

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Deity of Christ		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	2		Gary L.W. Johnson
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THE NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES (Part I)

William Plumber, one of the great theologians of the 19th Century, concisely declares, “A mere man cannot redeem himself much less another man. All men are guilty and have forfeited their lives by their own sins. When two pirates are condemned to death, one of them cannot die for the other, for the reason that he has to die for himself. Two manslayers are sentenced for life to close prison. One cannot take the place of the other, and so let him go free. Redemption, therefore, by any human means or merits was absolutely out of the question.”¹ As my beloved theology professor, the late S. Lewis Johnson was fond of saying, “the doctrine of the deity of Christ is the theological expression of the evangelical experience.” The Council of Chalcedon, convened in 451 A.D., dealt with the two natures of Christ, and affirmed our Lord’s true humanity. And, further, that the deity and humanity exist “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.” The two natures coalesced in one person (*prosopon*) and one substance (*hypostasis*). As to His deity our Lord was of the same nature as the Father, but as to His humanity of the same nature with us. He is like us in all respects apart from sin.² Some heretics have denied His true humanity altogether, such as the Docetics of the first two centuries of the Christian era.³ They conceived of the incarnation as something of an illusion. In one form of the heresy it was said that the divine Christ descended upon Jesus of Nazareth at His baptism and left Him at the cross. The real Son of God simply used the human Jesus for His purposes. This denial of the incarnation and true humanity of our Lord is reflected in the New Testament in such passages as 1 John 4:2-3, “Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come: and even now already it is in the world.” Cf. 2 John 7. Some of the Docetics denied the real flesh of our Lord’s body, thinking of it as made of psychic substance,⁴ as something of a phantom. Our Lord, then, would be similar to a divine being walking the earth in disguise. Others denied the humanity of Christ in part, such as the Arians, who denied His soul; Apollinaris, who denied that He possessed a rational human soul, or spirit; and the Monothelites, who said He had no human will.⁵ In light of these views of the humanity of our Lord, let us now turn to the Bible for its view of the matter.

I. THE TESTIMONY OF THE BIBLICAL TEXTS.

- A. First, we turn to John 1:14, where in his prologue to his gospel the apostle writes, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth.” Here is one of the great texts on the incarnation of the divine Son. “In one short, shattering expression,” Leon Morris says, “John unveils the great idea at the heart of Christianity that the very Word of God took flesh for man’s salvation.”⁶ The One

who had been “with God” is now “with us.” In the important clause, “And the Word became flesh,” there are some significant things to note. First, the Word in verse 1 was said to be God, called the Word because He was destined to speak to men. Here this divine Word has taken on human form, an effective way to express Himself to men. In becoming flesh, however, the Word does not cease to be the divine Word. In fact, He will now exercise His function as Word to the full.⁷ The term “flesh” is a very strong, almost crude, way of referring to human nature.⁸ The immutability of the Son, as well as His deity, is not compromised by the text. The being of the Word does not have a *new existence*, but He does with the assumption of a human nature in addition to His divine nature enter into a *new form of existence*. There is a remarkable contrast between verse 1 and verse 14 in John’s prologue. In verse 1 we read, “The Word was (*en*),” which contrasts with verse 14’s “The Word became (*egeneto*).” Second, in verse 1 we read that the Word was “with God,” while in verse 14 the Word came to be “with us.” And finally, in verse 1 we have, “The Word was GOD,” while in verse 14 we have, “The Word became *flesh*.” The eternal *being* stands in contrast with the temporal *becoming*. We conclude, then, that John 1:14 is a clear statement of the fact that the divine Son became man.

- B. Second, John 8:40 is one of our Lord’s plain statements of His true humanity. There we read that He said to the men of Jerusalem, “But now ye seek to kill me, a *man* that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God.”
- C. Third, the Apostle Paul’s opening words to the Romans contain a text about our Lord’s humanity. He wrote to the Romans and stated that he was an apostle separated unto “the gospel of God,” adding, “Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of *the seed of David according to the flesh*; And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:3-4).
- D. Fourth, in Romans 9:5 there is another reference to His humanity. The text has been hotly debated with respect to its statement of our Lord’s deity, and I believe that it plainly does affirm His deity, but there is no debate over its substantiation of His humanity. Paul is speaking of the people of the Messiah, and the text reads, “Whose are the fathers, and of whom as *concerning the flesh* Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.”
- E. Fifth, in Philippians 2:6-8 there is another Pauline confession of His humanity. Listen to the passage, “Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made *in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man*, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”
- F. Sixth, in the second chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews there are two texts that suitably form a conclusion to this section of notes. The reality of the human nature of our Lord is emphasized in the first passage, “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same: that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil” (2:14). Two verbs represent the concept of sharing in the verse. The first, rendered by the words, “are partakers,” suggest the idea of sharing in common and yields an emphasis upon the sharing in a common nature that human beings possess. The tense of the verb suggests that they have always shared this common lot. The second verb, rendered by “took part,” referring to our Lord’s incarnation, suggests that the nature He took was an additional nature

for Him, something with which by nature He had nothing in common. The tense underlines the historicity of the assumption of the nature. However, while the connection with humanity remains, the connection with humanity under the condition of transitoriness, that is, in the form of *blood and flesh*, was historical.⁹ There is no place here for a Docetic phantom Son of God!

