

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ
Lecture 1
Doctrine of the Incarnation

Today we begin a new locus – or theme – in our survey of Christian doctrine. We first began many months ago talking about the doctrine of revelation. By that we don't mean the biblical book by that name, but rather how God reveals himself to humanity, both generally in nature and conscience and specially in his Word – Jesus Christ and in Scripture. Then we spent a long time on that major topic of the doctrine of God – studying the attributes of God, taking an excursus on natural theology and arguments for God's existence, and then looking at the doctrine of the Trinity and finally the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Today we have the exciting opportunity to begin a new locus and to discuss the doctrine of Christ. This usually goes by the name Christology. Christology is going to be the theology or the study of Christ. As we'll see, there are two major aspects to Christology. One will be the person of Christ. The other will be the work of Christ. We will look at each of these two areas together. The person of Christ seeks to answer the question, *Who is Jesus Christ?* The work of Christ tries to answer the question, *What did he do?*

The person of Christ is preoccupied principally with the doctrine of the incarnation. The work of Christ is principally occupied with the doctrine of the atonement. Over the coming months we will be talking about these two important Christian doctrines. I think, as we all know, the doctrines of the incarnation and atonement are absolutely central to Christian theism. Up until now we've been talking about the doctrine of God. Although we did get into the Trinity and the Holy Spirit, which are uniquely Christian, for the most part the doctrine of God was a generic monotheism. But when it comes to Christ – the person and work of Christ – the doctrines of the incarnation and the atonement lie at the very heart of Christian theology. So this is a very important and exciting locus that we will now broach today.

We want to begin by talking about the person of Christ and the doctrine of the incarnation. We want first to say something about the Scriptural data concerning the person of Christ.

The New Testament affirms both the deity and the humanity of Jesus Christ. With respect to the deity of Christ, I am not going to rehearse again all of the scriptural teaching pertinent to the divinity of Christ but will simply refer you back to our discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity where you'll remember we examined at some length the New Testament witness to the deity of Christ and therefore his being a member of the Trinity. Let me simply read one summary statement from the New Testament that nicely captures this truth of the deity of Christ. This is Philippians 2:5-8.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, 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 men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Here we have a poignant statement of the incarnation of Christ.¹ Though he was in the form of God – he was equal with God – nevertheless he humbled himself and took on human form and eventually gave his life for us.

As this already suggests, the Scripture affirms therefore the true humanity of Christ as well as his true deity. As a human being, Jesus experienced all of the finite limitations that we experience as human people. For example, he was physically born. This is obvious but we'll read some Scripture to attest to this fact. Luke 2:7, 11: "And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Then the angel proclaims, "For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." So Jesus experienced a human birth. Though virginally conceived, his birth was perfectly ordinary.

He also experienced temptation to sin. Matthew 4:1: "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil." So he experienced temptations as we do.

He also experienced the full range of physical and mental limitations that we experience. Luke 2:52: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man." Here the boy Jesus is said to have increased in both his intellectual abilities and in his physical body.

Look also at Matthew 4:2. This was during his temptation: "And he fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterward he was hungry." So Jesus experienced hunger from being deprived of food.

John 4:6. This is the story of his encounter with the woman at the well: "Jacob's well was there, and so Jesus, wearied as he was with his journey, sat down beside the well. It was about the sixth hour." Here Jesus is said to have been tired. His body experienced fatigue and, as we see from the story, thirst as well as hunger as he asked the woman for a drink.

Mark 4:38. This is the story of the stilling of the storm. The great storm arose on the lake of Galilee, and in Mark 4:38 it says, "But he [Jesus] was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care if we perish?'" Here the boat is being swamped by these waves beating it and tossing it until it is ready to capsize, and Jesus is so exhausted, so fatigued, that he is sleeping through this thing, again showing his physical limitations.

¹ 5:00

Finally, Mark 13:32 – mental limitations as well as physical are indicated here. Part of his Olivet Discourse on the end times says, “But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Here Jesus says that he does not know the date of his return.²

So he experienced both physical and mental limitations.

Moreover, Jesus was tortured and executed. Luke 23:33, 46:

And when they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. . . . Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.

So Jesus experienced during his passion the suffering of horrible torture and finally crucifixion and death.

Moreover, Jesus experienced through what he suffered during his life moral growth. This surprising truth is declared in Hebrews 5:7-10:

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 for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Here it says Jesus was morally perfected through his sufferings.

