

Fully Man and Fully God?

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "Personal," November 1994

Will someone please explain to me how a person can be more than the sum of his parts? To me it seems to be illogical that when we consider all the parts of something separately, that the conclusion is greater than when the parts are joined together into one.

I am playing word games, but there is a serious purpose behind them. As recently as the September issue of a major church of God publication, a writer made a statement about "the full humanity and the full divinity" of Jesus Christ. Earlier, in the May/June issue of the same publication, the phrase that Jesus was "fully man and fully God" appeared. In the August issue of this publication, while expounding John 2:19 ("Jesus answered and said to them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up'"), the author wrote, "Thus, when Jesus spoke of raising himself, he spoke of God in the flesh."

That presented me with two questions. If Jesus was dead, how could He raise Himself from the dead? And how could He be both fully man and fully God at the same time?

The Condition of the Dead

The Bible makes some very plain points about the condition of the dead:

- In Psalm 146:3-4, the psalmist writes, "Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help. His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his plans [thoughts, KJV] perish."
- Solomon adds, "For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten" (Ecclesiastes 9:5).
- Speaking of a dead man, Job tells his friends, "His sons come to honor, and he does not know it; they are brought low, and he does not perceive it" (Job 14:21).

People who have died can no longer think. They are not merely unconscious, but every function of their body, including the brain has stopped. They have no recognition of anything, not even a recognition of a vast emptiness. Webster's Dictionary of the English Language defines dead as, "in a state of complete and permanent cessation of vital functions; inanimate, having no life; having no feeling, movement or activity."

In I Corinthians 15:3 Paul writes, "For I delivered to you first of all that

which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." Jesus Himself adds in Revelation 1:18, "I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore." He introduces the message to the Smyrna church by saying, "These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life" (Revelation 2:8).

Death, according to the above scriptures, is a state without awareness. If Jesus was unaware, how could He raise Himself from the dead? It is impossible! He was not even aware that He was dead!

Furthermore, Romans 6:23 says, "The wages of sin is death." When one sins, death is the result. Jesus did not sin (Hebrews 4:15), but "Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness" (I Peter 2:24).

There are many more scriptures of this nature that can be added, but it is clear that if Christ did not truly die, the penalty for sin has not been paid, and we have no Savior!

Does God not mean what He says in His Word? If He does not, how can we then trust Him? Jesus says, "The Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Surely somebody is either badly deceived, and thus does not understand, or a deliberate lie is being perpetrated on the church of God!

The Father Raised Him

In Acts 2:24, as part of Peter's sermon on Pentecost, he says, "[Jesus] whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it." Twenty-three times a similar statement is made in the Scriptures. Someone else, God the Father, raised Jesus from the dead. He could not do it Himself! He was dead.

The rest of the answer to John 2:19 is quite simple. The word "temple" also appears in verse 14, but it is translated from a different Greek word, hieron, which refers to a "shrine" or "holy building." In verses 19-21 the word naos is used. This signifies the "dwelling place" of deity.

In the New Testament naos is used metaphorically of the bodies of believers (I Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19). Whereas the Jews were thinking in terms of a physical building, the Temple, Jesus was referring to His body, the church.

During Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jews brought up what He said in John 2:19 as an accusation against him. However, Mark 14:58 adds two significant phrases that clarify beyond a shadow of doubt what Jesus said. "We heard Him say, 'I will destroy this temple made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands.'"

The instant Jesus was resurrected, the church, the body in which God dwells, was an accomplished fact. He is its first member and Head. This is also one of the senses of Matthew 16:18: "On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades [the grave] shall not prevail against it."

Can One Fully God Die?

This raises a problem concerning my second question. Jesus died, but One who is fully God cannot die because He has life inherent. He inhabits eternity (Isaiah 57:15); He has no beginning of days nor end of life (Hebrews 7:3). Is it too simple a question to ask that if Jesus was fully God, how then could He die?

That Jesus was God is without dispute. One of His names, Immanuel, literally means "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). John 1:1-3 identifies Him as "the Word," and John writes in verse 14, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus Himself said in John 8:58, "Before Abraham was, I AM." He was God, absolutely, but was He fully God?

Certainly, I do not demean Christ in any way, but I know of no scripture that makes that claim. Rather, some people make that claim for Him. However, the Scripture, plus some logic and common sense, shows that we need to formulate a more accurate description.

In Jesus' prayer in John 17:5 He requested, "And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was." Whatever that glory was that He asked to be restored, it was something He did not have as a human but He did have when He truly was fully God.

