

Spring 4-21-2021

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Recommended Citation

Yates, Addison (Spring 2021) "The Soteriological Necessity of a Full Incarnation and Its Implications for Believers," *Tenor of Our Times*: Vol. 10, Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/tenor/vol10/iss1/14>

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Adoration of the Magi, Rembrandt, 1632

THE SOTERIOLOGICAL NECESSITY OF A FULL INCARNATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR BELIEVERS

By Addison Yates

That Jesus of Nazareth was fully divine is certainly no small assertion. Many reject this idea today, from atheists to those of Jewish or Islamic faith; however, even Jesus' earliest disciples were uncertain about his divinity. Direct inquiries and pronouncements about Jesus' divine identity are observed throughout the Gospel accounts, both from Jesus himself (Matt 11:2-5; Mark 14:61-62; Luke 6:5; 22:69-70; John 5:16-18; 8:48-59; 10:30; 14:6-10) and those he dwelt among (Matt 16:13-17; Mark 1:1; 1:23-24; 3:11; 4:41; 5:7; 8:27-29; 6:2-3; 15:39; Luke 9:18-20; John 1:1-18; 1:29-34; 20:28; 20:31). After Jesus' death and resurrection, early Christians identified and worshipped him as divine Lord, but controversies about his divine identity failed to cease: For example, the doctrine of Ebionism arose in the first century, proposing that Jesus was not the divine Son of God but merely a man adopted by God;¹ later, the Arian doctrine, which similarly (but uniquely) claims that the Son is wholly subordinate to the Father, appeared and was declared heretical at the first major ecumenical Christian council (Nicaea I, 325 C.E.).² Support for heretical doctrines persisted even after conciliar condemnation, but despite internal challenges to Jesus' divinity, early Christians established at Nicaea I and affirmed at subsequent councils the orthodoxy of the fully divine identity of Jesus.³ This doctrine has generally been held as a defining belief of

¹ Amy Weber, "Ebionites," *Salem Press Encyclopedia*, 2015.

² Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus*, Second Edition. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 181-4.

³ *Ibid.*, 181-187; Joseph T. Lienhard, "The 'Arian' Controversy: Some Categories Reconsidered," *Theological Studies* 48, no. 3 (September 1, 1987): 415.

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Christians at all times; the church father Athanasius even stated that those who deny the divinity of Christ, as Arians did, are not Christians at all.⁴

The doctrine of the humanity of Jesus, like that of his divinity, also faced challenges within early Christianity. Many believers struggled, understandably, to reconcile the idea of a fully divine Jesus with that of a fully human Jesus, and some doctrines eased this struggle by simply abandoning his humanity: For instance, Docetism, which gained popularity among Christians during the second century, claimed that the divine Son never actually assumed human nature but only appeared to be human during Jesus' life.⁵ Later, Apollinarius of Laodicea developed a related but distinct doctrine: he asserted, in defense of Christ's full divinity and unity, that the eternally existent Word did not truly become flesh but only took the place of a mind and soul in the human body of Jesus.⁶ These doctrines that denied the full incarnation of the Son were largely rejected by the early Christians;⁷ however, especially within Christian sects that deemphasize the catholic history of the church, equally high Christologies persist unintentionally in the minds of some believers today.⁸ These believers, who regularly affirm the utter divinity of Jesus in worship, may profess his humanity in principle but find themselves uncomfortable in practice with the idea that God became fully man. Their underlying high Christological views likely affect how

⁴ Victor I. Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies: Voices from Global Christian Communities*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2013), 156, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ffjnm7>.

⁵ O'Collins, *Christology*, 169; Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies*, 1:151.

⁶ O'Collins, *Christology*, 186–7; Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies*, 1:158–9.

⁷ O'Collins, *Christology*, 169, 186; Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies*, 1:151, 159.

⁸ Scott Adair, "Like Us in Every Way: Helping Students at Harding University Identify with Jesus" (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2010), 40–3.

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they perceive God, understand humanity, relate to Jesus, and understand his saving work.

In response to contemporary high Christologies, I will argue here that Jesus underwent a full incarnation: The eternal Word surrendered all divine privileges to become one with humanity, fully taking on human nature and totally giving up any superhuman presence, knowledge, or powers. I will defend this claim by contending that a full incarnation was soteriologically necessary, i.e., that it was required for Jesus' salvific work to be effective. Furthermore, I will address possible dangers of Christologies that diminish Jesus' humanity and present some of the bold implications of Jesus' full incarnation for those who follow him. In summary, the goal of this work is twofold: to demonstrate that Jesus had to be fully human to save humanity and to explore the significance of his full humanity for all Christians.

