

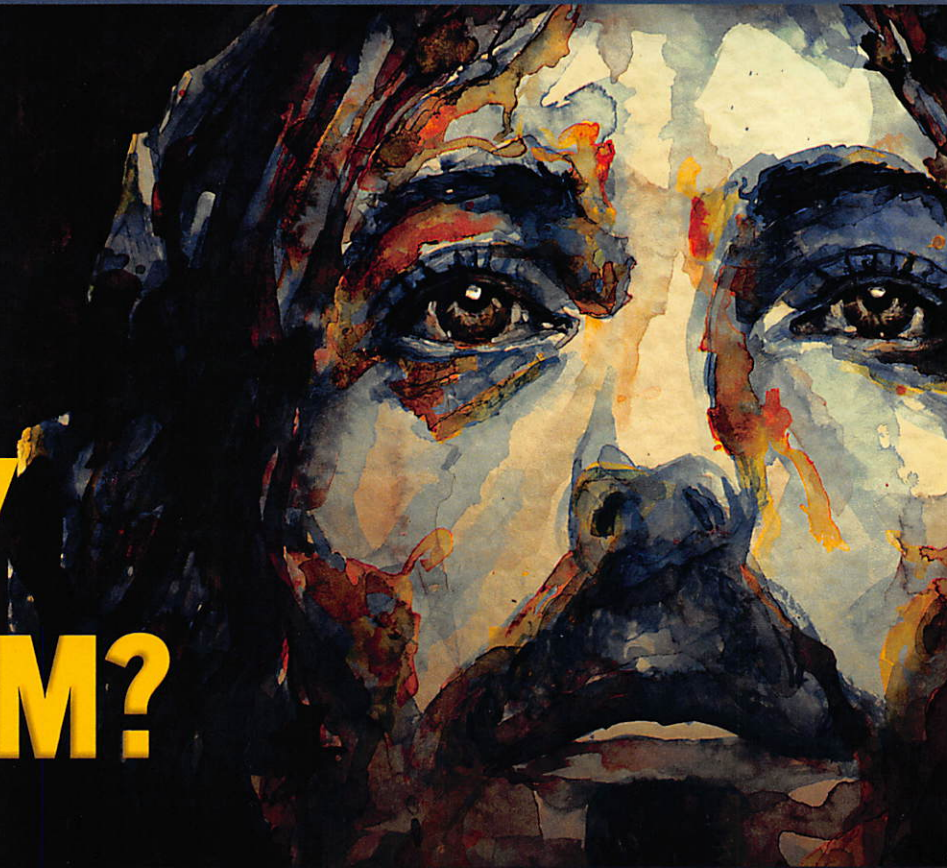
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WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?



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The Scandal of Christ's Humanity

BY STEVE RAY

They walked from sunup to sundown for at least two days. Rugged country, but they were rugged men. They had left the Jewish community in Capernaum and headed north to the pagan, gentile district of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus had led this motley crew of disciples for three years. They had watched his life, listened to him teach and debate, and witnessed his miracles and works of power beyond number.

Upon arrival in this unfamiliar territory, Jesus asks what are arguably the two most important questions of all time. As crowds thronged the outskirts of the city, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" (Matt. 16:13). And then he looks directly in their eyes and asks an even more pointed question: "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

There is no more important question we can ask. It has puzzled people from the beginning and is debated to this day. The disciples responded to Jesus' first question with a flurry of res-

ponses from the editorials and rumors of the day: Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets (Matt. 16:14). All of these were heroic men from their past.

The debate and speculation continue even today. The Jehovah's Witnesses knock on your door and present Jesus as "a god," an angel—in fact, Michael the Archangel. The fourth-century heretic priest Arius also held that Christ's nature was angelic. The Mormons present Jesus as a son of their heavenly father who is one god of many gods. The secularist will say he was a good teacher and a hapless rabbi at best, while a Jew might say he was a dangerous imposter and a false teacher. Jesus remains one of the most discussed and debated figures in history.

When he addressed the disciples personally with his second question, Peter blurted out, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" (Matt. 16:16). Now, that was a mouthful, and I suspect maybe even Peter was a

bit surprised. Jesus acknowledged the truth of Peter's words but also gave the credit to God, not to any insightfulness on Peter's part.

