§ 7. Doctrine of Christ
Lecture 5
A Possible Model of the Incarnation

We’ve been talking about church historical reflection on the doctrine of the incarnation. We come at last today to a proposed model of the incarnation. I believe that on the basis of the historical precedence that we’ve briefly surveyed, we can craft a model of the incarnation which is logically coherent and biblically faithful.

Before I present this model, let me emphasize that this is presented simply as a possible model of the incarnation. No one can presume to penetrate the mystery of the incarnation as to say exactly how God did this. But if we can give a coherent model of the incarnation – a possible account – then this will defeat any objections brought against the doctrine of the incarnation by those who say that it is simply logically incoherent to say that Christ could be truly God and truly man.

My proposed Christology has three planks or postulates to it.

1. I propose that we postulate with the Council of Chalcedon that there is one person who exemplifies two distinct and complete natures – one human and one divine.

   When the framers of the Chalcedonian statement affirmed that in Christ there are two natures they were not talking about individual essences, that is to say that set of properties that makes you uniquely you and different from anybody else (your individual essence). Rather, what they were talking about were kind essences or natures that serve to demarcate natural kinds of things. For example, according to Aristotle, every human being belongs to the natural kind “rational animal.” That expresses the nature that is common to every human being – that natural kind. In affirming that Christ had two natures, the church fathers were saying that Christ has all of the properties that go to constitute humanity and he also had all of the properties that go to make up deity. In that sense he had two natures, and so he belonged to two natural kinds – God and man. Each of us belongs simply to one natural kind – man, or humanity. But in the case of Christ we have a person who belongs to two natural kinds – God and man.

   Only the divine nature belongs essentially to the Logos, that is to say the second person of the Trinity. In the incarnation the Logos assumed contingently a human nature as well. So the Logos possesses the divine nature essentially, but he possesses his human nature only contingently. There was a time when the Logos did not have a human nature – before the virginal conception in Mary’s womb. There are possible worlds where Christ never becomes incarnate. So the human nature is contingent. It is not essential to the Logos as is his divine nature.
In affirming that Christ had two natures – complete and distinct, human and divine – I am rejecting any form of Kenotic Christology which suggests that in the incarnation the Logos gave up or divested himself of various divine attributes. If the Logos (Christ) divested himself of any attribute that is essential to divinity, then that means that in the incarnation he ceased to be God.¹ That is incompatible with the biblical data as we’ve seen, and therefore it is not acceptable as a Christian theory of the incarnation.

On the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, God did not turn himself into a human being. Rather, he was simultaneously human and divine. The incarnation is not a matter of subtraction from the divine nature to turn the Logos into a man. It is a matter of addition. In addition to the divine nature he already has as the second person of the Trinity, the Logos assumes a human nature as well. So contrary to Kenotic Christology, the incarnation is not a matter of subtraction but of addition.

On these Kenotic views that say that Christ relinquished some of his divine attributes, the Logos would, yes, be the same person after kenosis as before, but that person would no longer be God. Kenosis, you will remember, is the Greek word for “emptying” used in Philippians 2 where it said that Christ did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but he emptied himself. On Kenotic Christology the Logos would be the same person after the kenosis but he would no longer be God, because it is your nature (not your person) that determines one’s deity. Therefore, if the Logos’ nature were changed in the incarnation his deity would change. He would no longer be divine.

Moreover, typical members of natural kinds of things are plausibly taken to be essentially members of that kind. A horse is essentially a horse. A pig is essentially a pig. A human being is essentially a human being. They are not just contingently those things. If an individual undergoes a substantial change – that is to say he undergoes an essential change or a change of substance – then it ceases to exist as that thing and it becomes something else because it has undergone an essential or substantial change. For example, if a man dies and is cremated and his bones are ground into powder, that is an essential or substantial change. He has ceased to be a human being. That human being no longer exists. What exists now is just powder, and powder is not a human being. Although Christ is not a typical member of the natural kind “man,” he is a typical member of the natural kind “deity.” That means he could not cease to be God without ceasing to exist. If he gives up his deity, he ceases to exist because that is essential to him. Of course, God cannot cease to exist. He is necessary and eternal. The whole idea of Christ’s giving up certain properties belonging to the divine nature in order to become incarnate, it seems to me, just makes no sense at all.