O'Collins identifies that salvation played a central role in the early development of Christian doctrine:

Right from the outset, the driving force behind theological inquiry and official teaching about Jesus was clearly the experience of salvation. Having experienced through him the forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the new life of grace in community, Christians asked themselves: what questions does this experience of salvation raise about Jesus, his being, and his identity? What did/does he have to be as the cause, in order to save us in the way that we have experienced (the effect)?⁹

The earliest Christians sought to see who Jesus was through the lens of his salvific work that they had personally experienced; however, before considering the Savior in this way, one must first establish what exactly his effect, salvation, was. Scripture identifies several effects of Jesus'

⁹ O'Collins, *Christology*, 159–60.

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work, including atonement for sins (1 John 2:2), redemption from a curse (Gal 3:13), righteous transformation (2 Cor 5:21), peace with God (Rom 5:1), divine adoption (Eph 1:5), proximity to the Father (John 14:6-7), a divine indwelling (Gal 2:20), and eternal life (John 3:16). Given that Scripture offers an assortment of descriptions of Jesus' work, one might look to the ecumenical councils that produced official teachings about Jesus' being for an authoritative, unifying soteriological doctrine; however, these councils offer little clarification about the salvation he effected or how he effected it, and unsurprisingly, soteriological views vary considerably across Christianity.¹⁰ A full treatment of historical or biblical soteriology lies far beyond the scope of this work, but relevant, major issues in soteriology will be briefly discussed here.

The very concept of salvation necessitates that humans need saving from some threatening force. Soteriological doctrines typically identify evil and sin as this force, though they may differ in their understanding of evil and humanity's relationship with it.¹¹ Salvation encompasses not only that which humanity is saved from but also that which humanity is saved for; this can be seen in the salvational idea of atonement, the reconciliation of humans with God that restores a damaged relationship.¹² Once a soteriological doctrine has defined the human need for redemption, it must describe the manner in which this need was met, and in Christian theology, theories of atonement do this by proposing how exactly Jesus accomplished salvation.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid., 297; Victor I. Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies: Voices from Global Christian Communities*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2015), 54, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1ffjnnr>; Ben Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co Ltd, 2014), 125–6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1cgf45k>.

¹¹ O'Collins, *Christology*, 298–300; Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies*, 2:53.

¹² O'Collins, *Christology*, 298; Paul Lagasse and Columbia University, "Atonement," *The Columbia Encyclopedia* (Columbia University Press, 2018).

¹³ Lagasse and Columbia University, "Atonement."

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Before the presentation of arguments, any discussion of atonement theories should begin with an acknowledgement of the inherent inadequacy of human theories, language, and minds to capture that which is divine. Anselm of Canterbury demonstrates this kind of humble theological approach when asked to explain Jesus' atonement:

What you are asking of me exceeds my capabilities. . . . I am also very reluctant to honor your request . . . because just as it deals with Him who is beautiful in appearance above the sons of men, so it is also adorned with a rationale which exceeds human understanding. Hence, I fear that just as I am accustomed to becoming indignant with untalented artists when I see the Lord Himself portrayed with an uncomely countenance, so it may happen to me [that I provoke indignation] if I presume to explore such an elegant topic by an inelegant and contemptible discourse.¹⁴

Thus, atonement theories are best understood as imperfect portraits that convey Christ's work in part but never in the transcendent fullness and depth of God's salvation itself. Therefore, the necessity of a full incarnation cannot be effectively defended from within a single atonement theory, as such a necessity would only be demonstrated for that theory's image of salvation; to be robust, this necessity must be supported across multiple theories. With this in mind, three of the most common atonement theories will be given brief consideration here with respect to their reliance on a full incarnation: the ransom-to-Satan theory, the penal substitution theory, and the moral influence theory.

The ransom-to-Satan theory of atonement portrays Jesus' death as a price paid to the devil to free humanity from his captivity; in this

¹⁴ Anselm of Canterbury, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury*, trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Minneapolis: A.J. Banning Press, 2000), 301–2.

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theory, Satan held a legitimate power over humanity such that God could not rightly take back humanity's freedom by force.¹⁵ Jesus, to accomplish salvation rightly, deceived the devil by masking his divine identity within human nature so that, as Gregory of Nyssa describes, "the hook of Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh."¹⁶ God thus tricked Satan into a ransom exchange through Jesus' incarnate death: God freed humanity at the price of Jesus' blood.

