



## THE NATURE OF CHRIST

### WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?

When our Lord Jesus Christ was with His disciples in Caesarea Philippi, He asked them two questions. The first one was, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” They answered, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Then He asked them the second question, “But who do you say that I am?” Then Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”.

The same two questions are addressed over the generations – what do people say about Jesus Christ – who is He? Unfortunately, the answers have a wide spectrum from a regular man, to a prophet, to a god, to the Son of God Who took flesh for our salvation, and even then there are differences. So we would like by the end of this lesson to be able to state the faith as stated in the Holy Bible and the Holy Fathers of the Church as to Who really our Lord Jesus Christ is.

This question is directed to every single person individually. And the correct answer requires the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. Because when Simon Peter answered our Lord Jesus Christ, the answer was not from his own mind or understanding, but rather from God: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven”. (For this story, please see *Matthew* 16:13-17; see also *Mark* 8:27-29). And also, in *1 Corinthians* 12:3, St. Paul writes: “No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Spirit”.

### I. THE ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON OF THE FATHER

As we mentioned in our last lesson about the Holy Trinity, the Son is one in essence with the Father. “I and My Father are One” (*John* 10:30). “Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me” (*John* 14:11). “That all men should honour the Son, even as they honour the Father” (*John* 5:23). “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (*John* 14:9). “God... has in these last days spoken unto us by His Son... Who being the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person” (*Hebrews* 1:1-3). There are multiple other verses that express the same belief.

He is one in essence with the Father, and He is the Only-Begotten of the Father. Thus, He is the Son of God, the Only-Begotten of the Father. “For God so loved the world, that He gave **His Only-Begotten Son**” (*John* 3:16). “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that **God sent His Only-Begotten Son into the world**, that we might live through Him” (*1 John* 4:9). Again there are several other verses like these.

However, it is important to distinguish and understand that He is the Son of God by NATURE, whereas we are sons of God by ADOPTION. St. Paul writes, “But when the fullness of the time was come, **God sent forth His Son**, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that **we might receive the adoption as sons**” (*Galatians* 4:4-5).

So how can we understand and explain to others the idea that He is the Only-Begotten Son of God, yet still God and one with the Father from eternity? The Fathers

have given the analogy of the mind and the thought. We normally say that the mind produces thoughts, or rather “begets” thoughts. However, one cannot say that there is a mind without a thought or vice-versa. They are coexistent and one never exists without the other. Thoughts come from the mind, but there is never a mind without a thought. Taking this a step further, one cannot know what is in another person’s mind without that person expressing his thoughts. Thus, the words, expressions, and actions seen of the person are all from the thoughts of one’s mind.

Therefore, when we speak of the Only-Begotten Son of the Father, there is none like Him, and He is also the WORD or *LOGOS* of the Father since it is through the Son that we know about the Father. “No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him” (*John* 1:18). Also as St. Paul mentions in *Hebrews* 1:1-2: “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son”.

One last point in this section– the Son of God, the Word, took flesh. However, He never ceased being God and ruling the universe and being one with the Father. St. John states that He is still IN the bosom of the Father, in the present tense, signifying that although He took flesh never ceased being God and one with the Father. “No one has seen God at any time. **The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him**” (*John* 1:18). He also records the words of Christ that although He took flesh, He is still in the heavens: “**No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven**” (*John* 3:13).

The analogy of the mind and thought helps us understand this point. Even though the mind begets a thought, the thought never left the mind. So when I tell you what is in my mind, that thought never left my mind and I still know and remember what I told you. Thus, they are one and never separated.

## II. THE SON OF GOD TOOK FLESH

“**God was manifested in the flesh**” (*1Timothy* 3:16). And more specifically, the Son, the Word, the Only-Begotten of the Father took flesh, “**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth**” (*John* 1:14).

He took flesh in the womb of the Holy Virgin Mary in a manner which was revealed by the Archangel Gabriel: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God” (*Luke* 1:35). “Then Mary said, ‘Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.’ And the angel departed from her” (*Luke* 1:38). It was at this moment that the conception occurred and the prophecy was fulfilled: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us” (*Matthew* 1:23; see *Isaiah* 7:14).

