

The “Portrayal” of Jesus

Introduction

This morning, because this will be a topical message addressing a specific contemporary issue, I’ll be starting out with a question – a question I encourage you to think about carefully. What if someone asked *you* to be *Jesus* in a theatrical or a dramatic production. What if someone asked *you* to “play” *Jesus* – His personality, His personal interactions, His imagined conversations. What would you do? Even if you were a highly qualified actor, would you have any reservations? And if so, what exactly would those reservations be? Would you feel “inadequate”—even somehow unqualified—to act the part? But if so, maybe someone else wouldn’t. Is this just a matter of feeling and preference, or does it come back to a matter of conviction rooted in Scripture? *Should you*, or *should you not*, play the part of Jesus?

“The Chosen” is a show about the life of Jesus with a global and growing audience. It’s loved by multitudes of true, born again Christians. It’s apparently doing lots of good. People are reading their Bibles more. People are “connecting” more with Jesus and being encouraged in their “faith journey.” But let me ask: If *you* were Jonathan Roumie (who plays Jesus), with all of his talent, and *you* were invited to play the part of Jesus in “the Chosen,” *would you? Should you?* Is this a question that we even think to ask ourselves?

A Biblical “Christology”

Last week, we talked a lot about tradition. I briefly mentioned the difference between big “T” Tradition and small “t” tradition. For our purposes this morning, we can say that Big “T” Tradition refers to the universal consensus of the “orthodox” church, throughout the whole history of the church (by “orthodox” I mean a trinitarian orthodoxy), as that consensus has found expression in the ecumenical creeds (the Apostles’ creed, the Nicene creed (A.D. 325/381), the Chalcedonian creed (A.D. 451), and the Athanasian “creed” (5th century). In particular, it was the Chalcedonian creed that responded to various wrong ideas that were being promoted regarding the *person of Christ* by asserting what the church believed to be the true biblical teaching. It’s for this reason that we can speak of a “Chalcedonian” Christology (big “T” Tradition), which we also believe to be a truly biblical Christology – a truly biblical understanding of the *person* of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. This wasn’t simply a metaphysical, or even just an academic discussion for the church in the 5th century. The church saw that a right understanding of the **person** of Christ—or a faithful guarding of the impenetrable mystery of His *person*—had everything to do with the **work** of Christ, and therefore with our salvation. That’s why this mattered to the church.

Perfect in Godhead, perfect in manhood

For example, if Christ was the eternal Word and Son of God existing only in a human *body* (the eternal Word filling the place of a truly human soul), then Jesus was not truly and fully human. And if Jesus was not truly and fully human (having no human soul), then of what value can His death be for us? (Against Apollinarianism) So a Chalcedonian Christology confesses “our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead **and also perfect in manhood**; truly God **and truly**

man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial [of the same substance] with the Father according to the Godhead, and **consubstantial [of the same substance] with us according to the manhood, in all things like unto us,** without sin.”

- Hebrews 2:14–18 (cf. 4:15) — Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood [humanity], He Himself likewise also partook of the same [a true and full humanity], that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to **the seed of Abraham**. **Therefore**, He had to be **made like His brothers in all things**, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to help those who are tempted.

We see in these verses how the person of Christ has everything to do with our salvation.

- Matthew 26:38 — [Jesus] said to [His disciples], “My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.”
- Luke 22:42 — “Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me, yet not My will, but Yours be done.”
- Luke 2:52 – Jesus *increased in wisdom...* and in favor with God and man.
- Hebrews 5:7-8 – Jesus... *learned* obedience through what he suffered.

If we reject the Apollinarian error which says that the Son of God took to Himself only a human body and not a human soul, then we must also reject the error of adoptionism, which says that God “adopted” a merely human Jesus (body *and* soul) as His Son. In this case, Jesus was not truly and fully *God*. And if Jesus is not “perfect in Godhead... truly God... [and] consubstantial [of the same substance] with the Father,” then how can his work have any saving value for sinners like us? It was Jesus Himself who said:

- John 8:58 — “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.”

