

God Manifest In Flesh: The Mystery of the Personal Union

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Introduction

The apostle Paul in his first letter to Timothy says that the manifestation of God in flesh is a mystery which is great beyond controversy, or, as we might also paraphrase His words, the appearance of God in the form of a weak and despised human being is a mystery so marvellous that all those who believe it must confess its greatness. To this tremendous mystery we want to direct our attention for a few moments, even though even eternity will very likely not suffice to probe all the ramifications of this mystery which is beyond all controversy great.

That Jesus Christ is both God and man at one and the same time is a teaching of the Christian church which is taken for granted by every Bible-believing Lutheran. The letter which I received two years ago asking me to take this assignment said, among other things, "The evidence for the humanity and divinity of Christ (is) ... not primarily what we are looking for." Evidently your program committee was convinced that there would not be one single person at this convention who is not fully persuaded that Jesus Christ is both true God and true man, and that every one here knows enough of the biblical evidence for this doctrine to understand why he is fully convinced of this fundamental truth of our most holy faith. With Luther we all confess, "I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord."

The Miracle of the Incarnation

But what we sometimes fail to realize is that this fact that in Christ God and man are united in one undivided and indivisible person is in reality the greatest miracle in the whole history of the human race. In the doctrine of the person of Christ we have a concrete demonstration of the truth proclaimed by St. Paul when he wrote to the Corinthians that the things revealed by the Spirit of God are foolishness to unconverted men (1 Cor 2:14). Most of us have believed these things from our earliest childhood and scarcely ever give any thought to how utterly in conflict with the conclusions of unconverted reason the biblical truths concerning our Savior's person really are.

When the prophet Isaiah foretold the birth of the Messiah he said, in words familiar to all of us, "His name shall be called Wonderful." In the original Hebrew the word which is translated "Wonderful" in our English Bibles is not an adjective, but a noun. It is one of the Hebrew words for what we call in English a wonder or a miracle. We could therefore just as correctly translate Isaiah's words: "His name shall be called Miracle."

This is a most fitting name for the incarnate Son of God. He is in His own person truly a miracle. He is in fact Himself the greatest of all miracles. Once we believe that the child born in Bethlehem's stable is indeed very God of very God, as we confess in the Nicene Creed, all other miracles become child's play for Him. Those who are tempted to question the miracles of the Bible would do well to remember this. For if Jesus of Nazareth is really the almighty God by whom all things were made out of nothing, then why should it be difficult for Him to feed 5000 men with five loaves and two fishes or 4000 men with seven loaves and a few small fish? If He is the Creator who commanded all the waters that covered the earth in the beginning to be gathered together into one place so that the dry land might appear, then why should He not order the wind and the water to be still; why should He not compel the waters of the Sea of Galilee to support Him when He wanted to walk on them? If we consider these

things carefully we shall very quickly realize that the miracles which Jesus did pale into insignificance when we compare them with the miracle that Jesus is.

The Incarnation

The greatness of this miracle becomes evident first of all in the manner in which it came about. Almost every Sunday in the Apostles' Creed we confess that Jesus Christ, God's only Son, was conceived by the Holy Ghost and born of the Virgin Mary. John in the first chapter of his Gospel teaches the same truth in different words when he tells us that the Word who existed from all eternity and who created all things was made flesh (Jo 1:1.2.14). In plain and simple words we can say that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity became man.

This very simple statement, which we have all learned to accept with childlike faith, raises all sorts of difficulties for human reason. If it is really true that there is only one God and that the three persons, while distinct from one another, are never separate from one another, how is it possible for only one of the three to become man? This is a question that human reason cannot answer. Nor does Scripture answer that question. It simply tells us that this is what happened. Luther is right when he says in the "Christian Questions" that the Father is God only and the Holy Ghost likewise, but the Son is true God and true man. St. Paul confirms that when he says that God sent forth His Son to be made of a woman (Gal 4:4.5).

Yet when God became man He did not cease being God. False teachers have attempted to avoid some of the difficulties that the human mind has in dealing with the incarnation of the Son of God, by asserting that Jesus is not fully God or that He at least emptied Himself of some of His divine attributes when He became man.

