Knowing the Christ You Follow: Son of Man
Study 1

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

“God is spirit…” (John 4.24).
“…the Word was God…And the Word became flesh…” (John 1.1 and 14).
“It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing…” (John 6.63).
“He who eats my flesh…has eternal life…For my flesh is true food…” (John 6.54-55).

In this study, we will establish a biblical approach to the study of the humanity of Christ. The human mind approaches this subject as a problem. We dare not remove the problem; the humanity of Christ is the core of a mystery—the mystery of godliness (1Tim 3.16)—and a mystery is a secret divine truth that cannot be conceived of by the human mind but is revealed to believers. A divine mystery is, by its very nature, a problem for the human mind which requires a transformation of the mind to be comprehended. Remove the problem for the natural mind and you empty the mystery of its dynamic character. We must approach this subject as a mystery, and that means that we must be careful to let divine revelation open up all aspects of this truth and in the process the revelation changes the way we think.

The humanity of Christ is not a simple matter. It is rich, and the Bible gives us various angles from which the truth must be seen. We will try to gain the biblical perspectives on the humanity of Christ.

We will begin with what we might call the theological perspective. Here we want to ascertain what human nature is in contrast to divine nature. Then we will turn to the gospel perspective. The gospel is given to us in two basic forms. The gospel is first presented to people in proclamation through which the great facts of Christ are presented. The second way we know the gospel is as a narrative of Jesus’ life and work on earth known as a Gospel. The proclamation and the narrative forms give us two angles from which to see the humanity of Christ. Finally we will look at the humanity of Christ in the church’s confession of faith. We can call this the faith perspective. The first perspective looks at the humanity of Christ from the point of view of God’s nature, the second from the revelation of Christ in history and the third from the church’s confession of faith by the Spirit.

We will do this study in three parts, taking up each perspective in turn. This study will give us a foundation for exploring the different aspects of the truth of Christ’s humanity.
PART I. THE THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: THE TWO NATURES

In Jesus, we have two natures in one person. What are the two natures? We call them divine and human natures. But this sidesteps the real question. It only says that one is the nature of God and the other of man. But what is the nature of each? In biblical language, the two natures are spirit and flesh. God is spirit, and human beings are flesh.

Now let’s take a look at Jesus again. In Jesus we have God who is spirit become flesh. He does not cease to be God and so does not cease to have the divine nature of spirit, but he becomes flesh. As Christians we readily accept this on the authority of the Bible. But, for Jews the thought of this was highly problematic and, in fact, impossible, and they had some biblical basis for this. In the OT, flesh and spirit are opposite in nature. Man is flesh and not spirit, and God is spirit and not flesh. So, how are we to understand God in flesh? This prompts us to take another look at the relationship between divine and human natures.

At the head of this study, I have strung together phrases from the Gospel of John that link spirit with flesh in Jesus. God is Spirit, and the Word was God and so was Spirit. The Word became flesh. It does not say that the Word was turned into flesh so that he ceased to be God. No, through the change in becoming flesh he continued to be the Word and so continued to be God having the divine nature. I have put into this theme that one phrase (that represents a wrinkle) spoken by Jesus, “the flesh profits nothing.” This jolts us. The Word became flesh…the flesh profits nothing…. Yet, though the flesh profits nothing, Jesus’ flesh is the real food that gives eternal life. What do we make of this?

To understand Jesus’ statements on flesh, we have to begin by going back to the OT. Here we have to learn what flesh in contrast to spirit is.

A. TWO NATURES: SPIRIT AND FLESH

We tend to see the contrast between flesh and spirit as the difference between two states of being: physical and non-physical. In seeing things this way, we are looking at spirit or divine nature from the point of view of our physical sight. The result is that since it is not visible we actually say nothing positive about spirit. The Bible looks at things differently. It begins with God and the positive and powerful nature of spirit and sees flesh for what it lacks in its weakness. The Bible does not focus on two states of existence (physical and not physical) but on the dynamic reality of two natures. Spirit is powerful and flesh is weak, dependent and vulnerable to death.

The contrast between flesh and spirit is presented poetically in Ish 31.3:

Now the Egyptians are men and not God,
And their horses are flesh and not spirit;
So the LORD will stretch out His hand,
And he who helps will stumble
And he who is helped will fall,
And all of them will come to an end together.

