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Behold the Man

by Daniel R. Mitchell



Has Christianity been customized? "How much can you remove from a car, and still possess what is properly called a car?" asks Michael Green in *The Truth of God Incarnate*. "Lights may be a luxury; you can do without bodywork in warm weather; brakes may be dispensed with, at all events on the level; but if you remove the engine or the chassis it is questionable whether we are still talking about a car at all." Green notes that in recent years we have seen the acceleration of a process of dismantling full-blooded Christianity. Certain theologians have engaged so wholeheartedly in this process that one is justified in questioning if what they have ended up with can any longer be considered the genuine article.

The biblical doctrine of Christ has been especially victimized by this dissection. The truths of His deity, Virgin Birth, Incarnation, and Atonement have all been systematically plundered by people trying to modernize the faith or "make it more intelligible" to their respective generations.

With understandable fervor, Fundamentalists have always guarded those precious truths which have special bearing upon their Saviour. So much is at stake here. When we sully the waters of the fountainhead we pollute the entire stream. But also, over the years many have fallen victim to wrong thinking about Christ. Indeed, the history of Christology often reads like a "Who's Who of Heretics!" Satan knows that since he cannot defeat

Christ, he had best destroy His reputation. Many who have called themselves "Christian" have aided Satan in this attempt.

This column has already given attention to the deity of Christ, His Virgin Birth, and substitutionary Atonement. The burden of this study is to spotlight the doctrine of Christ's authentic humanity.

Was Jesus for real?

Some might say that discussing this is like carrying coals to Newcastle or shipping seafood to Nantucket. Does not talking about a historical personage like Jesus of Nazareth presuppose that such a man existed? Over the years the humanity of Christ has been misrepresented in numerous ways.

Some have denied it. Others have abridged it. Still others have accepted it but denied its importance to Christianity.

During the writing of the New Testament and for some time later, the idea that God would enter history in human flesh was extremely repulsive to those who viewed the flesh as inherently evil. They insisted that Jesus only "seemed" (Gr. *dokeo*) to have a human nature. These "docetists," as they were called, were quite prepared to accept that Jesus was divine, but were sure precisely for that reason that He could not have had a real human nature. For the purpose of dispelling such false teaching John wrote, "The Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). Paul also declared "For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9).

The Gospel of John most clearly defines the humanity of Christ

Special attention needs to be given here to John's testimony because in recent years it has been charged that John himself was a docetist and that he writes his Gospel entirely from that perspective. However, the argument that may be made for the humanity of Christ in John's writings is both full and instructive.

First of all, he depicts Jesus in terms common to human nature. Jesus is a real member of the human family with authentic historical existence. He became "flesh" (i.e. a human being), John 1:14. He came into the world and existed among men (John 1:10,14,26; 6:14; 12:46). He is found moving about from place to place through ordinary means. When He appears to supervene natural laws (6:16-21), it is always clear that John intends to underscore His divine mission (cf. 6:27) but never at the expense of His humanity (cf. 6:35-63).



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Furthermore, He is a thinking, rational, emotional, and volitional being (2:24-25; 6:15; 11:33,38; 12:27; 13:21). He decides to do things and, in terms governed by His circumstances, He makes judgments and pursues ideas and goals that are His alone.

Jesus is also related to God as a man. He prays to God (11:41-42; 17:1ff). He views His earthly life in terms of obedience to God's will (17:4,6-8). Throughout John's Gospel He is depicted as a man who knew God as His Father, who loved Him, and defined the ethical and moral propriety of all His actions in terms of God's Word and purpose.

Furthermore, John goes out of his way to utilize names and descriptive terms that emphasize Jesus' human nature. For example, he pays special attention to those who address Jesus as a "man." The Baptist addressed Him as "a man" that comes after him (1:30). The woman at the well testified of Jesus, "Come, see a man which told me all things" (4:29). The officers sent to seize Him returned with the report: "Never man spake like this man" (7:46). The man whose sight had been restored identified Him as "A man that is called Jesus" (9:11). His enemies in the Sanhedrin repeatedly called Him a man, to underscore their charge of blasphemy (9:16,24; 10:33; 11:47). Caiaphas prophesied that one "man" should die for the people (11:50). At His trial He is cited by His enemies as well as Pilate as "the man" (18:17,29; 19:5).

