

Jesus Christ: GOD IN MALE-HUMAN FLESH?

by J.W. Wartick



Christians around the world agree that Jesus is fully God and fully human. Jesus' humanity makes it possible for him to liberate us from the bonds of sin. At first glance, this central tenet of our faith might seem quite unrelated to many other important concerns, such as the role of gender in the Christian community. But is this the case?

How might someone's view of gender impact the doctrine of salvation through Christ? I believe it does, and in significant ways. I will argue that if women are subordinate simply because they are women, then Jesus' redemptive work can—in some fashion—not fully apply to women.

HUMANITY DEFINED

Before proceeding, we need to ask what it means to be human. Specifically, what characteristics are required for someone to be considered human? One thing that may come to mind offhand would be some physical trait. Humans have two legs and walk upright. Initially, this standard may seem perfectly acceptable, but then we must consider that some human beings are born without legs, others lose them in the course of their lives, and others may not walk uprightly for various reasons. We would rightly condemn any call to leave these people outside the definition of "human."

If no single physical feature can be "necessary" for one to be human, we must go deeper. Going beneath the skin, we find that all human beings have DNA that is identifiable as human. Though there is variation of DNA

among humans, we are able to discern whether the DNA we observe is from a human or a bat, for instance. As embodied persons, this seems like one feature that humans would necessarily have.

Humans also have a will, which may or not be expressed at all times. At every stage of development—as many parents, including myself, can attest—human beings have wills which they exercise. Certain conditions—sleep, comas, and the like—may prevent the exercise of this will, but that does not mean a person does not possess it.

Moving from concrete to abstract, we might say all humans share the image of God, a feature that is imparted to human beings by God's creation (Gen. 1:27), though there is much debate over the exact features of that "image." Such features as these would be abstract, yet still necessary for one to be a human being.

It seems that being a human is a *composite of various necessary components*. Human DNA, a will, and the image of God are all necessary for one to be human, and we can use this combination of traits to identify a human being. We might call these traits the *necessary features* of humanity.

These necessary features of humanity may also identify an entity as nonhuman. None of these features can be lost without also losing one's humanity, so if any feature is missing, one is not human. For example, although angels have wills, they do not have human DNA, nor are we told whether they are made in the image of God. Angels lack at least one necessary feature of humanity, so we can safely say they are nonhuman.

A COMPLEMENTARIAN VIEW OF GENDER AND HUMANITY

Having established that some features are necessary for human beings, while others are not, we can now move on to considering gender. According to a complementarian view, men and women are differentiated by roles. These roles exist and apply to a person by virtue of

As human beings, then, we are necessarily distinct—male and female—not just in matters of sex organs, hormone expression, and the like, but in the very essence of what it means to be male or female. There is no uniting the two genders, which must forever act as leader and subordinate according to their gender-based “roles.” Again, in this view, gender is a necessary feature of humanity.

of one’s humanity, so that no single being can adequately represent both—then one cannot maintain that Jesus Christ fully embodied human nature for *both* men and women. Instead, Jesus came as male-human, and we cannot claim that he fully represents women.

The implications of this conclusion are disastrous. Most disturbing, it means the atonement of women is not as complete as that of men. Jesus could not,

“It is furthermore necessary for eternal salvation truly to believe that our Lord Jesus Christ also took on human flesh.”

—the Athanasian Creed

their being male or female. The “role” of the man is to be the leader, while the “role” of the woman is to be subordinate. These roles or functions are tied explicitly to one’s gender. Thus, *to be a woman is to be subordinate to men.*

According to a complementarian view, the roles of men and women are essential—they are necessary features of human identity. Gender roles are not like the example of legs used earlier, but are closer to the category of DNA, a will, and God’s image. It is not that some women are not subordinate and others are, like some humans have legs, and others do not. Rather, all women are to be subordinate to all men, full stop. A person who does not express herself as subordinate to men is, in some way, a faulty woman.

Therefore, the “roles” of men and women are necessary features of these persons. Men are to function in one way; women are to function in another.

However, unlike the necessary features of human beings noted above, if one fails to function in this manner, one does not necessarily cease to be a man or woman, but has violated God’s order and design for humanity. If a man fails to lead, he is a man in rebellion. A woman who does not act in subordination to men is a woman who is not functionally a woman.

There will always be at least one aspect of one’s expression of humanity that is necessary—the gender “role”—which someone of the opposite gender cannot express. Thus, one cannot simply be human by having human traits, but must express gender “roles.” *According to the complementarian view, one cannot simply be human; one must be male-human or female-human.*

JESUS, GENDER, AND SALVATION

What does this all have to do with Jesus? Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human. He was a human who was a man. If the complementarian view is correct, Jesus’ gendered existence means that his “role” would have been different from the “role” of women. Had Jesus functionally taken on the “role” of woman, he would have been acting wrongly. Jesus was male, not a composite of male and female. Thus, according to this view, Jesus is male-human.

Finally, we can bring all these threads together, returning to the original question: “How might someone’s view of gender impact the doctrine of salvation through Christ?”

The answer to the original question is now clear: if one holds a view of gender essentialism—a view that makes some aspect of one’s gender a necessary feature

by virtue of being male, fully embody female-human nature. He lacked the aspects of identity that are unique to female-humanity.

Another implication is that the doctrine of the incarnation is made subordinate to the doctrine of gender “roles.” The historic Christian doctrine is that the Son of God became fully human, but if there is a real, necessary divide between male and female, then because Jesus is gendered, he did not fully represent all humanity.

Surveying the argument laid out above, we find that the notion that there are permanent gender “roles” is a defective anthropology. Although men and women are different, they are not different in such a way that there is a necessary and eternal division between the sexes. Christ came as a human being—indeed, a male one—but not as a male-human. Christ’s redeeming work is complete for both male and female, who are themselves made one in Christ.



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