

# **THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST AND CHRISTIAN PERFECTION**

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When the Conference at the SDA Theological Seminary observing the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Questions on Doctrine* was held in October, 2007, the General Conference President Jan Paulsen saw no necessity for it. He specifically addressed a key issue while delivering his Sabbath sermon to the Fall Council of church leaders on Oct. 13, 2007. (We have a profound respect for the officer of the General Conference President, realizing the sacred and God-ordained responsibilities that rest upon the world leader of Seventh-day Adventists. We do not seek in any way to diminish his position or calling from God.) Jan Paulsen said that continuing controversy over the church's definition of the nature of Christ will not, "on my watch," cause a reevaluation by the church. "I have to tell you I just cannot imagine a post-modern person in Europe, a businessman in Asia or Latin America, any more than a farmer in Africa will care one iota whether Christ had the nature of man before the fall or after the fall. The realities of the world in which we live have other concerns which occupy us."<sup>1</sup>

There is a solid core resistance to the Advent hope that there will be 144,000 ready to see Jesus come again without seeing death. The idea that the gospel of Jesus Christ with Him as the High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary preparing a people with a character that is fit to meet the close of probation, to go through the seven last plagues, to stand at a time when there will be no Mediator for the wicked world, and be translated without seeing death, is being severely challenged. We are not talking about a resurrection faith and preparing to die and come up at the beginning of the millennium. Christians have been preparing to die now for millenniums. It's a wonderful thing to believe in the gospel of the resurrection from the dead. Seventh-day Adventists have been preparing to die for over 150 years. But God needs an army of 144,000 that He can lead into the Battle of Armageddon whom He believes in. He seals with the seal of the living

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<sup>1</sup> Mark A. Kellner, "Seventh-day Adventists Are Growing Churches, Gaining Members," *Adventist World* 3, 12 (December, 2007), p. 7.

God, with the character of Jesus, for they overcome “even as I also overcame” (Rev. 3:21).

The reason God needs us is that we are living, just now, since 1844, in “the hour of His judgment” (Rev. 14:7). God is on trial before the universe. Satan is the “the accuser of our brethren” (Rev. 12:10). He hopes to overthrow God’s government by causing the 144,000 to give in to Babylon’s false teachings. If he is successful, he can disprove God’s promise in the everlasting covenant to “put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts” (Heb. 8:10). Satan has claimed all along that he has invented sin which is something for which God has no cure. Holy angels cannot keep God’s love in the law, much less fallen sinners. The gospel cannot cure the sin problem. There may have been a scant couple like Enoch and Elijah in bygone years, but so far as a good demonstration of the gospel to deliver from sin worldwide, from every nation, kindred, tongue and people, there is no such remnant people. There is not yet a people of whom it can be said that they “keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12).

And so God is under fire right now in the investigative judgment, to find a few good men and women whom He can recruit into His elite special forces unit, the 144,000. He needs this army to go into battle with Him. This force is said to “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth” (Rev. 14:4). This means they do not count their lives dear unto themselves, but are willing to follow the Lamb to crucifixion.

Jesus went to His cross alone. He did not enjoy the fellowship of support from His disciples at the cross. When His soul was exceedingly troubled because of the press of guilt for the sins of the world being laid upon Him, He said, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death” (Matt. 26:38). He hungered for the prayer support of His disciples, but they fell asleep. Consequently, they were unprepared for what lay ahead and collapsed under the pressure of seeing their beloved Master being crucified.

Jesus did not have the luxury of feeling the support of His beloved Father when He was nailed to the cross. The rules of the great controversy between Christ and Satan were that He was to die cursed of God, without any loving arms around Him. “Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree” (Gal. 3:13). Deuteronomy had recorded the curse of God for everyone who was hung. Because God “made him to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21), He was “made a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). He bore “the wages of sin [which] is death” (Rom. 6:23). He

died in reality the sinner's death, the second death. This is why He exclaimed, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Matt. 27:46.

The meekness of Jesus is shown in the submission of His faith to the Father's will that He die the second death for the sin of the world. Ultimately, no man took the life of the Divine Son of God. He "became obedient unto death" (Phil. 2:8). He "lay down His life" (John 15:13). The 144,000 have the faith of Jesus. They would rather die than preserve self by giving into Babylon's pressure of the death decree for keeping God's seventh day Sabbath. And so they refuse to receive the mark of the beast which is to worship on the first day of the week Sunday.

