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THE PERSON OF CHRIST AS THE WORK OF CHRIST

Tom Wells

Despite TV's recent interest in angels, the Bible treats recognizable angelic visits as rare. A visit from an angel was big news. You couldn't predict such a visit and, presumably, you couldn't forget it. It is probably due to Mary's memory, then, that we have the following from the lips of the angel Gabriel: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

In the Bible we find more than one person or group seen as the son(s) of God. It may be that the godly line of Seth bears this title (Gen. 6:2). To God in Egypt Israel was "My son, My first-born." So He said to Pharaoh, "Let My son go, that he may serve me" (Ex. 4:22-23). Pharaoh refused and quickly learned how much God loved His son. The angels too are God's sons (Job 1:6), as are Christians today (2 Cor. 6:16-18. Cf. 7:1). The phrase "son of God" has many and varied uses.

The early chapters of Luke contain yet another use of this phrase. In the genealogy of Jesus we read of "Adam, the son of God" (Luke 3:38). Luke looks on Adam's creation at the hand of God as sonship to God Himself. The reason is not hard to find. At Adam's creation he was made to be (or bear) "the image of God" (Gen. 1:26-27). Given his responsibilities (Gen. 1:28-30), we may judge that this "image" was the ability to govern the rest of creation and

the character necessary to do so. In large measure Adam lost these very things when he sinned.

It is against the backdrop of Adam's sin that the Lord Jesus appears as "the Son of God." The Psalmist sings in a major key of man's exalted office in creation: "Thou hast made him a little lower than God, and dost crown him with glory and majesty! . . . Thou hast put all things under his feet" (Ps. 8:5-6). But the writer to the Hebrews weighs in with a somber minor: "But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him" (Heb. 2:8). Not quite a *sour* note, but gloomy nevertheless! Sin robbed man of his glory! Yet that is not the whole story. Our Lord Jesus has entered the scene as the Son of God who will make the Psalmist's prophetic word come to pass.

It is usual to discuss the Lord Jesus Christ under two headings, the person of Christ and the work of Christ. His person, of course, is what He was and is, while His work is what He did and does. This division is sensible and has been widely used. But in one respect the two themes overlap.



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son, of course, is what He was and is, while His work is what He did and does. This division is sensible and has been widely used. But in one respect the two themes overlap. What He was on earth was part of the work He was sent to do. Put another way, His character was a revelation of what God is like. Showing what God is like was a prime part of His work. I have titled this article "The Person of Christ As the Work of Christ" for that reason.

The Lord Jesus, then, came to display the character of God, to show what God is like. Of course He did this through the media of His words and work, but those who saw His deeds and heard His teaching soon discovered something else. He was not simply the conduit through which these good things arrived. He Himself was more than the sum of His activities. An eyewitness said, "We beheld His glory," and described it as "glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). How could this be? Jesus explained it this way, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). In His humanity, the character of God was so deeply impressed on Him that it was as really His as the act of breathing. Do you remember what the police said? "Never did a man speak the way this man speaks" (John 7:46). Their witness was true because there never was such a man as this man was.

WHAT THEN WAS JESUS LIKE?

To begin with, we must understand the question. In describing Jesus we will be talking about how He is like God in what have been called God's *communicable attributes*. That means that He was like God in those things which God can share with others. There are some things God cannot share with mere men: His omnipresence, for instance, His ability to be everywhere at once. There is His omniscience, His knowledge of everything. There is also His eternity, His existence as far back and as far forward as

one can look. And you may think of others.¹

But there are things which God can share with men. They include God's moral character, and other things as well. These things did not simply pass through the Lord Jesus from God to us. They were natively His as a man. When the Lord Jesus walked the earth, He walked it as a man. When He was tested, He was tested as a man. When He rejoiced, He rejoiced as a man rejoices; when He wept, He wept as a man weeps. In each case, these actions were the actions of a man. They were really His actions as a man, but they revealed the very character of God.