- G. Seventh, a few lines on in the same chapter is the final text. The author writes, “Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people” (v. 17). The phrase, “in all things,” puts the capstone on the edifice of His genuine humanity. Chalcedon was right. He is “truly God and truly man.” And the Athanasian Creed (likely composed after Chalcedon) is also correct in adding, “yet he is not two, but one Christ; one, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking [assumption] of the manhood into God.”

CONCLUSION: Luther in his characteristic way underscores the doctrine of the incarnation in four points. “First, he emphasized the humanity of Christ in his basic approach. ‘The Scriptures,’ he observes, ‘begin very gently, and lead us on to Christ as to a man, and then to one who is Lord over all creatures, and after that to one who is God. So do I enter delightfully, and learn to know God. But the philosophers and doctors have insisted on beginning from above; and so they have become fools. We must begin from below, and after that come upwards.’ So he emphasized that Jesus ‘ate, drank, slept and waked; was weary, sad, joyous; wept, laughed; was hungry, thirsty, cold; sweated, talked, worked, prayed.’ Indeed, ‘there was no difference between Him and other men save that He was God and without sin.’ Secondly, he insisted that our redemption depends utterly on the deity of Christ, for sinners are guilty, and only God could save us. ‘If Deity be wanting in Christ there is no help or deliverance for us against God’s anger and judgments,’ he wrote; so ‘if it could not be held that God died for us, but only a man, then we are lost.’ Thirdly, Luther insisted on the vital connection between Christ’s person and his work: between the reality of the Incarnation and the efficacy of the Atonement – as will be apparent from what has already been quoted. Fourthly, his whole religion was supremely Christocentric. ‘I have no God, whether in heaven or earth, and I know of none, outside the flesh that lies in the bosom of the Virgin Mary. For elsewhere God is utterly incomprehensible, but comprehensible in the flesh of Christ alone.’ He wrote; or, again, ‘Wilt thou go surely and meet and grasp God rightly, so finding grace and help in him, be not persuaded to seek him elsewhere than in the Lord Christ. Let thine art and study begin with Christ, and there let it stay and cling.’”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ Wm. S. Plumer, *The Grace of Christ* (rpt. Odom Publications, 1989), p. 144. Plumer goes on explaining why an angel could not be the redeemer. “Nor could *angels* atone for men. Of course the sufferings of *fallen* angels, though they are in the pains of hell, being due for their own transgressions, could be no ransom for us. Nor could *holy* angels make atonement or bring in righteousness for others. All the obedience they can render is due for themselves. They could therefore never supererogate. They can have no surplus of merit beyond their own wants. Nor could they by suffering ever exhaust the penalty due for man’s sins. An angel is finite. The law violated and the justice offended, are infinite. Sin is therefore an infinite evil. In an angel an eternity of suffering would be necessary to redeem one man from hell. The sin of even one man would, if imputed to an angel, send him to prison for ever. Had his mediation been admitted, where would have been the gain in the happiness of the universe? Then too a sinner pardoned would have been bound for ever to ascribe his redemption not only to a mere creature, but to that creature ever suffering in hell the penalty due to the ransomed spirit, whose substitute he had become. In this way no end would ever be made of transgression. The suffering substitute could never rise triumphant and say, ‘It is finished.’ And the redeemed would have praised in the highest notes and with the deepest sense of obligation their deliverer, and that deliverer would have still been enduring the penalty. Such would have been the confusion, disorder, and idolatry of admitting an angel or angels to undertake the work of redemption. Besides, any holy angel must have been for ever unfit for the work of mediation, as he is not able as a days-man to lay his hand upon both God and Man. The highest created angel is infinitely inferior to God. For him to claim equality with God would have been robbery indeed. He never could have said, ‘Father, I WILL,’ without great presumption. Nor could any hold angel ever have sympathized with man, either as a sufferer or as a sinner, to such an extent as would have fitted him to be a Redeemer. Angels know not what suffering is. In their natures they are quite ignorant of what are the real feelings of men. They know nothing by experience of the natural affections of men. They understand not the hard pressure of poverty, or shame. Being holy and yet finite in their compassions, no one of them could endure the recital of our offences without utter dislike to our persons. Before he had learned half of the details and aggravating circumstances of any one’s crimes, he would have turned away with unspeakable loathing from the shocking tale of human guilt” (p. 145).

² *Prosopon* is a less technical term than *hypostasis* or *subsistentia*, used to refer to the persons of the Trinity or the person of Christ. By the time that the Greek fathers appropriated the word for use in Trinitarian theology, *prosopon* had taken on, in addition to its original meaning of “face” or “expression,” the connotation of a “role,” as in a play, and of the individual person indicated by the role. In its theological usage, it points toward an individual existence or subsistence, but without any philosophical or metaphysical overtones. Cf. R. A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker, 1985), p. 251.

³ Kermit Zarley, who I have referenced last week, repeatedly charges Trinitarians with being closet Docetists because they affirm the full deity of Christ. His reasoning is that Jesus cannot be *both* fully human and fully divine. This kind of rationalistic Biblicism colors his entire book.

⁴ Docetism – from the Greek word *dokein*, “to seem or appear to be.” They taught that Jesus was not really human, he only appeared to be.

⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, I, 6, 1 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* I eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (rpt. Eerdmans, 1979), p. 316.

⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1971), p. 102.

⁷ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, The Anchor Bible (Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966), I, 32.

⁸ Morris, p. 102.

⁹ Cf. Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (Macmillan and Co., 1892), p. 53.

¹⁰ Norman Anderson, *The Mystery of The Incarnation* (IVP, 1978), p. 56.