

John Calvin for Everyone

The Institutes of the Christian Religion

Book 2 – Chapter 14

HOW THE TWO NATURES OF THE MEDIATOR MAKE ONE PERSON

In this chapter Calvin continues his defense of the doctrine that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. In so doing he adheres to what is known as Chalcedonian orthodoxy. The history is that in 451 CE, representatives of the early church met in the city of Chalcedon, to confirm their doctrinal position that Jesus was “two natures” in “one person (hypostasis).” In other words, they formally reaffirmed that Jesus was perfectly human and perfectly God (two natures), yet was still a single person (hypostasis). Calvin’s opponent in this chapter was a man named Michael Servetus (1509-1553), who would ultimately be burned at the stake for heresy by Calvin and the city leaders in Geneva.

Summary: Calvin begins with the statement that, “...we ought not to understand the statement that *“the Word was made flesh”* in the sense that the Word was turned into flesh or confusedly made flesh” (pg. 482). By this Calvin argues that Jesus was not, once upon a time, the Word, or if you will divine, and then was transformed into a human being, thus losing his divinity. Instead Calvin states, “For we affirm his divinity so joined and united with his humanity that each retains its distinctive nature unimpaired, and yet these two natures constitute one Christ” (pg. 482). In order to explain this in human terms, Calvin offers the following human analogy. “For the soul is not of the body, and the body is not of the soul. Therefore, some things are said to be of the soul that can in no wise be apply to the body; and the body again that can in no wise fit the soul...yet he who consists of these parts is one man, not many” (pg. 482).

Calvin concludes this section when he declares that when, “...the Scriptures speak of Christ; they sometimes attribute to him what must be referred solely to his humanity, sometimes what belongs uniquely to his divinity; and sometimes what embraces both natures but fits neither alone” (pg. 482). This statement is bolstered by several scriptures which affirm Jesus’ humanity, such as the affirmation that Jesus was “the first born of all creation” (Colossians 1:15) and that Jesus was “working together with his Father” (John 5:17). He then turns to scriptures that reflect Jesus’ divinity including “God laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16) and “No one ascended into heaven except the Son of man who was in heaven” (John 3:13).

The Gospel of John becomes the focus of the next part of Calvin’s defense of the dual nature of Christ. “For one reads there (in the Gospel of John) neither of deity or humanity alone, but of both at once” (pg. 484). He continues, “For the Son of God had been endowed with such prerogatives (such as raising people from the dead, etc.) when he was manifested in the flesh...which could not have been given to a man who was nothing but a man” (pg. 484-5). In other words, many of the things that Jesus did when he was living in this world could not have been done by an ordinary human being. It was only because he was God incarnate that he was capable of doing what only God could do, such as raising people from the dead.

The last portion of the chapter is spent in arguing against Servetus. Servetus was a polymath who excelled in medicine, science and other areas. However, he was very anti-Trinitarian, and thus argued against the dual nature of Jesus. According to Calvin, Servetus argued that “Jesus’ flesh was... converted into deity,” (pg. 493) rather than flesh and divinity co-existing. In Calvin’s theology, Servetus view would ultimately prohibit salvation, because only one who was human and divine could save.

Questions:

1. Does Calvin’s analogy of human body and soul help you understand the dual nature of Jesus? Why or why not?
2. What do you think is at stake in this argument?
3. Why is it important for Jesus to be both human and divine?