

The Incarnation: Does It Make Sense?

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Many have endeavored to explain the difficult Christological concepts delivered to Christianity by the ancient creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon. Have they succeeded? Can orthodox Christology be defended scripturally or logically? And can the claims that “Jesus is God” or alternatively, “Jesus is God and Man” be understood so that thoughtful believers can understand what it is they are saying they believe? This lecture aims to examine closely the meaning of the words used to proclaim the incarnation, compare the doctrine of the God-man against the gospel record, and come to logical conclusions about the truth-claims of orthodox Christology.

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When someone suggests that “Jesus is God,” or more precisely, that “Jesus is God and Man, two natures undivided in one person,” how do we test these claims?

In the two lectures I’ve been privileged to offer so far to the One God Conferences, we’ve seen that this conclusion cannot be drawn from the writings of John or Paul. Moreover, there is much in their writings which point in the other direction; to that of a unitary monotheistic faith in one God, the only true God, the father of Jesus.

But there is another means of inquiry that we can pursue. Do the claims of orthodox Christology, in the end, make sense? By that I do not mean to ask, are they immediately and entirely comprehensible by mentally limited humans? After all, God, we’re told, never had a beginning, and I’m not sure I can entirely grasp how, exactly, that has happened. Yet the claim uses terms I understand, and does not appear to be self-contradictory. Even if I can’t quite comprehend the way it’s occurred, *I understand what the statement means.*

By the question, “Does the Incarnation Make Sense?” I do not mean to ask whether the orthodox claims about Jesus are difficult “hard sayings.” There are many counterintuitive things taught in Scripture, and genuine paradoxes as well, and we believe them also, as we should.

No, the question means to ask something more specific than that. The question is this: In the final analysis, is it possible for someone to confess that “Jesus is God,” or, more precisely, “Jesus is God and Man,” *while understanding of the meaning of the words he is using?* Certainly this is an important issue, because a theological system which does not make meaningful claims is not one worth believing in. And a faith wherein believers cannot make sense of what they say they believe can never be a triumphant one.

So our task in this hour is to discuss the meaning of the claims of orthodox Christology, compare them to relevant NT passages, and to arrive at conclusions concerning the truth claims of orthodox Christology.

The Calcedonian Model and the New Testament Record

In the fourth century Arius of Alexandria gained notoriety by publically opposing the emerging fashion of the period—that is, Christians daring to call Jesus “very God.” It is not often recognized today that Arius was a conservative in his time. He was reacting to innovations in Christian theology that had been slowly but inexorably marching forward

since the second century. After sixteen centuries of orthodox indoctrination, today the situation is completely reversed. Those who believe Jesus is God are the “conservatives” now, and those who do not appear to be the innovators, the radicals—indeed, the subversives.

No event did more to permanently establish Jesus’ Godhood in Western Christianity than the Council of Nicea in 325 AD., a gathering of about 250 bishops at the behest of Emperor Constantine. Their task was to settle once and for all the disruptive controversy between Arius, on the one hand, and Athanasius, who taught that Jesus was very God.

As Richard Rubenstein points out in his fascinating account of that period, *When Jesus Became God*, Nicea was as much political convention as church council, and for all intents and purposes, the fix was in. Constantine was sympathetic to Athanasius’ view all along, if for no other reason than that in it he saw a more effective path to unify the new Christian empire he’d hoped to build. So in the end, only three bishops could bring themselves to stand with Arius. Naturally, the Council came down on the side of Athanasius and drafted what became known as the Creed of Nicea, to be read in all the churches:

“We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father (the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made (both in heaven and on earth); who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

(But for those who say; ‘There was a time when he was not;’ and ‘He was not before he was made;’ and ‘He was made out of nothing,’ or ‘He is of another substance’ or ‘essence,’ or ‘The Son of God is created,’ or ‘changeable,’ or ‘alterable’—they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.)”

Now, the more one reads this creed the more apparent it becomes that the creed’s positive statements are rather general in nature and its negative statements—what it says they’re against—are quite specific. So it has long been recognized that Nicea did a good job telling the world what the Council did not believe—namely, Arianism—but not such a good job explaining what it did believe.

As a result, a number of theories were bandied about in an attempt to explain how one should understand the Creed’s statements that the Son of God, who was “of the essence of the Father, God of God...being of one substance with the Father,” nevertheless “came down and was incarnate and was made man.” Those theories, developed by men like Nestorius, Appolinarius and Eutychius, created heated controversies which bear their

names, and in time it became apparent that another council was needed to address the nature of Jesus.

Enter the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, which sought to explain once and for all how Christians are to understand Jesus' alleged dual nature. At a gathering of 600 bishops the Council established this Definition, which has served as the orthodox belief concerning Jesus ever since:

“We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhood and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable (rational) soul and body; consubstantial (coessential) with the Father according to the Godhood, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhood, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person, and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning (have declared) concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us.”

