

Was Jesus Perfect God and Perfect Man at the Same Time?

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Was Jesus Perfect God and Perfect Man at the Same Time?

According to Orthodox Christian belief, Jesus was perfect man and perfect God at the same time. This belief is necessary for salvation according to the Athanasian creed held dear by most Christians. Modern Christian scholars reject this idea not because it is difficult to understand but because it cannot be meaningfully expressed. The doctrine cannot be stated in any way that is free from contradictions. It is impossible for Jesus to have been perfect man and perfect God at the same time, for this would mean that he was finite and infinite at the same time, that he was fallible and infallible at the same time. This cannot be.

What the creed denies is also quite significant. The creed was formulated in response to the claims of various early Christian groups, and so includes clauses that deny the beliefs of those groups. In response to the Arians who believed that Jesus was not God, the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) decreed that he was fully God. In response to the Apollinarians who believed Jesus was God but not fully human, the council of Constantinople (381 A.D.) decreed that Jesus was fully human.

Then there was Nestorianism: the belief that started when Nestorius denied that Mary could be called "Mother of God." To him, Mary was mother of the human Jesus only. This implied that there were two Christs: one divine, the other human. Against Nestorius, the council of Ephesus (431 A.D.) decreed that the two natures of Jesus cannot be separated. Everything Jesus does is done by both the humanity and divinity in him. Likewise, everything that happened to him happened to both the man and God that he is. Therefore Mary gave birth to both, both died on the cross, etc.

At yet another council, the council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) the creed received some finishing touches and the Athanasian creed was declared official church teaching. Most Christians are not familiar with the detailed implications of the creed and in their own minds conceive of Jesus in the very ways the creed was formulated to deny. This tendency results from the fact that the creed's definition of Jesus is impossible for any human mind to comprehend. One can only repeat the

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words, but cannot grasp the meaning of the required belief. Therefore most just repeat the creed with their lips but in their minds turn to views of Jesus that are less taxing on the intellect, even though those views were declared by the Church to be heretical.

The orthodox doctrine is logically impossible. As Huston Smith, scholar of comparative religion, points out, it would not have been logically impossible if the creed said that Jesus was somewhat divine and somewhat human. But this is expressly what the creed denies. For orthodox Christians, Jesus cannot possess only some human qualities; he must possess all. He must be fully human. At the same time, he cannot possess only some divine qualities; he must have all. He must be fully divine. This is impossible because to be fully divine means one has to be free of human limitations. If he has only one human limitation then he is not God. But according to creed he has every human limitation. How, then, can he be God? Huston Smith calls this a blatant contradiction. In his book *The World's Religions*, he writes:

We may begin with the doctrine of the Incarnation, which took several centuries to fix into place. Holding as it does that in Christ God assumed a human body, it affirms that Christ was God-Man; simultaneously both fully God and fully man. To say that such a contention is paradoxical seems a charitable way to put the matter -- it looks more like a blatant contradiction. If the doctrine held that Christ was half human and half divine, or that he was divine in certain respects, while being human in others, our minds would not balk. (*The World's Religions*, p. 340).

If it was said that Jesus was partly human and partly divine that would not be logically impossible but only scripturally impossible. The Bible nowhere teaches that Jesus was divine in any way. Furthermore, if he was only partly divine then he was not the One True God of the Old and New Testaments. God is All-Powerful, not somewhat all-powerful; God is All-Knowing, not somewhat all-knowing.

C. Randolph Ross is a Christian. In his book *Common Sense Christianity* he debunks the orthodox view "not because it is difficult to understand," he says, but because "it cannot meaningfully be said." He rejects it because "it is impossible," he says. (*Common Sense Christianity*, p. 79). His arguments are so persuasive that I can do little better than just repeat them. To be human means to be limited, lacking in knowledge, prone to mistakes, imperfect. To be God means just the opposite: unlimited, complete in knowledge, infallible, perfect. You cannot have it both ways. You cannot say of one person that he was both. Either he was one or the other.

