

# NOW THAT GOD IS ONE OF US

## A STUDY OF THE COMMUNICATION OF ATTRIBUTES IN THE PERSON OF CHRIST

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"What if God was one of us?" With these striking words, Joan Osborne poses for her own contemporaries one of the few questions worth asking. But as her song continues, she makes it pretty clear that she thinks he *isn't*. She doesn't see God anywhere in the "slobs" around her, or in the other strangers on the bus trying to find their way home. We live here, she implies, in world devoid of beauty, devoid of compassion, devoid of connection, without God and without hope.

What if God was one of us? The phrase expresses the wistful longings of Baby Boomers and Generation X-ERs who have largely discarded the answers of their parents and grandparents, and who find themselves floating in a spiritual void. What they're experiencing is something like the feeling people had when the astronauts first showed them pictures of the earth rising over the moon's scarred surface. They saw this incredibly beautiful blue ball surrounded by the unspeakably black emptiness of space, and they thought, "Here we are, all alone."

### The Problem

Let us be clear about the reason why many feel so empty today. It was unbelief that caused people to banish God into some distant attic above and beyond the stars, while the 'natural' forces worked themselves out below. This particular strain showed up first in Europe during the Enlightenment of the 1700's, but it didn't take long before it had caused the West to forget about God almost entirely. Man was determined to fend for himself. Once God had gone away, there was no one left to judge his actions, no one left to tell him to guard his tongue. Man had become the measure of all things. And he thought he would like it that way. He thought he would feel free at last.

But human beings, enslaved to time and change and death, could never remain sure and permanent measures of God's world. Humanity, too, was eventually swallowed up by the sheer size of the universe. And that is why today so many feel that there's nothing left under this vast black sky but a jumble of ill-assorted things. With God banished from the scene, there's nothing left to connect it all together, nothing left to put things into perspective, nothing left to join people to each other. All the big ideas seem to have lost their meaning. Love? Virtue? Sincerity? Truth? Whatever! Nothing but big bloated words:

The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

Most turn away from thinking entirely and devote themselves to watching television, or to basking in the cold glow of their computer screens.

It's no wonder, then, that we also see some folks in headlong flight from human reason, that same human reason once welcomed as such a great light in the 1700's. People are tired of stumbling around in the fog of postmodern despair. Our natural religiosity abhors a vacuum. Once reason had driven out what it thought was the evil spirit of medieval superstition, the soul was left wide open for the entry of a real demon, who has brought along with him 'seven other spirits more wicked than itself' (Luke 11:26). That is why today we see people turning to the irrational, to eastern mysticism, to New-age myth-makers, to any fool who holds out to them the hope of security in some mother ship. The great resurgence of 'spirituality' that we see on

every side of us is in fact the great apostasy, and the turning away long predicted. These are the evil days Paul said we must experience before the very end. Thinking of our times, Jesus once asked his generation, "When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith upon the earth?" (2 Timothy 3:1-5; Luke 18:8)

### The Answer

Come from on high to me, I cannot rise to thee.

The answer to man's despair is found in the burning heart of God, a heart on fire with his eternal love for us poor sinners. Love begets love. God the Son is eternally begotten from the Father's heart. He is Light from Light, Love from Love, true God from true God. Now for the mystery that the Apostle Paul calls 'great' (1 Timothy 3:16). Roughly two thousand years ago, God's Son became a human being. He fully entered our space and shared our time without ceasing to be in any sense who he had always been. The Eternal God was born of a woman. He became 'one of us' in the person of Jesus Christ.

Although the mystery of godliness is a truth beyond all human telling, it is sufficiently and reliably described for us in the words of Holy Scripture. "In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form," "The Word became flesh" (Colossians 2:9; John 1:14). Scripture has testified in language clear and plain the things our God has done for us.

Despite this, from the very beginning of his earthly life Jesus has been a 'sign spoken against' (Luke 2:34). Who he is, and who the unbelieving world is willing to say that he is, have always been two different things (Matthew 16:14). The message of about Christ, the God-man, must make its way in the world not with great fanfare and success, but under constant contradiction.

Because this is so, the Church has found it necessary to safeguard the truth by using a highly formal language when speaking of this subject. Over the centuries, we have learned to choose our words very carefully. At first they aren't too difficult to grasp, words like 'human nature,' and 'divine nature.' But then along comes the phrase, 'the communication of attributes in the person of Christ,' and things start to get hazy. When finally we are presented with those terms which are a delight to every seminary's ear—the *genus idiomatum*, the *genus maiestaticum*, and the *genus apotelesmaticum*—our perplexity grows deeper. Are such terms really necessary? Have the theologians gone mad?

Of course the language sounds strange to us! It was forged in the heat of controversies largely unknown to us, and during a time far removed from our own. In order to understand it, we have to have some sense of why believers found it necessary to talk that way in the first place. As to the importance of the subject, consider what Luther has to say about it, "Whoever wants to discuss sin and grace, Law and Gospel, Christ and man, in a manner befitting a Christian, must for the most part discuss nothing else than God and man in Christ."

