). Jesus makes it clear that His great words were not of his flesh but of His Spirit (Jn. 6:63). The Father revealed His works to the Son by the Spirit.
4. Who did the Adversary tempt in the wilderness (e.g., Mt. 4)? The flesh of Christ! God cannot be tempted by evil (Jms. 1:13-15), yet flesh is fallible and open to the frailties of this age. Being led by the Spirit, the flesh of Christ was tempted.
5. Who died on the cross? The Son of God humiliated in the flesh! The Apostle Paul states, “By sending His own Son in the likeness [in the form of] flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3). God is Spirit, and God cannot die. But the flesh of Jesus Christ died for us all (2 Cor. 5:14-21). Only two individuals throughout history were born without a human father: Adam and Jesus Christ. In Adam, our spirits die, yet in Jesus, our flesh dies (Rom. 5:12-21). He truly is the Son of Man (Dan. 7:13). Recapitulation!
6. Who was resurrected on the third day? The Son of God exalted in the Spirit! The Apostle Paul again writes of the Son of God, “who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:3-4). So the Spirit of Christ was resurrected in a new form, in that of an exalted body (Rom. 8:9-11 & 1 Cor. 15:44-49). This body was not of flesh but of Spirit. And such is the hope of all who are in Christ!

Did you note how clear each of these questions become when we address them not from the “two natures” perspective but the “body/breath” perspective? Only once I started approaching the biblical texts with this perspective (which I now see is the perspective the New Testament authors took) was I able to make any sense of the hypostatic union. Indeed, there is a deep mystery to all of this that we will never grasp, but by faith we hold onto it. And that should bring us hope.

Affirmation 5: The Lord Jesus Christ never exploited the Spirit for His own glory, rather living out the flesh to the full extent of its weaknesses; this reveals God's humility.

So then was Jesus divine while on earth? As I hope you can see by now, such a question is loaded with so many assumptions that I have come to find this question most unhelpful. The better question I would suggest is, *what does Jesus Christ reveal about divinity while on earth?* And in one word the Apostle Paul answers for us—humility (Phil. 2:4-11). In the humble form of the human Christ, we see the incomprehensible humility of God. And this is the conclusion that we must proclaim, both in word and deed. Let me parse this out more fully by taking us to a few biblical texts.

Genesis 3

If the story of the incarnation is one of humility, the story of Genesis 3 is one of pride and shame. The Adversary's original temptation was that Eve and Adam would become "like God" (Gen. 3:5). In pride, humanity sought to exalt itself to the place of God, bringing about great shame. Yet in Jesus Christ, the Son of God became human, humbling himself in the greatest act of love that this world has ever seen (Phil. 2).

Matthew 5

If I could extend Philippians 2 to discuss not only the process by which the Son of God became incarnate but also the life that He lived in the flesh, this is how it would read: *Christ Jesus, who was in the form of man, did not count equality with God a thing to be exploited but rather lived out the flesh to its fullest extent, never exploiting the Spirit of God for His own gain but emptying Himself for our redemption.* Let me say this more concisely: our Lord never exploited the Spirit of God for His own gain.

In the sermon on the mount, who did Jesus Christ claim would have entry into the kingdom of God? Those who are "poor in spirit" (Mt. 5:3). And such was the form of the human life of Jesus. He became poor in spirit, that we may become rich in God. Throughout His life, Jesus spoke and acted by the Spirit of God (see especially Mt. 12:18, 28), but these words and acts were always for the sake of others. By the Spirit, Jesus glorified His Father (Jn. 17). By the Spirit, Jesus offered healing and redemption to others (Jn. 7:37-39). Yet He never did this for His own ease or glory.

Rather, Jesus lived out the fullness of flesh. When the Spirit of God led Him to the wilderness, He was tempted in the flesh (Mt. 4:1-17). Such is why the Hebrew

author says, “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence” (Heb. 5:7). Jesus did not call on the Spirit to rescue Him from the temptation; rather, He lived out the life of the flesh for our redemption. Never did Jesus call on the Spirit to exalt Him in the eyes of others. Rather, through the sufferings of the flesh, the humiliated Son of God was the exalted Son of Man. Jesus inaugurated the kingdom through the sufferings of His flesh. And as the Apostle Paul explains this in such hallmark passages as Romans 7 and 2 Corinthians 5, we learn that by exhausting the flesh, we like Him can be made alive in the Spirit.