The Bible doctrine of Christian character perfection and the translation of the 144,000 rests upon the faith of Jesus in His Divine human nature. If Jesus did not come all the way to where we are in taking our sinful nature, then there is no way for a people to be prepared to stand without sin in the day of His coming.

"God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law" (Gal. 4:4). "Under the law" in Paul means a subject of the condemnation of the law. Being "made of a woman" Jesus subjected Himself to the condemnation and death which the justice of the law demands.

Jesus had no exemption from our humanity because He was "made of a woman." Though He was "that holy thing" (Lk. 1:35) conceived by the Holy Ghost in the virgin Mary, Paul tells us "God [sent] His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. 8:3). *Homoioumati* means "made like to" or "similitude." Paul identifies "sinful flesh" as "the flesh the law of sin" (Rom. 7:25). This law of sin results in death. It is called "the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2). God sent His Son into the world with this law of sin and death. This law of sin is temptation.

But Paul says, Jesus "condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3). *Katakrino* means "to judge against." Jesus sentenced sin in the flesh. He condemned it in our humanity in which God sent Him.

Many Christians in their endeavor to preserve Jesus from any taint of pollution find it expedient to teach the dogma of the Immaculate conception. This means that His mother, the Virgin Mary, must be preserved from any contact with the original sin passed on from Adam. Hence Mary's Mother Monica, conceived and gave birth to Mary who was born without a sinful nature. Then Christ would have a clean womb from which to be born, thus not inheriting any bad nature

or original sin. This provides Jesus with an exemption from our sinful nature, and in effect makes Him separate and lifted above our human flesh.

The notion that Christ was impeccable or was exempt from temptation either via the dogma of the Immaculate Conception or because He came in the pre-fall nature of Adam is wrong. But most within the fellowship of our church agree that Jesus was tempted. Scripture is clear. He “was in all points tempted like as we are” (Heb. 4:15).

The view that comes very close, but yet misses the mark of Christ’s humanity by exempting Him from being tempted in all points like as we are, is where He came in the post-fall nature of humanity with its weaknesses of a physical nature, but He did not take our fallen nature. He became tired. He was hungry and thirsty. But He was not tempted to commit adultery or desire addictive substances, etc.

In that great hymn of Christ’s condescension, Paul writes, He “was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man” (Phil. 2:7, 8). Again, *homoioumati* is the Greek word for “likeness.” He was made the same in circumstances as a man.

Of course the concern is that making Christ altogether too much as one of us makes Him a sinner, and thus prevents Him from being our perfect substitute sacrifice, and Saviour from sin. The key issue revolves around His taking our sinful nature and being subject to all our temptations. To be tempted to sin is not sin itself. Christ did not become a sinner because He subjected Himself to be tempted to sin.

His mind or character was without sin. Paul said, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). His mind was kept pure and clean though He was subjected to our weaknesses, propensities, and inclinations to do wrong. Thus Christ lived sinlessly in sinful flesh.

If it is said that this is unattainable and cannot be repeated in our sinful flesh, then we have to reckon with whether or not the gospel, which is the genius of God, can really overcome sin; and whether it is a worthy answer to Satan’s accusations in the great controversy, that he has invented sin and God does not have a cure for it.

On the other hand, the Apostle Paul exhorts the Philippian, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.” This character of Christ brought to us by the Holy Spirit, twenty-four/seven, if unhindered is ours. If by our choosing Christ He may have His way in our inner person, these instruments of the body will not go the way of

the temptation of the flesh. Our characters will be transformed into doing the way of His righteousness rather than doing our own way. God's purpose in the gospel is sinless living in sinful flesh.

"Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same" (Heb. 2:14). He shared with us life as it exists in flesh and blood. He was a partaker. He took part of the same. And this nature of flesh and blood is condemned to death—"that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Heb. 2:14). By His choice in taking our tempted fleshly nature, He consigned Himself to the second death.

"For verily He took not on Him the nature of angels; but He took on Him the seed of Abraham" (Heb. 2:16). The nature of angels is holy (Matt. 25:31). "He took." *Epilambanomai* means to lay hold upon. He was sown as the offspring of Abraham. This remarkable language cements Jesus' complete identification with our humanity.

That God the Heavenly Farmer would have this rare, one of a kind seed, of His only begotten Son, and chose not to set it on the shelf for eternity, but rather sow it into the world that it might die, is nothing less than astounding. "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit" (John 12:24).