We should also be aware that we live in an age weary of doctrine and suspicious of words being able to convey definitive truths. Folks today shy away from definition. They prefer their religion served up spiced with emotion, but bland in thought. If we are impatient with doctrine, at times, it may be a symptom of the world's influence on us. At the same time, however, we must understand that it is not enough to act as if we can simply re-state what has been said in previous ages. Let's face it: so often when we talk doctrine, our words sound a little musty. We sometimes fail to see that our forebears, the confessors, were speaking the truth in love to their own times, and to the dilemmas people of their own generation faced. The words they hammered out were their words. For us to make a complete confession of the same truths, we also need to speak our own words, words drawn from same clear well of God's eternal Word. This is especially necessary in our evangelism, our preaching, and our teach-

ing. We need to speak to our own generation of Boomers, post-moderns, and X-ERs. "Unless dogmatics remains contemporary, it is no longer systematic but rather has become historical theology"

What follows is an attempt to do that. We will take up in order, then, each one of the three *genera* or 'types' of passages in which Scripture speaks about the two natures of Christ and their relationship to one another. First we will briefly define them. We will then look at the historical reasons why the great teachers of the Church spoke of them using the language that they did. Finally, we will try to answer the question of how these ideas speak to our own situation.

### "Who do you say I am?"—The Genus Idiomaticum

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say the *Son of Man* is?' . . . Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the *Son of the living God.*' (Matthew 16:13-15)

As Peter's confession makes clear, the Church has always believed that the man Jesus is the Son of God, God himself. Though he is and remains a single personality, God the Son unites in himself both a divine and a human nature. Though he is and remains true God, he has become and remains true man. Each nature is distinct and remains intact with its own unique characteristics. The humanity of Christ is not converted into his deity, nor his deity into humanity. Nor is it true to say that the two have been mixed together to become a new and composite nature—a being that is half-man, half-God. The union of the two natures is a personal one, not a substantial one.

When we talk about the 'communication of attributes,' we simply mean: Jesus Christ is a single, undivided personality. He is not sometimes acting, feeling, or existing separately in his nature as God; nor is he sometimes acting, feeling, or existing separately in his nature as man. While each nature remains distinct, there is a genuine sharing of each nature's attributes in the one person of Christ. Whatever Jesus is and does since becoming man, he is and does as a single person—the God-man!

In speaking this way, the confessors at Chalcedon in 451, and later at Cloister Bergen in 1577 only wished to preserve the paradoxical language of Scripture in the full weight of its true meaning. When Scripture, for example, says that the rulers of this world "crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:8), it means exactly what it says. God was there on Calvary. Jesus the God-man was crucified, died, and was buried. In his single personality, he participated fully in the sufferings of his human nature. Certainly, if we are speaking in the abstract, it is not possible to say that the deity suffered, or even that it can suffer. But Christ Jesus, who was true God, *did* suffer, according to his flesh. There are not two Christ's: one who suffered, and the other who did not. There is only one.

Similarly, when Jesus asks the people at the synagogue at Capernaum, "What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before?" (John 6:62) he is speaking in earnest words that are perfectly true. Certainly, if we are discussing matters in the abstract, it is not possible to say that the humanity of Christ existed essentially from all eternity. But the man Jesus is speaking as one and the same person as He who can calmly declare, "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58). There are not two Sons of God, one who was born in time of Mary, and the other who was begotten of the Father from all eternity. There is only one. He was born in time, and yet has no beginning, and knows no ending.

This kind of language defies our attempts to pick apart logically. They are unique declarations about a unique person. We are not surprised to find out, then, that when people in the past *did* try to pick them apart, they only succeeded in stumbling. First there were outright unbelieving skeptics like Celsus, who lived toward the end of the second century. People like him had rid themselves long ago of any belief in the ancient myths of their people. They were far too sophisticated to believe in the gods

the way that Homer had talked about them. It was a fairy tale to believe that the gods actually came down and appeared among men. To Celsus, then, the gospels seemed a self-contradictory and ridiculous patchwork, even less credible than the Greek myths!

There were not only denials of the truth outside the church, however, but inside it as well. One of them we probably should mention is Paul of Tarsus, the third century bishop of Antioch in Syria. His emphasis on the historical Jesus led him to divide the natures in Christ. He denied that Jesus could be God in any real sense. According to him, Jesus was only a uniquely receptive man upon whom God was able to exercise his divine influence. By responding to this influence, the man Jesus had been able to unite himself intimately with God, and thus had become a fit channel through whom God worked miracles and redeemed humanity. Eventually, because of his moral excellence, Jesus achieved permanent union with God. This type of false-doctrine has been called "Adoptionism," since it treats Jesus as if he were only the adopted son of God—adopted because of his goodness.

I suppose we should pause to say something here about the influence Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle had upon the ancient world. Their ideas had become commonplace by the time of the great Christological debates. Plato had emphasized the gulf separating human beings in their earthbound, physical state from a transcendent, spiritual God. He felt man could find true happiness only by seeking out a wisdom that would free him from time and space and the material world. By cultivating such a wisdom, he would eventually be able rise up to God. In a later section we will look at the impact this kind of thinking had on some groups called the Neoplatonists and the Gnostics. Aristotle, on the other hand, was much more down to earth. He did not deny the distance between God and the natural world. As a philosopher, however, Aristotle was much more interested in defining and classifying the world he saw around him. He was the great pigeon-holer.

It is Aristotle's mindset that we see at work in Bishop Nestorius of Constantinople. Now it seems that Nestorius wanted to affirm that the Christ was both true God and true man. But he was even more interested in keeping things in their proper categories and in defining things strictly. For example, while he did not object at first to simple people piously calling Mary the "mother of God," he believed that "strictly speaking" it would be better in serious theological language to avoid using the term.

