

# The Nature of the Person of Christ, and the Hypostatical Union of His Natures Declared

by John Owen

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*The sermon explores the nature of the person of Christ and the hypostatical union, emphasizing the importance of understanding this mystery for our faith and salvation.*

**Scripture:** John 1:14, Philippians 2:6

**Topics:** "The Person of Christ", "Hypostatical Union"

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## Description

John Owen addresses the profound mystery of the person of Christ and the hypostatical union of His divine and human natures. He emphasizes the necessity of understanding Christ's nature for a proper faith, warning against heresies that distort His identity. Owen outlines the significance of Christ's assumption of human nature, the union of His two natures, and the implications of this union for believers. He asserts that this union is unique and distinct from any other relationship between God and creation, underscoring the importance of adhering to scriptural truths. Ultimately, Owen calls for a reverent acknowledgment of the mystery of Christ's person as foundational to Christian faith.

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## Transcript

The nature or constitution of the person of Christ hath been commonly spoken unto and treated of in the writings both of the ancient and modern divines. It is not my purpose, in this discourse, to handle anything that hath been so fully already declared by others. Howbeit, to speak something of it in this place is necessary unto the present work; and I shall do it in answer unto a double end or design:

First, To help those that believe, in the regulation of their thoughts about this divine person, so far as the Scripture goeth before us. It is of great importance unto our souls that we have right conceptions concerning him; not only in general, and in opposition unto the pernicious heresies of them by whom his divine person or either of his natures is denied, but also in those especial instances wherein it is the most ineffable effect of divine wisdom and grace. For although the knowledge of him mentioned in the Gospel be not confined merely unto his person in the constitution thereof, but extends itself unto the whole work of his mediation, with the design of Gods love and grace therein, with our own duty thereon; yet is this knowledge of his person the foundation of all the rest, wherein if we mistake or fail, our whole building in the other parts of the knowledge of him will fall unto the ground. And although the saving knowledge of him is not to be obtained without especial divine revelation, Matt. xvi. 17 or saving illumination, 1 John v.

20 nor can we know him perfectly until we come where he is to behold his glory, John xvii. 24; yet are instructions from the Scripture of use to lead us into those farther degrees of the knowledge of him which are attainable in this life.

Secondly, To manifest in particular how ineffably distinct the relation <sup>224</sup>between the Son of God and the man Christ Jesus is, from all that relation and union which may be between God and believers, or between God and any other creature. The want of a true understanding hereof is the fundamental error of many in our days. We shall manifest thereupon how it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell, so that in all things he might have the pre-eminence, Col. i. 18, 19. And I shall herein wholly avoid the curious inquiries, bold conjectures, and unwarrantable determinations of the schoolmen and some others. For many of them, designing to explicate this mystery, by exceeding the bounds of Scripture light and sacred sobriety, have obscured it. Endeavouring to render all things plain unto reason, they have expressed many things unsound as unto faith, and fallen into manifold contradictions among themselves. Hence Aquinas affirms, that three of the ways of declaring the hypostatical union which are proposed by the Master of the Sentences,<sup>3</sup> are so far from probable opinions, as that they are downright heresies. I shall therefore confine myself, in the explication of this mystery, unto the propositions of divine revelation, with the just and necessary expositions of them.

What the Scripture represents of the wisdom of God in this great work may be reduced unto these four heads: I. The assumption of our nature into personal subsistence with the Son of God. II. The union of the two natures in that single person which is consequential thereon. III. The mutual communication of those distinct natures, the divine and human, by virtue of that union. IV. The enunciations or predications concerning the person of Christ, which follow on that union and communion.