"Blessed are you," he said, ". . . for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17). In other words, the gray matter between Peter's ears did not conceive of this profound definition. It was God who gave him a direct revelation and inspired his words.

Was Jesus merely a prophet with a human nature or was he more? Peter's words soared above the words of the others. The Jewish people had expected a Messiah imminently, but they were anticipating a mere man. His title would be Son of David, and he would bring back the glory days of their ideal king of the past. Peter's first description of Jesus was piercing, but the second portion of his description soared like an eagle: "the Son of the living God." A son has the same nature as his father, so Peter's statement asserted that Jesus was not only human but also divine.

The disciples knew of Jesus' humanity but now began to comprehend his divinity, as one of them would later write, "In the beginning was the Word . . . and the Word was God . . . and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father" (John 1:1, 14).

Jesus was the Word, and he put on a tent of flesh. That is what *dwelt* means. In the original Greek, it meant "tent" or "tabernacle"—in other words, to dwell in a tent of flesh.

The conundrum of Christ

So was Jesus God or just a man, or was he some kind of amalgamation of the two? Let's take a look at why it was, and still is, viewed as such a conundrum.

Jesus was born a Jew into a Jewish world. Paul tells us, "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law" (Gal. 4:4). The Jews expected a Messiah, but they did not expect God himself to become a man.

In several debates with the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus pulled back the curtain a bit to reveal his true nature, and the Jews responded by picking up stones to kill him. When Jesus asked them why, they responded, "It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God" (John 10:33).

Were they wrong to be leery of this rabbi, to challenge him? According to their Law and prophets, no one could see God. On Mount Sinai, God said to Moses, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Exod. 33:20). The Law stated, "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind" (Num. 23:19). Samuel asserts that God is not a man, and Job said of God, "For he is not a man, as I am, that I might answer him" (Job 9:32).

Had you been in Jerusalem at the

time, would it have been obvious to you that this carpenter and rabbi was divine, especially when all your religious leaders adamantly denied it? If we confronted this curly-haired Jew with calloused hands, wearing sandals and perspiring in the blistering heat, would we have said, "Ah, of course, he is God"?

Confusion is understandable. Defining this unique person was challenging. No one like him had ever walked the Earth before. St. Augustine, more than 300 years later, delighted in the conundrum and the mystery:

The Son reveals his Father and creates his own mother; he is eternally the Son of God without a mother and became the Son of Man through a mother without an earthly father. Without a mother, he is God; without a father, he is man (*Homilies on St. John*, 8:8).

Today most people will concede that Jesus was a real man who lived 2,000 years ago. He was not a mythical character of ancient lore and legend. Under the protection of the Holy Spirit, the Church has carefully and meticulously defined the person and nature of the eternal Son of God

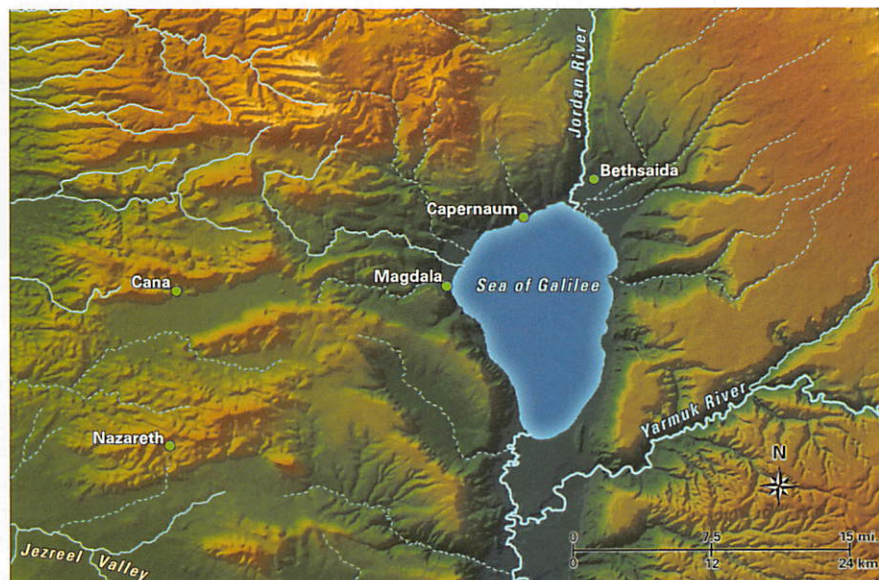
become flesh. The Church has removed the confusion as to his identity and dealt with numerous heresies and false teachings regarding his nature. He is God and man. He is the second Person of the Trinity, and he is Jesus the carpenter.

