

Three Examples of Divine-Human Relationships

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Introduction

It is a fact of Christian belief that Jesus Christ was both God and man. He was not part God and part man, but both—fully, completely, and simultaneously. Taking this unique fact as my starting point I discuss some of its implications for the nature of Scripture and the process by which God influences mankind in history. It is not my purpose below to say everything that can be said on the broad topic of divine-human relationships. Instead I examine three specific examples, doing some of my thinking on paper. I ask to be read in that spirit.

The Nature of Christ

(1) In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, (2) but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. (Heb 1:1-2)

It took the church a long time to understand who Christ was. During His life on earth He was seriously and consistently misunderstood even by His closest friends. After His ascension the apostles preached that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah (Acts 2:36), but later generations were left to explore the immense philosophical ramifications of His deity. The apostles made little effort to explain their assertions and did not organize their theology into a system, but focused instead on the more practical aspects of saving faith.

Early heresies

The age of heresy was already at the church's door by the time the last of the apostles died. The first major threat came from gnosticism, which was so radically different from orthodox Christianity that it might almost be considered a separate tradition with close affinities to Christianity rather than a heretical movement within it.¹

Gnostics objected strenuously to the concept of a bodily resurrection, which might help to explain the setting for Paul's warnings in 1 Cor 15:12-19 ("If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised" [vs. 13]). Gnostics did not only reject the resurrection of Christ but also His flesh and blood humanity. And so John was forced to write:

Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. (8) Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. (9) Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. (10) If anyone comes to you and does not bring this

teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. (11) Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work. (2 John 7-11)

It is unclear to what extent the unitarian system of Sabellius (condemned in 262) developed under gnostic influence. For him there was no distinction between Father and Son in terms of who They were but only in the ways and times that man had been permitted to know Them. First there was God as Father, then as Son, then as Holy Spirit.² In this schema Christ is fully God, but is not also fully man. Paul of Samosata and the school of Lucian which followed him went to the opposite extreme, teaching in effect that the Father had adopted Christ after His birth. In their adoptionist model there is no question about Christ's humanity. He is fully man, but is not also fully God.

Here we have a preview of the classic controversies over the nature of Christ which occupied the church during the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries.

Arius and Apollinaris

Arius, nurtured in the school of Lucian, taught that Christ was not coeternal with the Father but was Himself a creature. For Arius the Father and the Son are different in kind and not only in degree. Thus, Christ was not truly God. Arius was condemned with great notoriety at the Council of Nicea in 325. Apollinaris supported the decision at Nicea wholeheartedly, but in opposing Arius took a view no less extreme. For Apollinaris the divine Logos occupied a human body in Christ but displaced part of what makes the rest of us fully human. For him the question was how to divide up Christ's personality in the correct manner. The body was human, but the soul or spirit was not. Thus, "the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5) was not truly a man. Apollinaris was condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 381.

With time the heresies confronting the church were becoming more subtle, but the issues had not changed. Christ was both God and man. To understand this fact correctly requires balance and restraint. For this reason the doctrine of Christ has been especially vulnerable to heresies of various sorts. Heresy is not characterized by either balance or restraint.

Nestorius and Eutyches

After dealing with the extremes of belief proposed by Arius and Apollinaris, the church was firm in its belief that Christ was God and that He was also man. But, granting the validity of both factors, there is still a question how to relate them to each other. Nestorius taught that if Christ had two natures, He must in effect have been two persons. Thus, without denying the existence of either, Nestorius separated Christ's divinity from His humanity. Next came Eutyches, who taught that if Christ was one person, He must have had only one nature. Eutyches fused the divine and the human in such a way that Christ had neither a divine nature nor a human nature, but rather a single theanthropic combination of the two. Nestorius was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and Eutyches and Nestorius were condemned jointly at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

It is appropriate that the views of both Nestorius and Eutyches should come before one synod, because they appear to have shared the same presuppositions but merely to have worked their implications through in opposite directions. In both cases there is an assumption

that one person cannot at the same time have more than one set of attributes. The Council of Chalcedon erected a sturdy barrier against this fundamental error:

Of the relationship between the two natures it declared that they were united: without mixture and without change, without division and without separation; to this was added that each nature, even in the union, retains its own properties.³

Discussion

At this point I would like to leave the church's historic debate over the nature of Christ and learn from it rather than about it. If it is true that Christ was "at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man,"⁴ then we are left to conclude that the divinity and humanity of Christ do not stand in conflict with each other. In that one holy life both resided fully, completely, and without mutual interference.

