

“The Essentials”

In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things love.

Essential #7

When God became Love with Fingers
and Toes.

Title taken from Michael Kelly Blanchard

Hebrews 2:5-18 New International Version (NIV)

Jesus Made Fully Human

⁵ It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. ⁶ But there is a place where someone has testified:

“What is mankind that you are mindful of them,
a son of man that you care for him?

⁷ You made them a little ^[a] lower than the angels;
you crowned them with glory and honor

⁸ and put everything under their feet.”^{[b][c]}

In putting everything under them, ^[c] God left nothing that is not subject to them. ^[c] Yet at present we do not see everything subject to them. ^[d] ⁹ But we do see Jesus, who was made lower than the angels for a little while, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.

¹⁰ In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. ¹¹ Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. ^[e] ¹² He says,

“I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises.”^[f]

¹³ And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”^[g]

And again he says,

“Here am I, and the children God has given me.”^[h]

¹⁴ Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. ¹⁶ For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham’s descendants. ¹⁷ For this reason he had to be made like them, ^[i] fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

God has become human in Jesus of Nazareth

This statement is as basic to the Christian faith as the statement that “God is love.” Unlike the statement about divine love, which is about as uncontroversial as simple arithmetic, the declaration that Jesus is God in human form has been hotly contested from ancient times through today.

In modern times, the argument against the divinity of Jesus has tried to make the following points:

1. Jesus was nothing more than an exemplary human being

Jesus did not see himself as more than a human being

His *teaching* is what is of lasting value in his life.

Indeed, until recently many biblical scholars held that view. Today, however, the most current Biblical Scholarship has demonstrated pretty conclusively that, from at least the first year after the resurrection, Jesus was *worshipped* by his followers. That is to say, the first people to believe that God has come to earth in the human form of Jesus of Nazareth, were the very people who had been the closest to him during his earthly life. These would be the very people who would know if Jesus never claimed to be divine, or if his life did not back up such a claim.

As I try to think through the issues involving the essential beliefs of the Christian faith, it seems to me that this particular belief doesn’t require as much faith as some of the others. If you have already flown in the face of cruel and capricious reality to declare that there is a Single God who is good, loving, and in control and that this God made humanity in His image, then it seems to me a rather small step to believe that this God would visit the world of humans (made in God’s image) in human guise.

Indeed, the idea that a loving God would visit the world as a human is so reasonable that most ancient religions (and modern ones as well) had God or the gods coming to the world in a special way through some prophet or hero. Scholars of religion have pointed to these parallels to the Christian faith to prove that Christians got the idea of God in human form from other religions, but the myths could also prove the persistent and nearly universal human conviction that, if God loves humans and wants to make Himself known to them, He will do so by taking on human form. Notice the implication of the term “human form.” In the world of the New Testament the major objection to the statement “God has become human in Jesus” was not (as in our time) to Jesus’s divinity but to his *humanity*. The accommodation to the culture of that day that many wanted to make was not to say that Jesus was *only* human but to say that Jesus *only seemed* to be human—since God can’t weep, suffer, or die, Jesus *only seemed* to do these things. You will notice that in both the modern and the ancient objections, God ends up not sharing fully in humanity’s experience of pain. The need for God to make common cause with us in the experience of pain and death is at the heart of what the Bible says about Jesus.

The opposition to the idea that God is uniquely present in Jesus Christ was so persistent from the very beginning of the Christian faith that the Bible suggests (1 John 4:2) that acceptance of this essential is the litmus test that shows whether or not a person truly is a Christian. My question is: given that God coming in human form is *not* inherently improbable if one accepts God’s goodness, love, and personal involvement with people, *why* is there such opposition to the claim that Jesus Christ is God “with fingers and toes?” It seems to me that the opposition is more *spiritual* than *intellectual*.

Can I ask you to suppose for a moment that there is a Devil? If you don’t believe that there is a Devil (I do), that’s OK. I don’t want to take any time in these essays arguing for the existence of Satan, as though the Devil’s existence were an essential of the Christian faith (it seems to be presented that way at times). But, if Satan, the power of evil made personal, did exist and Satan were faced with the possibility of God coming to earth as a human being, what implications would that possibility have for the arch-demon? Consider the following train of thought:

1. Evil cannot create a person. Despite the best efforts at artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, cloning, and computer image generation which suggest that the creation of a person is the ultimate aim of some spiritual force, it has, as of yet, been impossible for God’s act of creation to be duplicated.
2. If God came as a person, evil would consider that God had taken unfair advantage of His creative power.
3. Furthermore, until now humanity has been “a little lower than the angels,” which means that Evil, as the purview of a fallen angel like Satan has thus far been *between* God and people. If God in Jesus reached across the “between” space to descend to humanity, then humanity is elevated above Evil by Jesus. Therefore, Evil cannot admit that God came as a person.

