## The Humanity of Christ

For ages, the puzzle remains unresolved, how the Son of God became man. The fact of His incarnation is undeniable, and many teachers and commentators have attempted to explain the incarnation. Some, though, have introduced serious distortions. Our study will attempt to bring clarity to this question as well as to point out errors and exaggerations in this doctrine.

### А. Testimony of Moses and the Prophets

**1. The Seed of the Woman**

The very first mention of the coming Messiah is in Genesis 3:15: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel.” Here, Yahweh promises deliverance from the power of evil by the hand of the “seed of the woman.”[[1]](#footnote-1) We must understand the serpent as an instrument of Satan or, more likely, Satan himself (see 2 Cor 11:3; Rev 12:9). The word “seed” is usually taken in a collective sense meaning “descendants.” Therefore, the “seed of the serpent” are Satan’s followers, i.e., children of this present age (see Jn 8:44; 1 Jn 3:10). The “seed of the woman,” taken in the collective sense, would be the righteous of the earth, including followers of Jesus.

However, we must also keep in mind that “seed” in the singular can still refer to one individual. The book of Genesis frequently highlights one specific descendant (“seed”) as the heir of a promise (Noah, Isaac, Jacob, Judah). Therefore, the expression “seed of the woman” can refer not only to the righteous ones, but also to the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. The conflict between the “seed of the woman” and the “seed of the serpent,” then, has two dimensions. First, unbelievers persecuted Christ, the “Seed of the woman.” Second, they also persecute followers of Jesus, the Church, and the righteous in general (such as Cain and Abel in Gen 4:1-8).

We also note that the serpent *himself*, not his “seed,” bruises the Seed of the woman on the heel. On the other hand, the Seed of the woman will bruise the serpent’s head. So then, although conflict wages between the righteous (seed – plural – of the woman) and the unrighteous (seed of the serpent), the ultimate conflict is between the promised Deliverer (Seed – singular – of the woman), and Satan himself (the serpent).

So then, the following drama unfolds. Since the serpent is cursed to crawl on his belly (Gen 3:14), he can only strike the Seed of the woman on the heel. The Seed, however, may crush the serpent with the same heel. We may propose that at the same time that the serpent strikes the Seed, the Seed crushes his head with the same leg. In other words, at the time when Satan struck Jesus through the cross, Jesus accomplished victory over Satan and deliverance for all from His power through the self-same instrument – the cross.

We note that people of antiquity expected a future deliverance by the Seed of the woman. Lamech hoped that Noah was the one who would “give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands {arising} from the ground which Yahweh has cursed” (Gen 5:29). Lamech was remembering the promise made by God to Eve. Yet, not Noah, but a descendant of Noah would be the future deliverer.

This account accents not only the Lord’s victory over the Devil, but also His true humanity – He is the “Seed of the woman.” In the Old Testament, the term “seed” unquestionably refers to physical descendants. Also significant is that He is called the “Seed of the *woman*,” which corresponds to the virgin birth by Mary. In this regard, Keil and Delitzsch comment, “As it was through the woman that the craft of the devil brought sin and death into the world, so it is also through the woman that the grace of God will give to the fallen human race the conqueror of sin, of death, and of the devil.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

**2. The Coming Prophet**

Later in the Torah, Yahweh spoke to Moses about a coming Prophet, whom He would “raise up… from among their countrymen” (Deut 18:18). Peter claims that this prophecy was fulfilled in the Messiah Jesus (Acts 3:22; сf. Acts 7:37). In the Old Testament, the expression “I will raise up” translates the verb קוּם (*kum*) in the *Hiph’il* form, which always refers to physical descendancy.[[3]](#footnote-3) The coming prophet is a true human.

**3. The Son of David**

Possibly, the most convincing Old Testament proof of Messiah’s humanity is that He was a physical descendant of David: “I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me” (2 Sam 7:12-14).

Although this prophecy was initially fulfilled in Solomon (see Acts 7:47), it finds its final and complete fulfillment in the Messiah Jesus. The New Testament confirms this (see Acts 2:30; 13:23).[[4]](#footnote-4) Only the Messiah Jesus will rule forever, and only He is the Son of God in the highest sense and the builder of God’s temple. After David’s and Solomon’s deaths, an expectation of a future Son of David persisted (Hos 3:5; Isa 9:7; Jer 30:9; Ezek 34:24), who was also called the “Branch” (Jer 23:5; 33:15). Isaiah announced, “Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit” (Isa 11:1). The prophet Micah even predicted the place of His birth (Mic 5:2). Messiah is a genuine human.

**4. “A Virgin Will Conceive”**

Without doubt, the most famous prediction of the supernatural birth of Messiah is in Isaiah 7:14: “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.” We find here a confirmation that Genesis 3:15 predicts the conception of the Savior without male participation. The mother of Messiah is a virgin.

The Hebrew term עַלְמָה (*alma*), that is, “virgin,” literally means “a young woman.”[[5]](#footnote-5) The Hebrew language has a more specific word for “virgin”– בְּתוּלָה (*bithulah*). Therefore, some conclude that Isaiah was not predicting a virgin birth, but a typical birth by a young woman.

However, a more detailed study of the word עַלְמָה (*alma*) yields some helpful insights. It occurs seven times in the Old Testament, namely in Genesis 24:43; Exodus 2:8; Song of Solomon 1:2; 6:8; Psalm 68:25; Proverbs 30:19; and Isaiah 7:14. In four of these cases, עַלְמָה (*alma*) clearly indicates a virgin (Gen 24:43; Ex 2:8, SOS 1:3; 6:8). In the remaining occurrences, i.е., Psalm 68:25 and Proverbs 30:19, the word most likely refers to virgins as well. A comparison of Psalm 68:25 with Judges 21:19-21 confirms this interpretation, as does observing that Proverbs 30:19 describes a romantic relationship before marriage. So then, all the Old Testament usages of עַלְמָה (*alma*) refer to virgins.

We also observe that in two of these seven instances (including Isaiah 7:14), the Septuagint translates עַלְמָה (*alma*) with παρθένος (*pathenos*), which is specific for a virgin. In addition, when Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, he also uses παρθένος (*pathenos*) (see Matt 1:22-23).

If we conclude, though, that Isaiah had in view a virgin birth, some complications result in the fulfillment of this prophecy. Was Isaiah speaking here of Mary, the mother of Jesus, or of a woman of his time? Those who feel he meant only Mary defend their view by saying only Mary ever gave birth as a virgin. This is true. Yet, the prophecy, then, would have no meaning for Ahaz, for whom Isaiah intended it. Isaiah, in fact, added, “For before the boy will know {enough} to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken” (Isa 7:16).