"Wherefore in all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren" (Heb. 2:17). He was bound or obligated to *ομοιωθηναι*, assimilate; or "be made like unto His brethren." This is more than just superficial language. Did Jesus just look like a man, but really He was only very God? That was an early heresy within the church called Docetism. Jesus appeared to be man, but He really wasn't.

The Apostle John warned against this heresy of Docetism. "For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist" (2 John 1:7). The flesh is human nature with its desires, passions, and weaknesses. Certainly Jesus was subject to weariness, fatigue, sleep deprivation, extreme hunger after fasting, thirst, physical weakness and inability to carry the cross, etc.

But it was far more than this for Him. On more than one occasion, Jesus found Himself subjected to the law of sin and death. As He contemplated the cross and the guilt of the world's sin laid upon Him, He said, "Now is my soul troubled" (John 12:27). There was a powerful temptation for Him to get out from under this cursed load.

We hear it in His contemplations, “And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour” (John 12:27). Shall I pray to my Father, don’t make me go to the cross? This is far more than physical weakness. It is psychological horror. But He immediately puts a stop to this line of thinking. He says, “But for this cause came I unto this hour” (John 12:27). This temptation which clearly arose from within, was faced squarely and head on. It was recognized for what it is as being contrary to the will of the Father. He made a conscious choice to deny Himself.

Then He made a direct appeal to His Father, which was immediately answered, unlike what would happen to Him on the cross. “Father, glorify thy name” (John 12:28). Vindicate your character. Father, reveal your true nature of love. Show them that I have chosen your pathway of self-sacrifice in choosing to die, bearing the sin of the world. “Then came there a voice from heaven, saying, I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again” (John 12:28). What a luxury it was on this occasion, for Christ to have instant confirmation of Divine approval for His decision to face the cross. Obviously, the Father was proud of His Son as any Father would be whose son follows in his footsteps.

But the point is that you have two Divine persons in the Father and the Son, and they each their own will. Now when you have two independent wills, it sets up the possibility for one to choose contrary to the will of the other, even within the Divine economy. Complicate this even further with the fact that the Son of God becomes the Son of man; subjecting Himself to the temptations of human nature, and the possibility is greatly intensified that Jesus could rebel against the Father’s will to impute sin upon Him and its consequences of eternal death. This is extreme exposure to temptation. Self does not want to die. It will fight to preserve itself. It will not roll over.

So then, when we go with Christ to Gethsemane we begin to understand what the apostle meant when he wrote, “though He were a Son, yet learned He obedience by the things which He suffered” (Heb. 5:8). As the Son of God He chose the way of the cross long before the creation of this world, when He covenanted with the Father to be the Surety and Substitute for Adam should he and his race fall into sin. But it was only as a human being, having set aside voluntarily His Divine prerogatives, that developmentally He progressed through all the stages of infancy, childhood, adolescence, and early adult life. “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in

favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52). His spiritual development progressed from elementary to graduate level. His experiences of affliction and suffering in life were developmental and progressively intensified. In this manner He learned obedience through each trial. It was an ongoing battle and march for the Son of man to choose His Father’s will.

In Gethsemane Christ had a titanic struggle with the weight of the sin of the world imposed upon Him. Here His independent will, which was undefiled and pure, was confronted with the law of sin and death. The normally buoyant and robust conscience of the Saviour was visibly shaken. He “began to be sorrowful and very heavy. Then saith He unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death” (Matt. 26:37, 38). Luke’s account reads, “His sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). Sin is crushing the life out of Him. He is compelled to draw near to the Father for support. The hour of temptation is the disciples’ hour of trial, too. The final exam is upon them. Will they pass or fail?

As His mental anguish overpowers His physical being, He loses the sense of balance and falls flat on His face. “And He went a little farther, and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matt. 26:39). This cup is filled with the satiated passions and indulged desires of the corporate sin of the world as though they were His own. His pure soul cried out, It is not just. I am not guilty of this. No innocent self desires to be accused unjustly. Self will fight to preserve its reputation. But Jesus was willing to be thought of as a bad person. He “made Himself of no reputation” (Phil. 2:7).

Such temptations as this are beyond ourselves to suppress. It was beyond the Son of man to endure, for He had set aside before coming to this earth, His capacity to not be tempted. He had set aside His capacity to flick off evil. Therefore, He turned to His only remaining source of strength to overcome and that was His Father. Had He been consumed with Himself, He would have fallen into sin and thus failed to be the Saviour that we need. He took His individual choice and laid it down in submission to the Father’s will for Him, in order to drink the cup of the sin of the world. His choice was, “Nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt. 26:39).

