

The Humanity of Jesus Christ

F.F. Bruce*

[p.5]

‘Jesus: the man who fits no formula’, is the title of one of the chapters in Eduard Schweizer’s recently published book *Jesus*:¹ the same words will serve admirably as a motto for what I have to say.

If Godhead is to be revealed in the created order, it will be revealed most adequately in manhood, since man was created in the image of God. It is fitting, then, that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Divine Word who became flesh, should in His one person be both altogether God and altogether man—not something betwixt and between as so many, from Arius (and before Arius) to Jehovah’s Witnesses, have supposed. The more, then, we emphasize our Lord’s real humanity, the more we do justice to His true nature, for it is in that real humanity—in it, and not merely *through* it that we see the Godhead shine.

I

My instructions are to deal with the biblical teaching about our Lord’s humanity, but to bear in mind, as I do so, the imbalances that need to be corrected in Brethren tradition. This can most easily be done if, before I survey the biblical evidence, I present some prolegomena—prolegomena which, I fear, will absorb the greater part of my time. What emerges from these prolegomena is this: a weakness on the doctrine of our Lord’s humanity, verging at times on Docetism, has been endemic in certain phases of the Brethren movement.

The reason for this is that, almost at the outset of the movement, Brethren found themselves involved in debates on the Person of Christ of a kind which, more especially among the rank and file, caused any emphasis on His normal manhood to be almost suspect.

The trouble, I think, really goes back to Edward Irving (1792-1834). Irving, who was a leading participant in the Albury Park conferences (1826-30) and visited Lady Powerscourt at Powerscourt Castle in September 1830, published in the latter year his work on *The Orthodox and Catholic Doctrine of our Lord’s Human Nature*, in which he promulgated views which he had already ventilated in his preaching, and which led, three years later, to his conviction for heresy by the Presbytery of Annan and his expulsion from the ministry of the Church of Scotland. In his own words:

The point at issue is simply this: whether Christ’s flesh had the grace of sinlessness and incorruption from its proper nature, or from the indwelling of the Holy Ghost. I say the latter. I assert, that in its proper nature it was as the flesh of His Mother, but, by virtue of the Holy Ghost’s quickening and inhabiting of it, it was preserved sinless and incorruptible.²

[p.6]

* Professor F. F. Bruce is Rylands Professor of Biblical Criticism and Exegesis at Manchester University.

¹ E. Schweizer, *Jesus*, E.T. (1971), chapter ii (pp. 13 ff.).

² E. Irving, *Doctrine of the Incarnation Opened* (1830), Preface, in *Collected Writings*, V (1865), p. 4

In other words, since it was fallen human nature that needed to be redeemed, it was fallen human nature that Christ assumed. As Dr. H. C. Whitley paraphrases Irving's argument, 'the deliverer must go into the prison-house where the captives were held, and be Himself a prisoner, so that by His own escape He might open the prison-door for His brethren'.³

Because of Irving's popularity as a preacher, his views received wide currency, and called forth several rebuttals. The leaders of the Brethren movement probably felt themselves under a special obligation to rebut them, because Irving, like them, was intensely interested in unfulfilled prophecy and because—also, but not likewise!—he aimed at the restoration of apostolic church order.

One such rebuttal of Irving's views, entitled 'Doctrines of the Church in Newman Street, considered', was contributed by B. W. Newton in 1835 to the second volume of *The Christian Witness*, and amplified by him in a second edition of the volume. (It was to Newman Street, London, that Irving and his followers moved in October, 1832, five months after his deposition from the ministry of Regent Square Church.) In the course of his rebuttal of Irvingism, Newton endeavoured to set forth a more biblical account of the human nature of Christ by exploring its relation to the 'federal headship' of Adam. Newton stood in that Reformed tradition which maintained the 'covenant theology' of Johannes Cocceius and other early seventeenth-century theologians (including the Westminster Divines). According to this school of thought, God, upon creating Adam, entered into a 'covenant of works' with him, a covenant which was conditional on Adam's perfect obedience. When Adam broke the covenant by eating from the forbidden tree, he incurred suffering and death not only for himself but for his descendants: since he was their 'covenant head' or 'federal head', his sin was imputed to them, and they reaped its fruit. Along these lines Rom. 5: 12-21 was interpreted. Now, Christ was undoubtedly ('according to the flesh') a descendant of Adam, and while Newton repudiated Irving's view that Christ accordingly inherited a sinful nature, he suggested that it was because of His *federal* relationship to Adam that He inherited such side-effects of the fall as 'hunger, thirst, weariness, sorrow, etc.', together with 'the being possessed of a mortal body'. Some years later he repudiated this view in favour of one which accounted for Christ's suffering such ills as flesh is heir to 'in virtue of His having been made of a woman'. He realized that the view he had previously expressed might be thought to imply the corollary that Adam's sin was imputed to Christ just as (in terms of covenant theology) it was imputed to every other member of the human family, so he not only repudiated it as an exegetical error but (so sensitive was his theological conscience) confessed it as a sin, for which he sought the Lord's pardon.⁴

In other papers Newton gave further consideration to the subject of Christ's sufferings during His life ('non-atoning' sufferings, as he reckoned them) by expounding some of the 'individual laments' in the Psalter in a christological sense. It was notes of such an exposition of Psalm 6 that provided the immediate occasion for the doctrinal controversy at Plymouth in 1845-47 which split the Brethren movement.⁵

³ H. C. Whitley, *Blinded Eagle* (1955), p. 90.

⁴ Newton's *Statement and Acknowledgment respecting certain Doctrinal Errors* (1847) is conveniently reproduced as Appendix B in F. R. Coad, *A History of the Brethren Movement* (1968), pp. 292 ff. It is surprising that W. B. Neatby was unable to procure a copy of 'this important tract', as he justly calls it in *A History of the Plymouth Brethren* (1901), p. 344. It contains salient quotations from Newton's *Christian Witness* article of 1835.

⁵ Cf. Neatby, *op. cit.*, pp. 130 ff.

[p.7]

We can see, more easily than our predecessors could at that time, that much of the trouble arose from mistaken principles of Old Testament exegesis. It is an instance of the irony of history that J. N. Darby, who led the attack against Newton, ran into trouble himself twelve years later because of papers on 'The Sufferings of Christ' contributed to *The Bible Treasury* in 1858 and 1859.⁶ Here he distinguished, in addition to Christ's ill-treatment at the hands of men and the atoning sufferings endured vicariously on men's behalf (the 'cup' which His Father gave him to drink), a third category, endured under the 'governmental' dealing of God when He 'entered in heart into the indignation and wrath that lay on Israel', in sympathy with the righteous remnant of the end-time. Here also the psalms of individual lament were brought into play. While Psalm 22 was (naturally) expounded in relation to Christ's atoning sufferings on the cross, Psalms 69 and 102 were related to the third category of sufferings.⁷ While this thesis was not identical with Newton's, both were based on mistaken exegesis,⁸ and some of Darby's most faithful followers saw little to choose between the two, since both implied that Christ endured divine wrath otherwise than vicariously and by way of atonement.

To revert to the Plymouth controversy, one of its effects was the growth of a morbid scrupulosity about the use of certain time-honoured language concerning our Lord's manhood, arising from fear lest the terrible stigma of Newtonianism should be incurred. Newton, for example, had spoken of our Lord's body as 'mortal', in the perfectly proper sense of its being 'capable of dying'. The application of the epithet to Christ in manhood had well-known orthodox precedent, as, for example, in Isaac Watts' lines:

Arrayed in mortal flesh
The Covenant Angel stands—

or:

Down from the shining heights above
In joyful haste he sped,
Entered the grave in mortal flesh
And dwelt among the dead.

But Newton's use of the word was chalked up against him as heresy. In 1850, replying to this misrepresentation, he appealed to its common use in a hymn by J. G. Deck which had been freely sung by the Brethren ever since its composition about 1837:

Such was Thy grace that, for our sake,
Thou didst from heaven come down;
Our mortal flesh and blood partake,
In all our misery one.

Here was a to-do, to be sure! The unfortunate hymn-writer had to wear a white sheet in public. On November 14, 1850, Deck issued a *Confession of a Verbal Error in a Hymn*. He admitted that the offending word had been 'long used by godly brethren without

⁶ Reproduced, in a revised edition, in J. N. Darby, *Collected Writings* VII, pp. 212-361.

⁷ *Collected Writings* VII, pp. 240, 273 n., 306; cf. the exposition of Ps. 102 in Darby's *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible* II, pp. 212 f.

⁸ For another example of this mistaken principle of exegesis—mistaken, for all the noble precedent it could claim—cf. S. P. Tregelles's difficulty in interpreting Ps. 119: 67, 176, as the words of Christ, described by himself in *Three Letters to the Author of 'A Retrospect of Events that have taken place among the Brethren'* (2nd edition, 1894), pp. 53 ff.

consciousness of evil' and explained that he meant no more than 'capable of death'—which no one doubted. But since Newton's use of the word had been pronounced heretical, it was thenceforth taboo among Brethren who valued their reputation for 'soundness'. Deck's hymn had to be altered, and was weakened in the

[p.8]

process: the new form of the line in question—'With us of flesh and blood partake'—was but a pale reflection of the original.⁹ If the term 'mortal' became taboo among Brethren, however, Newton's cousin and champion, S. P. Tregelles, reacted vigorously by making willingness to use it a test of orthodoxy: its deliberate avoidance, in his eyes, was a sign of Docetism.¹⁰

In October 1848 Henry Craik was severely criticised by G. V. Wigram for using language about our Lord's humanity which, while not including the taboo word, emphasized that 'He was in all things made like unto His brethren, sin only excepted; that the flesh which He assumed was the flesh and blood of the children; that the physical or chemical properties of His body were the same as ours'. The 'necessary inference' from his critics strictures, he said, 'would be, that the Blessed One did not take our flesh, but flesh and blood essentially different from ours'.¹¹

Darby knew very well that there was nothing heretical in what Craik had written, and is reported to have said that, when he received Wigram's criticisms of Craik, he put them at the back of the file. He must have seen, moreover, the docetic direction in which Wigram's arguments tended. But for purposes of ecclesiastical politics Wigram was too useful a henchman to be disowned.

One symptom of this docetic tendency appears in the description of our Lord's manhood as 'heavenly humanity', found in the works of C. H. Mackintosh and others.¹² In His present

⁹ Cf. S. P. Tregelles, *Five Letters to the Editor of 'The Record' on Recent Denials of our Lord's Vicarious Life* (2nd edition, 1864), pp. 29 f. The amended line stands as quoted in *Hymns for the Little Flock* (3rd edition, 1903), No. 327, *Hymns for Christian Worship*, No. 328, and *Hymns of Light and Love*, No. 70. The wiser path was perhaps followed in *The Believers' Hymn Book*, No. 128, which omits the controversial stanza. One might have thought that objection would have been taken to the word 'confessed' in the couplet

'Our sins, our guilt, in love divine,
Confessed and borne by Thee'

but evidently not.

¹⁰ 'The orthodox word "mortal" has become a kind of keynote. Let it be observed, that no one professing to be a *teacher* can be accepted as sound in connection with our Lord's spotless and vicarious life of obedience, who does not, without hesitation or equivocation, avow his acceptance of this term, as used habitually by sound Christians. He who *rejects* it, cannot *really* hold the incarnation of our Lord, that He took the same flesh and blood as His brethren: he must hold some part at least of the false doctrine of the "heavenly humanity" ' (*Five Letters*, p. 30). This was carrying the war into the enemy's camp with a vengeance!

¹¹ Cf. Heb. 2: 14 ff.; 4: 15. In the issue of *Pastoral Letters* which Wigram attacked, Craik allegorized the 'shittim' (acacia) wood, of which the ark of the covenant was made, in terms of our Lord's humanity, linking it with the words of Isa. 53: 2, 'a root out of a dry ground'. See Neatby's account of the matter (*op. cit.*, pp. 165 ff.).

¹² See C. H. Mackintosh, *Notes on the Book of Leviticus* (2nd edition, 1861, pp. 28 ff.) (the exposition of the meal offering of Lev. 2: 1 ff. in terms of our Lord's humanity), especially pp. 35-38. Some unguarded expressions in the first edition (1860), which I have not seen, were removed or modified in the second edition. So unprejudiced a critic as Horatius Bonar, in the *Quarterly Journal of Prophecy* (which he edited), charged him with Valentinianism! But this was absurd for, in spite of the imprecision of his devotional style, Mackintosh on p. 37 made it plain that our Lord had 'a real human body—real "flesh and blood".' Darby, while finding

exaltation He does indeed wear a heavenly humanity,¹³ but if the expression is used of the manhood of the historical Jesus, the natural conclusion would be that His humanity and ours were different.

As quoted by W. B. Neatby, F. E. Raven used this expression in a context which makes its docetic intention plain. He remarked that one of his critics, Gladwell by name, appeared to be 'in great ignorance of the true moral character of Christ's humanity. He did not get that character by being born of a woman, though that was the way by which He took man's form, but Manhood in Him takes its character from what He ever was divinely. "The Word became flesh". He does not seem to me to have any idea of a real heavenly humanity'. These words, as Neatby says, are unintelligible unless they mean 'that Christ was not man of the substance of His mother, but that He derived from her only the outward form of a man. It is hard to distinguish this from the doctrine that He was man in semblance only'.¹⁴

Raven's critics charged him with Apollinarianism—the doctrine (condemned at Constantinople in A.D. 381) that in our Lord's incarnate being the Divine Logos took the place that in other men is taken by the rational mind and spirit. Whether this is the proper label to attach to him is doubtful, because of the cloudiness of his language on this subject (as on many others). But he manifestly did not believe in our Lord's *personal* humanity and would not subscribe to the affirmation of the Athanasian Creed that 'God and man is one Christ'. When someone, at a discussion meeting in 1895, quoted Darby's comment on Col. 1: 15f. ('We say, Christ is God, Christ is man; but it is Christ who is the two'),¹⁵ Raven replied, 'Yes; but you must be careful how you take-up an expression like that. In Person He is God; in condition He is Man'. And again: 'Unity is not a

[p.9]

happy word as applied to the Lord. The teaching of Scripture is incarnation'.¹⁶ Raven was repeatedly urged to make his meaning plain, but on no occasion (so far as I am aware) did he make an unambiguous statement of our Lord's perfect and unimpaired manhood, although it would have been easy for him to do so, had he been so minded. On the contrary, when, in the course of the same conversations, someone referred to man as comprising body, soul and spirit, and asked if this was true of our Lord—you do not contend against His manhood?—Raven replied: 'No; but you might be near error there. You get on dangerous ground in applying such things to the Lord. He is a divine Person in manhood'.¹⁷

Raven's christological eccentricity provoked a healthy reaction in the group which in 1890 withdrew from association with him, the Lowe party, which united in 1926 with the Kelly

Mackintosh's occasional expression 'objectionable' (and rightly so), wrote trenchantly in his defence (*Collected Writings* X, pp. 49 ff.).

¹³ The 'heavenly man' or 'man of heaven', whose image believers are to wear (1 Cor. 15: 49), is Christ in His resurrection life. This is the reference also of 1 Cor. 15: 47, the second man is (the Lord) from heaven', which Mackintosh (*op. cit.*, p. 35) seems to apply to our Lord's earthly existence.

¹⁴ Neatby, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

¹⁵ Darby, *Synopsis* V, p. 16. On our Lord's personal humanity Darby expressed himself wisely: 'the simple faith that Jesus was God and man in one person can be easily accepted as plain and vital truth, but the moment you deny personality in the man Christ Jesus you run into a thousand difficulties and errors. What is really denied is Christ's individuality as a man' (*Collected Writings* XXIX, p. 322).

¹⁶ *Notes of Addresses and Readings at Quemerford* (1895), pp. 132 f.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 135. N. F. Noel quotes him as saying, 'Where the unity of the Person is got from, I know not. It seems to me perfect nonsense' (*The History of the Brethren* [1936], p. 511).

party. William Kelly's followers (who had separated from the main stream of Darbyism in 1881) were fortunate in having as their leader a master of biblical and historical theology who held intelligently to the Chalcedonian definition of our Lord's person¹⁸ and taught his disciples accordingly. Several years ago, in conversation with the late John Weston, a well-known leader in the Lowe-Kelly party, I mentioned that Apollinarianism was the besetting heresy of evangelical Christians. He expressed interest in my opinion, but added, 'Not among us.' But what could happen in the Raven succession was shown in 1927, when James Boyd of Brighouse, Yorkshire, not a 'Taylorite' but a 'Glanton' brother, published a pamphlet on *The Incarnation of the Son* in which he said, 'That the Son was the spirit of His own body I have not the slightest question... The assertion that Christ has a *human* soul and spirit is in principle a denial of the incarnation of the Son'.¹⁹ These statements were made in a polemical context, and when the good man realized the furore which they created he withdrew them, but plainly he could not see what was wrong with them. It is better to remember Mr. Boyd gratefully as the author of the beautiful communion hymn, 'O teach us, Lord, Thy searchless love to know',²⁰ than as one who inadvertently perpetrated a doctrinal deviation which occasioned a minor ecclesiastical cleavage.²¹

The fact is that, in certain strands of Brethrenism where the issues have not been clearly faced, views subversive of our Lord's manhood find a measure of acquiescence such as would never be extended to views subversive of His deity. Have you, for example, ever come across in Brethren circles the Valentinian view that from conception to birth our Lord passed through the body of His mother 'like water through a pipe', deriving no part of His humanity from her?²² I have met it—not, of course, in a responsible teacher but in a local leader whose expression of opinion was regarded by some of his followers as doing honour to Christ. Writing in 1901, W. B. Neatby said, 'A year or two ago I heard an address from a Brother of the Open Section, who actually taught that Christ did not die from crucifixion, but by a mere miraculous act. The good man was certainly not a responsible teacher, nor did I ever know a man of weight to set Holy Scripture aside with quite so much definiteness and completeness; but I have heard much that glanced in the same direction'.²³ And so have I, and probably you have too. Our Lord's statement, 'No one takes it [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord' (John 10: 18) must

[p.10]

be taken along with other New Testament passages which state explicitly that His enemies 'killed' Him (e.g. Acts 2: 23; 10: 39; 1 Thess. 2: 15, etc.). To deny the reality of His death is

¹⁸ For this definition, adopted at the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451), see my *The Spreading Flame* (1958), p. 313.

¹⁹ J. Boyd, *The Incarnation of the Son* (1927), pp. 14 f. In an open letter dated March 28, 1927, he said the pamphlet should have ended with p. 13, and took the 'opportunity of withdrawing the passage referred to as extraneous to the main question'.

²⁰ *Hymns for the Little Flock* (1903), No. 350.

²¹ The 'West Philadelphia Cleavage' (Noel, *History*, pp. 410 ff.).

²² Cf. the summary and scriptural refutation of the Valentinian doctrine in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* i. 7. 2; iii. 16. The doctrine is sometimes called Melchiorite, after the Anabaptist Melchior Hoffmann (d. 1542).

²³ Neatby, *op. cit.*, p. 170.

an ancient form of Docetism (represented in some apocryphal Gospels²⁴ and later in the *Qur'an*),²⁵ against which John the evangelist had to polemicize as early as the first century.²⁶

Or we may think of the disapproval visited even today on those who interpret our Lord's temptations realistically²⁷ or take at face value His words which place limits to His knowledge. I remember the criticism voiced about forty years ago by William Hoste in *The Believer's Magazine* of a statement about our Lord in C. F. Hogg's pamphlet, *The Traditions and the Deposit*: 'What He did not know, He knew that He did not know'.²⁸ Mr. Hogg's statement was based on our Lord's own unambiguous language in Mark 13: 32 (=Matt. 24: 36). But Mr. Hoste may well have been particularly sensitive in this regard, because the interpretation of Mark 13: 32 figured in the 1923-24 controversy over Theodore Roberts' alleged unorthodoxy, in which Mr. Hoste had played a leading part.²⁹

In my youth I remember the holy horror expressed by a ministering brother because someone else had, in an address, taken for granted that our Lord in His boyhood went to school. The very idea that He should have had to learn His letters from a human teacher was judged an intolerable aspersion on His perfect knowledge: 'He owed nothing to earth', said the speaker. As I listened to him, I felt glad that Luke stated expressly that 'Jesus *increased in wisdom*' as well as 'in stature' (Luke 2: 52), for I suspected that, if one of our own contemporaries had made such a statement on his own initiative, the speaker would have been horrified at him too. Our Lord's deity is not enhanced when men, thinking to do Him honour, detract from the completeness of His manhood.

II

We turn now to the biblical evidence, and it will be convenient to consider the main divisions of the New Testament one by one.

The Synoptic Gospels and Acts. While the Synoptic Gospels and Acts, like all the New Testament documents, are written from a 'post-Easter' perspective, yet they preserve a clear impression of the historical Jesus—Jesus as He was known to his associates and others during His Palestinian ministry. While full justice is done, especially by Mark, to His being the Son

²⁴ Compare what is said below about the *Gospel of Peter*. Basilides is said to have taught that Simon of Cyrene was crucified in Jesus' place, while Jesus stood by wearing Simon's form (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* i. 24. 4).

²⁵ Sura 4: 156 ('they did not kill him, neither did they crucify him; he was made a semblance to them'). By an unhappy accident, Muhammad apparently derived his knowledge of the gospel story from a docetic source.

²⁶ John 19: 34 f.

²⁷ As witness some reactions to G. F. Hawthorne's note on Heb. 4: 15 in *A New Testament Commentary*, ed. G. C. D. Howley (1969), p. 547.

²⁸ *The Traditions and the Deposit* (n.d.), p. 4. The edition which evoked Mr. Hoste's critical review was published by Pickering and Inglis; it was a reprint of a pamphlet originally issued by so orthodox a body as the Bible League. It is to this earlier issue (I think) that reference is made by T. Roberts in *The Word became Flesh* (1924), p. 6, where he points out that Mr. Hogg used 'our Lord's assertion that He did not know the time of His Second Advent as proof of His infallibility where He claims to know'.

²⁹ See *The Doctrine of Christ* (1924), a document signed by thirteen brethren, criticizing T. Roberts' teaching on biblical inerrancy and on the person of Christ. Controversy on the latter issue was sparked off by a letter to *The Christian* early in 1923 in which Mr. Roberts wrote, with reference to Mark 13: 32, of 'our Lord's plainly stated ignorance of the date of His second advent'. That Mr. Hogg did not agree with the thirteen signatories to *The Doctrine of Christ* (one of whom was Mr. Hoste) is evident from an open letter of his, dated July 17, 1924, in which he reported that at an interview 'what Mr. Roberts put before us seemed to me an explicit acknowledgment of the true, essential and unchangeable Deity of Christ'.

of God,³⁰ His real manhood is axiomatic for all three writers: it is assumed rather than asserted. The disciples realized, indeed, that He was no ordinary man: 'Who then is this?' they exclaimed in amazement when He awoke and stilled the tempest (Mark 4: 41)—but they knew that the one who, a few minutes earlier, had been lying asleep with His head on a cushion, was a real man, whatever else might be said of Him. Two of the Synoptic evangelists give some account of His birth, which was perfectly natural—it was His conception that was supernatural. The same two evangelists trace His ancestry back through many generations: Matthew back through David to Abraham (Matt. 1: 1 ff.), Luke back through David to Adam (Luke 3: 23-38). All three writers refer to His family relationships; and none leaves any doubt about the reality of His death. After His resurrection and exaltation He is described in the apostles' preaching as 'a

[p.11]

man (*aner*) attested... by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him' (Acts 2: 22), as the 'man' (*anēr*) appointed by God to be the future judge of living and dead (Acts 17: 31), and His descent from David is repeatedly emphasized (Acts 2: 30 f.; 13: 23). If I have not adduced the designation 'the Son of Man' in this connexion, that is because this phrase does not primarily connote His humanity but rather His identity with a figure of Old Testament prophecy and apocalyptic who is exalted after humiliation. Even so, in so far as it comes to mean 'the representative man' or 'the Proper Man whom God Himself hath bidden', it is not without its relevance here.

