

The Incarnation

by **Michael Bremmer**

All praise to Thee, Eternal Lord,
Clothed in a garb of flesh and blood;
Choosing a manger for a throne,
While worlds on worlds are Thine alone.

Like other great theological terms, the word incarnation is not found in the Scriptures. However, the idea the word represents is. The word incarnation means "in flesh" and is described by the apostle John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we behold His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1.1, 14).

Perhaps the best definition of the incarnation is found in the Westminster Confession of Faith: "The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance, and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance. So that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and manhood, 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"

THE PURPOSE OF THE INCARNATION

Our Lord leaves no doubts about the purpose of His incarnation. In His own words He came to "seek and save that which was lost," (Lk. 19:10) "to call not the righteous but sinners," (Mt. 9:13) "to give His life a ransom for many," (Mt. 20:28) "to save the world" (Jn. 12:47). Neither does the Apostle Paul leave any doubt as to the purpose of the incarnation. The apostle Paul summed up not only the mission of Jesus but the gospel as well when he wrote to his young friend Timothy, "It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tm. 1:15). The purpose of the incarnation was the redemption of lost sinners. For that reason, Jesus Christ, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, in the appropriate time took human nature, being born of the Virgin Mary. The benefits of the incarnation are many. Scripture tells us that Christ has revealed the Father to us; that He is our example; that He is our sympathetic High Priest; But these benefits result from the one purpose: Christ took human nature, was born to the Virgin Mary, lived, died, and resurrected, "To save sinners."

And Christ did so apart from any necessity. He did not need to take the form of a servant and to give His life a ransom for many. As God, He needs nothing--He is self-sufficient. Sometimes it is remarked that since God is love, His love had to be express in some way. Consequently, God created the world to manifest His love, and when man fell in Adam, this love required the redemption of man. However, this view disregards all that the Scriptures teach concerning God's self-sufficiency. Besides, the love of God is perfectly manifested within the Godhead. Christ came, not of necessity, but by grace. And this act of grace was also the greatest condescension. He who dwells on High in infinite glory, and to whom the nations are a drop in the bucket, emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant and died in our place. This He did, not because we dissevered it, or because He was under compulsion to do so, but because He is gracious and merciful.

THE MEANS OF INCARNATION: THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Lo! Within a manger lies,
He who built the starry skies.

The virgin birth of Christ is not to be confused with the false teachings associated with the Roman Catholic Church. Mary was not born sinless, nor did she remain a virgin after the birth of the Holy Child Jesus. We are to test all Biblical teaching by Scripture and judge accordingly. According to Scripture, the only person ever said to be sinless was Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5.21), all others are guilty of sin, "For all have sin and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3.23). That Jesus had brothers and sisters, proof against the perpetual virginity of Mary, is plainly stated in Matthew 13.55 and Jude.

The virgin birth refers to Jesus Christ's supernatural conception in Mary's womb, through the Holy Spirit. This conception was apart from the normal agency of a male, making it a miraculous event. The birth itself was not miraculous, it was the normal birth process most pregnancies follow after conception. What makes the virgin birth miraculous is its conception. This is the reason many prefer the description virginal conception rather than virgin birth. However, because Christ's birth has long been called the virgin birth, the former description, although more accurate, has not come into use.

It was not Jesus Christ, however, who was conceived in Mary's womb; Christ always existed from eternity. By virgin birth we mean that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, coequal and co-eternal with the Father, who was, is, and will always be, took to Himself human nature, originating in the event many have come to know as the virgin birth.

Many today deny the virgin birth of Christ, or if not denying it claim that as a Christian doctrine it is relatively unimportant to the Christian faith. However, if we hold to an inspired and inerrant Bible, then belief in the virgin birth cannot be an option, nor can it be banished to a place of irrelevancy. Furthermore, denying the doctrine of the virgin birth, or suggesting that it is at the least irrelevant, creates several theological problems, problems more serious and complex than accepting the Biblical account of the supernatural birth of Christ. For instances, Walvoord points out,

"How could one who was born both God and Man have perfectly human parents? The account of the virgin birth therefore, instead of being an unreasonable invention, becomes a fitting explanation of how in the supernatural power of God the incarnation was made a reality" (*Jesus Christ Our Lord*P. 104).

