

THE HUMAN NATURE OF CHRIST

by P. J. BALDWIN

EXACTLY ten years ago Mr. Baldwin contributed an article to the *QUARTERLY* on "Christian Doctrine". The value of this further contribution from his pen lies especially in its giving the reflections of a layman of Reformed conviction, manifestly well versed in Scripture and in Puritan and evangelical literature, on a subject which is not only of abiding theological importance but also, as Mr. Baldwin shows, of great practical contemporary relevance. He sent the article to us before the publication of "Honest to God" and "Soundings", but the issues raised by these and similar publications add point to what he has to say.

JUSTIFICATION by grace, through faith in the finished work of Christ, was the foundation and theme of the Protestant Reformation. In those momentous days our Lord Jesus Christ was given His rightful place as cornerstone and capstone of the fabric of the church. Devout men were concerned to study the nature of His work and His suitability and sufficiency for His task. The Reformers' doctrine, while never neglecting Christ's person and deity, gave special occasion for profound studies of the human nature through which He accomplished His mediatorial work.

I. PRESENT-DAY TRENDS

Our present age, noted perhaps for its rejection of traditional church building architecture, in a manner no less radical has largely sloughed off the Reformed dogmatic fabric while still seeking in some way to retain Christ as the focal centre of its religious communion. The richness and symmetry of the old lineaments have been replaced with simpler symbols of faith. Some form of commitment to Christ or agreement that "Jesus is Lord" is held to be sufficient for personal identification with the body of believers as well as adequate ground for fellowship between local church groups and denominational bodies. However, when we look for the cornerstone and capstone of the new edifice we encounter difficulty. Three new features obtrude themselves; features that are no part of the old design but which present to us another Christ being founded on another gospel.

These new features are (1) an idea that Christ, in order to understand us and to be of help to us, must be altogether such a one as ourselves; (2) that when the Holy Spirit indwells believers they may speak of their experience as an extension of the Incar-

nation; (3) that by an inference drawn from (1) and (2) the propagation of the Gospel is now dependent upon an organized programme of lay witnessing. We will consider these three features briefly in sequence and then proceed to a discussion of the true nature of Christ's humanity.

(1) *The contention that Christ must be altogether such a one as ourselves.*

This line of thought, being a distorted reflection of Hebrews 2: 17, takes its rise, no doubt, from the presumption of the human ego. It smacks somewhat of the attitude of the inebriate who demands that his companions imbibe also. Its irrationality will be evident from the fact that the child in need turns to the father who is stronger than himself; the person with a particular problem seeks one who by means of some special ability or influence can be of help but especially in the question before us, as it loses all sight of our real need. Now if our need is purely subjective the irrationality of this modern notion is heightened as we recognize that the same saviour might not be suitable to both you and me. But Scripture tells us the matter is much more complex for at the very least we need not only a redeemer but also a mediator *who can approach unto God* and who can "*lay his hand upon us both*".¹ He must be suitable to you and to me but more especially to God.

(2) *The Extension of the Incarnation.*

Berkouwer has pointed us to Brom's "secret" of Rome as being the incarnation "continued in history especially in the church and [manifesting] the unity of the divine and human".² In North America Protestants are using this phrase very loosely and with increasing frequency. Unfortunately this usage can only tend toward the destruction of our understanding of the uniqueness of the Incarnate Logos, not only with respect to His eternal Sonship but also with respect to what we call His human nature.

The Puritan Obadiah Sedgewick in a work published posthumously in 1661³ makes it very clear that it was one thing for the Son of God to assume a human nature into union with the divine nature in His Person but it is altogether a different matter for us, who are but creatures, to be united to Christ by grace through faith. The same Holy Spirit indwells His human nature

¹ Job. 9: 33.

² G. C. Berkouwer, *The Conflict with Rome* (1958), p. 207.

³ Obadiah Sedgewick, *The Bowels of Tender Mercy Sealed in the Everlasting Covenant*, p. 197.

and ours though not with equal fulness and measure. We have fellowship with him in many things but the bride must never be confused with the husband and her relationship must be that of loving subjection and obedience to him. That love will be typified by the conjugal relationship at its highest and the obedient subjection typified by the relation the many members of the body bear to the head. To *extend* the incarnation would be to destroy the uniqueness of that event which, heralded by angels and wise men, occurred once for all time and to merge it with that which takes place ever and anon as the Holy Spirit in grace bloweth where he listeth and men are born again. The one and only Saviour would be but one of as many saviours, mediators and heads of the church as there are redeemed souls. Such thinking is the inevitable consequence of submerging the unique historical God-man in the mass of humanity or of raising it to His level. Low thoughts of Christ's humanity, common to our day, do but facilitate this dangerous drift.