The contrast is between men and their strength as flesh, on one hand, and God and spirit-nature, on the other. The point is clear. Flesh (with all its might) is weak, and God (with spirit) is strong and has absolute power over flesh.

1. What is flesh?

The keynote in the OT is that human beings are flesh, and flesh is frail and in itself has no strength (Gen 6.3; 2Chr 32.8; Ps 78.39; Jer 17.5). The weakness of flesh is eloquently stated by Elihu in Job 34.14-15: “If He (i.e., God) should determine to do so, if He should gather to Himself His spirit and breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to the dust.” Flesh cannot give life or even keep itself alive. In itself it is dust. It is spirit that makes and keeps the dust alive. But, this spirit belongs to God. Man is not spirit. He is flesh and so is dust (Ps 103.14).
The weakness and vulnerability of flesh is not due to sin but to the very nature of flesh—it is as weak as dust and must be sustained as living flesh by God’s grant of spirit. This point is made in Genesis 2. Man is made from the dust, and in himself is dust. Only the infusion of spirit given directly from God makes the dust living flesh, and the whole creature becomes a living soul. After man sinned, God did not say to him, “You came from dust,” but, “you are dust” (Gen 3.19). Man in himself is dust.

Even before man sinned, the power of life was external to man. This is seen in the tree of life in the Garden of Eden. In the Garden, man could live forever because he had access to the tree of life. The sentence of death was carried out in barring man from this tree (Gen 3.22-24). Life was not inherent in Adam. His flesh could not sustain itself. The source of maintaining life was external to him.

Flesh is weak and dependent nature that of itself would die. Flesh cannot give life or strength. It must receive these from spirit given by God to man.

2. What is spirit?

In contrast to flesh, spirit is powerful. Given by God, it makes flesh alive and sustains it. Also, God who is spirit has complete power over human beings or flesh. Angels are spirits (Heb 1.14) and they are “mighty in strength, who perform His (i.e., God’s) word” (Ps 103.20). In the OT angels have power over people and armies. They do not have the limitations of flesh and are not mortal. They appear in the form of men, but do not suffer and are not weak. Against any human assault, they are invincible. Angels are not flesh.

Yes, spirit is non-physical and does not share the limitations and weakness of physical reality. But, the Bible does not define spirit negatively. Actually, it is flesh that is defined negatively by its lack of power. Spirit is powerful and not inherently weak, and it exercises power over flesh. God is Spirit. He is the source of life and has the creative power. Angels are created spirits and do not have the weak and mortal nature of mankind. They share in God’s transcendent power over flesh, but can only use it under God. This is even true of Satan (Job 1 and 2)

What we have seen from the OT throws light on Jesus’ saying, “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing….” Indeed, the flesh is weak and cannot give life.

B. THE TWO NATURES IN CHRIST

The Word became flesh—what does this mean in light of what the OT says about flesh in contrast with spirit? The answer is worked out in Hebrews 2 to 5.

1. Christ’s humanity as flesh (Hebrews 2 to 5)

Hebrews 1.1-2.4 focuses on Christ’s divine position. In verse 5 of chapter 2, attention is turned to his humanity. The discussion begins with a citation of Ps 8.4-6 in Heb 2.6-8. The Psalmist asks God the question, “What is man…or the son of man?” Still speaking to God, he answers, “You have made him for a little while lower than angels…” (v 9). The Psalm refers to mankind, but since Jesus took up the role of mankind to fulfil God’s purpose for man, this Psalm is applied to Jesus. The citation from Psalm 8 is followed up with the application of man’s inferiority to angels: “But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death…” (v 9). Jesus was made lower than the angels in being made a man to die.

In Heb 1.14 we are told that angels are ministering spirits. Man is flesh and so is made lower than angels. That the author has this in mind is clear from Heb 2.14-16. He says,

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but he gives help to the descendant of Abraham.
To help mankind (which is flesh) instead of angels (who are spirits), he took on flesh in order to die. The writer to the Hebrews goes on to say that Jesus had to be made like his brothers in all things, and this involved being tempted in that which he suffered, i.e., death (Heb 2.17-18). Through this temptation he can sympathize with our weaknesses (4.15), and that means he experienced the weakness of flesh. The reality of his experience in the weakness (and so genuineness) of flesh is stressed when we are told that “in the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of his piety (5.7).

