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Volume XII
Issue 298

The Doctrine of the Double Nature of Christ

Part 1

by – Don Snedeker

One of the primary elements of Trinitarian dogma is that Jesus Christ has two natures, one of God and the other of man. The doctrine of the “double nature of Christ” arose from the circumstances that Jesus is called a *man* throughout the Bible, but some of his followers began to think He was also God. In order to reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable views, arguments were developed over the centuries to account for the fact that Jesus is clearly delineated as a *man* in Scripture, and this would seem to disqualify Him from being God.

The special need for this doctrinal development arose because Scripture presents Jesus in a different “class” than the Father. The Father is always spoken of as having no limitations. Jesus being a *man* implies that He was limited, and there are explicit statements in Scripture that make His limitations clear. Jesus was ignorant of the day and hour of His return (Mark 13:39). He said His Father was greater than Himself (John 14:28). John said that nobody has seen God at any time (John 1:18). Paul informs us that there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the *man* Christ Jesus (I Timothy 2:5). To maintain the belief that Jesus is God, Trinitarians needed to account for the many verses that so clearly represent Jesus as a *man*.

The reasoning employed in the development of the doctrine is so arbitrary, it is as if those who developed it decided to accept it as true without considering what their arguments and conclusions sounded like. It requires very little scrutiny before the mind recoils at the propositions put forth in support of the doctrine

of the two natures in Christ. The so-called truth of the doctrine appears to have been (or perhaps become) a foregone conclusion. The claim that Jesus is a man *and* God is a matter of prejudice, and is manifestly absurd in light of Jesus’ Own statements on this subject.

It seems that it should be unnecessary to make assertions such as “*God is not a man*” (Numbers 23:19); but it is necessary to state things as elementary as this when addressing the arguments in favor of the doctrine of two natures in Christ. By His Own admission Jesus was ignorant of the day and hour of His return. This immediately disqualifies Him from being God. This is not only because of His claim of His Own ignorance on the issue, but because He said that only the Father knew the day and hour of His return. If He was co-equal with the Father, He would have been just as knowledgeable as the Father; but Trinitarian arguments continue unabatedly, trying by any means to save what was absurd from the very beginning. The Father is the only being without any limitations – limitations which Jesus Himself admitted to having.

The frequency with which God is called or described as “*the Father*” is also in this connection to be borne in mind. In the New Testament He is called simply “*the Father*” in no less than one hundred and twenty-two passages; in nineteen, “*God the Father*,” in various places, “*God our Father*,” “*Our Father*,” “*God, even our Father*,” “*God, even the Father*,” “*Father of Mercies*,” or merciful Father, “*Father of Glory*,” or glorious Father. He is

(see *DOUBLE*, page 2735)

Bible Student's Notebook™

Paul Our Guide – Christ Our Goal

ISSN: 1936-9360

Volume XII, No. 298 – June 21, 2011

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- the affirmation of God's purpose to save all mankind through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (I Timothy 2:3, 4; 4:10; Titus 2:11);
- the "preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began" (Romans 16:25);
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- the importance of receiving all whom Christ has received (Romans 14-15);
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DOUBLE (continued from front page)

declared in express terms to be “*the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*,” while our Lord Himself described Him as “*your Father which is in heaven*,” “*thy Father*,” “*your Heavenly Father*,” “*your Father*,” and after His Resurrection, directed Mary to say to His disciple, “*I ascend unto My Father and your Father, to My God and your God*.” **Never in Scripture, not in one solitary instance, is there the phrase “God the Son”** – which is so familiar to our ears that its profanity passes unnoticed.¹

THE TITLE “GOD”

There are a few verses that are used to support the doctrine of the double nature of Christ. In these Jesus is thought to be called “God.” So, taken literally, the inference is made that Jesus must be God as well as a man. One such verse is Hebrews 1:8.

But unto the Son He says, “Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Thy kingdom; Thou hast loved righteousness and hated iniquity.”

