

The Communication of Attributes in the God-Man Christ Jesus

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I. It is based on the union of the two natures in Christ.

- A. This doctrine's Scriptural basis
- B. This doctrine denied (Nestorius, Eutyches, Zwingli)
- C. This doctrine reaffirmed in the Formula of Concord, Article VIII

II. It is usually described according to three genera.

A. The idiomatic genus (communication of idioms)

Attributes belonging essentially only to one nature are always ascribed to the whole person of the God-Man.

B. The majestic genus (communication of majesty)

Christ's human nature shares in the divine power and glory of the Son of God.

C. The apotelesmatic genus (communication of official acts)

Christ performs all His official acts according to both natures, each nature contributing its proper share in intimate communion with the other.

III. It has great practical value.

A. For us as Christians

1. Christ's teaching is divine, and not on a level with that of prophets, apostles.
2. The Real Presence in the Lord's Supper is assured.
3. Christ's active and passive obedience have infinite worth.

B. For us as pastors

1. The Lord of the Church is the omnipresent God-Man, not a ruler in absentia.
2. The Lord of the Church is our sympathetic Blood-Brother.

THE COMMUNICATION OF ATTRIBUTES IN THE GOD-MAN CHRIST

The communication of attributes in the God-Man Christ Jesus is a doctrine of which many Christians are unaware and about which they're unconcerned. You just don't hear much about this doctrine today. It's very possible, I suppose, that among us here are some who might consider this one of the finer points of Christian doctrine, one of those peripheral teachings which he had to study as a seminarian but which is remote from the beating heart of daily Christian life and from his daily pastoral ministry.

If those thoughts are spooking around our minds at this moment, then we're probably asking: "Actually what practical value is there for me as a Christian and as a pastor in hearing an essay on this topic? Why should we review some theological terms with high-sounding Latin names which we probably haven't used since our seminary dogmatics class?"

Why? Because things like this have happened within the Christian church. *People have separated the Son of God from the attributes of His human nature* (His birth of the Virgin Mary, e.g., and His suffering and death). Christian teachers have said it's blasphemy to say that the Son of God actually took part in the action of being born and of dying. Nestorius, patriarch of Constantinople in the 5th century, put it this way: "I cannot worship a God who was born, who died, and was buried."

An error which is actually just the reverse has also been taught in the Christian church. *People have separated Mary's Son from the attributes of the Son of God*. Zwingli and Calvin, fathers of Reformed theology, e.g., insisted that Christ's human nature isn't capable of divine power and wisdom, that it cannot receive divine attributes without being annihilated. For example, you ascribe omniscience to a human being, and he's no longer a human being. Do you see a reason here for us to review the doctrine of the communication of attributes in the God-Man Christ Jesus?

Or think of this. Down through the centuries Christian teachers have *denied that Christ's human and divine natures cooperated in the miracles*. Reformed teachers have claimed: "Some of the actions of Jesus of Nazareth belong to His divine nature, others of His actions belong to His human nature, and let's not mix the two." It has been said that Jesus' human nature contributed no more toward the performance of His miracles than did the hem of His garment toward healing the woman sick with the issue of blood.

It's because things like this have been taught and are being taught in the Christian church that we want to review the doctrine of the communication of attributes. It becomes necessary for those who hold the office of the public ministry not only to encourage others by teaching the truth about the communication of attributes, but also to shut the mouths of those who intentionally or unintentionally rob the child of God of comfort God wants him to have.

Actually the doctrine of the communication of attributes is not difficult in itself. The Lutheran Church's presentation of this doctrine, as we have it in Article VIII of the Formula of Concord, has been complicated only because of objections that have been raised to this teaching, especially by the Reformed Church.

St. Paul once wrote to Timothy: "Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh." The Scriptures call the person of Christ a mystery, a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense upon which rebellious sinners dash their heads. This has to be the reason why the doctrine of the communication of attributes has encountered so much opposition in the history of the Christian church. *The communication of attributes is based on the union of the two natures in Christ*. Perhaps it ought to be stated at the outset that the term "communication of attributes" is not found in the Scripture. Our dogmaticians have coined it, and they use the term "attributes" in a sense somewhat broader than we customarily do. When we speak of God's attributes to our confirmation instruction classes we tend to think, e.g. only of His holiness or of His omniscience. Our dogmaticians don't restrict the term "attributes" to the properties of the God-Man, but include in the term all of Christ's actions, His experiences, all of His official acts. There is a communication, a sharing of all of these because of the union of the two natures in Christ.