Nestorius thought, apparently, that if theologians took the Biblical paradoxes of the God-man's living and dying at face value, they would destroy the genuineness of Christ's humanity. "For him piety could never be sufficient excuse for careless exposition. . . . In his eyes, the [Mother of God] title was an outstanding example of such terminological carelessness." In other words, he didn't want people to take too seriously the good news preached by the angels, "Unto you *is born* this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ, *the Lord*" (Luke 2:11 KJV). He felt similarly uncomfortable with saying things like "Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead," or "The Word died on the cross." He believed it was much more reverent and fitting to speak of 'the man Jesus' as the only subject of all human activities, and of 'God the Word' as the only subject of all divine activities. In this way he, too, wound up dividing the person of Christ by separating the human nature from the divine.

It was the great bishop Cyril of Alexandria who opposed Nestorius, and who clearly enunciated the Scriptural teaching of the communication of attributes for the first time. About one thousand years later Luther confessed the same truths in the Christological controversies that had erupted during the Reformation. This time it was Ulrich Zwingli, the Swiss Reformer, who had raised a question mark over the reality of the Bible's paradoxical language concerning the person of Christ. Zwingli dismissed it all as a figure of speech, calling it an *alloiōsis*, that is a figure by which "we attrib-

ute to one nature the qualities of the other.” Like Nestorius, he had no objection to referring to Mary as the mother of God, just so long as people understood this as a ‘mode of speech.’ Strictly speaking, she was only the mother of his human nature. To this, Luther replied,

Now if that old witch, Lady Reason, the grandmother of *Alloïôsis*, should say, the divinity cannot suffer or die, you should answer, That is true. Yet because divinity and humanity are one person in Christ, Scripture also, on account of such personal unity, attributes to the Godhead everything that belongs to the humanity, and in turn. . .the person who is God suffers in the humanity. In truth, the Son of God has been crucified for us; that means the person who is God.

The matter did not rest at Marburg with Luther’s refusal to join hands in fellowship with Zwingli. After Zwingli died, John Calvin tried to refine some aspects of Zwingli’s teaching. Zwingli seemed to have been almost entirely unaware of the ancient Church’s teaching of the communication of attributes. Calvin, however, was not only aware of it, but he tried to confess it, attempting to adopt a position somewhere in the middle between Zwingli and Luther. The language he used was so successful, in fact, that his teaching found many secret adherents in Lutheran Germany. Though Calvin was no doubt sincere in his desire to confess the communication of attributes, he could still speak of the divinity of Christ—after the incarnation—as existing, in part, *extra carnem* (outside the flesh). This caused those Lutherans who had remained faithful to Scripture to doubt whether he genuinely believed in any communication of attributes at all. They suspected that, for him, these types of statements in Scripture were *mere verbales* (mere forms of speech).

This is why Article VIII of the Formula of Concord never seems to grow tired of emphasizing the reality of the Biblical declarations. Over and over again, the Formula repeats words and phrases such as *vere; in re vere; propositiones non tantummodo verbales; neque nuda verba sine re* (truly; in actual fact; declarations that aren’t a matter of mere words alone; not bare words without any substance to them). More than anything, the confessors wanted to let the Scriptural statements stand at their face value: God means exactly what he says!

But were they, perhaps, pressing a point too far? Certainly they knew that the whole truth about God is a larger subject than we can ever talk about in any human language. We see, after all, only through a glass darkly. Why did they harp so on this matter? Because they wanted the Scriptural statements to remain in their full force among us, too! “Don’t turn away from the Word!” they say to us through the centuries, “While the Word may not tell us everything, what it does tell us, we can be sure of.” That is certainly a point worth making. As Chemnitz says:

With reverence and care in all these questions and disputations concerning this dark mystery let us turn to the light of God which shines out to us in His Word. Let us keep and restrain ourselves within the bounds of the divine revelation given us in the Scripture. With grateful minds let us be content with the simplicity of the partial knowledge which is given, demonstrated, and set before us in this life by the sure and clear testimonies of Scripture, albeit in part, through a mirror, and as it were in a riddle.

It is right here where Luther, and Chemnitz can also help us speak Scriptural truth to our own generation. First of all, in most of the modern scholarly discussions of this subject, there has occurred a major disconnect between the human and the divine natures in Christ. Ever since David Strauss’ sour skepticism led him in the last century to dismiss the gospels as being largely unreliable myths, people have lost themselves trying to ‘find’ the historical Jesus. Naturally, if the gospels themselves are perceived as unreliable, what they say must first be tested and sifted by human reason before it

can be accepted as true.

Over the decades, people have used different methods to do this, too many to go into here. The basic point we need to understand is that most ‘Christian’ scholars today have divided the man Jesus from the Christ of faith. They believe that the man can be understood, more or less, only through historical studies that adopt a critical attitude towards the Scriptures. The one whom the Church believes in as divine—the Christ of faith—can only be “experienced” in community with other Christians who share the same tradition. The exact connection between the two is uncertain. Some scholars who employ historical methods like these find the gospel records more reliable than others. They would all, however, agree that the gospels have to be tested before they can be historically trusted.