Outside the Church, the heresies and confusion still abound, which should not surprise us. We Christians find ourselves constantly defending the divinity of Christ.

Not a ghost or spirit

But what about Jesus' humanity, the adorning of his divine Person with the tent of flesh, born of a woman? In the early Church, his humanity was vigorously challenged, as well as his divinity. Some willingly accepted he was divine but regarded his fleshly body as a phantasm or illusion. How could God be a man in flesh? God must somehow only inhabit the body, or possibly pull a magician's trick and only appear to be a man. How could God be hungry, thirsty, tired, tearful? How could God spill his blood on the ground and die on a cross?

But the four Gospels don't give us much ground to doubt his humanity. He was born of a woman, suckled on the breast, soiled his diapers (or



whatever was the equivalent in those days). He cried when tired or hurt and learned from his mother and father. We are told, “The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom” and “Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:40, 52). He suffered under the soldiers’ lash and crown of thorns. The Romans had no doubt they were torturing a real man and not a ghost or spirit.

After his resurrection, there was reason to doubt his true physical body. He rose from the tomb, appeared in rooms, and was not always recognized. But he affirmed and confirmed his true, fleshly body: “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39). He ate fish and bore the physical wounds of his Passion, even commanding Thomas to touch them.

My wife, Janet, and I run a business that takes people on pilgrimages to Catholic sites throughout the world. When we take groups to the Holy Land, I say to them, “At home you defend the divinity of Jesus Christ, but here in this land I want to emphasize with you his

real humanity. Think and meditate as we walk in his footprints what it was like for him 2,000 years ago. Feel the hot sun, swat the flies that buzz around your head, taste the fish, and smell the breeze off the Sea of Galilee. Notice your thirst and hunger, your sore feet and sunburned neck. Jesus walked where you are walking. In this place you need to think of his body, fully human in all regards except for sin.”

When we take the boat out on the Sea of Galilee to give folks a sense of life in the Gospels, I tell them the story of the night I went fishing all night with two Jewish fishermen, Shemi and Udi (see sidebar below).

‘Step aside’

It is thirty-three miles around the Sea of Galilee where Shemi and Udi fish, and I have run the whole way in five stages. The Bible and the reality of Jesus and what he did through the Incarnation come alive as I run alone in the wilderness, slogging through swampy areas or wading through fields of wheat. I find serpents on the road; watch hyenas chasing gazelles, fish leaping into the air, fishing boats coming

in from the night’s work, hawks circling above. This is the land of Jesus: he created it as God and walked it as man.

One particular “incarnational moment” was an earthy one, for which I beg your pardon in advance, but it was its earthiness that made it so poignant. On this morning, I took off running and was about three miles out along the shore before I realized I had forgotten to bring along toilet paper.

Runners know that when nature calls, it doesn’t matter how far you are from the hotel’s porcelain toilet. Necessity demanded I find a clump of bushes to take care of business. I had no choice but to pick some big leaves to finish the paperwork, hoping it was not some kind of Israeli poison ivy. Then it struck me like a thunderclap—this is what Jesus did every morning!

The Bible uses euphemisms for bodily functions. It often refers to performing bodily functions as “stepping aside.” When Elijah chided the priests of Baal because Baal would not answer their pleas to send fire from heaven, he shouted, “Call louder, maybe your god has stepped aside!” i.e., “Maybe your god is sitting on the toilet!”

Night Fishing with Shemi and Udi

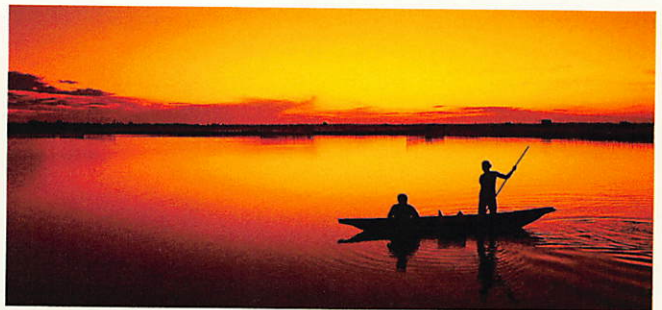
I MET TWO FISHERMEN on the shore of the Sea of Galilee while running one morning at 5 a.m., and I asked them many things. They spoke Hebrew with only a smattering of thickly accented English. Shemi finally said, “You ask too many questions. If you want to know all these things, be here at 6 tonight and go out fishing with us.” No way I could pass up that experience!