Anyone who teaches that Jesus is “fully God and fully man,” being “one person with two natures” is simply offering a condensed version of Chalcedon. It is this Definition, and the Creed of Nicea which gave rise to it, which we critique when we critique orthodox Christology, for they define orthodox Christology. If you grew up attending a Christian church and your parents were not Jehovah's Witnesses, in one form or another this is what you were taught about Jesus.

Our task at the moment is to attempt to understand these creeds on their own terms so we can accurately and fairly test their claims. Many have undertaken to expound on Chalcedon over the years, of course, and what follows is merely a tiny sample:

Moving forward from the ancient period, the Athanasian Creed proclaims Jesus is “One, not by conversion of the Godhood into flesh: but by taking of the manhood into God.”

Calvin wrote of Jesus that “the divinity was so conjoined and united with the humanity, that the entire properties of each nature remain entire, and yet the two natures constitute only one Christ.”

The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks of Christ having “two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhood and the manhood.”

A.B. Bruce explained that “in Christ must be recognized two distinct natures, the divine not converted into the human, the human not absorbed into the divine.”

Earlier in the last century J.P. Arendzen wrote that the incarnation rests upon the distinction between nature and person, and attempted to explain the difference between the two. “Every man is fully aware that, though his fellow men share something with him, they are not he. They share with him his nature, but not his person. They are *what* he is, but they are not *who* he is.”

So, Arendzen suggests, the *what* of Jesus was his two natures. The *who* of Jesus was his personal identity, Jesus, God the Son.

Recently, Ron Rhodes, an associate of orthodox apologist Hank Hanegraaff—Christian radio’s “Bible Answer Man”—explained the traditional doctrine this way in his book *Reasoning From the Scriptures with the Jehovah’s Witnesses* (p. 151):

“Theologians have been careful to point out that the incarnation involved a gaining of human attributes and not a giving up of divine attributes...As J.I. Packer puts it, ‘He was no less God then (in the incarnation) than before; but he had begun to be man. He was not now God *minus* some elements of His deity, but God *plus* all that He had made His own by taking manhood to himself...’ In other words, the incarnation involved not the subtraction of deity but the addition of humanity. So, in order to dwell among human beings, Christ made himself nothing in the sense that He veiled His preincarnate glory, He submitted to a voluntary nonuse (without a surrendering) of some of His divine attributes, and He condescended Himself by taking on a human nature.”

C.F.D. Moule writes, in the spirit of many others, that there was “a unique and distinctive identification of God’s Word with Jesus...in Jesus the Logos *became* a man of flesh and blood.”

Though these works courageously defend the ancient creeds and are undoubtedly sincerely held, are they true? Having now given the orthodox doctrine a fair hearing in both its ancient and modern expressions, we’re ready to begin testing its fundamental claims.

Let’s begin with Moule’s contention that, in keeping with the conventional reading of John 1, the Logos—assumed to be a divine person—became a man of flesh and blood. All exegetical shortcomings of this view aside, what questions naturally follow?

The most pressing seems to be this: exactly what was the same, and what was different about the Logos *after* it had become flesh and blood? What, precisely, is being stated?

Defenders of orthodoxy answer that everything the Logos was continued in his new state; as J.I. Packer explains, incarnate Jesus “was not now God *minus* some elements of His deity, but God *plus* all that He had made His own by taking manhood to himself.”

If this is true, then logically it must follow that *whatever God could not have undergone in preincarnate state he could not have undergone in incarnate state*. Why? Because nothing of God was lost in the incarnation, we're told. God exists fully in the man Jesus, we are told. God plus humanity, not humanity minus parts of God, etc. Only by maintaining this can they say that Jesus was "fully God and fully man." The orthodox doctrine, established by the ancient creeds, demands it.

So then, if God could not experience in incarnate state anything he could not have experienced in preincarnate state, how do we explain the New Testament witness to Jesus?

Jesus' Knowledge

The Old and New Testaments both teach that God knows everything that happens in the universe, including things which are secrets to men, such as activity within the wombs of women and in the secret counsels of men's hearts (I Ki. 8:39; Job 28:10; 42:2; Ps. 33:13; 139:1-16; 147:4, 5; Isa. 46:10; Jer. 23:24; Mt. 10:29, 30; Heb. 4:13; I Jn. 3:20).