He was on the Father’s watch. It was not yet time for Him to die. So committed was He that had there not been a Divine messenger sent He, would have expired right then and there. “And there appeared an

angel unto Him from heaven, strengthening Him” (Luke 22:43). Once again, He had the immediately support of His Father. The affirmation that He needed was so readily available.

But this did not yet convince Satan that the Substitute and Surety for mankind was capable of sustaining His faith in solitary confinement, without any visible means of support.

We have recorded for us a messianic psalm of David which provides a revelation of the inner mind of Christ at His crucifixion. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring?” Psalm 22:1. Of course, we recognize in these words the lament of our Lord on His cross. He knew the withdrawal of God’s presence of support. He experienced the wrath of God upon sin.

“Our fathers trusted in thee. . . and thou didst deliver them. . . . But I am a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people” (Psalm 22:4, 6).

Of His treatment by ruffians He described it as “many bulls have compassed me. . . . They gaped upon me with their mouths, as a ravening and a roaring lion” (Ps. 22:12, 13). What must it be like to have an angry tiger bearing down upon you, as a teenager did at the San Francisco zoo a few days ago? That was terror personified, to be mauled to death.

“For dogs have compassed me” (vs. 16). No one likes to be barked at and embarrassed. “The assembly of the wicked have enclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me” (Ps. 22:16, 17). All of the artists have gotten the picture wrong at Calvary. At the least they all wrap Him with a loin cloth. But David pictured it true to life. Jesus was crucified with the embarrassment of being exposed naked.

Jesus did the hard work when He died on His cross. Though the lightning and thunder, the earthquake and dark clouds, signaled God’s wrath and curse on sin, yet Jesus believed in His God. He cried out, “My God.” What He meant is written thus: “For He hath not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither hath He hid His face from Him; but when He cried unto Him, He heard” (Ps. 22:24). Jesus knew His Father heard Him. How did He know? Because, He believed the promise of God’s everlasting covenant. It is written that to “Abraham and His seed were the promises made” (Gal. 3:16). God promised the seed of Abraham, which is Christ, that He



would give Him a kingdom. “I covenant with you—according as My Father covenanted with Me—a kingdom” (Luke 22:29, Rotherham).

Jesus laid down His life believing that “all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn unto the Lord” (Ps. 22:27). Jesus knew that His cross would never be a dead issue. All in whom there is breath are drawn to the cross. All must decide the vital question. Not all will make the right choice, but all will be drawn to the uplifted Saviour.

But praise God, “a seed shall serve Him; it shall be accounted to the Lord for a generation” (Ps. 22:30). There are those who heard the call of the Great Shepherd from every nation, kindred, tongue and people. They fall on their knees before the foot of the cross.

It is written of them: “They shall come, and shall declare His righteousness unto a people that shall be born, that He hath done this” (Ps. 22:31). Jesus laid down His life believing that through His death His life would be multiplied. There was no other way for Him to be fruitful. He could not cling to life and keep Himself safe on the shelf. He would abide alone in that case. No, He must be crucified, buried, and then resurrected, in order to multiply Himself many times over, in a seed that would serve Him.

What difference does it make in a post-modern world whether Jesus took a pre-fall human nature, or post-fall sinful nature? The servant of the Lord wrote, “The humanity of the Son of God is everything to us. It is the golden chain that binds our souls to Christ, and through Christ to God.” (1SM 244). We have a Saviour who is near to us and not afar off.

This means much to a young man who may be struggling with addictions of a sexual nature. For a woman who finds herself ground down into hard servitude to chemical addictions, the humanity of Christ means deliverance from bondage. To the bi-polar sufferer of depression, Jesus is the balm of Gilead to bring peace and optimism where there is despair. To the one fighting cancer, the humanity of Christ brings hope, for He fought the battle of sin which is more lethal and toxic than any human malady. He imparts His victory to each one.

If Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are, then He faced the issue of breaking each one of the ten commandments. He was confronted with the matter of putting self first before God. He faced appetites and passions of unimaginable dimensions. Many times lying would have delivered Him from oppression, but there was no guile found in His mouth. And so we have a complete Saviour who

bore the full range of human weaknesses, and yet was a victor over all.

And if God can produce such a prototype in His Son, then a mold has been created from which many more may be replicated by the power of His gospel. May you be one of those who shall be perfected by His grace.