

# The Communication of Properties: A Post-Reformation Divergence between Lutheran and Reformed Theologies

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## INTRODUCTION

The church has historically believed that Jesus Christ is both fully God and fully man, possessing two natures—the one divine, the other human—united in one person. The church has also historically affirmed that these two natures remain distinct in the God-man: the divine nature, characterized by omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, eternity, and the like, remains fully divine; and the human nature, characterized by spatio-temporal locatedness, limited strength and limited knowledge typical of all human beings, and the like, remains fully human. As the Chalcedonian Creed expressed this belief,

the church acknowledges Jesus Christ “in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, 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 persona and one subsistence, not parted or divided into two person, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Working within this traditional framework, theologians wondered “whether it is proper to speak of the human experiences of Christ while referring to him as God, and whether it is proper to speak of the divine experiences of Christ while referring to him as man.”<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, theologians insisted that when speaking of his human experiences of tiredness, hunger, thirst, temptation, death, and so forth, reference must be made to Jesus the man, and when speaking of his divine experiences of immutability, miraculous power, eternity, and so forth, reference must be made to the Son as God. Thomas Aquinas dissented from this view, insisting that “words which are said of Christ either in his divine or human nature may be said either of God or of man ... And hence of the man may be said what belongs to the divine nature, as of a hypostasis [person] of the divine nature; and of God may be said what belongs to the human nature, as a hypostasis [person] of human nature.”<sup>3</sup> For example, the expression “crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8) ascribes what is true of the human nature—it dies—to the exalted person of Christ. Additionally, calling Mary *theotokos* ascribes what is true of the divine nature—the one whom she bears is God—to Jesus as he was developing in her womb. This communication of attributes or idioms (Latin, *communicatio idiomatum*) does not mean that the divine or human natures changed—the divine nature of Christ did not die; Mary only contributed the human nature of Jesus—nor does it mean that the natures mixed together. On the contrary, the two natures remained what they are, retaining their respective properties. “Nevertheless, what is said of either nature may be said of either God or man, because both ‘God’ and ‘man’ refer to the one person of Jesus Christ.”<sup>4</sup>

At the time of the Reformation, controversy arose between Martin Luther and Huldrych Zwingli as they opposed one another on the issue of the presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper. Zwingli believed that his memorial view was in harmony with the church’s historic position of the relationship between the divine and human nature in Christ, and he charged Luther’s

view of violating the church's classic position. Luther believed that his "sacramental union" view was in harmony with the church's historic position of the relationship between the divine and human nature in Christ, and he charged Zwingli's view of violating the church's classic position. This dispute became an important point of divergence between Reformed theology after Zwingli and Lutheran theology after Luther.

### **THE BEGINNING OF THE DIVERGENCE**

Those who followed Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and the other Reformers continued to embrace and defend this traditional view of Jesus Christ. For example, the Lutheran *Formula of Concord* opened with a statement affirming the historic creeds of the church and recognizing them as the standard against which all heresies receive their condemnation:

Immediately after the times of the apostles—indeed, even while they were still alive—false teachers and heretics arose. Against these, the early church composed creeds—that is, brief and specific confessions that contained the unanimous consent of the universal Christian faith, and the confessions of the orthodox and true church. We publicly affirm that we embrace them and reject all heresies and all doctrines that have ever been brought into the church of God that are contrary to their decision.<sup>5</sup>

The *Formula* continued to affirm and explain Luther's Christology that led to his view of Christ's presence in the Lord's Supper. And it did so against the Christology of Calvin and his followers. The controversy focused on the communication of properties:

The principal question of this controversy has been whether the divine and human natures in the attributes of each are *really*—that is, truly and in very fact and deed—in mutual communication in the person of Christ, and how far that communication extends. The Calvinists have affirmed that the divine and human natures are personally united in Christ in such a way that neither communicates to the other really—that is, truly and in very deed—anything that is proper to either nature. Rather, the mere names are communicated. Dr. Luther and those who hold with him have firmly maintained the opposite opinion on this doctrine against the Calvinists.<sup>6</sup>

