

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 13
CHRIST ASSUMED THE TRUE SUBSTANCE OF HUMAN FLESH

One of the ongoing debates in both the early church and in the early Reformation was whether or not Jesus was fully human (meaning actually like us). Calvin addresses this issue because there were a number of influential Reformed pastors and teachers who argued that Jesus never became human, but was instead merely a spiritual manifestation of God. In this chapter Calvin will argue first that Jesus was fully human and second that even while fully human he was also without sin.

Summary: Calvin calls his opponents the Marcionites and the Manichees after the two men, Marcion (85-160) and Mani (216-274), who first taught that Jesus was never a human being. His opening statement lays out the disagreement. *“The Marcionites fancied Christ’s body a mere appearance, while the Manichees dreamed that he was endowed with heavenly flesh. But many strong testimonies of Scripture stand against both”* (pg. 475).

Calvin’s first testimony is that the “blessing”, meaning the promise of God to Abraham that God was going to redeem and save the world was “...promised neither in heavenly seed (meaning say, an angelic figure) nor in a phantom of a man, but in the seed (meaning human offspring) of Abraham and Jacob” (pg. 475). Thus for Calvin, God’s redeeming work was promised through someone who was fully human.

Calvin’s second testimony is that Jesus was “...subject to hunger, thirst, cold and other infirmities of our nature” (pg. 475). The argument then is that if Jesus were neither really present on earth, or was more angelic than human, then he would not have been subject to the same physical trials that come to us.

The third testimony is that Jesus is not only called the Son of Man, but that it is the only term Jesus uses to refer to himself in the first three Gospels. Calvin points out that Son of Man is a Hebrew idiom for a human being. He quotes Psalm 8 as proof. *“What is man that Thou art mindful of him and the son of man that you visit him?”* (pg. 477).

He turns next to Paul’s letter to the church in Rome where Paul speaks of Jesus as being the “son of David according to the flesh” (pg. 478). Calvin continues to the 9th chapter of the same book where Jesus once again describes Jesus as being descended from the Jews “according to the flesh” (pg. 478).

At the end of the chapter Calvin addresses one critical issue concerning Jesus’ humanity, which is that Jesus was sinless. Referring to the Apostle Paul, Calvin writes, *“Thus so skillfully does he (Paul) distinguish Christ from the common lot that he is true man but without fault and corruption.”* He continues, *“And this remains for us an established fact; whenever scripture calls our attention to the purity of Christ, it is to be understood of his true human nature...”* (pg. 481). This matters for Calvin because only a sinless human being would be the appropriate “sacrifice” for our sins.

Reflection: the nature of Jesus, whether he was fully human and fully God, was the first great debate within the ancient Christian church. The outcome of that debate was that the church proclaimed that mysteriously, Jesus was both. The first half of this doctrine, that he was fully human, is critical for the church because it reminds us that Jesus experienced life like we do, thus he knows how hard it is to be human; that he actually suffered and died on the cross, just like humans did; and that he shows us what a true human life ought to look like.

Questions:

1. What does it mean to you that Jesus was one of us?
2. What difference would it make if he were not?
3. How does Jesus fully human life encourage you in your life?