Supporters of the “Mary only” view respond that the prophecy was not intended specifically for Ahaz, but rather for the household of David in general. The prophecy may find fulfillment, then, in any descendant of David, including Jesus of Nazareth. They add that the period of time Isaiah spoke of (when the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good) refers to first 5-6 years of Jesus’ life. Ahaz, then can expect deliverance in the same period of time, i.e., in 5-6 years.

Others feel that Isaiah is speaking about his wife. Some similarities exist between the virgin’s child of chapter 7 and Isaiah’s son described in chapter 8. Nonetheless, when Isaiah gave this prophecy, he already had a son by the name of Shear-jashub (see 7:3). Therefore, his wife was not a virgin at that time.

Another alternative is to theorize two fulfillments: one in Mary, and another in a woman of Isaiah’s time. In that case, the prophecy would have significance for both Ahaz and Mary. Possibly, for this reason a term with a more flexible meaning, i.e., עַלְמָה (*alma*), was employed, since it can refer to both a virgin and a young married woman. We would affirm, then, a dual fulfillment: one literal (possibly in Isaiah’s wife) and the other typological (in Mary).

**5. “A Body You Have Prepared for Me”**

The final Old Testament text that we will examine is Psalm 40:6-8, which is quoted in Hebrews 10:5. We will compare the Masoretic Text with the Septuagint – the latter being the source for the citation in Hebrews.

Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; *My* *ears You have opened* (כָרָה); burnt offering and sin offering You have not required. Then I said, “Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart” (Masoretic Text)

Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; but *ears You have prepared for me…* (Septuagint).

Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but *a body you have prepared for me…* (Heb 10:5).

The Hebrew Masoretic text contains the verb כָרָה (*kara*), which means “to dig.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The verse in Hebrew literally reads, “You have dug out ears for me.” The Septuagint translators chose for an equivalent to כָרָה (*kara*) the verb κατηρτίσω (*katertiso*), meaning “prepare, set in order.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The author of Hebrews, in turn, follows the Septuagint, but replaces “ears” with “body.”

The following explanation is proposed. The writer of Hebrews understood that the Old Testament text employed a figure of speech, that in order to “dig out” or “prepare” ears, God had to prepare a body. Therefore, he made this implication clear, offering a typological interpretation of the verse. In other words, he saw in Psalm 40 a symbolic representation of the Son’s incarnation.

However we might explain the differences between these passages, according to the doctrine of biblical inspiration, the author of Hebrews wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we have a firm basis to accept the variant “a body you have prepared for me.” This variant also fits the context well, being consistent with the phrase, “Sacrifice and offering you have not desired.” Messiah will bring the Father a new sacrifice – His body.

### B. Testimony of the Gospels

**1. Conception and Birth of Jesus Christ**

Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke describe the birth of Jesus by the virgin Mary:

- Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took {Mary} as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus (Matt 1:24-25).

- She gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Lk 2:7).

Even before His birth, the angel Gabriel announced the conception of the Savior (Lk 1:31), which Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, confirmed by her inspired testimony (Lk 1:41-43).

The Gospel of Mark gives a more indirect reference to the virgin birth. In Mark 6:3, Jesus is called the “son of Mary,” not the “son of Joseph,” as in the parallel passages in Matthew 13:55 and Luke 4:22. Possibly, Mark does this intentionally, since he did not relate a specific account of Jesus’ virgin birth as Matthew and Luke did.

The differences in Jesus’ genealogies between Matthew (Matt 1:1-16) and Luke (Lk 3:23-38) present a difficulty. In Matthew’s account, Joseph’s father is Jacob, while in Luke he is Eli. Some consider that due to the law of levarite marriage (Deut 25:5-6), Eli, supposedly the stepbrother of Jacob, married the latter’s widow after his death which resulted in the birth of Joseph. Therefore, although Eli is the natural father of Joseph, he is included in the genealogy of Jacob as well. A certain Africanus (2nd - 3rd c.) advanced this theory, claiming to have received this information from descendants of Jacob, Jesus’ stepbrother (see Eusebius, *Church History*, 1:7).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Another variant of the above theory goes as follows. Luke’s genealogy, again, follows Joseph’s natural lineage through Eli, while Matthew lists the royal line of David, ending in Jacob. Supposing that Jacob died without producing a son, his supposed nephew Joseph would then be counted as the heir to the throne and enter into the royal line of David.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Others theorize that Matthew records Joseph’s genealogy, while Luke gives Mary’s lineage. We would paraphrase Luke 3:23, then, to read, “Jesus… was supposed (to be) the son of Joseph, *but was actually the grandson of Eli (through Mary).*”[[10]](#footnote-10) Still others propose that Mary had no brothers and was therefore the heir of her father’s estate. However, in order to have a male be the heir, EIi adopted Joseph, and so Joseph’s name appears in the genealogy instead of Mary’s.[[11]](#footnote-11). Interestingly, there is a similar case in the book of Nehemiah, where a man who married one of the daughters of Barzillai was apparently included in Barzillai’s genealogy (Neh 7:63).

We must consider, too, that according to Scripture, Jesus “was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh” (Rom 1:3), and, to fulfill prophecy, He must “come forth from” David (2 Sam 7:12). Therefore, in order for this prophecy to be fulfilled, *Mary* must be an offspring of David. We recognize that the Evangelists emphasize Joseph’s place in the Davidic line, not Mary’s (see Lk 1:27; 2:4; Matt 1:20). Yet, this does not qualify Jesus to be a true descendent of David. If Luke’s genealogy does indeed belong to Mary, then Jesus is truly a physical descendent of David and fulfills the promise made to David.

**2. Christ’s Human Body**

The fact that Jesus was born of Mary means that He possesses a genuine human body. Several other factors confirm that conclusion. First, Luke reports that Jesus experienced typical human growth: “The Child continued to grow and become strong” (Luke 2:40), and, “Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature” (Lk 2:52). Luke records Jesus’ history at age 12 (Lk 2:42). Jesus, then, grew from infancy to childhood, became a young man, and finally an adult.

Second, Jesus experienced hunger, as all people do. After He completed His forty-day fast, “He then became hungry” (Matt 4:2). He also became weary: “So Jesus, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well” (Jn 4:6). During the storm on the Lake of Galilee, “Jesus Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion” (Mk 4:38). Clement of Alexandria greatly erred when he claimed that, although Jesus had a genuine human body, He had no need for food or drink.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Finally, Christ’s death is a fixed historical fact, recorded not only by the Gospel writers and other New Testament authors, but by secular historians as well. For example, Tacitus, a first-century Roman historian, writes in his *Annals*, “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.”[[13]](#footnote-13) “Christus” is a Latin variant for the title “Christ.” In his work, *The* *Death of Pelegrine,* Lucian, a second-century critic of Christianity, wrote, “The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day – the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Finally, Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, wrote of Jesus, “Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The physical death of our Lord conclusively proves the genuineness of His physical body.