(3) *The Implications for Lay Witnessing.*

If it can be established that Christ was altogether such a one as ourselves, strong arguments can be adduced for the replacing of pulpit preaching of the Gospel with an organized activity of promiscuous lay witnessing. Is not the Saviour universally recognized as having been a great teacher and in many things has He not "given [us] an example"?⁴ Now, if Christ understands and helps us because He is altogether like us, it behoves us, following His example, to try to get really close to the unsaved. By this means we will show them our love and that we are altogether such as they are. This will be a work for the laity of course. If a man is addicted to alcohol we shall have to seek him out in the beer parlour in order to understand his temptation. No one, to the present writer's knowledge, has had the rashness to suggest how drunk we must get nor the extent of our participation in even worse categories of vice. All insist, however, that we must approach him at his level; we must let him see that we really understand and love him; in a word, that we are like him. If, however, without losing one essential human characteristic, our Lord's human faculties were uniquely equipped to make Him the great preacher of His church, and if, as the Good Samaritan, He was especially prepared to render first aid to dying souls, this line of argument loses much of its force. We shall then be thrown back to

⁴ John 13: 15.

the Reformation idea of the priority of means to reach men outside and inside the visible church. Emphasis will again be placed on a powerful pulpit ministry supported by a laity that attends first to the keeping of the heart because it is uniquely the temple of the Holy Ghost. The combination of such a ministry and laity will be vitally concerned with evangelism, the care of the sick and needy and the maintenance of civil order. In this way the church will again discharge its Great Commission.

II. THE UNIQUENESS OF THE GOD MAN

The religious spirit of the age, despite its superficiality, still clings to a notion that the second Person of the Godhead became man and by means of His humanity bears a relationship to men unique among all created beings. Certain branches of Christendom quickly defected from the Reformed doctrine into kenotic heresies but today from the more conservative stream we too often hear Christians speaking of the Son of God as having left His throne and His glory at the time of His incarnation. We hear words used which imply some degree of surrender or voluntary limitation of His divinity.

In this study we are concerned with Christ's human nature; something that He took into union with His person without in any way diminishing His divine nature which is incapable of change. This union was precisely defined by the framers of *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, summarized sufficiently for our study in the following abridgement of their words: "The Son of God . . . being very and eternal God . . . did . . . take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin . . . so that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures . . . were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition or confusion. Which person is very God and very man . . ."⁵ Our purpose, however, is to consider Christ's human nature and to form some appreciation of the depths of the low condition which His manhood assumed as well as some ideas of the altogether unique gifts and graces with which that same nature was endowed.

A word of caution is necessary. The Incarnation of the Son of God is a deep mystery and we may not speculate beyond what God would have us know. We believe we can achieve our purpose without unseemly speculation if we are able to demonstrate that "in every age Christ had actually given him all such gifts as might

⁵ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Chap. VIII, ii.

fitly stand with the mystery of his humiliation".⁶ We believe that such a demonstration is compatible with and necessary to the Reformed claim that He had a perfect work to do as well as the burden of men's sins to bear. For this dual task he was appropriately equipped and sent.

III. HIS HUMILIATION

For the eternal Son of God, begotten not created, to take into union with Himself a created human nature has been correctly regarded by major segments of Christian thought to be in itself a profound humiliation. In addition He put Himself under the Law as it applies to men. It may be argued with some force that to employ that nature in the honourable vocation of a carpenter added nothing to the depth of his humiliation. But Scripture is eminently clear that the conditions of Christ's birth were of a very humble state; He "made himself of no reputation".⁷ In addition He voluntarily put Himself under certain conditions, or if it be preferred, contracted certain *infirmities*⁸ which are the common lot of man as a result of the fall. These included liability to hunger and thirst; the ground bringing forth thistles and His labour in the several phases of His vocation productive of intense weariness. He consorted with publicans and sinners, outcasts and the sick and "took an experience of such suffering in himself as are the proper objects of compassion when they are in others".⁹ From the first moment of His incarnation until he laid down his life as a malefactor in the esteem of men and deserted by God, he was pre-eminently the curse-bearer. *Made sin* by God, despised, rejected and shamefully treated by men, assaulted by devils, he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

At the same time, however, Scripture reminds us that he was "holy, harmless, undefiled [and] separate from sinners".¹⁰ It is now our task to determine the significance of these opposing concepts as they reveal how utterly unlike us Christ really was. Some men have been so far suborned as to hold that Christ was a sinner. Many more have felt constrained to allow that not only was there a *kenosis* with regard to His deity but that the human nature

⁶ John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace* (1645), p. 312, margin.

⁷ Phil. 2: 7.

