

“One of Us”

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He became like us so we could become like him.

Romans 1:1-7

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Jesus – a bedwetter?

This morning we continue a series of sermons on the Apostles’ Creed with the Christian belief that Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary.” The creed goes from there to “suffered under Pontius Pilate,” so this sermon will touch on the entire span of Jesus’ earthly life up until the day of his crucifixion.

Christians believe that Jesus is fully God and fully human. Today we focus on his “fully human” nature. What does it mean to believe that he is one of us, and what difference does it make? The writer of Hebrews provides one answer: it means that Jesus is able “to empathize with our weaknesses,” because he was “tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin” (Hebrews 2:15). I vividly remember when I first heard that Jesus faced everything we face. I was in sixth grade in a boarding school in what was then West Pakistan. My parents were missionaries, and it was standard practice in those days for MKs (missionary kids) to leave their parents for six months out of every year, and live at boarding school.

One aspect of boarding school was particularly difficult for me. I was the only boy in sixth grade who still wet the bed. Every other sixth grade boy in our dorm-style room knew about this, and I was terrified one of them would tell the girls in our class. Uncle Jim, our house parent, was a British-born strict disciplinarian. He never caned me for wetting the bed, as he did other boys often for different offenses, but neither was he understanding. I remember one stretch where he decided he would motivate me not to wet the bed by giving me less and less time every day to get up, take a bath, change my sheets, and get dressed. He had little understanding of how shaming would affect me.

It was during that sixth grade year that I remember wondering, “If Jesus faced everything we face, does that mean he wet the bed?” Hold on to that question.

The gospel and the incarnation

What Scripture would *you* choose to focus our attention on Jesus “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary”? The obvious choices are Matthew and Luke, the only two books in the New Testament that include birth narratives. We didn’t go in that direction because this part of the creed is about more than just his birth.

It’s often been noted that 25 of the 27 books of the New Testament do not mention how Jesus came into the world – that is, without a biological contribution from Mary’s husband, Joseph. For some, this means the doctrine of the virgin birth is unimportant, if not suspect. Maybe Matthew and Luke just made it up because the Christian faith needed a story to rival the miraculous birth of Isaac in Genesis, or of various Assyrian, Greek, Roman, or Egyptian gods. Even Star Wars has a virgin birth.

My Sunday School class is currently studying the Apostles’ Creed, using a book titled *The Good News We Almost Forgot*, by Charlotte pastor Kevin DeYoung. In this chapter titled “Vital Virginitly,” he addresses some of these arguments and quotes J. Gresham Machen: “There can be no doubt that at the close of the second century the virgin birth of Christ was regarded as an absolutely essential part of the Christian belief by all parts of the Christian church in all parts of the known world.” Comfortable or not, this belief is part of the package deal in the Christian faith.

One reason the miraculous conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb is underplayed in the New Testament is not because it’s untrue or unimportant, but because it’s scandalous. It’s what we might call an “insider doctrine.” When we witness to unbelievers about Jesus’ identity, starting with the virgin birth will likely be a distraction.

Unlike the doctrine of the resurrection, for the virgin birth we can’t offer historical proof or point to multiple witnesses. We take the word of his mother as reported by Luke, and of her husband as reported by Matthew. One could argue both of them had motive to make up this story if they wanted to.

For proof of Jesus’ identity as the Son of God, I don’t cite the virgin birth. Instead, I look to his life, his own testimony, his miracles, and ultimately his resurrection. In other words, I don’t believe Jesus is the Son of God *because* he was born of a virgin. I believe he was virgin born *because* I believe he is the eternal Son of God. If he is Yahweh in human form, the virgin birth is not only plausible but essential.

What is important about the affirmation, “conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,” is that this is the way we Christians declare that Jesus shares our humanity. While the miraculous is implicit in the words “by the Holy Spirit” and “virgin,” don’t miss the power of the words “conceived” and “born.” This Jesus Christ, God’s one

and only eternal Son, was once a zygote, then a blastocyst, then an embryo, then a fetus. He passed through a birth canal and had to be slapped on his bottom so his lungs would fill with air for the first time.