¹ 5:03
The Kenotic theologian might try to avoid these problems by saying that attributes like omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, and so on are not essential to deity. These are contingent properties that God happens to have; therefore they could have been abandoned by the Logos without thereby ceasing to be God. He could give up omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence and still be God because these are not essential properties of divinity or deity.

But I think that that entails a concept of God which is far too thin to be theologically acceptable. I think it is theologically untenable to think that a being could lack those sorts of properties and still deserve to be called God. Think about it. On Kenotic theology there is a possible world in which a being exists who is no more powerful, no more intelligent, no more spatially unlimited, no less logically contingent than any ordinary human being, and yet supposedly that being is God and is worthy of being worshiped. I find that just incredible to think that such a finite, limited being could be worthy of worship and therefore be God.

Moreover, certain divine attributes cannot be temporarily divested in the way that Kenotic theology envisions. Consider, for example, the divine attributes of necessity, aseity (or self-existence), and eternality. It makes no sense at all to say that attributes like these could be given up in the incarnation, for by their very nature if one ever has these properties then he always has these properties. One has them permanently. But then how could Christ die unless he did give these up? If he has necessary existence, self-existence, and eternality, then Christ could not be mortal. He could not die on the cross if he still had these sorts of properties.

So it seems to me that the Kenotic theologian is forced to say, He was only mortal and died in his human nature, but attributes like these are still preserved in his divine nature. But then why not say the same thing for the other attributes as well, like omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence? Christ can be omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and so and so forth, in his divine nature but not in his human nature. But then you’ve abandoned Kenotic Christology and you are right back to Chalcedon again, namely, that Christ has two natures each complete and distinct.

In my opinion, Kenotic Christology is theologically unacceptable and really incoherent in the end. Therefore, the first plank in any acceptable Christology is to agree with the Council of Chalcedon that Christ has two complete and distinct natures – one human, and one divine.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I would agree with the word “human” if you add “(mostly).” I don’t believe Jesus had the capacity to sin. To me, if you take away the capacity to sin, that is getting
kind of away from the definition of a human. I would say mostly human. How would you deal with that? If you take away the capacity to sin, can you really say . . . I would say it is certainly not fully human, nor do I think it is necessary for him to be fully human in order to take away our sins.

Dr. Craig: What I would say is this. Being sin is not necessary to human nature. Human nature can exist without sin. Adam and Eve prior to the Fall were sinless and Christ was sinless. What is required would be freedom of the will – that one has the freedom to choose to do righteousness. I would want to affirm (as we’ll see later on) that Christ, even though he was divine, did have freedom, and he freely resisted Satan’s temptations to sin.

Student: The big difference – you’ll notice I used the word “capacity.” Yes, Adam before the Fall was sinless as are most of the angels, but as far as I know all created beings that have free will have the capacity to sin. Jesus did not. That’s a huge distinction.

Dr. Craig: I agree with you. He doesn’t have the capacity to sin, but I guess I would not see that as essential to human nature. I would see freedom as essential to human nature, and I think Christ had that. The question, I think, would be: in order to have freedom, does one need to have the capacity to do the opposite? If I freely do A, does that imply that I have the capacity to do not-A?3 That is a deep philosophical question about the nature of free will. I would say, no, it doesn’t. You can freely do A even if you lack the capacity to do not-A. So I don’t see that capacity to sin as essential to human nature.

Student: I see how Jesus actually displays examples of omnipotence and omniscience, as in his human nature. I had a question about the omnipresence part of it. If it seems omnipresence is an essential facet of the divine nature and if it seems having a human body is an essential facet of the human nature then it seems to me that those would be in direct juxtaposition or direct conflict or direct contradiction with each other as opposed to the other attributes of God. Could you comment on how he is not giving up omnipresence which seems like those are in direct conflict.

