

THE HUMILITY OF GOD:
THE HUMANITY OF JESUS AS WESLEYAN ECCLESIOLOGIC
Diane Leclerc, Northwest Nazarene University

For Eleanor

Before I begin my discussion on Christology, which may push boundaries in unpleasant places for some, it seems appropriate to state a bit of what I also believe: I believe in God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; I believe in Jesus Christ as fully divine and fully human; and I believe that the Trinitarian God is worthy of worship. There has been a fresh call in our midst of late, to place worship at the center of our identity; I believe appropriately so. However, if we are not careful, we can make assumptions about who and why we worship. It is a great temptation, even today, to think of our God as pagans thought of their gods: namely, that God demands our worship as some sort of mollifying appeasement. We worship to placate an angry God so that we will not be punished. Alternatively, it is too easy to do our version of rain dances, believing if we can please God enough in our worship, blessings will rain down upon us. Thus, we distort the face of God, and make destructive conclusions about God's nature.

There is a vast difference between saying that God demands our worship and God is worthy of worship. It is too easy to bring our sacrifice of praise, believing that God mandates this type of sacrifice, at the expense of living poured out lives for the powerless. Many of us are familiar with the words of Amos in chapter 5: "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me... Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps" (5:21-23).¹ Instead, God wants us to act justly. So here begins my proposal.

¹ All references are in the NIV unless otherwise noted.

True worship is the worship of the true God. But who is the true God? The God whose essential characteristic is love, is also essentially humble, as revealed in the humanity of Jesus the Christ.

My aim here is to uncover the human portrait of Jesus by means of six characteristics of his life, death, and resurrection, all revealing the humility of God. From these theological declarations, it is my hope to push toward their ecclesiological implications overall, and for the Church of the Nazarene in particular.

The Incarnation

God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. Ever since Nicaea, we have declared the paradox that Jesus is fully God, and fully human. The incarnation, especially in the Wesleyan tradition, is salvific in and of itself (to be discussed below). We see a God who is, to a certain extent, divested of unlimited power through the volitional choice of embodying the Son. There is indeed a scandal of particularity here. That God became incarnate should shake the foundations of any implication of the Schleiermachian leaning that essentially all religions share the same sensibilities about the divine. The proclamation that God became human and entered concrete existence should shock us in its radical reshaping of what humans have perceived and believed about God. We now proclaim that God is fully and finally revealed in a person. What natural theology failed to do in its inability to speak meaningfully of the character of God, the special revelation of God in Christ does completely. If we want to know what God is like, we look at Jesus.

Luther portrayed the incarnation as God's great condescension to humanity. What I find problematic in condescension language is that it can imply a change in God's *modus operandi*, as if the Wholly Other suddenly decides to become immanent through the incarnation, or as if this God puts on flesh to disguise God's sovereignty and Almightyness. I would like to propose that

the humility seen in God's condescension is revelatory of God's very nature. The question could be stated this way: when Paul proclaims Jesus, who being in very nature God, humbled himself, is he saying that Jesus was being incongruous with God's nature or expressing God's nature? I think it crucial to understand Jesus and his sacrifice as congruent with God's eternal nature. This then implies that humility has always been at the heart of God's essential characteristics; the humility expressed in the incarnation is not out of character for God.

Jesus' Baptism

During Jesus' day, baptism was a liturgical method by which non-Jewish persons or "God-fearers" became Jewish by choice. What makes John the Baptist's message so radical, and so offensive, is that he was calling Jews to be baptized. This was not without historical precedent, of course, for "washing" in the Old Testament was ritually common. In Leviticus, God instructs the people to cleanse themselves from impurities, contracted through being exposed to a leper or touching a corpse, for example. Closer to the time of John the Baptist's ministry, washing fulfilled the legal requirements of ritual purity to sacrifice at the Temple. Nevertheless, these types of impurities did not imply a need for the repentance that John called for, for they were unintentional "sins." They were a part of living in a "dirty" world. Thus, John's call associated baptismal washing with true repentance, which offended the Sadducees and Pharisees especially.