⁸ Cf. Wm. Perkins, *A Golden Chaine, Works* (1603), p. 18.

⁹ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1840), II, p. 881.

¹⁰ Heb. 7: 26.

which He assumed was the impaired and vitiated nature of fallen man.

For the refuting of these errors it is necessary to see that while Christ entered history under certain of our conditions of life, He was not in Himself in our condition. This is immediately made clear from the fact that "even *after* he became man, his submitting to die was an act not of necessity, but of obedience ; an act flowing not from the weakness of the nature assumed, which never bore down or diminished the power of the Word, but from the condescension of his grace".¹¹ Beginning with His conception by the Holy Ghost, without the agency of a human father, He was "free from the least influence by that depravedness which befell the whole mass in Adam",¹² neither did He have of Himself a part in Adam's guilt. Isaiah prophesied that "the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of fear of the LORD, and shall make him of quick understanding . . .".¹³ So we see Him at twelve years in the temple and from Luke's vivid portrayal¹⁴ He must be viewed *in his boyish humanity* either as a spoiled precocious child or as the altogether unique Son of man! His faculties were enlarged by degrees for "the child grew and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom . . .". By a special work of the Holy Spirit His enlarged faculties, positively endowed with all graces so that no new graces were required, were filled up with all grace to the full measure of their receptivity. It was positive progress. There was no progressing from error to truth ; no unlearning for Him. Surely we are safe in saying that here were no neglected aptitudes ; certainly no perverted aptitudes ; rather they were employed unto all obedience. Do we wonder then that the people asked "whence hath this man this wisdom and these mighty works?"¹⁵ or that the officers should say "Never man spake like this man"?¹⁶ Adapting to our use some words¹⁷ of Charles Hodge we may say: He was holy and spotless, His reason subject to God, His will subject to His reason, His affections and appetites to His will, His body the obedient organ of

¹¹ Marcus Dods (the elder), *The Incarnation of the Eternal Word* (1845), p. 247.

¹² John Owen, *ibid.*, p. 880.

¹³ Isaiah 11: 2-3.

¹⁴ Luke 2: 46.

¹⁵ Matt. 13: 54.

¹⁶ John 7: 46.

¹⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1946), II, p. 99.

His soul. We may add that His conscience had not been seared and its dictates were trustworthy. "Christ knew no remorse."¹⁸

John Howe's intellect, souring above most mortals' reach in his desire to look upon the Saviour's face, in the final moment of ecstasy falters and falls back abashed by the weaknesses and ravages wrought in the human mind by sin. He, like the publican, cannot lift his eyes to meet his Saviour's gaze. Christ's mind was unimpaired by sin. At this point we hear it suggested that, of course, He was but the simple Jesus of Nazareth; we would not expect Him to have knowledge of, say, nuclear physics. This question in our view is quite irrelevant. Some forty years ago when, by the discovery of piezoelectricity, quartz crystals were made to *talk*, some rejoiced that we had strong confirmation of the validity of Christ's utterance that if the people "should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out".¹⁹ No doubt Jesus had a more immediate form of speaking in mind. Such knowledge as we are able to subsume under each of the special sciences represents but a stage in our development, lately discovered and soon to be submerged in greater knowledge. On the contrary Christ's knowledge penetrated regions unknown in His time and to remain unknown for all time. On the one hand "he knew what was in man"²⁰ and on the other His unique knowledge is in some way essential to our justification.²¹ While we are concerned with His knowledge it will not do to overlook the fact that His human faculties in all their perfection were united to His divine nature. Hence Jesus speaks, in the words of Vos,²² of having an exclusive knowledge of God in virtue of His being the Son—a knowledge perpetually existing and possessed in virtue of a state of being. Through His humanity He reveals to man something of that divine knowledge, yet He does so without any indication of prophetic ecstasy or tension. He could do this, as Shedd puts it, "because from the unfathomable and infinite fountain of the divine nature of the Logos there was inflowing into the human understanding united with it a steady and increasing stream".²³ Even His human nature cannot contain the fulness of God yet neither can we encompass the mind of Christ.

¹⁸ John Duncan, *In the Pulpit and at the Communion Table* (1874), p. 36.

¹⁹ Luke 19: 40.

²⁰ John 2: 25.

²¹ Isaiah 53: 11; cf. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, I (1959), Appendix C.

²² Geerhardus Vos, *The Self Disclosure of Jesus* (1926), p. 148.

²³ W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, II, p. 276.