I. The first thing in the divine constitution of the person of Christ as God and man, is assumption. That ineffable divine act I intend whereby the person of the Son of God assumed our nature, or took it into a personal subsistence with himself. This the Scripture expresseth sometimes actively, with respect unto the divine nature acting in the person of the Son, the nature assuming; sometimes passively, with respect unto the human nature, the nature assumed. The first it doth, Heb. ii. 14, 16, Forasmuch as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same. For verily he took not on him the nature of angels, but he took on him the seed of Abraham; Phil. ii. 6, 7, Being in the form of God, he took upon him the form of a servant; and in sundry other places. The assumption, the taking of our human nature to be his <sup>225</sup>own, by an ineffable act of his power and grace, is clearly expressed. And to take it to be his own, his own nature, can be no otherwise but by giving it a subsistence in his own person; otherwise his own nature it is not, nor can be. Hence God is said to purchase his church with his own blood, Acts xx. 28. That relation and denomination of his own, is from the single person of him whose it is. The latter is declared, John i. 14, The Word was made flesh; Rom. viii. 3, God sent his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh; Gal. iv. 4, Made of a woman, made under the law; Rom. i. 3, Made of the seed of David according to the flesh. The eternal Word, the Son of God, was not made flesh, not made of a woman, nor of the seed of David, by the conversion of his substance or nature into flesh; which implies a contradiction, and, besides, is absolutely destructive of the divine nature. He could no otherwise, therefore, be made flesh, or made of a woman, but in that our nature was made his, by his assuming of it to be his own. The same person who before was not flesh, was not man was made flesh as man, in that he took our human nature to be his own.

This ineffable act is the foundation of the divine relation between the Son of God and the man Christ Jesus. We can only adore the mysterious nature of it, great is this mystery of godliness. Yet may we

observe sundry things to direct us in that duty.

1. As unto original efficiency, it was the act of the divine nature, and so, consequently, of the Father, Son, and Spirit. For so are all outward acts of God the divine nature being the immediate principle of all such operations. The wisdom, power, grace, and goodness exerted therein, are essential properties of the divine nature. Wherefore the acting of them originally belongs equally unto each person, equally participant of that nature. (1.) As unto authoritative designation, it was the act of the Father. Hence is he said to send his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, Rom. viii. 3; Gal. iv. 4. (2.) As unto the formation of the human nature, it was the peculiar act of the Spirit, Luke i. 35. (3.) As unto the term of the assumption, or the taking of our nature unto himself, it was the peculiar act of the person of the Son. Herein, as Damascen observes, the other persons had no concurrence, but only [954;#945;#964;#8048;#946;#959;#8059;#955;#951;#963;#953;#957;](#) [954;#945;#8054;#7952;#965;#948;#959;#954;#8055;#945;#957;](#) by counsel and approbation.

2. This assumption was the only immediate act of the divine nature on the human in the person of the Son. All those that follow, in subsistence, sustentation, with all others that are communicative, do ensue thereon.

3. This assumption and the hypostatical union are distinct and different in the formal reason of them. (1.) Assumption is the immediate act of the divine nature in the person of the Son on the human; union is mediate, by virtue of that assumption. (2.) Assumption is unto personality; it is that act whereby the Son of God and our nature became one person. Union is an act or relation of the natures subsisting in that one person. (3.) Assumption respects the acting of the divine and the passion of the human nature; the one assumeth, the other is assumed. Union respects the mutual relation of the natures unto each other. Hence the divine nature may be said to be united unto the human, as well as the human unto the divine; but the divine nature cannot be said to be assumed as the human is. Wherefore assumption denotes the acting of the one nature and the passion of the other; union, the mutual relation that is between them both.

These things may be safely affirmed, and ought to be firmly believed, as the sense of the Holy Ghost in those expressions: He took on him the seed of Abraham He took on him the form of a servant; and the like. And who can conceive the condescension of divine goodness, or the acting of divine wisdom and power therein?

II. That which followeth hereon, is the union of the two natures in the same person, or the hypostatical union. This is included and asserted in a multitude of divine testimonies. Isa. vii. 14, Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel, as Matt. i. 23. He who was conceived and born of the virgin was Emmanuel, or God with us; that is, God manifest in the flesh, by the union of his two natures in the same person. Isa. ix. 6, Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. That the same person should be the mighty God and a child born, is neither conceivable nor possible, nor can be true, but by the union of the divine and human natures in the same person. So he said of himself, Before Abraham was, I am, John viii. 58. That he, the same person who then spake unto the Jews, and as a man was little more than thirty years of age, should also be before Abraham, undeniably confirms the union of another nature, in the same person with that wherein he spoke those words, and without which they could not be true. He had not only another nature which did exist before Abraham, but the same individual person who then spoke in the human nature did then exist. See to the same purpose, John i. 14; Acts xx. 28; Rom. ix. 5; Col. ii. 9; 1 John iii. 16.



