The Trinity Defined and Refuted (5)

_Hypostatic Union_

By Sean Finnegan

One of the major supporting structures of the doctrine of the Trinity is the notion that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. This is technically called the _hypostatic union_:

“A theological term used with reference to the Incarnation [when God became Man] to express the revealed truth that in Christ one person subsists in two natures, the Divine and the human. _Hypostasis_ means, literally, that which lies beneath as basis or foundation. Hence it came to be used by the Greek philosophers to denote reality as distinguished from appearances (Aristotle, "Mund.", IV, 21). It occurs also in St. Paul's Epistles (2 Corinthians 9:4; 11:17; Hebrews 1:3-3:14), but not in the sense of person. Previous to the Council of Nicaea (325) _hypostasis_ was synonymous with _ousia_, and even St. Augustine (De Trin., V, 8) avers that he sees no difference between them. The distinction in fact was brought about gradually in the course of the controversies to which the Christological heresies gave rise, and was definitively established by the Council of Chalcedon (451), which declared that in Christ the two natures, each retaining its own properties, are united in one subsistence and one person ( _eis en prosopon kai mian hpostasin_ ) (Denzinger, ed. Bannwart, 148). They are not joined in a moral or accidental union (Nestorius), nor commingled (Eutyches), and nevertheless they are substantially united.”

Catholic Encyclopedia (http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07610b.htm)

According to the creed at Chalcedon (AD 451), the union of the divine and the human occurred as follows:

Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul [human soul] and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these "last days," for us and behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer in respect of his humanness.

We also teach that we apprehend this one and only Christ-Son, Lord, only-begotten—in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the
union. Instead, the "properties" of each nature are conserved and both natures concur in one "person" and in one reality [hypostasis]. They are not divided or cut into two persons, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Word [Logos] of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus have the prophets of old testified; thus the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us; thus the Symbol of Fathers [the Nicene Creed] has handed down to us.

So, the Trinity teaches that Jesus is fully divine and fully human and that these natures coexist within him without becoming mixed together. There are a number of logical problems that arise from this dual nature hypothesis, but before investigating them, we shall turn to the biblical evidence traditionally given to support this doctrine.

Why would anyone conclude from that Jesus is both God and man? The reason is that Jesus is called God in Scripture (John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Philippians 2:6; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1), and he is called man (Acts 17:31; Romans 5:15; 1 Timothy 2:5; 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). The doctrine of the dual natures (hypostatic union) is an effort to take both of these sets of Scripture seriously. It is argued that the most biblically accurate statement that can be made in light of these verses is that Jesus is not just a man, nor did he merely appear as a man, but was, in fact, both man and God (the God-Man). Since it is uncontested that Jesus is a human being, I will focus on the texts that imply he is fully God and give brief responses to each.

**John 1:1, 14**
The word was God, not the Son. The truth expressed in John 1:14 is that Jesus is what the word became when it was made flesh. (As a side note, every single translation into English from the Greek before the King James Version of 1611 used the word "it" instead of “he” when referring to the word in the prologue of John chapter 1). In other words, since the Son is not one to one equivalent with the word, this text does not teach that Jesus is God.

**John 1:18**
There are two manuscript traditions here. One says “only begotten son” and the other “only begotten God.” Scholars debate which is correct, with many of the textual critics agreeing that since the earliest manuscripts contain “only begotten God,” and it is more likely that a scribe would change this difficult phrase to the more natural “only begotten son” than the other way around, the original was “only begotten God.” Meanwhile others, like Bart Ehrman, are unconvinced that this local tradition is correct because the manuscripts containing only begotten God are only found in the Alexandrian (Egypt) area, while the others reading “only begotten son” are found in the Western, Caesarean, and Byzantine traditions. Furthermore, the phrase “only begotten God” is foreign to the language of the Gospel of John and directly contradicts John 17:3 which indicates that the only true God is the Father. It is perhaps more likely that the “only begotten God” reading, though primitive, is not actually what John wrote, but instead an early corruption used to bolster the prologue to say something explicitly that it only at best states implicitly.
Here we have a clear confession of faith by Thomas who had previously doubted the resurrection of Jesus. There can be no question that he calls Jesus, “my Lord and my God.” However, is this to be understood in an ontological [of or relating to substance] or representative [Jesus represents God to us] sense? To say that the resurrection proves that Jesus is God is counterintuitive, because God cannot die (1 Timothy 1:17); since only dead people are resurrected, the resurrected one cannot be God. Furthermore, the phrase “my lord” is never applied to God and is represented in Hebrew as adoni (a title exclusively used of those who are not God). In effect, calling Jesus “my lord” is equivalent to saying that he is not God Almighty. Either Thomas was confessing that he in fact was now seeing God in Christ (cf. John 14:7-11), or he was calling Jesus God in a representative sense like Moses, the Judges of Israel, and the King of Israel were called God (Exodus 7:1; 21:7; 22:8-9; Psalm 45:6; 82:6; John 10:33-36).

Each of these comes down to a translator’s decision. The Greek may with good reason be rendered in either way: to confess Jesus to be God or to be a statement of two—God (the Father) and Jesus. The New American Bible renders the first two in the non-Trinitarian manner and inserts a footnote for 2 Peter 1:1 stating that it may be rendered “our God and the savior Jesus Christ.” Thus, all three of these are ambiguous in the Greek and so cannot form a substantial support for doctrine.

Although the NIV translates the phrase in question as, “who, being in very nature God,” this is a gross exaggeration of the Greek text which is correctly rendered by many other translations as, “who, being in the form of God.” If Jesus was/is in the form of God, then he is certainly not God. If Paul (or the hymn writer) had wanted to say that Jesus was God, he could easily have said, “who, being God,” but he did not. Furthermore, it is clear that the contrasting parallel of this passage is between Christ, “the form of God,” and “the form of a servant.” In other words, we are talking about rank or status, not substance.

Since this verse quotes Psalm 45:6 to call the Son God, we ought to understand the application in light of that Messianic context. The Psalm speaks of the Davidic king who is called God but not in an ultimate sense because, as God, he has a God which is called “your God,” the one who anointed him. Thus, if one concludes that Hebrews 1:8 makes Jesus into God, then the Davidic King of Psalm 45:6 is also God, which would make a “Quadity” rather than a Trinity.

In addition to these Scriptures, the Trinitarian argument that Jesus is fully God is also founded on certain things that Jesus did—places where he is not called “God,” but he in fact does things they would say that only God can do. He raised the dead, walked on water, exorcised demons, forgave sins, and lived perfectly. Each of these will be taken in turn in the next issue of Glad Tidings.
In conclusion, this doctrine of the dual natures depends on three major facts: (1) that it is possible to be both fully human and fully divine at the same time, (2) that Jesus is fully divine, and (3) that Jesus is fully human. We accept (3) without hesitation because of the overwhelming biblical witness that Jesus was a flesh and blood human being. Proposition (1) will be addressed in the next article of Glad Tidings. The middle statement, that Jesus is divine, we reject on the basis that there are no Scriptures that teach that Jesus is in fact fully God. It has been noted that Jesus is called “God” twice for sure in the New Testament (John 20:28 and Hebrews 1:8). Even so, both of these Scriptures are more naturally grasped using the concept of representational deity—that Jesus fully represented God to the world. This phenomenon (of calling someone God who is representing him) is attested in both the Old Testament in that Moses, the judges of Israel, and the angels were all referred to as “God” and in the New Testament by Jesus who also called the judges of Israel “Gods” and by Paul when he referred to Satan as “the god of this age.”