Now, in contrast to this, Luke tells us that Jesus "increased in wisdom" (Lk. 2:52). We may well ask why such an increase was even possible—much less necessary—if in fact all of God became the infant Jesus. After becoming an adult, Jesus often revealed the same kind of ignorance of earthly and heavenly events that any normal man would have. He claims to have not known who touched his garments (Mark 5:30-33), how many loaves the disciples had (Mark 6:38), how long people had been demon-possessed (Mark 9:21), when He would return (Mark 13:32), and so on. Moreover Jesus expresses surprise at times when certain events manifest themselves (Mk. 6:6; Lk. 7:9). If orthodox Christology is correct, this is hard to attribute to anything other than conscious deceit.

Incarnationalists sometimes respond by suggesting that perhaps the divine nature in Jesus did know the time of his return and other facts, but this knowledge was purposefully limited. Ron Rhodes suggested earlier that Jesus "submitted to a voluntary nonuse (without surrendering) of some of His divine attributes."

A. N. S. Lane counters: "This is like claiming that I am experiencing both poverty and wealth because there is no money in my left pocket while in my right pocket I have a million pounds. Wealth eliminates poverty. Omniscience and ignorance, omnipotence and impotence cannot coexist. The former swamps the latter. A cup cannot become empty while remaining full... While the Chalcedonian Definition may allow a theoretical acknowledgement of human limitation in Christ, in practice it denies them. As man he may have been limited, but the same one person at that very instant was unlimited as God." ("Christology Beyond Chalcedon" in *Christ the Lord: Studies in Christology Presented to Donald Guthrie*, p. 270)

Lane's point is crucial. Orthodoxy insists that we recognize Jesus as *one person*. This is stressed over and over again, and for good reason. But if this is true, and if all of the

alleged divine Logos personage incarnated Jesus, then that *one person* must have known everything God knows.

Lane has more to say on this subject that demands our consideration: “The question of omniscience is far from being merely academic...It is hard to see how an omniscient man could be genuinely tempted to do something that he *knew* that he would not do...It is hard to see how omniscience could be reconciled with the struggles of Gethsemane and Calvary...To refuse to accept the omniscience of the historical Christ is not to deny a biblical paradox but to defend the biblical doctrine of the true humanity of Christ against an unbiblical intrusion” (ibid., p. 271).

In response to these difficulties, some have been tempted to flee into the arms of the Kenotic Theory, which we touched upon yesterday in our discussion of Philippians 2. The idea here is that upon the moment of incarnation, the Logos emptied himself of those divine qualities which cannot be mediated in a human body (omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, etc.). This was widely taught in the old Worldwide Church of God, and remains so by many latter-day followers of Herbert Armstrong’s theology. As we saw yesterday, it is based upon an unwarranted introduction of additional meaning to the word *ekenosen*—or “emptied”—in verse 7 of that chapter; but its theological difficulties are even more daunting.

On its own terms, the Kenotic Theory presupposes, at best, a partial incarnation. Indeed, *the more complete the alleged divine self-emptying, the less complete the divine incarnation*. How is it that Jesus was truly “God in the flesh” when much of what makes God God was not present in him? Should we not conclude, on the basis of the Kenotic Theory’s own claims, that Jesus was God merely by degree? Informed scholars have thus abandoned the Kenotic Theory, because it effectively denies a complete incarnation. No one wants to claim that in Jesus only a percentage of God existed.

So it would seem we are stuck, for better or for worse, with a complete incarnation. And so, we must ask again, if there was a complete incarnation of the all-knowing divine Logos in the man Jesus, what of his claims to not know things, and his surprise to discover earthly matters that God surely knew?

Is there any answer?

Jesus, Sin and Temptation

The writer of Hebrews offers us one of the most provocative pictures of Jesus in the entire New Testament. For while he promotes one of the highest Christologies—claiming Jesus was without equal in all God’s creation (Heb. 1)—at the same time, he insists Jesus experienced all the temptations common to men:

“For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren...inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same... Therefore *in all*

things He had to be made like His brethren... For in that He Himself has suffered, *being tempted*, He is able to aid those who are tempted” (Heb. 2:10, 11, 14, 17, 18).

“For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, *but was in all points tempted as we are*, yet without sin... He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also beset by weakness...though He was a Son, yet He *learned obedience* by the things which He suffered. And having become *perfected*, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (Heb. 4:15; 5:2, 8, 9).

Now, the most obvious difficulty, which I do not know that orthodoxy has ever been able to truly resolve, is how could God, who cannot be tempted with sin, be tempted with sin to any degree? How is it, if Jesus was truly God incarnate, that any temptation could have occurred at all?

James is very clear: “Let no man say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed” (James 1:13, 14).

What was the manner of Jesus’ temptation? Was it only the need to eat, fatigue from overwork, and fear of death? No doubt it was all that, but Hebrews insists it was more than that: Jesus was “tempted in all points as we are, *yet without sin.*”

The “temptation” was the temptation to sin! This was not only physical weakness brought on by his inhabiting of a fleshly body; it was *moral* temptation, the same kind of moral temptation each of us face every day.

