

God and Man: Full humanity of Christ often shortchanged

March 22, 2013

Whenever Brandon Hudson speaks publicly about the doctrine of the incarnation, he does so cautiously. Growing up Baptist, leading youth and preaching have taught him to tread lightly around the topic of Jesus' human nature.

Why this—or any—concern around an ancient, core tenet of the Christian faith?

“It’s a very delicate subject,” said Hudson, pastor at [Northwest Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, N.C.](#) “We all have this image of Jesus we guard very carefully.”



In 325 A.D., the First Council of Nicaea declared the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus. That image, Hudson and others have noticed, is weighted heavily in favor of the “fully God” half of the doctrine of incarnation, emphasizing his post-resurrection kingship and de-emphasizing his humanity.

Some experts say it’s a trend they see equally in conservative and liberal

Christian traditions. The former usually are laser-focused on Jesus' divine, all-knowing lordship and the latter on a cosmic, spiritual Christ who dwells in the heart of every person.

'Silly thinking'

In either case, too much contemplation on the incarnate God often is avoided. For conservatives, the human Jesus threatens the divine Jesus. Yet others view the concept as nothing more than interesting, even metaphorical, detail.

"The humanity of Jesus is usually glossed over, and we think that Jesus knew everything that was going to happen to him from the beginning of his life to his death," said [Molly Marshall](#), president and professor of theology and spiritual formation at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. "That is really silly thinking."

But it's also understandable thinking, Marshall said. The desire for certainty in matters of faith usually trumps the ambiguity and tension built into the incarnation. After all, how could anyone have been fully God and fully human?

"To make it a story of God as well as the story of a first-century Palestinian, that's a challenge," she said. "We tend to want to resolve that tension with easy answers."

So in many Christian minds and churches, Christ's post-Easter exaltation is projected back over his human life, thereby sanitizing his earthly existence to make way for the righteous, risen Savior, Marshall said.

Making 'nonsense' of Christ

"It makes nonsense of the real hurting, weary, grief-stricken person who gets angry and who is sick and tired of the obtuseness of some who claim to

be his followers,” she said.

It also nullifies the atonement of Christ’s death and resurrection, said [Ben Witherington III](#), professor of New Testament and doctoral studies at Asbury Theological Seminary.

“If there is no incarnation, then the death of Jesus is not a once-and-for-all sacrifice for sins past, present and future,” he said. “It’s just a death of a really good human being.”

Accepting human limitations

Christians must embrace the belief that God accepted human limitations in the incarnation. Divine condescension means God gave up his all-knowing, all-powerful qualities to take on limitations in time, space and knowledge, but without sin, Witherington said.

“Divine limitation means he put the ‘omni’s on hold,” Witherington told the recent Winter Pastors’ School at Baylor University’s [Truett Theological Seminary](#).

Those self-imposed limitations mean Jesus’ humanity was “not a charade,” he said.

Jesus lived a fully human existence but retained full divinity—living a sin-free existence not because he had “a God Button he could push like an ‘Easy Button,’” but because he relied perfectly on the resources God makes available to all his children, he explained.

“Jesus lived his life on the basis of the two resources we all have—the word of God and the Spirit of God,” he said. “Incarnation means he humbled himself. He accepted our human limitations.”

‘Gnosticism of Jesus’

But suggesting that to many Christians causes “an allergic reaction of sorts” because they see it as undermining Christ’s divine membership in the Trinity.

Others don’t care much about the humanity of Christ because it interferes with time spent “with a Jesus they see only as the transcendent Lord who answers prayer,” he said.

And it’s a trend likely to continue in a post-modern, 21st-century context where Christianity’s waning influence results in a desire for spirituality without doctrine and “a Gnosticism of Jesus.”

‘Skin on Christ’

But it’s not just that, said John Uldrick, minister of students and missions at [First Baptist Church in Rome, Ga.](#), who has noticed a decided lack of interest among young Christians in the incarnation.

The culprit isn’t so much competing Christologies or wishy-washy spirituality, but the prevalence of communication technology that takes the humanity out of most interactions.

“I have seen teenagers not even think about Christ incarnationally because they aren’t living incarnationally themselves,” he said. “So much of life for teenagers is lived through their cell phones and the Internet and Facebook.”

Adults also struggle with touchy topics like whether Christ bathed, ate and was sexually tempted.

“I think many Christians live their faith in their head and not necessarily in their hearts,” Uldrick said. “We don’t put skin on Christ.”

‘Half the gospel’

It was an experience in teaching youth about the incarnation a few years ago that also fascinated Hudson.

They were discussing the passage in Isaiah 53 that describes the coming messiah as an unattractive man. The kids didn't like the passage and didn't take well to discussing Christ's human limitations at all.

"The response was so visceral that I have been fascinated ever since," he said.

Now as a pastor, Hudson said he views promoting incarnational theology as part of his calling. Why? The rest of Christ's story makes no sense without it.

"We do a disservice not to ponder and think about this because, otherwise, we are only getting half the gospel."

-With additional reporting by Managing Editor Ken Camp