

## John Calvin for Everyone

### The Institutes of the Christian Religion

#### Book 2 – Chapter 12

#### CHRIST HAD TO BECOME MAN IN ORDER TO FULFIL THE OFFICE OF MEDIATOR

In this chapter Calvin begins his discussion of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

**Summary:** Calvin immediately lays out his thesis, which is that in order for humanity to be saved, Jesus had to be both true God and true man. (For those of you not familiar with church history, this concept is at the heart of the church's first creed, the Nicene Creed). At first Calvin gives no logical reason why this had to be so, other than that it *"stemmed from a heavenly decree on which men's salvation depended"* (pg. 464). Even so Calvin continues with a series of arguments in which he explains the critical nature of this doctrine.

First he offers his rationale for Jesus having to be God, which is that no ordinary human being or angel *"...could serve as intermediary to restore peace (between God and humanity)."* This was so because the state of human beings was *"too lowly for us to reach God without a mediator"* (pg. 465). He sums it up this way. *"The situation would surely have been hopeless had the very majesty of God not descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him"* (pg. 464). In other words only God coming to earth could have restored the broken relationship between God and humanity.

Second he offers his rationale for Jesus having to be a human being which was that *"man who by his disobedience had become lost, should by way of remedy counter it with obedience, satisfying God's judgment and paying the penalties for sin"* (pg. 466). He continues, *"...our Lord came as true man ... to present our flesh as the price of satisfying God's righteous judgment, and in the same flesh pay the penalty that we had deserved"* (pg. 466).

In order to understand Calvin at this point we need to consider how he views sin, namely the fallenness of humanity and Adam's role in all of this. For Calvin, human beings were created without sin. Adam broke God's rule (don't eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil lest you die) thereby bringing sin into the world. God, being the righteous judge, had no other option but to condemn not only Adam but all of humanity to death because of this sin (meaning a violation of God's law). Think of it as a courtroom in which God the judge must sentence us to death because that is what the law demands. The role of Jesus then was to be that perfect human being, without sin, who would take upon himself the penalty intended for us, thus satisfying God's righteousness judgment.

On the surface this way of viewing God might appear to present God as an uncaring, legalistic despot. Calvin though takes great pains to remind his readers that even though God, because of God's purity and holiness, had to condemn humanity because of sin, God, from the beginning of time had a plan for setting things right; and that plan was to send Jesus. *"We all know why Christ was promised from the beginning; to restore the fallen world and to rescue lost men"* (pg. 467).

**Reflection:** There are a variety of explanations for the need for Jesus to be both fully human and fully God, and the role Jesus plays in breaking the power of sin and death. Calvin chose his, I believe, based on his understanding of God as absolutely holy and righteous; meaning that God could not simply let sin slide. God, by virtue of God's reality, had to judge and condemn humanity, thus necessitating the work of Jesus, which was in God's mind all along.

#### Questions:

1. How do you, if you do, try and reconcile Jesus as fully human and fully God?
2. How would you explain to someone the reason for Jesus having to be both human and God?
3. What do you think of Calvin's image of God as needing to condemn humanity?