

What is Hypostatic Union?

by Michael J. Penfold

C.H. Mackintosh once remarked that, “The truth respecting Christ’s humanity must be received with scriptural accuracy, held with spiritual energy, guarded with holy jealousy, and confessed with heavenly power. If we are wrong as to this, we cannot be right as to anything.”^[1] That being the case, Christians ought to pay special attention to exactly what happened at the incarnation — when Christ *“came in flesh”* (1 Jn 4.2, 1 Tim 3.16).

The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man at one and the same time: no less divine because of His humanity and no less human because of His deity. When Christ *“partook of flesh and blood”* (Heb 2.14) He became something He had never been before — man: while never ceasing to be what He always was — God. How do we know this? Because the Bible says, *“In Him [Christ] dwells all the fullness of the godhead bodily”* (Col 2.9). Note the last word in that sentence. The totality of divine powers and attributes were, are and ever will be, in the incarnate Christ. ^[2] Had He, at His incarnation, given up a single divine attribute — never mind completely exchanging His deity for humanity — He would have immediately ceased to be God.

A study of the relevant New Testament passages on the incarnation^[3] reveals that the incarnate Christ is one person with two natures.

One Person

Because He was God, Christ did some things that only God can do (create bread and fish, raise Himself from the dead). Because He was man, Christ did some things that only man can do (sleep, cry and sweat). However, the Bible never says that Christ did

the former 'as God' and the latter 'as man'. We read "He knew their thoughts", not "His divine nature knew their thoughts". We read "I am thirsty", not "My human nature is thirsty". At all times and in all places, everything the Lord Jesus did and said is attributed, in the Bible, to His one person. It can be confidently affirmed that Scripture never divides Christ's person, not even when speaking of His death. Christ did not die 'as man'. But surely God cannot die? True, but the man who died was God, and Scripture says ***"the Son of God [a title of deity] loved me and gave Himself for me"*** (Gal 2.20).[\[4\]](#)

Two Natures

Though the Bible presents the Lord Jesus as one person, it must be remembered that the Lord's humanity was not a person; it was a nature. Christ was already a person before He came into the world. He had always been a person, eternally sharing the nature of God, but in "becoming flesh" He assumed, appropriated and took to Himself, in full union, another nature (ours), and made it His own as much as it is ours, without sin. In other words, the eternal Son of God added a human nature, with its body, soul and spirit,[\[5\]](#) to His divine nature. Thus He is one person with two natures. For this we should be eternally thankful, for what is not assumed cannot be redeemed. Only because the Lord Jesus assumed full unabbreviated humanity — flesh enlivened by a rational soul — can He redeem us, represent us and reign with us in the age to come.

In the centuries since the completion of the New Testament, many have fallen off the narrow path of truth with respect to Christ being "one person with two natures". Some have fallen off one side by "dividing His person" (See 1. above). Others have fallen off the other side by "confusing His natures", an error to be avoided at all costs.

To avoid confusing Christ's natures, it must be understood that when, at the moment of conception, Christ's divine nature was united with His human nature, there was no loss or transfer of any essential attributes of either nature. Christ's human attributes belong only to His human nature; His divine attributes to His divine nature; while the attributes of both natures belong to the one person. Had Christ's two natures been in

some way fused or merged, the fundamental truth of God's immutability would be in peril. But no: the divine essence or nature cannot change.

At the moment of incarnation,

- Christ's deity was not humanised (or He would have ceased to be truly God)
- Christ's humanity was not deified (or He would not have been truly human)
- Christ's humanity and deity did not convert by fusion into a novel third entity.

This last option (c.) — that the Lord Jesus had only one nature — is an ancient heresy called monophysitism (Gk: mono = one, physis = nature).^[6] What is wrong with this idea? If the Lord had only one nature the question arises, was that nature human or divine? If divine, where were the human? If human, where were the divine? And if it is a mixture, a tertium quid, neither fully divine nor fully human, Christ has a different nature from both His Father and from us, leaving God without a perfect representative and us without a kinsman redeemer. Thus it is critical to understand that at the incarnation each of the Lord's natures remained whole, distinct and unchanged.

Historically, the truth of two natures united in one person has been called "hypostatic union"^[7] and four adverbs have been used to describe it. Christ's divine and human natures were and are united unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly and inseparably. This union, unbroken even in His death on the cross, will last eternally. The "man in the glory" will ever be one person with two natures.

An illustration from typology may help. The ark of the covenant was constructed from acacia wood and overlaid with gold. Gold speaks of glory and deity; wood of incorruptible humanity. When constructed, the gold did not become wood, nor the wood gold. Nor were the gold and the wood mixed into some kind of alloy. To form one ark, the wood and the gold were inseparably joined, while remaining distinct. And so it is, in a much deeper and more complex sense, with the natures of the Lord Jesus.

In summary, if rule number one with the Trinity is to "neither confound the persons nor divide the substance", rule number one with the person of Christ is to "neither confuse the natures, nor divide the person".