1. The cause of this union is expressed in it. This is the free grace and favour of God towards the man Christ Jesus predestinating, designing, and taking him into actual union with the person of the Son, without respect unto, or foresight of, any precedent dignity or merit in him, 1 Pet. i. 20.

Hence is that of Austin, *Eâ gratiâ fit ab initio fidei suæ homo quicumque Christianus, quâ gratiâ homo ille ab initio factus est Christus, De Prædest. Sanct., cap. xv.* For whereas all the inherent grace of the human nature of Christ, and all the holy obedience which proceeded from it, was consequent in order of nature unto this union, and an effect of it, they could in no sense be the meritorious or procuring causes of it; it was of grace.

2282. It is used also by many and designed to express the peculiar dignity of the human nature of Christ. This is that wherein no creature is participant, nor ever shall be unto eternity. This is the fundamental privilege of the human nature of Christ, which all others, even unto his eternal glory, proceed from, and are resolved into.

3. The glorious meetness and ability of the person of Christ, for and unto all the acts and duties of his mediatory office. For they are all resolved into the union of his natures in the same person, without which not one of them could be performed unto the benefit of the church. And this is that grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, which renders him so glorious and amiable unto believers. Unto them that believe he is precious.

The common prevalent expression of it at present in the church is the hypostatical union; that is, the union of the divine and human nature in the person of the Son of God, the human nature having no personality nor subsistence of its own.

With respect unto this union the name of Christ is called Wonderful, as that which hath the pre-eminence in all the effects of divine wisdom. And it is a singular effect thereof. There is no other union in things divine or human, in things spiritual or natural, whether substantial or accidental, that is of the same kind with it; it differs specifically from them all.

(1.) The most glorious union is that of the Divine Persons in the same being or nature; the Father in the Son, the Son in the Father, the Holy Spirit in them both, and both in him. But this is a union of distinct persons in the unity of the same single nature. And this, I confess, is more glorious than that whereof we treat; for it is in God absolutely, it is eternal, of his nature and being. But this union we speak of is not God; it is a creature, an effect of divine wisdom and power. And it is different from it herein, inasmuch as that is of many distinct persons in the same nature; this is of distinct natures in the same person. That union is natural, substantial, essential, in the same nature; this, as it is not accidental, as we shall show, so it is not properly substantial, because it is not of the same nature, but of diverse in the same person, remaining distinct in their essence and substance, and is therefore peculiarly hypostatical or personal. Hence Austin feared not to say, that *Homo potius est in filio Dei, quam filius in Patre; De Trin., lib. i. cap 10.* But that is true only in this one respect, that the Son is not so in the Father as to become one person with him. In all other respects it must be granted that the in-being of the Son in the Father the union between them, which is natural, essential, and eternal doth exceed this in glory, which was a temporary, external act of divine wisdom and grace.

(2.) The most eminent substantial union in things natural, is that 229of the soul and body constituting an individual person. There is, I confess, some kind of similitude between this union and that of the different natures in the person of Christ; but it is not of the same kind or nature. And the dissimilarities that are between them are more, and of greater importance, than those things are wherein there seems to be an

agreement between them. For, 1st, The soul and body are so united as to constitute one entire nature. The soul is not human nature, nor is the body, but it is the consequent of their union. Soul and body are essential parts of human nature; but complete human nature they are not but by virtue of their union. But the union of the natures in the person of Christ doth not constitute a new nature, that either was not or was not complete before. Each nature remains the same perfect, complete nature after this union. 2dly, The union of the soul and body doth constitute that nature which is made essentially complete thereby, a new individual person, with a subsistence of its own, which neither of them was nor had before that union. But although the person of Christ, as God and man, be constituted by this union, yet his person absolutely, and his individual subsistence, was perfect absolutely antecedent unto that union. He did not become a new person, another person than he was before, by virtue of that union; only that person assumed human nature to itself to be its own, into personal subsistence. 3dly, Soul and body are united by an external efficient cause, or the power of God, and not by the act of one of them upon another. But this union is effected by that act of the divine nature towards the human which we have before described. 4thly, Neither soul nor body have any personal subsistence before their union; but the sole foundation of this union was in this, that the Son of God was a self-subsisting person from eternity.