What we saw about flesh in the OT is attributed to Jesus. He shared this nature with us and experienced its weakness and trials. He lived in total dependence on God. Finally, he experienced what seals the weakness of flesh—he died.

2. Divine and human in Jesus

At one point the writer to the Hebrews shows that he is sensitive to the tension between Christ being in the flesh and being a divine person. After pointing out Jesus’ utter dependence on God in the weakness of flesh, he says, “Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things he suffered” (5.8). As Son he is God (1.8) and eternal LORD who created all and will remain forever though the universe will perish (1.10-13). He is the one through whom God made the world, and he is the exact representation of God’s nature (Heb 1.2-3). All that is true of divine nature as spirit (its creative power and immortality) is true of him, and yet all that is true of human nature in its weakness and dependence also became his genuine experience.

a. The dynamic unity

In Jesus, the two natures—divine spirit that is dynamic, creative, untiring and immortal and flesh in its total weakness, dependence and possibility of dying—are united. These natures are polar opposites. From an OT point of view, it is impossible to think of God as flesh. Divine nature is spirit in an absolute and infinite sense and is the opposite of flesh. The NT does not say God is flesh, but it does affirm that the divine Son became flesh and partook of the whole experience of flesh as his own experience.

The NT does not wrestle with how the two opposite natures can be joined in one person. It simply states and works with the truth that the divine Son became human and that the human Jesus was divine. The deity and humanity are held together in the fact that he carried out his divine role in the world by dying in the flesh. This is brought into focus in Hebr 1.2-3. Here Christ’s act of making purification of sins (through death) is presented in a resume of his divine glory.

We can put it this way: the creative and life-giving dynamic of divine spirit was carried out in this world by Jesus through his flesh in its utter weakness in death. Herein lies the key understanding the full union of the two natures. The focus in the NT is not on the way two natures with opposite qualities are held together but on how the dynamic of the divine nature is carried out in the utter weakness of the flesh in dying.

This yields an important insight for our study of the humanity of Christ. In Christ we have two natures that are polar opposites united in a dynamic way. All that he did in the weakness of flesh he did as the divine Son to realize in this world what he could not realize without working through the ultimate weakness of the flesh. We can put this the other way around. All that he did as the powerful Son (e.g., his miracles) he did in the weakness of his flesh, realizing in his flesh God’s relation to man in his weakness. In Jesus we do not have a split personality, sometimes acting in the consciousness and power of God and sometimes acting in the weakness of man. The union of the two natures was inseparable and essential to who he was. Yes, we do see the different dynamics in him: sometimes the power is in focus and sometimes the weakness. But, the cross, in which he showed the greatest and ultimate weakness seals the fact that in all of his weakness he was carrying out the dynamic role of God in bringing about a new creation.

b. His flesh as genuine flesh

A study of Christ’s humanity must accept, as the bedrock foundation, the reality of his humanity and deity united in one undividable person. Hebrews has guided us in uncovering that foundation. Now we can take a closer look at his flesh as human nature.
i. What does the flesh profit?

Let’s go back to John 6. Jesus said that “the flesh profits nothing” (Jn 6.63). In context this does refer to Jesus’ flesh. Jesus said. “…and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh” (v 51). “Then the Jews began to argue with one another, saying, ‘How can this man give us His flesh to eat?’” (v 52). Jesus underscores his point and affirms that his flesh is true food and his blood is true drink (v 55) and adds, “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him” (v 56). The Jews response was, “This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?” The Jews thought that Jesus meant to give them his physical flesh to eat. Jesus points them away from thinking of eating physical flesh by saying, “The flesh profits nothing.” He is affirming the truth of the OT. Flesh is weak and does not have life in it. The power of life is ever with God and not in flesh.

We must pause here and take in Jesus’ point. Yes, Jesus’ flesh is given to us as the very food of life. In view of this, no Christian can say that his flesh profits nothing without doing some heavy explaining. But, neither can we say his flesh is different from ours and profits much without doing some explaining. We have to take a closer look at Jesus’ flesh or human nature.

ii. Flesh as true humanity

The first truth is that Jesus took his human nature from the human race and it is as truly human as ours. Yes, his human nature was not corrupted by sin, but sin is not essential to human nature. In creation we see that flesh is dust made alive by God’s grant of spirit. So, flesh is weak and cannot give life and strength. It has to be continuously held up. This was as true of Jesus’ humanity while on earth as it was of Adam’s in the Garden and of ours outside of the Garden. This means that to eat a piece of Jesus’ physical body would not do more for us than eating a piece of any body. To deny this amounts to denying the incarnation—that his humanity was the same as ours in all of its properties.

