

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

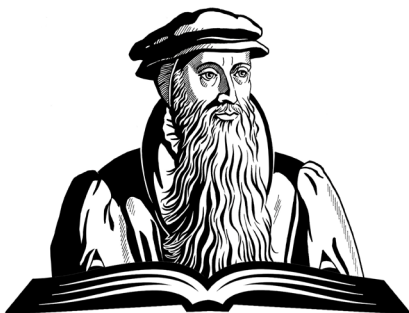
by Dr. Stephen Myers and Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 4:

CHRISTOLOGY— THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

Lecture 4

THE HYPOSTATIC UNION



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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by Dr. Stephen Myers and Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 4 ~ Christology

Lectures by Dr. Stephen Myers:

1. Introduction to Christology
2. The Divinity of Christ
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SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 4 ~ Lecture 4

The Hypostatic Union

Imagine entering the spacious ballroom of a wealthy palace. Lining the walls, you see intricately-carved panels of the finest mahogany, and a beautiful marble floor under your feet. But your eye catches something even more exquisite. In the middle of the room, a large chandelier hangs from the vaulted ceiling. It is covered with an enormous white sheet, through which, bright lights shine into the room, illuminating the space. Underneath the sheet, the chandelier is crafted from pure gold, and decked with precious stones that reflect the numerous lights that cover the chandelier. But from the outside, all of that is covered from sight by the sheet. What shines through is the light and the colors through the sheet.

Well, this serves as a simple and even inadequate illustration of the doctrine of Christ's incarnation. In Christ's earthly ministry, much of his divine glory was hid from those who saw him. Not all could see the exquisite beauty of the one who himself is God. But that is not to say that they saw no glory at all. John speaks for the disciples and others when he writes in John, chapter 1, verse 14, "We beheld his glory; the glory as of the only begotten of the Father." The light of the divine glory of his Person shined through, and his followers beheld him, and they worshipped him, as we see in John 9, verse 38.

The series of lectures in this fourth module or course on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the Doctrine of Christ. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the last couple of lectures, we have learned that Christ has both a human nature—a true body and a reasonable soul—which he assumed to himself in his incarnation. And we learned that Christ has a divine nature, as one who is the eternal God, the second Person of the blessed Trinity. Well, having considered his two natures, in this lecture, we will explore another Biblical doctrine, that Christ is One Person. He is the God-man, in two distinct natures and one Person forever.

And so in this lecture, we'll be considering this under the fourfold pattern that we've used in many of the other lectures throughout Systematic Theology. We'll consider it scripturally, we'll consider it doctrinally, we'll consider it polemically, and then fourthly, practically.

And so we will begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Christ's one Person. In 1 Timothy 3, verse 16, we read these words, "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh." God was manifest in the flesh. This is described as a great mystery. A mystery in the Bible refers to something previously hidden and unknown to the sight and knowledge of men, which God graciously reveals to his people. So it is to be believed, though beyond the reach of unaided and fallen reason. Paul says it is "a great mystery," similar perhaps to the doctrine of the Trinity of three Persons in the

divine essence. Indeed, if you have not listened to the eighth lecture in the second module of Systematic Theology, which covers the doctrine of the Trinity, it would prove helpful background to this present lecture. But going back our text in 1 Timothy, it also described this as “the mystery of godliness.” Why?—well, all doctrine, but especially this doctrine, promotes powerful and practical godliness, in all of its aspects. All of this is said to be beyond all dispute and doubt. It’s without controversy, the passage says.

But what is the mystery itself? We are told that God was manifest in the flesh. Well, it’s not speaking of God’s essence in the abstract. And it’s not speaking of the first Person of the Trinity, or the third Person of the Trinity, because what follows in this passage cannot be said of them. It refers to the second Person, the Son, the eternal Word—the one that John describes in the first verse of his Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John goes on to say, in verse 14, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” So that’s parallel to the passage we’re looking at in 1 Timothy, but here, in John 1, it’s “the Word was made flesh.” And so, he is the eternally begotten Son of the eternal Father, from whom proceeds the eternal Spirit. This is why we read in John 8, verse 58, “Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am.” And Jesus says, in John 10, verses 30 to 31, in that section, he says, “I and my Father are one.” Well, the Jews understood his meaning, and they sought to stone him, because he claims to be God, because he is God. And so, in 1 Timothy, it speaks of a divine Person, the second Person of the Trinity, before his incarnation, which is another proof of his true and proper deity, as you heard in a previous lecture. The Son of God in his divine nature is, of course, equally as invisible as God the Father. But he was “made manifest,” the text says, he was made manifest by assuming a human nature into union with his Person, so as to be seen, and heard, and felt. The passage says, “manifest in the flesh.” That refers to him taking this whole human nature to himself, consisting of a true body and a reasonable soul. Indeed, the word “incarnation” means literally, “in flesh.” It refers to the humiliation, and condescension of the eternal Son of God, in taking to himself a human nature, and continuing as both true God and true man in two distinct natures, and one Person forever.