Glory is used in the sense of anything that brings honor and praise upon a person. It can be one's works, attitude, manner of living, skill, strength, wisdom, power, appearance, or status. Some or all of these might be included within the framework of Christ's request. What He specifically meant is not stated, but whatever it was, it was lacking in Him when He was a man.

Philippians 2:6-7 takes us into a scene that provides a background for Christ's incarnation. "[Jesus,] who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men."

The first word we need to consider is form in verse 6. It is the Greek *morphe*, for which English has no exact equivalent. It does not mean "shape." It is a philosophical term that means "the outward expression of an inner essence." We can draw a human illustration from figure skating.

We might say, "I went to the Winter Olympics, and the figure skater's form was outstanding." What we mean is that the swift, rhythmic grace and coordinated movements of the skater were an outward expression of her inward ability to skate expertly.

Jesus was in the form (morphe) of God. The word being indicates a condition that began in the past and continues into the present. Therefore, while on earth, though His outward expression was of humanity, He retained His divine essence, deity. Paul means that when He came to earth to assume the form of a man, He did not cease being God.

Also in verse 6 is the word consider, meaning "to make a judgment based on facts." The word robbery has two applications: "to seize unlawfully" or "a treasure to be clutched and retained at all hazards." The subject of the context is Christ's humility, thus the second meaning must be the one applied. Christ humbly did not assert His right to consider the expression of His divine essence such a treasure that it should be retained at all hazards. He waived that right. This is the very essence of humility.

Finally, God in verse 6 does not refer to a Personage, or it would say "the God" in the Greek. Since it does not, it must refer to deity in general, that is, the expression of the divine essence.

My conclusion on verse 6 would be that Christ gave outward expression of His essential nature—Deity—and He judged that being equal with Deity in the expression of the divine essence was not a treasure to be clutched and retained at all hazards. Thus, He gave it up to take on another outward expression.

Emptied to Become a Servant

Verse 7 is very meaningful toward understanding this question. It says, "He made Himself of no reputation," or more literally, He emptied Himself. Instead of asserting His rights to the expression of the essence of Deity, He waived His rights and relinquished them.

The word form in verse 7 is the same Greek word as in verse 6. The grammatical structure of the sentence demands that the "taking the form of a servant" preceded, and was the cause of, "making Himself of no reputation." Remember, form is the outward expression of inner nature. But the sentence indicates an exchange of expression. Therefore, being a servant was not something of His inner nature that had been previously expressed. It was not His usual mode of outward expression.

An event in the life of Jesus may help explain this exchange of expressions. What happened in His incarnation was the exact opposite of what occurred at the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-5). On the Mount of Transfiguration, He was changed from His normal outward expression as

a servant to that of the outward expression of Deity.

Of what did He empty Himself? He did not empty Himself of His Deity, but rather the outward expression of His Deity and all it implies. Or, as one author states, "He emptied Himself of His existence-in-a-manner-equal-to-God." He set aside His legitimate and natural desires and prerogatives as Deity so that He might express Himself as a servant.

Can anything that has some part removed from it still be as much as it was before? In the Word's case, it was a level of existence never experienced by any human being because only God lives at this level both in terms of quality and length. What He gave up included immortality. If He gave up His immortality, was He as fully God as He was before?

The other side of this picture is His humanity. If we understand Philippians 2:6-7 properly, then Paul is saying that God exchanged one form of expression for another. Therefore He never ceased being what He originally was, only the expression of what He was changed. Therefore, He was not a man in the strictest sense of what a man is—like we are. He was the Son of God manifest in the flesh and nature of a man. Can we then say He was fully man?

When the Word became a man, He entered into a new and unique state of being. He was a fleshly person with two natures. The word likeness in the Greek text (Philippians 2:7; Romans 8:3) refers to "that which is made like something else." His humanity was a real likeness. He was not a phantom, but His human likeness did not express the whole of His being. He was also God. But neither did it express the fullness of God, even though He was God.

"Fully man and fully God" is a cliché that has an appealing simplicity to it. But at the least, it obscures a reality that needs to be more accurately articulated and understood. At the worst, it is a confusing and misleading statement that defies accurate biblical explanation.

It would be far better to use the expressions already inspired in the text of our Bibles. John, as mentioned above, writes, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). He gives no percentages of fullness of either humanity or divinity. Paul says something similar in Hebrews 2:14: "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same."

Jesus Christ was Immanuel, God with us. Jesus of Nazareth had as much of God's nature in Him as could be expressed in a human being. Can we just accept that at face value?

© 1994 Church of the Great God
PO Box 471846

Charlotte, NC 28247-1846
(803) 802-7075