

THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

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There were many debates over theology in the early church. These debates arose not from conflict between different traditions, as is the case today, but from attempts to formulate what the church believed. With the lack of established theological positions, these debates enabled the church to come to appreciate what was involved in the issues under discussion, and eventually to develop a consensus. One of the most crucial debates concerned the nature of Christ - was he fully human, was he fully divine, and if so, how did the human and the divine natures come together in the one person of Jesus Christ?

These debates are not without significance for today. At various stages through the history of the church both the human nature and the divine nature of Christ have been challenged. Today many Christians of liberal persuasion have difficulty in accepting the divine nature of Christ. One example of this is found in some liberal feminist thought which finds it difficult to accept the human nature of Christ, as this requires accepting that God was incarnate as a male. Thus we have suggestions that Christ was the androgynous ideal, not a mere human like the rest of us, as he was able to transcend the limitations of gender.

Equally incorrect is the tendency found among many conservative Christians to minimise the human nature of Christ, partly in reaction to the attacks of liberalism, but also as a result of the influence of non-Christian worldviews on conservative theology.

These problems are the result not necessarily of rejecting the humanity of Christ, for that is maintained. At the root is an unbiblical conception of what it is to be human. If we do not appreciate what it is to be human, the result will be to diminish the full humanity of Christ in some way or other.

Christ was fully human. He was not the Divine Son of God masquerading as a human being. Christ was born of the virgin Mary, took on a human nature and became a

human being in every way like us, apart from having a human father. But in every other respect he was fully human. That does not mean that he sinned like us, for to sin is to demean our humanity and act against it. To sin is to be less than human, as it runs contrary to what we were meant to be. Death, the penalty for sin, is the final insult to our humanity, an insult which we have brought upon ourselves because of our sin. Christ who was without sin is alone fully human of all our race. To understand what it means to be human we must look at Christ, who as the obedient and faithful human being perfectly presented to us what humanity really is.

The humanity of Christ was not adopted for a period and then discarded. Humanity is too important to God to be disposed of; human beings are intended for eternal life. When the Son of God took on human nature he became fully human, and so he remains human today. Once he was the Eternal Son of God. Today is he both the Eternal Son of God and a human person like us. When he died, he died as a human being. When he rose again, he rose as a human being, and when he ascended into heaven he did so as a human being and is still human in every way, except that unlike us, he is no longer subject to death. But we can be confident that we too will one day be freed from the power of death, as God has begun the redemption of the human race by releasing one of us from the power of death as the guarantee that all those who are faithful will, like Christ, inherit eternal life as he has.

We can never accept the Biblical message concerning our humanity if we are constantly longing to discard it. The neglect of the doctrine of the resurrection is one instance of the depreciation of humanity. God considers our humanity so important that in the eschaton it will be fully restored as it was meant to be, and that means that the bodiliness of human life will be eternally redeemed. We must accept what it means to be bodily people, created to live on this earth and to be part of the community of all living things as the creatures of God, at home in this world which he has made for our home.

The continuing humanity of Christ means that he can be our priest before God. Christ remains the same human being he was on earth, and will return as a human being to take up his kingdom. He now ministers as one of us in heaven, interceding for us, and

understanding our weakness and faults, and will return to this earth still human in every way. After Christ had ascended into heaven the angels said to the disciples "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." (Acts 1:11) The same Jesus who ascended will return, and there is no denying Christ was human after his resurrection. He had a human body, which was handled by the disciples, and he ate with them.

Christ is today still human and has a human body, although a body glorified in the resurrection. But we too will be glorified in that same way by the same means. "If the Spirit of Him who raised Christ from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you." (Romans 8:11).

Christ did not come to diminish our humanity but to fulfill it. He was no ascetic, rejecting the pleasures of life, as some do in the false hope of thereby attaining spiritual superiority. He certainly endured hardship and privation for the sake of his ministry, but that is not the same. He was content to enjoy a good meal and pleasant surroundings, a trait which earned him a reputation as a party-goer. The Rabbis used to say that we will be judged for every pleasure we have failed to (legitimately) enjoy. God is not against pleasure, he is against **sin** which is not the same thing!

The only aspect of human life Christ did not experience was marriage. Because he was however fully human, this indicates that contrary to the contemporary outlook, sexual relationships are **not** essential for us to be fully human (although they are not contrary to being fully human either of course).

That Christ became a human being indicates the high status of humanity. He did not become an angel or a demi-god; he became one of us. To be human is to be like Christ, who alone is the true human being God intended us to be. Everything he did, he did as a human being perfectly full of the Holy Spirit and perfectly one with the Father. If we

are joined to Christ, we too will be full of the Holy Spirit, as we thereby share in his anointing, and we will be one with the Father as he is one with the Father.

To be like Christ is to be **ourselves!** We are not called to be mystics or ascetics, not called to spend our lives as missionaries or evangelists, or to live in any particular way, in order to be human. We are called to be what God calls us to be, **whatever** that is. If we have been called to a life as a farmer or accountant or housewife, abandoning this task in order to be a missionary or evangelist does not fulfill our humanity. There are no spiritual or unspiritual **jobs** in life, there are only spiritual or unspiritual **people**. Those who are guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit in **whatever** they do are spiritual, not those who claim some special status because of the work they do. To deny the task that God has called us to do in this life is to be **worldly**; that is, to view our task in the creation as somehow alien to God's desires for us.

Christ spent most of his life as a carpenter, and it was in this calling that he learned obedience, not when he began to engage in public ministry. But in all that time Christ was truly the son of God **and** a human being. He was no less Son of God for being a carpenter, and no less a human being for being a carpenter. The Father proclaimed publicly at his baptism that this was the son with whom he was pleased, the son who up till that time had been a carpenter, faithful and obedient, but still a carpenter, not a healer and preacher. Can we be any less pleased with the callings we have received, if the Father was pleased with the life of a carpenter?

During his early years Christ lived perhaps more like most of us than when engaged in public ministry, for not many of us are called to spend our time as wandering preachers. But like most of us, Christ the Son of God, fully human and fully divine, spend day after day working for a living, subject to all the stresses of earning enough to make ends meet. Was Christ any less spiritual, or any less the Son of God, because he worked like us? No, it was in this he showed himself to be fully human, and in this he grew strong in faith and obedience.

And so to maintain the humanity of Christ is to maintain his true personhood. Christ was a human being with a body like ours. He was not sexless but male. He had to work for a living, he experienced cold and hunger, he experienced grief and sorrow at the death of a friend, he suffered and bled when he was tortured and put to death, and in all these ways and more fully shared in what it was to be human. If we are to be human we must look to Christ for our model. If we are to maintain our humanity we must maintain the humanity of Christ, who became one of us and remains one of us, and so his humanity is tied to ours forever.