

Christology

We believe that Jesus Christ, the unique Son of God and the second person of the Trinity, is the eternal Word made flesh, supernaturally conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of a virgin. He is perfect in nature, teaching, and obedience. He is one person with two distinct natures—fully God and fully man. He was always with God and is God. Through him all things came into being and were created. He was before all things, and in him all things hold together by the word of His power. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, and in him dwells all the fullness of God.¹

I. The Humanity of Christ**A. The biblical doctrine of humanity**

1. Humans are by God's created design earthly beings (Gen. 1:26–27; 2:7), designed for life in the physical universe that God made.
2. Humans did not exist in heaven (or anywhere else) before their physical conception and birth on earth, contrary to Mormon doctrine.
 - a. 1 Corinthians 15:46 says we begin as physical beings and will in the resurrection receive spiritual (or supernatural) life as well.
 - b. The NT contrasts the heavenly origin of Jesus Christ with the earthly origin of both John the Baptist (John 3:31) and Adam (1 Cor. 15:47), showing that Jesus is unique among human beings in having preexisted his human life.
 - c. The same point appears in Jesus' claim to have preexisted Abraham (John 8:56–58); this claim is a trivial one if all human beings, *including Abraham himself*, existed before Abraham's human life (cf. John 16:28). Jesus alone descended from heaven (John 3:13).
3. Humans die once (Heb. 9:27), and thus reincarnation is false.
4. Humans are created in "the image of God" (Gen. 1:26–27).
 - a. What it does not mean
 - (1) That humans are Gods or potential Gods, i.e., we are not and never will be uncreated, omnipotent beings (cf. Isa. 43:10).
 - (2) That God is an anthropomorphic being; anthropomorphisms in Scripture are clearly not to be taken literally (see, e.g., Isa. 66:1–2).
 - b. What it does mean

¹ "Jesus Christ, God the Son," *Statement of Faith*, Reformation Church, accessed March 18, 2025, <https://thereformationchurch.com/statement-of-faith>.

- (1) Humans are God's representatives or agents in the physical world (Gen. 1:28).
- (2) Humans are capable of likeness to God in some wonderful respects: we have the potential to become morally perfect (cf. Matt. 5:48) and to become immortal (Rom. 2:7; 1 Cor. 15:53–54; 2 Tim. 1:10).
- (3) Humans belong to God (cf. Mark 12:13–17).

5. Human beings, when alive, are a union of physical and spiritual aspects.

a. The NT repeatedly represents human nature as a duality of material and immaterial aspects:

- (1) body and soul (e.g., Matt. 10:28)
- (2) body and mind (e.g., Rom. 12:1–2)
- (3) body and spirit (e.g., 1 Cor. 7:34; James 2:26)
- (4) flesh and spirit (e.g., 1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 7:1)
- (5) flesh and heart (e.g., Rom. 2:28–29)
- (6) outer man and inner man (e.g., 2 Cor. 4:16)

b. Consistent with that pattern, created realities are sometimes divided into two kinds, the visible and the invisible (e.g., Col. 1:16).

c. Human beings, though they were created to live in the physical world, are capable of existing as persons in the spiritual realm as disembodied souls or spirits (e.g., Luke 23:43; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 6:9–11).

d. A couple of texts are sometimes interpreted to teach trichotomy, or a threefold division of human nature, but this view is probably mistaken.

(1) 1 Thessalonians 5:23 is the main proof text, because it refers to spirit, soul, and body; but cf. Mark 12:30, which if read in the same way would imply additional divisions.

(2) Hebrews 4:12 speaks of “the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow.” However, “soul and spirit” here may be synonymous, just as “thoughts and intentions” are likely synonymous.

6. Implications of the foregoing for the doctrine of Christ

a. If Christ became man, then he assumed the nature of a created being. If he is God, then an uncreated person took on creatureliness.

b. Christ coming from heaven to earth as a man is a unique event. No other human being existed before his human conception and birth.

c. If Christ is fully human, he must have a body and a soul. He must possess every constituent part or aspect essential to human nature.

d. The fact that human beings are created in God's image makes the incarnation fitting in a way that would not be true of any other creature. Indeed, some theologians (e.g., John Duns Scotus) have argued that the incarnation was always God's intention and that human beings were created to make the incarnation possible and fitting.

B. Christ's mortal human nature

1. Jesus is specifically said to have been a human being (*anthrōpos*) during his earthly life (John 8:40; 10:33; Acts 2:22; Rom. 5:15; 1 Cor. 15:21; Phil. 2:7–8).
2. He came “in the flesh” — Greek *en sarki*, Latin *in carne*, hence “incarnation” (John 1:14; 6:53–56; Acts 2:31; Rom. 1:3; 8:3; Eph. 5:31–32; Col. 1:22; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 2:14; 5:7; 10:19–20; 1 Pet. 4:1–2; 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7).
3. He is called the son, or “seed” (descendant), of Adam, Eve, Abraham, David, etc. (e.g., Gen. 3:15; Isa. 11:1, 10; Matt. 1:1–17; 21:15–16; Luke 3:23–38; Acts 13:22–23; Rom. 1:3; 15:12; 2 Tim. 2:8; Heb. 2:16; 7:14; Rev. 5:5; 22:16).
4. He is called the second or last Adam (Rom. 5:12–19; 1 Cor. 15:22, 42–49).
5. Jesus experienced all aspects of mortal human life, yet without sin (Heb. 2:14, 17).
 - a. Was conceived and born of a woman (Matt. 1:18, 25; Luke 2:11; Gal. 4:4)
 - b. Died (numerous references, e.g., Luke 23:46; Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 15:3–4; Phil. 2:8)
 - c. Was male, *anēr*, meaning a male human being (Luke 24:19; John 1:30; Acts 2:22; 17:31)
 - d. Was circumcised, confirming that he was male, had a sexual identity (Luke 2:21)
 - e. Was a Jew, specifically from the tribe of Judah (Matt. 2:6; John 4:9; Heb. 7:14; Rev. 5:5; see also the genealogies, Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38), and thus had a particular ethnic or national identity
 - f. Had an ordinary appearance (Isa. 53:2; John 6:42; 8:53, 57; Phil. 2:7–8)
 - g. Grew physically, intellectually, socially, and spiritually (Luke 2:40, 52)
 - h. Hungered and thirsted, ate and drank (Matt. 4:2; 21:18; Luke 24:41–43; John 4:7; 19:28; Acts 10:41)
 - i. Became tired (John 4:6)
 - j. Slept (Matt. 8:24; Mark 4:38)
 - k. Was touched (e.g., John 20:17, 27; 1 John 1:1)
 - l. Felt pain (Matt. 16:21; Mark 8:31; 9:12; Luke 9:22; 17:25; 22:44)
 - m. Perspired or sweated (Luke 22:44)
 - n. Wept (Luke 19:41; John 11:35)
 - o. Prayed (e.g., Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 22:41–45; John 11:41–42; 17:1–26)
 - p. Learned a trade — he held a job (Mark 6:3)
 - q. Paid taxes (Matt. 17:24–27)
 - r. Was tempted across the usual range of human temptation (Matt. 4:1–11; 16:22–23; Luke 4:1–13; Heb. 2:18; 4:15)
 - s. Was baptized (Matt. 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22)
 - t. Desired human companionship (Matt. 26:38)
 - u. Felt emotions
 - (1) Compassion, pity, affection, etc. (Matt. 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 1:41; 8:2; Luke 7:13)
 - (2) Joy or happiness (Luke 10:21; Heb. 12:2)
 - (3) Troubled heart or spirit (Matt. 26:37–38; Mark 14:33–34; John 11:33; 12:27; 13:21; cf. Isa. 53:3)
6. Jesus had all the elements of true humanity.
 - a. Body (Matt. 26:12, 26; 27:56–59; John 2:21; Col. 2:9; Heb. 10:10)