If I have correctly interpreted the essential features of the nature of Christ, the question is whether anything else can be learned from them. Does the very uniqueness of Christ teach us something that can be understood as a general principle? And if so, what is that principle? The answers I propose are respectively yes and that the divine and the human do not have enough in common to be directly comparable. If Christ can be fully God and fully man at the same time, then the two factors operate on separate dimensions.

The Nature of Scripture

If the above fact about the divinity and humanity of Christ can be applied anywhere else, the most natural place to apply it is in the doctrine of inspiration.

The nature of Christ explains the nature of Scripture by showing that it is not necessary to pit divine and human factors against each other as though they competed for the same space. They do not. Christ was no less divine because He was fully human and the Scriptures are no less inspired because they participate fully in an objective historical matrix of events and circumstances. Both influences are fully present.⁵

The written word in both Old and New Testaments is the record of God's ongoing effort to speak to mankind and to draw man into relationship with Himself. In Scripture, however, God does not put Himself on trial as an Author. He speaks through men and women that He inspires for that purpose by His Holy Spirit. The fact that God speaks through people should not be taken as evidence that He has not spoken after all. The message He gives has its origin in the Giver and transcends the prophet's limited experience. Nor should the fact that God speaks through people be taken as evidence that He is the only one involved. A human instrument is also necessary. The message received is seen from the viewpoint of the receiver. Thus, in the Bible, as in the person of Christ, we are confronted by two widely different sets of influences. Each must be preserved "without mixture and without change, without division and without separation."⁶

The problem of unity

It appeals to our sense of logic and order to say that if there is only one Holy Spirit, what He inspires people to say should always be the same. And in a sense it is. There is a robust element of unity in Scripture. But there is also an element of diversity. The extent to which the latter makes us uncomfortable may be the extent to which we fail to understand the nature of inspiration.

Written in different ages, by men who differed widely in rank and occupation, and in mental and spiritual endowments, the books of the Bible present a wide contrast in style, as well as a diversity in the nature of the subjects unfolded. Different forms of expression are employed by different writers; often the same truth is more strikingly presented by one than by another. And as several writers present a subject under varied aspects and relations, there may appear, to the superficial, careless, or prejudiced reader, to be discrepancy or contradiction, where the thoughtful, reverent student, with clearer insight, discerns the underlying harmony.⁷

Note that the harmony within Scripture is an underlying element. It does not lie entirely on the surface. If one were to assemble all the printed descriptions of and references to New York City in the world's literature, I venture to speculate that they would not have any one literary feature in common. There would be a variety of reasons for writing, no agreement as to style, a use of different languages, and so on. And yet one element clearly binds all of these descriptions together and makes them in some way a single corpus. This unifying element, however, does not reside in the accounts themselves but in the external object they all describe.

When the Old and New Testaments are combined they form a unified whole, but their unity is not literary in nature. From a literary point of view the Bible is highly diverse, and so are both Testaments by themselves. But in many different and varied ways, all parts of this inspired anthology contain a witness to Jesus Christ—when the references to Him in the Old Testament are recognized as such and when His corresponding claims in the New Testament are taken at face value. If it is true that in some way "Each of the major themes of the Old [Testament] has its correspondent in the New, . . ." that is a useful and interesting fact, but the sort of unity I have in mind is not dependent on it. The very diversity of the Scriptural witness to Christ is an evidence of the unifying power He exerts. Christ in His person, and not any purely theological or literary consideration, is the center around which Scripture is unified in the sense proposed here.⁸

In a sense we might say that the unity in Scripture lies outside of Scripture. The Bible is not a self-contained entity. Its words have value because they point to a larger reality. God speaks both to and through man in His written word.

The problem of editorial activity

John knew that a book such as the one he had just written would invite creativity as it was copied by later generations of scribes and so he called down a curse on anyone who should tamper with its contents.

(18) I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds

anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. (19) And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Rev 22:18-19).

The problem of tampering did not arise for the first time during John's lifetime. On the contrary, the reason why he recognized the potential danger to his own book was because he had seen so many other manuscripts distorted before. Jeremiah comments on the same problem.