All this can come as no great surprise to anyone here who has ever heard about the “Jesus Seminar,” where scholars vote to decide which sayings of Jesus in the gospels are real and which are bogus. Nor would it be news to any of you who might have caught the recent series on PBS’ *Frontline* entitled “From Jesus to Christ.”

Yet, while some of their language might anger us, and while it certainly has caused great offense in Christendom, it would not be wise for us simply to dismiss all attempts to recreate the history of the world into which Jesus was born as being misguided and useless. Without question, we must understand Jesus within his own historical context so that we can better proclaim him to our own. From some historical scholars we can learn a great deal; of others we should be at least be aware. What we do need to be on our guard against, and what is truly new about all these ‘Christologies from below,’ is the way these scholars drive a wedge between heaven and earth, faith and history, the man Jesus and the divine Logos. They do so by creating a gap between the language of Scripture and historical truth. On this point, there can be no compromise, and in this respect, they can teach us nothing. As Bernard Ramm puts it:

The concept that God comes into this world by the incarnation and appears as a historical figure crashes into all our human self-sufficiencies. It is an offense to our sense of natural order, to our sense of scientific history, to our sense of our intellectual competence, and to our sense of our moral worth. *It is therefore of necessity that Christology and the human mind—wherever and whatever—clash.*

Perhaps a greater problem for us, however, is what any of this can possibly mean to the postmodern generation. Why should a jaded, aging Boomer pause to consider the communication of attributes when the only kind of communication he’s paid attention to for years has come to him via the television set? How can we hope to get past the cynicism and suspicion of the X-ER with the absolute truth of Scripture? One self-described Baby-buster had this to say of himself and his generation, “Our view of religion is skeptical. Our view of commitment is wary. Our view of reality is survivalist. Our thinking is relational and feelings-oriented, not intellectual. We live in the now; we can’t imagine eternity.”

How can we reach people like that? Well, I don’t know that I would start with a dissertation on the communication of attributes. From where they’re at, they probably can’t see it as anything but dull. Reverence for the subtle textures of the gospel paradox is more likely to be engendered in one who already has faith. Once, however, the connection *has* been made with Christ, what a thrill it is to see the way Jesus replaces hard-bitten cynicism with childlike trust in every word God speaks! Then precise connections matter—whichever ones God has placed before us in the Scriptures for our contemplation. These connections matter because the person himself has become connected to him who joins everything in himself (Ephesians 1:10). And then a man is more than ready to get up from his couch. Now he understands in his own

living experience that man does not live by ESPN alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Deuteronomy 8:3).

If I were trying to reach them, then, I would remember to tell them a story. A story that's far more compelling than the sitcoms they've been putting their minds to sleep with every night. A story that's not a cleverly invented myth like the ones they're so prone to believe. It's the first and best story, really: one that doesn't gloss over how far away we've fallen from God's glory, yet one that can still promise us a happy ending. I'd tell them how God was one of us, how he sank down into our flesh to raise us up to himself forever. To help us tell it in a truer and better way, let's have a look at the last two categories of Bible passages.

### *Where Can I Find God?—The Genus Malestaticum*

“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” John 14:9

With the Apostle Paul, the Church has always joyfully confessed that “in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col. 2:9). Note carefully the way the Apostle piles up term upon term. ‘*In Christ*,’ that is, the one in whom we believe. ‘*All the fullness*,’ that is, not merely part, but the fullness; and not merely part of the fullness, but all of it. ‘*The Deity*’ that is, whatever makes God to be God, all the qualities, attributes and power of the Divine Being as it fundamentally present in the Second Person of the Trinity. ‘*Lives*,’ that is, assumes as its permanent habitation. ‘*In bodily form*’ that is in the perfectly human body and soul of the man Jesus. The more we probe this statement, the less we understand, and the more we must adore. We dare not, however, say anything less than the Scriptures say on the subject. In explicating the *genus maiestaticum*, we wish to assert with the Holy Writings that Jesus’ human nature, because it is united in one person with God the Son, has permanently received and continually “shares in the divine power, knowledge, and glory of the Son of God.”

When Jesus came to his disciples and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matthew 28:18), he was teaching them this truth. Even before his resurrection in glory, he declared the same thing by saying, “The Father. . . has entrusted all judgment to the Son. . . he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:22, 27). Here it is worth reminding ourselves of the axiom of the ancient Church which states that whatever Christ “received in time, he received not according to his divine nature (according to which He has everything from eternity) but. . . according to the assumed human nature.” To remove all doubt from his disciples’ minds on the point, Jesus permitted three of them to become “eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Peter 1:16) as he allowed it to shine from, with, and through his human nature on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9).

With the teaching of Christology it has long been true that people have troubled their minds to no good purpose in trying to unscrew the inscrutable. How can the eternal God become a time-bound creature like man? Do you remember our earlier discussion of Plato and his influence on the Greco-Roman world? If ever a man had felt the gulf between God and man, none had felt it so keenly as Plato. To him God was pure, unmoved being. He was utterly above and beyond the this-and-that, the here-and-there, the now-and-then of this world. For this reason, any involvement in the material world Plato saw as a loss of life, and as a falling away from God. Naturally, it was far easier for him to describe God in negative terms—saying what he is *not*—than in positive ones—saying what he *is*. When he did, however, attempt to describe this transcendent world and the way for man’s spirit to return to it, Plato resorted to metaphors and myths: “It becomes *not* a sensible man to affirm that these things are indeed *just as* I have described: but to say that. . . something *like this* is true. . . I count fitting.” God is indeed beyond us, he is saying, but we can tell ourselves plausible fictions that might give us some clues about him, at least.