Because of the union of Christ's human and divine nature, the Virgin Mary bore not a mere man-child, but as the angel Gabriel testified, the Son of the Most High God. Even in His mother's womb the God-Man showed His divine majesty, inasmuch as He was born of a virgin with her virginity inviolate.

The two natures of Christ don't exist side by side like two boards glued together, but rather like body and soul in a human being. Christ's divine nature so permeates and penetrates His human nature that both natures make one person. This is one of the mysteries of God's marvelous plan which even the angels of God are astonished at.

This basic teaching of the person of our Lord, of the personal union of the two natures, a teaching which is the very bedrock on which Christian faith and hope rests, was one of the first to be attacked by the opponents of Christ and His church. It was attacked while Jesus was still on earth, and it has been attacked ever since. In the early centuries of the Christian era *Arius*, a presbyter of Alexandria, in Egypt, *denied that Jesus of Nazareth had a divine nature*. Arianism held that God cannot impart His essence to any creature. About a hundred years later *Nestorius*, patriarch of Constantinople, *denied the union of the divine and human natures in the person of*

Jesus Christ. According to Nestorius, the Son of God is one, and the Son of Man is another. He called it heresy to teach that the Son of God was born, suffered, and died. He refused to grant Mary the title “*theotokos*” (“God-bearer”), although he allowed as how she could be called *Christotokos* (“Christbearer”). A century later *Eutyches* (like Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria) taught a new heresy, that *at Bethlehem the two natures with their properties were mingled into one essence*, that in effect there no longer is a human and a divine nature.

It was to counteract heresies such as Arianism and Nestorianism and Eutychianism that our Lutheran fathers wrote in Article VIII of the Formula of Concord regarding the personal union: “We believe, teach, and confess that God is man and man is God, which could not be if the divine and human natures had no communion with each other (FC YIII,6). “Christ is and remains to all eternity God and man in one undivided person, which next to the Holy Trinity is the highest mystery, upon which our life and consolation depends” (FC YIII,18).

II.

Actually to speak of the communication of attributes is just a different way of speaking about the personal union of Christ’s two natures. Then why do we treat it separately? Actually we’ve been forced to by the strange occurrences within Christendom. And since errors in Christology are usually of three kinds, the Lutheran Church’s response has been a threefold one. Passages of the Scripture that speak of the personal union have been arranged under three heads or genera. In our theological literature, the doctrine of the communication of attributes is usually described according to these three genera, each of which is aimed at combating a particular Christological error.

The first genus is the *idiomatic genus*, or the communication of idioms. This states simply that since both natures belong to the same Person, *attributes belonging essentially only to one nature* (omnipotence, omniscience/being born, dying) *are always ascribed to the whole person of the God-Man*. The Bible will often name the Savior according to one nature (either divine or human) and predicate of Him attributes of the other nature. In 1 Corinthians 2:8, e.g., Paul makes the striking statement that the Lord of glory was crucified. Now it surely cannot be said that one of the characteristics of the divine nature *per se* is mortality. God is the same; He cannot change. And yet Paul tells us that the Lord of glory was crucified. In the Second Article of the Creed we confess that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was conceived, born, crucified, dead, and buried. Here our Creed designates Christ according to His divine nature and then predicates things of Him which properly apply to His human nature.

The idiomatic genus works the other way around, too. The Scripture often designates Christ according to His human nature and says things about Him which actually and essentially apply only to His divine nature. Jesus once asked His opponents: “What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where He was before?” (Jn 6:62). Here Jesus is named according to His human nature, but something is said about Him which properly is not true of the human nature — His existence as a person of the Holy Trinity prior to His becoming a human being. Here is the idiomatic genus: an attribute which belongs essentially only to one nature is always ascribed to the whole person of the God-Man.

The moment we say that we have opened the door to all kinds of questions and to apparent conflicts and contradictions. According to the Scripture, Christ proceeded from the Father in eternity, He was in the beginning with God; and yet He was born of the Virgin Mary in time. He is both eternal and eight days old. He is omniscient, and He grew in wisdom. He is God’s dearly loved Son, yet St. Luke tells us that “He grew in favor with God and man.” In front of a coal fire on the shore of Galilee one morning after breakfast Peter told Jesus: “Lord, Thou knowest all things,” and yet the Son of Man confessed He didn’t know the exact day or hour of God’s return to judgment.

