

—Westminster Shorter Catechism—
Lesson 17—The Incarnation of the Redeemer, Q. 22

“The incarnation is a great mystery which can be known only so far forth as it’s revealed. Human speculations on the subject are of no value.” –AA Hodge

- I. God took on flesh, Jn 17.1-5, 24; Heb 2.14; Jn 6.38, cp. Ex 3.7-8
 - A. Besides the fact that it would be impossible for Him to do so, there’s nothing in the Scriptures about His deity being laid down or emptied or left in heaven. The Person who came to earth and became a man IS the eternal, divine Person of the Son of God, Col 2.9
 - B. Hence, the flesh of man was *added to* His divine Person. He took on humanity, not a human person. Goodwin: “He took not the person of a man, but took man to be one person with Himself.”
 - 1. Thus the words “emptied Himself” in Phil 2.7 cannot mean emptying Himself of His deity but are used by Paul to describe the radical humiliation and condescension He underwent in becoming man, 2Cor 8.9; 13.4.
 - 2. Paul explains his meaning when he says *Christ emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men*. That’s the emptying. It was an emptying, not by the *subtraction* of His deity, but by the *addition* of our humanity. See Mt 9.6
 - C. Furthermore, He took on our flesh permanently because He took it on personally.
 - 1. It was not a veil or an external dress or a symbol of His presence—like His pre-incarnate appearances to the patriarchs and prophets of the OT.
 - 2. But when He became a man, He united our nature to Himself *personally*, in such a way that the flesh in which He manifested Himself is not something foreign to Him, but His own, His very self, Jn 1.14; 1Tim 3.16. Athanasius, “It was not that, being man, He afterwards became God; but, being God, He afterwards became man.”
 - D. Is this a change in God?
 - 1. No. The immutable divine essence continued to subsist as the eternal Word and Son of God, the Christ. Embracing a human nature in the unity of His Person brought no change to His essence (since both natures remain distinct), but only changed His relationship to creation. The human nature served as *a new avenue of access and egress to the Divine Mind and Heart of the Son of God*.
 - 2. There was no change in the Son of God, but He now became to us: *God with us, God manifest in the flesh*, Mt 1.23; 1Tim 3.16
- II. Christ’s humanity is a real and entire humanity, Lk 24.39; Mt 17.22-23
 - A. *Docetism* is an ancient and deadly heresy of the early church which taught that our Lord took on the appearance of a body. John was confronting this error in 1Jn 1.1-4; 2.22-23; 4.1-3; 2Jn 7-9.
 - 1. But as an early church father said, “If the incarnation is a phantom, then so is our salvation.” Hence the phrase coined in our church creeds and then in the Catechism: Christ took a “true body.”
 - 2. Thomas Hooker, “That body which it has pleased Him to make His own, that body wherewith He has saved the world, that body which has been, and is the root of eternal life, the instrument wherewith Deity works, the sacrifice which takes away sin, the price which has ransomed our souls from death, the leader of the whole army of bodies that shall rise again, His body is a body constitutional with our bodies.”
 - B. *Apollinarianism* is a heresy of the early church which taught, against the Docetists, that Christ had a true body, but that the divine nature took the place of a true soul. They could not accept that Christ had a finite intelligence, human affections, and a human will. They accepted the human body, but denied a human will and faculties to the incarnation.

