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TRULY MAN, BUT MORE THAN MAN: REFLECTIONS IN CHRISTOLOGY

Peter Teon

For people of orthodox Christian convictions, for whom the deity of Jesus Christ is a central and critical affirmation, one of the urgent tasks of Christology today consists in exploring the aspects and implications of the human existence of Jesus Christ. This is so because it is in Christ's humanity that His divinity is revealed. Revelation is produced in the Man, Jesus, and thus all we can know of the words, actions and events of the human life of Jesus are of great importance to us if we desire truly to know the real identity of Jesus Himself, who called God "Abba." In fact we find that as we examine the human figure from Nazareth we discover that while He is always fully and truly a Man, He also exceeds human dimensions and manifests what we can only call a transcendence or divine dimension that immediately leads us to His Father, God, and then back to Jesus as the Son of this holy and eternal Father.

Because we are earth-bound creatures, Christological thinking and inquiry necessarily start from the humanity of Jesus. There is thus a priority of the human dimension in such study, for being human we naturally encounter Jesus as truly Man as we begin. However, to state this obvious fact is not to commit ourselves to a false methodology which first considers Jesus Christ the Man and then moves on to discover or ascend to Christ as God. We find in practice as we read, study and meditate that the whole of Jesus' humanity is a revelation of the divine. The totality of the

human life of Jesus forms a whole and it is in this wholeness that His divine identity is revealed. Christ Jesus is a Man, but a Man who manifests and reveals God, for those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

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Christology is committed to exploring
the deepest mystery which consists
in the act of incarnation.*



In saying this about the priority of the human starting point, we are stating that there is truth in what is often called "Christology from below." However, any rigorous study of the gospel texts will also necessarily involve sooner or later a "Christology from above," simply because the whole Old Testament background to the ministry of Jesus as Messiah points to a movement from God to man. Jewish monotheism had a single point of departure, namely Yahweh Himself. Further, Jesus did not arise in just any place; He was born within the bosom of a people who had been brought by divine providence into a covenant with the true God, Yahweh. Thus the reader of the Gospels and Epistles has to think in a downward direction from heaven to earth and from God to man as he studies various critical passages such as John 1:1-14 and Philippians 2:6-11. For here as elsewhere a Christology from above cannot be avoided.

By studying the content of the text, Christology is committed to exploring the deepest mystery which consists in the act of incarnation. God the Father so loved the world

that He gave His only begotten Son to the world in order to bring salvation and redemption to the world. So it is no surprise to discover as we read the Gospels that the love of the Man, Jesus (the Incarnate Son), for man is the most poignant mark of His earthly life. And this love is the very love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father.

INCARNATION

What took place at the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary made it different from any other conception of a human being. There was not the coming into existence of a new human person who did not previously exist, but there was the taking of a new human nature, a perfect and complete human nature, by a divine person who already existed from all eternity. Mary provided Jesus with His humanity but not with His existence, for the Person of the Son, the Logos (Word), is the second person of the blessed, holy and undivided Trinity from everlasting to everlasting.

In the words of the second anathema of the fifth General/Ecumenical Council (553):

If anyone does not confess that there are two generations of the God the Word, the one before all ages of the Father, without time and without body; the other in these last days when the Word of God came down from heaven and was made flesh of the holy and glorious Mary, Mother of God (*theotokos*—birth giver of God), and ever-virgin, and was born of her: let him be anathema.

What happened in the womb of Mary was unlike what had happened in the conception of Mary herself (and this remains so if we admit with some of the early Reformers and orthodox Catholics the doctrine of the immaculate conception wherein she was by the grace of God purified of original sin). The conception of Mary by her mother was

not virginal, for Mary had a human father as well as a human mother. In contrast Mary's Son had a human mother but no human biological father. Practically speaking, however, Joseph acted as His father.

The incarnation took place at the annunciation when in response to Mary's *Fiat* the Word was made flesh, truly man, in her womb (Luke 1:45). God the Father did not by His Holy Spirit merely grab Mary and use her for His redemptive purpose (although He could have done so as the Almighty God). Mary might (without being consulted in the matter) have found herself pregnant, as mother of the incarnate Son. But there are moral as well as biological aspects to her unique conception. Mary was not a passive instrument in the hands of the Almighty God. She accepted her vocation: "Be it unto me according to Thy word," and only then was the Word made flesh.

In fact it is important to note that Mary's *Fiat* is the culmination of a long process of obedience and faith within the remnant of Israel. She represents the faithful in Israel, those who have kept the covenant of their God. She was not merely "highly favored" but "endued with grace" (R.V. margin) and even as the Vulgate has it, *plena gratiae*, "full of grace."

