

Based on: Roger Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Humanity: Essentially Good *and* Existentially Estranged (chap. 9) Jesus Christ: God *and* Man (chap. 10)

As I was dividing up the book into weekly segments, the chapter about Jesus could have been discussed with the chapter on humanity or the two chapters on salvation. Obviously I chose the former, but the reality is that our understanding of Jesus influences all of our theological discussions because we are able to comprehend the nature and purposes of God most fully when we look at the life and teachings of Jesus. All that to say, this will really “set the stage” for our discussion of salvation, as we’ll talk about humanity’s present condition as well as the nature of Jesus as God with us, fully human and fully divine, here.

We’ll begin with the Christian confession regarding humanity, which Olson reveals is centered upon three main issues:

- (1) How humans are both physical and spiritual...
- (2) What it means that humanity is created in God’s image/likeness...
- (3) How humans can be essentially good and existentially estranged at the same time...

These three issues form the dogma (essential affirmations) for Christians regarding humanity. In other words, the unifying Christian confession is that human persons are both animal (physical beings) and supra-animal (conscious, reasoning, spiritual beings); are created in the image and the likeness of God; and are both inherently good yet estranged from God. These are the general, universal affirmations of the Christian faith, yet great diversity exists in explaining (“fleshing out”) what this means in particular. We’ll briefly consider each, noting the various perspectives offered throughout church history.

First, how are we to understand humans as both physical and spiritual? As Olson notes, “for the most part in Christian anthropology, human beings are ‘living souls’ (persons inevitably and inescapably related to God) composed of both body (natural existence) and spirit (supernatural existence)...Christian anthropology values *both* body *and* spirit as two sides of the good creation of a human soul” (204). Precisely how we are to understand the relationship between body, spirit, and soul has led to three basic views (upon which numerous variations/explications have been offered): *dichotomy*, *trichotomy*, and *holism*. All three explain in slightly different ways how humans are both physical beings and supra-physical (or spiritual) beings.

“Dichotomists” believe the human person is composed of two distinct elements—body and soul. That is, they believe that humans are soul/spirit and body, and the soul/spirit survives death and waits for the resurrected body. This is the view held by the 13th century Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas who understood the human soul as “a term for the spiritual aspect of a person...[that] could be called *spirit* just as well” (216). Essentially this view equates soul and spirit, which make up the spiritual or supra-animal nature of a human person who is able to relate to God, to reason and be conscious of existence as well as of reality beyond ourselves—and understands the body as the physical or animal nature.

“Trichotomists” believe the human person is composed of three distinct elements—body, soul, and spirit. Whereas the “dichotomists” combine soul with spirit, the “trichotomists” distinguish between the two. This view, held by a few early Christian theologians (such as Irenaeus) is clearly influenced by the ideas set forth by Plato, which “taught a tripartite psychology very similar to Christian trichotomy” (216). As Olson explains, in trichotomy “the soul is a mediating organ of the human being; it is the animating life force that surpasses the merely physical body but does not survive bodily death...[the] spirit is the higher substance or dimension of a human person that radically transcends [the soul]...and is capable of community with God both while in the body and when out of it after death” (216, 217). Essentially this view understands the spirit as the means by which humans are able to reason and relate to God, while the soul is the means by which our physical body is animated and living.

“Holists” believe that a human person is body, soul and spirit (or body and soul/spirit), which are distinct yet inseparable. As Olson describes it, they believe “human beings are unified entities that cannot be sliced up into separable substances; soul and spirit are merely terms for the whole person who is also physical but not merely material” (217).

My view is similar to that of Olson, who reveals that *dichotomy* has been the prevailing understanding throughout church history, while noting that *holism* offers a needed reminder that to be a human person requires a bodied existence coupled with an awareness of reality beyond ourselves and the ability to relate to the divine. While *trichotomy* seems to owe more

to Plato than the Judeo-Christian tradition, many Christians do hold this perspective and nothing vital is lost or compromised in so doing.

