

**THE NECESSITY OF THE HYPOSTATIC UNION  
FOR THE EFFICACY OF THE ATONEMENT**

JOHN LARSON  
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The gospel announces that God has saved sinners through the death of His Son. What it does not immediately explain is why this death, of this Person, accomplishes what no other death could. Why did the author of Hebrews insist that the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sins, and that the blood of Christ does? The answer Scripture gives is bound up with who the One who died actually was. Because atonement requires both infinite satisfaction and genuine human substitution, Christ's atoning work is efficacious only because the one person who offers it is both God and man. The hypostatic union is not an ornamental doctrine attached to the atonement but its ontological ground. What follows traces the biblical foundation for this claim, the necessity of each nature, and the union itself as the condition that makes the atonement efficacious in the one Person of Christ.

### **The Biblical Foundation for a Divine-Human Mediator**

The New Testament presents the incarnation as a mission of redemption from its earliest Christological statements. John writes that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The aorist *egeneto* marks entry into the human condition at a point in time, and *sarx* is chosen precisely to rule out any merely apparent humanity. Morris observes that John uses the strongest term available to leave no room for docetic fancies, and that the tabernacling language situates the flesh of Jesus as the new Shekinah, the literal dwelling place of divine glory.<sup>1</sup> What the Old Testament temple prefigured has now arrived in the flesh of a particular Galilean man whose identity reaches back before creation.

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<sup>1</sup>Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 91.

The same truth stands behind the apostolic confession of Christ as *theos*. Thomas, seeing the risen Christ, says “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). The opening of Hebrews quotes Psalm 45 with the address “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever” applied directly to the Son (Heb. 1:8). These attributions are not honorific. In the Jewish monotheism that shaped the apostolic writings, saviorhood belongs to God alone, and naming Christ *theos* is a recognition that the saving work the New Testament ascribes to Him requires Him to be what only God can be.<sup>2</sup> The same Jesus who ate fish, grew tired, and wept at a tomb is identified as the God whose purchase of the church is recorded in Paul’s speech to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:28).

Philippians 2:6–11 sets out the movement of this Person across both modes of His existence. He was existing in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited for His own advantage, emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant, and humbled Himself by becoming obedient unto death. The disputed *harpagmon* in verse 6 carries the sense of something one grasps or takes advantage of, and the passage turns on the judgment that Christ’s divine status was already His.<sup>3</sup> Fee rightly insists that *ekenōsen* is metaphor, and that Christ did not empty Himself *of* anything. The one who “was himself God, and who never during the whole process stopped being God,” nonetheless embraced the vocation of a servant.<sup>4</sup> The passage shows the same Person acting first as God and second as man, with the incarnation itself as the connective tissue between the two modes.

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<sup>2</sup>Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 450–51, s.v. “theos.”

<sup>3</sup>Bauer, *Lexicon*, 133, s.v. “harpagmos.”

<sup>4</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 210.

Paul presents the same structure with a different accent in Romans 1:3–4, where the gospel concerns God’s Son, “who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead.” The two clauses can tempt a reader toward an adoptionist misreading, as though Christ became divine at the resurrection. Moo shows that the verse resists that reading. The subject of both clauses is the same Person. What the resurrection accomplishes is not a change in essence but a change in status and function: the eternal Son, who had entered human existence as the Davidic Messiah, is appointed to exercise the powerful, life-giving sonship that belongs to Him in the age inaugurated by His resurrection.<sup>5</sup> The grammar itself refuses any division of Christ into two subjects.

The clearest and most sustained argument for the necessity of a divine-human Mediator is the Epistle to the Hebrews, and that argument cannot be understood without the Levitical sacrificial system. Israel’s cultic life centered on a pattern in which a priest drawn from among the people offered a blameless victim on behalf of sinners, reaching its yearly climax on the Day of Atonement when the high priest entered the Most Holy Place with blood not his own. The Passover operated by the same logic at the household level. This was the instructional substrate of Israel’s worship, a divinely appointed school in which the people were taught that sin requires atonement and atonement requires both a priest and a victim. Hebrews reads this entire economy as patterned after a heavenly reality now manifest in Christ (Heb. 8:5; 9:23).