Dr. Craig: Think of it in these terms. If a person is spatially located at a specific spacetime location, that doesn’t imply that he doesn’t have a wider sort of existence that would be located elsewhere as well. One could be spatially located in one’s human body in Palestine, and yet the divine Logos could still be omnipresent with respect to his divine nature. Especially if we think of omnipresence in the way I did when we talked about the attributes of God as being cognizant of and causally active at every point in space. It seems to me that the Logos can be cognizant of and causally active at every point in space even though his human body occupies a finite region of space at a certain time in history.
Student: It seems to me that Christ did show his divine nature in the fact that he knew of his death and he knew Peter was going to deny him. Can you comment that at the point of his death was when his physical nature died, that is his human nature died, and so he did die as a human?

Dr. Craig: Yes.

Student: Yet he was given a new heavenly body.

Dr. Craig: Well, let’s put it this way. His earthly body was transformed into an immortal and incorruptible body.

Student: Therefore he was the first-born of that type. Is that the way you see it? At the end of time all of his followers will also follow suit in being given their new divine bodies.

Dr. Craig: Yes. So long as we don’t think of these resurrection bodies as something distinct from the earthly body, as though they are waiting for us in the closets of heaven – these new bodies that we will don. No, it is a transformation of the earthly body into an incorruptible, immortal, glorious body. In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul emphasizes, This corruptible must put on incorruption. This mortal must put on immortality. He talks about how, when Christ returns, we shall all be changed in the twinkling of an eye to resemble Christ in his resurrection body.

Student: But there is no male or female.

Dr. Craig: Well, now, I wouldn’t say that.

Student: You wouldn’t say that?

Dr. Craig: Jesus seemed to appear to be male after the resurrection, wouldn’t you agree?

Student: Absolutely. I don’t know where . . . I thought there was a point in Scripture . . .

Dr. Craig: You are thinking that there isn’t marriage in heaven. Right? Jesus says that they will not be given in marriage in the afterlife.

Student: OK. Maybe it’s that.

Dr. Craig: I wouldn’t say that they are sexless or have no gender. Jesus was . . .

Student: As he was shown in his glorified body, it was in a male form.

Dr. Craig: Right. Clearly.

I want to underline what she said because she did say it so nicely. One of the ways in which the church or theologians have treated these attributes is by reduplicative predication. That is to say attributes are predicative of Christ not simply but they are predicative of Christ with respect to which nature you are talking about. She put it very
nicely – Christ died with respect to his human nature, but not in the divine nature. Christ is omnipresent with respect to the divine nature but not in the human nature. That will go a long way toward removing apparent inconsistencies if we remember to predicate these properties of Christ with respect to one nature or the other.

**Student:** When Jesus is a baby, a toddler, an adolescent – he is pretending to not be omniscient? What is going on there?

**Dr. Craig:** I think we wouldn’t want to say that – that the incarnation is a matter of pretense, that he is fooling people, especially his mother, Mary, when he is nursing at her breast. That just would be a monstrosity. We are going to need a model of the incarnation that will allow Jesus to have a genuine human consciousness that begins as a normal infant – little baby – grows up to be a boy and then finally a man. That is one of the emphases of the Council of Chalcedon. He had a human consciousness. Christ had a human body and a soul that made up his human nature. We’ll talk more about this. But you are certainly quite right in saying that any credible model of the incarnation is going to have to account for that.

**Student:** You were asked last week about the passages in the Gospels where Jesus says he doesn’t know the time of his second coming, but the Father alone knows. A similar question, I think, is posed in Hebrews 5:8 where it says, “Jesus learned obedience from the things he suffered.” That seems to imply that he is going through a process of learning and becoming obedient. How do you reconcile that?