Orthodox apologist Robert Bowman, another associate of Hank Hanegraaff, writing in *Why You Should Believe in the Trinity* (p.75), replies: “God, *as God*, cannot be tempted: but Jesus, who is both God and man, *as man* and living in a fallen earth, was tempted.”

But this is not what these people have told us we must believe about the incarnated Jesus! We have been told by these same people that *nothing* of God was lost in the incarnation and that all of the Logos was found in the man Jesus. They’ve insisted that the divine nature of the Logos was completely and permanently united with a human nature in the man Jesus. Then, when faced with these obvious difficulties, they subtly back away from this conviction, and suggest that perhaps this alleged uniting was not so complete, so that one part of Jesus may have experienced what another part of Jesus did not.

Do these people believe their own doctrine, or do they not?

Jesus’ Will

In Jesus' struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed: "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will" (Mark 14:36).

Jesus' request is direct and clear: "*Take this cup away from Me.*" That was what Jesus wanted! And it just happened to be the precise opposite of what God wanted. Jesus' will was not God's will in this matter, at this moment.

Why, then, did Jesus not sin? Because he also said, "Nevertheless, *not what I will*, but what You will." His will was to not die. God's will, we find out, was that he must die. One of them was not going to get what he wanted, and what made Jesus a fitting sacrifice for our sins is that *he agreed to be the one to not get what he wanted.* We can all be thankful that our savior was willing to thwart his own will to fulfill God's (see John 12:27, 28).

Was there a titanic struggle in Jesus' mind about what to do? Yes! But there is no evidence the struggle was between competing desires within Jesus, but between his singular desire and what he suspected was the will of God. *It was his fear of failing to conform to the will of God which created the struggle* (Lk. 22:44; Heb. 5:7).

It is time we ask those who want us to believe Jesus was God in the flesh to explain exactly how that claim can be true when his desires could—if even for a moment—stand in opposition to the complete Godhood he was supposed to have possessed by nature.

Jesus' "Death"

Now we broach what may well be the greatest difficulty in believing that Jesus was God incarnate: his death. Both Testaments teach that God cannot die (Gen. 21:33; Deut. 32:40; 33:27; Ps. 41:13; 102:12, 24-27; Isa. 26:4; 40:28; 57:15; Jer. 10:10; Dan. 4:34; Ro. 1:12; II Cor. 5:1; I Tim. 1:17).

So is there any teaching in Scripture which suggests that perhaps Jesus was resting, or greatly wounded but not quite dead, or simply waiting patiently in the tomb for his "resurrection?"

No. Every NT prophecy of Jesus' crucifixion, death and burial is made with the conviction that Jesus was going to die like any other man. After the fact, every reference back to his death says he was as dead as any man is dead when he is dead (Mt. 17:22, 23; 21:37-39; Mk. 9:31; Lk. 9:22; Jn. 10:11; 15:13; 18:31, 32; 19:33; Ac 2:23, 24; 3:15; 5:30; 7:52; Ro. 14:9; I Cor. 15:3; I Thess. 4:14).

The words used in these passages—*apokteino, thnesko, thanatos, anaireo, nekros, phoneus*—are all standard-usage terms for kill, dead, death and murder. In the NT they are customarily used to describe the death of mortals; they are not used in a special way when applied to Jesus.

Moreover, for theological reasons, Jesus must have been truly dead; for then no one would have paid the death penalty for our sins, men can have no hope of any life beyond the present, and Christianity is essentially a fraud (Ro. 3:25; 4:25; 5:1-10; 6:1-10; II Cor. 5:8; Gal. 1:3; 4:4; Eph. 1:7; Col 1:14, 19-22; I Thess. 5:9; He. 2:9; 9:9-15, 22, 25, 26; 10:1-12, 18-20; I Pet. 1:18-20; 2:24; I John 2:2; Rev. 5:9).

John Hick elucidates the considerable difficulties for orthodoxy in this discussion: "...the story (of vicarious death for men's sins), whilst it makes perfect sense when told about a good human being, loses its point when the victim is said to God himself. For whilst a human being can make the supreme sacrifice by giving his life for others, God cannot. God incarnate would know that his 'death' could only be temporary; for God cannot cease to be God, the eternal source of all life and being; and to speak literally of his death is to speak without meaning.

Indeed in earlier theology, to avoid undermining the very idea of God, some clutched at the desperate expedient of saying that *qua* God, Jesus was not subject to death and that it was *qua* man that he was killed. (Cf. Bowman, above.) But then we sunder the two natures and thereby destroy the idea of incarnation. How was God incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth if God did not undergo what Jesus underwent?" ("Evil and Incarnation," *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, p. 83)

This question strikes at the very heart of all of the scriptural facts which contradict the incarnation doctrine. Until Hick's challenge is satisfactorily answered, is there any reason to continue believing the doctrine?

