

Who Do You Say that I Am? A Study of Zwingli's *Alloeosis* and the Damage It Does to the Doctrine of Christology

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“Who do you say I am?”¹ Jesus’ question calls for a confession of faith. The doctrine of Christ, which stands behind this question, is at the center of the Christian faith, and as such, will determine the subsequent doctrines to which a person holds. The post-modern pluralism that pervades our society today is not tolerable because the pages of Scripture present only *one* Savior from sin: pictured in the Old Testament sacrifices, prophesied by the prophets, praised by the psalms, presented as Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospels, and preached about in the epistles.

Therefore it is of the highest importance that we have a clear understanding of how Scripture speaks of Jesus. This brief study will seek to analyze the Reformed understanding of Christology, specifically Zwingli’s *Alloeosis*, and contrast it with orthodox Lutheran Christology in light of God’s Word.

The stage is set in Marburg, 1529. The purpose of the colloquy was to get Luther and Zwingli to agree on the word “is” in Christ’s institution of the Lord’s Supper², so that the Lutherans and Reformed might join forces against the errors (and armies) of the Roman Catholic Church. However the two had a serious clash—their view of Scripture. Luther showed his view of Scripture pointing to ‘the Lutheran *est*’: “‘The Word, the Word, there it is, there can be no argument!’ ...and yet each stuck to the viewpoint with which he had started. Luther roared angrily: ‘God can do much more than any of us have any idea of, we must yield to the Word of God. A servant does not fret over his master’s wishes, we must shut our eyes.’ Then resorting to paradox, as he so often did, he added still more furiously: ‘And if God commanded me to eat dung I should eat it!’”³ Finally, Luther recognized that ‘they did not have the same spirit,’ for Zwingli’s view of Scripture was subjected to his reason. Influenced by Erasmus, he must logically be able to rationalize the words of Scripture, for (as many Reformed will profess) ‘surely God would not expect us to believe what we cannot fully comprehend! Would he?’

It is out of this enslavement to reason that Zwingli’s *Alloeosis* sprang up. He defines it as “that leap or transition or, if you prefer, interchange, by which when, speaking of one of Christ’s natures, we use the terms that apply to the other.”⁴ At first glance, Zwingli masks his teaching with words describing the Lutheran view of the *genus idiomaticum*, until, of course, you understand fully what he means by ‘interchange.’ Zwingli explains one occurrence:

“I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to me” (John 12:32ff). This he said, signifying what death he should die. The people answered him, “We have heard out of the law that Christ abides forever: and do you say the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” See how those thickheaded people were yet cleverer than we are at seizing the trope. They understand that in using the expression “be lifted up” he was speaking of dying. Unless, therefore, they deny that Christ can die, and he himself asserts it, it is evident that he is making the quickest possible transition from one of his natures to the other. For the

¹ Matthew 16:15

² Matthew 26:26–28

³ Friedenthal, p. 505.

⁴ Zwingli, trans. Pipkin, p. 320.

expression “If I be lifted up from the earth” looks to his human nature, but the words that follow quicker than a flash, “will draw all people to me,” beyond a doubt look to his divine nature...⁵

Zwingli’s clever words must be analyzed carefully. He claims that ‘those thickheaded people were yet cleverer than we are at seizing the trope.’ He has to protect his viewpoint of Christ’s divinity, for to him, the very idea of ‘God dying’ goes against his reason. God is eternal; how can he die? Thus, he concludes that this passage is a trope, something of a figurative speech, a kind of metaphor. According to Zwingli, if people do not recognize this, they are even more thickheaded than the people in Jesus’ day.

He speaks of Christ dying in the quotation above, defending the view that Christ indeed does die, ‘and he himself asserts it.’ And yet, who is the Christ that dies according to Zwingli? Since, according to his reason, God cannot die, Zwingli removes the divine nature from Christ, insisting that at the time Christ speaks of his death, only the human nature is present in the person of Christ. But then the words of Christ that immediately follow speak of an activity which he is only able to do essentially by the divine nature, namely, ‘drawing all people to himself.’ Zwingli’s reason once again distorts his understanding of what Scripture is trying to say. Since Christ, according to his human nature, cannot do activities which are essentially divine (Zwingli’s view), this must be the divine nature of Christ which is now speaking. Thus, in the middle of Christ’s sentence, there is a transition, or interchange (*alloeosis*), which takes place between the two natures.