Scripture, however, never speaks in that way. During His whole life here on earth, from the moment of His conception and birth to His burial in Joseph's tomb, He is true God according to the testimony of God's inspired Word. The baby conceived in the womb of Mary and laid in the manger of Bethlehem, who must be carried and fed by His mother, is still the mighty God.

The testimony of Scripture to this fact is clear and unmistakable. Seven hundred years before His birth Isaiah not only predicted that the Savior would be born of a virgin but also that His name would be Immanuel, God with us (Is.7:14). The same prophet, in another prophecy concerning the birth of Christ, says that this child that is born to us is the Mighty God and the Everlasting Father (Is 9:6). Jeremiah says that the king who is to come from David's line will be called "Jehovah (or Yahweh) our Righteousness" (Jer.23:5,6). The angel Gabriel told Mary that the child she would bear would be called the Son of God (Lk 1:35). Months before the birth of Jesus, Elizabeth called Mary the mother of her Lord (Lk 1:43). When He was born the angel told the shepherds that the baby lying in the manger was Christ the Lord (Lk 2:11). To realize the full significance of the angel's words we might recall that the word "Lord" is used fifteen times in the first ninety verses of Luke's Gospel and in every single case the word is a synonym for "God." Several times it is obviously the exact equivalent of the OT name "Yahweh" or "Jehovah," *which is* the specific proper name of the true God in the OT. When, after those fifteen references to God as "the Lord," in the ninety-first verse of Luke's Gospel we are told that this child is Christ the Lord, there can be no doubt that the angel is testifying to the deity of this weak and helpless baby, who cannot walk by Himself but still carries the government of the whole world on His shoulder (Is 9:6). This child is the eternal Word who was with God in the beginning and by whom all things were made. Thus we can truly say that Mary is the "mother of God."

When the Lutheran confessions say that "Mary, the most blessed virgin, bore not a mere man but ... such a man as is truly the Son of the most high God" and that she therefore is "truly the mother of God" (FC VIII, 24), Protestants are likely to see this as evidence that Lutheranism is a poorly reconstructed Catholicism. However, while Romanism calls Mary the mother of God in the interest of

their practice of Mariolatry, Lutheranism gives her that title because we are intent upon upholding the Scriptural doctrine that Christ is never anywhere anything less than God. Human reason finds it difficult to believe that a man could be born of a virgin. But even this great miracle fades into insignificance when we consider how difficult it is for human reason to believe that God was born of this virgin, when God become man.

But while we can say that God became man we cannot say that man became God. The man Jesus, the Son of Mary, never had any independent existence as a man. False teachers have asserted that Jesus became God at His baptism or at the time of His ascension, but all such speculation not only are without Scriptural support but they also contradict the plain teaching of Scripture which tells us clearly that the eternal Son of God assumed a human nature.

But since God became man we can say that God is man, or in more careful language, the Son of God is a man. And we can also say that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, is God. When Philip asked to see the Father, Jesus expressed surprise that Philip after so long a time in the company of Jesus' disciples still did not know that anyone who had seen Jesus had seen God (Jo 14:9). The centurion at the cross of Jesus said this in so many words, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mk 15:39).

The Communion of Natures and of Attributes

Since Jesus Christ is both God and man He must possess all the attributes of God and man. This fact creates what is perhaps the greatest problem that human reason has with the person of Christ. Luther says somewhere that to say that God is man or that man is God is more disparate than to say that a man is a donkey. What he means is that the difference between God and man is far greater than the difference between a man and an animal.

When we, however, say that a man is a donkey, or a wolf, or a snake in the grass we do not expect our words to be taken literally. We mean only that there is some similarity between the two. But when we say that Jesus is God we do not mean only that there are points of similarity between Jesus and God. We mean that He is God in the fullest sense of that term.

As God, He is almighty and omniscient and omnipresent. As God, He is eternal, unchangeable, and infinite. All the attributes of God belong to Him without exception.

And in the same way He is true man. As man he has a beginning in time. He is weak and limited in knowledge and confined to a certain place and time. All the attributes that are an essential part of a human nature belong to Him, also without exception.