Well, this is the central theme to which the entire Bible points. From the beginning, in Genesis 3:15 forward, everything pointed to Christ’s coming. Yes, there were other manifestations of him in the Old Testament, but this text describes the singular event of his incarnation. God purposed in the incarnation to reveal his divine glory. So we read in John 1, verse 18, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” Likewise, in John 14, verse 9, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.” The whole New Testament expounds this theme. Christ is the fullest and final revelation of God. The Bible describes Christ as the one “who is the image of the invisible God”—Colossians 1:15; and elsewhere, “Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person”—Hebrews 1, verse 3.

So our knowledge of God is tied to the revelation in the Person of his Son. To be God-centered is also to be Christ-centered. And so it is Christ’s one Person that we will consider in this lecture.

Secondly, let’s consider some of the doctrinal details regarding Christ’s Person, and the *Larger Catechism* will help summarize the doctrine for us. In *Westminster Larger Catechism*, question #36, we learn, “The only Mediator of the covenant of grace is the Lord Jesus Christ, who being the eternal Son of God, of one substance and equal with the Father, in the fulness of time became man, and so was and continues to be God and man, in two entire distinct natures, and one person for ever.” And to summarize, so if we want to boil this down to a single phrase, it’s this language, “two distinct natures in one person.” That’s what we have to have engraved on our minds. Two distinct

natures in one person. Let's consider what this means, what this entails doctrinally.

We'll begin with the two distinct natures. You've had two lectures describing each of them. But we're going to think of them in light of the doctrine before us. Two distinct natures. A nature has distinct attributes, properties, and powers. So the attributes of the two natures in the Lord Jesus Christ are without mixture. We call them "distinct"—two distinct natures. The two natures are without mixture. The two distinct natures are unified in the one Person. So the unity is in the one Person. The two natures remain distinct. And by that, we mean it did not produce a new hybrid nature by this union. So it's not as if the divine nature and the human nature are blended together, and now there's one new nature as a result that's kind of a mix of the divine and human natures—no! that's not what it's teaching, the Bible. It's teaching there's two distinct natures.

Christ is revealed as having all the attributes of deity, and all the attributes of humanity, including a body and soul. Let me describe it in one of the early church creedal statements produced by the Council of Chalcedon. We read in part of that statement, it describes Christ as "One and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial"—or coessential—"with the Father, according to the Godhead, and consubstantial"—or coessential—"with us, according to the manhood." So there's no confusion of the two natures. Chalcedon goes on to say, "one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of the 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."

Well, this leads to the next clarification, definition, distinction. We're speaking of Christ as one person. So the question I have is this, Who is that person? The answer is this: it is the Person of the eternal Son of God. The divine second Person of the Trinity assumed an impersonal human nature to himself. And so, the person isn't something new. It is the eternal Son. That's important, because when we speak about the two natures being distinct, we need to be clear—there are not two persons, a human person and a divine person. A twofold personality does not exist in Christ. We have no account of the human speaking to the divine, as it were, within Christ. While there is interaction between the three Persons of the Trinity, there is no analogy like that within the Person, the one Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You'll note, for example, that the Scriptures always use singular person pronouns concerning Jesus Christ. This one Person in the union is, in theology, it's called "the Hypostatic Union." It's speaking of a union of subsistence. We've seen that the Son assumed into permanent union with his Person a human nature. But let's be clear now. God the Son did not change in his divine being. God cannot change. He's infinite, he's eternal, he is immutable, he's unchanging. God the Son cannot change in any way with regards to divine being. And so that helps us. We remember the theology that we learned in the second module of Systematic Theology. That means that Christ did not relinquish some of the attributes of God in becoming man and suffering death, and so on. Nor did he divest himself of divine powers. In the incarnation, there was no subtraction, there was no loss to his being as a divine Person. He remained, and always remains the immutable Son of God. But in taking the human nature, it was his in that unique sense.