The idiomatic genus simply states the truth God has revealed to us about the God-Man without explaining that truth so that it makes sense to our logical minds. It’s enough for us to know that it makes sense to God. In the communication of attributes we will be reminded repeatedly that God is a hidden God, who has told us no more about Himself than He feels we ought to know, and who is under no obligation to us to provide rational explanations for everything He has told us.

The second genus is called the *majestic genus*, because it describes the communication of majesty from the divine nature to the human. Unlike the idiomatic genus, the majestic genus is not reciprocal. The human nature does not communicate anything to the divine nature; the divine nature is already perfect, and nothing can be added to it. But we do teach and believe that the *human nature shares in the divine power, knowledge, and glory of the Son of God*. When the Son of God assumed human nature, He communicated divine majesty to it. In speaking about the Word who had become flesh, St. John tells us that the disciples “beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father.” When they looked at the lowly Son of Man they saw all the excellence and majesty which His divine nature had communicated. St. Paul assured the Colossians (2:9) that in Christ all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily.

Because of this communication of majesty, the God-Man performed miracles by virtue of His own *omnipotence*. Moses opened up the Red Sea, Elisha made the axehead float, Peter raised the lame beggar, and Paul restored dead Eutychus to life only through a power not their own. Jesus, however, spoke of His divine power as His very own. You remember His statement: “I lay down my life. . .I have power to lay it down, and power to take it again” (Jn 10:17f). He could say this because almighty power was communicated to His human nature.

Another element of the divine nature’s majesty which is shared with the human nature is *omniscience*. When performing His prophetic ministry, Jesus proclaimed the Word in an altogether different manner than did prophets and apostles. They spoke and wrote by divine revelation or by divine inspiration. Christ declared what He had seen and heard in the councils of the Trinity; He taught not from human, but from divine knowledge, the source of which was His uninterrupted oneness with the Father and the Holy Ghost.

In Ephesians 1 and again in Ephesians 4 St. Paul illustrates the majestic genus by pointing to another one of Christ’s attributes, His *omnipresence*. Paul tells us: “God raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His own right hand. . .and God placed all things under His feet. . .Christ ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the universe” (1:20-22; 4:10). Jesus Himself taught the majestic genus when in His last conversation with His disciples He told them: “All power is given unto Me” (namely, according to His human nature) “in heaven and in earth. . . And lo, I am with you always.” Who is it, then, who promised and promises to be with His disciples always? It’s our Brother, the One who came to take on our flesh and blood, to live our life, to die our death, to take our place, whose human nature shares in all the majesty and perfection of God.

We can see this also when we look at the *honor* which the Scripture assigned to Mary’s Son. The Scripture is unanimous in presenting to us Christ Jesus, the Seed of the woman, the Seed of Abraham, as the Savior in whom all should believe and whom all should worship as Savior, before whom every knee is to bow. Even in heaven the object of adoration is the Lamb that was slain.

Christ’s human nature shares in all the majesty of God when it comes to doing *God’s work*, too. John tells us: “As the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself. And He has given Him authority to judge because He is the Son of Man” (5:26f). Now the power to give life, to raise the dead (the physically dead and the spiritually dead) was not innate in Christ’s human nature; that was an essential property of the divine nature which Christ’s human nature shared because of the personal union of the two natures. All of the perfections of the divine nature, all that makes God was communicated with the human nature. This is the majestic genus. The Formula of Concord puts it this way: “The entire fullness of deity dwelt in Christ bodily, as in its own body, so that it shines forth with all its majesty, power, and glory and efficacy in the assumed human nature. . .as the soul does in the body, and as fire does in glowing iron (FC, SD VI I I ,64) .

Because of this communion of the two natures, Christ had this divine majesty at His birth. St. Paul explains, however, that for the most part of His life He laid it aside. He kept it concealed, so that if you and I had walked the streets of Nazareth and Capernaum 2000 years ago it’s very possible we could have seen but never recognized God Himself walking on our planet.

Reformed theology has consistently found it difficult to accept the teaching that Jesus of Nazareth possessed divine power. Reformed theology is willing to admit that Jesus had great power and wisdom, but insists that human nature is not capable of divine power and wisdom without being destroyed. The motives of

Reformed theologians may be noble, for all of that, they may want to safeguard Christ's deity, but in effect they deny that in Jesus of Nazareth dwelt all the fullness of the God-head bodily.