The *Formula* specifically denied that this communication of properties resulted in a fusion or confusion of the divine and human natures of Christ: “We believe, teach and affirm that the divine and human natures are not fused into one nature, nor one changed into the other. Rather, each nature retains its own essential properties.”<sup>7</sup> This meant that the divine nature alone is omnipresent and the human nature does not become ubiquitous.<sup>8</sup> Rather, it is in virtue of the communication of properties that Christ is present in the Lord’s Supper, according to the Lutheran view: “Being present everywhere, Christ can impart his true body and his blood in the Lord’s Supper. Now this is not done according to the way and property of human nature, but according to the way and property of the right hand of God, as Luther said. And this presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper is neither physical nor earthly; nonetheless, it is most true and indeed substantial.”<sup>9</sup> In light of this, the *Formula* rejected the Calvinist understanding of Christ and his presence in the Lord’s Supper: “We repudiate the error that it is impossible for Christ, on account of the realities of his human nature, to be in more places than one—not to say everywhere—with his body. We repudiate the error that the Son of God is present to us on earth in the Word, the sacraments, and in all our troubles, only by his divinity, but this presence has nothing to do with his humanity.”<sup>10</sup>

On the Reformed side, the major Calvinist confessions continued to uphold the church’s historic Christology. For example, the *Belgic Confession of Faith* explained the incarnation in this way:

We affirm that God did fulfill the promise that he had made to the fathers by the mouth of his holy prophets when he sent into the world, at the time that he appointed, his own only-begotten and eternal Son. He “took upon himself the form of a servant and was made in human likeness” (Phil. 2:7-8), really assuming the true human nature, with all its weaknesses, except for sin. He was conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, without the participation of a man. And he did not only assume human nature as to the body, but also a true human soul, so that he would be a real human being.<sup>11</sup>

And it affirmed the personal union of the two natures—which retain their respective properties—in the one person Jesus Christ:

We believe that by this conception, the person of the Son is inseparably united and connected with the human nature. Thus, there are not two Sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in one single person; yet each nature retains its own distinct properties. Since, then, the divine nature has always remained uncreated, not having a beginning of days or end of life, filling heaven and earth, so also has the human nature not lost its properties but remained a creature, having a beginning of days, being a finite nature, and retaining all the properties of a real body.<sup>12</sup>

These confessions of faith on the doctrine of Christ represented the beginning of the divergence between Lutheran and Reformed theologies.

### **THE POST-REFORMATION DIVERGENCE CONTINUED**

Lutheran churches and theologians in the post-Reformation period continued to express the traditional doctrine of the two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ. Martin Chemnitz carefully defined the terms of this formulation:

- *Essence, or substance, or nature*, is that which of itself is common to many individuals of the same species, and which embraces the entire essential perfection of each of them.<sup>13</sup>
- *Person or individual* is something particular, possessing indeed the entire and perfect substance of the same species, but determined and limited by a characteristic and personal particularity.<sup>14</sup> It thus subsists of itself, separated or distinguished from the other individuals of the same species, not in essence, but in number. For a person is an indivisible, intelligent, incommunicable substance, which neither is a part of another, nor is sustained in another, nor has dependence on another object such as the separated soul has on the body that is to be raised up. Therefore, the names of the essence or natures are θεότης, ἀνθρωπότης; divinity, humanity; divine nature, human nature; divine essence, human substance. The designations of the person are God, man.<sup>15</sup>

Concerning these two natures, John Andrew Quenstedt affirmed: “The incarnate person consists of two natures, divine and human. The divine nature he possesses from eternity, from God the Father, through eternal,

true and properly named generation of substance; from this, Christ is also the true, natural, and eternal God, and Son of God. A true and pure human nature he received in time, from the virgin Mary.”<sup>16</sup> Proof that Jesus Christ possessed these two natures was marshaled by David Hollaz:

- *The true and eternal divine nature* is proved by the most complete arguments, derived from:
  - the divine names;
  - the attributes that are particular to God alone;
  - the personal and essential acts of God;
  - the religious worship due God alone.
  
