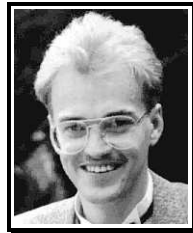


ST502 Systematic Theology II / Van Horsesen

Book - Report

Louis Berkhof : *Systematic Theology*

by



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September 6, 1993

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I. Introduction

The following is a survey of Berkhof's Christology. I have used the categories I have learned in Information-Science to bring the terminology up to date and clarify the issue for me and for my contemporary intellectuals.

II. Concept and Nature of Christ

From early on and certainly since Chalcedon the Church held to the doctrine of the two natures of Christ. The issue was not solved at Chalcedon, the Church just stated what it believed and what was regarded as heresy. The two-nature teaching was regarded as a "mystery of faith" that could not be solved. Berkhof sees it of ultimate importance to stick to this doctrine despite attacks from different sides in recent times.

A. Evidence for two natures

Berkhof presents evidence for the divine nature of Christ from scripture based largely on Paul and John and to a lesser extend also on passages from the Synoptics. Another item he uses to prove the divine nature is Jesus self-consciousness as the Son of God for example when he addresses God as Father. To prove God's divinity is Berkhof's heart's desire against other contemporary ideas of Jesus as purely human.

With the same method he proves the "real humanity" of Christ, although he lays less emphasis on this since this is not much disputed in the current debate. He shows that Jesus was subject to suffering and the ordinary ways of human development, therefore "really" human.

He proves the necessity of the two natures along the same line as Anselm. The necessity for his being human is different in that Berkhof insists that Christ had all infirmities that we have after the fall. In line with Anselm's thought this would mean that Christ is mortal! According to Anselmian theology Christ could not atone for us then since he cannot not give his life of his own free will! Berkhof also incorporates the recapitulation theology. Jesus is our ultimate example.

The necessity for his divinity also runs its usual course. Jesus must be divine in order to apply the accomplished work to his followers, bring a sacrifice of infinite value and obedience and bear the wrath of God. Anselm would argue that to bear the wrath of God Jesus has to be human, since humans offended God.

B. Definition of the Person of Christ

Berkhof's attempt to define the two natures and the one person of God. First he has to define the terms (with my somewhat updated terminology at the side):

A **nature** is the sum of essential qualities of a thing. In modern terms one would say the **type** of something. A **type** are the characteristics of a class of **objects**.

A person is a complete substance (a confusing and often misunderstood term) with reason, a responsible **subject** or a nature with individuality. In other words: A unique independent instantiation of a type or short an **object**. Since this **object** can act on its own it should probably be properly called a **subject**.

The Logos (preexisting Christ) takes on a human nature which is -- important -- at this point not personalized but becomes personalized by the Logos. In other words: The **subject** of the Logos adds another **type**. Since an object/subject can only have one type, this violates the rules for reasoning here. The definition for type or nature is violated! We have a paradox here. The logical scheme that was built is not fitting. This is also acknowledged by Berkhof.

He acknowledges that this doctrine "transcends human reasoning". Since this is paradoxical it is open to a huge number of understandings. Therefore Berkhof has to add conditions of the usage of this formula. But first some additions to the defining of objects on my own: There is a terminology for unchanging objects which are called **constants**. Corresponding the term for changing object is **variables**. Divine subjects are constant according to Berkhof since they are immutable.

C. Conditions of stating this view

1. The unchangeable Logos

Christ contains only one person the Logos, which is the preexisting Christ. In my terms the Logos is the subject with just **one** type. This is the mediator and it is therefore constant since immutable.

Paradox: It is not correct to speak about the mediator as divine only since the incarnation constituted him a complex nature. This is a violation of the definition of nature or type consisting of human and divine, another violation of logic. Constant and Variable types cannot be joined in that way since it is not possible to base deductions on such a concept!

Problem: If the mediator is divine only, then how can he suffer for us? Will God be satisfied with an action that did not involve suffering of the mediator? I thought that was the point here? This smells like Nestorius!

2. Human nature is not a complete person

It is clear that the human type is not a complete person. It becomes a person through the instantiation by the Logos commonly described as the incarnation. I violated logic again since a type of one kind cannot be instantiated by a constant of another but only of the same.

Berkhof describes it as the human having or being the divine person of the Logos. The mediator assumed a human nature.

Problem: This construction violates everything and it will be very difficult to make any conclusions from this construct. Since the humanity was instantiated not in the normal way there is the question if Jesus is still a human.

3. Humanity not impersonal

The humanity of Jesus is in-personal in the Logos rather than impersonal. At the incarnation the human started developing and at that point already the Logos was there. The human nature does not exist apart from the Logos.

In my type language this is self-evident. You cannot talk about an subject before it is there (instantiated from a type). This would be a discussion of the type and not the subject (In this case anthropology, the characteristics of humans).