Jesus intentionally traveled to the Jordan where John the Baptist was preaching repentance. According to Matthew, John is immediately struck with the absurdity of Jesus' request (Matt. 3:13-14). John had proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, and as the one who would baptize them with the Holy Spirit and with fire, implying a deeper, more cleansing baptism than he himself could offer (Matt. 3:11-12). The Apostle John tells us that John the Baptist saw Jesus

as the perfect Lamb of God, who would take away the sin of the world! Not as a sinner in need of repentance. And so, he was stunned that this savior would submit himself to baptism.

What do we make of Jesus' request? We could understand that Jesus uses this act of initiation when Gentiles become Jewish, as symbolic of his initiation into his official ministry. We could see Jesus as washing himself of the impurities that surrounded him, as anyone living in the world. However, if we focus on John's shock and reluctance, we see Jesus' request as a profound act of humility, in his association with sinfulness—he would have appeared sinful to all who saw his baptism through John's hands. Is this a foreshadowing of what is to come of Jesus? In his submission to baptism, we see a heart willing to submit to a cross—the symbol of sin and shame. Indeed, he became sin for us. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Certainly, sin is not characteristic of God. But again, we see a God willing to absorb even sin itself, into himself, as acting in character, not out of the character of God. God's characteristic love expresses itself in the humility of Jesus at his baptism.

Jesus' Temptations

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine Jesus' temptations at length. What is important for our purposes here is what they reveal to us about Jesus' nature. In days prior to Nicaea² one attempt to understand the nature of Jesus was expressed as monophysitism—the belief that Jesus Christ only had one nature and that it was divine. By implication, he had a human body and a divine nature or will,³ and so in his essential being Jesus Christ was not fully human. The problem with monophysitism should become clear: if this is true, Jesus' temptations in the desert and in Gethsemane were not real, for his divine nature could not have said yes to them. It would

² And after in the form of Coptic Christianity.

³ Or will, as expressed in Monothelism.

be impossible for him to sin. Monophysitism effectively denies that “was tempted in every way as we are” (Heb. 4:15)

Understanding the temptations in the desert supports the thesis of this paper—that Jesus’ humanness reveals the humility of God. Jesus was tempted by Satan precisely to reveal and act on his divinity—to favor his divine nature over his humanity, by utilizing his divine power to meet his human needs. Instead, he chooses not to act as a God could act, but limits himself by choosing obedience and submission to the will of God over self-exaltation, and even self-preservation. It is this humble obedience that becomes central to the doctrine of recapitulation put forth by Irenaeus of Lyon.

Recapitulation

The humanity and humility of Jesus shine brightly in the theology of recapitulation. Paul describes Jesus Christ the second Adam (Rom. 5:12-21). Adam disobeyed God, and in doing so lost his full humanity. Sin is an aberration of true humanity. Therefore, when Adam sinned, he became “less than” human, less than how humanity was designed originally. Alternatively, Jesus is the model of true humanity, as the new Adam. But more than that, we find a nascent, but emerging doctrine of theosis in Irenaeus’ scheme: God had “become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”⁴ However, unlike Athanasius and others who follow with a more fully developed understanding of deification, it is clear that Irenaeus is calling us to embrace our full humanity in Christ, even as we participate in the divine. This leads us to state a very Wesleyan premise: sanctification is the very renewal of the image of God in us. It is the *imago Dei* that sets us apart from the rest of creation. It is the *imago Dei*, then, in Jesus, that

⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 5, preface.

reveals the image in its undistorted form, untouched by sin. Thus, it is the human Jesus, who is tempted just as we are, who shows us full obedience to God, and enables that obedience in us, through the power of the Holy Spirit. To love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves fulfills the holiness—the holy humanness—we were designed to embody. Jesus Christ’s love for God and neighbor led him to the cross, which illumines the humility of God in its most poignant form.