Another question difficult to explain apart from the doctrine of the virgin birth is how could the eternal and preexistent Christ assume human nature in Mary's womb and remain undefiled by sin? The fall of Adam, and humanity with him, resulted in human nature being polluted, and all born since Adam, save Christ, have been born with a depraved sinful nature. Had Christ been born of human parentage then He would be condemned with humanity because of the fall of the race in Adam. The great Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield writes,

"It is only in its relation to the New Testament doctrine of redemption that the necessity of the virgin birth of Jesus comes to its full manifestation. For in this Christianity the redemption that is provided is distinctly redemption from sin; and that He might redeem men from sin it certainly was imperative that the Redeemer Himself should not be involved in sin . . . Assuredly no one, himself under the curse of sin, could atone for the sin of others; no one owing the law its extreme penalty for himself could pay this penalty for others. And certainly in the Christianity of the New Testament every natural member of the race of Adam rests under the curse of Adam's sin, and is held under the penalty that hangs over it. If the Son of God came into the world therefore--as that Christianity asserts to be a 'faithful saying'--specifically in order to save sinners, it was imperatively necessary that He should become incarnate after a fashion which would leave Him standing, so far as His own responsibility is concerned, outside that fatal entail of sin in which the whole natural race of Adam is involved. And that is as much as

to say that the redemptive work of the Son of God depends upon His supernatural birth." (*Christology and Criticism*, p. 455).

The inability to accept the doctrine of the virgin birth is really the inability to accept any miracle at all. It is impossible, say some, for a child to be conceived apart from a human father. But "the virgin birth is no more miraculous than the atonement or resurrection or the regeneration of sinners. If miracles are rejected, then nothing important to Christianity can be retained" (J. M. Frame, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, P. 1143).

We must also note that one's belief or disbelief in the doctrine of the virgin birth will generally be the same as one's view of Scripture. The Scriptures clearly and carefully teach that Jesus was conceived supernaturally and born of the virgin Mary. To deny these facts of Scripture is to deny the Scriptures are inspired and inerrant. Baptist Theologian A. H. Strong sees only two alternatives: "Christ's human nature was supernaturally conceived; since a denial of His supernatural conception involves either a denial of the purity of Mary, His mother, or a denial of the truthfulness of Matthew's and Luke's narratives" (*Systematic Theology* P. 675).

Because the virgin birth of Christ sustains a close relationship to many other important doctrines of the Christian faith, it is very common for those rejecting the Biblical account of Jesus' birth also to reject many other basic Christian doctrines. With the virgin birth, they often reject the Deity of Christ, His vicarious atonement, and His resurrection. This is why the doctrine of the virgin birth has become a touchstone for Christian orthodoxy. For those who reject the virgin birth, it is often an indication of a serious defection from the basic truths of the Christian faith. Gromacki makes this practical application:

"Evangelical Churches should exercise great discernment in screening pastoral candidates for their empty pulpits and in ordaining college and seminary graduates into the ministry. Special attention should be given to the Christological viewpoint. It is not enough to ask a candidate whether he believes in the virgin birth or in the incarnation. Ask him what he means by those terms" (Gromacki).

Other than the theological significance of the virgin birth as it relates to other doctrines of the Christian faith, it teaches us a very important truth about God. The angel Gabriel, after announcing to Mary that she would miraculously give birth to the Messiah, said, "For with God nothing is impossible" (Lk. 1.37). Nothing, **NOTHING**, is impossible with God! What a comfort to God's children!

SCRIPTURE REFERENCES

"And Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus who is called the Christ" (Matt. 1.16 KJV).

"The word whom' is the genitive feminine singular relative pronoun. Its grammatical antecedent could only be the female Mary, not the masculine Joseph. All forms of the word "begot" were aorist active indicative until Matthew switch to the aorist active for the birth of Jesus. These abrupt changes definitely show that Joseph did not beget Jesus, but that he was simply the husband of Mary" (Gromacki, p. 80).

Some dispute the common rendering of this verse substituting: "Joseph, to whom Mary, a virgin, was betrothed, was the father of Jesus. . . ." (The New English Bible). However, the textual evidence is clearly against this rendering; nevertheless, it is still adopted by some because they cannot accept the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, so they disregard the overwhelming textual evidence, choosing an obscure and incorrect rendering of the text.

"And Mary said to the angel, How can this be, since I am a virgin'? And the angel answered and said to her, The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the Holy offspring shall be called the Son of God' (Lk. 1.34-35).

Notice that because of this miraculous conception the Holy offspring is called the Son of God, not the son of Joseph.

"Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14).

Many have vainly tried to refute that this prophecy concerns the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ. The inspired Word, however, states clearly that it pertains to Christ. Matthew 1:22-23 tells us that the events surrounding the birth of Jesus are a fulfillment of Isa. 7:14.

THE HUMANITY OF JESUS

"And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Lk. 2:52).

"Veiled in flesh the God-head see;
Hail the incarnate deity;
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus, our Emmanuel"

Charles Wesley

The Scriptures teach that Jesus Christ was truly man, and everything that can be predicted of man, except sin, can be predicted of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures also teach that Jesus Christ was truly God, and everything that can be predicted of Deity, can be predicted of Jesus Christ. Yet Jesus Christ, having both a divine nature and human nature, is one person. The same person who said "I thirst" said "Before Abraham was, I AM." Jesus Christ was one person with two distinct natures: one Divine, the other human. Since Christ's Deity has already been established (see The Deity of Jesus Christ), it remains only to examine His humanity and the relationship of His Divine and human natures in the one person Jesus Christ.

The Scriptures teach that Jesus Christ had a real material, physical body. A body subject to the same pain, pleasure, thirst, hunger, fatigue, and death as we. His body was not a phantom, or seemingly real, it was real. The Scriptures tell us that, "Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same" (Heb. 2.14a) and, "See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Lk. 24.39). "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have handled, concerning the Word of life" (1 Jn. 1.1), "By this you know the Spirit of God; every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (1 Jn. 4.2).

Jesus Christ also had a rational soul as we. He thought, reasoned, experienced joy, love, and sorrow. The Scriptures tell us that He increased in wisdom, and that at times He was ignorant. He had limited human intelligence. The gospels are filled with examples of Christ's humanity, and His true human nature is rarely denied.

THE SINLESSNESS OF JESUS CHRIST

Is it possible for Jesus to have sinned? Note that the question is not did Jesus sin, for all Evangelicals are agreed that Jesus did not sin. Nor is the question was Jesus tempted, for Heb. 4.15 says that He was tempted. The question is, *could* Jesus have sin. The two views are (1) Jesus could have sinned, that is, He was peccable (able to sin), and (2) that He could not sin, that is, He was impeccable (not

able to sin). It is generally true that Arminians believe that Jesus could sin, while Calvinists believe that He could not. I say generally because one notable exception is the very able Calvinist Charles Hodge. He held that Jesus could sin since He was truly human.

Clearly, no Christian would say that the eternal Word, the second person of the Godhead, was able or liable to sin. It seems, then, only the human nature is able or liable to sin. However, Jesus Christ was one person, not two; and only a person can sin. Acts 15.10; 1 Cor 10.9; Heb. 3.9; Acts 5.9. The peccability of Christ view also fails to emphasize that person Jesus Christ not only had a human nature, but also a divine nature. He was, is and will always be perfect Deity, and as such was incapable of sinning.

But it is objected to this view that it makes Christ's temptation not real, and, therefore, He could not be our example in times of trial and temptation. The premise, however, that one must be able to sin to suffer temptation is false. In many place in Scripture God is said to be tempted, yet no sane person says that God the Father can sin. Furthermore, Jesus would know through his human nature what it is to endure temptation. Therefore, he is our merciful High Priest, who can sympathize with our weakness, and can help in time of need. (Lk. 1.5; Jn. 8.46; 14.30; 2 Cor. 5.21; Heb. 4.15; 9.14; 1 Pet. 2.22; 1 Jn. 3.5). Finally, Shedd rightly argues:

"It is objected to the doctrine of Christ's impeccability that it is inconsistent with His temptability. A person who cannot sin, it is said, cannot be tempted to sin. This is not correct; any more than it would be correct to say because an army cannot be conquered, it cannot be attacked. Temptability depends on the constitutional susceptibility, while impeccability depends on the will. . . . Those temptation were very strong, but if the self-determination of His holy will was stronger than they, then they could not induce Him to sin, and He would be impeccable. And yet plainly He would be temptable" (Dogmatic Theology, p. 2.336).

HYPOSTATICAL UNION

"This concept of the hypostatic union or one-person union of the divine and human natures in one Person is probably one of the most difficult concepts to comprehend in theology. Not one of us has ever seen Deity except as the Scriptures reveal God, and not one of us has ever seen perfect humanity except as the Scriptures reveal pre-fallen Adam and our Lord. To try to relate these two concepts to the person of Christ adds complexities to ideas that are in themselves difficult to comprehend" (Ryrie, *Systematic Theology*, p. 250).

Two questions, therefore, must be answered before the doctrine of the incarnation can be correctly understood: (1) What is meant by the term "nature," and (2) What is meant by "person."

Nature as used of the humanity of Christ includes all that belongs to His humanity. As applied to the deity of Christ it includes everything that belongs to His Deity. "Nature and person are not synonymous. Persons have natures, yet personhood involves more than a nature. Person includes nature plus independent subsistence or reality embracing intellect, emotion, and will. The Son of God, who was one in person and nature (divine), became two in nature (divine and human) while remaining one in person through the incarnation, The eternal Son of God did not join himself with a human person, it must be remembered, but with a human nature" (Lightner 82). "The concept of nature refers to 'the sum-total of all the essential qualities of a thing, that which makes it what it is. The term person means 'a complete substance endowed with reason, and consequently, a responsible subject of its own actions'.. . . Thus, God is a person with a divine nature. An angel is person with an angelic nature. A man is a person with a human nature" (Gromaki 107.)

Charles Hodge gives the following principles in his discussion on the Hypostatical Union:

"(1) It is intuitively certain that attributes, properties, and power or force, necessarily imply a substance of which they are manifestations. Of nothing, nothing can be predicated. That of which we can predicate the attributes either of matter or mind, must of necessity be a reality. (2) It is no less certain that where the attributes are incompatible, the substances must be different and distinct. That which is extended cannot be unextended. That which is divisible cannot be indivisible, That which is incapable of thought cannot think. That which is finite cannot be infinite, (3) Equally certain is that attributes cannot exist distinct and separate from substance. . . .otherwise there might be extension without anything extended, and thought without anything that thinks. (4) Again, it is intuitively certain that the attributes of one substance cannot be transferred to another. Matter cannot be endowed with the attributes of mind; for then it would cease to be matter, Mind cannot be invested with the properties of matter, for then it would cease to be mind; neither can humanity be possessed of the attributes of divinity, for then it would cease to be humanity. This is only saying that the finite cannot be infinite. Speaking in general terms, in the whole of human thought, these principles have been recognized as axiomatic; and their denial puts an end to discussion" (Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 p.387).

In light of these universal principles, Hodge goes on to say that when the Scriptures speak of Jesus Christ as sorrowful, joyful, increasing in wisdom or being ignorant of things, it can only mean that God intends us to understand that Jesus was a real man. Likewise, when the Scriptures speak of Jesus possessing attributes of deity such as omniscient, power, and eternity (to name but a few), it is because God intends us to understand that Jesus is very God. Since God intends us to understand that Jesus is both God and man, possessing divine and human nature, then also we must understand that these two natures are distinct in the one person Jesus Christ, meaning, the two natures are "unchanged, without mixture or confusion;" for attributes cannot exist apart from substance, and incapable attributes cannot be mingled together and must remain distinct. The gospels never give any indication that even remotely suggest that He was anything but one person. In all His actions, and attributes, the gospels present to us one person who is called Jesus Christ. Yet of this one person, Divine and human attributes are predicted.

Jesus Christ, then, is one Person, co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. In the fullness of time Jesus Christ took to Himself a human nature, being born of the Virgin Mary. As a result, this One Person has two natures--one Divine, one human.