We who believe in the deity of Christ and have entrusted our lives to him may feel uncomfortable with these verses that show the finitude and physical and mental limitations of Jesus and the way in which he grew during his lifetime. The affirmation of the humanity of Jesus may make us squirm in discomfort. But, in fact, the affirmation that Jesus was truly human is essential to Christian doctrine. Indeed, in 1 John 4:1-3 we are told that if you do not affirm the true humanity of Christ you are a heretic. So this is essential to the doctrine of the person of Christ just as much as his deity. 1 John 4:1-3:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already.

² 10:02

Here John emphasizes that it is essential to the doctrine of Christ to affirm that he has come in the flesh – the true humanity of Jesus. This is not a mere appearance as the heretics claimed. This is a real and genuine incarnation of Christ in human flesh.

So essential to the doctrine of the person of Christ is the affirmation of both his true deity as well as his true humanity.

START DISCUSSION

Student: The last statement about “you must believe he came in the flesh” - I think that is important because you need to have trust in him. If you don’t believe he came in the flesh then when you see him at his appearing you will not have the faith to be transformed . . .

Dr. Craig: I think that it is especially important when it gets to the work of Christ. If Christ’s incarnation was merely illusory – something that was mere appearance – then that makes nonsense of the atonement of the sufferings of Christ and his saving us and redeeming us from sin.³ It would be merely illusory. You can see why the affirmation of the humanity of Christ would be essential as well as his deity.

Student: Do we know whether Jesus was born of an egg of Mary and then grew into Jesus or, like in-vitro fertilization, was a fertilized egg . . . ?

Dr. Craig: You are raising a very interesting question which perhaps we can talk about more when we come to the virgin conception of Jesus. You are wanting to know: did Mary contribute any genetic material to Jesus? Or was it wholly miraculous – simply the production of this fertilized egg within Mary’s womb? I don’t think that biblically there is any way to prove it one way or the other because in either case it could be truly human – a truly human being was produced in Mary’s womb. Or you could say that God contributed the genetic material that would make this a male child rather than a female child but that Mary contributed her chromosomes to this as well. I don’t think that biblically there is one way to prove it rather than the other. But theologians have addressed this question. It is a very interesting question about the virginal conception. I do not think that how you answer it need affect your affirmation of the true humanity of Christ.

Student: Jesus did refer to his “brothers.” Yes, he could be taken either step-brothers or whatever, but to me that might weigh a little bit on the idea of being fully human in the sense that there was genetic material of a human being.

Dr. Craig: What you are saying is: were these brothers of Jesus his brothers not just in the sense they were members of the same family (which is clear) but that they were actually genetically similar to Jesus? They shared their mother’s genetic material? That

³ 15:15

would make him even more intimately connected to his brothers and his sisters as well. I hope we haven't gone on a tangent here!

Student: Scripture says he is the seed of David. I see the miraculous in that he averted the curse on the kings by being born spiritually from above but also fulfilled the prophesy that he would be of the line and seed of David by sharing that physicality.

Dr. Craig: This is a good question that you are raising in terms of being part of the line of David, the messianic line. This has to do with whether or not this is to be traced through Mary or Joseph legally as his father. Joseph was legally his father and part of the royal lineage. Or is this in virtue of being from Mary? That would be part of the conversation here as well.

Student: Just as Jesus grew physically, he probably also grew in his realization of who he is. Hebrews 5:5 says, "Christ did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest, but God said to him, 'You are my Son. Today I have become your Father. You are a priest forever.'" Hebrews 10:7 says, "Here I am. It is written about me in the scroll. I have come to do your will." Hebrews 10:10 says, "And by that will we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." It looks like this understanding of who he is also grew in time. It didn't just come in as he was born.⁴

Dr. Craig: I think you are making a very good point. We know that by the time of his baptism by John he had a clear sense of his vocation and identity to embark on a public ministry. But even earlier when he is twelve years old and visits the temple with his parents and stays behind and they search frantically for him. When they finally find him, he says, *Didn't you know that I must be about my Father's business?* Even there early in Jesus' life you have some intimation at least that he had a special consciousness of his relationship with God as his Father. But how full it is we don't know. But I think that you are quite right in saying that this would be something that would naturally dawn on him and grow as he grows from a little infant – a normal little baby – to a Jewish boy and finally to adulthood. This causes special problems for understanding the incarnation, doesn't it? Because, as God (as the second person of the Trinity), he is omniscient! So how does he not already know these things? We'll be talking about that question in this section.

