

Reformation  
& Revival



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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

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Volume 2, Number 2 • Spring 1993

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Ours has been a difficult century. Wars and rumors of wars have been rampant; earthquakes and other natural disasters have taken their toll worldwide. In addition, print and broadcast media have brought these things to our attention in ways once undreamed of.

The theological world has been shaken by wars and earthquakes of its own. Our century, for example, has seen the blossoming of modernism, a movement noted for its abandonment of the doctrine of the full deity of Jesus Christ. Much of fundamentalism and evangelicalism has been shaped by reaction to that denial. When the battle lines were drawn on this issue each side took the stance it thought to be most useful in defending Christian doctrine as it understood it. Conservatives are what they are, to some important degree, because the modernists advertised their faith in the humanity of Jesus Christ at the expense of His deity.

But there is an odd fact about that battle: through much of church history it would have seemed necessary to side with the modernists (had they been around) in asserting that Jesus Christ is fully and truly man. It may be that the humanity of Jesus Christ has come under attack even more often than His deity.

At the end of the first century Christians confronted an error called Docetism. The word comes from a Greek verb meaning "to seem" or "to appear." The Docetists contended that Christ seemed to be a man, He appeared human, but His humanity was just that: an appearance. They said this because they thought that human flesh, along with all other matter, was evil. In their own mistaken way they hoped to preserve the purity of Christ by denying that His flesh was real. Such a notion, however, would have been fatal to true Christianity if it had carried the day.

It seems likely that John addressed this problem in his first Epistle. He wrote of false prophets:

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of anti-christ. . . (1 John 4: 2-3b).

And again in his second Epistle he wrote: "Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist" (2 John 7). These harsh words show how strongly the Spirit of God, speaking through John, felt about Docetism. To deny that Jesus Christ was fully human was the work of antichrist and not of God. We may note in passing that Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science, by denying the reality of matter, falls under the condemnation of Scripture at this point.

The fourth and fifth centuries saw the development of Monophysitism (one-naturism), a serious attempt to do justice to the deity of Christ, that endangered the doctrine of His full humanity. The Monophysites did not deny that Jesus' flesh was real, but their doctrine of only one nature in Christ threatened His true humanity. If our Lord had only the nature of God or a composite nature that was a mixture of humanity and divinity, how could He be truly human? To their opponents the Monophysites made Christ appear to be God dressed up in human flesh merely to look like a man.

Docetism and Monophysitism were fairly straightforward attacks on Christ's humanity. Later centuries added others that were more subtle. In the thirteenth century the Roman Catholic Church adopted the view that the human body of the Lord Jesus replaced the bread and wine of the communion service. To the eye and to the tongue of the worshiper bread and wine seemed to be present, but in fact his senses deceived him. What he was eating and drinking were the literal flesh and blood of Jesus. What's wrong with this? It demands a question: are we dealing here with a real

and true human body if it can be everywhere in the world at once? To many the answer seems to be, No. Yet at the Reformation Martin Luther adopted an understanding of the Lord's table that demanded the same quality of ubiquity, i.e., the ability of Christ's body to be everywhere at once. A natural retort to this criticism might be: "The body of the risen Jesus passed through doors that were not open, yet we don't deny the reality of His human flesh on that account. Why then question the ability of His flesh to be everywhere at once?" Still, uneasiness remains, in part because one can imagine our own glorified bodies with unusual properties, but not with the quality of being everywhere at once.

More serious yet was the doctrine of some of the Anabaptists. They said and wrote that Christ's flesh was heavenly flesh. They meant by this that nothing of Mary's humanity was passed on to her son. Jesus' humanity, like His deity, came to Him from heaven. In their view Mary acted only as the container in which the Lord Jesus spent the first nine months of His existence. She contributed nothing of herself to His human life. Critics of this view, however, have seen that a humanity that has nothing in common with Mary (and hence with Adam) is not true humanity at all.

Yet Jesus Christ was and is truly man, and the Scriptures make this point in many ways.

