

## Fully Human, Fully Divine

*By Heather Isaacs*

A Commentary on the Sabbath School Lesson for January 15–21, 2005, "A Body You Have Prepared for Me"

Jesus may be "fully human, fully divine," but if we are truthful with ourselves we rarely want him to be. At least, we tend to choose the side of Jesus that comforts us the most. And it's not always the same side.

And yet, choosing which side of Jesus to believe in—even at the risk of letting go of the other, less inviting side—seems blessedly human. When we are flung deep into our own dark night of the soul, the Markan Jesus who cries out on the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" is a brother to us in our suffering.

In times when the power of death threatens to overwhelm all that is good, the Johannine Jesus is the vine of life that strengthens us with promises of resurrection that are, in his mouth, the very words of God. Our life experiences dictate which side of Jesus/Christ we turn toward. As my friend Pam once said: "We look for a God who can help us make sense of our past."

Unfortunately, this week's lesson draws (in the tradition of Quarterly Cartography) a predictably easy and clear map of the nature of Jesus/Christ that largely excludes one's personal experience of Jesus as human and/or God. In a theological exercise connecting the dots, the reader follows a select list of Bible verses, then promptly fills in the blanks to questions that are some of the most disturbingly difficult propositions in Christianity.

Without wrestling with the problems posed by Jesus' encounter with the Syrophenician woman or Jesus' violent outburst in the Temple or other disturbing texts, the reader participates in the lesson as if she is actually doing critical thinking and research. And yet the metanarrative of Adventism (in this instance, silently rooted in early Church creeds like Chalcedon) hangs over each page and directs the reader in a large, gentle circle back to the place where she started—Fundamental Belief number 4.

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As part of this doctrinal feedback loop, the treatment doesn't give the reader any of the historical context for the long-running debate about who Jesus was at birth. It attempts to prove text the sinless humanity of Jesus when the Gospel writers themselves did not agree on how Jesus was human or God. Mark excludes any notion of Jesus as a preexistent aspect of God, whereas the entire narrative of John is based on that one belief.

More broadly, no biblical writer ever said that Jesus was "fully human, fully divine." Those words were uneasily settled upon between the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon in the fourth and fifth centuries after the birth of Jesus. A point of conflict both before and after the councils, the question about the nature(s) of Jesus Christ, fomented debate and schism between East and West in ways that continue to be unresolved.

It is interesting, then, that this week's lesson alludes to but makes no attempt to identify or question the weight of creedal influence on the formation of its brand of christology. Likewise, no ink was given to the traditions of dissenting christologies that preceded the Councils of Nicea and Chalcedon, shaped its outcome, and persist even now.

I have to admit that when I started writing this commentary, I wanted to be one more among the dissenting voices. I wanted to challenge the value of the phrase "fully human, fully divine." I wanted to throw it out mostly—given its nonbiblical source and problematic connections to empire. I wanted to break open the doctrinal feedback loop and yell—"What about the Syrophenician woman? What about the outburst in the Temple? Stop trying to make everything so clean!" And yet, what would I be yelling about? The fact that I'm no longer protected by that loop? Perhaps.

As I was again confronted by the paradox of Jesus/Christ, I learned that I have been as vulnerable to creating my own theology of self-justification as anyone else. For in being newly confronted with the mystery of Jesus, I learned something about my own current preferences for God—I don't want Jesus to be God.

The version of Christianity that prevailed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 C.E. drew a clear line in the sand about who Jesus was to the world—he was God as much as he was man. And happening to have God choose *your* side, to be in *your*

corner was a great way to consolidate imperial political power, finance crusades against infidels, and expand the empire by conquering "heathen" lands under the guise of sharing Jesus, the Christ, *the* God.

In my life, I've learned that if Jesus isn't God, it's much easier to make space for others who do not claim Jesus as God and Savior. People should be treated as people, after all—not evangelical targets. In my experience, it is easier to be a better person in the world when the only statement I make about Jesus is that I want to live like him. But the mere fact that my faith is easier in light of such a belief makes me wary of such faith in the same way that I do not trust the easy conclusions of this week's lesson. And the danger of easy conclusions is that we become too attached to them—we like them too much to let them go.

Recognizing how my grasp on easy faith has tightened, I am (against my will) trying to let go. At this very moment, my little gods of religion and academia are being slayed, (in the language of H. Richard Niebuhr) by the power of one small phrase: "fully human, fully divine." My faith in little gods is being replaced (yet again) with true and difficult faith—the faith that "involves us in a permanent revolution of the mind and of the heart, a continuous life which opens out infinitely into ever new possibilities."<sup>1</sup>

My faith tomorrow may resurrect those gods, and yet the power of a paradox like "fully human, fully divine" is that you and your gods are never safe in its presence. Your preferences are exposed, the gods you worship are laid low. The moment faith becomes as comfortable to you as a Sabbath afternoon walk, you have to start over. No amount of theological critique and intellectual investigation can reduce the experience of faith to an easy formula.

Regardless of our liberal or conservative leanings, the paradoxical nature of Jesus/Christ, if we let it do its work, never lets us rest or congratulate ourselves. We are continually being awakened to and pulled out of our preferences for who we want God to be. We are always letting go of our attempts to conjure the presence of God with formulas and magic spells that we call doctrine. And we are forever engaging in something infinitely harder—letting God do the work of revelation.

## Reference

1. Richard H. Niebuhr, "The Nature and Existence of God," in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture with Supplementary Essays* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1960).

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