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Are You Saved? A Fundamentalist View of Christ

Fundamentalists, like Augustine, see humankind as a massa damnata. Their acceptance of Jesus, however, guarantees them salvation immediately after death.

How often have we been approached with the question, “Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?” Two significant implications follow from this question. The first is anthropological, that is that humanity is in need of salvation. The second is christological: that salvation is accomplished by one who is both human and divine.

Humanity’s need for salvation stems from the sin of Adam. Through that sin humanity became depraved. Only through the graciousness of God sending his Son would the effects of that sin be reversed. We know that occurred in the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus. The fathers of the church from the time of Irenaeus recognized that it was necessary for the one who would be the savior to be God but also to be totally human (“in all things but sin” [Hebrews 4:15]). Irenaeus saw this when he said “what was not assumed, was not redeemed.”

From the time of Irenaeus through the debates leading to the formula of the Council of Chalcedon, several theologians attempted to minimize the humanity of Jesus in favor of his divinity. Nestorius

claimed that Mary was the mother of the human Jesus but not the mother of God and thus could not claim the title *theotokos*. Apollinarius understood the logos to be a substitute for the human soul of Jesus. Eutyches held that there was essentially one nature in Jesus, his divine nature—hence the name of the heresy associated with him, monophysitism.

In each of these heresies, there was an attempt to skew the understanding of the Incarnation toward the divine side. The response of the councils was to emphasize again and again that the very nature of the Incarnation was that the divine word took flesh. Thus, the formula of Chalcedon states that

We confess that the one and same Christ, Lord, and only-begotten Son, is to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division or separation.

In terms of doctrine, this formula answered the christological question of the relation of the human and divine natures in the person of Jesus Christ. Yet, the tendency to skew the Incarnation to the divine side continues to the present day. This tendency is particularly characteristic of Fundamentalists in their understanding of Christ. In the famous “five point statement” of Fundamentalist beliefs, the second point is a profession of the divinity of Jesus Christ. There is no corresponding point concerning Jesus’ humanity.

FUNDAMENTALISM AND THE INCARNATION

As christological thought developed in the early church, there was a movement from what is known as “functional” christology to “ontological” christology. Functional christology seeks to understand Jesus of Nazareth in terms of what he did, that is his function in the history of salvation. Ontological christology seeks rather to know Jesus in himself, that is the relation of the human and the divine in the person Jesus. Most Fundamentalist christologies would fall into the category of functional. They are seeking to understand Jesus Christ in terms of the work that he performed for

humanity when he walked the earth: salvation, justification and so on. They are not interested in the ontological nature of Jesus.

There is no doubt that any adherent to a Fundamentalist interpretation of the scriptures would affirm that Jesus was "the word made flesh," that is God and man. Yet, when it comes to the implications of that for the development of theology, we see the need of humanity for salvation weighing more than the necessity of Jesus becoming human. Fundamentalist christology is intertwined continually with the understanding of human nature and the fall, what is known theologically as anthropology. Fundamentalist anthropology reaffirms Augustine's judgment on the human race, calling it a *massa damnata*. Thus, there is a general mistrust of anything human.

George Marsden, in his studies on the Evangelicals, who are forerunners of contemporary Fundamentalists, has noted that Evangelical proclamation centers on two major themes: 1) Christ's saving work through his death on the cross and 2) the necessity of personally trusting him for eternal salvation. We see here the functional aspect of Evangelical Fundamentalist christology and the necessary intertwining of the christological with the anthropological.

The Fundamentalist view of Christ also affects views of church, sacraments and so on. To many Fundamentalist groups, the organized, magisterial church that is characteristic of Catholicism is simply a "human" institution that is fallible because of human nature. The necessary principles and interpretation necessary for good Christian living are imparted through the Spirit to the person who reads faithfully the divinely inspired word of God. With the scripture that comes directly from God (note the emphasis on the divine), an interpreting church is unnecessary.

Similarly, many Fundamentalists view the sacraments, which are a significant part of the liturgical and ritual life of the Catholic Church, as a use of human moments and symbols to designate special times in the development of one's faith life. In essence that is what they are, but there is another dimension that is not readily accepted. The sacraments are "graced" moments.

Grace is a power and reality in our lives. As Aquinas puts it, grace is a "special love of God deeply but freely influencing our lives." God's presence in our lives is thus something that is ordinary and normal. We only need to be attuned to it. The Fundamentalist, on

the other hand, sees God acting only in the extraordinary — the miraculous healing of the sick, the staving off of a hurricane, the wondrous raising of funds. All these are the signs of God's presence. The ordinary is considered to be outside the realm of God's action.