With the repopularization of his views in the Hellenistic culture of the Roman Empire, Plato’s ideas became the thinking man’s credo. When Christianity was left *out* of the mix, the result has been dubbed ‘Neoplatonism.’ When some ancient intellectuals tried to blend together Christianity, the Platonic worldview, and a few mystic rites, the result was Gnosticism.

Anyone who attempts to describe Gnosticism is faced with the same dilemma as the seven blind men with the elephant: where does a person start? There’s a simple reason for this: Gnosticism was syncretistic. It had no problem whatever discerning the deeper ‘truths’ embedded in the myths of all religions and combining them all into their complex cosmologies. For our purposes it is enough to say that in Gnosticism, God was the One so Far above Us that no human could ever attain to him apart from spiritual intermediaries—angels and principalities and emanations and powers. The material world was evil, created by a malevolent Deity called the Demiurge. Inside some men, however, were sparks of the divine spirit, trapped within the inert ‘stuff’ of the body.

The way out was opened for Gnostics when the Supreme God sent a redeemer to wake the elect. The elect were the ones whose material bodies contained this spark of divine spirit. They were conceived of as spiritual sleepwalkers whom the redeemer needed to rouse from the dream of life. This redeemer—and the special knowledge he brought with him—could bring these spiritual people into the light of true knowledge. He would shine on them, and they would realize their divine origin and destiny. According to the Gnostics, the man Jesus was instrumental in giving them their esoteric knowledge. He was a deeply spiritual man upon whom ‘the Christ’ temporarily descended. This ‘union’ was dissolved shortly before the crucifixion, an event which lacked any real significance for the sect.

Jesus, therefore, was important to the Gnostics as a teacher, as a conduit for the knowledge brought by ‘the Christ.’ But the man Jesus could never have been the Supreme God. Such a thought was inconceivable to them. Gnostics also passed along to their devotees other bits of secret wisdom, much of which was to be received through participating in mystical and magical rites. One who was thus put in the know could pass beyond the bright stars, Venus and Mars, and ascend into the realms of purest light.

Neoplatonism shared Plato’s definition of God as pure \*Being\*. The highest part within the rational soul of man was the closest thing to God in the world of space and time. The created world of ‘stuff’ came into existence when the soul ‘fell.’ How that had happened in the first place was not made completely clear, but it had something to do with the passions and desires that kept man enslaved to his physical senses. He was thus trapped inside a body which was stuck inside a material world.

The way out for Neoplatonists came through the cultivation of that divine spark within. Through a study of philosophy (and maybe a little magic on the side), a wise man would turn more and more inward in thoughtful contemplation of that which \*is\* (Stay with me now, and remember: the only thing that purely existed was purest Mind). In this way, he could increasingly withdraw himself from the world of sight and sound and sense. If he was sufficiently skilled, he might catch a glimpse of that which \*is\* by means of a mystic ‘knowing’ of God. This was the Platonic ascent to the realm of the \*real\*. If it all sounds like your average night on the computer, you’ve got it about right. Neoplatonists wanted to transcend the world of incidents and accidents, hints and allegations to be reunited with pure Being. Neoplatonism made a deep impact on the thought of a few Church Fathers, including Gregory of Nyssa and St. Augustine.

We can see much that is similar in these two ancient worldviews: matter (including the physical body of man) is bad. God is transcendent. There is a spark of God in

man (Gnostics: *some men*). Salvation is not received by faith in the God who became a human being, died, and rose again to redeem us from our sin. Instead it is achieved through the reception of the correct knowledge, and the willingness to put that knowledge into practice.

There is no doubt that these views were widespread in the ancient world. There is no doubt either, as we have seen, that even some ancient Church fathers were influenced by some aspects of this type of dangerous thinking. Yet despite this—and with one voice—the ancient Church stoutly rejected Gnosticism as heresy and affirmed the goodness of God’s creation. They were firm in their confession (as we have seen) that the man Jesus *was* true God, and that he was crucified, died and was buried. The Apostle John had clarified for believers what the chief issues were when he wrote against the early Gnostics of his day. He said “The Son of God. . . came by water and blood” (1 John 5:5-6). Which is to say: Jesus was God not only when he was baptized in the Jordan river (when he passed through water), but also when he was crucified on Calvary’s cross (when he endured the shedding of his blood).

The Greek Church Fathers plainly saw what this mythologizing and philosophical kind of separation of God from man would do: it would spell the end of the incarnation! If the Gnostics and Neoplatonists were right, God was not really present in Jesus in any essential and permanent way. Nor was there any need for him to be! Jesus would merely be a spiritual guide, bringing us into a better understanding of that which we pretty much knew already. The way to salvation lay outside Jesus in making the mystic ascent to the eternals.

To clarify matters under controversy in their own time, these Fathers wanted to confess the full truth inherent in the statement, “The Word became flesh. . . and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory” (John 1:14). That is why Cyril wrote, “God the Word came down to us. . . even into the nature of man. . . [so that by this union he might] endow it with the dignities of the divine majesty. And this, far from subjecting the unchangeable God to this nature’s limits, raised it up to a transcendence of its nature.” The way back up to God lay not in the mystic ascent, but only through discovering God in the very physical, very human Jesus. Without attempting to explain the mystery, Cyril merely asserted that the majesty of God was shared by the human nature of Jesus without altering it essentially in any way, and that the human nature was a fit organ for the Eternal Word.

