**Hypostatic Union**

**Consideration:** The early ecumenical councils of the church defined orthodox Christian belief(s) about Jesus (Christology) in a manner that clarified the mystery of Christian belief which deems Jesus to be fully human and fully divine. Consider how the teachings of the Council of Chalcedon and the Hypostatic Union serve to convey the central dimensions of this mystery, i.e., that Jesus is a divine person begotten by the Father with a divine nature the same as the Father, and via the Incarnation via the Virgin a human nature the same as ours (including human mind and will). What are the soteriological implications of this mystery of faith?

**Statement**

“The dawn of modernity in the eighteenth century raised some very specific issues for the Christian understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ.”[[1]](#footnote-1) These are the same questions raised in our day with movies like the Di Vinci Code. They are offering answers to century old questions. Since the very essence of Christianity and orthodoxy are centered on Jesus Christ, this will always be the focal point of attack. Destroy the identity of Jesus, either the divine or the human, and Christianity is destroyed. With the death of Christianity, God is reduced to human predispositions or, worse yet, as Nietzsche predicted, is philosophically dead, leaving humanity as substitute gods.

What began in the early years of Christianity has plagued the church for centuries. The battle over the identity of Jesus loomed over these early years of Christianity like a death shroud. Even the Chalcedonian Definition did not stop heretical thinking about the nature of Jesus, especially in the East where Pope Leo was considered a heretic.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nonetheless, orthodoxy had to be established and in 519, after the death of the principles of the eastern and western church, “Emperor Justin and Pope Hormisdas reached an agreement that was in fact a return to the decisions of Chalcedon.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The statement of orthodoxy was the church’s foundation (*hupostasis*) for their faith in the nature of Jesus and efficiency of His sacrificial death. The council concluded that

“…our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance (*homoousious*) with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin…”[[4]](#footnote-4)

The conclusion drawn by the council acknowledging the nature of Jesus[[5]](#footnote-5) formed the basis for the concept of the hypostatic union between the fully divine and fully human Jesus. The “being” was who Jesus was as he shared Godness,[[6]](#footnote-6) which sharing was defined by homoousios at Nicea. At Chalcedon, the next step was to establish the church’s position on how this ousia was affected by the Incarnation[[7]](#footnote-7). That is, what was Jesus’ nature now that the Holy Spirit had brought divinity and humanity together in a form not previously realized. For this, the word chosen was hypostasis, which will be discussed in detail. First, it is helpful to understand some of the background that led to the use of the hypostatic concept to describe Jesus.

There are two words of significance in this discussion—being (*ousia*) and substance (*hupostasis*). The first *ousia* (essence/being/substance): Important in the Trinitarian doctrine codified at the council of Nicea (325), which declared the Son to be of the same essence (*homoousious*)[[8]](#footnote-8) as the Father. It becomes important in Christological debates as various theologians sought to understand how the humanity of Jesus and our human nature could be *homoousious* (usually translated "co-essential").[[9]](#footnote-9)

By Plato’s time, being (ousia) was “already a quirky, idiomatic word…(that) denoted permanent property, real estate, non-transferable goods: not the possessions we are always using up or consuming but those that remain--land, houses, wealth of the kind one never spends since it breeds new wealth with no expense of itself.”[[10]](#footnote-10) It was tied with permanent, passive wealth that seemed to regenerate. This is why it was often related to the concept of substance. With this as the backdrop, Plato’s Socrates asks Meno, “What is the nature (ousia) of bees?”[[11]](#footnote-11) From this, Socrates leads Meno to understand that there is a basic nature or essence to anything that makes it what it is and that nature/essence is transmitted naturally because it cannot be held from transmission. Ultimately, what Plato is insisting is that there is an irreducible essence that is the abiding element. This is why the term was so appropriate for use by the Nicene Fathers who gave us the orthodox statement regarding the common essence of God and Jesus.

For Aristotle, “being (ousia) must come already divided: the highest genera or ultimate classes of things must be irreducibly many.”[[12]](#footnote-12) For Aristotle, this is best understood in the theory of categories. These categories have different elements (names)[[13]](#footnote-13) but each ultimately is giving reference to that which is the irreducible distinction. For example, if I say dog, you may ask what kind of dog? From here we go into bred, color, size, physical place it occupies, etc. Nonetheless, we are still only talking about a dog. This is the essence of being for Aristotle. It is the irreducible complexity from which all distinctions are derived.