But someone may say, "Didn't Jesus display omniscience and omnipotence as well?" And "Weren't these things native to Him as God?" These are good questions. I think the answer to both is "Yes," but I think something else also. For most of His life on earth, perhaps for all of it, Jesus limited the exercise of His attributes as God. That is why He could say of the time of His return, "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Matt. 24:36). He did things that only God could do, but He did them, not by His own power but by the power of the Spirit. Even in John's gospel where this might seem less evident, it remains true. "For He whom God has sent speaks the words of God; for [God] gives the Spirit [to Him] without measure. The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand" (John 3:34-35).² The presence of the Spirit accounts for whatever superhuman work He does and whatever superhuman qualities He shows. We will pass over these things and seek instead some qualities of God which Jesus revealed as the preeminent Man among men.

THE WISDOM OF CHRIST

Biblical wisdom is skill for living, especially in the choice and pursuit of goals. The earliest reference to what

the Lord Jesus was like in His mental and moral life is found in the third gospel: "And the Child continued to grow and become strong, *increasing in wisdom*; and the grace of God was upon Him. . . . And Jesus kept increasing *in wisdom* and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:40, 52, italics added).

Luke twice remarks on the wisdom of Christ at an age when we do not usually credit people with wisdom. Yet Luke speaks of His "being filled with wisdom" (v.40, lit.). No doubt this refers to a fullness consistent with the capacity of a boy His age, since in verse 52 He increases in wisdom as He grows up. These verses bracket the incident in which the Lord Jesus stayed behind at the temple while His parents started home after Passover. Luke brings out the depth of His wisdom in the apparently stray remark that His parents "did not understand the statement which He made to them" in explaining why He had stayed behind (2:50). Why didn't they understand? Not through any lack of clarity in Jesus' statement, but because of His deeper insight into His role in life, even at that young age.

The early signs of wisdom in Jesus no doubt contributed to Luke's remark that He increased "in favor with . . . men" (2:52). In His public ministry, however, things changed. His wisdom, now increased in keeping with His adult capacity, did not keep Him from getting mixed reviews. We see this in Nazareth. The initial reaction to His teaching was astonishment. "Where did this man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers?" (Matt. 14:54). But they had known Him and His family all their lives. He couldn't be anyone special! "And they took offense at Him" (Matt. 13:57).

As His ministry proceeded His wisdom was set loose on the enemies of God and they smarted under it. Plans to trap Him were cleverly laid, but they regularly failed. Human ingenuity was no match for the wisdom of Christ, a wisdom informed by the purposes of God. His enemies

floundered while He steadily pursued the will of God. When the time came for Him to be "lifted up," in their ignorance they fell in with God's plan. "Away with Him," they cried, "away with Him, crucify Him!" (John 19:15). In so doing, they were the blind instruments the Father used in answering the prayer of Wisdom incarnate: "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Thy will be done" (Matt. 26: 42). The career the Lord Jesus wisely pursued, including the cross and the resurrection, is a transparent proof of the wisdom of God.

THE FAITHFULNESS OF CHRIST

Faithfulness, in God, means being true to His word. In man it means being true both to his own word and to his responsibilities. The plan of God to turn us back to Himself depended jointly on God's faithfulness and the faithfulness of Jesus. In His evident faithfulness, the Lord Jesus set the faithfulness of God before our eyes.

We have seen that in some ways Jesus' knowledge was limited. No one can say when the full horror of His destiny fell across His mind. Did He know at age twelve, or at age thirty? We have no basis for even a guess. It is clear, however, that the backdrop of eventual death lay behind His activity almost from the beginning of His public ministry. When Satan said of the kingdoms of this world, "All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me" (Matt. 4:9), did he mean for Jesus to see an easier path—easier than the cross—to lordship over this world?

Given Jesus' wisdom, it must have become plain to Him not later than the early months of His ministry. In chapter two of Mark's gospel it is already suggested *to us* in the hostility He arouses. Beyond that, He speaks of days "when the bridegroom is taken away from" His attendants (2:20). What can this mean, except His death by violence?