The Pauline Corpus. More important is the testimony of Paul, whose words about no longer knowing Christ 'after the flesh' (2 Cor. 5: 16) are frequently taken to mean that he had no interest in the historical Jesus, concentrating exclusively on the now exalted Lord. What Paul is really contrasting in these words is his own former, pre-Christian attitude with his present attitude as a believer; his meaning is brought out well in the N.E.B. rendering: 'With us, therefore, worldly standards have ceased to count in our estimate of any man; even if once they counted in our understanding of Christ, they do so now no longer'. No one would dispute, indeed, that Paul was immediately and permanently conscious of Jesus as the exalted Lord, raised high above the universe (Phil. 2: 9-11; Eph. 1: 20-23), embodying the fulness of deity (Col. 2: 9), as he also identified Him with the Wisdom of God, the agent through whom all things were brought into being and maintained in being (1 Cor. 1: 24, 30; 8: 6 b; Col. 1: 15-17). Yet for Paul He who was the eternal Wisdom and the exalted Lord was personally continuous with the historical Jesus, true man, 'descended from David according to the flesh' (Rom. 1: 3), 'born of woman, born under the law' (Gal. 4: 4), who met His death upon a cross (Gal. 3: 1; Phil. 2: 8, etc.). In his death the death—blow was given to sin in the sphere of human nature where sin had usurped control, and redemption was procured for sinners. When, in the place where he teaches this most explicitly (Rom. 8: 3), Paul says that God sent 'his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh'—literally, 'in likeness of flesh of sin' (i.e. flesh which is dominated by sin)—the word 'likeness' modifies 'sin', not 'flesh'. His flesh was the same as ours, otherwise the death-blow given to sin in His death would not have broken its power in our lives; but His flesh—His human nature—was not dominated by sin, as ours is. (Perhaps it should be mentioned here that the similar phrase in Phil. 2: 7, 'being born *in the likeness of*

³⁰ Cf. Mark 1: 1. That Jesus is the Son of God is twice proclaimed from heaven (Mark 1: 11; 9: 7), but is for the most part concealed on earth until it is affirmed in Jesus' reply to the high priest (Mark 14: 62) and acknowledged at the climax of the passion narrative by the centurion (Mark 15: 39).

men', may be rather a rendering of the phrase 'one like a son of man' in Dan. 7: 13.)³¹ As 'first-begotten from the dead' (Col. 1: 18) Jesus is head of the new creation, but since the new creation comprises a new humanity, not a new order of divine beings, His own humanity persists in His risen life.

In the Pastoral Letters the one who was 'manifested in the flesh' (1 Tim. 3: 16) is the 'one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim. 2: 5), whose 'good confession' before Pontius Pilate provides an example and incentive to His followers to be faithful confessors in their turn (1 Tim. 6: 13 f.).

[p.12]

Hebrews. For the writer to the Hebrews, as for Paul, Jesus is the Son of God 'through whom also he made the worlds' (Heb. 1: 2) and is addressed in Old Testament scripture not only as 'Lord' (Heb. 1: 10) but actually as 'God' (Heb. 1: 8 f., twice); but there is no New Testament writer who more emphatically underlines the necessity of Jesus' humanity if there was to be any gospel for mankind. Since... the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death' He might 'deliver' them (Heb. 2: 14 f.). 'He had to be made like his brethren in every respect' if he was to be their effective high priest: 'it is not of angels that he takes hold; he takes hold of the descendants of Abraham'³² (Heb. 2: 16 f.). Far from being an impassive visitor from another realm, playing a set part on the world stage with Olympian detachment, He sympathizes with the weaknesses of His fellow-men and knows how best to help them, for 'he himself has suffered and been tempted'—tempted indeed 'in every respect... as we are, yet without sinning' (Heb. 2: 18; 4: 15). There is nothing impassive, there is everything that is warmly and appealingly human in the picture of one who poured out His soul in 'prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death', and 'learned obedience through what he suffered' (Heb. 5: 7 f.), who blazed the trail of faith and persevered to the end, enduring the cross and despising the shame, putting up with sinners' hostility so that His people, profiting by his example, need not 'grow weary or fainthearted' (Heb. 12: 2 f.).

