Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 32 Article 13

3-1-1961

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CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Volume XXXII March 1961 Number 3

Published by

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD

Edited by

THE FACULTY OF CONCORDIA SEMINARY
SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE
SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY is published monthly by Concordia Publishing House, 3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis 18, Mo., to which all business correspondence is to be addressed. $3.50 per annum, anywhere in the world, payable in advance. Second-class postage paid at St. Louis, Mo.

PRINTED IN U. S. A

CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

Vol. XXXII March 1961 No. 3

Address all communications to the Editorial Committee in care of Walter R. Roehrs, 801 De Mun Ave., St. Louis 5, Mo.

"In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh" Rom. 8:3,4

By MARTIN H. SCHARLEMANN

THE Incarnation is without question the most profound mystery in the universe. That the Creator should condescend to become a creature is an event that defies logical analysis and rational explanation. "This cannot be," said the Greek of ancient days. "The infinite can not become finite without denying itself. God is God, and man is man. One cannot be the other." But God did become flesh, man, a full human being, and there is every reason in the world to call this, as Kierkegaard has done, the Great Paradox. It cannot be comprehended. It can only be received in grateful adoration.

The church spent many agonizing decades, even centuries, attempting to formulate the event of the Incarnation in language that was intelligible and useful. It did so with the metaphysical and linguistic tools at hand. It set out to be doctrinally meaningful to itself and to those who stopped long enough to listen to its proclamation. Emperors and empresses became involved in the contest for proper creedal statements. Bishops and councils anathematized each other at times for daring to differ from proposed terms and phrases. Theologians found the problem of the relationship between the two natures of Christ to be particularly difficult to set forth in human language. In fact, they finally resorted to the use of four negative adverbs, at Chalcedon,[1] as the only means of expressing for their day the incomprehensible measure of God's condescension. This is as far as they felt it possible to go beyond the Nicene Creed, which had taken the term σάρξ from John's Gospel to make the participle σαρκωθέντα and had then gone on to invent the further participial construction καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα.

Within recent years a new interest has arisen among theologians in the complex problem of the humanity of Jesus Christ. The psychological discoveries of Freud and Jung have had no small part in this revival of concern for a meaningful way of describing, in contemporary terms, what it means that God's Son became a man. It is not the purpose of this paper to explore that particular side of the question. We can only call attention to it. In addition, however, it is not only possible but necessary to have a look once again at the way the Scriptures themselves speak of the humanity of Jesus Christ. At present we shall limit ourselves to the study of a rather crucial passage in Romans. It reads (8:3,4):

> For God has done what the Law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. *(RSV)*

Now, obviously, this passage can be treated also under the subject of soteriology. That is not our aim, however, in the present discussion. We have set ourselves the

[1] Martin H. Scharlemann, "The Case for Four Adverbs: Reflections on Chalcedon," CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY, XXVIII, 12 (December 1957), 881—892.

task just now of interpreting what St. Paul says in this passage to throw light on the doctrine of the humanity of our Savior, Jesus Christ. For we must be sure that He was really a man. Our redemption depends on it. That is why the apostle needed to be most precise in the use of words. He had nothing less at hand than to set forth the very heart of the Incarnation in its redeeming consequences for mankind. To this end he had to avoid any kind of suggestion that the Incarnation was only a bit of holy pretense.

St. Paul's phraseology is designed, on the one hand, to reject the notion that the life of Jesus Christ as a man only seemed to be human, and on the other, to forestall any conception of Jesus as being no more than a man. The former error is known as docetism; the latter is called adoptionism. The apostle was determined to avoid encouraging either false view.

A look at verse three of the text under discussion will indicate that St. Paul thought of the incarnate Son as one who had been sent on a mission, on an assigned task. "God sent His own Son," we read. Nowhere else in the New Testament is the Son of God spoken of in just this way. There are other sons of God, of course, but only by adoption. There was and is only one person to whom the expression of "His *own* (ἑαυτοῦ) Son" could apply, and that is Jesus Christ. God's adopted sons are part of this cosmos, living within the circle of human existence. God's "own Son," however, was sent from beyond time and space on an assignment of redemption into our historical context with all of its limitations and vicissitudes.