1. It was to correct this heretical teaching that early church creeds and catechisms confessed the phrase, “a reasonable soul”.
 2. The pages of the Gospel narratives abundantly testify to the reality of our Lord’s humanity in His soul as well as in His body.
- C. Whyte, “No one who has not studied early Church history can have any conception of the struggles the Church had to carry on with all manner of false doctrines concerning the Person of Christ.” See the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the Chalcedonian Creed for accurate and authoritative statements of the Christian Church on Christ’s Person.
1. All heresies concerning Christ’s Person bear of the the following elements: 1) the denial of His divine nature (Ebionites; Socinians; Unitarians; Arians, Kenosis), 2) the denial of His human nature (Docetists, Gnostics, Apollinarians), or 3) the the denial of the unity of the Person embracing both natures (Nestorians, Monophysites, Monothelites).
- III. Christ’s humanity was taken from Mary so that He might be in every way the son of Adam, the seed of the woman, Lk 1.30-31; 2.7; 3.23, 38; Gen 3.15
- IV. Christ’s conception was supernatural, by the Holy Spirit, in the womb of a virgin, Lk 1.26-38
- A. The words of Gabriel to Mary had never been spoken before and have never been repeated since. This was the miracle of the incarnation of the Son of God in human flesh. Mary was blessed among women in being chosen to be the mother of our Lord, but she was a sinner saved by His grace just as we are. Her example of faith, surrender, and self-denial are exemplary for us all.
 - B. The same Holy Spirit who hovered over the waters of creation when darkness was on the face of the deep and out of the chaos created light and order and harmony and beauty, hovered over the corrupted substance of the virgin and formed a human body in her womb, as perfectly separated from and protected against all corruption and defilement of Mary’s sinfulness as the three Hebrew children were from the fires of death in the womb of Nebuchadnezzar’s furnace, Dan 3.27; Heb 10.5-7; Ps 40.6-8
 1. Christ did not come by ordinary generation and hence escaped being defiled with original sin. But He was not only not sinful; He was also impeccable, i.e. not able to sin.
 - C. At the exact moment when this true body was conceived the power of the Most High at once untied it to a soul, formed in perfect purity and holiness. And at the same moment too, both the body and soul were united to the Godhead in the Person of the Son, by a personal union, never to be dissolved.
- V. Christ was born, and remained all His life, sinless, Heb 7.26-27; Acts 2.24-33
- A. Bengel, “O much wished-for birth, without which we ourselves might well wish we had never been born! But do thou thyself, reader, see that thou makes sure of the benefit of that nativity!”

Reflections

1. Jesus Christ is the true Redeemer and Saviour promised to Adam as the seed of the woman. It was He whom the Father promised to send for us.
2. Behold the wonderful love of God, who was content to degrade and debase His Son in order to bring about the salvation of sinners. How astonishing that He should send His Son to assume our nature and bear His dreadful wrath.
3. See the wonderful love and astonishing condescension of the Son, to be born of a woman in order that He might die in the room of sinners.
4. Here is the cure of our being born in sin and brought forth in iniquity: Christ was born of a woman for us and He was born without sin for us, that the holiness of His nature might be imputed to us.
5. Christ is sensibly touched with all the sinless infirmities that attend our nature and is full of compassion and pity for us in all our straits, Heb 2.17-18; Mt 15.32
6. Come unto Him and be saved. He that could sanctify the virgin’s substance to make a sinless body for Himself, can easily sanctify you; and He that united the human nature to His divine person forever can also unite you Himself so that you will never be separated from Him.

AA Hodge: The 5 Points of Orthodoxy concerning Christ's Person

1. Jesus of Nazareth was very God, possessing the divine nature and all its essential attributes.
2. He is also true man, His human nature derived by generation from the stock of Adam.
3. These natures continue united in His Person, yet ever remain true divinity and true humanity, unmixed and as to essence unchanged. So that Christ possesses at once in the unity of His Person two spirits with all their essential attributes, a human consciousness, mind, heart, and will, and a divine consciousness, mind, feeling, and will. Yet it does not become us to attempt to explain the manner in which the two spirits mutually affect each other, or how far they meet in one consciousness, nor how the two wills cooperate in one activity, in the union of the one Person.
4. Nevertheless, they constitute as thus united, one single Person, and the attributes of both natures belong to the one Person (cf. Acts 20.28; 1Cor 2.8). Thus:
 1. He is still *God* when He dies and still *man* when He raises His people from the grave.
 2. Mediatorial actions pertain to both natures, yet both natures remain distinct in the one Person.
 3. What belongs to either nature belongs to and is attributed to *the one Person* to whom both natures belong; *but* what is peculiar to the one nature is never attributed to the other. Thus, while it is *the divine person*, who is at once God and man, who gave His blood for His church (Acts 20.28), and while it is *the Lord of Glory* who was crucified (1Cor 2.8), *yet* this death and crucifixion can *only be* attributed to His human nature and *never* to His divine nature, cp. Mt 27.46. Christ's human nature is never deified by the union, nor is His divine nature ever humanified; yet is the one Person is deity and humanity, fully God and fully man.
5. This Personality is not a new one constituted by the union of the two natures in the womb of the virgin, but is the eternal and immutable Person of the Logos (Jn 1.1-2), which in time assumed into itself a nascent human nature, and ever subsequently embraces the human nature with the divine in the Personality which eternally belongs to the divine nature.