This brings us to the question, what does it mean for humanity to be created in the image and likeness of God? As with the effort to understand the human person, there is no consensus. An early church theologian by the name of Irenaeus made a distinction between image and likeness. He understood image of God to mean humanity's ability to reason, while likeness of God referred to God's intended destiny for all humanity, namely to become like Christ through God's redeeming grace. Others have not distinguished between the two terms, understanding image/likeness variously as immortality, conscience, ability to respond to God, freedom of choice, or dominion over the earth. Catholic writer and theologian G.K. Chesterton suggested that the image/likeness of God is the capacity for creativity. There is clearly a great diversity of thought on the matter, with the only consensus being that image/likeness does not refer to the physical body/appearance of human beings. As such, Olson's suggestion proves helpful: "Why not simply regard [the image of God] as *personhood*—that psycho-spiritual need and capacity for community and cultural creativity, development of language and communication, worship and self-transcendence, freedom and responsibility?" (218) In other words, he rightly cautions against equating the image/likeness of God with one particular aspect of the human person, preferring to see it as an overarching quality that makes us distinct from the rest of the created order.

This brings us to the final issue regarding humanity, namely the affirmation that human persons are *essentially good* and *existentially estranged*. Kept at such a bare minimum, this idea is universally affirmed by orthodox Christians. While all things were created good, humanity turned from God to walk according to their own wisdom and desires, and therefore is presently estranged from God while remaining essentially good. In other words, we are all in need of redemption made possible by God's grace while not being inherently evil. Olson put it this way, "the extent to which the image of God is affected by the fall into sin is a subject of great debate...but all agree...that original humanity, true humanity, essential humanity is good because humanity is created in God's own image and likeness" (207). As with the other issues, there is no clear consensus when one seeks to explain exactly what this means. Some have followed Augustine in equating sinfulness with biology, believing that sin is transferred through conception. Therefore, Adam's sin is our sin by nature of being born. Others see sinfulness in terms of the manner of life human society continually chooses. Therefore we are born into systems and structures which lead us down a path that is contrary to the will and purposes of God. The difference is that those following Augustine believe that Adam's sin becomes our sin by the physical act of being born as a descendent of Adam—that is, we inherit guilt because of the particular sinful act of Adam. Those taking the other approach believe that Adam's sin becomes our sin by choosing to follow the way of life contrary to God's will that Adam first exhibited—that is, we inherit the general sinful act of Adam by placing ourselves in the place of God believing we are the arbiters of right and wrong and choosing to live by our standards rather than God's. In both God's grace is necessary for redemption, but how one understands God's grace in/through the life of Jesus the Messiah is radically different dependent upon which view you accept.

We'll discuss this more next week, but the Augustinian view tends to focus primarily on Jesus' death as an atoning sacrifice that appeases God's just wrath against humanity or ransom's us from Satan for the guilt that we inherited because of Adam's sin, and tends to regard the ethical teachings of Jesus as optional (implicitly at the very least). Jesus' death is understood as required punishment for the collective guilt of humanity, and redemption is equated with this atoning act alone. By contrast, the view of inheriting sinful systems and structures that enslave us and lead us inevitably into sin understands Jesus' life as opening up the possibility of a new and redemptive way of life known as the Kingdom of God. This view regards the life and teachings of Jesus as central to God's redemptive work, because he exposed the sinful and ultimately self-destructive systems and structures of our world and offered another way that is made possible by God's grace and leads to the reconciliation of God and humanity. Jesus' death is understood as the ultimate renunciation of the violent, self-centered systems and structures of sinful humanity, trusting that God's ethic of non-violent revolution (while seemingly foolish and fruitless) is the way to advance the Kingdom of God (God's rule and reign). Both emphasize God's grace working in human lives through the presence of God's Spirit as necessary for redemption, but one sees salvation as accepting Jesus as our replacement/substitute while the other sees Jesus as making visible (and possible) a new and redemptive manner of life.