The Fundamentalist forgets that humanity was created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). In that creation, humanity at its base is good. In the mystery of the Incarnation, that implicit goodness of humanity is reaffirmed. God so loved us that he sent his only Son not only to save us but also to be one of us. The Incarnation affirms that it is possible for God to be present and active in our world, in the ordinary actions of our lives. Because of sin, we are in need of salvation. Jesus is our savior, our personal savior if you will. Because Jesus became human, so much more is possible. God has broken into our way of life, and it becomes ever more possible to find God in that way of life.

Acceptance of Jesus as savior is, for Fundamentalists, an assurance that they will go to heaven immediately after they die. They claim the basis for this is found in the exegesis of two scripture passages — Galatians 2:20 and John 3:5 — coupled with the Reformation theology of justification.

GALATIANS 2:20: CHRIST GAVE HIMSELF FOR ME

The notion of Jesus Christ as personal savior is drawn from the Fundamentalist exegesis of Galatians 2:20: "And it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself *for me*." The opening of the verse affirms that justification and salvation are an experience of transformation. The justified are no longer themselves but rather Christ lives in them. They are new ontological realities. This is certainly not the declaration of one as just; it is the actual constitution of something new.

Further, the life that is lived in Christ (a life of faith) has its origin in the redemption and vicarious surrender of the Son of God. It is precisely this Son of God who shows love for the justified one, handing himself over on behalf of the justified one. The Greek here is crucial. The objects of the verbs are singular. In other places where Paul speaks in similar language, the object is plural. Here

Christ loved *me*. Christ handed himself over on behalf of *me*. The language is personal.

The two verbs *agapao* and *paradidomi* are used throughout the New Testament in connection with the Passion narrative. John tells us that God so loved (*agapao*) the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16). That giving in John takes place in the Incarnation (1:14) and will take place again in the Passion narrative. The verb *paradidomi* occurs in several places in the Passion narrative for the actions of Judas, the high priest and even Pilate in terms of Jesus. Judas hands Jesus over to the high priest, who in turn hands him over to Pilate, who in turn hands him over to the executioners. By the time Paul uses the term in Galatians, it has a strong connection to the Passion of Jesus.

The problem with the Fundamentalist exegesis of this text is that it takes the verse out of context. Standing by itself, it could be seen as an affirmation of Jesus as an individual's personal savior. However, the verse appears in the context of a synopsis of Paul's teaching based on his own conversion experience. Hence the singular object refers to Paul's personal experience. It should not be generalized. When Paul speaks of salvation elsewhere, it is always in the first person plural.

JOHN 3:5: UNLESS ONE IS BORN AGAIN

In the dialogue with Nicodemus, Jesus announces that "very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." The usual Fundamentalist interpretation of this text will emphasize the Spirit, saying nothing about the water. The main thrust is to show that the Spirit convicts us of sin and shows us the necessity of faith in Jesus. When we put that faith in Jesus we are reborn, saved.

Again we must put this statement into its context. Nicodemus has come to Jesus because he believes Jesus to be a teacher from God. This must be so because of the signs and wonders Jesus has performed. His response to Nicodemus is "very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." This is reminiscent of the prologue to John where the children of God are described as those "begotten not by blood, nor carnal

desire nor by human will, but by God" (John 1:12-13), that is begotten from above.

The Greek verb *gennaō* appears in both texts. It has the sense of a new birth. Here it is modified by the adverb *anōthen*, which has a double meaning. It can mean either "from above" or "again." Jesus' answer to Nicodemus is that one cannot see the kingdom unless one is begotten again/from above. Nicodemus takes the more literal sense of Jesus' statement and asks how it is possible for one to be "begotten again," that is to return to the mother's womb to experience begetting and birth all over. Obviously this is not the meaning Jesus intends. He repeats his statement in different words.

The birth of which Jesus speaks is not a natural rebirth but rather a birth in "water and the Holy Spirit." The Greek *anōthen* is thus clarified as meaning through water and the Holy Spirit. This, on the surface, would seem to point to the sacrament of baptism. However, such a connection is not acceptable to many Fundamentalists. Hence they explain water as a reference to the water of the womb, implying that there we have the natural birth, and the Spirit then is the spiritual rebirth, the being "born again." Or they will turn to the exegetical work of scholars who see "water and" as a later addition to justify the ecclesial practice of baptism. Hence Jesus spoke only of being born in the Spirit, since in the repetition of the text (3:8) only Spirit is mentioned.