From Zwingli’s words, the non-Reformed reader would gather that the two natures are never in the person of Christ at the same time. However, Reformed theologians would tell us otherwise. “Sharp as was his insistence on the distinction of natures, Zwingli never failed to affirm the unity of the person of Christ. Christ is never simply God or man, he is always true God and man. We can say that the one who suffered is God, but not that the godhead suffered.”⁶ What then can be said? Are there two separate spirits within the one person? Apparently. Followers of Zwingli will acknowledge the unity of the person of Christ in so far as they accept that Christ is both God and man. However, they do not accept that every activity done by Christ is done by the God-man, for their reason will not accept that conclusion. Thus, they reserve the right to separate the natures of Christ.

If a person carries Zwingli’s *alloeosis* to its final conclusions, they may be able to rationalize away the divinity or humanity of Christ whenever they find it necessary by the context to separate the natures—however, there will be consequences to this view. “If we must regard as nominal or topical in Scripture everything to which man’s blind reason opposes itself, then, in the last analysis, every article of faith must be denied.”⁷

What then is the Lutheran view of Christology? Lutherans understand that “the Word became flesh.”⁸ When God became man, Jesus, the Son of God (the λόγος ἄσαρκος) assumed a non-personal (not an existing person) human nature and was united with it in the one person, Jesus Christ (the λόγος ἐνσαρκος). Chemnitz explains the result of this union (in contrast to Zwingli’s *alloeosis*):

⁵ Ibid, p. 324.

⁶ Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli*, p. 116.

⁷ Mueller, p. 271.

⁸ John 1:14

These two natures in Christ do not subsist individually, by themselves, or separately, so that there is one Christ the God and another person who is Christ the man; but they are united into one hypostasis or person, so that there is one Christ who is at the same time God and man...[for] as Luther rightly says, the hypostatic union does not permit the kind of division whereby I can properly say that the divine nature of Christ does this or the human nature does that.⁹

Because of this union, there is a communication of attributes which takes place within the person.

The Lutheran dogmaticians breakdown the communication of attributes into three classes: *genus idiomaticum*, *genus maiestaticum*, and *genus apotelesmaticum*. The *genus idiomaticum* states that “attributes belonging essentially only to one nature (omnipotence, omniscience/being born, dying) are always ascribed to the whole person of the God-man.”¹⁰ The union of the two natures is not such that the two natures mix to become something entirely different (cf. Eutychianism). Rather, the individual natures retain their essence and at the same time communicate their attributes to the God-man. This is evidenced in Scripture: “None of the rulers of this age understood it [God’s plan of salvation], for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”¹¹ His death is an attribute of the human nature ascribed to the entire God-man, Jesus Christ. Since, as Chemnitz stated before, the natures are indivisible in this union, both God and man in Christ suffered and died.

The *genus maiestaticum* states that the “human nature shares in the divine power, knowledge, and glory of the Son of God.”¹² This teaches that the human nature actually possesses the divine majesty of the divine nature as a gift. This teaching is not reciprocal for that is not spoken of in Scripture, and would make a change to God, assuming human nature from all eternity. This teaching is in place, however, because some Reformed and Roman Catholic theologians would claim that, by essence, the human nature is incapable of possessing many of the divine attributes. Pieper speaks sharply to this point: “In so far as Reformed theology...applies the principle that the finite is not capable of the infinite, it inevitably denies the incarnation of the Son of God and Christ’s vicarious atonement, and so destroys the foundation of the Christian faith.”¹³ By contrast to the Reformed, the Lutheran theologians hold true to the words of Scripture in faith. Thus, we can confidently declare with the apostle Paul that “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.”¹⁴ Professor Paul Wendland details the significance of this passage (which in and of itself completely refutes Zwingli’s *alloeosis*):

‘All the fullness,’ that is, not merely part, but the fullness, and not merely part of the fullness, but all of it. ‘The Deity,’ that is, whatever makes God to be God, all the qualities, attributes, and power of the Divine Being as it is fundamentally present in the second person of the Trinity. ‘Lives,’ that is, assumes as its permanent habitation. ‘In bodily form,’ that is, in the perfectly human body and soul of the man Jesus.¹⁵

⁹ Chemnitz, pp. 162–163.

¹⁰ Jeske, p. 3.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 2:8

¹² Jeske, p. 4.

¹³ Pieper Vol. 2, p. 271.