In closing our discussion of this chapter, I find Olson's words a helpful reminder that while we may formulate our understandings of the particulars differently we can all come together around essential (dogmatic) affirmation regarding humanity. "The basic, unifying perspective on humanity," Olson says, "includes the relatively simple (not simplistic) idea that all human beings are *both* unique and possessed of special dignity and value because they are created in the image of God *and* corrupted from birth by a spiritual disease that prevents them from being fulfilled apart from God's saving grace" (221). There will always be diversity when we begin "fleshing out" our understanding of these issues, but we can and should come together around this general affirmation and lovingly agree to disagree in our particular affirmations.

This brings us to the chapter on Jesus Christ, which focuses on his identity as fully God and fully human. Olson notes the significance of this topic by stating that "belief in and about Jesus Christ lies at the heart of Christianity...[T]he person of Jesus Christ is the most important reality for Christianity and therefore believing rightly about him is absolutely crucial to preserving authentic Christianity" (223). The centrality of Jesus to the Christian faith tradition is seen in the myriad efforts to understand the significance of his life and teachings. In the process many theologians have offered up different formulations of Jesus' two natures, some of which have been deemed outside the bounds of Christian teachings. Again, we must remember that these are Christians who were seeking to reconcile the difficulty of comprehending how a person could be fully human and fully divine, as well as how one could affirm that there is only one God (Jewish monotheism) while confessing that Jesus is also divine (God). Therefore, when we say they are "outside the bounds" of Christian orthodoxy ("heretical"), this does not mean that they are not Christians, but simply that their efforts to understand Jesus led them to conclusions that the mainstream church has deemed improper. With that, let's begin with six major alternate views of Jesus before turning to the Christian consensus.

First, *Docetism*, which suggests that "Christ only appeared to be human and fleshly; [while] in fact, he was only spiritual" (232). Put another way, Docetists believe that Jesus was fully and truly divine, but not fully and truly human. This is basically a Gnostic Christology. Gnostics believe that the spiritual (non-corporeal) is good and the flesh (corporeal) is evil. Therefore, Christ could not have been fully human, but could only appear to be so because the body is inherently evil and corrupt. However it is formulated, "all docetists den[y] the full and true incarnation of the Son of God in humanity...[and] they spiritualiz[e] the incarnation so that it was not a true incarnation at all" (232, 233).

Second, *Adoptionism*, which, like Docetism, struggled to comprehend how someone fully and truly human could also be fully and truly divine. This perspective suggests that Jesus was a very special (unique) human who was adopted by God for the purpose of being his anointed representative *par excellence*. As Olson put it, for Adoptionists "Jesus Christ fulfilled among humans within history an eternal divine plan: he was a human being perfectly fulfilling the image of God and God's ideal for humanity. The key characteristic of all adoptionist Christologies is an affirmation of Jesus Christ's uniqueness in relation to God combined with a denial of his ontological deity (equality with God's own eternal being)" (234). Thus, Adoptionism affirms Jesus' full and true humanity while denying his full and true divinity.

Third, *Arianism*, which is named after its founder, Arius, a four-century Christian leader who "argued that the Son of God—the Word (Logos)—preexisted the man Jesus and became incarnate in him," and "denied that the heavenly Son of God is God or equal with God...[instead] Jesus Christ is the incarnation of God's first and greatest creature who is a secondary god and not at all equal with the Father" (144). Arianism is quite similar to adoptionism in so far as both see Jesus as a very special, even unique, human being created by God. The only difference is that Arius posited a Trinitarian understanding, with the eternal, divine Logos coming upon Jesus at his conception, while Adoptionism posits Jesus as a divinely chosen representative. Both deny the divine nature of Jesus.

Fourth, *Appollinarianism*, also named after its founder, Appollinarius, a fourth-century Christian bishop who "believed that the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ could easily be explained by saying that he was a human body and soul (animating life force) without a human rational soul (mind, spirit)...[and that] the place of a human rational soul or spirit was filled by the divine Logos/Word, the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity" (236). In other words, Jesus is fully God but not fully human. He is God in human form, but lacking anything remotely analogous to human nature. As Olson reveals, this view has been explained by the phrase "God in a bod" (236), which is the exact opposite of Adoptionism and Arianism, and very similar to Docetism.