(3.) There are other unions in things natural, which are by mixture of composition. Hereon something is produced composed of various parts, which is not what any of them are. And there is a conversion of things, when one thing is substantially changed into another, as the water in the miracle that Christ wrought was turned into wine; but this union hath no resemblance unto any of them. There is not a mixture, a contemperation of the divine and human natures into one third nature, or the conversion of one into another. Such notions of these things some fancied of old. Eutyches<sup>5</sup> supposed such a composition and mixture of the two natures<sup>230</sup> in the person of Christ, as that the human nature at least should lose all its essential properties, and have neither understanding nor will of its own. And some of the Arians fancied a substantial change of that created divine nature which they acknowledged, into the human. But these imaginations, instead of professing Christ to be God and man, would leave him indeed neither God nor man; and have been sufficiently confuted. Wherefore the union we treat of hath no similitude unto any such natural union as is the effect of composition or mutation.

(4.) There is an artificial union wherewith some have illustrated this mystery; as that of fire and iron in the same sword. The sword is one; the nature of fire and that of iron different; and the acts of them distinct; the iron cuts, the fire burns; and the effects distinct; cutting and burning; yet is the agent or instrument but one sword. Something of this nature may be allowed to be spoken in way of allusion; but it is a weak and imperfect representation of this mystery, on many accounts. For the heat in iron is rather an accident than a substance, is separable from it, and in sundry other things diverts the mind from due apprehensions of this mystery.

(5.) There is a spiritual union, namely, of Christ and believers; or of God in Christ and believers, which is excellent and mysterious, such as all other unions in nature are made use of in the Scripture to illustrate and represent. This some among us do judge to be of the same kind with that of the Son of God and the man Christ Jesus. Only they say they differ in degrees. The eternal Word was so united unto the man Christ Jesus, as that thereby he was exalted inconceivably above all other men, though ever so holy, and had greater communications from God than any of them. Wherefore he was on many accounts the Son of God in a peculiar manner; and, by a communication of names, is called God also. This being the opinion of Nestorius,<sup>6</sup> revived again in the days wherein we live, I shall declare wherein he placed the conjunction

or union of the two natures of Christ, whereby he constituted two distinct persons of the Son of God and the Son of man, as these now do, and briefly detect the vanity of it. For the whole of it consisted in the concession of sundry things that were true in particular, making use of the pretence of them unto the denial of that wherein alone the true union of the person of Christ did consist.

231Nestorius allowed the presence of the Son of God with the man Christ Jesus to consist in five things.

[1.] He said he was so present with him ¶¶¶; or by inhabitation, as a man dwells in a house or a ship to rule it. He dwelt in him as his temple. So he dwells in all that believe, but in him in a more especial manner. And this is true with respect unto that fulness of the Spirit whereby God was with him and in him; as he is with and in all believers, according unto the measures wherein they are made partakers of him. But this answers not that divine testimony, that in him dwelt all the fulness of the Godhead bodily, Col. ii. 9. The fulness of the Godhead is the entire divine nature. This nature is considered in the person of the Son, or eternal Word; for it was the Word that was made flesh. And this could no otherwise dwell in him bodily, really, substantially, but in the assumption of that nature to be his own. And no sense can be given unto this assertion to preserve it from blasphemy, that the fulness of the Godhead dwelleth in any of the saints bodily.

[2.] He allowed an especial presence, ¶¶; as some call it; that is, by such a union of affections as is between intimate friends. The soul of God rested always in that man [Christ]; in him was he well pleased: and he was wholly given up in his affections unto God. This also is true; but there is that which is no less true, that renders it useless unto the pretensions of Nestorius. For he allowed the divine person of the Son of God. But whatever is spoken of this nature concerning the love of God unto the man Christ Jesus, and of his love to God, it is the person of the Father that is intended therein; nor can any one instance be given where it is capable of another interpretation. For it is still spoken of with reference unto the work that he was sent of the Father to accomplish, and his own delight therein.