The effectiveness of the atonement outlined by the ransom-to-Satan theory depends on a fully human Son. As the church father Irenaeus wrote, "If a human being had not overcome the enemy of humanity, the enemy would not have been rightly overcome."¹⁷ God could not rightly, in his divinity, overpower Satan to free humanity because Satan maintained rightful control over humanity. If Jesus had retained divine powers and not fully assumed a human nature in his incarnation, he would have freed humanity in an unjust way, and because God's character is just, the only method he had to restore humanity from the devil's captivity was a full incarnation: a defeating of Satan from within humanity rather than from divinity. Human beings were unable to save themselves from Satan's power, so God became a man to save humanity as the ultimate human, surrendering all of his divine privileges in the process of incarnation so that Satan would be rightly overcome.

The second atonement theory to be considered is that of penal substitution. Highly popular among evangelicals, penal substitution

¹⁵ Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze*, 7.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, "Great Catechism," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.*, ed. Philip Shaff and Henry Wace, trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, vol. 5, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church II* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 492, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf205>.

¹⁷ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, 3. 18. 7, quoted in O'Collins, *Christology*, 160.

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theory claims that God punished Jesus for the sins of humanity.¹⁸ Pugh explains this theory:

Penal substitution simply means that Jesus died to bear the penalty for my sins, hence “penal,” and that he did this in my place, hence “substitution.” The bearing of penalty implies that God needed to punish sin and that something actually happened to Jesus on the cross that constituted a punishment of the innocent Christ and which was accepted by the Father as a satisfactory equivalent to the punishment that was due to the human race as a whole.¹⁹

Thus, according to penal substitution theory, God gave the punishment that humanity deserved to Christ, the innocent sacrifice, on the cross.²⁰ Christ is killed by God in humanity’s place so that sinful humanity could be made innocent in the eyes of God and reconciled to him.²¹

Just as in the ransom-to-Satan theory, the penal substitution theory necessitates a fully incarnated Jesus for atonement. According to Pugh, “Substitution implies that there were certain things that only Jesus could do for us.”²² The God-man was uniquely able to act as a substitute for humanity because of the full human nature he took on. A Jesus that existed without a fully human nature could not adequately act as a substitute for humanity because he would have neither a claim of true solidarity with humans nor a claim of true sacrifice in his receiving of their penalty, but a fully incarnate Son could validly take the place of

¹⁸ Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze*, 63; Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies*, 2:94.

¹⁹ Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze*, 63.

²⁰ Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies*, 2:94–5; Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze*, 63–4.

²¹ Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies*, 2:94–5; Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze*, 63–4.

²² Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze*, 63–4.

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humanity as a vulnerable human himself; a fully human Son could act as a “satisfactory equivalent” to the Father.²³

Finally, in contrast to the first two theories, the moral influence theory of atonement involves an internal rather than external change; it proposes that Jesus’ dwelling and dying among humanity accomplishes reconciliation by simply revealing God’s love and inspiring sinful humans to repent.²⁴ As explained by Pugh, “the cross changes our ethical behavior because there, in the crucified Christ, we come to understand something of God’s love for us. This love motivates us to change the way we live. This, rather than some barbaric sacrifice for the sins of others, is how we are saved . . .”²⁵ Therefore, in moral influence theory, atonement comes through humanity’s response to God’s love as it is magnificently displayed in the passion of the Christ.

According to the church father Tertullian, “the flesh is the hinge of salvation,”²⁶ and even in the moral influence theory, atonement hinges on the full humanity of Jesus. Without a genuine incarnation, Jesus’ living and dying among us would be a meaningless act: God would merely be pretending to be human. If God never actually became human, then the life of Jesus no longer communicates the same relentless, transcendent love of God for humankind; Jesus would not have truly suffered and poured himself out for humanity but would only have feigned obedience unto death as an actor in a drama. Furthermore, Jesus would not serve as an inspiring example to identify with and follow but would instead be an unrelatable teacher with impossible standards. This Jesus no longer functions as a savior.

In summary, there are many ways of thinking about Jesus’ saving work, but no one way can claim to truly capture the essence of his magnificent work. A multitude of atonement theories and motifs describe

²³ Ibid., 63.

²⁴ Ezigbo, *Introducing Christian Theologies*, 2:89–90.

