

CHAPTER 7: THE QUESTION OF THE DIVINITY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

“I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee . . . that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me.” (John 17:20–23)

In considering the question of Jesus’ divinity the first thing we should do is try to state clearly the orthodox doctrine. This is not as easy as you may think. Even among people who consider themselves to have a perfectly orthodox belief in the Trinity and the Incarnation there is a good deal of confusion as to precisely what these mean. This should not be surprising, for the doctrine of Jesus as “God the Son” includes either some extremely fine nuances or (depending on your point of view) a good dose of contradiction and vagueness.

Nevertheless, I need to confess that I stand in awe and admiration of the orthodox dogma, particularly in light of the world-view, the Greek philosophy and the doctrinal debates that served as its background. I do not find it to be necessary or helpful for us today, but I admire it as the best possible answer to the doctrinal needs of its day.¹

If we extract it from the Greek philosophical language in which it was first framed, we might state the orthodox position as follows: “There is one God, one divine being. This one God, however, has three aspects, or presents itself as three “persons”: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the Trinity, the one triune (three-in-one) God. The second person of the Trinity is called God the Son or the “Logos” (the Greek word often translated as “the Word”, as in John 1). As an aspect of God the Logos has existed since the beginning, and at the birth of Jesus of Nazareth became incarnate in this human being. In this one individual

¹The reader is recommended to *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* by Jaroslav Pelikan (University of Chicago Press, 1971) or *A History of Christian Doctrine*, Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, ed., (Fortress Press, 1980). John Cobb, Jr., also has a nice summary in Chapter 9 of *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (The Westminster Press, 1975). None of these individuals should be held responsible for anything I say in this chapter.

there was a truly divine nature and also a truly human nature. The human was not made divine, nor the divine human, nor were the two somehow mixed, but both were in this one person. Nor can we say that the divine nature in Jesus did one thing and the human nature in him another, for all actions and experiences were those of the one individual, Jesus Christ, both human and divine."

This formulation satisfied a number of requirements. First, by the time it was formally adopted there was a long-standing tradition of worshipping Christ. This, of course, required that he be divine.

Second, it met the needs of most of the contemporary doctrines of salvation. These depended either on (1) the atoning sacrifice on our behalf of a perfect being, or else on (2) the incorruptible and eternal having come into our corruptible and finite flesh. The former required that Jesus who was crucified be divine; the latter required that God became human. The Incarnation satisfied both of these.

Third, the Scriptures seem to speak of Jesus in most instances as human, but in some cases as divine. The Doctrine of the Incarnation allows both of these to be true.

Fourth, it was taken for granted by the Greco-Roman philosophical world that God was immutable and could not suffer pain. By postulating the existence of two natures in this one person, the Doctrine of the Incarnation allowed one to say that the suffering of Jesus as reported in the Gospels was experienced by the one human-and-divine person through his human nature, which avoided a run-in with the prevailing wisdom of the time.

Thus the Incarnation met the needs of its day for worship, soteriology, and evangelism in a way not incompatible with the Bible. It represents a remarkable theological achievement.

The Incarnation Reconsidered

This doctrine of the nature of Jesus of Nazareth was not firmly fixed until the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Nevertheless, from the end of the first century it seems to have been generally accepted by the Church that Jesus was divine in one manner or another. On top of this, the Chalcedonian formulation itself now has more than fifteen centuries of tenure. Thus, one of two common reactions to it (when people bother to think about it at all) is this:

"How can anyone doubt the consensus of the Church, developed in the early years of the faith from the Biblical witness, confirmed in the teachings of scholars and saints through the centuries, and tested and proven in the living out of millions of faithful lives?"

However, the other common reaction to the Doctrine of the Incarnation reacts to its antiquity in a different way:

"How can anyone pay any attention to a doctrine that grew out of a

Greek conceptual system being imposed on Jewish Scriptures, that was as foreign to Jesus as it is to us, that depends on concepts and a common sense that have gone the way of the Roman Empire, and that is about as understandable as if it were still written in ancient Greek?"

Both of these reactions are extreme, of course. And both ask too much of us. The first asks us not to think for ourselves, while the second asks us to ignore the past and not even consider beliefs which are still held by many contemporary Christians. Whether or not you share my admiration of the orthodox doctrine, we have to recognize that it represents an interpretation of God and Jesus which not only has had the allegiance of the vast majority of Christians in the history of the Church, but which also has a proven track record as a doctrine which can help people to lead faithful lives following the teaching and example of the Christ. Only for the gravest of reasons, and only with an appropriate sense of awe, ought one to dare to challenge this traditional understanding.