Their denial goes even one step further. They also deny that Jesus' redemptive acts were shared by the two natures. This is the so-called *apotelesmatic genus*. Derived from a Greek word which means "the final result to be accomplished," the apotelesmatic genus is the communication of the official acts of Christ. It emphasizes the truth 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*. Whatever the Savior accomplished as our Priest, Prophet, and King may not be ascribed to either nature exclusively, but must be ascribed to both natures conjointly.

Who was made under the Law so that He could obey the Commandments and thus provide the perfect obedience God has demanded of us but never got from us? Was it the Man Jesus, Son of the Virgin Mary? St. Paul says no. "When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth *His Son*, made of a woman, made under the Law, to redeem them that were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption of sons." (Ga 4:4f). Who is it who was conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried? Again, was it the God-Man Jesus Christ? For centuries Christian congregations have been confessing: "I believe in Jesus Christ, *God's only Son, our Lord*, who was conceived, born, crucified, and buried." Luther summarized this genus well in his Explanation to the 2nd Article: "I believe that Jesus, true God. . .and also true Man. . .is my Lord, who has redeemed me." Maybe we're not going to use the term "apotelesmatic genus" from the pulpit, but we're certainly going to present the truth that Christ performed all His official acts according to both natures. Destroying Satan and his devilish plan was not performed by Christ's divine nature independently of His human nature; it was performed through the human nature. The writer to the Hebrews made this crystal clear when he said (2:14): "Since the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same, that through death" (there's the human nature) "He" (= the Son of God) "might destroy him who had power of death, that is the devil." In our redemption the natures of Christ did not act independently of each other; again, there was a communication, a communication of Christ's official acts.

This is a teaching which is again unacceptable to Reformed theology. As the Reformed see it, to say that the Son of God could suffer and die changes God into a man. Calvin and Zwingli consistently denied that the Son of God suffered and died. They also taught that Christ's human nature must be excluded from all cooperation in works of divine omnipotence because that exceeds its capacity.

One asks: "What did Zwingli do with those clear passages which ascribe Christ's redemption to both natures? "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin." "We were reconciled to God by the death of His Son." Zwingli admitted that many Scripture passages speak of the sacrifice of God's Son, but he insisted these must be understood as referring exclusively to His human nature. He called this an "alloeosis," a figure of speech by which *one* nature is named, but *the other* one is meant. You can probably guess that Luther had no kind words for the alloeosis. He labeled it a device of Dame Reason which doesn't give much credit at all to the Saviorhood of Christ or to the clarity of Scripture. Luther added: "If your reason objects 'God cannot suffer or die,' then you answer: 'That's true; yet because in Christ deity and humanity are one person, the Scripture ascribes also to deity everything that happens to humanity, and vice versa. Although deity does not suffer, yet the person who is God suffers in His humanity. In truth God's Son has been crucified for us, i.e., the person who is God.'"

III.

This is, in summary, what the Scripture has to say about the communication of attributes of the God-Man and how the Lutheran Church has sought to clarify and define the teaching in response to attacks on it. How important is this doctrine to us? Is it really one of the peripheral doctrines of Christianity, one which need not concern us as much as certain others? Have the lengthy explanations and careful definitions and the complicated terminology been mere strivings about words? As this essay comes to a close, let us concentrate on

the great practical value the doctrine of the communication of attributes has for us—for us as Christians, and for us as pastors.

As Christians we have been called basically to hear our Lord's voice. In an ecclesiastical climate where many church leaders are saying in effect: "Listen, God, I'm talking," we want to say: "Speak, Lord, I'm listening." But to whom are we listening when we hear Jesus Christ speak to us from the pages of His Word? Consider what the Reformed view of the communication of attributes does to Christ's work as our Prophet. The majestic genus reminded us that Christ's human nature shared in all the majesty and divine power of God. But the eminent Reformed scholar Charles Hodge writes: "Omniscience is not an attribute of which a creature can be made the organ." Do you see how that view debases all of Christ's teaching? When He was on earth, He carried out His teaching ministry in and through His human nature. If what Hodge says is correct, if our great Prophet is not omniscient, then Christ's ministry is reduced to the level of the prophets and apostles.

It's the doctrine of the communicated omnipresence of Christ which is important for a correct understanding of what the Scripture teaches about the Lord's Supper. We were cheered this morning when those wondrous words resounded in this house of God: "This is My body! This is My blood!" You know that Luther's opponents argued against the Real Presence by saying: "How can the body of Christ, which is in heaven, be in many different places at one time?" Luther answered: "Because of the communication of attributes, the body of Christ is everywhere. He fills all things in heaven and earth."