**Dr. Craig:** Right. The book of Hebrews even says “being made perfect” through what he suffered. There is moral perfection going on there. I would say exactly what I just mentioned with regard to reduplicative predication. Clearly the Logos does not grow in moral excellence or perfection in his divine nature. But it would be with respect to the human nature that Christ was schooled and disciplined through what he suffered and was perfected as he resisted temptation such as we mentioned before and was obedient. He experienced moral growth and improvement in his human nature. This idea of reduplicative predication is really key to understanding at least some of these questions.

**Student:** Growth would have been a normal part of being human – to learn mentally, grow, and experience all the things physically that people do when they grow. That would be part of that fulfilling that human nature. That would be one thing. Going back to the omni’s and Jesus being local. You could take something out of quantum physics where you can have locality but another effect demonstrated simultaneously in a different place. So you could have him experiencing something locally but the divine nature is not localized.

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Dr. Craig: I’m not sure that is a good analogy. I think what you are talking about are quantum phenomena where you can have particles like photons going in opposite directions and it is impossible for a causal signal to reach one from the other. But if you make a measurement on one of them the other one instantly takes on the correlated value. So there does seem to be a sort of action at a distance. Maybe you could say there is a kind of whole web of reality. But I don’t see that that is really analogous to saying that the Logos is omnipresent in his divine nature but locally confined in a body.

Student: [inaudible]

Dr. Craig: Oh, I see. Yes, you could have causal influence that isn’t just at that locality. OK. I can see that.

Student: If only the Father knows the day and the hour of the second coming, how should we address the Holy Spirit? Does the Holy Spirit know?

Dr. Craig: I think we have to affirm that the Holy Spirit, as the third person of the Trinity, is also omniscient and that therefore the Holy Spirit and the Logos in their divine natures do fully know that. There is complete interchange and sharing of knowledge among the three persons of the Trinity. We’ll come back to this again – all of these difficult questions relating to Jesus’ human limitations. But it seems to me omniscience would require us to say that the Holy Spirit also knows this.

Student: I need to look it up, but I think someone in the Old Testament says if God withdrew his Spirit all flesh would die. Is that a human spirit he is withdrawing or is that his divine Spirit? I think there is only God’s Spirit which is divine which would imply that beneath us before the sin nature translates it and destroys it we have of his Spirit.

Dr. Craig: When the Scripture speaks of God’s Spirit (ruach), I think what it means is that Spirit that is from God. It doesn’t mean that God himself is embodied in all of these different people. It means that we have a soul or a spirit that is from God, and I think in the unregenerate unbeliever that spirit is dead. It is not functioning to relate properly to God. In the new birth, the Holy Spirit regenerates us so that that human spirit becomes alive and we can relate to God. But I would say, again, we shouldn’t say that the Spirit that is in us is literally God because that is a kind of way of affirming our deity, I think.

Student: This is going back to last week. We spent a lot of time talking about Philippians 2 where it says he emptied himself. If we are saying that kenosis is not correct then how do you read that verse?

Dr. Craig: Thank you! That is so important. How should we understand kenosis if it is not divestiture of divine attributes? I think what Paul is talking about is a change of status. Christ, in his pre-incarnate state, was in glory, worshiped by the angels, and so
forth. He had a state of glory. Then he took on human nature, and it says he humbled himself and became obedient. Christian theologians typically distinguish between the two states of Christ – the state of humiliation (which begins with the virginal conception and lasts until the burial) which is followed by the state of exaltation beginning with the descent into hell and the resurrection from the dead in which Christ is restored to the glory that he had with the Father before the incarnation. I feel confident that is what Paul is talking about in Philippians 2 because he uses the language of humbling and servitude and so forth. But he still continues to worship Christ as God. He doesn’t think that God turned himself into a human being and is now merely a mortal man. So it is a change of status, I think, the way *kenosis* should be properly understood.

**END DISCUSSION**

This has been a really good discussion. We will continue to develop our Christological model next time.⁶

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⁶ Total Running Time: 29:36 (Copyright © 2017 William Lane Craig)