

glory. Phillips explains: "Jesus saw the event of his greatest earthly humiliation—the apex of his servant obedience—as His true glorification on earth. 'The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified' (John 12:23)." Calvin boldly states that the richness of God's glory "is invisible until it shines forth in Christ...the majesty of the Father is hidden until it shews itself impressed" on Christ's image."

It Undergirds the Lord's Supper

How do we receive Jesus and his benefits in the Supper? In the Catholic and Lutheran view, Christ is physically present in the elements of the Supper. But that could only be true if his physical body were radically unlike ours. Christ's two natures do not bleed into each other. Instead, they constitute a single person with two distinct natures. Christ is physically in heaven, but his Spirit is everywhere present. Therefore, in the Spirit we feast on Christ by faith, not by the mere grinding of our teeth.

It Compels Us to Godly Living

"For the love of Christ compels us...those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:14-15). True godliness is lived out in a mutually loving experience with God. With biblical warrant, we usually think of *the cross* as the greatest manifestation of God's love. But if on the *cross*, Christ's descent reached the pit of hell, the *incarnation* was his first step in that agonizing descent. This is love without limits!

We need to know Christ as he truly is, God and man in one beautiful, glorious person. Knowing Christ ensures being changed by him.

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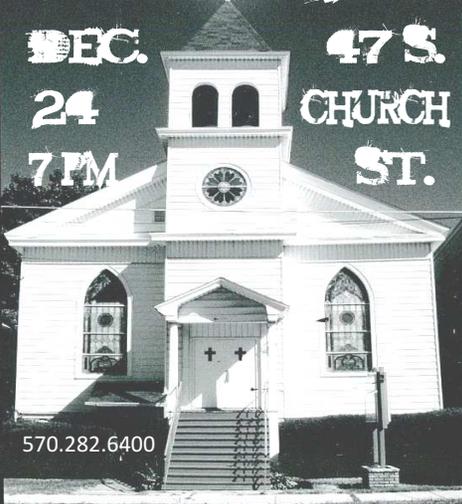


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LOVING THE INCARNATION

THE REALITY AND RELEVANCE OF GOD-IN-FLESH

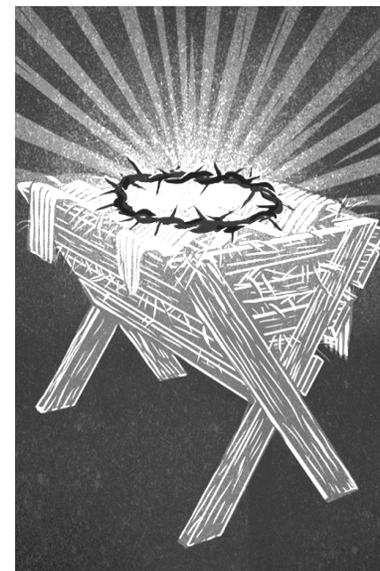
BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

When you set out to know someone, you usually want to know where they came from and what they are like. Such information is far from trivial. Instead it becomes the blood that pulses through the heart of the relationship. When we ask the typical "get-to-know-someone" questions about Christ, we find their answers are given in the doctrine of the incarnation.

The word "Incarnation" sounds fancy, but it simply means "in flesh." It is the term the church has used to describe what happened when the second person of the Trinity left the bliss of heaven for some thirty-three years to

enter, as one of us, into the mess of the human condition. As the incarnate Son of God, Christ was born, lived a difficult, but perfectly obedient life, suffered, died, and rose again; all for the salvation of his chosen people. For good reason, the

incarnation is the foundational doctrine of the gospel; no one can be saved without affirming that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (1 John 4:1-3). But for those who truly confess Christ, as God-in-flesh, the incarnation becomes a pivotal doctrine for



practical godliness. The Apostle Paul once wrote a letter to his protégé Timothy, helping him to know how to conduct himself in the house of God. *Toward that end* Paul dictated these words, "Without controversy great is the mystery of Godliness: God was manifested in the flesh" (1 Tim. 3:15-16). There is an intimate connection between the incarnation and

personal piety. To call the doctrine "relevant" almost sounds patronizing.

The Reality of the Incarnation

The historic Christian doctrine of the incarnation can be expressed in a few simple phrases which the West-

ern church codified in the Athanasian Creed, (hereafter: Ath. Cr.) around the sixth century.

Christ Is True God

Jesus of Nazareth is of the same substance as the Father, equal to him in deity (Ath. Cr. 31,33). Christ is not a lesser God. When the second person of the Godhead became a man God didn't compromise himself and change into something lesser than he was. Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). "In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (2:9). He is the "brightness of (God's) glory and the express image of His person..." (Heb. 1:3).