This might allude to the practice of being baptized in water and then receiving the Holy Spirit. Recall Acts 19 where Apollos baptized with the baptism of John. The recipients did not receive the Holy Spirit. When Paul and his company arrived, they baptized in the name of Jesus (water) and then called the Holy Spirit down on the believers by the laying on of hands (Acts 19:6).

From the above, it is clear that the texts of Galatians 2:20 and John 3:5 do not justify the belief that a simple act of faith in Jesus Christ as personal lord and savior is a guarantee of being saved. Our salvation is the object of hope. If our salvation were assured in the Fundamentalist sense, then there would be no reason for hope. Paul makes this clear in Romans: Although "through him (Christ) we have gained access by faith to the grace in which we now stand," we still "boast of our hope for the glory of God" (5:2). The glory of God is still to be attained. If that were not so, there would

be no reason for hope. "In hope we are saved. But hope is not hope if its object is seen: How is it possible to hope for what [one] sees?" (Romans 8:24). To see how these texts of the New Testament transformed Christ from the one whose saving acts give us hope to the one who is our personal savior, it is necessary to look at the understanding of Christ's act of salvation in Reformation theology.

REFORMATION THEOLOGY OF JUSTIFICATION

Medieval theologians who were the backdrop for Luther and the Reformation saw life in this world as an "anxious pilgrimage." There was need for confession, indulgences, intercession by saints and the help of good works. In the midst of all this, certitude concerning salvation became almost impossible.

Luther, in developing his theology of justification, attempted to make certitude of personal salvation possible. He taught that salvation demanded trust in the righteousness of Christ apart from any good work an individual can do. All that was necessary was total faith. Using several texts from Paul's epistles to the Romans and Galatians, Luther defended his position. "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand" (Romans 5:1-2).

Paul's doctrine was the logical outgrowth of his experience of conversion on the Damascus road. Paul had been an avid persecutor of the followers of Jesus. His conversion was a gracious gift of God. In no way had he merited the encounter he had with Christ. Through that encounter, Paul realized that he had come into the right relationship with God through the action of Jesus Christ. Augustine and Luther had conversion experiences that profoundly affected their understanding of salvation and justification.

In particular, Luther saw the value of justification through faith as an antidote to the many abuses of the church around him. His teachings countered the selling of indulgences and other practices tied to using good works to achieve salvation. However, there is a potential problem in his teaching. Can people so set on seeing their worth in terms of achievements really accept a theology that says all human effort is nothing when one stands before the Lord?

Luther's position on good works did not eliminate human effort. In fact, his theology demanded that good works be performed. What was different was the motivation behind performing them. In Luther's thinking, one does not do good in order to be saved; rather, one does good *because* one is saved. All the good in the world should not require any kind of reward from God.

There is thus a real point of dissension between the reformers (and beyond them the Fundamentalists) and Catholics concerning the meaning of justification. The Pauline texts that speak of justification use the Greek verb *dikaioo*, which is rendered as "to put right with," "show to be right," "to acquit," "to set free" or "to obey righteous commands." These definitions show that *dikaioo* has the dual sense of "to declare upright" or "to make upright." This is a subtle, but significant, distinction.

The verb occurs primarily in a juridical context where it refers to one actually being put right with another. The problem between parties has been rectified and right order (*dike*) is once again restored. This is the "ethical" understanding of justification. In a legal proceeding, it can refer also to the accused being acquitted. In this case, the accused is declared to be innocent whether or not he or she is actually innocent. It is this second or "forensic" understanding of justification that was prominent in the theologies of the reformers.

When justified, a human being is acquitted of any sins that he or she may have previously committed. It is as though God covers over the sinful person or turns a blind eye to his or her sinfulness. Yet, the person remains unjust and sinful. In this forensic view, the sins remain, but they are "non-imputed." The text used to justify this is Romans 4:7-8: "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin." Let us look a little more closely at this text.

ROMANS 4:7-8

The text appears in the midst of an argument in Romans on the justification of Abraham through faith based on the narrative of Genesis 15:6. A parallel is drawn between the wages of a worker and the righteousness of faith. When one works, the wages received are not considered a gracious gift. Rather, they are owed in justice.

However, when one trusts God apart from works, that act is considered as righteousness. It is a gracious gift. This was the situation with Abraham. Since Abraham was justified through faith, it is also possible for any human being to be justified apart from works.

A further support is presented from Psalm 32. The text is read according to the rules of Hebrew parallelism.