- b. Flesh (see point 2. above)
 - c. Bones (Luke 24:39; John 19:36)
 - d. Blood (Matt. 26:38; John 19:34; Acts 20:28; etc.)
 - e. Water (John 19:34)
 - f. Hands and feet (Matt. 28:9; Luke 7:38–46; John 20:25, 27)
 - g. Soul (Matt. 20:28; 26:38; Mark 10:45; John 12:27; Acts 2:27, 31)
 - h. Will (Matt. 26:39, 42; John 5:30; 6:38)
 - i. Spirit (John 11:33; 31:21)
7. These descriptions of Jesus rule out such ideas as that he was a divine spirit dwelling in a human body. Jesus was fully human, with a human soul, a human mind.

C. Christ's resurrected, immortal human nature

1. Jesus is specifically called a human being (*anthrōpos*) after his resurrection (Acts 17:31; 1 Tim. 2:5; cf. 1 Cor. 15:47).
2. He rose from the dead with a body of flesh and bones (Luke 24:39).
3. He was capable of eating and drinking (Luke 24:41–43; Acts 10:41).
4. He had hands and feet that could be touched (Matt. 28:9; Luke 24:39; John 20:17, 27).
5. Jesus' body is now immortal and incorruptible, as will be the bodies of resurrected believers (1 Cor. 15:42, 50–54). Note: the expression “flesh and blood” (15:50) is an idiom that meant mortal human nature. It is debatable that we should infer that Jesus' resurrection body has flesh but no blood (a literalistic way of harmonizing the text with Luke 24:39).
6. Conclusion: Jesus remained fully human after his resurrection, though now gloriously perfected in his human nature with immortality. We don't know a lot of details about his resurrection body, but we know that we who are believers will live forever as human beings in glorified bodies like his (see also Phil. 3:21).

II. The Virgin Birth of Christ

A. The Virgin Birth is presented as fact in two of the Gospels.

1. Technically, we might prefer to use the term *virginal conception*, meaning that Mary conceived Jesus in her womb without the participation of a human father. Traditionally, though, Christians use the term *virgin birth* because Matthew indicates that Mary remained a virgin until (at least) after Jesus was born (Matt. 1:23–25).
2. The foundational reason to accept the Virgin Birth is that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke give independent accounts of Mary conceiving Jesus while she was still a virgin (Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 1:26–38). (The difficulties in harmonizing the two accounts, though not insuperable, are serious enough that we may be sure they come from independent sources.)
3. Luke's account follows closely after his preface stating that his purpose was to inform his reader of what actually happened (Luke 1:1–4).
4. The “silence” of the other Gospels or of the rest of the NT does not militate against the truth of the Virgin Birth.

5. It is possible that Paul's description of Jesus as "born of a woman" (Gal. 4:4) alludes to his virgin birth.

B. The Virgin Birth has always been part of the church's faith.

1. The Virgin Birth is affirmed in the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed. These creeds are still recognized by the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox churches, and most Protestant denominations.
2. The Virgin Birth is affirmed in official confessions of faith of every major branch of Protestantism—Lutheran, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal.
3. The Virgin Birth was taught by all Christian theologians until the rise of modern antiscapernaturalism. All of the great Christian thinkers, such as Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, and many others have affirmed it.
4. Christians should be very hesitant to reject or to minimize the importance of believing something that has been part of the official beliefs of virtually all Christian bodies throughout church history.

C. The Virgin Birth is consistent with orthodox Christology.

1. On the one hand, some critics (John Hick, Marcus Borg, et al.) argue that the Virgin Birth is inconsistent with the full humanity of Jesus. However, having a human father, or even human parents, is not essential to a person's being fully human, as the example of Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:26–31; 2:7, 18–25) suggest.
2. On the other hand, Unitarians argue that the Virgin Birth is inconsistent with Jesus having preexisted, and therefore with his being God incarnate. This argument appeals to Luke 1:35, traditionally translated, "Therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (CSB; similarly, KJV, NASB, NIV). This sounds like the Virgin Birth resulted in the Son of God's *existence*. However, the text can also be translated, "Therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (ESV; similarly, LEB, NABRE). This sounds like the Virgin Birth confirmed the Son of God's *holiness*. Which translation is best? Just one chapter later, Luke uses the same construction with the same adjective and verb: "Every male who first opens the womb will be called holy to the Lord" (Luke 2:23b). Here the emphasis is clearly on the holiness of the one being born. Thus, rather than implying that the Virgin Birth would bring about the Son of God's *existence*, Luke 1:35 is stating that the Virgin Birth would confirm the Son of God's *holiness*. In any case, the Unitarian inference from Luke 1:35 is too tenuous to overturn the massive evidence from John, Paul, and other New Testament writers for Christ's preexistence.

D. The Virgin Birth is the sign of the Incarnation.

1. There is some debate among Christian thinkers as to whether the Virgin Birth was absolutely *necessary* in order for Jesus to be God incarnate. Whether or not it was necessary, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us this is how it happened.
2. The angel of the Lord told Joseph that Jesus would be called "Immanuel," which means "God with us," in connection with his Virgin Birth (Matt. 1:20–23).
3. Thus, the Virgin Birth was the way that God the Son chose to incarnate himself, and it is a fitting sign of the Incarnation. That is sufficient reason to insist that Christians should gladly affirm it.

E. The Virgin Birth is fitting in light of the Resurrection of Jesus.

1. Jesus left this world through the Resurrection—the recreation of human life where life had ended. Jesus came into this world through the Virgin Birth—the creation of human life where life had not yet begun.
2. It is difficult to understand why someone could believe in the Resurrection but not in the Virgin Birth. If God can do the one, he can surely do the other.
3. However, some people in the church today don't really believe in the Resurrection, either. They sometimes believe in the survival of Jesus' spirit in heaven but don't believe that his dead body was raised. But the Resurrection is the restoration of life to the body, and it is one of the non-negotiable essentials of the Christian faith (1 Cor. 15).