Fifth, *Nestorianism*, yet again named after its founder, Nestorius, another fourth-century Christian leader who believed Jesus possessed a fully human nature and a fully divine nature, but separated the two natures to the point that Jesus was portrayed as having multiple personalities (or, put another way, Jesus is understood as two different people who took turns acting in certain capacities). As Olson put it, “the ‘person’ of Christ was actually a ‘moral union’ of two persons like a perfect marriage. The eternal Son of God entered into a unique relationship with the human Jesus Christ from the latter’s very beginning in the virgin Mary” (237). Nestorius believed that only Jesus the human nature (person) was born of Mary, but from birth onward he worked wholly in cooperation with the divine nature (person) that came upon him. The human nature/person of Jesus experienced hunger, pain, and death; whereas the divine nature/person of Jesus performed the miraculous works. This, Olson reveals, is essentially another form of Adoptionism (though more sophisticated and nuanced).

Finally, *Eutychianism* or *Monophysitism*, again named after its founder, Eutyches, who reacted to Nestorianism “by denying that Jesus Christ could have two full and complete natures” (237). Nestorius had emphasized the two natures of Christ to the point that it was two different persons—the human Jesus of Nazareth and the divine Jesus Son of God—working in cooperation but quite distinct and separable. Eutyches responded by affirming the two different natures while emphasizing that the human nature was overridden and/or overwhelmed by the divine nature. As Olson describes it, Eutychianism suggested that “while [Jesus] *had* a human nature *in theory* it was actually swallowed up by his divinity so that he was really a hybrid of humanity and divinity” (238). This could be understood as a variation of Docetism and/or Apollinarianism.

At this point you may feel a bit overwhelmed, certainly a little confused, and likely frustrated and wondering how we are to understand what it means for Jesus to be fully human and fully divine. You may be thinking that most of those views sounded very similar and you’re not quite sure what precisely was problematic with a few of them anyway. I believe the problems with all six of these views will become more evident as we turn to the Christian consensus regarding the nature of the person of Jesus.

First, the essential Christian affirmation (dogma) regarding Jesus is that he is both God and Savior and that he is both fully human and fully divine. As we have just seen, most of the problems arise from efforts to explain how this can be, but as long as one confesses Jesus as God with us, fully divine and fully human, there is room for diversity of opinion. A more detailed consensus of Christian beliefs regarding Jesus humanity and divinity was set forth at a gathering of leaders and theologians in AD 451 known as the Council of Chalcedon, where a statement now called the “Chalcedonian definition” was formulated. This statement tried to establish some boundaries or parameters about Jesus’ divine/human natures, while leaving room for the mystery of the incarnation. As Olson summarizes, they affirmed “the belief in a perfect union of two distinct but never separate natures—one human and one divine—in one integral, eternal divine person” (227). Rather than trying to set forth a precise formulation, which led the aforementioned theologians astray, the council left room for (and sought to protect) the mystery of the incarnation by choosing to set forth four “fences” regarding the Christian understanding of Jesus rather than offering an explanation.

At Chalcedon, it was affirmed that Christians should confess Christ as “Son, Lord, only-begotten—in two natures; **without confusing** the two natures [fence 1], **without transmuting** one nature into the other [fence 2], **without dividing** them into two separate categories [fence 3], **without contrasting** them according to area or function [fence 4]” (227). Or, as Olson summarized, “whereas the doctrine of the Trinity says God is *one what and three whos*—one divine substance shared equally by three distinct persons—so Jesus Christ on earth and now in heaven because of the incarnation is *two whats and one who*—two distinct but never separate natures (divine and human) and one integrated person, the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity” (227).

The truth is, even after three years of seminary all of this is still a bit confusing and overwhelming at times. What we must remember is that God’s presence among us in the person of Jesus the Christ will always be a mystery that we will never fully understand much less be able to explain. We need not be able to formulate a detailed, finely nuanced understanding of the incarnation and the person of Jesus. Rather, we need to trust and confess that in Jesus the Messiah God came near to us, that he was fully God and fully human, and that he revealed to us, in Olson’s words, “not only the will and character of God but also our own humanity” (242).