- That Christ is *true man* is shown from:
  - human names;
  - the essential parts of a man;
  - the attributes that are particular to a true man;
  - human works;
  - the genealogy of Christ as a man.<sup>17</sup>

Against the historical errors of Christology, Lutheran theologians affirmed the historic orthodox position as articulated in the *Chalcedonian Creed*. For example, Hafenraffer stated:

The two natures in Christ are united

- *without change*: He did not become the Son of God by the change of his divine nature into flesh;
- *without confusion*: The two natures are one, not by a mingling, through which a third object (*tertium quiddam*) comes into being, preserving in no respect the entireness of the simple natures;
- *without separation and interruption*: The two natures in Christ are so united that they are never separated by any intervals either of time or place. Therefore, this union has not been dissolved in death, and the Word cannot be shown at any place without the assumed human nature.<sup>18</sup>

The Lutheran theologians acknowledged certain peculiar realities about the real and full humanity of Christ.<sup>19</sup> The first was his impersonal human subsistence, Christ’s “ἀνυποστασία, the being without a particular subsistence, because this is replaced by the divine person (ὑπόστασις) of the Son

of God, as one far more exalted. If the human nature of Christ had retained its particular subsistence, there would have been in Christ two persons.”<sup>20</sup> As Quenstedt specified: “When the human nature of Christ is said to be ἀνυπόστατος, nothing else is meant than that it does not subsist of itself, and according to itself, in a particular personality. Moreover, it is called ἐνυπόστατος because it has become a partaker of the person of another and subsists in the λόγος.”<sup>21</sup>

The second peculiarity about Christ was his sinlessness, as affirmed by John Adam Scherzer:

Christ never sinned, nor was he even able to sin. We prove the statement that he was not even able to sin, or that he was impeccable, as follows:

- He who is like men, with the exception of sin, cannot be peccable. For, because all men are peccable, Christ would be like them also with regard to sin and peccability, which contradicts Hebrews 7:26 [“For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens;” Heb. 7:26].
- He who is both holy by his origin and is exempt from original sin, who can never have a depraved will, and constitutes one person with God himself, is clearly impeccable.
- He who is higher than the angels is completely impeccable.
- He to whom the Holy Spirit has been given without measure is also holy and just without measure and, therefore, cannot sin.<sup>22</sup>

A third particular reality about the humanity of Christ, according to the Lutheran theologians, was an excellence of soul and body.

Following Luther, these theologians affirmed the communication of properties or natures. Quenstedt defined this as the following:

The communion of natures is that most intimate participation and combination of the divine nature of the Word and of the assumed human nature by which the Word, through a most intimate and profound *perichoresis* [mutual indwelling], so permeates, perfects, inhabits, and appropriates to himself the human nature that is personally united to him. The result is that from both natures mutually inter-communicating, there arises the one incommunicable subject—that is, one person.<sup>23</sup>

Of particular importance was the implication that, in the incarnation, the divine nature communicated its properties—for example, omnipresence—to the human nature of Jesus Christ. This was affirmed by John William Baier:

From the personal union proceeds the participation of natures, through which it comes to pass that the human nature belongs to the Son of God and the divine nature to the Son of man. For marking this, the word *perichoresis* (which, according to its original meaning denotes penetration, or the existence of one thing in another) began to be employed. Thus, the divine nature might indeed be said actively to penetrate, and the human nature passively to be penetrated.<sup>24</sup>

It was on this one particular point that Lutheran and Reformed theologians disagreed in their Christology. In dealing with this disagreement, Johann F. Cotta first listed nine areas of agreement between Lutherans and Reformed theologians:

They agree that

- in Christ there is only one person, but two natures; namely, a divine and a human nature;
- these two natures have been joined in the closest and most intimate union, which is generally called “personal;”
- by this union (a more intimate one than which cannot be conceived), the natures are neither mingled, as has been condemned in the Eutychians, nor the persons divided, as has been condemned in the Nestorians; rather
- this union must be regarded as without change, fusion, division, and interruption; therefore
- by this union neither the difference of natures nor the particular conditions of either have been removed; for the human nature of Christ is always human ... but the divine nature is and always remains infinite, immeasurable, impassible;
- nevertheless, by the power of the personal union, the properties of both natures have become common to the person of Christ, so that the person of Christ, the God-man, possesses divine properties, uses them, and is named by them; in addition to this,
- by means of the hypostatic union, there have been imparted to the human nature of Christ the very highest gifts of acquired condition; but