A.N.S. Lane offered this observation: "The New Testament gives us a certain amount of material about Jesus but no systematic formulation of this. The theories come in at this level. They are themselves not biblical but they are models which purport to interpret the biblical material. The New Testament provides the data, the theories seek to organize and interpret it... They are to be judged by their success... in interpreting the biblical data—much as a pair of shoes is judged by its ability to fit comfortably round our feet. Which model fits most comfortably?" ("Christology Beyond Chalcedon," p. 280)

Given that the Nicean/Chalcedonian model pinches at the point of Jesus' professed ignorance, pinches at the point of Jesus' differentiated will, pinches at the point of Jesus' temptation to sin, and pinches at the point of Jesus' death—all central issues to the life of Christ—we may be excused, I trust, for requesting to try on a different pair.

Logic, Semantics and the Meaning of "God"

It is an unavoidable fact that when we do theology, words are required. After all, we can't take God out and touch Him, feel Him, measure Him, or take photographs of Him. For the moment, we can only talk about Him.

Human language is, to be sure, inadequate to the task; yet our only option is to not think or talk about God at all. It is a fact that God has engineered us in such a way that we are

unable to express thoughts without words. Perhaps someday we will communicate with each other through some kind of spiritual telepathy. But for now, words we are stuck with.

Now words have meanings, or they have no value at all. The meaning of words is the field of semantics, and so when we do theology we are unavoidably laboring in the realm of semantics. So our only real choice, if we want to do theology at all, is to speak as precisely as we can about what we mean when we talk about God.

Therefore, let's ask, can one express orthodox Christology with words which carry stable and consistent meaning, and can one express orthodox Christology without slipping into the fog of mystification?

We have already witnessed the difficulty of adhering to the incarnation when confronted with the plain facts of Scripture concerning Jesus' earthly experience. Those difficulties alone, I suggest, is enough to dispense with the whole program. There are simply too many points at which the NT patently disagrees with the doctrine for it to possibly pass as "biblical."

But going further, let's ask what, exactly, does it mean to say "Jesus is God," or "Jesus is fully God and fully man?" We all grew up with these statements; we believed them, most of us, for many years. Some of us powerfully preached them to others. So there's a familiarity there. These confessions don't seem so strange, because they're dear old friends; and of course it's ungracious to press too hard upon the shortcomings of old friends.

Yet, press we must, for we do not own our minds and we have not been given the right to believe anything we please, regardless of how comfortable some ideas make us feel. Our minds have been bought with a price, and as such we have a divine obligation to subject our beliefs to rigorous testing, "for those who worship God," Jesus said, "must worship in spirit and in truth."

"Jesus is God"

This seemingly simple confession is packed with semantic possibilities. Let's break this phrase down and attempt to enumerate its possible meanings.

"Jesus"

Typically refers to the historical Jesus of Nazareth, an itinerant rabbi who lived in Palestine in the first century AD, who died on a Roman cross. It also refers to the resurrected Jesus, who was raised to life by God after being dead three days and nights in a tomb, and who later ascended "to the right hand of the Father" in heaven.

"is"

Believe it or not, today we're actually going to discuss what the meaning of "is" is.

(I1) The “is” of identity

“Bush is President.” A one-to-one statement of exclusive identity which should be reversible, so that if “Bush is President,” it can also be said that “the President is Bush.”

(I2) The “is” of predication

“Westby is white-haired.” Predication does not require reversibility, so for “Westby is white-haired” to be true, “white-haired is Westby” need not be true. When white-hairedness is predicated of Westby, it is not exclusive to Westby. Rather, white-hairedness is a quality which Westby possesses, which any number of others may also possess. Some, alas, would be happy to have any hair at all.

(I3) The “is” of existence

“Tyler is a city in Texas”

“God”

Here definitions become more fluid, some of which is the doing of orthodoxy but some of which is simply a fact of scripture. There are six senses in which “God” is used in and out of the Bible:

(G1) The proper name of the Supreme Deity of heaven.

The Hebrews knew God by the proper name YHVH, the name God revealed to them. Today many of us are not inclined to use YHVH, rather to use “God” as an equivalent, so that, when we pray, as David, did, “Give ear to my prayer, O God...” (Ps. 55:1) we are calling out personally to the One whose name to us is simply, “God.” In belief and practice this nearly always refers to God the Father.

(G2) The title of the Supreme Deity of heaven

“God” in this case is a descriptive title, rather than a proper name as such, with a specific and unique reference to the Creator God of the universe. (Gen. 1:1; I Ki. 18:21; Mt. 22:32; Eph. 4:6; Heb. 1:1)

(G3) A divine level of existence

A sortal term for all divine Persons thought to live and exist as God. For Trinitarians, this is Father, Son and Holy Spirit; in Armstrong theology, it is Father, Son, and all faithful believers who will someday be resurrected, glorified and inducted into the God Family to live on what is called the “God plane of existence.”