God reveals himself as a triune being: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, "the whole three persons are co-eternal, and co-equal" (Ath. Cr. 26). In the incarnation Christ did not shed his glory as a snake sheds its skin; he veiled his glory in humanity. Those who see Jesus see God (John 14:9).

Christ Is True Man

Jesus isn't *almost* like us. He didn't come as close to experiencing full humanity as God could come, without going all the way. He had a real body and soul (Ath. Cr. 32) because he was really human.

Jesus' conception was extraordinary (Matt. 1:20); the rest of his development was mundanely human. The Bible describes his birth in very typical fashion. "...When the fullness of time had come God sent forth his son, *born of a woman...* (Gal. 4:4). He was nourished from Mary's body. He matured through the same phases as others. He was subject to pain, pleasure, hunger, thirst, fatigue, disappointment, suffering and death. He thought, reasoned, and felt, as a

man. The Bible puts it plainly, "In all things He had to be made like His brethren" (Heb. 2:17) because only as a real man could Christ be "in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

Christ Is One Person with Two Natures

The relation of Christ's natures to his person is mysterious, but it is important. If we fail to recognize the unity of Christ's person we might see him as divine with some human characteristics, or as human with some divine characteristics, or as a confused combination of the two. Jesus is one Christ with both human and divine natures which do not bleed together. In Christ, God became a man, while continuing to be God.

To help us understand, in a similar way each of us are whole persons consisting of body and soul (Ath. Cr., 37). A single, whole, person is both mortal (because of his body) and immortal (because of his soul). Likewise, as a human, Christ could be born. As God, he could say, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58).

Highlighting the relevance of the incarnation, the Athanasian Creed transitions seamlessly from Christ's person to his work. During the whole of Jesus' earthly ministry (and into eternity), Christ the God-man, secures salvation for his elect. He acts as man, because It is man who needs salvation. But, for a mere human, however infused with divine help, the call of duty is too great. Only God could provide man's remedy. In Christ, God and man meet, and sinners are saved.

The Relevance of the Incarnation

How does the doctrine of the incarnation assist believers?

It Opens Up the Old Testament

Until we grasp that Christ is God-in-flesh, the Old Testament will remain a collection of stories about how men and women struggled with the call to faith. The incarnation helps us to see that the Old Testament sets the stage for God to once again live with man as he did in Eden. The Old Testament teaches that the redeemer would be a God-man; a human deliverer who is also stronger than Satan (Gen. 3:15). On every Old Testament page, God promises both an anointed king, and a suffering servant. Only in the incarnate Christ, are all of the promises answered with a resounding "yes!" (2 Cor. 1:20).

It Clarifies the New Testament

The reality of God-with-us is explained and applied throughout the rest of the Bible starting with Matthew. The New Testament is not simply a collection of ethical instruction, or even a commentary on the life of a certain Nazarene. It is the real-life story of what happened when God came to men that they might belong to him. The New Testament is the answer to the Old Testament anticipation of a redeemer. Near the story's last chapter, John heard these words from heaven: "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them, and be their God" (Rev. 21:3).

It Makes God Accessible

In the Old Testament, God was accessible only through the mediation of prophets, priests, tabernacle, and temple. No Israelite could properly see God (John 1:18). John Calvin said the revelation of God prior to Christ was like a pencil sketch.

In Christ, God became accessible to us in a most familiar form. Six times in the opening of his first letter, John says, "We saw him!" (1 John 1:1-4). During Jesus' earthly ministry, the majestic God of heaven and earth cried out to the crowds, "Come to me!" (Matt. 11:28). If you want to know what God is like, study Christ. As Richard Phillips has written, Jesus' earthly posture, tone of voice, attitude, and reaction to events were those of God "God is Christ-like"

It Reveals Our Only Mediator

At Mount Sinai Israel needed mediation; they were justly terrified by God's thunderings. "If we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, we shall die." (Deut 5:25). God gave Moses as a temporary mediator (Deut. 5:27) who admonished the people to look for a better one! (Deut 18:15). Of the man Jesus, Paul later wrote, "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men..." (1 Tim. 2:5). In his humanity Christ suffered our judgment for sin. In his divinity he endured that judgment to the very end.

It Teaches Us True Humility

Christ prostrated himself to the earth because we needed rescue—that's humbling! God lowered himself to gather to himself his rebellious children. Even the earthly body of Christ was lowly. It was as crude as the tabernacle in the desert compared with the pyramids of Egypt or the ziggurats of Babylon. Christ willingly compromised his reputation by becoming a man (Phil. 2:7).

It Reveals God's Glory

Paradoxically, in Christ's humility, God also reveals his other-worldly