Matthew 26

If the hypostatic union of Christ ever comes to the forefront of the pages of the New Testament, it would be in the Garden of Gethsemane. For there, the Lord says, “The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt. 26:41). Note again that this story does not tell us of the conflict between the divine and human natures of Christ but of the body and breath of Jesus. And what do we learn of the Spirit? The Spirit is indeed able to save and deliver! The Spirit of God could have rescued Jesus from the hour, but such was not the desire of our one God.

Rather, the flesh of Jesus had to suffer. And his flesh was weak. I only learned this recently, but it is so helpful in making sense of this story. What does the word *weak* mean in Greek? Sick! Yes, the flesh of Jesus was sick. Much like the suffering servant in Isaiah 53, Jesus was living out the life of the flesh—a life that is sick under the condemnation of sin and death. No, Jesus did not sin. Nor was He condemned. Rather, “God condemned sin in the flesh of Jesus” (Rom. 8:3). Much like a surgeon who removes a tumor from a sick patient, our God has healed us from the sickness of our sin—loving us while pouring wrath upon the sickness. Yes, the flesh of Jesus had to die. And as our representative, when He dies, we die. But this death was but the beginning. For in the death of the flesh, the Spirit can reign.

And let me return to Wayne’s original concern that he expressed to me. We must not erase the humanity of Jesus. For in the flesh of Jesus, we see what He truly gave up FOR US! In becoming human, Jesus did not exploit His equality with His Father. In remaining human, Jesus did not exploit the power of the Spirit. In both cases, Jesus Christ took on the form of a sick servant—so that the flesh may die and the Spirit may reign in our resurrected bodies. Let us praise our Lord Jesus Christ for the immense

weight of the sacrifices that He made for us, both in coming to earth and in suffering FOR US.

The King's Clothes

Jerri offered a most helpful story to help us understand the story of the incarnation, one that I'm going to adapt to a beloved Christmas song. Good King Wenceslas looked down from His glorious castle in which he was hosting the Feast of St. Stephen. On noticing a poor man gathering winter wood in the coldness of the day, the king called for his page to bring him "flesh and wine. Bring me pine logs hither." [Notice the gospel overtones in this?] So the king and the page traded the luxury of the feast to bring food and light to a poor man. Together they ventured into the cold, dark winter. In this great interchange, the king became cold, that the poor man may become warm. The king entered the dark, that the poor man may see the light. The king became like a poor man, that the poor man may feast like a king. Such is the story of the incarnation!

And I have to note this. Jerri's analogy is most helpful but like all good theology far from original. Karl Barth referred to the flesh as the "human clothing" (CD IV/2, 101), as did Thomas Aquinas long before him. Let us be thankful that the King has put on human clothes!

Affirmation 6: Through the cross, our flesh can die with our Lord, and we can be recreated through the "two Hands of God" in the world.

So what does all of this mean for us? Irenaeus, a second-century Christian who by the way formalized recapitulation, said that God has created through His two Hands: the Son and the Spirit. Through this rich metaphor, Irenaeus captures a deep truth held within our Triune God. God the Father has worked with and through the Spirit and the Son to create all. And if I may extend Irenaeus' metaphor to explain the incarnation, the Father has reached down to us through the flesh of Jesus to bring us back up to Him through the Spirit. God continues to work through His two Hands.

While much about the incarnation will remain a mystery, let us hold onto this claim by faith. How did the one God bring humanity back to oneness with Him? Through the incarnate Son of God, inspired by the Spirit of God. God's two Hands. Indeed, the Son of God humiliated is the Son of Man exalted. By exchanging His glorious form for a sick human form, the Son of God was humiliated, yet we can be exalted with Him. The

flesh must die, so that the spirit can live. This is not the question of us exchanging human nature for divine nature. Rather, this is the reality of our flesh being crucified with Christ, that we may be exalted with Him by the Spirit (Rom. 8:11). Praise be to God!

Addendum: A Hymn

As I have looked for stories and analogies to explain the incarnation, I have continually come back to the hymn, *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. This beautiful hymn was written by Charles Wesley, who himself was an exemplary theologian. Let us raise our hearts to God in praise at the second and third stanzas of this hymn:

Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of the Virgin's womb:
veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail th'incarnate Deity,
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel.

3 Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth.