

The Reality of His Humanity



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gal. 4:4; 1 Tim. 2:5; 3:16; Heb. 4:15, 16; 1 John 4:1–3.*

Memory Text: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (*John 1:14, NIV*).

In the New Testament, without any rationalistic explanations whatsoever, Jesus Christ is presented as both human and Divine. After beginning his Gospel with the Word who is God (*John 1:1*), John makes the extraordinary declaration that this same Word, this same God, “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (*vs. 14, NIV*). And perhaps anticipating future concerns about moral contamination, the New Testament maintains the sinless life of Jesus with unequivocal consistency (*Heb. 7:26, 1 Pet. 2:22*). Moreover, the writers of the New Testament matter-of-factly regard Jesus as a proper object of worship and veneration (*Acts 7:59, Rom. 9:5, Heb. 1:6*). These earliest Christians were not detained by the philosophical problems inherent in the concept of the God-man or by the difficulties it would pose for later thinkers. “The humanity of the Son of God is everything to us. . . . When we approach this subject, we would do well to heed the words spoken by Christ to Moses at the burning bush, ‘Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground’ (*Exod. 3:5*). We should come to this study with the humility of a learner.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 244.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 19.*

In the Presence of Mystery (*1 Tim. 3:16*)

Last week's lesson spoke about the mystery of Christ's deity. But as we contemplate His humanity, we stand also in the presence of a profound mystery. As Paul expressed it: "Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He [Jesus] appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory" (*1 Tim. 3:16, NIV*).

One scholar makes the point that the claim that the founder of Christianity was Divine was not a big shock in the Roman world; after all, their emperors routinely claimed divinity. But the claim that "the Christian God was concerned about humanity; concerned enough to suffer in its behalf. This was unheard of."—Huston Smith, *The Illustrated World's Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986), p. 219. But however strange to the Greco-Roman world, that, precisely, was the testimony of the New Testament.

What do the following passages teach about this amazing condescension?

Matt. 1:18–24

Luke 1:26–35

John 1:1, 14

Gal. 4:4

Phil. 2:5–11

It is fascinating to watch the unstudied precision with which the New Testament writers approach the issue of Christ's humanity. Matter-of-fact and straightforward, they simply tell the story, with no knowledge (perhaps) of the firestorm that would follow in succeeding centuries. But it is precisely the absence of any posturing that helps give credibility to the documents that we have. It is not as if the earliest disciples faced no controversy in regard to the nature and identity of Jesus; they did, as we see in the New Testament itself. But their arguments in regard to Jesus' person clearly were not designed to counter the position of rationalistic or *scientific* opponents, which gives an unspoiled freshness to their witness. It was as though they argued their case out of surprise that anyone would dare to doubt the uncommon mystery that had affected them so dramatically, both corporately and personally.

Then There Was Conflict

As Christianity spread through the Greco-Roman world and moved into the second generation, people began to reflect on its basic message about Jesus' person, and to raise questions: How could Divinity and humanity cohabit the same body? How could Deity become mortal? What is Jesus' relationship to the Father? And so forth . . .

Beginning in the first century, two conflicting emphases emerged. One would stress Christ's humanity at the expense of His divinity; the other would do just the opposite. Among those denying Christ's deity were the Ebionites, early Jewish Christians who taught that Jesus became the Son of God only at His baptism, at which time He became united with the eternal Christ, a nondivine being who could not save humanity but came, instead, to call humanity to obedience. The Arians later would take up the struggle against Christ's divinity, beginning around the late third century, a position strongly condemned by the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325.

The heavyweights on the other side of the spectrum were the Gnostics, who taught that *spirit* was good and *matter* evil, particularly the matter that forms our body. Therefore, the human body could not serve as a vehicle for the revelation of the Supreme Being.

Study 1 John 4:1–3. In what way does John's concern relate to the Gnostic emphasis just described?

The controversy over who Jesus was raged for five solid centuries, from the second century all the way down to the sixth. At first it was over His deity. Was He God? And if so, how was He related to God the Father? The questions then shifted to His humanity, and to how Divinity and humanity were combined in a single person. There were statements and counterstatements, pronouncements and counterpronouncements, accusations and condemnations and excommunications, with one "ism" after another claiming the day. Incredibly, amid all the turmoil and controversy, biblical orthodoxy in respect to Jesus' essential nature and person ultimately prevailed. (See the quotation from the Creed of Chalcedon in Friday's lesson.)

What are some of the questions in the church today about the human nature of Christ? Why must we be careful not to let these questions divide us, as they often did the early church?

He Took Our Nature *(Gal. 4:4)*

Many of His contemporaries considered Jesus an unusual person, yet they each knew Him to be a human being, a man. When the Samaritan woman rushed to her village to spread the word about the unusual Jew she just had met at the well, her announcement was straightforward: “‘Come, see a man’” (*John 4:29, NIV*). Hers was the universal testimony of Jesus’ contemporaries. Even after He had calmed the storm, the exclamation of those closest to Him was, “‘What kind of man is this?’” (*Matt. 8:27, NIV*).

How do the following texts help support the fact that Jesus was a genuine human being of flesh and blood?

Matt. 8:24

Matt. 21:18

John 4:5, 6

John 4:7, 19:28

John 11:33–35

While on earth, Jesus voluntarily surrendered the *independent* exercise of the Divine attributes. He *surrendered*; He did not relinquish. The attributes remained in Him. He could have used them at any time for His own advantage, but He did not. The temptation to call on these attributes to extricate Himself from difficulty (in ways not open to us) was a major ingredient of His daily trials.

It is helpful to keep in mind that the Scriptures are not definitive on every point that stirs our interest. They make no overt attempt, for example, to spell out precisely how the human and Divine components of Jesus’ nature are related. But they make it clear that Christ was *one unified person*. They do not discuss the technicalities of this union, limiting themselves, rather, to the clear confession that such a union did occur, that the Son made of a woman was, indeed, the Son of God (*Gal. 4:4*). “Christ did not make-believe take human nature; He did verily take it. He did in reality possess human nature.”—Ellen G. White, *Lift Him Up*, p. 74.

Why is Christ’s humanity so important to us? What does it mean to us to know that Jesus became a human being? How does it encourage you to know that Jesus shared our human limitations?

To Feel Our Pain *(Heb. 4:15, 16)*

Why did God need to come into the world in human flesh? The question is important. But we should wean ourselves away from purely rational answers to it. It is not as if we need to come up with an answer that makes sense to us. There is no independent research we can do in philosophy, science, sociology, or whatever, that would lead us to an answer. Nor should we concoct our own answer. The safest way is to listen carefully to what the Bible itself reveals on this point. And in the book of Hebrews, we find some of the clearest, most intentional statements on the issue. Nor is it without significance that Hebrews also happens to be the book focusing most directly on Jesus' present high priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary.

Each of the following passages highlights one particular aspect of Jesus' coming in human flesh, then proceeds to answer the implied question: **Why did He do that? And in each case a reason for that particular aspect of His humiliation is given. What are those reasons?**

Heb. 2:9

Heb. 2:14, 15

Heb. 2:16, 17

Heb. 2:18

Heb. 4:14–16

Heb. 5:8, 9

Notice that in each case, the focus is on Jesus; and in each case, the benefit is for us. These inspired reasons for Jesus' humanity and suffering should be taken with utter seriousness. They should bring us immense joy to know that Jesus meets us in our need; His arms are open wide for us; He knows our plight because He has been here; *He has felt our pain*. Can we imagine a more merciful Savior, a more understanding and compassionate High Priest? Immense joy and profound gratitude wells up in the souls of those who know that He suffered all for us. Thus encouraged, we "approach the throne of grace with confidence" (*Heb. 4:16, NIV*), giving ourselves to Him in complete abandon.

What trials are you encountering at the moment? How does it help you to know that Jesus feels and understands your pain?

An Eternal Solidarity (1 Tim. 2:5)

When we imagine the huge difference between God and ourselves, it is astounding to think that God would reach out to us by condescending to take on human flesh. But after He was done, most of us would have been content for Him to abandon His affinity with us and return fully to what He was before. However—and this absolutely astounds us—we learn that Jesus will forever remain in solidarity with us by retaining our nature!

Consider the implications of the following passages in regard to Jesus' eternal solidarity with us:

Luke 24:36–43

Acts 1:10, 11

Acts 17:31

1 Tim. 2:5

“By His life and His death, Christ has achieved even more than recovery from the ruin wrought through sin. It was Satan’s purpose to bring about an eternal separation between God and man; but in Christ we become more closely united to God than if we had never fallen. In taking our nature, the Saviour has bound Himself to humanity by a tie that is never to be broken. Through the eternal ages He is linked with us. ‘God so loved the world . . .’ He gave Him not only to bear our sins, and to die as our sacrifice; He gave Him to the fallen race. To assure us of His immutable counsel of peace, God gave His only-begotten Son to become one of the human family, forever to retain His human nature. . . . God has adopted human nature in the person of His Son, and has carried the same into the highest heaven. It is the ‘Son of man’ who shares the throne of the universe.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 25. “Christ ascended to heaven, bearing a sanctified, holy humanity. He took this humanity with Him into the heavenly courts, and through the eternal ages He will bear it, as the One who has redeemed every human being in the city of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1054.

A friend of yours, hearing about Jesus' eternal solidarity with us, says, “That is going too far. It is too much!” What would you say to that person? And how do you feel about the fact He will be like us for eternity? However incredible a concept, what does it tell us about God’s love for humanity?

Further Study: In the centuries-old controversy over the person of Jesus, the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) marked a significant milestone. Essentially, it agreed and proclaimed that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man: “. . . we all with one voice teach that . . . our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same God, the Same perfect in Godhead, the Same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, . . . [one] with the Father as to his Godhead, and . . . [one] with us as to his manhood; in all things like unto us, sin only excepted.”—Cited in Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), p. 390. For an assessment of the implications of the Chalcedon statement from an Adventist perspective, see Roy Adams, *The Nature of Christ* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 1994), pp. 57–72.

“In contemplating the incarnation of Christ in humanity, we stand baffled before an unfathomable mystery. . . . The more we reflect upon it, the more amazing does it appear. How wide is the contrast between the divinity of Christ and the helpless infant in Bethlehem’s manger! How can we span the distance between the mighty God and a helpless child? And yet the Creator of worlds, He in whom was the fullness of the Godhead bodily, was manifest in the helpless babe in the manger. Far higher than any of the angels, equal with the Father in dignity and glory, and yet wearing the garb of humanity! Divinity and humanity were mysteriously combined, and man and God became one. It is in this union that we find the hope of our fallen race.”—Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, July 30, 1896.

Discussion Questions:

- 1** What for you are the big issues surrounding Christ’s humanity? Why are they important for you? At the same time, why must we be careful not to be too harsh or dogmatic about the finer points of Christ’s humanity?
- 2** Ellen G. White says that Christ’s humanity is everything to us (*see Selected Messages, vol. 1, p. 244*). What did she mean? In what practical ways does the idea of Christ’s humanity affect you in your Christian walk?
- 3** How might we use what we have studied in this week’s lesson in our personal witness? How does the reality of Christ’s humanity touch people where they live today?

The Woman Who Didn't Like God

by HEIDEMARIE KLINGEBERG

On a snowy March day in Germany, a woman who had not liked God was baptized into the Adventist Church.

"I thought Christians were weak people who could not manage their lives by themselves," Ute testified. "Then I met my neighbor Frank. He manages his life and a demanding job quite well. One day he invited my children to join Pathfinders at his church. 'They will learn a lot of useful things, and it will be good for them,'" Frank said.

"*Why not?* I thought. My youngest daughter joined Pathfinders and really enjoyed it.

"Frank invited me to attend a Pathfinders reception in the church. I wasn't so sure I wanted to meet these strange people, but I decided to go in spite of my concerns.

"I entered the church with mixed feelings and looked around the sanctuary. It was so simple, not as I had expected. And the pastor seemed normal and friendly.

"I liked the people I met that day. They were not weird at all. I started attending church and had to admit that I really enjoyed it. The warmth and love the people showed me made me feel accepted and loved. Each week I took part with greater enthusiasm and commitment in the worship at the Adventist Church. I was growing spiritually.

"I began reading the Bible for myself, starting with the Old Testament. But that was too hard. I went on the Internet and searched for something in German to help me understand the Bible better. There I discovered the Voice of Hope Bible correspondence course. I enrolled, and I began completing the Bible study guides with growing enthusiasm. Studying the Bible became almost an addiction! My coach encouraged me when I got stuck and answered my frequent questions.

"I have learned so much from the Bible studies, and my life has changed a great deal. I have discovered that the Bible gives me what I call operating instructions for my daily life, and from studying God's 'manual,' I get great joy. I have discovered that I have a loving heavenly Father who will help me through life's bumps.

"I sealed my commitment to God through baptism and started a new life. My sorrows are not all gone, but Jesus goes with me into battle and has promised never to leave me. I have seen Him work out several problems already.

"The future may not be easy, but I am confident in spite of problems, for Jesus and my new brothers and sisters in Christ are beside me."

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