²⁵ Lagasse and Columbia University, “Atonement,” 129.

²⁶ Tertullian, *De resurrectione carnis*, 8. 2, quoted in O’Collins, *Christology*, 179.

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salvation, and an incarnational dependence has been presented in at least some of the most popular of these theories. Now, with an argument made for Jesus' full humanity, consider some of the powerful implications of his full incarnation.

If God truly became a man, then the way he lived within the limitations of humanhood reveals something about what it is to be human. In his full incarnation, Jesus willfully gave up access to the divine powers he had. He had no special privileges among the human beings he came to save; if he did, then he would not be genuinely human and could not claim solidarity with humanity. This consideration reveals several significant ramifications of the Savior, including his total identification with humankind, his complete reliance on the Holy Spirit, and his modeling of utter obedience to the will of the Father.

In becoming fully human, Jesus entered into unmitigated human disadvantage, allowing him to wholly relate to humans. As stated by O'Collins, "Through the incarnation, the Son of God experiences at first hand what it is to be human—with all our limits, including death."²⁷ Furthermore, in the incarnation, God did not become man so much as he became one single man. Some may object that Jesus cannot identify universally with humanity because he was only a specific human with non-universal characteristics: as a first-century male Jew, he cannot effectively relate to, for instance, a modern North American woman. However, specificity is part of the inherent limitation of being human; the specified nature of being confined to one particular place, one particular time, and one particular body is paradoxically a universal trait of humans, and to take specificity from Jesus' life would be to strip him of his humanness and bar him from identifying with humanity.²⁸ As a limited human, Jesus shares the same pains, struggles, and feelings that are common to all of humanity, and in his risen Lordship he retains his

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 236.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

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understanding of human limitations to act as the perfect mediator between humanity and God (Heb 4:14-16).

Secondly, the Jesus who gave up all divine powers in his full incarnation was completely reliant on the Spirit to guide him, sustain him, and empower his work. This assertion is worthy of exploration in an entire work of its own, but consider briefly the meaning of a Spirit-filled human Christ. All four Gospel accounts record Jesus receiving the Spirit at the time of his adult baptism (Matt 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-23, John 1:32-34), and his ministry begins only once this event has occurred, indicating the importance of the Spirit's indwelling for his work. In his full humanity, Jesus is neither omnipresent nor omniscient, and on his own he does not know the future (e.g. Matt 17:22-23, Mark 11:1-3) or the secrets of others (e.g. Matt 12:25, John 4:17-18); however, the Spirit that indwells him guides him and shares this knowledge with him, allowing him to make such prophetic statements. John the Baptist testifies to this aspect of the Christ: "For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure" (John 3:34)²⁹. In the same way, Jesus' omnipotent acts in his ministry are Spirit-powered; this is indicated by Jesus himself when he states that "the Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14:10). Peter also credits God, not the human Jesus, when he describes Jesus as "a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him . . ." (Acts 2:22) and later states that "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him" (Acts 10:38). Thus, Jesus' divine qualities displayed in his earthly life came not from retained divine privilege but from the divine Spirit of God that dwelt in him.

Finally, the incarnate Jesus acts as the ultimate example for humankind by demonstrating in full humanity the way that human beings ought to live. As a human himself, Jesus had the same abilities that all

²⁹ All Scripture quoted is from the English Standard Version.

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humans possess. Therefore, his life of extraordinary righteousness should be understood not as an impossible standard that can never be met by others but as a serious example for his disciples to emulate. Jesus and the apostles after him communicate an expectation for Christians to actually practice the radical love and obedience that Jesus did (e.g. Matt 7:24-27, Jas 1:22, 1 Pet 1:14-16); clearly, Jesus' example of a Godly life is to be reflected in the lives of his disciples. Furthermore, as O'Collins eloquently states, Jesus' life "reveals that one can be *fully human* without being *merely human*."³⁰ Human beings, as the God-man demonstrates, can participate in divine nature (2 Pet 1:4) and, by the power of the same Spirit that dwelt in Jesus, live in a way that transcends mere humanity. The incarnate Son of God, in his complete humanity, illustrated for humanity what a human life should look like: radical righteousness, radical enemy love, radical humility, and radical obedience to the Creator. The divine God joined entirely with humanity so that humanity might join with him, not only in the afterlife but also their present, earthly living. And still today, the risen Lord calls out to humanity:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.
(Matt 11:28-30)

³⁰ O'Collins, *Christology*, 237.