

The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration

Lesson 6: The Person of the Gospel

Statement 6. We affirm that faith in Jesus Christ as the divine Word (or Logos, John 1:1), the second Person of the Trinity, co-eternal and co-essential with the Father and the Holy Spirit (Heb. 1:3), is foundational to faith in the Gospel. We deny that any view of Jesus Christ which reduces or rejects his full deity is Gospel faith or will avail to salvation.

Statement 7. We affirm that Jesus Christ is God incarnate (John 1:14). The virgin-born descendant of David (Rom. 1:3), he had a true human nature, was subject to the Law of God (Gal. 4:5), and was like us at all points, except without sin (Heb. 2:17, 7:26-28). We affirm that faith in the true humanity of Christ is essential to faith in the Gospel. We deny that anyone who rejects the humanity of Christ, his incarnation, or his sinlessness, or who maintains that these truths are not essential to the Gospel, will be saved (1 John 4:2-3).

I. Introduction: On Definition

The identity of Jesus has everything to do with the Christian faith. If Jesus' essential nature is misunderstood, then His message simply doesn't matter. Throughout the history of the Church, the belief that Jesus is a complex unity (one person) consisting of two natures (fully divine, fully human) has been persistently taught and defended. The outworking of this, however, has been a matter of intense theological and philosophical debate since the early beginnings of the Church.

“If he [Jesus] was indeed God incarnate, Christianity is the only religion founded by God in person, and must as such be uniquely superior to all other religions” (John Hick, *The Metaphor of God*).

If one could adequately demonstrate that Jesus is not God Incarnate, or that it is incoherent to believe so, then the Christian faith is, at best, just another choice in the milieu of religious confusion. Therefore, the Christian faith stands or falls on the definition of Jesus Christ. Jesus' question to his disciples is relevant for all ages: “Who do you say I am” (Mt. 16:15).

II. Lessons from the Past

A. Ebionism (late 1st-2nd Century)

1. Denied the full deity of Jesus.
2. Born out of a strong Jewish monotheism. If Jesus was fully divine, then polytheism results.
3. Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165 A.D.) and Irenaeus (ca. 130-200 A.D.) spoke against Ebionite heretics.

B. Docetism (2nd Century)

1. Denied the reality of Jesus' full humanity.
2. Born out of a strong Greek dualism where material (evil) and immaterial (good) could not unite. If Jesus was fully divine, then God could not take on a material, human body.
3. Origen (185-254 A.D.) and Tertullian (196-212 A.D.) spoke against docetic heretics.

C. Arianism (early 4th Century)

1. Denied that God's essence (divinity) can be communicated.
2. Born out of a misguided philosophical theology, viz., that God is an indivisible and simple essence. Thus God created the Logos to embody Jesus. Jesus was a subordinate god, or demigod. Neither was Jesus fully human, since the Logos replaced the human soul. Arius viewed Jesus as half human, half divine.
3. Arianism was condemned by Athanasius at the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.).

D. Monophysitism—also known as Apollinarianism (4th Century)

1. Stressed the unity of the divine and human natures such that the distinction between the two was lost. The result was a Jesus with only one nature (one divine nature, one person).

2. Born out of Platonism and a misguided anthropology (trichotomous makeup).
3. Monophysitism was condemned as heresy at the Council of Constantinople (381 A.D.).

E. Nestorianism (5th Century)

1. Stressed the radical distinction between the divine and human natures. The result was a Jesus with two distinct persons, one divine and the other human.
2. Born out of a desire to avoid the notion that Mary could give birth to God.
3. Nestorianism was condemned at the Council of Ephesus (431 A.D.).

F. Eutychianism (5th Century)

1. Stressed the merging of the human into the divine, such that the humanity of Jesus was lost (one person, one divine nature).
2. Born out of a reaction against Nestorian teachings.
3. The teaching of Eutyches was renounced at the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.).

G. The Orthodox Response: Chalcedon Christology (451 A.D.)

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance [*homoousious*] with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer [*Theotokos*] one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized IN TWO NATURES, WITHOUT CONFUSION, WITHOUT CHANGE, WITHOUT DIVISION, WITHOUT SEPARATION; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person [*prosopon*] and subsistence [*hypostasis*], not as parted or separated into two persons [*prosopa*], but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and as our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the Fathers has delivered to us.¹

III. On the Logic of God Incarnate

A. On Contradiction

1. The doctrine of the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth would be a logical absurdity if one were to assert that Jesus had the essential attributes of deity and, at the same time, did not have the essential attributes of deity. Example:
 - a) All humans have hair.
 - b) Some humans do not have hair.

B. On Sub-contrary relationships

1. Contradictory statements are not the same as complex propositions, or sub-contrary relationships. Example:
 - a) Some of the people in the world are rich.
 - b) Some of the people in the world are not rich.

C. The Logic of God Incarnate is:

1. A complex belief involving *sub-contrary relationships*: Some of Jesus' attributes are divine and some of Jesus' attributes are human. Neither set of attributes cancel out the other. Therefore, the belief that Jesus is fully human and fully divine is neither incoherent nor contradictory. Since Jesus of Nazareth is one integrated per-

¹ Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), 72-73, emphasis mine.

son with two distinct natures, then he can possess both human and divine properties simultaneously, such as divine omniscience (cf., Jn. 1:48-49, 2:24-45) and human ignorance (cf., Mk. 13:32).

2. Neither polytheism nor tri-theism: While it is orthodox to claim “Jesus is God,” the reciprocal statement, “God is Jesus” is false. The logic of God Incarnate claims *essential* identity, not *numerical* identity.
3. Ultimately a *mystery* (cf., Col. 2:2): To say that God cannot incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth because we don’t fully understand how this could be, is to say a great deal about us and nothing substantial about what God could and did do. Although God Incarnate is a mystery, this does not preclude us from affirming its reality.