The reasons are grave indeed. So in spite of my trepidation, and in awe of tradition, and knowing that this gives an impression of audacity when what I feel is rather an obligation that I cannot avoid, I am impelled by my understanding (such as I am capable of) to raise this challenge. I find myself a servant or even a prisoner of the truth that I feel, to which I have no choice but to bear witness. In so doing, I find it necessary to challenge the orthodox doctrine of the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. I do this on four grounds:

- (1) The orthodox doctrine is no more Biblical than some other interpretations of Jesus' nature, and is in fact less Biblical than some.
- (2) Even if this doctrine once made sense to the philosophical heirs of Plato and Aristotle—a question beyond our purview here—it no longer makes sense to us. I am not just saying that it is difficult to understand. I am saying that it cannot meaningfully be said, that it is impossible.
- (3) If it could make sense, which it can't, its meaning would violate our common sense.
- (4) Last but not least, this doctrine is unnecessary. It is unnecessary to the message of Jesus or the centrality of Jesus. Furthermore, for some people it actually stands in the way of their receiving the message.

1. The Orthodox Doctrine Is Not Required By The Bible

When the Church fathers were formulating their Christology they were constrained by the fact that they were Biblical literalists. Because they took for granted that all scriptural references to Jesus were true, they had to come up with *one* doctrine of his nature that was in harmony with *all* these different passages. Since at times Jesus is spoken of in very human terms, and on occasion is spoken of as divine, the only solution was to conceive of him as somehow combining both the human and the divine.

In contrast to this, the actual (and liberating) fact is that we do not

have in the New Testament a single, monolithic interpretation of Jesus. Rather, we have a diversity of interpretations. In this regard the New Testament demonstrates both the unity in essentials and the liberty in interpretation that are appropriate to the Christian Church.

The Gospels are unanimous about the centrality of Jesus the Christ: his central importance to our understanding of God and as our norm for living in right relation to God. But while they all agree on this centrality, the different New Testament authors have different ways of conceptualizing and explaining it. Matthew views Jesus as “super-prophet”, the man chosen by God to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies, in the tradition of Moses and Elijah but surpassing even them in importance and authority as the culmination of the prophetic line. Mark and Luke differ from Matthew in emphasis: Mark depicts Jesus as a rather secretive Messiah, chosen by God to inaugurate the Kingdom of God, while Luke highlights more clearly Jesus’ mission to bring the gospel to people of all stations and all nations.

John is the only Gospel to portray Jesus as different in *nature* from the prophets, as more than the culminating high point of the succession of people called by God and commissioned with special tasks. Especially in the prologue (John 1:1–18), it is clear that John considers Jesus to be more than human. He shares somehow in divinity, but in a way that is not very clear, and which seems to owe much to Jewish “wisdom literature” (see Proverbs 8:22–31). Jesus was pre-existent as the “Logos”, which is translated “word” but which means much more than that. The Logos is divine (“was God”), but is not *the* Deity (“was with God”). Jesus himself is quoted as claiming oneness with God, but when he is alive he always claims this same oneness with his disciples. So in sum, while it is clear that John considers Jesus to be more than human, it is not clear exactly what he has in mind.

Paul, as usual, says different things in different places. In Romans 1:4 he says that Jesus was “designated Son of God . . . by his resurrection from the dead”. This implies an “adoptionist Christology”—that is, that Jesus was a mortal man who after his faithful obedience to the cross was *then* designated (adopted) Son of God. In Philippians 2:5–7, however, he says of Jesus that “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man”. This has many possible interpretations, but all point to a pre-existent Jesus who was more than human and somehow like God. In Colossians 1:15–16 Paul reaffirms Jesus’ pre-existence in words that (like the prologue to John) echo wisdom literature, as he through whom all things were created.

The non-Pauline Letter to the Hebrews also affirms this of Jesus, and goes on to say that he “bears the very stamp of [God’s] nature”. (Hebrews 1:3) But the author speaks of Jesus not as God, but as son and heir, as higher than the angels. What we have here is a “ladder of being” not uncommon in ancient times: there is God at the top, with human

beings below God but above all other animals, and there are also beings above humans. Angels, for instance, would fall in here. They are more divine than we but less divine than God. What Hebrews does (and perhaps John and Paul do as well) is to place Jesus next to the top of this hierarchy, below God but above angels and everybody else.