[3.] He allowed it to be ¶¶; by way of dignity and honour. For this conjunction is such, as that whatever honour is given unto the Son of God is also to be given unto that Son of man. But herein, to recompense his sacrilege in taking away the hypostatical union from the church, he would introduce idolatry into it. For the honour that is due unto the Son of God is divine, religious, or the owning of all essential divine properties in him, with a due subjection of soul unto him thereon. But to give this honour unto the man Christ Jesus, without a supposition of the subsistence of his human nature in the person of the Son of God, and solely on that account, is highly idolatrous.

[4.] He asserted it to be ¶¶; or on the account of the consent and agreement that was between the will of God and the will of the man Christ Jesus. But no other union will thence ensue, 232but what is between God and the angels in heaven; in whom there is a perfect compliance with the will of God in all things. Wherefore, if this be the foundation of this union, he might be said to take on him the nature of angels as well as the seed of Abraham; which is expressly denied by the apostle, Heb. ii. 16, 17.

[5.] by an equivocal denomination, the name of the one person, namely, of the Son of God, being accommodated unto the other, namely, the Son of man. So they were called gods unto whom the word of God came. But this no way answers any one divine testimony wherein the name of God is assigned unto the Lord Christ, as those wherein God is said to lay down his life for us, and to purchase his church with his own blood, to come and be manifest in the flesh, wherein no homonymy or equivocation can take place. By all these ways he constituted a separable accidental union, wherein nothing in kind, but in degree only, was peculiar unto the man Christ Jesus.

But all these things, so far as they are true, belong unto the third thing to be considered in his person, namely, the communion or mutual communication of the distinct natures therein. But his personal union consists not in any of them, nor in all of them together; nor do they answer any of the multiplied testimonies given by the Holy Ghost unto this glorious mystery. Some few of them may be mentioned.

The Word was made flesh, John i. 14. There can be but two senses of these words (1st,) That the Word ceased to be what it was, and was substantially turned into flesh (2dly,) That continuing to be what it was, it was made to be also what before it was not. The first sense is destructive of the Divine Being and all its essential properties. The other can be verified only herein, that the Word took that flesh that is, our human nature to be his own, his own nature wherein he was made flesh; which is that we plead for. For this assertion, that the person of the Son took our nature to be his own, is the same with that of the assumption of the human nature into personal subsistence with himself. And the ways of the presence of the Son of God with the man Christ Jesus, before mentioned, do express nothing in answer unto this divine testimony, that The Word was made flesh.

Being in the form of God, he took upon him the form of a servant, and became obedient, Phil. ii. 68. That by his being in the form of God, his participation in and of the same divine nature with the Father is intended, these men grant; and that herein he was a person distinct from him Nestorius of old acknowledged, though it be by ours denied. But they can fancy no distinction that shall bear the denomination and relation of Father and Son; but all is inevitably included in it which we plead for under that name. This person took on him the form of a servant, that is, the nature of man in the condition of a servant. For it is the same with his being made of a woman, made under the law; or taking on him the seed of Abraham. And this person became obedient. It was in the human nature, in the form of a servant, wherein he was obedient. Wherefore that human nature was the nature of that person, a nature which he took on him and made his own, wherein he would be obedient. And that the human nature is the nature of the person of him who was in the form of God, is that hypostatical union which we believe and plead for.

Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and his name shall be called The mighty God, Isa. ix. 6. The child and the mighty God are the same person, or he that is born a child cannot be rightly called The mighty God. And the truth of many other expressions in the Scripture hath its sole foundation in this hypostatical union. So the Son of God took on him the seed of Abraham, was made of a woman, did partake of flesh and blood, was manifest in the flesh. That he who was born of the blessed Virgin was before Abraham, that he was made of the seed of David according to the flesh, whereby God purchased the church with his own blood, are all spoken of one and the same person, and are not true but on the account of the union of the two natures therein. And all those who plead for the accidental metaphorical union, consisting in the instances before mentioned, do know well enough that the true Deity of our Lord Jesus Christ is opposed by them.

III. Concurrent with, and in part consequent unto, this union, is the communion of the distinct natures of Christ hypostatically united. And herein we may consider, 1. What is peculiar unto the Divine nature; 2. What is common unto both.