(G4) Subordinate divinities

All the powers, principalities, and so-called gods of the invisible world, real and imagined, including Satan, his demons and pagan deities. Usually rendered with a lower-case “g.” (Ex. 32:4; Judges 8:33; Judges 16:23, I Cor. 8:5; II Cor. 4:4)

(G5) Exalted human beings and angels

Human beings or angels endowed by God with special authority were sometimes called “god.” The Hebrew term *elohim* is often used in these cases (Gen. 23:5, Ex. 7:1, Ex. 21:6, Ps. 8:5).

(G6) Anything which becomes the object of a religious attitude.

Spiritually speaking, whatever is of most importance to a man can be said to be his “god.” A man’s belly, in this sense, can be called his “god” (Phil. 3:19).

So now we are prepared to analyze the phrase, “Jesus is God.” What are its possible meanings?

Jesus is (I1) God (G1). In this case Jesus was, whether they recognized it or not, the YHVH of the Hebrews. He is also the One Christians refer to when they call out to God in prayer and speak of the One in heaven named “God.” Orthodoxy does not teach this because it excludes the Father and Holy Spirit. Armstrong theology teaches that Jesus was indeed YHVH, but the Father is generally in view when the name of God is uttered today. This inconsistency has never been resolved.

Jesus is (I1) God (G2). Here, Jesus is equivalent to the One God of heaven, and the One God of Heaven is Jesus. Orthodoxy does not teach this because it excludes the Father and Holy Spirit. Armstrong theology does not teach this because it excludes the Father.

Jesus is (I3) God (G3). That is, Jesus exists on the God plane, and lives as all God Persons live. The problem here is that the G3 definition of God does not exist in Scripture. There is no mention of a class of God beings or persons in Scripture. In Scripture, the heavenly Diety is only referred to in the G1 and G2 sense. Therefore this confession concerning Jesus would be unscriptural.

Jesus is (I2) God (G2). Here, Jesus possesses the divine character qualities of the One God of heaven. This appears to be quite biblical, but the NT teaches that through the agency of the Holy Spirit, Christians also possess the divine nature (I Cor. 11:7; Eph. 3:19; II Pet. 1:4). Thus this claim is not exclusive to Jesus, and in any case is not an ontological claim concerning Jesus’ state of being (as is I1 + G1 or I1 + G2). Rather it is a claim concerning the character attributes of Jesus, which all predicate statements are. This is roughly equivalent to saying “Jesus is Godlike,” which I’m sure we would all agree with, and which we know should apply to us as well—“Be you perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5:48).

Jesus is (I3) God (G5). This is the sense in which we can understand Thomas’ declaration in John 20:28, “My Lord and my God!” In a true moment of “shock and awe,” confronting the resurrected Jesus led a stunned Thomas to suddenly realize he was in the presence of more than an esteemed prophet or rabbi, but the very son of God. We understand it is God’s intent that “at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10, 11).

Jesus is (I3) God (G6). This is a confession concerning Jesus we can and should make every day. Christians should have an ever-growing awareness of and appreciation for Jesus' role as our redeemer, High Priest and heavenly intercessor: "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith..." (Heb. 12:2).

So, in what sense can the phrase "Jesus is God" be both meaningfully and scripturally uttered? Only the last three. But only the first three make ontological claims, that is, claims concerning the nature of Jesus' being! There are no confessions here which are both scriptural and support the Nicean/Chalcedonian view of Jesus.

Therefore "Jesus is God" is not a meaningful phrase with respect to Jesus' nature or being, because there is no sense in which the words can be understood which are remotely biblical.

"Jesus is God and Man"

Now, some orthodox theologians would agree with every word of what was just said. They would say that "Jesus is God" is, strictly speaking, not what the creeds teach. The creeds teach that Jesus is God and man, because that is the truth of Scripture, they say.

Fine, then, exactly what does the statement "Jesus is God and Man" mean? Here we need to return to our previous question: If the Logos was a preexistent divine being that became the man Jesus, *what changed in the Logos, and what continued?*

The first part of the question is easy to answer; Logos prior had no flesh-and-blood body, but after the incarnation he did. The problem lies in how to understand the one-to-one identification of the Logos with Jesus of Nazareth that incarnationists want us to make.

This has proven to be extremely difficult for theologians to articulate, so different analogies have been attempted; perhaps you've heard of some of them. One of the most popular has been the fable of the prince becoming a frog. Here we think we have approached the heart of the matter; the body is different, but the frog still has the prince's memory, the same love for the princess, and so on.