Two distinct and unconfused natures

A Chalcedonian Christology confesses that Christ is truly and fully God and truly and fully man – that it was the eternal Word and Son of God who took to Himself *all* of our humanity (body and soul). As soon as we confess this reality, we have to ask: What is the relationship between the human and the divine in Christ?

On the one hand, if Christ is essentially a divine-human “hybrid” so that either His humanity is “deified” (absorbed into His deity) or His deity is “humanized” then either He can no longer be truly God or He can no longer be truly man. And if He is not both *truly* God and *truly* man at the same time, then how can He be the *mediator* between God and men? (Against Eutychianism/Monophysitism). The Apostle Paul writes:

- 1 Timothy 2:5 — For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.

The idea that our humanity could be “deified” or that “deity” could be humanized (mixed with our humanity) represents a failure to understand what the Scriptures teach about the infinite distance between God (who is infinite Spirit) and man (who is finite creature). So a Chalcedonian Christology confesses that Christ is to be acknowledged in two distinct and unconfused natures, “the property of each nature being preserved.” The London Baptist Confession (LBC) speaks of “two whole, perfect, and **distinct** natures... joined together... **without conversion, composition, or confusion.**” Remember, “two distinct natures” is necessary not only because of the infinite distance between Deity and humanity, but also because any “conversion, composition, or confusion” robs us of all hope of salvation – making Jesus either less than fully God or not fully human.

One Person

But does this doctrine of two distinct natures mean that Christ is actually two distinct persons? If Christ is essentially two distinct persons—a divine person (the eternal Word and Son of God), and a human person (Jesus) existing in a perfect “moral” union of will, and if it was therefore *only the human person*, Jesus, who died for us on the cross, then of what value is His death and resurrection for us? (Against Nestorianism). Was it just a human person who died on the cross for us? Was it just the human Jesus, severed from deity, who died on the cross for us? Or was it one divine person who died on the cross for us?*

A Chalcedonian Christology confesses “**one and the same** Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly, **unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably**; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in **one person and one Subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ**, as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning him, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the creed of the holy fathers has handed down to us” (big “T” tradition). The LBC confesses that “two whole, perfect, and distinct natures were inseparably joined together in **one person**, without conversion, composition, or confusion; **which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ**, the only mediator between God and man.” This is the mystery of our devotion and the mystery of our salvation. It’s this *union* of the two distinct natures in *one person* that the Chalcedonian creed recognizes when it confesses that “our Lord Jesus Christ... [was] begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, *the Mother of God*, according to the manhood.” This expression (“mother of God”) was used before the Church’s idolization of Mary. What the Church meant to say here was that “Mary was the mother of *Him* [the one person] who was [according to His divine nature] the eternal Son of God” (Berkouwer).

* “Even in Christ’s death, the divine and human natures were still *united in one person*, but the divine nature did not die... During the time that Christ was in the tomb, the divine nature was united with a human nature whose soul was in paradise. Christ said on the cross, ‘Father, into Your hands **I** commend **My** spirit (Luke 23:46). Christ said this as only *one Person*” (Sproul; Truths We Confess).

Jesus said in John chapter three:

- John 3:13 – No one has ascended into heaven except he who **descended from heaven, the Son of Man**.

Who descended from heaven? The Son of *Man*. But “Son of Man” refers to Jesus according to His human nature – which Jesus didn’t have while He was still in heaven. Shouldn’t Jesus have said that it was the Son of *God* who descended from heaven? The answer is that Jesus wasn’t referring to His human nature all by itself! He’s simply referring to *Himself*. The unity of His one person is such that He can describe *Himself* as descending from heaven (which can only be true in terms of His divine nature), and yet refer to *Himself* in terms of His *human* nature. And so we hear Jesus saying that the Son of Man descended out of heaven. The technical name for this is the “communication of idioms/properties” (*communicatio idiomatum*). The London Baptist Confession says it like this: “Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture, attributed to the person denominated [called] by the other nature.”