John also employs the name "Jesus" throughout the Gospel. This is the name given to Him by His parents which highlights His relationship to history. His lineage may be traced back through David (1:49; 7:42; cf. Rev. 3:7; 5:5, 22:16) and Jacob (cf. Matt. 1:1-2; Luke 3:34, cf. John 1:47) to ancient promises given through Moses and the prophets (1:45; 5:46). The importance of this focuses primarily upon Jesus' sacrificial death as authentic man for sinful man.

The title "Son of Man," insofar as it is the title of "incarnation," is also a title of humanity. The title is the one most commonly utilized by Jesus to refer to Himself in the Gospels, and in John is employed in a unique way to point to His messianic mission. Its

association with the "Bread of Life" presupposes the capacity to die as a man (6:27,53,62). Its employment in relation to the cross has the same force (12:23-24; 13:31).

Then, too, Christ, as the "Lamb slain," could not have merely an "apparent humanity." To qualify, He must be taken "from the sheep" (Exod. 12:5). His mission demands that He be "like unto his brethren" (Heb. 2:17). Then, having accomplished his task He "passed into the heavens" (Heb. 4:14-15; cf. John 16:25-33), leading His followers to victory (16:33; 1 John 4:4). As the "Bread of Life," Jesus' "flesh" and "blood" existence is linked to the faith of His followers. Only as a man could He lay down His life and offer Himself to the world. But this also becomes the basis for imparting life and fellowship for those who receive Him. As "the Resurrection," Christ brings victory over death, because He has achieved it. When Jesus is raised, John is careful to point out that people touched Him (20:16-17; 25-28); He "breathed on them" (20:22); He ate with them (21:12-13); He talked with them (21:15-23). This is important to John because human existence does not seem to be contemplated otherwise. G.C. Berkouwer, professor emeritus of systematic theology at Free University of Amsterdam, correctly observes in his book *The Person of Christ*: "Anyone expecting that Christ's deity would completely overshadow His genuine humanity in this period is mistaken. The great change which took place... is His transition from the cross to glory; but He Himself, the man Jesus Christ, remained unchanged."

John's account is no myth

What John has to say about Jesus in His day-to-day associations and involvements with men emphatically underscores his commitment to the reality of Jesus' full humanity. While it is true that he is not concerned with the "Christmas story" as it is developed in the Synoptics, it is a gross oversimplification to suggest that he is not concerned to present Jesus as subject to the common afflictions, passions, and contingencies of all men.

In terms of Jesus' earthly relationships the whole manner of His life is human. He attends a wedding with

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family and friends (2:1-11) and responds in a predictable way to His mother's request to secure more wine (2:3-4). He had brothers who told Him what He ought to do in a manner immediately recognizable to anyone who has grown up with brothers (7:3-5). He demonstrates a concern for His mother and His friends, showing deep filial attachments common to human relationships (11:5; 13:1; 19:26-27). The prospect of His death disturbed Him and He ponders, for an instant, the options available to Him (12:27). He demonstrates emotions such as anger (2:14-16), fear for His life (7:1,10), love (11:5; 13:1), compassion (11:14-15; 16:19-33), sorrow (11:33,35), anxiety (13:21). He is also subject to the common lot of man. He grew tired and thirsty (4:6-7; 19:28). While He showed a remarkable ability to understand human nature and the dynamics of human interaction (2:25; 6:26), there are times when He lacks information and seeks it through questions (6:67; 11:26; 11:34; 18:34). He is subjected to rejection and betrayal (6:66; 13:21). The fact that He must anticipate restoration to His former glorious state shows that He is restricted to time and space (17:4-5).

Finally, He died as a man. One is hard-pressed to explain this full and absorbing narrative of Jesus' crucifixion in John's Gospel, if in fact he was a docetist. It cannot be said that John has skimmed on this part of his story.