Jesus’ flesh was weak and needed to be sustained by food, sleep and exercise like ours. It was as dependent on the Creator’s word, which keeps all souls alive on earth, as was the flesh of any other. In his temptation Jesus made clear that he would not use his role as the Son of God to treat his flesh in a way that is different from God’s will for flesh in general (Matt 4.3-4). In fact, the thought of Jesus using his divine Sonship to override an aspect of the nature of flesh as God has made it is satanic. To use his divine power in such a way would be sin. In marring the genuineness of his humanity he would ruin his divine Sonship—an impossibility! True to the nature of the humanity he took on, Jesus could say of his flesh what was true of all flesh—it profits nothing.

iii. Flesh in relation to God

We have stressed the genuineness of Jesus’ human nature in its created weakness. But, his humanity could not contradict his relation as divine Son to God. As Son, Jesus holds the primary relationship with God through which all others must be related. By becoming flesh, he put human nature into the perfect relationship with God. Let’s open this up.

The relationship between flesh and God is presented forcefully in Jer 15.5-8:

Thus says the LORD, ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the LORD. For he will be like a bush in the desert and will not see when prosperity comes, but will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, a land of salt without inhabitant. Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD and whose trust is the LORD. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit.

The curse is not only on people who trust other people but who take their strength from flesh, even their own. As water gives vitality to a tree, so the Lord is the source of life and strength to a person. The flesh by its very nature is no source of life. To draw on the flesh for life and strength is to turn in one’s heart from the LORD and be cursed. This points to the true relation of flesh to God. In its utter weakness, it is designed for a relationship of total
dependence on God in which the life and strength experienced in the flesh is God’s direct action on man. Only man in the absolute weakness can be related to God in his absolute strength.

Jesus was a true man, and his humanity was no source of strength to him. His whole life and power was in his Father. This was not simply true in his relation as a man to God but first of all his eternal relation as the Son to the Father. He makes this clear in Jn 5.19-30. In his relationship as Son with the Father, all that he was and did had its source in the Father, as all that the Father is and does is realized in the Son. In keeping with this, Jesus held his flesh in perfect weakness and dependence on God, and through this perfect dependence could carry out, as a man, the role of oneness with the Father. This has the profound result that God is the Father, in the fullest sense, not only of the eternal Son but of man in the Son.

c. Jesus’ flesh as the food of life

As long as Jesus lived in human nature as he received it from Mary, he could not impart his divine life in the gift of the Spirit to others. To impart his life, he had to be glorified through dying (Jn 7.39; 12.23-24). Here lies the key. His flesh only became the source of life in the act of dying. Not the life of his flesh but his death in the flesh is the source of life for the world. The food of life is not his flesh in the strength of flesh alive but his flesh in its total weakness as having died.

Jesus did point the Jews to his death in the flesh in Jn 6.51-62. Up to this point in the discussion, Jesus referred to himself as the bread which came down from heaven. The reference is to his incarnation. The source of our life as human beings must be in the Son of God become man. In v 51 Jesus specified how he will give this bread from heaven to people by saying, “and the bread also which I will give for (or on behalf of, huper) the world is my flesh.” Here Jesus turns from the past tense (the bread that came down from heaven) to the future in which he will give his flesh. Jesus is pointing the Jews away from what they were seeing, a living man, to what he will do. Jesus does not say he will give his flesh to the world but for the world. The preposition here (huper) is used of his sacrificial death (Jn 10.11,15; 11.50f.; 15.13 and 17.19). Then in Jn 6.55, Jesus say that he gives his flesh as food and his blood as drink. Blood separated from the body is death and the flesh as distinct from the blood is flesh in death. To see that Jesus’ flesh as sacrificed is indeed the food that gives eternal life, the Jews would have to wait until he ascended to where he was before (v 62). Through his death he is the source of life for the world under death, and thus he is seen in the divine position of the Son through whom God relates to the world and mankind is related to God.