The earliest prophecy of the coming of Christ speaks of Him as the offspring of Eve, the first mother of humanity. As part of the curse on the serpent God says: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; He will crush your head, and you will strike His heel" (Gen. 3:15). Nothing in this prophecy suggests Christ's deity. Clearly the offspring of the woman would be a man. More than that, the fact that the serpent or Satan would "strike His heel" shows His vulnerability, a

prominent human trait. It is not of God but of man that Job says, “Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble” (Job 14:1). The “striking” of the Messiah’s heel would prove to be trouble of the severest kind.

Later prophecies, of course, asserted or suggested that the Messiah or Christ would be God. But even these mentioned His humanity. Look at Isaiah 9:6: “For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The one who will come as Mighty God and Everlasting Father will be born as a human babe, a son of man. We find the same thing in Micah 5:2: “But you, Bethlehem Ephratha, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for Me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times.” The reference to Christ’s origins—“from old, from ancient times,” or as the margin reads, “from days of eternity”—is probably an indication of His deity. But it does not stand alone. Here also is the place of His birth as a king from the line of David, as a human child.

When we turn to the New Testament we find the same interest in the true humanity of our Lord. The birth narratives in Matthew and Luke speak for themselves. Not only does the actual birth bear witness to the humanity of our Savior, but the announcement of the angel speaks of “a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Luke 2:14). A baby!—a baby that grows up (Luke 2:40,52) and as a man hungers (Luke 4:2) and thirsts (John 4:7) and grows weary (John 4:6) and feels agony (Matt. 26:38-39) and dies (John 19:31).

The reality of Christ’s humanity pervades the Bible. Behold the man! But what does it all mean? Where does its importance lie? On the most obvious level we may answer, “It proves that God is true, that what He prophesies will come to pass. The promised man- above-all-men has come,

“born of a woman” (Gal. 4:4), as God had said. Surely this is no small thing. But the main interest in the manhood of our Lord Jesus lies elsewhere. Why was He prophesied to come? And especially, why as a man?

The Bible leaves us in no doubt about the answer to these questions. No one less than the God-man could make sinful men right with a holy God. To do this, God became man. Or in the words of John 1:14, “The Word became flesh.” Flesh here means more than the meat on our bones. It speaks of true humanity as in Joel’s words, “I will pour out My Spirit on all people [flesh]” (quoted in Acts 2:17). Our salvation depended on Jesus Christ being man.

The writer of Hebrews makes this point in Hebrews 2:5ff. Let’s look at that passage in manageable bits.

It is not to angels that [God] has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified: “What is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him? You made Him a little lower than the angels; You crowned Him with glory and honor and put everything under His feet. In putting everything under Him, God left nothing that is not subject to Him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to Him (vv.5-8).

Notice two things here. First, man was promised dominion over the earth at the creation. Nothing was outside his control. Second, we cannot see man’s control over all of nature. That is not because his control is invisible, but because it does not exist! The promise of God seems to have failed. What’s happening here?

The writer of Hebrews goes on to answer the problem that his quotation raises:

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because He suffered death, so that by the grace of God He might taste

death for everyone. In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering (2:9-10).

The promise of God has not failed. Mankind does have control over all things in the person of Jesus Christ. All men are not yet crowned with honor and glory, but the representative man is. As He Himself said: "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to Me" (Matt. 28:18). The present rule of Christ is the downpayment on the promise of an earth ruled by a new nation of men and women, the new nation known as the church. When that promise is fulfilled salvation will have come in its fullest sense. For us to be saved Jesus Christ had to be truly man.

Yet there is more. We see it when we ask the question, "Why was Jesus crowned with glory and honor?" The answer is: "... because He suffered death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone." He was crowned because He died.