- to the mediatorial acts of Christ, each nature contributed its own part, and that the divine nature conferred on the acts of the human nature infinite power to redeem and save the human race.
- In summary, the intimate union of God and man in Christ is so wonderful and sublime that it surpasses in the highest degree the comprehension of our mind.<sup>25</sup>

The main point of difference was the following: “The Reformed theologians differ from us [Lutheran theologians] when the question is stated concerning the impartation abstractly considered, or of a nature to a nature. They deny that, by the hypostatic union, the properties of the divine nature have been truly and really imparted to the human nature of Christ (and that, also, for common possession, use, and designation) so that the human nature of our Savior is truly omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient.”<sup>26</sup> According to the Lutheran position, however: “The majesty of the omnipresence of the Word was communicated to the human nature of Christ at the first moment of the personal union. In consequence of this, along with the divine nature, the human nature is now omnipresent, in the state of exaltation, in a true, real, substantial and effective presence.”<sup>27</sup>

According to Hollaz, Reformed theologians employed three principal arguments against his—the Lutheran—position:

- because the reality of the body of Christ, of his death and ascension to heaven, would be disproved, inasmuch as a true human nature cannot be extended indefinitely [be everywhere present];
- because he who is omnipresent cannot die;
- because he who is by virtue of his omnipresence already in heaven cannot still ascend to it.<sup>28</sup>

To these objections, Hollaz responded with the following points:

- The doctrine concerning the reality of the flesh of Christ is not overthrown by the ascription of omnipresence to it, for it is not omnipresent by a physical and extensive presence, but by a hyperphysical, divine, and illogical presence that does not belong to it formally and *per se*, but by way of participation and by virtue of the personal union.
- The doctrine concerning the death of Christ is not overturned by it, for the natural union of body and soul was indeed dissolved by

death, but without disturbing the permanent hypostatic union of the divine and human natures.

- The doctrine of the ascension of Christ is not disproved by it, for before the ascension the flesh of Christ was present in heaven by an uninterrupted presence as a personal act, but he ascended visibly into heaven in a glorified body according to the divine economy so that he might fill all things with his omnipresence of his dominion. For Christ, by virtue of his divine omnipotence, can make himself present in various ways.<sup>29</sup>

Interestingly, what had been developed by Luther as an explanation for his view of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper—the divine nature communicated its omnipresence to the human nature of Christ—was now further developed by his followers into a full-fledged doctrine of the communication of properties.

Turning to the developments in post-Reformation Christology among the Reformed churches and theologians, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* echoed the traditional formula:

The Son of God is the second person in the Trinity, being true and eternal God, of one nature and equal with the Father. When the fullness of time came, he took upon himself a human nature with all the essential properties and common weaknesses, yet without sin. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary, and is of her nature. Thus, two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, divine and human, were inseparably joined together in one person, without change, composition, or confusion. This person is true God and true man, yet one Christ, the only mediator between God and man.<sup>30</sup>

The *Confession* also affirmed the communication of properties: “Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself. But by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person referred to by the other nature.”<sup>31</sup>

As noted above, the disagreement between Lutheran and Reformed theologians focused on the precise nature of this communication of properties. According to Amandus Polan:

The things peculiar to the separate natures are common to Christ's person and are accordingly attributed to and true of the natures only distinctly, but of the person without distinction—and this not merely verbally or by empty titles, but most really. For because the person embraces both natures, whatever participates in both natures or in one of them really belongs to it because of the hypostatic union of the natures. And what is proper to one nature is by no means common to the other one in it because of the essential and eternal difference between the natures, though it is common to the person or to one of the natures in the person.<sup>32</sup>

Specifically, and over against the Lutheran view, Mark Frideric Wendelin explained further:

We acknowledge that in Christ dwells the entire fullness of divinity bodily, provided that the communication of the natures as well as the properties is understood to have taken place in the person through the union, not in the natures among themselves so that one nature has been communicated to the other along with its properties—namely, to the human nature [has been communicated] the divine nature and its properties, to the divine nature [has been communicated] the human nature and its properties. Communication of this kind confuses or abolishes the natures and the attributes, and it is not found anywhere in Scripture.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, both Lutheran and Reformed theologians in the post-Reformation period embraced and defended the church's historic position on Jesus Christ, the God-man. But one major divergence over the proper understanding of the communication of properties separated the two theological camps.