At Nicea, based on the concept of being, the church settled on the “who-ness” of Jesus. It was the sameness that He shared with God the Father. Totally divine, begotten and not created. This was eventually[[14]](#footnote-14) to become orthodox Christianity and form the foundation upon which Chalcedon would resolve the question of the “what-ness” of Jesus. The following summarizes well the concept of “who-ness” compared to “what-ness:”

* Christ’s “who” is his eternal identity as Born-of-the-Father
* The Eternal Word shares the same divine way of being as the Father
* This divine one took on flesh, took on a human way of being
* The kind of being is new: a divine person is now existing in a human nature[[15]](#footnote-15)
* Who the Word is remains the same, What to Word is has changed[[16]](#footnote-16)

This thinking expanded the concept of hypostasis. As noted above, the two concepts (ousia, and hypostasis) were synonymous at the time of Nicea. With the question regarding what nature best describes Jesus, the council stretched hypostasis to define the Catholic view.

This consideration of the history of usage in the fourth century, then, makes clear what the Council of Chalcedon was affirming in its endorsement of the Trinitarian teaching that came to it from the councils of Nicea and Constantinople, and it establishes the meanings of the terms *homoousion*, *ousia*, and *hypostasis*, in the Chalcedonian Definition.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The latter gained importance at Chalcedon. “Over the course of the 4th century[[18]](#footnote-18) it comes to be distinguished from *ousia* and taken as meaning "entity" or "individual reality" or even "distinct manner of existing."”[[19]](#footnote-19) The distinction developed into a word tool to properly state orthodoxy regarding the nature of the Incarnated son of God. A deeper look into the primary word of this council may reveal their logic in using this term.

The word translated substance (*hupostasis*) is a compound of the Greek *hupo* (under) and *histemi* (to stand). This compound is used five times in the NT—translated in the NIV by confident (2 Cor 9:4; Heb 3:14), self-confident (2 Cor 11:17), being (Heb 1:3), being sure (Heb 11:1). As we shall see later, the use in Hebrews 1:3 serves as a Biblical basis for the conclusions draw at the council.

In classical Greek, this word “is used concretely for what stands under, the basis of something.”[[20]](#footnote-20) This root meaning is realized with reference to human attitude with the idea of confidence as we saw in 2 Cor. and Heb. 11. In the physical realm, it is like a foundation, residue or sediment. It is the philosophical background that gives credence to the way the term was used in the early church. In classical usage it

“denotes the transition from the latent to the manifest actualization… realization, being a substance, matter, or an object (Plut., *De Communibus Notitiis*, 50, 1085e). It then denotes the immanent Logos (word) in matter giving it form. Here the *hypostasis* is to be distinguished from the *hypokeimenon*, the basic primary matter which has not yet been formed. Thus God, as the world-logos, is the *hypostasis* of the world.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Thus, the Greek mind understood *hupostasis* as the metaphysical “what” in material form. Putting this into theological context, Leo the Great wrote,

The son of God, therefore, came down from his throne in heaven without withdrawing from his Father’s glory, and entered this lower world, born after a new order, by a new mode of birth. After a new order, inasmuch as he is invisible in his own nature, and he became visible in ours…By a new mode of birth…supplied the material of flesh.[[22]](#footnote-22)

While Nicea focused on the Trinity, Chalcedon dealt with the Incarnation. Between these councils, the First Council of Constantinople, 381 A.D., taught that “what was not taken on was not saved.” That is, if any part of the humanity of Jesus was lacking or replaced by any part of the divine nature, then that part of humanity could not be saved. Jesus had to be savior of every facet of humanity.

Paul’s teaching in Philippians 2 sheds light on how the hypostatic union is achievable. In the Tome of Leo, he states, “Thus the properties of each nature and substance (*naturae et substantiae*) were preserved entire, and came together to form one person.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The following puts this into perspective:

The emptying was not a subtraction but an *addition.* The four following phrases (Phil. 2:7–8) explain the emptying: “(a) taking the form of a bond-servant, and (b) being made in the likeness of men. And (c) being found in appearance as a man, (d) He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.” The “emptying” of Christ was taking on an additional nature, a human nature with its limitations. His deity was never surrendered.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Jesus did not empty himself *of* anything but rather, he emptied himself. [[25]](#footnote-25)

It is because of this hypostatic union that Jesus was able to be a faithful, High Priest, offering Himself for our sins. “The eternal priesthood of Christ is based on the hypostatic union. By incarnation He became Man and hence could act as a human Priest. As God, His priesthood could be everlasting after the order of Melchizedek, and He properly could be a Mediator between God and man. [[26]](#footnote-26) This perfect combination gave a perfect answer to humanity’s dilemma. “…the sacrifice of Christ was the oblation of himself; he offered his own blood, truly called, by virtue of the hypostatical union, *the blood of God;* and therefore of infinite value.” [[27]](#footnote-27)