**3. Christ’s Human Soul**

The Bible reveals that Jesus has a genuine human soul. He expressed typical human emotions, such as compassion (Matt 9:36), joy (Lk 10:21), and anger (Mk 3:5). We recognize that God has such emotions as well. Jesus, however, displayed other emotions more characteristic of humans. For example, in Luke 7:9 we read the Jesus “marveled” at the answer of the centurion. God in His non-incarnate form is not surprised by anything, since, “Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Yahweh, You know it all.” (Ps 139:4). Jesus also “wondered” at the unbelief of those in Nazareth (Mk 6:6). However, God “declares the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done” (Isa 46:10).

Another human quality seen in Jesus is friendship. Scripture reveals that Jesus valued the friendship of several individuals, such as the family of Lazarus and the apostle John. We read about Lazarus’ family, “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (Jn 11:5). Lazarus’ sisters once said to the Lord, “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick” (Jn 11:3). When the Jews saw that Jesus wept for Lazarus, they said, “See how He loved him!” (Jn 11:36). As for John, he was “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (Jn 13:23; 20:2; 21:20).

Finally, Jesus responded to His impending suffering as any human would respond – He experienced anxiety and torment: “My soul has become troubled” (Jn 12:27). While He was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before His Passion, “His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground” (Lk 22:44). He experienced loneliness on the cross and cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mk 15:34). Having a genuine human soul, Jesus suffered both in body and in soul.

Since Christ possessed a human mind, He was at times limited in knowledge. The Scriptures say that Jesus “kept increasing in wisdom and stature” (Lk 2:52). We recall an incident when Jesus encountered a demon-possessed boy and asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” (Mk 9:21). It seems that Jesus did not know. In addition, once Christ prayed all night before He chose His disciples (Lk 6:12). Apparently, He did not know which ones to choose. Finally, He directly stated that He did not know the time of His Second Coming: “But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father {alone}” (Mk 13:32). Based on these observations we can confidently conclude that Jesus has a genuine human mind.

**4. Christ’s Spiritual Life**

As a complete human, Jesus’ spiritual life was characterized by dependence on His Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit, drawing strength and direction from them. The New Testament records that He was frequently in prayer. Luke pays special attention to this feature. For example, only he records that Christ was praying at the time the Holy Spirit descended on Him (Lk 3:21-22). In addition, Luke 5:16 reads, “Jesus Himself would {often} slip away to the wilderness and pray.” The use of the Greek imperfect tense in this verse underscores the continuous nature of Christ’s prayer life. He prayed, “as was His custom,” on the Mount of Olives (Lk 22:39; сf. Jn 8:1). Prayer was clearly an integral part of His lifestyle. His prayer life so inspired His disciples that they requested of Him, “Lord, teach us to pray (Lk 11:1).

Jesus not only regularly prayed, but devoted special times to prayer when in special need. As we mentioned before, He prayed all night before choosing the Twelve (Lk 6:12). After the miracle feeding of the five thousand, He withdrew for fellowship with His Heavenly Father (Matt 14:23). Finally, after celebrating His final Passover with His disciples (Jn 17) and just prior to His Passion (Lk 22:41-44), He again turned to His Father in prayer.

Jesus’ dependence on the Father is displayed not only in His frequency in prayer, but also in the support the Fathers showed Him. When Christ underwent temptation in the wilderness (Matt 4:11) and agony in the Garden (Lk 22:43), the Father sent angels to minister to Him. The Father was ready at any instance to send supernatural aid (Matt 26:53). The Son’s reliance on the Father was dramatically displayed on the cross, where Jesus committed His spirit to the Father’s care (Lk 23:46).

Moreover, Christ conducted His life in submission to the Father to accomplish His will. The apostle John gives special attention to this feature. We often encounter in the Fourth Gospel the idea that the Son was sent by the Father.[[16]](#footnote-16) The Son did not come into the world by His own initiative: “I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me” (Jn 8:42). The Son is the one “whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world” (Jn 10:36). The Father commissioned Him to accomplish a certain work (Jn 5:36). Jesus confirmed that he came “not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (Jn 6:38).

Finally, the Gospels relate how Christ in His humanity relied on the power of the Нoly Spirit. Interestingly, Jesus performed no miracle until the Holy Spirit descended on Him at the time of His water baptism. Jesus, in fact, announced the commencement of His ministry with this reference to the Spirit:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord (Lk 4:18-19).

We find another reference to Christ’s dependence on the supernatural work of the Spirit in Matthew 12:28: “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” In another place, we read, “The power of the Lord was {present} for Him to perform healing” (Lk 5:17), i.е., the Spirit was manifesting through Him gifts of healing. The Holy Spirit not only empowered Christ, but also led Him (Lk 4:1).

Although the doctrine of the Trinity assures us that the Father, Son, and Spirit are all equal in nature and dignity, Jesus nonetheless demonstrated His dependence on the Father and the Spirit during His earthly ministry. In this way, He left us an example of trust in God and obedience to Him and demonstrated His genuine humanity.

**5. Conclusions**

So then, the Gospels give clear indication that Jesus Christ had a physical birth and possesses all the qualities of a genuine human nature. Therefore, Jesus is a true human being. In John 8:40, He bears witness to Himself, “You are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth” (Jn 8:40).

### C. Testimony of the Apostles

**1. Paul**

The apostles in general also affirmed Christ’s full humanity. Paul without apology asserts that Jesus “was born of a virgin” (Gal 4:4) and “was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh” (Rom 1:3; сf. 2 Tim 2:8). Therefore, Paul did not hesitate to speak of the “man, Jesus Christ” (1 Tim 2:5; сf. Rom 5:15; 1 Cor 15:21).

Paul’s teaching on Christ’s humanity finds clearest expression in two key passages, which He likely borrowed from early Christian hymns: Philippians 2:7-8 and 1 Timothy 3:16.

…who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, {and} being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8).

By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory (1 Tim 3:16).

Philippians 2:7-8 may be somewhat problematic in this regard, since at first glace it seems to contradict the claim to Christ’s humanity. We read, “…being made in the *likeness* of men,” and “Being found in *appearance* as a man…” Do these phrases indicate that Jesus’ humanity was only superficial and not genuine? Did He just *appear* as a man? The Greek word σχήμα (*schema*), translated “appearance,” refers to an external likeness.[[17]](#footnote-17)

On the other hand, in verse 7, we find the term μορφη (*morphe*), i.е., “image,” in the phrase “the form of a bond-servant.” The same word describes the Son in verse 6 in the expression, “in the image of God.” If the word μορφη (*morphe*) refers to Christ’s true deity in verse 6, one may conclude that it refers to His true humanity in verse 7.