¹⁴ Colossians 2:9

¹⁵ Wendland, Paul O. Ed. Curtis A. Jahn. “Now that God is One of Us: A Study of the Communication of Attributes in the Person of Christ.”

The implications of the *genus maiestaticum* are far-reaching. Jesus Christ, the God-man, is omnipotent (has power to take his life up again),¹⁶ omniscient (he knew their thoughts),¹⁷ omnipresent ('I will be with you always'),¹⁸ and deserving of the divine honor of God.¹⁹

The applications of this teaching extend beyond the brief scope of this paper; allow one example to suffice: The Sacrament of Lord's Supper. If an individual holds a view in line with Zwingli's *alloeosis*, they (usually) will teach that Christ's human body was separated at the time of his death and was seated at God's right hand where it remains to this day. This is also in keeping with their view that God is omnipresent only according to his divine nature. Guided by this misunderstanding, they are horrified at the Lutheran doctrine of Real Presence:

If we take 'This is my body' and 'This is my blood' literally, an absurdity results.

If Jesus meant that the bread and wine were at that moment in the upper room actually his body and his blood, he was asserting that his flesh and blood were in two places simultaneously, since his corporeal form was right there beside the elements. To believe that Jesus was in two places at once is something of a denial of the incarnation, which limited his physical human nature to one location.²⁰

In spite of this, Lutherans boldly cling to the Real Presence. Why? *Sola Scriptura*. It goes back to the Marburg colloquy. Zwingli's reason needed to deny that 'is' means 'is' because according to his human nature, Christ's body was in heaven and there could not be everywhere on earth in a sacramental presence in accordance with Christ's special promise. Luther, however, had no need to change the words from their intended meaning. Luther understood that the union of the two natures in Christ was inseparable. He recognized that the human nature received gifts from the divine nature, such as omnipresence.²¹ He understood that while his Christology required faith (as also the doctrine of the Holy Trinity), Scripture was the only authoritative source for teaching. He must hold his reason captive to Scripture. 'Is' must mean 'is.'

Finally, the *genus apotelesmaticum* emphasizes that "Christ performs all his official acts according to both natures, each nature contributing its proper share to the act in intimate communion with the other."²² This emphasizes that when Christ does an official act, such as Prophet, Priest, or King, he does it as the God-man. For example, Paul wrote to Timothy about Christ's act as mediator and both the divine and human natures are emphasized in the verse. "For there is one *God* and one mediator between God and men, the *man* Christ Jesus."²³

"Who do you say that I am?" Do you join in with Peter's confession?: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!"²⁴ Or do you hold to Ulrich Zwingli's view, who could rightly agree with any statement of/about Christ, but only by means of *alloeosis*?

Zwingli cannot say that God died, because that is irrational. Lutherans agree that God by his very essence cannot die, thus we do not claim that the 'Godhead' died. And yet, in Christ, God and man are inseparably united together so that the God-man died, that is, God died. That is

¹⁶ John 10:17-18

¹⁷ Matthew 9:4

¹⁸ Matthew 28:20

¹⁹ John 5:23

²⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Vol. 3, p. 1121.

²¹ This is not intended to suggest ubiquity.

²² Jeske, p. 5.

²³ 1 Timothy 2:5

²⁴ Matthew 16:16

why Peter can say that the Jews “killed the author of life.”²⁵ Paul reinforces God’s death (and our redemption) when he states that God’s own blood paid our ransom. “Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.”²⁶

If you carry out Zwingli’s view to its conclusion, that God did not die and Christ only died according to the human nature, then only a man died. And if only a man died, then our faith is futile and we are still in our sins.²⁷ It is only because of the unique union of both natures in Christ that we are reconciled to God. By virtue of his human nature, he endured the temptation and suffering in our place and yet lived a perfect life. By virtue of his divine nature, his life, death and resurrection are for all people. Don’t rob yourself or others of this comfort—yes, Jesus Christ, the God-man died and rose again for you. We are now reconciled to God; our sins are forgiven. We can be confident that he has prepared a place for us in heaven. Though, through reason we are not able to fully comprehend the God-man, we trust the words of Scripture which also reveal God’s way of salvation.

⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to *him* through the death of *his Son*, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! ¹¹ Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.²⁸

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²⁵ Acts 3:15

²⁶ Acts 20:28

²⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:17

²⁸ Romans 5:9–11

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