"How can you say, "We are wise,
for we have the law of the Lord,"
when actually the lying pen of the scribes
has handled it falsely?" (Jer 8:8)

I cannot discuss the matter of editorial activity fully in this paper. It is not my purpose to dwell on such matters but to use them to make a point. The Bible was not taken out of the world (John 17:15), but was brought into the world. It has been studied, abused, cherished, and reviled, by different people at different times. It has grown old with use. Its presence among us has not been an illusion.

Discussion

God did not send either His Son or His written word into a world free from danger. Christ's ancestors were among those He came to save, and for good reason. Their lives were faulty just like everyone else's life is faulty (Rom 3:23). Christ came into a fallen world as a human infant, born to a human mother, under a hostile king, and grew up in a city proverbial for its wickedness ("Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathaniel asked" [John 1:46]). After being brutally executed on the cross, Christ entrusted the treasures of His gospel to a church filled with people who had been just as lost as those they went everywhere to save. But after we finish saying these things, the end result of it all is "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (Rev 7:9). It is a mistake to underestimate God. He can do what He sets out to accomplish--even, it may be, with inadequate resources.

"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"
declares the Lord.

(9) "As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

(10) As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread
for the eater,

(11) so is my word that goes out from my mouth:

It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.
(Isa 55:8-11)

The Bible has had a very human, very traceable past, and yet God has spoken through it. Neither of these facts should be allowed to negate the other. On the contrary, when taken together they illustrate perhaps the single most profound truth about human history, i.e., that God deals with mankind. He meets us where we are. Whenever God confronts man two sets of influences are present and the problem of relating them to each other arises. In the Bible therefore we have a second illustration of how the divine can be brought together with the human. The only one clearer than this is the person of Christ.

Christ is properly an object of worship while the Bible is not. So there are differences between the living Word and the written word. But there is a close analogy between them that should not be missed. In both cases we must keep two factors in mind (the divine and the human) if we are to understand correctly the role of either.

The Nature of God's Influence in History

In a bold statement that is typical of her, Ellen G. White stresses how important it is for effects to be related to causes so that we can see the results of our actions.

When Satan wrought through the Roman Church to lead men away from obedience, his agency was concealed, and his work was so disguised that the degradation and misery which resulted were not seen to be the fruit of transgression. And his power was so far counteracted by the working of the Spirit of God that his purposes were prevented from reaching their full fruition. The people did not trace the effect to its cause and discover the source of their miseries. But in the [French] Revolution the law of God was openly set aside by the National Council. And in the Reign of Terror which followed, the working of cause and effect could be seen by all.⁹

If the only causes we know about are material ones, then reasoning rigorously from cause to effect must lead to materialism. This is an interesting fact. Secular scholars have not felt the need to go beyond what they, or others, can personally experience to account for the course of history. Some have tried to explain the providences of God in the history of Israel on such a basis, with the implication that if factor x is what caused factor y then God did not also cause it.

If our explanation of biblical events is not considered complete until we have removed God from each of them in turn, something is wrong. The people who wrote the documents preserved in the Bible believed that God had revealed Himself by affecting the course of events in history. To explain God's self-revelation by reversing the process and taking Him back out of the history that the Bible was written to preserve is a methodology that can never do justice to the documents explained in this way. But while materialism is bad, reasoning from cause to effect is good. What is the distinction between them?

History in Scripture

The believing exegete acknowledges a wider range of causes than the secular scholar does. But after we have acknowledged their existence in principle, where do they fit? If everything is accounted for by other means, how can we justify a second set of causal factors? In response I would suggest that a complete system of historical cause and effect need not be considered a closed system. If we cannot sketch a complete series of causal links, we do not know the events well enough to discuss them. But in gathering such knowledge we do not demonstrate that God exerted no influence in the events we are studying or even that He did not exert a profound influence. There is room enough in history for both God and man.

We should ask how anyone can be so sure that everything really is in fact accounted for on a materialistic basis. Is it the case that when God acts to bring about His will what He does displaces something that people would otherwise do? Do the divine and the human operate entirely on the same dimension in history such that if the one set of influences is present the other cannot be? I would say no, that when we succeed in showing how every available material factor affects every other one, we have completed our causal chain but have not closed it. There is another dimension to consider that is separate from this and ignoring it serves no useful purpose. I would go further and suggest that both types of factors can be not only present at the same time but fully present.