Yet Jesus is only one person. That means that one and the same person has both human and divine attributes. As God, Jesus Christ is infinite and unlimited, but as man He is finite and limited. Yet there is only one Jesus Christ, who is therefore at one and the same time both infinite and finite. As God, Jesus is the Creator of the world by whom all things were made (Jo 1:1-3), but as man, Jesus Christ is a creature, who was made of a woman (Ga 4:4.5). Yet there is only one Jesus, who is therefore both Creator and creature. As God, He has existed from all eternity and He could say, "Before Abraham was, I am" (Jo 8:58). Yet at that same time He did not deny the contention of the Jews that He was not yet fifty years old, and the Bible itself tells that He was twelve years old when He went with His parents to Jerusalem (Lk 2:42) and thirty years old when He was baptized (Lk 3:23). Thus this same person has a beginning in time and at the same time has no beginning at all, having already been in the beginning. God is (a) spirit (Jo 4:24) and spirits do not have flesh and bones, as Jesus Himself says (Lk 24:39), but in Jesus, who is true God, God has flesh and bones, or flesh and blood, as the writer of Hebrews tells us (Hb 2:14).

To say that one and the same person is both spirit and flesh and blood, both infinite and finite is an offense to human reason. Many theologians therefore have attempted to find a way of speaking about Christ that removes this offense. The Docetists, who firmly upheld the deity of Christ, insisted that He

really did not have flesh and blood, but He only appeared to have flesh and blood, that He was not really weak, but that He only appeared to be weak, that He did not really suffer and die but only appeared to suffer and die. In other words, they said that He was not really a man.

The Arians, on the other hand, who firmly upheld the humanity of Christ, denied His full deity. They taught that Christ was indeed very powerful but not almighty, that He existed before creation, but not from eternity, that He was called God but was not really God.

In Luther's day Zwingli tried to make the doctrine reasonable with his proposal of the figure of speech which he called *alloeosis*. In effect, he divided Christ into two distinct persons who had only an outward connection binding them into one. Thus Zwingli said that whenever the Bible ascribes to God in Christ any human attribute or to man in Christ a divine attribute we must in our thinking substitute the proper nature and ascribe human attributes only to the human nature and divine attributes only to the divine nature. In effect, he revived the old heresy of Nestorianism, which held, for example, that when Christ was nailed to a cross it was not God but only a man who was crucified.

God's Death

Even many pious Lutherans who earnestly want to be faithful to the Bible sometimes have difficulty with the statement that God was crucified or that God died. Several years ago I preached for a Good Friday service in one of our Wisconsin Synod churches in Milwaukee. At the end of the service one of the very fine laymen in that congregation, a member of the church council, came to the vestry and said, "Professor, you misspoke yourself in your sermon today." Since that happens to me quite often, I asked him what I had said. He then told me that I had said that God died on the cross, and he was very surprised when I said that this is exactly what I had intended to say. He said that it is surely impossible for God to die. I hope I satisfied him with my explanation of this doctrine.

But what we ought to realize is that the remark of this layman makes perfectly good sense. Of course, God can not die. He is Life itself and His very essence excludes the possibility of death. For that reason we never say that the Godhead or the divine nature of Christ died.

Yet the Bible says that the Jews crucified the Lord of Glory (1 Cor 2:8) Peter told the Jews that they killed the Prince of life (Ac 3:15) or as the NIV puts it, the author of life. Unless we are willing to separate the God-man into two persons, we must say that the God-man died, that God died. He could not have died if He had not been man. His body and soul could not have been separated in death if He had not possessed a body and soul. His blood could not have been shed if He had had no blood. For that reason the letter to the Hebrews says that the eternal Son of God became a sharer of flesh and blood together with other men for this very purpose that He might die, and through His death destroy the devil. His flesh and blood was God's flesh and blood, even though human reason would say that God who is spirit cannot have flesh and blood. The very definition of a spirit excludes flesh and blood and to speak of a spirit as having flesh and blood seems far more illogical than to say that the moon is made of green cheese. A moon made of green cheese at least does not involve a contradiction in terms, but to speak of a spirit with flesh and blood is as unreasonable as to speak of round squares or square circles.