In addition, the idea “in the likeness of men” occurs in Romans 8:3: “God {did:} sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh.” In this text, Christ is “in the likeness of sinful flesh.” “Likeness,” then, means that He was a true human, yet without sin. We assert that Paul had the same idea in mind in Philippians 2:7. Jesus is “in the likeness of men” in the sense that He is has a genuine humanity, but does not share with us inherited depravity.

Finally, we note in verse 8 that Jesus was “*found* in appearance as a man.” The sense here is that people who knew Christ personally “found” Him a genuine human being. The phrase “in appearance” is added because people who knew Jesus could only judge His humanity “by appearance.” People cannot know the nature of something except by observation. The fact that those who surrounded Jesus could consider Him human is further evidence of the genuineness of His humanity.

In concluding Paul’s teaching, we will touch on one other problematic passages – 1 Corinthians 15:47: “The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven.” Does this mean that Jesus is purely a “heavenly being” with a “heavenly body?” Not so. The verse is not addressing the condition of Jesus’ body, but His heavenly origin. As a divine Person, He descended from heaven. Yet, His body was material, just as ours is. In addition, Paul’s goal in this context was to inspire his audience to anticipate their future physical resurrection in light of the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. If His body was different than ours, what hope does His resurrection offer us?

**2. Epistle to the Hebrews**

The epistle to the Hebrews provides strong evidence for Christ’s humanity as well. The author speaks plainly of Jesus’ dependence on the Father, just as our Lord Himself did. The Father anointed Messiah (Heb 1:9) and sat Him at His right hand (Heb 1:13; сf. Phil 2:9). He “crowned” Him with “glory and honor” (Heb 2:9).

A key passage for our discussion is Hebrews 5:5-10:

So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, “You are My Son, today I have begotten You”; just as He says also in another {passage,} “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Jesus was anointed high priest. In order to be high priest, He had to become human or else He could not be the representative of humanity before God. Earlier in this epistle, the author comments on this: “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb 2:17).

Hebrew 5 further enlightens us about Christ’s reliance on the Father. He entrusted Himself “to the One able to save Him from death” by offering up “both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears” (Heb 5:7). Commentators diverge concerning what Jesus prayed about: deliverance from the sufferings of the cross (in the Garden of Gethsemane), or deliverance from death (through the resurrection).[[18]](#footnote-18) Since the verse continues, “He was heard because of His piety,” we prefer the second variant.

Jesus true humanity is also seen in His “learning obedience” (Heb 5:8). Being God, Jesus was already perfect in character. Yet He attained perfection as a human by personal obedience.

In conclusion, we cite Hebrews 2:14-18.

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

This passage in several ways convincingly confirms Jesus’ true humanity. First, the Son’s incarnation was necessary for the salvation of the world. Only as a true human could He become a genuine substitutionary sacrifice for people’s sins. Second, Christ’s human nature is compared to angelic nature, which He did not assume. Third, as mentioned before, Jesus must be a true human to serve as high priest. Finally, only a genuine human could experience real temptation.

**3. John**

The final New Testament testimony of Christ’s humanity is taken from the writings of the apostle John. Although John accented the deity of Christ, he also penned a number of strong statements about His human nature. In chapter 1 of his Gospel, after affirming the deity of Jesus, John writes, “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). Similarly, the introduction to his first epistle echoes this truth:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life – and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us – what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:1-3).

Clearly, the first apostles (i.e., “we”), heard, saw, observed and handled Jesus. Some people may claim that they heard God’s voice or saw some vision of Him, but John goes farther to say that the apostles actually physically touched the Word of Life. The Greek term ψηλαφάω (*pselafao*), translated “touched,” means not only “brush,” but handle or feel.[[19]](#footnote-19) The same word occurs in Luke 24:39, where Jesus invites His disciples to touch His wounds. Jesus’ body was one that could be touched and felt.

John not only affirms the humanity of Jesus Christ, he also warns those who would dare to deny it. Those who do so are in league with Antichrist (1 Jn 4:2-3; 2 Jn 7-9).

### D. Conclusion

The testimony of God’s Word from beginning to end yields only one conclusion – Jesus Christ is a real human being who possesses all the typical human qualities except sin. His human nature includes a physical body, a human soul, and, if one may distinguish soul from spirit, a human spirit as well. His conception was supernatural – He was conceived in a virgin without the participation of a male.

### E. The Question of the Virgin Birth

Although Jesus has a genuine, physical body, its formation required a miracle. We know that a typical conception involves the contribution of an equal share of chromosomes from both parents. If Jesus, as we can safely assume, had the full compliment of 46 chromosomes, then the Holy Spirit must have created *ex nihilo* the remaining 23 not received from Mary. This assertion is confirmed by the fact that the chromosome determining the male gender of the child comes from the father, not from the mother. The mother’s contribution can only produce a female offspring. Therefore, if Jesus received all His chromosomal material from Mary alone, He would not be male. The Holy Spirit supplied the lacking material.

Why was Jesus born of a virgin? The Scriptures reveals only that it was to fulfill prophecy (i.e., Isa 7:14). This supernatural conception certainly underscores Jesus’ uniqueness among humans. Thus, the angel Gabriel could announce, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God” (Lk 1:35). In addition, such a conception highlights the supernatural nature of our salvation. Just as God miraculously provided for a conception without participation of a male, He miraculously provides salvation for the world. Lastly, some feel it was necessary for Christ to be so conceived to avoid inheriting a sinful nature. We will look into this question more closely.

Some believe that sin is transmitted to Adam’s offspring through the male line. They base this belief on the fact that, although Eve sinned first, the Fall resulted from Adam’s sin, not hers. Therefore, it is supposed that by Jesus’ conception without a male participant enabled Him to received a sinless human nature. Others, however, feel that transmission of human depravity is not connected to the male lineage, but is the result of humanity’s union with Adam. According to this view, any human born under any conditions, as a member of this fallen race, would inherit a sinful nature. Jesus escaped this curse not by being conceived by a virgin, but because the Holy Spirit “overshadowed” Mary (Lk 1:35), supernaturally removing the curse.

It is also of interest to inquire, “Did Jesus receive any consequences of Adam’s sin, such as death?” If Jesus had lived on, would He have aged or died of natural causes? The question is difficult to answer directly, since the Bible gives no specific light on the subject.

On the other hand, some passages may indicate that Christ was not subject to the curse of death. In John 10:17-18, we read, “For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.” This verse may imply that Jesus could die only if He allowed it to be.

