

The Incarnation of Jesus Christ

To understand the Incarnation, we must first know something about the divine Trinity. The Old Testament does not present the teaching of the Trinity in detail, for the revelation of God in the Bible is progressive. As man was able to receive it, God gave increased information. It was necessary in Old Testament times to make clear the **unity** of God as opposed to the multiplicity of gods that Israel's neighbors worshiped. Yet the doctrine of the Trinity is implied in the very first chapter of Genesis. In verse 26 we read, "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth." To whom was God talking? It had to be someone with creative power, for He said, "Let **us make**." He didn't say, "Watch what I am going to make." It had to be someone with the same image and likeness as the one who spoke, for He said, "Let us make man **in our image**," not "in our images," thus showing the unity of the speaker and the one spoken to. The New Testament more clearly reveals the doctrine of the Trinity. In Hebrews 1:1-2 we read, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, **by whom also he made the worlds**." So we see that it was the Son to whom God was speaking in Genesis 1:26. And in Psalm 104:30 we read, "Thou sendest forth thy spirit, they are created," showing that the Holy Spirit was also a partner in the creation. In Matthew 3:16-17 we read, "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: and lo a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." This passage shows us the three persons of the Trinity in their separate personalities: the Father is in Heaven, and it is His voice that says, "This is my beloved Son"; the Son is on the earth, coming out of the water; and the Spirit of God, usually called the Holy Spirit, comes down from Heaven to earth in the form of a dove. Space does not permit us to go more deeply into the nature of the Trinity, but anyone wanting to learn more should read "***The Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit***," by Harold S. Martin.

1. The Meaning and Importance of the Incarnation

The word "Incarnation" does not occur in the Bible. It is a word which has been coined to help describe the doctrine of which we are speaking. It comes from the Latin words "in," which has the same meaning as our English word "in," and "carnis," which means "flesh." Flesh is the solid part of our being, the part that we can see and touch, in contrast to our mind, soul, and spirit. We have pointed out that the Son of God is one of the three persons of the three-fold Godhead. Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well, "God is a Spirit" (John 4:24). What Jesus means is that God's essential nature is "spirit," just as the essential nature of a table usually is wood. We can't see or touch "spirit" with our natural senses. Jesus, in talking to Nicodemus, compared "spirit" to the wind; you can't see it, but you can feel it and see the effects of it (see John 3). But the plan of salvation, as it was arranged, made it necessary for the Son of God to be revealed to humankind in ways that they could see and touch, and so the Incarnation was a part of the plan—placing the eternal, immortal, invisible Son of God in a body of flesh.

We want to look for a moment at this divine Person. The ancient creeds rightly say that the three persons of the Trinity are one, although they are also three. When our son was conceived, I imparted some of my own nature into his being, and my wife did the same. But when he was born, he was born a unique individual, not a part of me or of my wife any longer, but with his own humanity. We had a part in forming his character and fixing his habits, but we cannot control him. In many ways he is like me and like his mother, but in other ways he is very different. This is the way it is with every human being.

But with the Son of God it is different, for He was never born or brought into existence at a certain point of time. He existed from eternity with the Father. We are not told exactly how the Father and Son are related to each other, and probably could not understand it even if the Bible did try to explain. There is no earthly relationship to compare with it, but in some way the Father constantly imparts His life and nature to the Son, without interruption, just as a brook that is fed by a spring constantly sends its water out and thus keeps it flowing. In this way, although the Son is a distinct and separate person from the Father, they still are one, as Jesus frequently said (see John 10:30). We need to keep this in mind as we speak further about the Incarnation.

For many years the writer taught Bible classes at a children's camp, and I often tried to explain the Incarnation by asking a boy who had a well-loved dog if he would be willing, in order to save the life of his pet, to enter the body of a dog and live for awhile. I would point out that the caretakers of dogs sometimes forget to feed them or give them water; they may leave them tied in the hot sun and otherwise cause them discomfort, and the dogs have no way to tell their masters about it. I never found a boy who said he would agree to lead a dog's life for the sake of his pets. Yet the Son of God took on a kind of life much below His normal life, so that it was something like a dog's life would be for a man. Let's look at the life of Jesus Christ before He came to earth.