And that's only the beginning. God in human form nursed. He soiled his diaper. Like every other human, his brain was almost a blank slate at birth, but then averaged a million new neural connections every second for the first three years. He learned to say "Abba" and "Amma," and tottered to his feet somewhere around a year old. The little guy skinned his knee and later hammered his thumb while learning the trade of his contractor father. He sat in the synagogue to learn the law like everyone else. He went to Jerusalem and impressed the leading scholars of his day with his questions and answers. He hit puberty in his second decade and likely learned what grief and need are when his father died. The responsibility for providing for his mother and siblings then rested on his shoulders, and it was far from easy. Every indication of the Gospels is that Jesus was as ordinary a boy and young man as any other in Nazareth. Fully human and fitting in. No one in Nazareth would have voted him "Most likely to be God."

Although the New Testament does not consistently repeat the miraculous birth story, every one of the four Gospels and continuing through the letters of Paul and others shine a spotlight on the very real humanity of Jesus. He learned, he walked, he ate, he drank, he thought, he prayed, he hurt, he sweated, he wept, he raged, he slept.

All this Paul summarizes in Romans 1 when he says that Jesus "as to his earthly life was a descendant of David." The Apostle Paul wrote the letter to the church at Rome, a city he had never visited. He knew many of the believers in Rome, but there were even more he did not know personally. Most of them had never heard him speak or read his writings. The opening verses of Romans introduce many of the themes in the letter, a systematic outline of Paul's gospel.

Paul identifies himself in verse 1 as "a slave ("servant" is too mild) of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God." In verse 7 he says he's writing "to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people." In other words, his letter is not to everyone in Rome but to the church.

In between those two verses Paul gives a summary of the gospel it will take him sixteen chapters to unpack. He mentions all three persons of the Trinity, even though the term had not yet been coined. "God" or "Father" (or a referent pronoun) is mentioned about ten times in these verses. The Holy Spirit is mentioned once in verse 4, but the word "holy" in its various forms comes up three more times.

"Jesus" and "Christ" appear four times each (always paired), "Lord" twice, "Son" twice, and pronouns for Jesus three more times. Jesus' death and resurrection are the focus of verse 4, as well as his grace through faith in verse 5. Both Paul and his readers, Jew and Gentile, are "called" by God and Jesus Christ into a life of obedience and service "for his name's sake" (5). Jesus is central to Paul's gospel.

Almost all essential Christian doctrine is embedded in Romans 1:1-7, and right in the middle of these verses is the expression of Jesus' humanity: "as to his earthly life was a descendant of David." Jesus the Messiah, the Lord of all, became so thoroughly human that his DNA could be traced back to the David, the father of the dynasty.

The phrase "as to his earthly life" is remarkable in Greek because, literally translated, "according to the flesh." Most often when Paul uses this word, it's negative – an expression of our sin nature. But it doesn't have to mean that. It's just a reference to the human body. Jesus was just as human as you and I are. He had 26 chromosomes that mapped out in advance his height, his hair style, his eye color, when he would cut his first tooth, how fast he would be able to run, and whether he would prefer pretzels or ice cream. (I'm going with ice cream.)

Jesus' humanity is as important to the Gospel as his deity. If Jesus did not participate in our flesh, there is no gospel. Early in the church's history, the boundaries of what we call "orthodoxy" were established, based on passages like this one, all over the New Testament. This is not a minor theme; it's a major chord of truth. Jesus is just as much God as the Father is, and he is just as much human as you and I are. Yet he is one individual person with two separate natures.

Why does it matter that Jesus is one of us? I'll spend the rest of my time answering that question. I'm going to refer to three other New Testament passages for key words about the meaning of Jesus' humanity: mediation, intercession, and empathy.

Mediation

For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. (1 Timothy 2:5-6)

I wrestled with "mediation" all week – not because it's unbiblical, but because it seems to have a somewhat different connotation in our culture than it does in the New Testament. We often use it as a synonym for compromise. More often than not, in our time mediation makes no one happy. It feels like a lose-lose proposition.

That's not how Paul is using the word, nor is it the heart of the word in English or Greek. Mediation does assume there are parties at variance, but the goal is a win-win. It is true that we humans are enemies of God, as Paul will say in Romans 5 – powerless, ungodly, sinners. There's a yawning Grand Canyon of separation. There's the God-side marked by goodness and eternity and beauty. On our side there is rebellion and self-absorption worthy of death.

The only way to bridge that gap is for one side to cross to the other. We humans have no way to get to God. We are created in God's image, but one of us cannot become God, so God became one of us. Paul says in Philippians 2: "he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness."

