

The Biblical Unitarian Podcast - by Dustin Smith, PhD

Episode 362—"Why Christians Should Abandon Partitive Exegesis"

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Introduction

Have you noticed that some people seem to read the Bible through the lens of interpreting some of the things Jesus did as pertaining to being a human being and other, more exalted things as pertaining to being God? Whether these interpreters know it or not, this way of reading the post-biblical doctrine of the Two Natures of Christ into the New Testament is called Partitive Exegesis.

This week's episode will look at the concept of partitive exegesis in order to show why it is faulty, why it distorts the presentation of Christ in the Bible, and why Christians should stop using it entirely.

Does Partitive Exegesis clarify the meaning of Scripture, or does partitive exegesis import into the text a Christology that none of the biblical authors possessed?

Let's find out on this week's episode of the Biblical Unitarian Podcast!

1. Examples of Partitive Exegesis from the Time of the Christological Church Councils

- a. Cyril of Alexandria (early 5th c.), *On the Unity of Christ*
 - i. So even if he is said to have been wearied by the journey, to have hungered, and to have fallen asleep, would it be proper, tell me, to attribute these things which are petty and demeaning to God the Word?
 - ii. Such things would not be at all fitting to the Word, if we considered him nakedly, as it were, not yet made of flesh, or before he had descended into the self-emptying.
- b. Gregory of Nazianzus (middle-to-late 4th c.), *Orations*, 29.20
 - i. A man cannot transport things from one place to another, for instance, merely by thinking about them; nor can you or I move the sun and the stars just by sitting at home and looking at them. With the Word of God in His human nature, however, it was otherwise. His body was for Him not a limitation, but an instrument, so that He was both in it and in all things, and outside all things, resting in the Father alone. At one and the same time — this is the wonder — as Man He was living a human life, and as Word He was sustaining the life of the universe, and as Son He was in constant union with the Father. Not even His birth from a virgin, therefore, changed Him in any way, nor was He defiled by being in the body.
- c. Athanasius (middle 4th c.), *On the Incarnation*, 3.17
 - i. He was baptized as Man — but He remitted sins as God — not because He needed purificatory rites Himself, but that He might sanctify the element of water. He was tempted as Man, but He conquered as God; yea, He bids us be of good cheer, for He has overcome the world. He hungered — but He fed thousands; yea, He is the Bread that gives life, and That is of heaven. He thirsted — but He cried, If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink. Yea, He promised that fountains should flow from them that believe. He was wearied, but He is the Rest of them that are weary and heavy laden. He was heavy with sleep, but He walked lightly over the sea. He rebuked the winds, He made Peter light as he began to sink. He pays tribute, but it is out of a fish; yea, He is the King of those who demanded it. He is called a Samaritan and a demoniac; — but He saves him that came down from Jerusalem and fell among thieves; the demons acknowledge Him, and He drives out demons and sinks in the sea legions of foul spirits, and sees the Prince of the demons falling like lightning. He is stoned, but is not taken. He prays, but He hears prayer. He weeps, but He causes tears to cease. He asks where Lazarus was laid, for He was Man; but He raises Lazarus, for He was God.
- d. Gregory of Nyssa (late 4th c.), *Refutation of the Views of Apolinarius*

- i. The man was he “who spoke to us” in a human way using our language: that is, he who spat and made clay with his hand,!” who put his fingers into deaf persons’ ears,”! touched people who were diseased or dead, took rest from his labor by sleeping!” or sitting down,!” wept, felt anguish and distress, experienced thirst, desired food, and asked for water. Is it he, actually in his human flesh, who is to be thought of as existing before the creation of the universe? Is the nature of the flesh, composite, solid, and dense as it is, to be called divine? Let all pious ears be blocked! May the pure doctrine of God not be defiled by having fleshly passions insultingly attributed to him by those who bring down the divine to a human level!
- e. *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), R. B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman
 - i. “Scripture speaks of Christ in a twofold manner: some things are said of him as divine, and other things are said of him as human. Biblical reasoning discerns that Scripture speaks of the one Christ in two registers in order to contemplate the whole Christ. Therefore read Scripture in such a way that you discern the different registers in which Scripture speaks of Christ, yet without dividing him.”

2. Texts Often Interpreted with Partitive Exegesis

- a. *And behold, there arose a great storm on the sea, so that the boat was being covered with the waves; but Jesus Himself was asleep. And they came to Him and woke Him, saying, "Save us, Lord; we are perishing!" He said to them, "Why are you afraid, you men of little faith?" Then He got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and it became perfectly calm. The men were amazed, and said, "What kind of a man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?"* (Matt 8:24-27)
- b. *"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone.* (Matt 24:36)
- c. *Jesus wept...When He had said these things, He cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come forth."* (John 11:35-43)
- d. *for the Father is greater than I.* (John 14:28)

3. Reasons to Abandon Partitive Exegesis

- a. The doctrine of the two natures of Christ is not taught in Scripture.
- b. Standard textbooks on hermeneutics and interpretation argue that we need to ask what ancient documents meant to their original audiences in their own contexts. Hermeneutical textbooks do not teach partitive exegesis.
- c. Historically anachronistic.

- d. Contradictory
 - i. Jesus knows all things, and he is ignorant of several things
 - ii. Jesus is all-powerful, and he gets tired and has to take a nap
 - iii. Jesus has existed forever, and he has a genesis, a beginning, in the womb of Mary
 - iv. Jesus is innate immortal, and Jesus dies
 - 1. This is the biggest issue. If the immortal second member of the Trinity assumed a human nature, then he is still innately immortal. An immortal Jesus cannot die for your sins.
 - 2. So, you can either have Jesus being an immortal God, or you can have Jesus die for your sins. But you cannot have both, which is why all Christians should abandon the post-biblical doctrine of the Two Natures and Partitive Exegesis in favor of simply reading the Bible on its own terms.
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Thanks for listening to this week's episode!

Join us next week as we explore the Council of Nicea, which took place 1700 years ago in 325 AD. Many see fit to celebrate the seventeen hundredth anniversary of Nicea, but I don't think it is appropriate to celebrate the anniversary of a train wreck. That is just cruel.

Please look forward to our next episode.

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