4. Humanity not incomplete

Berkhof: In a similar fashion one cannot say that Christ's humanity is incomplete. It is complete and has the personality of the Son of God.

This is problematic since the instantiation was done by the Logos and not the regular way. In some ways Christ must be different after all.

5. The Human nature has will and consciousness

Will and consciousness are part of the human nature as stated by the church. These are then characteristics of the human type. Therefore the complex nature (combined subject with type, or instantiated type) has these too.

6. No mixture of natures

Berkhof maintains that the two natures have to be kept distinct. The divine subject added or instantiated in a human type. The integrity of the two types must not be violated lest another combined type results. Basics of typing forbid this.

D. Scriptural survey for this

Berkhof finds both natures represented in scripture in Romans 1:3+4, Galatians 4:4+5 and Phil 2:6-11. None of these passages explicitly refer to two natures. The two natures can be inferred from these passages only if one already has build categories for the two types he wants to handle. The scriptural proof is therefore not conclusive for the existence of two natures. This is only a theorem, the best explanation that we have so far.

Scripture always represents Jesus Christ as a unity, as one person and never as a divine being united with a human.

Berkhof further finds that the attributes of the human and divine nature are consistently mixed in scripture further undermining his finding of the two natures in the New Testament.

E. Lutheran mixing of the Natures

The Lutherans allow a mixing of natures. They spoke of communication in both directions and saw it as a way of insuring a real unity in the person. Lutheran scholars after Luther himself modified the teaching to restrict communication in one direction: From the divine to the human. This communication took place at the incarnation.

Berkhof objects that this has no scriptural basis, but so has the doctrine of the two natures. Furthermore it confuses the divine and human nature which scripture [Berkhof] keeps strictly apart. But he himself earlier concedes that scripture mixes the natures! He is not following his own evidence here.

Further: The Christ in the Gospels is not omnipotent like a divine being (would happen if these attributes would be communicated). But the Lutherans never said that all attributes were communicated.

Furthermore: It mixes the natures and obliterates distinction between exaltation and humiliation. This charge can be brought against Berkhof too, since he insists on the immutability of the Logos. Thus there cannot be a difference for the Logos in exaltation and humiliation.

The doctrine of the two natures is already paradoxical and has severe limitations. I cannot see any problem in adding something from scripture that is necessary for the God to be able to be real and not a static dead God that cannot feel and act.

III. Incarnation

A. Immutability

The teaching of the two natures of Christ guards the immutability of God. The incarnation always constituted a problem for this. Therefore it should be maintained that the divine nature did not "essentially change" in the incarnation. He did not die in his divine nature, nor was he tempted in his divine nature.

These utterances are bothering me. Does Berkhof teach that just one nature suffers within Christ? Again I see a danger to the atonement, we are on our way to Gnosticism.

B. Threefold Communication

1. Communicatio idiomatum

Berkhof maintains that nothing "peculiar" to either nature was communicated to the other otherwise the human would be deified or the divine humanized. Deity cannot share in human weakness neither can man participate in the perfections of the Godhead.

I would say this is destructive to the whole concept of salvation. What was the purpose of the incarnation if the divine part did not change at all? Did God not give up his Son but only the human nature born by Mary? Did the divine part flee before the crucifixion?

These are tendencies of Gnostic thought here. The point of the whole atonement is to show that God suffers and that he is passionate for us. He loves therefore he must be able to suffer¹. Belief in an immutability of God that prohibits emotions is contrary to the scriptural witness of God in both the Old and New Testament.

2. Communicatio apotelesmatum

Here Berkhof is saying that the combined two natures accomplished the work of Redemption together, yet they do not intermingle.

This looks like something that one has to believe for me. Working together usually necessitates communication and change in both parties involved. Christ learned obedience and so on.

3. Communicatio charismatum

For Berkhof there was a one way street in which something was communicated after all.

The human nature was given gifts from the divine nature. Noteworthy especially the sinlessness.

No more objections except the above already mentioned ones.

¹For elaboration on this see Juergen Moltmann "*The Trinity and the Kingdom*" Chapter "*The Passion of God*"

IV. Conclusion

The theology of God in Berkhof is largely determined by the Platonic image of the unmovable mover. This God does not change and therefore can neither love nor suffer nor show any emotion. But this is not the God of the Bible. God gets angry at Mount Horeb, God loves the people of Israel and suffers when they sin against him. He longs for their worship (see the Prophets).

I really do not know how to describe God with a better concept than Berkhof's. Yet the deficiencies of this theory should be clearly observed. The elements of Greek thought that demand immutability for a divine person should be removed somehow, so that God comes alive.

Let us keep in mind how lively God is:

**From his throne in heaven the Lord laughs and
mocks their feeble plans [and theologies]. (Psalm 2:4
Good News Bible)**