Jesus became human so that he could fully bear the consequences of our sin. Someone asked me the other day, “Why did he have to die?” Why was a sacrifice needed? The answer is that otherwise no sin matters – hatred doesn’t matter, racism doesn’t matter, pride doesn’t matter, injustice doesn’t matter, abuse doesn’t matter, greed doesn’t matter, lust doesn’t matter. If sin matters, there must be consequence. Sin, the Bible says, leads to death.

We all agree the more heinous the crime, the greater punishment is deserved. Nobody wants a child molester to walk free. When the Christian message gets thoroughly imbedded into our souls, we say things like, “There but for the grace of God go I.” That other sinner may have done something worse than I have done, but the gap between human and deity is no less crossable for them than for me.

None of us reaches God without a mediator. God had to get to us, and he did. God can only pay the debt of our sin if he shares fully in our human nature. Someone like us had to suffer for us. That someone would have to be sinless, or else he would pay for his own sin. Moreover, even a human who never sinned could pay for the sins of the whole world. However, an infinite person could, and did. Because he is fully man, he meets us on our side. Because he is fully God, he satisfies God’s side.

Jesus is a mediator – not in the sense of a negotiator, but as a peace-maker. The two sides are no longer at variance. It’s a win-win. God wins, because love compels him to redeem this fallen race. We win, because our sins are banished as far as the east is from the west. This is the best of all possible news, and the mediator made it happen. Jesus could never have been a mediator without becoming fully human.

Intercession

Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. (Hebrews 7:24-25)

Here is another game-changer. One of us is in heaven serving as our advocate, our defense attorney, and our liaison. We don’t know exactly how all this works, but we don’t have to. Is Jesus talking out loud to the Father? I suspect he doesn’t have to. The mystery of the Trinity is at work. Paul says in Romans 8 that it’s the Holy Spirit who takes our inexpressible groanings and aligns them with the heavenly Father’s will.

As my brother said on Facebook this week about the birthday present, this is YOOOGE (“huge”)! It’s related to an aspect of Christian doctrine you may not have considered. Christians don’t believe Jesus *was* human; we believe he *is* human. The incarnation was permanent. Jesus became fully human, lived on this earth, died in a mortal body, and was raised in a glorified human body that is like the one we will have in the resurrection. What grace that he would eternally live “according to flesh”!

We don't have an intercessor in heaven who says, "I remember what it was like to be one of them." The one pleading our case for forgiveness and bringing our needs before the Father is *still now* one of us. He says to the Father, "I know what that's like."

Empathy

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:15-16)

Here is where we return to the question framed by an insecure sixth grade boy in boarding school: "Did Jesus wet the bed?" It's a perfectly understandable question in sixth grade. We now need to consider it as grownups.

It's not the point that Jesus dealt with every specific temptation we face. He was never married and never a parent, for two obvious examples. He never faced old age, never had to fight the urge to surf the Internet for pornography, never lusted after a Ferrari, never lost his cool because his team lost to an underdog during March Madness.

The word "tempted" in Hebrews 4:15 probably should be translated "tested," which includes temptation, but is even broader. He is able to empathize with our weaknesses. He knows what it's like to be dependent, to be needy, to have his body scream to fulfill desires outside the will of God. He can identify with hunger, thirst, exhaustion. He understands waiting on God when nothing happens. He experienced unanswered prayer. He was misunderstood, mocked, shamed, rejected, unjustly accused, betrayed, and denied. He experienced the worst kind of physical torture invented by man with his flogging and crucifixion. He knows what it's like to feel life draining from his body and to breathe his last. He knows what it means to be one of us.

The writer of Hebrews adds, "...yet he did not sin." Still, he doesn't look at us, and say, "You pitiful humans, you're the worst. I faced everything you face and I didn't sin. What's wrong with you?" Instead he says, "There but for the grace of God go I. I get your struggle, my beloved child." He knows he had advantages we don't have – not the least of which was being God. But because he's one of us, he stands ready to help us "receive mercy and find grace...in our time of need."

He did all this so that we would have a perfect model of what it looks like to honor God fully, a goal toward which to strive, and a glimpse of what we'll be like in heaven. As Pastor Paul said this week, "He became like us so we could become like him." There isn't better news anywhere in all the world, anytime in history. Amen.