For Luther, too, the basic issue in confessing the *genus maiestaticum* was the question, “Where do I find God?” His great gospel insight, his solid rock in all temptation, was that the God of love was fully found in Jesus of Nazareth *and nowhere else*. We will allow him to speak more about that tremendous gospel comfort later in our discussion of the final genus. For now it is merely necessary to emphasize this truth as Luther’s Biblical response to Zwingli. Zwingli, as you can well imagine, was unable to accept the thought that the human nature of Christ could so be taken up into God that it, too, could transcend space and time. Zwingli’s logical presuppositions convinced him that a human body—in order to be genuine—had to exist in a space. . . Luther’s retort at Marburg was, “I do not admit mathematical dimensions. God is higher than all mathematicians. Christ can keep his body without space at a certain place.”

His deeper concern, however, is revealed in the following passage, also cited in Article VIII of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord:

Where (Christ) is, there he is as one undivided person. And when you can say, Here is God, then you must also say, Christ, the man, is also here. If, however, you were to show me a place where the divine nature is and the human nature is not, the person would be divided, because then I could say in truth, Here is God who is not man and never has become man. That is not my God!

Similarly for the formulators of the Formula of Concord, the problem was not Gnosticism but the *extra Calvinisticum* described above (see page 5). In open denial of Colossians 2:9, Calvin refused to say that the whole fullness of the Deity existed in Christ’s body. Preferring Zwingli’s logic concerning space and time to the logic of faith, he asserted that Jesus’ body had to be locally confined in heaven, and could not transcend the limitations of human bodies as they existed in our world. As a faithful reflection of his thought, the Heidelberg Catechism confesses that the Godhead in Christ was both inside and outside the humanity of Jesus.

Now our own Confessors took pains to deny that they had any thought of a spatial expansion of Jesus’ humanity. To put it crudely, they didn’t want anybody to believe that Jesus’ humanity had been somehow inflated by Deity to the size of the whole universe like some oversized Macy’s Day balloon. Christ’s humanity remained essentially unchanged, while his divinity remained essentially undiminished. What they wanted to affirm was the same Scriptural truth Luther had confessed: *extra hunc hominem, nullus Deus reperitur*—outside this man, no God is found! They wanted us to keep our eyes fixed on Christ, to understand that in him, God was “sunk deep in the flesh” and that now it truly could be said “God is one of us.”

It is in this sense that Luther’s famous words about approaching God “from below” must be understood. In Jesus we see the love of God as nowhere else. Outside of Jesus, we who live here below can only know God in one of two possible ways. Either we must speculate, using our own reason, in which case we wander from one uncertainty to the next. The only God we find that way must be a product of our own theological imagination. Or we know him according to the law, and discover him to be a God of wrath and judgment. Then we are bound to flee from him. In neither case do we really come to know the true God.

But when we come to him in Jesus, and see him revealed under the face of the Suffering One, then we not only know him truly, we also begin to love and trust in him. He who looks into the face of Christ looks into the heart of God. This is why we must find God in Christ, and in Christ alone: Christ is God from above come down here below. We see him revealed to us in all his glory in the trustworthy words of the Holy Scriptures.

Today, sad to say, we find almost nothing but speculation as people hobble together their Christologies any way they can. We have already looked at the historicists, who have trouble dealing with the “God from above,” the God who has come down from heaven and become incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary. They simply dismiss from their minds, for the most part, any serious grappling with the issues of such a God-man, labeling the idea as ‘myth.’ The theologians we are most concerned with in this section, however, are those who, with Plato, have mastered the art of creating new myths. They hunger for some larger meaning in life than can be found in the spirit-shriveling materialism of modern science. So they look to Christ to provide them with larger answers. Most, however, construct their own myths from whatever materials lie close to their hand. Christ only comes into it as a pretext for talking about other things they think would invest life with greater meaning.

We might call them “the contextualizers” because they try to interpret the meaning of Christ within the context of some overarching, unifying concept. Theology is no longer seen as doxology—as the art of praising God by apprehending his revelation. It is rather seen as the do-it-yourself skill of building a mystery through the construction of whatever metaphor might happen to ‘work’ for you. These contextualizing ideas usually spring from concerns which are current in contemporary society. “Jesus the Liberator” was—and still is—popular in South and Central America. Jesus the New Age Mystic and Spiritual Guide are others. Then there are the ‘theologies’ and ‘hermeneutics’ that seem to reproduce like rabbits wherever you look: Feminist, Gnostic, African-American, Reader-Response, and on and on and on. It seems like everyone’s building a mystery these days. In any case, these ‘contexts’ and metaphors

often act as filters for the Biblical data. Whatever doesn't fit the thesis is usually strained out, leaving behind only that which does.