END DISCUSSION

Let's reflect a bit on this. How can Jesus be truly God and truly man? If anything looks like a contradiction surely this is it. Jesus seems to be the proverbial round square or married bachelor. How can he be both creator and creature? Both infinite and finite? How do we unite in a single person omniscience and ignorance? Omnipotence and weakness? Moral perfection and moral perfectability? The attributes of deity – which he must have

⁴ 20:06

possessed as the second person of the Trinity – seem to drive out the attributes of humanity. So it seems to be a logical contradiction to affirm with the historic Christian church that Jesus is truly God and truly man. In the language of the classical creeds – *vera deus, vera homo*. Truly God and truly man.

In order to get at this question, let's do a historical survey of reflection by great church fathers and thinkers on the doctrine of the person of Christ.

As a result of the trinitarian controversies which culminated with the Council of Nicaea in 325 and the Council of Constantinople in 381, a new chapter in intellectual church history opened. I am referring to the Christological controversies of the fourth through the seventh centuries. Following the trinitarian controversies came these Christological controversies. The central question that was addressed by the church fathers was how we should understand the affirmation that Jesus Christ is both truly human and truly divine.

There emerged among the church fathers two broad schools of thinking about Christology often labeled Alexandrian versus Antiochian Christology because of the geographical centers of these schools of thought. But I think these are perhaps best seen as a conflict between what could be called Monophysite and Dyophysite Christology.

The Greek word *physis* means “nature,” *mono* obviously means “one.” So Monophysites would affirm that there is in the incarnate Christ one nature – a kind of combination of deity and humanity. Whereas the Dyophysites affirmed that there are in the incarnate Christ two complete natures.

The presupposition of both schools was that members of natural kinds of things have natures or essential properties which make the things what they are.⁵ A horse has a horse nature. That distinguishes it from, say, a cat which has a feline nature. By the same token, there is therefore such a thing as human nature. This differs from the divine nature.

What is human nature? According to the great Greek philosopher Aristotle the nature of humanity is that man is a rational animal. On Aristotle's view being truly human involves having both a physical body but also an intellectual soul. To be a rational animal is to be a human being possessed of a physical body and an intellectual or rational soul. The church fathers seemed to have accepted Aristotle's view of what human nature is.

At the same time they also believed that God has a nature. God possesses certain essential attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, moral perfection, and so forth. The question that they faced was how do we understand the incarnation of the *Logos* – the second person of the Trinity? *Logos*, you'll recall, is the Greek word for “reason” or “word.” The challenge was how do we understand the incarnation of the *Logos*, the second person of the Trinity?

⁵ 25:09

The church fathers were unanimous in thinking that the incarnation was not a matter of the *Logos*' divesting himself of certain attributes of divinity in order to turn himself into a human being. That sort of conception would be more akin to Greco-Roman pagan ideas. In Greco-Roman mythology, for example, Zeus is said to have turned himself into a bull or turned himself into a swan. The notion of the incarnation in Christian thinking is not that the second person of the Trinity somehow turned himself into a human being. Doing so would mean that he thereby ceased to be God. The Christian affirmation is that Jesus is both God and man simultaneously. In the incarnation the *Logos* did not abandon or lay aside his divine nature. That meant that the incarnation could only be conceived as the *Logos* acquiring an additional nature to the nature that he already possessed as God. The incarnation for the church fathers was not a matter of subtraction but of addition. It is not that the *Logos* subtracted some of his divine attributes in order to turn himself into a human being. It was rather that the *Logos*, being fully God (fully divine) acquired, in addition to his divine nature, a human nature as well. The question was how this acquisition of a human nature by the *Logos* is to be understood.

Advocates of a Monophysite Christology or a one-nature Christology, held that after the incarnation the *Logos* possessed a single divine-human nature, a kind of mixture of divinity and humanity together. Some of them understood the incarnation to be a matter of the *Logos*' clothing himself with flesh, assuming a human body as his own. Sometimes they thought that Christ's flesh was deified in virtue of its union with the *Logos*.

By contrast, proponents of a Dyophysite, or two-nature, Christology, believed that the incarnation of the *Logos* involved not simply taking on human flesh (a human body) but a complete human nature, that is to say both a human body and a rational soul.⁶ The *Logos* at conception in Mary's womb was joined to a human being. So the incarnation involved the existence of a complete human being and a complete divine being that were somehow joined together at conception in Mary's womb.⁷

⁶ 30:13

⁷ Total Running Time: 31:55 (Copyright © 2016 William Lane Craig)