The title “God” applied to Christ in this verse does not mean that He is the *supreme* God. The title “God” (or “god”) was applied to people who were obviously not the supreme God. This custom is not practiced in the West, but by looking at a few parts of Scripture we may see how it was applied.

The word God is here applied to Christ, and is understood as proof of His deity. This, however, would be an uncertain proof, for the same word is applied quite frequently in a subordinate sense. It was applied to Moses, who was said to be “*a god to Pharaoh*” (Exodus 7:1). Those also were called gods to whom the Word of God came (John 10:35). We must look, therefore, to the connection to see what its meaning is in this case; and we read directly after the words quoted,

Therefore God, even Thy God, has anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy fellows.

Observe, therefore, which is the point of our argument in this case, that, even when spoken of as God, there is the *Supreme God* over Him, from

Whom He receives His anointing, and by Whom He is raised above His equals. Let me read to you, also, the beginning of that same chapter, that you may see how plainly the dependence of Christ upon the Father is expressed.

God, Who at sundry times and in divers manners spoke in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son, Whom He has appointed heir of all things, by Whom also He made the ages; Who being the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the Word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high; being made so much better than the angels, as He has by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. For unto which of the angels said He at any time, “Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee?” And again, “I will be to Him a Father, and He shall be to Me a Son?”

We admit that words cannot easily express higher exaltation than this. It was the Apostle’s intention to speak in the strongest terms which were consistent with truth, and he has done so. In reading them we perceive that the exaltation of Christ is greater than we can fully comprehend. But at the same time we perceive, with equal plainness, delegated authority and absolute dependence on the Father.

On the one hand, we can have no doubt that His highest nature is here spoken of, for there is no passage in which stronger words are used. On the other hand, we read that He did not speak of Himself, but that God spoke by Him; that in all His highest offices He was the agent of God; working only by God’s power; that He obtained a more excellent name than the angels by inheritance, according to the appointment of God; that there was a time when His existence began, as plainly expressed in these words, “*This day have I begotten thee*.” In the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth verses, which are a quotation from Psalm 102, the Almighty Himself is addressed as the source of all power and might; after which the Apostle returns to His former subject, the dignity of Christ, which He again ascribes to God as the Author and Giver.²

1. Frederick Farley, *The Scripture Doctrine of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*, 1873, pp. 13-14.

2. William Eliot, *Discourses on the Doctrines of Christianity*, 1877, pp. 52, 53.

THE SUPREMACY OF THE FATHER

This is an important point regarding the supremacy of the Father. He is always designated as the origin and giver of power and authority. So **if Jesus is anywhere called “God,” it is to be understood in a subordinate sense.** He is One unto Whom the Word of God came and, just as the prophets and judges before Him, is, by idiom, entitled to the title “God.”

Another verse that some think is proof of Jesus’ deity is Philippians 2:6:

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal to God.

If this verse was meant to prove Christ’s deity, it would stand as a singular example of verbosity and circumlocution. Thinking that the phrase “*thought it not robbery to be equal with God*” is the equivalent of the phrase “is God” is to pervert the sense of the words employed. If Jesus was God, this verse would say something like, “Who, being God, etc.” – but it is unnecessary to address this verse at length here. The following quotation sheds light on the meaning of this verse, and is an interpretation which harmonizes with the whole of Scripture.

To be in the form of God means to be the image or manifestation of God ... But the exact meaning of the words is not important to our present argument. Whatever they mean, their limitation is found in the ninth and following verses.

*Wherefore God has highly exalted Him, and given Him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every name shall bow, of those in heaven, and those in earth and those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is the Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*³

A DISTORTED VIEW OF JESUS

The doctrine of the double nature of Christ creates a distorted view of Jesus. If we try to conceive of a being who is both God and man, we become unhappily bewildered. Our notions of what it is to be man are very different from our notions of what it is to be the almighty God. The two terms have their own unique

characteristics and are so different that they cannot be predicated of the same being.