So to further clarify, he did not assume a human person. The divine Son did not come and then embody a preexisting person called Jesus, whom he indwelt—no, not at all. At his conception, conceived by the Holy Ghost, he took to himself a sinless human nature. And this is a miracle in

several respects; not just the virgin birth, which is a miracle; not just that he was conceived by the Holy Ghost; but all of the other attending parts of what's entailed in this incarnation reveal what is miraculous to us.

We should also see reinforced here that it is a permanent union. Two distinct natures in one person forever, we said at the beginning. So it's not as if while Jesus was on the earth he had this human nature, and then he shed the human nature on his return to heaven—no! He remains forever the God-man. That means that Christ's glorified human nature is locally present in the highest heavens. As some of our theological fathers said, human dust is on the throne of heaven. Romans 8, verse 34, "It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." The one who died, and the one who is risen, is also the one at the right hand of God. And so there is one Person, not two. Just as we said there are two natures, not one.

But we can also think a little more carefully about the communication of the properties of these two natures. And here we can turn again to the *Larger Catechism*, question #40, where we learn, "It was requisite that the Mediator, who was to reconcile God and man, should himself be both God and man, and this in one person, that the proper works of each nature might be accepted of God for us, and relied on by us, as the works of the whole person." So it says, "and this is one person...as the works of the whole person." The properties of both the divine nature and the human nature are the properties of the one Person. Therefore, what is ascribed to either nature—the human nature and the divine nature—is ascribed to the one Person. Well, this makes so much sense, when we're reading our Bibles. This enables us to understand the numerous passages of Scripture, where Christ, perhaps with a divine title, can have human properties ascribed to him, or on other occasions, where Christ, in his human nature, has divine properties ascribed to him. Because the properties of both natures are ascribed to the one Person. In all of Christ's actions, it was the God-man, the one Person who was acting. The works of Christ were the works of the one Person. Nevertheless, there is never a confusion or a blending of those two natures. And so we read about Jesus growing in wisdom and stature. We read about the developments that take place in his life, and so on. That's all appropriate with regards to the human nature. And we read about other things that are appropriate to his divine nature.

It is because Jesus is both God and man, that he can be the Mediator between God and man. We'll be learning more about that in the lectures that follow, how, as Mediator, he brings God and man together. We've noted that the human nature of Christ was exalted to heaven at his ascension, where he remains forevermore both God and man. So, to summarize, rather in a condensed way, we can say this: Not two, not one, but two in one. Two distinct natures in one person forever.

Well, next we turn to the polemical consideration of this doctrine, assessing some of the errors related to the doctrine of Christ's one person. You may recall that in the fourth century, the fourth-century debate between Athanasius and Arias, and the difference between orthodoxy and heresy centered on a single letter. The smallest letter in the Greek alphabet, which is the letter *iota*. There was a difference between Athanasius and Arias over this single letter. Why? Because in one Greek word, *homoousios*, the letter *iota* is not found in the middle. Whereas, in the other word, *homoiousios*, contains the letter *iota*. Okay, what does that mean, especially if we don't now Greek? Athanasius affirmed Christ's divine Person. He asserted *homoousios*, which means that Christ was the same substance with God, *homo* means "same," *ousios* means "substance" or "essence." So he was of the same essence or substance with God. Arias denied Christ's divine Person. He asserted *homoiousios*, which means "similar substance" to God, not the same—*homoi*

means “similar.” You also had another character, Eunomius, who asserted *heteroousios*, which means Christ was “of a different substance” altogether than the Father—*hetero* means “different.” So this is an example from the fourth century. You can see how the debates are taking place within the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me give you a sample of some of the early heresies. And why is this important? Not just to know history, but because these provide recurring themes, errors that continue to recirculate from generation to generation. So knowing some of this history enables you to watch for them, to spot them, to recognize and reject them as unbiblical errors. I’ll give you some examples. There were some in the early church who denied the preexistence of Jesus, thus denying his essential deity. So they believe that when Jesus was conceived and born, he came into existence. They don’t believe, as we learned from 1 Timothy, that it was God who was manifest in the flesh. A second error, there were those who believed that God adopted the human, Jesus, a human person, as his divine Son. That’s clearly not what the Bible teaches. Some deny the two distinct natures of Christ. They said, well, Christ is neither divine nor human, but a new singular nature, a combination of the two. And so in that case, you have one person, one nature, if you will. Others when in the other direction, and they denied the unity of the Person, by so stressing the two natures, that it resulted in Christ being two persons rather than one.