The General Epistles. Of the General Epistles (apart from 1 John, which is considered below), the only one that contains material directly relevant to our subject is 1 Peter. In 1 Peter, as in the Pauline letters, Jesus is now the exalted one 'who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers subject to him' (1 Pet. 3: 22); yet He was 'put to death in the flesh' (1 Pet. 3: 18), enduring unjust suffering uncomplainingly on His people's behalf, that they might learn by His example and follow His steps (1 Pet. 2: 21). The writer claims to be a witness of the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet. 5: 1), and there is much in his language about those sufferings which bears out this claim, even if the language be largely indebted to the fourth Isaianic Servant Song (so especially in 1 Pet. 2: 22-25). Christ's sufferings and death were real: on their reality their redemptive and exemplary efficacy depends.

The Johannine Writings. The Apocalypse may be passed over briefly, since it concentrates on the exalted Christ to such a degree that it contributes but little to our purpose. Yet the exalted Christ is pictured, *inter alia*, as the Lamb that was slain (Rev. 5: 6 ff.), and the repeated

³¹ This may be said also of the phrase 'being found in human form' in Phil. 2: 8a

³² The RSV rendering, 'it is not with angels that he is concerned but with the descendants of Abraham', is too weak; the verb is that found in the phrase 'I took them by the hand' in Heb. 8: 9.

references to the redeeming and cleansing virtue of 'the blood of the Lamb' (Rev. 5: 9; 7: 14; 12: 11) leave us in no doubt that His present exaltation is the consequence of His humiliation and death. If His followers win their victory through being faithful unto death, it is because He won His thus and has shown them the way.

But the Johannine Gospel and first two epistles are quite outstandingly germane to our theme. The evangelist who expounds so eloquently the divine character of the eternal Logos who was manifested on earth in Jesus Christ set his face uncompromisingly against docetic tendencies in the

[p.13]

church of his day and made as sure as he could that no docetic inferences should be drawn from his exposition. (If, nevertheless, such inferences have been drawn, the fault is not his.)³³ He does not content himself with saying that the Logos assumed manhood: in the most positive terms he affirms that the Logos 'became flesh' (John 1: 14). This affirmation cut at the root of the dualist presupposition that the spiritual and the material orders were too incompatible to be congenially associated. The incarnate Logos, moreover, according to John, was capable of weariness, thirst and grief, and died as only men can die. John will not allow that there was anything unreal about the death of Jesus: the solemn eyewitness testimony to the effusion of blood and water which followed the piercing of His side with the soldier's lance (John 19: 34 f.) is adduced in order to emphasize, against much contemporary docetic speculation, that He really died.

So essential, indeed, is Jesus' true manhood to the authentic gospel that in John's first epistle the confession of this is a criterion of membership in the family of God (1 John 4: 2; 5: 1), while its denial is a mark of the spirit of antichrist (1 John 4: 3; cf. 2 John 7). Some Docetists might hold, as Cerinthus apparently did, that the Christ-spirit came upon the man Jesus at his baptism but left him before his passion. In the Gospel of Peter the cry of dereliction is reinterpreted in this sense: 'My power, my power, thou hast left me!' But to all this speculation John says No: 'This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and with the blood' (1 John 5: 6). If the one who was baptized was the Son of God, as the heavenly acclamation confirmed (cf. John 1: 32-34), the one who died was equally the Son of God. And the witness of the blood attests that, as the Son of God's manhood was real, so was His death.

The gospel of our salvation depends upon the genuineness of our Lord's humanity, and so does the value of His life as an example for His people to follow. The power of that example is weakened if we can say, in extenuation of our own failure, 'It was different, or easier, for Him'. Only as He presents himself to us as perfect man can we in turn be validly encouraged to grow up, not only individually but corporately, 'to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ' (Eph. 4: 13).

'A Saviour *not* quite God', said Bishop Handley Moule, 'is a bridge broken at the farther end'.³⁴ With equal truth it must be said that a Saviour—and an Exemplar—*not quite man* is a bridge broken at the nearer end. 'The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ,

³³ Our Lord's words in John 4: 32, 'I have food to eat of which you do not know' (viz. the doing of the Father's will and accomplishment of His work), do not mean that he was immune from physical hunger.

³⁴ H. C. G. Moule, Prefatory Note to Sir R. Anderson, *The Lord from Heaven* (1910), p. vi.

who, being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was, and continueth to be, God and man in two distinct natures, and one person, for ever'.³⁵

© 1973 *Partnership*. Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in May 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

³⁵ *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (1647), Answer to Question 21.