We also note the manner in which He died – He “yielded up His spirit” (Matt 27:50; Mk 15:37). John records, “Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished!’ And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit” (Jn 19:30). It seems that our Lord “laid down His life,” just as He said in John 10. At the same time, claiming that Jesus was not under the *curse* of decay and death does not mean that His body could not die *by any means*. His death on the cross was a real death.

Several aberrant views have been voiced regarding the virgin birth. Many liberal theologians flatly deny it and consider it a myth created by the Early Church in order to glorify Christ. Liberal theology, in fact, denies the supernatural acts of God in general.

Mormons grossly distort this teaching as well. They theorize that Jesus’ conception was the result of a sexual union between God the Father and Mary. Mormons believe that God has a physical body: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s” (*Doctrines and Covenants*, 130.22).[[20]](#footnote-20) They seek support for their doctrine in supposed references in Scripture to God having body parts (hands, ears, eyes, etc.). However, here we are dealing with a figure of speech, “anthropomorphism” to be exact. Scripture reveals, “God is spirit” (Jn 4:24).

The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faiths have their own unique misunderstandings of this event as well. Two theories are advanced. The first claims that Mary remained a virgin after Jesus’s birth for the remainder of her life. Yet, the Bible speaks of other children in Joseph and Mary’s family: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?” (Mk 6:3). Therefore, we conclude that Mary bore children by the natural course after giving birth to Jesus as a virgin. In addition, Galatians 1:19 speaks of James as the Lord’s brother. Moreover, we read in Matthew 1:25: “(Joseph) kept her a virgin *until* she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.” Finally, Luke 2:7 reveals, “(Mary) gave birth to her firstborn son.” The word “firstborn” implies the birth of subsequent sons.

However, defenders of Mary’s “perpetual virginity” respond that Jesus’ so-called brothers and sisters were actually cousins. Yet, the Greek language has another term specific for “cousins,” i.e., ἀνεψιός (*anepsios*), which is used in Colossians 4:10. We would expect to see the term in reference to Jesus’ “cousins” as well. Second, Mark 6:3 clearly speaks of close family relations: parents and children.

Others object that these children were Joseph’s from a first marriage. However, in Jesus birth narrative no other children are mentioned. In addition, these children remained with Mary as adults after Joseph had dropped out of the narrative, likely due to his death (see Mk 3:31 and Jn 2:12). It is a safe assumption that she was their mother. We also recall Matthew’s testimony that “he kept her a virgin *until* she gave birth to a Son” (Matt 1:25) and James being called the “brother of the Lord” (Gal 1:19). Especially problematic for this position is the fact that if Joseph had a son prior to Jesus’ birth, then this former son would be the heir to David’s throne before Jesus.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The second theory advanced by Catholics and Eastern Orthodox is that Jesus passed through the birth canal, but left no mark of His passing. John of Damascus, in fact, asserted, “But just as He who was conceived kept her who conceived still virgin, in like manner also He who was born preserved her virginity intact, only passing through her and keeping her closed…. For it was not impossible for Him to have come by this gate, without injuring her seal in anyway.” He adds another fabrication: “For, as pleasure did not precede it, pain did not follow it.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

However, we have no basis for the view of a supernatural birth. Every passage of Scripture describing this event lacks any hint of a supernatural birth process (see Lk 2:6-7; Matt 1:18: 2:2; Gal 4:4). This is merely another attempt by Catholics and Orthodox to defend the unbiblical doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary.

### F. False Views on Christ’s Humanity

Just as Jesus Christ shares with the Father and the Spirit divine nature, He shares with humanity human nature. He possesses all the characteristics of typical humans with the exception of sin. However, the perplexing question arises as to the relationship between His divine and human natures.

Through the course of Church history, this question became the starting point for several heretical movements concerning the person of Christ. Some teachers acknowledged His deity, but totally denied His humanity, or nearly so. Among these movements were Docetism, Apollinarianism, and Eutychianism.

**1. Docetism**

Docetism affirms Christ’s deity, but denies that He became man. He simply appeared to be human in order to accomplish His mission on earth. Jesus is a divine spirit, without a body. The Gnostics held to this view.

One of the most well-known teachers of this view was Marcion (2nd c.). He held to the Gnostic idea that certain “emanations” issue forth from the “Ultimate God” and act as mediators between Him and the material world. Since Gnostics deem matter as evil, God must be separate from it. This is the reason why he issues forth “emanations.”

The final emanation, allegedly, created the world. Marcion equated it with God of the Old Testament, whose character differs greatly from that of the “Ultimate God.” Jesus came to earth to reveal the true nature of the Ultimate. He appeared on the earth as an adult, but only appeared to have a body. Marcion’s teaching is refuted by the proofs offered above in defense of Christ’s humanity.

**2. Apollinarianism**

Before we enter into a discussion of Apollinarianism, it will be helpful to survey the debate in the Early Church between the Antiochian and Alexandrian theological schools. Both sides recognized Jesus Christ as both God and man. Both agreed that Jesus Christ was one divine-human person. Yet, they differed in how they understood the relationship between His two natures.

The Alexandrian school emphasized the unity of Christ’s person. They felt that the concepts of “person” and “nature” were so closely connected, that if we said that Jesus possesses two natures, it would be tantamount to claiming that He is two individuals. Consequently, in order to preserve their understanding of the unity of Christ’s person, they spoke of Him as possessing only one nature with two “aspects”: divine and human. However, some Alexandrian theologians went to the extreme of denying Jesus’ full humanity. One example of this excess was the teaching of Apollinaris.

On the other hand, the Antiochian Fathers thought it best to give equal emphasis to both the divine and human natures of Christ. Nonetheless, certain theologians in this camp also went to the extreme of dividing Jesus Christ into two persons. For them, Jesus was a man indwelt by the divine Spirit, i.e., “Christ.” Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius were among their number.

Apollinaris (310-390) was born in the Roman province of Syria, in the city of Laodicia. He believed in Christ’s deity, but was troubled by the question of His two natures. He recognized three components to human nature: (1) the spirit, i.e., people’s rational capacities, (2) the soul, i.e., animal instincts, and (3) the body. Yet, God is spirit and has rational capacities as well. If Jesus became fully human, then He would possess two rational spirits. Apollinaris felt this to be an absurdity. Therefore, he advanced the theory that Jesus’ spirit was divine (the “Logos”), but His soul and body were human. Percival summarizes, “(Apollinaris) attributed to Christ a human body (σῶμα) and a human soul (the ψυχὴ ἄλογος, the *anima* *animans* which man has in common with the animal), but not a rational spirit.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Apollinaris appealed to John 1:14 – “The Word became flesh.” He interpreted this to mean that the invisible God took upon Himself a human body in Mary’s womb and became the person, Jesus Christ. So then, Jesus lacks a rational human spirit. Apollinaris could not conceive of a person with two spirits – this would violate the unity of Christ’s person. Jesus is not like the monsters of Greek mythology with two heads. He is one Person.