2. What the Incarnation Meant to the Son of God

In the first place, the Son of God was normally "spirit." "Spirit" isn't bound to one place as a body of flesh is. He had the entire universe for His workshop and playground. Men have built jet planes that can cross the Atlantic Ocean in six hours, but the Son of God could travel to the remotest place in seconds. He was the **beloved** Son, as the Father announced at His baptism, and again at the transfiguration. He was the **only** begotten Son, as John 3:16 tells us, and the writer of Hebrews says that the angels are commanded to worship Him. He was a partner in the creation of the world. He had helped to create angels whose only duty was to worship and serve Him, and the only thing that He still wanted was the companionship of creatures like Himself, and this He secured by helping to create human beings in His own image.

This is what He gave up to come down to earth as one of us. John says, "And the Word became flesh, and encamped among us" (literal translation of John 1:14). Here is the critical part of the Christian doctrine that we need to believe in order to be saved. John writes in his first epistle, "Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist" (1 John 4:2, 3). The Bible teaches, and we need to believe, that the man known in history as

Jesus of Nazareth was actually the divine Son of God. Paul tells Timothy, “And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: **God was manifest in the flesh**, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory” (1 Timothy 3:16). Earlier I said that the plan of salvation required that the Son of God should take a form that human eyes could see and human hands could touch, and this is what the Incarnation is about. Many people today, including many ministers, believe that the Jesus of history was an ordinary man, born like any other man, probably the son of Joseph, and that the early church invented the story of the Virgin Birth to cover up the shame of his illegitimacy. John tells us that such a teaching is from the spirit of antichrist. The doctrine of the Virgin Birth has been recognized by the church of all ages as critically important; it has been attacked in every period of history, and has always been vigorously defended.

What was the purpose of the Incarnation? The primary purpose (and we do not have space to deal adequately with it) was that the Son of God might justly offer Himself as our substitute and pay the penalty for our sins so that we might be free from the penalty of eternal death. But a secondary purpose was that He might, by sharing our experiences, be a merciful and understanding advocate. A young man once told me, “I can’t believe that Jesus was really tempted as men are today in this age of immodest dress, and not have a sinful thought. He couldn’t have had our nature and never sinned.” But the writer of Hebrews says, “For we have not a high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in **all points** tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). That includes the temptation to unholy thinking and unlawful sex. The Bible says it, so I believe it, but my illustration of the boy going into the body of a dog helps to make it easier to understand for me.

When the Son of God took on human nature, He did not give up His divine nature. Paul says in Philippians 2 (putting it in my own words), that Jesus was in the form of God, and did not think it improper to regard Himself as equal with God, but He emptied Himself—this is what the original language actually says—and took on the form of a servant. Jesus retained His divine powers and attributes, but He did not use them for His own benefit. He knew the thoughts of those who were criticizing His actions, and He knew from the beginning that Judas would betray Him. He didn’t use His creative power to turn stones into bread when He was hungry, but He did create food on several occasions for other hungry people. He freely used His divine power to heal the sick and to drive out evil spirits. He told Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane that He could have called for twelve legions of angels to rescue Him, but He didn’t. He endured the scorn and contempt of those who regarded Him as a fanatic and deceiver, taking comfort only in the loving faith of a handful of devoted followers. He never ceased to be the divine Son of God, but He took on a full and complete human nature in addition, including all our temptations.

Now let’s go back to my illustration of a boy in a dog’s body, only this time I will pretend to go into the body of a wolf. If I were to put on a wolf skin, I might frighten a sheep, but it wouldn’t change my nature. But if I could take on the entire nature of a wolf, as Jesus took on **human** nature, then I would really know how a hungry wolf feels when he finds a sheep. I would be tempted to kill it and eat it, but because I would still be David Lehigh and not “Bobo the Wolf,” I would be able to resist the temptation. The Son of God took on not only a human body, but a human soul and spirit, in order that He might fully

understand the feelings and temptations of humankind. But because He was still the divine Son of God, He was able to resist the temptations that seem to be too strong for us.