For those who had been followers of Jesus, those whose words and testimony were preserved in the New Testament, there was no doubt that Jesus had *implied* that God was present in him. The experiences they had of what he said and did proved to them that the implication was true. These experiences were very strong, but although they proved to the follower’s satisfaction that God had indeed been present in Jesus, they didn’t fully explain that presence. It took the church the better part of 400 years to arrive at a satisfactory explanation of what it had experienced. The explanation is usually given briefly in this way: “Jesus is fully human, fully divine and combines both natures without mixture or confusion in a single person.”

There is a lot to explain in that statement, but since the basic idea that Jesus was at the same time God and Human is easier to grasp than explain, I would rather approach the question: *Why* did God take human form? There are, I believe, three basic answers.

The most common answer is that God became a human being to communicate His love to us. In the movie “Never Cry Wolf” a man who wanted to study the life of Alaskan wolves spends a year living among the wolves, learning to behave and think like a wolf. Only slowly were the wolves able to accept him and see him as one of them. God became human in part to win our trust, because that in that trust we would come to know God’s love. This explanation for why Jesus came as a human being has always satisfied me very well, but as I thought about it this week I realized there were two others that I had never considered.

In his book *Blue like Jazz* Donald Miller makes a statement about sharing our faith that hit home for me. My version of what he said is this: “*No one will pay attention to what you say about faith if they don’t feel that you LIKE them.*” I think that we could have known that God loved us without Jesus, but without Jesus there was no way to know that God *liked* us. We read in the Gospels about the different kinds of people Jesus liked.

He admired the woman who tossed two copper pennies in the offering plate, so Jesus liked poor people. He felt love for the young man who could not bring himself to sell his possessions to follow Jesus, so Jesus liked rich people. He praised the faith of the Roman Centurion, so Jesus liked military people. He called for tax collector Zaccheus to come out of the tree and take him to dinner, so Jesus liked bureaucrats. He touched the lepers, so Jesus liked sick people. He told nice stories about Samaritans, so he liked outcasts. He had about as much trouble with religious people as with anyone else, but the way he received Nicodemus proves that Jesus liked them too. He called his disciples as they were mending their nets, so Jesus liked working people. He treated Martha with firm kindness when she came to complain about her sister, so Jesus liked hard-to-get along with people. He let Judas kiss him, so Jesus liked traitors. He refused to condemn the woman taken in adultery, so Jesus liked immoral people. I assure you that you can find yourself among the people Jesus likes, and the Bible says that He is not ashamed to call you His brother or His sister.

It’s important to know that Jesus embodies not just the love of God but the “like” of God. He does not have a “crush” on you, liking you in a romantic way. Nor does he like you the way you might like a rich aunt who might leave you gobs of money in her will. He likes you because you are unique, special and wonderful in your own way, and because you have a potential that only He can imagine.

The final reason that I believe God chose to become human in the person of Jesus Christ is because it was only as a human that God could show that his love is *heroic*. Now, Jesus was not heroic in the traditional sense then (and now) accepted. Jesus did work miracles, but in a very private and secretive way—unlike Moses who worked plagues and wonders before the entire land of Egypt. Unlike Samson or Hercules, Jesus was not physically mighty. He was no great military leader like Alexander or Julius Caesar had been. Unlike Augustus, Jesus ruled over no empire. But succeeding generations were so impressed by Jesus’ courage and strength of personality that they willingly suffered horrible deaths rather than admit the divinity of any human but Jesus. Whether in ancient Rome or modern China, Christians do not suffer persecution because they proclaim that “Jesus is Lord”, they suffer because they refuse to proclaim that anyone or anything else is. And yet the Lord Jesus is set apart from every other hero or demigod by the kind of love that freely shared human suffering and death, steadfastly refusing to call angels down to defend him.

If Jesus was going to truly be a human being, he could not stay in the world indefinitely, so after his death and resurrection he returned to his Father in Heaven. There is a real difference, though, now that He has been here among us and shared our mortality. If God the Beloved became one of us, and he calls us his brothers and sisters, then we may truly become like Him. We may become a physical presence of God’s Love in the world around us. In this way, the essential that declares that “God has become human in Jesus of Nazareth,” also implies that we who belong to him may become like God in our identification with others, in our liking of them, and in our freely (in an unmanipulated or co-dependent way) offering to show heroic love. By God’s grace may it be so.