Apollinaris also believed that the spirit is the essence of the human being, the source of life. Therefore, the sinful nature of people must reside in their spirits. If, then, Jesus Christ had a human spirit, it would be sinful, which undermines the doctrine of Christ’s sinlessness. Therefore, Jesus has to have a divine spirit to avoid inheriting the sin nature.

Apollinaris was aware that according to his teaching, Jesus was not fully human. He defended his view with an appeal to Philippians 2:7-8: “…but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, {and} being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man…” According to Apollinaris’ interpretation, the expressions, “made in the likeness of men,” and, “being found in appearance as a man,” indicate the incomplete humanity of Jesus the Christ.

Similar to the Arian contention that Jesus was not *homousious* with the Father, i.е., not of the same nature with Him, Apollinaris taught that Christ was not *homousious* with humanity. Yet, the evidence presented earlier in support of Jesus’ complete humanity serves to defeat this theory.

The Early Church long debated Apollinaris’ teaching. His main opponents were the Cappadocians: Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. On the Second Eccumencial Council in 381, the Church rejected Apollinaris’ definition of Christ’s natures. According to the definition of this Council, the Son of God possesses both a divine and a human rational spirit. The Cappadocians argued that whatever aspect of human nature the Son did not take upon Himself, He did not heal. Therefore, He must take upon Himself all of human nature to heal humanity in every respect.

Later, the Council of Chalcedon declared that the human nature of Jesus Christ was *homousious* with humanity. Thus, He has the same nature as all humans, but remains without sin. Therefore, Christ is *homousious*, i.e., of the same nature, with both God and humanity.

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**3. Eutychianism**

Eutyches lived in the early fifth century in Constantinople and served as an abbot in a prominent monastery. He lived during the time of the great Church debate over the teachings of Nestorius, but embraced the Alexandrian view of the unity of Christ’s person. His views were akin to those of Cyril of Alexandria, who was hesitant to ascribe two natures to Christ. Eutyches, however, took this to the extreme of basically denying His humanity.

In Eutyches’ teaching, the human nature of Christ was reduced to such a degree that one could no longer consider Him a genuine human being. Before the incarnation, two natures existed: the divine nature descending from heaven, and the human nature conceived in Mary’s womb. When they joined, only one nature remained – the divine. Even the physical body of Jesus was unlike ours. Eutyches compared the human nature of Jesus with a drop of vinegar in the ocean – it practically ceases to exist. By minimizing Christ’s human nature, Eutyches hoped to defend the unity of His person.

A local church council in 448 condemned Eutyches’ doctrine. However, a supporter of Eutyches defended his teaching before Emperor Theodosius II, who called for a general Church Council in 449 in Ephesus to look into this question. Three groups of bishops assembled: from Alexandria, Rome, and Constantinople. Flavian, bishop of Constantinople, opposed Eutyches’ teaching, as did the Roman bishop Leo 1, who sent a written decree, “Leo’s Tome,” instead of coming personally.

However, Dioscorus, bishop of Alexandria, supported Eutyches and enjoyed the support of Emperor Theodosius II, who gave him civil authority to enforce this doctrine. Consequently, opponents of Eutyches were not allowed a chance to refute his views. This Council, now famous as the “Robber’s Council,” endorsed Eutyches’ teaching and excommunicated Flavian and Leo I, and condemned all teaching defending the two natures of Jesus. Flavian died after the Council, reportedly from mistreatment he received there.

In 451, after the death of Theodosius II, a new Council convened in Chalcedon, which reversed the decision of the Robber’s Council and condemned Eutyches’ views. Afterwards, Eutyches was expelled from the Empire, and his subsequent fate in unknown.

**4. The Chalcedonian Definition**

This landmark Council gave the Church the definitive formula for Christ’s two natures, which all orthodox Christian confessions embrace to this day, and which faithfully reflects the biblical witness. It reads as follows:

We all unanimously teach… One and the Same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten; acknowledged in Two Natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved, and (both) concurring into One Person and One Hypostasis; not as though He was parted or divided into Two Persons, but One and the Self-same Son and Only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Therefore, the true understanding of the Person of Jesus Christ is that He possesses two natures: divine and human. Yet, He remains only one divine-human Person. On the one hand, He is the eternal God, who is one in nature and dignity with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, He is completely human, possessing a genuine physical body and human soul/spirit. These two natures do not mix, but remain distinct. At the same time, these two natures interface with one another in the unified Person of Jesus Christ.

Both the church of Rome and the church of Constantinople embraced the Chalcedonian Definition. Nonetheless, not a few believers in the Alexandrian Church, specifically native Egyptians, remained convinced of a single nature in Christ. The Greek Christians in Alexandria, in general, accepted Chalcedon, which created a rift between the two groups. Each side set up their own leadership. This led to the establishment of rival churches in Egypt: the Greek Orthodox and Coptic (Egyptian) Orthodox.

The Coptic Church acknowledges both the deity and human of Jesus Christ, but rejects the doctrine of His two natures, fearing that this leads to Nestorianism. This movement is also known as “Monophysitism.” This word consists of two parts: “mono,” or “one,” and “physis,” from the Greek word for “nature.” In other words, Jesus has only one, divine nature. The Orthodox Church of Armenia holds to the same position.

Two attempts were made to reconcile the Monphysite and the Chalcedonian fractions. The first was made by Emperor Zeno (5th c.), who produced the document the *Henotikon*, which endorsed the definitions of all the previous Church Councils with the exception of Chalcedon. Zeno allowed all believers the right to accept or reject the Chalcedonian definition at their own discretion. In spite of his efforts, though, he was unsuccessful in healing the rift in the Church.

In the seventh century, Emperor Heraclius proposed that Jesus indeed did have two natures, but united by one will and energy. Therefore, Jesus had only one will – a divine one. Some objected, however, that denying Jesus a human will made Him less than human and undermined His full humanity. They also argued that the will is a function of the nature, and not of the person. Since Jesus has two natures in one Person, He must have two wills: one divine, and one human. Finally, they recall that Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not my will, but Yours be done,” demonstrated the presence in Jesus of a human will.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Consequently, the Sixth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople rejected the “one will” teaching. The rift between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian factions remains to this day.

**5. Salvation through the Incarnation?**

**а. Description**

Our final topic is whether salvation (more precisely “deification”) comes through the incarnation. The essence of this teaching is that God saves and renews humanity through the incarnation of the Son of God. Deification is transformation to the likeness of God to the degree that the “deified” person possess all the qualities inherent to the so-called Divine energies (see the discussion of “God’s uncreated energies” in chapter 1 of this volume).