THIS IS NO PARADOX

To those who say this is a paradox, Ross answers nicely. It is

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important to understand first of all what is a paradox. A paradox is something that seems impossible but can be demonstrated to be true. On the other hand, the creedal statement may seem true to some people but logic demonstrates it to be false. Ross argues with an example that makes the point succinct:

"Ah!" some will say. "That's the paradox!" No, it isn't a paradox. This is a very important point, so please take special note: a paradox is something which seems impossible but which is demonstrably true. Thus, it was a paradox when some scientist carefully analyzed bumblebees and concluded that according to the laws of physics they couldn't fly. There was contradiction and apparent impossibility, but bumblebees kept on flying. However, for an individual to be both perfect and imperfect is the reverse of this: it may seem true to some, but it is demonstrably impossible. And not just impossible according to our understanding of the laws of nature, which can be wrong (as with the bumblebee), but impossible according to the rules of logic upon which all our reasoning is based. (p. 82)

Let me elaborate this last point. Human observation and analysis can turn out to be incorrect. This was the case with the scientist who figured that according to the laws of Physics bumblebees could not fly. The flaw in his procedure is that our understanding of the laws of nature is always improving. New knowledge often declare old to be false. But with the rules of logic things are different. What is true by definition will always remain true unless we start redefining things. For example, $2+2=4$. This equation will always remain true. The only way this can ever become false is if we decide to change the definitions of the component parts. Now, by definition, a thing cannot be the opposite of itself. A thing cannot be perfect and imperfect at the same time. The presence of one of these qualities implies the absence of the other. Jesus was either one or the other. He cannot logically be both. Ross is very eloquent on this:

To say someone is perfect and imperfect is like saying that you saw a square circle. This is an impossibility. Are you saying the circle was not round, in which case it was not a circle? Or are you saying the square was circular? This is not a paradox; this is meaningless nonsense, however imaginative it might be. (p. 82)

To develop this point further, I tried to relate it to what can and cannot be said about Jesus according to the creed. In the diagram we see a figure that is somewhat round and somewhat square. It is unorthodox to say that Jesus was somewhat man and somewhat God. Even the models that combine a circle and a square one inside the other do not work, for in each case you have two objects clearly separable. Orthodoxy does not allow this for the two natures of Jesus. To satisfy the requirements of orthodoxy we must find an object which is at once a circle and a square. By definition, such an object cannot exist (see accompanying diagram, next page).

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The difficulty is not with believing what the creed says. The problem is that the creed in effect says nothing. When we are told two opposites what then are we to believe? Ross puts it nicely:

To say that someone is perfect and imperfect at the same time is to say that "X" and "not-X" can both be true. This is either to abandon the meaning of these words or else to abandon logic, and in either case this means we are speaking nonsense that can have no meaning for us. (p. 82)

The orthodox say that Jesus was imperfect with regards to his human nature but perfect with regards to his divine nature. The problem with this position is that it implies the existence of two persons occupying the one body of Jesus: one perfect, the other imperfect. You need for this two minds, two wills, two characters. But the creed does not allow this necessary conclusion and insists that Jesus was not two persons but one only. Now, this one person had to be either perfect or not, infallible or not, unlimited in knowledge or not. You cannot say of the same person that he was both.

When Jesus faced death on the cross according to Christian belief, either he faced it with the human belief that he would be raised on the third day, or he faced death with the infallible knowledge that he would be so raised. If he believed with human faith in God's power to raise him then he himself was not God. If, on the other hand, he faced death with infallible divine knowledge that he would be resurrected, then he was not taking any real risk in letting himself die. If the divine nature in him knew he would be raised, but he did not know this, then it was not his divine nature. If the divine nature knew something he did not, we are back to two persons.

This could get more difficult to explain as we look at the deeds reported of Jesus in the gospels and ask whether the divine or human nature or both performed those deeds. Let us consider the episode where Jesus curses the fig tree. First, the account as it appears in Mark:

Jesus was hungry. Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again." (Mark 11:12-14, NIV)

As a result, the tree withered from the roots (v. 20). Now, a few things are clear from this episode.

Jesus did not know the tree had no fruit until he went up to the tree and found nothing but leaves.

When Jesus saw leaves from a distance he hoped to find fruit on the tree.

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It was not fig season, and this is why the tree had no figs. This comment from Mark clearly, implies that it was a perfectly good tree. If the tree was barren, Mark's comment about the season would have been pointless and misleading.

Jesus did not know it was not fig season. If he had known this, he would not have expected the tree to have fruit, and he would not have cursed the tree for having no fruit.

The whole thing began when Jesus felt hungry.

Now it is easy to understand that the human Jesus felt hunger, and that the human Jesus did not know it was not fig season and so mistakenly expected the tree to have fruit. A divine Jesus would have known all these, and would not have to go to the tree to discover it had no fruit; he would not have been hungry in the first place.

Now the cursing of the tree is a little more difficult for those who assert the divinity of Jesus. His miracles, they say, are performed by his divine nature. Okay, so the divine Jesus cursed the tree. But why? Why ruin a tree which in Mark's view was a perfectly good tree? Come fig season this tree would have had fruit and others could have eaten from it. The reason was that the human Jesus made a mistake. But why did the divine Jesus act upon the mistake of the human Jesus? Does the human mind in Jesus guide the divine nature in him? Actually, there is no warrant for all this speculation, for scripture nowhere says that Jesus has two natures. Those who want to believe contrary to scripture that Jesus was fully human yet fully divine can go on speculating.