F. The Virgin Birth is a sign of God's grace in salvation.

1. In the Virgin Birth, God by his Holy Spirit sent Christ to dwell in Mary's womb. This is a sign of the saving work of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. In the Virgin Birth, God initiated the beginning of new life. This is grace: not our producing the life God asks of us, but God producing that life for and in us.
3. In the Virgin Birth, Mary's response was one of trust and acceptance of God's word (Luke 1:38). This is a sign of faith.
4. The fact that the Virgin Birth functions in these ways as a sign of grace and faith does not mean it can be treated as a *mere* symbol, as a pious myth symbolizing a spiritual truth. To draw that conclusion would be to say in effect that a historical fact could not symbolize a spiritual truth. That is, if the Virgin Birth is a myth, then the truth would be that Jesus was conceived by a natural, human-initiated act, not by the Spirit and not through faith, but by the flesh, not by grace but by human will. If this were the truth, then the Virgin Birth story would really be a lie.

G. Denial of the Virgin Birth is a symptom of a bigger problem.

1. It is not surprising that non-Christians don't believe in the Virgin Birth. It is surprising, however, that many people in the church today don't believe it.
2. It may be possible to believe in Christ without believing in his virgin birth. However, it is not *normal* for a Christian to believe that Jesus was not born of a virgin. Disbelief in the Virgin Birth, given its truth and its importance, is a symptom of a bigger problem.
 - a. Disbelief in the Virgin Birth is symptomatic of a low view of Scripture. Those who regard the Bible as completely inspired generally do not even question it.
 - b. Disbelief in the Virgin Birth is often symptomatic of a lack of knowledge. Some Christians are not aware of the substantial evidence for the Virgin Birth as fact, or have been led to believe that the Virgin Birth is scientifically impossible.
 - c. Disbelief in the Virgin Birth may be symptomatic of a lack of faith in God. Belief in it requires faith that nothing is impossible for God (Luke 1:37).

III. The Sinlessness of Christ

A. New Testament attestation

1. Consistent with his humility, in the Gospels we do not find Jesus proclaiming his sinlessness or perfect holiness in any direct statements. Nevertheless, he does say and do things that point in that direction.
 - a. Jesus forgave people's sins (Matt. 9:2–6; Mark 2:5–10; Luke 5:20–24; 7:47–49) and taught his followers to forgive others and to pray for God's forgiveness for their own sins (Matt. 6:12–15; 18:21–35; Mark 11:25; Luke 6:37; 11:4; 17:3–4). Yet Jesus never spoke about needing forgiveness himself, a surprising omission since good spiritual teachers typically model for their disciples what they teach them.
 - b. Jesus stated that he had come to give his life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28 = Mark 10:45). The work of ransoming or redeeming people presupposes that the sacrifice is without defect.
 - c. Similarly, Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper, in which he said that the wine represented "my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28; cf. Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20), presupposes that Jesus was about to die as a blameless sacrifice for sins.
 - d. The Synoptic Gospels report Jesus successfully overcoming extreme temptations prior to beginning his public ministry (Matt. 4:1–11 = Mark 1:11–13 = Luke 4:1–13) and at the end, just prior to his arrest (Matt. 26:39–42 = Mark 14:36–39 = Luke 22:41–44).
 - e. John quotes Jesus as saying that his very food was to do the Father's will (John 4:34) and, in his prayer the night before his death, that he had accomplished the work the Father had given him to do (17:4).
 - f. Christ stated that the Son (i.e., he) could do nothing except what he saw the Father doing (John 5:19). In the context, Jesus had just been accused of violating the Sabbath and (implicitly) of blaspheming (5:17–18). In this context, Jesus' statement in John 5:19 implies that he could not sin (see also John 5:30; 6:38). The idea that Christ *could not* sin is called *impeccability*. We should note that evangelical theologians differ on whether Christ was impeccable and if so how.
 - g. The idea of sinlessness is practically explicit in Jesus' statement, "I always do the things that are pleasing to him" (John 8:29). Later in the same passage, Jesus rhetorically challenged his hearers which of them accused him of sin (8:46).
2. The idea of the sinlessness of Christ is almost pervasive in the rest of the New Testament.
 - a. Speeches by early Christian leaders in the book of Acts (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14)
 - b. Paul's epistles (2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 2:8)
 - c. Epistles by three other authors (Heb. 1:9; 4:15; 7:26; 10:7–10; 1 Peter 1:19; 2:21–24; 3:18; 1 John 2:1–2, 29; 3:3–7)
 - d. The Book of Revelation (Rev. 3:7)

B. Supposed evidence against Christ's sinlessness

1. Jesus was baptized by John, whose baptism was for repentance (Matt. 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:32–34).

- a. When Jesus was baptized, the Father spoke from heaven, calling Jesus “my beloved Son” and saying that he was “well pleased” with him (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:21–22). This remarkable pronouncement, not mentioned for anyone else John baptized (or repeated in Christian baptisms), indicates that Jesus, unlike others, had nothing for which he needed to repent.
 - b. Matthew reports that John protested that he needed to be baptized by Jesus, to which Jesus urged John to baptize him “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:14–15). Without saying so directly, the exchange indicates that Jesus got baptized for something other than his own sins.
2. When a man asked Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus responded: “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:17–18; Luke 18:18–19). This saying is often misunderstood to mean that Jesus was denying that he was good.
- a. The man obviously assumed that Jesus was just a man. Rather than challenge that assumption (directly), Jesus points out that no one who is just a man can claim to be good without qualification. That is something true only of God.
 - b. The point is confirmed when Jesus asked the man if he had kept the commandments pertaining to human relationships (against murder, adultery, etc.) and the man claimed to have kept them from his youth (Mark 10:19–20; Luke 18:20–21). In short, the man thought he was “good” and assumed that Jesus was a good person like him.
 - c. In reply, Jesus told the man he lacked one thing. The man needed to sell everything he had and follow Jesus (Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). If one assumes that Jesus was not God, Jesus’ statement here is odd if not downright wrong. Should he not have told the man that what he lacked was to love God above all his possessions?
 - d. Matthew presents Jesus’ statement in a way that could not be misunderstood as Jesus denying his own goodness: “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good” (Matt. 19:16–17). Matthew’s version means the same thing as what we find in Mark and Luke. Jesus was pointing out to the man that he had a shallow, inadequate grasp of what it meant to be good.

“It was a widely disseminated tradition in earliest Christianity that Jesus was sinless . . . a claim made all the more pointed by the fact that many of the church’s leaders were drawn from Jesus’ family members or closest associates.”²

IV. The Deity of Christ

A. The Biblical doctrine of deity

1. Biblical monotheism
 - a. Only Jehovah (Yahweh, *YHWH*, “the LORD”) is God (Heb., *’ēlōhîm*; e.g., Deut. 4:35, 39; 6:4; 32:39; 2 Sam. 7:22; 1 Ki. 8:60; 2 Ki. 5:15; 1 Chr. 17:20; Isa. 44:6, 45:5, 14; Mal. 2:10).
 - b. Objections

² George H. Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 313.