The argument Hebrews builds on this substrate is precise. A mediator must share the nature of those he represents, for “every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act

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<sup>5</sup>Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, 2nd ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 46.

on behalf of men” (Heb. 5:1). The children of God are “sharers in flesh and blood,” and therefore the Son “himself likewise partook of the same, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death” (Heb. 2:14). He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, “so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17). Bruce captures the argumentative force when he notes that the writer treats the incarnation as the divinely willed condition for the atonement itself: the Son became a partaker of flesh and blood with death as the purpose of that partaking, so that He might become the *archēgos* of salvation.<sup>6</sup> The word carries both the sense of originator and the sense of leader, naming Christ as the one who pioneers a path His people cannot cut for themselves.<sup>7</sup>

Yet the same epistle insists with equal force that the Mediator must be divine. The Son offered Himself “through the eternal Spirit” (Heb. 9:14), and by a single offering obtained eternal redemption. The contrast the writer draws between the animal sacrifices and the sacrifice of Christ is not merely a contrast of scale but of kind, and the ground of the difference is the Person of the offerer. Bruce observes that the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice hinges on its absolute character: “only one who knew no sin could take any responsibility in regard to it which would create a new situation for sinners.”<sup>8</sup> The lexical weight of the propitiation language reinforces the point. The Greek *hilastērion*, used of Christ in Romans 3:25 and applied to the mercy seat in Hebrews 9:5, is distinctive in New Testament usage precisely because the initiative of propitiation originates with God, who sets forth His Son as the means by which the removal of

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<sup>6</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 85.

<sup>7</sup>Bauer, *Lexicon*, 138–39, s.v. “archēgos.”

<sup>8</sup>Bruce, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 214–15.

sin is accomplished.<sup>9</sup> The Mediator must be human to stand in the place of sinners, and He must be divine because only God provides the propitiation that God requires. The entire Levitical apparatus, for all its divinely appointed dignity, could never meet this double requirement: the priest was always less than God, and the victim was always other than the priest. Christ fulfills both offices in one Person.

### **The Necessity of the Divine Nature**

Once the biblical pattern is established, a question follows. Given that God has chosen to save sinners, why must the atonement take this particular form, involving this particular Person? Two historical answers frame the debate. Hypothetical necessity, associated with Augustine and Aquinas, holds that God might have saved by another means but chose the cross as the most fitting. Consequent absolute necessity, held by the classical Protestant tradition, holds that once God has freely decreed to save, the perfections of His own nature require the satisfaction that only the God-man can render.<sup>10</sup> Murray defends the latter on Scriptural grounds, arguing that the Bible's language about the cross cannot be reduced to fitness. The justice, holiness, and immutability of God together mean that salvation from sin cannot bypass the satisfaction of divine justice.

Turretin states the case in its classical form. Once God has willed to save, a necessity arises from the perfections of His own nature: the satisfaction must be infinite because it is satisfaction offered to an infinite God whose holiness has been infinitely offended.<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>9</sup>Bauer, *Lexicon*, 474, s.v. “hilastērion.”

<sup>10</sup>John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (1955; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024), 5–6.

<sup>11</sup>Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1994), topic 14, question 10.