Now by the nature of a thing we mean its qualities. To say, therefore, that Christ possesses *both* a divine and a human nature is to say that He possesses both the qualities of God and the qualities of man; that the same mind consequently is both created and uncreated, both finite and infinite, both dependent and independent, both changeable and unchangeable, both mortal and immortal, both susceptible to pain and incapable of it, both able to do all things and not able, both acquainted with all things and not acquainted with them. Here is one of the persons of the Trinity united to the person of the man; here there is a person or mind both finite and infinite. Now, to use the words of another in expressing my own sentiments, if it be not certain that such a doctrine as this is false, there is no certainty on any subject. It is in vain to call it a mystery; it is an absurdity – it is an impossibility. According to my ideas of propriety and duty, by assenting to it I should culpably abuse those faculties of understanding which God has given me to distinguish between right and wrong, truth and error.⁴

A DOCTRINE OF INFERENCE AND CONFUSION

The doctrine of the double nature of Christ, like that of the Trinity, is a doctrine of inference. Neither doctrine is declared in any verse, nor can they be expressed in the language of Scripture. Scattered verses are assembled in quasi-syllogistic form, inferences are drawn from newly-created contexts, and it is assumed that the Messiah is *both* a mortal man and the almighty God. The absurdity of this method is manifest in the body of theology that comes from it.

This doctrine makes utter confusion of our understanding of our Lord Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, and the Bible, the written Word of God. There is simply nothing in Scripture that supports the amazing supposition that He is *both* God and man. There is nothing anywhere, no analogy, no terminology, no defense of any sort that can be produced to support the idea that anybody could be *both* God Almighty and a man. The doctrine of the double nature of Christ, like that of the Trinity, turns the Bible into confusion, rendering the clearest verses obscure and clouding what we know to be true about God and man.

3. Eliot, pp. 54, 55.

4. J.S. Hyndman, *Lectures*, 1824, pp. 34, 35.

According to those that maintain the doctrine of the two natures in Christ, Christ speaks of Himself, and is spoken of by His Apostles, sometimes as a man, sometimes as God, and sometimes as both God and man. He speaks, and is spoken of, under these different characters indiscriminately, without any explanation, and without its being anywhere declared that he existed in these different conditions of being. He prays to that being Whom He Himself was. He declares to be ignorant of what (being God) He knew, and unable to perform what (being God) He could perform. He affirms that He could do nothing of Himself, or by His Own power, though He was omnipotent. He, being God, prays for the glory which He had with God, and declares another is greater than Himself (see John 17; Mark 13:32; John 5:30; 14:28).

In one of the passages quoted in proof of His divinity, He is called the *image* of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15); in another of these passages, He, the God over all, is said to have been anointed by God with the oil of gladness above His fellows (Hebrews 1:8-9); and in a third, it is affirmed that He became obedient to death, “*even the death of the cross*” (Philippians 2:5-8).

If my readers are shocked by the combinations which I have brought together, I beg them to do me the justice to believe that my feelings are the same with their own. But these combinations necessarily result from the doctrine which we are considering. Page after page might be filled with inconsistencies as gross and as glaring. The doctrine has turned Scriptures, as far as they relate to this subject, into a book of riddles, and, what is worse, of riddles admitting of no solution. I willingly refrain from the use of stronger language which will occur to many of my readers.⁵

As the very Infinite, His [Jesus'] words can have no sincere meaning – His suffering must be unreal – His temptation a dramatic show – His prayers an insincerity – His sorrowing affection an assumed disguise – His example of no application to our mortal state. Analyze your own thought of Him, and you will find it resolves itself very much into what I have said.

... Forced and strained beyond this simple truth, the doctrine is one reposing on insufficient evidence, and in the highest degree confounding to our reason. He is taken from the sphere of our sympathy, and put in a position merely official towards us. An arbitrary and artificial array of “offices” is assigned Him, in place of the free, natural, spontaneous exercise of spiritual power by a gloriously endowed and sincerely faithful soul.