- (1) Statements in the Old Testament that there is “one God” or that “there is no other” or “besides me there is no God” are statements of “incomparability,” not denials that other gods exist.
- (a) These statements can assert *both* that in fact there is only one God *and* that Yahweh is incomparably greater than anything that people might be tempted to regard as gods.
 - (b) The “incomparability” interpretation appeals to statements attributed to Babylon and Nineveh, “I am, and there is no one besides me/no one else” (Isa. 47:8, 10; Zeph. 2:15). This argument fails, because Babylon and Nineveh are not represented as saying, “I am the only *city*” or “there is no *city* beside me.”
- (2) The Old Testament occasionally refers to supernatural beings as “gods,” especially in Psalm 82:1, 6: “God judges in the midst of the gods. . . . I said, ‘You are gods, and all of you are sons of the Most High.’”
- (a) Psalm 82 was indeed referring to what we would call supernatural beings, at least as understood by people in the surrounding nations. The older view that Psalm 82:1 refers to unjust human judges will not work, because such a view simply cannot fit verse 6. Nor would it fit verse 7, which warns that they will “die like man.”
 - (b) On the other hand, the Psalmist’s warning that the “gods” will “die like man” indicates that these so-called gods are not genuine gods, which ancient people viewed as immortals.
 - (c) The contrasting wording, “I said . . . but” (vv. 6, 7) is a Hebrew rhetorical device that makes a statement of expectation or presumption followed by an assertion that the expectation has proven false (e.g., Zeph. 3:7). In other words, the Psalmist (or even God) is making the point that the reference to these beings as “gods” set them up to be exposed as failing to meet that description.
 - (d) Elsewhere in the same section of the Psalms, the “gods” of the nations are routinely derogated as impotent (see Pss. 86:8–10; 95:3–5; 96:4–5; 97:7–9).

2. Biblical monotheism views Yahweh, the Lord God, as solely responsible for creating or making all things.
 - a. One God alone, Yahweh, created all things (Gen. 1:1, 31; 2:4; Neh. 9:6; Job 38:4–7; Ps. 95:5–7; Isa. 37:16; 44:24; Jer. 10:16; 51:19; Rom. 11:36).
 - b. This is the Creator–creation distinction (Rom. 1:19–25). That is, the Bible divides all existence into the two categories of the Creator and the creation. There is nothing between these two categories.
3. God’s nature transcends our universe of space, time, matter, and energy.
 - a. He is eternal (Pss. 90:2; 102:25–27) and is infinite spirit (Isa. 66:1–2; John 4:20–24).
 - b. He is omnipresent (Gen. 28:15; 1 Ki. 8:27; Ps. 139:7–10).
 - c. He is omnipotent (Gen. 18:14; Job 42:2; Isa. 55:11; Mark 10:27; Luke 1:37; Eph. 1:11).
 - d. He is omniscient (1 Ki. 8:39; Ps. 139:2–6; Isa. 41:22–23; Matt. 10:30; 1 John 3:20).
4. No other supernatural or spiritual beings are to be worshiped or served (Exod. 20:3–5; Deut. 6:13–15; Rom. 1:23–25).

5. As the God who created the heavens and the earth, the Lord throughout all time rules over all creation from the most exalted position in all existence, commonly expressed metaphorically as his heavenly “throne” (e.g., Pss. 11:4; 93:2; 103:19; Isa. 6:1; 66:1–2 [=Acts 7:49]; Lam. 5:19; Ezek. 1:26–28; Dan. 7:9; Matt. 5:34; Rev. 4:2–10; 19:4–5).
6. The preceding five points may be conveniently summarized and remembered using the acronym HANDS (see more on this below in section IV.C.):
 - a. *Honors*: God alone is the proper object of the full range of religious honors.
 - b. *Attributes*: God is the one uncreated, eternal Being (because he is the Creator).
 - c. *Names*: The God of Israel alone bears the name Yahweh; he alone is truly “God.”
 - d. *Deeds*: God is the Creator of the whole world.
 - e. *Seat*: God is the one who rules over all things (from his heavenly “throne”).
7. Biblical monotheism rules out the notion that Christ is “a god” in a positive, honorable sense and yet inferior to the Lord God (as in Mormon and Jehovah’s Witness doctrines).

“However diverse Judaism may have been in many other respects, this was common: only the God of Israel is worthy of worship because he is sole Creator of all things and sole Ruler of all things.”³

B. Overview of the deity of Christ

1. The meaning of the “deity” of Christ
 - a. What it means: That Jesus Christ is properly honored as God.
 - b. What it does not mean: That Jesus Christ is God the Father. He is, rather, “the Son of the Father” (2 John 3).
2. Hermeneutical considerations: How to develop a biblically sound Christology
 - a. Heretical religions commonly appeal to isolated prooftexts to support their view of Christ. Unfortunately, Christians all too often do the same thing, though generally not in the same Scripture-twisting fashion.
 - b. Ideally, we want to integrate into our view of Christ everything Scripture says that is relevant to the subject. Admittedly, that is an ideal toward which we strive, not something anyone attains perfectly or something we can expect of the average churchgoer.
 - c. Contrary to the method used by some groups (notably Unitarians), we should allow the New Testament to interpret, and expand on, what is revealed in the Old Testament, rather than limiting what the New Testament teaches to what we think the Old Testament texts say. Of course, the New Testament should not be interpreted to *contradict* Old Testament doctrine about God.
 - d. Based on the preceding considerations, we should seek to build our Christology primarily from the longer, more substantive passages in the New Testament that provide a description of the “big picture”

³ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 9.

of who and what Jesus is and what he has done. We don't limit our Christology to these passages, but we expect them to reveal more directly and fully what is found elsewhere. Based on this principle, the following four texts—coming from three different New Testament authors—are by far the most important places to begin:

- (1) **John 1:1–18**: The Johannine Prologue—Jesus Christ is the Word who became flesh and dwelled among us to bring us grace and truth.
- (2) **Philippians 2:5–11**: Christ was in God's form but humbled himself by becoming a man and dying on the cross; God then highly exalted him so that all creation will confess Jesus as Lord.
- (3) **Colossians 1:12–20**: The Father's beloved Son is the heir of all creation, the one who is to be preeminent in all things from creation to reconciliation.
- (4) **Hebrews 1:1–14**: God's Son is superior to the angels, since he has higher names than they, is worshiped by all the angels, is greater in nature than they are, made the heavens and the earth, and rules over all things from God's throne.

3. The basic “story” of Christ, which all four of the above passages at least mention

- a. **Preexistent Son/Word**: Prior to becoming Jesus of Nazareth, Christ was a divine person, in heaven with God the Father, and the one through whom God made all things (John 1:1–5; Phil. 2:5–6; Col. 1:15–16; Heb. 1:1–3, 10–11). During this period Christ was divine but not human.
- b. **Humble Incarnate Christ**: The divine Son humbled himself by coming into the world as a human being to redeem us (John 1:14–17; Phil. 2:7–8; Col. 1:12–14; Heb. 1:3a, cf. 2:9–18). During this period Christ was both divine and human, a point that will be examined in more depth later in these notes.
- c. **Exalted Incarnate Lord**: Christ (following his resurrection) returned to heaven with the Father, who exalted him to the highest possible status (John 1:18; Phil. 2:9–11; Col. 1:18–20; Heb. 1:3b–9, 12–13). He is now both divine and human (see II.C. above), though his human nature, having become immortal and glorious, is different from our present mortal, fallen constitution in significant ways.