The church has rightly believed, taught and confessed that Jesus is literally human, and that He took His human nature by the physical process of gestation and birth from a human mother. Since Mary gave Him His human nature but not His existence, the virginal conception was thoroughly congruous with the circumstances of this unique case. In the words of the *Nicene Creed*, Jesus (the incarnate Son/Logos) "was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and was made man." So the infant Jesus, the young man Jesus, the carpenter Jesus of Nazareth, was never less than fully human, the new and second Adam, but He was more, much more—He was God incarnate.

However, a careful reading of the Gospels will disclose that Jesus Christ (whatever else He was) was a real, male, human being. He was circumcised and grew up as other boys did; He walked and talked; He ate and He slept; He knew hunger, thirst, weariness, joy, sorrow, anger, pain and death. Jesus was a first-century Palestinian Jew, sharing the physical and mental features of His Jewish background. He spoke Aramaic (with occasional Hebrew and Greek) and traveled the country as a rabbi, interpreting His people's Scriptures. He kept the Jewish festivals, engaged in prayer and offered sacrifice in the temple.

While the four evangelists show no interest in what we could call today the psychology of Jesus, they do assume that He had a mind-soul, because they ascribe to Him such mental acts and attitudes as joy and sorrow, compassion and anger, love and affection. We must also assume that Jesus developed as a human being according to the general laws of nature so that His maturity at each stage of His development from infancy to manhood was according to the laws of nature. Thus He would not as a five-year-old have either the strength or the reasoning capacity of a fifteen-year-old. The mentality of Jesus developed *pari passu* with His bodily development.

At the same time we have to take into account two major factors which bear on the quality of the humanity of Jesus. Since Jesus possesses perfect human nature, not diseased, fallen human nature, we should expect capacities and powers to be manifest in Him with which we are not familiar in the best of sinful human beings. Further, since Jesus is the incarnate Word and His human nature is in the closest relation to His divine nature, we should expect the manhood of Jesus to reveal unique aspects not seen in other human beings. Now to decide when either or both of these factors is operative is not easy, but their presence must be borne in mind.

He is one person who is wholly God and wholly Man. Thus everything He is and says and does is of and from the one person who possesses two natures, one divine and one human.



ONE PERSON MADE KNOWN IN TWO NATURES

When we come to evaluate the content of the ministry of Jesus and of His saving actions we benefit the most from reading the sacred text when we adopt the “mindset” provided for us by the church after long and profound reflection upon the identity of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels. The point here is that, in the words of the Ecumenical Councils of the patristic period, He is always and only one person, not a human person joined to a divine person. He is one person who is wholly God and wholly Man. Thus everything He is and says and does is of and from the one person who possesses two natures, one divine and one human.

In the words of the “Definition of Faith” of the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451):

Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all with one voice teach that it should be confessed that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, the Same perfect in Godhead, the Same perfect in manhood, the Same consisting of a rational soul and body; consubstantial with the Father as to his Godhead, and the Same consubstantial with us as to his manhood; in

all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of the Father before the ages as to his Godhead, and in the last days, the Same, for us and for our salvation, of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God [*Theotokos*—birth-giver of God] as to his manhood.

Here the repeated use of the word “Same” makes the point that it is the one and the same Son who was/is with the Father for all eternity who is the very Jesus, incarnate God, with us in space and time.

The “Definition” continues thus:

We confess one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, made known in two natures which exist without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the difference in the two natures being in no wise taken away by reason of the union, but rather the properties of each being preserved, and [both] concurring into one Person [*prosopon*] and one hypostasis, not parted or divided into two Persons [*prosopa*], but one and the same Son, Only-begotten, the divine Word, the Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets of old have spoken concerning him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us and the Creed of our fathers has handed down.

The distinctive theology of this “Definition” is the equal recognition given both to the unity and duality of the incarnate Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. To express the oneness of the person, two words, *prosopon* and *hypostasis*, are used; and to express the elements or natures of Godhead and manhood, one word, *physis*, is used. Each of these three Greek words is used in a technical way, a way formed by Christian thinking and usage and not by Greek philosophy as such.

[*Prosopon*, originally “face” or “countenance,” is used of the “face of Yahweh” in the Septuagint. Its developed

meaning is that of the Latin *persona* pointing to a distinct person who has a genuine role and who is in relationship with others. *Hypostasis* pointed to the specific realization or expression of a concrete, perceptible reality. Its Latin equivalent is *subsistentia*. Thus it complemented *prosopon*.]