Some will say that everything is possible with God, and that we are using words here with their human meanings. This is true. Everything is possible with God. We believe that. If you tell me God did such and such and He is such and such I cannot say it is impossible. But what if you say "God did and did not," or "He is and is not?" Your statements are meaningless. When you say that Jesus is perfect God and perfect man at the same time you are saying two opposite things. Therefore, I reply, "Impossible!"

So what we need here is to hear it said with meaning. If you think that the words have a different or deeper meaning, when applied to God I cannot help agreeing with you. But I would like to know with what meaning you are using those words. Ross explains:

If you wish to redefine some of these words, that's fine, as long as you can tell us the new meanings that you are using. The usual practice, however, seems to be to say that while one cannot say precisely what these new meanings are, one is nevertheless sure that they fit together in a way that makes sense. This, of course, is simply an effort to duck the requirements of logic. But if you do not know the meanings of the words which you are applying to Jesus, then you are simply saying "Jesus is X" and "Jesus is Y," X and Y being unknowns. This, of course, is to say nothing at all. (p. 83)

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As a result of this confusion, many Christians revert to the idea that Jesus had two natures that are separable. Sometimes he acts as a human and sometimes he acts as God. This, of course, is not supported by scripture, and it would have been wiser to move to the scriptural position that Jesus was a man and a servant of God (See Matthew 12:18, Acts 3:13, Acts 4:27 in the Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version).

William Ellery Channing is one of many Christians who have moved to that scriptural position. He wrote thus:

Where do you meet, in the New Testament, the phraseology which abounds in Trinitarian books and which necessarily grows from the doctrine of two natures in Jesus? Where does this divine teacher say, "this I speak as God, and this as man; this is true only of my human mind, this only of my divine?" Where do we find in the Epistles a trace of this strange phraseology? Nowhere. It was not needed in that day. It was demanded by the errors of a later age.

We believe, then that Christ is one mind, one being, and, I add, a being distinct from the one God. That Christ is not the one God, not the same being with the father, is a necessary inference from our former head, in which we saw that the doctrine of three persons in God is a fiction Jesus, in his preaching, continually spoke of God. The word was always in his mouth. We ask, does he by this word ever mean himself? We say, never. On the contrary, he most plainly distinguishes between God and himself, and so do his disciples. (William Ellery Channing, *Unitarian Christianity and Other Essays*, edited by Irving H. Bartlett (U.S.: Liberal Arts Press, 1957) pp. 17–18)

Channing contends that since the doctrine of the two natures is "so strange, so difficult, so remote from all the previous conceptions of men," it would have been taught with utmost clarity in the Bible had it been a necessary belief for Christians. But no such teaching can be found in the Bible. Some Christians say, however, that some passages ascribe divine qualities to Jesus and others human qualities. To reconcile all these necessitates the said doctrine. Channing replies that those passages that seem to ascribe divine qualities to Jesus can be easily explained without resorting to the doctrine. He regards with disdain what he understands to be the solution proposed by other Christians:

In other words, for the purpose of reconciling certain difficult passages, which a just criticism can in a great degree, if not wholly, explain, we must invent a hypothesis vastly more difficult, and involving gross absurdity. We are to find our way out of a labyrinth by a clue which conducts us into mazes infinitely more inextricable. (p. 17)

Many, like Channing, after thorough study have concluded that Jesus was simply a man chosen by God to deliver His message. The mighty works he did were by the permission and aid of God. Jesus of his own

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could do nothing. The book *The Myth of God Incarnate*, edited by John Hick, is a collection of essays written by practicing Christian theologians and clergymen. Anyone who still has a doubt about this matter should read that book.

Finally, we must turn to God for His guidance. He sent His final book, the Qur'an to rescue mankind from the theological traps of humanly invented dogmas. The Qur'an addresses Christians and Jews:

O people of the Scripture! Now hath Our Messenger come unto you, expounding unto you much of that which ye used to hide of the Scripture, and forgiving much. Now hath come unto you light from Allah and a plain Scripture, whereby Allah guideth him who seeketh His good pleasure unto paths of peace. He bringeth them out of darkness into light by His decree, and guideth them unto a straight path. (Qur'an 5:14–15)

And again:

Say: O People of the Scripture! Stress not in your religion other than the truth, and follow not the vain desires of the folk who erred of old and led many astray, and erred from the plain road. (Qur'an 5:77)

Let us pray to Allah for His help. Nothing is possible without His help. O Allah! Guide us and guide all of humankind on the straight path.

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