Although the Scriptures teach that Christ is both God and man, fully human and fully Divine, Jesus Christ is not two persons. The person who from eternity existed with the glorious Godhead, the second Person of the Trinity, is the same person who has manifested in the flesh at the virgin birth. He did not assume a human person, making Him two persons, but He assumed human nature. In the gospels Jesus Christ always referred to Himself with the personal pronouns "I" and "Me," and never suggest duality of persons. We find also in the Scriptures that in some passages both natures are referred to, but clearly one person is intended. Philippians 2:6-11 is one such example. (See also Gal. 4:4-5; Rom. 1:3-4).

Jesus' Divinity and humanity are not mingled or combined together, but each remains distinct from the other. Can the visible also be invisible, or the infinite finite? Neither can Christ's two natures be so mingled together that one over shadows the other nor combine together forming a separate entity. If it were possible, then Jesus would be neither God nor man. But the Scripture teaches that Jesus is both God and man, therefore His two natures are and will ever be distinct. He is God-man.

Without question "We have arrived at the edge of the deepest mystery-- as man, Christ was born of Mary (Luke 2:7), as God, He had no father or mother (Heb. 7:3); as man, He grew up (Luke 2:52), as God, He does not change (Heb. 13:8); as man, He slept in a boat (Matt. 8:24), as God, He upholds the universe by His power (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3); as man, He died (Luke 23:46), as God, He lives

forever (Heb. 7:3, 22-25)" (Barnes, *The Milk of the Word*, p. 45).

These truths are difficult to understand. But as B. B. Warfield remarked,

"No doubt it is difficult to conceive of two complete and perfect natures united in one person; but that once conceived, all that the Scriptures say about Jesus follows as a matter of course"(Warfield *"The Human Development of Jesus."* "A most valuable article on Christ's humanity and union of the two natures.")

It is the failure to recognize and understand this doctrine that has resulted in the many cultic attacks and denial of the Deity of Jesus Christ. Because the Scripture presents to the reader a very real and very human Christ, it is denied that He is truly God. But the Scripture presents to use not merely a man, or merely Deity, but Jesus Christ, the God-man, who is the **only** object of true saving faith.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST

(1) Christ's humanity is as important to the doctrine of the atonement as is His Deity. He was truly one of us. Therefore, He could take our place, suffer, and die: "Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of His people" (Heb. 2.17). If Jesus was not truly human, then He could not stand as our substitute and representative, and if He did not possess a real flesh and blood body, then He could not die as a substitute and representative for His people. Christ's humanity, then, is indispensable to the salvation of God's people. As Man, Our Lord became our High Priest, as God, His Priesthood is eternal and efficacious.

(2) Christ Our Example.

D. G. Hart writes,

"Consequently, when Christians confess that the Son of God was conceived by the Holy Ghost and was born of the Virgin Mary we put our trust in the fact that the experience of Jesus Christ--His encounter with the demands of God's righteous law, His temptation to disobey God's revealed will, His experience of the frailty and misery of the human condition--was in fundamental way the same as that today of a married, African-American female attorney living in Anaheim or a male, Korean-American shop owner working on the lower east side of Manhattan" (D. G. Hart, *The Incarnation and Multiculturalism*).

(3) We are to test the spirits using the doctrine of Christ. If, says the apostle John, one denies the incarnation, that God has come in flesh, then they are not Christian: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that is coming, and now it is already in the world" (1 Jn. 4.3-4).

(4) Christ our Mediator. "When we betake ourselves to a person for relief in any case, we have regard to nothing but their will and their power. If they have both, we are sure of relief, and what shall we fear in the will of Christ to this end? What will He not do for us? He who thus emptied and humbled Himself, who so infinitely condescended from the prerogative of His glory in His being and self-sufficiency, in the assumption of our nature for the discharge of the office of mediator on our behalf, will He not relieve us in all our distresses? Will He not do all for us we stand in need of, that we may be eternally saved? Will He not be a sanctuary to us? Nor have we any ground to fear His power; for, by His this infinite condescension to be a suffering man, He lost nothing of His power as God omnipotent, nothing of His infinite wisdom or glorious grace. He could still do all that He could do as God from eternity. If there be anything, therefore, in a coalescency [Joining] of infinite power with infinite condescension, to constitute a sanctuary for distressed sinners, it is all in Christ. And if

we do not see Him glorious in this, it is because there is no light of faith in us" (Owen, *The Glory of Christ*, p.106).

(5) "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weakness, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4.15-16).

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