But the exact time is not the central issue. At some

point in the years before His crucifixion, God's plan lay open before His mind. The effect was this: from then on, an incessant clamor for faithfulness on His part rang in His ears. In one sense that was His only responsibility. It will be instructive to see how He met it.

To begin with, He often reminded Himself of why He came, why He existed as man. He did this in two ways. First He spoke in general terms of coming to do God's will. When He was urged to eat He said, "I have food to eat that you do not know about" (John 4:32). He enjoyed the mental excitement of pondering and doing the will of God. So He added, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to accomplish His work" (John 4:34; cf. 6:38; Heb. 10:9). Second, He spelled out exactly what the will of God meant: "[T]he Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). Both generally and explicitly He contemplated His end.

But that could not be all. Reaching goals takes much more than thinking on them. Preliminary steps must be taken. In Jesus' case this was complicated by a timetable. He could not, in one exuberant burst of physical and moral energy, bring Himself to the cross. Yes, He had authority to lay down His life (John 10:18), but only on the strictest schedule. He could have given Himself up to the temple police (John 7:35-36), but No, it was not time. He could have allowed Himself to be taken at the treasury, but "no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come" (John 8:20; cf. 7:30).

Even at the end, He required faithfulness. It cost Him anguish in the garden (Luke 22:44), restraint at His arrest (Matt. 26:52-54), plain speech before the Jewish leaders (Luke 22:66-71), bearing false accusation before Pilate (Luke 23:2) and silence before Herod (Luke 23:9). Nor was that all! On the cross, He faced the temptation of His abusers, "[S]ave Yourself! If You are the Son of God, come

down from the cross" (Matt. 27:40).

What do we learn from the faithfulness of Jesus? Though He was a man, He teaches us the faithfulness of God. Here again, His person was His work.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST

Righteousness, in God, is His devotion to what is right and just. Men too are said to be righteous when they share that same devotion.³ When we meet the ideas of righteousness and justice in Scripture, they often savor of the law-court. In the earliest explicit mention of God's righteousness, Abraham addresses God as Judge: "Far be it from Thee to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike. Far be it from Thee! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly [do right]?" (Gen. 18:25).

God made man morally pure, and He was pleased with him. That pleasure was part of the larger satisfaction He found in all He made. Scripture says, "God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). The fall, however, changed things. Man and creation remained "good" in the sense that they still served the purposes of God, but a new purpose became evident. The element of evil in the world had to be dealt with, and God had to do so in a righteous way. The alternative would have been the full destruction of mankind. So God planned for a Righteous Sufferer, our Lord Jesus, who would die as a substitute for sinners.

Was the Lord Jesus a righteous man? We need only look at Him to find the answer.

We first see the evidence of His righteousness in His sinless life. At the outset of His public ministry this sinlessness is implied in the rigorous contest with Satan. Why else concentrate all the forces of wickedness on Jesus? What was the result? Clearly Jesus was as innocent after this battle as

He was before. Unlike the rest of us, the consciousness of innocence was His continually. Describing Himself, He said, "He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but He who is seeking the glory of the one who sent Him, He is true, and there is no unrighteousness in Him" (John 7:18). No unrighteousness!

John 8:44-47 illustrates His sense of separation from sinners:

You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is liar, and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak the truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God.

It is clear that Jesus puts His listeners in a category distinct from His own. They are Satan's children; He is not. They believe lies; He speaks truth. They are not of God; He is. He protests His innocence: "Which one of you convicts Me of sin?" He expects no answer, and receives none! They ask a question that contains this slander: "You are a Samaritan and have a demon" (8:48), but, as to sin, they are silent. "Moral indignation must be accompanied by confession of sin in anyone else," yet there is no trace of consciousness of sin here!⁴ We recognize, of course, how easy it is to protest our own innocence. But when such words come from the lips of the greatest moral teacher who ever lived, they carry a weight that amounts to certainty. Of Jesus we can believe even this, spoken on the night of His arrest: "[T]he ruler of the world is coming, *and he has nothing in Me*" (John 14:30, italics added).