Happy are those whose
transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the
LORD imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

There are three verbs employed in this text, "forgive," "cover," "impute," that have become expressions connected with the removal of sin. That this is the case is confirmed by the objects of those three verbs, "transgression," "sin" and "iniquity." Hence this text speaks of the major obstacle in the right relations between God and humanity: sin. The psalm describes the sinner who acknowledges sin before God and receives forgiveness. In addition, the one who trusts God, acknowledging sin, is promised steadfast love, *hesed*. The commentators on Psalm 32 point out that the verb "to cover" that is used carries a special meaning when the subject is God and the object is sin. Its meaning becomes "to take away."

Thus, the effect of the argument in Romans 4 is to call upon the example of both Abraham and David as Old Testament precedents for the doctrine of justification by faith. Fundamentalists further use the verbs "cover" and "impute" to provide proof for their understanding of justification as a covering over or declaration of acquittal.

THE CATHOLIC POSITION ON JUSTIFICATION

The position of the Catholic Church as set forth in the Council of Trent is that justification is not simply a covering over of sins but rather a true remission of sin won by Jesus. The Council picks up on the second nuance of the verb *dikaioo*, to make right. When speaking of the effect of baptism on original sin, the Council teaches that

through baptism the guilt of original sin is remitted. Everything that is part of sin is taken away in baptism. "Justification is not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man." This is made possible through the work of Christ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states,

Justification detaches man from sin which contradicts the love of God and purifies his heart of sin. Justification follows upon God's merciful initiative of offering forgiveness. It reconciles man with God. It frees from the enslavement to sin, and it heals.

Justification thus becomes a remission of sin. God actually cancels out the sin. This is the primary meaning of the verb that is used in the New Testament for forgiveness of sins: *aphiemi*. This verb can mean to "depart from," "to forgive" or "to cancel a debt." It is this last nuance that is significant here. More precisely, in the business or accounting sense, it means "to release a person from the obligation of repaying what is owed." This is illustrated in several of Jesus' parables. An example should suffice here.

In the Gospel of Luke, in the midst of the story of the penitent women (Luke 7:36–50), Jesus tells a parable about two debtors. Both were unable to repay their debts and so both debts were canceled. The obligation to repay the debt was removed, eliminated. The creditor did not merely cover over the fact or look the other way. The slate was wiped clean. This is the sense of forgiveness that is prevalent in the gospels. It is a wiping clean of the slate, which once again puts the sinner in the right relation with God. All this is possible through the act of Jesus on the cross, which made right again the sin of Adam.

The Council sees justification as an act of God in Jesus that has an effect on humanity. God justifies, and the effect of that justification is that sins are forgiven and the "depraved, sinful" human being is transformed into an "inherently good being." This is the sanctification of the interior person that makes the human a friend rather than an enemy of God. Trent then defines the causes of this act using Thomistic causal distinctions. The final cause (the purpose) of this justification is the glory of God and life everlasting. The efficient

cause (the one who brings this justification about) is the merciful God. The meritorious cause (the one through whom this is brought about) is the only-begotten Son of God who merited justification through his passion. The instrumental cause (that by which we participate in this justification) is the sacrament of baptism. The formal cause is the justice of God by which he makes us just.

The Council, however, is also careful to note that although past sin is forgiven, the seeds of inordinate desire, the inclination to sin, remain in human nature. The justified person is *simul justus et peccator*, "at once just and sinner." Although freed from sin, the justified person retains that which had its beginning in sin, concupiscence. An ontological change has taken place in the justified person; he or she is made good. In an existential, historical sense, one who is justified is both justified and sinner. Hence it is possible that the one who is justified can fall into sin again.

Here, we find a major departure from the theology of justification of the reformers. Although justification is given from above, daily life is a continual struggle, and the justified person always stands under the threat of falling into sin again. Hence "being saved" is not necessarily a guarantee of heaven. There is a necessity for a renovation of the interior being also. This is seen in the texts of the Pauline corpus that speak of the creation of the new being:

This means that if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old order has passed away; now all is new! (2 Corinthians 5:17).

In his own flesh he has abolished the law with its commands and precepts to create in himself one new man from us who had been two and to make peace (Ephesians 2:15).

You must put on that new man created in God's image, whose justice and holiness are born of truth (Ephesians 4:24).

What you have done is put aside your old self with its past deeds and put on a new man, one who grows in knowledge as he is formed anew in the image of his Creator (Colossians 3:9-10).

When people encountered Jesus, there was a demand for some sort of interior renewal, a putting on of a new being. In chapter 5 of the Gospel of John, a paralytic is cured by Jesus at the side of the pool of Bethzatha. The narrative ends with the admonition "you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." It was a common understanding that illness was connected to sin. Hence Jesus implies that the salvation achieved through this encounter will demand a change in the man's way of life.

