

How Human? How Divine?

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Did Christ lose some of His divine attributes when He became human?

The Incarnation, together with the cross, is and will remain an unfathomable mystery of the nature of God's sacrifice for the human race. Our explanations will always be incomplete and could even distort it. Your question seeks to understand what happened when God became a human being. I do not have the answer to the larger issue, but I can make some suggestions concerning your specific question.

1. *Affirming the Incarnation:* The New Testament makes it undisputably clear that Jesus was a human being. He was born of a woman (Gal. 4:4), grew and developed as a normal child (Luke 2:40), learned obedience (Heb. 5:8), suffered, and died (Matt. 26:38; Luke 23:46). It is also clear that He was divine; God in human flesh (e.g. John 1:1, 2, 14; Heb. 1:3). The affirmation of those two teachings raises the type of question you ask. It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand how God became human and yet remained fully God. The limitations of human nature suggest that Jesus' divinity had to be limited or modified in some way at the Incarnation. Yet the Bible affirms both His full divinity and His full humanity.

2. *Diversity of Views:* Many Bible interpreters believe that the Bible addresses your question in Philippians 2:7, where Paul wrote that Christ "made himself nothing [*kenoō*], taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."* The verb *kenoō* means "to make empty, to empty." There have been many discussions in Christian theology concerning the nature of that self-emptying. During the nineteenth century some theologians suggested that at the Incarnation there was a separation of the metaphysical attributes of God (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence) from the moral ones (e.g., love, holiness). Others went so far as practically to empty Jesus of all of His divine attributes, making the use of the term *incarnation* meaningless. If *God* became human, then the fullness of God must have dwelt in humanity. This is precisely what Paul said when he wrote: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col. 2:9; cf. 1:19). If in the Incarnation one or several of the divine attributes were lost, we would have had less than the incarnation of God.

3. *Self-emptying and Servanthood:* Philippians 2:7 seems to explain what Paul meant when he said that Christ "made himself nothing [emptied himself]." In verse 6 he stated that Christ Jesus was "in very nature God," equal to God, before the Incarnation. Then he proceeded to tell us what happened at the Incarnation: Christ took "the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (verse 7). He who was divine became what we should be, a servant; a servant of God and of others. This meant for Him to be willing to humble Himself before God, to be obedient to Him, to submit to Him to the point of death, even the death of a cross. In another place Paul described this using different language: "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you

through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). The reference is primarily to the event of the cross, where He became the poorest of the poor—what we were.

It is probably safe to conclude that the self-emptying of Christ Jesus is related not to what happened to His divine attributes but to what He was willing to do as a divine being in order to save us. It has to do with the experience, not with the nature, of one of the members of the Godhead. Christ became a servant, that is, He voluntarily restrained Himself from using His divine powers except probably under obedience to the Father. He placed everything under the authority of the Father, but in doing that He did not divest Himself of any of His divine attributes; He was indeed God in human flesh. One could then suggest that there was a concealment of the divine in Jesus; yet deity was always present.

Paul used Christ’s willingness to humble Himself before the Father, in the context of Philippians 2, to exhort us to be like-minded and to “do nothing out of selfish ambition,” but to serve one another in humility (verse 3).

*Texts in the column are quoted from the New International Version.

9/11/03