Now of course we all interpret Christ from within our own situation; no doubt because of the weakness of our sinful natures, some of what is there in Scripture may be hidden from our eyes. However, we also have the confidence as believers of knowing that "we have the mind of Christ," and that therefore, through the Word, the Spirit himself will open our minds to grasp even the deep things of God. Especially, we know, the Spirit will open our spiritual eyes to see the love of God as it is revealed in the face of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:10-16; 2 Corinthians 4:6). Precisely because of this, it is impossible for us to imagine how anyone not equipped with the spirit of faith—a faith that holds fast to the words of Scripture—will be able to say anything that's spiritually true, no matter what context he's operating with.

We are not speaking here of hardworking Christians on the frontlines of the faith who are attempting to translate the ancient story into another cultural context. We must admire the industry and ingenuity of those who grapple head on with these issues, and who make the attempt, at least, to plant the gospel into a new cultural setting. What a blessing it would be if more among us would show that same industry! (And not only abroad, but also at home to a society and a people that is rapidly changing!) Communicating in words and pictures that people can understand is fundamental to fulfilling the evangelical admonition to "speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

However, there are some cross-cultural writers who say they want to communicate the timeless Gospel, but whose words are so 'listener-oriented' that they no longer breathe the same Spirit who speaks in Scripture. That is why the first and most basic question to ask ourselves whenever we try to communicate in this way is one suggested by Dr. E. R. Wendland, "What is truth?" Pilate didn't know the answer, but we do. Truth is found in Jesus, the Son of God, and is mediated to us through the words of Scripture. To the extent that modern or cross-cultural contexts provide some useful analogies which genuinely correspond to the once-for-all gospel-truth of Jesus, to that extent—and to that extent alone—we may press them into the service of the gospel. But where there is little or no 'conceptual overlap,' we should avoid them. As Dr. Wendland points out in another place, "Where the attesting record of Scripture itself is ignored, or is contorted to fit the mold of some secularized methodology, it is no wonder that spiritually voided responses can predominate."

This has been heavy going, I admit, so now I would like to tell you a story. A true story, actually, about the time a woman knocked on my office door in Salt Lake. I had never before met her in my life. That was one of the really neat things about working in Salt Lake: walk-ins like this to our church were not at all uncommon. She said, "I'd like to ask you a few questions about Jesus." I said, "Fine, that's what I'm here for." She began, "Now, about that time Jesus went to India. . . ." "Wait a minute," I said, "Jesus never went to India!" For the next fifteen minutes we went back and forth, getting absolutely nowhere. She had her book, giving her the myth she liked the best about a New-Age, Gnostic Jesus. I had mine. She couldn't see why my book was any better than hers, or why my book shouldn't be judged in the light of her book, instead of the other way round (as I was trying to do). She could tell I was feeling a little frustrated, so she finally said to me (with a great deal of compassion in her voice), "Look, it's fine for you if you want to believe the way you do. I'm okay with that. Your truth, my truth—what's the big deal? They're all different ways of going to the same place." And then she walked out the door, leaving me sitting there with my mouth open.

This was the first time I had realized it. Ancient Gnosticism is making a comeback in the good old USA! People are tired of feeling spiritually cast adrift, alone in a vast ocean of doubt and situated under a blank heaven, without God and without hope. That's where materialism and scientism have left them. They are desperately seeking

spirituality. They long to be touched by an angel. So they have re-populated the middle air with new angels and demons and principalities and powers. They long to make the ascent to heaven's gate, even if it's hidden behind the misty haze of Hale-Bopp, and even if they have to kill themselves to do so. They figure if there are aliens 'somewhere out there,' then maybe they won't feel so all alone. They've also re-inhabited the earth with spirit-guides and channellers and mystic crystals and energy-auras. They want to make a connection to God, you see. Don't tell them it doesn't make sense. It makes sense to them, and that's good enough.

What tremendously good news we have to share, if only we can be patient with them, if only we can get past their defenses, if only we can avoid blasting away at them, and getting involved in some doctrinal argument that leaves behind winners and losers but no converts! We can tell them they don't need to make the ascent. That God has already touched our race with something much better than an angel. That we have something more than a spirit-guide to bring us news of the world beyond. He is not far, not lost among a thousand stars. He's near, very near. They don't have to drift anymore. They don't have to wander down endless paths in search of him. Because he came looking for them. He's come down for them. See, poor and in a manger, there he lies. He is all transcendent mystery and yet, all intimate love. God has sunk himself deep into the flesh, our flesh. There we can find him.

### *How Can I Be Sure?—The Genus Apotelesmaticum*

"The blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies us from every sin." John 1:7

In some ways we have saved the best category of Bible passages for last. Certainly it's the easiest for us to understand, and a great consolation to us in every trial. In fact, we can look at it as being the comfort and consolation Lutherans are trying to preserve in every one of the three types of Bible passages under our review.

The *genus apotelesmaticum* refers to those Bible passages in which the accomplishments of Jesus as our Savior, Redeemer, Mediator, Teacher, High Priest, Victor, Judge, and King are described as the accomplishments of the God-man. Each nature in Christ performs in communication with the other that which is proper to it. In every redemptive act of the God-man, both natures fully participate, each in communion with the other.

For example, Galatians 4:4 tells that "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law." By this Paul is telling us that the Father sent his Eternal Son into the world. He was born of the Virgin Mary, and he willingly allowed himself to be placed under God's law. The purpose for God's sending—and its effect—was the redemption of all those who were under the God's curse as it is pronounced in his holy Law. Being born and placed under law, of course, are activities proper to the human nature. But the fact that this human nature was personally joined to the Eternal Son of God lends infinite value to the fulfilling of the law and to the bearing of its curse.