Earlier we said that the primary purpose of the Incarnation was that the Son of God might suffer the penalty for the sins of mankind. But I have often wondered how a loving Father could permit His Son to endure such suffering. I do not pretend to know the answer, but I have thought about a two-sided answer that satisfies me. On the one side is my belief that since the Father and Son are so closely joined that they can be called one, the Father actually shared the suffering. God the Father not only felt sympathy, as we humans do, but He actually felt the same pain of the driven nails and other tortures as the Son did. I couldn't picture the loving Father allowing the Son to suffer as He did on any other basis. And in some way that we do not understand, suffering is good for us. The writer of Hebrews says that the Captain of our salvation was made perfect through suffering (see Hebrews 2:10).

The other side of the picture is that it was done for love. I believe that every red-blooded young man who loves a girl can agree that if he had to suffer in order to save her from suffering, he would gladly do it. And Jesus was bearing the suffering of the cross in order that His beloved bride, those who believed on Him and accepted His plan, might escape the suffering of eternal Hell.

3. What the Incarnation Means to Us

Let us now look at what the Incarnation has meant to us in the present age. What would our life be like if Jesus had never left Heaven and come down to earth in the likeness of men?

First, there would be no clear knowledge of God. There are still areas where the true God is not known, and from history and literature we know what the gods are like which men have invented for themselves. The gods of the Greeks and Romans were cruel and revengeful. They quarreled among themselves and tried to defeat each other's plans. They had to be appeased with offerings. They were often untruthful and unfaithful. Only with the coming of Jesus was the true nature of the Father revealed as loving and caring, and doing everything possible to reconcile rebellious humankind to Himself.

Second, there would have been no New Testament. The Old Testament ends with the words, "Lest I come and smite the earth with a curse" (Malachi 4:6). If it had not been for the coming of Jesus in the Incarnation, we would not have the Sermon on the Mount with its Beatitudes; we wouldn't have the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son; we wouldn't have the fourteenth chapter of John or the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians; we wouldn't have Paul's marvelous description of the plan of salvation, or the description of Heaven in the Book of Revelation. We would still be sacrificing lambs, bulls, and goats whose blood could never take away sin, for only Jesus Himself could offer the perfect sacrifice that can make an enduring atonement.

Third, there would be no churches, no homes for the aged, no orphanages for homeless children, for all such works of Christian charity are done in the Name of Jesus. There are no such institutions in pagan countries. A missionary who had returned from China about 1920 explained that when crops failed, the aged grandparents were driven from those homes that could not afford to care for them, and they were

left to starve, unless they could get to a mission station, where they would be cared for as best the missionaries were able to provide care. I read an account of a pilot on an aircraft carrier in World War II who boasted about his contempt for religion. But one day on a bombing mission in the South Pacific his plane got lost from the carrier. They were low on fuel, and knew that they would have to land on one of the islands that dotted the ocean, many of which were inhabited by cannibals. The pilot looked for a place to land, and as they neared the island the navigator called out, "We're all right, there's a church down there. I see a cross on the steeple!" Later, when the pilot remembered how relieved he was at seeing the church building, he became a Christian believer.

Fourth, if it had not been for the Incarnation, there would be no assurance of eternal life. The hope of meeting our loved ones again is one of the strongest desires of mankind. The poet Whittier wrote, after describing his family in the poem "Snowbound," of whom only he and one other brother were left: "Yet love will dream, and hope will trust, Since He who knows our needs is just, That somewhere, somehow, meet we must." Jesus told His disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2-3).

One more concluding thought: The Incarnation did not stop when Jesus went back to Heaven. Although Jesus was in His glorified body, John knew Him on the Island of Patmos. He is still one of us, and today He is our advocate in Heaven. Some years ago a young man got into difficulty with the law, and he employed a lawyer who persuaded the judge to give him a suspended sentence. Later this lawyer was elected judge, and the same man who had earlier committed a crime, now older but not wiser, repeated the offense again. When he was brought to court, he felt that the judge might be lenient with him again, but the judge said, "Then I was your advocate, now I am your judge." Jesus offers to be our advocate during this present age, but if we refuse to accept Him, He will someday be our judge. If you have not already done so, accept Him as your advocate today, or He will be your judge sometime in the future.

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