Later on, in the Patristic era, there were those who contended that there were two persons, and two natures. You can see that error. Later on, the monophyletists taught that Christ, while the God-man, possessed a singular will. That is in error, because in his divine nature, there is the divine will, and in the human nature, one of the attributes of the human nature included him having a human will as well. And so they failed to recognize the distinction at that point between the two natures. And this gives you some examples of the sorts of errors that continue to circulate.

I want to give you one other example drawn from later in history, the Reformation and post-Reformation period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They had some of the old errors there. You had the Socinians, which were like the Arians, who denied the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. We see the same thing today. There are the Jehovah Witnesses, as they call themselves. They insist that Jesus is man, that he is not God. They deny the Trinity, they deny the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. That was there, and it continues to surface in each generation.

But I want to narrow the scope just to show you how we move from the doctrine of Christ to other doctrines. There was a debate that arose between the Lutherans and the Reformed, and it took place within the context, not in the first instance over the Person of Christ, but rather the debate over the Lord’s Supper. And more specifically, the nature of Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper. So the position of some of the Lutherans taught the ubiquity of Christ’s human nature, that Christ’s human nature was not limited, as it were, as a human nature is, and local in heaven, but that his human nature could be found in every place. So some of the Lutherans have tended to follow some of the errors from the early church on this point perhaps, by claiming the participation of Christ’s human nature in the divine perfections, which were communicated to his human nature at the incarnation. As I said, this controversy arose in the context of debates over Christ’s presence in the Lord’s Supper. Some of the Lutherans were maintaining that the human nature of Christ, his body and blood, have omnipresent abilities, and thus, are locally present in the Lord’s Supper itself. That Christ’s body and blood is by, with, and under the bread and wine. This doctrine is called *consubstantiation*. Well, Calvin’s position was very different. Calvin, following the orthodox expressions of Biblical Christology, as summarized in the Chalcedonian tradition, with people like Athanasius and Augustine. He maintained the transcendence of the divine nature of Christ,

and the heavenly location of the body of Christ in his human nature. He stressed that even in the incarnation, the finite humanity of Christ was incapable of receiving the full infinite attributes of the divine nature, such as omnipresence, and so on. And he insisted on his in a phrase. He said, “The finite cannot contain the infinite.” With regards to the Lord’s Supper, Calvin insisted Christ is truly present in the Lord’s Supper by his Spirit, but not physically in his human nature present in the Lord’s Supper. So I mention this just as an illustration, as an example of how our understanding of the doctrine of Christ can influence other doctrines as well. The Reformed confessions—Belgic Confession, Helvetic Confession, Thirty-nine Articles, Westminster Standards—all followed Calvin on this point.

Well, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves, briefly. First of all, the doctrine of Christ’s One Person leads us to worship Jesus Christ in his divine glory, as our Lord and King. We should respond as the disciples did. We should worship him as the Person of the Son of God and ascribe to him the glory that is due to his name.

We should also approach the Most High with confidence through our sympathetic Mediator, the God-man. We’ll explore more in future lectures the relationship of salvation to this doctrine, very important, that Christ is both God and man in one Person. That’s necessary for the salvation of sinners. But it’s also a great comfort to believers. Here is one who is God, and therefore knows all things before and after they happen. And he also one who also has a human nature. He knows the frailties and temptations of our humanity. You think of the end of Hebrews 2, and end of Hebrews 4, and all of the consolation that’s derived from the sympathy and compassion of the God-man.

But also, we should listen with fear to what the Lord Jesus Christ says, and to do what our Lord proclaims, because he speaks to us through his Word with divine authority. It is none less than God himself, the eternal Word who speaks to us in the Scripture.

Furthermore, we should seek to be conformed to his image. He is the supreme perfection of all that our humanness entails, that human nature that’s been united to his divine Person. And what is it to mature as a Christian? It is to become more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ, to die unto sin, to grow in righteousness, and in conformity to who he is.

Fifthly, and lastly, we should have jealousy over the orthodox doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ. This requires careful precision, but it is motivated by preserving and proclaiming the true glory of Jesus Christ. Few things should arouse us more than those who contradict the Biblical doctrine regarding the Person of Jesus Christ.

Well, in conclusion, building on the previous lectures regarding Christ’s human and divine natures, in this lecture, we’ve learned that Christ is one Person. He has two distinct natures, and one Person forever. In the next lecture, we’ll build upon this doctrine by considering the states of Christ—his state of humiliation, and his state of exaltation.