"The Humanity and Divinity of Jesus"

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This paper, written at the beginning of the second term of Davis's course Christian Theology for Today, indicates King's estrangement from the conservative Baptist theology he learned as a child. As he had done in his earlier outline of William Newton Clarke's An Outline of Christian Theology, King dismisses the conception of an inherent divinity in Jesus and concludes: "The true significance of the divinity of Christ lies in the fact that his achievement is prophetic and promissory for every other true son of man who is willing to submit his will to the will and spirit [of] God." By establishing Jesus as human, King allows for the possibility of progressive improvement in earthly society through individual action. Commenting on the essay, Davis warned: "You need to proofread your papers before turning them in. Note corrections on p. 4." Nevertheless, he marked the work a B+ and praised the paper as "a solution which would appeal to the liberal mind."

Many years ago a young Jewish leader asked his followers a question which was all but astounding. He had been working with them quite assiduously. During their work together he was constantly asking them what his contemporaries were saying about him. But one day he pressed the question closer home. It is all very well to say what other people think of me, but what do you think? Who do you say that I am?

This question has gone echoing down the centuries ever since the young Jewish prophet sounded its first note.¹ Many have attempted to answer this question by attributing total divinity to Jesus with little concern for his humanity. Others have attempted to answer this question by saying that Jesus was a "mere" good man with no divine dimensions. Still others have attempted to get at the question by seeing Jesus as fully human and fully divine. This question, which was so prominent in the thinking of the early Christian centuries, was not answered once and for

¹. William Adams Brown, How to Think of Christ (New York: Scribner, 1948), p. 3: "Many years ago a young Jew put to a little group of his companions what in its setting seems a strange question. He had been asking them what his contemporaries were saying about him and they had repeated a variety of answers. Now he presses the questions closer home. It is all very well to tell me what other people are thinking about me. What do you think I am? . . . It has been so ever since. The question of the young Jewish Rabbi has gone echoing down the centuries."
all at the council of Chalcedon, rather it lurks forth in modern theological thinking with an amazing degree of freshness. In grappling with the question of the person of Christ, modern Christian thinking is unanimous in setting forth the full humanity of Jesus, yet Christians have not been willing to stop there. Despite all the human limitations of Jesus, most Christian thinkers have been convinced that "God was in Christ." To be sure, Christian thinkers are often in conflict over the question of how and when Jesus became divine, but as to the presence of the divine dimension within him we find little disagreement in Christian circles. At this point we may turn to a detailed discussion of the humanity and divinity of Jesus.

The Humanity of Jesus

If there is any one thing of which modern Christians have been certain it is that Jesus was a true man, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, in all points tempted as we are. All docetist, Eutychean, Monophysite errors which explained away the humanity of our Lord have now been jettisoned by all serious theological thought. Theologians of all shades of opinion have declared that in respect to His human nature Christ is consubstantial with ourselves.

We need only read the Gospels to attest to the fact of Jesus' genuine humanity. There is not a limitation that humanity shares that Jesus did not fall heir. Like the rest of us, he got hungry. When at the well of Sameria he asked the women who was drawing water for a drink. When he grew tired, he needed rest and sleep. He learned obedience, we are told, in the way we must learn it. When his disciples were unfaithful it was very cutting to his heart. The blindness of the city he longed to save moved him to tears. In the garden he experienced the normal agony of any individual in

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3. Brown, How to Think of Christ, pp. 6–7: "If there is any one thing of which Christians have been certain it is that Jesus is true man, bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh, in all points tempted as we are."
4. Baillie, God Was in Christ, p. 20: "all serious theological thought has finished with the docetist, Eutychean, Monophysite errors which explained away the humanity of our Lord and thus the reality of the Incarnation."
the same situation. On the Cross, he added to all physical tortures the final agony of feeling God-forsaken.⁵

Notice how the unknown writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the humanity of Jesus. Nowhere in the New Testament is the humanity of Jesus set forth more vividly. We see him agonising in prayer (5:7) embracing the Cross with joy and faith (12:2). Sprunging from the tribe of Judah, He passed through the normal development of human life, learning obedience, even though a Son, by the things which he suffered (5:8). Like all other men he was tempted. Yet no corrupt strain existed in His nature to which temptation could appeal. Here we find a frank emphasis of the humanity of Jesus, paralleled nowhere in the New Testament.*⁶

Again we may notice that Jesus was by no means omniscient. His knowledge was essentially limited by human conditions. This fact was set forth as for back as 1912 by the notable theologian, H. R. Mackintosh. In dealing with this question of Jesus' omniscience He states: "The question can be decided solely by loyalty to facts; and these, it is not too much to say, are peremptory. Not only is it related that Jesus asked question to elicit information—regarding the site of Lazarus tomb, for example, or the number of the loaves, or the name of the demented Gadarene—but at one point there is a clear acknowledgment of ignorance. 'Of that day or that hour,' He said, respecting the

⁵. Brown, How to Think of Christ, p. 7: "If further evidence of Jesus' genuine humanity were needed, one has only to read the Gospels. There is not a limitation to which our human kind is heir but Jesus shares it with us. Like the rest of us, he was hungry. At the well at Samaria he asked the woman who was drawing water for a drink. When he grew tired, he needed rest and sleep. He asked questions, and expected answers. He was a learner, and not from books alone. He learned obedience, we are told, in the way in which we must all learn it, by the things which he suffered. He was cut to the heart by the faithlessness of disciples. He knew what it was to be betrayed by a friend. The blindness of the city he longed to save moved him to tears. In the garden he was in agony and sweated blood. On the Cross, he added to all physical tortures the final agony of feeling God-forsaken."