Yet the Bible says in so many words that God has blood. In his farewell speech to the elders of Ephesus St. Paul admonished them to "feed the church of God which He, that is, God has purchased with His own blood" (Ac 20:28). The lengths to which men will go to avoid the difficulty which these words present to human reason are manifested in the TEV translation of this verse which says that God purchased the church with the blood of His own Son. There is absolutely no justification in the Greek text for the addition of the word "Son" here. The text clearly speaks of God's own blood, although there are a few manuscripts which speak of the Lord's "own blood." Yet even the TEV attempt to avoid the difficulty fails unless we are willing to say that God's own Son is something less than God.

It is, however, not only Reformed theologians who have difficulty in speaking of God's death. Lutherans can think as logically as Calvinists and Zwinglians. Luther says somewhere that if he wanted to, he could find as many rational arguments against the incarnation as Zwingli or the Mohammedans. In fact, he says that if we would follow reason we would all become Mohammedans. At another time he said that the statement that God became man is philosophically indefensible. It is not meant to be understood but to be believed.

Because of that Lutherans have sometimes found it difficult to maintain this doctrine clearly. Several years ago one of our students at the seminary submitted a sermon to one of our WELS pastors for approval. In that sermon he wrote that God died. When the sermon came back the word God was crossed out and the word Christ was substituted and the student was told that he could not say that God died, for God cannot die.

In this matter we must never give up the struggle to put reason to death, as Luther puts it. As another example of this need we might mention our present hymnal. In the hymnal in common use in the Synodical Conference prior to the 1940's there was a stanza that read, "O sorrow dread, Our God is dead." The intersynodical hymnal committee received a proposal that this stanza be eliminated. The final decision that was reached was to change the wording from "O sorrow dread, Our God is dead" to "O sorrow dread, God's Son is dead." I was a student at Concordia Seminary at that time and one of our professors, who was a member of the hymnal committee, told us in class that the hymn was being changed because it was not correct to say that God is dead. Yet the German version of the hymn is even more emphatic, for it says, "*O grosse Not! Gott selbst ist tot* (O sorrow dread, God Himself is dead).

It is difficult to understand how a committee of the Synodical Conference meeting in the 1930's could have been persuaded to change the wording of that hymn when the whole committee was composed of men who had subscribed to the Formula of Concord which clearly says, "If it were not to be said, God has died for us, but only a man, we would be lost" (FC VIII, 44). What is even more surprising when the whole situation is analyzed is that some members of the committee, who objected to the wording: "Our God is dead," were perfectly willing to accept the words, "God's Son is dead," for Lutheranism has never seen the name "God's Son" as applied to Christ as anything less than the ascription of full deity to Him.

Fortunately the committee was not consistent. It allowed another hymn which speaks of the death of God to stand unchanged. Isaac Watts, who was suspected of Arianism during his lifetime, in his hymn "Alas! and did my Savior bleed," had written,

Well might the sun in darkness hide
And shut his glories in
When God, the mighty Maker, died
For man the creature's sin.

This stanza the committee allowed to stand unchanged. Most Protestant hymnals as well as the hymnals of the Augustana Synod and of the United Lutheran Church, however, changed the third line of that stanza to read, "When Christ, the mighty Maker, died." It is, of course, true that if words have any meaning at all, the revised versions of both hymns teach nothing really different than the originals, but in the light of the objections of reason to the incarnation, the change is nevertheless significant.

In reality it is no more offensive to human reason to say that God died than it is to say that God was born, or that God suffered, or that God is man. If God can be man, then God can also be born or suffer or die. The real stumbling block for human reason here is the incarnation itself. It is important for us to recognize this, for any consistent rejection of the concept of the death of God must eventually end in either a denial of Jesus' deity or of His humanity, or in a denial of the Personal Union of the two natures in Christ, the God-man.

The Godforsakenness of God

But if it is difficult for human reason to accept the statement that God died when Jesus of Nazareth was crucified, the difficulty is compounded when we listen to the Son of God cry out on the cross “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

If we cannot doubt that God suffered and died on the cross and that God’s blood was shed there for the sins of the world, then we must also be convinced that it was God who cried out, “My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken Me?” This is not a mere human cry of despair. Neither may we say that it was a delusion that was expressed in those words and that Jesus was not really forsaken by God but that He was laboring under a false impression of Godforsakenness. If Jesus always speaks the truth, then these words must be true also. He was truly forsaken by God.