According to the concept *perichoresis* (i.e., “interpenetration”), the Persons of the Trinity are somehow “located” in one another. A similar relationship is proposed between the human and divine natures of Christ. His deity “penetrates” into His humanity to the degree that the latter is deified, that is, obtains all the qualities that characterize the Divine Energies.[[26]](#footnote-26) So then, through the incarnation, Jesus’ human nature is deified by the penetration of His divinity into it.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Moreover, it is claimed that through the incarnation, Jesus took upon Himself not only His own personal human nature, but human nature in general. McGrath describes this patristic teaching, represented by the theology of Athanasius: “Athanasius concluded that the Logos did not merely assume the specific human existence of Jesus Christ, but that of human nature in general.”[[28]](#footnote-28) John of Damascus comments more on this:

God the Word Incarnate, therefore, did not assume the nature that is regarded as an abstraction in pure thought (for this is not incarnation, but only an imposture and a figment of incarnation), nor the nature viewed in species (for He did not assume all the subsistences): but the nature viewed in the individual, which is identical with that viewed in species. For He took on Himself the elements of our compound nature, and these not as having an independent existence or as being originally an individual, and in this way assumed by Him, but as existing in His own subsistence.[[29]](#footnote-29)

This means that after Jesus deified His human nature, which He assumed at His incarnation, He deified at the same time human nature in general. Gregory Palamas taught, “In the person of Christ existed, in its entirety, human nature individually particularized, which, being hypostatically unified with the Logos of God, was deified and received the fullness of the divine energy.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Therefore, each individual has the potential to be deified in Christ. The Holy Spirit communicates this grace for deification, which was made available through the incarnation, to believers.[[31]](#footnote-31)

So then, Jesus, as the God-man, becomes a “bridge” between God and humans. His “descent,” that is, His incarnation, makes possible the “ascent” of humans to God, i.e., their “deification.” The redemption of people, then, occurs not so much through the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as through the deification of human nature by virtue in His incarnation. Berkhof summarizes this teaching: “By His incarnation and human life he thus reverses the course on which Adam by his sin started humanity and thus becomes a new leaven in the life of mankind.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

This teaching has a long history. Several early Church Fathers embraced it, such as Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and others.[[33]](#footnote-33) At the present time, the Eastern Orthodox Church accepts it.

Let us examine Irenaeus’ treatment of this topic:

Now this is His Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, who in the last times was made a man among men, that He might join the end to the beginning, that is, man to God.[[34]](#footnote-34)

He speaks undoubtedly these words to those who have not received the gift of adoption, but who despise the incarnation of the pure generation of the Word of God, defraud human nature of promotion into God, and prove themselves ungrateful to the Word of God, who became flesh for them. For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God.[[35]](#footnote-35)

So then, although in Irenaeus’ teaching the theosis teaching is not yet fully developed, nonetheless a number of its key features are already present: union with Christ, union of God and people through the incarnation, and “promotion” into God.

Furthermore, Origen writes the following about the communication of divinity to people through the incarnation:

…they saw also that the power which had descended into human nature, and into the midst of human miseries, and which had assumed a human soul and body, contributed through faith, along with its divine elements, to the salvation of believers, when they see that from Him there began the union of the divine with the human nature, in order that the human, by communion with the divine, might rise to be divine, not in Jesus alone, but in all those who not only believe, but enter upon the life which Jesus taught, and which elevates to friendship with God and communion with Him every one who lives according to the precepts of Jesus.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Another Alexandrian theologian, Athanasius, supports this view:

For as Christ died and was exalted as man, so, as man, is He said to take what, as God, He ever had, that even such a grant of grace might reach to us. For the Word was not impaired in receiving a body, that He should seek to receive a grace, but rather He deified that which He put on, and more than that, “gave” it graciously to the race of man.[[37]](#footnote-37)

The Cappadocians add their opinion. Gregory Nazianzen writes, “While His inferior Nature, the Humanity, became God, because it was united to God, and became One Person because the Higher Nature prevailed… in order that I too might be made God so far as He is made Man.“[[38]](#footnote-38) According to Gregory of Nyssa: “The Godhead ‘empties’ Itself that It may come within the capacity of the Human Nature, and the Human Nature is renewed by becoming Divine through its commixture with the Divine.”[[39]](#footnote-39)

In the teaching of John of Damascus, “The human nature assumed by the Logos was deified. It did not change, nor was it destroyed; it remained human nature with all of its inherent human qualities, but was enriched by divine qualities,” and, “Since the human nature of Christ was ‘saved, renewed, and strengthened,’ the nature of other people can be saved, renewed, and strengthened, in one word – deified.”[[40]](#footnote-40) In addition, John of Damascus taught that since the human nature of God’s Son was not hypostatic, He was able to take upon Himself a “general” or “universal” human nature. Hypostatically, the Son of God is a Divine Person, who became a divine-human Person (see *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,* 50).[[41]](#footnote-41)

Maximus the Confessor (7th c.) developed this theme further. According to his understanding of deification, God’s plan is that “he should make man a god through union with himself.”[[42]](#footnote-42) To attain this goal, “The Incarnation of the Logos crowns God’s descent into the world, and creates the possibility for the opposite movement…. And man becomes God through grace.”[[43]](#footnote-43) In addition, “To the decree that God became fully human and fully took on human nature, assuming the entire human, soul and body, to that degree the entire human, soul and body, is called to become God through grace.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

We can also cite the celebrated 14th century mystic, Gregory Palamas, who claims that Jesus took upon Himself our nature and “cleansed it by the miraculous and unapproachable fire of His Deity from every carnal disposition, making it a participant in God (*Homilies,* 21).[[45]](#footnote-45)

The theosis teaching can also be found in the West. In Augustine’s words, “He who was God became man to make gods those who were men” (*Sermons*, 192.7), and, “For neither should we be made participators of His divinity, unless He became a participator of our mortality” (*Commentary on Psalm 117*).[[46]](#footnote-46)

This teaching persists in the works of contemporary Eastern Orthodox writers. Meyendorff cites Florovsky about salvation through the incarnation: “The whole history of christological dogma was determined by this basic idea: the Incarnation of the Word, as Salvation.”[[47]](#footnote-47) Kuraev writes the following about the influence of the incarnation on humanity: “The path to healing is Christ, who introduced His Divinity into our human nature, not allowing it to sin, and thus healed it in Himself.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