We see the righteousness of the Lord Jesus in another

way, His acceptance with God.

Which of us could pray as He prayed at Lazarus' tomb?

And Jesus raised His eyes, and said, "Father, I thank Thee that Thou heardest Me. And I knew that Thou hearest Me always. . . ." And when He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth." He who had died came forth, bound hand and foot with wrappings. . . . Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go" (John 11: 41-44).

How often did the Father hear Him? "Always." How do we know? "He who had died came forth."

There is yet a greater act of acceptance on His Father's part, the acceptance of His sacrifice authenticated by His resurrection from the dead. God Himself described this acceptance through Isaiah centuries before He came.

As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify many, as He will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors (Isa. 53:11-12).

How Jesus could receive "a portion with the great" and "booty with the strong" after His death becomes clear in the account of His resurrection, God's stamp of approval on His person and work.

Finally, we see His righteousness stressed by His first-century followers. In preaching shortly after Pentecost, Peter calls Him "the Holy and Righteous One" (Acts 3:14). In his First Epistle he describes Jesus as having committed "no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth" (2:22). Paul speaks of Him as the one "who knew no sin" (2 Cor.

5:21). The writer of Hebrews speaks of Jesus as "one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin" (4:15), and describes Him as "holy, innocent [and] undefiled" (7:26). He also reminds us that unlike the Levitical priests He had no need to offer sacrifice for His own sins (7:27). John says plainly, "He is righteous" (1 John 2:29) and "in Him there is no sin" (1 John 3:5).

It was necessary that Jesus was a righteous man in order to be God's Righteous Sufferer. It was also necessary to properly display the character of His Father.

THE ANGER OR WRATH OF CHRIST

Wrath is the reaction of a righteous moral being against sin and ungodliness. It was and is closely related to righteousness in the Lord Jesus. It is the necessary evidence that righteousness was more than a mere name in Him. Warfield has written:

The moral sense is not a mere faculty of discrimination between the qualities which we call right and wrong. . . . [It passes] moral judgments; that is to say, they involve approval and disapproval. . . . It would be impossible, therefore, for a moral being to stand in the presence of perceived wrong, indifferent and unmoved. Precisely what we mean by a moral being is a being perceptive of the difference between right and wrong and reacting appropriately. . . . The emotions of indignation and anger belong therefore to the very self-expression of a moral being as such and cannot be lacking to him in the presence of wrong.⁵

The experience of Jesus bears this out. Anger or wrath was part of His life. We meet it when He sees the Jewish leaders hostile to Himself and indifferent to the man with the withered hand. "Is it lawful on the Sabbath," He asked, "to do good . . .?" (Mark 3:4). The question was met with

sullen silence to which Jesus reacted strongly. He looked "at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart" (Mark 3:5). Considering the woes that He pronounced on these kinds of men, He must have often felt moral indignation at their coldness. A single chapter in Matthew contains the phrase, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites," six or seven times (Matt. 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29).⁶ These "woes" do not simply reflect sorrow. They reflect Jesus' anger at the abuse of religion by the Jewish leaders. His choice of the words "fools" (23:17), "serpents" and "brood of vipers" (23:33) to describe them did not arise from pity, but from outrage.

Yet in all of this, the man Christ Jesus exhibits the attitudes of His Father. Jesus' humanity reflects the moral image of God.



Yet in all of this, the man Christ Jesus exhibits the attitudes of His Father. Jesus' humanity reflects the moral image of God. It will continue to do so in the future. That is why we meet the surprising phrase, "the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6:16), near the end of the New Testament.

THE LOVE OF CHRIST

Love is an affection that leads one to seek the benefit, or promote the interest, of another. Looked on by some as the central attribute of God's nature, love abounded in the life of our Savior.