4. Other texts that briefly indicate or allude to the same three phases of Christ's story

- a. “(a) For I have come down from heaven, (b) not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, (c) but raise it up on the last day” (John 6:38–39). Christ's assertion that on the last day he will raise his people up presupposes his exaltation.
- b. “(a) I came from the Father (b) and have come into the world, (c) and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father” (John 16:28).
- c. “(b) I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. (c) And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence (a) with the glory that I had with you before the world existed” (John 17:5).
- d. “(a) But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, (b) born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, (c) God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:4–6). Here the third phase is implied by the sending of the Spirit of God's Son.

C. Five aspects of New Testament teaching on the deity of Christ

1. The evidence from the New Testament that Jesus is God incarnate may be studied under five headings, which offer a comprehensive way of thinking about Christ:

H: Jesus receives *honors* due to God.

A: Jesus possesses *attributes* of God.

N: Jesus bears *names* of God.

D: Jesus performs *deeds* of God.

S: Jesus sits on the *seat* of God's throne.⁴

2. These five aspects of Christ's deity are all mentioned or implied in all four main Christological texts identified earlier, plus at least one more:

a. John 1:1–18

H: Christ is the object of belief in his name (v. 12).

A: He has the glory as of one only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth (v. 14b).

N: He has the name "God" (vv. 1, 18).

D: All things—the world—came into being through him (vv. 3, 10).

S: God the Son is at the Father's side (v. 18).

b. Philippians 2:5–11

H: Every knee shall bow to him and every tongue shall confess him (vv. 9–10).

A: Christ existed in the form of God (v. 6).

N: He has the name "Lord" (*kyrios*, v. 11), representing the divine name YHWH.

D: He humbled himself to die on the cross for our redemption (v. 8).

S: God has "highly exalted him" above all creation (vv. 9–11).

c. Colossians 1:12–20

H: Implied: All things, including *thrones* and the like, were created for *him* (v. 16).

A: In him all the fullness (of God) was pleased to dwell (v. 19).

N: No *overtly* divine name, but in context "Son" (v. 13) is a divine name.

D: All things were created in and through him (v. 16).

S: In everything he is to be preeminent (v. 18b).

⁴ This acronym is the framework for the following two books by Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski: *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007); *The Incarnate Christ and His Critics: A Biblical Defense* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2024).

d. Hebrews 1:1–14

H: All God’s angels are to worship him (v. 6).

A: He has the immutability of God the Creator (vv. 11–12).

N: He has a more excellent name (v. 4) and is called both God and Lord (vv. 8, 10).

D: He upholds all things, having made the heavens and the earth (vv. 2–3, 10).

S: He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (vv. 3, 13).

e. Matthew 28:16–20

H: The disciples worshiped him (v. 17).

A: Christ is with his disciples throughout all nations, thus omnipresent (v. 20b).

N: Disciples are baptized in “the name” of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (v. 19).

D: He commands them, as the Lord commanded Moses and the Israelites (v. 20a).

S: Implied: He has all authority in heaven and earth (v. 18).

3. These five aspects of the deity of Christ are found throughout the NT.

a. **Honors** (all of them, see John 5:23), for example:

(1) Worship (Matt. 28:17; Luke 24:51–52; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 5:14)

(2) Faith (John 3:15–16; 20:31; Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:11; 1 John 5:13)

(3) Prayer (John 14:14; Acts 7:59–60; Rom. 10:12–13; 2 Cor. 12:8–9)

(4) Doxologies (2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 13:20–21; 1 Peter 4:11; 2 Peter 3:18)

(5) Love, above all creatures (Matt. 10:37; Luke 14:26; 1 Cor. 16:22; Eph. 6:24)

b. **Attributes** (all of them, see Col. 1:19; 2:9). For example:

(1) Uncreated (John 1:1–3; 17:5; Col. 1:16–17; Heb. 1:2). Note that this attribute cannot be conferred or gifted to a creature.

(2) Omnipotent (Eph. 1:19–21; 1 Peter 3:22)

(3) Omniscient (John 16:30–31; 21:17; 1 Cor. 4:5; Rev. 2:23)

(4) Omnipresent (Matt. 18:20; 28:20; Eph. 4:10–11)

c. **Names**, for example:

(1) “God” (John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 5:20).

(a) “The Word [*logos*] was God” is still the best translation of the last part of John 1:1, so long as readers understand that John is not identifying the Word as God the Father (“the Word was with God”). Note that Christ is not called God in the sense of being God’s representative, because John says Christ was God “in the beginning,” before anyone existed to whom he might have functioned as God’s agent.

- (b) Of the eight texts listed above, only in John 1:18 is there a relevant textual variant: Most manuscripts have the word “Son” (*huios*) here (as in the KJV, NKJV) instead of “God” (*theos*). Key early manuscripts, along with the difficulty of explaining why scribes would change “Son” to “God” here, have convinced most scholars that “God” is correct. Complicating the translation of the verse is its use of *monogenēs*, which has been interpreted to mean “only begotten,” “only/unique,” or “only [Son].” The best translation is “the only Son, himself God” (NRSV; see also CSB, NIV) or “God the only Son” (CEB, NASB [2020], and now the recently updated ESV).
- (a) Their translation was once a matter of debate, but now scholars generally agree that Titus 2:13 calls Jesus Christ “our great God and Savior” and 2 Peter 1:1 calls him “our God and Savior.” A minority of exegetes argue that Titus 2:13 calls Christ “the glory of our great God and Savior.” However, Paul goes on immediately to say that Christ “gave himself for us to redeem us” (Titus 2:13), which clearly explains in what way he is our “Savior.” In any case, no such ambiguity exists in 2 Peter 1:1.
- (2) “Lord” (Greek, *kyrios*), often representing the divine name Yahweh, which is translated with *kyrios* in the Greek OT. In several instances, in fact, references to Jesus as Lord quote from or allude to a specific Old Testament text (e.g., Mark 1:2, cf. Isa. 40:3; Rom. 10:9–13, cf. Joel 2:32; 1 Cor. 8:6, cf. Deut. 6:4; Phil. 2:9–11, cf. Isa. 45:23).
- (3) “Savior,” twice with “God” (Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1).
- (4) Note! Jesus does not have the name “the Father.” He is “the Son of the Father” (2 John 3). Even Isaiah 9:6, on any exegesis, does not call him “the Father.”

d. **Deeds** (all of them, John 5:19), for example:

(1) Creation.

- (a) The New Testament says both that the Son made all things (Heb. 1:10, cf. Ps. 102:25) and that God made all things through the Son (John 1:3, 10; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2).
- (b) Since the Bible affirms that the Lord God alone made all things (Isa. 44:24; Rom. 11:36), one cannot interpret the above statements to mean that Christ was a creature who acted merely as God’s agent in the work of creation.