St. Paul's words certainly imply that Jesus Christ "was at the beginning," to appropriate a Johannine phrase. However, this is not the chief issue to which he addresses himself here. The immediate context speaks of liberation from the "law of sin and death." Now, the apostle is at pains to describe the way such freedom was effected.

The assurance of being free has, in point of fact, been the theme of the past few chapters in Romans. We are no longer under God's wrath; nor are we subject to sin, law, and death, now that the principle of the "Spirit of life in Jesus Christ" has been established. This radical change in man's situation, however, has not come about by means of the Law, even though, as a revelation from God, it was and is, in Paul's own words, holy, just, and good. For sin had captured God's holy Law and perverted its use by inciting men to rebellion against God rather than motivating them to obedience. The Law set forth the righteousness of God, to be sure, thereby accusing men of sin. But even so, it was unable to bring sin itself under condemnation. Instead, it evoked and increased sin. The Law had been given so that the righteousness of God might prevail. In place of that it put all things under God's wrath to a degree unknown beyond the sphere of this revelation of God's holy will. The Law turned out, in fact, to be part of the old aeon, unable to redeem man.

This being the situation, God resorted to the unbelievable measure of sending His very own Son, in fulfillment of His Word, to accomplish what the Law was unable to do. And so Christ Jesus came "in the matter of sin," we read. It was sin that had debased men by taking up residence as an alien power in our very flesh. It was the power of sin that had even twisted

God's Law to make it serve destructive ends. Such an enemy — and Paul almost hypostasizes sin! — had to be dealt with. Sin had to be brought under condemnation right in its own realm. This was the mission on which God sent His own Son.

The περὶ ἁμαρτίας of the text, which we have translated as meaning "in the matter of sin," is the language used, in the Septuagint, of sin offerings. As a result some commentators suggest that the apostle meant to introduce the thought of expiation into our present passage. However, there is no indication in either the context or the text itself that Paul, at this point, intended to raise the whole issue of man's guilt. There is no hint here of any sacrificial language. That kind of terminology, of course, is found in many other passages, but here Paul devotes himself to the question of coming to grips with the power of sin at work in human life, to destroy and to kill. In other words, this text does not specifically discuss the death of our Lord. It is concerned rather with His total mission.

Jesus Christ was sent "in the matter of sin" to do something about the whole problem of man's estrangement from, and even rebellion against, God. The Law had proved to be impotent in this respect. It brought condemnation rather than liberation. Hence God sent His very own Son to enter the ranks of mankind "in the likeness of sinful flesh." Each term in this Pauline phrase is heavy with meaning. Not one syllable may be omitted without upsetting a very carefully constructed conceptual balance.

For one thing, the apostle was determined to say that Jesus Christ, God's own Son, was in every respect man, a particular individual, exposed to the full threat and force of sin. He is not content, therefore, to use just σάρξ; he adds the descriptive genitive ἁμαρτίας. The Son of God assumed not only flesh but "the likeness of sinful flesh," St. Paul insists.

"Flesh" itself is a strong term. It is used of man in his distinction from God. What is more, the Scriptures employ this word to speak of man in his alienation from God, as a being standing under God's judgment and condemnation. Into this estrangement came Christ Jesus and assumed "the likeness of sinful flesh." Lest there be any mistake about the measure of our Lord's descent, the apostle includes the word "sin" in his phrase to point out that it was not a perfect world into which God sent His Son as the second Adam. As such, in his redemptive activity, He entered the very center of our fallen estate. He was "born under the Law," St. Paul says in Galatians. Hebrews tells us that He was even made subject to death as He shared the nature of our flesh and blood.

This solidarity with us in our sinfulness Jesus assumed publicly at His Baptism. There He was officially designated to be God's Anointed, made sin for us in order, as St. Matthew puts it, to fulfill all righteousness. This means that God's Son did not enter the fabric of our mortal context in the form of a demigod or of an heroic ideal. His life was not spent above or even next to our own. His was no halfway commitment to our desperate state. Jesus Christ did not remain aloof from mankind. On the contrary, He even made it a point to associate with sinners and tax collectors, with people who stood outside the sacred order of things, according to the thinking of Israel's religious leaders. Jesus did so

in order to invade the very citadel of sin's inner fortress. This is precisely why so many passed Him by as a man. He could not be distinguished from others. Hence His own brothers are described by the evangelist John as not believing in Him.