IV. The Biblical Testimony

A. The Humanity of Jesus

1. Explicit teachings:
 - a) “The Word became flesh” (Jn. 1:14), was “the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5), whom John claims to have “heard, seen, and touched” (1 Jn. 1:1-4)
 - b) Jesus “shared in our humanity” (Heb. 2:4) being “born of a woman” (Gal. 4:4); descended from the line of David (Mt. 1:1-16) as God’s “only begotten Son” (Jn. 3:16).
2. As with us all, Jesus was:
 - a) corrected by his parents (Lk. 2:48), tempted (Matt. 4:1-10), hungry (Matt. 21:18), thirsty (Matt. 25:35), sleepy (Mk. 4:38)
 - b) dependant upon God in prayer (Mk. 1:35; Lk. 11:1), angry (Mk. 3:5), compassionate (Matt. 9:36; 14:14), grief-stricken (Lk. 19:41), distressed at pending evil (Matt. 26:37-38), and subject to physical death (Rom. 5:6, 8; 1 Cor. 15:3).
3. His post-resurrection appearances reveal his humanity:
 - a) Nail marks and spear wounds (Jn. 20:24-30)
 - b) His appearances to many (1 Cor. 15:3-8)
 - c) His appearances to few (Lk. 24:36-42; Jn. 20:19-20; Acts 9:1-9)

B. The Deity of Jesus

1. Jesus acted and spoke as God:
 - a) He forgave sins (Mk. 2:1-12; Lk. 7:47-50), commands nature (Mk. 4:39-41), feeds thousands by multiplying food for one (Mk. 6:35-44; 8:1-9), restores the dead to life (Mk. 5:35-42; Lk. 7:12-17; Jn. 11:43-44)
 - b) He adjusts God’s Law (Mk. 7:19), claimed to have all authority *in heaven* (Matt. 28:18)
 - c) To see and know Jesus was to see and know God (Jn. 8:19; 12:45; 14:7, 9)
 - d) He claimed to determine one’s eternal destiny (Lk. 12:8-9)
2. He accurately predicted future events:
 - a) Judas’ betrayal (Matt. 26:21-25) and Peter’s denial (Matt. 26:31-35)
 - b) His resurrection (Jn. 2:19-21)
3. Jesus displays omnipotence:
 - a) In creation and preservation of the universe (Jn. 1:3; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:2c)
 - b) In providence over Israel (1 Cor. 10:1-10)
4. The Logos of God is eternally self-existent.
 - a) Matthew claims that Jesus is literally “God with us” (Matt. 1:23)

- b) Jesus affirmed his eternality (Jn. 8:58)
- c) John affirms Jesus' self-existence (Jn. 1:4; 5:26; 1 Jn. 1:2)
- d) Paul explicitly taught that Jesus' existence pre-dated his birth in Bethlehem. The people of Israel all "drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Cor. 10:4).

C. *Philippians 2:6-11*

1. Paul indicates a time sequence that suggests Jesus was of the same essence as God prior to the Incarnation. Jesus was in the state of "equality with God", *then* "made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (vv. 6-7).
2. The incarnation was *not* a subtraction of deity, but an addition of humanity. The Second Person of the Trinity did not have to make room for humanity, but added a human nature to the divine nature to become Jesus of Nazareth.
3. His incarnate state was "made in human likeness," indicating that he was not identical to us in all respects (cf., Rom. 8:3). Jesus was completely, yet uniquely, human. The common human property shared by all but Christ is sinfulness or sin nature. However, it is not necessary to possess a sin nature in order to be fully human (e.g., the Pre-fall human state in the Garden, Gen. 2).
4. God the Son became the Son of God by adding to himself what he did not previously possess (fully human nature).

V. So . . . What's the Point?

A. *If Jesus is not fully God, then . . .*

1. There is no eternal life to be had (1 Jn. 4:15; 5:1), for John clearly states that the condition for eternal life is belief in Jesus' deity.
2. Sin is not conquered, as only God can defeat sin and Satan once and for all.

B. *If Jesus was not fully human, then . . .*

1. He cannot adequately represent humanity (Rom. 5:12) and could not take our punishment for sin (Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21).
2. He cannot sympathize with our weaknesses and the point of his sinless life has no significance (Heb. 4:15).

C. *Since Jesus is the God-Man—fully human, fully divine . . .*

1. Understands completely our temptations and sufferings, since He never changes, is utterly dependable, completely sympathetic, and always available to help us in our time of need (Heb. 4:15; 13:8).
2. We can be assured that there is victory to overcome the world (1 Jn. 5:5).
3. There is no longer any *real* time of loneliness or solitude, since as the God-Man, Jesus is with us always (Matt. 28:20). We have an eternal companion!
4. He has left us with the ideal human life to model. *Intellectually*, we can grow in our knowledge of his profound life and teachings. *Morally*, we can mature in our character in becoming more like him. *Emotionally*, we can progress in appropriate affective responses to life's challenges. *Volitionally*, we can decide among choices that would best please him. *Relationally*, we can enjoy relative peace with God, self, and others.
5. We can stand firm that our belief in Jesus as God Incarnate is historically responsible, rationally plausible, and biblically faithful.
6. We can be assured that we will be led victoriously out of death into eternal life because of Christ's resurrected human body (1 Cor. 15).

Because of the Incarnation of God in Christ, we can proclaim with confidence the words of John Calvin:

“Since neither as God alone could he feel death, nor as man alone could he overcome it, he coupled human nature with divine that to atone for sin he might submit the weakness of the one to death; and that, wrestling with death by the power of the other nature, he might win victory for us.”²

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.12.1

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