Let's explore this further. The promise made to man to rule over the earth was postponed due to man's fall into sin. For the promise to be fulfilled, man would have to be restored to holiness. How could that be done? By the death of a substitute. The principle of substitution is pictured all through the sacrificial system of the Old Testament. But only pictured! No animal was an adequate substitute for sinful man. As the writer of Hebrews says elsewhere, "... it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (10:4). The only adequate substitute was a spotless human being. Since God was determined to bring "many sons to glory," He substituted the death of Jesus Christ in the place of each of those "sons" (and "daughters"). God cannot die, but the Son of God, who became a man, both could and did.

And there is still more. Men often act with complex

motives and several ends in view—how much more, God! Not only did God send His son to die for sinners, He also sent Him to form a family, a family of brothers.

Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, "I will declare Your name to My brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing Your praises." And again, "I will put My trust in Him." And again He says, "Here am I, and the children God has given Me." Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels He helps, but Abraham's descendants (2:11-16)

The writer takes great pains to make his point. The Lord Jesus has formed a family of fellow humans. He calls them "brothers" (vv. 11-12). By trusting in God He takes His place beside them as a fellow man (v. 13). He "shares" their humanity in dying to free Abraham's descendants, literal or spiritual (vv.14-16).

Nor is all this merely formal. Not at all! The chapter closes by showing that in His death, and beyond, His acts are the acts of one who feels what His brothers and sisters feel.

For this reason He had to be made like His brothers in every way in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the people. Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted (2:17-18).

Family membership involves family feeling. The sins and sufferings of His brothers and sisters in temptation call forth His mercy. They need and receive the help of one who has been tempted. You receive that help, if you believe in

Him. In Hebrews four persevering faith in Christ as God and man has this promise:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (4:14-16).

The writer's point is clear: both for the forgiveness of our sins and for our comfort we are indebted to the humanity of Jesus Christ.

But finally, I think I hear someone saying to me, "Don't you know that you are preaching to the converted? We all believe in the true humanity of our Lord Jesus!"

Maybe—but I wonder. At the beginning of this article I mentioned the battle with modernism over the deity of Christ. I made the point that that battle has in some degree made us conservatives what we are. After all, we are not immune to the influences around us, secular or sacred. I wonder if the constant reiteration of the deity of our Lord has not affected us. Are we really free from the problem of the Monophysites? Do none of us think of Christ as God dressed up like a man? And do we really believe that He remains a man today and forever?

The New Testament makes it clear that the humanity of Christ is a doctrine to be believed, among other reasons, for our present comfort. Certainly it is important that we hold tenaciously to the fact that Christ is God. In the midst of a world apparently disintegrating into chaos His control would be no more than a name if He were not God.

But the Scriptures offer us more, and we are unwise if we do not take hold of it. There is a man in heaven who knows our needs. He knows them both as God and man. As God He

knows whether they are genuine needs or mere passing lusts. As man He knows our agony and shame and sorrow. Our paramount need, according to Scripture, is just such a man. And we have Him.

In closing, let me add one word of caution. If you are convinced of the full and true humanity of the Lord Jesus, it is still important how you think of Him.

Do you think of Him as a babe in a manger? Many do. If you join them you will have cut Him off in infancy as Herod hoped to do when he slaughtered the infants in and around Bethlehem (Matt. 2:7-18). Of what help is such a Christ to sinners like you and me?

Do you think of Him as the crucifix depicts Him, hanging on a cross? That is better, of course, than resigning Him to perpetual babyhood. If you never visit Christ dying "outside the city gate" (Heb. 13:12) your vision of Him is deeply defective—perilously so.

If that, however, is your only vision of Jesus Christ, you may see Him as needing help Himself and sending you elsewhere—to ancient or modern substitutes. How many have looked on a dying Christ and turned to His blessed Mother for help? Too many, I fear! How many have celebrated His death and turned to psychology and psychiatry for daily strength? I do not know—but I have my suspicions.

The humanity of Jesus Christ is a central doctrine of the Christian faith. It does not stand alone. It cannot be set in opposition to the reality of His deity. It needs, however, its full recognition. Without it there is no atonement; without it no present help in our time of need. We neglect it at our peril, but we celebrate it as glorious in itself and as leading us to glory and honor forever.

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