It is hazardous, therefore, to set Jesus apart from men, except to make the point of Heb. 7:26 that He was without any sin of His own and so "separate from sinners." Ascribing to Jesus certain special qualities of physique and appearance[2] runs the risk of denying the redemptive power and purpose of our Lord's whole life. For if God's Son was to redeem us from our fallen estate, He had to be like us. If there is anything about our human nature that He did not assume at His incarnation, that part of us remains unhealed and unredeemed. For that reason, as Ignatius suggested many years ago, we ought to stop our ears if anyone would speak to us of a Christ not born of David and of Mary. He came as one who "truly (ἀληθῶς) assumed the body . . . truly ate and drank . . . was truly crucified — not just apparently (οὐ δοκήσει) — and died."[3] St. Augustine made a strong point of this when he said, "Non enim alterius naturae caro nostra et caro illius, nec alterius anima nostra et anima illius. Hanc suscepit naturam, quam salvandam esse indicavit."[4] In this respect the Bishop of Hippo followed Paul and the Greek fathers in their appreciation of the redemptive significance of our Lord's whole life.

St. Paul includes the term "likeness" (ὁμοίωμα) in his remark about "flesh of sin." Here we arrive at the very heart of Paul's attempt, under God's Spirit, to set forth in the language of his time the essence of the mystery of the Incarnation. He chose the Greek word ὁμοίωμα to carry the burden of his formulation. On the one hand, the apostle meant to point out that this "likeness" was not a matter of poetic fancy. This was no figure of speech, as might be suggested, for example, by the "as it were" of Philippi's commentary.[5] For from the Biblical usage of ὁμοίωμα it is clear that this term signifies the concrete expression of similarity.[6] That is to say, there was no make-believe in Jesus' becoming man. Moreover, this term stresses the fact that God's own Son truly became a human being. The "flesh" He assumed was no abstraction; it was that of one single individual, "being born in the likeness of men," as the apostle puts it in Phil. 2:7.

In other words, this term introduces a modification into Paul's phraseology for the purpose of recognizing the fact that Christ was Himself "without sin" and remained so (cf. Heb. 4:15). No one could ever accuse Him of having done a wrong. No unkind word ever left His lips; no guile was ever found in His words; no

[2] Artists in particular are known for wanting to depict Jesus as more than human. Sometimes theologians also draw inferences from Biblical texts that are difficult to justify. Thus Hollaz went so far as to say that Jesus refrained from laughter *(a risu abstinuit). (Examen theologicum acroamaticum,* p. III, sect. i, cap. iii, qu. 12, 4th ed. by John Henry Hollaz [Stockholm: Johannes Heinrich Russworm, 1725], II, 81—82).

[3] *Ad Trallianos,* IX, 1, as given in Migne, *Patrologia,* v, 689.

[4] *Sermo* 174, 2.2.

[5] I, 392.

[6] The important Biblical passages are the Septuagint of Deut. 4:16; Is. 40:19; and Ex. 20:4; as well as Rom. 6:5 and Phil. 2:7. On this term Kittel's *Theol. Wörterbuch* says (v, 191): "Es bezeichnet nicht abstrakt die Gleichheit oder Übereinstimmung, sondern stets das gleichgemachte Abbild"; and again: "Abbild, das einem anderen gleichgemacht ist und nun mit ihm übereinstimmt."

thoughts of hatred ever entered His soul. He Himself, though tempted as we are, did not have the experience of sinning. Since He lived where we do, God could make Him to be sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21). In this way God chose to effect a reconciliation between us and God, between God and us. For as the use of ὁμοίωμα in Rom. 6:5 reminds us, we are in some mysterious way identified with Jesus in His crucifixion and resurrection. This, too, is part of the paradox.

When God sent His own Son in "the likeness of sinful flesh," that Son became part of our situation as fallen creatures of God. That is to say, He was in every way, and to a much greater degree, tempted as we are. The synoptic gospels, therefore, take Jesus right from His Baptism into the desert, there to be exposed to the full fury of Satan's onslaught. Jesus was confronted with the prospect of living like the Son of God among men, using His power to escape the difficulties of life and the terrors of the crucifixion. He might have withdrawn from the necessity of descending to the full depth of our individual and particular existence. And we can be quite certain that the devil's assaults touched Him more deeply than they do us, for the very doing of sin has dulled our sensitivity to what is just and holy. Jesus, however, held out "like a fortress in immaculate purity by the Godhead within."[7] He remained sinless, not because He lived next to life, but precisely because, as a true man, He fought off temptation by means and with the help of the Spirit of God residing in Him, creating what systematic theology refers to as an *unio personalis*, wherein the powers and attributes of His divine nature were communicated to what St. John calls His "flesh."