Levitical system made this point typologically. The sacrifices were repeated endlessly because each offering was finite. Witsius draws out the logic with particular clarity: if satisfaction were a matter of God's bare decree rather than His essential holiness and justice, the whole apparatus of the cross would appear as a kind of solemn theatre. The unsparing offering of the beloved Son cannot be accounted for on the supposition that God might have dismissed sin by a word. The only explanation worthy of God is that the cross was necessary because sin is a contradiction of His nature.<sup>12</sup>

Bavinck brings the dogmatic point to its sharpest expression when he grounds the infinite worth of Christ's sacrifice in the infinite dignity of His Person. The obedience and suffering of Christ possess atoning efficacy because they are the obedience and suffering of one who is God. A merely human obedience, however perfect, could not render satisfaction of infinite value, because the offerer would possess only finite dignity.<sup>13</sup> Witsius then makes the impeccability of Christ theologically decisive. The Surety must be not only true man and true God but also a holy man, without spot of sin, because a sinner cannot satisfy for others when he cannot satisfy for himself. The sinlessness of Christ is an ontological requirement of His atoning office: the One who offers must Himself be without defect if the offering is to avail for the defective.<sup>14</sup> The priest must be holy; the victim must be unblemished; Christ is both.

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<sup>12</sup>Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, trans. William Crookshank, 2 vols. (repr., Escondido, CA: Den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 2.8.3–13.

<sup>13</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 377.

<sup>14</sup>Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 2.4.8–11.

The efficacy of the atonement is therefore inseparable from the divine nature of the One who performs it. Only a sacrifice of infinite worth, offered by one infinitely holy, can purge the conscience.

### **The Necessity of the Human Nature**

The necessity of the divine nature would by itself produce a sacrifice of infinite worth, but it would not produce an atonement. God in the abstract cannot obey, suffer, or die. Scripture is emphatic that these realities stand at the heart of what Christ accomplished. The Son “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb. 5:8), was “made under the law” (Gal. 4:4), and tasted death for everyone (Heb. 2:9). None of this can be predicated of deity as such. A real human nature is required because these belong to human nature alone.

Justice itself demands this. Ezekiel states the principle that “the soul who sins shall die” (Ezek. 18:4), and the penalty for sin must be borne in the nature that sinned. If the Son were to bear that curse in any meaningful sense, He had to bear it as a man. His passive obedience, the enduring of the penalty due to sin, is unthinkable apart from a nature capable of being wounded and sorrowful. His active obedience, the positive fulfillment of the law’s demands, is likewise unthinkable apart from a nature capable of obedience. The law was given to human beings and required human conformity. Christ’s obedience was the lived submission of a human will to the Father’s will across a human life.

This is why Hebrews insists with such repetition that the Son was made like His brothers in every respect. He was tempted as we are. He was drawn from the same stock as those He came to sanctify. The typology of the Levitical priesthood required a priest taken from among men, and Christ fulfilled that typology in His genuine humanity. A redeemer of humans must Himself be human.

The representative character of Christ's work matters enormously here. Murray rightly stresses that Christ's obedience was rendered in human nature and on behalf of those whom He came to save, and that this substitutionary obedience is credited to them through union with Him.<sup>15</sup> But Witsius sharpens the point by grounding representation in the Surety's personal identification with those He represents. The Surety must be of the same nature as those for whom He pledges Himself, for the law of love requires one who lays down his life for the brethren. Only a true human can be our kinsman, and only a kinsman can redeem.<sup>16</sup> The covenantal logic of representation requires the Redeemer to share the nature He redeems.

Letham brings this to pastoral weight. The whole life of Christ was lived in vicarious obedience, and every moment of that life was lived as one of us. The temptations He resisted, the prayers He offered in the days of His flesh, and the tears He shed in Gethsemane are all given to us by virtue of our union with Him.<sup>17</sup> The atonement was not a moment at Golgotha detached from the years that preceded it. Christ's human obedience was the fabric from which His saving work was woven.

### **The Hypostatic Union as the Ground of Efficacy**

The two preceding sections, taken in isolation, might suggest that the atonement requires two collaborators: a divine nature to supply the infinite worth and a human nature to bear the penalty. This is precisely the error that the Council of Chalcedon was called to prevent. The two natures must exist in one Person, or the atonement collapses. A Nestorian Christ, in which the

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<sup>15</sup>Murray, *Redemption Accomplished*, 161–73.

<sup>16</sup>Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 2.4.3–7.