There is a certain arrogance in assuming that what one says on a topic is the whole story or that the issues one chooses to raise are the only ones worth talking about. It is a dangerous assumption to make because it is so exposed to contradiction, but this is precisely what the materialist must assume in dialogue with those who acknowledge God's place in history, and not just in a number of cases only but every time he declares himself on a matter of historical explanation.

The point I wish to make in this section of the paper is that showing how human influences have exerted themselves is not the same as showing how God's influence has not been exerted. If we must constantly choose between the two, then the extent to which we understand history as a record of human events becomes the extent to which we are unable to acknowledge within it the working of any divine purpose. This is a disastrous recipe for failure in the area of biblical exegesis. There is ample room, even in the worst of circumstances, for God to work in order to bring about His will.

This does not mean that God is responsible for everything that happens, i.e., that He is responsible for evil. Nor does it mean that God is notably at work in every situation. But when God does work notably through events, He does not have to push people aside to do so. He does not enter human history to displace us, but to bring us into relationship with Himself. God's mighty acts do not create vacuums in history but rather fill events with a significance that they would not otherwise have had.

Conclusion

It took the church a long time to inoculate itself against heresies that would deny either the divinity or the humanity of Christ. It also took time to ensure that both factors would be kept in proper balance. There is more to learn from this fact than a knowledge of who held what view as the positions matured.

We need the same maturity in the doctrine of inspiration that the church struggled so hard to achieve in the doctrine of Christ. There is a useful analogy between the living Word and the written word. We should learn from it what we can, realizing all the while that no analogy is complete.

In the matter of historical explanation and the fulfillment of prophecy the above analogy can be extended further. Prophecy is not an exercise in fatalism. It is a reflection of God's willingness to participate in human history and to influence events in specified ways. It is an expression of His interest in and involvement with mankind.

When God meets man in the person of Christ, or in Scripture, or in history, two factors are present and these must be kept in balance. By balance I do not mean separate proportions of influence, such that if God is twenty percent active man must be eighty percent active, or whatever. On the contrary, in each of the above cases both factors may be fully present.

Note: All Scripture quotations in this paper, except when noted otherwise, are from the Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright (c) 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

¹The separation of gnosticism from orthodoxy was practical as well as theoretical. "All who had received *gnosis*, they say, had gone beyond the church's teaching and had transcended the authority of its hierarchy" (Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* [New York: Random House, 1979], p. 25). The two communities developed separate hierarchies, or rather distinguished themselves by their respective acceptance and rejection of hierarchy. "Irenaeus tells us that when [one group of Valentinian gnostics] met, all the members first participated in drawing lots. Whoever received a certain lot apparently was designated to take the role of *priest*; another was to offer the sacrament, as *bishop*; another would read the Scriptures for worship, and others would address the group as a *prophet*, offering extemporaneous spiritual instruction. The next time the group met, they would throw lots again so that the persons taking each role changed continually" (ibid., p. 41).

²[Sabellius] differs from the orthodox standard mainly in denying the trinity of essence and the permanence of the trinity of manifestation; making Father, Son, and Holy Ghost only temporary phenomena, which fulfil their mission and return into the abstract monad" (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprint ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], vol. 2: *Ante-Nicene Christianity: A.D. 100-325*, p. 583).

³*The Person of Christ*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 66. At this point let me insert an additional remark by the same author, made in reference to the views of Apollinaris on the eve of Chalcedon: "Whoever thinks that the Christological conflict was a matter of ingenious theological subtleties does not know what he is saying. Antidocetism, for the church of Christ, is a question of to be or not to be" (ibid., p. 68).

⁴Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 73.

⁵Hardy, "The Christocentric Orientation of Daniel and of Scripture Generally," *Historicism* No. 1/Jan 85, p. 2.

⁶From the Definition of Chalcedon, quoted by Berkouwer, *Person of Christ*, p. 66. See Bettenson, *Documents*, p. 73.

⁷Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan: The Conflict of the Ages in the Christian Dispensation* (Mountain View: Pacific Press, 1950), p. vi.

⁸Hardy, "Christocentric Orientation," p. 2. The quotation embedded within the above paragraph is from Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Unity of the Bible," *Ministry*, May 1975, p. 9U.

⁹*Great Controversy*, pp. 285-86.

¹⁰See Michael J. Folk and Bill Zoellick, *File Structures: A Conceptual Toolkit* (Reading, MS: Addison-Wesley, 1987), pp. 210-40, 294-404.