

Is Jesus a God-Man in 1 Timothy 2.5?

by Kermit Zarley

Some church fathers reckoned Jesus as a “God-man,” and Christians have been doing so ever since. Emil Brunner repeatedly does so in his classic defense of traditional Christology, *The Mediator: A Study of the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith*.

Those who call Jesus “the God-man” mean that God literally came down to earth and became the man, Jesus Christ, which they also call “the incarnation,” and they often cite 1 Timothy 2.5 as their sole means of biblical support. Paul writes therein, “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

Many scholars think that in 1 Timothy 2.5, Paul cites a liturgy that is commonly used in churches of that time just as he does in 1 Corinthians 8.6, in which he says “there is but one God, the Father.” If 1 Timothy 2.5 is a liturgy, it explains why Paul did not consider it necessary to explain what he meant since it would have been familiar to Timothy.

Accordingly, this liturgical saying in 1 Timothy 2.5 establishes the first precept of all truth about God, apart from the fact that he exists, which is that he is numerically “one.” It therefore alludes to the Shema, the Jews’ brief creed. The Shema reads, “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” (Deuteronomy 6.4).

The “one God” in 1 Timothy 2.5 also refers back in this letter to “God the Father,” who is “invisible” and “the only God” (1.2, 17). Thus, Paul says to Timothy, his ministry associate, that the Father is the only God, meaning that he is numerically one.

Trinitarians argue that “one” in the Shema does not designate God numerically but a unity, thus allowing for their doctrine of God as a unity of three Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But Paul’s juxtaposition of “one God” and “one mediator” in 1 Timothy 2.5 distinguishes two Persons. In other words, if “the one mediator” identifies one Person, namely, Christ Jesus, then to be consistent the parallel expression, “one God,” must identify numerically one Person—God the Father. So, rather than this verse indicating that Jesus is a “God-man,” it distinguishes him from the one God.

What is a mediator? In the Greek New Testament (NT), the word here translated “mediator” is *mesites*. It means “one who stands in the middle,” that is, a “middleman.” Bible textual critic B.F. Westcott defines *mesites* as “one who, standing between the contracting parties, shall bring them into fellowship.”

So, a mediator is a third party who attempts to reconcile two parties at variance. The two parties, in this case, are God and sinful humanity. Jesus was not a member of sinful humanity because he was “without sin” and therefore “separate from sinners” (Hebrews 4.15; 7.26; cf. 2 Corinthians 5.21). This mediator—Jesus Christ—attempts to bring the two parties together. Rather than 1 Timothy 2.5 offering support for Jesus being God, it does the opposite by necessitating that the mediator, as the middleman, is neither God nor a member of sinful humanity that is alienated from God. That is the whole point of being a mediator, in which that individual is unique by being neither of the disputing parties.

Jesus is described as “mediator” three other times in the Bible, all in the book of Hebrews (Hebrews 8.6; 9.15; 12.24). These passages, as well as their contexts, contribute to the view that Jesus was uniquely

qualified to mediate between God and humankind. As the Son of God, being perfectly righteous, Jesus was intimately associated with both.

The Bible teaches that sinful humanity is alienated from God and thus at enmity with him. God is the One with whom sinners need to be reconciled. John writes, “the wrath of God abides on him” who is without Christ (John 3.36). So, Paul writes to the Corinthians, “be reconciled to God,” that is, to God the Father (2 Corinthians 5.21; cf. Romans 5.10). Interestingly, the NT never commands people to be reconciled to Jesus. God is the One to whom sinners are accountable because they have broken his laws.

Therefore, God is the ultimate source of reconciliation. He plans and accomplishes it through Jesus Christ, whom he sent as the Redeemer. Paul further informs the believing Corinthians, “God ... has reconciled us to Himself through Christ” (2 Corinthians 5.18).

Some past scholars objected to applying the ascription “God-man” to Jesus. German Friedrich Schleiermacher, a non-Trinitarian and the most celebrated Christian theologian of the early 19th century, was one who did. He and many others pointed out that the term “God-man” neither appears in this 1 Timothy 2.5 text nor anywhere else in the Bible. Schleiermacher cautioned that this term requires scrutinizing.

Indeed it does. The concept of a God-man parallels the pagan notion of mythological demigods who are both god and man. In fact, proto-Gnostics of the 1st century CE could describe such a mythological redeemer figure as a “God man.”

Actually, Paul may have had proto-Gnostics in mind when he penned 1 Timothy 2.5. Perhaps he was contrasting Jesus as the one mediator with the proto-Gnostic belief in a *pleroma* of many aeons as a chain of mediators linking God and humankind.

It is strange that Christians would identify Jesus as “the God-man” based only on a single biblical text, it being 1 Timothy 2.5. Instead, this passage suggests that Jesus is not a dual being. For it clearly (1) distinguishes God and Christ Jesus, (2) affirms that God is a single Person, (3) calls Christ Jesus only a “man,” and (4) therefore neither calls him “God” nor a “God-man.”

It should be concluded that it is incorrect to identify Jesus either as “God” or “the God-man” based merely on 1 Timothy 2.5. Logically, Jesus Christ as a third party cannot reconcile us to God and at the same time be God. Finally, Today’s English Version well paraphrases Paul’s intended meaning in this verse as follows: “For there is one God, and there is one who brings God and mankind together, the man Christ Jesus.”

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