The prominent twentieth century Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky especially emphasized this teaching. He writes, “The Son becomes incarnate in order to restore the opportunity for people to unite with God.”[[49]](#footnote-49) Evgeniy Zaitsev summarizes Lossky’s teaching – the human nature of Christ was “penetrated with Divine energies.”[[50]](#footnote-50) On Mount Tabor (the Mount of Transfiguration), Christ displayed His deified humanity in the so-called “Tabor Light.” This brilliance always surrounded the Lord, but in this case, He allowed His disciples to behold it. Mantzaridis comments that the teaching of deification is “the common property of the Orthodox tradition.”[[51]](#footnote-51)

It is curious to note that the Christological debates in the early years of the Church are closely tied to the idea of salvation/deification through the incarnation. If Jesus was not either fully God or fully man, then the link between God and people would be broken and deification becomes impossible. This is one of the main reasons why the Church fought so fiercely to defend the true doctrine of Christ. Zaitsev observes,

From this, it is clear why the Orthodox Church has always viewed any deviation from the integrity of orthodox Christological doctrine as having serious soteriological and spiritual consequences, especially regarding the *theosis* teaching. This is why for Lossky and his understanding of *theosis*, a proper interpretation of the person and ministry of Christ has decisive significance.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Lossky himself acknowledges this:

The complex battle over dogma, in which the Church has been engaged for centuries, if you view it from purely a spiritual point of view, seems to us to be, first of all, a tireless concern by the Church in every historical epoch to provide Christians with the opportunity to attain to the fullness of mystical union with God… (The Church) defends the doctrine of the equal-in-nature Trinity against the Arians, since the Word, Logos, opens to us the path to unity with the Godhead, and if the incarnate Word is not of the same nature as the Father, if (the Word) is not truly God, then our deification is not possible. The Church condemns the teachings of the Nestorians in order to break down the barrier, by which they seek to separate in Christ people from God.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Athanasius also speaks of the relationship between Nicene Christology and deification:

…man had not been deified, unless the Word who became flesh had been by nature from the Father and true and proper to Him. For therefore the union was of this kind, that He might unite what is man by nature to Him who is in the nature of the Godhead, and his salvation and deification might be sure.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Zaitsev confirms, “For Athanasius, *theosis* is the very essence of the Council of Nicaea, since salvation requires precisely such an understanding – that the Son possessed the entire fullness of Deity.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Finally, Mantzaridis echoes this thought as well: “At the time of the great Fathers, the fact of man’s deification was fully lived by the Church and, on the basis of this living experience, the Church formulated Orthodox Christology and fought the great heresies.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

**b. Evaluation**

In assessing the validity of this view, we note, first of all, that it has no biblical support. Nowhere in Scripture do we read that the incarnation itself leads to salvation. The New Testament unequivocally points to the cross as the place where God accomplished our salvation. The goal of the incarnation is clearly outlined in Hebrews chapter 2:

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted (Heb 2:14-18).

The incarnation of the Son of God was necessary not to “purify” or “deify” human nature, but so that Christ could become “a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” Having become human, Jesus Christ could take upon Himself the sins of all humanity and become a substitutionary sacrifice for people before God. Having removed people’s guilt through His death, Christ rendered “powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” and freed “those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.”

The apostle Paul also links the incarnation of God’s Son with His sacrifice on Calvary. The Son “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, {and} being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:7-8).

We must also specify what “human nature” actually is. Human nature is the sum total of the qualities that make up the human race: a human body, reason, will, memory, spirit, etc. If a certain individual possesses all the qualities that characterize humanity, we can consider him or her a human being. Human nature is not some abstract conception like the Platonic forms or ideals, but simply the sum total of necessary human traits. Gross correctly comments on how adherents of theosis distort this concept, “The Platonic origin of this realism is hardly questionable.”[[57]](#footnote-57)

Therefore, Jesus did not assume some kind of “general human nature.” When Scripture says that the Word became flesh, it simply means that He adopted all the necessary qualities possessed by humans: a human body, reason, will, memory, spirit, etc. The concept of a “general human nature” has its roots not in biblical revelation, but in the Platonic conception of “universals,” which many Church Fathers adopted.

The theory of “salvation/deification through the incarnation” is derived from the Neoplatonic conception of the “ascent to the One,” which captured the fancy of many early Fathers. In the Neoplatonic worldview, the universe consists of emanations from an impersonal force called the “One.” The goal of life is to “ascend” to this Absolute and unite with it. This requires successfully passing through several stages. One must connect with the intermediary emanations which separate the One from the world, namely the Nous and the World Soul.[[58]](#footnote-58)

One can identify many common features between Neoplatonism and patristic theology (see Appendix A). Specifically, in both systems exist a certain “bridge” connecting God (or the “One”) with people and making ascent to Him/It possible. In Neoplatonism, the Nous and World Soul serve this purpose, while in patristic theology it is the incarnation of God’s Son. So then, this theory is derived from Greek philosophy, not biblical truth. It is a thinly veiled attempt to adapt Christian faith to a pagan worldview.

We do affirm that Jesus is the mediator of salvation, but in a soteriological mediation, not an ontological one. In this errant system, Jesus is not the mediator between sinful people and a holy God, as in the Bible, but between creaturely humans and an uncreated God. According to Scripture, Jesus became the “bridge” over the chasm of sin, while in theosis, Jesus serves as a bridge over “creatureliness.”

Still another weakness in this theory is that it offers no solution to the problem of human guilt. The Bible emphatically affirms people’s guilt before God for sin and of the former’s need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. This patristic view, though, makes no provision for this. An interesting (but pathetic) paradox results – people become God, but are still guilty of sin!

Finally, this teaching violates the Chalcedonian Definition of Christ’s person. Chalcedon determined that the two natures of Christ do not mix, that is, “the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved.” This rules out the teaching that divinity was communicated to the human nature of Christ. According to the definition of Christ universally accepted by orthodox Christian confessions, the human nature of Christ contains only typical human characteristics.

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3. See 1 Sam 2:35; 2 Sam 7:12; 12:11; Jer 23:4-5; 30:9; Zech 11:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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6. Ibid., p. 500. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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12. Noted in Lane T. A Concise History of Christian Thought. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. – P. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Tacitus, *Annals,* 15.44. From Geisler N. L. Baker Еncyclopedia of Christian Аpologetics. – Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999. – P. 381-384. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Lucian, *Death of Pelegrine*, 11-13. From Geisler, p. 381-384. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3.3. From Geisler, p. 381-384. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Jn 3:17; 3:34; 5:36, 38; 6:29, 38, 57; 7:29; 8:42; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Arndt, et. al., p. 797. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ellingworth P. The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text // New International Greek Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1993. – P. 288. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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36. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 3.28. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Athanasius, *Discourse against the Arians*, 1.42. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
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