The charge of assuming such a character He repels as explicitly as possible, in the words which best express His true spiritual relation to man and God:

If he called them gods unto whom the Word of God came, how say ye of Him Whom the Father hath sanctified and sent into the world, “Thou blasphemest,” because I said, “I am the Son of God?”

His own exposition of His lofty claim, “*I and My Father are one*,” is when He prays for all His disciples throughout the world,

*That they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in Us; that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me.*⁶

If Jesus was a man who could not have failed in His mission, there would be no way for us to relate to Him. His life would become devoid of meaning because we relate to others based on our experience. The doctrine of the double nature of Christ strips us of a true appreciation of the challenges he faced and the manner in which he handled them.

Biblical research is to be conducted in a manner that is no different than any other form of investigation we undertake. In all areas of research we use our minds to sort out information with which we are presented. When we examine Trinitarianism, though, we are confronted with a new approach, one in which common sense is not required or employed. New words and phrases are invented that are unbiblical and incomprehensible and that find their final resting place in the realm of “mystery.” I wonder if a person who accepts the tenets of his religion on such grounds would confidently embrace flying in an airplane which was constructed by engineers employing the same ►

5. Andrew Norton, *A Statement of Reasons for Not Believing the Doctrines of Trinitarians*, 1877, pp. 60, 61.

6. Joseph H. Allen, *Ten Discourses*, 1849, pp. 87, 88.

methodology. If the method of constructing the airplane was a mystery to its builders, who in his right mind would get on it? This is because confidence is based upon the reasonableness of the way in which a final product, whether an airplane or a doctrine, is constructed. An exception to standards of reasonableness must be made by someone who decides to accept Trinitarian dogma. It is preferable to accentuate or heighten our implementation of those mental faculties which God has given us to interpret the Bible. The Bible, with the exception of our acceptance of its divine origins, is to be interpreted like other books.

If we are to gain anything from Scripture, we must understand words according to their plain meaning. Unless some part of speech requires an unusual interpretation, such as an idiom, we ought to interpret the words according to their normal meanings; but exceptions to this must constantly be made for one to accept Trinitarian doctrines as true. Jesus said such things as *"My Father is greater than I"* (John 14:28). The obvious meaning of this must be circumvented in order to sustain the notion that He is co-equal with God. The notion of a double nature in Christ was invented to do exactly this. It makes it possible, even acceptable, to cast our Lord's words in an entirely different sense than they were meant when they were originally spoken.

We find no passage in the Bible, and there is none, in which it is taught that our Savior had two natures, one human and one divine; but he is always spoken of as a single being, *"the Christ, the Son of the Living God."* ... When He spoke of Himself without qualification, using the personal pronouns, "I," and "Myself," and "Me," He must have used them in their common meaning, and He was certainly, at the time, so understood. If He had intended to have been understood differently, He would have given some indication of it. As He gave none, we take His words in their plain and obvious meaning. Just as you would understand me, if I were to say, "I do not know such a thing," without qualifying the words, so do we understand Him. We dare not understand Him otherwise. For would it be right for me to say, "I do not know such a thing," if I really know it? And defend myself by saying, that my body does not know it, but my mind does? Such would not be a fair use of language; and if the Scriptures were to be interpreted in such a manner, there is absolutely no doctrine that could not be proved from

it. We understand Jesus simply as He spoke, and therefore, while we pray for the time when *"at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue confess Him to be the Lord,"* we remember that this must always be done *"to the glory of God the Father."*⁷

CHRIST'S WORDS NEGATED AND RENDERED UNINTELLIGIBLE

The practices of interpretation that give rise to the doctrine of the double nature of Christ foster the negation of the words of Jesus and render them unintelligible. That Christians would accept a mechanism that allows such blatant disregard for Jesus' Own words is shocking. The idea that our Lord delivered distinct precepts, and then following generations would work feverishly to alter His words and make them a mysterious hypothesis, is unconscionable. It is impossible to understand the words of Jesus without a clear idea of Who He is, and the doctrine of the double nature prevents us from obtaining this necessary understanding of His identity.