The Cross

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he took a towel and basin and washed his disciples’ feet. The writer of the Gospel interjects that in doing so, he showed them “the full extent of his love,” (John 13:1). We know that Jesus took the position of a slave in this act. Often this description is used to highlight the servanthood of Jesus. And as Peter’s question to Jesus suggests (John 13:6), this act of humility is supposedly not appropriate for a Messiah. Nevertheless, it is this act of humility that bridges foot washing to the submission at Gethsemane, to the trial, to the cross. Jesus could have lorded it over his disciples, said no in the Garden, pleaded his case at trial, fought back at his scourging, and rejected the cross. But Jesus dies. Jesus the fully divine and fully human one dies a real human death.

We have rejected theories that say only Jesus’ human body dies, just as we have rejected theories that Jesus only appeared to have a human body (Docetism). In more modern times, we have even rejected the early rejection of Patripassionism, and rightly proclaim that the cross was an event in the Trinity itself. In this sense, we can say that God died, God experienced human death.

Nevertheless, there is great significance in the fact that Jesus the Human One,⁵ with deep and pervasive humility, became obedient to death, even death on a cross. Jesus underwent the totality of the human experience through to its end. This was the truest expression of the extent of his love, that Jesus emptied himself, laid down his life for his friends, and was entombed. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that he died on a cross—the most graphic and elucidatory symbol of guilt and shame in that culture. He died the most humiliating death imaginable.

We proclaim this as salvific, no matter our atonement theory. What we do not often see, or at least do not often express, is that he died for sinners, yes, but in his humiliation, he also died for the humiliated. He allowed himself to be beaten, to empathize with the beaten. He submitted himself to excruciating pain, rejected any analgesic, to empathize with those in pain. He allowed himself to be victimized to empathize with victims of all sorts. For many victims of violence and abuse, they are lingering between life and death—literally perhaps; surely psychically, emotionally, spiritually. For many, their most existential question: “For God’s sake, where is God?” Jesus experienced God-forsakenness and can empathize with the Godforsaken.

Further, the more common biblical question “what must I do to be saved?” cannot afford to linger in the realm of the eternal that concerns itself only with the propitiation of the sinner’s sin and the offer of future “reward”; it is a question that must be answered in the literal, where literal “salvation” is often its chief command. In other words, the meaning of the words “what must I do to be saved” is radically different when they come from different mouths. From the sinner: how can I escape the eternal consequences of my sin? From the sinned-against: how will I survive this present existential horror? We are clear: the cross is the means of all salvation. It

⁵ From the Common English Bible, translated the “Son of Man” in other translations.

is also the most important revelation of the empathetic capacity of the God-human who stands in solidarity with those who suffer and die at the hands of others.

The Resurrection

While I could spend a great deal of time on the depth and breadth of meaning found in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I will limit my discussion to the following points. First of all, while we all need the hope of the resurrection for eternal life, there are those who specifically need the hope of a bodily resurrection. Think of the child sold to a brothel at the age of four, who lives through unspeakable circumstances for years, and dies of transmitted disease or violence when she is 14. She desperately needs a bodily resurrection that will redeem her spirit and her *body* to the uttermost. In a sense, her body has never really lived, except under the condition of others' perverse objectification and horrific abuse. The resurrection of Jesus represents that he still lowers himself in love to lift those from the lowest vestiges of human life.

Second, the resurrection of Jesus is crucial if we are to understand that he remains, even now, human. Jesus, who is God, does not shed his humanity when resurrected or ascended. God, then, remains human. Moreover, if we affirm an eternal now in God (which I know is debated), then we can make the outrageous claim that God has always been, and will always be human. But even if we do not affirm an eternal now in God, we can still claim that God will always be human. We cannot even begin to comprehend the degree of God's persistent unanimity with every human situation, indeed with every human.

A Christological Ecclesiology

From these Christological reflections, I will now speak specifically to their ecclesiology—what does the humanity of Jesus tell us about the nature and operations of the Church? What might the humanity of Jesus have to say to the Church of the Nazarene?

The incarnation of the Human One calls the Church to a shared incarnational humility.

Just as Jesus displays the characteristic humility of God, we, as a body, are to display humility to each other, and to the world. We must rid ourselves of power struggles that imitate secular models of power, and understand the call in Christ's words "the first will be last, and the last will be first" (Matt. 19:30; 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30). As Paul says, in the body, the unrepresentable parts are treated with special honor (1 Cor. 12:23). In the church, we must exalt the lowly, in an effort to affirm the full equality of persons. Outside the church, we must see that the message of the Gospel can only be heard if we speak humbly, and that our first priority of love is to the poor and oppressed.

The baptism of the Human One calls the Church to genuine repentance.

If Jesus, the Christ and sinless one, submitted himself in humility to the baptism of John and his call to full repentance, we must no longer resist confession in some distorted attempt to maintain a façade of holiness. It is a clear distortion of Wesley's theology to suggest that holiness belies repentance in believers! It is time for us to expand our doctrine of sin to include "involuntary transgressions", sins of omission, and participation in systemic evil, and to make confession especially for the sins of complicity, and for our racism, sexism, classism, consumerism, and other forms of oppression—as individuals and as a denomination.

The temptations of the Human One calls us to the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

Just as Jesus was tempted to exert power inappropriately, we must acknowledge our temptations to do the same (Luke 4:3-4, 9-12). However, we are not left on our own to overcome such temptations. Luke tells us that when Jesus left the desert to return to Galilee, he did so in the power of the Spirit (Luke 4:14). We have access to this same power through this same Spirit. Yet, we must, must remind ourselves that the power we receive from the Spirit is

very unlike the power of the world. The power of the Spirit is manifest in our weaknesses. When we are weak, then we are strong (2 Cor. 12:9-10). In God's inverse kingdom, blessed are the poor in spirit, the mournful, the meek, the hungry and thirsty, the merciful, the peacemaker, the persecuted. Let us pray, "Lead us not into [the] temptation" to safeguard our insecurities through exercises of self-preservation.

The recapitulation of the Human One calls us to holy humanness.

The call of God has never been to become more than human. Through Christ's recapitulation of humanity, we see clearly that holiness is a part of our created being. We were created fully human. In sin, without hope and without God in the world, we express the distortion, or perversion of what is truly human. Only in Christ, are we renewed in the image of God, regaining our humanness, and set on the path of Christlikeness. It is bad theology to say that we sin because we are human. We sin because we are less than human. Also, it is complete misunderstanding of holiness to define it as sinlessness. You cannot define holiness fully by means of a *via negativa*—referring to God's holiness or ours. Holiness has positive content, namely love. We were created to love. When we love as God designed, we are holy, and fully human. We as a denomination miss the mark when we focus on sinlessness (implying a super human reality) at the expense of love in our theology of holiness.

The cross of the Human One calls us to solidarity with those who suffer.

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it" (Luke 9:23-24, NIV). These verses are extremely familiar to us, as holiness people, who believe that consecration and surrender are the very means to entire sanctification. And yet, while we are experts at self-denial, we have not always understood the call to pick up

our crosses and what this entails. We have interpreted it to mean that we have a cross to carry from time to time—an illness to bear, or some period of personal struggle. We forget that Jesus' cross was a complete and final sacrifice for the Other. We take up our crosses when we suffer on behalf of *others*! Further, we misunderstand Jesus if we lose our lives *in order to* save ourselves! Salvation is a result, not a motivation. The call, then, is to pour out our lives as Christ poured out his—on behalf of those who cannot save themselves.

The resurrection of the Human One calls us to participation in the New Creation.

The humanity of Jesus in the form of a resurrected body stands as a hope for the resurrection of human bodies. One day we will rise anew. Jesus said to Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” And Martha answered “I know he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day.” In response, we hear these words: “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:23-25). We are people of hope. As holiness folks, we must also affirm that we are raised to new life now, because Jesus is the Resurrection; Jesus has already raised us from the dead in the New Creation in which we even now participate. We live in the optimism of grace as a Wesleyan-holiness people. We believe that the power of sin has been broken, death has been defeated, and we can live a new life in the power of the Spirit in the here and now. This is our unique message, our unique calling. In the midst of a world hemorrhaging of any life's blood, we proclaim the life-giving blood of Jesus, who even now can heal us to the uttermost. And in humility we bow in worship before the Divine-Human One, who bowed before us to wash our feet and make us whole.