

IS IT  
ESSENTIAL  
OR NONESSENTIAL?

THE COMPLETENESS OF JESUS' HUMANITY

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## About the Author

Dennis Priebe is a Seventh-day Adventist minister with 50 years experience as a pastor, a teacher, and seminar speaker. He spent 11 years as a professor at Pacific Union College, and the past 30 years as a seminar speaker for Amazing Facts. Elder Priebe has been married for 50 years to Kay, and they have one son, Matthew. Elder Priebe has held over 800 seminars in churches and schools around the U.S. He has written several books and booklets, with many audio and video tapes on these topics. His one desire is to prepare people for the very soon return of Jesus to this world.

## Preface

When God intervenes in His world, sending numerous pages of inspired writings, there is a reason. The information He sends is very important. And what is more important for the Christian than his having a correct understanding of how Jesus Christ, its very center, lived in humanity?

Since the 1950s certain teachers have promoted a view concerning Christ's humanity that, until then, was practically unknown within Adventism. Some of their arguments? That our understanding the nature of Christ's humanity, while interesting, is a nonessential topic, and that those who urge its importance advocate a teaching not crucial to the completion of the church's mission.

The following offers a contrasting viewpoint. Plain, straightforward, inspired statements, although often sidestepped, demonstrate the pivotal nature of these questions. GCO Press asks the reader to

reconsider whether this topic, after all, is nonessential or essential.

## Introduction

We have experienced much discussion and debate on the subject of the humanity of Christ. Too much, in the minds of many. "Enough of the arguing," they say. "It is time to concentrate on the essential thing—revealing a Christlike spirit to people around us." In 1990 the editors of *Ministry* and *Adventist Review* even called for an end to debate concerning the nature of Christ.

In August 1989 the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference issued "An Appeal for Church Unity." In this document is the following opinion:

"The world church has never viewed these subjects [nature of Christ, nature of sin] as essential to salvation nor to the mission of the remnant church.... There can be no strong unity within the world church of God's remnant people so long as segments who hold these views vocalize and agitate them both in North America and in over-

seas divisions. These topics need to be laid aside and not urged upon our people as necessary issues.”

Many of us would like to follow this counsel. We too are tired of the seemingly endless debate. We would like to move on to other topics. It is discouraging to witness God’s people being divided over a topic concerning which there was essential unity for the first hundred years of our existence.

But a new situation has developed in the past half-century. New interpretations of the humanity of Christ have been pressed to the forefront of discussion. These interpretations have had their source outside Adventism, coming largely from conservative, Protestant, Evangelical scholars. Some of our people have been much impressed by their arguments and their sincerity. For many Adventist scholars, these new interpretations have carried the day, and, as a result, we have seen articles and books

calling for a change from our historical understanding of the nature of Christ.

How ironic that when some protested the acceptance of these new ideas within Adventism, and began using the same methods of communication (sermons, books, articles, and electronic media) as the proponents of the views new at that time, the stigma of divisiveness and agitation was placed on the protesters rather than the innovators. Perhaps a similar phenomenon occurred during the early centuries when some Christians began protesting the gradual change of sacredness from Saturday to Sunday.

Irony aside, the question before us is simple. Since the subject of the humanity of Christ has been considered a divisive topic in the Seventh-day Adventist Church, should it be laid aside for the sake of unity? Even if those protesting the new interpretations feel that the weight of evidence is on their side, is the topic "essential" to the mission of the remnant church? We would

be delighted to cease discussion instantly if this topic is one of the interesting but non-essential subjects found in the Bible. We will receive clear answers to many of our questions only after this earth closes its history. Is this subject one of them?

In recent decades the convictions of many have been deepening and intensifying. Study has brought them to where they believe that a correct understanding of the subject of Christ's humanity is truly essential to our accomplishing the mission of the remnant church. In fact, the success or failure of Christianity itself may be tied directly to this subject.<sup>1</sup> Despite our reticence to disregard the counsel of the previously quoted appeal for church unity, too much is at stake here to go silent. If our silence allows a new viewpoint to win the day by default, and this contributes to the defeat of God's purpose in raising up a remnant movement, then the luxury of being silent and avoiding stigma carries a price far too high for the conscience to pay.

The issue of Christ's humanity is significant to two vital aspects of Christ's redemptive work.

- The first is whether Christ's death could function as a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of men. In other words, could His death legally and logically take the place of my deserved death, so that I can be forgiven for my sins?
- The second aspect has to do with the relation of His life to my daily living. What are the implications for my living today from Christ's life 2000 years ago?

To put it simply, the nature of Christ has significance with reference to Christ as our Substitute and Christ as our Example.

### **Did Christ Meet Satan's Challenge?**

When Satan first challenged God's right to rulership, he chose God's laws as the focal point of his attack. If God's rules could be shown to be faulty, then it would also be clear that God's system of govern-

ment was founded on a faulty foundation, and this would be very persuasive evidence that God's character itself was flawed. (For a thoughtful and insightful delineation of these issues, consider the chapter in *The Desire of Ages*, entitled "It Is Finished," pp. 758-764.)

When Jesus came to earth, His most important task was to reveal the character of God to fallen and unfallen beings, so that God could be completely cleared of the charges brought against Him by Satan. When the Jews challenged Jesus' mission, He responded, "He that sent Me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I have heard of Him" (John 8:26). In other words, the real issue was not Jesus' mission, but the credibility of God Himself. On another occasion Jesus told Philip, "the words that I speak unto you I speak not of Myself: but the Father that dwelleth in Me, He doeth the works" (John 14:10).

Now Satan had offered two primary charges:

- Charge A: God's law could not be kept by angels, unfallen beings, and newly created mankind.
- Charge B: Satan also claimed that fallen mankind could not keep God's law.

Since it is Charge B that is not well understood by most Christians, including Adventists, we need to review the evidence.

### **Evidence For Charge B**

“Satan, the fallen angel, had declared that no man could keep the law of God after the disobedience of Adam. He claimed the whole race under his control” (*Selected Messages*, vol. 3, p. 136). “Satan declared that it was impossible for the sons and daughters of Adam to keep the law of God, and thus charged upon God a lack of wisdom and love. If they could not keep the law, then there was fault with the Lawgiver. Men who are under the con-

trol of Satan repeat these accusations against God, in asserting that men cannot keep the law of God. Jesus humbled Himself, clothing His divinity with humanity, in order that He might stand as the head and representative of the human family, and by both precept and example condemn sin in the flesh, and give the lie to Satan's charges" (*Signs of the Times*, January 16, 1896).

Satan's charge was clearly leveled against fallen man's ability to keep God's law. It should be noted that Jesus voluntarily humbled Himself to the level where He could meet Satan's charges as the representative of the human family, which, except for Adam and Eve, have all been fallen.

"He came to this world to be tempted in all points as we are, to prove to the universe that in this world of sin human beings can live lives that God will approve.... Satan declared that human beings could not live without sin" (*Review and Herald*, March 9, 1905). Again, Satan's charge relates to human beings

in this world of sin. Part of Christ's mission consisted in "revealing to the heavenly universe, to Satan, and to all the fallen sons and daughters of Adam that through His grace humanity can keep the law of God" (*My Life Today*, p. 323). "Through Christ's redeeming work the government of God stands justified. The Omnipotent One is made known as the God of love. Satan's charges are refuted" (*The Desire of Ages*, p. 26).

Clearly, it was crucial to Christ's work of redemption that He refute the charges Satan had made against the laws and character of God. Now, did Christ refute only Charge A, or did He refute both Charges A and B? Only by refuting both charges could Christ accomplish His redemptive work and fully reveal the character of God. Only by refuting both charges could Christ stand as the head and representative of the human family, legally and persuasively empowered to act as man's representative, to die for all men in their place. Only by refuting both charges could Christ's

death in our place, as our substitute, have any validity in the court of the universe.

If Christ took Adam's unfallen nature, what would He have proved? That unfallen men could obey God's law, thus disproving Charge A. If Christ took a nature partly like Adam's and partly like mine, what would He have proved? That anyone partly like Adam and partly like me (no one who has ever lived!) could obey God's law. Only if Christ took man's fallen nature could He refute Charge B. Only by taking the place of fallen humanity could Christ fulfill His mission as the Redeemer of the fallen race. And it would be crystal clear to the watching universe that if fallen nature could obey God's law by grace, then unfallen nature could obey easily.

If Jesus had sidestepped the ugliness of man's fallen nature, and had been given a special dispensation so as to become only partially like us in terms of His humanity, then who in this universe has refuted Satan's charges? All men have sinned, so no fallen being has refuted

Satan. And if Satan has not been refuted to this day, what right does Christ have to represent the human race? The horrible truth would be that we are no closer to the final resolution of sin on this planet than Adam was at the moment of his sin. The human race would stand condemned without a Saviour.