1. There is a threefold communication of the divine nature unto the human in this hypostatical union. (1.) Immediate in the person of the Son. This is subsistence. In itself it is [that which hath not a subsistence of its own, which should give it individuation and distinction from the same nature in any other person. But it hath its subsistence in the person of the Son, which thereby is its own. The divine nature, as in that person, is its suppositum.](#) (2.) By the Holy Spirit he filled that nature with an all-fulness of habitual grace; which I have at large explained elsewhere. (3.) In all the acts of his office, by the divine nature, he communicated worth and dignity unto what was acted in and by the human nature.

For that which some have for a long season troubled the church withal, about such a real communication of the properties of the divine nature unto the human, which should neither be a transfusion of them into it, so as to render it the subject of them, nor yet consist in a reciprocal denomination from their mutual in-being in the same subject, it is that which neither themselves do, nor can any other well understand.

2. Wherefore, concerning the communion of the natures in this personal union, three things are to be observed, which the Scripture, reason, and the ancient church, do all concur in.

(1.) Each nature doth preserve its own natural, essential properties, entirely unto and in itself; without mixture, without composition or confusion, without such a real communication of the one unto the other, as that the one should become the subject of the properties of the other. The Deity, in the abstract, is not made the humanity, nor on the contrary. The divine nature is not made temporary, finite, united, subject to passion or alteration by this union; nor is the human nature rendered immense, infinite, omnipotent. Unless this be granted, there will not be two natures in Christ, a divine and a human; nor indeed either of them, but somewhat else, composed of both.

(2.) Each nature operates in him according unto its essential properties. The divine nature knows all things, upholds all things, rules all things, acts by its presence everywhere; the human nature was born, yielded obedience, died, and rose again. But it is the same person, the same Christ, that acts all these things, the one nature being his no less than the other. Wherefore,

(3.) The perfect, complete work of Christ, in every act of his mediatory office, in all that he did as the King, Priest, and Prophet of the church, in all that he did and suffered, in all that he continueth to do for us, in or by virtue of whether nature soever it be done or wrought, is not to be considered as the act of this or that nature in him alone, but it is the act and work of the whole person, of him that is both God and man in one person. And this gives occasion,

IV. Unto that variety of enunciations which is used in the Scripture concerning him; which I shall name only, and conclude.

1. Some things are spoken of the person of Christ, wherein the enunciation is verified with respect unto one nature only; as The Word was with God, and the Word was God, John i. 1; Before Abraham was, I am, John viii. 58, Upholding all things by the word of his power, Heb. i. 3. These things are all spoken of the person of Christ, but belong unto it on account of his divine nature. So is it said of him, Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, Isa. ix. 6; A man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief, Isa. liii. 3. They are

spoken of the person of Christ, but are verified in human nature only, and the person on the account thereof.

2. Sometimes that is spoken of the person which belongs not distinctly and originally unto either nature, but doth belong unto him on the account of their union in him, which are the most direct enunciations concerning the person of Christ. So is he said to be the Head, the King, Priest, and Prophet of the church; all which offices he bears, and performs the acts of them, not on the singular account of this or that nature, but of the hypostatical union of them both.

3. Sometimes his person being denominated from one nature, the properties and acts of the other are assigned unto it. So they crucified the Lord of glory. He is the Lord of glory on the account of his divine nature only; thence is his person denominated when he is said to be crucified, which was in the human nature only. So God purchased his church with his own blood, Acts xx. 28. The denomination of the person is from the divine nature only he is God; but the act ascribed unto it, or what he did by his own blood, was of the human nature only. But the purchase that was made thereby was the work of the person as both God and man. So, on the other side, The Son of man who is in heaven, John iii. 13. The denomination of the person is from the human nature only, The Son of man. That ascribed unto it was with respect unto the divine nature only, who is in heaven.

4. Sometimes the person being denominated from one nature, that is ascribed unto it which is common unto both; or else being denominated from both, that which is proper unto one only is ascribed unto him. See Rom. ix. 5; Matt. xxii. 42.

These kinds of enunciations the ancients expressed by alteration; permutation; communion; the manner of mutual position; the communication of properties, and other the like expressions.

These things I have only mentioned, because they are commonly handled by others in their didactical and polemical discourses concerning the person of Christ, and could not well be here utterly omitted.

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