<sup>17</sup>Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 130–31.

natures are separate persons working in concert, could not atone, because no single subject would be both the infinite God who satisfies and the true man who suffers.

The Chalcedonian Definition of 451 confessed one Christ in two natures, “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person.”<sup>18</sup> The Westminster Confession echoes this: “Two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.”<sup>19</sup> Macleod notes that the hypostatic union encapsulates three truths: Christ is one person, both natures belong to the same person, and the person is the agent behind all of Christ’s actions.<sup>20</sup> When we look at the life of Christ and ask who did this, the answer is always the same: the Son of God. He was born, baptized, tempted, transfigured. He suffered and died. He rose. The unity of the acting subject is what the hypostatic union secures.

The communion of attributes, the *communicatio idiomatum*, follows from this. Reformed theology has insisted that because the natures are united in one Person, whatever is true of either nature can be predicated of the Person, even though the natures themselves remain distinct and unmingled. Calvin observed that God does not have blood, does not suffer, and cannot be touched with hands, yet because Christ, who is true God and true man, was crucified and shed

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<sup>18</sup>Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6th ed., rev. David S. Schaff, vol. 2 (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 62.

<sup>19</sup>Westminster Confession of Faith, 8.2, in *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 2007), 41.

<sup>20</sup>Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 189.

His blood for us, what He carried out in His human nature is rightly ascribed to His divinity, because the same Person is both God and man.<sup>21</sup> This is what makes the language of Acts 20:28 coherent: God purchased the church with His own blood, not because deity has blood but because the Person who bled is God. The same logic makes it possible to say that the Lord of glory was crucified (1 Cor. 2:8) and that the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7).

This is also the only framework within which the atonement coheres as a single act. Letham states the thesis with unusual directness: the atoning death of Christ is both unique and utterly sufficient because it is the death of the unique Person who died. It is sufficient because the Son of God died. It is unique because no other way existed to rescue us, and because the One who died had a Person of such a character that no other death could accomplish what His accomplished.<sup>22</sup> Murray makes the same point from the opposite direction when he observes that the efficacy of Christ's priestly offering is bound up with the constitution of His Person, and that if there was the necessity of such a sacrifice, none but He could offer it. The argument is reciprocal: only such a Person could render such a sacrifice, and the sacrifice is efficacious precisely because such a Person rendered it.<sup>23</sup>

The practical importance of the hypostatic union for the atonement therefore lies not in a metaphysical puzzle but in a soteriological necessity. If the natures were divided between two subjects, the infinite worth of the divine nature would not attach to the human obedience. If the natures were mingled into a third thing, neither would be truly present. The atonement requires

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<sup>21</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.14.2, quoted in Macleod, *Person of Christ*, 196.

<sup>22</sup>Letham, *Work of Christ*, 155.

<sup>23</sup>Murray, *Redemption Accomplished*, 20.

that the very obedience rendered in the garden was the obedience of God, and that the very blood shed on the cross was the blood of God the Son. The hypostatic union is what makes these claims true.

### **Conclusion**

The doctrine of the hypostatic union is not peripheral to the gospel. It is the condition that makes the gospel coherent. A divine Christ who was not truly human could not stand in the place of sinners. A human Christ who was not truly God could not render satisfaction of infinite worth. A Christ in whom the natures were confused or divided could not be the one Mediator between God and men. Scripture names the Son of God and the Son of Mary as a single subject, who offered Himself through the eternal Spirit and whose blood purchased a people for God. The incarnation was not a prelude to the atonement but its ontological foundation. The efficacy of Calvary depends on the identity of the Person who hung there.

The Reformed tradition has handled this truth with care because everything else in soteriology depends on it. The satisfaction of divine justice, the purchase of the church, the application of redemption, and the consummation of all things in Christ presuppose that the one who accomplished redemption is the God-man. The cross is the display of divine wisdom because it is the place where the Mediator of the covenant, being what He is, did what no other could do. To this Mediator, in the unity of His Person and in the distinctness of His natures, belongs the worship of His redeemed people, now and forever.

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