At the next Ecumenical Council, held in Constantinople in 553, it was made very clear that the person, the *hypostasis* or *prosopon*, of Christ is the preexistent Son or Logos of the Father. Then, at the later Ecumenical Council, also held in Constantinople, in 680-81, the duality of the natures of the one person was underlined:

We likewise declare that in him are two natural wills and two natural operations which undergo no division, no change, no partition, no confusion, in accordance with the teaching of the holy Fathers. And these two natural wills are not opposed to each other (God forbid!) . . . but his human will follows (and that not as resisting or reluctant), but rather as subject to his divine and omnipotent will . . . We recognize the miracles and the sufferings as of one and the same Person, according to the differences of the two natures of which he is, and in which he has his being.

Thus we may say that the unity of the two natures and wills/operations in the one Christ is not that of a parallelism but more like that of a synthesis of the two, which concur in the one *prosopon* of the incarnate God.

In reading the Gospels we see that it is the one and the same Christ who is weary and who calms the raging waters, who is hungry and who feeds the multitude, who bleeds from wounds and who heals the incurable, who is crucified /dies and who raises Lazarus from the dead. It is the one Christ with two natures who acts out of one and then out of the other and always perfectly in harmony. And, of course, the human nature as perfect creature, is always obe-

dient to the divine. But obviously when He dies on the cross and is buried and is raised from the dead it is according to His human nature, for His divine nature has abundant, rich, eternal life and is incapable of death. However, because He is the one, eternal Son/Word possessing two natures, what He does in His atoning sacrificial death is given a value which proceeds from His divine nature. This value is more than sufficient to cover all sins through all space and time, for He who died and rose again in His humanity is very God made Man, the incarnate Word.

It is Christ the Man (the one person made known and acting according to His human nature) whom people see and behold initially. However, by faith and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, some people also begin to see the deeper truth concerning the one person—"Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." After His resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit to convict people of sin and open their inward eyes, more people begin to recognize the true identity of Jesus—"My Lord and my God" and "Jesus Christ is Lord."

THE EXALTATION OF THE INCARNATE SON

It is extremely important to believe, teach and confess that it was the incarnate Lord, the one person, who was resurrected, who ascended into heaven, who was exalted to the Father's right hand in glory and who reigns there as Prophet, Priest and King. That is, it is the one person with His two natures who ascended and reigns in glory. His human nature/body changed or developed in that it was glorified, supernaturalized and immortalized (as will be ours by His grace), but it did not change in essence, for He is still of the same substance as we in His humanity. In fact He is the Man of prayer—He ever lives to make intercession for us.

Our hope to be in and with Him in glory with a body like unto His glorious body is wholly dependent upon

Him remaining as we are, possessing a full, perfected humanity, for it is within that humanity that we are and shall be enclosed so that we are assured of eternal life and everlasting bliss. We shall behold the glory of the Father in the face of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son, and serve Him unceasingly.

A very biblical way to speak of the life of the incarnate Word in heaven and on earth is in terms of sonship. Here we may benefit from the insight of Dr. Austin Farrer:

We cannot understand Jesus as simply the God-who-was-man. We have left out an essential factor, the sonship. Jesus is not simply God manifest as man; he is the divine Son coming into manhood. What was expressed in human terms here below was not bare deity; it was divine sonship. God cannot live an identically godlike life in eternity and in a human story. But the divine Son can make an identical response to the Father, whether in the love of the blessed Trinity or in the fulfillment of an earthly ministry. All the conditions of actions are different on the two levels: the filial response is one. Above, the appropriate response is a cooperation in sovereignty and an interchange of eternal joys. Then the Son gives back to the Father all that the Father is. Below, in the incarnate life, the appropriate response is an obedience to inspiration, a waiting for direction, an acceptance of suffering, a rectitude of choice, a resistance to temptation, a willingness to die. For such things are the stuff of our existence; and it was in this very stuff that Christ worked out the theme of heavenly sonship, proving himself on earth the very thing he was in heaven; that is, a continual act of filial love (*The Brink of Mystery* [London: SPCK, 1976], 20).

Because Jesus is the Son and because by the grace of God believers are united to this Son, they share in His filial relation to the Father. They are adopted as sons of God and they are given the gift of the indwelling Spirit of the Father

and the Son and thus they are enabled truly to pray, "Our Father . . ." They live in sonship in hope of the resurrection of the dead, the redemption of their bodies and the experience of the fullness of sonship in heaven with the incarnate Son Himself.

Author

Peter Toon (D.Phil., Oxford) was ordained in the Church of England in 1973, is the author of more than twenty books and is the president of the Prayer Book Society of the Episcopal Church, U.S.A. This is his first contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

For Further Reading

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- H. R. Percival, *The Seven Ecumenical Councils of the Undivided Church*. Vol. 14 of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd series (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publications, 1994).
- N. F. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990).