IV. CHRIST'S HUMANITY IN THE DISCHARGE OF HIS PROPHETIC OFFICE

We have noted our Lord's freedom from all corruption ; the harmony existing between His mental and physical faculties, His endowment with gifts and graces and His exercising of them. But since preaching was to be one of His principal engagements we find special provision made for that aspect of his vocation. As he approached His ministry and stood up in the synagogue at Nazareth a particular manifestation of His uniqueness appeared. Filled with the Spirit beyond measure he cried: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach . . .".²⁴ When the Spirit previously came upon prophets and kings they performed supernatural feats of strength and prowess. This same Spirit came upon Christ's humanity for the carrying out of His preaching office.

V. CHRIST'S HUMANITY IN THE DISCHARGE OF HIS PRIESTLY OFFICE

The absolute integrity of Christ's human nature becomes especially important when we are again enabled to orient our thinking and see our need more properly in respect to our standing before God. It is here that we, as sinners, need a champion, a priest who has *in Himself* "somewhat also to offer"²⁵ and who is capable of entering the holy place by his own blood, One who above the cry of dereliction can be heard in His *human voice* to shout "it is finished"²⁶ and from His *human soul* to make utterance—"I delight to do thy will".²⁷ Now that same human nature, no longer under the weight of our infirmities but eternally part of one glorified Christ, is fully engaged in the administration and application of His mighty acts to the *individual* needs of His own. Now clothed with a "new eminency and dignity over all creatures"²⁸ He has the full "act and use"²⁹ of the faculties and graces which were His from His incarnation. The exaltation of the God-man was but "the manifestation of that glory which he [as the Son] had had from the beginning, an open declaration of that which was not previously known".³⁰

VI. CHRIST'S SYMPATHY

The validity of the line of argument taken thus far will in a

²⁴ Luke 4: 18.

²⁵ Heb. 8: 3.

²⁶ John 19: 30.

²⁷ Psalm 40: 8.

²⁸ John Ball, *ibid.*, p. 305.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

³⁰ Marcus Dods, *ibid.*, p. 144.

large measure stand or fall according to how it affects our Lord's capacity for sympathy with His own. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that "we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities".³¹ The original word here translated *infirmities* does not exclude any infirmity of the mind or body but the context requires that its usage shall have special reference to those who are encountering afflictions, temptations or persecution on account of their Christian walk and warfare. The Gospel makes it clearly apparent that even "his miraculous cures . . . not only fatigued him, but cost him much in the way of sympathy and even of endurance".³² Nothing that we have considered as to the perfection of His human nature and its rich endowments can be said in anywise to have weakened His capacity for sympathy nor has it put Him out of touch with human need, suffering and sin. Rather because of His enlarged powers of perception and understanding of things revealed to Him by His divine omniscience—rather because He thus knows how devastatingly the virus of sin has entered our natures, and not our natures only but the whole created cosmos, material and spiritual, He was moved to weep over Jerusalem and at the grave of Lazarus, and keep silent before a Herod! He could tell the woman of Samaria "all things that ever [she] did"³³ and could feel the deepest yearnings of one who washed His feet with her tears.

VII. CONCLUSION

The considerations which we have reviewed have sufficiently established that our Saviour was not really separate from sinners as they were flesh but rather as they were *sinful* flesh. This *separation* is wholly to the sinner's advantage. It has enabled the Saviour to understand you and me and all men and has made Him acceptable to God.

All the high demands of His mediatorial office were fully met because He was adequately furnished for the performing of them. As he did with John on Patmos, He puts his right hand upon us, and God and man are reconciled. The deity of Christ's person, the qualifications of His unique human nature and its condition were specific to Him. His conduct before men as man was given as an example for us to strive to follow. His *separateness* from men is, however, so radical that to speak of a prolongation or extension

³¹ Hebrews 4: 15.

³² George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Atonement as Taught by Christ Himself* (1868), p. 108.

³³ John 4: 29.

of His incarnation when the Holy Spirit condescends to indwell our hearts is to nullify all that we have discovered concerning that *separateness*. Language that confuses one with the other echoes the subtilty of Satan's deception of our first parents ; "ye shall be as gods".⁸⁴

This same *separateness* has deep implications for the believers's vocation. His Lord has given him an example. Rather than seeking to find a degraded basis of contact with lost men, he will emulate his *separated* Master ; sanctifying the Lord God in his heart, doing justly, loving mercy and walking humbly. This vocation will provide sufficient grounds for some soul to "ask a reason of the hope that is in [him]"⁸⁵ and will give some point to his answer. If given in meekness and fear, that answer will be free of the current gross subjectivism and will point away from self to the Saviour of men.

If our theologians would again take up this theme of the uniqueness of Christ, they too would turn from much of today's mechanized mass approach and like the noble Puritans would preach and write to *separate* men and glorify Christ.

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⁸⁴ Genesis 3: 5.

⁸⁵ 1 Peter 3: 15.