Flesh and blood were the two items put on the altar through which people could relate to God and live. Jesus points the Jews to think in terms of the way people relate to God by defining the eating as believing (Jn 6.29,35, 40 and 64). Jesus gives us the sacrifice of himself in death so we can relate to God through it. His life laid down in the flesh must be received as that which puts us into his relationship of life with God. So, if we eat his flesh and drink his blood we abide in him and he in us (Jn 6.56). Through his death in the flesh, we live in his relationship with God.

As human nature that lives in this world, Jesus’ flesh shared our dependence on God and did not give life and strength; but as laid down in death, his flesh is the very food of life. His flesh thus functions within his dynamic role as divine, as spirit that gives life.

C. LIFE IN THE SON

1. The relationship of life

Jesus is the Son of God. In our earlier studies on the deity of Christ we saw that God is eternally related in his Son and only through this relationship did God create and become related to others. Sin has brought in a deep problem. Mankind, made in the image of God, is separated from God. This raises the all-important question as to how man can be brought into a life-giving relationship with God. The answer must come from the way God is related in and of himself, that is, in the Son.

Man, separated from God, must be given a relationship with God in the Son. That means that the Son must open up his relationship with the Father to sinful man. This points out the real problem. The relationship of life in the Son is one of perfect unity with the Father in which God imparts all he is to be received and carried out. What would it
mean for the Son to carry out this relationship with God in God’s relationship with sinful mankind? To answer this question, we have to ask, how does God relate toward sinful mankind? God is holy and holds mankind off as separated from himself. To stand in God’s relation to sinful mankind is to receive that separation in death as the act of being one with God in his absolute holiness. This the Son had to do to bring mankind into his relationship with God as Father.

2. Taking over the human side of the relationship between God and man

To carry out his role in bringing sinful people into a relationship with God, the Son became human. In creation, he had carried out the divine role in relation to mankind, and now in incarnation he took over the human role as well. This means that in the Son both the divine and human sides of the relationship between God and man are carried out. But, in simply being in flesh he still was infinitely apart from us. He was sinless and was not under the judgment of death. So, we in our sin could not relate to God in his relationship with God. Only in dying for us did he bring his eternal and human relationship with the Father to the point where we, who are related to God in death, could share his relationship with God.

In our earlier study on the Trinity, we called the Son the mediating cause in the Godhead. He is the one, by his eternal relationships in the Trinity, through whom life from the Father is given to us. Thus he is the source of life for us. This was true before the incarnation, during his whole life on earth and is true today. But, only through his death did he bring us to live in him and in his relationship with God. As he said in John 6.56, “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me and I in him.”

The incarnation and death of Jesus have a profound implication for us. We have no role in building our relationship with God. Our human identity is worked out in the Son and is given to us in him. We, by faith, truly live in him. That means we have our relationship with God in our total weakness, not relying on our flesh, by living through the Son’s death. Not even the act of total surrender to God on the basis of which God gives life can be the act of man as flesh. It had to be carried out and given to us by the Son become flesh. Indeed, God alone must make us what we are before him. Through this, true humanity is regained from the distortion of sin.

3. Regaining true humanity

Our relationship with God in the Son is contrary to mankind’s sinful orientation in the flesh in which life is based in the flesh, but it is true to God’s relationship with flesh in creation. Flesh or human nature cannot make itself or be a source of strength. To base life on the flesh in any way is a deep distortion of what God made flesh to be. In its utter weakness, as man accepts that weakness and turns to God only, God gives life to flesh and works with his infinite power through it. Both the power of God and the human surrender of life in the flesh were carried out by the Son. So, we present ourselves to God in our total weakness, not relying on our flesh, by living through the Son’s death. Not even the act of total surrender to God on the basis of which God gives life can be the act of man as flesh. It had to be carried out and given to us by the Son become flesh. Indeed, God alone must make us what we are before him. Through this, true humanity is regained from the distortion of sin.

God is Spirit, and we, in ourselves are flesh. We must live wholly by God’s action. In Christ our very human identity in relation to God is given to us by God’s action in flesh. This involves a very profound change in us. Our human identity is wholly worked out and held by God. So, what we are in relation to God is activated in us by the indwelling Spirit who puts into effect within us what the Son has done for us.

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