- (2) Forgiving sins (Mark 2:5–7), backed up by healing a paralyzed man with a simple command (2:8–12); see also Luke 7:47–49.
- (3) Calming a storm by telling it to shut up (Mark 4:39); other miracles performed in ways that implicitly manifested his deity (cf. John 2:11; e.g., Mark 6:30–52).
- (4) Conquering death by his own death and resurrection (note esp. John 2:19–22; 10:17–18; Acts 2:24).
- (5) Judging all people at the end of history (Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:22–29; Acts 17:31; 2 Cor. 5:10; 2 Thess. 1:5–20).

e. **Seat**:

- (1) Jesus sits on God’s throne alongside the Father (Mark 14:62; Acts 2:33–34; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 1:3–6; 1 Peter 3:22; Rev. 22:1–3; cf. Ps. 110:1; Dan. 7:13–14).

(2) Jesus actively rules over all existence from God's throne, and He does so forever (Matt. 28:18; Luke 1:33; Phil. 2:10; Heb. 1:8).

4. All five aspects of the deity of Christ are expressed in the Nicene Creed.

We believe . . . in [honors] one Lord [names] Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally [attributes] begotten of the Father;
God from God, Light from Light, *true God* from true God [names];
begotten, *not made, of one Being with the Father* [attributes].
Through him all things were made [deeds].
For us and *for our salvation* [deeds] he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven, and is *seated at the right hand of the Father* [seat].
He will come again in glory to *judge the living and the dead* [deeds],
and his kingdom will have no end [seat].⁵

V. The Two Natures of Christ

A. The biblical basis for the two natures

1. We have seen explicit statements in the New Testament that Jesus was and is a man (Acts 2:22; Rom. 5:15; etc.) as well as equally explicit statements that he was and is God (John 20:28; Titus 2:13; etc.).
2. Beyond such explicit statements, we have seen rich, extensive evidence for both Jesus' full humanity and his full deity, particularly his possessing divine attributes and the ability to perform divine deeds.
3. Critics of Christianity often allege that these two aspects of New Testament teaching about Jesus are contradictory. Such a criticism might have some merit if these two seemingly incompatible teachings were found in different New Testament writings, e.g., if Mark presented Jesus as (simply) human and John presented Jesus as (simply) divine. However, we actually find both aspects in the same writings.
4. Most significantly, at least three New Testament authors directly teach (in different, independent ways) that Jesus was a divine person who *became* human. We find this idea in all four of our main Christological texts.
 - a. "The Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh" (John 1:1, 14). See also John's statement that Jesus Christ "came in the flesh" (1 John 4:2). The words "in the flesh" translated into Latin are *in carne*, from which we derive the term *incarnation*.
 - b. "Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, coming to be in the likeness of human beings" (Phil. 2:5b-7, lit. trans.).

⁵ Slightly modified from Bowman and Komoszewski, *Incarnate Christ and His Critics*, 757.

- c. “He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:18–19, lit. trans.). Cf. 2:9, “For in him dwells all the fullness of the deity bodily,” which like 1:19 makes it explicit that the Son did not cease to be divine when he took on our human, “bodily” nature.
- d. “. . . in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. . . . But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. . .’ and ‘You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning. . ..’” (Heb. 1:1–2, 8, 10; cf. 2:14–17, where Jesus “partook” of “flesh and blood” in order “to be made like his brothers in every respect”).

B. The paradox of the incarnation

1. Approaches to biblical statements about Christ’s deity and humanity

- a. One could claim that what the New Testament says about Jesus is contradictory; but it is highly implausible to claim that three different authors independently presented the same contradiction. Moreover, as we shall see, the pattern shows that the difficulties are systemic throughout the New Testament, not just found in those four passages.
- b. Many critics cut through the problem by arguing for a Christology in which Jesus was human but not divine, despite the many texts that seem to indicate he is; but this view requires a lot of fudging on and fixing of the texts.
- c. One could conclude that the apparent contradictions are paradoxes arising from the fact that the divine Son humbled himself to share in our finite humanity. A *paradox* affirms two claims that may seem contradictory (and that may even be beyond our ability to harmonize fully) and yet are both true. This approach is by far the best.

(1) It accepts the direct teaching of this explanation in the main Christological texts.

(2) It is the historic Christian position.

(3) It requires no fudging on or fixing of the meaning of the texts pertaining to either the deity or the humanity of Christ—not even those texts that critics commonly cite against his deity (see below).

2. How the paradoxical approach to the incarnation answers alleged biblical proofs against the deity of Christ

- a. God is not a man (Num. 23:19), but Christ is a man (1 Tim. 2:5).
Yet he is also God (Titus 2:13, etc.).
- b. God is eternal (Ps. 90:2), but Jesus was born (Matt. 1:18).
Yet he existed before creation (John 1:1–2; 17:5; Col. 1:17), long before his birth.
- c. God is immutable (Ps. 102:26–27), but Jesus grew (Luke 2:40, 52).
Yet the Son is immutable (Heb. 1:11–12; cf. 13:8).
- d. God is omnipresent (Ps. 139:7–10), but Jesus was one place at a time (Matt. 4:18).
Yet Jesus could heal someone at a distance (Matt. 8:5–13; cf. Matt. 18:20; 28:20).
- e. God knows everything (Isa. 41:22–23), but Jesus didn’t know the day or hour (Mark 13:32).
Yet Christ knows all things, even what is in people’s hearts (John 16:30; Rev. 2:23).
- f. God is immortal—he cannot die (1 Tim. 1:17), but Jesus died (John 19:33).
Yet Jesus could not have his life taken from him but laid it down (John 10:17–18).

- g. God cannot be tempted (James 1:13), but Jesus was tempted (Heb. 4:15).
Yet Jesus never sinned (Heb. 4:15), unlike everyone else (Rom. 3:23).
- h. Everything in creation belongs to God, and no one gave it to Him (Job 41:11); but God gave Jesus his authority (Matt. 28:18).
Yet Jesus had all authority everywhere (Matt. 28:18). Again, Jesus humbled himself to save us (20:28), depending on the Father to exalt him afterward.

“Thus he took up man into himself, the invisible becoming visible, the incomprehensible being made comprehensible, the impassable [which means unable to suffer] becoming capable of suffering, and the Word being made man, thus summing up all things in himself” (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.16.6).

Appendix I: Alternative Christologies

A. One Christ

1. The critical question that dominates the Gospels: *Who is Jesus?*
 - a. Jesus asked his disciples (Matt. 16:13–15 = Mark 8:27–29 = Luke 9:18–20).
 - b. The high priest asked Jesus (Matt. 26:63–64 = Mark 14:61–62 = Luke 22:66–70).
 - c. Jesus warned that his enemies would be condemned for failing to believe who he was (John 8:24–28).
 - d. The question was asked frequently (Matt. 8:27; 21:10; Mark 6:2; Luke 5:21; 7:49; 9:9; John 9:36; 12:34).
2. Paul affirmed that there is “one Lord,” Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 8:6; 12:5; Eph. 4:5), and warned about those who teach “another Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:4).