Similarly, Jesus' shedding of his blood we can call an activity proper to his human nature (see 1 John 1:7 above). But John also says that Jesus' blood has the power to cleanse us from every sin. From this we can easily see that his divine nature is participating in full unity with his human nature in the work of setting us free from our sins.

Thus our faith has the surest comfort. . . the work of our redemption is not the work of a mere man or of the humanity by itself. For thus sin would be even greater, the wrath of God heavier, and the reign of death stronger. By His own blood God has redeemed the Church. . . . For the power of the divine nature itself works through the obedient and suffering assumed nature and thus achieves redemption"

This is what makes our hearts secure and our salvation sure. This is the point Luther

was driving home with his well-known 'God in the scale' illustration: "If God is not also in the balance, and gives the weight, we sing to the bottom. . . But if 'God's death' and 'God died' lie in the scale of the balance, then He sinks down, and we rise up as a light as an empty scale."

We can learn a great deal from Luther, not only in what to say, but also in how to say it. Luther is someone who never grew tired of reciting the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed in his daily prayers, precisely because he knew that there he was recounting the mighty acts of the God-Man, the one who had come to live, die, and rise again for you and me. "It is all ours, and concerns us," as he put it. Luther was a preacher who never grew tired of retelling the simple gospel story for his people in his sermons. He did not always feel he had to chop it up into parts, with a trendy little sound byte for a theme. He was a man who opened his Bible and heard God talking. And what he heard was all that Christ, the God-man, had done for him. Consider these words from one of his Christmas sermons:

Look at the Child, knowing nothing. Yet all that is belongs to him, that your conscience should not fear but take comfort in him. Doubt nothing. Watch him springing in the lap of the maiden. Laugh with him. Look upon this Lord of Peace and your spirit will be at peace. See how God invites you in many ways. He places before you a Baby with whom you may take refuge. You cannot fear him, for nothing is more appealing to man than a baby. Are you frightened? Then come to him, lying in the lap of the fairest and sweetest maiden. You will see how great is the divine goodness, which seeks above all else that you should not despair. Trust him! Trust him! Here is the Child in whom is salvation. To me there is no greater consolation given to mankind than this, that this Christ became a man, a child, a baby. . . . Who is there whom this sight would not comfort? Now is overcome the power of sin, death, hell, conscience, and guilt, if you come to this gurgling Baby and believe that he is come, not to judge you, but to save.

In the ancient church the doctrine of Christ's saving work was certainly proclaimed, even if it was not always preached with the precision we later believers might like. Someone who looks carefully might, however, notice a different emphasis in the way Christ was presented in the West, as opposed to the way he was presented in the East. The East described the work of Christ *from its effects*: concentrating more on the way Christ cleanses, heals, and exalts our fallen natures. The West spoke of it more in terms of *its cause*: concentrating on the need for Christ to make satisfaction for our breaking of God's law. With the Reformation, greater clarity finally came on these points. Then the Reformers were able to enunciate a more Biblically sound confession of both these truths—and the relationship between them—in the doctrine of justification and the doctrine of the mystic union.

The primary proclamation of the Church will always be the forgiveness of sins purchased by Christ, and Christ's alien righteousness given to us as gift by God's pure grace. This proclamation produces faith in us, and faith in us always holds fast to Christ-for-us. But faith in Christ-for-us is also the new life of Christ-in-us. The believer can say with Paul, "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20). He trusts completely in God's promises to make his home *in* us, and is fully convinced that, while outwardly we may be wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed. This is precisely the way Christ brings us at last to the eternal home he has prepared *for* us (John 14:23; 2 Corinthians 4:6 to 5:14).

The crucial point for us to bear in mind here is that *both* the 'Christ-for-us' *and* the 'Christ-in-us' is the God-Man. The God-Man is present *to* faith as the One who loved us, and who gave himself for us on Calvary's cross. The God-Man is also active *in* faith, remaining with us to the very end of the age. We do not need to send our hearts soaring above, where at last we might find him (according to his human

nature) sitting on a golden throne. Nor do we have to struggle in trying to come up with some mental picture of the divinity of Christ—abstracted from his humanity—as somehow being the only portion of him near to us on earth.

We rest our hope simply and always and alone in the whole Christ of the gospels. The one who has no beginning and no ending, the one who walked the dusty roads of Palestine from sunrise to sunset, the one who made all things, the one who grew tired and thirsty, the one who lives in eternal bliss, the one who shrank from the horror of death, the one who is pure, sweet goodness itself, and the one who was tempted to sin—**HE IS OUR BROTHER**. This God of ours has now become bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh—“like his brothers in every way” (Hebrews 2:17)

As our Brother he lived for us. As our Brother he died for us. As our Brother he rose again for us. As our Brother he was exalted to the heavenly realms for us. As our Brother he has filled all things with his loving presence. Oh, how full of God and his love this world is now! If only our faith had eyes that were strong enough to see it that way always! As our Brother he intercedes for us now. As our Brother he rules all things for us now. As our Brother he is present with us now. As our Brother he is living out his life in us now. As our Brother he is bringing us to glory now. As our Brother, soon, we will see him. As our Brother, he will bring us home. And then no one will take away our joy.

Now that God is one of us.