By inventing a theory which makes Jesus to be *both* God and man, Trinitarians have, perhaps unwittingly, assigned to Him a split personality.

A being of complex constitution like man is not a being of a double nature. The very term double nature, when one professes to use it in a strict, philosophical sense, implies an absurdity. The nature of a being is ALL which constitutes it what it is; and when one speaks of a double nature, it is the same sort of language as if we were to speak of a double individuality.⁸

KNOWABLE OR UNKNOWNABLE?

Entertaining the notion that Jesus has a split personality is damaging to one's relationship with Him. To have a fruitful relationship with our Lord we must know Him as He is; but the doctrine of two natures causes Him to be unknowable.

What becomes ... of the personality of Christ, the consistency of His character, and the identity of His consciousness, when in the sacred drama of His Gospel manifestation He is represented as per-

7. Eliot, pp. 50, 51.

8. Ellis, pp. 139, 140.

forming in two parts, and without change of fleshy garb or tone or speech lays aside now His Deity and now His humanity in alternate moments and in successive sentences of His discourse? His prayers must be construed as soliloquies: His deeds of power must be referred to Himself, and His professions of dependence to one element of that self, speaking of another element in the same self. The incongruity, the incoherence, which the Orthodox doctrine of two natures in Christ either puts into or draws from the Scriptures, is not the least of the confounding conditions of the theory. When an individual speaks of himself to others, they understand him as speaking of all that is embraced under his seeming and his real individuality. Unless he has announced himself as representing two characters, and as free to pass from one impersonation into the other without giving warning of the transition, his two characters will be regarded as making up one character, and some deeds and utterances which would have been intelligible if assigned to either of his impersonations, become inexplicable if referred to his composite character. Only through the help of an illustration – for which, however, we need not apologize, as the candid will recognize the simple intent of a parallelism at only one point – can we express the real embarrassment which we meet in attempting to deal with the theory of a double nature in Christ. Let it be allowed us, then, to conceive of a man who is concerned in business under two relations – first as an individual, and second as a member of a firm of three partners. Under each of these he receives and writes letters, meets at his two offices those with whom he has dealings, and speaks and acts under the exigencies of his double mercantile connections. As a member of the firm he has visited its place of business, consulted its books, and read letters which have made known to him certain facts of a very serious import and interest to others. He goes to his place for transacting the business which he does on his private account. While there, a friend, who is deeply concerned in the very matters of which he has just come to the knowledge, enters and asks for information about them, addressing him as an individual possessing one mind, one consciousness. He replies that he knows nothing about the matter, keeping in reserve, however, the explanation which he makes to himself, that he means that his private letters are silent on the subject. Does he deal fairly with his questioner, especially if that questioner has ap-

pealed to him on the very ground of his well-known extended and various relations to the business affairs of the world, and perhaps on the day previous has heard him speak in that character? Precisely this question would be continually presenting itself to us in embarrassing and painful shapes if we accepted the theory of a double nature in Christ, under which, when questioned as an individual on the ground of all He ever claimed to know and to be, He replied according to His choice of characters for the moment, by a claim founded on His Deity, or a profession of limited knowledge or ignorance justified by His humanity.⁹

HYPOSTATIC UNION

The doctrine of the double nature of Christ develops the idea that there are two distinct persons in Christ, each with different cognizant abilities. Trinitarians refute the claim that they have made two distinct persons out of Jesus, but the language employed is demonstrative of this undesired consequence. It is argued that He made some of His statements as God and others as a man. This hypothesis shows that Trinitarians represent Jesus as two separate persons.

Trinitarian brethren, believing in the two natures of Christ, a doctrine, the consequences of which it is impossible to conceive anything more fatal to Christianity, deserves our particular attention. ... Look at the consequences of such a hypothesis. If Christ possessed two perfectly distinct natures – perfect manhood and perfect Deity – then He certainly must have had two distinct minds, and consequently two distinct persons; a being thus, which even the most mystery-loving mind cannot acknowledge.¹⁰

It is frequently argued by those who favor the doctrine of two natures in Christ that whatever Jesus did on earth prior to His resurrection He did as man, but after His resurrection He returned to being God. This does not at all agree with Scripture, which says that after Jesus' resurrection He is still a *man*.