Jesus says in Matthew chapter 24:

- Matthew 24:36 – Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor **the Son**, but **the Father** only.

Who doesn’t know the day or the hour? The Son doesn’t know. But the Son is the second person of the Trinity and is God. Shouldn’t Jesus have said something like: “Concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even... the Son of *Man*”? Once again, the answer is that Jesus wasn’t referring to His divine nature all by itself. He’s referring to *Himself*. The unity of His one person is such that He can describe *Himself* as not knowing something (which can only be true in terms of His human nature), and yet refer to *Himself* in terms of His divine nature. And so we hear Jesus saying that the Son of God the Father doesn’t know the day or the hour.

The Apostle Paul said to the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter twenty:

- Acts 20:28 (cf. 1 Jn. 3:16-17) – Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock... to care for the church of **God**, which he obtained with **his own blood**.

How can Paul talk about God’s blood when God has no blood? Shouldn’t Paul have said something like: “Care for the church of *Jesus Christ*, which *He* obtained with His own blood”? The unity of Christ’s person is such that Paul can describe Him as having blood (which can only be true in terms of His human nature), and yet refer to Him in terms of His divine nature (as God). And so we hear Paul saying that God purchased the church with His own blood. Here is the mystery of our devotion and of our worship and of our salvation! A mystery that we can never penetrate or comprehend, but that we guard with reverence. Two complete and distinct natures united in one divine person – our Lord Jesus Christ. This is why we can sing: “Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?” (cf. Jn. 20:28)

A Biblical Christology and Idolatry

What does this theology—this Chalcedonian and biblical Christology—mean for playing Jesus? When we cast an actor to “play” the part of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, are we casting him to play Jesus *only* according to His human nature? If so, then we’ve divided Jesus into two separate persons and have fallen into the error of Nestorianism. The man who plays Jesus according to His humanity must also play Jesus according to His deity because Jesus is only one *divine* person. This means that in order to succeed in his acting, the one who plays Jesus must be at all times perfectly revealing the Father.

- John 1:18 — No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*.
- John 10:30 — [Jesus said:] “I and the Father are one.”
- John 12:45 (cf. 14:9) — “He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me.”
- John 14:7 — “If you have come to know Me, you will know My Father also.”

It would be one thing to play Abraham, or Moses, or David, or one of the twelve disciples. It’s another thing entirely to play Jesus. If we could divide Jesus into two persons and play only the human person, then there would be nothing wrong with this *in and of itself*. But the humanity of Jesus is united inseparably with His deity *in one person*. And so **He** is “the radiance of [God’s] glory and the exact representation of His nature” (Heb. 1:3). To play Jesus *is* to play God, and therefore, I believe, to make God into our own image and break the second commandment:

- Exodus 20:4–5 — “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them...”

An interviewer once asked Jonathan Roumie, “What do you think Jesus is going to say to you when you get up there and meet him?” Jonathan answered, “Well, I hope he says, ‘Not too shabby.’ I hope he says, ‘That was pretty close,’ but I doubt it, but you know, He’d be like, ‘maybe it wasn’t your thing.’” In his humor, Jonathan was seeking to be humble, but when it comes to playing the part of the Son of God, is there really any room for anything less than perfection? And where is the only place that we can find the perfect and wholly sufficient portrayal of Jesus, the eternal Word made flesh? The only place is in the Scriptures; and particularly in the Gospels as we read those Gospels in the light of the *whole* of Scripture.

A Biblical Christology and the True “Attraction” of Christ

I watched a video where an interviewer said to Jonathan,

If there’s one thing I suspect you’ve heard from other people, it’s your style of presenting Jesus in a way that is so gentle, so winsome, so subtle, so understated, and yet so intensely relatable. My son said, “You don’t just want to convert, you want to enter into a deep relationship, a close friendship with Jesus because He is— because there’s humor, there’s irony, there’s understatement, there’s just a winsomeness, that you’re like, ‘Could He have been that way?’” You create this desire, you evoke a response of like, if that’s

what Jesus was like and still is, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is something I want perhaps more than anything else.