B. Many “Christologies”

1. Islam (Muslims)
 - a. Doctrinal authority: Muhammad, especially in the Qur’an (here abbreviated Q)
 - b. Belief about God: One God (*Allah*), sole creator and ruler of the world
 - c. What Islam gets right about Jesus
 - (1) Jesus was born of a virgin (Q 3:47).
 - (2) Jesus performed miracles (Q 5:110).
 - (3) Jesus was a prophet (Q 19:30, cf. Matt. 13:57 = Mark 6:4 = Luke 4:24 = John 4:44; also, Luke 13:33; Acts 3:22–26).
 - (4) Jesus was unqualifiedly righteous, apparently meaning sinless (Q 19:19, 30–31).
 - d. What Islam gets wrong about Jesus
 - (1) It denies that Jesus was God’s Son (Q 4:171; 19:45), no doubt assuming a physical procreation would be involved.
 - (2) It denies that Jesus died on the cross (Q 4:157–58) and thus, of course, that he rose from the dead.
 - (3) It denies that Jesus was more than a messenger of God and even that he was the most important (Q 4:171; 5:75).
2. Progressive Christianity (a form of liberal theology, e.g., Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong)
 - a. Doctrinal authority: None, but emphasizes experience and reason
 - b. Belief about God: Generally, a form of pantheism (God is the spirit or divine in all things), like pantheism (all is God or manifestations of God)
 - c. What progressive Christianity gets right about Jesus
 - (1) Jesus was a great teacher (Matt. 7:28–29; 10:24–25; 23:8; Mark 1:22; Luke 4:32; John 13:13–14; etc.).

- (2) Jesus' message involved a radical call to love others (e.g., Matt. 5:43–45; Luke 6:27–35).
- (3) Jesus died on the cross.

d. What progressive Christianity gets wrong about Jesus

- (1) It denies the view of God that Jesus taught—a personal God who is like a Father.
- (2) It denies that Jesus rose from the dead.
- (3) It reinterprets the deity of Christ to mean that the divine that is in all of us was fully experienced and expressed in Jesus' life.

3. Unitarianism (or Socinianism; advocates often use the qualifier “Biblical Unitarian”; e.g. Anthony Buzzard, Dale Tuggy)

- a. Doctrinal authority: Scripture (the Bible), but as interpreted by “reason”
- b. Belief about God: One eternal person, the Father alone, the sole creator of the world
- c. What Unitarianism gets right about Jesus

- (1) Jesus was born of a virgin.
- (2) Jesus lived a sinless life (though this is not often mentioned).
- (3) Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead.
- (4) Jesus ascended to heaven, where the Father exalted Jesus at his right hand.
- (5) Jesus will return to earth to establish God's kingdom in its fullness.

d. What Unitarianism gets wrong about Jesus

- (1) It denies that Christ existed personally (as the Son or Word) prior to his human life.
- (2) It denies that Jesus even now possesses the full divine nature.
- (3) It denies that Christians should worship Jesus Christ.

4. Mormonism (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)

- a. Doctrinal authority: The Bible, the Book of Mormon, and two other canons of scripture, as interpreted by the current LDS prophet and other leaders
- b. Belief about God: Heavenly Father was once a mortal man like us and became a God through a process open to us; he has a wife, our heavenly mother; all humans were spirit children of those heavenly parents before coming to earth as mortals.
- c. What Mormons (Latter-day Saints) get right about Jesus

- (1) Jesus existed in heaven with the Father before the earth (but so did we all, according to LDS doctrine).
- (2) Jesus was Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament (but supposedly a lesser God under Elohim).
- (3) Jesus lived a sinless life, died on the cross, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven.
- (4) Jesus will come back to the earth.

d. What Mormons (Latter-day Saints) get wrong about Jesus

- (1) They believe that Jesus and the Holy Ghost (the preferred LDS term for the Holy Spirit) are two additional Gods alongside the Father.
- (2) They believe that Jesus was just the firstborn of literally billions of spirit sons and daughters, all sharing the same nature and potential (although he became a God before them).
- (3) They believe that Jesus was the *literal* son of Heavenly Father in the flesh (with it implied, though not stated, that the Father united physically with Mary to “sire” Jesus).
- (4) They believe that Jesus atoned for sins in Gethsemane as well as on the cross.
- (5) They believe that Jesus appeared to Israelites living in the Americas shortly after his ascension.
- (6) They believe that Jesus (and the Father) appeared to Joseph Smith in 1820 to inaugurate a new dispensation and restore true Christianity to the earth.
- (7) They deny that Christians should pray to Jesus Christ.

5. Jehovah’s Witnesses (the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society)

- a. Doctrinal authority: The Bible, as translated (New World Translation) and interpreted by the Watchtower.
- b. Belief about God: Jehovah God is the Father only, credited as the Creator though he delegated the actual work to Christ, Jehovah’s only direct creation.
- c. What Jehovah’s Witnesses get right about Jesus

- (1) Jesus existed in heaven with the Father before the earth (but as the first and greatest angel, not as deity).
- (2) Jesus was born of a virgin.
- (3) Jesus died (though on a simple stake, not a cross).
- (4) Jesus went to heaven shortly after his death.

d. What Jehovah’s Witnesses get wrong about Jesus

- (1) They believe that Jesus was Michael the archangel, the first and greatest angelic being.
- (2) They deny that he rose physically from the grave (instead, they claim he was recreated as an angelic being again). In effect, they deny the resurrection of Jesus.
- (3) They deny that Christ will return personally or visibly to the earth (claiming that his second “presence” began in 1914).
- (4) They deny that Jesus should be worshiped or addressed in prayer.

Appendix II: Kenosis Theories

A. Explaining the issue

1. Given the teaching that Jesus Christ was the eternal God and that he became a man, it has often been felt that the apparent contradictions (discussed above) require an explanation that goes beyond describing the matter as a paradox.
2. Beginning in the nineteenth century, many theologians appealed to Philippians 2:6–7 to solve the apparent contradictions. Since verse 7 says that Christ “emptied [*ekenōsen*, a form of the verb *kenoō*] himself,” the term *kenōsis* [“emptying”] has been used to denote whatever it was that Christ did in becoming a man that led to the apparent contradictions. The term has also been used to denote specific theories that resolve the contradiction by maintaining that in some sense Jesus ceased to be fully God.

B. Basic Types of Kenosis Theories

1. *Change of Attributes* (or “Full Kenosis”) Theories — heterodox theories that in effect deny or diminish the full deity of the incarnate Christ
 - a. Christ ceased to be God (advocated by some liberals and other heretics).
 - b. Christ ceased to possess some or all of the metaphysical attributes of God (typically the three “omni” attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence), while retaining the moral nature of God (advocated by some otherwise orthodox teachers, e.g., Walter Martin).
2. *Change of Action* (or “Partial Kenosis”) Theories — interpretations that insist on the full deity of the incarnate Christ but hold that he ceased to act as God
 - a. Christ continued to possess, but ceased to use, his divine attributes.
 - b. Christ continued to possess, but ceased to make “independent use” of, his divine attributes (a particularly popular position among many evangelicals).
3. “Non-Kenosis” Theories maintain that what took place was in effect a *Change of Appearance*—interpretations that hold that even while a man on earth Jesus was (in some way or ways) acting as God.
4. Although we call these “non-Kenosis” theories, they agree that what Philippians 2:6–7 says is true, but they deny that it means that Christ ceased to possess or have use of his divine attributes.
5. The basic idea is that Christ appeared in a way that veiled His divine attributes (cf. “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” by Charles Wesley: “veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the Incarnate Deity, pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel”). We might call this the “glory-kenosis” theory, so long as the distinctions explained above are maintained.