An analogy to help us understand what happened in the incarnation is a radio. The radio waves are everywhere. However, in order to hear what those waves carry, one needs a few things. He needs a radio, an antenna, a power source, and someone to push the “ON” button. The Holy Virgin Mary is the radio, the antenna is the Son of God. The power source (plugging in the power cord) is the Holy Spirit as signified by the verse

above. The last part is her acceptance. When she said, “Let it be to me according to your word”, that was the “ON” button that needed to be pushed.

### III. “ONE INCARNATE NATURE OF THE DIVINE LOGOS”

In order to best understand the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ, St. Cyril of Alexandria, the 24<sup>th</sup> Pope of Alexandria, gave us this formula. Our Lord Jesus Christ is fully God (i.e. the Son of God) and fully human at the same time, in One Composite or United Nature. This was in what we call a “*hypostatic*” union, i.e. One Person. So His divinity and humanity were not separate, but one. As we say in the confession at the end of the Divine Liturgy: “His divinity parted not from His humanity for a single moment nor a twinkling of an eye”. However, there was no mingling, confusion, or alteration.

The famous analogy used by the Fathers is that of the red-hot iron. The iron when put in the fire becomes red-hot as a result of the fire. Thus, the fire and the iron become one and inseparable, but the two are not mixed or confused or altered as a result of the other.

This becomes important in terms of not only speaking the truth of who our Lord Jesus Christ is, but also in terms of our salvation. If this was not the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ, then we weren’t redeemed through His sacrifice on the Cross. We will discuss this in the next lesson, God willing, when discussing “Why did God take flesh?”

There are endless verses in the Bible that speak about both the divinity and the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ that go beyond the spectrum of this lesson. However, it is important to point out the verses that show that He is God in the flesh. Probably one of the most expressive of this point amongst all these verses is: “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of **God which He purchased with His own blood**” (*Acts 20:28*) through shedding His blood which He got through the Incarnation.

### IV. HE EMPTIED HIMSELF

There have been many different heresies concerning the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ. There are those who have denied His full divinity like Arius, and there are those who have denied His full humanity, like the Docetists. But the main difference in Christology, i.e. the understanding of the nature of Christ, amongst most of the different denominations today is what the relationship of His divinity and humanity truly is. Those who were influenced by Nestorius and the Antiochian school of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries believed in a “low” Christology, i.e. beginning with the humanity and trying to understand how that man was also God. This led to many problems and ultimately a denial of a true *hypostatic* union of Christ’s divinity and humanity. This was the problem of the faith expressed in the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. The other side was the teaching of the school of Alexandria whose great champion at the time was St. Cyril of Alexandria, who believed and taught a “high” Christology, i.e. beginning with the divinity and seeing the mystery of how God took flesh and became Man. According to the Holy Bible and the teaching of the Fathers of the Church, this “high” Christology is the only way to explain how God could be born, and suffer, and die, because He did so **IN THE FLESH**.

Our analogy of the red-hot iron explains this issue as well. If one were to strike the red-hot iron, the iron is bent. However, there was really no effect on the fire, even though they are one.

So even though He suffered and died, this occurred IN THE FLESH. How could this be since He is God? This was a result of God “emptying” Himself, i.e. humbling Himself, and taking flesh and living as a human with all of its properties, except sin alone (see *Hebrews* 4:15; *Isaiah* 53). He never ceased being God even though He fully united with the human nature. He chose to do this according to His own free will for the sake of our salvation.

St. Paul explains this principle in *Philippians* 2 when he writes that:

**“...Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled (lit. “emptied”) Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross”** (*Philippians* 2:5-8).

One of the fraction prayers in the Divine Liturgy, the Syrian Fraction, expresses and clarifies this faith saying:

“Thus truly the Logos of God suffered in the flesh and was sacrificed and bowed upon the Cross. His soul parted from His body, while His divinity in no way parted either from His soul or from His body. He was pierced with the spear in His side, out of which came blood and water... His body was smeared by them; and His soul came and reunited with His body... and on the third day He rose from the grave. One is Emmanuel, and unseparated after the unity, and undivided into two natures. Thus we believe, and thus we assure, and thus we confirm...”

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#### References:

- 1) *The Nature of Christ*, H.H. Pope Shenouda III
- 2) *The Divinity of Christ*, H.H. Pope Shenouda III

#### **QUESTIONS:**

- 1) **How would you explain the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ to someone in simple, yet accurate and effective terminology?**
- 2) **What analogies can be used to help us understand the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ?**