But in this case has the prince truly "become" a frog or has he in fact hijacked a frog's body? You'd have to say the latter, because a frog, by definition, does not love princesses. The prince has not *become* a frog, strictly speaking; he has merely *disguised himself* as a frog. This is the idea behind the work of the docetists—whom John fought so vigorously—in that they claimed Jesus was actually a divine being in human dress.

Well, then, we don't want to go there, so let's grant that the prince has not retained his former princeliness, and that like all real frogs he knows nothing of princesses, castles and charity balls. But in that case, the prince has not *become* a frog, the prince has been *replaced* by a frog. The prince, by virtue of losing his princeliness, has effectively disappeared.

Silly fable as this is, does it not precisely outline the dilemma of the incarnation? We are trying to understand the alleged “God-man.” But when we try to affirm the continuity of the Logos, the human becomes a mere suit of clothes; and when we try to affirm the human, the Logos evaporates; and if we try to affirm both, we haven’t the slightest idea what we’re talking about.

Michael Goulder has expressed well the fix defenders of orthodoxy are in: “All attempts that have been made to say what the element of continuity is between the Word and Jesus seem to be either implausible or vacuous, and they have in many cases been declared heresy. But unless *some* element of continuity can be alleged, nobody knows what is being stated, and ‘the Word became a man of flesh and blood’ is apparently not sense. This is the challenge to incarnationists: *unless some continuity between the Word and Jesus is being asserted, their doctrine is not a paradox but a mystification, not an apparent contradiction but apparent nonsense*” (“Paradox and Mystification,” *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued*, p. 54).

The heart of the matter

Have you ever heard of the Christian leopards? In the Sudan, there is a tribe called the Dorze tribe. And if you visit them they will tell you that leopards, of which are quite a few in the area, are Christians.

Now, upon receiving this piece of information you might be tempted to ask, “Isn’t a Christian someone who goes to church at least occasionally, takes communion periodically, and performs acts of charity?” They would answer yes, of course. “Do the leopards here do these things?” No, they would say laughing, they do not. “Well then, if the leopards don’t do those things which define what a Christian is, how is it they can, in truth, be Christians?” And your Dorze hosts would answer, “We don’t know; but we know they’re Christians all the same.” Well, by now you’re not quite sure exactly what this “belief” really amounts to.

What has happened here is that the Dorze tribesmen have so altered the definition of “Christian,” the term can mean virtually anything, and if a term can mean anything, it means nothing at all. Without stable definitions of words, no intelligible communication or thought is possible. So in this connection they are not speaking sense; they are speaking, quite literally, non-sense, speaking in self-contradiction; the rhetorical equivalent of “square circle” or “Marxist entrepreneur” or “Texas culture.”

So it is with our incarnationist friends. When they say “Jesus is God and man” they are using the term “God” in a sense in which the Bible does not use it. We know this because “God,” like “Christian,” involves some necessary points of definition. Quite a number of those defining characteristics could not and did not apply to Jesus, or to any other man. According to the Bible, God, *by definition*, cannot die, by definition, cannot be tempted

to sin, by definition cannot be ignorant, or possess a will contrary to Himself. Yet according to the gospels all these facts apply to Jesus. According to the Bible, God, *by definition*, knows everything, can be anywhere, and can do anything. Yet according to the gospels, none of these facts apply to Jesus.

So then, the incarnationists' "God" just happens to be the kind of God who can die, just happens to be the kind of God who can be tempted to sin, just happens to be the kind of God who doesn't know everything, and so on. When all these necessary attributes of God are qualified away, do we have any better idea of what, exactly, the incarnationist's "God" is than we do of the Dorze's "Christian leopards?"

What the defenders of the traditional doctrine will never tell you, but what we are demonstrating here, is that *a radical redefinition of "God" is necessary to believe any confession of incarnation*; just as a radical redefinition of "Christian" is necessary to believe the Dorze tribesmen's claims about their local leopard population.

Something has to go: the biblical definition of God, or the incarnation. Such is the state of Christian theology at the present time.

Escaping into mystery

If patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, mystery is the last refuge of a befuddled theologian. Eventually, if you ask enough questions of people who attempt to defend the incarnation, they'll fall back upon a last, final plea that, in the final analysis, the incarnation is essentially a mystery and our puny human minds really can't hope to understand it. We've all heard these excuses, disguised as expressions of humility. They appear as regularly as clockwork in nearly every article and book which attempts to defend the indefensible.

I wonder, would these people accept such excuses from someone teaching a doctrine *they* were not inclined to believe? Or would they not insist the man prove his case with scriptural certainty, verbal consistency and sound logic? When will incarnationists begin to live up to the standards of proof they require of others? You know a religion is in trouble when its most highly trained experts cannot explain to you their beliefs.