Now if you were to ask which of those is *the* Biblical position on the nature of Jesus of Nazareth, the answer would be “none of them”. Instead, each of them represents a Biblical alternative for explaining the central importance of Jesus. And since we are not burdened with the need to come up with one good interpretation that incorporates all of these—as is the literalist—we are free to choose for ourselves the one which best helps us to understand Jesus and to respond to his message. In fact, we can go further than this. Since the constant in the New Testament is the centrality of Jesus and his message, and not any particular explanation of why and how he is central, we are then free to interpret this centrality in a way that meets the needs of our own day and our own common sense, so long as we remain compatible with the basic thrust of Jesus’ teaching.

In fact, *only* if we allow for the introduction of other non-Biblical conceptualizations can we accept the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation as legitimate Christian options. It may be argued that these doctrines represent the development of Biblical ideas, but neither of them can be found in Scripture in their orthodox form. Obviously, if we allow one set of interpretations that is developed from positions found in the New Testament then we must allow others as well, so long as they are compatible with Jesus’ message.

2. The Orthodox Doctrine Is Impossible

The doctrine of the Incarnation, that Jesus of Nazareth was fully God and fully human, is simply impossible. It does not make sense. The words cannot be put together this way without doing violence either to their meaning or to the rules of logic.

To be human is to be finite, limited in knowledge, fallible, and imperfect. To be human also means to be aware of one’s finitude, and of one’s separation from others and from God—sometimes painfully aware. If Jesus was human, then he was all of these—and indeed this is how the Gospels portray him, experiencing anger, fatigue, uncertainty, reluctance, pain and even death.

To be God—not just to share a spark of the divine, nor to be in God’s image, nor to be a lesser divine being like the angels, nor any of the other possible subversions of the orthodox doctrine,² but really to be God—in any Christian understanding, this means to be eternal and un-

²Those who speak of God as immanent in all of us but *fully* immanent in Jesus of Nazareth present an alternative which escapes some of the problems of the orthodox explana-

limited, to be perfect in love and understanding. Now, either Jesus of Nazareth was limited, fallible and imperfect, or else he was unlimited, infallible and perfect. These two sets of attributes are opposites of each other. You can't have it both ways; he was either one or the other. You can't say of one person that he was both.

"Ah!" some will say. "That's the paradox!" No, it isn't a paradox. This is a very important point, so please take special note: a paradox is something which seems impossible but which is demonstrably true. Thus, it was a paradox when some scientist carefully analyzed bumblebees and concluded that according to the laws of physics they couldn't fly. There was contradiction and apparent impossibility, but bumblebees kept on flying.

However, for an individual to be both perfect and imperfect is the reverse of this: it may seem true to some, but it is demonstrably impossible. And not just impossible according to our understanding of the laws of nature, which can be wrong (as with the bumblebee), but impossible according to the rules of logic upon which all our reasoning is based.

To say someone is both perfect and imperfect is like saying that you saw a square circle. This is an impossibility. Are you saying the circle was not round, in which case it was not a circle? Or are you saying the square was circular? This is not a paradox; this is meaningless nonsense, however imaginative it might be.

To say someone is both perfect and imperfect at the same time is to say that "X" and "not-X" can both be true. This is either to abandon the meaning of these words or else to abandon logic, and in either case this means we are speaking nonsense that can have no meaning for us.

The orthodox will reply that Jesus was limited, fallible and imperfect with regard to his human nature, but unlimited, infallible and perfect in his divine nature. This sounds nice, but what does it mean to have two natures? If it means having two minds and two wills and two characters, one perfect and the other imperfect, then it means there were two separate persons occupying this one body (or else Jesus was schizophrenic). On the other hand, if this was really the one person Jesus the Christ, as orthodoxy claims, then either this person was perfect or he was not. Either he was capable of sin or he was not. Either he had limited knowledge or he did not.

For instance, either he knew—not believed, but *knew*—that he would be raised on the second day after his death, or he did not know this. If he knew this then he did not face death as any other human, and he was not taking any real risk in allowing himself to be caught, tried and crucified. So in this regard he could not be considered fully human. If, on the other

tion of Jesus' centrality. But one must keep in mind that this is *not* the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation, which represents Jesus as different from us in kind, not just in degree, and which does not say that God was *in* Jesus but that God *became* Jesus.