Let me be clear: I'm not saying that Jesus had no "humor," but not once in Scripture do we see Him doing or saying something "humorous." Again, the point is not that Jesus had no humor or that He couldn't laugh at a joke (though I'm not saying that He did laugh at jokes); the point is that, apparently, it's not the humor of Jesus that ought to have anything to do with drawing us to Him. Neither is it His use of irony, or understatement (which [understatement] I also never see portrayed in Scripture). What draws us to Jesus is not how "relatable" He is in terms of his human "personality," but rather how relatable He is in terms of partaking of our flesh and blood (our essential humanity) so that He might die for us, and be raised up from the dead for us, and intercede for us at the Father's right hand. What draws us to Jesus is not how "relatable" He is in terms of His human "personality," otherwise the Gospels have failed us miserably (and so have the Epistles). What draws us to Jesus is that as the eternal Word made flesh *He is* the revelation of the Father.

➤ Colossians 1:15, 19 — [He] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... In Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell...

Once we understand this, then His human "personality" is rendered almost irrelevant. What I mean to say is that it won't matter to us if Jesus doesn't laugh at jokes or doesn't use understatement or humor, or if He doesn't meet all of *our* "criteria" of gentleness and winsomeness. These things won't matter to us because *whatever* He is like will be good and right. There are a number of times in preaching through Matthew and John where I've warned against supposing that Jesus was speaking belligerently or harshly or sarcastically. This matters greatly. On the other hand, the danger of playing Jesus is that we make Him fit our sensibilities, when, in fact, the true Jesus may—and often does—expose the illegitimacy of our sensibilities.

I believe that the only place we ought to go to see Jesus portrayed is in the Scriptures read and preached. Sometimes we read the Scriptures and we see a skewed Jesus because of our own lenses and presuppositions. Sometimes we preach the Scriptures and we preach a skewed Jesus because of our legalism or our cheap grace. In both these cases, the solution is not to look to some other mode of portraying Jesus. The solution is not to find someone who will play a relatable human Jesus that I can love, or even someone who will preach a relatable human Jesus that I can love. The solution is to pray that God would open our eyes to His salvation—to the *true Gospel*—as *that* saving Gospel has been revealed in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

As a pastor concerned for the flock, I would suggest to you that a TV series like "the Chosen" may actually be subtly—but seriously—detrimental to our *true* spiritual health and joy. "The Chosen"—by necessity (because of the medium of film/acting)—focuses our attention on aspects of the humanity of Jesus upon which the Scriptures are, I believe, very purposefully silent. On the other hand, "The Chosen"—by necessity (again because of the medium of film/acting)—must minimize the divinity of Christ's person because no other human being has ever been a divine person. The Apostle John writes of his own experience walking with Jesus:

- John 1:14 — And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Certainly, John didn't know from the beginning what he was beholding in Jesus, but looking back he could see clearly that this is what he had been beholding all along – the glory of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. When we see Jonathan Roumie playing Jesus, we know that all we're seeing is a human being, *and nothing more*. And this is the fatal flaw. I would suggest that it leads, inescapably, to a making of *God* in our own image.

My purpose is not to legalistically add to the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt not watch the Chosen.” My desire is to guard us against the all-too-subtle influence of idolatry. It's to guard us against the practical denial of a biblical Christology. Ultimately, my desire each and every Sunday is to hold before us the perfect and wholly sufficient portrait of Christ as He is revealed to us *in the Gospel*, or as *the Gospel* is revealed to us in Him (cf. Gal. 3:1).

On what grounds do you know and love Christ? Have you found in Him “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3)? Has He become to you “wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30)? Do you know Him, and are you coming to know Him *in the Gospel* always more and more (2 Cor. 5:16; Phil. 3:10; 1 Jn. 1:1-3)?

- 1 John 5:20–21 — We know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. Little children, guard yourselves from idols.