Maurice Wiles has a good suggestion for those who would push us back into the fog of Christological mystification: "I am not claiming that one ought to be able perfectly to fathom the mystery of Christ's being before one is prepared to believe. We do not after all fully understand the mystery of our own or one another's beings. But when one is asked to believe something which one cannot even spell out at all in intelligible terms, it is right to stop and push the questioning one stage further back. Are we sure that the concept of an incarnate being, one who is both fully God and fully man, is after all an intelligible concept?" ("Christianity Without Incarnation?" *The Myth of God Incarnate*, p. 5).

To Wiles' point, many have explained things this way: "It is only to be expected that the great God is so far beyond our ability to imagine or describe him, that theology, if it be true, will always remain at some level a mystery." Well, how about it? *Does* mystery have a place in Christian theology? Mystery, after all, has a long and storied history in religion; unfortunately, a little too long. It's at least as old as Nimrod and Semiramis.

In fact, mystery religion has been the chief feature of pagan systems through the centuries, and for some very sound psychological reasons. There's power in the invisible spiritual world. The power of fear, the powerful hope of having our deepest yearnings fulfilled. Therefore those who seek to mediate between men and the unseen world, namely the priesthoods of Christian and non-Christian religions, occupy a powerful position. From their position as mediator, they seek to control, and through control, to gain esteem and influence.

Now, there is no more effective lever of control than mystery, because if the believer does not really understand what he thinks he must believe to be saved—but *can trust the priesthood, the keeper of the mysteries, to handle that for him*—then the believer can rest with the assurance that the "God thing" is being taken care of. As long, of course, as he continues to jump through whatever hoops the denomination sets up for him; regular attendance, volunteerism, contributions, etc.

The way this works is, *the believers' confidence in his understanding of his Creator is stolen from him by the mysteries, and redeemed for the price of loyalty to the church.* This is happening all over the world, and has been happening almost since the beginning of time.

Some have asked, didn't Paul himself say in I Tim. 3:16 that the manifestation of Jesus was a "mystery"? No, he did not. The Greek word *musterion* doesn't mean mystification, which is what "mystery" has come to mean in modern English; rather it meant *truth once concealed but now revealed to God's people.*

In fact, throughout his letters Paul tells Christians they are uniquely positioned to understand and *should* understand the *musterion* of God (Ro. 11:25; 16:25, 26; I Cor. 2:7-10; 4:1; 15:51; Eph. 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 6:19; Col. 1:26). Jesus said he came to "reveal the Father," not conceal Him. The heart of Christianity is *clarifying* the true nature of the divine, not confusing it. At least it used to be.

How has Christian theology stumbled down this headlong slide into senseless mystification? In large measure by making unwarranted leaps of logic from often ambiguous scriptural premises. I do not know how to better articulate the nature and wide-ranging effect of this error than Don Cupitt already has, so here is an extended quote from his treatise, "Jesus and the Meaning of 'God,'" which was published as a chapter of the book *Incarnation and Myth: The Debate Continued* (p.37).

"The vocabulary of the developed faith is not only very hard to understand, but also very alien to the New Testament, so it is not surprising that many people today wish to

dispense with it, while yet hoping to retain the divinity of Jesus in the strong sense. And they wish to claim that the idea is taught in the New Testament. Here is an example of the difficulty they get into: in *The Truth of God Incarnate* the editor of that book, Michael Green, writes as follows: 'It would be ridiculous to imagine that Jesus is God *tout simple*. The New Testament writers do not claim this for him; they know he is very much one of us.' So it is clear that, like other theologians, Green does not accept every interpretation of 'Jesus is God'. What, then, is he excluding?

Elsewhere in Green's text we find the following statements: Jesus 'takes the place of God Almighty in the Old Testament, as the one to whom every knee will bow; he is identified with Almighty God...the Father has openly bestowed upon him the sacred name of God...who seems to have accepted worship as his due, and whose theological teaching is 'rampant megalomania...unless he is indeed God' (quoted from C.S. Lewis).'

When the New Testament writers say 'God' they normally mean God the Father, Yahweh the God of Israel and they do not have any idea of a distinction of coequal Persons within God. So in order to proclaim Jesus' deity Green must...support this view by leaps in the argument.

God was in Christ, therefore Christ was God; the fullness of Deity *indwelt* Christ, therefore the fullness of Deity may be *predicated of* Christ; St. Paul *associates* Jesus with God, therefore he *identifies* Jesus with God; St. Paul sees all God's action as being mediated through Christ, therefore he regards Christ as connatural with God; Jesus is God's image, therefore Jesus is God; and so on.

The difficulties, both of logic and exegesis, in the traditional doctrine seem to me to be overwhelming. People say, What will you put in its place?; and my answer is, What else but the primitive faith as preserved in the New Testament?"