Yet this man who is forsaken by God is God Himself. Thus we are compelled against all the protests of reason to say that God is forsaken by God, and yet God is one. It is absolutely impossible for human reason to explain or to comprehend how such a thing could happen. We can only believe that it is so, and that in that moment the God-man suffered the eternal punishment of hell for us. We can only stand in awe before the love that moved God to do this great miracle so that we might live a life of hope in the face of His judgment and the eternity that lies beyond that moment when we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For us the Judge will always be that God-man who loved us enough to endure God-forsakenness for us.

If we are tempted by the laws of logic to say that if God has been forsaken by God then there has been a division in the Godhead and God is no longer truly, one undivided and indivisible being, just as the Redeemer is one undivided and indivisible person, we might remember that this God-forsakenness of God is in reality no greater problem for human reason than the incarnation itself.

In the same way, the God-forsakenness of God is in reality no greater problem for human reason than the death of God. When I was a boy, doing my chores on the farm, I used to wonder how the universe could have been preserved in order or even in existence during the three days in which God was dead. I did not understand in those days that God was both dead and alive during those three days. While that body was lying in the grave separated from the soul in paradise, God, in all three persons, was still alive, preserving and governing not only the whole universe but also keeping that body from corruption and decay. That the God-man should be both dead and alive at the same time is no more of a mystery than that He is both almighty and weak at the same time.

Reason may ask, “How can one person in an undivided and indivisible Trinity become man while the other two persons remain outside of the incarnation and do not become flesh?” Or, “How can one undivided and indivisible person be both uncreated and created, almighty and weak, asleep and awake, alive and dead, at one and the same time?” Or, “How can one undivided and indivisible person be both forsaken by God and eternally united with God?” For those questions we have no answer. We only know that it is so. And if someone presses us for an answer, we can only say with Elihu in the book of Job, “I will answer thee that God is greater than man ... he giveth not account of any of his matters” (Job 33: 12.13). We ought always to remember, as the book of Job reminds us, that any attempt to explore the mysteries of God with human reason and speculation, is an attempt to catch crocodiles with a bluegill hook, (Job 41:1), or, as Luther says, to seek to illuminate the sun with a candle. Instead of insisting on an explanation of the mystery as a prerequisite for believing acceptance of the divine revelation we ought to say with the ancient church father, “I believe in order that I may understand,” or, as Luther said, “It requires faith just because it is absurd.”

Other Apparent Contradictions

There are many other apparent contradictory statements in the Bible that confront us as we take seriously and at face value what the Bible tells us about Jesus. The Bible tells us, for example, that no one has ever seen God (Jo 1:18), that no man shall see God and live (Ex 33:20), and that God dwells in the light that no man can approach unto (I Tm 6:16). Yet Jesus says, “He that has seen me has seen the Father (Jo 14:9). Thus we are clearly told that in Christ the invisible God has become visible. God is truly manifest in flesh. And yet He still dwells in the light that no man can approach unto.

A similar paradox confronts us in the words of Jesus to Nicodemus, “No man has ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man which is in heaven” (Jo 3:13). In this case the paradox does not become evident when we compare two passages from separated sections of the Bible but two phrases in the same passage seem to be in conflict with one another. On the one hand we are told that the Son of man has come down from heaven and on the other that he still is in heaven.

It is true that the NIV and most modern translations omit the words, “which is in heaven.” However, the manuscript evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of these words. The longer reading is early and far more widespread than the shorter reading. The short reading is found only in Egypt. It is also not difficult to see why the Egyptian scribes omitted the phrase. Human reason will always object to saying that Jesus has come down from heaven and still is in heaven. But Bible-believing Christians will recognize that the apparent contradiction here is only a part of the paradox that we meet everywhere whenever we contemplate the union of the two natures of Christ, and with John Wesley they will sing, “The Word becomes incarnate and yet remains on high.” Even if the phrase in John 3:13 were not part of the original text, the same truth is taught in almost identical words in John 1:18, where John is evidently speaking of Jesus’ activity here on earth and yet describes Him as the one “who is in the bosom of the Father.”