Again, in the Tome, Leo reminds us that “the Lord took nature, not sin.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Not because the divine nature had any control over the human, but because the human, “learning obedience by what He suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him.” (Hebrews 5:8) This is why he prayed and sweat in the garden. This is why he cried out on the cross. His humanity, though humanity and felling/acting like humanity, persisted in obedience and offered complete salvation. Also, because of the hypostatic union, Jesus was able to be the perfect priest by His divine nature which lives forever. He has a permanent priesthood. (Hebrews 9:24)

While this is a great mystery and difficult to understand, the most difficult for this writer to put his mind around is the fact that the totally human Jesus, while having a divine nature at His disposal, did not call upon that. Rather, he totally committed Himself from His human capacity to a relationship with His father—a relationship that cost Him His life! On the other hand, we have access to the divine in the Holy Spirit, yet we constantly struggle to live committed lives. Should we learn the lesson from Leo—“Each nature performs its proper functions in communion with the other”[[29]](#footnote-29)—allowing our human nature to work in partnership[[30]](#footnote-30) with the Holy Spirit of God that resides in us, then we too, with a hypostatic union of the Divine Spirit in communion with our spirits, can learn obedience by what we suffer and by how we live.

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1. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 305. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 2 vols.; (San Francisco:HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 1:257 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 1:258 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church,* (London:Oxford University Press, 1943, 1973), 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Conclusions regarding the nature of God were determined at Nicea, establishing the orthodoxical concept that God and Jesus were of the same being ().  was the fem. Part. for the verb eijmiv**.** [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Romans 1:20 uses the fem. noun qeiovth" to refer to one of God’s invisible qualities—His “Godness.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The need was due to the teaching of Eutyches, a monastic leader who proposed that in Jesus there was a combined nature dominated by the divine. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The word (ὅμοιος, which is usually found with a dat. in the NT; the gen. occurs only once at Jn. 8:55 vl. (cf. Is. 13:4). Cf. Bl.-Debr. § 182, 4. (TDNT)) is very common in the NT in a formula which introduces images and parables (Mt., Lk., Rev.), especially in Jesus’ parables of the kingdom of God. This is the formula ὁμοία ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (J. Schneider, “ὅμοιος.” n.p., *TDNT* on CD-ROM. Version 3.0e. 2000-2007) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt , “Key Terms in the 4th and 5th Century,” n.p., [cited 29 January 2008], Online: http://www.evergreen.loyola.edu/~fbauerschmidt/TH246\_terms.html [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Joe Sachs, “Aristotle,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.p. [cited on 29 January 2008]. Online: http://www.iep.utm.edu/a/aris-met.htm#H3 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is a dialogue on the nature of virtue in which Socrates (Plato) is trying to define the ultimate nature or essence of virtue. ( Meno, 72b) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Sachs, “Aristotle” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. “The categories have familiar names: quality, quantity, relation, time, place, action, being-acted upon. The question Socrates asked about things, What is it?, is too broad, since it can be answered truly with respect to any of the categories that apply, and many times in some of them.” (Sachs, “Aristotle”) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. It was not until after the shift of power from Constantinople to Rome and the crowning of Charlemagne that Arianism was finally put to rest under the watchful eye of orthodox teaching. (Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 238) [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. This is Leo’s “new order” (novo ordine, novo nativitage generates, “born of a new order, a new birth. “Tome of Leo,” 765b) [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Christological Development after Nicea,” n.p. [cited 31 January 2008] Online: http://www.lourdes.edu/SYLLABI/RST312/AfterNicea.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Eugene Webb, “The Hermeneutic of Greek Trinitarianism,” n.p. [cited 30 January 2008], Online: http://faculty.washington.edu/ewebb/R327/trinity.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian Fathers, mid to late 4th c., made the distinction between ousia and hypostasis in that “*Ousia* (substance) refers to the Godhead shared by all three persons in the trinity, though not as a universal is shared by individual substances while *Hypostasis* (person) is a mode of being, i.e., the way in which something exists. Gregory expressed distinction within the Godhead in terms of causality as the manner of existence, e.g., only-begotten. (Mike Bone, “Schematization of the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa,” n.p. [cited 30 January 2008] Online at <http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt_themes_210_gregorynyssa.htm>) [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Webb, “The Hermeneutic of Greek Trinitarianism,” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. G. Harder, “*hupostasis*",” n.p. NIDNTT on CD-ROM. Version 2.8. 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. G. Harder, “*hupostasis*,” NIDNTT [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 50-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. 50 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1997, c1989), 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary* (, Tyndale reference libraryWheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology,* 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996, c1991), Heb 9:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church,* 51 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The Greek concept of *koinonia* holds the idea of partnership, communion, fellowship, and intimacy. In 1 Corinthians 16, the word is used in reference to the partaking of the Eucharistic meal. Our fellowship with Jesus in the Spirit, the Eucharist, the Mass, is the ultimate hypostatic union—Total divinity with total humanity. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)