In other words, Christ's taking man's fallen nature was essential to His mission of refuting Satan's charges and standing at the head of fallen humanity. If Christ is to be our legal substitute, then it could only be through the dangerous path of His accepting our fallen nature as His nature for the entire period of the incarnation.

### **Can Human Beings Obey God's Law Perfectly?**

The issue here is really very simple. Revelation 14:5 describes the last generation in these words, "And in their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God." Can God really carry

out this promise? What real tangible evidence do we have that this will happen?

One astutely observed, "Those who teach that Christ took a superior human nature draw the logical conclusion that it is impossible for the rest of mankind to perfectly obey the law of Jehovah in this life." This is really a very logical and simple deduction. If Christ was able to obey perfectly because of His perfect spiritual nature, then as long as we have imperfect, fallen natures, perfect obedience is impossible. In that case, the fulfillment of Revelation 14:5 is in real jeopardy.

Once again, we return to the question of which charge Christ refuted. If Christ refuted Charge A, He proved that the law can be kept perfectly after glorification. If Christ refuted Charge B, He proved that the 144,000 can keep the law perfectly while living in fallen natures.

If Christ did not prove perfect obedience in a fallen nature, then the perfect obedi-

ence of the final generation remains only a theoretical possibility. But if Christ demonstrated that fallen nature can return perfect obedience to God's law, then the victory of the 144,000 is much more than a theoretical possibility. It becomes a promise based on real, tangible, factual evidence.

The relation of Christ's obedience to our obedience is clearly revealed in the following statements. "God requires of man nothing that is impossible for him to do.... Christ kept the law proving beyond controversy that man also can keep it" (*Review and Herald*, May 7, 1901). "Everyone who by faith obeys God's commandments, will reach the condition of sinlessness in which Adam lived before his transgression. Christ took upon Himself the nature of man, and by a perfect life demonstrated the falsity of the claims of him who constantly accuses those that are trying to obey God's law" (*Signs of the Times*, July 23, 1902). God's promise of perfect obedience

rests upon very solid historical evidence, and no one need doubt its reality.

Inspiration has given us a strong warning also. "In our conclusions, we make many mistakes because of our erroneous views of the human nature of our Lord. When we give to His human nature a power that it is not possible for man to have in his conflicts with Satan, we destroy the completeness of His humanity" (Ellen G. White, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 929). Make no mistake here. The power of Adam's unfallen spiritual nature is a mighty power which is not possible for us to have this side of the Second Coming. Are we in danger of destroying the whole point of Christ's humanity, and thus nullifying His redemptive work for man?

To summarize, the issue of the human nature of Christ is very essential to Christ's victory in the great controversy and thus to the vindication of God's law and character and the ultimate refutation of Satan's

charges. The human nature of Christ is very essential to the success of the final demonstration of loyalty and obedience, through the grace of God, by those who live after the close of probation. We cannot be silent at this crucial time in human history when the truth and beauty of Christ's redemptive work are in real jeopardy of being blurred and even lost in a sincere but misguided attempt to become more Christian by evangelical standards. Let us rather search for the unique Seventh-day Adventist understanding of the gospel, the incarnation, the great controversy, and the issues at stake in the final atonement cleansing of the sanctuary.

1 "Christ is the ladder that Jacob saw, the base resting on the earth, and the topmost round reaching to the gate of heaven, to the very threshold of glory. If that ladder had failed by a single step of reaching the earth, we should have been

lost. But Christ reaches us where we are. He took our nature and overcame, that we through taking His nature might overcome" (*The Desire of Ages*, pp. 311, 312; see also *Confrontation*, pp. 17, 18).

## RESOURCES

<http://www.GreatControversy.org>

Books/Booklets published by GCO Press:

*Cleanse and Close:*

*Last Generation Theology in 14 Points*  
(Book, 159 pp.) by Larry Kirkpatrick.

*1973 and 1974 Annual Council Appeals*  
(Booklet, 44 pp.) by General Conference  
of Seventh-day Adventists.

*Opportunity of the Century:*

*And How Seventh-day Adventists Missed It*  
(Booklet, 48 pp.), by Herbert E. Douglass.

*The Will: His Power, Your Choice*

(Booklet, 52 pp.), by Dennis Priebe.

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(Booklet, 48 pp.), by M. L. Andreasen.

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