The Lutheran Confessions by strong implication exempt Jesus from having been born in original sin by saying that all men born *in the natural way* are conceived and born in sin.[8] This is their way of taking into account the Virgin Birth and its significance for the *"likeness* of sinful flesh." In several passages these same confessions attempt to clarify this mystery by drawing on the philosophic distinction between *accident* and *substance*. Sin is an accident, they say, not a substance, that is, it was not created by God. For the theological discussions of the 16th century this was, no doubt, a useful distinction to make. Whether this differentiation between that which is accidental and what is substantial is helpful today will depend, most likely, on the degree to which once accepts, or at least learns to work with, the presuppositions of the philosophical outlook that gave birth to this kind of terminology. The fact is that no kind of wording solves this riddle. The mystery inherent in Paul's formulation defies full explanation. It has always been and will continue to be God's secret. We can only try to talk about it as meaningfully as possible in a day that has become quite unfamiliar with Biblical terminology and, in addition, works with concepts and presuppositions very different from those that proved useful to the authors of our confessions.

When all is said and done, the descent of God the Son did not stop somewhere midway between heaven and earth. Christ

[7] The words are those of Edward Irving as quoted in H. R. Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ*, 1931, p. 277.

[8] The Augsburg Confession, Art. II.

Jesus came down all the way into our utmost estrangement in order to become a curse for us so that we might be set free. He Himself did no sin. Thereby He brought sin itself under full condemnation. This the Law had been unable to achieve. This was its weakness, for σάρξ had rendered God's own Law powerless to effect a liberation from the Egypt of our sin.

It should be noted that in our text the words ἐν σαρκί go with κατέκρινε. The apostle's point is just this: right there where sin prevailed, God's Son brought sin under judgment by His perfect obedience. He did so by constantly refusing sin any entrance into His will and action. His meat was to do the Father's will, He said. And by this persevering and absolute exclusion of all that is sinful He brought sin itself under God's judgment, thereby destroying an alien power that had come to tyrannize over man's life.

The specific purpose God had in mind as He sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh is set forth in the text as follows: "In order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us. . . ." The Greek word for "requirement" is δικαίωμα. St. Paul had already used this term in 5:18 as a synonym for obedience and as meaning the very opposite of transgression. In the light of this usage we can be sure that it is Christ's active obedience, to borrow a word from dogmatics, which constitutes the Apostle's emphasis. By Himself living out the full demands of the Law, Jesus Christ met the requirements of God's holy will as revealed in that Law. In this way He became the second, or last Adam. Unlike the first one, Jesus did not want to be like God. In fact, He "emptied Himself" in order to become an obedient servant. God sent Him on this mission in order to undo the effects of the disobedience in Eden.

Now the demands of God's Law on our individual lives have been fulfilled. Here, too, Jesus took our place. His whole life was lived vicariously. As a consequence, we have been set free from the Law. In fact, we live in the new aeon, or as St. Paul has it, "according to the Spirit." The purpose, then, of Christ's mission is not to be attained at some moment in the future, at the final παρουσία, for example. It has already been achieved. The life of Jesus Christ already sanctifies us, and the rule of Law has ended for us. Sin stands condemned by our Lord's refusal to yield to it. And in this way Jesus now stands at the head of a new humanity, one that has been liberated from "the law of sin and death," as St. Paul puts it. Now we need no longer walk according to flesh. We live in the new age.

The two aeons of revealed history, therefore, are separated from each other by an act of God's sending. Between them there stands one who came "in the likeness of sinful flesh" to settle this matter of sin once and for all by Himself living sinlessly among the most sinful of men and under all the pressures and tensions of man's creaturely existence. In this way He dislodged the power of sin over men, removing the very weapons of rebellion from our grasp. Apart from this we have no salvation. For this reason the Nicene Creed quite explicity binds our redemption to the coming down of God's Son as incarnate and as man.

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