It is clear that the Lord Jesus loved men generally. We see this love in acts of His compassion. Many of these were done on individuals who might well have been among His elect (e.g., Matt. 20:34; Mark 1:41), but that is not the whole story. *His compassion extended to mixed multitudes.* The feeling of compassion led Him into various acts of love for large groups. He directed His disciples to prayer because of His compassion for multitudes (Matt. 9:36-38). Repeatedly He healed multitudes of sick (Matt. 14:14; Luke 4:40). His compassion led Him to feed a multitude (Matt. 15:32), and in a vivid witness to what is strategically important He *taught* a multitude of five thousand men, plus women and children (Mark 6:34, 44).

God's elect were special objects of His love. John makes this plain in recounting the story of His final hours. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lays down his life for his friends" (John 15:12). Who are these friends? "You are My friends, if you do what I command you" (15:14). We must not understand this to mean that they became His friends by their obedience. That would overthrow grace and throw all of us who know our own sinfulness into despair. No, they were friends because He befriended them and chose them out of the world (John 15:19). All they were could be traced to His love, the love of His Father and the love of the Spirit, that special love which belongs to all His elect people.

Finally, two closely related loves lived in the breast of Jesus: love for the Father and love for the truth the Father revealed. This led to His fulfilling the first and greatest commandment, to love "God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37).

At first glance, we might think that love for the Father and love for truth are appropriate to creatures but could hardly portray the interior life of God. But even here the Lord Jesus reflects God's image. It would not be meaningful

to describe God as "love" (1 John 4:8,16) unless that description had always been true. We are not to think of growth and development in God as though He were a creature. It is true that love for men generally and love for His elect always existed in God; in that sense He always loved. But there was an even higher sense, a logically prior sense, in which God exercised love in eternity past. The persons of the Trinity loved one another. Father loved Son and Spirit. The Son loved the Father and the Spirit. The Spirit loved both Father and Son.⁷ In loving one another they loved one another's characters, including the attribute of truth.

The love, then, that we find in Christ mirrors the makeup of the God who sent Him.

SUMMING UP

In writing to the Colossians, Paul portrayed the Lord Jesus in these words: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation" (Col. 1:15). Again, he spoke of "the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). The writer to the Hebrews adopted similar language: "He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb. 1:3). These sweeping statements cannot be confined to the humanity of the Lord Jesus; they describe humanity and deity in the unique God-Man. To discuss their broad reach is beyond us. Our aim has been more modest, to look on Christ at the level most accessible of us, His simple humanity.

And what did we find? We found in Him the character of His Father. It does not pass through Him to us as if He were a conduit, unaffected by what He carries. Not at all! What we see is Himself. He displays the nature of God by sharing the nature of God in His humanity. The communicable (shareable) attributes of God are His own attributes. In that way, His person is His work.

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Notes

1. Unfortunately the division of God's attributes into communicable (shareable) and incommunicable (unshareable) is not airtight. For example, infinite wisdom is God's alone. On the other hand, He can and does give men a *small* amount of wisdom. For discussion of this problem see Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 156-57.
2. Verse 34b is ambiguous as it stands. It might also mean that "Jesus gives the Spirit [to men] without measure." But the rendering I have put in the text is most consistent with verse 35. The Father, in giving Jesus the Spirit, has also given Him ability to do all kinds of things that He could not otherwise do as a man.
3. Here I pass over other meanings of "righteousness" applicable to both God and man. Some of these are thought to be closely connected with the covenants of Scripture, but for our purpose we are interested in the character of God logically prior to all covenantal activity. Righteousness in men, of course, arises from God's covenantal work in them.
4. The words in quotation marks are taken from the margin of my Bible, but I no longer know the source, whether myself or someone else.
5. B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 107. He adds: "We should know . . . without instruction that Jesus, living in the conditions of this earthly life under the curse of sin, could not fail to be subject of the whole series of angry emotions . . . [and that] there have been preserved records of the manifestation in word and act of not a few of them."
6. The uncertainty about the number of occurrences reflects the fact that the UBS Greek text omits verse 14.
7. The evidence for these assertions is found in the mutual love of Father and Son (see John 14:31; 17:24). Given the equality and likeness among the persons of the Trinity, the participation of the Spirit in these same relations seems a reasonable inference.