Again the salvation experience of Jesus entails a change in one's way of life. The tax collector Zacchaeus was a wealthy man, presumably from defrauding and overtaxing the people in his district. He encounters Jesus, who comes to stay with him. His response is to give half of his belongings to the poor and repay fourfold anyone he has defrauded in the least (Luke 19:8). Jesus then announces the salvation of Zacchaeus: "Today salvation has come to your house" (Luke 19:9). This is a play on words since Jesus' name in Hebrew means "Yahweh saves" or "the salvation of God." The statement thus refers both to the guest and to the action of Zacchaeus in response to the guest. Jesus' saving presence produces a change in Zacchaeus' way of life.

All these texts show that once people have encountered Jesus and made a commitment, they must change their way of life. Thus there is a close connection between one's understanding of Jesus and one's understanding of self. There is a connection between this functional christology and anthropology.

Those who hold that the simple confession of faith in Jesus Christ is all that is necessary confuse the concepts of redemption and salvation. The once and for all act of Jesus on the cross effected our redemption. All human beings are redeemed in that one gracious act. However, the participation in that redemption which is salvation is conditioned. It is possible to enter once again into the wrong relationship with God, to sin. "For if we willfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins but a fearful prospect of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries" (Hebrews 10:26-27).

Fundamentalists interpret this to mean either that the one who has been saved will not sin or will not sin grievously. This seems a bit presumptuous! The reasoning behind this is the same as the

reasoning behind the original thinking on justification. A human being cannot do anything at all to guarantee salvation. It is not merited in any way. Salvation is a gracious gift from God. It is understandable that good works do not achieve salvation; it is brought about solely through the grace of God. But once one has been saved, good works become the verification of that salvation. The transformation of life that comes with justification is proven in the good works that issue from the justified person. It is true to say that good works are not performed *in order to be saved*; rather they are performed because one *is* saved.

Ultimately, the question is can one know whether one is saved or not. The words of the Fundamentalists imply that once one has "accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior," he or she is saved. Yet the question of how one lives out his or her life after that acceptance makes one wonder whether such assurance of salvation is possible. What of the preachers who denounce sinful behavior in others yet engage in it themselves? Are they saved? According to many Fundamentalist theologies the answer would be "yes" if those preachers have committed themselves to Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. Then, it would seem that the good lives led by committed Christians are for naught.

The position of the Catholic Church on this corresponds to biblical evidence. Paul told the Philippians that they must work out their own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). This means that one's individual conduct must reflect a reverence and dependence on God that originates in faith. From God's point of view, salvation is always possible. It is the individual, like Adam, and his or her acts that tend to make one independent of God. Further, at the opening of the Epistle to the Romans, Paul notes that God will repay according to each one's deeds (Romans 2:6).

Finally, Christ himself in speaking of the final judgment shows that entrance into the kingdom of the Father is dependent on what we do after that commitment of faith. He does not say "come you blessed who have acknowledged me as your Lord and Savior." Rather he says,

Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and *you gave* me food, I was

thirsty and *you gave* me something to drink, I was a stranger and *you welcomed* me, I was naked and *you gave* me clothing, I was sick and *you took care of* me, I was in prison and *you visited* me (Matthew 26:34–36).

If entrance into the kingdom is based on what we *do*, so also must salvation be determined by what we *do*, not merely what we say.

CONCLUSIONS

The understanding of Christ set forth in much Fundamentalist christology does not understand the implications of the Incarnation. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that "the Word became flesh so that thus we might know God's love." The mystery of the Word made flesh announces that we as human beings made in the image and likeness of God are significant, important and lovable in the eyes of God.

The *Catechism* further tells us that the Word became flesh to be our model of holiness. Jesus in his ministry has revealed that God's love for us results in our loving God in return and in our loving our fellow human beings. Jesus, the Word become flesh, is the one whom we are called to imitate. As John tells us, "Love one another, as I have loved you." The Incarnation enabled Jesus to serve rather than be served (Mark 10:45). On the cross, he became the ultimate model of that service.

Finally, the *Catechism* tells us that the Word became flesh to make us partakers in the divine nature. St. Athanasius tells us that the "Son of Man became man in order that we might become God." The prologue to the Gospel of John notes that in the mystery of the Incarnation we were allowed a glimpse of the glory of God.

The Incarnation understood properly is a mystery that discloses the love and giving of the Father. It is a mystery of a loving God who chose to become one of us in order to proclaim loudly that we are important, we are lovable, we are loved. This is the essence of that highly cited text John 3:16. Too often do we concentrate on the second half of the verse that speaks of the believer having eternal life. We forget the first part that tells us God's motivation for sending his son: the Incarnation was God's love for the world.