That evening, as we loaded the nets and food, fuel and gear into their thirteen-by-five-foot fiberglass fishing boat, I was beyond thrilled. We set the

nets in the northern tip of the sea and pulled into the mouth of the Jordan River to eat our dinner of pita bread, tomatoes, and hummus as we waited for the sun to set so fishing could commence.

Shemi and Udi called in Hebrew to the other fishermen doing the same thing. They picked twigs from the bushes to clean their teeth and washed their hands in the sea.

Then it hit me—I am out here on fishing with Peter, Andrew, James, and John, and Jesus could come walking across the water at any moment! Jesus



Fishermen set out at sunset on the Sea of Galilee.

spent a lot of time with these guys in their boats—weathering storms, avoiding crowds, traveling, fishing like I was doing, and teaching them lessons.

I refer to times such as this in Israel as “incarnational moments”—times when I am immersed in the moment,

but the moment is timeless. I am walking around with the disciples and experiencing the reality of Our Lord Jesus, God made man. These moments fill me with wonder and awe. It always takes my breath away and helps me practice the presence of God.



Jesus Calms a Storm on the Sea, a painting in the Church of the Birth of the Virgin Mary in Prcanj, Montenegro

When Jesus and his twelve disciples were walking from Capernaum to Jerusalem, or from Chorazim to Bethsaida, one at a time they would shout out, “I have to step aside, I will catch up with you in a minute.” This is what Jesus did every morning.

The Incarnation and cross

But consider that Jesus is God and chose to become a man to experience all that we experience in the world. Imagine the response of the angels when they first learned that the Son was going to leave the glory of heaven and do something so radical. I can envision their faces when they first heard the news.

“He’s going to do what? Why would he do that? Those creatures down there on that speck of dust don’t even love and obey him. They get tired, hungry, perspire, are unkind to each other, and die. Why would he do that?” There’s a reason it is called the “scandal of the Incarnation.”

The only way I can get my grandkids to even consider this great mystery is to find an anthill in a field. We get down on our bellies and part the grass with our fingers. “What do you see?” I ask.

They say, “Ants running around and going down tunnels into the ground.”

“Could you ever love the ants enough to give up your bedroom and toys and good meals and friends to go down in the dirt and become an ant to live with them?” I ask. Their answer is always a resounding, “No!”

But then it gets more intense. “If you did go down and become an ant,” I say, “would you do it if you knew ahead of time that they were going to hate you, make you suffer, rip off your legs and antennas, and kill you?” Usually, the kids are too dumbfounded to respond. This is called the “scandal of the cross.” Jesus endured the scandal of the Incarnation in order to stoop even lower to experience the scandal of the cross.

But the scandals continue unabated in two other senses as well. Jesus went back to heaven but did not leave his human body behind in the grave or in some kind of reliquary. He took it with him back into heaven, and Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father still clothed in the tent, or tabernacle, of his body of flesh in a glorified form.

But there is even more! He deigns to come to us again under the form of bread and wine in the Eucharist. He feeds us his real body and blood each day at the altar. It is no surprise that people walk away muttering, “This is

a hard saying. Who can listen to it?” This Person is both God and man; he is in heaven with his acquired body and feeds us daily with his body and blood. Hard saying, indeed! But God has revealed this truth to us; and his Church, his mystical body, has preserved, defined, defended, and promulgated it throughout the millennia.

* * *

There is no more important question in the whole universe than “Who do you say that I am?” Understanding the person and two natures of Christ, his life and his ministry, is the pinnacle of all knowledge. To be able to correctly answer this question is the most significant thing you will ever do. Without the proper answer, life is meaningless. So study well, learn well, and answer well: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” ■



STEVE RAY is the author of three best-selling books and is a writer, producer and host of the ten-part video/DVD series *The Footprints of God: the Story of Salvation from Abraham to*

Augustine, filmed on location in the Holy Land and surrounding countries. He and his wife, Janet, lead pilgrimages throughout the world.