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<sup>1</sup> Creed of Chalcedon, adapted from Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper, 1877-1905), 2:62-63.

<sup>2</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 378.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, pt. 3, q. 2, art. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Allison, *Historical Theology*, 378-379.

<sup>5</sup> *Formula of Concord*, epitome, 2. In Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3.94-95.

<sup>6</sup> *Formula of Concord*, article 8, statement of the controversy. In Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3.147-148.

<sup>7</sup> *Formula of Concord*, article 8, affirmation, 2. In Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3.148.

- <sup>8</sup> *Formula of Concord*, article 8, affirmation, 3. In Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom*, 3.148.
- <sup>9</sup> *Formula of Concord*, article 8, affirmation, 12. In Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom*, 3.153.
- <sup>10</sup> *Formula of Concord*, article 8, negatives, 11, 13. In Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom*, 3.156.
- <sup>11</sup> *Belgic Confession of Faith*, 18. In Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom*, 3.402-403.
- <sup>12</sup> *Belgic Confession of Faith*, 19. In Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom*, 3.404.
- <sup>13</sup> An example is human nature, which is a complex essence consisting of both a material aspect (the body) and an immaterial aspect (the soul or the spirit).
- <sup>14</sup> An example is my wife, Nora, who is a particular instantiation or concretization of the entirety of a human nature.
- <sup>15</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Of the Two Natures*, 1. In Schmid, 297.
- <sup>16</sup> John Andrew Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica sive Systema Theologicum* (Lipsiae, 1715), 3:75. Cited in Schmid, 298.
- <sup>17</sup> David Hollaz, *Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum*, 656. Cited in Schmid, 299.
- <sup>18</sup> Matthew Hafenerffer, *Loci Theologiae sive Compendium Theologiae*, 3:77. Cited in Schmid, 307.
- <sup>19</sup> For clarification of the following discussion, a definition of the hypostatic union may be helpful: “the joining together (the union) of the two natures—one fully divine, one fully human—in the one person (Gk. *hypostasis*), Jesus Christ. The preexistent Son of God became incarnate by taking on a fully human nature—both a material aspect, or body, and an immaterial aspect, or soul. The man Jesus had no existence prior to the incarnation; he was *anhypostatic* (no personal existence). Rather, the human nature exists in the divine person; it is *enhyposstatic* (existing in the Son of God).” Adapted from Gregg R. Allison, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, forthcoming).
- <sup>20</sup> David Hollaz, *Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum*, 657. Cited in Schmid, 300.
- <sup>21</sup> John Andrew Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica sive Systema Theologicum* (Lipsiae, 1715), 3:77. Cited in Schmid, 300.
- <sup>22</sup> John Adam Scherzer, *Systema Theologiae* (1680), 189. Cited in Schmid, 302.
- <sup>23</sup> John Andrew Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica sive Systema Theologicum* (Lipsiae, 1715), 3:87. Cited in Schmid, 310.
- <sup>24</sup> John William Baier, *Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, 463. Cited in Schmid, 317.
- <sup>25</sup> The list was added by Cotta in his edition of Gerhard’s works. In John Gerhard’s *Loci Theologici*, 4, Diss., 1.50. Cited in Schmid, 329-330. Cotta produced the definitive edition of John Gerhard’s work as a twenty-two volume set published at Tubingen between 1762 and 1787.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> John Andrew Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica sive Systema Theologicum* (Lipsiae, 1715), 3:185. Cited in Schmid, 331.
- <sup>28</sup> David Hollaz, *Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum*, 714. Cited in Schmid, 332.
- <sup>29</sup> David Hollaz, *Examen Theologicum Acroamaticum*, 718. Cited in Schmid, 332.
- <sup>30</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 8.2. In Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom*, 3.619-620.
- <sup>31</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 8.7. In Schaff, *Creeks of Christendom*, 3.622.
- <sup>32</sup> Amandus Polan, *Syntagma Theologiae Christianae* (Hanover, 1624/1625), 6:16. Cited in Heinrich Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Ernst Bizer, ed., G. T. Thomson, trans. (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1950), 439.
- <sup>33</sup> Mark Frideric Wendelin, *Collatio Doctrinae Christianae Reformatorum et Lutheranorum* (Cassel, 1660), 69-70. Cited in Hepp, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 440-441.