A theological watershed

John considers this doctrine of such great importance that one may use it to differentiate authentic from counterfeit Christianity (1 John 4:2-3; 2 John 7). This is the "true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (1:9; cf. 9:5). He is God in flesh. God living, breathing, moving up and down among His people and revealing the very heart of God. He is the Light in the same sense that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is at once the ideal man and the only *truly authentic* man. In His life He is the prototype and example (cf. 1 Pet. 2:21). In His death, He is the propitiation (1 John 2:2). In glory He is the Advocate with the Father (1 John 2:1).

He is the "Prophet" (1:21-27), "Messiah Christ" (1:41), the long-

awaited "King of Israel" (1:49), who is a "Jew" (4:9), "Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Joseph" (1:45), the One who was anticipated with gladness by Abraham (8:56), prophesied by Moses (1:45), and spoken of in all the Scriptures (5:39). If He only appeared to be a man, He only appeared to fulfill the Scriptures.

The affirmation in 1 John 4:2-3 is more than just one of the criteria by which the Christian can know He is born of God (cf. 5:13), although it is certainly that. It forms a key that unlocks the full significance of the present ministry of Christ in the life of the believer. The Incarnation was important to the historical verification of the message ("word") of life. This is not just an *idea*, as such, that John is preaching. It concerns that "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes... and our hands have handled." What is it that John has seen and heard and handled? It is "the life... manifested unto us." Throughout this epistle, John expands on the "normal Christian life." He knows what it is because he walked and talked with the perfect, living manifestation of it. With that thought in mind John explains that his purpose in writing was to show the readers how to maintain fellowship with "us" (Christians) who, in turn, are in fellowship with the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ (1:3). Only then will they experience the fullness of life.

But to have this fellowship, sin must be dealt with. How? On the basis of the shed blood of Jesus Christ (1:9). He is the "Advocate" and the "propitiation for our sins." Again, the basis for these concepts is the authentic humanity of Christ.

Further, if Christ did not become a man there is no substantive hope for the Christian. John expresses this in 3:2 in the words "When he shall appear, we shall be like him." If He never became "like us" the promise of this verse could never be true, for we shall surely never take on the essential nature of Deity. Nor does John intend to say that. Rather, his thought is much like Paul's in 1 Corinthians 15. The Resurrection of Christ is the firstfruits and the believer's resurrection is the harvest. His Resurrection is both the basis and the pattern for the believer's.

John goes on to relate the purpose of Christ's incarnate ministry in relation to Christian purity (3:5-10; cf. 1:5-7). The practice of sin is entirely antithetical to the work of Christ to "destroy the works of the devil." Christian love also finds its definition in the incarnate Christ, particularly in the context of Calvary (3:16; 4:9). The very gift of salvation is owing to the incarnate ministry of Christ (4:10,14). In fact, if the Christian is to have any spiritual understanding at all about God and the nature of his life in God, it is because "the Son of God is come and hath given us an understanding" (5:20). It is no wonder that for John only antichrist could deny this vital truth so necessary to salvation, godly living, and hope of glory.

Behold the Man

In his attempt to play to the emotions of the crowd Pilate turned as Jesus walked in the room, His face streaked with blood from the thorns that pierced His brow. "Behold the man," Pilate cried, hoping to induce pity for a man he knew was innocent. It was a mistake, for no mercy would come that day from the bloodthirsty crowd.

But Pilate was right about one thing. When he said "Behold the man!" he wrote a title over the brow of Jesus which is His everlasting glory and our eternal hope. Indeed as "the Man" He has no peer. "Beside Him we are all less than men," as J.C. Macaulay, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, has so eloquently noted. "His utter perfections, seen now in the crucible of suffering, flash forth the very image of God, while we stand before Him convicted and condemned of all the sin which has made humanity the broken earthenware that it is."

"Behold the man!" And know that He now stands, not before Pilate, but at the right hand of the Father ever ready to make intercession for us, "Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). □