⁶. H. R. Mackintosh, The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913), p. 79: "Nowhere in the New Testament is the humanity of Christ set forth so movingly . . . We see Him proclaiming salvation (2:3), agonizing in prayer (5:7), embracing the Cross with joy and faith (12:2), suffering the last penalty without the city gate (13:12) . . . Sprung from the tribe of Judah, He passed through the normal development of human life, learning obedience, even though a Son, by the things which He suffered (5:8). . . . Yet no corrupt strain existed in His nature to which temptation could appeal. . . . A frank emphasis, without parallel in the New Testament, is laid on His human virtues."
Parousia, 'knoweth no man, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father.' If he could thus be ignorant of a detail connected in some measure with his redemptive work, the conclusion is unavoidable that in secular affairs His knowledge was but the knowledge of His time.**

Again we may notice the human character of our Lord's moral and religious life. His religious experience was in the human realm. Certainly he had a human faith in God. As Dr. Baille has so cogently stated, "Our Lord's life on earth was a life of faith, and His victory was the victory of faith. His temptations were real temptations, which it was difficult and painful for Him to resist."† Jesus overcame his temptations not by reliance on some inherent divine dimension, but by the constancy of his will. So we are moved to the conclusion, on the basis of peremptory evidence, that Jesus shared fully our human life.

The Divinity of Jesus

After establishing the full humanity of Jesus we still find an element in his life which transcends the human. To see Jesus as a "mere" good man like all other prophets is by no means sufficient to explain him. Moreover, the historical setting in which he grew up, the psychological mood and temper of the age and of the house of Israel, the economic and social predicament of Jesus family—all these are important. But these in themselves fail to answer one significant question: Why does he differ from all others in the same setting. Any explanation of Jesus in terms of psychology, economics, religion, and the like must inevitably explain his contemporaries as well. These may tell us why Jesus was a particular kind of Jew, but not why some other Jews were not Jesus. Jesus was brought up in the same conditions as other Jews, inherited the same traits that they inherited; and yet he was Jesus and the others were not. This uniqueness in the spiritual life of Jesus has lead Christians to see him not only as a human being, but as a human

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7. Baillie, God Was in Christ, p. 15, quoting William Temple's Christus Veritas, p. 147: "He overcame them exactly as everyman who does so has overcome temptation—by the consistency of his will."
being surrounded with divinity. Prior to all other facts about Jesus stands the spiritual assurance that He is divine. As Dr. Brown succinctly states in a recent book, "That God was in Christ is the very heart of the Christian faith. In this divine human person the ever recurring antinomy of the universe is presented in a living symbol—the antinomy of the eternal in the temporal, of the infinite in the finite, of the divine in the human."*

As stated above, the conflict that Christians often have over the question of Jesus divinity is not over the validity of the fact of his divinity, but over the question of how and when he became divine. The more orthodox Christians have seen his divinity as an inherent quality metaphysically bestowed. Jesus, they have told us, is the Pre existent Logos. He is the word made flesh. He is the second person of the trinity. He is very God of very God, of one substance with the Father, who for our salvation came down from Heaven and was incarnate be the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary.

Certainly this view of the divinity of Christ presents many modern minds with insuperable difficulties. Most of us are not willing to see the union of the human and divine in a metaphysical incarnation. Yet amid all of our difficulty with the pre existent idea and the view of supernatural generation, we must come to some view of the divinity of Jesus. In order to remain in the orbid of the Christian religion we must have a Christology. As Dr. Bailie has reminded us, we cannot have a good theology without a Christology. Where then can we in the liberal tradition find the divine dimension in Jesus? We may find the divinity of Christ not in his substantial unity with God, but in his filial consciousness and in his unique dependence upon God. It was his felling of absolute dependence on God, as Schleiermaker would say, that made him divine. Yes it was the warmnest of his devotion to God and the intimacy of his trust in God that accounts for his being the supreme revelation of God. All of this reveals to us that one man has at last realized his true divine calling: That of becoming a true son of man by becoming a true son of God. It is

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8. Davis underlined "surrounded with divinity," and asked, "Was not divinity 'in' him?"
the achievement of a man who has, as nearly as we can tell, completely opened his life to the influence of the divine spirit.

The orthodox attempt to explain the divinity of Jesus in terms of an inherent metaphysical substance within him seems to me quite inadequate. To say that the Christ, whose example of living we are bid to follow, is divine in an ontological sense is actually harmful and detrimental. To invest this Christ with such supernatural qualities makes the rejoinder: "Oh, well, he had a better chance for that kind of life than we can possible have." In other words, one could easily use this as a means to hide behind his failures. So that the orthodox view of the divinity of Christ is in my mind quite readily denied. The true significance of the divinity of Christ lies in the fact that his achievement is prophetic and promissory for every other true son of man who is willing to submit his will to the will and spirit of God. Christ was to be only the prototype of one among many brothers.

The appearance of such a person, more divine and more human than any other, and standing and standing in closest unity at once with God and man, is the most significant and hopeful event in human history. This divine quality or this unity with God was not something thrust upon Jesus from above, but it was a definite achievement through the process of moral struggle and self-abnegation.\(^\text{10}\)

**Bibliography**


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\(^{10}\) A version of this paragraph appears in a previous paper for Davis during the first term of Christian Theology for Today: "The appearance of such a person, more divine and more human, than any other, and standing in closest unity at once with God and man, is the most significant and hopeful event in human history. This divine character or this unity with God was nothing thrust upon Jesus from above, but it was a definite achievement" ("Six Talks in Outline," 13 September–23 November 1949, p. 247 in this volume).