It's important to maintain the joint action of the two natures in all of Christ's work. But it's absolutely critical to see clearly on this doctrine when we study and proclaim Christ's redemptive work. You will remember that when God gave His Law to the human race, He said basically two things. He said something about obedience and something about disobedience. He said, "I want obedience, and I insist on it. But I don't want disobedience, and I forbid it." Our Savior therefore had a double job to do in order to ransom and rescue us for a place in God's family. During His life He had to provide that perfect obedience to the word and will of God which God had demanded but never received from us. We call this Christ's *active* obedience — *doing what we had not done*. And then He had to *undo what we had done*. He had to suffer God's announced penalty for disobedience. This work we call Christ's *passive* obedience. He provided this by suffering a substitutionary death, letting God's anger crush the very life out of Him, suffering that separation from God which is the ultimate torment of the damned in hell.

Now what has the communication of attributes got to do with this cardinal doctrine of Christianity? Everything, that's what. Imagine for a moment that you were perfect, without stain of sin. What could God say to you when you stood before His judgment throne? What else than "Come, my child, be with Me forever." But what if at that moment you were to say to God: "May I take my family along with me?" God would have to say: "Your holiness is enough for you, but not enough for you and them. They'll have to stand before Me on their own."

Do you sense the frightful implications of the Reformed position that God cannot die, that death is incompatible with deity, that Jesus Christ died only according to His human nature? If Christ obeyed God's Law only according to His human nature, and if He died only as a Man, you and I don't have a Savior. It's the divine nature personally united with the human nature which gives Christ's work its infinite value. The psalmist said it well: "None of them can by any means redeem his brother, or give to God a ransom for him, for the redemption of their soul is precious." (49:7f). Because of the communication of attributes in the God-Man, that death on Calvary was actually not a single death, but one death for every sinner who ever lived. And the result of the active and passive obedience of the God-Man is that a whole world of sinners is reconciled to God. Luther once made the perceptive comment: "If it's only the human nature of Christ that died for me, then Christ is a mighty poor Savior. We Christians must know that if *God* is not also in the balance and gives the weight, we sink to the bottom with our scale. But if 'God's death' and 'God died' lie in the scale of the balance, then He sinks down and we rise up." If Christ died only as a human being, then He's no more than one of the many great human benefactors who have died in a noble cause. But if it's the God-Man who lived a perfect life and who died an innocent death, a world of sinners is saved. Then life is worth living, and death is worth dying.

The doctrine of the communication of attributes has special significance for us as pastors. The Scripture has told us that Christ has ascended to heaven not merely as any saint, but as the omnipotent, and omnipresent God-Man. When He was on earth in His state of humiliation, He chose to be in only one place at a time. If He was in Perea, east of Jordan, then He wasn't in Bethany, where Martha complained: "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." But now, because the lowly Son of Man is forever united with a divine nature, He possesses such majesty and power that He can say: "I am with you alway." Reformed theology, which insists that Christ's human nature is incapable of omnipresence amounts to saying that Christ rules the world in absentia. But we know this is not so. As we conduct our ministry we have the constant confidence that the God-Man is not far from every one of us.

Additional assurance for our ministry can be found by reminding ourselves exactly who this omnipresent Lord of the Church is. The Lord of the candlesticks, the One who guides and oversees the work of His Church, who is He? Is it enough to answer: "The Lord of the Church is God?" I confess I find that a disturbing thought. If the one who observes and evaluates my ministry is only God, the majestic and perfect God, then I must know that His white-hot holiness is to my ministry as fire is to stubble. And then what man is there among us who will dare to say with Isaiah: "Lord, send me"? Then we will rather want to say with Moses: "Lord, please send someone else"

But now look at the comfort which the doctrine of the communication of attributes holds for the pastor. Christ is present with His Church not only according to His divine nature, but according to His human nature as well. The One who walks among the candlesticks is He who was in all points tempted as we are, who knows human frailty, who can sympathize with His blood-brothers. As we conduct our day-to-day ministry, we can rejoice that, as the Formula of Concord puts it, "our flesh and blood is placed so high at the right hand of God" (VIII 96).

By accepting in simple faith what the Scripture teaches about the union of the human and the divine natures in Christ we will have something solid to live for, to work for, to die for. And having that, we have all we need.