C. Interpreting Philippians 2:6–7

1. Paul does not mean that Christ emptied himself of his divinity or of select divine attributes.

- a. “Emptied himself” stands in contrast, *not* to “existing in God’s form,” but to “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.”
 - b. “Emptied” is used intransitively, i.e., there is no direct object expressed or implied (e.g., Paul did not write, “emptied himself *of his divine powers*”). When used this way, the verb means something like “made himself of no reputation” (KJV) or “made himself nothing” (NIV). The NLT “gave up his divine privileges” mistakenly treats the verb as transitive and comes close to construing the text to teach some form of kenosis theory.
2. Paul does not mean that Christ ceased to make use of his divine attributes, independently or otherwise. (Christ never used his divine attributes “independently of” the Father or the Holy Spirit. If he could, he would be a separate God.)
 3. Paul means that Christ came not in his divine glory but in the humility of a human servant, the servant of the Lord (cf. Is. 53).
 4. Thus, Philippians 2 does not teach that Christ ceased to be God or that he ceased to possess or to use various divine attributes. It does teach that Christ came in a form that did not exhibit in an unfiltered way his divine glory.

D. Other Considerations

1. The immutability of God — If Jesus was God, he must have possessed all of God’s attributes, since God cannot change; indeed, Scripture says Christ cannot change (Heb. 1:10–12; 13:8). Further, Christ must have been continuously using the divine attributes to sustain the existence of the universe and of all life, since that is what the Logos, the Son, does (John 1:1–5; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:2–3).
2. The Gospels suggest that Jesus did in some sense retain and even “exercise” such divine attributes as omniscience (John 16:30) and omnipresence (John 3:13)
3. If incarnation is incompatible with the omni attributes, then Christ *still* does not have those divine attributes — because he is still incarnate (Col. 2:9).
4. The paradox of the Incarnation — if Jesus was God incarnate, then, as explained above, *any* of the divine attributes possessed by him would involve a paradox (self-existence/creation; eternity/temporality; immutability/mutability; life/death; etc.), not merely the “omni” attributes. Such a paradox is precisely what we should *expect* if the infinite God became a finite man.

Appendix III: For Jesus to Be Tempted, Must He Have Been Able to Sin?⁶

All of the alternative Christologies deny what theologians call Christ's *impeccability*, which is a subtly different concept than sinlessness. To say that Christ was sinless means that he *did not* sin; to say that Christ was impeccable means that he *could not* sin. To look at the difference from another angle, these Christologies maintain that Christ was *able not to sin* but also *able to sin*; they deny that Christ was *not able to sin*. By contrast, historically most (though not all) orthodox Christians have held that Christ was impeccable, meaning he was not able to sin; in some sense, he could not sin.

The principal objection to the doctrine of the impeccability of Christ is that if Christ could not have sinned, then he could not have been genuinely tempted. We saw this objection stated explicitly by several of the authors quoted above: "there would have been no real test" (LDS Church); "temptation and the possibility of sinning" go together (SDA Church); "If you believe that Jesus was not able to sin, then why would Satan waste his time tempting Him?" (Benny Hinn).

In response, we suggest that there is a general lack of clarity in many discussions on this question in the way seemingly simple language is used (and not just by critics of impeccability): that Jesus "could" or "could not" sin, that he was "able" or "not able" to sin, and that it was "possible" or "impossible" for him to sin. The problem is that these words—*could*, *able*, *possible*—mean different things in different contexts.

A classic distinction, developed famously by the American theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards almost three centuries ago, distinguishes between natural possibility or ability and moral possibility or ability.⁷ *Natural ability* refers to the means that are necessary to do something, whereas *moral ability* refers to the inclination or willingness to do something. Edwards gives the example of a mother who has the natural capacity to kill her child (she has hands, sharp knives, and the opportunity) but not the moral capacity (she simply would never have the inclination to kill her own child). The Bible uses the language of ability in these different ways. For example, when Jesus said, "And who among you, by being anxious, is able to add one hour to his life span?" (Matt. 6:27 LEB), "is able" (*dunatai*) expresses natural inability: it is physically impossible to extend one's life by worrying about it. On the other hand, when Jesus asked the Pharisees who attributed his exorcisms to the devil, "How are you able [*dunasthe*] to say good things when you are evil?" (Matt. 12:34 LEB), he was saying that bad people are morally incapable of saying what is good and right.

The relevance of this distinction is that in order for Jesus (or anyone else) to be tempted to sin, he needed to have the natural ability to commit sin but not necessarily the moral ability to do so. Temptation is a potential inducement to sin that tests someone's faithfulness to what he or she knows is right. For temptation to occur, there must be *motive* (a reason to sin), *opportunity* (an occasion to sin), and *means* (the resources needed to commit the sin). For example, in the wilderness (Matt. 4:2–3; Luke 4:2–3), Jesus was hungry (motive), had stones available (opportunity), and had the ability to perform a miracle (means). In this sense, Jesus "could" have sinned; the temptation was meaningful

⁶ Excerpted from Bowman and Komoszewski, *Incarnate Christ and His Critics*, 281–82.

⁷ See Jonathan Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Inquiry into the Prevailing Notions of the Freedom of the Will*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, rev. Edward Hickman (1834; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 1:10–11 (Part I, Section IV).

because giving into it would have satisfied an immediate felt desire (in this case, the desire for food). However, the genuineness of the temptation does not require Jesus to have been *morally* able to yield to it. In order for the temptation to be real, it was not necessary for him to have an inclination or willingness to do something selfish or unfaithful to the Father's purpose such as turning stones into bread for his own immediate gratification. Notice the important distinction between having a *motive* to sin (such as hunger) and having an *inclination* to sin.

The classic view of Christ's sinlessness is that although he had a fully human nature and thus ordinary human desires and needs, he had no inclination or inner bent toward sin that he needed to "overcome." Paul threads this needle when he says that God sent "his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3; see also Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:6–7; Heb. 2:14–18; 1 John 4:1–6). The Son came in the flesh—the same frail, needy, mortal nature as sinful human beings—yet he was not himself sinful or sinfully inclined. This meant that *he could be tempted as we are without responding as we do*.

The fact that Jesus lived a morally perfect life for over thirty years is itself strong evidence that in some sense he could not sin. Every human being faces many moments every day in which sin is a possible outcome. Jesus lived well over ten thousand days, so over the course of his lifetime he must have faced many tens of thousands of such moments. If it is true that he was tempted as we are and yet never sinned, as the New Testament clearly teaches, this fact is best understood as meaning that he was morally incapable of sinning.

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