We meet the same apparent contradiction also in passages that speak of the knowledge that Christ has. Peter says to Jesus, and Jesus does not correct him, “Lord thou knowest all things” (Jo 21:17). While these words were spoken to Jesus after His resurrection, when He had entered into the state of exaltation, yet the evangelists portray Jesus as omniscient throughout His ministry. Nathanael was so impressed by Jesus’ knowledge of his character and previous activities that he exclaimed, “Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the king of Israel” (Jo 1:49). John says, “Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man; for he knew what was in man” (Jo 2:24,25). The synoptic Gospels tell us that Jesus knew the inmost thoughts of the Pharisees (Mt 9:4; Mk 2:8; Lk 5:22), and that He repeatedly predicted His suffering and death. Many more examples of His omniscience could be cited.

Yet we are also told that Jesus grew in wisdom (Lk 2:52). How is it possible for an omniscient person to grow in wisdom? While the twelve-year-old Jesus astonished the Jewish rabbis with His understanding and answers, Luke’s words seem to imply that Jesus had to study His Bible just as other believing children of God.

Even more surprising than these words of St. Luke is the clear statement of Jesus, reported by both Matthew and Mark, that He did not know the date of the end of the world (Mt 24:36; Mk 13:32). Thus the Scriptures clearly assert that Jesus knows all things and that there are some things He does not know. While it is perfectly correct to say that He knows all things according to His divine nature and that He is limited in knowledge according to His human nature, yet this does not in any way make the mystery any easier to understand for He is still only one person. Moreover, Lutheranism has always held on the basis of Scripture that divine attributes have been given to the human nature of Christ, so that it can be asserted that Christ is omniscient also in His human nature.

What is said about His omniscience can also be said about His omnipotence. On the one hand we are told that all power is given to Him in heaven and in earth (Mt 28:18) and the many miracles He performed demonstrates the truth of these words of His. Yet at the same time we are told that He was

crucified in weakness (2 Cor 13:4) and that He was strengthened by an angel in the garden of Gethsemane (Lk 22:43TR).

We do not have the time to go into all these aspects of the mystery in detail. I trust that enough has been said, however, to make us realize once more how necessary for us all is the admonition of the Formula of Concord, which says,

We admonish all Christians, since in the Holy Scriptures Christ is called a mystery upon which all heretics dash their heads, not to indulge in a presumptuous manner in subtle inquiries, concerning such mysteries, with their reason, but with the venerated apostles simply to believe, to close the eyes of their reason, and bring into captivity their understanding to the obedience of Christ, 2 Cor. 10:5 and to take comfort, and hence to rejoice without ceasing in the fact that our flesh and blood is placed so high at the right hand of the majesty and almighty power of God. Thus we shall assuredly find constant consolation in every adversity, and remain well guarded from pernicious error (FC, Th.D., VIII,96).

Conclusion

Whenever we contemplate the mystery of the personal union we must surely be reminded of how dangerous it is to allow theological discussion to become concerned over what can happen and what cannot happen in God's dealing with men. The important question is never what can happen or what cannot happen but rather what did God do.

As an illustration we might cite the common opinion of the dogmatians that Christ could not have fallen into sin when He was tempted. It is certainly most difficult to see how this could possibly have happened. What we know from Scripture, however, is that Christ did not fall when He was tempted in all points like as we are. I sometimes wonder however, whether, in the light of what the Bible says in regard to other attributes, we ought not to say that also here we are confronted with the same paradox we meet everywhere in the personal union and that according to His divine nature He could not fall and according to His human nature He could have fallen.

But above all, when we contemplate this great mystery of God manifest in flesh we ought to be overwhelmed by awe before these great miracles which God was willing to perform so that we might have a Savior whose human nature enabled Him to die and to shed His blood and whose divine nature made that blood so precious that it was sufficient to pay the price of our redemption and the price of the redemption of the whole wide world. Soli Deo Gloria!