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*Easter's Importance: Jesus as Divine and Human*

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As the Christians in America prepare for Easter Sunday, on which they celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, I would like to consider how the resurrection shaped Christianity. It sent Christianity off in a totally different direction from that in which it had been going.

During his ministry, Jesus had been a wise teacher and a miracle worker. This is amply recorded in the New Testament's four Gospels. But Jesus' death and resurrection, with the claim that the resurrection brought salvation to all humankind, was something completely different. It took more than three centuries for the politically dominant forms of Christianity to arrive at an understanding of that event.

The reason the resurrection played such an important role in defining early Christian theology was because it required an understanding of Jesus' nature. In early Christian belief, other people had come back from the dead; the Gospels even describe Lazarus' resurrection. But Lazarus' reanimation did not bring salvation. So why did Jesus' resurrection?

The main problem centered on whether Jesus was human or divine. If he was human, then his death and resurrection affected him alone and could have no impact on other humans. By contrast, if he was completely divine, then he could not have really suffered and died. The solution was that he was partly both. But how?

One solution came from the so-called Adoptionists. In their theology, Jesus was born a human and lived a human life until his baptism. During that event, God's spirit descended and entered into him. God's divine nature was added to Jesus' humanity, and so he became sort of an "adopted" god. The problem with this explanation was that it did not go far enough. An adoption did not transform Jesus into the "Son of God" who was capable of saving humankind.

The Arians had a solution that solved some of these issues. Arius held that Jesus was the Prince of Angels. In this guise he came to Earth and fashioned himself as a human being. The advantage of this explanation is that it gave Jesus a nature that was more divine than simply being human, although it was not so divine that he could not do the things he needed to do, such as die. The problem with this perspective is that it made Jesus into a creation and denied his full god-like status.

The advantage of both of these explanations is that they maintained monotheism; there was only one god, namely, God the Father. By portraying Jesus as either an angel or as an "adopted" human, there was no second god. But the critics of both theologies argued that since Jesus was not God, there could be no universal salvation for all humanity.

In the end, the Emperor Constantine moved to settle the debates. The Council of Nicea, called by the Emperor in 325 A.D., put forward the Nicene Creed as the solution. It established that the Father and the Son were of the same "substance." Jesus the Son was not created or made, but actually "begotten." Thus Jesus was a separate person from the Father (e.g., it was Jesus, and not the Father, who came to Earth), but he remained God and he was not a different being. Thus Jesus could experience pain, suffering and the other difficulties of human life, and even die. Yet he could also return to life, and bring salvation to all human beings--providing them eternal life in heaven.

This solution enables Western Christianity, both Catholicism and Protestantism, to celebrate Easter. By understanding Jesus' death and resurrection in this manner, Christianity was able to make God's sacrifice and rebirth into a powerful act that benefited all who believed in it. At the time, it was this act that made Christianity different from the surrounding religions. It also helped reconcile the negative aspects of human nature and actions with their longing to be linked to the pure and sacred character of God.