*For there is one God, and one Mediator between God and men, the **Man** Christ Jesus* (I Timothy 2:5).

9. Ellis, pp. 139, 140.

10. Thomas, p. 29.

Paul's letter to Timothy was written after Christ ascended and Jesus was still spoken of as a *man*.

The idea that Jesus is God is negated by His Own testimony of His reliance upon the Father. What need would there have been for the Father to be instrumental in Jesus' life and resurrection if Jesus could have done it Himself? Every part of Scripture that speaks of God's involvement in Jesus' resurrection would be pretentious if the Father was not really needed.

Trinitarians argue that Jesus said "*My Father is greater than I*" in His human capacity, though as God He was co-equal with the Father. What Trinitarians are really arguing is that Jesus' statement is not true. This is an outright dismissal of Jesus' Own declaration that His Father is supreme, and has the effect of making Jesus a liar. ... The Father is uniformly described as the supreme God, the only One Who is greater than Jesus. With the supremacy of the Father recognized, Jesus' words may be easily understood and trusted; without this recognition, Jesus' words are untrustworthy.

Jesus said, "*I can of Mine Own self do nothing.*"

The Trinitarian says, Jesus can of Himself do everything that God can do.

Jesus said, "*My Father is greater than I.*"

The Trinitarian says, Jesus is as great as the Father.

To one unacquainted with the use that is made of the doctrine of the Two Natures, these assertions appear to be palpable contradictions. He cannot perceive how the assertions of Jesus, and those of Trinitarians, can both be true. But here comes in the doctrine of the Two Natures to reconcile the apparent contradictions. "Jesus is *both* God and man," says the Trinitarian. "And though as man, He can do nothing of Himself, yet as God, He can do everything. Though as man, He is not His Father's equal, yet as God, He is equal with the Father in substance, and power, and glory." But if He is God, can He say in truth, that He can do nothing of Himself? What, can God do nothing of Himself! If He is God, can He say in truth, "My Father is greater than I"? What, is the Father greater than God? For one to assert that He cannot do what He is conscious that He can do, is to say what is not

true. For what one can do, in any way, or by any means, He can certainly do.

Jesus is said to have two capacities of knowledge – His divine and His human nature. The one is strong and piercing, knowing all things. The other is weak and defective, being ignorant of many things. As such a one, He says, in regard to the time of a certain event, He does not know the day nor the hour. He makes no exception of one of His capacities of knowledge; but says, absolutely, He does not know the time. No one knows but the Father. Yet the doctrine of the Two Natures supposes that Jesus did know the day and hour; and that when He said He did not know, He spoke only of His capacity of knowledge which is weak and defective.

Another objection to the doctrine of the Two Natures is that it renders it impossible to understand or believe anything that Jesus says of Himself. The terms I, me, myself, mine own self, always denote one person, an individual; they include the whole person, all that constitutes Him a person. In this sense they were unquestionably used by Christ. When He said, I, Me, Myself, He could not have meant a part of Himself. He could not have meant that part of Himself which is infinitely less than another part of Himself. If it be admitted that Jesus did not mean Himself, His whole self, all that constitutes His proper personality, there is no assertion He ever made but what may be contradicted. One has only to say, "This He did as man, it is not true of Him as God, therefore it is not true; and this He did as God, it is not true of Him as man, therefore it is not true." In this way, every assertion He ever made of Himself, may be contradicted. In this way, we may deny His birth, His crucifixion, His death, and His resurrection, because these were true of Him only as man, not as God.¹¹

(to be continued)

11. Charles Morgridge, *True Believer's Defense Against Charges Preferred by Trinitarians*, 1837, pp. 71-74.